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THE NABU REVIEW

• A FICTION MAGAZINE •

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REVIEW

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The Nabu Review: A Fiction Magazine - April 2018

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The Nabu Review

Editor in Chief Emily Deimler

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About The Nabu Review:

Nabu is the ancient Mesopotamian patron god of literacy, the rational arts, scribes and wisdom. He was the Babylonians and the Assyrians and he was the son of the god Marduk. He is credited as the inventor of writing, as well as being credited as an oracle. Interesting fact: Nabu rode on a winged dragon known as Sirrush.

The Nabu Review is a biannual online fiction magazine that aims to publishing fiction pieces that are believable, concrete, and detail orientated.

We accept submission year round. Submissions can be sent to nabureview@gmail.com



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LETTER FROM

the intern

Dear Reader,

I am writing on behalf of The Paragon Journal, an online literary magazine dedicated to showcasing the works of both new and established authors. We are currently seeking submissions for our first chapbook contest.. All are welcome to submit, with a small entry fee of only \$20. The prize for this contest will be publication and \$100.

The Paragon Journal is looking for chapbook manuscripts that push boundaries. Entries should contain roughly 15 to 30 poems of varying lengths, the theme of which will be up to the contest entrant. Initial judgment will be overseen by our staff, while the top 5 chapbooks will be judged by poets Gabe Kahan and Marissa Higgins. Entries will be accepted until June 30th of this year.

If you know of anyone who might be interested in this opportunity, please tell them to contact ashay@theparagonjournal.com with any questions. You may also direct them to The Paragon Journal's website, theparagonjournal.com for more information.

Thank you very much in advance.

Sam Bixler
Intern
The Paragon Journal

WHAT IS AND WHAT SHOULD NEVER BE

WRITTEN
BY **FRIDAY FARADAY**

It was a deadly motion—her lips upon his. Antique glass shook on the nightstand as their bodies intertwined in savagery. Their chimes became angelic melodies within the cluttered bedroom. What drove their sweaty thrust wasn't love—it was something more dangerous—the hope for it.

Words whispered like a holy prayer. They threw themselves into an implosion that darkened the space around them.

He took a deep breath as he removed the bulky chrome helmet. A flurry of lights danced inside it as he sat the device on his lap. Augmented Reality Generator. In the beta stage, he welcomed the role of guinea pig.

To what does a man wish to escape?

For what does he long in the tender shadows of night?

He placed the ARG on its charging cradle, breathed in the stale air that dominated the studio apartment. He gazed upon the sea of clutter, grabbed a half-finished bottle of beer off the table next to him.

Do not use more than one hour per day. He read the thin label on the cradle.

The beer tasted putrid, like a wellspring of regret, yet he finished it before taking another breath. Letting it fill his belly, warmth chilled and hardened, turning his insides to cement. He watched time pass—light to dark—AM to PM and back to AM.

With the new day, he placed the helmet back on.

Do not use more than one hour per day.

After the hour floated away, his ears heard a knock that barely registered in his mind. He shuffled his stiff limbs forward.

The door opened.

"You look like crap," said the plump woman. "When was the last time you bathed?"

He wiped from his eyes flecks of grit that seen more rest than him. Daring not to yawn as he tasted the volcanic eruption of noxious fumes behind his teeth. Swallowing the atrocity, he flashed five fingers.

"You need to get over her, no one is worth turning into—" she sized him up with her right hand, "this."

His eyes became narrow slits.

"Fine, but once you snap out of this funk ... I won't say *I told you so*," she said before walking down the hall.

The door closed.

He looked at the helmet—a storm brewed inside him, striking his nerves with a frost that forced his body to the jumbled floor. A moss of inky webs appeared and disappeared across his forearms. Sleep, unrelenting, cold, and brutal took him against his will.

"Babe, wake up. You've been asleep for so long." A kiss, held upon his lips for the length of a dream, woke him. "There's my beautiful man."

Her winter face, fresh as the last day that he saw her. Midnight hair draped over his chest—he looked up and she looked down.

"What should we do today?" she asked. In response, his fingers skipped a river's distance across her thighs. "I like your way of thinking."

Time became mangled in the twister of moans. Dawn turned to gloom, and gloom stepped up to the

gallows' pole, but awareness went through him like a fleeting ghost.

Do not use more than one hour per day.

"What should we do today?" she asked. In response, his fingers skipped a river's distance across her thighs. "I like your way of thinking." Promises of forever, promises of stars beyond stars led him deeper into her flesh as twilight battled daybreak.

"What should we do today?" she asked. In response, his fingers skipped a river's distance across her thighs and fell in the deep end.

The warning—he wanted to remember it. Faint kisses stripped his memory. The bed—a planet's length held him in its gravity. The spin, harsh and true left him a mess that he gladly adorned. He grabbed onto her for pleasure but inherited pain and desiccation that spread into the outside world. The more she caressed the more his seated body fell under the sway. The filth of the apartment covered him in an expansion of time while her sleep-scented words corroded his digital-self. The thump of a wasted heart gave its last call as she planted another kiss from a corrupted world.

Her lips parted into a smile.

"What should we do today?"

THOSE LESS FORTUNATE

WRITTEN
BY **ELLYN SIEGEL**

I purposely sit down at the table next to these two hot-looking, Latina women. I sip my coffee and pretend to read the Sunday paper. Yeah, I'm that guy.

Hoping to strike up a conversation of some kind. About anything. Sports. The weather. Whatever.

I imagine going over, "I couldn't help overhearing you..." Hey, it's possible! So what if I'm old enough to be their father. "Who's your Daddy, baby?" But they're deep in conversation and don't even notice me.

The one with the long ponytail that I can totally imagine grabbing hold of, is wearing a very tight, and very low cut t-shirt. She's telling her friend a story about someone who sounds like it might be her employer.

"Yes, Mee-suss Tall-boat... Oh no, Mee-suss Tall-boat." I talk to her like that all the time. She thinks I barely speak English, which is fine by me."

Her friend with the big, dark brown eyes laughs and says, "Are you still working on your 5 year plan to marry the husband?"

Ponytail answers, "You know it! It might even happen sooner than that if I can help it. The wifey has been super busy lately planning one of her charity events to raise money for 'those less fortunate'. I even offered to work late on those days, since she's usually too "exhausted" by the time she gets home to make him dinner."

"My best nights are when she has an evening meeting and I get to be alone with him. I change into my tightest mini-skirt like the second she leaves the house. Believe me, I've never found so many reasons to bend over in the kitchen. I'm constantly dropping a dish towel or something right in front of him, just to see his reaction."

They both laugh. "Don't these guys usually just sleep with the maid? Do they ever really leave the wife and marry them?" Brown Eyes asks.

"Learn your history, chica." Ponytail answers. "Robin Williams married his nanny. Ethan Hawke cheated on Uma Thurman and married the nanny. Arnold Schwarzenegger, didn't marry "the help", but he did buy her and his son by her, a four-bedroom house and a \$30K brand new Jeep Wrangler."

"You need to stop watching your telenovelas all the time, girl. This is the real soap opera," she continued. "Pick up a People magazine once in awhile." she laughed. "I plan to live in that house, not just clean it."

Brown Eyes replies, "Maybe these gringo women will figure out they shouldn't hire nannies who are half their age."

"Let's hope not!" Ponytail replies, and they both laugh some more.

I'm amazed at how calculating it all sounds. I had no idea that all these innocent-looking young house cleaners weren't just happy to have a job and be living in this country.

Funny, these two hotties suddenly don't seem so attractive to me. Ponytail's eyes have a hard look to them that I didn't notice before. And her friend is definitely a little too plump around the middle for my taste.

I finish my coffee and walk away.

HOW TO REPORT A MERMAID SIGHTING

WRITTEN
BY SAIGE CROSS

He found another. It took him thirty-nine years.

Sunday evenings on Folly Beach were reserved for his hunt. There was a curve in the shoreline that tucked itself under a large ridge, where on top, you could see an array of rocks scattered along the coast line, violently dividing waves that slammed up against them. A sandy hill ran up its back, where he would walk up to stand on top, surveying the water for any proof. The rocks jutted out from the water like giant prehistoric teeth as if an ancient skull was buried under the sand. He was standing at the edge of the ridge with his camera when he saw it on top of the largest rock, completely stationary, the sun glaring off its back. The gleam of its lower body unmistakable—just like the first. Its tail had been badly wounded, the blood discoloring the bottom half of its body. He would take a photo but knew from experience he needed more. Making his way down the edge, he headed for his car to get his phone.

On the front page, the photo would show it, splayed out over the rock like raw meat on a grill. The text above would be in bold: LOCAL MAN MAKES SHOCKING DISCOVERY, with a small thumbnail photo of Robert in the bottom corner, smiling wildly on the top of the cliff, pointing towards the water. He rehearsed his responses to the newscasters' questions on the way to the car: *thirty-nine years. Yes, when I was thirteen. It was on the same rock, actually. Alone? No. I've got a Labrador named Ranger. Yes... my tip would probably be, well, diligence. And trust yourself—no matter what.*

By the time the police and ambulance had arrived, a crew of newscasters pulled up and began unloading equipment from the News Channel 7 van. Robert was on the ledge, eyes glued to her to ensure she didn't go anywhere before the cameras started rolling. He positioned himself accordingly as the crew met him on top of the hill. They began talking to a policeman who was with a group of rescuers already making their way down shore to retrieve her. Men in lifejackets swam out to the rock when the tide subsided and gently hoisted her onto a stretcher and made their way back to the ambulance.

Robert caught a glimpse of her as the paramedics walked by with her on the stretcher. She belonged in the water. She had something much more alluring than mere beauty, but Robert couldn't figure it out. He felt the sudden primal inclination to protect her—they would want her for tests and experiments; they would poke and jab and drill and slice until all her majesty had been dissected and analyzed—she would be nothing more than data. The waves returned. The impact of the water against the ridge sent a wall of mist, set aflame against the backdrop of dusk on the horizon, around Robert and the news crew. One approached him with a microphone, and Robert watched as they lifted her into the ambulance and slammed the back doors.

"C'mon guys—I wanna get this before the rain comes," she said, surveying the sky.

The camera man counted down, holding out his fingers. The anchor spoke a monologue at the camera before turning to Robert.

"I suspect they'll call you *Folly's Hero* after all of this sir. Care to comment on that?"

It was a hell of a lot better than *crazy*, Robert thought.

"Well, you know I look out on that ledge there every Sunday, for what... almost forty years now."

"What'd you think when you saw her out there, on that rock?"

He was thinking restoration. About the water, and how he could see it for itself, finally—not a means to an end. He was right. He would hear the break of the tide, the roll of its foam on the edges of the sand before its swift retreat towards the sun.

He was thinking about Mary—about her license plate shrinking down the road. About waking up, arms stretched out, tracing the curve of her back again.

Mary.

“Well, I thought, I’d finally done it!”

The reporter held an empty gaze, mic stretched out under Roberts nose. She conjured an opaque smile. “And what was it you think you’d done?”

Robert leaned into the microphone.

“Well, I found one finally! I was the first to do it. I knew I’d see another one.”

“Sorry... the first to do what?”

The story would be monumental. It would be better than the house fire off 15th and Lexington, more provocative than the budget cuts to the local school system. The report on average rainfall, air content, and humidity percentage were immediately disregarded as Robert proclaimed to Goose Creek, South Carolina what he found out on the rock. And as the report went on at nine, the city learned about Lexi Beals, 21, who was found face-down on a rock just off Folly’s Beach, in critical condition. After making it home that night, Robert watched too, and wondered why they mentioned nothing of her tail. They said nothing of the large cut found underneath her breasts that traveled down to where the iridescent scales began, just below her stomach. He reached for the phone to call Mary, when the rain came.

