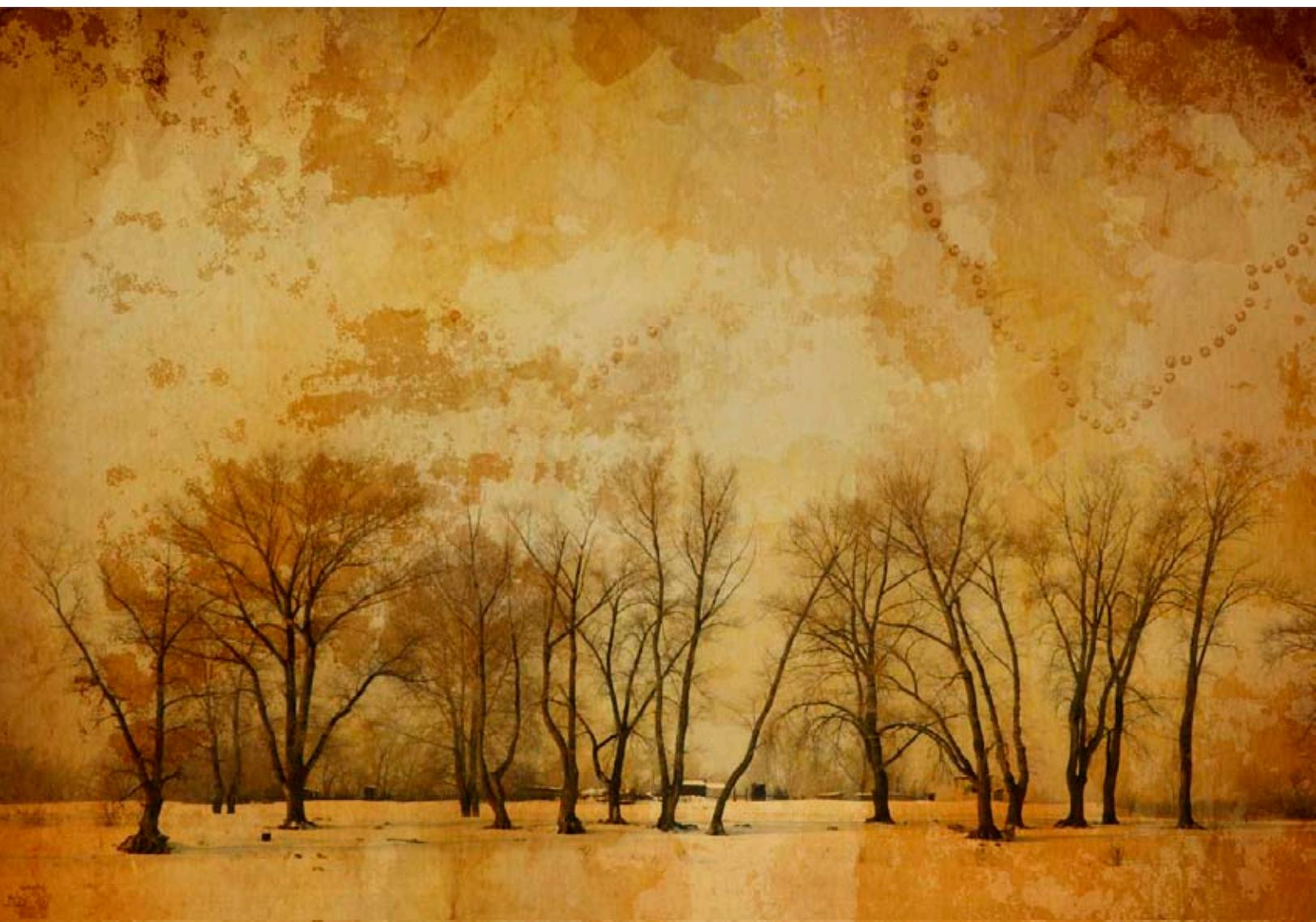


Scissortale
REVIEW



Winter 2010

The logo for 'Scissorsortale REVIEW' features the word 'Scissorsortale' in a red, cursive script font. A red arrow points to the 'i' in 'Scissorsortale'. Below it, the word 'REVIEW' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

Scissorsortale
REVIEW

WINTER 2010

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ScissorTALE Review
Winter 2010

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A Foreword from the Editors

Thank you for taking the time to read and enjoy the premier issue of the University of Central Oklahoma's *ScissorTale Review*. As a companion to *New Plains Review*, *ScissorTale* provides a forum for students of the Central Plains to publish their creative works. We were pleased at the response we received to our call for submissions for this semester and are hoping for an even greater response for our next issue. Spread the word. We want to hear from you.

As you will see, the authors published here represent a variety of genres, from pastoral poetry to realistic fiction. You will travel from Oklahoma to North Dakota and back again, from pre-European America to yesterday. You will meet a paper boy braving the elements, a post-apocalyptic monarch, and a little girl in the body of a 40-year-old woman. We are especially happy to recognize Kurtis Cavender's poem "Love Songs for Ariel" and Kimberly Condon's short story "I Knew Toby Bergen" as our one-hundred-dollar prize winners. Congratulations!

We are proud to present the works of these students, some of whom took the brave step of submitting their work for the first time. Enjoy, and please come back for the next issue.

Ashley Miller – *Editor-in-Chief*
Kerri Rivera – *Associate Editor*

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POETRY



Navajo Woman on the High Plains

Kurtis Cavender

These were the fields of her forgotten days,
the arid dust that powdered her cracked lips.
This was her land: the unforgiving haze
of locust swarms, the sun, the stone choked crops.
These were the mountains of her murmured youth,
swelling like gourds beneath her chalky feet.
She stood like Moses here, watching the breath
curl from her lips as smoke, waiting to meet
something, some Holy Thing that never came.
Only the whispered mocking of the scrub pines.
The chaffing of the thirsty granite. Some
grotesque shriek from the grackle in her mind.
And that was her horizon, the sharp rim
between an earthy bowl and her flayed dreams.

Ponce de León

Kurtis Cavender

But even here amongst the Spanish mosses
hanging heavy and dry, the swollen mangroves
lurking, the weeping rainbow eucalyptus,
even within these glades they found no life.
Those ragged bony men in iron shells
and frayed white beards, astride their wheezing horses,
lifted their slouching spears and trudged on, wordless.
Remember the soft voices of sweet waters,
the Spaniard said, and knew it was a dream:
With God's help we may reach the fount by sunset.

EDITOR'S PRIZE WINNER

Love Songs for Ariel

Kurtis Cavender

*And I will bring distress to Ariel and there shall be
heaviness and sorrow and she shall be as an Ariel unto me. – Isaiah 29:2*

I.

The birches rest bearded with snow
thin-boned and brittle as old men.
Their skins are cracked and grey. The doe
melts soft against the mottled glen
a reddish velvet shadow. Her
bright nose twitches to test the wind
for predators. Ice cracks the air.
Her speckled back arches with cold.
We both know wolves have hunted here.

II.

That blue guitar no longer sings
the witching chords. Silence congeals.
A shiver grips the mossy strings
and chokes their voice. The pipes are still
and from the corner like some thing
abused, the fiddle weakly trills.

III.

Pale sunlight dusts the autumn leaves
and traces leafy patterns on
the crumbling bricks. The bright air gives
the pines a yellow calm and when
the distant smell of wood smoke clears—
and with it the last sign that men
still know this place—then in the air
the whisper of an empty womb:
Come back. There is no one to hear.

These bricks have a soul of their own.
I did not mean to leave this way.
I did not mean to leave this way.

IV.

There is a bird trapped in a room,
a finch with amber colored eyes.
A window watches the blank room:
a captive square of purple sky
lidless and bloodless, a portal
watching the bird until it dies.
Red freckles fleck the frosty wall
the unbent glass and on the ground
some broken yellow feathers. All
about the bird a grayness grows
until there is only the room
and the unblinking eye of God.

A Writer's Foreplay

Ranell Collins

Looking across the room I see
The dust that has settled on the furniture,
So I get up and Swiffer my way
Around the house.

Then, sit back down to discover
The blades of grass tracked in on the carpet,
The dirt that stains the kitchen floor,
And I sweep and I mop.

But just as I am about to settle down
Again, I'm reminded of the laundry
Lying in the den, and I separate,
Wash, dry, and fold.

And crooked pictures, filthy blinds,
Baseboards covered with grime and
I stretch and reach and find the peanut
That rolled under my refrigerator

Six months before.
This sparks my appetite
So I fix a sandwich, take a couple
Of bites and decide I am tired.

Tomorrow, I will write!

Choctaw
America

Malory Craft

23rd street is where I had my first summer job,
sitting in the snow cone stand
fingers stained strawberry
high schoolers cruise the streets in mustangs
eating Little Caesar's at lunch
in the park

that park
is where Josh and I got away from my parents
His were dead
He didn't seem to care
He was just Josh

First Kiss

Malory Craft

He smelled of
Sweet and musky cologne, fruity pomade and women's hairspray
And the car was cold and piercing as he leaned me up against it
My back arching over the chipped green aluminum
We kissed- I couldn't see his face
My heart was racing – because I was so damn late for curfew
But we kept kissing
It got warmer and warmer each time
Until he broke away and I looked in his
Light
Gray
Eyes
He looked back, but only for a second. Then he said
“You should probably go”

White Mouse

Amber M. Cianfrocco

Army emerald serpent with
amber jeweled eyes
Stealthily you slithered into my life
starlit crystal of destiny
your look hooked me.
Dull history, melted by your kiss
dormant hearts set ablaze yet,
we resist. Together we push, pull, twist
wrapped around infallible lust
Venom pierces, spits flesh,
your poison searing deep within my veins.
Swallowed by your grip.
In your belly I lay digesting in acid of your love.

Through the Eyes of the Last Organism

Nathan Griffin

I am the lonely Kingdom,
For there is only me.
No more lying politicians
Hanging their false patriotic wreaths.

With no ambitious opportunities
Or propaganda to aspire or buy.
What aspirations could I have?
This begs the question, "Who am I?"

I am the organic camouflage
That hides, just beneath your shoes.
How could you or would you trample me now,
That Death can hit the snooze.

Nothing but air,
Oh! How I guess it's all for me.
Unfortunately in this world of mine
There will be no laurel trees.

