

# PHAETHON

2016



Here Phaethon lies who in the  
sun-god's chariot fared.

And though he greatly failed,  
more greatly he dared.

Cover Illustration by Xanthian Lincoln





The Fall of Phaeton by Rubens

## About Phaethon

The myth of Phaethon is simple. He seeks to know his father. So he asks his mother Clymene, and she tells him his father is none other than Apollo, the god of the sun. Phaethon goes to Apollo and asks for some proof of their relationship, and Apollo says he will grant him one wish. Phaethon wishes to drive Apollo's chariot that pulls the sun across the sky. The only being that can do this successfully is Apollo himself. Not even Zeus can pull the sun across the sky. Knowing this, Apollo tries to dissuade Phaethon from this task. This does not work, and Phaethon is placed in charge of the chariot and its horses that breathe fire. Doomed from the start, Phaethon loses control of the chariot and nearly burns up the Earth. The Earth cries out to Zeus for help, and Zeus strikes Phaethon dead with a thunderbolt. Phaethon, now a falling star, plunged into the river Eridanos still ablaze. His epitaph reads:

*Here Phaethon lies who in the sun-god's chariot fared.  
And though he greatly failed, more greatly he dared.*

In the spirit of this figure, we at the Phaethon value bold, confident, daring, courageous, and risky fiction, poetry, and art. Phaethon is not a tragic figure. His actions, that of a mere mortal, for a brief moment of time are equal to an immortal. He did something no other mortal, or immortal for that matter, could ever do. His confidence, courage, and daring are an inspiration to all of us. We too, if we risk our very lives, can be gods.

So we want pieces that challenge, inspire, stump, and move us. We crave new expression. New ideas. New connections. We do not value art that tests the boundaries of expression. We value art that obliterates them.

### *Faculty Advisors*

Matthew Powers  
Andrew Devitt  
Blake Pitcher

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## She Jumped

Yiming Chen

She jumped from the top floor of this building.

Eighteenth floor. She feels release at the moment her feet leave the frozen cement rooftop ledge. One second later, she feels gravity.

Seventeenth floor. She is seventeen and a half. She made it to the eighteenth floor, but she would never be eighteen. Is she afraid of the reality that she was going to be an adult and the responsibility that comes with it and trying to escape from it? Ask her.

Fifteenth floor. She is a downward elevator, except she is faster and not going upward again.

Thirteenth floor. She sees herself on the slick glass wall of this fancy building. A face without her makeup on it, she can barely recognize herself. A skirt in donut pink, pure sky blue shirt, her favorite match. Compare to the classy suits those



Triangle by Yiming Chen

grown ups are wearing at the other side of the glass, she is wearing nothing.

Eleventh floor. She does not give a shit about those douchebags in classy suits, does not give a shit about people like her. She is falling but going straight to heaven. Unlike those guys who are living in heaven. Karma.

Ninth floor. She says: "What a number." However, nine does not mean forever to her. It only means that she is right in the middle of the building. She is right in the middle of the family. In a poor family, she bears more crosses than anyone else.

Seventh floor. She thinks she should be more positive in the last minute. So she smiles.

Fifth floor. She has been passed twelve floors. No one notices because their heads are down all the time. She seems to not care that she is falling like a meteorite hitting the earth, yet no one gives a shit or she is going to be pollution geomancy. All she wants is a piece of calm.

Third floor. She sees her father who is in heaven, she sees her mother who is in heaven, she sees her best friend who is in heaven, she sees her sisters who are still suffering. In science, it is called momentary recovery of consciousness just before death.

First floor. She has no time to think anymore, she has no need to suffer any pain anymore.

B-1. People walk out of the elevator just like usual. ● ● ●

## Family Struggle

Michael Sarpen

The Saturday morning sun wasn't visible. The light gray clouds produced a drizzle of rain that paired with the breeze for a chilly fall morning. Sam pulled the hood of his poncho back over his hat as he tried to line up the nail. He was getting increasingly frustrated as his hands grew colder. The screen door creaked open loudly.

"Sam, would you get down from there?" the blonde young woman in her late twenties shouted from the back porch of the farmhouse. "You're not getting anywhere with that roof in this weather."

"I know Em, I'm getting down," Sam called back. He began to climb down the ladder from the barn roof as another gust of wind blew his hood down again. A roaring truck engine could be heard speeding down the road toward the house. Sam paused and saw the headlights coming closer through the fog. He jumped to the puddle at the bottom of the ladder as the '80s Ford pickup quickly turned into the driveway, kicking up gravel.

"Sam..." his wife said hesitantly.

"It's Paul again," Sam said as he stomped toward the truck, which had skidded to a stop.

The driver's side door of the truck swung open, and out jumped a frantic-looking young man in muck boots and a denim jacket.

"Paul," Sam shouted. "It's 10 a.m. The hell is your problem?"

"Sam, you got to get inside now," the man yelled as he ran to the house, leaving the door open and the truck still running.

Sam walked to the truck, reached in, and pulled out the key. He did a double take when he realized the back window was shattered. He shook his head, closed the door, and made his way into the house.

"Paul, your brother's got enough to worry about without you showing up half wasted on a Saturday," Emily scolded him.

"You don't understand, Em, I'm in trouble," Paul said, still frantic. He spun around clumsily when the door creaked open.

"What trouble?" Sam asked as he shut the door.

"Sam," Paul said, trying unsuccessfully to have a calm expression on his face. "Hey sorry, I think I might have dug up a little grass there--"

"What trouble, Paul?" Sam cut in. "Tell me it has nothing to do with those boys you 'worked' with in the city."

Emily's face looked worried. "You're not even supposed to be here. That's why they moved you to Tennessee after the trial," she said in a loud whisper.

Paul ran his hands through his hair and looked at the floor. He looked

about ready to snap.

"Uncle Paul!" Sam's kindergarten-age daughter came into the kitchen with a big grin.

"Em, would you take her upstairs a moment please?" Sam said in a serious voice. "Bonnie, honey, dad's got to talk with Uncle Paul quick, okay?" he added in a lighter tone.

"But he's never here!" Bonnie complained.

"I know but I'll be quick, honey." Sam assured.

Emily picked up the young girl and took her out of the room to the stairs.

"You tell me right now what is going on," Sam said. "What's wrong?"

Paul was reluctant to answer, but did so before Sam got angry.

"I was in town, Sam," Paul began. "Just grabbing some things for dad at the hardware store. I saw one of their vans out front. Scared the hell out of me. Two of them were already coming in. I tried to hide my face but I think they might have seen me."

"No, God, please do not tell me that Paul," Sam cut in before Paul could continue, now in a frantic, almost angry-sounding voice. "Please tell me you didn't do that!"

"Well, I don't know for sure," Paul started.

"Then why the hell is your back window smashed?" Sam asked, almost shouting.

There was no answer.

"They came after you, and your first thought was to come to my house, with my family?" Sam got in Paul's face. Now he was shouting.

Paul tried to get his words out. "I drove around a couple blocks and waited," he said with a stutter. "Somehow they found me and almost got me."

"My God, Paul, I don't understand why you don't go to the police if people are trying to kill you," Sam said in a borderline crazy voice while pacing the kitchen.

Paul knew he shouldn't say anything at this point. Sam went to the kitchen sink and stood there, leaning on the linoleum countertop. The fog was now gone due to the wind, but the drizzle remained. The ringing of wind chimes on the porch and the hum of the furnace were the only audible sounds at the moment. A ways down the road, a pair of headlights crept over the pavement, and then another. The sound of large engines slowly got louder. Sam stood up straight. As the two vans got closer, he could see they were dark '80s Chevy utility vans.

"Call the police right now or I swear I'm going to kill you," Sam said as he pulled a key from on top of the window and backed away from the sink. The seriousness of his tone had come back, as though he had snapped out of going crazy. He ran out of the room towards the hallway. Paul took his brother's threat seriously and did as he was told.

"Emily, lock the door and stay up there," Sam shouted up the stairs. Under the staircase was a small, locked closet. He fidgeted with the key and got it into the lock. He jumped at the sound of a gunshot. The lights went out, and the furnace stopped. He could hear the vehicles driving into the driveway. Sam swung the closet door open as his brother came in, crouching slightly.

"You do it?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, I got 'em," Paul said.

Sam grasped his scoped .308 hunting rifle and leaned it against the wall. He pulled out the 12 gauge pump-action shotgun and a box of shells and handed it to his brother.

"Load it, quick," Sam said as he grabbed a rifle magazine, added five bullets to it, and loaded it into the weapon. The engines stopped, and Sam and his brother turned around. Sam crept over to the doorway to the kitchen, his brother close behind. Four van doors closed. Heavy-sounding footsteps came up the porch steps. There was a moment of silence, followed by a loud knocking on the door.

Sam turned to Paul and grabbed his collar. "You go to the top of those stairs and go prone with the shotgun, you hear me?" he whispered, pointing upstairs. "If something happens to them, I swear I will come out of the grave and make sure your soul goes straight to hell," he snapped. He didn't care if those were his last words to his brother. Paul ever so quietly snuck up the stairs.

"Mr. Samuel Weaver?" a gruff voice called out. Sam could see a large man in a worn leather jacket standing by the door. "I need to talk to you. It's about your brother." There was a long pause. Nobody said anything. "Listen Sam, I know all about you and your family," the man continued. "I don't have any problem with you. You seem like nice folks. But your brother wronged me and my family big time. Stabbed my brother in the back. He's coming with me."

There was another long silence. Sam's hands were covered in sweat.

"I don't even want to kill him," The man kept going. "But he's going to come with me."

More silence.

"Sam, he was with us in the city for three years, he didn't care about you guys. Then he decided to turn on us, and as soon as he sensed danger, he brought you and your lovely wife and daughter into it. He's a liability." Sam held the gun tighter, knowing this was not going to end well. "One last chance, Sam. If you make me take him by shooting my way in there, every drop of blood is going to be on your hands. Don't let that happen."

Sam wanted to do it. He was so angry with his brother, he didn't care about him living at this point. But he knew these guys were bad. The Black Smoke MC had built up quite a reputation in and around Philadelphia, so much so that his deadbeat younger brother had joined in their meth business to get

rich quick. When Sam had heard that, he despised Paul more than anything. Paul had always been lazy, and wasn't afraid to cheat to get ahead. But then Paul came clean, got a large portion of their business shut down, and testified against their leader. Part of the deal had Paul living in rural Tennessee for five years, while more of the gang was cleaned up. That was only eight months ago. Within the last couple weeks, Paul had showed up back here in Pennsylvania. He said he was only going to stay for a couple days, claiming he had to help their father on the farm. Now Sam was killing himself inside, wishing he had made Paul leave. But there was no way of knowing whether these men would not just shoot the whole family if he surrendered Paul to them.

The man at the door stepped back. Sam's pulse quickened. What if there was a chance they would be true to their word? He couldn't bear the thought of letting his wife and daughter die. He was ready to say something, when another shot rang out. The door knob flew off the door, and Sam pulled the trigger in an involuntary, flinch-like reaction. The rifle had been pointed at the door the whole time. The bullet went through the door, and after a brief shout of pain, the sound of the man falling on the back steps was heard. Instantaneously, a hail of bullets hit the door, throwing it wide open. Sam clung to the wall as he chambered another round. He could hear Emily trying to keep Bonnie from screaming. The men outside were shouting and still shooting. Some of the bullets were hitting unnervingly close to Sam's feet, so he pointed the gun back out the door without being exposed, and fired again. He pulled the bolt back again and heard one of the men coming around his side of the house, where there was a window near the stairs. A second later, a flaming bottle smashed through the window and ignited on the floor. Sam was becoming cornered, with the flames and gunfire getting increasingly intense.

