BURN MAGAZINE
PAR DEUX

It's Always a Pleasure to Burn
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
Dear Reader,

Our days seem to pass with a frantic stillness. Endeavoring the hours we navigate crowded impasses for quicker access, wait in dreadfully long lines with exhausted patience, and tap our petulant toes willing the subway car to only come, all so that we might get there faster. I have heard that the man who is in a hurry has nowhere to go.

Contemplate with me the purpose of our riddled striving. I believe that perhaps we anticipate every fleeting moment in the hope of finding some semblance of satisfaction. We await the minutes with quiet fanaticism without any solid dream or belief to hold fast to, our desires dispersing in constant flux. We desperately hustle without concrete purpose, floating on malleable clouds of caprice, our restless wandering betraying our restless hearts, longing for a channel or object of veneration. I ask you reader, for but a moment, to be passionate about language. Have faith in words, their effortful attempt to capture our flocking desires. I cannot promise that a poem will right the wrongs that have been done to you, or silence the murmuring of your discontented mind, but I hope for this volume of literary work to quiet the storm. Read with unobstructed eyes and believe in the letters. Let these expressions be your destination. No longer chase, anticipate, and suffer. Stay here for awhile and have faith.

Sincerely yours,
Chase Quinn
Managing Editor

Burn Magazine - A Boston University Undergraduate Literary Magazine

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Dedicated to the effort of Letters
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Landscape</td>
<td>Alexandra Appatova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Blasphemy of an Exodus</td>
<td>Ashish Premkumar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ashes</td>
<td>Matthew Lemoyne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cycles</td>
<td>Ryan DeBeasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Kristal Hang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Valentine’s Day, One Year Later</td>
<td>Liza Katz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Haiku for an Imagined Love</td>
<td>Jonathan Chin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My Dear</td>
<td>Kurt J. Lindboom-Broberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>In a Word</td>
<td>Kurt J. Lindboom-Broberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Speechless</td>
<td>Kristal Hang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I Should Know Better</td>
<td>Katie Uva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Coffee Table</td>
<td>Kirby Robinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Traveler</td>
<td>Jacqueline Motyl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Poem for Kim’s Mother</td>
<td>Meghan Schultz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Song of Daniel</td>
<td>Chase Quinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Sap Tree</td>
<td>Rayan Khan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Poem for Evan Schilling</td>
<td>Meghan Schultz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Isn’t it Funny</td>
<td>Kerry Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Mary Sullivan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Grave Marker</td>
<td>Sarah Ip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Gone to Borneo</td>
<td>Mary Sullivan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Lipstick</td>
<td>Liza Katz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Burlesque</td>
<td>Melissa Fabello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Name My Doll for Me</td>
<td>Brittney Watkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>A Poisoned Pleasure</td>
<td>The Uninvited Guest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alaxandra Appatova</td>
<td>Ryan Zanoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Winter, sexuality and boston university law school</td>
<td>POW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew Lemoyne</td>
<td>Sarah Ip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Thoughts on Rebirth</td>
<td>Politicians at Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kelsey Shelton</td>
<td>Kirby Robinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Orienteering</td>
<td>To Be: An Existential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Katie Uva</td>
<td>Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>At Low Tide</td>
<td>Kids These Days (don’t want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chris Havlin</td>
<td>God)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Natalia Bovkun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>White Noise</td>
<td>Daniel as the Soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ariella Gogol</td>
<td>Chase Quinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Golgotha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Andrew Kelly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Battle in John</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jonnie Grey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>The Purging of Icarus from Humanity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ashish Premkumar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>The Wives of Pindi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rayan Khan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Love Letters of an Electrician</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jonnie Grey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Excerpt from the Cookbook of Folly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timothy Tilbe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Landscape

Alexandra Appatova

There is certainly merit in
The Big Picture
But never overlook
The dew-covered web

Seeing the entire landscape
Is recognizing
The million mysteries within it:
The ant hill and the ant

Every part coming together
Unity
The rotting stump, the nest
Seem as One, but

From a million separate pieces
Of brown leaves and spiders,
Wilted grass and daisies,
The Whole is full of secrets.
The Blasphemy of an Exodus

Ashish Premkumar

This is the time of outrageous convictions.

They drip onto
fertile soil, black
with the senses
    of bewilderment and
curiosity flowing
from loose tongues.

Words coalesce, sprouting
shoots of fresh green
of our diaspora, of the
wandering that has
damned us to gaze
into what we cannot
    fathom, what
brutal force we
cannot deem to interpret
with our fashioned hearts.

It only grows within us,
blending into the
scenery of this
    majestic field, the
one birthed by our
pasts, segregated as
we (seemingly unaware) grew
towards blindness-

darkness that overwhelms
smothering us
in the fury of
velvet wrenching into
the smooth interior
of a mouth
forever drowning out
the sounds that grew
so passionate from
heaving chests.

Now no water will wash
our contorted bodies;
Jesus abdicates
his bloody throne,
tearing his thorn’d
crown from his
head;

we stare into the
soil inching between
out toes and find
the growing fear
that the ground is
shifting, and we
must bend to
have our faces
taste its sharp flavor.
Ashes

Matthew Lemoyne

) )

a man who
cannot
live with
Himself

( treads
sidewalks with

eyes only,
faceless wonder,

worshipper of
sunday mornings
and the ephemerality

of fourth-stage sleep
and mattresses

smelling still of
floral perfume that,

just last night,

was as vivid
as the face

he never had )

dies in his
sleep each time

he awakens

(  

---

3
Cycles
Ryan DeBeasi

The last leaves of fall cling to the branches, trembling in the tumult. The wind whispers a challenge and they answer it. In the end they are ripped apart, carried away in the gusts. Their perseverance is no less noble for it.

Things begin to change.

Encrusted with daggers of ice, caked with snow, the empty limbs refuse to snap in the wind.

They wait in silence...

Their tenacity is not in vain. Small green specks push through the thawed bark, giving way to timid, brilliant white petals.

They grow.

Summer brings fragrant air and swelt’ring nights, cooling breezes, leaves green and bright.

Eventually, though, this too must end. The colors fade and fall returns to consume what’s left.

Etcetera.
Time

Kristal Hang

I see the tears forming in your eyes
which will inevitably fall in a snowball effect
as water rushes over the dam.
What pains me isn’t that you’re crying.
What pains me is that I can’t do anything to stop the tears.
Not this time.
Every other time, I had the right poem to deliver.
I would always convince you in a haiku
that Josh didn’t deserve you because his head was filled
with only narcissism (and you deserve ninety percent, not two)
or that Kevin was (nicely stated) a big jerk.
I had a villanelle for you every time your sister made you angry.
I always had the limerick to change your frown.
But not this time.
This time, your pain runs deeper than a broken heart or a little steam.
In my head I compose sonnets, tankas, ballads,
and even free verse poems (which you know I hate)
but I know none will make you smile now.
I can only write you an epitaph to personify your grief
(although I know I can never comprehend the extent
of what you’re going through),
to memorialize the part of you that died
but I know that despite how beautiful it may be,
it will only make you cry harder.
So for now I offer you my shoulder, silence,
and a prayer that you’ll have more time than she.
Valentine’s Day, One Year Later

Liza Katz

I. the rain on my roof at night
drums the beat of a song,
soft and steady,
with no beginning and no end
kind of like all the years.
lately i’ve found time is the only thing
that is truly invincible
tireless as we may seem,
the rain and i.
you must have thought i was foolish
and i can’t say i blame you.
can we even exist with no beginning or end?
i guess i was too tangible for you.
you liked to shout my name down hallways,
then disappear.
you were more real to me than a lot of things
and i wanted to keep you that way
before i felt my grasp loosening
and you slipping
like water between the cracks of my fingers.