In a sense I'm the most successful,
Intelligent, and strongest of living beings.
But who will admire this single blade of glory
When no one sees me when I swing.

In seclusion I am the only king,
But who will serve me my drink.

Ada, OK
memories, sort of

Amanda James-Dill

you know, it's funny
how the memory works.
good memories stick around
and the bad ones fade away,
leaving behind those rare
happy moments, shining
like that first 'diamond' ring
a young girl gets, from that boy—
that boy her mother didn't like
for whatever reason
(it's forgotten now).

reconnecting with people
you 'used-to-know'
can be like stepping back in time
because people don't change,
not in any way that really matters—
smiles, laughs—they stay the same
even when a person has been
through hell and back.

like memories, sort of,
good people stick around
(even if they're lost for a while)
while the not-so-good ones fade away,

leaving behind opportunities
for those rare happy moments
regardless of the circumstances
of the reunion of old friends.

Introduction to the Grass

Janet Jarvis

Bluestem turns red in fall
and this defines Nebraska.
A contradiction of colors;
politics; changeability.
Webs of roots regrow
across the prairie almost
as fast as they are severed.
A net of possibilities
catches water as it journeys.
The grass knows it grows
from an ancient source.
Soil once married to water;
volcanic ash that killed one
and gave birth to another.
The grass remembers to live;
fights through fire and flood;
forces its way through concrete
to remind us of its presence.

West Table

Janet Jarvis

Dusk framed in pink light
against a hazy purple and orange sky,
and the four teenagers sit
with a nearly empty Boone's Farm bottle.

Again.

In this back pasture
it's still; a held breath.

The rows of trees hold formation for miles.

Broken Bow darkens for a moment,
then hums under artificial light.

From East Table it's harder to see what's coming,
there's too much curve in Highway 2.

The high part of the road is parallel to the railroad tracks.

The cross, lit by years of charity overlooks the valley in-between.

One teenager comments that everything just passes through.

The others nod and look harder at the Western horizon.

All that's left to see is stars.

Everything Leaves Something of Itself Behind

Janet Jarvis

She found the spot
where the glacier
began to melt.
Where the land under it
regained consciousness
and took a deep breath.
Just one crooked tree
grew there; branches
folded around itself
like a closed umbrella
The brown winter grass
lined up on either side
of a raised rock ridge.

The First of March

Laura Wiseman

Winter ice weeps in the shadows along the fence.
I strain to open the garage, recover work gloves,
handheld metal tools, and buckets creased in dirt.
The pooch prances blindly for the ball somewhere
in the garden. I step through mulch, sprigs of pine,
the first blades of grass, to kneel at the edge
to part the chicken wire. Inside I touch three stalks
of onions overlooked last summer, unplucked
from their plot. Alive, full shoots of green, fragrant
when I place my palms against my face, inhale.
I remember a year inside, trapped by cold, a year
to turn over in the soil, open to air and light.

Winter Tongue

Laura Wiseman

I reach for the mailbox by shovel,
carve out a soft soliloquy.
Gauze plumes push from my lips.
I print a path from driveway
to garden to touch muted icicles
and the glass, lulled heads of mums.
Winter reveals the little sounds.
The telephone poles, gutters,
and fence posts cupped in ice.
The muffed tines of trees.
Squirrels with muzzled tongues.
Finches and sparrows tucked in close.
The city streets hush in snow.
Stilled behind deep, wide curtains,
the whole world is home.

St. Valentine's Day Elegy
February 14, 2009

Adam Worden

A song of mourning,
A song of disappointment;

So long a year,
So long;

My heart awoke in the Spring
To die by Winter;

So long a year,
So long;

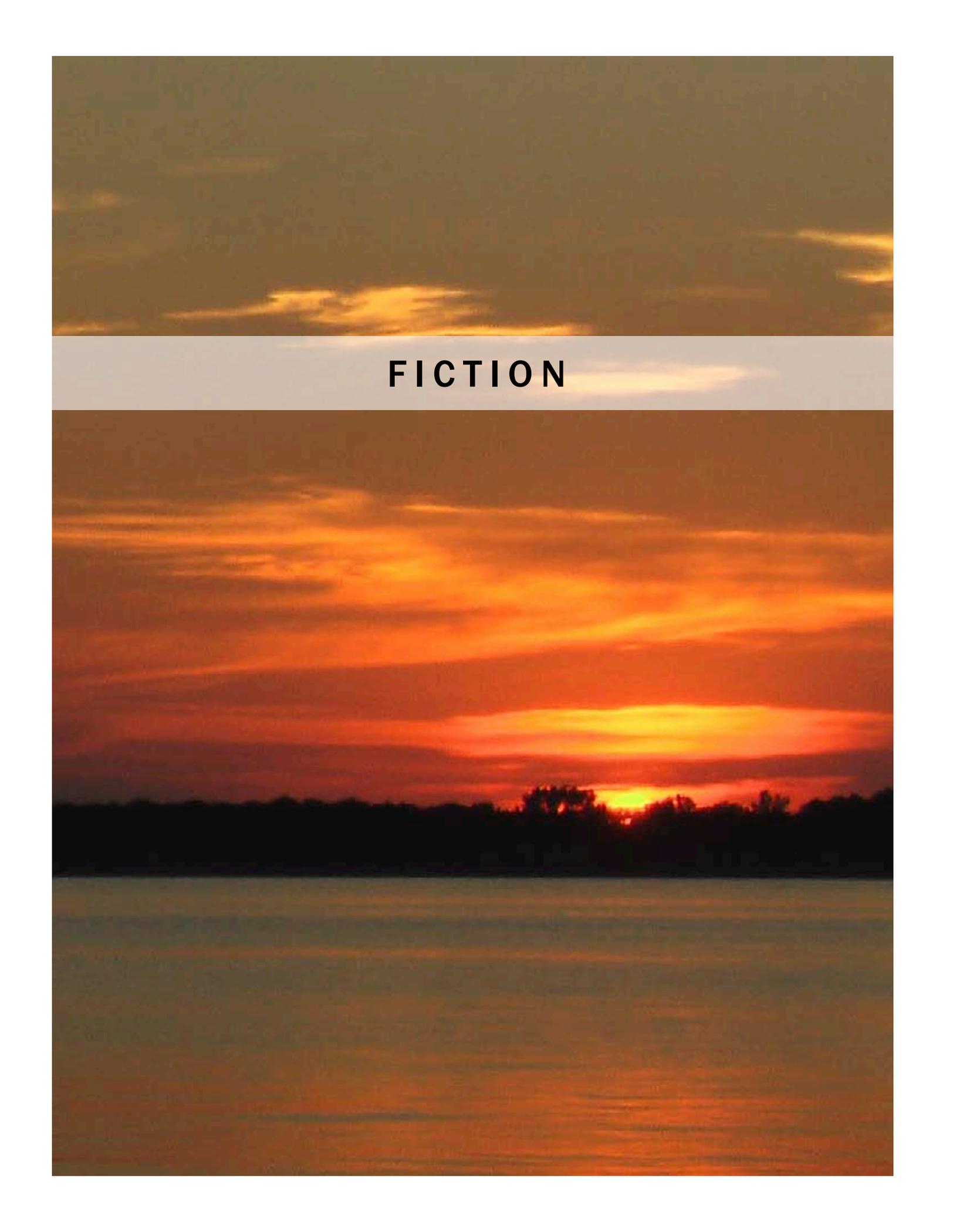
The grave gapes to swallow
The heart's renewal;
The heart in renewal gapes,
And is overtaken, and is riven asunder;

My heart awoke in the Spring
To die by Winter;
And it did wander, and wonder,
And ponder
Why the year had made new
What was so long buried under;

The horizon breaks my heart,
Because it loosed no light on me;

A song of mourning;
A song of disappointment;

So long a year,
So long.

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sky is filled with horizontal bands of orange and red clouds. The sun is partially obscured by a dark silhouette of trees on the horizon. The water in the foreground is calm and reflects the colors of the sky. A white horizontal banner is centered across the middle of the image, containing the word "FICTION" in black, bold, uppercase letters.

FICTION

On Bated Breath

Katherine Coats

“These things never work. You would think in all places a coffee machine would work, it would be here.” Mark sighed and his shoulders sank. “Just once I would like one to work. Just one that won’t eat my quarters and actually dispenses coffee.”

“Dad, please sit down. Before I go back to check on Mom, I’ll see if the gift shop has anything to eat. Come on, you’ve been up all night; you must be exhausted. Please, sit.”

Mark made his way around the maze of sad, wooden, dated chairs and sat down. “Thanks honey, I’m just tired. I should know better than to pick a fight with a coffee machine this early in the morning anyway.”

Mark looked down at the sweet face of his daughter, Amber. He was so proud of her. She was all grown up now, and about to finish her undergraduate degree. She was still undecided about what to do next, but Mark secretly hoped she would attend medical school, like he should have. He often wondered if her interest in medicine had been his doing, since he regretted not pushing himself to go. When Amber was a child, he helped her learn all of the bones, muscles, and anatomy she could. She had always loved learning, but wasn’t always eager for their after-dinner ritual. Mark smiled as he remembered those evenings.

“Daddy I don’t want another test tonight.”

“Come on honey just a few questions and then you can go play in your room.” Mark replied smiling, retrieving the human anatomy model from the bookshelf.

“Ok sweetheart. What is this?” Mark said pointing to the model’s abdomen.

“Liver.”

“Good. And this?”

“Small intestine.”

“Good. And which bone is this?”

“Uh...I don’t know. What is it?”

“The humerus.”

“Humerus. Ok can I go play now?”

“Ok, I’ll let you off easy tonight but more questions tomorrow.”

Now that she was so close to graduation, he couldn't help but wonder where that little girl went, and if she would have been happier as a ballerina.

But for now, his little pre-med girl was on her last college break. What a way to spend the break, cramped up in a horrible room in the ICU with its strange smells and incessant noises. He had managed to go into that room only once when they first admitted his wife but had since confined himself to the dismal waiting room.

Most of the time, he was alone. Amber had elected to stay by her mother's bedside. Mark punished himself for not sitting at his wife's bedside watching her slip away with every breath and every descending peak on the heart monitor. He mostly sat, staring blankly at the wall; the only sound was the television that was clearly entertaining itself droning on about something happening in some far away land. He had no time for trivial wars or for gossip about the latest celebrities. He had to wait.