Through the living room, he could see what looked like three men walking around the other side of the house. He realized that was where the cellar entrance was.

Suddenly, the guns stopped firing. Before Sam was able to think about it, he heard footsteps running up the back porch. He swung around again, just in time to see a skinny, younger looking man in a leather vest and torn jeans with a pistol in his hand. Again, Sam pulled the trigger, and the shot hit. The man crashed to the kitchen floor. Sam looked at the body in disbelief before the gunfire started coming into the house again. He lost his balance and went prone on the floor, inching forward away from the flames. Another window was heard smashing, and Sam could hear gasoline igniting in the living room. The gunfire in the doorway was letting up again, so he pulled the bolt back and fired. He heard the outside cellar door clanging open, followed by footsteps upstairs. Sam chambered his last bullet. He knew he was going to die when they rushed in again. The flames were engulfing the stairway, and the smoke was making it hard to breathe.



Then Sam heard an unmistakable shotgun blast from upstairs, and a man's yell outside. Another blast followed, and then two more. All the gunfire stopped. Sam was choking on the smoke, so he crawled to the doorway, gripping his rifle. He saw the last two men as they looked towards the side of the house with the cellar entrance. They had stunned looks on their faces. In the relative quiet outside, distant sirens could be heard, which drew the men's attention. They looked at each other and got into the van closest to the road. Sam inched backwards a little, making sure he stayed out of sight as the van started up. It fishtailed a little before doing a 180 in the gravel and speeding out of the driveway. Sam got up and looked back into the house. The flames were coming into the kitchen. There was no way to the stairs.

"Sam, get your daughter!" he heard his brother yell from the side of the house. He ran as fast as he could around the corner, where Paul was in the open upstairs window. Sam saw three dead bodies on the ground, all around the cellar door. Paul threw the shotgun in his hand out the window as smoke poured out of the house. Then Paul brought Bonnie to the window, and Sam quickly got underneath it.

"I got her," Sam said as he beckoned Paul to drop her. Paul did so, and Sam caught her.

"Cover your eyes honey," Sam told her. A police car sped by, sirens blaring. The young girl looked and saw a second one pull into the driveway. Paul helped Emily climb out the window.

"Em, I'll catch you just, let go," Sam said. She climbed down part way, hung on to the window sill, and then let go. Sam caught her and stumbled to

the ground. Paul wasted no time in jumping out himself.

The two police officers got out of the car. One quickly got Bonnie away from the house while the other made sure the three adults were alright, and then got them away as well. Almost immediately the sun came out, accompanied by a blue sky, leaving an ironic backdrop to the burning farmhouse.



In the Shadows by Jill Cadena David



## Ode to a Red Salamander

V. Clapp

Small red thing...  
diminutive dinosaur  
red like soft giving lips.  
Speckled with sprinkles on top.  
I love the way you move  
lunging dance crossing the wet black road  
All steadfast and sure of destination.

I show Kipper  
Who noses your redness  
Moist black on red  
Red tongue on red body

I present my hand  
Flesh mountain you climb aboard  
Tiny fleetness with a purpose  
A mere whisper of tickle on palms

Tucking you into a leafy nest  
I remember as a child  
Holding salamanders captive  
watching them swim in jars of water  
Then setting you free to wander  
moist woods  
and take chances crossing roads.

# Sculpture + Portrait



Her by Megan Alley



Grip of Death by Jonathan Jensen



Mug by Steven Genao



King Kunta by Yiming Chen



Stellar Cap by Jason Gambrah



Plaid Shirt by Yiming Chen





Ceiling by Yiming Chen



Nathasha Abbott



Nathasha Abbott

## Prodigal Son

T. Stock

After he got over the initial shock, he called his brother to tell him their father had died on the cruise ship he was on. Details were sketchy. His brother, who often traveled for his job, went about getting both of them airline tickets to Florida. They would go to the port where the ship was due in later and wait.

Their flight south was a mix of some light and not so light moments as they recounted their childhood memories of their father. He was not an easy man, given to violent eruptions often resulting in some form of physical assault against his five sons. A brother younger than them was never able to get beyond the hurt they all had suffered. He fled their upstate hometown decades ago, as soon as he could drive a car. Never calling, never visiting. To his brothers and sister, it was like a brother who had died or went missing. When their mom died, he didn't come back for the funeral. He had escaped ground zero, never looking back.

It is not easy getting a body returned home when someone dies at sea. Upon return to port an autopsy must be performed before any remains are released. Arranging for some mortuary services has to be done, ground and air transportation. It becomes a bureaucratic exercise in frustration a long way from home. Regardless, it is what most families do in this situation. They bring their loved ones back home, to be buried in hometown cemeteries.

Calling up his younger brother, 'the prodigal son' as they nicknamed him once a long time ago, fell upon him to be done. Several attempts finally got him to pick up the phone. When he told him, there was just the long silence of the humming line until the prodigal said blankly, "So?" He would not be coming home. Other relatives and family friends were called, arrangements made. Flowers ordered.

Four sons and a daughter stood in line to receive the last good words about their father. 'He was such a' this' and 'He was such a that' flowed like a politicians testimonial. These people didn't have a clue they were talking to hostages from a childhood robbery. They had never seen the beast come roaring out of nowhere because the beast never left the home. They only knew the guy who was always happy, always trying hard to please everyone, always ready to lend a hand to anyone--except his family. They never saw him wake up in a cold sweat and bolt out of bed, certain that there was a ghost soldier trying to kill him in his fitful sleep. Vivid World War Two memories held him a POW in his mind long before anyone called it PTSD. He didn't drink, didn't gamble, worked hard, volunteered. Perfect. No one knew of the monster that lived under his bed. The monster who could be summoned by a glass of spilled

milk.

The last trip home by their father brought them all a gift they didn't expect. It was the gift of sunshine which could now burn away his long shadow that had darkened their lives. Things that try to grow in the shade are stunted and lack color, lack vigor. The prodigal never came home. Never claimed his inheritance like his siblings did. He tended swine on the farm he worked, far from any shadow of what was. He came to envy the swine at their ability to live in such terrible conditions and not seem to mind. Though, it was all they had ever known. ● ● ●



Upper Gound by Yiming Chen

## A Tired Man's Lament

Noah McDonald

The sun was descending to its horizon when Icarus finally sat down at the base of the stone tree with a pained look on his face. All of the years of abuse he had inflicted on his body were catching up to him. The distinct smell of blood wafted through the air, turning his attention back to the latest battle with the demons in the Valley of the Bleeding-Sun.

It was one of the worst clashes with the demons he had ever seen. The screams of the dying were too far away to hear but they still played like a horrific nightmare in his head. He was an old veteran of the valley, he had seen it all, but today is was different. Maybe the weather changing was affecting him, but for the first time in a long time he felt tired. It sapped away at his once unflagging strength and now left him empty.

His mind flitted to and fro through his memories, stopping as it found interest in one thing, but flew again when it found the memory boring. His mood darkened when he remembered his friend Rom who came with him to this valley. He remembered the good times they had together. The laughter, the stories. His favorite was watching the sun set and blowing smoke rings. Rom was always better at smoke ring than I, he thought to himself. I never had him teach me how to do it properly; I guess I will never get that chance.

He remembered watching Rom die in his arms before the healers could get to them. He, himself, was gravely wounded; the pain of his wound was masked by the sorrow over the death of his brother-in-arms. His breath caught in his throat as his side twitched in a painful spasm at the memory of his old wound. Icarus was lucky that his side has never done that while he was fighting.

He turned back to watch the sun continue its setting, he did not wish to linger on memories of Rom, for the pain had always left him feeling raw. Yet like a moth to a flame his mind lingered and would not leave, they stopped at the last words Rom told Icarus before he died.

***"I am at peace, brother,  
when the time comes I  
hope you find yours."***

He felt a chill run up his back as he remembered those haunting words. Icarus knew he was pushing his luck in this gambit called life, he knew his luck would not hold out the next time. I think I could just stay here and live the rest of my life right on this hill, maybe when this is all over. It will be my final journey home.

He heard her coming even before he could see her crest the ridge, Wrin was the only one who had befriended Icarus after Rom's death. It was a bitter-sweet memory for him.

"Another day gone and another day passing," Icarus said. "How many of the new recruits did we lose today, eh, Wrin?" said Icarus as he whipped out his pipe and scraped out the old ashes.

"Off the top of my head I think I saw three hundred and one new graves being dug, and the infirmary is over-flowing." She said grimly. "I did what I could, but if I stayed there any longer I think I'd go mad. The screams are what get to me they remind me of who we can't save, of those we can't help; even the Death Hands can't silence all of them."

Wrin sat next to Icarus, her armor clicking as she found the most comfortable spot on the stone tree. The air was silent, only to be broken by the crunching of tobacco leaves.

"Hey do you have a light on you?"

"Here,"

Wrin snapped her fingers and a blues spark awoke in her hand and jumped into the pipes bowl, greedily lapping at the leaves.

"Thanks," Icarus said, as he took a deep breath and exhaled a ring of smoke.

"Long day for you, eh? I saw you were there when the line broke, I still can't believe you mended the entire thing by yourself. How do you have the energy to do it all I wonder? No one has that kind of energy." She paused seeing the hollowed look on his face. "You look tired. Is it your knee again? I thought I stitched the tendon back in place." She put her hand on his shoulder as she inspected his knee.

"My knee is fine Wrin; really, you did an excellent job of stitching me back together. I'm just tired. Tired of this war. Tired of this valley. Tired of age. Tired of the never ending sorrow, damn it!"

"...."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to raise my voice." He paused and let out a deep sigh. "Did you know that it was 60 years to the day since I first came here with Rom? Serve the crown they said. Be a hero they said. Fight for your home-land they said. Protect the weak they said. Hah," Icarus muttered, his words dripping with sarcasm.

"I have lived here longer than I had lived in my own homeland. I don't



even know if my family is still alive, and it doesn't really matter because I have forgotten what they even look like now. All of those who came with me are dead. All of my old friends have died and have been buried, and their families turned their backs on us like we never existed; leaving my brothers to be forgotten from this world. I have been here long enough to know that if you are weak you die, it is that simply, and I can't help those who are. I'm just tired of it all. I don't know what I have left to live for, there is nothing in victory. We are losing, and they know it. That's why the supply trains have been stopped."

"I know, I have known for a long time. But if you lose your sense of purpose you lose everything. You must never let it go. Everything has a purpose, even an old soldier such as you, no matter the outcome of this war."

"You know what I have that I live for." He said putting his hand on her shoulder.

"I know. But I will not always be here."

They sat there and watched the sun go down, and the sky was filled with the twinkling of stars, not a word was passed between them. The stillness, and their company, was enough for them.

The sun was setting and bled red across the Lake of the Drowning-Sun as Icarus finished digging two graves at the base of the stone tree. He gently lowered a body shrouded in a white cloth stained red with blood into the first grave.

He sat down at the foot of the grave, motionless, as if a statue guarding the dead. The time raced past him but yet he still did not move. The stars danced above him as if mocking him, but the statue would not move. Yet his mind was in chaos. Everything boiled in his mind, and then it would stop. Leaving Icarus with an emptiness that transcended anything that he had known before.

*How will I go on? There is nothing here for me all that I have known, except the memories of the pain and suffering, is gone. What will I do now?* Icarus's gaze shifted to the second grave as the ever gnawing of death's peaceful words whisper in his mind.

*Is this all that there is to life? Is there nothing more than just dying? Why should I postpone the inevitable? I have lost the one person who keeps me alive. What is left for me? Do I end it all, or is there another path...?*

Icarus let out a sigh as if a huge weight was lifted off of his chest, and with a new found strength he stood up.

