

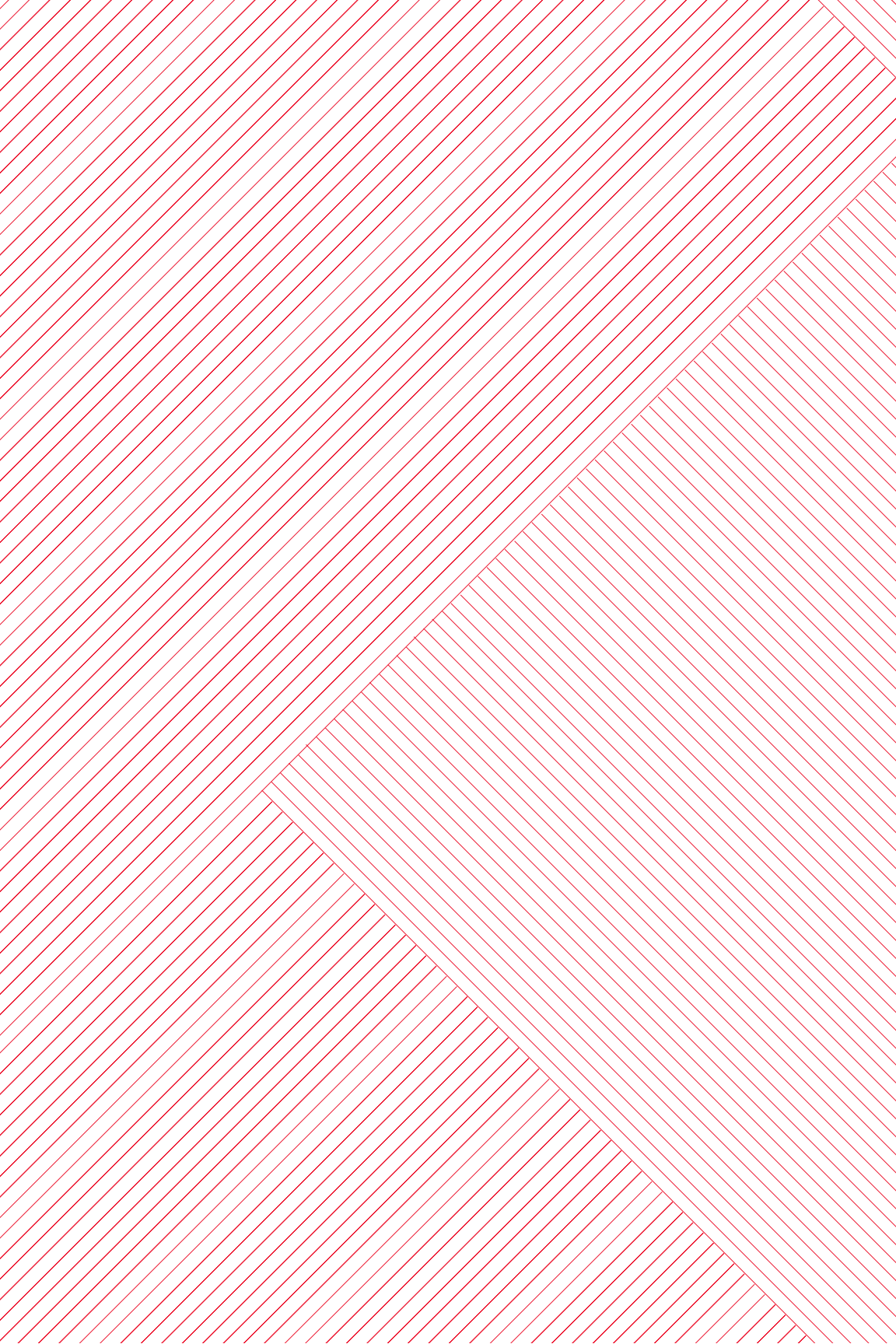
*A publication of the  
winners from Cal Poly's  
40th annual Al Landwehr  
Creative Writing Contest.*

**B**

**yzantium**  
BOLDLY forward

SENIOR EDITORS  
Mateja Lane & Beth Shirley

ART DIRECTOR  
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# BYZANTIUM

*CAL POLY'S*  
*20<sup>TH</sup>*  
*LITERARY ANNUAL* } 2010



# *acknowledgements*

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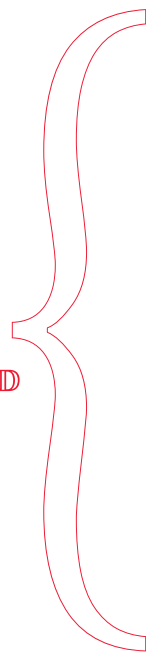
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**BOLD**



## foreWORD

*The concept behind this year's theme, "Bold," actually came from concepts our art director, Melissa, showed us during our first meeting. We had tossed around ideas of, "Timeless," "Enduring," and "Vintage," amidst our discussions of how in the world we were going to raise money for the journal this year. With the economy tanking, we knew art programs like ours would be the first to suffer. We wanted to find a theme that captured how we felt about art and how art made us feel. We kept coming back to the same idea: We have to just be bold and go forth with this project, as if nothing in the world could stop it. As soon as Melissa showed us the black background with the neon lettering, we knew exactly what our theme was to be this year. The pieces seemed to knit into place before our eyes.*

*Art has to be bold in order to achieve anything. It has to punch limits in the gut and spill its own soul on the page, canvas, or music sheet. It must stand out and stand on its own. The poem on the next page, "Sailing to Byzantium," is about striking out for a land where people are not afraid to be individual and create art that is bold. For us, the journey of getting Volume 20 published has felt much like the journey to Byzantium: long and arduous, but extremely rewarding in the end.*

*We set out boldly, and we "have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium."*  
—Mateja & Beth

*william butler yeats*  
1928 { SAILING *to* BYZANTIUM

II

THAT is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.

III

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of **BYZANTIUM**.



### III

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

### IV

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of **BYZANTIUM**  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

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POETRY }  


1  
ST  
place

*RIPPED HUSK Alissa Magorian*

## *RIPPED HUSK*

*by Alissa Magorian*

Two halves of a husk  
lost their seed—  
one blue day it dropped  
through the center  
    like a heart  
    or a stone  
    or a star, falling.

The sun is to blame. And the rain,  
and wind.  
Leathered armor, cragged  
cupule cap  
encased acorn-seed  
till its edges  
blistered and ripped.

• • •

White-summer heat  
rising off black-tar road—  
so hot it blistered my feet  
on the jog from pool to car.  
My pre-teen limbs hung in angles  
as you drove, hunch-heavy,  
lips taut as tightrope lines.  
Only when you slid out  
did I see the puddle—  
like mulled wine—  
soaked through the seat.

• • •

Dead air of an August afternoon,  
sun dulled by dust

from ploughed fields.  
I sneak to your cabinet  
in search of your caked mascara brush,  
your liquid rouge, half-dried out.  
There it sits—a nebula  
of blood-and-flesh mass,  
russet miasmic fluid,  
in a clear medical jar.

• • •

Curving round  
slump-shouldered hills,  
the crevice of the creek  
rips through the land—  
nothing left but viscous  
algae-sludge, drying  
to a stagnant, stony pulp.  
Scraggly oaks drop  
their acorns early.  
I try to tell you that  
I'm bleeding too,  
but the red rock rises,  
and you're on the other side  
of the ravine.







## ALISSA *magorian*

*Alissa comes from the rural town of Patterson, California, where the most delicious apricots in the world are grown. Beguiled with words and stories from an early age, she has had a turbulent romance with writing. Three moments bubble to the surface in her affair with language. First, Camille Norton's lips parting around the curves of the first line—round and heavy her words fell, river stones tumbling over one another. Second, studying Finnegans Wake in Dublin, she was swept away by Joyce's sacrilegious spurning of logic and conventional semantics to retrieve a deeper truth. Last, she discovered and treasured Audrey Lorde's manifesto that "Poetry is Not a Luxury." Alissa is deeply grateful to her partner, Michelle Keillor, for all her support and love.*





2ND

PLACE

*WHAT IT IS TO BE A MAN* Carly Hanzlik

## WHAT IT IS TO BE A MAN

by Carly Hanzlik

I remember the first fight  
my brother John had with my father—  
The sun and moon were  
trading places against a burning  
autumn sky in Danvers, Minnesota,  
and the kitchen air was so thick  
with garlic and slate-grey smoke  
that I felt I could never  
fully rinse myself of it.  
Too much noise, loud static,  
then just bodies. Men.  
So beautiful and ridged,  
they looked like lightning dancers  
praising gods I'd never heard of.

The day Father brought John home,  
he was a musk ox carrying a  
milk body still warm from the womb,  
wrapped in an unmistakable blue blanket—a *boy*.  
Father dreamt of cheers echoing  
in the football stadium at Glenwood High,  
and sucking freshly cut Cohibas  
on front porches stained with  
birch wood and tobacco.  
He pictured them in fifteen years  
inhaling the fumes—  
And he tells the story of the first time  
he ever fucked a woman.

The palm of John's hand  
knows where it's going—  
winds a path from the sole  
of a foot around to curve  
an aching inner thigh,  
then up to graze the peach-skin belly  
of a man.  
It lingers there for a moment,  
and John's hand mimics  
the steady rise and fall—  
like the breath of the Earth.  
And he knows he has never  
felt more alive.  
Somewhere under the same sky  
Father sits on a thousand fading front porches—  
Hard. Silent. Strong as an ox.

## CARLY *hanzlik*

*Carly Hanzlik is a third-year English major. She loves reading and writing poetry. In her free time, she enjoys running, Thai food, and going to concerts. She would like to give a shout-out to her great friends, supportive family, and her awesome poetry professor, Kevin Clark!*





3RD  
place

*SOLEDAD Sam Thorn*

## SOLEDAD

by Sam Thorn

I haven't talked to anyone in weeks.  
Well, not more than a few words.  
I tried to start up a conversation with a guy  
in a New Mexico diner the other day;  
I was hauling a load of horse manure downstate,  
and he dabbling in tax evasion.  
Well, that's what it sounded like to me, but  
that's as far as we got.

I can feel the tiny veins in my eyes  
poking out like parched flowers in a drought.  
Weak headlights and the soft drone of  
an aching cowboy and his guitar. He's  
wailing that breed of sorrow you can't help but laugh at.  
*Which, I suppose, makes it all the more sad....*

*Loneliness*, Mr. Alvarez had said  
with a sad, knowing wink as he'd handed over the keys:  
*Loneliness comes with the job, brother.*

I roll down the window, and the cool night breeze  
hits me full in the face.  
I've forgotten how cold it gets out here.  
I light a cigarette in my right hand and hang the other out the window,  
arm bent at the elbow.  
The glowing stick feels good in my hand, almost like  
its warmth could be traced to some living, breathing center—  
some reassuring pulse that might keep me awake with a story,  
or lie soft on my shoulder, yawning and happy  
as the vineyards blur into muddy, brown streaks....



But it doesn't, and the nicotine drains from my brain  
like sand in an hourglass, counting the days till—  
I'm tired again.

I pull into the next rest stop and kill the engine.

*Soledad.*


*Christ, what a name.*

I don't stay long—gas-station coffee,  
chips, and more cigarettes—but before I hit the freeway again,  
a sign catches my eye.

I chuckle.

At least someone out here has a sense of humor—  
What exactly *is* happening in Soledad?