Wait for the doctor to come by with news. Wait for Amber to retreat back to the room he had confined himself in, carrying coffee and something slightly edible from the cafeteria. Mark was trained in the art of waiting. He had waited for his wife to start dinner every night after he got home from work. He had waited for her to turn out the light after removing her makeup, so she could come to bed. He had waited for her for 22 hours to give him his only child, a beautiful baby girl. He was always waiting for his wife. Now in the twilight of their years, he was waiting still. He remembered the first conversation that he and his wife had about the word "twilight."

"These are the twilight of our years Mark. We have to make them count."

"Beth, you are only forty. You have plenty of life left in you. Turning forty does not mean your life is over."

"No it means I'll have to slow down if I want to see fifty. If I'll even see fifty."

"Please don't talk like that. You and I have been through this and you've seen specialists. There is nothing wrong with you. Can't you try to believe you're not fated to die so young? I would like to keep you around a bit."

Every time she said "twilight" Mark would immediately think of someone old. Beth did not feel like she had much life ahead of her, as if the fates had stolen what was left of her youth, and placed her in the shell of a person that reminded her so much of her mother. Now, three years after the first of many "twilight" conversations, he wished he had not been wrong. Maybe, if he had believed what she had adamantly said about her future, he would have not ignored her worries. He should have taken her to the doctor sooner. They would have caught it in time, and he wouldn't be sitting in a hospital waiting room, praying his wife would wake up.

He sat there on those inconsiderate and uncomfortable chairs, waiting for news. Then, an elderly man carrying a bouquet of flowers entered the room. Mark had been entirely alone in his dismal state for the week his wife had been in the ICU. Amber frequently visited to let him know what the doctors were saying, or what they were

thinking of trying next, but she never stayed. All he had for company was his mind, back issues of trashy gossip magazines, a broken coffee machine, and a television that still only entertained itself. Mark sized up the man. He was slightly hunched from age, and what little hair he had was stark white. He wore thick glasses that made his once bright eyes seem slightly larger than normal. The man was very pale and had a look of hopelessness about him like he had gotten dressed too quickly. Mark immediately felt sorry for the man. The only thing that seemed to have a cheery thought was the blatant, bright bouquet the man had brought with him.

“Do you mind if I join you?” He asked in a slow, sullen tone.

“Only if you can find room. It’s pretty crowded in here.”

Mark’s meager attempt at lightening the mood caused the man to pause for a moment, and then he smiled slightly.

“I think I can manage. That thing work?” He asked motioning to the coffee machine.

“No. Tried it earlier.”

“Those things never work.”

Mark was once again left with his thoughts as the man painstakingly tried to lower himself into a chair across from him. *Why was this man here? Why wasn’t someone here with him? Who lets an old man sit in a waiting room alone?* Mark, lost in thought, hadn’t realized that the man was now seated properly and staring back at him.

Mark offered his hand. “I’m Mark. Mark Harris.”

“George Masters.” The man replied taking Mark’s hand.

“So what brings you to the waiting room?”

“They say she had a stroke. They don’t know if she’ll make it.”

George’s voice cracked and then he looked at the wall as if he could see straight into the ICU.

“My wife, Beth, has an aneurysm. In her brain. They, they don’t know if they can prevent it from rupturing without causing more damage. My daughter is in there with her.”

“Why aren’t you in there with her?”

“Why are *you* out here?”

“Touché. They won’t let me go back until they know how bad it is. Afraid my old ticker can’t handle it. So they sent me to wait for them in this beautiful room with you.”

“I can’t sit in there. I’ve been in there to see her but I can’t sit in there. Amber, my daughter, comes with updates every couple of hours and I have to fill out forms, but I can’t sit there watching her slip away.”

“What makes you think this is it?”

“She’s only 43. She used to be so full of life, but then she turned forty. It was then

she made the prediction she wouldn't live to see fifty."

George stared at him sympathetically. "I think we should get you out of this room for a while. Besides, I could use a good walk."

"The cafeteria won't be serving lunch for another hour."

"I was thinking we should get out of this stale hospital air for a while and away from these neutral colors."

"There's a small courtyard behind the hospital. It's not much, but there are flowers back there."

"Lead the way."

The two men made their way to the elevator, and then down the corridor that led to the courtyard in silence. George still carried the bouquet. They found a bench in the middle of the courtyard and sat down.

"You could set that down you know."

"I hadn't even noticed I still had the silly thing."

George set the bouquet between the two of them.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"You smoke? George those things will kill you."

"Yeah yeah, tell it to my grandchildren. They want me to quit too. I haven't lived 76 years for nothing. If I want to smoke a cigarette I will. Now answer the question. Do you mind if I smoke?"

Mark stifled a laugh. George's outrage at the idea of someone telling him not to smoke was clearly in conflict with his need to be polite.

"No I don't mind."

"You want one? You won't be so jumpy."

"I quit when my daughter was born. Haven't touched the things since."

"How long ago was that?"

"Twenty-one, no, twenty-two years ago."

"Then you're due for one. Go on I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks."

For a while the two men just sat enjoying the spring blossoms and watching the clouds move across the sky. Once again, it was George who broke through Mark's quiet thought process.

"So why won't you go see your wife? I know you said you don't like seeing her like that, but don't you need to see her if this indeed is it?"

"I guess."

"So why?"

"Because it's my fault she's in here."

"How do you figure?"

"She told me she was going to die. She told me. I just thought she was getting an

anti-aging complex. I didn't believe her. If I had, she wouldn't be here. We would have caught it before it had turned bad."

"Mark. Aneurysms aren't like treating a broken bone, or a cold. They are silent, for years sometimes, with most people never knowing they have one until it is too late. The only treatment for an aneurysm is to watch them, and catch them if they rupture. They usually aren't safe to operate on."

"How do you know? How do you know she couldn't be saved if I believed her?"

"My youngest son had one. They didn't catch it in time. Believe me, I've been where you are. But once I realized I couldn't have saved him, I was able to let him go."

"Oh. I'm sorry George."

"You should be. But not for that reason. You should be up there by your wife's side so that she knows you're there. Come on, let's get back up there and see if there's any news."

Back in the waiting room Mark took a deep breath. George smiled at him and then handed him the bouquet.

"George I can't take these. They're for your wife."

"She hates flowers. I only bought it because I thought I was supposed to. She'll murder me for sure if I walk in there with flowers."

"Thanks George."

Mark sighed at the threshold of his waiting room. He hated the room, yet it brought him some semblance of comfort and control. He turned left and made the short walk down the white corridor to the doors labeled "Intensive Care Unit". Once through the heavy doors, he looked for his wife's room. The rooms were arranged in a circular pattern off the central nurse's station. The entire wing smelled strongly of industrial grade cleaners. Mark could hear beeping from at least a dozen machines that told him there were many people clinging to life, just like his wife.

"Dad? Did you need something?"

"Yes. I need to see your mother."

Amber led him to the room her mother was in, and Mark went to his wife's bedside. He took her hand, kissed her on the cheek and whispered to her that he was there. Beth laid there motionless, the monitors beeping just like before, and then she squeezed his hand.

EDITOR'S PRIZE WINNER

I Knew Toby Bergen

Kimberly Condon

Toby Bergen died while taking a leak the day after he had his appendix removed. Dad said it was a blood clot that broke off after he stood up, and it was just one of those things, quick and painless, and there was nothing anybody could do.

Now all it seems anybody can do is talk about how great he was, even though when he was alive, they all acted like he was an old painting on the wall—nice to look at now and then, but not something you really pay any mind to. But now it's "Toby was my favorite student in first period English," and "Toby was such a good little soccer player," and all I can think is it was *fifth* period English, you old bat, and Toby never got off the bench last season, so how do you know if he was good? And the school wants to call an assembly on Wednesday in remembrance of Toby but there's hardly another person in all of Wilson County Intermediate School who knows Toby's last name, and not one who knows his middle name but me, and I'm not telling because he made me lock that up in our Box of Secrets when we were seven. Dead or not, once something's in the box, it stays there.

All everyone keeps talking about is how he died, and how his mother said he was just standing there and then all the sudden he just crumpled in on himself like in slow motion. And I keep picturing him as one of those giant inflatable Santas people put on their lawns after Thanksgiving, deflating and folding in on itself once the power to the blower is shut off. I think if I hear that story one more time, I'm going to scream and tell them what a bunch of hypocrites they are, and for the first time in my life I'm happy about Mrs. Weller's vocabulary quizzes, because now I know what a hypocrite is, and it's them.

At the visitation last night, my mom sat with Toby's parents while they gave me "time to say good-bye," as mom said, even though he's dead and the time for good-bye was two minutes before that last whiz. His wooden casket sat at the front of the room on a white marble slab in front of these dark red, velvety drapes that look like they came out of the Grand Imperial Cinema downtown. There are flowers all around it, too—flowers on the floor, flowers on pedestals, and big wreaths of flowers on fake gold easels—and it smells like a flower shop, which is good, because that was one

thing I was afraid of about seeing Toby dead: the smell. But I can't smell anything bad, and it all looks real nice and expensive, which surprises me because Melburn's Funeral Home is really just a Morton building that they dressed up with fake stone panels on the outside so it wouldn't look like it was made out of metal, which it is.

The top half of the lid of the casket was open, and it was lined with shiny fabric in a baby blue color that would have made Toby puke if he were alive to see it. The half of him that I could see lying there was dressed in his white button-down shirt and dark blue blazer—the same church clothes he wore every Sunday since I'd known him. He'd wear them until he outgrew them, and then his mom would go and buy the same stuff in a size too big so he wouldn't outgrow them so fast the next time. I could guess that the bottom half had the matching navy slacks and the black loafers, because those were always the same too. These are the things I looked at first, because I didn't want to look at his face, because then I'd be seeing my best friend Toby, and not some faceless body in church clothes. When I did look, it seemed all wrong. It was like one of those wax museum faces, all frozen in place and not quite the right color. His rusty brown hair looked the same, but it was short, so how bad could they mess that up? But the lids that closed over his dark hazel eyes looked flat, and I would have sworn there was mascara on his lashes. No, it didn't look like Toby at all, and I almost said something, like they had the wrong kid here, but then I remembered the clothes, and I knew that this was just what Toby looked like dead.