It fell hard against the window in the kitchen. The sink was half full of dishes that he’d been soaking from earlier that morning. Reaching in, he grabbed a table spoon and a butter knife and began scrubbing them, dunking them under the water to remove food particles he couldn’t scrub off with the sponge. He set them on the drying rack next to him on the counter, taken aback by the way the light hit them. Retrieving more from the sink, he scrubbed them all, and placed them on the rack accordingly, until the silver gleam became almost too much for him to bear.

PEACHY

WRITTEN
BY **FRANK CANDELORO**

When I pulled up in my mother's car, Lori was on the withered grass in front of her building, a squat three story low rise on a dead end street behind the bus station, standing beneath a tree. She was looking up into the branches and talking to it.

"What the hell is she doing now?" I said to myself as I waved at her. She waved back and then began talking to the tree again. In any other neighbourhood, people would have stared.

"Peachy. Peachy. Come on, Peachy. Come down," I heard her say to the tree.

"What's up?" I said.

"Hey. It's Peachy. She got out. Peachy, come down. Come down now."

"How did she get out?"

"I was cleaning her cage and I forgot the patio door was open. I'm such an idiot. I've been out here forever. I have to pee."

I looked up into the tree and saw nothing but sun. I moved a bit to the left and the vague silhouette of a small bird was visible in the upper branches. "Come on, Peachy," I said. "Go pee. I'll stay here with her."

"No, I can't. Listen, go get her cage and her food. She might come down if she sees it."

"Maybe I can climb it?" I said, patting the trunk.

"Yeah, ok. Go get the cage and food."

"Ok," I said. I started for the building but turned around. "Is it locked? Do I need your keys?"

"No. I don't know." She searched her pockets. "I don't have them. I don't know. Just go."

This wasn't the afternoon I had planned. I was planning on breaking up with her, leaving immediately, and then calling Michelle. But as much as I was done with Lori, I couldn't bring myself to break up with her in the middle of this bird situation. She loved that bird. I decided I'd help her get bird down and then break up with her.

Cascading rust stains and old tin cans filled with cigarette butts decorated the front of Lori's building, the door of which was wedged open with a cinder block.

Her apartment was not only unlocked, but the door was wide open. What a mess. Typical. Garbage, literally garbage, everywhere. And empty bottles. Dozens of empty bottles everywhere. If I needed a reminder of why I was breaking up with her, if I my resolve needed strengthening, this was what I needed to see. And the whole place reeked of cat litter, even with the patio door open.

"Here," I said, tossing the bird seed and cage on the ground at her feet.

"Not so loud, you'll scare her!"

This went on for another twenty minutes. "Maybe we should throw something at her," I said. "Maybe that'll get her to come down," I said.

"Peachy! Peachy, come down and see mommy!"

I went to my mother's car to see what there was I could throw at the bird. Papers, empty coffee cups, Elton John's Greatest Hits on CD. I grabbed the CD. I was about to throw it at Peachy but had second thoughts and shoved it in the pocket of my cargo shorts. I took off my flip flop and threw it up into the branches.

"What are you doing?" Lori yelled.

“I’m trying to get her down,” I said. I threw my sandal up into the tree again.

“Stop! You’re going to scare her! What are you doing?” Lori yelled.

It was too late. Peachy flew from the tree to another one not far away. Lori ran after the bird. “Bring the cage, you idiot!” she yelled from the other tree.

We stood under that tree for a while until Peachy got spooked and flew off again into a neighbouring tree. We followed her from tree to tree for what seemed like hours. Lori would stand beneath the tree, call her, and she’d get spooked and fly.

“What we need is a ladder,” I said, as we sat on the boulevard in front of someone’s house a few blocks from her apartment.

“Where are we going to get a ladder? Try to be helpful.”

I sat on the curb while she talked to Peachy.

“We’re never going to get her down. We’re going nowhere.”

“Try to be positive. Come on, Peachy. Please! She can probably sense your negativity.”

“Oh, so it’s my fault she won’t come down?”

I knew I had to break up with her then and there, bird or no bird. We’d been together only a few months, and in that time, my feelings had gone from infatuation to pity with the slightest touch of revulsion, or maybe vice versa. I’d cheated on my girlfriend, Michelle, with Lori. I’d broken up with Michelle, who I been with since high school, for Lori. I was an idiot. I loved Michelle, but I didn’t realize that until I’d broken up with her. And I’d wrecked everything, ruined a solid relationship and hurt a wonderful person, for someone whose voice I couldn’t even stand to hear anymore.

Lori and I had met at work, at the mall. I’d worked there every summer break since high school, and now, during the university break, diligently saving my money to pay for tuition. That was until I’d met Lori. I was 21 at the time, she was 25. She’d dropped out of college and had been on her own for a few years. Working at the mall was the endgame for her career wise. But she had her own place and car. And she wanted to have sex with me. Michelle, on the other hand, was a bit boring, a bit predictable. She had it all planned out - we’d both finish law school, get jobs, get married, have babies, etcetera. But compared to Lori, boring and predictable magically transformed into solid, dependable, sane, and attractive.

I was instantly attracted to Lori when I met her, and when I found out her and a bunch of other people from work went out drinking practically every night after work, I wormed my way into the group through an old high school friend. It wasn’t long before Lori was offering to drive me home. One night, we were both drinking of course, we ended up making out in the bar after everyone else left, and then having sex in her car in the parking lot of the bar. We didn’t even use a condom. I pulled out just in time and made a mess all over.

I went home that night and didn’t sleep a wink. I was in love with Lori, and couldn’t picture my life without her. I really cared about Michelle, but I knew I’d never be happy without Lori, so the next day I went straight to Michelle’s house and broke up with her. She was destroyed. I was the first boyfriend she’d ever had. I ran from Michelle’s house with her in hysterics.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her mother on the way out. The handle of the screen door caught my belt loop as I tried to run out of the house. Michelle’s mother just stared at me confused. “I’m sorry,” I said, freeing myself from the door handle.

After a few weeks with Lori, however, I realized she wasn’t the one for me. It dawned on me one morning, after spending the night at her house, that she was an alcoholic. We’d usually go out for breakfast when I stayed over, but that morning we both realized we were broke. “Let’s just eat here,” I said. “What have you got for breakfast?”

“I haven’t done groceries for a while,” she said, looking in the fridge. I looked over her shoulder. All she had in the fridge was a six pack of beer and a bottle of vodka.

“Have a beer,” she said, and grabbed one for herself. “That’s usually what I have.” She took a swig and gave my shocked face a kiss, oblivious to the shock.

Another night she told me about her father, the alcoholic, and how difficult her childhood and family life was because of him. Lori was fun, but not the kind of girl I wanted to get serious about. I needed to break up with her so I could get Michelle back, so I could marry Michelle and have a normal life.

“Peachy, come down, please!” Lori said to the tree, hitting in frustration, as we sat on the boulevard in front of a house.

“Listen, we need to talk,” I said. I was reading the back of the Elton John CD for about the hundredth time that day.

“Peachy! Peachy come down. Yeah, we do. I have something to tell you, too.”

An SUV pulled into the driveway of the house we were sitting in front of. Dad, mom, son, daughter. The perfect little family. All four of them stared at us.

“Can I help you?” the man said, somewhat aggressively, coming over to us.

Lori smiled and explained the whole thing. Within ten minutes, he was out there with a ladder. What a guy. His wife and kids were plainly within sight behind the fence in the backyard, and he was drooling all over Lori.

“What a silly bird,” the man said. “I mean, here he is with a nice safe cage, and what does he do? He escapes, he's free, free to starve, to freeze, to meet a cat or a hawk. He won't last a night out here.”

They continue chatting, and I just sat on the curb thinking and staring at Elton John. From where I sat, I could see the kids playing in the backyard and the mom gardening through the fence. I thought about Michelle.

Lori was still up the ladder, trying to get the bird to come down. The man was clearly staring at her ass. “Come on,” she said, “come to mamma, pretty bird.”

“That's it, that's it. Come on,” said Lori. I looked up. Peachy was starting to hop down the branches slowly, one by one, towards Lori. I stood up. “Come on, Peachy,” I said.

But then the kids started fighting, yelling at each other, and Peachy got spooked and flew off. None of us saw which direction she went in, she took off so fast. She was gone.

“I'm sorry,” said the man, touching Lori's arm when she'd climbed down.

“Honey!” called the wife, as if on cue. “Honey, I need you!”

“Sorry,” said the man to Lori. He gave me an envious, conspiratorial wink as he left. “Coming, dear!” he yelled in the direction of the yard.

Lori and I sat on the curb in silence. I stared at the happy family behind the fence.

“Lori, I -”

“I'm pregnant, Mark,” she blurted out. She reached for my hand. She looked me dead in the eye. The kids made a noise and she looked up for a second, over my shoulder, and smiled at the happy family behind the fence.

MORNINGTIME

WRITTEN
BY **TYLER CLARK**

Although I had never seen her cry, I couldn't blame her after what just happened. I had heard her cry before, been near her when she was crying, but never actually seen it.

Let me start at the beginning. As I woke up, I saw the bright, gentle light filtering ever so slightly through my blinds. Looking around, I saw the remnants of my past life. My former report cards, all straight A's once brought me a great sense of pride. Now, they just remind me of what I once was, what I could be. I saw the pictures of myself as a youth, smiling jubilantly at whoever was taking the picture. I saw how much of a mess my room had become recently. There were dirty clothes strewn all over the floor and dirty dishes galore. I simply didn't care about myself or anything relating to me anymore. As soon as high school started, I fell into a great depression, or maybe it was angst. We don't know for sure, the counselors and therapists told me it was angst and it would pass, but I'm led to believe it was and still is the former. My grades slipped, people I loved left me and I began drinking to solve my problems. It worked for a while, but eventually it stopped. At that point, I turned to marijuana and when that didn't work I began taking Xanax. Not because I was anxious or anything, I just didn't know what else to do.

I saw the person I used to be. I used to be a bright, happy soul, now I'm just so... me. I couldn't ever quite bring myself to get out of bed. That was always the hardest part of the day. Knowing that whatever was to come would be shitty, why even bother. I was failing most all of my classes, not due to lack of knowledge, but instead to sheer lack of motivation. Well, not all of my classes. I was at least passing English. I absolutely loved to write. Whenever I was depressed, I used writing to cope. Whenever I was happy, I used writing to show that. No matter how much I wrote, however, I was never satisfied. I had the ideas, just not the talent. I used to have talent. I used to be so damn smart.

I'm at the point that I genuinely only think one person cares about me, and that's me. In all my classes my peers look at me weird like a zoo animal or an alien. My parents don't bother with me anymore. I'm almost certain they wouldn't miss me if I was gone but how would I know. Maybe they care, they just show it in an odd way. I certainly hope so. I remember, back when I was maybe eleven or twelve, I was one of the kids that everyone wanted to know. That's likely because they wanted to use me or my knowledge for their gain, but it still made me feel wanted nonetheless. That's the worst feeling in the world, looking back. Realizing I was only kept around people because I knew how to long divide. Regardless, my proudest achievement, to this day is my signed Presidential Recognition of Academic Excellence paper, signed by none other than Mr. Barack Obama himself. Yes, I know it isn't really his handwritten signature, instead it was a stamp of it, but it's reassuring to know that Obama, or whatever middle aged man had stamped it thought I was smart.