II. the past can freeze over
like pools in February where the street meets the curb
where i used to pretend i was a figure skater,
spinning clumsy pirouettes in snow boots.
this was before i came to accept the futility
of doing anything with all my heart.
i learned too late
and thawed –
didn’t we know it all had to come out sometime –
a river of tears
that fell like rain down a glass window
until my eyes subsided.
but the river remains
and runs
(salt water never freezes)
faster with each passing year.
i’m tiptoeing the banks
trying to keep pace
Valentine, i’ll miss you.
Haiku for an Imagined Love:
This is My Tiny Language of Dust

Jonathan Chin

Teach me the salt roads
of your body so I know
your East-West, North-South.

Together we were
naked body honesty
and short-breath lovers.

Every time we kiss
I learn your name in Turkish
though pronounced backwards.

She quakes; her song bends,
breaks. Too vibrant, her air shakes.
Mirage – her name, taste.

My broken Latin
writes you of Pax Romana
meaning peace and love.

I watch star systems
run streaks on midnight skin
like healed-over scars
and learn to maintain
redundant passions. You are
my guarded refrain.

Checklist: 1 - press nose
to belly. 2 - mumble words
that sound like your name.

When I sleep, I dream
timidly vivid against
annihilation.
I thrash memories
hoping commotion's enough
for thought, emotion.
She watches a while
before smiling and folds her
body into mine.
She counts with me the
permanence her pulse repeats;
hand in hand we sleep.

Morning came quick but
we closed our eyes, kissed through that
darkness improvised.

I guess the closest
thing to your bed is sleeping
under a warm rain.
My Dear

Kurt J. Lindboom-Broberg

There's a hole in this window -
it's letting air in
and I'm getting colder
while I sit here
and wait.
I look to the ceiling -
back to floor -
Are you ready yet I say;
No answer

There's a feeling -
Remind me.

The words are subsiding
in my head -
rewinding
to a place
less confining
my dear.
In a Word

Kurt J. Lindboom-Broberg

Out on a limb

with a word quite unable
to figure it out.

Locked up inside -
have you heard
through the window
i'm looking out,
there's answers to questions
ears never heard;
paths for those lost
among reason and word.

Climb to the top.

When you've found what was lost -
when you've figured it out
I give you a word
with answers unturned -

figure it out.
Speechless

Kristal Hang

You can see her through the frosted window of Mrs. Toutfrey’s Coffee and Tea Shop situated on Main Street, in the heart of town. Snow clings to your glasses, but you see her seated facing Raven Street, her thin fingers (she probably plays piano) clasped around a white ceramic mug. The way her long brown hair falls softly at the ends and the way she sits with a soft curve in her back (with her body cupped around the warmth of the mug) tells you she is a tea kind of girl: Earl Grey, with one teaspoon of sugar. You can’t see her face or the cover of the book she’s reading, but you know it’s her; you can sense it.

One of your black leather gloves drops into a clean pile of newly-fallen snow, but you don’t seem to notice. You only notice how well that black sweater suits her. You don’t notice that your to-do list has fallen out of your pocket as well, the one on which your mother wrote the names of all the people she had forgotten to buy Christmas presents for... You do notice that she never once looks up from her book, and you wonder if she realizes that you’re there at all.

You hear your cell phone ring in the side pocket of your coat, but you don’t bother to answer it. It’s probably your mother anyway, calling to tell you to pick up more vanilla extract for the sugar cookies, or to remind you that Uncle Edward is lactose intolerant but doesn’t appreciate fruit baskets. The phone beeps, indicating a new voicemail. You’ll listen to it, along with the other seven, later (which means never).

Meanwhile, she flips another page of her book. Maybe it’s Pride and Prejudice, you remember once she mentioned. Maybe she was one of her favorite writers of all time, in addition to other classic writers you don’t know because you don’t read. You were supposed to read Pride and Prejudice for sophomore English, only you didn’t. Now you wish you had.

Her name is Sloane. Sloane Shakespeare. Everyone confuses it with Shakespeare (even you know who William Shakespeare is) and they always wonder if she is related to him somewhere in her family tree history. She isn’t, because it’s S-H-A-K-E-S-P-E-A-R-E, not S-H-A-K-E-S-P-E-A-R-E. She wishes Shakespeare’s own literary blood ran through her. She still writes poetry anyway, and she’s damn good at it.

The first moment you had a feeling that you’d see her today was at Martin’s Toy Shop on the opposite end of Main Street. You purchased a red fire truck for little David but before that you passed the dress-up aisle. Fashioning a sorcerer’s hat and magic fairy wand, you thought, I bet Sloane never wore these. You looked in the mirror and realized what a goofball you were being, so you took them off and put them back on.
shelf. But as you put the wand back in its container, a spark shot through your mind, one brief thought: I’m going to see Sloane today. And you were sure of it.

When you went to Hallmark to buy an ornament for Aunt Mildred, your eyes spotted a small carousel of unicorns, each one delicately hand-painted. It reminded you of Sloane, specifically her laugh, because it was musical and joyous and pure. The green pen set at the drug store also reminded you of Sloane: you remember that she only writes her poetry in green ink. A dash of pepper reminded you of her culinary dreams; man with a yellow puppy wearing a small knit sweater reminded you of her greatest fear.

You looked forward to the moment that you’d see her ever since ten fifteen that morning. Last night, she hadn’t told you where she might be. She could be anywhere, Filene’s, picking up a last-minute present for her father, Kane’s Booksellers, browsing through the new fiction selection, the grocery store, buying food for the family. But of all the places in town, you found her in Mrs. Toutfrey’s. There she is, still sipping her tea. It’s nearly empty, which means she will be leaving soon.

Your heartbeat quickens. Instead of bump-bump-bump, it becomes bumpbumpbump. Should you go in to say hello? Of course you should, but you are so overcome with love and anxiety that you can’t move your legs. Oh no, she’s getting up. It’s now or never. You’re so afraid (you never do anything impulsive) but the love inside you is greater like a huge lump in your throat that you can’t hold down and you can’t control and it just keeps creeping up and up and up your throat until you vomit all over the floor but feel better after doing it. You remember what Uncle Edward tells you every year on your birthday, right before you make a wish, that life’s too short and that love, if not acted upon, will disappear like a shooting star, never to be caught again. You take a deep breath. Then you push open the glass doors.

Immediately you are overwhelmed with the aroma of coffee, and you think of the lump in your throat, but then you see her again, putting away her mug in the dirty dish- es basket, and all you think is Sloane. She looks exactly as she did last night in your dreams, and every night in your dreams. She is so beautiful that you’d know her anywhere, and today it is here. You’d remember her, you told her. But she said she wasn’t sure if she’d remember you, not because she wasn’t in love with you, but because she had such a terrible memory, especially from her subconscious mind. But you laughed because you know that a love like this isn’t easily forgotten.

You were right: she is nearly halfway in Pride and Prejudice (the Bantam Classics edition). She looks down at her feet as she walks toward the door and your chances of procrastinating are over so you seize the moment and you walk right up to her and take her by the hands (so that she drops her book) and turn her to face you and put her arms around her waist and then you kiss her.
Her lips are soft and lush, a residue of Earl Grey flavor still lingering like lipstick. Her body feels frail and stiff and cold, even with that thick sweater she is wearing. You’ve never kissed a girl before but you know this feels right and you’re doing it right and that this is what love is like.

When you pull away you smile and look to see if she’s smiling too, if she’s sharing the same happiness at finally finding her soul mate, the one she met in dreams. You try to read her face. Her green eyes are large with astonishment. She’s probably just astonished to see you (she can’t believe it’s really you!), astonished that her life goal is complete.

She pushes the glass door open with the side of her body and runs down Main Street without a word, and you’re left with only the space in which she stood only seconds ago. You try to comprehend what just happened. But then you see the book with its dog-eared cover. You smile because this is Cinderella’s glass slipper. You’ll find her, return it, and live happily ever after because you know that this is what true love is.
I Should Know Better

Katie Uva

It's too cold to sit outside
But the past week fooled us, made us
Think that maybe spring would come
Even though it's far too soon

We're sitting our same old way, leaning back
In precarious chairs
Speaking well worn words
Sharing jokes that go unspoken
Because we know them all by heart

You laugh at how my little legs dangle
And my jacket is too big
And I laugh at how you laugh at me
And how I don't mind

I should know better, but I've been
Thinking teenage thoughts
Writing poems rejoicing in
How I write poems
Watching gray skies and
Making dramatic line breaks,
Hoping that will soothe me, move
Time forward, make sense that someone else
Can see, that lasts a little longer
That might be something new this time
For real, for true, for not just me

Winter ends when winter ends
And I should know better
But last week was warm
And I don't.
Coffee Table

Kirby Robinson

A bathroom mirror mounted
On cinder block stilts,
Sells for a week's salary,
And sits at the center of my room,
reflecting a landscape of items.