I had gone up there with every intention of saying my goodbyes, as strange and as weird as that felt, but looking at him there, all I could think of was how it was just fitting that he died while taking a leak, because I almost killed him once myself for doing the same thing. I don't remember how old we were. Eight, maybe nine. Toby had come over to my place to spend the night. We had stayed up late to watch *Raiders of the Lost Arc* on AMC and mom yelled at us for drinking all of her RC Cola. The next day, after Toby had gone home, I went into the closet to get my soccer gear out for practice, and it all felt damp, so I called my mom in to check it out. She wasn't even all the way to the closet yet when her face wrinkled up, disgusted, and she said, "Oh my gosh, Max, it smells like urine in your room."

I dropped my shin guards on the spot and ran to the bathroom, gagging the whole way. I think I washed my hands eight times before they finally felt clean again. I was drying them when I caught my mom's reflection in the mirror. She was standing in the doorway with my soccer clothes and several pairs of shoes in her arms, looking severe and put out.

"What the hell, Max?" That was her favorite thing to say whenever I did something really wrong, which I hadn't, and I told her so.

"Don't look at me, Mom. It must have been Tucker." Tucker was our Golden Retriever. He was getting old, so it sounded reasonable to me.

“Uh-uh. Tucker was with Dad and me last night, and he’s been out back all morning, so don’t try ‘the dog did it’ with me. I’m not buying.”

“Then it had to be Toby.” Her reflection glared at me. “I swear, Mom. Why would I pee on my own stuff?”

“Maybe you did it in your sleep.”

“Maybe he did it in *his* sleep.”

She’d huffed the way she does when she doesn’t want to hear it anymore and walked off to the laundry room. I called Toby and asked him about it, but he denied it up one side and down the other.

“Why the heck would I pee in your closet, dude? I think I know how to use the pot.”

I told him if I every caught him in the act, I was going to beat him blue.

For two months after that, Mom took away whatever I was drinking by nine o’clock at night, and one day when we were going past the baby aisle of the grocery store, Dad asked me if I needed him to buy me some Pull-Ups. I didn’t talk to him for three hours for that one. But I got them back, oh yes I did, or I guess Toby got them back for me, only he didn’t know it at the time. He was spending the night at my house again, and I woke up sometime after midnight to the sound of my mom’s voice down the hall crying out, “Oh, Toby...oh no, Toby, sweetie, stop.”

I got out of bed, and ran out into the hall where I bumped into Dad. We both headed toward the lit doorway of the bathroom, and when we got there, mom was in the tub. She had pulled a towel down from the rack and was holding it with one hand to cover her nakedness, and her other hand was up, palm out and fingers splayed, trying to ward off the stream of pee coming out of Toby.

“Do something,” she said to my father as the pee just kept coming. Dad ran in and took Toby by the shoulders and aimed him at the toilet, but the lid was down, so the urine just ricocheted off of it, splashing little droplets on the cabinet and the floor. When it finally stopped, Toby just stuffed himself back into his pajamas bottoms and walked out of the room. His eyes were open but kind of glazed and far off when he walked past me, and I took a step back from him, a little afraid because I’d never seen anybody sleepwalking before. I heard Mom pull the plug on the drain, and Dad reached under the sink and pulled out some cleanser and a cleaning rag. I raised my brows and crossed my arms in front of me, waiting for the apology that should have been coming my way. But they looked at me and then at each other, and then Dad came over and shut the door in my face. I guess they didn’t want to hear that either.

It turned out that Toby knew he sleepwalked, but had no idea that he sleep-peed. His mom told my mom that he’d done that once or twice before when he was younger, but that she’d never told him about it. She thought he’d outgrown that, or she would have warned us. I told mom I wanted new shin guards.

So he peed in his sleep, and then one day he peed and he died. This was what went through my head when I was looking down at him in his church clothes, being swallowed up by a baby blue liner and somehow a laugh gurgled up in my throat and burst out of my mouth like an unwelcome surprise. It was loud and high, and it scared me so much I jumped. I clapped my hand over my mouth to keep any more from escaping, but for some reason they just kept coming and coming and nothing was funny and I just couldn't stop. The quiet murmur of mournful voices in the room behind me went silent, and my face went hot with the shame of laughing at my dead best friend, and somehow I kept going until Mom came up behind me and put her arm around my shoulders. She steered me away from the casket just like Dad had steered Toby away from the bathtub just a couple of short years ago, and my goodbye went unsaid as we slipped out of the visitation room.

Now that the funeral is over, everyone is at Toby's house and everyone has brought food, and I think, by looking around, the way to tell who really gave a crap about Toby is to look at who's eating. His folks aren't eating. My folks aren't eating. His grandma looks like she hasn't eaten in days, and I'm sure as hell not eating. But the rest of them are stuffing their faces and barely putting down their plates long enough to mumble their false remembrances to Toby's mom and dad.

It's dark in here because it's gray outside and even with the curtains open it feels like dusk. And one person says he remembers how good Toby was in the role of Geppetto when the school put on *Pinocchio* last year, and another says he sang like an angel in the church choir. And everyone can't believe he's gone, and everyone thought he was such a sweet boy, and wasn't I a good friend to him all those years, and all I can think is, was I?

Was I a good friend when I helped John Wickersham and Justin Berry toilet paper his house on Halloween when he had the flu and couldn't go trick-or-treating? Was I a good friend when I held hands with April Hempstead this summer at the movies even though I knew Toby had a giant crush on her? How about when I stole his '65 Mustang Match Box Car after he wouldn't trade it to me for a '74 Impala?

But I can't think about that now. I'll cry if I do, and I'm not going to let these hypocrites see that. Wouldn't that give them something to talk about? Max Shepherd, laughing like a mad clown at the visitation and then crying like a Betsy-Wetsy at the reception. And a week from now, someone will see me in the hall at school and nudge the person next to them and say, "Hey, isn't that the kid who cried like a baby after the funeral of that other kid who died taking a whiz?" And then I'll throw a punch and get suspended, and then I'll get grounded, because dead best friend or no, hitting is never okay. So no way, no crying.

I stand up and go to my mom. She's next to the couch where Toby's parents sit, their hands clasped together so tight their knuckles are white and their fingers look

blue.

“I want to go now.”

Mom looks down at me and her brow is furrowed like she’s annoyed, but after a second her face softens and she says that’s fine. I step in front of Mr. and Mrs. Bergen, who both seem to be looking at their knees, and in a voice that’s way too loud and I don’t know why, I speak.

“Toby played Jiminy Cricket in the play last year, and he flubbed his lines twice. He kicked a soccer ball like a chicken, he peed in my closet, and he wasn’t even *in* the church choir. But he loved thunderstorms and Harry Potter, and he’d stand up for anyone who couldn’t do it themselves, and he was the best friend I ever had.”

The room is quiet now and I can feel dozens of sets of eyes on the back of my head, but I don’t care. Mr. and Mrs. Bergen aren’t looking at their knees anymore, but looking up at me with red-rimmed eyes I can hardly bear. Then a tiny smile spreads slowly across Mrs. Bergen’s face, and she stands up and hugs me so hard I hear my back pop. Then it’s she who is laughing when she pulls away from me and puts a hand on each of my shoulders.

“That’s exactly who he was, Max. Thank you.” Mr. Bergen stands too, and puts an arm around her waist. He smiles as well and leans his head so that it touches hers, and her hands fall from my shoulders. I nod to both of them and walk away. Mom and Dad follow me out.

In the car on the way home, the tears come, but quietly, and I let them. In my head, I say goodbye, winging it out to heaven or wherever he may be. For all his fumbling and weirdness, he was Toby Bergen, and things just won’t be the same without him.

All Paths Lead to Grand Rose

Justin Garver

World renowned writer H.K. Landross lay in his hospital bed, his heart pumping in irregular patterns. It seemed only yesterday that the doctors had warned him about his heart problems. Sure enough it had landed him in the hospital in serious condition. His family stood around him watching, worried that Landross might not make it through this time. Three days in bed had made Landross sore. Today he would finally go into surgery.

Doctors came into the crowded room and transferred Landross to a wheelchair. His heart beat rapidly, but this time from nervousness. The doors swung open to the surgery room, and the bright lights blinded him as he lay on the table. Sleep quickly overtook Landross as the doctors placed a clear plastic mask over his nose and mouth.

Landross felt as if he just woke up after days of sleeping. His head hurt and his eyes were extremely blurry, but that faded away quickly as he sat up and looked around. The land around him a waterless dry desert, sand blew down streets as doors with broken hinges swayed back and forth. Landross lay in the middle of a sand-covered street, small buildings down both sides. Rusted cars sat parked on the road, never to move again. A sharp metallic sound drew his attention to his right as a sign broke free of its holdings and fell from the top of a nearby post. It read, "Grand Rose City." The name sounded familiar to Landross but the memory of it seemed far off.

"Ello!" A beautiful woman stood behind Landross. A long braid fell over her shoulder and ran down to her stomach. A pair of goggles sat on her forehead, and she wore a leather flight jacket. She seemed familiar, just like the sign, yet Landross couldn't quite remember. She gave him a slight wave with a robotic hand, smiling as wide as she could.

"I was wonderin' 'ow long it'd take ya to realize I was here."

"I—I just woke up here a few moments ago. You are?" Landross stumbled over his words.

"I'm Lauren. 'Eya Graves! Get out here an' say 'ello to our new buddy."

From Landross's left side a battle-hardened soldier stepped out of a dark building and into the light of the desert sun. He wore a full World War Two kit, a rifle slung

across his back. He had a scar across his cheek and a large cigar sticking out of his mouth. He looked Landross up and down as he approached the two.

“It’s been a while Landross, glad to see you’re well.” Graves moved his cigar to the other side of his mouth, smoke still coming from the end.

“I’m sorry, you seem familiar but I can’t quite remember your name.” Landross seemed confused.

Lauren giggled. “He musta been knocked on the ‘ead, eh, Graves?”

“It’s all right, recruit, you’ll remember with time. Right now we’ve got a mission to complete and you’ve just been recruited. We’ve got to get down this street to the building at the end. There a tunnel waits, and at the end of that is our goal.” Graves nodded in approval.

“Seems I have no other choice in the matter. No idea where I am or where I’m going, so I might as well follow the two of you.”