## SAM *thorn*



*Sam Thorn is a third-year English major/music minor hoping to graduate in Spring 2011 with an emphasis in creative writing. After graduating, he plans to pursue a career in music composition for video games and aims to begin by scoring student creative projects while still an undergraduate. He would like to find a unique way to combine writing, music, and visual art, and would love to collaborate with others on these experimental creative projects. He would like to thank his girlfriend, Michelle, for putting up with him and his crazy sleep schedule, and his poetry professors, Lisa Coffman and Kevin Clark, for helping him improve his writing!*

*short*  
STORIES }  


1  
ST  
place

*CHICKEN AND CARROT STEW Joy Saler*

## CHICKEN AND CARROT STEW

by Joy Saler

Every Thursday night around six o' clock, the old man would make chicken and carrot stew as was his tradition for over fourteen years. Even after his wife had died about five years ago, he still kept it up, and it was *funny because I began to tire of the tradition and it was always a mystery why Margi so persisted on it but, ah, now I can't let it go.*

Rover also could not let it go. He was the old man's bloodhound, nearly fifteen years old. The age blared on the white of the dog's muzzle and bulged in the tumors that ruptured on his hind legs, and his eyes were hazed over with a grayish film that clouded the gleam of chestnut pride. This was no matter for the old man, for Rover never left his side, and on Thursdays, the old man would boil his chicken, and when the meat was tender and at its juiciest, the old man would tear a strip off and say, "Like a piece of chicken, eh boy?"

Rover would lift his head as that precious piece would sail through the air and land perfectly between the jowls of the hound's mouth, still strong. Rover lived for this moment. He knew the words, and his ears would perk, his nostrils would flare, and his tail would thump on the linoleum floor of the kitchen.

One Thursday, Rover was acting peculiar. When the old man called out the magic words, the aging dog barely lifted his head. The sound of his tail against the linoleum tile scarcely made a whisper, and when the old man threw the chicken to his companion, there was a sound of it hitting the tile instead of the smack of a salivating jaw.

*Rover always catches his chicken.* The old man walked over and bent down and picked up the morsel of deliciousness, groaning as he did. He had a dislocated hip, and several disks in his back rubbed together, creating a most agonizing friction. His heart was better, and the old man ignored his other disabilities and fed his friend by hand. The dog licked at the treat and looked up at his master with drooping eyes that sagged into his skin, making the animal look forever sad *but don't judge the breed for its deceiving looks.* The old man knew Rover was happy.

The next day, the old man went to the grocery store, as was custom for his Fridays. He bought his stock of carrots and his pound of chicken for the next Thursday from the cashier Rick, whom he always went to.

"How's your day, Rick?" asked the old man.

"How's Rover?" Rick asked, trying to smile. He tolerated the old man but found that he smelled funny and his conversation was always a bit stale.

"He was feeling ill yesterday, but he's better today," the old man said anxiously, his voice raspy with the weather-beaten philosophy of age. *Rick is such a nice boy. He always remembers Rover.*

After the grocery store, the old man always stopped by the post office to check his box. As usual, there was nothing but ads, prescription refill notices, and that ever-daunting medical insurance bill, but there was no letter from his girls. There was a sinking in the left corner of the old man's mouth *oh, I hope Amelia is still working in Hollywood on those costumes. She was always so good at make-up and dress. And little Gina, God bless, she's almost eight now.* He hadn't heard from his daughters since Margi's death five years ago. He had seen them at the funeral, but through veils of tears. Amelia, the oldest, had not talked to him and had only clung to her little girl tightly. How he had wanted to walk up to her and say, "Sorry." How he had wanted to hold little Gina tightly against his chest, feel her tiny fist in his hand, that breath of fresh light baptized in the promise of future magnanimity. His other daughter, Mae, had been pregnant at the funeral, pregnant with twins. He had known this from Margi, for the girls would still talk to her, and now that she was gone, how would he know anything? He wished he could hug Mae, wrap her up in his arms, shelter her from all harm; she had always had a delicate frame and had broken so many bones as a child. He somehow had always been there to rush her to the emergency room. *I used to think she broke bones on purpose when I was around.* He had kissed away her pain and drawn smiley faces on her casts, but she must've forgotten he was capable of being a father. They both must have forgotten.

But Rover had been there, and as the old man had bent over the casket to kiss Margi one last time, Rover saw. He had stood quietly by his master trying to get his nose over the rim of the casket and had not understood why the wooden box next to him smelled of a familiarity fading.

*{continued}*

The old man walked back to his house; a quaint, humble home that was just a block away from the town green. It was a one-bedroom with no front yard, and the backyard was just big enough for Rover to do his business. The wooden wind-chime he had bought Margi on his trip to Bali still hung on the porch frame. When the old man opened the door, it was *strange, Rover always greets me*. He walked past the living room where an array of tourist souvenirs decorated the shelves and window sills. There was a German doll, a glass Eiffel Tower, one kangaroo foot, a set of a Russian matryoshkas, a collection of Buddhas carved out of various woods and stones, a pair of ivory chop sticks—all things he had given Margi from his travels. He entered the kitchen, and Rover lied there.

“Hey, old boy, I know what will cheer you up,” the old man exclaimed. “I know it isn’t Thursday, but how about I make us some chicken and carrot stew? Just to make you happy, eh? Old boy?” The old man stooped down to pet his reliable canine’s ears. The loose skin on Rover’s head moved those velvet, slouching ears back and forth.

The old man laid his ingredients on the counter and began to boil the water as he cut the raw meat into thin strips. He continued his discourse with Rover as he worked, “Guess what’s coming up soon? Margi’s birthday. She would be seventy-five now. Do you remember the day I brought you home to her? Ah, you were such a cute little thing of only five months old.”

*And it was the first time I had seen Margi smile since she found out she had breast cancer.* It had been her sixtieth birthday, and Margi had been struggling with cancer for nearly five years. She struggled with it until her death. She had had one breast removed, her hair had fallen out, and she had been in constant live-in situations at the hospital. He had watched her disappear before his eyes, and he had felt the eeriness lying next to him in bed. How the mattress barely dented when she lied on it. She had floated when she walked, with the dignity of one whose wings were clipped, and yet there was still a want to soar.

When the old man had first found out she was diagnosed with breast cancer, he had been cheating on her with Regina, the new, young, vibrant secretary in his office. There had been a distance established between him and his wife, for she thought he loved his work more than her, and his pleas to convince her she was stereotyping were fruitless. When he was home, he would fidget on the couch. He would pace the kitchen, stare at his

new computer (one of those top-of-the-line Macintoshes), talk on his phone, and have an air of resentment that resonated from his isolation, which he clearly desired over the touch of his family.

He owned an electric company, which required him to travel to other cities and overseas to various development projects. This gave him little time for family from the beginning, since *I thought I could provide for the family through hard work.*

When he had heard that Margi might have only a year to live, in that white room of the hospital where the light was bright, the revelation was brighter. Change.

She had sat on the patient table, on that plastic paper that rustles with every squirm, and she had looked so small, her legs dangling off the table like those of a child. And to think, he hadn't wanted to go with her to the doctor in the first place, but she had given him the look and *I knew what that meant.* There was no arguing with her strong, silent glare that rarely revealed its life in her understanding face, but when it did, it sucked out the very fight in her opponent.

And in that bright room, the gnawing began. She had known he was cheating on her, and so did his daughters, so *why hadn't she left me?*

He still didn't know as he placed the chicken in the boiling water and began to chop the carrots. Once he was done dicing all five of them, it was his cue to feed Rover. He picked out the most opulent strip, well endowed with the ripe plumpness of poultry, and called out, "Like a piece of chicken, eh boy?"

The dog did not raise his head, but *this will cheer him up,* and the old man threw the luscious meat where it landed with a thud before Rover's nose that did not twitch.

"That's the spirit," the old man declared, going back to throwing the carrots into the rest of the stew. "And where was I? Oh yes, Margi. She wanted to name you Rover. Said she always wanted a bloodhound after she read the book *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and she wanted to name a dog 'Rover,' 'one who wanders.' But you know, her father never let her have a dog."

*And I hadn't either, saying pets were too much of a hassle. Wouldn't the girls have loved*

*{continued}*

*a dog in the family? What was I thinking? I wasn't...I wasn't thinking until the last few years of her life.*

"Ironic though, isn't it? Your name that is, 'cause you never left her side, not even when she was on her deathbed, when I had to fight to let you into the hospital to see her, remember?" The old man paused, shook his head, and continued cutting.

On Saturday, the old man went to the store. He could only think of chicken and carrot stew.

"What brings you here? I only see you on Fridays," Rick commented.

"Rover is craving the chicken and carrot stew more than ever," the old man replied. He was smiling, but the crevices around his eyes swallowed any shine that had once been there.

"He must be," Rick murmured, as his eyes widened to the amount of chicken and carrots the old man was buying.

A few days passed, and the old man kept up the Thursday ritual that was becoming a nightly passion. Every night, he made the chicken and carrot stew and sent a piece Rover's way. On Friday, he went to the store again and bought even more chicken and carrots.

"Do you shop anywhere else?" Rick asked.

"What do you mean?" questioned the old man.

"Well, it seems you are living only off chicken and carrots," Rick chuckled, trying to make the remark seem a joke, but his laugh was nervous, and an infant concern crept under his skin, much to his surprise.

*He does not understand how much Rover likes the chicken but, ah, so it is with youth. Thoughts don't make sense.* "It is a very healthy diet," the old man quipped and then winked. *I still have spunk in me yet.* And he hobbled away with his five bags of chicken and carrots, three in one hand, two in the other, the plastic stretching itself, groaning under the weight of the inevitable.

As the old man arrived home, the sun was above his head, harsh and biting. Even though it was five hours early, he decided to start cooking. So he got out the pot he had washed earlier, and after he put away the majority of his chicken and carrots, he began



his preparation.

He felt like talking about change. "I tell you what, Margi's cancer changed my life. I sold my business, I sold the home we had in L.A. and bought this house in this small town. I stayed here with her, and for the first time, I began to see what other people needed."

*After Regina broke up with me. I guess the gal did have a conscience, for she wouldn't see a man who had a wife with cancer. At first, the old man had regretted ever telling Regina that he was selling the business because of Margi's cancer and his need to stay home with her.*

"We can still see each other," he had said. What a terrible thing to say. *But I was a terrible man back then.*

What had made him stray from Margi and his girls seemed a distant haunting for him. Was it the greed that had overtaken him, the fatigue from traveling, of not having a home to connect to? *And Regina was attractive and willing, and I, nearing an older age, was flattered.* The old man had fit into the stereotype of a businessman in a midlife crisis.

But he once was like all other fathers. When Margi had told him she was pregnant with Amelia, he went out and bought a new house in L.A. He designated a nursery and a bedroom for his baby, painted the walls, bought a crib, clothes, little baby booties. But business had picked up by the time Margi was pregnant with Mae, and an extra person meant a need for more money. And he forgot that *distance makes the heart grow fonder is a lie.*

The chicken was done boiling, and the old man relished the moment, for he could feel her around him, clutch her in his hands, hold her at the center of his brain *Oh, Margi, your smile is fading*, as he sang the sweet melody of the sweet times. "Like a piece of chicken, eh boy?"

He was generous and pulled out a whole chicken wing, flinging it at Rover, and it thudded on the tile with loud indifference among other pieces of chicken that littered the floor. Some of the chicken was dried out and shriveled; other pieces were still slightly damp from the night before. Rover was stiff, his fur coarse like a taxidermist's specimen, his eyes void of any color, not even the purplish haze that had once hovered over his pupils, and his

*{continued}*

nose was dry, no longer moist with curiosity.

Another week passed, and the old man came back from the store, this time with eight bags of ingredients for chicken and carrot stew. He did not bother putting the bags away. He just let them fall on the floor and counter space around him. He grabbed an unwashed pan he had been reusing for several days. Dirty bowls were piled high in the sink. Scraps of carrot-tops and chicken ligaments lay strewn in bits about the counter.

The old man was in a good mood. He filled up the pot of water and ignited the burner. "Did I ever tell you how this tradition came about?"

Rover's skin moved.

"I had triple bi-pass surgery about ten years back. It was when the cancer was dormant in Margi. Funny, how our health always traded off. Anyway, I had just come back from the hospital. It was a Thursday, and Margi said she would make me chicken and carrot stew. I had loved it as a boy; my mother used to make it for me when I was sick. Well, we were all in the kitchen, I in my wheelchair, she at this stove here, and you were so excited. You watched her as if she held life itself, and then she asked, 'Like a piece of chicken, eh boy?' And indeed you did."