"So now it has finally come to say those dreadful words that we could never utter. We must say our farewells to this valley, and, to those we have met here, it is the only proper thing to do, yes?"

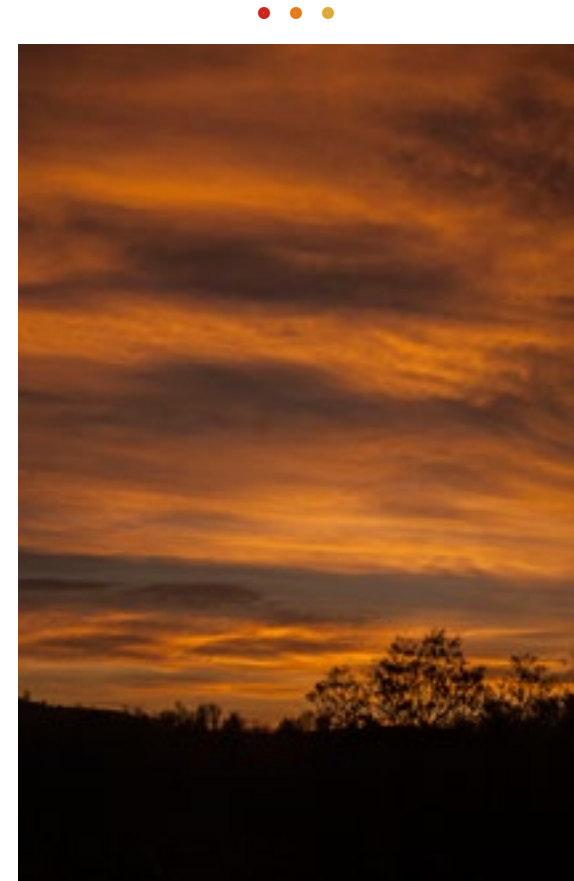
"The Commander will not be happy of my departing; I couldn't care less about him so it doesn't matter to me. I find it funny how easy these words are coming to me; you know I am terrible with words.... I had wished...I had wished these would be under more pleasant circumstances," Icarus said as tears rolled down face, "That maybe we might have left at the same time saying good

bye at ours convenience. Maybe I could have left first, and our places would be switched.

"No, you would never allow that to happen. I still carry a grudge after you stitched me up just because you wanted me to go on a mission to save a scouting party, remember that... So this is it, my good bye, you always said that one must always have a sense of purpose or all is meaningless... So I will take your word for it. Farewell my friend. Farewell from the sorrows of this life. May you find rest in the arms of the Guardians. Fare-thee-well."

And with that he left.

No one from the camp ever saw him again after he went up to the stone tree, and none wanted to go up there to find him. There are stories about a lone statue standing guard over a grave at the tree, but no one knows for sure. The stories of the wars at the Valley of the Bleeding-Sun faded from history and legends, but one legend stayed through the years: of a man who traveled across the earth, the heavens, and even the Hall of the Guardians in search of his lost love.

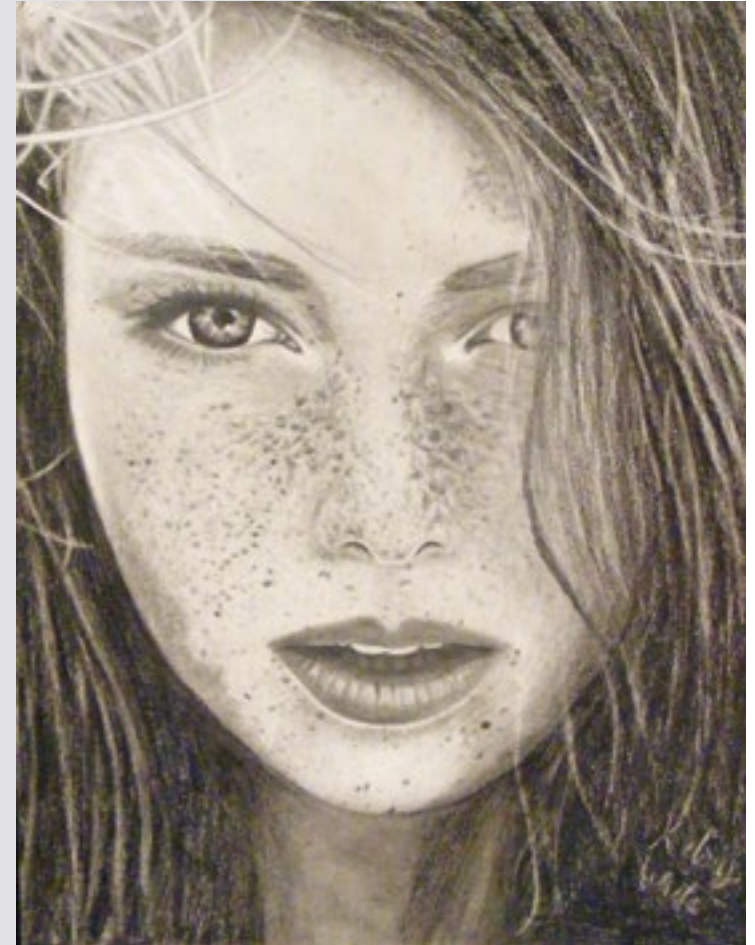


Liz Raggi

## Untitled

Tiffany Boyer

You open your eyes to a brand new day  
Something is in the air, something astray  
Things are out of place, next to you is space  
Where just last night your lover's body lay  
You check downstairs but he has disappeared  
You wonder was he ever really here?  
There is a picture in the living room  
Can't sweep it under the rug with a broom  
Him looking down at you and you up at him  
You leaning in for a passionate kiss  
It was a cold rainy day there at the park  
But it left a deep scar right there on your heart  
Him holding you tight while both of you swayed  
The love never left, it just moved away



Kelsey White

## Love and Ashes

Jason Romeyn

Katie sat at Mark's bedside, her eyes swollen and red from crying for the past three days. The sounds of the hospital filled the air- the beeping of the monitors and the chatter between the doctors and nurses- but all she could hear was Mark's shallow breaths. She ran her fingers down his arm following the faded tracks like she was reading a book of bad memories. This wasn't the first time that they have been here, in fact this was the third time in four years that Mark had overdosed after going on a bender

Katie and Mark have known each other since they were in Mrs. Brown's second grade class. He would tease her and pull her hair, like little boys do. She hated him, or so she would say. If you ask her mother she will tell you how Katie would always talk about the mean boy Mark in her class. Even when her mother would tell her to just stay away from him she would always find an excuse to be around him, like little girls do. Now almost twenty years later, as she stared at his lifeless body, she just wished she could go back to that time.

Katie reaches into her bag and grabs the scrapbook that she brought from home. She wants to go through the book hoping that by talking to Mark he will hear her and wake up. At this point she will try anything to get him to respond, he's been in this situation before but never this long.

"Hey baby, I brought our scrapbook I thought you might enjoy looking at it with me again."

Thumbing through the book Katie's eyes start to tear up again. Page after page the memories, both good and bad, come flooding into her head. She cannot take the rush of emotions and slams the book closed. Sitting there sobbing she never realized that a nurse came into the room.

"Are you okay dear? Can I get you anything?" the nurse asked.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in. No I'm fine, thanks though," replied Katie.

The nurse continued on with what she was doing, checking Mark's pulse and changing the I.V. bag.

"Everything looks good here," said the nurse as she washed her hands at the sink in the corner of the room. "If you need anything just push the call button and I'll be in right away. You sure there is nothing I can get you?"

"No, really I'm fine." Katie said clutching the scrapbook to her chest.

The nurse left the room and Katie just stared at Mark. Her mind wandering thinking about all the times they have shared together. She opened the book again and ran her hand over the pictures of him, trying to get back to that time when he was so full of life.

"Remember this one at that stupid music festival that you dragged me

to. I didn't want to go but you begged me to go with you. You said I would have such a good time, yeah well I did until you ended up passing out by the bathrooms."

She keeps on flipping through the pages. "Oh, how about this one when we all went camping? What a cluster fuck that turned out to be when you got too drunk and fell through the tent and we had to sleep in the back of the car for the weekend. God, you are such an ass." Katie laughed as she continued to flip through the book.

There was so much in this book that even she forgot half of what was in there. Little notes that he left for her over the years, dried daisies, her favorite flower, squished between the pages. Stupid drawings that they would draw for each other. "Look here babe, it's the drawing you made of your tattoo, the one with my name in it. I told you not to get it, people always break up when they get someone's name tattooed on them, and what happened? We broke up! Remember?" she said laughing trying to hold back the tears. "But we always found our way back together didn't we?"

As Katie continued she suddenly stopped turning the pages and stared at the open book on her lap. Running her hand over the page she couldn't hold the tears back anymore. "Why? Why do you keep doing this to yourself, to us?" Katie cried as she stared at the two hospital bands that they had put in the book from the times before that Mark had overdosed. "You said the last time this happened you would get help and it wouldn't happen again. I even offered to go to every meeting with you so you wouldn't have to do it alone." she cried as she slammed the book shut and threw it on the ground.

"You knew that you had a problem; you used to tell me all the fucking time. You always said you didn't want to be like you father. You watched him drink himself to death in between bouts of him beating the shit out of you. The only difference between you two is that he only drank, you stick a needle in your fucking arm or do whatever else you can get your hands on," Katie said, her voice raising now as she stands over Mark. "Look at you now, lying there half fucking dead. What am I supposed to do, just wait for you to come out of it and start the whole evil cycle over again? You will say you're sorry and that it won't happen again. You will get back in program and be good for a little while.

Then one day you will get a bug up your ass and take off with your goddamn friends and then we will be right back here again, or worse you will end up in the fucking morgue!" she cried. "Maybe we would both be better off if you just died right here, right now." She couldn't believe the words that were coming out of her mouth. "I fucking hate you so much, you selfish bastard! All I have ever wanted to do was love you, but you can never fully let me can you? You know what...Fuck You!" Katie yelled, clenching her fists, fighting with herself not to pound on Mark's chest. She wanted him to wake up so he could hear all of this.

Exhausted, Katie fell back into the chair. Her tears are no longer from



sadness but now are tears of anger and hurt. She knows that nothing is ever going to change. She knows that he will never change. She picks the book up off of the floor and opens it up again. Turning through the pages her anger grows with each page turn. Before she realizes it she is no longer turning the pages but ripping them out. Page after page ripped out and thrown on the floor.

“There, you asshole, none of this means anything to you anyway, right? Let’s just throw it all away!”

Tearing through the book she is stopped by a picture, her favorite picture, just the two of them. Katie sitting on Mark’s lap. It was taken at the lake, their favorite spot to go. She always loved the look on his face in that picture. She always wondered why he didn’t always look at her this way. She took the picture off of the page, remembering that day, feeling his touch. Then she looked at Mark laying there in that hospital bed, wires everywhere, a tube down his throat.

“This is all I ever wanted for us, this day, this look, to last forever,” she said as she threw the picture onto Mark’s chest. “But it is what it is I guess. I just don’t know if I can do this anymore. I don’t know if I can love you anymore. Loving you is killing me and you are just killing yourself.”

As Katie sat there head in her hands sobbing, an alarm on one of the monitors went off. She jumped out of the chair and went to the bed. Mark’s eyes were open and he was trying to grab at the tube going down his throat. Katie didn’t know how to feel right now, she was relieved that Mark was awake, but in a way she hoping that he never woke up.

