Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.

~William Wordsworth
Syzygy: East Mississippi Community College
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Table of Contents

Awards of Excellence
- Dane McCulloch “Father Knows Best” 6
- Ronnie Robinson’s “Teardrop Leaf” 10
- LT Gathings “The Misadventures of Super Dupe” 11
- Taylor Durrett “Paper Bags” 20
- Andrew Brooks “Friday Night” 21
- Jena Stafford “Just Before the Benediction” 22
- Jesse Pounders “Untitled” 23

General Contributions
- Tracy Jackson “Every Color” 25
- Jena Stafford “Mother Oak” 25
- Charles Salazar “The Secret Song of the Whippoorwill” 26
- Stacy Robison “Science Fiction?” 27
- Grant Jeffries “Semper Fidelis” 28
- Susan Reynolds “Leaves of Fall” 29
- Willie Stewart “Untitled” 31
- Erin Getz “Perfect Vision is No Vision at All” 32
- Leah Peters “Beauty” 32
- Morgan Fant “The Waitress” 33
- LT Gathings “Give It Up” 33
- Andrew Brooks “Stalker” 36
- Stacy Robison “The Infamous Sweeney Todd” 36
- Jamie Sciple “Birds” 37
- Jena Stafford “The Silent Way” 38
- Hunter Lohman “Bottom of the Ninth” 38
- Jennifer Sullivan “Brrraaaaiiiinnnss” 39
- Morgan Fant “Pass Me By” 39
- Grant Jeffries “A Stranger” 40
- Alex Anthony “Untitled” 46
- Tyler Stanley “September 1st” 47
- LT Gathings “Most Likely to Succeed” 48
- Stacy Robison “Eternal Conflict” 56
- Jordan Lewis “Fog” 57
Awards Of Excellence
Betty Killebrew

Literary Award of Excellence

Father Knows Best

Dane McCulloch

I thought it best that we head west
In search of better life.
I had no care or no despair
For the discerning of my wife.
She asked me, “Dear, what we have here
Does it not serve us fine?”
But blind with greed, both gold and green
The decision was all mine.

Then quick as sin, the winds begin
To bustle, stir, and drone.
They turned and furled and tossed and whirled,
And winter was not gone.
The next four days, a pallid haze
Enclosed the way to wealth.
I forced us on through land unknown
And debilitating health.

The first big thaw, I looked and saw
That spring was coming early.
The wagon load, tilt to and fro
With bourbon, book, and burley.
My wife and me, and children 3
Went west with fear and glory.
The wagon trails, were bare with fail
And dust whispered their story.

The first to go, the youngest though
Was nine months removed from womb.
In four long days, he slipped away
To his untimely tomb.
Beside the road, beneath the snow,
I laid my son to rest.
With tearful eyes, and whiskey highs
I turned and headed west.
The songbirds soar a fortnight more
And travel was at leisure.
A warming breeze did blow the trees
There were no fits or seizures.
A new leaf turned, the fires burned
And lit the wagon trail.
Once bare with dread that woe had tread
Now flourished green with gale.

At night we slept by day we leapt
Toward a bright tomorrow.
The golden rays greeted our days
And rid our hearts of sorrow.
I assured, “The pains endured
Are just an apparitions.
The one we lost can’t square the cost
Of a man with lost ambition.”

My wife agreed, “You sowed the seeds
Which will lead us all to pelf.
You weigh the chance and circumstance
Of what is best for us and self.”
Once again my mind chimed in
“I know what is there to find.
In times of doubt you follow out
The seeing, not the blind.”
'Til late one night, I woke with fright
To odd cacophony.
The sounds of wolves were blurred with hooves
And unknown phonology.
I offered all despite my gall
My coin, my colts, my bread.
The savage tribe, declined my bribe
And took my wife instead.

Blind with rage, my manly sage
Fueled my ferocity.
Bloodshot red, my eyes inbred
From this atrocity.
My rampant ire burned like fire
Enflamed my soul with vengeance
For all my life, my estranged wife
Will haunt my dreams and remnants.

I made a vow, someday, somehow
Again we’d be abreast.
But my wandering ear heard it clear,
The calling of the West.
Rich with gold, and strong tenfold
I would return to save her.
With guns and men, I would amend
The deeds of my savage neighbor.

The morning sun cast shadows none
And it began to rain.
With every drop, my soul would sop
My guilt and ease my pain.
My children’s faces, like empty spaces,
Were still like the land we tread.
Filled with fears and stained with tears
Their souls were desiccated and dead.

In the next few weeks, the white capped peaks
Encroached the looming distance.
And through that breach, my goal in reach
For there was no resistance.
But my delight did turn to fright,
I saw what I had not known--
The salt fat back and stale hardtack
And water all were gone.

The next day along the way
We passed a lonely hovel
All my pleads, and children needs
I tried to beg and grovel.
I tell the man, my future plan
Of gaining wealth so merely.
And if they stay, I would repay
For his service dearly.
A morning new I traveled through
A cascade of emotion.
A father’s word had been deferred--
A loss of my devotion.
The west of great would have to wait
If alone it would begin.
For riches, gold, and fortunes told
Are worthless without kin.

My travels cease as I head east
To find my children’s keeper.
O’er the creeks that slowly leek
And the canyons that run deeper.
That day at dusk a haughty musk
Filled the summer air.
I soon learned, the camp had burned
And nobody was there.

Now all alone I travel on
To gain my affluence.
The ones behind plague my mind
And fill me with repentance.
What kind of man would trek the land
And leave his family dead?
A cylinder spin did rid my sin
And the golden dream ran red.

Do not put statements in the negative form.
And don't start sentences with a conjunction.
If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a
great deal of repetition can be avoided by rereading and editing.
Never use a long word when a diminutive one will do.
Unqualified superlatives are the worst of all.
De-accession euphemisms.
If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky.
Last, but not least, avoid cliches like the plague.

~William Safire, "Great Rules of Writing"
Bill Lauderdale

Art Award of Excellence

Teardrop Leaf

Ronnie Robinson

The artist's world is limitless. It can be found anywhere, far from where he lives or a few feet away. It is always on his doorstep.

~Paul Strand
Carl Net, mild mannered customer service specialist at The Modern World, an electronics superstore, has seen a lot of changes during his 15 years of employment, not one of which has ever been to his benefit. In the last 12 years there have been three store manager changes and eight assistant managers to come and go, some of whom were hired after him, most of whom he helped to train, and all of whom were promoted over him. However, being accustomed to the role of non-entity, each time, he took it in stride. In high school he was constantly the butt of practical jokes. In college he had not fared much better. So it only stood to reason, it just seemed natural, that he would serve as a puppet, a tool, at his place of employment. Still, like anyone else, he wanted to be more than a door mat, more than just a means to someone else’s end.

The 35 year old African-American male had a receding hairline, a less than athletic body, 20/40 vision without his glasses and a very friendly disposition. Among the customers he was a favorite, knowledgeable and courteous. Heralded as the hero of store #96, consistently outselling every other salesperson in the district, he appeared to be a success on paper. However his efforts continuously went unappreciated as far as promotions are concerned. It wasn’t a matter of qualification. He knew the policies and inner workings of the company better than his immediate supervisors. In fact, it was often Carl who smoothed over customer complaints, settling a vast majority of consumer disputes. Frequently called upon to perform the duties of a manager as well as those of his fellow salespeople, he complied without protest but not without a begrudged attitude.

The Saturday before the Super Bowl had always been one of the busiest day at The Modern World, equally as busy as Black Friday. Thus far Carl had already sold six 52” plasmas, five 45”, five 37”, 3 laptops and 2 cell phones. His feet were killing him as they always did during the big Super Bowl sale. Somehow he always wound up working the entire day, from nine to nine, twelve grueling hours while the other salespeople seemed to draw the shorter shifts.
9:55 p.m. found him in the middle of what was certain to be the last sale of the evening. Unfortunately his customer was Mr. Gruber, a cantankerous 82 year old retired military man who fancied himself an expert on everything, especially electronics. It was not by chance that Carl always wound up with Gruber. The other associates had come up with a code, “doomsday,” which they circulated to everyone except Carl whenever the tiresome geriatric approached the store. Tonight’s adventure was a simple exchange, an exchange that had been over an hour in the making and was just getting its second wind.

“Mr. Gruber, I’m trying to tell you that it’s not the plasma you purchased that’s faulty; it’s the cheap cables that you’re using during installation. What you need is—”

“No, no, no there’s nothing wrong with these cables. I’ve been using these kinds of cables for twenty-five years, and I’ve never had problems like this!”

“But, Mr. Gruber that was with the old analog televisions and that technology is not compatible with this technology.”

“Son, I was a communications specialist for the army for twenty-four years....”

“What I don’t understand, Mr. Gruber, is why you’re complaining about spending $29.98 for a cable after you’ve spent $1500.00 on a 52” HD plasma?” Carl said strategically intercepting Gruber’s standard spiel.

The exchange between the 2 men went on another hour and a half before Gruber finally agreed to purchase the newer cables. Everyone else including the night manager, whom Carl himself had trained, had been gone for almost an hour but not before leaving him with the keys to lock up, a mountain of paperwork to fill out and distressed feet. The midnight hour was close at hand when he finally exited the store with his shoes in one hand, the DVD that he’d purchased in the other, and a general dislike for his role in life. Why, he wondered, was he always the one who kept getting duped into doing everyone’s dirty work while they all were going on dates or to parties? Well, this is it, the last time, no more Carl to the rescue.

As he searched for the keys to his Dodge Dakota, he heard a distinct mixture of sobbing and swearing coming from the adjacent parking area. He laid his shoes and the DVD on the hood of his truck and then walked over to investigate. He soon discovered the source of the buffet of emotions. They were emanating from a tall blond wearing a tight dress and high heels, frantically searching the sparsely lit parking area for something.

“Excuse me.”

She looked up at him trying to hold back her tears. “What?” she snapped defensively.

“Is there something I can help you with?”
“Boy, you didn’t put much thought into that line, did you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Why’d you come over here, huh? And don’t try to feed me some line about trying to help me because you do not know me,” she barked causing him to slowly retreat backwards.

“Ow!” he cried out just as he’d begun to back away.

“Ow? Oh-my-God, what is this, the seventies? Is that all you got? Is that supposed to be some kind of macho innuendo toward my figure or my face?” she huffed tearing further into him.

Before answering he lifted his foot and reached down to pick up the object of her flustered search, her keys. “I believe this is what you’re looking for.”

She wiped the tears from her face and reached for them with a trembling hand. If there was to be a progression into a come-on line, this would be the perfect moment. Yet he dropped the keys into her palm without innuendo or glib remark.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude—I mean, I’m sorry,” he replied trying to avoid incurring more of her wrath as he turned and began to walk away favoring his left foot.

The twenty-seven year old beauty studied the items in her quivering hand, the ignition key, the door lock key, the key to her apartment, the key to clothing store, which she’d just closed, a post office box key and the miniature flail key chain that held them all. It was only after the examination of the key chain that a revelation disclosed itself to her. He hadn’t made an insinuating reference toward her. His outcry was inspired by her pointy keychain under his sock foot, the keychain containing the keys that she’d thrown in anger, not lost, but chucked. This man, this total stranger was merely being chivalrous, perhaps at the expense of physical injury, and she’d effectively rewarded his gallantry with alienation.