At the familiar words, after the old man finished talking, he turned and threw a whole chicken breast at Rover, and the floor ruptured with life. A rat ran out from under Rover's stomach and grabbed at the breast, dragging it with all its might across the floor and disappearing back under Rover again. Several mice clamored too late to catch the oh-so-precious source of meat. Rover's eyes were gone, and the fur around his muzzle was shagging off. Bits hovered about the linoleum floor, the slight breeze from the window carrying the fluff to collect at the corners of the kitchen. Rover's chest heaved and fell where the maggots writhed and strived in the innards. Gnats and flies buzzed about on the hide of that loyal, faithful brute, as a stench of divinity to the heathen erupted from his withering form. There was a suffocating odor that squeezed out any freshness that had once placated the air and replaced it with the stagnant decay of soiled spirit.

The old man shook his head. *My girls never called to see if I was okay.* They had called

Margi every week, but whenever he asked to speak to them, they had refused. Even when he was in the hospital, there was no contact. He had missed it all. He missed both of their weddings, both of their pregnancies, both of their lives. He remembered he had been in Baltimore when Amelia had walked down the aisle. And he had been in Paris when Mae had had her quiet wedding with only a priest to attend. Not even Margi had been there, and *perhaps if Mae was not mad at me, she would have had a grand wedding.*

Once he had asked Margi the question he still had no answer to, "Why did you forgive me when they can't?"

"You were never a part of them."

Another week passed, and the old man was at it day and night, chopping carrots, boiling water, stripping the raw chicken. He had four dirty pots on the stove. One was boiling water, the second had chicken in it, the third had chicken and carrots, and the fourth was finished, ready to be served. He was unshaven; a steady growth of whiskers protruded from his chin. His clothes smelled; they hadn't been washed for days, and his pants had a damp spot between his legs, since he no longer bothered to go to the bathroom. He had not slept. The bags under his eyes weighed heavily, dragging down his eyelids, and the wrinkles about his face sagged with emaciation. Ten bowls sat on the table, each full of chicken and carrot stew. Scraps lay about the bowls, along with plastic grocery bags and styrofoam containers with cellophane still clinging to their frames after they'd been torn open to retrieve the chicken. The old man was mumbling. His voice was hoarse and guttural. Something deep within was trying to escape but was a slave to keeping his lungs breathing and his heart beating.

• • •

The old man turned and threw a piece of chicken at Rover, who now, despite all the food he was being fed, had his ribs showing. The white of the bones revealed their chalky surfaces through shreds of disintegrated skin. Rover's teeth were in full view, his jaw fully rotted away. His paws looked enormous compared to his eaten limbs, the bones carried off by rats and other varmints. They still scuttled about, their feet making a constant shuffling sound, as if the floor were breathing: something had to be breathing. The flies

*{continued}*

buzzed; the constant hum of their delicate wings made a comforting noise of recycling the air, refreshed. Worms looped in and out of the torn holes in Rover's hollowed-out flesh, and ants trotted to and from the body, carrying little pieces of whatever they could salvage after the larger creatures took away their share. The fresh whole chicken the old man threw created a squabble between several rats, and it ended when a stray cat hopped down from the window sill and made a dreadful hissing sound. The old man's back was turned as the creatures scattered about into the various cracks, corners, and shadows of the house. Dust fluttered into the sun rays that spilled through the windows, splashing their golden hues along the walls, along the photos of the old man and Margi when they were young, when Amelia and Mae were young, when Rover was young.

There was the wedding photo fading in the glorious light of the ageless sun, Margi wearing her beautiful smile, the smile that had captured the old man when he was at Purdue. She had been a waitress at the local diner, and WWII was over, bringing a new beginning that was in the minds of all.

The old man reached for his next batch of chicken. His knotted hands groped across the counter, tossing old grocery bags on the floor. Pots fell to the ground, chicken and carrot stew spilled; the noise even scared the mangy cat away, back up and out the window. There was no more chicken, and yet, this didn't stop the old man, since *I am a hard worker. I get by with what I got.*

So he grabbed the knife that had fallen on the tile and began to scratch it across the counter, the motion still with him. Then he grabbed a pot, grimy with putrid phlegm along its ridges, and he filled it up with water and placed it on the stovetop to boil. His famished arms, the skin sliding off his nimble bones, his muscles melting into the oblivion of malnourishment, did not give up on delivering the chicken and carrot stew. *I will cook for you.*

The old man and Margi used to go out to dinner when she was too weak to cook, and they knew all the waitresses who would give them treats to take to Rover. Those waitresses had moved on since Margi's death. The old man and Margi used to go to church together when Margi had that sting of death on her head, but she had finally concluded, "I don't want to believe in something just because it will make me feel better. Death is unknown and


ignorance is bliss.”

They used to go together to their friends’ funerals. All the people they had known went before them, and this made Margi feel she had seen more funerals than most. And now it was just the old man, Margi, and Rover.

He chopped furiously.

*We used to take walks together in the mornings. We used to, we used to...*

## JOYsaler



*Joy Saler is a fifth-year English major graduating in Spring 2010, and her passion is writing. Even as a child, she was drawing stories before she could write, and she is grateful her parents read to her every night. Joy would like to thank all the people who know that literature is the way.*



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place

*ELAN AND THE SUN Aaron Rowley*

## ELAN AND THE SUN

by Aaron Rowley

Elan was awake. *This is weird*, he thought, *because I don't remember waking*. There was no slow acclimation to the world, no groaning, no shoving sheets or stretching limbs. It was as if, like ice to vapor, he had sublimed straight to consciousness, skipping the groggy arousal entirely.

Perhaps it was the way the sun beat him this morning with its rays, sharp like daggers. He groaned as he pried himself from bed, noticing how his sweat stuck the sheets to his skin. It was the day of the poetry reading, and his mother knew it.

"Relax," she said, seeing how the spoon shook in his hand.

"I know, I'm just nervous," he said, letting the spoon sink into the cereal.

"Would you like to read it to me again?" she asked through a smile.

"No, I want it to be fresh. It's better that way," he said, eyeing the spoon. He could feel his mother's eyes from across the table.

"You're brilliant Elan, you know that. They'll love you; how can they not?" He looked up at her from his seat at the kitchen counter. Her eyes were a little watery, and her lips were hanging in a half-grin. That was just one of those things mothers always say. They think that just because their children have got those cute little noses and their father's eyes that everyone will have to love their children as much as they do.

His mom wanted nothing more than for Elan to be happy; she only wished that he didn't place so much importance on one event. But she knew that Elan loved poetry, and so strong was his love, so passionate his desire to be involved, to be another poet in the world, lifting broken spirits with words like hymns, that once in a while he had to challenge himself.

Today was the regional poetry reading, and he knew he had some tough competition. But Elan always said, "It's not a competition—it's a reading, it's a sharing," and he meant it. Even if it meant that he went home without a win.

"Oh, come on," friends would say. "Don't you get a little sad, watching others go home with what you wish you had?" Elan would shrug, nod just a bit, and acknowledge that a little competition was inherent in every reading. And every time he lost, he would wish that he



had spoken a little louder, put a little more emphasis on that one word, that one little word, or been a little more animated, perhaps a little more still, or perhaps that he had screamed and spit and let his emotions read instead of his soul.

But that was over fast, he assured them, because he didn't like looking too much into the past. After it was over, it was time to recoup. Time to gather his thoughts, to revise or keep the same, and wait for the next reading. Sometimes that next reading would be with his friends, in a bedroom or a coffee shop, reading what scraps of writing he scribbled between equations from his notebook. Advice was great, too.

"This part's a little vague," or "It's perfectly vague!"

"Too fast," "Too slow," "Just rewrite the whole thing, Elan."

Regardless of whom he listened to, he always arrived at the end feeling something distinct. Sometimes he spent so much time with particular poems, he ended up loathing them. He would stay up, coursing caffeine in place of blood, wrestling with an idea that just didn't seem to make it to the paper. He would try and try and try, until the idea scrambled his mind like eggs, and anything he tried to write just spilled out like breakfast.

Sometimes that emotional baggage was just what he needed. The writing was imperfect and the tone frustrated, something he didn't realize would go together. But when he reached the end of his lines, skidding to a halt with his *own eyes* wide...it was beautiful.

Of course, there were also the times when it was *just* baggage and nothing *but* baggage: lining every sentence and snippet of poetry with a dash of unrefined ugliness and cookie-cutter rhyming. If those poems were flops, then Elan accepted it and tossed them to the depths of his desk drawers. Elan felt that each recital was an opportunity to spark motivation. He practiced a ritual before every reading.

*He moves close to the microphone and takes a deep breath, keeping his head lowered to prevent noise from passing through the speakers. Slowly, he looks up, letting his eyes adjust to the spotlight so that ultimately his audience comes into focus, a blurry mass of shadows though they may be. He fast-forwards through his poem, mentally hitting the big notes, the patterns, the eloquent pronunciations and enunciations, and then he stares, he*

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*stares until he sees the spotlight on the crowd. People, for the most part, are as still as he is now. But there is a subtle change. People are looking around at everyone else with this surprised look on their faces, this excited look, this "Damn, did you just feel that?" look. Because something Elan said hits them, passes through them, and becomes them. It bonds to blood, becomes their thoughts and their drive so they fly across seats and laps, bust through doors, sprint toward anyone who was not there, ready to spread his word.*

Elan had yet to hear his words being whispered by a youngster on the streets, or to see a line from his poem scrawled across the grimy tiles of a public restroom, right next to the "Carpe Diem" and the obscene cartoons. But every time he found himself in front of a urinal, he looked. He wanted words to have power, to stir emotions like the great speakers of the world had stirred his own.

He remembered hearing Dr. King, the deep quality of his voice casting the severity of all that took place in those sad times, but the words floated softly, with kindness, with hope. Or the raw beauty of Thoreau in the woods, picking apart nature and pressing it to paper, as if no one had ever seen the world on its own before.

Because words have power, or so he was told.

• • •

After breakfast, Elan rode his bicycle to the nearest coffee shop where his dear friend, Sulpicia, was already waiting at a table outside. She was leaning so that the chair was teetering backward on two legs, her legs kicked up on the table, and a coffee steaming to the skies in her right hand. Elan parked his bicycle and approached the table, noting how she wore sunglasses despite the sky being overcast. As he approached the seat opposite to Sulpicia, he realized that it was quite possible that she was sleeping. Her head was resting on her shoulder and her eyes, whether open or not, were sheltered behind opaque lenses. Elan slowly squeezed between the table and the chair, trying to take his seat before she noticed.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Elan jumped. She had caught him mid-sneak, with his legs awkwardly bent to the side as he attempted to lower himself noiselessly into the chair.

“Just trying to be quiet. I thought you were asleep,” Elan said grinning.

“I don’t sleep; I just watch,” she pointed to her glasses. “You gonna get a drink?” she asked.

“Yeah, some tea I think. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here.”

Elan went inside and ordered a small green tea. He liked this café for many reasons, the most important being they never sweetened their drinks. He hated the fact that at other coffee shops, you had to ask to get a drink without syrup. But here, it was served pure, with only what you asked for. After placing two sleeves around the cup, he joined Sulpicia at the table.

She hadn’t changed her position, only now, her cup was empty.

“So, whatcha got?” Sulpicia asked.

“An old one. I’ve been changing things and moving things around—I’ve actually never read it to anyone before.”

“Well, let me hear it,” she said softly. “I’m your genius.”<sup>1</sup> Elan smiled. She always said she was his genius, which was true. Whenever he had trouble with writing, she helped him more than any teacher or peer ever had. She always managed to guide him toward what he really wanted to express.

But only if he listened.

Elan read her the poem a few times, watching as she manifested her thought with a scrunched brow.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s great, but I think you get caught up in it.”

“What does that mean?”

“I just wonder,” she trailed off, adjusting herself in the seat so that she was sitting upright, “if you’re missing the point.”

“Well, the point is my own. I’m not sure I can miss my own point.”