I looked over at my alarm clock, which was partially obstructed by my water cup. As I attempted to move it, I bumped it with my hand and sent water everywhere. I watched as the water slowly snaked from the brim of the cup to the table to the ground and out of my sight. I'm jealous of water, in a way. It's free, free to flow wherever it chooses with no one to tell it that it isn't good enough or that it should try being something it's not. Water is free in ways humans will never be, free to be itself. Since my cup was no longer impairing my vision of my clock, I realized I was up far too early. School didn't normally start until 8 o'clock, I didn't normally get there until well after 8:30. Today, though, I woke up at an astonishing 6:30. So I decided to lay in bed until I felt like going to school. As I lay there, nothing to keep my mind occupied except the sound of my own thoughts pounding away at my head, I stared at the ceiling. Days like these, looking aimlessly above me, I'd come to the conclusion that all silence is made with sound and that the worst sound is no sound. And as I stared into the emptiness of my roof, I got thinking about the emptiness of everyone. I mean, when you really think about it, none of us are truly alive. We all live the lives others want us to and conform ourselves to fit their standards. We don't get to be the us we want to be, we're forced to be the us that society says that we are. If society doesn't get their way with us, then they spit us to the ground and leave us to die there. The only way of living is to be like water or air or something. To be free of form and to flow however you so choose. God, I sound like a hippie.

I decided that was enough of that hippie bullshit, so I started thinking about something else. Just my luck, my mind drifted to an even worse area, my exes. As a bisexual, I've had both male and female significant others. I've come to learn that relationships are either designed to fail or are fake. There is no such thing as un-

conditional love. Love definitely wasn't something I had, nor wanted. I remember, one of my longest lasting relationships was with a girl who for a long time I actually believed that I loved. I quickly came to my senses, though, and realized that either she was using me for her gain or she was dumb. I had and still have absolutely nothing to offer to anyone, except for my evident top notch personality. That was sarcasm, if you didn't catch on. Love is overrated.

By this point, I had thought enough. Probably entirely too much.. I looked back at my clock. It read 6:38. Only eight fucking minutes. In a desperate bid to pass some more time, I decided I'd give in and get ready for school. It's funny, you know, how all we have in our lives is time, but we're always in a constant attempt to get rid of that time. Be it by reading, writing, watching television, playing games, we always want our time to pass. I think that in order for us to advance as a people we need to learn to utilize our time and make a difference. Try thinking for once instead of just allowing our time to flow into useless addictions. Then again, who am I to talk. Well, back to my daily routine, I suppose. The first step is always to shower, so that's what I did.

As I turned the water on, I saw again the true freedom of water. All it did was fall, then it got to go anywhere. Maybe that's the deep allegory to life I keep implying at. Maybe we're all meant to fall, then after we hit rock bottom, we're finally allowed to flow free. Or maybe that's all bullshit too and I'm grasping at straws to make sense of my nonsensical life. Who knows? Regardless, I stepped into the cold water and thought some more. Not about anything in particular, just some writing prompts to stories that will never be told and lyrics to a song that'll never be sung. Then I made the mistake of looking down to my legs. I saw my thighs, my scars, my truest signs of weakness. Although the scars were most definitely fading, they were still entirely too visible. I still regret making them and I can't believe nor forgive myself for ever being so weak. Sure, I was sad but why bring pain to oneself? Isn't pain inherently sad? Too deep for me. I got out of the shower, not because I was done but because I was only merely starting. Through my short life, one of the few things I've learned is that if you give in to your thoughts for even a second, they'll plague you forever. So I dried my body off instead.

The next step was to brush my hair and teeth. So, I grabbed my toothbrush and my comb and looked into the mirror. There I saw her. Not her, me. I looked like shit. My skin was beyond pale, almost translucent to the point where I could see my veins creeping across my face and into my neck and beyond. My naturally brunette hair had countless gray hairs in it, all over like a plague running across the world. My eyes were sunken into my face, at least two inches too far. Worst of all, though, were the tears draining from my eyes. I didn't even realize. I guess I was just used to crying by now. No, I had never actually seen myself cry. But after what had just happened, I didn't blame me.

SORROW OF THE TURNSPIT DOG

WRITTEN
BY **OWEN SCHALK**

I don't know what compelled him to actually do it. There are things you shouldn't need to do anymore once you're a father, one of which is feeling the need to prove yourself to anybody outside of your family. Your self doesn't matter anymore, it shouldn't exist. It makes me wonder if he'd always been a selfish person. I asked Mom a while ago and she told me not to sully my father's memory with thoughts like that. I told her it'd be pretty difficult to sully my mental image of my retired sixty-three year old father in his ill-fitting mechanic's jumpsuit collapsing in a rasping red heap on our front lawn and being torn limb from limb by a seven-foot-tall ape-beast with monstrous claws and depthless black eyes any more than it had already been sullied. She said not to remind her of that. I asked why not, because it was a selfish thing to force us to see? 'Please leave,' she said.

'What did he have to prove?'

'Go.'

In his younger days, although he wasn't very young at the time and he wouldn't get much older, he worked at Gustav's Autobody, a shop owned by a family friend, whose name was Gustav. I say friend but I only spoke to him a few times as a kid. His familiar status was simply passed down to me like with all of my dad's other friends, Lyle and Don and Jim and them, like they're all heirlooms, meaning they're like little useless ornaments you'd get from a great-aunt that you set aside and never think about until you have to get rid of them. He was always working with his hands, my dad, since where I grew up that's how a father would make a living. He'd be a lumberjack or a fisherman or a janitor or a farmer or a mechanic, which was what my dad was, a mechanic. As far as I remember the first time he heard the story was there at Gustav's, from a friend from school whose name was Jim who showed up one day to get an oil change and asked idly how much someone could get for a car like his if someone might want to sell it.

'Few thousand,' my dad said. 'Why, you looking to sell?'

'Not me. Janine, if worst comes to worst.'

'Why's that?'

'Well she'll need to account for my income, since I won't be providing anymore.'

'Why, here are you going?'

'Nowhere.'

'So what are you doing?'

'What do you mean?'

It's my learned understanding of guys like my dad that they always assume everybody knows exactly what they're thinking and so finding out what they're actually thinking is like pulling teeth from a possum. But eventually they'd have gotten to it, after who knows how much tedious preamble.

'Oh,' Tom said, 'why didn't you just ask? I'm gonna be chased by the ape.'

Whether or not Tom stated it so matter-of-factly because it was such a well-known challenge around those parts or simply due to the aforementioned masculine vagueness so popular with that generation can't be said for sure. At least, I can't say for sure, because I wasn't there.

'Chased by the ape,' Tom would have explained eventually. 'I can't believe you don't know it. What you do is clear a patch in your front yard so it's just dirt, put up a ten-foot pine pillar in the exact center, border the patch with pine logs, then water the pillar and leave it for the night. When you wake up in the morning the ape'll be standing beside the pillar, staring at your house, waiting for you to come out so it can start.'

'Start what?' my dad would have wanted to know.

'Start the chase.'

My dad didn't ask what the point of the chase was, why anybody would ever summon such a ghastly abomination to their home, what person told Jim about such a ghastly phenomenon, and what person one day in the past had first followed all those convoluted steps of construction in order to coincidentally arrive at the conjuration of a seven-foot-tall black-eyed talon-fingered ape-beast, and how they'd reacted upon doing so. Instead he just said 'Huh,' and changed the oil. The next day he heard what happened from Gustav.

'Did you hear about Tom?'

‘Yeah, he’s thinking about selling his car.’

‘No, he died.’

‘What? How?’

‘The ape got him.’

‘What?’

‘The ape got him.’

‘What do you mean it got him?’

‘It got him.’

Eventually by process of elimination or repetition and re-phrasing they would have arrived at the point.

‘It sliced him apart piece by piece and left him there for his family to find, then it just vanished. That’s what the ape does.’

‘How do you stop it?’

‘You just keep moving.’

‘How do you know when it’s over?’

‘When what’s over?’

‘The race.’

‘Well, you win.’

Turns out the ape was a pretty common thing back then, mostly among middle-aged or elderly fathers. All you had to do was step into the ape’s pen and run around the circumference, not even run, you could jog or walk, and the second you started the ape would come shambling after you, swinging its arms lazily in your wake, like two bags of sand. At the start of any ape-chase it seemed miraculous that the ape had ever managed to catch anybody. But then naturally fatigue would set in and the dad would slow down, and as the dad slowed the ape would keep going, it never tired and it never stopped. It became inevitable that their paces would meet, and when they did the ape would rip him apart with a rabid ferocity that was shocking to behold, especially in comparison to its preceding languidity.

‘So why does anybody do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘Get chased the ape.’

‘Well. Wouldn’t you like to be the guy who beats it?’

Mom had always been the working type. It was a point of pride that she constantly made known to us that the first time she worked she was fourteen, and it was on a beach near her family’s second beach-house digging clams for a bearded widower named Philbert, I don’t know why I remember all the details of all Mom’s jobs when I’ve only ever known Dad as a mechanic at Gustav’s, but I just do. She was a barber’s assistant at sixteen, a Zamboni driver at nineteen, a slaughterhouse worker at twenty-two, and so on and so on, more jobs that I probably even know about and I know about a lot of them. Her family travelled a lot though so she constantly needed to adapt. She’s shown me pictures of all the places she’s been in her life and the places she plans to go that she probably won’t be able to go to now. As for Dad, I’ve only ever seen him in the black-and-white graduation photo in the faded hallway of the same old red-brick high school that’s still there, the same one I went to, or in the picture we keep in the living room of him with his parents in the yard of the house he grew up in, the same house where he ended up living with his wife and children until his gruesome and untimely, or all too timely, death on that same front lawn where he’d posed as a teenager for so many candid family portraits.

I have a very vivid recollection of this one particular time when Dad came home late from a long day of work at Gustav’s, tightening axels or changing tires or whatever it is a mechanic does late into the night, came in still wearing his old jumpsuit that in his last years was a second skin and just as wrinkled and hardened as the first, threw down his bags which had whatever he carried in them in them, and tossed himself down on the couch in front of the TV that was still playing some irritatingly vibrant children’s cartoon that we’d absently left on before going into the bathroom to brush our teeth under the supervision of our babysitter Dominic. I watched from the doorway with peppermint toothpaste burning my lips, that’s the sensation I remember most, the burning, as Dominic walked to his shoulder and informed him of the night’s entirely usual events in a tired, routine order. Mom was away on a business trip for an international car manufacturer at the time. Dad sighed and nodded after each item in the mundane debriefing. ‘Money’s on the counter,’ he mumbled when Dominic was done. His features were limp and doughy as he stared at the bounding yellow cat on the television chasing after the elusive blue mouse. Dominic came back and kneeled in the doorway in front of me and my sister. ‘Your dad’s beat,’ he said, tousling our hair. ‘Go to bed and don’t bug him okay? Good night.’ ‘Night,’ we said to him in turn. When he left we went to bed but after a few minutes I went out and sat

on the couch next to Dad. He'd switched over to the sports channel, though it looked like he'd fallen asleep immediately after doing so.

'Hey,' he whispered, startling me. 'What are you doing up?'

'I couldn't sleep.'

'Was the TV too loud?'

'No.'

I stared up at Dad, the watery electricity of colors swarmed on his face like a lightning storm reflected on a slick brow of rock. He breathed in heavily. 'So how was your day?' he asked.