“Hey, uh, hello!” she yelled in pursuit of him, her heels clopping on the pavement. He turned around cautiously, careful to say nothing in an effort to avoid another barrage of anger.

“Say, I owe you an apology for my rudeness just now.”

“No, you don’t. You were upset,” he said graciously.

They stood next to his truck which was parked under a light and quietly observed an awkward moment of silence. She laughed first smoothing the way for him to relax. Her unsteady hand reached out to him, and he nervously received it.

“I’m Alexis, Lex to my friends.”

“I’m um—um.”

“Carl?” she helped.

“How’d you know that?” he shuttered. “You are still wearing your name tag,” she replied. “I hope my key chain thingy didn’t hurt you too bad, Carl.”

“Flail,” he replied.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The thing on your key chain is a flail. It’s a medieval weapon used by knights.”
Chit-chat segued into his accepting an invitation to allow her to buy him a cup of coffee at her favorite all night spot for brew. They hopped into their respective automobiles to rendezvous at the Java Hut. Never was there a more apt name, “hut.” It was a tiny little hole in the wall, wedged in between a tattoo parlor and an Acupuncture clinic, well hidden from the world behind a check cashing store. Still, it always boasted succulent aromas of various coffees.

Carl ordered a cappuccino while his benefactress went with black coffee. They talked about everything, from her ugly break up with Luther, to how the managers of Modern World were always duping him into doing their work, and so much more in between. She took another cigarette from the pack, her third since they first struck up a conversation, slipped it between her lips, and remarked on how she admired his selflessness. On the subject of relationships she seemed to be especially fascinated by the thought that he’d never been deeply involved.

“You know, in a way I admire you,” she stated then paused to allow smoke to sensually ghost from between her sexy lips. “At least you’ve never had anyone to break your heart.”

He almost missed his cue being so enamored with her sex appeal and beauty.

“But isn’t that the chance that you take by being in love?” Carl replied.

“Still, Luther called me an insensitive, manipulative bitch who doesn’t care about anybody’s feelings except my own. How’s that for a zinger?”

“Apparently, he’s never seen you as I saw you a little while ago.”

“Oh God, please don’t remind me,” she said dragging on the cigarette. “I am so glad that we’re here together. If we weren’t, I’d probably be at the club forced to look at him hanging out with his friends. I’m sure he was expecting me to drag my dejected butt in and pine away over a few shots of tequila.”

In his world, she was the kind of woman who only existed in cosmetics ads or going in the opposite direction, but never sitting across the table from him in an afterhours coffee shop. Every time he looked at her, the first thought that crossed his mind was that of a Hollywood starlet, perhaps even a supermodel. He thought Luther a fool to ever walk away from such a woman.

“Why did he call you manipulative, Lex?”

“He saw me with Brian Lac, my ex-boyfriend, and thought I was flirting with the guy to make him jealous. That would be pretty shallow, wouldn’t it? Do I seem like a shallow person to you?” she asked smiling in his direction while slurping the steaming coffee.
Even her hands were beautiful, those long fingers wrapped around that mug featuring very evenly manicured nails, perfectly polished in candy apple red. She drank coffee like a man, but made love to that cigarette as only a woman could. There was something mesmerizing by the way she looked at him and she knew it. The way her eyes seemed to look through him rather than at him might have meant something but easily could’ve meant nothing. Occasionally, he tried looking into his cup and out the window, but he always found his way back to those gorgeous, penetrating, gray eyes.

“Huh? Oh...no, no one would cry like you were crying unless they have a heart.”

“I have an idea,” her eyes seemed to gleam at the thought of it. “Why don’t we go at my place and watch that DVD that you bought?”

Wow, he hadn’t see that one coming. To date he’d only been in the company of three women socially, the first was during his senior prom, in which his aunt duped him into escorting his cousin who was over six feet tall with feet bigger than his. The second, two years ago, was a blind date which his co-workers set up with a prostitute as a practical joke. The third was with a female body builder, as part of a double date that his cousin conned him into. However, this was different, no matchmaking, no blind date brokering, absolutely no third party at all. She was Venus, this one across the booth from him, inviting him to her place.

“You do realize that it’s almost two a.m., don’t you?” he asked swallowing hard.

“Do you have a curfew? Do you live with your mom or something?” she asked with a tone that was meant to emasculate him.

“No, it’s not that,” he replied nervously, “What if Luther tries to contact you? I mean, he might realize that he’s made a terrible mistake. I would.”

She took the cell phone from her purse and turned it off. “There you see. I don’t want to talk to him. I’m engaged in great conversation already.”

It was straight to the sofa once they arrived. It was a nice apartment, not very tidy. There were magazines scattered all over the coffee table along with an ashtray that was overdue for emptying. The half full beer bottle with a cigarette butt floating in it on the end table next to Carl appeared as though it had been there at least two days judging by the dust that had settled on it. On the walls there were a couple of framed bar menus as well as several photos of Lex.

He was a little timid, uptight, waiting for Candid Camera to come out of one of the other rooms and expose the evening as a hoax. Lex eagerly pulled the DVD from the bag to see what it was and then grimaced, “The Adventures of Superman?”

“Sorry, it’s an animated tribute to Christopher Reeves in which the Superman character is drawn in his likeness. There’s also behind the scenes footage from the movies that has never been seen before,” he tried to explain without sounding geeky.

She shrugged, chuckled, kicked off her shoes and then loaded it into the machine. Playing the good hostess she offered him a beverage from a menu of choices, which he politely refused, and then landed herself next to him on the sofa, “Speaking of footage, I want to check your foot. Gimme,” she said tapping her lap with both hands.

“Huh? Oh! I think its fine now,” he chuckled nervously. “I’d actually forgotten about it.”
“Still there could be a puncture. You might require some peroxide or a bandage. Now gimme,” her insistence became almost maternal.

He gave in to her insistence surrendering his left, size eleven foot into her lap. She removed both the loafer and the white sock slowly, almost provocatively. He was blushing, as much as he could. It was the closest he’d ever come to being undressed in front of woman. Of course there was some awkwardness. What if there was something about his foot that grossed her out, his elongated toes, his less than even toenails, or his lack of arch? Paranoia set in about things like toe jam and foot odor. Her examination was so thorough that he could feel the breath from her nose. There was a reddish looking spot that would barely qualify as a bruise just beneath the ball of his foot. As she used the nail of her pointing finger to examine it for broken skin, he abruptly began to squirm and chortle.

“Oh don’t tell me you’re ticklish,” she said teasingly while employing the rest of her fingers for an all out offensive.

Rhythmically he desperately tried to liberate his foot from her grasp, but she was stronger than she looked. Pleading with her between guffaws, contorting his body, and flailing his arms like a man possessed until eventually winding up on the floor. Every time that he thought he could stop laughing, another involuntary outburst betrayed him. After a few moments of playful torture, which inspired tearful laughter, she had mercy on him. It took him a couple of moments to catch his breath which amused his host.

“Well, that was fun,” she giggled looking down at her guest.

It was for him as well, even arousing. His heart was pounding like a bass drum. Blood rushed to areas of his body that he’d forgotten existed. It was a sensation he had precious little experience with. Somehow he expected to be embarrassed by that little aerobic display, but in the aftermath he was sorry that it ended so quickly. Taking a few moments to catch his breath, he pulled himself back up onto the sofa.

“Sorry, I just couldn’t resist,” she said provocatively biting her bottom lip.

“Actually I should apologize to you for that little display that I just put on,” she continued in an anaerobic voice. “I thought it was cute.”

“Cute.” There’s a word he’d never heard in reference to him before. Somewhere in the midst of that chance encounter just a few hours ago, he seemingly had stumbled onto the greatest adventure of his life. Eventually their attention wound up on the animated movie. However Carl, who was not as accustomed to all nighters as his hostess, was soon fast asleep. Lex glanced at her watch. It was twenty minutes until five. She looked at her guest who was oblivious to the goings on of the world and then moving swiftly she took a blanket from the closet. His second sock wound up by the door after she removed his other foot coverings, carefully. Lastly she joined him under the blanket giving her watch one last glance.

It was about 5 a.m. when Grace, Lex’s bartending roommate, came in with a guest of her own. They’d both come from Experience, the club where Grace worked and where Lex was supposed to have met with Luther. They were both a little drunk, but not too drunk to be staggered by the scene on the
sofa, Lex and some guy, other than Luther, whom neither of them had ever seen before. Quietly they crept past the sofa and into Grace’s room.

By 6 o’clock he and Lex were making love right there on the sofa. She was even more beautiful naked, an avatar. It was the most awesome experience of his life. He wondered if she could read his mind because if she could she’d realize that it was his first time. He didn’t know who she was, not really yet he was in love with her. He tried not to look into her eyes, but they were so beautiful that he had to, and when he did he could no longer contain himself. It was then that he...woke up.

The whole love-making had all been just a dream. A strategic exit was called for, precipitated by cat-like agility and stealth. However, agility and stealth were skills that he lacked. So as a result of his elephantine disposition she was awakened partially.

“Oh man, it’s too early to be moving around,” she said whispered still quite groggy.

“Uh, I think I’d better go,” replied Carl.

“Please don’t go, I’ll make breakfast about eight, how’s that?”

“That is really nice of you but...”

“Do you really have to go now?”

“I’m afraid so, but I really enjoyed your company.”

Finally Carl managed to get up from the sofa. He collecting his shoes, found only one of his socks, grabbed the DVD and then escaped the apartment with both in hand which echoed the manner in which their encounter began.

Once at home his first order of business was a shower. The water had barely sprayed him when he heard a familiar sound. He turned off the water and listened for it again. It was his cell phone. His first impulse was to ignore it, but what if it was her? It was a consideration that he couldn’t ignore. She didn’t even know his number. Still, what if? He dashed from the shower leaving watery footprints with every step until he reached the phone and answered it. It was her!

“I hope you don’t mind me calling so soon, but I just wanted to thank you again.”

“Thank me, for what, the keys or the coffee shop?”

“Are you kidding? Stop being so modest, you wonderful man. You saved me from a night of wallowing in self-pity.”

“It was all in a day’s work. By the way, how’d you get my number?”

“I went through your phone while you were asleep. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all!”

She went on to explain that Grace was hosting a Super Bowl at their apartment in which most of the guests would be Luther’s friends. It was a foregone conclusion that most of them had heard about the break up because he always tells them everything.
In an attempt to avoid being the object of gossip and whispers in her own domicile, which she seemed adamant about not making an appearance, she made a request of him. The words that came out of her mouth fluttered every butterfly in Carl’s stomach. “Could we watch the game at your place?”

“Um...here, at my house?”

“Cool! Oh thank you, I really appreciate this!”

“But I’m working today,” he said nervously.

“Today? Who works on Super Bowl Sunday?” she scoffed. “Oh, eureka! I’ll just come by the store, pick up your key, get the directions, and set up our private Super Bowl party before you get home. I’ll even make my famous chili. You are so super. I love you, dude!”