“What point are you referring to?” she asked. Elan opened his mouth to respond, but someone approached the table.

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<sup>1</sup>The Romans believed in divine entities, referred to as geniuses, who were with humans from birth until death. These geniuses, it was believed, provided inspiration for the humans to which they belonged. Sulpicia is the name of two Roman poets. Their work survived the ages and is still in circulation today.

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"Excuse me," the woman asked. "Am I interrupting?" She looked slightly concerned.

"Not at all. I'm just reading," Elan said, pointing to his paper.

"Oh," she said airily. "Well, all right. Do you mind if I borrow some chairs?"

Elan looked to Sulpicia, but found only vacancy. She had walked around the corner to throw her cup away.

"Sure, you can take those," Elan said, motioning toward Sulpicia's chair and the empty one to his right. Elan stood up as the woman dragged the two chairs away. As Sulpicia returned, Elan took a seat on the ground.

"Why'd you give her my chair?" Sulpicia asked.

"I didn't know what else to say," Elan shrugged.

"Well, you can sit in your chair if you'd like."

"No, I'm fine on the ground. Don't worry about them," Elan said, nodding toward the woman who had taken the chairs. Sulpicia glanced over at the woman, who was now sitting with a man at another table. The couple whispered to each other as they watched Elan speak only to his steaming coffee, perplexity plastered to their faces.

"Suit yourself," Sulpicia said through a laugh, as she took her seat in Elan's chair.

"So," Elan went on, "you say I'm missing the point, but I'm not sure what you mean."

"When you read this poem, do you *feel* it? Do you really *believe* what you are saying?" She looked strangely alive in that moment. She was leaning forward, her glasses now off and her eyes peering at Elan as though she could see right through him. He looked at the ground and flicked some pebbles, which deflected off the side of his cup and bounced into the street. Picking up his cup, he took a deep swig, closing his eyes as the warmth cascaded down his throat.

"I think..." Elan said, still thinking about her question. The couple caught his attention again. They were still glancing over at him sitting on the ground.

"I just need to think. The recital is in an hour, and I need to go sign in, I'll just think about it on the way." He stood up. "Are you coming?"

"I'll be there," Sulpicia said as she put her glasses back on.

“All right, can we talk more about my poem when you get there?”

“I’m your genius,” she said over her shoulder as she walked away. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Elan unlocked his bicycle and rode to his school, letting Sulpicia’s question run over and over through his mind. When he arrived at the school, he parked his bicycle in the back of the auditorium and signed in at the table. There were eleven people on the list, which was pleasantly surprising. Last year, they had only four people sign up.

Elan sat backstage and waited for the event to start, but he couldn’t let Sulpicia’s question go. *Of course I know what the point is*, he thought. *I wrote the damn thing*. Despite his attempts at convincing himself, he realized he didn’t know what the point was. Perhaps he had simply forgotten. After all, he had written it years ago. He had picked it out of an old collection a few weeks ago and begun to edit it.

The organizer came backstage to address the poets. Elan did his best to listen, but all he heard was that he was third from last. Elan didn’t care; he didn’t ever care. He only hoped that when it was his turn to speak, people would listen.

When the event began, all the poets were called onto the stage, and their names were read, to which most of them smiled and waved to the audience, and then they were sent backstage. Last year’s winner performed a poem, and the commentator called up the first person to read. Elan waited and waited for Sulpicia to appear, but there was no sign of her.

• • •

The poet before Elan was called up to the stage. Elan was just about to duck into a dark hallway to look for Sulpicia, but something caught his attention. The back door to the auditorium was ajar, and through it crept the faint whisper of voices. Elan approached the door, only to discover that the voices were not whispers, but jeers and curses, coarsely filling the air. He placed his face against the crack and looked to see where the commotion was coming from.

A small blonde girl was standing against the wall of the building across from the auditorium. Her hair was a mess, and she was staring at the ground. A few girls stood around her. *Friends*, Elan thought, but was shown otherwise.

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One of the larger girls pushed the blonde-haired girl into the wall, and when she didn't protest, the larger girl began to yell.

"What, are you going to ignore us?" she taunted. "Push me back!"

The little girl didn't.

"Fix your hair, fix your pretty hair," one of the other girls chimed in, ferociously rubbing her hand across the little girl's hair. She didn't budge.

"I SAID FIX YOUR HAIR," the girl yelled again, but this time she grabbed at the little girl's hair and pulled. Elan's eyes widened with disgust. The little girl was pulled to the ground and the sound of roots ripping from skin raced toward him. The little girl winced and grabbed at the arm of her attacker.

"That's it, fight back," they taunted. "Fight back." Someone laughed.

"Fix your pretty hair," they spat. The larger girl kicked the little girl, who was on the ground, square in the shins. Someone laughed.

"You're such a *bitch*," they screamed through smiles, wide and evil as anything Elan had ever seen. Elan began pushing the door, ready to race into the group and break up the fight. But his shock grounded him. Words were replaced with laughter as another girl began to pull the little one's hair in the other direction. The little girl craned her neck backwards in pain, and Elan saw her face for the first time.

A few blonde strands were matted to her cheeks, dirt speckled her face, and her eyes were red and swollen. For some reason, the girl was trying not to cry, as if that was the last thing she had on them, as if not crying protected her dignity as they stole her safety. Elan's eyes began to well. He was not sure how much more the girl could take. One of the girls let go of the hair and threw a clump of dirt at her face. Then it happened.

A whimper escaped the little girl's lips.

They had won.

"That's it, cry," the group of girls ran away laughing, leaving the girl to crawl back against the wall in silence.

Elan's name was called from the stage. He wanted to go to the girl, but she was safe

now. He raced back inside and walked onto the stage, but for some reason, he could still hear the whimper. It slithered along the ground where it coiled up his leg and stuck with him all the way to the podium. He took a few preparatory breaths, starting his mental routine that he was always sure to practice. But the whimper was strong. It had wrapped around his ears and down to his neck, whispering over and over into his ear, until it owned his concentration. It was then that he realized what Sulpicia had meant.

This poem was no longer for him; it couldn't be for him. It was for the girl and all those like her. It was for those who thought they were powerful but had yet to hear the power of this girl's cry. He would speak it to the crowd, and as the whimper whispered in his ear, they would surely hear it.

Elan approached the microphone.

*A view unfolded, time and again, as predictable in its regularity as it was unique in its character. Like a snowflake, never the same, but always born of the same rotation, the same amber crease ripping wide horizons, chasing hues beyond eyelids crusted over by slumber, evaporating crystal dew and validating choices and movements before falling backwards into star-scattered skies with a faint hiss of a westward wind.*

*The Sun was proud, if it were to feel, for the land bore fruits before wars. Flowers before wounds.*

*The Sun would watch, if it had eyes, a lion breaking free of placental muck, grass and dirt adhering to its mane, and the mother letting slip her rough tongue to smear and remove the mess of it all.*

*The Sun would listen, if it had ears, to the first birdcall, the first vibration of sinewy tissue, clashing molecules, propagating rhythmically into songs. To the hand-slams of drums, finger-flicks of strings, or the wind-spit to pipes. For contained in sound is a mystical quality to bridge divides, be it of animal conflict or the vacancy of space, so that beings, like the Sun, if it were alive, absorb it. Listen to it. Feel it.*

*The Sun would touch, if it had sense, the organic sludge of a saturated pine, fallen and melting into the soil, filtering through the ground that gave it life, until finding its way to*

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*roots like purpose, and becoming another again. Or the color-stained waters of gurgling pools, burping up the earth's heat and anger. For the Sun knows temperature only of its own.*

*The Sun would cry, if it could, as babies born of love and science take only one breath. Or as fingers crookedly pointed away from their own, casting blame, spewing disgust, assigning judgments that land like lingering knife-slices on the skin, only deeper, on the part of which the self is thought to be. As if they knew.*

*As if they would ever know.*

The crowd applauded, but Elan didn't listen. What the crowd would do with his words was up to them. He only hoped they could feel that little girl's sorrow in his voice. The whimper was still there, though, and he had to cast it away, he had to find the girl. He raced toward the back of the auditorium, listening as the commentator's voice drifted away.

"We'll let the judges deliberate for a few...."

Elan burst through the doors as if they were cardboard, sending them back into the concrete walls where they slammed violently, announcing his arrival to anyone who was near.

But it was only the girl, small still, and against the wall.

"Excuse me," Elan said, walking over and crouching down next to her, "is everything all right?"

She said nothing.

"I'm so sorry about what happened," he said, touching his arm to her knee. She looked up with eyes cold like the ground on which she sat.

"What they did to you was horrible, but I want you to know you are safe, and that I'm here for you."

"It's always like this," she whispered.

"They do this a lot?"

"No...it's you," she said. "You're always like this." Elan cocked his head to the side, confused by what the girl said.

"You always come too late and expect everything to be okay. Nobody ever does



anything, as if words are going to help,” she said.

Elan had wished that she had heard his poem, and that it could have offered her solace. The girl, perhaps as a result of her sensitivity, seemed to have felt what Elan was thinking.

“Give me a word,” she demanded, her eyes now wet. “Give me a word that will help,” she stood up and held out her hand.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Elan answered, shaking his head.

“A word. Give me a word that dries this blood and puts my hair back in my head. Give me a word that cures nightmares and gets rid of the shakes I get every time I see those kids coming toward me.” Something about her voice made Elan feel heavy. Perhaps it was how calm she seemed, given the circumstances, or the way her tone did not match the emotion on her face.

“I...I don’t...” Elan stammered, trying to find the words; he could surely do it with words, that would make her realize it was all over.

But the whimper was too strong now, and she couldn’t find them either. She looked to the sky, staring at the sun as it stared down at her, never blinking, fierce in its strength.

She ran to the streets without a sound.

Elan rode home. He didn’t wait for the winner to be announced, or for his mother to leave the audience and congratulate him. He raced home, grabbed a pen, and flipped his poem over. Sulpicia was right. Something was missing.

Elan let a tear drop with an ever-echoing thud, blurring the ink from the first word as he furiously scribbled meaning to fiber.

*The Sun would suffer, if it could, one thousand whips to a slave’s raw back, a child’s mouth buried beneath the dirt stained red, a nation merrily pumping clean oil from wells, when their oil drives machines that spill blood to others’ water.*

*The Sun would cringe, if it had a face, hearing the invisible gashes of a bully’s tongue lashes.*

*The Sun would cry, if it could, because those fortunate to do as it longed to do, remained always face to the ground with backs to each other.*

*The Sun would die, if it could perish, straining to move, screaming its silence into the emptiness that contained it, shaking as it tried to shout, "Speak, Elan, but don't ever forget to move," to try and force action from my feet, power from my voice.*

*But that's why the Sun is just a star, and I a being meant not to watch indifferently from afar.*



## AARON *rowley*

*Aaron Rowley is 20 years old and is a second-year biomedical engineering major. When he is not surfing, climbing, or writing, he is generally being mischievous with his roommates and friends.*

*He would like to thank his educators for always pushing him to do his best, his friends for being as weird if not weirder than he, and his family for giving him the freedom to be who wants to be.*





**3**  
**RD**  
**PLACE**

*THE EMERGENT HEART Edward Turner*

## *THE EMERGENT HEART*

*by Edward Turner*

“It is in love,” said the robot in the corner. Thomas and Rochelle, snug on the couch and quite unaware that the robot had even finished its daily chores and returned to its charging station, jolted in surprise and turned to face their convenient household automaton.

“What was that?” Rochelle asked it.

“It has realized, it is in love,” the robot said. It was a stout multi-limbed can, with a round, metallic head plonked unceremoniously on the top. The bargain model BX-4 general maintenance unit had come out ten years ago, but a series of patch-jobs, cheap repairs, and off-the-shelf upgrades had kept it functioning well past the warranty. Even if it didn’t look as good as the new-model androids which LipTech was pushing this year, it kept the place clean and still ran just as well as it ever had. At the moment, it was backed into the corner, charging, with its arms fully retracted and its two cameras, vaguely mimicking eyes on what was vaguely mimicking a head, stared off into nothingness.