'Good.'

'How was school?'

'Good.'

'Learn anything?'

'No.'

A burst of muted cheers came from somewhere inside the screen. Dad's eyebrows perked up. I don't remember what sport it was. He made a comment about it that I couldn't respond to then and wouldn't be able to respond to now, and the silence continued.

'I miss Mom,' I finally said to him. His eyebrows went down. He closed his eyes. What happened next I don't remember exactly, but he sent me to bed not long after.

I was six or seven years old that night, maybe five. On the morning I awoke and looked out the living room window to see a crudely constructed pen of weathered pine and in its center a ten-foot pine pillar and beside it a hulking, black-eyed, unnaturally still ape-beast gazing emotionlessly into the open window I now occupied, I was twenty-two. I called Mom and Dad and asked Mom where Dad was. She went to look, calling his name. I was alone at the window when he stepped into sight, the dull morning sun putting a glowing egg on top of his bald scalp, his blubbery midsection manifesting beneath the folds of his overworn jumpsuit as rings of melting rubber slowly seeping down his waist, as though working with tires all his life had led him to gradually adapt into half-tire-half-man being himself. He glanced at me once and smiled meekly. Then he stepped into the pen.

'Why does anybody do it?' my mom said another time when I bludgeoned her with the question. Coming from her it wasn't a justification, but a lament. 'These men are fathers, they have wives and children. It's an epidemic, if you ask me.'

I'm a father now and I still don't understand why he did it. A provident, well-travelled wife and two children who didn't burden him with unnecessary adoration or inquisition, what more could a man want? Now I have most of what he had and it's never once crossed my mind to go out and erect the ape-pillar. The only time I ever think about the ape is when I'm thinking about why my dad and so many others dads his age thought to do it, and how they'd deluded themselves into thinking they'd be the one to finally outrun it.

NINE DAYS WONDER

WRITTEN
BY **ELTON JOHNSON**

April 13, 2001, the island woke to the news of young Jomain Foster. For the entire day, it was all that was on the lips of the people. The head of the Anglican Diocese called it a national tragedy. There were even calls for the prime minister to declare a day of mourning.

In the early hours of the Friday morning, thirteen-year-old Jomain was found in his bedroom with a bullet wound to the head. A handwritten note had been found beside the boy and his death was being investigated as a suspected suicide.

This was the first time ten-year-old David had encountered that word, suicide. He contemplated asking his father what it meant, as they sat in the dark of their living room together watching the television report later that night. However, judging from how upset his father was at the news, David thought it best he peruse a dictionary later in the privacy of his bedroom.

“This man call himself an officer? Manage to let his son get a hold of his gun like that?”

And why the hell this little boy gone and kill off himself for foolishness?” David’s father, John, raged at the TV—emphasizing the word boy in his deep Patois accent to sound like bwaay.

Two years before, Jomain had risen to national fame by finishing first in the local spelling bee. He was the smart kid in glasses whom the whole island fell in love with after he blasted through the word *Zygophyllaceous* with ease in the final round of the competition. No one was prepared to hear the news that hours after a harsh conversation with his father about the same, as the TV anchorwoman alleged, an explosion was heard and Jomain was found in his bedroom in a pool of blood.

“Let you ever do anything like that and see if I don’t bring you back to life and kill you again,” John said to David. John had no tolerance for the inferior lives of others. His human failings were minuscule and forgivable; everyone else’s was an indictment on their very right to life. At the mossy bottom of that dry pit of tolerance was that which John showed to his son—his sole heir, and ungrateful bearer of his last name.

Rosecrans, the suburban development David’s family lived in, provided the battleground for David’s childhood. Under the shroud of quiet suburban streets and neighbours who minded their own business, he and his father negotiated his development into manhood. The community was fitted with a perimeter wall and security posts for the protection of inhabitants from the dangers outside. To David, it felt more like he was trapped inside with greater dangers and no means of escape.

In the comfort of his bedroom, David thumbed through his dictionary.

‘Sugar’... ‘Suggest’...

There it was. ‘Suicide: the action of killing oneself intentionally.’

David froze. They have a name for that? he thought. His young mind too understood what the feeling of rather dying than living felt like. Less than a year earlier, he too had tried the very same thing, albeit through less effective means.

Two of his cousins from the countryside, Renard and Rory, nephews of his father, were at his house for the summer holidays. They’d always been envious of David’s life. Living so close to the city with the latest toys and gadgets at his disposal, more clothes than he could wear, and house with no holes in the roof. The en-

vy led to an unnecessary rivalry for the notice of David's father.

John himself encouraged it. It'll toughen up the boy, the man thought.

Who could climb higher and faster? Who was better at keep-ups in football? Who could shoot the most birds with a makeshift catapult? Even though David hardly ever succeeded at any of these competitions, his cousin never relented. Maybe they thought if they proved

David inferior his father would take one or both of them into his care. Sometimes David wondered the same thing.

Renard and Rory's latest ploy was their most underhanded yet. In David's room, they proposed playing a game where they'd skip through a GQ magazine they found lying around the house and pick the women they most wanted to be with and the men they wanted to be. With their competitive natures, it soon became a race to see who could point on which man or woman first. David laughed so hard at this game and found himself captivated by it. In the midst of all the excitement, Renard proposed something to make the game even more fun. He dared David to kiss one of the men from the magazine. Something about this felt suspicious and David hesitated.

"You're too afraid of everything," he taunted David, using 'fraidy-'fraidy, the even more mocking Patois version of that term.

"You know that's how she is from long time," Rory said in support of his brother. "You know she not going to do it."

Anger spurred David into action. He drew the magazine to his lips and gave the half-naked male image of a men's cologne model the quickest peck. However, before David even removed the magazine from his lips, their howls of repulsion drove a new emotion into him—fear. The brothers followed with suppositions of what John would do David when they told. They spoke of how a man from their rural banana farming district in the hills was almost killed when he did, in real life, what David had imitated. The man's very own father, they said, chopped him on the arm with a machete and helped the district people chase him out of the community.

David imagined the shame in his own father's eyes and how that alone would be enough to destroy him. Renard and Rory had won. David hit himself in the head repeatedly.

The one thing he wanted most in this world had escaped him forever. He devised a plan to permanently escape from the pain of the loss.

Their house was less than a half-hour's walk from the Plantain River. It had claimed the lives of more than a handful of David's schoolmates. Young boys who had cut school to go swimming and never made it back home. David thought of going the same way as those boys. He walked there teary-eyed and enveloped in the backdrop of a crimson summer sunset.

The water was cold and steady at first dip, then became cool and comfortable after he had fully submerged. Still, he couldn't do it. The currents were too calm to sweep him away and he didn't have the bravery to keep his head under water long enough to drown—or so he thought. Soon as the water crept up his nose his head bobbed right out of the water, then he gagged and choked from the feeling of water in his windpipe. With each try, it became more difficult to do it again and soon he gave up and reluctantly dragged himself home.

"What the fuck you crying for? I give you anything to cry for?" John asked rhetorically, lips pouted in disgust. David was curled up on the kitchen floor, and John battered him with the cord from whatever appliance he grabbed first. The electric kettle? The toaster? The details were blurry, but the way the makeshift whip whistled through the air, repeatedly, on its way to his face, feet and hands, David remembered clearly. "Make one more sound and I will really give you something to bawl for!" John continued.

Lying on his bed and cringing in the memory of what had happened, young David learned then that thoughts of self-murder were something to hide deep in his mind, on fear of the wrath John.

Late into David's teenage years, when beatings were replaced by threats of beatings and even crueller non-physical punishments, David's suicidal thoughts continued to fester under a shroud of shame and fear.

More than five years later, after the nine days' wonder of Jomain Foster's death had been replaced by similar superficial outcries of compassion for our nation's children David found himself lying in the darkness of his upstairs bathroom, bathtub half-filled with water, naked from the waist down and drunk. He thought not only of Jomain, but Kemar Wilson, nine-years-old, was killed in crossfire on his way home; Marlon Jacobs, fourteen-years-old, hung himself after being severely bullied at school; Kwame Russell, seventeen-years-old, jumped from a high building to his death after being molested by his village pastor and the many others his mind could remember. Two vertical slits were on David's arms, profusely oozing pain and hurt, as he drifted into a darkness between sleep and death and ruminated about what the nation would say about him during his reign as the newest nine days' wonder.

THINK OF ME

WRITTEN
BY **NIKKI MARTINEZ**

18-year-old Maria Toledo follows the rowdy group of college students in red shirts, hoisting the Filipino flag on their shoulders. It is 3 o'clock, and the sun smacks the Old Fort like a fist, heat and moisture making even the lace-patterned shadows of trees unbearable. Beyond the crumbling yellow stones of the fort, the sea sleeps, cloud-colored and uneasy, resisting the supernatural warmth of a summer on a tropical Southeast Asian Country. No one, however, seems to notice what the sea resists, as a spirit of anger and triumph is stirring through the groups of people sitting in shade thrown by the looming walls.

Maria is at a rally in a shirt colored red, that old Communist color which has changed the world in uncountable ways. Looking back, however, she must say, a little shame-facedly, that she has never really cared about politics. Unlike her family. Who have always talked about it with their different tones, some sad, some skeptical, some praising, some enraged. She has memories of them, seated around the mahjong table, laboring with conversations and arguments while she, a child of 8, watched Barbie movies and ate puffed rice and bananas, half-listening. Papa and Mama, Tios and Tias, Grandmama with her soft dyed hair in curlers, congregated like birds in a circle around the table, voices intersecting each other like angry drivers on the clogged roads of her hometown. There was only one thing they wanted, and it was change. No more corruption. Finish those road projects! Keep the defenseless safe. But Barbie laughed and twirled her blonde hair on TV, and little Maria forgot the voices.

That was then, however. Now...

DUTERTE, the red-tinged banners read in shouting letters. Since the New Year of 2016, he has been the only sound on peoples' lips. He has been everywhere – on social media posts, on the news, in posters and banners pasted on graffiti-colored cement walls and gates around the city. He has been on the lips of all Maria's friends, as they argue for or against him. They say that this new president, if elected, will change the lives of Filipinos. Corruption will finally come to an end. Fear, poverty, and, most of all, drugs, which plague the country like a disease, will disappear like a receding shadow at dawn. She can almost see his fist, iron-clad and powerful, smashing to pieces all of those who hurt the street children, and all of those who push Shabu and Marijuana. The image of this hero, in the red shouting letters, brings a sizzling feeling to her blood. Like fire. Like the sea hissing with white-hot foam caps beyond the fort.

The sun is setting, and the west becomes a conflagration of spices from a traditional kitchen, gold-brown for cinnamon, vermilion cayenne pepper, burgundy-hued chili powder, yellow-orange Indian saffron, stripes of mellow green dill weed, all set aflame by the red ball of the sun. Slowly, the sleepy lethargy of the crowd begins to peel off like dry skin, and the anger concealed as they sat in the heat bubbles to the surface. Flags are raised, a yellow sun and three stars, stripes of red and blue, a triangle of pure white, catching the rays of the falling light. Cellphone lights flicker; custom balloons are waved. Suddenly, the uneasy air is broken by the growling, earth-shaking roar of helicopters. Silhouettes appear, black iron birds against the madness of the spice-hued sunset. On the stage, a fire-eyed Emcee grabs a microphone and yells, in a brittle, enraged battle cry, "What is the voice of Cebu?" "DUTERTE!" yells the crowd, a living body in the coming night. A snake. A monster. "DUTERTE, DUTERTE, DUTERTE! DUTERTE DUTERTE DUTERTE!" As they raise their fists and scream, confetti floats down on them, jagged and red, from the helicopters. It is like fire. Like blood. The blood of transgressors and the corrupt. Fireworks explode into the darkening sky, and from somewhere backstage, a lady with a full-bodied voice begins to sing BAYAN KO. My country. The sound mixes with the roar of the crowd, and the helicopters, and the exploding of fireworks, and the crumpling sizzle of falling confetti, and Maria, shivers running up and down her spine, brushes with her country's history for the first time.