She was already off the phone and expecting to pick up the keys. It was still ringing fresh in his mind, she said that she loved him! Him, everyone’s favorite tool, she said that loved him. Finally, someone who appreciated him for him rather than what he could be gotten from him. He was in love and would’ve given her anything that she asked for.

The Modern World was only opened from noon until six p.m. on Sundays, but for Carl it seemed like a twelve hour shift. Lex was waiting for him at his place and he was anxious to get to her. He could care less about the game. It was those gray eyes that he was so desperate to get lost in. His imagination was working overtime. She could be the one, Mrs. Carl Net. It was easy to imagine, a wedding at the nicest of cathedrals. His first cousin, Nelson, would be his best man, Derrick, Lonnie, Max, Trevor, J’Wan, Marshall, and Patrick would all be groomsmen. Oh man, what about the ring? She’s a prize deserving of more than just any ring. She was worth, at least, a 2 carat diamond. He could afford it. After all, he’d been saving the bulk of his paycheck for fifteen years. Oh, then there was his mother, what was he thinking, she would have to meet his...

“Carl?” Reggie the, manager on duty, said tearing him from deep thought.

“Huh?” he replied startled, knocking down multiple packs of batteries.

“What is up with you, man? Super bowl Sunday is not a great selling day, but you’re up to about $263.00 in commission.”

“It’s all in a day’s work,” Carl’s tone was jovial as he picked up batteries.

“No, there’s something different about you today. You are really laid back. What did you do when you left here last night?”

“Is there any way possible for me to get off a few minutes early, Reg?” he asked trying to avoid answering the question.

“You want to leave early? There’s a woman, isn’t there?”

“If I tell you, will you let me go?”

Of course his request went unfulfilled. He worked the full shift and then ran out of there immediately. Lex’s yellow Charger looked natural parked in the driveway as he parked on the street. The aroma coming from his home was wonderful, perhaps a preview of things to come. His fingers ran alongside the beautiful Dodge as he walked to the house, unlocked the door and entered eagerly.
However he was staggered to find his guest with a guest of her own on his sofa cuddled up watching the pre-game show and sharing a bowl of chili. She introduced him as Luther. With great eagerness the very handsome 6’ blond, with perfect teeth, and muscular arms, wearing a Patriots t-shirt stood up and shook the hand of, his host, the flabbergasted Carl.

“You gotta be Charles,” even his voice was handsome. “I’m Luther and I just want to tell you that I really appreciate you doing this for me and Lex.”

Carl was speechless but managed to find a way to force an ingenuous smile across his face while moving his eyes from Luther to Lex then back to Luther. Surely someone was going to explain what this is, though he wasn’t certain that he really wanted to know.

“When Jack called me this morning and told me that him and Grace found Lex on the couch with some dude under a blanket, a sock by the door and her dress on the floor at five in the morning, my imagination went into overtime. So I called her. Then she explained to me that you’d injured your foot in the parking lot, how she’d approached you and offered to even treat it. That’s when I realized that my little Lexy is not as superficial as I thought. I mean does she seem superficial to you?”

Poor Carl was distraught, dejected, and certainly devastated; as such he’d begun to view the woman on his sofa differently. When she said we were going to watch the game, a completely different demographic had entered his mind. His imagination was cranking out questions. Did she know when she called him this morning that she and Luther were getting back together? Could she be that cruel, that fiendish, that heartless that she could make him laugh like no one has ever done before and in less than twenty hours make him desperate to cry with equal magnitude?

She was cool as a winter’s breeze watching the game and devouring chili while the 2 men talked, or rather while Luther talked and Carl shrunk. However Carl couldn’t help but wonder, even hope, that she might possibly feel just a little—shallow.

“Then when she told me that you insisted that we watch the game at your place, away from the distraction of our usual buds, I thought that was genius. Why would you do this for us?”

This was Carl’s opportunity to foil her diabolical plan, to burst her duplicitous bubble, to dismantle her devious deception and expose her for the dastardly villain that she is. Turning his direction she met his gaze with the same damsel in distress expression that stole his heart originally. Once he looked into those grey eyes, in which he had no defense, he could only say one thing, “What can I say? It’s all in a day’s work.”

“To think there were times when I thought she was using other guys to manipulate me. Thanks to you, Charles, I’m seeing a side of her that I never knew existed. You are really a super dude,” he said as he shook Carl’s hand and then dropped back down on the sofa next to his girlfriend.

Tears swelled in Carl’s eyes as he tried to stiffen his quivering bottom lip. Once again he’d been the puppet, the tool to further someone else’s end. All he could do was just stand there in shock watching them cuddle, kiss, and eat from the same bowl on his sofa. Humiliation and degradation filled him with an urge to toss the truck keys in his hand across the room and yell profanities. The best hours of his life and it was just a caper, a coup. It was another score for the other side. Lex glanced up at him for a moment smiling a smile that might’ve easily been a smirk, “Sit down, Carl, and take off your shoes.”
2 Dimensional Art

Award of Excellence

Paper Bags

Taylor Durrett

Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures.

~Henry Ward Beecher
Poetry Award of Excellence

Friday Night ~ a rondeau

Andrew Brooks

Liquid courage flows from tap to vein dizzily
As a faint popping echoes from my seesawing bar key
Behind the earthquake of bass amongst hands of green.
Young feet grip the brass bar rail like a fiend,
As I struggle through slurred orders in the hazy sea.

I fight back as they scream at me.
The blinding headache sets in from reflections of the t.v.
And the shrieks of the girl attempting “Kerosene.”
Liquid courage flows.

I silently beg for left over coins and crumpled money,
Like the vagrant guttersnipe craves honey.
With wages so low, my oblivious bosses just want their caffeine.
The clock drudges on like a recovering addict of methamphetamine.
The lights come on, and the hormone hunters prey upon their bunny.
Liquid courage flows.

A writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer.

~Karl Kraus
Poetry Award of Excellence

Just Before the Benediction

Jena Stafford

Amen, they cheer, rocking in the seats,
Reverend stands again and clutches the podium
His eyes graze the congregation and
With his mouth wide open, he cries,
“You don’t know like I know...what
God has done for me!”
And the crowd rebuts,
In hoots and hollers, the congregation
Raises their voices
And he presses on,
“I said, you don’t know...like I know...
What God has done for me!”
And they answer,
Lifting up voices of praise in a glorious
Echolalia of song and acclamation
Framed by dancing notes from the organ
And toes tapping on the floor,
Heads swinging and hats falling, the church
Breaks into a fit of divine convulsions,
And the parsons in red unveil the sacrament.

I love writing. I love the swirl and swing of words as they tangle with human emotions.

~James Michener
3 Dimensional Art

Award of Excellence

untitled

Jesse Pounders

I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way - things I had no words for.

~Georgia O'Keeffe
General Contributions
Red polka dots, yellow peep-toes, and black patents,
What girl doesn’t love a million pair?
Green alligator skins, orange wedges, and brown oxfords
What woman doesn’t hate a solitary tear?
White sling backs, leopard knee highs, rose tinted florals
Will walking past testosterone get her quite a few stares?
Navy pumps, olive corks, and plaid high heels
How can one mind decide which to wear?
Leather calf skins, maroon stilletoes, and blue suedes
Once a woman experiences the mountain-tops, she feels exposed when bare.

Languid arms reach down, down,
Towards resting crowns that
Nestle beneath stony headboards.
Although weathered elbows twist outwards,
Shielding from winds blown rampant,
The nimble fingers of leafy green
Pull up the mossy coverlets.
Dreaming, dreaming, the children
Sigh in peaceful slumber
While Mother Oak,
Ever nurturing,
Keeps watch on sleepless nights.
The boy stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. His long day was rewarded by the gentle breeze of the night wind and the tranquility of the quietness. He stood there, only breathing, only existing. Inhale, pause, exhale. The night forest sounded alive, but there was a sound that separated itself from everything. A beautiful song gave rise over the trees. It had a vibrant crescendo that echoed across every foxhole and every star. The song seemed omniscient, and the boy gave in and started moving with the sounds whose origin seemed untraceable.

“What is making this?” The boy said aloud, awaiting an answer to his simple inquiry. The nocturnal orchestra seemed to halt at this. And an answer made its way through his ears.

“Please forgive me for not telling you,
I’m the music that you dance to.”

The boy was captivated by the lovely voice of this creature he could not see.

“What are you?”
“I am a Whippoorwill.”
“You have a gorgeous song, why do you only perform at night? Such beauty deserves to be seen, no?”

The boy made sense; such a talent should be seen in the sunlight. It should be known by all. It should be adored and the Whippoorwill should not hide in the dark with such a gift. Surely all of creation and even God himself longed to see something that could produce such a masterpiece. The bird’s song connected all nature and heaven through a melody of perfect pitches. A mystical matrimony of harmony was invading the night sky and no one could see its composer. The bird answered back:

“I am nocturnal, I prefer the wonders of the un-seeable universe. Beauty isn’t only in the sunlight, ya know. There is a certain beauty only found at night. I have grown fond of this type of beauty. The beauty of a young fawn nestled up against her mother. The beauty of a lone coyote roaming restlessly on the forest floor. The beauty of a gargoyle stretching its wings. The beauty of an aged, experienced hawk evaluating the meadows for mice. The list is endless, boy. The gems of darkness cannot be contained through simple language. No words on paper, no brushstrokes on canvas can capture it.”

The boy merely grinned at the words of the Whippoorwill.

“I too know of the beauty of darkness.”
The night sky had produced a mist that felt cool to his skin. It gave the grass an alluring aroma.

“I’m sure you are just as beautiful as your song... Will you sing more for me? I love music.”

The boy had surely fallen in love with the Whippoorwill. The bird thought to herself, “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about, there’s no way he knows of the preciousness of darkness.” However, the Whippoorwill blushed at the idea of someone calling her beautiful. The bird played for him all night, and all of creation marveled at her skill, her God-given talent. Her solo cradled they boy’s heart and soothed his mind.

When the sun rose, the boy was reluctant to say goodbye. He looked forward to hearing the song of the Whippoorwill for many more nights to come. They had formed a friendship. He dreamed of telling stories to his future grandchildren about the secret song of the Whippoorwill. The sun’s radiance gleamed on the boy’s skin and thawed out his bones, bringing him warmth that the dew had stolen from him.

After the boy’s applause, the bird left him with nothing more than the sound of fluttering wings. He imagined her taking a final bow before leaving. He took up his cane and whistled for his seeing-eye dog that led him back inside.

“I too know of the beauty of darkness.”

If I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad.

~Lord Byron

Science Fiction?

Stacy Robison

Giant women? Killer clowns?
What would happen if they all came down?
Would they be on a trek or waging war?
Shall we retreat into the core?
Are we alone? Are they out there?
Are they scaly green or covered in hair?
Fluffy? Slime? Warm or cold?
When, oh when, will the truth be told?
Do they play spaceball or will mars attack?

Snatch our bodies? Do we need a few men in black?
Are they humanoid monsters? What’s the occasion?
A small x-file or a world invasion?
Lightsabers or laser rays?
I wonder how much a martian weighs?
Will they be robots in disguise, or something that we'll all despise?
Do they like our planet because it's breezy?
Or is it simply because earth girls are easy?
We arrived on that island in an old Greyhound bus.