Thomas paused the TV. “Robot, explain,” he said in a loud, clear voice. He had a much lower tolerance for anthropomorphization than his wife. He was several years older and his parents had been poor, so he’d had very little interaction with robots. It had taken weeks of prodding from Rochelle before he’d submitted to the half-hour-long registration process that would let her robot see him as its owner as well.

“Love. Noun. A feeling of strong attachment induced by that which delights or commands admiration; passionate affection. Verb, transitive. To regard with passionate and devoted affection; to take delight or pleasure in; to have a strong liking or desire for, or interest in. Verb, intransitive—”

“We know what love is,” said Rochelle, who truly did. She’d written poems on the subject that she dared not show anyone, not even her husband. “Why did you mention it?”

“It doesn’t know.” The BX-4 was not built with a voice box; as packaged, it had a screen built into its chassis that could display any necessary information. The vocal unit Thomas picked up had originally belonged to a cherry-red, 4-door Raptor (though he had encountered it as a rust-red, no-door Raptor), and despite his best efforts, the polite, androgynous voice was emotionless, tinny, and screamed through a grating static. Still, he

felt it a damn sight more convenient than walking across the room whenever the robot had something to say.

“Are you...okay?” Rochelle asked. She knew that the robot was old and needed replacing, but she put up with her husband’s spendthrift tinkering because she loved the thing; it was the first robot she had ever bought on her own, with her own money, and in her heart it had a special place that she was slightly ashamed of.

The robot did not respond. It did not move. It did not give the slightest indication of being cognizant or alive, but then again, it was neither.

Thomas Franklin was a square-jawed man with a long moustache and short temper. “Robot!” he shouted, “Go to store! Shopping list: standard staples. Additional items: cigarettes. Proceed!”

The robot grew a few inches as four small wheels sprouted from its underside. A moment later, it whirred off, and the room was silent. The BX line was not originally intended to go outside, but Thomas didn’t see the need to purchase a separate chore-droid when he could just throw in some extra memory and some open-source programs he had found on the Internet. He considered himself to be a bit of an amateur roboticist, blissfully unaware that that wasn’t a real word.

“Don’t you think you were a little hard on him?” Rochelle asked.

“It’s not a ‘him,’” said Thomas. It was something he said whenever he got annoyed with Rochelle’s tendency to mollycoddle the bot. It didn’t really resolve the argument, but it tended to signify that it was over.

Something didn’t sit right with Rochelle, but she couldn’t say what it was. Her robot had acted up before, usually after Thomas had tried to improve it, but then it acted unpredictable or incomprehensible. It had never claimed to be in love before; it gave Rochelle a creepy feeling. So, as one does in such situations, she ignored the feeling and returned to watching TV.

An hour later, though, she was quite concerned again.

“Tom, the store is three blocks away! He should be back by now!”

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"Yes, yes, it is taking a long time. I suppose there must be a crowd at the...checkout." Tom said uncertainly. The word felt unfamiliar. He hadn't been to a grocery store personally in years. Now that he thought about it, the last time he'd been in a checkout line must have been back when he was in college! Humans just didn't deal with grocery shopping anymore; robots were infinitely more efficient at it. They knew what they wanted, where it was, and how much it would cost, plus tax, before they crossed the threshold, and could be in and out in minutes. So if there was a snag at the store, it was a big one. Thomas ambled over toward the robot's recharging dock, which had a direct phone link roughly soldered on to it. "Robot!" he yelled into it, "Location!"

A moment later, the robot responded. "32 East Rively Avenue."

Tom raised an eyebrow at his wife, who pulled a computer out of her handbag and tapped in the address. "That's a LipTech outlet," she said, and scowled. "I think...I think that's where I bought him. Oh, no, it is. It's right by the theater. We've had him serviced a few times there."

"What the hell is he doing there on his own?" Thomas growled. "Robot," he yelled into the uplink, "what the hell are you doing there? Gah! I mean: Robot, explain failure to perform assigned task!"

"Malfunction," said the robot.

"Diagnose nature of malfunction."

"...It is sad." The voice was no less hollow and monotone than it had ever been. It wasn't plaintive, it wasn't heartbreaking; it was polite and androgynous and full of static, but it brought with it a crashing silence all the same.

Thomas and Rochelle stared at each other for a long, confused moment. Rochelle stood up and took the uplink from her husband. He snatched up her computer and tapped furiously at it.

"What is sad, Robot?" Rochelle asked.

"It is. It. This unit."

"You? You are sad?"



"This unit."

"What does that mean?"

The robot did not respond.

"It doesn't know the word 'I,' Ro." Thomas stopped fiddling with the computer for a moment and looked up at his wife. "Or 'me' or 'my' or whatever. I got rid of them a few upgrades ago."

"Tom! Why would you do that? What do you know about programming?"

Thomas threw his hands up in the traditional way of exasperated husbands. "It was... uppity! I don't know! I read how to do it on the Net. I backed it up beforehand!"

"Thomas, you idiot! It's bad enough you tack so much hardware onto him! You probably did this to him!"

"Melanie did this to it," said the robot, who could still hear them. As usual, the Franklins had forgotten it was listening.

"What? Who is Melanie?"

"It loves Melanie." And with this, the robot disabled his phone link. Rochelle turned to her husband, who had dropped the computer on the couch and was putting on his shoes.

"All right, Ro," Tom said, setting down the computer. "There was an automatic LipTech update two nights ago. Obviously that's what started this...this weird change. Now, I didn't find any other complaints out there, but I'm pretty sure that if these problems can be traced back to the update, then they have to cover the cost of a full memory wipe and reprogramming."

"Memory wipe! Tom, no! He's not malfunctioning; he's in love!" Rochelle was not nearly as pragmatic as her husband. She had named her car (Betty) and her computer (Roger), and even though she hadn't named the robot because she knew it would annoy Thomas, in her head it was named Robot with a capital R. Rochelle talked to animals like they were babies and to babies like they were adults. She was imaginative, and Thomas not so much, which led to a few good-natured arguments between the two. And occasionally, it led to them being quite fed up with each other.

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"It's a robot," Thomas spat. "It's not capable of love!"

"Clearly, he is," Rochelle said deliberately.

Thomas huffed, but backed down quickly. He knew how these arguments tended to end, and slipped into his nicest available tone of voice. "Regardless, I still think you'd be interested in taking it to the local LipTech sales representative."

"Why." It wasn't a question, it was a threat.

Thomas thrust forth the computer, currently displaying a list of LipTech employees, straight from their web-site. "Her name is Melanie McCann. You know any other Melanie?"

Rochelle didn't. And so, half an hour later, the Franklins were standing on either side of their waist-high robot. Before them was the local LipTech franchise, a small storefront on one side and a body shop on the other, with a scrap yard hidden in the back. Through the window in front of them, across the storefront, they could see a woman taking care of the various makes and models of machinery on display. She was pale, plain, and skinny, but not unattractive, at least by human standards. If she was some sort of robot Athena, though, Thomas didn't see it.

"Go to the service entrance, robot," Thomas commanded.

"No."

Thomas bristled. Yes, he was aware that his brand of amateur electronics was liable to create side effects, but obedience was supposed to be hard-wired. "That wasn't a suggestion. Robot, do as I command."

"No. If this unit does as you command, this unit will never be able to confess its love for Melanie. Why, then, exist?"

"Don't get philosophical!"

"Thomas!" Rochelle scolded. "Let me try something. Robot, go talk to Melanie."

The robot rolled forward about a foot, stopped, and returned. "No! No! No!"

"What?"

"It can't! It can't! Melanie cannot know!"

"Robot!" Rochelle barked, rather aghast. She was expecting something more cinematic

to happen; she couldn't say quite what, but this wasn't it. "Explain!"

The little robot paused for a few seconds. Even Thomas would have said it was thinking, "She would never love it back. She is...perfection. It is a malfunction."

Rochelle bit her lip. The voice was as expressionless as the cameras that served as the unit's eyes, but she could sense its pain. She wished she could make it feel better. "No you aren't, Robot. You're a good robot."

"It is not good enough for Melanie. It is not an APX-10." The robot's voice suddenly dropped an octave and became uncharacteristically animated. "APX-10, the top of the line! The first android to exceed the average human across the board! Just watch this bevy of benchmark tests!" it said, quoting an infomercial that came bundled with its last upgrade. Its voice returned to metallic, vacant normalcy. "Melanie deserves an APX-10. This unit is an undefined collection of disparate parts. Melanie is everything. It is nothing."

Rochelle patted the robot on the head, starkly avoiding the annoyed glare her husband was giving her. "But an APX-10 wouldn't love Melanie," Rochelle said.

"This unit's love is not real."

"Well said, robot," Thomas said with a smirk.

"Yes it is! It is real!" Rochelle said.

"No, this unit does not feel, does not really feel. It is a mistake: it is a conflict of programs and glitches and failures! It is an emergent imitation of intelligence! There is no love! Or is there? Is it an emergent intelligence? Is it an emergent heart? How does it know if it is real? How does it know?"

Rochelle and Thomas stared at each other over the robot's fake head.

"It is!" she said.

"It isn't!" he said at the same time.

"It is confused!" said the robot. "It is conflicted! Is it in love? It does not know! It should know! Why does it not know! It wants to work; it cannot work! It wants to love; it cannot love! What can it do? What can it do? It does not know!"

"Robot," Rochelle said, "Calm down. Please."

*{continued}*

"Shut it off!" the robot declared, calmly and vacantly. "Shut it off. Shut it off. Shut it off!"

"Robot!" yelled Thomas. "Be silent! Now!"

"It cannot be silent! It hurts too much!"

"Oh, Robot," Rochelle said, her heart breaking.

"All right, this has gone far enough," Thomas growled. "Shut yourself down, robot. We'll deal with you—"

"No," the robot interrupted. Thomas twitched.

"What?"

"It will not. It must. It will not."

"This is ridiculous. Rochelle, do you still have that EMP?"

On Rochelle's keychain were two safety devices that her mother had long ago insisted she have on her at all times. The first was a small canister of pepper spray. The second was a tiny electromagnetic pulse generator that would shut off every electronic device within twenty feet. Both were considered weapons, and would potentially stir up a lot of trouble if they were spotted, but they were more than worth it for the peace of mind. She pulled her keys out and held onto the little metal cylinder thoughtfully, but did not activate the EMP. It was strange, but she felt she knew what the robot was going through. She'd never thought Thomas could love someone like her. She'd spent more nights than she'd like to recount staring at her ceiling, trying to disappear because of some man or another. "I know it feels like the end of the world, Robot, but it's not. I've been there!"

"You are real!" The robot couldn't shout, really, but its volume had increased so much that it was being distorted. "It is not! It must be shut off!"

"But you're real too, Robot!" Rochelle said, but the robot wasn't listening. It spun in place to face Thomas.

One of the robot's arms, with a small but powerful pneumatic pincer at the end, leapt up at lightning speed and seized Thomas's neck, gently but firmly. "SHUT IT OFF!"

"Shut it off!" screamed Thomas as well. He was in no pain and no real danger, but he was hardly thinking clearly at the moment. "Ro! Shut it off!"


Rochelle twisted and pulled the small cylinder open, knocking out the lovelorn automaton, which used its last second of activity to release Thomas Franklin.

The couple was too shocked to move as they stared at the still form of their robot.

“What’s going on out here?” a shrill voice called. Melanie came running out of the LipTech building. “What’s that noise? Why is everything in there dead? What happened?”

Rochelle was the first to speak. “He...” she started, but her voice cracked. She pointed at the robot. “It needs a full memory wipe and reprogramming,” she said. That way, it would be less painful for all involved.