An unfinished game of cards
Skirts the shores nearest my couch.
Royalty and the lesser alike
Bathe in the waters of their
Perfect reflection.

Beyond them the wilting
Pages of a Shakespearean play,
Borrowed from the library
Not since the Nixon day's,
Now lies open like a Geisha's fan.

In the background stand
three shining peaks
Of dormant and empty
Corona bottles, a slice of lime
Still bemanning their bottom.

Do not ask about my astrology
Nor take my palm in yours.
But look to my table and you will see
The mind's trapped barn-swallow,
in this, the landscape of my psychology.
The Traveler

Jacqueline Motyl

He was cultured. He hung his Picasso next to his O’Keefe and drank café noir every morning for breakfast. His suitcase served as his passport, slapped with stickers of all the different places he’d been. Shanghai, Prague, St. Tropez, Egypt, Madrid. He was constantly on the move, traveling.

You are cultured too, but in a different way. You are cultured in that you have some Ferragamo, some Louboutin, some Choo, and that when shopping you are never afraid to venture into an unheard of store. You enjoy change as well, switching seamlessly between Dostoyevsky and Vogue. Like him, you love to travel. CBGB, the corner bookstore, and Lucky J’s Thrift Shop are some of your favorite destinations.

Yes, you and Michael are too very different people. You met by chance one day over three months ago, at the small coffee shop that is like a second home to you. You were hoping to snatch the last blueberry muffin before heading on your way to work. And Michael, he was there getting his café noir. The morning crowd swarmed, cramming the tiny shop with much more than its maximum capacity. There was a bump, an apology, a glance, and then a smile.

Michael never left for Morocco the next day. He stayed in New York. It had been the longest he had ever stayed in one place. You knew that sooner or later his habits would prevail, his inclination to always be moving would overwhelm him, and he would leave. Your friends told you this too, but you wouldn’t listen, because that’s what people do when they’re in love – they don’t listen.

Your love was quick, no lengthy novel, just a children’s book, short yet fulfilling. He had truly become your first true love, in every meaning of the term. He smiled when you smiled. He laughed when you laughed. Before long you finished each other’s sentences and instinctively knew one another’s moves and habits.

“I think we have reached a dead end,” he tells you one day in October. “There is nothing left for me here. I’m leaving. I have a flight to Paris in the morning.”

You study the bag in your hand. The food you had bought on your way home from work now seems to be getting heavier and heavier, begging you to drop it to the ground. The small dinner for two that you had planned for tonight is not going to happen. Memories rush through your mind, culminating in the present. “Then I’ll come with you,” you finally tell him.
“No,” he says. “It’s not that I don’t love you. I just need to be alone for a while. I can’t explain it.” He kisses you and walks towards the door, headed back to the cheap hotel room that he has been staying in for almost three months.

You are in shambles, mascara running down your face, wiping the tears from your eyes so that you can catch one last glimpse of him as he leaves. He pauses at the doorway, his back facing you, and the light from the hall illuminates the contours of his body. There is silence, then a sigh, and he is gone.

You don’t know what to do. Thoughts of your future together, traveling the world, become but a distant memory. The hills of Rome, the ancient terracotta soldiers of China, and the Hagia Sophia vanish before your eyes. Part of you knew it would come to this; that one day, he would leave. You just never thought it would be this soon. If love is truly the most powerful force in the world, you think, why can’t it make him stay?

You’re friends are no help. “I told you so,” is all they have to offer. It’s mid-November. The Christmas decorations seem to go up earlier every year. Everywhere you turn there is love, if not for another human being, then simply for the holiday itself. You feel left out, unable to share the time with someone you love.

A letter arrives, postmarked from Malta. You know whom it’s from. You choose not to open it, knowing that his words will not help you overcome your heartache, but only serve as a catalyst, plunging you deeper into despair. He has moved on, you tell yourself.

So you try to move on, too. You opt for change, telling your landlord that this will be your last monthly payment. You start collecting functional cardboard boxes from dumpsters on the side of the street. Everything slowly makes its way into a bin separated into books, movies, linens, shoes, clothing. You place the final knickknack into its respected box. It is a picture of the two of you. You sit, frozen in time, both you smiling, hair blowing, noses red from the cold, at the top of the Empire State Building in winter. It had been something he had wanted to do, something that, in all of his visits to New York, he had never done. Thinking back, it was the first time you had been there, too. A New York City native all your life and yet there were still the places there still exist new adventures. If only he would realize, you wish, that in familiar places there still exist new adventures.

The movers place the last of the furniture into the truck as angry cab drives honk incessantly, waiting to get through the narrow alley, eager for their next fair. directions you give the movers are clear. The furniture is to go to Chicago, to your cousin’s house where you will stay until you find a place of your own. Wearily, you send them on their way, praying that your belongings make it to your new home.
Your flight is delayed. At the newsstand in the terminal, you decide on a book, a touching love story that will no doubt depress you more than entertain you. You sit at the cheap coffee shop next to the gate, your flight long overdue, the last blueberry muffin satisfying the grumbling in your stomach as you flip through the new book, reading the very last line first, as always.

The airport teems with people from all over the world. Some are coming, some are going, all are rushing. Despite your best efforts, you begin to wonder where he is now. Has he found someone new? Will he ever change? Will he come back to you? There is still a smidgen of hope in the farthest crevice of your heart that believes that he will.

The sharp, authoritative voice rings from the speaker’s above your head, announcing that your flight has begun to board. You look up into the chaos that surrounds you, and happen to spot a familiar face out of the corner of your eye. There he is, ordering his café noir. He sees you too and smiles, his teeth whiter, his skin tanner, his hair longer.

“I see you got my letter. Though, I didn’t expect you to pick me up at the airport,” he says as he walks over to you. He stops short and notices the boarding pass that is budding out of your handbag. “Oh, I guess it seems I almost missed you. Where you off to?”

“Chicago,” you say.

“Mind if I join you?”
Poem for Kim's Mother

Meghan Schultz

I should like nothing more
than to enter my
mother's veins,
armor-clad,
and drive the disease,
like the snakes of
Ireland,
from her
blood
-Song of Daniel

Chase Quinn

I have long been waiting here, on this roof top,
the country between us,
a distance I could never close,
a gaze I could not shut down.
By this state divided, I implore you.
Do not endure this kingdom-rule of the past.

Unblinking I’ve searched the sky
and it is free of the boundaries that disreader us,
formed out of the politics of tragedy,
unmoved by my diplomacy, Longing.
And so we remain:
me here
you there
with just the moon and star, our commemorative banner,
to part the door ajar,
earth bound by memory.

After the queens death, mounting her low slung chariot to the stars,
the landscape changed.
Ravaged by civil war,
our orphaned hearts, without reign, wandered.
I went unfed for days in that time.
You manning the rebellion-
me...starving for peace.

Soon came a time when we would part.
You fled to the east, and how I missed you.
There were no letters,
only the common recollection of violence, failed campaigns.
Choosing the life of a renegade you passed from sight like some chamaeleon moth,
the gaps between us ever widening,
the confines of this rule ever acute.
My lips learned not to part,
discovering the safety of silence.
I would not betray our understanding, our secret plans,
the power over that fragmented prison, the beating against that wall,
the fascist regime of time.
In my waking hours I sit upon this rooftop waiting, believing that I do not gaze the stars alone, knowing that the years have tempered my appetite for reform, blunted my sharp-tipped sorrow, disarming me of that blade, and I wander where you are star gazer, what keeps you from me....
The Sap tree

Rayan Khan

It knows nothing about the wind, harboring no such protracted features like the hirsute willow to warn of approaching breezes. It is more like a man, who one day decided to take up a cause in the dirt, his squat arms spilt out before him. This is why the tree looks like it's ready to embrace a host of ideas.