Mara is also listening to the voice of these people. She is not at the rally, but she has turned her radio on; she is listening to their relentless screaming, thinking that it is like the cry of a predator when it is about to taste the blood of prey. Slowly, she gets up, her broken feet finding their steps across the ragged linoleum floor. She has to get to the black pot which is burning on a bamboo spit-fire, to stir with her wooden ladle the rice which is boiling inside. Her feet, however, stumble on the scars on the linoleum, and she slips, breaking her fall by holding on to the stained plastic table beside her.

“DUTERTE” she tastes the name on her lips, and it is like hot white rice, comforting, satisfying. “You cannot bring her back,” she says into the humid, warm air of her small squatter’s dwelling, “But you can save others like her.”

A face comes into her mind, a gentle face with her own button-round black eyes and her husband’s small, pretty nose. A 3-year-old’s face, framed in the gentle lines of very soft, thin hair. A girl who loves Barbie and Frozen and who can already sing the songs of her favorite cartoons. A girl who equates cakes with birthdays, and always insists on blowing out candles whenever they buy a cake. A girl whose laugh is the sound of pure, unrestricted and relentless joy, whose smile can fix all the wrongs in the world. A girl who is dead.

She can still see the killer. A thin young man, a drop-out from public high school. She can still see his worthless face, his red, unseeing eyes. “Sorry,” he blurted out to her, before he was put away forever. “I was under the influence...I didn’t know...” She had spat on his face before the world turned dark and she lost her consciousness. Hatred and love and unending grief. How can one human being take in all of these things? How can one forget the smile of a daughter who has gone beyond the grave? How can the image of that small white coffin, two feet long, ever escape one’s nightmares?

“Duterte will bring justice,” Mara thinks, and although it will never be enough to save her little girl, it will be enough to save other beloved children like her. And somehow, that is enough for now.

But a few Barrios away, another mother watches the news, hears the cries on her small, broken-down black TV. “DUTERTE!” they scream, and she feels a chill turn her blood cold. In her mind is that baby boy, that child she held in her arms when he was born, squealing his protest at coming out into a cruel world. In her mind she sees him, 3 years old, with his soft curly hair, playing with the yellow toy trucks she bought at a discounted price from the second-hand shop. 5 years old, he is falling to the floor because his father has hit him for the first time. Black bruises, turning violet and mustard-colored on his fair forehead. 10 years old, and he goes to school on an empty stomach because there is no more money to buy a slice of bread, a cup of rice. 12, and he is denied the chance to go to school at all, forced by his father to beg for food in the streets. 15, and he has taken to drugs, escaping into that beautiful world of oblivion where he can be free from the pain of his life. 18, and he has killed a beautiful 3-year-old girl. Now sits in a squalling country prison, rotting in the mouth of filth and broken chances.

“It is my fault,” she says to herself. “I should have given him more. I should have stopped my husband’s hand from hitting him. I should have worked harder. I should not have brought a child into the world without having the means to care for him.” She somehow feels that the Punisher, Duterte, will win the elections and that because of this, her child will be executed. But is that fair, considering he never had a chance in life?

Maricel is also watching the news and her eyes glow with excitement. Her father, 67 years old and broken down with infirmity, sits beside her.

“Duterte!” he says, a smile ghosting across his face, which is like a shadow in the soft light. “Finally, a real ruler who will bring safety to the country.”

Maricel is also smiling. For 10 years, she has taught at the public school, watching the children come in, some without any rubber slippers to protect their feet from the burning asphalt roads. Some without any lunch, little persons in 3rd grade who sit in their seats the whole lunch break, pretending to play and talk while their stomachs are growling with the need to eat. Some not coming at all, having to take care of their younger siblings at home who are racked with disease. During class, the children need to share books because the hand-me-downs from an older year have been torn by mildew and termites. There are even times when they have to have class under the shade of the mango tree, where flies and mosquitoes and pestering heat make the children’s eyes close.

Corruption is the problem. Dirty, dirty corruption. Fat government officials, sleepy with corruption, putting money into their pockets which should have been for the children’s books. Stout ladies with overdone makeup, eating at fancy restaurants and buying thousands of pairs of shoes, spending money which should have been for the poor. High-class couples driving in sports cars, overseeing the building of their mansions, using the money that could have bought Zhoey a piece of bread, and rubber slippers for Anton, and lunches for all of her students for the next year.

“Now Duterte will end corruption,” she says to her father. “No more bribes, no more robbing honest tax payers from the chance to have their money used to fix the roads and feed the hungry. And a teacher’s raise, I heard about it. Medication for senior citizens. Land for the homeless. Safety from drug-addicts and the death penalty for child-molesters.” She smiles as she falls asleep with her head on the table, dreaming of a safe country where stomachs are all full, where children do not burn their feet on the roads in the summer, where her father can lay his wrinkled head down on the softer, more comfortable bed, which she plans to buy with her salary increase. “If Duterte wins.”

The sound of the exuberant crowd also reaches Josh, and he closes his laptop, laying his head on his fists. His room has grown dark with the setting of the sun, and raising his head, he can see the flyovers and expressways of Manila, twisting like powerful snakes clogged with red and golden lights. The Manila of freedom, his hometown. The Manila where he has enjoyed democracy and freedom of speech for all of these years. With a twisting fear in his stomach, then, he tries to erase the exploding voices of the crowd screaming DUTERTE!

There is nothing more Josh values than freedom, than democracy. There is nothing that can erase the hole left by his father, taken from him when he was only 10, in that dark, horrific time of the Martial Law. He still has nightmares about that time. He still remembers his mother’s face on the evening when his Dad failed to come home to dinner. “Let us wait for him until 8 o’clock,” she said then, and her voice was the voice of an old woman. 8 o’clock came, and still he did not appear. Midnight, and they had sat, like ghosts, on the wooden steps of the patio, staring into the night which was still as death because of the curfew. He didn’t come the next day, nor the next, nor the next. In fact, he never did come back. He became a statistic, one of those people who disappeared without a trace, collateral damage of an era of utter darkness.

Now Josh sits in his high-rise, looking at his beautiful and beloved homeland. “Another dictator,” he thinks. “Extra-judicial killings. A man above the law, who decides who lives and who dies. Can a human being take the place of God? Have we fought for freedom and democracy all of these years, only to have them snatched from us again?” And he feels wave after wave of despair because he cannot forget his Dad’s gentle eyes when he said prayers before mealtimes, or the look of pride shining in his face when Josh first learned to ride a bike, shoot a basketball, solve a Math problem. How many children will lose their fathers to this Punisher? He cannot hold his sorrow, and weeps upon his desk, tears crystallizing in the reflection of lights on his laptop computer.

And somewhere in Leyte, a father ducks his head under a makeshift tent. 3 years after Yolanda, that vicious, living typhoon that flattened their island, they are still living in makeshift dwellings. A broken-down television flickers within the tent.

“DUTERTE! DUTERTE! DUTERTE!” a screaming crowd crackles over the bad reception. The man smiles.

He remembers seeing the politicians when they arrived in Leyte from the Capital. He remembers seeing a slender man in dark glasses, tedium written on his face, walking upon the debris of lives turned to ashes. This man looked unconcerned, but when the camera was turned upon him, he flashed on a look of reverence and pain, and began handing out bills to the ravaged poor around him. For lunch, the politicians sat down under a big tent, and a helicopter arrived, bearing lechon and donuts, a feast. While they ate, a row of starving people who had not eaten in days watched them.

“No more corruption,” he thinks now. “Now, people like them will be kicked out of government, and we will have food and shelter, the basic rights of all human beings.” Through his uneducated brain these words are not articulate, but the forms of them are real and living.

Election Day arrives, and Maria wakes up at the crack of dawn. Zeal, excitement, valor, those great values of old, fill her mind and heart. Dressing quickly, she dons on a red t-shirt, that old communist color which will still change the world in many ways.

They are to vote in the schoolrooms. Because she and her family have left home at 5 AM, she arrives there and is the first in line. Sadly, she realizes that she is not allowed to take photographs, not even allowed to wear her DUTERTE arm band.

A teacher arrives and ushers her in, looking with disapproval at her red t-shirt. Ignoring this look, she raises her patriotic head and passes...into a classroom she walks, a classroom which is old but new. Old because its paint is peeling off its sides in large chunks, new because young hands have painted pictures of flowers on the walls. She is given a voting ballot...Into her hands, for the first time, she feels history drop...

And lights flash and go dim. Suddenly, the world is spinning out of control. She sees confetti, red and jagged, falling down from a black helicopter which cuts the air with its thunderous roaring. She sees flags raised against a sunset, and fists flying. She sees fireworks and hears the triumphant, hopeful strains of BAYAN KO. She sees DUTERTE in front of a crowd, and his cheer, “Alluha Akbar!” rallying the country to progress, and peace, and war. She sees a man weeping with grief in a high-rise overlooking the city of his hopes and freedom. She sees a woman who has grown gray hairs before her time because of the memory of a white coffin being lowered into the earth...and another woman who cannot outlive the pain of sleeping every night on her bed, while her beloved son, the child who used to play with yellow toy trucks, rots in a city jail. She sees poor street children with no slippers on, and rich children who may soon lose their own footwear...

And the ballot slips from her fingers as a thousand voices erupt into her head. As fear, hope, pain, sorrow, regret, mingle in a great sea, spilling over her. “Think of me when you vote,” the voices mumble, sob, shriek, scream, plead. “Think, think of me when you vote!” The sound eats up the whole world.

In a minute, the lights come back on, the morning continues, the sun rising. The teacher is looking at her, annoyed, her glance hurrying her to move forward to make room for the next voter. But Maria knows that now

she cannot cast her vote. Her vote which, shading the circle under the candidate's name, can condemn someone to death. Her vote which can give redemption to the heart of one mother, but rob another of her son. Her vote which can feed many starving children, but exile others into a land of strangers. Her vote which can allow a daughter to give her father a soft bed to sleep on, but which can make a man weep in his sky-rise for his own lost sonship.

Dropping the ballot, then, she leaves the circles empty, un-darkened by her pen, and walks out into the light of the sunrise.

NICOTINE NIGHTMARES

WRITTEN
BY **TIANNA GROSCH**

Amelia leaned her burning cigarette in the ashtray beside the armchair. Tendrils of smoke rose from its red ember and danced in the air. They spiraled in the glow of the television, clouding the dim room. Amelia's eyes glazed over, staring unfocused at the images flickering across the screen. She thought about that night, as she had nearly every moment since. Amelia shook her head.

She picked up her cigarette again and flicked ash off its end. Amelia took a long drag and closed her eyes, leaning her head back as she breathed smoke through her nostrils. She shouldn't be smoking, but she enjoyed the nicotine's euphoric buzz. Maybe she should pick up a couple bad habits while she was at it. Amelia heard smoking weed messed with your memory but maybe it would help with the nightmares. But more bad habits would suck her into a black hole she couldn't risk.