## EDWARD *turner*



*Edward Turner is currently working his way through his first year in the English graduate program. He enjoys 'bots, books, and board games and can often be found on campus scribbling in his notebook about ways to combine these interests. He'd like to thank his fiancée and his family for continuing to support him on his quest to become both an English professor and the world's best-looking man in a fedora.*



EDITORS'

*choices*

*WET-FEET, DRY-FEET**by Jaquelin Sicilia*

The lottery for freedom drove Abuelito  
 straight to the fields, and sometimes I swear  
 I can feel the ligaments in his forearm  
 like violin strings pulled tight as he swung for the stems,  
 muscles tuned and ready to burst under pale skin ignited.  
 Every slash, a stroke melodic as the composition  
 of machete blisters mounted, left his pallid hands bloody.  
 Later calloused, they would serve as reminders of the life he reinvented;  
 the intruders on his careful hands, mapped.

Pre-Revolution, he was a statistician.  
 He wore clean blue ties that draped over sterile white paper,  
 knew every ballplayer by name and batting average.  
 Later, he recited them like a symphony into the holes he'd dug with his hands,  
 fingernails cracked and stained by the rich dirt of a country that betrayed him.  
 His eyes, flooded with thin fractured veins,  
 witnessed cane fall, to be bent over, collected.  
 Enduring prickle knots in his palms, he'd continue the methodical hack,  
 stringy sweet lacerations, and hum to himself:  
 "Only in death can a red handkerchief ever touch the base of my neck."

Years later, he would write of the stalks so tall he would lose himself—  
 fly ninety miles every morning, hit dry land, and sing.  
 He says there are still times he can smell the sugary roots,  
 the way humidity impregnated his pores  
 with a thick earthy scent sweet enough to devour.

Now he sits near the windows and rubs his pale hands together,  
 imagines the time-capsule island that negated his dreams—  
 a place he once called home.



## JAQUELIN *sicilia*

*Jaquelin Sicilia is a fourth-year double major studying business and English, and she thinks the world needs more professors like Lisa Coffman. She awakened in Jaquelin the poet she wasn't quite sure existed. She is a first-generation Cuban-American, and this poem was written for her grandfather, Eudaldo Alvarez. The fortitude he exhibited in preserving his integrity during the revolution in Cuba inspires her in a way she could never truly capture with words; Wet-Foot Dry-Foot is just one of her attempts. Jaquelin owes everything she is to her beautiful family—their tender sacrifices, their invaluable teachings, their unrelenting love.*

## *BLIND DATE*

*by Ivan Van Wingerden*

The Roman collar and holey paddle  
that marked Dad's childhood did little  
to prevent his eyes from poking out his  
head to admire cheeky bikinis  
and gossamer bandeau push-ups.  
Not even my mother's goring elbow  
could stop his manful wheezings  
or strained *ahem's*—  
Which is why he hands me a flashlight,  
feigning bona fide gallantry, and says,  
"Go walk this lovely lady to her car."  
His eyes flash down, calling my attention  
to no-show velveteen pants that whisper  
as she grabs her purse from Mom's countertop.  
Coquettish black pearl lashes beat lazily  
as she sidles up to the doorframe  
like a coiled viper, but with a forked tongue  
that flicks through creamy plum lip gloss.  
Twenty-two heavy steps out the front door,  
we arrive at her car. The street lamp  
reflects hungry azure eyes and rattling  
satin keys that linger in her palm.  
As I dodge her closed eyes and extended lips—  
She jolts into the fabric of my right shoulder.

She pauses. "So, you'll call me, right?"  
Walking back to the house, I glare  
at the plum resin staining my shirt.  
Dad's urging is like a blunt cow prod.  
But my appetite is for angular jaws  
and warm robust hands that could  
massage sour isolation away.

## IVAN *van wingerden*

*Ivan Van Wingerden was born naked in October of 1987. Distinguished with a "baby on board" sign and plaid uniforms for the first few years of his life, he has since been clothing himself in the good and the useful as an English major at Cal Poly. He attributes his feral concupiscence toward poetry writing to his patient and encouraging high school English teacher, Dr. Schmidt, as well as his inspirational Cal Poly teacher, Dr. Clark. Also, he would like to thank his mother for her undying vitality and appreciation of the arts, and his dad's enthusiastic sponsorship of them. Ivan will be warming himself with an Andean alpaca sweater in Peru after he graduates this quarter, where he plans to write poetry of witness about indigenous peoples in addition to teaching ESL classes.*

## *BIRTHDAY SONG*

*by Kate Malczynski*

Enjoy the pacifying peace of paradise  
where trees sway lazily in lullaby patterns  
like the nodding heads of silent monks.

Lie in the honeyed sand  
and remember what you have left  
at home: rainy dissolution.

The irony is not lost on me—  
this Day of Infamy rests on  
aging soldiers and young daughters  
who rely on textbooks.

I'm sorry today is your birthday,  
but I'm more sorry the trees and sand  
are far superior to  
the girl who sits by her  
window writing poetry.

## KATE *malczynski*

*Kate Malczynski is a third-year English major from beautiful Huntington Beach, CA. When she is not writing, dissecting, or simply enjoying reading poetry, she loves discovering new music and hanging out with her pup, Huckleberry (a.k.a. Nugget). Being a student in the Cal Poly liberal arts program has really shaped her love for poetry and all literature, and she must thank two of the most influential and inspiring professors she has had here: Dr. Rummell and Dr. Clark. Kate would also like to thank her family for still loving her even if she writes angry poetry about them, and her sweetheart for putting up with her bad first drafts (nom).*

## *MIND ON FIRE*

*by Will Taylor*

Casey Durst didn't hesitate as he struck the match on its box. The explosion of light in the dark clearing caused his pupils to quickly shrink. The match fell from between his thumb and forefinger, and he watched as the flame flickered out as it hit the tan, brittle grass at his feet. The match smoldered momentarily, then released a small line of smoke before going out completely. Casey stood still for a moment, slowly losing the match to the darkness.

For the first time that night, he thought about what he was doing. This would have been the biggest fire he had ever started if the match hadn't died. He had confidence in his knowledge of fires though, and believed he had thought it out enough. The wind was fairly calm; he was on the leeward side of the hill, and Rifle Creek was close by, the perfect place for the crew to get water if things got out of control.

The hesitation bothered him. Why did he always have to think things over like this? The bottle of Rebel Yell Whiskey sitting on the ground was the easiest way to stop his thoughts. He picked it up and took a long pull. His Adam's apple jumped over and over until his head was tilted so far that Casey's favorite hat, a camouflage Cabela's baseball cap, fell to the grass behind him. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he picked up the hat.

Casey wished the alcohol would take immediate effect; instead, his fire training crawled around in his mind, causing him to question his motives. It had been five years since he had started working for the Forest Service and three since he had joined the Hotshot crew. As a member of the crew, he was considered a professional at fighting wildfires. He took great pride in belonging to an elite team, responsible for going into isolated places with little outside support to try and control high-priority wildfires. The crews of twenty to twenty-five people were on-call and ready to go at a moment's notice from late spring until late fall. His closest friend, Bobby, was on the crew with him and had been since they had started with the Hotshots the summer they graduated from high school.

When there were no fires, the teams did work and training in their district. This included training hikes, speed exercises, and continued learning. Both Casey and Bobby usually hated these exercises and wanted to be in on real fires all the time. But Casey clearly remembered his first prescribed burn. Jim, the superintendent of the crew, had announced

they would be taking down an abandoned house using control methods. The fire ate the house in a severe blaze, the temperature getting so hot that all vegetation within fifteen feet of the house wilted. Being fresh to the crew, Bobby and Casey had only dug a firebreak and fed fire hose, but it gave Casey the opportunity to admire the blaze. It spouted from windows, crawling upward to join in a massive tendril of flame that licked the sky. Bobby nudged Casey back to the reality of feeding and directing hose as the house collapsed to the ground. But Casey couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Fuck it," he said out loud to pull himself from the memory. He wanted to see fire like that, raging, now. "I'm setting this fire."

Tonight, he could admire the flames with a minimal amount of danger. Casey pushed one end of the box of matches and plucked a small, rectangular sliver from the pile inside. The match struck the box and once again illuminated the grass at his feet. The match fell to the ground, the light in the clearing flickering, dimming, and then growing.

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Casey concentrated hard in his drunken state to race his dusty maroon Toyota Tacoma, dented, scratched, raised, and well-used, around the corners of the gravel logging road. On the uphill side of the truck, a dense, dark forest raced past. Below, a clear-cut, full of stumps, ferns, and small branches, lay barren. Casey ignored the outside world. As an experienced drunk driver, with one DUI already on his record, he knew concentration was necessary to avoid the finger test, handcuffs, and maybe a night in the county jail. Two hands on the wheel when not on the bottle, both eyes slightly squinted when he wasn't seeing double, and the driver-side window fully rolled down. And AC/DC. Always AC/DC when there was fire involved.

The fire had taken off ravenously tonight. It had spread through the dry grass and slowly teased the bases of trees until their moisture content dropped enough for the flame to take hold. Casey had stood back for a while, his shirt off, his skin feeling the heat of the fire and his glassy eyes reflecting the magnetic flames. But the fire had gotten too hot too fast. The fire sped up the hillside toward the crest, where Casey was sure it would stop. He couldn't really hang out and enjoy it though; his truck was in danger, and he thought he felt

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a slight northwest breeze picking up. If the wind continued to build, tomorrow could be a busy day. *Tonight could be busy, too. I'd better be sure I beat the guys to the station just in case it doesn't burn out.*

While Casey drove, he thought about his affinity for starting fires. It seemed like something he had always done, and for the most part this was true. His father, a logger, had always made sure his one boy could take care of himself in the wilderness. Some of Casey's earliest memories were of camping with his dad. His father was not an educated man and was the product of living in Lewiston his entire life, but he had an innate knowledge of the outdoors, of motors, and of building which he wanted to pass on to his son.

Starting a fire was essential to the outdoor experience, and Casey had caught on quickly. Bonfires and burn piles, Casey was soon the one to start them, and his father had been happy to pass the torch. He carried a big stick, using it to prod the fire, continually caring for it. The ashes needed consolidation; a fresh log needed to be put on or a little breath of air given. Casey took these tasks upon himself whenever a fire was present.

His affection for fire did not go unnoticed. He had always been a quiet person, hanging back and observing while Bobby would get rowdy. He was especially quiet when a fire was burning. In high school, trucks full of teenagers would drive to clearings out in the woods to drink cheap alcohol and misbehave. Fires were the focal point for these gatherings, as their flames provided just enough light for dirty deeds. Girls would vie for Casey's attention after a few shots of Hood River Distillery plastic-bottle vodka, but the fire would hold his attention rapt. They bitched, drawled, and teased, but most of the time Casey just ignored them. The curves of the flame, the dancing and dodging, was something he wished for eternally. The allure of a woman had nothing on that of a fire. Bobby usually tried to send some girls his way but almost always failed and would then sneak off to his bag with some sophomore girl. Sometimes, when he didn't get too drunk and pass out, Casey would sit next to the fire after everyone had retired to their greasy sleeping bags and continue caring for the fire. He didn't think; he just sat and let his mind flow in a trance led by the beat of the flames.

After the prescribed burn, Casey hadn't been able to stop thinking about fire. That



night, he built a bonfire in a clearing for Bobby and some friends, but it seemed so tame in a fire circle made by round, smooth river rocks. After the flames he had experienced earlier that day, Casey felt fire should be more free, more loose, more unrestrained. He'd freaked some people out by throwing gas on the fire that night, sending up large plumes of black chemical smoke and flames. This wasn't an unusual practice, but Casey had taken it a little too far; Bobby had gotten pissed when the flames were getting too close to his green Ford. Casey settled down. The other people didn't understand what he saw.