A rag tag group of boys anxious to grow into men

Chose a road only taken by the few and the proud.

The journey before us was grueling and long.

Day and night we marched across that sacred ground

Led by four Hounds from Hell charged to turn us to men.

Their task to ensure that the legacies of old would be

Passed down to us filled them with rage at our slightest misstep.

“DIE!” they screamed as they fought with their leashes held

By their Senior. We cringed in fear that they might break loose.

The days came and went, each worse than before

Until we each pulled together, all of seventy-four.

As we walked across the sacred deck known to Basilone,

Lecky, and Strank, we boys became men once we earned the title

They held so proudly. We are United States Marines.

Few can comprehend the bond strong as blood shared by all

Who hold that title, and we will always be faithful to those
Belonging to the Corps. We gladly offer our lives in service of Flag or Brethren and count it an honor as the bugle plays “Taps” And the bagpipes cry “Amazing Grace.” If we die before you Wake we only ask that the flag of our fathers which we fight For be given to our loved ones before they lower us into The cold ground where many men have already gone. We will watch from above as that old Greyhound takes More boys anxious to turn into men to that hellish island We know so well. And those of us who live to grow old can Rest in the knowledge that we will always hold the right to Be called United States Marines.

How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.

~Henry David Thoreau, Journal, 19 August 1851

Leaves of Fall

Susan Reynolds

The countless fall leaves crackle noisily under my feet as I make my way across the courtyard. The sun is shining brightly but almost ineffectively as it merely implies its golden warmth on my face. The air has an almost tangible sharpness to it; the undeniable fingers of old man winter are reaching out to remind us that he is on his way. The leaves of the surrounding trees blaze brightly in fiery hues of crimson, gold and amber and they dance and twirl playfully in the intermittent breezes. I pause to perch for a moment on the cool marble bench that sits sheltered by a wall of towering copper–flecked bushes to drink in one of the last days of fall.
A myriad of students bustle to and fro about the campus, busily chatting about finals and Thanksgiving plans. I speculate, as I watch them walk by; where are they going? Will they be coming back in the spring? Will they reach the goals they have laid or will they find themselves in a different life than the one they had envisioned? I wonder if they know how easily that can happen. So many faces; so many dreams, hopes, and plans. These are the faces of the young. Full of expectancy and potential, most have not yet tasted the bitter waters of circumstance and disappointment. The harsh reality of the real world has left most of my fellow students temporarily unscathed, although occasionally I do glimpse a pair of eyes who seem all too familiar with the world and its trials, responsibilities and tribulations.

I don’t know about their futures, or about mine, for that matter. All I know is that this semester is almost over, and this year of our lives is winding down, never to return again. Did we spend it wisely or foolishly? It could be one of many that are to come or it could be our last. There are so many countless variables that intertwine with all our fates, blurring the line between chance and choice.

An icy gust, like plunging headlong into a frosty barricade, abruptly demands my attention as I involuntarily shake my head to loosen what is left of the fragments of daydream that try to linger in the mirrors of my mind. To my rueful chagrin my face is not youthful like those that I see passing by. In fact, increasingly I gaze into the mirror and I notice the edges of an old woman trying incessantly to peek back at my reflection. I know that my future is not the same as the countless ones that surround me, and for a minute; I am intensely sad. I take a moment to look circumspectly at my world. I know that endings can be a bit melancholy, yet they are sprinkled with an undeniable feeling of relief, while the knowledge that another beginning is right around the corner is somehow both invigorating and exhausting at the same time. I decide that while my future may not be the same as my young peers, it doesn’t make it any less important or meaningful. That brings a little smile that finds its way to play briefly on my lips.

I gather my books and I stand up straight and tall, the wind tickling my face with random wisps of errant raven tendrils, and determinedly step back across the rustling leaves. I smile at the many faces that I meet, while mentally wishing them all well. And to my surprise the sun kisses me with a warmth that feels almost like a touch of affection, reminding me that the sun is always shining, even in the fall and the winter when we can’t always see it. It reminds me that no matter where any of us have been, or where we are going that for today, surrounded by the leaves of fall, we are all here together. We are making our lives and our futures brighter one day at a time.

The act of putting pen to paper encourages pause for thought, this in turn makes us think more deeply about life, which helps us regain our equilibrium.

~Norbet Platt
Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.

~Scott Adams
Perfect Vision is No Vision at All

Erin Getz

Does the blind man really see?
Has he been holding out on me?
Without the chains of the physical plane,
What does he really have to gain?
Can he take a touch, a smell, a sound,
And construct a gilded playground?
Pondering this, my thoughts wander
To the time we with “vision” squander.
The man with no vision I do not pity.
For his beautiful mind, I only hold envy.
The weakness of my imagination
Only brings to me frustration.
In my sad attempt to create a world of bliss,
I wonder again, what does the blind man really miss?

Words - so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.

~Nathaniel Hawthorne

Beauty

Leah Peters

Beauty in the way that nothing is right.
Beauty in the fear you run from the light.
Beauty in the darkness that touches your hand.
Beauty in the moonlight in which you stand.

Beauty in the words you utter with a sigh.
Beauty in the tears that fall from your sky.

Beauty in the disaster you claim as your life.

Beauty in the way that nothing is right.
The Waitress

Morgan Fant

I am your servant, sir, but just for an hour.
I watch as you eat your greed, becoming blown.

Please, sit and enjoy your moment of power.
I accept the copper you leave on your throne.

If it is not to your standard, I’ll simply redo.
I clean your waste, missing not a crumb.

Your time is too valuable for a single ‘thank you’.
I sculpt a new smile, waiting for the next heir to come.

Give it Up

L T Gathings

Forgiveness is a tricky matter. As a sensitive youth who grew up to become an equally sensitive adult, I am an expert on the subject of bitterness. I’ve been the victim of adolescent ridicule. I’ve been the recipient of callous rejection. I’ve also suffered the cruel injustice of betrayal by so-called friends. I’ve even been taken for granted more than a few times. As a result I’ve suffered many sleepless nights because of my embitterment. Bitterness is such a dangerous attitude. Like the embers in a fireplace that are responsible for the sustenance of the flame, bitterness sustained negative emotions that were detrimental to my state of mind. In other words, bitterness provided sustenance to my unforgiving attitude. However, I realized that it did not have to end on that note. I learned through trial and error that there is a weight that is lifted by the offering of forgiveness.

The first step instrumental in my learning to distribute genuine forgiveness was my acknowledgment of how difficult the distribution process would be. Having to face that particular truth was without a doubt the foremost, most crucial, element to the issuance of true forgiveness. I had to learn to under-
stand that forgiveness does not come naturally. When it comes to forgiving, I was forced to face the sobering fact that nothing just happens on its own. I had to come to the realization that forgiveness is not a reflex. Why was that tidbit so crucial? Because waiting for bitterness to fade away on its own only intensifies the burn. I know, I’ve felt that burn. That’s why this step proved to be the most critical and difficult of the entire process. This was the step that forced me to look into the mirror of the heart at the guy who was willing to play host to the parasite of resentment, and admit to myself that I would have to actually exert effort to forgive. Acknowledging that gave me the necessary focus to understand the forgiving process. It is a proven fact that understanding is the first step in the accomplishment of any endeavor, including forgiveness. So recognizing that forgiveness could not be achieved without effort on my part was the first step that I learned to take.

My second step toward exacting forgiveness was following certain protocols. What protocols? Things like offering salutations despite the nauseating objections that came from my gut. Giving up a handshake and the occasional hug, regardless to how the hairs on my neck stood up in protest was a big step in the right direction. Note that this was not an easy step but a necessary step. This is not to be mistaken for hypocrisy. It would have been hypocritical had I done those things in an attempt to conceal my true feelings. However, in a genuine effort to overcome bitterness, the purpose of these exercises was simply practice. As the saying goes “Practice makes perfect.” Karate students practice maneuvers. Singers rehearse songs. Do not speakers rehearse their speeches? So too did I have to learn the maneuvers associated with overcoming the bitterness that was seething within me. Merriam-Webster defines second nature as “an acquired deeply ingrained habit or skill.” Any skill must be crafted and every habit must be learned. Forgiveness would never become second-nature until it became a habit. For me, forgiveness had to be crafted into a skill before it could become a reflex. Learning the process of forgiveness lifted a great burden from my mind.

Finally, the only step left in the process of forgiving was letting go of whatever it was that caused my bitterness. I had to learn to give it up. Believe it or not, by the time I’d arrived at this step it proved to be the easiest. That’s not to say that the idea of giving up that resentment toward those who initiated those injustices against me was easy. Resentment, the twin brother of bitterness, can be so empowering and as a result addictive. Like anyone else, I wanted to hang on to my bitterness, my resentment and my rage, to exact a never ending vengeance against those who wronged me.
But the price was too high. It was costing me sleep. I was pawning my peace to hold on to resentment. I was plagued by headaches. So my focus had to shift to freeing myself of the bitterness. In order to accomplish that, there would have to be total release, without which there could not be complete freedom. And no matter how good that retribution may have felt, bitterness was just a burden. This is that part of the process that forced me to choose: expel the burden or except the burn. Deal or no deal! That’s what made this part easy. Looking at it from that perspective, there was no choice. It wasn’t worth the risk of high blood pressure or the possibility of a stroke. The hours of sleep that it cost me was just too high of a price. I chose to expel the burden, to give it up. No deal! So as a result I gave it up, the resentment and the bitterness, wholly and completely. I decided to stop dwelling on what had happened to me and focus on the possibilities. I was resolved to rise from the ashes of my injury like the phoenix and see life through new eyes. I am a living testimonial that the burden of bitterness is eased through the power of forgiveness.

Discovering the steps of forgiveness changed my life. I could even say that it gave me back my life. There were so many days when I should have been enjoying life instead of playing host to bitterness. Those flames of my unforgiving attitude were snuffed out once the embers of bitterness were gone. That’s what forgiveness is, giving something up. In my case, it was bitterness. Forgiveness proved to be a complex matter but not an impossible one. I was resolved to evolve. That desire to go to the next level of living became the new fire that burned within me. I was able to transform sleepless nights into blissful slumber. Those headaches disappeared. Poof! I’m free! I’m free of the burn of bitterness and I love it. I’m free of the resentment that occupied my every thought. I’m free of the burden that was ever with me. “Free at last! Free last! Thank God almighty, I’m free at last!” I can truly say that there is a weight that has been lifted by the offering of forgiveness.

“I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all.”

~Richard Wright, American Hunger, 1977
Stalker

Andrew Brooks

There is one who knows me well, he lurks so close in black. Yet blends in so, no one can tell, the day he will attack.

I turn and spin, then around again, as a canine chases its tail. This panic-terror disease sets in, and his face he'll ne'er unveil.

Just as the red lamp bleeds west, my foe chases the eventide. Scads of saliva do I ingest, for he a million by his side.

The shadows of his kind, blankets the world in dark. So quiet, I lose my mind there's nor a flash or a spark.