Maybe she should talk to someone. The thought crossed her mind at least twice a day. Sometimes at random, when she was in the shower or letting her mind drift while driving the regular commute. Other times, it was more intense; her inner critic scowled upon her, tearing down each small solace she used as temporary bandage.

The final strands of smoke faded as Amelia stubbed out her cigarette. She relaxed into the large cushions behind her. The armchair was always too big for her; it suited James better. Amelia promised to call someone in the morning as she let her mind drift off into nicotine-glazed nightmares.

*

Amelia appraised the woman sitting across the room. Dr. Julianna Barnes was plump, mid-50s, peering behind black-rimmed spectacles. Crow's feet perched at the corners of her eyes as she smiled warmly.

"How are you, Miss Lark?"

"Please, call me Amelia."

"Amelia." Dr. Barnes smiled. "What's troubling you?"

Was it obvious? Amelia cleared her throat. "I've been having trouble sleeping."

"What sort of trouble?"

"I keep having these nightmares that feel like memories."

"Memories," Dr. Barnes mused.

Amelia stared down, twirling her thumbs. She wet her lips then gnawed on the lower one. Her voice was soft when she spoke but grew louder like a magnificent shadow in the room. "Everything is so dark. Vivid. I feel the night air around me. Rushing. Speeding. I'm driving too fast. I don't have time to stop..."

Amelia couldn't bring herself to continue. The nightmare loomed in her mind's eye, sending chills through her. She traced the scar on her wrist where it curved toward her thumb. Touching the slightly raised, pale slice of skin reminded her too well.

Everything had been heightened that night.

Dr. Barnes gestured around, encompassing the faded yellow walls, two armchairs squared off on opposite sides, a fake fern in one corner, and cheerful pictures of serene wilderness. "This is a safe room."

Without thinking about it, Amelia reached up to brush a finger across the twin scar on her forehead. Her skin tingled as she ran a finger over the spots she had lost so much blood. She remembered waking up disoriented, her mind full of foggy images and strange voices. "James?" she asked aloud. Her voice had fallen flat in the stillness of an empty hospital room.

Later, she was told James sat with her for hours. She pictured him hunched by her bedside, hair hiding

his face as he held her hand and wished for her to wake up. She wondered if he put up a fight when they came to arrest him, or if he held out his hands complacently. "At least let me say goodbye to her," she imagined him pleading.

"So these dreams, they seem real to you?" Dr. Barnes' voice broke through Amelia's thoughts.

She nodded, speechless.

"How does the dream end?" the therapist pressed.

Amelia's voice quivered in her chest. "There's something in the road," she said. "I can't slow down; my foot can't find the brake. Then I hear a thud. That sound, the feeling of the car, running over it...it's a jogger. A woman." Amelia took a deep breath, and rushed on. "The car is out of control. My husband, he's the passenger. He grabs the wheel, tries to steer us to safety but we're going too fast. Then there's a tree in my vision...and that's all I remember. I wake up."

"How does that make you feel?"

Amelia sucked in her breath. "Scared...and guilty."

"What do you think your husband's role is in your dream?"

She thought for a moment. "He's trying to save me, protect me."

"Do you think these dreams reflect some of your fears in real life?"

Amelia stiffened. "They could."

"Is there something your husband is protecting you from?"

Amelia cocked her head, chin up. "What if I don't want his protection?"

"Why do you think that is?" Dr. Barnes looked at her.

"I want to take responsibility for my own actions, whatever the consequences."

"You seem to know what you want." Dr. Barnes smiled. "Now what about your husband? Why do you think he feels the need to protect you?"

"Well," Amelia's lips pulled up. "I just found out a couple months ago, I'm able to get pregnant."

"Have you struggled with this before?"

"Yes," Amelia said. "It almost tore us apart."

"How did your husband respond when you told him?"

Amelia hesitated. "He didn't seem as thrilled as I expected."

"How long have you been married?"

"Three years now. We never discussed children seriously, but I always thought..." Amelia broke off and shrugged. "One day."

"How did his reaction make you feel?"

Amelia's heart fluttered. She hadn't seen James since the accident. "It definitely put a strain on our relationship."

"You want to nurture your relationship with your husband in the process of beginning a new family; try to understand his fears so you can move past them together."

Amelia nodded. The remainder of the session passed with Dr. Barnes' words ringing in her mind. They were the confirmation she needed. Amelia didn't think she could avoid it any longer. Tomorrow she'd visit James.

The next day, Amelia walked inside prison walls for the first time. All rough brick, bland and colorless, congested with the smell of stale air and confined humans. She resisted the urge to pinch her nose when she walked in the lobby.

The wait seemed to take forever. Children fussed as they waited to see parents. Amanda's cigarettes called to her from the car, stashed in the glove box. She'd allowed herself one on the way over but flicked it out the window before finishing it, sneering at her own behavior. She could only imagine what James would say if he found out.

After close to an hour passed, the prison guard called "Ms. Lark" and she moved through the metal detectors. They beeped. The guard motioned at his chest, then pointed at her. Amelia's face flushed. The guard motioned her through. She heard the click of the door in front of her, and she pushed it open.

On the other side, a different prison guard met her, a woman. Her nametag read Jenkins. She instructed Amelia to lift her arms above her head, and did a quick, polite patdown of her lower torso and shoulders, then waved a flashing wand over Amelia's body. It beeped around her lower chest and back.

"Underwire bra?" Jenkins asked.

Amelia's cheeks felt like they would never fade from a deep red as she nodded.

"Follow the dress code next time, please, Ms. Lark."

"I will, I'm sorry," Amelia stammered, nerves shot to hell.

"Follow me," the correctional officer said. Jenkins led Amelia to the visiting room. Inside, she could see James sitting in a plastic chair with his face hidden. She'd know the shape of that head anywhere.

Her whole body quivered; she ground her teeth together and clenched her fists with the effort to stop shaking. At least three other couples were in the room but James sat in the center. Amelia lowered herself into the plastic seat across from him. James looked up when he heard her sit down. He was a little less clean-shaven, she observed, haggard and strained like he hadn't seen a good night's sleep in weeks. The orange jumpsuit hung on him, giving him the appearance of losing weight. Amelia felt a sting inside her as she looked at him.

James' whole face lit up when he looked her over. He smiled like no time had passed, nothing had happened, like they were on a getaway - isolated on their own make-believe island. Amelia almost felt the warmth of the sun on her face, the caress of sand underneath bare feet, the smell of saltwater lingering in the air. Then she blinked, and the salty air was remnants of sweat left over from all the visitors, all the fingerprints and greasy hands, the tears shed in these chairs. The weight of it anchored Amelia into the seat.

"I didn't think you would come," James said.

Amelia was sure her smile didn't reach all the way. "Here I am," she said.

"I'm not supposed to touch you," James said. A teardrop hung in the corner of his eye. "But I can't help myself." He grabbed her hand and lifted it to his face with such haste, Amelia felt herself jump a little. James brushed his lips across her fingertips and breathed in the scent of her palm. Just as quickly as he had taken hold of her, he let go and Amelia sat back feeling the ghost of his touch on her skin.

James looked at her with accusations in his eyes. "You've been smoking."

Amelia opened her mouth to say...what? Nothing would excuse her behavior. "I can't sleep," she heard herself say.

She watched James' eyes soften. "You need your sleep."

Amelia almost laughed. "How am I supposed to?"

He waited for her to look at him, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. "You look good," he said.

"What am I supposed to do with you in here?" She couldn't voice her silent question of why he was in here in the first place.

"Finish your degree, Amelia. Take care of yourself." His face was set with serious lines when she looked at him. His eyes searched hers.

She didn't understand. She stared down at her fingernails.

"Listen," James hissed. "What's done is done. If you tell anyone, I'll be back in here for obstruction of justice. Tell me, what's the use of us both being locked up?"

Amelia stayed silent, and shook her head. The movement felt feeble, as if her neck bobbed on a spring.

“Two years at most, that’s what the lawyer said.” His shoulders hunched at her words. “I’m doing this for us,” he said.

Amelia shook her head. “You don’t deserve to be in here. I do.”

There. She’d said it.

“No, you don’t.” Her husband’s voice rumbled. Amelia couldn’t tell if he choked back anger or sorrow, maybe both. “We don’t have much time. I know this isn’t how you want things to be, but I’ve made my decision. Don’t do anything to try to change my mind.” He looked at her, and his eyes grew soft again. “I love you, Amelia Rose.”

Amelia tried not to cry as tears burned her throat. Jenkins came to escort her out. She didn’t look back as she walked out of the room. Her heart weighed heavy and tugged at her feet as she left the prison. Amelia hadn’t even told James what she intended.

*

“I had the nightmare again,” Amelia said. “It was longer this time.”

Dr. Julianna Barnes sat across from her once more. One more session is all she needed, Amelia told herself.

“More detailed?” Dr. Barnes asked.

Amelia nodded. “My husband and I were arguing. That’s what caused the accident.” She cleared her throat. “When the police came to arrest me, my husband said he was driving instead.”

“Did they believe him?”

“They arrested him.”

Dr. Barnes searched her face. “Where did that leave you?”

Amelia shrugged. “Alone.”

“Are you having any doubts which might influence this dream?”

She held her breath for a count of three, then released. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Dr. Barnes looked at her with her crow’s feet and spectacle eyes. “Ready for what?”

Amelia cleared her throat. “To be who James wants me to be.”

“It shouldn’t matter who James wants you to be. Who do you want to be?”

Amelia held Dr. Barnes’ gaze. “I guess I’m not sure,” she said. The faded-yellow room burned behind Amelia’s eyelids as she leaned back, trying to concentrate. She stood without a sound. “Thank you for your time,” Amelia mumbled as she went.

*

That night, Amelia accompanied her cigarette with a whiskey on the rocks. She might never understand her actions. She decided it didn’t matter, and settled into James’ armchair. He used to sit in that overstuffed mammoth chair every night before and after dinner watching the news, “catching up on the world,” he called it. Sometimes she’d look over and see him staring at the television with a blank look. Lost in his mind.

Amelia wondered what he thought about but never broke his stare to ask him. She secretly thought he sat there so he wouldn’t be bothered. But now she felt she connected with that emotionless stare. It was the same distant, troubled look she fell into every night.

Amelia coughed on a drag of her cigarette and stubbed it out. She got up from the armchair, thinking of James’ accusing eyes. Amelia walked into the bathroom and flipped the toilet seat up. She took out her pack of cigarettes and crushed it in her fist, then threw them in the toilet.

As she turned, she caught a glimpse of her reflection. Amelia tugged up the hem of her shirt. Flatland waiting to be conquered, waiting to expand. Waiting for life to bulge beneath it like a planted seed. Amelia

shuffled over to the armchair where she sipped her whiskey to the lullaby of the television. Some things never changed, but she wouldn't be like them. She allowed the ice in her glass to melt and condensate. Amelia looked at the drops of water beading on the sides, reminding her of the tear hanging in James's eye.

The smoke that once clouded the room cleared, leaving Amelia alone with her thoughts and the blue glow of the television. She absently traced the scar near her left thumb.

A tiny flutter in Amelia's stomach caught her full attention. Like the brush of a butterfly's wing, the kiss of eyelashes on skin, the promise of possibilities and more to come.

A smile captured her lips. You're a survivor.