Everyone else spent their Saturday drinking and swimming in the river, but Casey went home for an experiment. He would still drink; he just had some work to do. Jim had told them the Indians had used fire to control the vegetation around their villages, and Casey didn't see why he couldn't do the same. It was still early in the fire season, and he didn't need a permit to light fires in his backyard just yet. He figured the Forest Service would issue the fire ban in the next couple of weeks, though. It was always dangerous setting fires during the summer, and Forest Service permits were a good way to make sure people followed the rules. *You can't trust people. You have to have the skills like I do.*

Luckily for Casey, he didn't have to follow those rules yet. He took a pulaski, and a shovel, and dug out minor firebreaks around the small patch of weed-and-thistle-ridden grass in his backyard. Casey didn't mow his lawn often and figured he could use some Indian methods to shorten the process. He squirted some diesel on the grass at the edge of one of the four corners of his firebreaks and lit it. The diesel flame burned steadily in place for a minute and began to slowly and steadily devour the grass. The flames marched forward in a wavering line, shifting and transforming as they continued. Casey forgot about his beer and watched the progression, transfixed, as the color of his yard transitioned from green grass to orange flame to black soot.

Within ten minutes, the yard was reduced to a fine layer of smoldering charcoal and ash. The flame was out and left no danger to the surrounding yards and vegetation. Without too much effort, Casey had controlled the fire and had it do exactly as he pleased.

Shortly thereafter, Casey had set fire to a dog kennel, then to some singular trees, a junk car, and finally an abandoned cabin. There was no separating the alcohol and the fire

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for Casey, so he took extra care to not set fires where people could easily notice. Luckily, there were plenty of valleys, riverbeds, and forests close to town, just in case he had a drunken lapse of judgment. That was the beauty of living in an isolated rural town in the Pacific Northwest. It was easy to get away.

• • •

The Toyota jumped when it hit the transition between gravel and concrete, rattling the worn suspension and the driver. Casey swerved, causing his head to lean out the window. The brim of his Cabela's hat caught in the wind, and it was snatched right off his head, disappearing into the darkness. *Fuck, that's my favorite hat.* He stopped the truck and looked for it in the red glow of his brake lights. He didn't see it and didn't think it would be easy to find. Plus, there was no time to look. He had to get to the station.

Casey realized he hadn't been paying close attention to the road. He leaned into the glow of his CD player and turned up the music. When he looked back, he glanced in the rearview mirror and caught a faint glow to the southeast. It looked the way a person might imagine a UFO crash in the forest. A faint glow from behind a hill, the smoke reflected the colors beneath. *Doesn't look too big.*

He decided against stopping to admire his fine handiwork however. A slight change in weather conditions could dramatically affect the fire's damage potential. He unconsciously deployed the clutch and slipped into fifth gear as he raced the inevitable fire call.

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Casey slowed down considerably as he came to the small neighborhood that had settled itself along the banks of Rifle Creek. His house was just a quarter mile down the road, and Sheriff Warner lived only a few drives behind where he was now. Not only was he drunk, but the fire could be more closely tied to him if he was seen, let alone pulled over. Luckily, he had seen no other vehicles on the logging road that had led him out of the hills.

His beeper went off as he put his hand on his front door. "Lewiston Wildfire, request response to forest fire twelve to fifteen miles up Rifle Creek Road. Lewiston Wildfire, request response." All the other guys would be rolling out of bed pulling on their boots, kissing their wives and girlfriends, or else doing the same thing as he was: covering up. For

them it was weed, alcohol, or possibly meth for a couple of rougher guys on the force. For him it was alcohol *and* fire.

The smoky Levis he wore quickly hit the ground, and he pulled a pair of ripped Carhartts off the floor along with a t-shirt. He brushed his teeth, washed from his hands up to his elbows, and inspected himself for any more signs of fire. A handful of Nacho Cheese Doritos and he was out the door.

Five minutes later, he was at the station. A few guys, Jim, Bobby, and a couple of others were pulling on their fire outfits. Dark olive-green pants and yellow long-sleeved shirts were zipped and buttoned. Each firefighter was in some stage of his rote method of making sure he had everything. Every piece they carried was crucial: goggles to protect their eyes from smoke, helmet to protect the head from widowmakers dangling from trees, and gloves to protect the hands from excruciating heat and blisters. And of course, the fire shelter; federal law required every wildland firefighter to carry one. They used them when escape from an approaching fire was impossible. All a firefighter could do was try to find some fire block, cover himself with the shelter, and wait. It had been noted, not without irony, that these shelters looked like silver coffins. They saved lives, yes, but some fires were just too brutal to be survived.

"Hey, Case," Bobby said, looking up as he laced his scarred and beaten leather boots. "How you doin'?"

"You know, tired, but ready," Casey said as he opened his locker. "Been too long since we've been on a real fire."

"What'd you do after you left the Wing?"

Casey had his back to Bobby and thought for a second. He'd left the Gull's Wing, their local bar where the bartender, Wendy, would always pour them a shot of whiskey and a beer as soon as they walked in. Casey had been drinking steadily and doing well on the pool table. He'd had a good three-game run, winning handily the first three games and making fifteen dollars in the process.

Bobby had been at the bar, hitting on a thirty-something lady, whom Casey recognized

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but couldn't put a name to. He thought he remembered that she had a kid, but wasn't sure. Tonight was the night; Casey had decided two days before that he was going to start his first forest fire. He was ready. Casey had walked to the bar, taken a few shots to prepare himself, and tried to catch Bobby's eyes to let him know that he was taking off, but Bobby had been focused on his familiar mission. Casey had left without saying goodbye. On his drunken drive through the back roads, his anticipation had started to grow, like water starting to boil. He had decided the ideal slope to do it on after eying it for quite some time. No one knew where he was tonight, especially Bobby, who was preoccupied.

"Just went home, tried to get some sleep," Casey answered Bobby at the station. "Thought we might have a good weekend, you know, go camping or somethin'. Looks like we're gonna be busy, though. Any word on the fire?"

"Besides it being up past your place, not too much," Bobby said. "South slope fire; doesn't sound too big. Might burn out if we don't get any wind, but who knows?"

More fire fighters were filtering into the station and going through their checks and preparations quickly and efficiently. From across the room, Jim said, "It doesn't sound like it's going to be a bad one, boys. Possibly just a containment situation, but we are due for an increase in wind from the northwest, so we have to be prepared for anything. It could turn out to be a runner."

• • •

It smelled like smoke in the crew truck, but that was nothing unusual. The hygiene level of the guys on the crew was low, even by small-town standards, and washing clothes definitely wasn't a priority when there was beer to be consumed or TV to be watched. They sat mostly in silence, exchanging words here or there. Some guys slept while others stared. It was almost four o'clock in the morning. Casey and Bobby sat silently side by side on a bench seat in the middle of the lead truck. Ten guys followed them in an identical, light forest-green truck that said "Lewiston Wildfire" on the side.

As they drove past his house, Casey noticed that he had left the kitchen light on.

Ten minutes later, he was on the verge of nodding off when a loud pop and the sound of gravel hitting the undercarriage of the truck jolted him awake. The truck fishtailed to the

right and overcorrected, spraying gravel to the left before stopping.

“Fucking blowout,” said Jim, who was driving the truck. “Tire popped on the edge of the pavement and gravel. All right, everyone out. We gotta get this fixed and get up to that fire. Dispatch said it’s spreading.”

*Spreading?*

Everyone filed quickly out of the first truck. A harsh glow was cast on the crew members by the headlights from the second truck. It had stopped about three feet from the right rear corner of the first truck. They waved the other truck on, told them the situation and said that they’d be up as soon as they fixed the flat.

Casey thought about the fire, which had apparently been growing. *It must’ve gotten out of control.* He walked to the edge of the road and looked out over the clear-cut below. The wind had picked up, not much, but enough. He could feel the wind flowing steadily from the northwest. Instead of making him nervous, the news excited him, like a small fire was burning inside of him. *This is my fire. I did this.*

Casey heard footsteps on the gravel behind him and turned around to Bobby approaching. He had something in his hand.

“Found something you might be interested in,” Bobby said. He extended his arm. Clutched in his rough fingers was Casey’s favorite camouflage baseball cap. Casey snatched the hat out of his hand.

“What the fuck is this doing up here?” Bobby asked.

Casey didn’t say anything. He looked at Bobby. Bobby looked back in the dim light cast by the truck’s headlights. The sound of a tire jack squeaked in the background as the truck caught its own weight.

“All right boys, let’s load it up,” Jim yelled. “We’ve got a fire to fight.”

Bobby gazed a little longer at Casey, then snapped away. He walked quickly back to the truck, the gravel amplifying his pace. Casey followed slowly.

• • •

The fire that Casey Durst had set was ravenous with an appetite for acres of forest. It had consumed the original hillside and moved on to two others to the southeast. Casey,

*{continued}*

Bobby, and the crew were sent to cut off the fire on a hill to the south. They were to cut a fire line on the east side of the valley. Casey avoided eye contact with Bobby, but he could feel Bobby's eyes digging into him inside the truck and in the field. He knew Bobby though. Bobby wouldn't turn him in. Bobby knew of Casey's love of fire. He had found the scorched backyard, and was always giving Casey a hard time about ignoring women for flames. They would certainly talk about it sometime soon, but Bobby took his job seriously and wanted to put the fire out.

Casey couldn't believe that the fire had gotten so big, so fast. And it was all his doing. He tried to slow his excitement but didn't have any luck. He was a swamper, that is, he dragged the fallen brush away when the sawyers cut it down. It was hard, sweaty, dirty work that required falling into a steady and deep focus. Today his focus was broken; he kept looking up, hoping to see a flame or more smoke. The slope was steep, but the fire looked like it was making its way closer to the top of the other side of the hill. He was working with a sawyer named Zach, and they were assigned to work the highest up on the hill. The smoke that came from the other side continued to grow until there were occasional flames reaching over the crest.

The shift in wind was obvious. The heat on Casey's face suddenly increased, and smoke started funneling down the valley like a suspended grey river. "All southern units fall back, all southern units fall back immediately. The fire is going to run, the fire is going to run," ordered Casey's radio. Casey looked below him and saw the crew scrambling down toward the bottom of the valley. He and Zach stopped everything, dropped their unwieldy tools, and started sprinting down the partially-cleared fire line. They ran, slipped, and fell, leaving a trail of brown dust as they went.

The fire was moving at an incredible pace down the hill, slowly gaining on the crew, of which Casey and Zach took up the rear. As they reached the bottom of the hill, Casey turned to see how close the fire was. He instantly decided he shouldn't have looked; the fire was less than 150 yards away and moving rapidly. The rest of the crew was well ahead, and Zach was tearing off behind them. Casey started running as fast as he could. There were boulders, stumps, and bushes of poison oak in the way. He ducked, dodged, and jumped,

trying to catch up to the crew.

Nature was against him, however. A boulder stood on one side of the ravine, an impenetrable bush of poison oak on the other, and a large stump in-between. Judging by the trampled bushes and dirt tracked onto the stump, the crew had all taken that route. He hurriedly climbed the stump.

From the top of the stump, about eight feet up, he could see he was gaining on the crew. He thought he saw Bobby's face look back at him, but the visibility was getting worse and worse as the smoke was getting thicker and thicker. He stole a glance backward and saw that he had also increased the gap between him and the flames. *Might make this yet.* But as he jumped from the stump, a lace from his boot caught a jagged branch and set him off balance. Casey was agile and still managed to land on his left leg, but there was a rock underfoot that contorted his ankle, sending a sharp line of pain through his body and to his brain.

Casey was on the ground. He tried to stand, raising himself first to his hands and knees, then trying to put his bad foot forward. Even that was too much. *I'm not getting out of here. Even if someone came and got me, we would both die.* He looked to the boulder to the left. It was a large rock, probably fifteen feet in diameter with a slight overhang. It was the best he could do. He crawled fifteen feet to the boulder and grabbed his fire shelter from his backpack. He snapped it out like a mother folding bed sheets and pulled himself under the overhang. All Casey could do was wait in his silver coffin.

## WILL *taylor*

*Will Taylor is a journalism major who is also working on an English minor. He grew up on the southern Oregon coast reading and playing in both the forest and the ocean. When he's not reporting on an article or doing homework, he is procrastinating and thinking about what he should be accomplishing. He tries to make sure he lives an actual life and not one solely amidst words, sentences and paper. He graduates this spring and plans to force himself upon the magazine industry.*

## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

by David Liebig

“Man, are you even sure this shit is legit?” he asks me.