It's worth a real study, the way the earth can impart so much to children. They snake around with their rounded limbs till they have accumulated all sorts of what nots. When I was young we thought that the tree gave us magic. The sequined barks poke to us through the infinitesimal bits of gum left in our pink paws. Our mothers would always ask us where it came from.

It was the only structure from the wild lawns that truly esteemed its owner. When my grandfather walked by the tree always seemed to bow lower than it did when we were around. Maybe it was because he was so tall and we were like small mottled leaves in front of it. My little cousin thought the tree was sad, hence the teary gum production.

A million years later I think she was right. The day my grandfather was similarly planted in the ground we didn't know what to do with the many hundred strands of gum sap.
Poem for Evan Schilling

Meghan Schultz

You did not plan for this.
You did not plan the pieces you would leave us
Although you left us many and not enough.
When you had your fill of this place
And we lifted and held you
Aloft on our shoulders
You did not intend to relieve us of our burden
Evan Schilling, parts of ourselves are fooled and
Are waiting for you to come home.
Isn't it Funny?

Kerry Miller

isn't it funny how some things stick?
and others fall away like shedding skin
like you are shedding me
like you are the sun and i am the snow
and i melt away from you
desperate to stay but
a causal relationship for
nature's way of keeping peace
your fire touched my ice
and now my eyes leak water
Untitled

Mary Sullivan

I buried you so long ago
that now that I remember
where you are stashed
and dig you up
there is nothing but teeth
no substance
but substantial evidence
that you once were more than teeth
I could find your dental records if I wanted
I stopped by the Judas tree again
to pay my respects
but there was another funeral
replacing yours
and I never wish to see that again
so I will never go back
I will only visit your grave
unmarked and ear marked
for only me
to set another stone upon
Grave Marker

Sarah Ip

A Series. For the victims of the Khmer Rouge and those tortured and executed under Pol Pot. For victims and survivors everywhere.

1.
Death and decay
Can you smell the stench
Decomposing away
Blood-curdling how they
Ground you down to
Granules of mortar
Chopped up your will
Into thinly sliced portions
Razor-speared your skull
Pot roast on a skewer
How can they make you
Believe in the untruths?
You load the cartridge
Hold the butt to your side
Dangling loosely
The rifle pinpointed at
Your enemy:
DIE!
Orphaned at seven
Never given a chance
You march in procession
Hunting down Youns
Your strength spent
But you see they failed
To tell you one thing
Your enemy lies not
In ambush huddled in
The jungle of thick hedge

2.
What’s that rustle
A time bomb
Tick-tick
You twist
Barrel aiming for the brush
Now you break out in sweat
Charged by adrenaline rush
Crunch-crunch
Pronounces the death march
Leaves rustle underfoot
Now jolted alive by
A thud crashing your ribs
Scarlet drizzling
Viscerally it oozes from
Bloodshot lids wide-eyed
Free-falling from foreign skies

I am the dirt
A pile of manure
I am flesh and bones
And dust.

The phantoms still cling
Ironed to your shirt
The garment reeks of smoke
Smog fills dizzying eyes
Lightheaded, you teeter over
Devoured by a rusty cleaver

And all you wanted was
To live
Why, why this tempered fate?

Your enemy
A parasite

Instinct feeds, infests
3.
The clouds contract
Fusing your rib cage
Symmetrical lines cut across
Slash it
But this line
I cannot dot
Remorseful period
Woeful eyes
Now bloated
Pasted in soot
Glass spliced your heel
But you run, run so far
Til your knobby knees give way
Combating a
Tightening heart, it wrings
Squeezed shut to this violence
Demanding forced silence
A stray tear bubbles
On the precipice of your
Cratered flesh
Throwing back a bobbed
Oil-slicked lice-infested
Mane to the sky
You pump your fist
For answers
"Where is my angel?"

Denied.

4.
The ghosts
I hear them gaining on me
Trees rustle with unease
They aim to reach into my
Soul and rip it from my
Chest
Lest I
Resolve to live
And taint their
Hateful plans
They wish it on me
Utter misery
Despair and darkness body-bagged
Flung into a bottomless well
But I grit my teeth
They won’t have all of me
Until I give my final breath

On my own terms.
Gone to Borneo

Mary Sullivan

I'm tired and your nose is broken
And I may have loosened a few teeth today as well
Now I may talk with a very hard edge
Because I'm trying to put them back into place
But no matter how hard I smash them into the line of my mandible
They still rattle at times
Like bone coins, not tinny on collision, but cracking
Like those times when I kissed you too hard
and we crashed together
But they only rattle at times
Times when I can't justify the time of day
Or why I have a pineapple in my left hand
And chipped nail polish
Those are the times that
I can't recall going to your Christmas party
Or sleep at night
Not like I expected to anyway
Those are the nights (times)
That I venture into the basement
With all those dark shapes
Always conjuring up silly questions
Like what do you think about god or Death
Or something ridiculous like that
As if I didn't know fact from faith
Or what real lies are
Or who begat who
But I satisfy them with slippery, conventional words
So they will let me get on with my life
I laugh and say, I know, I know, I need to find beauty

Show me beauty

It's those times when I
Fight bare and brass-knuckled
With my china
That lovely pattern we picked out
One of those times
Lipstick

Liza Katz

self-actualization is nice
but
nothing boosts my ego
like a tube of
bright red lipstick
smeared across my face and
smashed into my backpack.
i can be
anything i want to be –
whatever floats your boat,
quenches your thirst,
makes your heart beat like
war drums
cuz i’ve become
a slave for your approval and outward appearances.
if you’d like i can
kiss your cheek
get lipstick on your face while i
stain your cherished pride.
i can write your name
on the walls of the girls’ bathroom
just watch.
watch me paint my face –
paint myself a smile and
pretend i’m all right –
can you make the lipstick
penetrate through my skin and
make me sane?
Burlesque

Melissa Fabello

Jazz and stringed pearls traded
for punk rock and chokers.
This burlesque show draws in a
new Beatnik generation.

Poe writhing in his grave;
cat calls and cigarettes,
Baby powder cocaine
floating in the air.

Your mouth a pomegranate
and I’m counting every seed.
Your teeth clenched in a smile,
mine in self-control.

Upside-down electric tape crosses hide
pink and protruding –
oh fuck –
I cross my legs to save myself.

Lipstick lesbian? – no!
Well, maybe, as my nails
dig into my thighs because
Yours make me feel like a man

Ready to explode.
Gulping down your sunshine,
Swallowing your rain;
A stranger’s hot breath on my neck,

Men up against me
for a chance at friction.
I’m being lulled
by the way your body moves.

I don’t think I ever blinked
away from this display of
X-rated Candyland ny mphs.
That’s it – I’m done in.
Name my Doll for Me

Brittney Watkins

name my doll for me.
the one with a heart on her sleeve.
we'll paint her dollhouse red,
and torch the wildflowers with the sun.
let's stain the glass.
let's blind her eyes from what's outside.
we can make her a beautiful fool.
we can trade her blood for syrup,
and turn her insides thick,
and let her drip from her fingertips,
onto her pancakes for breakfast in the morning.
let's paint her bedroom purple.
and put a lock on the door,
sandpaper on the floor,
pull the covers over her head,
and let her scream when we leave her
for one more week.
let's paint her dreams in black and white,
glaze her eyes for one more night,
and we can play tricks
when she isn't looking in our direction.
name my doll for me.
let's call her lost.
let's put her where she can't escape.
let's pay for less than what she costs.
we can give her a moon and the stars.
and we can take them away.
we can give her the sun and the breeze.
let's break the glass windows,
and she can kneel on the shards
and bleed from scars on her knees when she prays.
let's write her a song
to sing her to sleep.
let's give her a kiss
and silently creep down the stairs
and leave her in her dreams.
when she wakes to no one there
and when she starts to cry out for no one
we can laugh in her face
with words we can pop like balloons.  
let's throw her a party  
when she comes of a new age  
and when the day ends  
we can take all her gifts for our own.  
we can build her a pool from her own sweat,  
and pick her up and toss her in  
and watch her sink to the bottom like a stone.  
as she watches us blur  
into sillhouettes of shadows  
maybe she'll finally realize  
she was born to be broken.  
name my doll for me.  
we can call her easy.
A Poisoned Pleasure

Alaxandra Appatova

Some sickly pleasure in this pain
To build a tower with my sweat
Whose scope no Power can constrain,
And know the mortar in its veins
Foretells its falling silhouette.