FIELD OF FLOWERS

WRITTEN
BY **JORDAN MEYERL**

Maryland is known for its sunflowers, apparently. The tall, green stalked, saffron petaled creatures that need to face the sun in order to survive cover the field that stretches before me. I for one don't exactly get it, especially when the state flower is the black-eyed-susan, a flower which, arguably, looks near identical to the sunflower, save for the manner in which the petals lay, falling down away from the black eye. This is in lieu of them standing upright and tall as they do when surrounding the disk of the sunflower, almost mimicking the rays of the sun...oh wait. I guess that's the point.

Maryland isn't even in the top ten states for sunflower production, but that sure doesn't stop people from flocking to this field. It probably has something to do with the novelty of being surrounded by plants nearly as tall as you, if not taller. You feel as if you have become one with nature, as if all is right in the world and you in your fake flower crown and breezy skirt combo could stay here forever. The truth of the matter is in ten minutes you will have gotten the perfect shot and you will be back in your car with the A/C and radio blaring, forgetting about your run-in with the natural world until people comment on your newly acquired, naturally inspired Facebook profile picture.

I told all this to my brother when he told me he wanted me to tag along, and more. "Eli," I said, "why bother when you can just take a picture leaning against a tree and get the same result? Why do we have to drive and waste gas to get there?"

He'd just smirked and said, "Dahlia, it is your call, but I'm going whether you tag along or not." Since Saturday's are typically our days, I figured I didn't really have a choice.

I open the car door, closing it with a soft whoosh and bang, and stroll around to the front end, leaning back against the dusty hood. Eli emerges a moment later, camera in hand and his eternal smile on his face. When we were young, our mom told us that our smile is the greatest gift we can give to the world. Where I called bullshit (I'm sure there are much better things in the world than a smile, like Heart of Darkness and Wolf Alice's album), Eli took it to heart, never letting more than a minute go by without showing off the enamel squares that line his jaw. I think he even sleeps smiling, although I don't have the proof yet.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

I grimace, not ready to endure the countless number of absurdly unnatural poses for pictures that I'll never actually let the rays of the sun touch. But hey, it's crazy the stuff we do for the ones we love. So I turn my grimace into the best smile I can and follow Eli into the field of flowers.

Eli is my older brother, although only by two minutes. The same straight nose and ice blue eyes grace both of our faces, and Eli often jokes that I inherited his good looks. His shaggy hair is nearly as long as my close cropped cut, his dimples adding to his annoyingly stereotypical boy-next-door appearance. His mocha skin is our mother's, black coffee with at least two splashes of cream stirred in, milk chocolate to my calla lily white complexion. Stationed as wide receiver for the football team, he practically bleeds green and gold. His lanky frame should prove an impediment— too-long limbs stretching in all directions that struggle to keep contained— but somehow he employs them to his advantage to carry out the carefully crafted plays. I prefer my perch in the stands, where I can applaud his actions with the rest of the crowd.

Eli is my brother, my twin, but sometimes I can't help but feel we aren't related at all. I'm the pessimism to his optimism. Eli can see the best in people, day in and day out, as a child who has not experienced the world's pain. I, on the other hand, prefer to gaze at life skeptically, as a school teacher who hates children but needs money to keep alive. Eli always finds a positive spin, whether it be in regards to a news story, a friend not doing well in school, whatever it may be. I see the worst, the darkness and downside. Eli is the good Samaritan where I would continue to walk past.

Eli is an energetic lab, running from activity to activity. When its not football, its intramural baseball, when its not intramural baseball, its learning guitar, when its not guitar, its Model UN; the list goes on and on until nearly every second of his day is filled to the brim with a flurry of events. I choose to hang back, staying distant from the bustle of school events and activities, headphones in and the world shut out. I'm part of the book club, but I never go to any of the meetings; I just know I'll need something to write when filling out college apps.

Eli has friends. I have Eli. It's not that I don't like people. I do. I enjoy being on my own a lot, just me and my music, enjoying the silence being filled with wise and familiar words and expressions rather than foreign terms and phrases. I have acquaintances, but no true close friends, save for Eli. Close friends expect sustained attention and conversation; I have very little of that to go around. I'm soft snickers to Eli's resounding guffaw, unruly derision to his gentle benevolence. We are night and day, to be cliché (and rhyme), but I wouldn't trade him for anyone in the world. A world without Eli isn't a world worth living in, as far as I am concerned.

—

"Giddy up, horsey!" I exclaim, jumping on Eli's back as he begins to stride away, digging my heels into his side. Pictures taken, skin sticky with sweat, I'm ready to go home and shower. Eli could've stayed out here for hours more, I'm sure, but after I let him take a picture of us together, a grudging grin gracing my face, he gave into my demands.

He grunts, hitching me higher on his back. I feel us stumbling slightly, losing form, before he gains his footing again, hiking me back into place. I feel my lips curl up on their own volition, and so I hide my face against his neck as he maneuvers from the field towards the parking lot.

"I'll take the wheel," I murmur, arms draped around his neck.

"You sure?" he asks, extending his lanky legs so we move faster, bumping me up and down.

"Yeah," is my response as we get to the car. I hop off his back, wobbling on my feet before straightening. I stretch my hand out, palm facing up like the sunflowers face the sun. He drops the keys in my hand, I climb in, the tacky leather feel sticking to my sweat coated legs. Key in the ignition, the engine goes on. Eli messes with the radio as I pull out, and I growl, glowering at him as Tim McGraw's "Top of the World" comes on. He just smirks, singing along, arm slung out the half open window.

I drive for about five minutes before out of the corner of my eye I see a fence, on the right side of the road, blocking off access to what is most likely private property, some woods, maybe a stream hidden further back. It's no different than any other fence. Just woven pieces of metal used to create a continuous diamond pattern. I don't pay it any mind. That is, until I feel the tire bottom out in a pot hole. I try to keep a steady hold on the wheel, but I lose it. Suddenly we are spinning, turning, twirling as a ballerina, except instead of turning into a graceful stop we spin out of control, not stopping until we reach the destination I never would have chosen: the fence. That ordinary fence, no different than other fences. Except it is, because we crash through it, tires screeching and probably leaving dark, smoking marks in their wake as a constant reminder for future drivers of the tragedy they know nothing about. I hear rather than see the car crash through the fence, metal on

metal scraping and crunching, but not stopping. I hear Eli screaming my name, but I refuse to open my eyes. I feel us going, going, until my head flies forward and crashes into the wheel as the impact of whatever we hit shoves me forward then back, like a shell caught in the tides of the sea.

My head sits slightly askew, neck sore, eyes finally open. I feel needle-like pain, starting from my chest and radiating down my left arm. It reminds me of the time a couple of years ago Eli and I went to get a shot at our regular check-up. Eli was scared shitless; who would've thought that the big, bad football player would be scared of needles. He later said he wasn't frightened, he just didn't like the thought of a small piece of metal entering his body; I had let him have his pride. I don't like Eli to be in pain, so I reach toward him, wanting to tell him it would be okay. Before my hand reaches him, I feel my eyes flutter closed as my own pain becomes too much to handle.

—

The last few weeks had been a blur, partly due to the fact that I was unconscious for about half of that time (three cracked ribs, a fractured wrist, and tons of cuts and bruises now grace my body). Since then it had been an endless stream of people coming to the house, coming up to me, talking to me, giving me their condolences (although I doubt they really mean them, I'm a killer, and who has compassion for a killer?), looking at me expectantly, although I don't know what they expect. I spend the majority of my time staring into space. My father makes sure I eat enough to keep me alive; I only bother to keep him off my back. Eating feels like too much, though. After the funeral we had a huge feast, where everyone we knew came to our house with trays of food, casseroles and chicken dishes and dips. They all wanted to talk about Eli's life and how sorry they were he was gone. All I wanted to do was sob in the corner, but that apparently wasn't appropriate behavior when company is over. I sat in the corner, wondering how they could smile and laugh when he is gone, gone, gone, and never coming back.

I just want it to be over—the pain, the guilt. I know my Mom blames me, though she'd never say it out loud. For all I now Dad blames me too. I feel like an outsider in my own home. Actually, correction: I don't have a home. Home was Eli. Home is Eli. I need Eli. I killed Eli. And I don't know what to do.

—

It's 3 am and I can't sleep. I want to because I know in some sense I am tired, but my eyes won't make the final few steps of the journey and close completely. Earlier tonight I took some of the Percocet I had left over from the crash, the stuff I'd stopped taking because it had numbed the pain, and I didn't deserve to be given relief. Now I will give anything to escape, even for just a minute. I don't know if that is what is keeping me from sleeping, or just my thoughts continually swirling around my head, like a carousel. Except instead of one filled with caricatures of cheerful animals, this one contains bloody caricatures of what I have done. I can't bear to be in this house. I can't bear to feel the oppressive emptiness of his room next to mine. His door is closed, hasn't been touched since he last left it, except for when I closed the door upon my return from the hospital. Having the door open seemed like a taunt, as if he would emerge from it any moment to ask me a question about homework or tell me some story about his idiot friends. These things will never again occur.

I can't bear to hear my mom crying at night after she thinks I've gone to sleep, her heaving, drunken sobs traveling up the stairs and into my room, as if they are meant solely for me, to guilt me. She does it every night. She sleeps on the couch these days, barely even acknowledging our existence. She's taken to drinking. I tried counting how many different bottles she has gone through, but I stopped that after she got through ten in a little over a week; it was too depressing to think about. I can't bear to see the lost look in my dad's eyes. He didn't just lose his son that day; he might as well have lost his entire family. With mom barely functioning and me simply gazing into space most of the day, as if Eli will magically fill the space my eyes rest on, dad has had to put his own grief, his own suffering to the side. I know it isn't fair, but I can't find it in myself to do any-

thing about it.

I climb off my bed and slide to the ground, orange blanket wrapped tight around my shoulders to nearly cocoon me in the fabric. To my left I see my bookcase, Harry Potter, Les Mis, and The Stranger among others gracing the shelves. I see my walls, decorated with Sense8 posters and a collage of Eli and I. I've been staring at it a lot since he's gone, reminiscing. Like about the one picture of us at our ninth birthday. We got bikes that day. Eli's smiling, cake coating his face, and I'm scowling, having already fallen off my bike and sworn off it for life. Two weeks later, Eli, having gotten the hang of it right away, had me riding like a pro. Or the picture of us from junior prom. Eli had decided not to get a date when he found out I wasn't planning on going so he could guilt me into being his. We'd spent half the night sitting at a table while I laughed at the more ridiculous fashion choices and him attempting to coax me to dance (which he managed). All of these memories, and yet we'll never have another. No more pictures will be added to the wall.

I freeze in place, remembering the photos we took in the sunflower field, still in the camera. My head whips back and forth, trying to remember where it is. They gave me a bag containing some of the things that survived the crash, but I didn't want it, because none of that crap meant anything to me. I'd give it, and everything else I owned, for Eli. I vaguely remember throwing it against the far wall in my room. Standing, I stagger over, and see a foreign bag on the floor. I open it, and among a book, some CD's, and a jacket sits the camera.

It had survived with minimal damage due to the camera bag Eli carried it in. I pick it up, running my hands over it, trying to remember where he had said the memory card was held. He'd shown me how to use it in case I ever wanted to borrow it. I had half listened, indulging him, knowing I'd never have a use for it. Suddenly, I feel a piece of the plastic give way and pop open. I flip the camera in my hands and see the memory card. I hold it in my hands, feeling my chest rise and fall as I gaze at the object that holds some of the last moments Eli and I shared. Before I can stop myself, I've changed into a pair of jeans, pocketed the card, and filled a bag with my laptop. Walking downstairs, I grab my moms car keys off the hook, sneak out the back door, and climb in.