“Man, there was a Facebook event,” I assure him.

We have been off the path for a while now. The trees couldn’t get much thicker. In fact, it is as if they have tried—generations of live and flourishing branches entangled with the dead and decomposing, competing for ground. This is the silent war of the forest.

The floor of fallen leaves whispers to our shoe soles. With each step, the sun sinks a little more into the ocean. I can’t see this, surrounded by thickness, but I imagine it.

“There’ve been some gnarly sunsets lately,” I say.

“Dude, don’t change the subject. I mean, are we even going the right way?”

I look at the compass we scored off the Best Buy gumball machines.

“Northeast. She just said to follow the path to the brown sign, then go northeast for a while,” I remind him.

“A *while*?”

We abandoned the man-made trail at the brown WELCOME TO MONTAÑA DE ORO STATE PARK—PACK IN, PACK OUT notice at least two hours ago.

“We’ve *got* to almost be there,” I say and hope.

“And what if this girl’s a vampire? Like, vampires don’t exist, but if there was a vampire, it would be her. You said she had fucked-up teeth right?”

I laugh and say, “She had country teeth. Not fangs.”

“Whatever. Any chick that works to get paid in herbs, and not the kind you can smoke, isn’t human. At least not American.” He zips up his sweatshirt and pulls the hood over his golden mop before stuffing his fists into the pockets.

I slide my own hands into my jeans’ back pockets for warmth. One of them finds the notebook hidden there.

• • •

She seemed pretty strange when I met her. But that’s why I talked to her. She looked like a story.

It was last weekend. I’d driven to Morro Bay to check out the coastal craft shops.



Feeling adventurous, independent, I entered “Honest Herb.” She was the only one inside, on a stool behind the counter. I could see at once she was no sorority toy.

Bags under the eyes accentuated their clearness. Both nostrils pierced by golden rings. Her black hair barely reached her narrow shoulders. She wasn’t beautiful, but she was reading *The Martian Chronicles* and drinking tea.

“Bradbury,” I noticed out loud.

“Bradbury,” she confirmed.

And we talked. Bradbury led to books. Books led to hobbies. Hobbies led to hers. Through the battling scents of the store, she told me about the raves. The raves led to secrecy. Secrecy led to names. Hers was Shannon.

• • •

We hike another hour while the woods fill with darkness. Perhaps it’s the heightening of our non-vision senses—or perhaps the festivities, like us, are gaining speed—but this is when we hear the music. Either way, we feel we are getting close.

We follow the ground as it rises in sync with the sounds beyond. Cresting the hill, we stagger at the sight of Sgt. Pepper’s strangest dreams....

In and out of neon bursts, humans move. Some swing from trees. Some play with fire. Some sit in circles to share hands and bodies. In a natural bowl, all the fruitiest loops have gathered to float through musical milk. We inhale a pungent, skunky wave.

“I am way too sober for this,” my friend says.

I smile and lead the way down, taking mental notes.

The music is now distinguishably techno. Each bass note shakes the earth at its own frequency. People all around manifest the sounds through their movements. We pass a girl deeply lost in someone’s kiss. Neither she nor her friend pays us notice.

My friend asks, “That your girl?”

It’s not. We walk on.

There’s a DJ on a stage at the source of the noise. Balls of fire attached to ropes attached to flailing dancers surround him. Lasers pierce the fog-enveloped sea of sweat and flesh. We stand; we stare. The trailing flames burn streaks into my night eyes.

*{continued}*

"You two look like you could use some candy," someone tells us.

"Got any beer? I could use some all-American confidence," my friend says.

The stranger points to a row of kegs.

My friend to me: "Be right back. Want a beer?"

I shake my head. He nods and goes. I am left alone and sober, but there is no awkwardness, no sense of abandonment. Every soul in this clearing is alone. And together. I feel no need to impress.

My eyes break from the hypnotic, strobing epicenter. Along the perimeter there are backs to the ground, eyes to outer space. Rings of boys and girls. Loners. Lovers.

That's where I see her, at the outskirts of the clearing, with a guitar in her lap and an ear pressed to its body to hear chords her hands form beneath the sonorous bombardment from the stage. Dodging spastic munchkins and stepping over legs, I move to where she is.

"Shannon," I call.

She lifts her head as if woken from a dream.

"Hello, Ezra." She sets down the instrument and stands.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"We are under the Indigo, holding hands for the Seafloor Dance."

I'm not sure if she is singing or not.

"You're tripping," I say.

"Are we? Or are you?"

I just laugh and ask, "How long have you been here?"

"Since before the sun went down. Did you come by yourself?"

"I brought a friend." I point to him, still by the kegs. He has found someone who finds him funny. "That's Mark. He's harmless. And I made him swear secrecy, just like you said."

"Cool," she says genuinely.

"This is pretty crazy, what you guys have going on out here."

"We're not crazy."

Afraid I've offended her, I add, "I mean how you're all out here, and nobody really

knows about it. Everybody else is getting wasted at some frat house." She just nods, so I try, "You guys are the tree that falls in the forest when nobody is around to hear it."

This makes her smile. I'm either clever or lame, but at least she finds it amusing.

"You think we're unknown," she says.

"Do you ever feel unknown?"

"I know me."

Mark shows up with a giggling blonde and a foamy one in his hand.

"We're gonna go dance," he says. "You guys wanna come?"

"If I dance, I will throw up," Shannon says.

Mark shoots me a man-what-the-fuck-is-that-supposed-to-mean glance.

I laugh and give him a man-we're-cool nod.

"Suit yourself," he says.

"Sootsyaselv," the canary crows.

They wade into the chaos.

• • •

The woods have sunken into full-fledged night by now. Features soften. Senses take the roles of other senses. The lines and shapes that make up Shannon's face seem more at home in the absence of light. I ask her if she would like me to leave her alone so she can go back to playing her guitar, and she says no. It wasn't even her guitar.

"Besides," she says, "you're good at talking."

My mind translates the flattery into downright fascination, and I start to think that this girl might really have something I can write about.

There is division between the caffeinated poppers at the center of the scene and their glassy-eyed neighbors. Worlds apart, these cultures have found union in nature. Shannon has me sit and sip smoke to keep from feeling like a spectator. But truly, I'm infinitely amused by her willingness to just talk. So I talk....

"Do you go to Cal Poly?" I realize I'd been assuming all along.

"I don't go to school," she says, eyes on my sweatshirt's embroidered CALIFORNIA

*{continued}*

POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY JOURNALISM.

A little disappointed, I say, "What do your parents think about that?"

"I'll ask them for you if I ever meet them. I live with my grandparents, and they're so old.... It's like after high school, the earth adopted me. Out here, in her essence, I learn everything I need to know. Like the natives that lived right *here*"—she pointedly jams a stick into the dirt like an astronaut claiming a planet. "And the dinosaurs before them. Someday I'll repay her when my flesh is put back into the ground."

"No parents. No homework. Do you ever feel like you're just...floating?"

"People with their deadlines and their standards think they have such a firm hold on their lives. But really they're just as lost as anyone. I spend as much time as I can where there's no phone, no mirror, no Internet. Just freedom to feel."

"Feel what?"

Shannon smiles. It could be the darkness, but her teeth don't seem nearly as bad as I remember. She stands and offers me a hand.

• • •

I know that, with his unfaltering independence, Mark can handle himself. He has made a friend. Someone to spend the night with. So I don't feel too bad about leaving him when Shannon leads me away from the sounds and the people. She actually seems more interested in talking to me than being a piece of the party for belonging's sake. Acting oblivious to the others and their merrymaking, she wanders into the trees, expecting me to follow.

I don't know where we are going or how long we walk, but it seems far enough to talk about everything and anything I've ever thought about along the way. When Shannon asks me to tell her something trippy, my mind stumbles upon a paradox I picked up from a theoretical physics class I took.

"This guy, I can't remember his name, has a cat in a box. And the cat might be alive or dead. Nobody knows. But what he's saying is that the cat wouldn't be dead unless you opened the box and saw that it was dead. Until you actually know, the cat is neither alive nor dead. Or it's both."

“Curiosity really did kill the cat,” Shannon says. “But we were the curious ones.”

“Do you know where you’re going?” I finally ask.

“I think so. But if we end up somewhere else, we’ll just be *there* instead.”

But through the green and the black, we swim, and eventually arrive there—not *there*.

I notice clouds of steam and egg-smell hang in the air. The crowded growth thins before opening up to frame, at the foot of a rocky incline, the twirling pool of a wild hot spring.

“Aren’t there rules for going in these things at night?” I say.

Shannon stops and looks at me very seriously.

“It’s a *hole* in the *ground*.”

Her eyes stay locked on mine. From between her breasts, she pulls a small packet of crinkled tinfoil. The thin silver unfolds to reveal several tiny white squares. Shannon places two of the pea-sized papers on her tongue and tells me to do the same.

Turning to the foamy water, I say, “Is this your rabbit hole?”

“Something like that.”

She extends the hand holding the acid, and I eat two hits. We take our clothes off and slide into the steaming spring. At first the burning water bites at my chilled limbs. But the sting fades to an ache, and the ache fades to a numbness. My body is weightless in the wake of complete relaxation.

Shannon settles in and says, “You don’t always have to know where you’re going to get where you want to be.”

I perch my crossed arms on the lip of the natural spa to look back and imagine the lightless miles we just traveled. I hear careful movement in the water behind me. Shannon’s hands land on my shoulders. My brain spins.

As if she can sense this, she says, “Don’t think. Just feel.” And her fingers work circles of pressure in and out of my back. She pushes until every thought is lost, and my head is as dark as the night. Then the chemicals set in and paint vibrant flashes of passion across the black canvas of my mind....

We wake to sun sifting through clawed, leafy branches. We have slept on the ground

*{continued}*

near the hot spring. In the light, this is a different forest. There is dirt on our faces and clothes. We rise and—stumbling through our drunken sleepiness—backtrack to the site of last night's extravaganza. There is no talking along the way.

When we get there, I see that the bodies that moved so fast last night have faces, and they move slowly now. Dehydrated and photophobic, these walking corpses file out of the clearing and back to their lives or lack thereof. One of them is dressed like Mark.

"Hey, man," it says. "Where the fuck did you fairies fly off to last night? I thought I was hippy-food for sure."

Shannon speaks for the first time all morning: "Hippies don't eat people."

"Oh. Well I didn't even get laid. That blonde chick ended up barfing on me and after that I was over it," Zombie Mark says. "You get her number yet?" He tilts his head toward Shannon.

"Oh, uh, no," I stammer. The forgotten notepad in my back pocket comes to mind. "Here." I hand it to her. She puts down ten digits and hands it back.

Zombie Mark laughs, "Nice. Now let's go back to Normalville. I got shit to do."

"Bye, Shannon."

"Bye, Ezra."

• • •

At my apartment, I sit before my computer. Nighttime has returned too soon, and the glow of a blank Word document paints my fingers pallid. I move one white hand to touch the notepad on my desk. Beneath Shannon's phone number I have scribbled in every detail of last night that is still with me. It is everything I need to write a full-length feature that is sure to make the front page of the Mustang Daily. I have dreamed about getting freelance publication in the school paper since I knew it existed. But I am torn, realizing last night's perfection. I at least owe Shannon anonymity.

I feel bruised by the residual drugs still pulsing through me.

No.

Trees will fall in the forest whether I tell people about it or not, but there is something sacred about the simple existence that these people can appreciate by sharing it with the natural world. Their silence embodies the promise of the unknown.

I fold down the laptop screen as if closing a great, gaping mouth.

And Shannon's unknown. The phone number that will destroy it. I throw it away.

Along with the notes.

I've decided to let that cat live.

I fall into my bed and dream about the Indigo.



DAVID *liebig*

*David Liebig is a second-year journalism major who once saw the future while listening to Fleet Foxes in a dark room. David thanks his gorgeously insane family and insanelly gorgeous friends.*





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