I sew each satin strand in line -
The tapestry of my caprice,
Such as no other, I divine,
Can craft – but let the tips unwind
To mutilate the masterpiece.

This satisfying guilt supplies
A warm release and I, perhaps,
Will find no sin that gratifies
An architect as when he tries
To orchestrate the ultimate collapse.
winter, sexuality, and boston university law school

Matthew Lemoyne

towards a stone spire,)
she flexed haphazardly north,  
(raw, with snowfall squaw,  

peered a fair lady,)
her face a thin question mark,  
(gaunt with lonely charm,  

an autumn orphan,)
with a vermeil, earthy veil,  
(a neb of wan ice,  

:  

a concrete frame of  
) all december is silence (  
what ( devotion? ) meant
Thoughts on Rebirth

Kelsey Shelton

birds melting into wind, i saw them
disappear into thin air and escape down the sidewalk.

thinking perhaps my eye played tricks,
that the light had shifted for a moment,
shadowing my perception, i stared at the
empty space for a sign, nothing.
but turning to leave, calling it a mystery
never to be understood, i breathed fullness,
air saturating lung space, overflowing into
heart space until all bitterness for life
evacuated and fullness filled emptiness
like water fills a cup.

i felt wild caged animals flying in me;
realized i had breathed them in, those birds,
and their force like a flood, plundering,
sweeping me from the ground like a balloon rises
effortlessly to its death above. Here, atmosphere
rushed past me like soul freedom, a shell
peeling from inward parts, a shadow
shrinking into a dot on the pavement, infinitesimal until

nothing.

just like that.

and the evaporation of my body multiplied
across space, melting into wind,
as the birds exploded into being once again.
Orienteering

Katie Uva

It was October, cold and clear
My nose was red and my hands were cracking
We were trudging through the rotting leaves
Stiff-legged and bored
Clasping plastic compasses

You had found a stick
At the trailhead
And it gave you a sense
Of power you enjoyed too much
Splitting open rain-soft logs
And the life and musk ran out of them
Like egg yolks into the air

"I am Gandalf!" you announced, sending
Moss and brambles flying
And they bore it stoically
Which was more than I could do.

My feet grew heavier
My hands more purple
My face more chapped
As you charged on, listing
All the things you wished you were eating
Gummy worms and coffee

We had lost the group a while ago
Lost count of our paces
I was losing my patience
And you were losing your mind

Trying to orient, to find a way
In a foreign place
Where the trees leak life
And the rocks look alike
And North is just a state of mind.
At Low Tide

Chris Havlin

Outside,
life flows by
in mostly ones and twos

as TV-gloWS
through windows
help to light the road.

Those ones
and twos alone
are but remnants of the tide;

in a few short hours, in the twilight shadows,
the trickle will become a pour.
White Noise

Ariella Gogol

Her study. Forty years she worked.
Read and read. The current project different
Yet the same
As the first. Her study.

As she confronts her young. A photograph by her desk
Stares
A lake of hair flat as morning.
Eyes as forlorn as failure. Young.

Her pain hidden in the papers, her gaze in the syllables.
The work offering distraction and immersion,
Refuge from the past.

Curtains drawn low, sound machines high
Noise drowned out
Nothing moves
Except her fingers across the keys
Rewriting the future.
Her study.
Golgotha
Andrew Kelly

I stand high upon the hill,
of my skull,
in my skull,
Hill of The Skull.

I look up and attempt understanding.
I look down and see past suffering.
I look within and see joy,
joy springing from hope, faith.

Hill of The Skull.
Landmark in the
frontier of loss.
land of dead,
home to none,
inhabited by all.

Possessing faith, knowing no firmness of belief.
I admire those with conviction,
those knowing belief.
Possessing love, knowing no vessel or direction.
I admire those with focus, those knowing oneness.

Love directed only back,
at the origin,
of myself and my faith.
Tradition, things long written down,
studied, interpreted, lacking application for too many.
Much has become too hollow.
The Hill of the Skull, once filled with a mind.
A heart, a love, now it is as an empty case,
discarded by most in times of our wasted land.
Clung to some out of conviction or habit.

I walk slowly down from atop the hill.
I hope others will follow,
that I follow others.

I hope, I pray, I know,
some things go beyond chance,
they must be driven beyond,
and placed atop
The Hill of the Skull.
Battle in John

Jonnie Grey

I walk into the tiny room
As I have done many times before.
I stare into the reflecting Underworld,
And see myself smirking back.
I must kill this imposter I see.
I load my weapon and aim to fire.
I stand and say my last goodbyes.
As I shoot, my nemesis disappears,
And all that grows are waves
Crashing against the edges of the pool.
My firing ends, the waves recede.
Something is forming in the depths
I appear in the hole, smiling back.

If you are looking for a message,
It isn't clear.
For I have hidden its meaning.
Teen suicide is not the subject of mine
Nor narcissistic thoughts.
It's not the demons in my head,
Or the plague of other men.
The weapon is a part of me,
Plain and simple.
The room is one I go to every day for relief.
Don't think too hard,
I'll give you the answer.
It's me pissing in a black toilet.
The Purging of Icarus from Humanity

Ashish Premkumar

And he fell into the ocean
with his lotus-white wings
wrapped around his body, fluttering
wildly as he spun towards the water. He lay face-up,
arms outstretched to the sun
with a weak finger pointing upwards,
bent sideways from his broken hand. Words were scrawled black
upon his forearm,
some circled and some underlined,
in felt-thick cursive
covered in dried blood and melting wax.

She could see him plunging downwards from the cliff,
a streak of white blazing towards the endless sea.
His voice called out to the shoreline, begging for a hand to grasp him from the pure water he now swallowed.

She did nothing.
Her hands gracefully plucked a blushing leaf from a yellowing tree as the water milked over, the wax dissolving under the Atlantic sun.
The Wives of Pindi

Rayan Khan

It is always you dames who rise to greet visitors, with polka frocks and twiggy smocks, right out of the palatial watering hole. Who else could execute such prolific welcomes? The synchronized munching and innocent droppings are unrivaled anywhere else on the globe.

While the ground changes and memories tuck themselves, exhausted, into the muck, you all graciously maintain the old with your sensual bovine strut across the road. No matter if the land gushed away on its own, these ladies will be waiting there, conducting clods of unwanted earth home.
Love Letters of an Electrician

Jonnie Grey

Dear Mr. Eddie Span, 8/6/03

This is Phil Tenup, your appliance technician at your former place of residence. Your leaving to higher and greater things in L.A. has left me with an emptiness that I must exchange a few words with you. Our friendship we shared I thought would live through the ages. Even though we only had a strictly business knowledge of each other’s existence, I know we had something much deeper and it is a shame our lives were separated. My life otherwise is going quite slowly. My membership to the bowling alley near my mobile house has been taken away because I couldn’t make my snack payments but everything else is going great. I wish I could have bowled with you and discussed the situation of your domestic devices but I understand you are a busy man. However, the thought dawned on me that we are not two completely different people, as many would immediately think. Your computer analyst job has only slight differences from my kitchen tool repair career. I received much delight from working in your home and being able to work on the latest models that I had only seen from Sears catalogs that I stole from my neighbor’s Sunday newspaper. I had only dreamt of working with the Stainless Steel Kenmore Elite 22.5 cu. ft. Side-By-Side Refrigerator with Filtered Ice and Water model but until you came into my life it was only a fantasy. But now that you are absent from my life, those magnificent machines of electronic genius have become a glorious memory in my meager world.