From the corner of my eye, I see mom has left a bottle on the front passenger seat floor. It must have fallen out after her last shopping trip and odds are she couldn't bring herself to care, too desperate to get inside and start in on her spoils. I reach over, grab it. Vodka. I sit, scrutinizing it for a moment, before unzipping my bag and stashing it inside. Better it be hidden in there than out in the open, I rationalize. And then I'm gone.

—

I drive. I drive and drive and keep driving. I don't know where I am going until I've stopped. I don't even notice myself turn the wheel and press the break, skidding to a stop on the unpaved, dirt shoulder. Confused, I look up, and there it is—the sunflower field. The place where I last saw Eli, last spoke to him, last laughed with him. The place we were last happy together.

And then I'm screaming. The noise fills the car, every nook and cranny, taking over the silence and filling it with unadulterated fury. This field took my brother from me. Had he not wanted to come then we wouldn't have been driving, I wouldn't have hit that pothole, I wouldn't have killed him. I scream and scream and scream until I feel like I can't anymore and then I still find it in me. My hands bang on the steering wheel and move to my hair, yanking it as tears surge down my face, creating the water to match the thunder my screams create.

As soon as it has started it is over. I'm leaning forward, face against the wheel, tasting of salt and violence. And then I'm standing, door open, walking, ground firm where I am weak, moving through the field. My backpack had somehow ended up over my shoulder, although I can't remember grabbing it. And then I'm in the field, walking until I find a spot that is far enough in I won't be noticed but not so far in I will get lost.

I lay on the ground. The sunflowers are so tall they almost completely eclipse my view of the sky, but I see little glimpses of the stars and dark abyss above me. Eyes traveling across the tops of the flowers, I feel like I understand them now. They are dependent on the sun to live, just as I depended on Eli.

Opening my backpack, I take out my laptop, inserting the SD. As it loads, I pick up the bottle, contemplating its weight in my hand. I gaze at it, wondering if it will take the pain away. The top comes off and I take a swig, gasping at the unfamiliar burn, before taking another, then another. My throat ignites and my head swims, and then I look down. There he is.

Even in just a small picture he lights up the screen, his smile blinding and eyes filled with happiness and joy. He was in his element. Being alive was what Eli did best.

Feeling a little lightheaded, I lean back, clicking the arrow to the next picture, and then the next and the next. I sit there for what could have been hours or minutes, taking blazing gulps of the vodka until I realize half the bottle is gone. *That probably isn't safe, I think as I take another pull. I guess I'll just have to stay here a little longer until I've sobered up.*

I keep clicking, not stopping until I reach one of the final photos Eli and I had taken that day.

Eli was reaching towards me, I think, trying to tickle me, make me laugh. I bet he'd be sad that there is no laughter here anymore. I can't move my hand anymore, so I leave that picture up. Eli's infectious smile makes me want to do the same, but I'm not sure if I'm actually doing it. I can't feel my face anymore, so whether or not my muscles are actually doing what I want them to is a mystery. My stomach suddenly hurts, and I think I'm going to puke, the taste of pennies cutting through the sharp acidity of the alcohol, but nothing happens.

I look at the screen again, and am surprised to see Eli move. Again I want to smile, but am seemingly unable. His hand stretches forward, not stopping, and suddenly I see his hand wrapped around my wrist, embracing it like he used to do. Except I feel none of the usual warmth he supplied, just cold and empty. He is here, but I know he isn't; even through the haze that covers my head like fog on a humid morning, I know Eli is dead, and his image is just that— an image.

I watch as my hand lifts with his, although I don't know how as I don't have any control of my limbs left. They feel heavy, and I imagine this is what it would feel like to be dead if one could be consciously aware of such a thing. As my hand lifts, I see Eli's lips moving, attempting to speak, but I can't hear anything. I don't know if it is because he is speaking too softly, I've lost the ability to do so, or because he isn't really speaking. I try to lean forward, and suddenly I'm flat on the ground, my arms seemingly unable to hold me up anymore, as if I am a baby first learning to support my own weight. Unable to do anything else, I gaze up at the sky. I'm freezing; it's almost as if I'm in Alaska rather than Maryland in the late summer. The field begins to spin. The green stalks swirl around me with the bits of yellow petal peeking out the side, creating a kaleidoscope of color with the quickly lightening sky as its background. And then I see Eli among them, like in his picture, arm outstretched, reaching towards me. I close my eyes and try to summon all of the strength I have to reach him, to touch him, to be with him. My hand feels warm, and it spreads through me like those first sips of the vodka had. Eyes still closed, I smile, teeth spread wide, or at least I think they are, and I reach, reach, reach...

LUSTERWEAR

WRITTEN
BY **ROBERT CIESLA**

Why are you so serious, little one? Mother would always ask her, even from the depths of the hospice bed. Daisy couldn't come up with any reasons, not at age six and not at forty-six. It's a mostly different life now with mother buried. Some things are the same. Daisy still can't control her voice. She's either yelling at the timid cashiers or talking sweetly to the drunk who felt her voluptuous body at the bus stop. She may have lost her face to the crow's feet and bad eyesight, but at least she still has the figure. Too bad the decent guys ignore her, even the lonely ones.

Daisy's summers are the worst. It's not much fun driving the mail-mobile in hundred degrees Fahrenheit in Georgia dew. Her suffocating uniform only complicates matters, becoming a kind of humid suit of armor to reluctantly grind against. Outside of work thrift-stores are Daisy's safe haven. She loves her silver tops, bright t-shirts, and dollar sunglasses. Dorky shop assistants just sweeten the deal with some small talk. These little things make her feel alive, but not as much as William and Stephen, her boys. If only she could hold them just once. The human voice reaches everywhere, Daisy is convinced of that. She has dedicated her life to addresses and delivery, after all.

Daisy spends most of her few days off taking photographs of things most people don't notice. Dead trees, abandoned malls, the occasional anchor. She prefers cemeteries and shadows to beaches and sunlight. These places always had their significance. She met her boys on a windy summer day in a Georgia bone yard. William and Stephen were twins. Born in June of 1870, they nearly left together, too, in August just eight years later. A mere month apart. They probably died of cholera or yellow fever. There were some crickets and birds, but it wasn't enough of a tribute to the twins gone too soon. So Daisy just started singing to them that very night. They could hear her perfectly and they were thankful, she thought. Daisy would go through some of her favorite songs, hour after hour, well into the next day. William really seemed to like current hits, Stephen not so much. By the time Daisy got back to her mail-mobile she felt renewed. That night had healed parts of her soul. Her colleagues wouldn't understand, nobody would. But Daisy felt less and less alone. She had someone in her life. What a mother she would've made.

Some nights tweakers would force Daisy to stop singing with their noise. Other times it got too cold to stay the whole night. But she would persist, even calling in sick on several occasions just to entertain the boys.

Several seasons later, Daisy and the boys knew each other's lives very well. They gave her ideas right in the brain and she in turn told them things about her experiences. She tried explaining what Blue Oyster Cult, red wine, and feta-cheese meant to her. They couldn't really understand what the internet or smartphones were for.

Daisy learned the boys did die of cholera. They remember very little of their last days in the hospital. It wasn't a nice way to go, that's for sure. William tried to describe the god-awful smells he experienced. They spoke funny, too, like you would expect from 19th century kids. Stephen wanted to be a pianist, he'd said. Their family almost afforded him an instrument by installments so he could stop playing the bar piano. But then the illness took over things. When they couldn't stop throwing up, mom and pop made sure they got the best medical attention they could afford. It didn't help much. The runs Stephen and William endured were painful and plentiful.

The hospital had many troubled faces. Old women and children mostly, Bill adds. They all wanted to die, just like you, Daisy. The boys knew. Everybody knew. Her life was miserable, even when singing her tunes in the cemetery to the boys. The good-looking girls were long ago married to their account manager guys, cheating on them rampantly during the business trips. Daisy wouldn't ever do that. If only someone had given her a chance. There was but one lousy ex in the eighties she tried to forget about, but couldn't.

At least they had some sweet juice in the hospital, the boys would reminisce one day. It would make you feel funny and forget about the pain for a while, often putting you to sleep in an instant. Don't you have that too? You have some, Daisy, take your momma's leftover morphine next time you come singing.

Daisy makes a cup of tea in her home full of antique furniture. Cupping her cheek with her hand, she glances at an orange garage sale clock somebody manufactured in the seventies. A bloom lights up the living room then. It's red and orange all over in Georgia. She knows it's time to go. She disappears into her economy car with some excitement she last felt in high school.

Daisy is dressed up in her favorite lusterwear, ditching the uniform for good. She feels kind of in a hurry, speeding up on the leafy path to the cemetery grounds. This poorly maintained site, too, looks magnificent to Daisy this time of day. Each golden hour only lasts for so long and should be captured in some way.

The bitter taste of the sweet juice makes Daisy gag, but she's not going to get sick now. She takes a deep breath at the grave and begins. Daisy gives it her everything. She completes all of Puff the Magic Dragon, reaching only the second verse of Blowin' In the Wind. She gets tired after that, so very tired. Then, pass the rustle and wind she hears the boys' light and troubled voices loud and clear. Such beautiful voices they have, too.

You have a family now, momma. For all eternity, Stephen whispers. A ray of auburn light floods the cemetery as the sun approaches the horizon. Daisy takes off her cheap sunglasses to see better, but her eyesight is failing quick. It's the heart of the golden hour as all the colors go, followed by the sounds of awakening nature surrounding her. No more knowing her place in the world. No more feeling the pain of the thankless. It's alright, momma, says William in his loud and confident voice. We'll look after you now. Daisy feels warm inside for the first time in years. She relives the specks of affection from her past spread so thin over the years, now amplified tenfold. She feels Stephen and Bill grab her by the hand, one boy on each side. Such tiny hands, she mumbles out loud, hearing a giggle in response. Too weak to keep her eyes open, Daisy catches her last ray of sunset with one of her eyes still working. Her sense of smell is the last to go. Daisy inhales the cemetery air as much as she can, breathing in all the winds of the centuries affected. The boys then eagerly feel her long, fair hair as the day cools off around a slumped postal worker in a glitter t-shirt, no longer calling in sick.

CONTRIBUTOR

Notes

Friday Faraday was born and raised on the south side of Chicago and found the love of fiction by reading Ray Bradbury and learning that words can have a poetry to them even when describing events out of this world. Friday's writing has allowed a freedom to accept the Agender and Pansexual identity that stayed hidden for years and has influenced the need to shine a light on characters that are not part of the norm. Friday is a soon-to-be graduate of Southern New Hampshire University with a Masters in English/Creative Writing. A member of the International English Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta. Friday has been published by The Paragon Journal.

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Elton Johnson, 27, is a development communication and digital marketing specialist from Jamaica. His life is dedicated to using communication to improve lives through tackling discrimination based on gender and sexuality with a keen sensibility those are affected by the intersection of race and class. He is a pesca-ova-lactatarian and spends all his wakeful hours dreaming up stories that have a tendency to burst onto paper at the most inconvenient times. He is currently working on his debut novel *Where Parallel Lines Meet*.

Owen Schalk is an English major at the University of Manitoba. His family owns and operates a honey farm, Two Suns Honey, which he works at in the summers. He spends almost all of his free time reading and writing; some of his biggest influences are David Foster Wallace, Vladimir Nabokov, and William Faulkner. He hopes to one day become an English professor,

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