Doctors and nurses rush into the room and for a moment it is total chaos, but for the first time in years Katie can see through the chaos. As the doctors are tending to Mark trying to calm him down and get the tube out of his throat, Katie goes over to the head of the bed, she looks into Mark’s eyes and begins to cry again. Not tears of sadness or anger, but tears of relief. She knows that from this point on they can never be together- one of them will be dead if she stays. She leans over and gently kisses him on the forehead, feeling him on her lips one last time.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Katie grabbed her jacket and her bag and walked across the pages of the scrapbook that are scattered over the floor. She doesn’t look back, she can’t. When she gets outside she reaches into her bag for a cigarette and she notices something stuck to the bottom of her shoe, it’s her favorite picture, she looks at it one last time. She flicks her lighter and takes a long drag, then turns the lighter onto the picture setting it on fire, holding it until the flame almost touches her hand. She throws her cigarette and the picture into the ashtray and watches as they both turn to ash. ● ● ●

## Communion

Matt Powers

I don’t know when it happened,  
But I started sharing food with them.  
I portioned my sweet potato-zucchini scramble on their plates,  
Then took what was left.  
It all happened quite by accident,  
Through forces beyond anyone’s control,  
But they’re here, I owe it to them:  
It must be difficult being a refugee  
From one’s mother...

They slowly chew their food.  
The cut umbilical becomes painfully aware,  
And the longing to suture the sever  
Rises in the throat.  
They sip warmed milk,  
Peer through frosty windows,  
And try to fathom the contours  
Of foreign hills in the distance.



Heart by Yiming Chen

## “Hi”

Brandy Nolan

One simple word, a conversation starter and that is all it took. She was an emotional wreck, a broken hearted single mother with more baggage than Southwest on a Saturday. After living with abuse for close to 20 years, Leah was convinced they were all the same.

Her best friend had told her about online dating, but quite frankly she found it revolting. The concept of window shopping just to get laid.

“No thank you...” she thought. I will collect cats instead.

“Leah, you can’t stay single forever... that is what Rob would want,” Erica said.

“I know Erica, I just don’t feel like getting caught up in a battle of the dick pics. I just want to meet someone for coffee. Do people do that anymore?” She replied.

Erica was irritated yet impressed with Leah’s quick wit, but she admitted she couldn’t hang out tonight as she had already made other plans. It was going to be one of those long nights of just staring at the ceiling, in the dark. Again.

Rob had been out of the house for close to six months by now and compared to the 20 years they were together that was just a drop in the hat. She still hated him for choosing adultery over monogamy, but she was proud of herself for choosing eviction over murder. She was too pretty to go to jail.

Sunday morning rolled around and she was preparing for church. As always she would pray for her sins, and his sins and yours too if you needed it. But this Sunday would be different, after today her life would be different. On her way out the door her phone chimes, that nagging noise that will mentally eat you alive until you acknowledge it. It was never anything important, usually her mom or Walmart letting her know that her bill was due. She decided to wait until she pulled into her small town church on South Broad Street to respond. Walking up the stairs she realized that the message had gone unanswered. Sitting in the third pew back on the right side of the congregation she decided to check her phone. It was then she read the first line from Jessica. In black and white there on her screen were five single words she never thought she would get to see. “I have a single friend.” At first she thought it was a joke, maybe she texted the wrong person, after all it had been quite some time since she had heard from Jessica anyways.

Before the Pastor made his appearance she replied “good for you, I will pray for him.” Immediately Jessica responded “well that wasn’t the response I was expecting, don’t be a bitch, I gave him your number.” She sat in the pew and just prayed the dizziness away, she couldn’t imagine who Jessica had in

mind. It better not be some douchebag, Leah thought. For the rest of the service she checked her phone more than she checked her lipstick, her OCD was in overdrive. She ate the cracker and drank the juice and gave hugs and headed out the door. For the next seven days she was able to sin like a whore house on nickel night, but she wouldn’t, even though she wanted to.

Leah headed to her mother’s for lunch and on her way her phone chimed, eagerly she pulled over, she had a feeling this couldn’t wait. Her screen displayed the message “Hi” from a 985 area code. Her first thought was who the hell did she set me up with, someone from Bangladesh? Ignoring that lame but ever so cute introductory text all while being pulled over on the side of the road she shot Jessica a quick text.

“Look lady, I don’t speak a foreign language so I have no clue who you just gave my number to. Thanks anyways.” Without missing a beat Jessica barked “Simmer down Leah he lives next door to me, originally from Louisiana, answer him and quit procrastinating.”

If he was anything like the last few this shouldn’t take long, so she clicked on that god awful ten digit number that she was convinced was from another country and simply typed “Hi.” And now we wait she thought. Before she even had time to put her piece of crap Hyundai into drive her phone chimed.

“Wow” she thought “he is an eager beaver”.

She didn’t mean to have such a snotty undertone to every sentence or even every thought that circled her brain, but that is what years of dealing with assholes will do to a person. Deciding to throw caution to the wind she replied to the man she now had nicknamed Mr. Bangladesh because well, Jessica never told her his real name.

The first real conversation they shared via text message lasted throughout the night. They texted nonstop, sometimes two different conversations going at once, never running out of things to say. They learned so much about each other, from his 5 siblings to her being an only child, the number of pugs that slept in her bed and their daughter’s middle names. His name was Jake and he too was a single parent of a daughter the same age as hers. He spent eighteen years in the Army and was awarded three purple hearts; if they kept this up he would have hers as well.

It’s hard to detect tone in a text, but she could sense it, the pride he had of being a Sergeant in the Army was unmistakable, but she loved it; she loved every minute of that night, guaranteed one she would never forget. She had learned so much about this mystery man behind the phone, she was convinced he was too good to be true.

Finally she silenced the repeated dings, she didn’t want them to wake up her daughter as fiercely as they were awakening her heart.

The one conversation that stood above all the rest started around 1:30 am, and while they were exhausted beyond belief they couldn’t bring them-

selves to say goodbye, not just yet.

Jake: So do you think you will ever get married again Leah?

Leah: No. Just No. It's just a piece of paper anyway, it doesn't promise someone will be faithful, so why bother?

Jake: My thoughts exactly, not going through that again. Cold day in hell.

Both of them from shitastic previous marriages they vowed to themselves never to say "I DO" again.

For another hour or so they carried on and she could feel the walls she built come tumbling down piece by piece. She was slowly reconsidering her need to collect cats. Realizing sometimes those scenarios result in the happiest of endings, but she wasn't getting her hopes up, she couldn't. She woke the next morning with her phone in her hand and drool on her pillow thinking that last night had just been a dream. Three long weeks went by texting morning noon and night into the wee hours, they had developed a bond that neither one of them had felt before. It was the early part of July that they decided to meet halfway at a diner for lunch. With her mother worried for her safety, Leah was feeling completely overwhelmed, but she sat and she waited.

She has only seen pictures of his Jeep, yellow with a rag top, but finally around the bend she saw him approaching, as he parked she almost made a run for it. Realizing she already paid the babysitter, she stayed. They greeted each other with caution and proceeded to the front door, the waitress sat them at a booth under a life size poster of Elvis with ketchup splatters that were well over a year old. Shit she hated Elvis, check please was her first thought. The conversation was less to be desired, almost forced. She ordered salad and he ordered some buffalo chicken thing that was dripping with heartburn and regret. They ate in silence. It was then she was convinced that they are all the same.

As the lunch date came to an end, they walked to the parking lot and they said their modest good-byes. With a lump in her throat she walked to her car. He promised he would text her later, she wouldn't hold her breath, It was going to be a long 40 minute drive, even the radio couldn't settle the racing thoughts. Pulling out of the parking lot her phone chimed. It was Jake. Four simple words read "I miss you already." It hit her right in the feels.

With continuous conversations behind the screen of the phone they planned another date, this one involving a trip to his house for a cookout. Being that he lived an hour away and her daughter would be at her father's house, if all went right she wouldn't be coming home that night. Every so often she would stop to think to herself, what am I doing? But she was tired of always needing answers to every scenario in her life, so she just ran with it.

She only packed for one night, but stayed for three. Reality set in that his

home wasn't hers, and she needed to leave soon. An hour south she had a child and a life, but it wasn't where she wanted to be; not even a little bit.

Anxiously she gathered her things and prepared to make the drive to Hamilton, as she started the car and press the brake pedal she felt her heart sink. This is not what she wanted. For the next hour she beat herself up, for falling in love with someone that was so unobtainable, she didn't sign up to be just another weekend fling.

Weeks turned into months and they continued to text and make the drive, both of them questioning the sensibility of this relationship. Like every other morning she woke up to her good morning text, except this one was different. This one was longer. This one had meaning and feelings attached. Jake asked her to move in with him. She was numb.

This morning she didn't respond right away. She couldn't, she needed space, to think.

Hours went by and the texts added up. She wasn't responding and he wasn't letting go. He couldn't, he loved her too much. After so much thought and a 50/50 checklist she finally picked up her phone and sent a message to Jake. One simple word was all it took, "Yes."

From then on they counted down the days until the move. November 15th couldn't come fast enough.

The night before moving day, they slept on a mattress on the floor and ate Pringles out of the can with a candle for light in her boxed up apartment. For the first time in a year she could fall asleep with a smile on her face, and for a very good reason.

As the seasons changed they no longer had to text goodnight or good morning.

Jake was single handedly proving to her that they all weren't the same and she couldn't be happier. She thanked God she wasn't going to have to collect cats.

Going against everything he had ever told himself, he planned a proposal. On the evening of August 16th, sitting on the peer, Jake nervously and awkwardly dropped the ring in the grass. Without missing a beat Leah said yes, she didn't need a checklist, she was absolutely sure for the first time in her life. She had never been so sure of anything, ever.

With the word "Hi" engraved on their wedding bands, they boarded a plane and headed to Vegas, with the one and only Elvis impersonator as their officiant. ● ● ●



## Hamburger

Frank Tubman

I have a friend named Hans Berger.  
 I've always called him Hamburger  
 as a clever pun on his name.  
 Finally today he told me  
 he was quitting his job at  
 Gino's Pizza  
 and that  
 his name was Jim  
 and that  
 we'd never been friends.

I had a friend named Hamburger.

I hope whoever replaces him  
 at Gino's  
 is as cool as he was.  
 He always counted back my  
 change to me  
 in a really friendly way.  
 I really thought  
 we were friends.

## The Man Who Mistook His Wife for an iPhone

T. Stock

Always clutching her  
 Close to his side,  
 Forever first asking her  
 "What is it I do  
 Today?",  
 Knowing she keeps his calendar clear  
 For trips outside  
 The metal and glass box they live in,  
 He needs her,  
 Requires her.  
 So efficient  
 Managing his libraries,  
 Never missing his Doctor  
 Or Dentist appointments,  
 Paying all his bills,  
 Calling his mother on her birthday,  
 Never preaching, nagging,  
 GPS's them along unknown paths,  
 He would be lost without her.

At night,  
 When she glows blue from the TV light,  
 Battery warm to the touch,  
 He enjoys knowing  
 She is always within reach  
 To be woken,  
 Illuminating  
 Their long dark night;  
 A light house on a strange shore  
 In a strange land.

Every morning  
 While he reads the Times on line,  
 She never minds,  
 Never accuses of being ignored,  
 Perfectly patient  
 Waiting for the next command.  
 The blank chair across the breakfast table  
 Gathers dust, never warmed.  
 Together,  
 Leaving the house,  
 Entering the world of many screens,  
 Only knowing the sky is blue  
 From the reflection in her eye,  
 He thinks of French authors  
 And tells her,  
 "Google Camus."

## Till Death Do Us Part

Katelynn Brown

This wedding dress looked a lot better when I tried it on for the first time. I felt happy when I tried it on the first time. I was happy. It was three months till the wedding where I was to eternally link lives with the one person I loved most in the world. The one I thought would never betray me. The one who did.