Well, I must leave you now to get back to work. I hope that you continue your success but if things don’t work out, you can always come home to Arkansas.

Your Close Friend,

Phil Tenup

Dear Mr. Tenup, 9/1/03

Thank you for your letter. I’m sorry that I am writing you back so late. It has really been hectic over here. Forgive because I can only vaguely remember you. My wife reminded me that you were the one who came to our Super Bowl party uninvited and got that weird stain on the floor (which we still spend nights trying to identify what it was). My job at Menseltron is going quite well and the people I work with are really helpful to the new guy.
In reading your letter over you mentioned our old fridge. It's funny that you mention it because it was damaged on the way over here. But the moving company was very nice about it and got us a new one. I can't remember off the top of my head what it's called, but it's pretty good.

Give my best regards to the people back in Arkansas and if anyone asks we are doing great. Wait there is one last thing I want to ask you. I don't mean to sound paranoid or ungrateful, but how did you get our address?

From,

Eddie Span.

Dear Mr. Eddie Span, 9/5/03

My deepest apologies about the loss of your refrigerator. It always saddens me whenever a fine piece of equipment like that goes to God’s Kitchen in the sky. If you tell me the name of the moving company that did this to you I will personally sabotage the assembly lines to get revenge on this careless act of unsuitability.

Otherwise, I am glad to hear that your life is going well for you and your wife. I hope your marriage goes much more smoothly than mine went. Marge, whom you were fortunate not to meet, has been bugging me for alimony payments for the past couple of weeks, even though she left me for a plumber. Can you believe that? She left me for the lowest of all career options. A man who deals with crap day in and day out and is proud of it! I don’t care if he gets paid more than I do and he may own a better home than I do; it’s the moral obligation that he stands for. I couldn’t see that coming from her if I had a million Giga watts of power in my head.

On the brighter side of my life, the guy who owns the lots where I live took my grandfather’s old watch for another month’s pay. Now I just have to wait for business to pick up and get back on my feet. No one has moved back in your old house yet but maybe when they do I’ll be able to work for them like I did for you. That is of course unless you aren’t coming back to The Natural State. The 2nd annual bluegrass show is this weekend and if I can get a ride it is going to rock my beard off.

Well, I got to get back to see if I have any messages for more work so when you get a chance it would be nice to get to hear about a world outside my own.

Sincerely,

Phil Tenup
P.S. Sorry about the barbecue sauce, I had Porky’s take out and this was the only paper I had.

P.P.S. I know you are busy but I would really like to get a letter. You’ve only sent me one and I’ve sent 5 in the past two weeks thanks.

Dear Phil Tenup, 10/4/03

I’m sorry to have to tell you this but my wife and I feel that it is best that you stop writing to us. You and I have nothing in common. I can’t help you with your problems because we have no connection besides the fact they you fixed my fridge right before it broke in the move away from boring old Arkansas. The culture is terrible, the history is almost nonexistent, the food is bland, the music hurts my ears, and the people are about as ignorant as they can be. If I were you I would get out of that town before a black hole sucks you and all the other degenerates into and another tasteless dimension. It’s not that hard for you to move since your house is on wheels so just get out the truck and go find new work.

If you send one more letter to me I will have to call the cops on you. I don’t have anything more to say to you.

Final Goodbye,

Eddie Span

Excerpt from "The El Dorado News-Times" Obituary 12/12/03

Phil Tenup, 45.

On last Friday, Phil Tenup died outside his trailer home in a freak accident. The electrician had become somewhat of a hermit the past couple of weeks. He was thought to have been responsible for dozens of raids on local junkyards. Mr. Tenup’s lease on his mobile home had run out and his landlord was getting ready to kick him out of his lot. He found Phil smashed under a refrigerator with wings and what looked like a rocket attached to it. “It seemed that he wanted to go somewheres real bad,” said his landlord, Hank Burling, “But he ain’t goin’ nowhere but to that kitchen in the sky that he talked ‘bout. That crazy kook.” Authorities believe that in his madness he attempted to make a crude rocket ship out of a refrigerator. Police guess that he wanted to go to California because of the countless number of maps found in his home. He was a divorcé of local lady Marge Brocrad who won the pickled eggs competition in the bluegrass fest a couple of months ago. His funeral will be on Dec. 15 at Rumph-Owers Funeral Home.
Excerpt from the Cookbook of Folly:  
How to make a Bush Republican  

Timothy J. Tilbe

Take a seemingly ordinary American.  
Simmer with irrational rage for several years.  
Self-consciousness and humility will rise to the top; skim them off.  
With a fork, remove the conscience and the capacity for rational thought.  
Marinate in cultish devotion to right-wing leaders.  
Inject a large quantity of raw, naked, abject fear.  
Stuff with ignorance and misinformation.  
Add a paste of bloodthirstiness.  
Apply a glaze of macho posturing.  
Sprinkle with hostility flakes and essence of vitriol.  
Garnish with delusional, half-baked religious dogmas (optional).  
Drizzle with a sauce of failed policies.  
Season to taste with aggressive prudery and persecution-complex powder.  
Bake in the oven of power for a few election cycles, until thoroughly ruthless.  
Yield: Boundless misery.  
Bon-appétit Dig in!

(Helpful hint: To create a self-described "moderate" or "liberal" who is actually a Bush loyalist, just add an extra dollop of hypocrisy. Refined palates will swear it's the real thing!)
The Uninvited Guest

Ryan Zanoni

(Special thanks to my friend Kyle Befus for the inspiration)

He was perched atop the Gothic-style Gibraltar building in Hartford, Connecticut, with the only companion he could trust, his AR-34 assault rifle. A slight breeze tussled his longish hair and did a poor job of whisking away from his brow the sweat that stung his eyes. He blinked to clear his vision. The long-sleeved black nylon shirt and matching pants certainly weren’t the most comfortable ensemble in the saturated July air, but it was better to sweat like hell than to get caught and shot—life was about trade-offs, he always said.

That’s what he tried to tell himself over and over again as he lined up his target in the crosshairs of his gun, but he knew damn well that the sweat was from more than just the heat: it was a little thing that posed a huge problem, and its name was Conscience. Prior to today, they hadn’t been acquainted, but this stranger had decided to barge in and ruin what should have been an ordinary business transaction, like many others he had made over the years. The worst part about it was that the more he tried to ignore it, the more insistent and troubling it became.

Sylvester Guilane had done these jobs before; numerous times, numerous targets. What was so damn special about this one, this—what was his name again? Oh yeah, Warren Farmer—god, what a dopey name. What made him so unique? Nothing. The Sly Guy had taken out plenty of others just like him. They were all the same; they just had different names. It had never bothered him before.

Well, okay, that was a lie—the first time had been tough, because he had never done anything of the kind. But since then, he had been fine, firm in his resolution to pay back the debt that he knew his family still owed from all those years ago. Many years of planning, thinking, hard work, and, above all, patience. So much waiting. But he had done it, he had come this far, and now only had to do it once more before the service was complete. One more simple tap on his ultra-sensitive trigger and the debt was paid, and he was free. That’d all it would take. And then he could go and live his life without the burden of something owed weighing on his shoulders. Finish the job, Sly. Finish the job.

And he could have done so easily, had it not been for this damned uninvited guest called Conscience. It had been nagging him constantly since he had woken up this morning, four hours ago, as if it knew this was his last job and had deliberately held out until now, just to spite him. And it really pissed him off.
But beyond pissing him off, it weighed on him, and the weight was far heavier than that of the debt he owed to the man who had saved his grandfather’s life and rescued his family from the clutches of Depression-era Irish poverty. Had it not been for that man, his grandfather, Jameson, would have surely died that day beneath the crushing weight of the coal in the mines where he worked. George Polk had personally pulled him out of there, being one of the few among the wealthy who would ever deign to enter a coal mine where the commoners toiled in such filthy and unhealthy conditions.