They ambush me in a swarm, so to my haven I hurry. Once there I'm all but warm, and they follow in a flurry.

They file in one by one, behind their lunar king. Finally I'm saved by the sun, upon his eastern wing.

Then all day he stalks away, and I become afraid. He licks his lips behind his prey, awaiting his allies' aid.

The Infamous Sweeney Todd

~an acrostic~

Stacy Robison

There was a man that went by Todd; How great a shaving pro was he. Enter his shop and get a deal, It is only a penny. Now be warned if you were to go, For more than once there's been a scene. And sev'ral times I've overheard, Many think Todd's a callous fiend. "Out of the dark a monster comes. Untouched by morals and feeling..." So goes the tale of Sweeney Todd, Said to send your insides reeling. When the barber spots a bright prize, Even if it's owned by a gent, Expect Todd to polish him off, Now through the floor the lord is sent. Ended is his life on earth, Yet here the story does not stop. Todd chops his victim's hearty flesh, (Only as meat for Lovett's shop.) Drop in, sirs, for a quick shave, Don't deny the people what they crave.
The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.

~William Faulkner

Birds

Jamie Sciple
The Silent Way

Jena Stafford

My family has secret legacy
Handed down from behind closed doors
And bills left carelessly on kitchen tables.
Anxiety permeated my pillows
As I played the quiet game,
Listening, listening, to covert words
That warned of mistakes and mortality.

Now, in silence, I too have a legacy
Tucked somewhere
Behind the pills in the cabinet
And concealed by weekend vacations.
This is the private way, the respectful way,
To swallow the worries of others,
And to eat your own fears.

Bottom of the Ninth

Hunter Lohman

I stand on the mound, ball in hand
The stage is set, it is massive and grand.
Bottom of the ninth, one out to go,
I know it’s up to me to defeat our foe.
I step on the rubber and take the sign,
Now I know it’s my time to shine.
He swings and misses, and I think to myself,
To hit this next pitch, he’ll need some help.
I can tell he’s nervous and the next pitch I send,
Just as before he missed it again.
I’m up 0-2 and now I can’t slip,
I come set on the mound with the ball tightly gripped.
I begin to throw, not knowing that soon,
My fastball would be hit, right to the moon.
As I watch it soar, I immediately know
With my head held down, this save is a no-go.

And by the way, everything in life is writable
about if you have the outgoing guts to do it,
and the imagination to improvise. The worst
enemy to creativity is self-doubt.
~Sylvia Plath
Brrraaaaiiiinnnssss

Jennifer Sullivan

Walking around among the dead,           Constantly in search of my next meal,
Slurping mush from someone’s head.      Looking for couples, a 2 for 1 deal.

Dead flesh rotting in the sun,           A lust for blood, guts, and gore
An afterlife, so oddly begun.                Like a money hungry whore.

Stuck inside this corpse’s shell          Everyone around me seems to be dead,
Forever a minion, a servant of hell.       Is this for real or all in my head?

Shuffling the Earth in search of brains,  
Pulling bodies through window panes.

Pass Me By

Morgan Fant

I shiver, sweat, and suffer in my home. Home is anywhere I am allowed. Family is anyone who can bear standing over me for a brief moment and can treat me as an equal. I understand why I am purposefully unnoticed. Routinely, at the sound of clacking feet walking hurriedly past, I look up, just to receive a glance of my reflection on a pair of sunglasses that hide a face of disgust. I know what I have become. My eyes droop like those of an elderly hound. Wrinkled and cracking, my skin begs to be refreshed. My teeth have become yellowed and fragile. Round, blue eyes that were once always complimented are now never noticed due to the earth filled mane that surrounds my face. The old suit that dangles from my body would be more flattering on a scarecrow. This weary way of life has caused me to age fifty short
short years in a long ten. People used to hang on each petty word that would travel from my lips. Lips that now barely open, forced to retain limited moisture. Words that now go unnoticed, but are the most meaningful I have ever spoken. I cannot say I blame those who pass me by on the street and look at me, not as a human being in need of help, but as a chunk of unworthy flesh that is no better than the dirt caught between the treads of their polished shoes. I was once one of them; I filled myself with the sense of complete importance. Never believing that I would fall to the low I have been for the past ten years, I, too, would pass me by.

A Stranger

An excerpt from a work in progress by Grant Jeffries

Chapter 1

The age of heroes came and went leaving behind the legends of men and women conquering evils no longer known to the world. These legends soon turned to myth--tales told to little children. As time wore on even the stories were forgotten, and the only remnants of the hero’s existence were whispers in the wind. The great mysteries of the earth that had once been proof of the heroes’ existence and had told the stories of their miraculous feats are no longer mentioned. For whatever reason, the people chose to forget their past and live in ignorance. Yet as time passed, a new era began; and the powers that the heroes once held are released again. And the generation that had forgotten will be forced to remember.

*   *   *

The wind rips incessantly through the long stretching plains of A’mon Rue. The tall brown grass of the vast empty stretch of land sways back and forth making it look as if the ground is actually rolling. A’mon Rue is primarily an empty country, abandoned after the fall of Tarus. Before Tarus fell, the roads through the plains were well used, but now it is an infinite stretch of nothingness. Once, long ago, the roads were safe for tinkers and bands of musicians and stage performers traveling from village to village entertaining the townsfolk. Now, the only people who travel on the deserted roads do so in large caravans with armed escorts to protect them from bandits that plague the roads attacking anyone who happens through. Today, however, there are no large caravans on the long, winding road. The plains are empty — except for a lone rider on a large, coal black horse.
The large stallion prances impatiently in the middle of the road, kicking up clouds of dust as it tugs angrily at its bit. Its cloaked rider sits unconcerned in the saddle, calmly keeping his horse at bay. A gust of wind sweeps by pulling at the edges of his cloak. He swings down off his horse. Reaching out, he rubs the horse’s neck and mutters into its ear; the horse stops prancing and the cloaked figure drops the reins. Kneeling down, he scoops up some of the dry, powdery dirt and lets it sift through his fingers. Standing back up, he takes off his cloak and drapes it across the horse’s saddle. His dark brown hair, almost reaching his shoulders, frames a stony, emotionless, face. The man’s dark brown eyes dart back and for as he stands unconcerned by his horse.

“This ambush is well laid.” The dark haired man glances around again. “If I were just an ordinary traveler passing through, I doubt I would have noticed anything unusual.”

Several men stand up from their hiding places on the sides of the road, the tall brown grass reaching just above their waists. Eyeing the lone man warily, they walk closer, surrounding him. They are all dressed in grungy earth-colored clothes helping them blend in with their surroundings more easily.

The leader steps forward. “We got a smart one ‘ere boys.” He looks to the rest of the grungy, dirt covered men in his group letting out a coarse laugh that quickly turns into a hacking cough. “Ow exactly did you know we was waitin’ in the grass?” The seedy looking leader of the group scratches at the week old stubble on his face with grimy fingers.

“You stench was the first thing I noticed.” The traveler looks around at the group. All of them are wearing swords or cudgels. “Then I heard you coughing and saw all of the tracks that you,” he points to a tall gangly looking man standing to his right, “tried to hide.”

“You got a quick tongue boy.” It is the leader who speaks up. “I’m ‘aff a mind to give ya a beatin’ to teach you some respect.”

The traveler looks up and gives a humorless smile. His dark, almost black, eyes scan the group of bandits, noting which of them are the most dangerous. The tall gangly one to his right, whom he assumes is the woodsman of the group, will be the fastest. There is a sword at the woodsman’s waist, but the knives up his shirtsleeves are what the stranger knows he will have to watch out for. The rest of the bandits would be easy to kill. Most of them are just ruffians, nothing more than brawlers. Of course, there is the archer hanging back, still hiding in the grass. Although the traveler knows he will be a threat, the archer will be hesitant to let an arrow loose in the midst of all his companions. The only thing he has to worry about is the first shot from the bow before the fight starts.

The leader speaks up again. “What you lookin for?”

“Which one of you I am going to kill first.”

“An ‘ow do you plan on doin’ that? Seein’ as you left your sword strapped to your horse’s saddle?”
“I won’t need a weapon for a handful of bandits.”

“You ‘ear that Wil?” The leader looks to the woodsman. “He don’t need a weapon.” He looks back to the dark-eyed traveler. “You just empty your pockets an’ give us your horse an there won’t be no trouble.”

“It is too late for that.” The traveler looks to the leader, his dark eyes flashing.

In one fluid movement, the stranger kicks a cloud of dirt into the leader’s eyes and rolls his right shoulder backwards as an arrow flies through the air whistling past his ear. He steps to the right towards the woodsman. Bringing his hand up, he slaps away the knife in gangly man’s hand and grabs his wrist, twisting his arm around behind him. The woodsman cries out in pain as the dark eyed stranger slams the palm of his hand into his elbow, snapping his arm.

The strangled scream of the woodsman, startle the rest of the thieves into action. Two of the bandits with swords converge on the stranger from both sides. He rolls under the first blow aimed for his head; and swinging up with the palm of his hand, he catches the second assailant under his nose, jamming the bone into the thief’s brain, killing him instantly. Spinning around, the stranger grabs the first assailant around the side of his face, wrenches his head around, and snaps his neck. The leader of the group lets out an angry cry and charges with his sword raised above his head. The dark eyed man waits patiently for the leader to get close. As soon as the leader gets within reach the stranger side steps and swings his arm out crushing the leaders throat.

High in the air a single vulture circles, watching the fight below, waiting for it to end so that it may feed on the soon to be rotten carnage. As the last man falls and the lone traveler mounts his horse and rides away from the dead bodies, it begins its long circling decent to the feast waiting below. The vulture finally settles on the ground a few feet from the bodies eyeing them warily.

A tall gangly man stands up and staggers away from the bodies, his arm dangling by his side at an awkward angle. The buzzard flaps its wings and hops backwards several feet and watches the injured man stagger off into the grass. The man stops several feet away from the road where a man with a bow joins him. The buzzard eyes the two men cautiously then hops closer to the dead bodies.

The small village of Kern is bustling with activity. Several people gather in the street surrounding two men. One of the men is gesturing wildly with his one free arm that is not in a sling.

“It wasn’t natural I’m tellin’ you.” The tall gangly man with one arm in a sling spoke. “Fin an his crew was helpin’ me get the last of my wheat harvested, seein’ as my boys went off to Vurta to sign up to be foot soldiers under Lord Melbin, when I noticed someone ridin’ up on this giant black horse. Bein’ the friendly sort I offered for him to get off his horse an’ rest a bit. Well I went over to the cart to get him some water when I heard Fin scream. I turned around an’ the man who had rode up on the horse had a sword in his
hand an’ was killin’ all of them I tried to stop him but he whispered somethin’ and this wind stirred up an
slung me back against the cart an knocked me out. When I woke up, it was dark out an all the horses were
gone.”

“Where were Fin and the rest of them?” The voice came from the blacksmith standing at the back
of the crowd. He straightens his leather apron and looks to the gangly man. “Were any of them alive?”

“All the bodies were gone. It took me two days to get back to town ‘cause of bein’ hurt an all.”

“What did the governor have to say of all this?” Krena the seamstress looks at Wil.