**\*\*Wedding Day\*\***

"You look so beautiful Dee," my mom muttered through some tears while we both stared mesmerized by this beautiful dress, hair and makeup. Happy tears of course, but sad to see me so grown up and soon to be walking down the aisle. She always thought me and Ryan were too young when we first said I love you in the fifth grade, little did she know I knew what I was talking about. At least at the time. He proposed the day of our graduation at Florida State, I think that was the first time my heart stopped for a good reason.

"Stop mom please I'm begging, I just got my makeup done," I said rolling my partially filled eyes.

"I know I just can't believe my oldest is finally getting married, I'm so happy for you honey."

"I know mom," I assured giving her a hug. I couldn't believe this was happening. Just two hours until I take the name of the man of my dreams.

"Where's Anna?" that seemed to be the common question when it comes to finding my sister.

"Probably snorting a line or two on the toilet seat of the same one her drunk ass threw up in." My cousin Ashley can be a real bitch. She's blunt, but she also doesn't have a strong desire for my sister. You can only screw your cousin's fiancée so many times before both relationship breaks.

"Classy," my mom said staring at her while more than likely throwing imaginary darts at her face. Our family is pretty fucked up if you were to ask, I can't lie about that one.

"I'll go find her, the last thing she'll screw up is my wedding." So many rooms in this stupid venue. I can't believe I even agreed to have my wedding here. This shit looks ancient. Guess that's what I get for falling in love with a history major. So boring but who could resist those emerald eyes and sandy brown hair, and who could resist the frappuccinos he picked up for us to share before class every day. He made falling in love with him effortless.

"YES! Adrian oh my god, have you seen Anna? I can't find her anywhere. She's not in the bathroom passed out again so I don't know where else to look."

"Yeah actually I just saw her go into the room Ryan's in." I looked at her

confused but the search continued on.

Why on earth was she in Ryan's room, and when the hell did she leave mine? Walking towards Ryan's room the first voice I heard was Anna's.

"What the hell?" I heard laughter and rumbling as I got closer.

I pressed my ear up against the door and couldn't believe what I was hearing. How could my own sister betray me? How could my soon to be husband and love of my life be messing with my sister? This had to be some sort of sick ass joke. I for one was not laughing.

"You couldn't have picked a more perfect day Mr. Adams. It's bad luck for the bride to see the groom before she walks down the aisle." Anna said, both of them laughing.

"Shh.. You can't be loud. If anybody finds out.." I didn't let him finish long enough before I kicked that ancient piece of shit door open.

"Dana?!" Ryan said concerningly. I wasn't convinced. He can spare the act with me.

To no surprise at all I saw my slutty little sister and my infidelic asshole ex fiancée pleasantly on top of each other nothing between their skin at all. I could've puked. I wanted to cry and ask him what I did wrong, but I wanted to do nothing but bash his face in. My sadness quickly turned to rage.

I threw my ring at him. "You stupid piece of shit I can't even believe you. And you! you both make me sick. I swear to god."

"Baby please," he pleaded, but I was never going to forgive.

Figures Anna wasn't phased, getting caught in bed with another woman's man was a history of it's own to her. She just sat in the bed, in absolutely no hurry to put her clothes on. I could've skinned her alive. I had many thoughts rushing through my head and the first was obvious. I walked over to the door calmly and shut it.

***"I know I just can't believe my oldest is finally getting married, I'm so happy for you honey"***

"What the fuck are you doing Dana?" Anna got up in attempt to walk over to the door, that wasn't about to happen.

"This is rich. I applaud you two for pulling off such a wonderful meeting spot, you're absolutely right Anna. There couldn't have picked a more perfect day." I paced back and forth, trying to catch up my emotions with my thoughts.

Sick pervert, how could he do this to me. How could she do this to me? My own sister. "I'm glad I see in you now what I couldn't before Ryan, and you. I always knew what you were about, but never thought you disrespected yourself that much to take it this far. You disgust me." I couldn't bare to look at her. Tears rolling down her precious tan face as if I could give two cares about it. Well I couldn't. Somebody with a heart may feel guilty, but mine had just been burned ripped and sucked dry. "Get out," I said staring at my trampy, still half-naked sister. "Ryan, it'd be best if you stay." It didn't take over two seconds before Anna was out that door, and Ryan was about to experience a wedding day he will never forget.

I walked back over to the same door, this time locking it. "I'll spare you my tears. You don't deserve even that much from me. You gross son of a bitch." He looked confused and scared, and I thought to myself he very well should be.

"Dana please, I love you. Come on, you know this. You're my soul. We're meant for forever." His mouth was moving but I rolled my eyes at the sound of utter bullshit.

"Bullshit." I sat down in the vanity chair staring in the mirror and rage filled my face. One punch to the mirror and out poured the blood.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! Stop this Dana, You're crazy!" his fear didn't alter my feelings at all. I kept searching for emotions, but I found none.

"Karma is a bitch Ryan." I shoved him back hitting him punch after punch. Blood started falling and for some odd reason it felt better than it should've. So I hit him again, and again, and again. What was I becoming? Can rage really take a person over like this? With every blow the pounds began to lift off of my shoulder. "Come on! Tell me why! Why her, why anybody?!" He was pleading, but it didn't have me phased in the slightest. He jolted me back against the dresser, my head hitting against it.

"You've always been a crazy bitch you know that?!" He was heading towards the door, but I couldn't let him leave. I reached up onto the dresser and launched the champagne bottle that we should've been sharing later. Instantly blood. All I wanted to hit was the door.

"Stop.." his voice was fainter this time. His eyes began to roll in the back of his head and I could see the amount of fight in him diminishing. Yet I still couldn't resist. The punches kept coming until his eyes came to a stop. Did I kill him? All I wanted to do was make him feel my pain.

"Ryan.." I said easing off trying to get him to sit up. "Please get up. What did I do?" His pulse was undetectable, certainly not there. My hands touched his neck, the warmth I once knew was gone. The makeup I didn't want to ruin previously, was gone. My heart and soul, gone. I couldn't think straight with the amount of banging on the door.

"SECURITY OPEN UP NOW!" My thoughts were frantic at that moment. Today is my wedding day, we were supposed to happy.

"So happy," I said to the lifeless body that once used to send me flowers with chocolate every Friday after work. The one that I used to just sit in complete silence with and was so happy in doing just that. The one I was supposed to walk down the aisle with.

"You have till the count of three before we kick this door down Dana." The care I should have was gone too. As far as I'm concerned I was gone, the one thing that held me together all these years was gone. No warning, no nothing. That's all I was left with.

"There's no need." I walked over to the door and opened it. Security swarmed through the door, then police, then Anna. Her sympathy for him was pathetic and honestly made me want to vomit. They asked me all the basic questions. Why did I do it, why did he cheat, how did this happen. I couldn't answer any of his questions. I couldn't even answer my own questions.

This was supposed to be the best day of my life. I was supposed to be happy, and smiling. We had the most magnificent honeymoon planned out in Cancun. Yet I'm here. Standing in my fiancée's dressing room staring at myself in the mirror again.

"This wedding dress looked a lot better when I tried it on for the first time. I felt happier when I tried it on the first time. I was happy when I tried it on the first time. There was no blood from the man who would never betray me when I tried it on the first time. The one I thought would never betray me. The one who did. Guess we weren't meant for forever." ● ● ●



## The Missing Piece of Me

Keegan Connolly

"Let's go Trev,"

"Put 'em in Trev,"

It's all I hear around me, nothing else. It's just another ordinary day at my man cave, 6 o'clock Men's League basketball at the local YMCA. Nothing better. All I'm waiting for is more paperwork, taxes, and journaling when I get home...fun. All that stands in between me and going home are two foul shots-make them both, we win, simple.

First one, good. Second one, I think to myself, "Make it or miss, it doesn't really matter. You're going home and doing the same thing you do every night." It slips off my hands into the bucket, Finally, going home.

"Trevor Johnson for the win!" shouts Jamie as he goes to his car.

"Hey Trev, do you want grab a beer quickly, post-game celebration, it's on me," Jamie asks.

"Nah, I got work to finish up," I tell him.

"Come on, get a life, seriously, you do this every time," he responds as he drives away. He's right. If I keep this up I'll become a loner, I don't want that. There's just something missing in my life, I don't know what it is.

Back to Daily Grind Co. in the morning, grab my coffee and typing until 3:00... hopefully 2:45 today if my boss didn't crap the bed this morning. Just as I leave, of course, "Trevor! Who in the hell is going to read this?"

Great, my boss, Mr. Wilcox.

"I know sir, I know, it's the only thing I can think of. I'm just not feeling it today," I tell him.

"That's what you've been saying the past few days. Look, I like your work ethic, but if you can't get your act together, I have to fire you." he tells me.

I tell Wilcox, "I understand, I'll do better tomorrow." This can't get any better, I almost get laid off, and I'm trying to figure out what's not there that I need.

When I get home, the first few steps I make out of my car, I step in my neighbor's dog crap.

"Seriously man! Fifth time this week," I yell at him.

He just calmly responds saying, "Watch where you're stepping jackoff!" Pissed off as I walk into my house, it finally clicked in my head. A dog, that's what I need. I know it will poop all over the place and it's ironic, but this is going to fill that missing piece in my life. So, I start to wander around my house and I say out loud, "where in the heck do I get a dog?"

Next thing you know I'm walking around my local PetSmart store. And much to my luck, a huge sign says "Adopt a Puppy." In the back there is box

full of puppies. I pick up the one that looks the calmest, a Rottweiler, and all of a sudden it licks my face like crazy. I was somewhat pleased.

When I got home I thought to myself "What did I get myself into? Eh, it won't be that bad, it's man's best friend."

Wrong.

Day 1.

I didn't know what to name it, so I started off with "Thing" Thing thought it was a good idea to give me some sausage links and lemonade for breakfast, but it ended up on the floor instead. Cleaning dog produce and being late to work isn't really a good start to the day so I would like to end the day with a positive note...not going to happen.

A usual dog would jump on you when you get home from work, and you would take it for a walk; not Thing, Thing was taking a bath in the toilet. He manages to get out, happy as he could be, and pees on my favorite dress pants. The day's not over yet it gets better. It appears that Thing chewed up my basketball shoes that I wear to Men's League, there goes my 2015 Nike Hyperdunks that cost almost two hundred dollars! Just one day and this dog has caused more shenanigans than I have had my whole life. I wonder if I could manage to keep that hairy beast in my house without any problems.

Days go by and there's always signs in my house that Thing was out and about during the day. Toilet paper trails around the house, a chewed up couch pillow, and there's always a sneaker laying around somewhere that I didn't put there. I have no clue how this dog can escape from the basement that is locked, there's no possible way. There must be a way, and that's where I find myself in PetSmart again asking one of the workers.

"Is there a dog cage that can make sure my dog cannot escape at all?" I ask with 100% confidence.

"Why yes, this cage contains a combination lock with other features on the lock that not even Houdini could escape through," she replies with a look on her face that seems like a "He is an idiot" look. I was never able to actually tell her my dog actually is Houdini in dog form, she probably would've thought that I was on drugs or something. You can never trust people working at pet stores, they're probably crazy cat ladies on the inside especially this lady.

I get the cage, and I was expecting to see Thing waiting for me at the front door after a good day at work, instead he left me a present- dark chocolate, my favorite. The next day goes well, no morning problems, and Thing is trapped in the cage.

I get home, I see the cage, but no Thing. Like I said, "don't trust pet store people" The cage was connected in two parts, and that's where the magic happens. I never actually yelled at him yet, but I let it loose accidentally and Thing went into hiding under my couch for the night and the next morning as well.