Polk had personally known Sly’s grandfather before his family’s stock investments had paid off big time, well before the Depression, and he did not forget an old friend in his time of need. Sly’s grandfather had asked Polk what he could ever do to repay him for his generous offering of all the finances necessary for escaping poverty-stricken Ireland forever, for starting a new life for himself and his family. All Mr. Polk and his organization, a certain Irish Republican Army, had wanted were a few people out of the way. Competitors, old nemeses and the like.

When his grandfather had passed on, the charge had passed on to Sly’s father, Ernest, and with Ernest’s death, to Sly. It was his job to finish it, for this was the last man Polk had wanted removed: Warren Farmer, the son of an old nemesis, who he knew would grow up just like his father, and who had indeed done so.

But Conscience pierced his every thought, like a scalpel picking at his brain, a painful reminder that what he was doing was murder—a way he hadn’t thought about it since before that first shot had entered the head of his first target. Since then, it had been strictly business—a favor for an old family friend who had ensured that Sly lived a comfortable middle-class life where he didn’t have to scrounge for his next meal, as his grandfather had had to do before the accident that killed him. Just business. Why couldn’t he believe that anymore? Why couldn’t he just tap that trigger one more damn time and end it all, then walk away and promptly forget about it, as he had all the others? Why was this so hard?

He knew why: he was a killer, and now his denial was breaking down and the cold, ugly face of truth was glaring at him, staring deep into his hardened blue eyes and breaking through his protective wall. He was a killer—no, he was a loyal friend, a loyal grandson; this was a point of honor—honorable to pick people off like sitting ducks from hundreds of yards away? No, that was cowardly. The sweat ran down his face like a river now, uncontrollably. His hands began to shake and he did all he could to steady them, lest they hit the trigger and unleash the fateful bullet—but he wanted to unleash the bullet—no, this was his chance to turn it all around, to spare this man and salvage some morality, to prove that he wasn’t just a murderer.
The heated tug-of-war escalated in his mind, until he was no longer certain of which side he actually believed. Was he truly a man of honor in his steadfastness to the charge he had been given? Or was he just a base killer, wiping people out he didn’t even know, a coward who took people out when they were defenseless. The moment of choice was upon him now, for if he waited any longer, he would lose his last chance at a good shot, and his duty to his family and their friend would go unfulfilled. And a man who had done him no offense would get to live, as maybe he deserved to do. As maybe all his victims had deserved to do.

He truly did not know which choice was right, but the doubt was killing him. Put down the gun, said Conscience, pleading with him. Let him live; repent your sins.

“Screw it,” he said aloud. Life was about trade-offs. “This is easier.” Bang.
POW
Sarah Ip

I am a prisoner of war

Your
Foolish
Senseless
Gut-wrenching
Attack against humanity
Hostilely full-blown
Unjust
Cruel

War

You
Put me in the front ranks
And I was wiped out with a blow to the skull
Tied to a stake
Dislocated from all feeling
Oh, the numbness in my fingers
Snipered down around the corner of
Deadwood
A miserly haunt, a dying ember
In the milieu of Ghost town circa 1953.

But I whisper in the canal of
Your burnt ear
That my pulsing corpse
Is within reach
Guns butt, jar me from
Deformed concussion
Mucus clogged in the
Crimson I retch from an
Impaled conscience.

When you pronounced me dead.
Clocked in at 1500
Just like blood work.

You
Thrashed the gurney sack
Over my resistant head
Pulled the trigger
Let me fall limpidly
To your twinkling
Shoe-shined Oxfords.

You
Clinched my bruising arm
Applied pressure with your
Sanitized words
Feeling for a vein
So you could pop it.

You
Tazered my back
And left my pale flesh
Ransacked
Just like you maced that
Black dude who wouldn’t
Give you back your change.

You
Tightened the cord
Around my trachea
And squeezed out
Every
Little
Bit
Of
Life.

You
Shipped me out
Taped up in a corseted package
Ready for next-day arrival
Nauseating, head combobulating
In the murky foreign seas
(Wo)man overboard.
Now I try
To return to a semblance
Of yesterday's meat
Loafed between a capsule
Sealed from my fate
Yesterday

I shut the book
With a thud
It resounds against the hollow
Walls echoing distant chants of
Your name
My glassy eyes watering
For the
Soul
You buried long, long ago.

I flick you like a mosquito
Gorging my limpid wrists
You ingrown cyst
How could you
How could I
Let you
Parasite
Take over
I, the host
Should have
Shown you the door

I squish
Your shrunken anatomy
Between
Pointer finger and thumb
Pointing at this sham foolery
But it is not enough
To make amends
For your insult to my
Person.

I was never anything but a number to you.
Politicians at Work

Kirby Robinson

Pure posturing as they walk side
By side through a side entrance
To his house, his white house.
The other, a friend from London.
Each's arm around the other's shoulder
The media getting what it wants--
    Both smiling,
    Both failures.
    Two failures smiling:
      cheese
To Be: An Existential Dream

Jake Chudnow

"Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is."
-Jean Paul Sartre

What does it mean to exist? Can anyone ever know? These were questions found myself asking while taking a course in philosophy called "Existentialism." Every day I feared that in class we would discuss the same old history of modern existentialists; Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and so on. The concepts about which we were lectured proved even more difficult for me. I took especially hard blows to the psyche when we discussed how one defines his sense of self and authentic individualism; I could no longer live my life in adolescence. The course was ripping me from a soothing lack of self-consciousness that allowed me to live life simply for the sake of living, and I was not enjoying the transition. Maybe I was afraid of myself, or afraid of the inherent complexities of life, or afraid of life's ultimate end underground.

This fear and consequent confusion manifested themselves in the many internship and job applications I had filled out for the upcoming summer. A typical question was something along the lines of: "In 25 words or less, tell us who you are." Every other job applicant was able to answer this question without an extensive evaluation of meaning and purpose, but never had a question this simple been so hard for me to answer. Who am I? Jesus Christ, Buddha, Allah, I didn't know! And being aware of my inability to answer this question ate at me slowly. I felt like a fly that was attracted to the fatally sweet and sticky perfume of a Venus fly trap's inner lining.

That changed abruptly during the night that followed a particularly challenging class. Our task for the day was to define "To Be," and the state of being. We were given Sartre's introspective definition of the word (Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what is) and then asked to interpret it for ourselves. This task was extremely difficult and most definitely infiltrated my subconscious thought. After a long night of tossing and turning and dwelling on these thoughts, I sunk into a shallow state of dream-intense sleep, a sleep that would ultimately define my sense of self and existence.

The only light in the cold metal box of a room in which I was standing was a single flickering, egg-shaped, low-watt light bulb whose sound reminded me of a hiss of slightly irritated bees. Although it seemed there were no doors or windows, I felt a chilling breeze that smelled like the exhaust of an old clothes dryer. There was a constant low hum of distant machinery and rustling nylon pants and the soft pitter-patter of a midnight rain whose echo refused to dispel. Every so often moisture on the ceiling became too bloated and drops of water fell, trickling down my nose or ear. Air was thick and bitter but somehow left a sweet taste in my mouth like licorice.
The room was physically empty with the exception of a ledge half way up one of its walls. There I stood side-by-side in line, with about three other men, like something you would see at a police station. Although this ledge was not high up, I figured that if I fell, I would fall one hundred miles into the catacombs of whatever lay beneath.

Opposite us was a simple rectangular lever with a rounded handle. I could feel its frigidity from the other side of the room. In between the lever and me was a mad scientist. His massive white hair was a tangled mess and his nervous twitches forcefully animated everything he said.

The scientist began to explain to us that with the pull of this lever we could experience “being.” I remember thinking to myself, “I’m confused...aren’t I already in a state of being? What does it mean ‘tobe’?” I felt lonely and detached, as if I were being ripped from my mother’s womb.

However, confusion led to curiosity and my curiosity led to my ultimate decision to let him pull the lever. Upon my consent, the scientist looked me cold and stern in the eye and said: “Jake, if I pull this lever, there is no going back. This is it.” This is it. That reverberated in my head for a while. I was struck with a horrible feeling deep in my stomach; the same feeling I had gotten when my grandmother passed away six months prior.