“He sent word to Lord Melbin. Gave some excuse about the constable ‘ere not bein’ able to ‘andle a
massacre like this.”

“What’s this goin on over ‘ere?” A heavy set man pushes his way through the throng of people, his
black vest that marks him as the constable stretched to its bursting point over his round stomach. “I won’t
have you creating unrest Wil.” The constable looks to the rest of the crowd puffing up his chest. “Go about
your business, the governor will take care of this.” The crowd slowly scatters, murmuring its discontent.

“Selena,” the constable gives a pretty girl with black hair a stern look. “What are you doin’ ‘ere? The governor’s daughter ought not be seen gossiping with the townsfolk like that.”

“I was going for a walk when I saw the crowd, and I stopped to see what was causing the disturb-
ance.” Selena stares at the constable, cringing inwardly as he scratches his fat belly with a greasy hand.

“Well run along an’ this will be our secret.” He smiles, revealing yellow teeth.

“Thank you, sir.” Selena bows her head slightly and hurries past the constable who turns to watch
her leave. She shudders as she feels his eyes on her back.

Selena knows the constable is right. If her father had seen her in the middle of the crowd listening
to Wil tell his story he would have been furious.

She has a hard time believing Wil’s story. Last year, when his barn burned down, he had claimed it
was a group of thieves. She had it on good authority, however, that he had knocked a lantern over in the
hay during a drunken stupor. No one in the town believed that it had been bandits The whole village knew
Wil was a drunk. Still, if Wil’s story is true, the only person who would know for sure was Martha.

The village of Kern is not very large. There are only a handful of shops. Selena walks slowly through
the center of town pausing at the seamstress’s shop to see if her dress for the Harvest Festival is ready. If
she is going to go to Martha’s, she knows she cannot walk directly there. Her father detests Martha, claim-
ing that anyone who dabbles in herbs and potions was clearly unstable. Selena always lets him go on his
rants about Martha and her dark ways. If he knew about their friendship—Selena shudders at the thought.

Selena was nine when she first met Martha. She had wandered outside of town to pick flowers for
her mother’s birthday. She was on her way back into town when she saw puffs of smoke rising from a small
grove of trees several hundred feet from the road. The sun was still , and being a child, she let her curiosity
get the better of her — as she all too often did.
As she made her way into the trees, Selena saw a small hut covered in moss built under the trees. It was hard to tell where the house ended and the trees began. Vines traced their way up the sides of the humble shack and wound their way into the low hanging limbs of the surrounding trees. She was just about to turn and leave when an old woman opened the door of the hut.

“I was wondering when you would finally make your way here.” The old woman’s voice was soft and caring. “Don’t be scared dearie.”

“I’m not scared.” Selena puffed up her chest and looked the old woman in her eyes, determined to put on a much braver face than she actually felt.

“Oh course you aren’t.” The old woman winked at her. “Come in. You must be hungry.”

Selena thought about saying no, but seeing the old woman’s kind face and being as curious as she was, Selena changed her mind. “I am a little hungry.”

“That’s a good girl.” Martha turned back inside. “My name’s Martha.”

“I’m Selena.” Selena pulled up the hem of her dress, walked up the steps and into the house.

“I know who you are, child. You’re the governor’s daughter, everyone knows who you are.”

Selena looked around the house in awe. It was much bigger than it looked from outside. Dangling herbs hung in bunches from the rafters, giving off a thick, sweet aroma that filled the house. Shelves of books lined the walls. To most people this would have been more books than they would see in a lifetime, but her father’s library was full of books—newer, nicer books, she thought. Still, these books looked much older than the ones sitting on the shelves in her home.

“Sit, sit.” Martha said with a motherly tone, bustling around in the kitchen. “I’ll make us some tea. Would you like that?”

Selena nodded, walked into the kitchen, and sat at the small wooden table in the center of the room. They talked while Selena drank her tea sweetened with honey. Martha showed her all different kinds of herbs, and told her what their uses were. When she told her father about Martha after she got home, he told her he did not want her to go back there again. But she always found a way to sneak out and visit Martha several times a week.

Selena smiles at the memory of first meeting Martha. She makes her way past the blacksmith shop to the edge of town. Pausing, Selena looks back to make sure the constable is no longer behind her. She lets out a sigh of relief as she sees the street where he had been standing is empty.

The walk to Martha’s is a short one, only a mile or two from town. Selena strolls down the dirt road at a leisurely pace, keeping an eye out for herbs on the roadside. Martha has been acting strange lately, mumbling about dark times when she did not think Selena could overhear. Selena spots the plant she is looking for and walks off the road into the soft grass. She stoops down and plucks several wedge shaped
green leaves with veins of dark purple running through them. She pulls out a small cloth purse from a pocket hidden in the folds of her dress and drops the Demulcerus leaves inside. Once she gets to Martha’s she can slip them in the boiling water with Martha’s tea to help soothe her nerves.

Up ahead, Selena sees the smaller path breaking away from the main road, leading into Beggars Wood. She often wonders how the wood got its name. She has heard all the rumors, but each seems as unlikely as the next. Her favorite story of the large forests namesake was of the arrogant king, Elatus.

Legend had it that long ago, long before the emperors Cringe and Copercornus, Kern used to be the largest kingdom for thousands upon thousands of leagues, and King Elatus was responsible for its prosperity. The king was a brilliant strategist and an even more vicious warrior. In less than a decade he had conquered every kingdom he came up against. He no longer went to battle in order to protect his people, he went to further his reputation. He called himself the king of kings, ruler of rulers, and claimed that he truly was the greatest man alive. As time passed this god-king’s reputation spread even into the deserts of Saru where a young girl, barely old enough to be called a woman, heard the stories of King Elatus. She did not know if the stories were true, but she set out to find the king of kings and see if he really was a god-king or perhaps just a great warrior. It was on the eve of the Feasting when the girl finally made it to the palace of King Elatus. Upon her arrival she asked if she might be granted an audience with the king so that he might help her with the direst of plights. Thinking some terrible foe beset her, the king agreed to see her and hear her request. The girl told the king her story and how her land was plagued by famine and all the people were starving. She asked the king if he could send grain and cattle to her people to keep them from starving. The king, however, was outraged that she had come to him for something as insignificant as that and told the guards to take her away. As the guards grabbed her, the girl looked up at the king and told him, in a voice just above a whisper, that before the moon reached center-sky his kingdom would be overtaken by a forest and he would be forced to live in it as a beggar until the end of the world. She told him that people would no longer tell stories of his greatness; instead, they would tell stories of the young Saruin witch that turned a kingdom into a forest and its king into a beggar.

As a child, Selena had always hoped that the story was true and that one day she would meet the beggar king. As she walks through Beggars Wood now, she finds it hard to believe that it was once a great kingdom and harder still to believe that a young girl had turned it into a forest. Selena shrugs off the story and continues her trek through the woods to Martha’s. It is not hard to imagine that the forest is somehow magical, Selena thinks, as she feels the soft moss, which covers the forest floor, beneath her feet. The sounds of the Beggars Wood are unlike any sounds she has ever heard anywhere else. The animals of the wood are unafraid of the people who enter and often times walk beside them for hours as they navigate the forest.

Today, however, no animals walk beside Selena as she moves through the forest. The trees get thicker as she makes her way deeper into the woods. Finally, after several more minutes of walking, Selena smells smoke from a fireplace and Martha’s house comes into view. —if it can really be called a house, Selena thinks, as she sees it in the distance.
What was any art but a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself - life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.

~Willa Cather
September 1st

Tyler Stanley

It was September 1, I’ll never forget —
New stadium, first game, the stage was set.

All the running and lifting, for the first game of the year
Playing MS Gulf Coast, it all started here.

Adrenaline flowing and our blood pumping
Hearts beating and the locker room jumping.

When kickoff came, we all knew
That MDCCC didn’t know what they’d gotten into.

Back and forth, score after score
We went in at halftime wanting more.

Offense scared the next time we got it,
But then came the incident that puts me on topic.

Our next possession, we called a play by the name of “22.”
Little did I know my season was about to be through.

I felt it break and fell to my knees.
I immediately thought, “Don’t let it end my season, God, please.”

While yelling and screaming, cause how bad it hurt
I could hear my teammates and their encouraging words.

As they rolled me off, I heard a roar from the stands,
I knew right then, our opponents had no chance.

Fans, announcers, they can call it how they see,
But I like to think my brothers won that game for me.

It was an awesome feeling, that’s no denyin’
But that day, like every day, was a great day to be an EMCC Lion.
“Cute” was a term that Jo Ann Graham wanted to separate herself from. However, it was accurate. She was a 5’6” 26 year old with curly red hair and adorable cheeks dotted by freckles. Her dainty qualities were further detailed by a dimpled smile and sparkly bright blue eyes. She preferred the name “Jo” in an effort to offset the disposition that bothered her so much.

In high school she was the best tennis player on the team. She won the state title in singles and received a scholarship as a result. It was the 3.98 grade point average that marked her as an honor student during graduation. The honor of Valedictorian was also bestowed upon her. Coupled with her tennis prowess, she was voted Most Likely to Succeed.

Jo was the youngest vice president in the history of, locally owned and operated, Hue Briss Bank of Ft. Lauderdale. The track record of successful loans approved by her was extremely impressive. Her killer instincts and business savvy made her the apple of the eye of the Board of Directors. The rumor was that she was on the fast track to the, soon to be vacated, president’s office.

Latte Le Café was Jo’s favorite coffee shop as well as her last stop on the way home. It was only after hours, away from the conservative crowd of Hue Briss, that she could unwind. Though the coffee shop serviced a diverse clientele, for the most part it was a much more liberal atmosphere than the one she worked in. Most of its patrons were her peers. Surrounded by blue jeans, t-shirts, short pants, tank tops, and flip-flops, it was easy for her to stand out. With a $300.00 suit wrapped around her size 6 frame, $200.00 pumps on her size 6 feet, her finger adorned with a $2000.00 diamond ring, and $700.00 watch attached to her wrist, she easily considered herself to be the upper echelon of her age demographic.

She always took a “Wall Street Journal” in the café with her to keep up the consummate business woman appearance. However, it was the catalog that contained paint colors concealed within the “Wall Street Journal” that held her interest. Though she was the picture of tranquility, within she was a torrent of jubilation. Only a few hours earlier she’d closed on her dream house, a beautiful Intracoastal. At 26 she owned a home, and not just any run-of-the-mill house. The keys in her purse were to a 3 bedroom, 2 bath, $576,000.00 Intracoastal within spitting distance of a Yacht club.

She’d just settled on a color for the living room when a hefty man in dark glasses sat down at her table. Slowly she allowed her eyes to move from the catalog to her uninvited guest. Her nose wrinkled with contempt as the man sank into the seat.

She cleared her throat first to assure his attention and then spoke, “Excuse me, this table is taken.”

“There are two chairs,” he replied in deep lazy voice.

“And just enough empty tables to go around. Now please excuse yourself.”

“Still the little prima donna aren’t you, Jo Ann?” She shrugged and then sharpened her focus on the mysterious man at her table, “Um, do I know you?”