Landross got up and patted the sand off his clothing. He nodded to the other two waiting around him and they trotted off down the street. Every building, every shadow looked threatening, as if they had the potential to come alive at any moment. As they closed in with the building near the end of the street Landross could make out the sign above the doors. It read, “Rose Thorn Theater.” They passed the last of the threatening buildings and came to a rest outside of the theater. Lauren pulled out a silver flask and started chugging, while Graves pulled a canteen out from somewhere in his kit. Landross didn’t feel thirsty at all.

“Everything seems so familiar here.” Landross spoke up to break the otherwise silent downtime.

“You ‘ave been here more times than we can count.” Lauren smiled.

“I’ve been here before?” Landross questioned. “I don’t really remember any of it. Just brief glimpses at the edge of my memory.”

“Ah, so you’ve had the memories all along. You should have spoken up, recruit.” Graves tightened the cap on his canteen and put it away. “I guess I can let you in on the secret.”

“Let me do it, Graves. I’ll handle this ‘un.” Lauren put on her wide smile again. “You created this world, these buildings, and both of us. You should at least remember Grand Rose City. All of your personal greatest achievements have been gathered in one place.”

Lauren tinkered with her steam-driven robot hand as she spoke to Landross nonchalantly. Landross paced back and forth, wearing a grooved area into the sand. A light bulb clicked in Landross’s head illuminating the dark spots of his mind. The memories became clear. He knew, better than anyone else, where they were. He knew that Lauren would act nonchalant as she always did to ease her tension. He knew that Graves would soon pull out one of his signature cigars to do the same. Landross, had

created everything here in his stories. Graves took a deep breath and pulled out a cigar from somewhere in his kit. Landross couldn't remember why the tunnel would be important though. Most of the time he didn't know the importance of any of the things in his stories until the end of the book. More often than not his stories wrote themselves, the characters did what they wanted, everything happened on its own. This story too began writing itself without the help of Landross.

Graves had pulled out his old rifle. Landross knew it as Old Reliable, which happened to also be the title of the war story Graves had come from. Lauren took out a wrench and adjusted some screws on her pneumatic fist. Landross had named it Thumper for its ability to demolish anyone or anything. Lauren fit perfectly into his steampunk novel he wrote less than a year ago.

Landross pulled out a small notebook and pen from his back pocket. Just as Graves used Old Reliable, Landross used his pen and paper. He carried it around with him everywhere to take notes for his stories. Graves and Lauren told Landross that this was his story, and if so he should be able to write it. Even though for the most part it would write itself.

Lauren finished her adjustments and put the wrench back into her toolbelt. Graves slammed home a fresh clip. Landross slipped the cap off his pen. The wind began to pick up, blowing dust into Landross's eyes. Lauren pulled her aviator goggles down giving her a slightly bug eyed look.

"It's time. You ready, recruit?" Graves announced, looking towards the other two.

Lauren took off her leather jacket and tossed it aside. "Ready as I'll ever be." She smiled.

Landross jotted down a note and smiled. "Lauren, you better hit the door. I have a feeling someone will be there waiting."

"Aye, captain." Lauren nodded and put her fist on the door. With a hiss and release of steam her fist extended. The door buckled splinters flew inside. The yell of several men penetrated the silence of Grand Rose City as the splinters hit them.

Graves quickly rested his rifle on the door frame and took a few shots inside. The cries of more men joined the cries of the first as Graves added to the death toll. Landross wrote down a sentence in his notebook just as Graves stormed into the room, Lauren close behind. Just on the inside of the door Landross found the shield that he had written into the story. He snatched it up and took cover as bullets struck around him. If he knew Graves and Lauren as well as he thought he did, then they'd finish soon. It might have been his story, but if a bullet hit him he wouldn't be able to write his way out of the wound.

Landross worked up the courage to take a peak around his shield and saw the black tactical armor of the enemies. As last minute additions to his recent sci-fi novels, they were basically generic villains. He knew how to work the guns if he could only

reach them. Landross heard the hiss of Lauren's fist as another man flew through the air, hitting a wall hard. Still ducking for cover Landross noticed a few seconds of silence.

"It's all over, recruit, you can stop wetting yourself now." Graves grabbed the shield and tossed it aside. Both Graves and Lauren stood in front of the cowering Landross. Lauren tried to shake bits from her fist, and Graves stuck a new cigar into his mouth.

It wasn't until now that Landross began to actually take in his surroundings. The three of them stood in the lobby of a theater. The crumpled bodies of armored men lay spread everywhere. Only two doors were in the room, most likely because Landross had never bothered to describe the bathrooms and such of the place. Both of the doors led to the actual theater.

A voice came over the speaker system setup in the lobby. "Well done. That was only the first of the battle. You still have me to contend with." Landross knew the voice all too well, exactly as he had imagined it all those years ago. A budding writer needing money, Landross wrote a romance novel that he despised. He always knew it would come back to bite him. He had created the character Clyde Loveless as the villain in the story, and Landross hated him with all his being.

The time for Landross to become the hero of his own story had come. He would take down Clyde personally. He took down a few notes in his notebook. This battle would come down to an old fashioned sword fighting duel. Although he had never taken sword fighting classes, Landross figured he had a better chance with a sword than with a gun.

"I've got to take this one on my own." Both Lauren and Graves nodded to Landross.

"Wait a second!" Lauren ran to Landross and hugged him. Her robotic fist dug into his back. She whispered into his ear, "Thanks for the adventure."

Landross looked up at Graves who simply switched his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "Go get him."

Landross gently pushed Lauren away. He loved her with all of his heart. A perfect image of his wife, beauty always surrounded her. He didn't want to leave Graves or Lauren behind but he felt he had to complete the rest of the mission on his own. He had to take care of his worst regret—creating Clyde.

Just inside the door, as he had written, a finely crafted longsword waited for him. The theater cast shadows from dark lights on the walls that could spook anyone. Rows and rows of seats sat empty, always waiting for a show to start. In the front of them all, center stage, Clyde sat in a chair with a fencing rapier lying on the ground in front of his feet. Landross had a feeling that Clyde would choose the rapier. He considered a mace or broadsword too barbaric to even touch. Arrogant, rich, backstabber about summed up Clyde. Landross hated him.

The lights on each side of the aisle led Landross to his final battle in Grand Rose City. He tested the sword, swinging it around, as he walked onto the stage. Clyde kicked the chair out of the way and picked up his rapier, taking on a perfect fencing stance. Clyde practiced fencing in his novel, something that just now came back to Landross's memory. It crossed his mind that he should have chosen a gun fight after all.

"So we meet again, Landross. On this stage the final battle will be held. If you manage to defeat the magnificent Clyde, then the tunnel you are looking for will open. If not—"

"Shut up. Just keep your mouth closed, Clyde. I've hated you since I first wrote your name on a piece of paper. You and your novels got me started, but I trashed you. I'll trash you again."

He knew he shouldn't give Clyde time to talk. In the novels Clyde could talk his way out of anything. Before Clyde could respond Landross charged at him.

Clyde quickly dodged as Landross tripped past him. Turning, Landross charged again angrily. Clyde, a much better swordsman than Landross, had the advantage and Landross knew it. With such quick reflexes and such a quick sword Landross would never lay a hit on him. He had a plan.

Taking a very open stance, sword held above his head, Landross prepared for the worst. He knew that Clyde would always take advantage of an opponent's opening. Clyde took the bait, running his sword home through Landross's chest. Landross grabbed the sword, pinning it in his chest, and swung down hard with his other hand on the surprised Clyde. The battle ended.

Landross's chest ached badly, worse than he had ever felt in his life. He scanned the room once more. A rattle drew his attention downward towards a trap door opening in the stage. A large door frame rose from below stage until it reached a height of twenty feet. He took a closer look. Through it he could see a long dark tunnel, the only light reflected off the black rock surface from further down.

Walking around the door frame, Landross looked through the opposite side and saw the same. The door frame seemed to contain another world, despite there being nothing on either side of it.

A cool draft came from the tunnel, blowing Landross's hair gently. He had the sinking feeling that if he went the rest of the way, if he completed the mission, it would all end. Something tugged at him and he was overwhelmed with the urgency to enter. He fought it as hard as he could.

The doctors looked down on him, their heads covering the bright lights above. The surgery came out a success, and a long line of stitches on Landross's chest would leave a scar to prove it. His family let loose sighs of relief as they saw his eyes open. Later he would find out that he had a heart attack during surgery and they came close

to losing him. Clyde had almost gotten the best of him. The thoughts of his adventure ran through his head as he closed his eyes, still tired from the surgery. He promised himself that once he woke up, he'd take care of Clyde once and for all.

Riding Atop Elephants

Rachel Jensen

It was obvious by the way she stood, the cool September breeze whipping her light camisole around her waist with her face turned towards the whispered drops of mist, she didn't care about the weather. Michael stood back and watched her thick frame; the collection of skin above her elbows cinched in large lumps that shook when she flared and flapped her arms. The sweater she threw on before running out the door was only buttoned at the top, exposing a large white belly with tiny yellow lines stretching up out from the waistline of her gray sweatpants. Her laugh was childish and simple, loud in the same surprising way the sudden scream of a wet-headed baptized baby fills a chapel's walls with its echo reverberated back and forth from sloped ceiling to dusty stained glass. When the wind began to pick up and the smile shook across her long face, Michael opened the screen door and called to her.

When Miranda heard her name, she stopped spinning, set a side-long gaze at her gray-haired father behind the front porch door and slapped her belly. She frowned.

Michael stepped onto the stairs and sat down. His daughter, love and anger encased in a two-hundred and forty pound cage, came bellowing towards him. Each leg seemed to give a little with each step; the skin of each calf seemed to grow towards the ankle into the soft slope and roundness of each foot. The maddening scream grew until her bare foot reached the sidewalk and caught on a slight crack. The scream stopped and she fell slowly, as if a cloud or a breeze held her up until her skin tumbled onto the dirt ground.

Michael stood up and walked down the sidewalk. The mist was heavier now, leaving a thin film on his hair and eyelashes.

"Hurts," Miranda said. She pointed to her right foot. The largest toe was bleeding on the left corner near the nail.