Almost a year has gone by, and "Thing" seemed to me a pretty vague name. "From now on I'm going to call you 'Bear' because you destroy and chew

up everything you see," I tell him as he wags his tail with cheerful passion. Later that day, I finally decided that this was the day to take Bear for a walk. The outcome was not what I wanted, and Bear had a blast. He chased 6 squirrels, peed on every tree he saw, and he sniffed and jumped on nearly every person we walked past. While being yanked by a hairy beast, I accidentally let him go, and all I see is Bear running over someone and licking them to death.

"Oh geez, I'm so sorry," I say to the innocent lady running.

"Oh its fine...wait, you're that dumbass I helped in PetSmart," she exclaims as she gets up. "I see that cage isn't doing any help," she continues to say.

"No, I don't suppose it is, he chewed it up like everything else in my house as well," I explain to her. After that conversation I soon came to realize that he was walking me, because it felt like my arm fell off. Even though Bear might be the biggest troublemaker the world has ever seen, he does keep me company.

My job at the Daily Grind is very difficult at this moment of time since there is nothing to write about. Then I realized that the adventures I have experienced over the years with Bear might give me that thumbs up from Mr. Wilcox as well as a pay raise.

My journal articles have become a top hit for readers just because of my furry friend.

"Trevor, your recent work is phenomenal, pay raise guaranteed," Wilcox tells me.

"Thank you, the best is yet to come," I say as I pack my things up and head for home. When I get home, what should I expect? Another mess; I guess it was ok to rearrange my couch and furniture. I'm used to it now, and I just expect something to be wrong.

Years go by. Bear grew to about the size of an actual bear, and it doesn't even surprise me if he tried to eat my neighbor's cat. I love this dog because now I have revenge on my neighbor whose dog thinks it's ok to produce on my lawn. Well, Bear makes sure his presents are shown on his lawn. When my neighbor sees the wonderful gifts, Bear proudly trots back home wagging his tail triumphantly.

My life has changed because of this dog, ironically, I get married to the asshole PetSmart worker who failed to help me with my dog problem, Sara, and I am greeted to a huge promotion at The New York Times as a journalist there, where I continue my adventures based on my furry friend. This means I have moved to NYC, which means a new home for a new family. We buy a house that contains a pool and I wonder who the first one to jump in it is?

Through the first few days at the new home, it looks like a tornado came through here: garbage bags torn apart, the new woodchip décor in the front lawn is obliterated, and my pool always seems to be muddy after Bear jumps in it. Life with Bear hasn't changed since day one, and from the looks of it, it never will change. It seems like Bear is a giant ball of energy, ready to explode at any

moment.

Since we're married now, Sara and I agreed to plan on a honeymoon. Now, that's all set, but leaving Bear behind is the only problem. Leaving a dog like that behind is like paying someone to kick you in the groin. We assign a dog-sitter, and I can't wait to see the aftermath of Tropical Storm Bear when I come home. Instead, there's something beyond of what I expected.

Bear has aged over the years, he's still been living wild and free, but his recent vet-appointment has shown signs of arthritis and cancer developing. In the meantime though, when Sara and I return we find the house clean as a whistle and no dog-sitter, but a motionless Bear lying on the floor. I immediately pick up Bear and bring him to the vet, nearly getting into two accidents on the way. I find out that he has developed cancer in his stomach, which will eventually spread throughout his whole body and there is no treatment for this.

"I'm sorry but there is no choice, either let him suffer for a few more days, or do it now," the doctor tells me, "I'll give you a minute to think about it."

I've come to realize that I need to do to what is best for my friend that changed my life. The pain he's been going through has crawled through me and this is no ordinary pain; it's like having needles implanted all over you along with your heart slowly being torn apart. I can't let a friend suffer any longer, but I can't say goodbye yet.

"This is hard for me, and it is probably harder for you, but there is no other choice," I say with each word a struggle to get out. "I don't want to say goodbye to you, it just can't happen yet,

"Even though you destroyed my house multiple times, you're such a good dog, and I want you to know that, nothing can replace you."

Then the doctor walks in, "Are you ready?" he asks.

The words are like stones in my heart, and eventually the "yes" finally squeaks out. I can't bear to watch, but I see the needle go in, and all I feel is Bear go cold as my hands lie on him; my body goes cold as well. It is a true stab in the heart, which the wound will never heal. But a bad outcome can also lead to better things.

I was wrong the whole time when Bear stood at my side, I never knew. I never knew that I would name a dog "Bear" that he was actually a she. Yes, during our honeymoon, Bear actually gave Sara and me some living presents for once.

Now, I have three Bear Jr.'s, and another long adventure ahead of me with not one, but with three furry friends now.

Bear's time has passed now, but that doesn't mean I don't think about her still. Bear was a dog that changed and saved my life, and I will always guarantee that. Throughout my life, Bear was the missing piece of me. ● ● ●

## Freak Show

### Canyon Hicks

I wake up to complete darkness, I can barely move as my arms and legs are tied up so tight by rope that everytime I try to move a shock of pain goes down my spine. I try to scream but I can feel the stitching inside of my mouth preventing the slightest movement. I noticed the horrid smell of something rotting in the darkness with me. The last thing I remember was going to this circus in the woods last night with my girlfriend, buying us a drink and then everything started to fade.

The lights above me started to flicker on and then I look around to see that I am not the only person trapped here. I'm in some type of warehouse in a small cage big enough to fit a person and all around me are people tied up just like me with their mouths stitched shut as well. Something not only caught my attention, but everyone else's as we all looked up in the same direction. There was a huge pile of dead people and all sorts of body parts sitting next to a huge furnace. I wanted to gag and throw up from the sight and smell, but that wasn't an option with my mouth stitched shut. I counted twenty two other people, men and women of all ages tied up just like me with the same sad look of depression on their faces.

All sorts of thoughts flooded through my head like where the fuck was I and was this just some sick dream I was having. I just wanted to wake up from this nightmare and go on living my normal life with my girlfriend back in our home in Houston. I remember her saying to me, "Paul you have so much strength and so much desire to push forward in life and I am so proud of all that you have accomplished, I am so grateful to have you in my life." Tears started to come down my face and I realized that this was no dream but just a fucked up situation that I found myself in.

A door behind me swung open and the sound of footsteps came towards me. I turned around and saw this huge man dressed in a clown costume that was covered in blood. The clown had to be at least 6 foot 5 and wore a lot of clown makeup. He was bald and looked to be in his 40s. In one hand he carried a closed duffle bag and in the other hand he held an axe with dried blood on it.

"That was the same clown from the circus," I thought to myself.

He walked passed us dragging his axe across the floor and then he turned around at the end and walked back until he stopped at this cage and just stared at the women in there. The duffle bag was dropped to the ground. The clown reached down into it and pulled out a balloon that he blew up and made it into a dog shape. This woman just sat there kicking the cage in fear and the clown screamed and started freaking out. He reached down, opened the lock and dragged the girl out where he punched her and she fell to the ground. The

clown grabbed his axe and began hitting the girl as hard as he could, spraying himself and everyone in the cages nearby with blood. After the clown just screamed and grabbed the body and dragged her to the pile of other bodies where he then turned the furnace on. He started grabbing arms, legs, all sorts of body parts and just started throwing them into the furnace. You could tell this clown was furious he was talking to himself and kept shouting things out that didn't really make sense.

"Fuck them, fuck, fuck, fuck, kill, kill, I will kill them, all!" The clown kept muttering to himself.

I woke up the next day when the sun shone through the top part of the warehouse and put a glare right on my face. It had to be early the sun was just coming out and everyone else seemed to be asleep except for a few people that just sat in the corner of their cage crying. I have so much to say. So many ideas that I had to help get us out of here but I couldn't talk and I could feel pain every time I tried to move my lips.

"I'm not going to die here, not like this," I kept telling myself.

I moved to the back of my cage where something sharp poked me in the back I looked around to see a piece of metal sticking out from the cage. So many thoughts and ideas went through my head at that very moment. I rubbed the rope that had my hands tied together on the sharp piece of metal and could feel it getting looser. After about a good five minutes I managed to cut the rope loose and I rushed to untie the rope on my ankles. I got the rope off and started to hit the cage to wake up the people next to me to show what I have done. You could see the look in their eyes and only one word came across that I could think of and that was "hope". I was going to get out of here and get help to free the others that are trapped.

The factory lights turned on above me and I knew the clown was back so I had to put the ropes back on my legs and arms but loose enough where I could just get out of them. This time the clown went over and turned the furnace on right away and then walked over to us and stood in the middle of all of the cages where he just looked around at all of us. He had the same set up, an axe and the closed duffle bag. The clown reached into the duffle bag to pull out three juggling pins and began to juggle. I had an idea to get his attention that just might get me out of here. I started making noises with my mouth shut and kicking the cage and just then the clown stopped juggling and the pins fell straight to the ground. He turned his head slowly to look at me with this devilish look on his face like he wanted to kill me. The axe was picked up and he slowly walked over to my cage and bent down where he stared me right in the eyes. He slowly unlocked the cage door. He didn't come right in though this time like he did with the last girl he murdered. The clown stepped back almost as if he was waiting for me to just get up and come out.

"He knows," I thought to myself.



Just then he ran into my cage and grabbed me and dragged me out. I slipped the rope off and tackled him to the ground and the axe fell out of his hand. I got up quick and ran towards the door that the clown would always come through at the front of the warehouse. I just kept running through all these rooms in the warehouse and I came out to this slaughter house where workers were there slaughtering and hanging cow meat up on hooks. They all looked at me surprised and I couldn't say anything. I turned and kept running through where all the cow meat was hung up. Just then the workers scrambled to grab their cutting knives and any other type of thing that could be used as a weapon near by and chased after me too. I looked back to see the clown chasing me with his axe along with the workers from the slaughter house and I just ran faster. This warehouse was huge; it almost seemed like there was no exit to this place.

These stairs came out of nowhere and I rushed down them and found this large wooden door that I pushed open and found myself staring at woods right in front of me. Footsteps came from the stairs so I ran straight into this large forest in front of me. This warehouse was in the middle of the woods facing a river and nothing else in sight. The woods made it dark as I was running through it, hoping to come out to a road where I could find help.

I ran for what seemed like a good five miles and I was winded when I came upon a road that was in the middle of nowhere. Nothing around me looked familiar almost as if I was in a different city, it was just endless woods. I heard something coming from the road, I looked and in the distance I could see a car coming. Hope just rushed through me as I ran to the road jumping up and down to try getting their attention but the car was still too far away. Just as I thought I found help I could hear the sound of something being thrown and I looked back as this axe came right towards my head. I dropped to my knees and just then my eyes rolled in the back of my head and

**complete  
darkness  
rolled in.**



The Day Comes by Yiming Chen

## The Cursed Mask Laughs Coldly

Akane Kusumoto

Within seconds, I hit the breaks sharply. A tree had fallen over in the middle of the road. It's cold as winter has taken its full blown grasp on the earth around us, I stepped out of the car to take a closer look and I saw that there was a letter stuck in the tree. I closed the door behind me, and then took it by the hand. I opened the letter to find, which says, "Don't join this charity or you'll regret it. By the phantom of the cursed masks."

Even though I am an ordinary college student, I was unexpectedly invited to this charity event that billionaire Mr. Smith presided on. The reason I was picked for this charity event was because I belonged to the volunteer club at my college and the activities I had done were recognized and appreciated by the state. Mr. Smith also takes part in volunteer activities and sometimes he invites someone who has achieved magnificent results. Because I am the president of the club, I had to join this event. After taking the note from the tree and removing it from the roadway, I precede on towards my destination- the mansion. At first I shuddered but I decide to think there won't be any mischief. After a few minutes, when I arrived at Mr. Smith's mansion which is really luxurious and gorgeous. There are already three people in front of the entrance to the mansion. I easily find who is Mr. Smith and introduce myself.