Without the utterance of a syllable the man removed the sunglasses from his face. Behind the eye-wear was a pale face with distorted features. There was not a single hair follicle on his body. The nostrils of his nose resembled those of an ape. His right eye was grey and larger than the left one which was blue.
He was grotesque, but at the time familiar.
“Creepy Clyde?”
“Eight years and a Master’s Degree later, and I still do not rate better than juvenile name calling?”
his deep voice retorted.
“So what are you doing in Ft. Lauderdale, still stalking me?”
“I’d prefer the term visiting.”
“I’m sure you would,” she scowled, “Well if you’re not going to leave, I guess I will.”
“Which address are you going to? The 5233 Jack L. Lane or 3425 DVS Drive?”
A shiver ran down Jo’s spine as she shuttered. The look on her face was that of repugnance. Her
mouth was open, a fact that she was not conscious of. Jack L. Lane was the location of the apartment
complex where she lived. DVS Road, on the other hand, was the location of her new home. It was one
thing for him to know where she lived, but it was an entirely different thing for him to know about the
address of the place she’d just purchased.
“So you’re stalking me again, Clyde?” she asked while removing her cell phone from her purse.
“Who’re you calling, the police?” he inquired while reaching into his back pocket.
“You betcha.”
“Oh, maybe they’ll be interested in these as well,” the grotesque man replied as he flung pictures
onto the table with hands the size of her feet as if he were dealing cards.
There were pictures of a street sign and a mailbox on that same street. Some were pictures of Jo
and a man having sex in multiple positions as well as in multiple locations. Then there were also some of
four tombstones. Slowly, as if they had a mind of their own, her legs bent as she returned to her seat. Her
hands trembled as they fumbled the pictures with the cell phone suddenly on the table. The one that
seemed to disturb her the most was the one of an old dilapidated barn.
“You seem a little preoccupied, Jo Ann,” Clyde chuckled displaying his crooked teeth,
“Would you like for me to complete that call for you?”
“What—um—are these pictures supposed to mean to me?”
“Head games, really? Ok, I’ll play. There was a robbery at Hue Briss four years ago when you were
just a part-time teller during your senior year. You remember don’t you, Jo Ann? The one in which those
five guys got away with $6,000,000.00. The one in which one of the guys turned on the other four, killed
them, and then took off with the money. I find it interesting that they could never find the other guy. He
must’ve been very clever to have outsmarted all the police and the FBI. What do you think, Jo Ann?”
“What do you want, Clyde?”
“Restitution.”
“Restitution?” she shrugged.
“That’s right, little Ms. Valedictorian,” he retorted leaning forward, “Remember how I was picked
over as Valedictorian because you didn’t want to stand next to me on the platform? I had the highest GPA
in the school, a perfect 4.0!”
She forced a smile to offset the unwanted attention that his outburst had drawn from the other
patrons of the coffee shop, “Ok, Clyde, calm down.”
He leaned back in his seat and gathered his composure. As the others slowly returned to their own
conversations and affairs, Clyde’s focus returned to his table mate.
“Clyde, the school chose the Valedictorian, remember?”
Your father met with the principal and the school board, and told them that he didn’t want his
daughter standing next to non-pretty boy like me during graduation, and you know it.”
“Um—if that’s true—-”
“You know it’s true!” he huffed as his large fist slammed against the table, “One of the school board members, Mrs. Collins, do you remember her? Well, she did not agree to it. She told my mother how it went down. So Stanley Frewer was the Salutatorian with a 3.93.”

“I’m sorry, Clyde.”

“About what, robbing me of my rightful place next to you on that stage? Maybe you’re sorry for labeling me with that awful nickname that everyone began to call me. Say, maybe you’re sorry for pretending to like me that one time in order to get me to write a research paper for you. What exactly are you sorry for, Jo Ann?”

“I never meant to hurt you. Come on, I was a teenager, Clyde!” Jo huffed between clinched teeth.

“But now you’re mature, is that it?”

“That’s right.”

“Yet when you saw me just now you referred to me as ‘Creepy Clyde’ again.”

“You know, you did follow me around at school and after school. Do you remember that? Do you remember peaking from around corners and from behind trees? Guess what. That was pretty creepy, Clyde,” Jo rebutted sarcastically stroking her right eyebrow.

“Oh yeah? Well as I recall Brad Palmer went everywhere that you went. So did Hank Pruitt, and Reginald Salter, but that didn’t seem to bother you.”

“I dated each one of them, remember?” she cried with her arms thrown outward and furrows in her brow.

Once again they were the subject of stares and ogles. She brought her arms back in slowly while she skillfully crafted a smile across her irritated face. To complete her portrait of serenity she crossed her legs and then finished off her cappuccino as Clyde leaned forward.

“Now you’re dating me.”

The shiver was back. Only this time it was much colder. Unconsciously, she looked into his strange eyes. There was something in those eyes. On the surface it appeared to be disdain, but there was a residue of something else that lingered. Infatuation. She allowed herself to study the rest of his hairless features. He was even more repulsive to her than he was during their prep years.

“I’m dating someone already,” she gasped nervously.

“You mean Hill Bramlett, Jr., your boss’ son, or that other boy toy with the six-pack?” Clyde came back shaking his head negatively, “I recommend that you break it off with them both.”

“Come on, Clyde. You’re blackmailing me. How real is that going to be?”

“It will be as real as your being Valedictorian, or as real as those clients that you only do business with online. It will be as real as this lifestyle that you’re living at the expense of five men’s lives!”

“You’re shouting again,” she reminded him in the form of a tune.

“You’re laundering the money that you stole and killed for through the very bank that you took it from. When they voted you as Most Likely to Succeed I don’t think they were referring to bank robbery and murder, yet you’ve gotten away with both, haven’t you?”

“Please, Clyde, I’ll give you $750,000.00.” Her voice began to tremble.

“That’s all? Oh, that’s right the rest is tied up in dummy corporations and your new Intracoastal home.”

“I can get another $250,000.00 in six weeks. That’s $1,000,000.00, Clyde.”

“I have a Master’s Degree, Jo Ann. I can add.” Clyde replied with a smile and a head shake, “Why don’t we get out here?”
Jo’s eyes fell back to the scattered pictures on the table. Her heart thumped in her chest, throat, and ears. He owned her.

“Um—where—where would you like to go?” she found her voice then swallowed hard.
“How about we have dinner at your favorite restaurant, the Furtherest Point, isn’t it? Maybe you’d like to catch a movie? You know boyfriend and girlfriend kind of stuff.”
“Clyde…”
“No more futile negotiation, Jo Ann. You’re only going to piss me off.”
With those words she changed her tact, “I was only going to suggest that we have dinner at the new house. What could be more romantic?”
A smile moved across his abnormal face, “I like that. It would be your first evening there as well. Is there any electricity?”
“Yes, the realtors have it on to show certain features of the house. I’ll have it transferred in my name tomorrow.”
“Oh this is perfect, dinner on the floor and then—”
“Oh yeah—great—I just need to go to my apartment and pick up few things. I’ll meet you at the house in an hour.”
An ominous web of frowns bent on his brow. His smile straightened into something completely opposite.
“You think I’m a fool, don’t you?”
“No! I only—”
“We’ll buy whatever you need, but we’re not splitting up. I know you just want to put some distance between us so that you can try to pull a fast one on me. If for one moment I think that you’re trying to allude me, it’s off to the police I go,” Clyde replied, “You don’t think I know what you’re up to?”
“I’m not up to anything, Clyde. I swear.”
“You just confirmed that you’re a liar. You may have forgotten, but I was captain of the chess team, and I’m a damned good poker player. Do you really want to play head games with me? If I let you out of my sight, you’ll stall trying to find a way to ditch me or kill me.”
“I wouldn’t—”
“You wouldn’t what, kill me? You’re saying that you wouldn’t betray me like you did Tyler Mims. You remember him, don’t you? He’s the bank robber that the police and the FBI believe turned on the others then vanished. They never caught him did they, Jo Ann? Maybe that’s because the unseen player in the robber met up with him, poisoned him, and buried him in that barn on the old Holland property. Of course, I have nothing to worry about right, Jo Ann?”
A tear fell from her eye. Not a tear of remorse, but rather despair. The smile on Clyde’s face made her feel weak, vulnerable. Memories of her failed tennis career haunted her thoughts. The words of her father that drove her to have it all resonated within in her mind. It was as if she was naked before Clyde. Somehow he knew the intimate details of ever dark secret of hers.
“How did you get these pictures, Clyde? Have you been following me?”
“No, but I have had you followed for three years. I just wanted to know how Joel Graham’s little princess, the tennis star, was doing. Imagine my surprise when my P.I. gave me those pictures. I wonder how your sanctimonious father, the man who kept me off the graduation stage, would react if his perfect little girl was scandalized.”
“So you’re telling me there’s another possible blackmailer out there?”
“No, you needn’t worry about the P.I.”
“Why is that, because he’s so loyal to you?”
A smile moved across Clyde’s face that made her cringe, “No, because he met with an untimely death about a week ago.”

“You killed him?” she gasped as her beautiful bright eyes widened.

An ominous smile slithered across Clyde’s face before he answered, “The police seem to think that some woman whom he photographed cheating on her husband is responsible. After all, he was one of those low rent, low life, part-time P.I. bums who sneak snapshots from windows and occasionally do a little second story work.”

“Second story work, you mean breaking into people’s homes?”

“You see, he could’ve pissed off anybody,” Clyde joked. “Now, shall we go?”

Following his lead she gathered the pictures, paid for her cappuccinos and then they both went to their respective cars, she to her red Corvette, and he to his Jeep Wrangler.

They only made one stop which was a small grocery store which was off the beaten path. He sat in his vehicle while she picked up a few items for dinner. It was a very small window of opportunity, but it was all she had. She used it to brainstorm. How would she handle Clyde was the question on her mind. He didn’t come for money so that wouldn’t prove to be an effective diversionary tactic. Somehow she had to come up with something to satisfy him for a few days, just long enough for her to foolproof a plan. As she paused on the aisle in which odd pieces of cookware, utensils, and dinner plates were displayed to think, the carcass of a dead rat underneath a display table of onions caught her eye. Obviously it had been poisoned, probably enticed by something else: cheese or a piece of meat. Immediately Tyler came to mind.

She pushed her shopping cart ahead of two other people who were already in line, and then engaged the Arab cashier in conversation, “Sir, I have a pest problem, and I was wondering what you use to kill your rats.”

“We have not rats,” he boasted smugly.

She leaned forward with a smile on her face as if she owned him then whispered, “Don’t play with me Achmed, or I’ll call everyone’s attention to the little dead critter under that red onion display.”

His eyes found the display that she referred to, “Oh, rat poison.”

“I doubt that. One more chance before I go girlie in here.”

“Strychnine, we use Strychnine,” he confessed nervously.

“I’ll give you $20 for a pint of it.”

“Please, if anyone ever found out–”

“Sell it to me, and no one will ever know. Otherwise I’m going over there with my cell phone to get a picture for the Health Department,” she insisted as her hands tightened on the handle of the shopping cart.