"Yes," Michael said. If he was angry, if he wished she had caused greater injury to herself so next time she would know that getting mad only caused pain, he didn't show it. He stepped behind her and rested his legs behind her. He put pressure on her back with his knees and cupped his hands under her shoulders. She pushed up from the ground slowly and carefully, until almost all of her weight was on Michael. He

wincing and pulled her the rest of the way until she stood on both feet. Even though she was almost twice his size in girth, father stood over a head taller than daughter. The sky was entirely gray, and the wind blew large drops of water that splattered on the two of them in the front yard.

“Inside,” Michael said. He pointed towards the screen door and Miranda lumbered up the stairs, her tongue lolling around her mouth until she salivated enough to use her lips to make loud smacks. Michael followed her and bolted the door behind him. Sometimes if the wind caught it right, the unlocked latch would loosen and the door would flap against the side of the house. He’d replaced the spring three times since the summer months and the arthritis securing itself in his fingers grew stronger in the cold.

Miranda was lying on the green and burgundy couch, already covered with a blanket and sucking her thumb. The television was turned to *SpongeBob Squarepants*, and the eyelids of the silent watcher began to droop. Michael thought about taking a nap, and turned the volume down of the cartoon show he himself found detestable and nothing like the entertainment of his youth. He often fell asleep in his bedroom, his radio tuned to *Prairie Home Companion*, the closest thing to *Abbott and Costello* or the *Jack Benny Program* his radio could receive. He took a step up the wooden staircase and took a breath as his hand rested on the banister. The phone rang. He turned and walked slowly to the kitchen, assured in the fact that nothing could wake his sleeping daughter. Once she went under, she became like a bear in hibernation; she snored just as ferociously too.

He pulled the receiver off the turn-style and held it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Michael?” A woman’s voice, younger than his and deeper, but with the same timbre as his own.

“Ah, Rena,” he said. “I thought you’d be calling.”

“Yes. The party. I was worried you’d forgotten.”

“I’m old, Irena, not senile,” Michael sighed. He was only eight years older than his sister, and she seemed to claim this as an accomplishment over him.

“I know, I know, Michael. It’s just that you’ve got your hands full over there. That’s why I offered to plan it.” She paused. “Miranda doesn’t know, does she?”

“No, she has no idea,” Michael sighed. “What do you need?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to make sure you’ll have her at the church by three tomorrow. No earlier, but the clowns and elephant rides start at three. I thought she should go first,” she said.

“Elephants? What all do you have planned?”

“Well, the grass area surrounding the church is plenty large enough to throw an exciting party for Miranda. It is a big birthday.”

“Apparently,” he said. “Although I don’t think *my* fortieth was that special.”

“We cannot have a bunch of black balloons and jokes about sailing for death’s door for Miranda.” Even over the phone, Michael could tell his sister was becoming indignant. “It would be depressing and not at all festive.”

“And she wouldn’t get it,” Michael said.

“Wow, Mike,” Irena said. “I think I’m going to go. Don’t let the poor girl hear you.”

“Rena, stop it. I’m not insensitive; it’s just been a long day.”

“I know.” She sighed. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Mike.”

Michael hung up the phone and steadily walked upstairs. He had no idea how his daughter would cope with the excitement of the coming day. He was glad he hadn’t had to plan the party this year. Miranda never knew when her birthday was, but when the morning came and she saw balloons and a present wrapped at the kitchen table, she knew it was for her. The stairs creaked with his knees and when he got to the top, he leaned against the wall to stretch his legs and back. A loud creak came from downstairs, but it was Miranda just shifting her weight on the couch. Michael sat on the edge of his bed. He always slept on the left. Over twenty years had passed and he still slept on the same side. He looked at the floor and said a prayer to have his wife’s patience for the next day.

He only meant to sleep for an hour or so, but Michael woke to the excited screams and loud clapping palms of his daughter. He opened his eyes to her wide animated mouth, her tongue lifting and dancing back and forth outside her lips while her eyes moved back and forth in her head. She didn’t have words for what she knew. Michael slowly rolled onto his side and pushed himself up.

“Good morning, Miranda,” he said. He kissed her head and smoothed her mussed hair down around her ears.

“G-goo-da!” Miranda cried. She ran out of the room; Michael followed slowly, the stairs creaking and his joints popping at each step.

In the middle of the living room sat a large box, wrapped in pink unicorn paper and green and orange ribbons. Blue and purple balloons floated on strings inches below the ceiling, and two party hats sat on the coffee table. Michael smiled. He owed Irena for her help; he couldn’t leave the house to shop and there was no way to keep this hidden from Miranda for more than one day. He walked over to the table and put a hat on.

“Happy birthday, my daughter,” he said. He pulled the rubber band around her face and set the cardboard hat on top of her head. The excess skin overflowed around the string, and Michael had to look away when she smiled up at him. She looked almost exactly like her fifth birthday picture, just in a larger body.

“Would you like to open your present?” he said.

“Habby bir-bay.” Miranda waddled slowly to the box, as if it were a deer or a rabbit. She didn’t want to spook it and have it disappear forever into the dark trees she didn’t know or understand.

Michael helped her untie the bow, but she tore the paper off by herself. Miranda struggled with presents; she hated to rip the paper, but curiosity haunted her more. She ripped each piece quickly and sadly, and piled them up on the floor until the entire box was clear of every last frolicking pastel unicorn. When she finished, she clapped, and Michael picked the paper up from the floor. He smiled encouragingly, and after a quick smile and tilt of her head, Miranda opened the box. One eye peeked over the side of the cardboard and then she sat back. She slowly leaned forward again, this time sticking her entire head into the box and laughing. She pulled a bright pink dress with enough ruffles and tulle to be a tutu. It glittered in the sunlight gleaming through the window, and reminded Michael of a fish; scale upon scale of pink shimmer and fluffed fins expanded in the air. Miranda screamed and jumped up and down, her body jiggling in her purple nightgown, the mass of skin and fat screaming to be thrust into the coral dress.

He lifted her arms for her and pulled off the nightie. Usually she didn’t need much help getting dressed every day, but this was a bit more complicated than a pair of jeans and a sweater. Michael knew the zipper in the back could be hazardous if she got it tangled in her hair. He struggled finding the opening to the bottom of the dress to slide over his daughter’s head because the layers of white tulle kept sticking together and the tight bones in his fingers resisted every attempt at separating them. Miranda stood with her arms straight up in the air and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

After a few minutes Michael finally found the middle of the dress and pulled the gown down over her head and past her hips. He carefully zipped up the back, first gently lifting Miranda’s shoulder-length blonde hair out of the way. Miranda clapped and ran to the bathroom to find the mirror. As a child she had spent hours in front of it, dressing up with her mother and accessorizing to the point of garishness. Michael followed her and smiled as he watched her spin in front of the mirror, as if the wind circled around her and lifted the skirt up around her waist; the mounds of tulle bounced underneath and covered her like a diaper. He certainly had to hand it to his sister; she had a way of making Miranda perfectly happy.

In the kitchen, Michael sat Miranda in a chair he had decorated with balloons and crepe paper, and he made scrambled eggs with ketchup, a secret family ingredient. The yellow eggs coated in the bright tomato ketchup were what Michael and his wife ate the morning she told him she was pregnant. They had been trying for over ten years, and the joy spread between the couple like an illness; they felt sick with excitement.

Wendy loved Miranda with all her heart and Michael had loved those first years, the two girls of his life running around in the backyard, chasing the stray cats and catching butterflies in fishing nets. Wendy held the net closed with the butterfly gingerly attached to the side to show Miranda how she had to be delicate with the fragile wings and not touch them. Miranda watched, her mouth wide and her eyes squinted carefully at the black, gold, and blue insect. It lifted its wings slowly one time and put them back, revealing the gold pattern with blue streaks. Miranda shrieked joyfully and clapped her hands happily on the butterfly. Wendy pulled the net away and looked at the broken wings and crushed body misshapen inside the green netting. Miranda ran off; Wendy shook the mess out of the mesh. It was the first time Michael saw she was hurt by Miranda's childishness.

Miranda hated car rides. She squirmed and struggled with the seat belts and the door handle, so Michael had to make sure the doors remained locked at all times. If he spoke firmly enough, she would calm down, but today provided extra difficulty because of the large amount of dress tangled around her arms and legs. He held her hand and she sucked on her other thumb, the seatbelt tight over her right arm, holding her against the seat. As they neared the church, Miranda began to grunt and jut her head forward. She had friends at church; people talked to her.

Michael smiled as he parked the car across the street. He led her to the back of the church where a large dirt lot usually used for parking on Sunday services was decorated with a large open tent and hundreds of people, mostly church members, wearing bright colors of clothing and carrying balloons. Miranda screamed and started to gallop, short grunts with each stride. She was caught in a hug of smiling faces. One of them, a gray-haired woman, dressed with triangle glasses and a long dress covered in sunflowers kissed Miranda on each cheek as Michael walked up.

"You've outdone yourself, Rena," he said.

"Well, it's a special day, darling," Irena said. She took Miranda by the hand and led her past the tent where the majority of people were crowded in a semi-circle. Michael followed behind, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders relaxed. He watched his sister lead his daughter by the hand towards the large rough hide of the animal while the trainer stood near, gently lifted the chubby wrist to touch the gray skin. Miranda's fingers grazed the tiny thick coarse hairs and pulled back. She didn't make a sound; slowly, she reached again and put her whole hand on the side of the elephant. Her eyes grew and her mouth opened wide as she gazed at her aunt. Irena led her up the stairs to sit on top of the monstrous animal. They rode together, Irena behind Miranda with her arms wrapped as far they could go around her pink sequined belly. Irena laughed and spoke into Miranda's ear. Miranda's eyes hardly blinked, and when Irena took her hand and waved it at Michael, she grunted softly.

"Da!" she said.

Michael smiled and waved back. The pink of his daughter's dress was almost blinding compared to the thick gray skin of the elephant. The creature marched in its circle, led by the trainer with a rope connected to a stake in the ground. It didn't protest, and its eyes hardly moved as it made its last round. When Miranda reached the ground she screamed and clapped her hands. She jumped towards the elephant in small bursts. Irena grabbed her hands, whispered to her and pulled her away. The elephant then began its rides for the rest of the guests.

The members of the church spoke to Michael periodically. He didn't remember most of their faces, and it was hard to think of things to say. He was surprised to see so many people, and he was shocked by the large table piled with decorated packages and presents inside the tent. Walking over to examine how large the table was compared to his van, he knew he'd need to pack and repack them all to get them in it along with the birthday girl of honor.