"Hi! I am John, Mr. Smith. Nice to meet you guys." I politely add to the other guests at the entrance of the mansion. Then we introduce ourselves to each other. There are three other men, one is Kevin and he is a photographer. The other is Mike and he is a baseball player. Another man is Taylor. According to him, his mother had been working as a maid at Mr. Smith's mansion, but she had a car accident that killed people and his mother had committed suicide. Because of this, Mr. Smith has been taking care of him for a long time and started to hold the charity events willingly for that type of person. While we are talking two entrances opened at the same time. Two maids came out from each entrance and they say welcome at the same time.

A maid says, "Hello John and Taylor, please enter on this side, the east entrance."

The other maid says, "Kevin and Mike, please enter on this side, the west entrance."

I am wondering why we have to enter different entrances so I ask them.

"This mansion is divided between east and west. The guests who will be staying on the west side will use the west entrance. The guests who will be staying on the east side will use the east entrance. That is this mansion's rule. In this mansion, if one does not follow the rules, they will face terrible consequences," say the maids.

"Terrible consequences? Why?" They answer frantically.

"Because this place is where the phantom of the cursed masks resides."

After we go through the entrance, the maid asks us to wait in the mask's room. When I come in the room with Taylor, Kevin and Mike also enter the same room from the other door that is located on the opposite side. I figure out that this room connects the east and west sides of the mansion. All around us in glass cases there are masks from many places all around the world. After searching the room more fully I find a remote control. Out of curiosity, I push it. Suddenly, a curtain on the wall is pulled aside where I find that there are a large number of masks. These masks were white, with closed slanted lines for the eyes, and the mouth was curved upward, almost expressing a sinister laugh. At the time, Mr. Smith and his secretary, Alyssa, appear again.

"As you see, these are Miguel's Masks. It is said that just before Spain's artist Miguel died, he made these 200 masks. They are known as the cursed masks."

According to his story, although he had great talent, he was a miserable artist. The talent consumed him then he lost his family, position, and money. After falling into an emotional devastation, he started to make these masks as if he were possessed. The moment he finished all 200 of them, he committed suicide. The masks around his body collected the blood that came out; it was as if the masks themselves had sucked it out of him. Later, his fame was revived and these masks went to many different people. But for those who had them, many died tragically and people fear them now. At that exact moment, I remembered the letter I found.

"Mr. Smith. A real person's evil may be more fearsome than any curse. You see, on my way here, the road was blocked by a tree and this was stuck on it," I said while showing the letter. Surprisingly, other guests have the same letter. I think we'd better call the police, but Mr. Smith refuses, because a lot of mischief like this has happened before. He just says, "Don't worry about the letters! Let's get dinner together!"

At this time everyone begins to join the dinner table and dine together. They all begin asking questions for Mr. Smith and the other guests about their lives. Mostly we talk about how we came to participate in volunteer activities and I also explain what I usually do in the club. Since Mike is a baseball player he is familiar with children and he sometimes teaches baseball at some orphan asylums. He donates to the children there. Kevin actually lost his wife in an unfortunate accident. Because of this, he had not gotten over the shock for long time. Since meeting Mr. Smith, he decided to help the people who are in the same circumstances with him.

After having fun with delicious foods and drinks, the maid says "I'm sorry everyone. We have to finish dinner before midnight. Everyone should head back to their part of the rooms, and during the night the doors will be

locked. No one can go from the east side to the west side.”

“Why is that?” proclaims Mike.

“It is because the masks come to life during the night, and like to make mischief.”

“No way!” Mike says.

“Okay everyone to your rooms.”

During the night, I get a phone call, saying,

“There will be blood spilled.”

“Who is this?”

“I am the phantom of the cursed mask.”

“What do you mean?” I say, but the person on the other line has already hung up. I quickly go out of my room. Outside, Taylor and a maid are there. They tell me that they have had the same phone call.

“What was that? What is going on?” I ask them.

She says, “I honestly have no idea but I am scared. I worry about everyone”.

She calls the other maid to ask what has happened.

After a few minutes, she says “I just talked to the other maid, she also got same phone call... I don't think it is just mischief. Let's find everyone and confirm that they are okay”.

We decide to go check on the mask room. When we reach the mask room, Kevin, Mike, Alyssa and the other maid come inside from the west side. Then we all found that there are no masks there. We were all frightened.

“What is this???” some screamed.

“We have to go to ask Mr. Smith what is going on.” I say.

However, when we arrive in front of his room, it is locked. He doesn't answer even though we knock. We get scared... what has happened to him? So we break down the door. Shockingly, he already died and the masks are around him.

After we call the police, they arrive and begin investigating the room. The police officers start to pick apart the room and examine what entrances could have been used to commit the murder. In the room, there are two doors. One in front of the bedroom, and another that is on the side of the bedroom. There are also two airtight windows which reside on the west side of the building. They then begin analyzing who was in the building at the time of the murder, who was on the east side of the bedroom, and who was on the west side. Kevin and Mike stayed on the west side, and on the east side resides Taylor and I.

“I figured it out! The criminal is John or Taylor because Mr. Smith's bedroom is located on the east side!” Mike suddenly says.

“Wait, wait! Remember, we could not open the door! Even though I stayed on the east side, I can't even get inside.”

“Right! I agree with John! That was a completely sealed room!” Taylor supports me. The police then begin to examine and come up with a conclusion on the possibilities.

“Yes, they are right. It is impossible to enter the room from the outside because there are two locks. The door is locked and there is a second metal lock, and although the room has airtight windows on the east side, it is too small for a human to go inside through the air lock.”

His partner says, “Another piece of strange evidence is the knife is covered in blood. Usually, when you hold a knife, you will only get blood on the knife part that is sharp, not on the hilt.”

Mike says, “The masks killed Mr. Smith!”

Kevin also says, “It's cursed!!!”

Alyssa says, “No way!!!”

“Hold on! Look at that! What is this?” Because I realize that one of the masks has the most blood around the mouth, the rest just have a little blood around the mouth.

“Indeed, it is odd,” a policeman says.

“See? I was right! The masks killed him!!!” Mike starts to scream.

While we are calming him down, the police reconsider the case from the beginning. I actually have something stuck in my mind...

“We also found that there are traces of strings in the airtight window, but still no idea.” A police says.

At the time, I put together all the events, and yell “I think I know the murderer!”

In my discovery, I think how the killer might have pulled off the murder. I think that because the air tight windows located above the door might not be big enough for a human arm to fit through, but you can fit a piece of string through the hole of the window, and on the piece of string each mask's mouth is open. So you can run the string through the hole of the mouth, one by one. As you can see, you can fit each 200 masks on the line of string through the mouth opening, and then through the airtight window, slipping them through the hole, one by one. At the end of the string, the murder weapon can be tied. When all 200 masks are finally through, you just pull the string and the masks fit together. If you can see, each mask is about 1.5 cm. After you pull the string and all the masks fit front to back, the masks together make up 3 meters- long enough to reach the victim's bed... right above the throat where you can stab the victim after pushing the last mask with a ruler, extending all the masks so they form a long enough projectile to reach the target.

Kevin says, “So who is the murderer?”

Then I take a deep breath and say, “The murderer is.... Taylor”.

Taylor says, “Why, why me???”

“Actually, something has been remaining in my mind.”



I start to explain why I think Taylor is the murderer. The reason why is that when I got the phone call, I also heard in the maid's room that the phone was also ringing, but I did not hear a phone ringing in Taylor's room. That's why I suspect, that Taylor was the one who called us.

"That's not enough evidence that I am the murderer,"

"I know. Besides I am on the east end of the building, not on the west end where Mr. Smith's Room is," Taylor says.

"Yes, that's right," says John.

"Even though, you are on the east end, I have figured out you don't need to be on the west end of the building to get to the room. Earlier how I described how the masks fit perfectly one by one with each other, and how they easily slip through the window, once the string with the knife attached to the end of it, is pulled, all 200 masks tighten up and is able to reach above the body to kill Mr. Smith."

"That is how you killed Mr. Smith; you are on the east side, right?"

Then I say, "If you're the murderer then you will have the string used for the masks still in your room."

Taylor is caught in his own trap and collapses to the floor. He says "Okay, Okay, you are right-- I killed Mr. Smith."

Taylor confesses why he killed Mr. Smith. Because, even though he told everyone his mother had a car accident that killed people, actually Mr. Smith had put all the blame on her. Taylor was with his mother at the time of the car accident and knew this was a lie. Mr. Smith had been taking care of him, but it is only because he wanted to hide the truth. He knew everything, but he decided to be with Mr. Smith to take revenge on him someday. Moreover, he knew the person whom Mr. Smith killed is Kevin's wife. That's why he didn't want Kevin to take part in the Charity event that Mr. Smith held. After we all know everything, Kevin just cries without saying anything. I think he couldn't hold a grudge or appreciate Taylor.

I feel like even though the story of the cursed masked ended up to be more of a superstition, a lot of people were killed by this legend that was made up. In the end though the legend of the cursed mask was kind of true. At the time, the masks seem to laugh coldly.