Despite the protests of the people in the line behind her, the cashier rang her up and carefully smuggled a small container of the orange colored liquid in with her groceries. She gave him a credit card and offered him extra for the addition item. The nervous cashier promptly declined and then eagerly asked her to leave.

The drive from the grocery store seemed to hold more promise than the drive to it. At last she had a plan, a possible escape. Despite his appearance, Clyde was an extremely intelligent man, and Jo knew it. In order to pull a slight-of-hand over on him the key was to keep the mark off guard. His focus would have to be in one direction while she made her move from a completely different one. Unfortunately there was no television at her new home, no stereo. She only had one weapon at her disposal, and as repugnant as the thought of it was it was her only trump card.
The house at 3425 DVS Drive was beautiful. It sat on an acre and a half of luscious green ground. The house itself was 2400 sq. ft. with eight majestic palm trees spaced out strategically throughout the yard. The living room was the most spacious and empty like the rest of the house.

“Do I get a tour?” Clyde asked setting the grocery bags down.

“Sure,” Jo replied kicking off her shoes.

She took him around the beautiful house awing him with the magnificent view from every room. From the kitchen was an incredible view of the ocean with yachts on the water and some were docked. Right outside the patio doors was a long pathway that led all the way to a narrow dock with a small motor boat moored to it. As beautiful as the exterior and the scenery was, the empty house itself was cold.

“This is the perfect place for you, Jo Ann. It’s very beautiful as are you,” Clyde gasped admiring the view.

The words from his mouth were consistent with the strategy she’d improvised. An opportunity to segue into her plan was at hand. Though the timing was perfect, she had to be careful not to be obvious. She took a deep breath as quietly as possible then spoke, “Yeah, it is a nice view. I’m curious to know exactly what you expect to happen here tonight, Clyde. Exactly what do you consider to be adequate restitution?”

“You.”

“You’ll never have me, Clyde. No matter what you force me to do. You will never really have me.”

He turned with his gaze fixed on her, “Perhaps, but you’d better do your best to convince me that you’re mine.”

That was close enough for her to make her move. She fixed a defeated look on her adorable face then moved in on him slowly. Suddenly she found usage for her cute disposition. In a stage worthy performance she made those big blue eyes as helpless and submissive as possible. Her perfectly manicure fingers reached up and began to unbutton his shirt from the top downward, “Then forget dinner. Let’s just get to it.”

He watched her delicate little hands undo each button and then move to his belt. She discerned by the expression on his face that it was a new experience for him. It seemed as though her cuteness defanged him. His hands shook though he tried desperately to steady them. The certainty that the balance of power was about to shift in her favor further motivated her to battle through the repugnance.

She was surprised to discover that Clyde was somewhat buff in the buff. He was no world class bodybuilder, but he had a nice body nevertheless. His skin was like that of a baby’s. Occasionally her hands touched certain areas of his anatomy that caused him to flinch. There was no doubt in her mind that he’d never been with a woman before. She led him by the hand into the living room, laid him onto to the floor, and joined him.

Jo might’ve appeared to be a sweetheart, but as a lover she was lethal. Clyde, on the other hand, had the appearance of a monster, but in her arena he was peon. She knew exactly what to do to dispatch him quickly, and that’s what she did. Clyde bellowed as tear welled in his eyes, and the angulated toes of his bunion afflicted feet cracked like Walnuts. Still Jo did not relent. It was like nothing he’d ever experienced before, and the more overwhelmed he was the further she took him.

“I thought this is what you wanted,” she taunted him with a facetious tone.

Finally with what little strength he had left, he managed to throw her off him. She just smirked amused by his labored breathing and sudden languidness. Overpowered, he was right where she wanted him. Fully aware that it was moment that he’d like to savor, she looked at him, and snickered.
“This is the way it’s going to be every day, Clyde. Can you handle that? Because from where I’m sitting it looks like you won’t last a week,” Jo chuckled further emasculating him.

“That--was the most incredible thing I’ve ever experienced,” he confessed with labored breath.

“I wish I could say the same, but it was over pretty quickly,” she twisted the knife.

“I know what you’re trying to do, but it won’t work. You can’t get rid of me.”

She sighed, shook her head then stood up, “I guess I’d better make dinner then. After all, if you want me to enjoy it as well, we’ll need to do it again, and again, and again.”

While Clyde napped Jo began dinner. She wasn’t much of a cook. What she’d chosen to prepare for him was easy: meatball ravioli from a can and garlic bread. The beverage that she’d chosen was sparkling cider, the red version. In intervals she peeked in on him to make sure he was still asleep. Once the ravioli was heated she poured the equivalent of two tablespoons of Strychnine into the glass that she’d prepared for him and then re-entered the living room to serve him. The aroma of the food placed by his face awakened him abruptly. After she’d gone back for hers, she sat down across the room from him.

Just as she expected he watched her carefully. No matter how many bites she ate, not once did she ever take a sip of from her glass.

“Why aren’t you drinking?” he asked.

“I’m not ready yet. Why?”

“I’d like to see you drink.”

“Why, are you afraid that I’ve spiked it?”

“Frankly, yes.”

“Wow! Is this what it’s going to be like every day?” she sighed then took a very small sip, “Are you happy now? Would you like to trade glasses?”

“As a matter of fact, I would.”

That was not the response that she’d gambled on. She sighed, laid her plate on the floor then walked over to him. She took the plate and glass filled with tainted liquid, and moved it away from him, “Since you’re obviously not as hungry as I thought you were, we can get back to your lesson.”

She discerned that her gesture had not satisfied his distrust in her. All she could do was disarmed him with her touch. Slowly but eventually his gruffness gave way to Jo’s sensuality. Once again he was hers. While she pleased him, she seized the moment to consider damage control. Since the sparkling cider laced with Strychnine failed, something more overt was necessary, something so obvious that he’d never suspect it.

It was over, and Clyde had fallen asleep again. Jo was exhausted as well, but she was determined not to be owned by him. At best she could stomach the charade another day or two which meant that a failsafe plan would have to be conceived soon. The only poison that she knew of that worked on contact was Anthrax, but there was no way of exposing him to it without endangering herself. Though tired, she refused to close her eyes without a possibility of success.

It was only when she couldn’t keep her eyes open any longer that it came to her. He’d turned down $1,000,000.00 to walk away. People do worse every day for much less, like kill. Somewhere out there was somebody who would remove her nightmare for a fraction of what she’d offered him. Of course such a matter would have to be handled delicately. There have been cases reported of undercover law enforcement agents in the guise of hit-men. With only five hours until she was due at the bank, Jo allowed her eyes to close.

7:41 a.m. Jo gathered her things as quietly was possible, but Clyde’s eyes opened anyway. He glanced at his watch then at her, “Where’re you going? It’s only 7:41.”
“Give me a break, Clyde. I need a shower and there are no towels here. I can’t wear the same clothes to work today that I wore yesterday. I need to go my apartment.”

He yawned with his arms and legs stretched as far as humanly possible, and then brought himself into a sitting position, “Don’t I get a kiss at least?”

“No, this isn’t real, remember?”

“I told you that I expect you to make it feel real, remember?”

“What about morning breath?”

He shook his head and then cracked his obtrusive knuckles. Jo rushed over to give him a quick peck on the lips, but he grabbed her chin and managed a thirty second sour kiss. Once free she rushed toward the door.

“Last night was the most incredible night of my life,” he confessed, “I love you, Jo Ann.”

Unbeknownst to Clyde, it was not the first time that Jo had affected a man in that way. It was also not the first time that she’d hurried out after. Without so much as a goodbye, or go to hell she dashed out the door.

It took her twenty minutes, due to morning traffic, to drive to her apartment. A shower and clothing quick change took an additional half hour. Finally, the drive to Hue Briss required twenty minutes. For the first time in her five years in their employment she was late.

She dashed in with briefcase in hand and found her parents at her desk. She gave them both hugs as they smiled at her with pride.

“What are guys doing here?”

“Well we received a call and two airline tickets to celebrate a big day with you?” her father replied with a big grin.

“Big day, what big day?” she grimaced.

“Didn’t you tell us that the bank president is retiring?”

“Yeah, Judd Waddle but he’s not leaving for another six months.”

“Joel, maybe you’re saying too much,” her mother remarked.

“I’m sorry, I’m just excited.”

Hue Briss, Hill Bramlett, Sr. and two men that she did not know approached them. The expressions on the faces of the four men were completely opposite of the expression of her parents.

“Hill, can you tell me what’s going on? Why are my parents here?”

“I don’t know why your parents are here, Jo. These two men are with the FBI.”

“Jo Ann Graham, my name is special agent Nick Harry and this is special agent Gibbons. We’re here to arrest you for murder and grand larceny.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” Mr. Graham gasped.

“No sir. The bodies of two men were discovered in a barn in Lighthouse Point, Ronald Higgins and Tyler Mims. Higgins was a private investigator. His body was found with a gunshot wound to the head, pictures of Ms. Graham meeting with Mims at that same barn, and a few strands of red hair. Mims’ remains are on their way to the state pathology office.”

Jo’s mother crumpled onto the cold hard floor as her husband just stood with his mouth agape. On the other hand, Jo had lost the feeling in her legs. She stumbled backwards onto her desk. A tear welled in her eyes as her boss stepped to her.

“Jo, they’re saying that you were responsible for the robbery that cost this bank $6,000,000.00. Is that true?” Hill inquired with pain emanating from his voice.
“We’ve already uncovered two of your dummy corporations, Ms. Graham. It’s only a matter of time before we uncover any others that you’ve hidden the money in.”

Jo began to hyperventilate. She was going to prison for bank robbery, murder, accessory to four murders, and even a murder that she didn’t commit. It was only then that she understood it all. Clyde Hugh-Mann was just an unfortunate child born with deformities who’d grown up to be a monster. She and her father, on the other hand, were always monsters. Clyde was genuinely infatuated with her, but he loathed her father so much more. He’d gotten his restitution from her and his retribution on her father.

Eternal Conflict

A villanelle by Stacy Robison

We're not solving problems, we're making more,
If only we could see,
No one ever really wins the war.

Countries rotting from their cores,
yet they still hold the keys.
We're not solving problems, but making more.

Men keep fighting, worn and sore,
and wouldn't dare think to flee,
but no one ever really wins the war.

Never learning from the men of lore,
Who have paid their hefty fees.
We're not solving problems, we're making more.

Loved ones crying on their floors,
enough despair to fill the seas.
No one ever really wins the war.

Miles of carnage, what's the score?
How much bloodshed must there be?
We're not solving problems, we're making more.
No one ever really wins the war.

Writing is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself.

~Franz Kafka
Fog

Jordan Lewis

If I fall asleep with a pen in my hand, don't remove it - I might be writing in my dreams.

~Terri Guilleminets
Submissions to the 2013 edition of syzygy

** Each semester all students of EMCC are encouraged via email and postings around the campuses to submit their creative endeavors for possible inclusion in this magazine.

** The deadline for submission is the Friday before Thanksgiving each year.

** Publication of the magazine falls during the spring of the next semester.

** Any interested student may also contain one of the following:

Marilyn Ford, English instructor — mford@eastms.edu
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**We look forward to growing this magazine year after year. And we look forward to hearing from each of you.