Irena entered the tent with Miranda and a troop of children. As the director of the Methodist Children's Choir, Irena often exploited their young talent at community functions. She stood in front of them, the four rows of kids shouting "Happy Birthday" at the top of their lungs. Miranda grunted along throwing in some "haps" whenever she felt it necessary. The people clapped and four men carried out a large cake from inside the church. The cake, with its white and pink icing reminded Michael more of a wedding cake than a birthday cake. Each tier grew smaller and a single giant candle sparkled on top. Irena helped Miranda blow it out and then they both dug a hand into the bottom tier, a tradition Miranda had followed all her life. Irena rubbed a tiny piece on Miranda's nose and she laughed, loud and happy as she plunged her own handful into her mouth.

As the party wound down, Michael headed towards the elephant's circle. She still plodded along, a few little kids taking advantage of an extra ride as the older guests left.

"It's your turn," Irena hugged him from the side.

"I'm too old for that, Rena," he said.

"You're only eight years older than me!" she said. "And I did it!"

Michael looked up at the animal; he thought he saw something trapped within the big monotonous eye, but it blinked and rolled over. The trainer helped Michael up the steps and into the big wooden seat strapped to the elephant's back. He was amazed it didn't slip off the side and crash into pieces on the ground, him along with it. As he sat, he leaned back towards the young man holding the rope.

"How old is the-uh, big lug here?" He leaned forward and patted the elephant's back.

"Misty is fifteen," the trainer said. "She'll retire in another year or so. Free roaming at the zoo for the rest of her life. She'll like it there." He patted her side and

Misty began to walk. Michael felt the dip and lift of her body, and while the little box seemed clumsy and awkward, each step of the animal's walk felt graceful and poised. Misty stopped periodically to play with her trunk, and Michael was able to look at the festivities closing down around him. He saw a couple of clowns helping his sister load his minivan with gifts, and a circle of kids were playing tag, Miranda included, her pink exterior glowing in the setting sun. He rested his head in his hand and closed his eyes, the soft sway of the broad creature below him easing the tensed lines in his forehead. He found himself rather disappointed when the ride was over. At the trainers command, Misty slowly lowered herself, and sat on the ground. Michael climbed out of his seat and down the stairs. With a short pat on Misty's trunk he thanked her for the ride. She didn't look down at him; she didn't even move. Irena and Miranda stood nearby and clapped for Misty and her trainer; Irena held Miranda's hair to keep her from lumbering towards the tired gray creature.

Michael walked over to his sister and helped carry the last load of gifts to the van.

"Someone should be here to get the tent tomorrow morning. Everything else is cleaned up," Irena said.

"This was too much, Irena," Michael said. He kissed her head, the right side above the temple. She just smiled and set two blue and pink wrapped boxes on the back seat.

The ride home was loud. Miranda turned whenever she thought Michael wasn't looking and grabbed a gift. He let her open one, but after she opened the box and found what it was, she threw it—a stuffed turtle—and went for another wrapped package. She laughed every time he pulled a box away from her. When they got in the house, Miranda ran in the living and jumped. She wanted her gifts.

Miranda pulled away and plummeted her body into the couch. She moved it back against the wall, and knocked over a plant sitting on a side table. Dirt tumbled across the floor. She screamed and began to cry.

"Stop it!" Michael said. She didn't. She began to punch the couch and all the pillows. Michael ran as fast as his arthritic knees could bend, and grabbed the first box out of the van. He ran in and showed it to Miranda. Immediately she stopped her screeches and looked at the box.

"Move the couch back," Michael said. She frowned, but he took her hand and led her behind the couch. She put her hands on it and slowly moved it back. Michael picked up the plant and set it back on top of the table.

"Here," he said. He gave her the gift. She tore it open, not bothering to save the paper, and squealed with delight when she found a package of sparkly hair bands. She tossed it on the couch and looked at Michael.

"No," he said. Her face began to scrunch up again, so he went outside and brought a pile back. And so the night went, Michael bringing in a pile every time Miranda began to pout. He walked a steady circle, thinking of how his wife might react.

Michael sighed and made his last trip out to the van. A large pile of clothes, jewelry, and stuffed animals buried the couch with Miranda sitting in front of them, unsure of what each thing was, but certain they were hers. She guarded them like a large bloated dragon, unable to do anything of substance with its treasure, but defensive nonetheless. She fell asleep amidst her gifts, and Michael began to pick up the stray stuffed animals that were scattered near the couch. A stuffed duck, with a soft green head and glimmering glass eye, caught Michael's glance. He picked it up and shook his head as he smiled sadly.

"Oh, Wendy," he whispered. A few years after they were married, he took his new wife duck hunting. Wendy hated it. She yelled loudly and shook the long grasses around her whenever a duck landed in the water nearby. What was supposed to be a three day trip ended after two hours. The whole ride home she cried, and asked Michael how he could kill a living creature.

At first Michael laughed, surprised by her overreaction, but she didn't stop crying. It was then she told him she thought she wasn't able to have kids. Michael had pulled his pick-up over to the side of the road and held her hand until she stopped crying. He hadn't known what to say then, and he didn't know what to say after a doctor's appointment twenty years later when she told him she was in the advanced stages of lymphoma. She didn't cry that time; Michael did. She held him while his head rested on her lap; his large tears left round wet splotches on her gray pants. Those splotches stood out the most in his mind as they matched the spots that began to appear on her skin, last of all her face, as her body began to lose its battle.

Michael slowly sat in an arm chair and gazed at his daughter. Someday soon he wouldn't be able to care for her on his own; the strain of carrying out her every need and want would be too much of a burden. But that day wasn't today. He closed his eyes while he leaned back against the cushion of the chair. While his daughter snored near him, he imagined he could almost feel himself atop the elephant again, the gentle motion of the great beast below him slowly rocking him to sleep.

Ice Planet

John R. Lindensmith

Frigid air, choke on it. Can't breathe. Dryness squeezes phlegm from lungs. Mucus in nostrils turns solid. Nasal cavity burns as if from snorting dry ice. Sealant of contact lenses frozen; hot sand in pools of vision. Tears run down face, frozen in mid-stream. Skin is numb. Blood in the cheeks turns into sharp icicles, splintering within the fleshy veins, piercing the face. Grimace, lips feel heavy, hanging beneath chin, dragging upon collar. Legs wobble in front of body, chilled to the very marrow. Joints ache, screaming. The icy atmosphere inflames the body, a sharp contrast one can only feel to believe. Imagine the black fungi of frost bite devouring the face, the toes, the fingers. Touch the nose and it crumbles into frozen ash. The mucus runs down the lips in streams. Stench of snot is overpowering. Body grows numb, disconnected from self. Drifting through the breeze, which steers the flesh toward frozen death. Genitalia has shrunk and disappeared. Fingers pull into a tight fist, trying to find warmth within the palms. There is only the relief of a semi-less cold touch.

Turn the key. The machine tries to start up, struggles, and then dies, much like everything else in this wasteland. Turn the key once more. The machine finally roars to life, exhaling chilled steam.

This is a frozen hell.

This is North Dakota, winter of 2008. Huge snowdrifts pile against apartment buildings, houses, schools, locking the inhabitants inside, trapping them within their warm dens, isolated from the outside world, a desolate plain of white. Ice slicks the roads. Temperature is negative 44. One lone figure moves through the chaotic mess, delivering newspapers to an alien, ice planet, absent of all inhabitants, except for the occasional, mysterious being wearing a face-mask, plowing through the snow with a red, angry machine that eats the white powder and then pukes it out a long ventricle. The paper boy is also equipped with a face-mask and spacesuit that allows him to explore this barren frozen land. Blue/red coat stuffed with feathers over a jean jacket. Tan cargo pants over long johns. Two pairs of extra thick socks pulled past the shins and over the pant legs. Heavy-duty boots and gloves. These thick layers of cloth protect his fragile human form from hypothermia, frostbite, and pneumonia,

the paper boy's only barrier against the unforgiving ice planet. The atmosphere is toxic, but he is safe within the suit.

The paper boy trudges through white-powdery mounds; his legs sucked into their deep frozen depths. Chunks of snow and ice fall into the gaping mouths of his boots, and his toes become wet, frozen. When this happens, the paper boy must crawl to the safety of his warm vehicle, claw the ice from his boots with numb fingers and place his socked feet on the ventilation of the heaters. The hot air soothes his face, but he knows he must exit the vehicle and once again enter the frigid blast of the high winds. The face-mask only works so well. Congealed snot drips into the lining of the nose pocket, onto his lips. Face full of Novocain, injected by Mother Winter. Eyes squint against the brightness of sheer white that blankets existence. The paper boy trudges on, moving from house to house, snow drift to snow drift.

The chill paralyzes the extremities, then crawls its way to the heart. Body temperature drops. The shivers wriggle their way through the veins; the boy's teeth clatter together. Surely, this will wear away the enamel. 44 below zero. It is much too cold to be outside. But the paper boy continues, moving, trudging, fighting against the harsh gale, focusing on the last remnants of warmth deep in his core. Half-way through the route, he realizes the mission is futile. This new icy frontier is uninhabitable. Nature was not put here for man. On the food chain, Nature is first, man is second.

The vehicle's weak tires are trapped in drifts of snow. Amazing how tiny flakes composed of water can conspire together—billions of them—to form a mound so huge it can stop a two ton machine. The paper boy sits within the warmth of the metal box (another barrier between him and icy hell). No matter how hard he pumps the gas, the wheels only spin against the slick frozen water. Desperation floods his brain. He will have to enter the icy atmosphere again, and this time, run for his life. Run to the safety of his home. Run without slipping on the frozen surface.

Nature doesn't care about man. Nature is man's greatest rival. Six months ago, this planet was full of lush, green grass, and colorful, blooming flowers. The air was scented by the sweetness of barbeque, hot dogs, cinnamon buns, and lemonade. The sky was blue and crystal clear, white puffy clouds gently gliding by. The sun toasted the skin just right. Now, nothing. No smells but the sweat and desperation from within the mask. No grass, just blankets of freezing ice and snow. No sun or blue sky, just dreary gray. Where there was once life, now there is nothing. The trees and flowers are dead. The buzzing bees, dead. Gray and white are the colors that best describe this bleak new world. Running home six months ago would have been a breeze. Running home now meant the possibility of frostbite and pneumonia.