I felt the scientist put his hand on the cold lever, rapidly becoming warmer. He pulled the lever and BAM! It was as if an atomic bomb exploded. There was a huge flash of light, everything is silent, and slowly the rumbling creeps up, the crying, the screaming, the chaos and the death dashes across the land.

And at that moment, I experienced every single feeling anyone could ever have, has ever had, and ever will have. I experienced being born. I experienced being rocked gently to sleep by my mother. I experienced every single one of my fingers being systematically cut from my hands. My blood became warmer. I experienced being held tight by a lover, completing each other. I experienced every bone in my body shatter into a million pieces. I waited as time passed slowly for a bus that never came. I experienced being trapped under miles of avalanched snow, unable to move a finger, unable to distinguish what was up and what was down. I experienced the best drum solo I’ve ever taken. I could smash Mount Everest with a single fist. I could be crushed by a feather. My blood burned the vessels in which it traveled. I experienced being lost in the all-encompassing darkness under the Amazon’s dread-locked canopy. Granules of sand were lodged under my eyelids after having combed the beach for the perfect nautilus. I experienced a giant icicle falling millions of miles from the sky, crashing into my skull and scattering my brains. I experienced an amazing orgasm. I experienced being thrown with endless momentum into the depths of space from an exploded moon rocket – with nothing to grasp on, flying forever into oblivion. My blood was boiling. I was burning on a funeral pyre. I experienced death.... And then I saw white.
All of the atoms, all of the sub-atomic particles in my physical body dissipated and evaporated, until all that was left of me were my experiences. I was nothing. I was everything. I just was.

At that moment, I woke from my dream. I wondered if that was ironically what it was to be. Could this be the answer to that simple question of identity that I could never before answer? I was a point in time: neither linear nor cyclic, just a point. And in the depths of that point were hidden everything I had ever experienced and everything I will ever experience combined with the experience of all others. It was that close to me and I felt as if a huge burden had been taken off my beleaguered brain. I felt how I imagined Pythagoras of Samos felt upon his realization that the Earth must be round.

As for my internship applications, they were all rejected, leaving me no choice but to dwell on my thoughts while landscaping for the summer. But at least I know how to answer that damned question: “Who are you?” Everything. Absolutely nothing. I just am. So is that existence? In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, “One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life.” In a single dream I had done both and have never since questioned what it means to exist.
Kids These Days
(don't want to be God)

Natalia Bovkun

Do you want to be considered a god?

This was the hypothetical question posed to my WR100 class. To my surprise, more than half the students said no. They feared the responsibility linked to god status. They believed blind worship would degrade their followers. They insisted they did not need other people's devotion to boost their egos.

This good sense, compassion and confidence stems from our American obsession with individual independence. This good sense, compassion and confidence will be the downfall of our society.

Americans are steeped in the glory of “independence” from daycare to college. When all our friends jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, we assess the situation, conclude that conformity is death, and walk home alone. We regard independence as a virtue in itself, and wage wars to save those who are not independent enough.

As a result, our society spits out sensible, compassionate, confident members. Taught to rely on themselves, they learn to be levelheaded and logical. They learn to weigh their options and make right choices. They learn to trust themselves to make their fortunes.

They learn to question everything, and thus, construct their own systems of beliefs. Just as they can rely on themselves to make their fortunes, they can rely on themselves to tell right from wrong. Their independence obligates them to be moral. It obligates them to be good. Good, in turn, means not infringing on anyone else's independence.

This circle is fatal.

Its fatality lies in that no one aspires to anything anymore. True, there's no danger of Hitlers, Stalins, Saddams; there's also no hope of Caesars or Alexanders.

When asked if they want to be gods, the majority of educated Americans say no.

They are too compassionate. They fear robbing their worshippers of independence if they inspire unaltering allegiance - faith. Instead, they look to reason to settle disputes. They are waiting for North Korea to judge international peace of mind more important than nuclear power. For Sudan to find genocide immoral. For Somalia to figure out it's better off under a single government. For Israel to see the necessity of a Palestinian state. For Palestine to reason against terrorism. Americans are praising the light of reason and condemning the toxicity of faith. They are ignoring the positive byproduct of religious fanaticism - its power to unite. When civilizations were only bickering villages, Egypt was a united kingdom under Osiris, Isis, Anubis and Ra.
When barbarians chipped away at Rome, Christianity held together the Byzantine Empire. When America, world power, technologically supreme and ridiculously wealthy, invaded third world Iraq, Muslim insurgents managed to not lose the war; now, it looks like they might win it. Where, in America, is there the unity inspired by fanaticism, and where are its results? Where are the Great Pyramids, the Temple of Jerusalem, the Hanging Gardens?

It doesn't matter.

Unlike fanatics, we are individuals privileged to make independent choices. Even if someone emerges with a set of choices that are better than anything we could come up with, he or she can only try to logically persuade the crowd. Such a leader would hope for logical agreement, not devotion, not faith. No matter how useful an unconditional pursuit of these choices might be, it infringes on our human right to independence. We'd take freedom even if it meant the end of the world.

Even if American values be set aside, the sensible, educated majority still vote against being made into gods. They realize the difficulty of managing the world - the exposure and responsibility it entails. I guarantee that in a survey of America, not one eighteen-year-old would list as his or her ultimate goal Alexander the Great's desire to control all known civilizations. I bet many would mention becoming CEOs, VPs, VPs, managers. A few may even want to be senators, ambassadors, or presidents, but not will consider the task of directing all the people on Earth feasible. Reasonable America know that the responsibility that comes with being world leader is impossible to carry. Such large-scale management would require not only majority admiration, but universal devotion.

No, Americans do not want to be gods. It's not sensible.

And for those whose natural hunger for power consumes their morality and their good sense, America has provided a cure in self-confidence. Even the power-hungry intellectuals are too self-assured to want to become gods. They proudly insist on being only human because they are awesome enough in their humanity; they do not need worshippers to boost their egos. They don't want to be gods anyway.

Our generation is the best and brightest in American history. We are very aware of our potential - cure cancer, abolish world hunger, colonize the moon. Nonetheless, we lack the ambition to perform the ultimate miracle and unite the world. Somewhere in America lives a god, maybe even gods, but they are too sensible, too compassionate, too confident to be worshipped, to let us unconditionally follow them, and to save us from destroying ourselves.

So, behold, America, our generation. We were left to cry in the dark until we independently fell asleep, and now, we do not want to be gods. Being upper-middle class is sufficient for us, thanks.
Daniel marches along paved roads,
the sad glimmer of cowardice muddling his lovely face.
Between blocks he conjures treasure,
flipping coins, vending pleasure,
marching all the while.

I promise, his battles are more real than any I’ve read in print.
I am only familiar with the violence of Bagdad, the plight of Palestine,
the oppression of distant regimes.
But I know this place, the urban desolation of these shores

I gaze through his life,
a silk screen casting into shadow a state of civil war,
the battlefront, a cultural landscape, and wonder:
What is he fighting for?
His choices glare back through the screen,
hard and unflinching, daringly complacent;
And yet, I am not convinced;
For all soldiers were once children, had once a conscience,
did once play at war.

Daniel’s battle is further, deeper within than I might know,
perhaps more internal and consequently perilous than the combatants he imitates.
He is made of conflict, victim to the politics of his skin,
his apathetic pose a cheap strategy of defense.

I bear witness, reporting from the front line of this proximate dispute.
The enlisted forms are misshapen by oversized t-shirts and denim,
speaking code language that is stripped and raw.
They post at corners, eying civilian vehicles,
looking for contributors to the rebel cause,
slinging rocks that anchor the community.

This wasteland continues to descend into a Darwinian chaos;
Daniel only wears the face of a survivor.
Brother, this is no life for you;
atrophying among urban decay.
I do not know the corruption of Russian officials, the war in Iraq, the consequence of Iranian nuclear development, but I know that this conflict rages on, taking the lives of my people, my brother, on these shores, in these streets.
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