Death of Pyjamas by Tom Callister

# Art / Photo



Yiming Chen



The Shady Boys By Jill Cadena David



Liz Raggi





Kelsey White



Cons by Yiming Chen



Jill Cadena David





Kelsey White

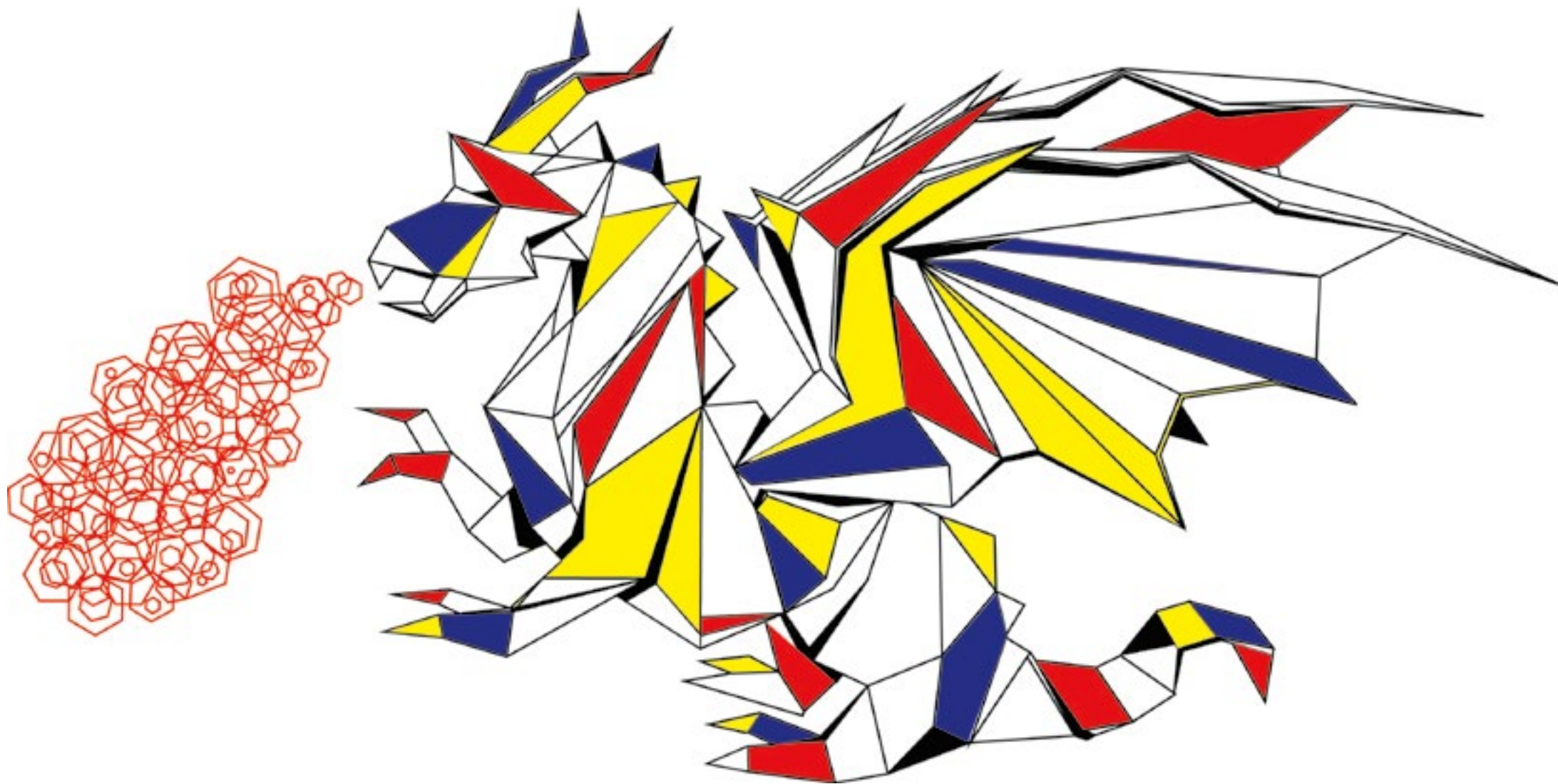


Kelsey White



Xanthian Lincoln





De Stijl Dragon by Akane Kusumoto



Karen Champion



Liz Raggi







Kelsey White



Xanthian Lincoln



Karen Champion



Karen Champion

# CCHA AWARD WINNERS

The 2015 issue of Phaethon won several awards in the Community College Humanities Association's literary magazine contest (Northeast Division, Small Colleges):

- \* 2nd place, Overall Publication
- \* 1st place, Artwork, Shunyu Yao
- \* 3rd place, Artwork, Xavier Goins
- \* 1st place, Fiction, Zachary Vercz

The award-winning submissions are presented here. The entire publication may be viewed in digital form at [Herkimer.edu/phaethon](http://Herkimer.edu/phaethon).



Xavier Goins



Shunyu Yao



## Poppy Fields and Prince Harry

Zachary P. Vercz

I was jostled back and forth in the turret of the truck as our convoy rumbled over the sand covered plains of the Helmand desert. The tobacco stung against the inside of my lip and gums. The rush from the nicotine kept me awake and alert. The sun was sinking off in the horizon. The cool desert air of the evening felt refreshing after having to endure temperatures upward of 100 degrees during the day. The smell of diesel fumes filled the air from the vehicles ahead and behind me. Tires kicked up sand and dust as we plunged forward. I pulled my balaclava up around my face and neck to protect me from the wind and sand. I grabbed ahold of the butt of my machine gun attempting to balance myself in the turret as the LVSR traversed over the uneven, rough desert terrain. Bedouins had set up camp off in the distance next to a gigantic boulder sticking up out of the sand. Their sheep wandered about aimlessly around the stone marker. I stared about at the lunar landscape marveling at the blood red light appearing from in between the clouds of the evening sky.

The convoy emerged out of the desert wasteland and approached the outer edges of the village of Marjah later in the evening. We were halted by a caravan of camels that were crossing the road on the outskirts of the village. The long column of animals took their time as they shuffled across the beaten dirt road spitting in between their high pitched moans. Off to the left of the road a young local boy was washing in the nearby creek while his donkey was tied to a pole with water jugs strapped to its back. The houses of Marjah were mostly made up of dry clay, mud, and stone. Old sheet metal and scrap material adorned most of the dwellings. Green shrubs and tall draping trees dotted the scenery. There were no street lamps or electricity as barrel fires burned outside along the road. An old Afghan man stood outside the front door of his house with his cane. He was dressed in a black robe and turban. His beard was tinted with orange dye and his fingernails were decorated with orange paint. He looked up at us with a disdain in his black eyes as we passed by. Marjah was heavily infiltrated with Taliban and an anxious nervousness began to grow in my stomach as our convoy slowly maneuvered through the roads and side streets of the village.

The sun had completely disappeared and was replaced by a sliver of moonlight peering through the night sky. Our convoy began to travel at a snail's pace through the village due to the lack of vision. I gripped the M240 and looked about intently, hunched down in the turret. I found myself focusing on the dark windows of the homes that lined the road. I could feel their eyes peering down at the passing trucks. The humming of the diesel engines was the only noise that could be heard in a village that very quickly turned as if it were a

ghost town.

The screeching sound of sheering metal stung my ears as a smoke cloud rushed passed my head. It felt as if my ear drums had burst when I felt the heat from the explosion in front of me. With ringing ears and blurred vision I tried to gather my wits to comprehend what exactly had happened. When the smoke, dust and debris settled the MRAP traveling ahead lay on its side in a ditch, burning. The front tire had been launched across the road and struck an Afghan home, crashing through its walls. The MRAPS front end lay in a heap of twisted debris. The cry from wounded Marines inside echoed through the night.

The radio screeched and screamed as my truck was ordered to the rear of the convoy to provide security. My driver turned the LVSR around, abruptly racing to the rear of the column. We passed by the Wrecker as it raced up to the IED site in an attempt to pull the MRAP out of the ditch. Over the loudspeakers of the village mosque, prayer music began to play. The village appeared to be coming back to life. The LVSR positioned itself horizontally, blocking off the road to the rear end of the convoy. Racking the bolt back on my 240, I strained my eyes trying to look through the darkness to witness any enemy activity. I stood ready to fire as I watched the outline of trees swaying in the wind. The eerie mosque music seemed as if it were growing ever louder.

An eternity seemed to pass within only a few moments. The adrenaline rush mixed with fear was something I had never quite experienced before. To my rear, the whizzing blades of the medevac could be heard approaching out of the night sky. Villagers started to appear out of their houses. The platoon Sergeant could be heard screaming Pashtun at them to get back and to stay in their homes. The chopper landed, kicking up dirt and debris to the right of the blast site. Working quickly, they loaded the wounded Marines onto the chopper, taking off as quickly as it appeared. The noise from the chopper blades slowly disappeared off in the distance.

The Wrecker and a group of Marines worked diligently in an attempt to wench the MRAP up out of the ditch. Some villagers began to approach my position through the dark. In shooting a pen flare at them I let them know not to come any further. I heard sporadic gunfire to my rear down the road about a mile at the front end of the convoy. A cold sweat overcame my body. The recovery effort was taking too long and my nerves were amplified. I thought I kept seeing random movement under the cover of the night but could not tell if my eyes were playing tricks on me. Out of the depths of the darkness a car with no headlights appeared. It was rapidly approaching towards me. Holding the trigger down, I fired two quick bursts at the front of the car. The flame from the muzzle of the machine gun lit up the sky as the weapon punched back repeatedly against my shoulder. The vehicle stopped dead. I could hear the doors of the car fly open and the occupants scurrying to get away. The prayer music still continued to play over the loudspeakers of the mosque echoing off the buildings

that surrounded us.

A call over the radio finally squawked out. The Wrecker crew had successfully retrieved the MRAP and was able to hook up for a tow. We would finally be moving out. Relief came over me as the LVSR straightened out and began to lurch forward to meet up with the rest of the convoy. We rolled out of Marjah under the cover of darkness as I felt I had escaped with my life.

Tired beyond exhaustion we continued on. The convoy traveled fast, not stopping for traffic or other vehicles that were unlucky enough to get in our way. We headed north, finally reaching paved roads as the morning sun rose up into the sky. I admired the scenery that passed by. Fields of crops, poppy, and hemp. Sporadic dwellings, ANA checkpoints riddled with bullet holes. Sheep and camels roamed about as children played on old burnt up Russian tanks. One small village possessed an old Ferris wheel in the center of town. As we reached further to the outskirts of Lashkar Gah, an ancient castle built by Alexander the Great dominated the skyline off to the distance on a high bluff. I thought about the great armies that had traveled the same terrain before me, the armies of Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the British Empire and the Soviet Union. Afghanistan truly was a land steeped in a history of bloodshed and warfare.

We approached the bridge leading into the entrance of the ancient city of Lashkar Gah. The ANA checkpoint there had been hit by a suicide car bomb the day prior, and blood was still stained on the asphalt crimson red and blackened by the blown up concrete barriers. The destroyed vehicles were pushed off to the side of the road in heaps of twisted metal. The local there on post waved us through as he gripped his AK47. Our convoy traveled over the Helmand River into the thousand year old capitol of the Province. The old bridge buckled under the weight of our trucks and I could hear stones falling and splashing into the river below.

We finally entered the city as if we were conquering 21st century crusaders. Young children ran up to our trucks waving and asking for food. The ancient city smelled of smoke and garbage. Men stood on rooftops looking as some Afghan women pulled their shawls, hiding their face down, pointing and waving. The city was bustling with activity as bazaars and markets were full. The roads were jam packed with carts being pulled by animals and outdated trucks and cars, some with Mercedes symbols tacked on the front of them. Stray animals lurked about everywhere.

We came to the center of the city passing by the famous Mosque that towered over the surrounding buildings. Various old monuments littered the streets. A water fountain with a world globe surrounded by doves stood in the center of the main traffic circle. Reaching the other side of the city we approached the NATO base located within a compound. The convoy approached the huge barricades of the base waiting for permission to enter. A mob of

Afghan children surrounded our trucks as we waited outside the base. They screamed and yelled and begged. We gave them what little food and water we had left in our trucks and some of us even took pictures with them. I threw down my last two bottles of water to a beautiful young Afghan girl who was holding onto the hands of her two little brothers.

After being cleared our vehicles rumbled into the tiny compound as the huge metal doors closed behind us after entering. We maneuvered through the checkpoints and barriers reaching the staging area. I finally was able to take off my helmet and plate carrier and hung them up on the side of the turret. I beat the dust and sand off of my uniform and wiped the sweat from my forehead as I reached into my cargo pocket and pulled out my cover. Hopping down off the truck I watched as the generators, refrigeration units, water, fuel and other necessities we had traveled so far to deliver were offloaded.

Tired, hungry, sore and filthy I walked to the chow hall located within the compound. It was filled with dozens of different NATO troops from all over the world. Estonians, Swedes, Canadians, Poles, Germans, Bahrainis, Georgians, and British. In the corner of the chow hall was even Prince Harry dining with his unit. People were crowding around him to shake his hand and get a glimpse of the famous Royal Family member. I finished my hot meal and returned to my truck.

After checking over my gear I climbed up into the cab. I gazed up into the sky, watching the clouds pass by from the opening of the turret. I thought about home, I thought about poppy fields and Prince Harry. I listened to the sounds of stray dogs barking and the calls to prayer from the mosques around the city.

“When you’re wounded an’ left on Afghanistan’s plains,  
An’ the women come out to cut up your remains,  
Just roll to your rifle an’ blow out your brains,  
An’ go to your Gawd like a soldier”  
– Rudyard Kipling -

## Poem with Backlighting

Matt Powers

He squeezes a small stuffed lamb  
And a squeaky voice sings,  
"Jesus loves me this I know  
For the Bible tells me so."  
He hugs the lamb closer,  
Its stockinged head nestled  
In the crook of his neck.  
For a moment  
God exists

And doesn't.



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