The paper boy's boots thrash through the snow, pound over ice, making sure to grip and not slip. His ears are red and ache with throbbing pain that hammers the

head. Face is completely numb. Legs scream with exhaustion. Fingers don't exist on hands anymore. Hands are dumb weights, hanging on loose dead arms. He runs, taking in frozen, harsh gasps that rip apart his throat. Coughing and gagging up his snot-filled lungs. Logical thought is erased. Survivor's Instinct oils and ignites the engine of the body. Run, run, run!

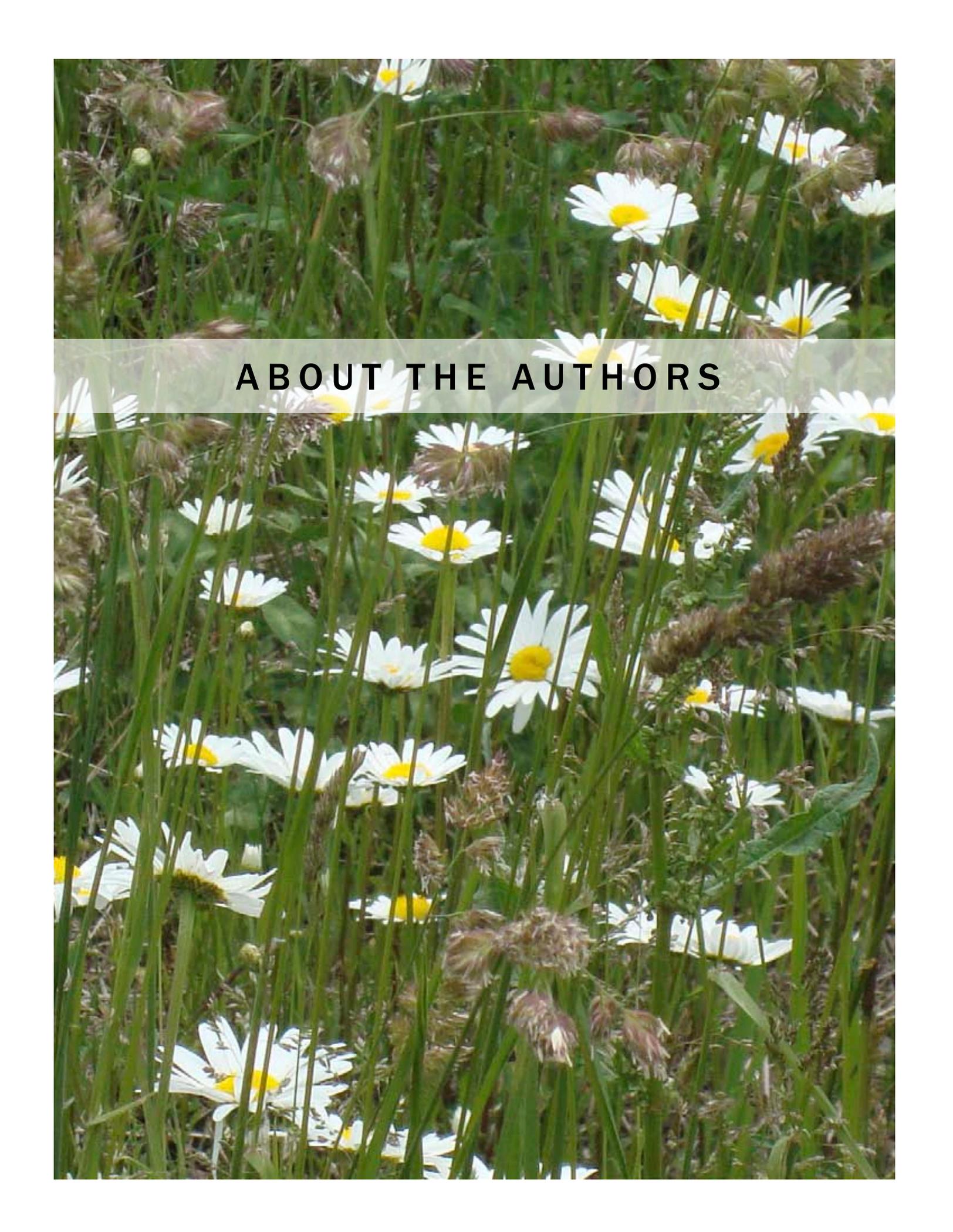
The world tilts, equilibrium is disrupted, up is down, down is up. Thwack! Sharp pain, like an icicle impaled through the back of the head. Paper boy lies in the snow drift, which hides a thick sheet of ice. He can only stare into the gloomy sky, moaning and cursing, as the sun slowly peeks out from behind the gray clouds. The warmth of the yellow eye-in-the-sky is vague, but present. And staring into that sun, he realizes how beautiful this disaster is. Even though the landscape is cold, dead, and barren, the sun is still there, watching over him.

The snowflakes gently kiss his numb face, swirling down upon him from heaven. God's dandruff, he thinks. Magical dandruff. The frigid air is embracing, chilling his bones, tickling his nerves, igniting his brain cells with electric pops. The beauty of this ice planet overwhelms his senses: the howl of the wind sings sweetly to him, the magical snow glittering like tiny prisms in the sun's light. Each flake contains the beautiful, vibrant colors of summer. Red, blue, green, yellow, orange, violet sparkle all around him in micro-form.

The numbness in his body becomes comforting. The struggle against nature melts away, and instead, he allows nature to take him. He allows himself to be one with nature, not fight her. An ecstasy on par with sexual desire spikes his dopamine levels as Mother Nature swallows him in her powdery embrace and shines her light upon his inferior flesh. She is so great, so majestic, he is not worthy. Nature is God, and his existence, in comparison with her mighty winds, her gorgeous prisms, her life-giving sun...is inferior. He realizes he is a speck of dust amongst her creations. He is a part of her, yet only a tiny part. The feuds, the material, the worries of life become insignificant in comparison to her immaculate beauty.

"Hey, get out of the damn snow! You're gonna freeze to death!"

The paper boy sits up and hitches a ride with the trucker, thankful for the blast of hot air.

A photograph of a field of white daisies with yellow centers, interspersed with green grass and some brown, dried-looking plants. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, and the overall scene is a lush, natural setting. A semi-transparent grey banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text "ABOUT THE AUTHORS" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Kurtis Cavender grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee. He has since lived in Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma, where he is currently working on an M. A. in 20th and 21st Century Literature. His interests include Shakespeare, modern poetry, and the literature of the American West and South; and outside of literature, hiking, camping and fishing.



Katherine Coats is from a small town in southwest Oklahoma and the middle child of three girls. She graduated Altus High School in 2005. She has always enjoyed writing and is currently earning a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry with a minor in Mathematics at Southwestern Oklahoma State University.



Ranell Collins graduated Summa Cum Laude in December of 2006 from the University of Central Oklahoma with a B.A. in English Education and a minor in Creative Studies. This May she will graduate from UCO with an M.A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She is a previous winner of both the Carpenter Square Theatre and the UCO ten-minute playwriting competitions.



Kimberly Condon was born in Kansas City, Missouri and was raised in Lawrence, Kansas. She has previously published poetry through Dystopiamagazine.com. She is currently studying literature and creative writing at the University of Kansas and will commence studying law at KU in the fall of 2010. She lives in Lawrence with her daughter, Tatum.



Malory Craft is a senior Creative Studies major at the University of Central Oklahoma. Hailing from Choctaw, Oklahoma, she lives in her sorority house among 30 women and enjoys sushi, National Public Radio, and Jason Mraz. She also very much enjoys reading and writing poetry.



Amanda James-Dill lives in Southern Oklahoma with her family and their cat. Having recently graduated from East Central University, she holds a Bachelor's degree in English. Her other works include one book of poetry, *Katharsis*, many other poems, and a few creative non-fiction pieces, which have appeared in various publications such as *The Dead Mule of Southern Literature*, *Glassfire Magazine*, and *Originals*.



Amber M. Cianfrocco was born in Rome, New York. At a young age she began to compose short pieces of writing and journal work which gradually became an art form by the time she graduated from Pittsfield High School in Massachusetts in 2001. After her service in the U.S Army, Amber went to college at South Dakota State University (SDSU) where she is currently working on her Bachelors in English Education. Amber is also working toward her minors in Business Management, Professional Writing and an emphasis in creative writing. She currently works as a student writer for University Relations at SDSU.



Justin Kyle Garver is a senior at the University of Central Oklahoma majoring in creative studies with a film studies minor. He is an aspiring fantasy and sci-fi novelist occasionally writing screenplays. He is influenced by works from Robert Jordan, Tracy Hickman, George R.R. Martin, and many others. On the side Justin is a fencer, a gamer, a web designer, and a nerd.



Janet Jarvis is currently a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She teaches at UNL and Southeast Community College. She will be moving back to Central Nebraska in June, and will spend as much time as she can on the grasslands and contemplating the rim of the Prairie.



Rachel Jensen is a student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who is working on her Masters in Creative Writing. Her interests lie mostly in fiction, but she has been known to dabble in poetry as well. Besides exploring the mysteries of the written world, she enjoys playing piano and trying to keep her houseplants from dying which is proving to be a difficult task.



John R. Lindensmith is a 21-year-old writer from Mandan, North Dakota. He was born in Japan, where his parents served as missionaries. In 2006, he self-published and promoted a psychological thriller entitled *Mystery Man*. He is currently in his junior year of college, working toward a Bachelor's in English.



Laura Madeline Wiseman is the recipient of the 2009 Academy of American Poets Award from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she is a doctoral candidate and teaches English. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Feminist Studies*, *MARGIE*, *Arts & Letters*, and elsewhere. She is the author of two chapbooks *My Imaginary* (Dancing Girl Press, forthcoming 2010) and *Ghost Girl* (Pudding House, forthcoming). Other awards include the Mari Sandoz Award in fiction, the Will Jumper Award in poetry, and five Pushcart Prize nominations.



Adam Worden was born poor, on a flat slat of ground named Hennessey, Oklahoma, and looks forward to improving his situation. He is currently attending UCO in Edmond, OK, slightly sliding southerly slat. This is his first—but hopefully not his only—publication.