THE MINOR BIRD
Chatham University’s Undergraduate Literary Magazine
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Chatham University
Department of English
# POETRY

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Three Poems Written in Front of the [TUBE]

by Marguerite Sargent

*

Americans find joy
in bodies
unthreading
before them like a lioness
defurred, declawed,
bald pimpled pruned—
a cat toothless gumming the leg
of a cow in hysterics.

2:00 Tuesday afternoon.

*

To watch a woman
be built through the transfer
of electromagnetic waves
in the tube—millions of pixels
smashing together, ants on
a chocolate dipped potato chip,
to make the female body
in vain of a single electric impulse
to rip her apart,
pixelbypixel
limb by limb,
in a one hour premiere of rape.
[Victim—prostitute found in back alley:
never identified]

*

And these faces stark staring,
unflinched like a fox to a rabbit,
at the *tube*
that relies on the red and black light beams
to emit the fragments of a body
of a woman against cement
and the full body of a man running into the shadows
of
the
credits.
Memories of Marilyn

by Eva Houser

Platinum blond tresses,
an ageless, soulful siren.
Young and irresistible,
childlike and eternally feminine.

Trademark hips suspended in time,
a serious femme fatale.
Marilyn offered sex without strings,
luscious yet forbidden.

Nudity exposed her fever to the world
damn the consequences.
Soft creamy skin: shrewd, eloquent Norma.
Norma Jean.

Branded a rebel in a white silk skirt,
a scarlet letter across her breasts.
Caught in a vortex of
champagne and caviar.

A coveted sex kitten.
Vulnerable, discarded lover.
Innocence devoured
by the appetite of wolves.
New Car Blues
by Daeja Baker

“She reached into the back seat of the car
and pulled out her plastic clothing bag
and Billie Holiday albums.”

– Gloria Naylor, The Women of Brewster Place

The music’s so righteous you have to close your eyes to hear it,
jam your foot into the floor to feel it—let your fingers
get to snappin’ to keep up with the rhythm running off the page,
and tilt your head when the drumstick hits the symbols;
Let your soul turn blue.

Jumping dotted eighth notes like love in the backseat of the car,
lipstick on shirt collars, pantyhose torn in two; pants on the floor
“maybe we’ve gone too far”—

As you dig and dance the 1972 Mustang convertible
red on the outside, vanilla on the interior
ash tray to go I ain’t po’ no’ mo’
smell of the new car Blues.
It’s Swank to Be Remodeled
by Elizabeth Minutello

In memory of those who died through consistent malicious word or deed.

When we die
no one’s remodeled alive any more than a prostitute
is remodeled into a virgin.

Hazardous wordmongers,
acting as if they were backswept by a dauphine
because someone didn’t know their place,
have become a new breed of hunters.

It’s stirringly new-fashioned to wound a soul mercilessly,
then claim it was all ‘innocent mischief.’
While hobnobbing in my handkerchief I wonder
that even as we chump these children,
decresent in adulthood and trapped in
prisons of their own cruel construction,
how did we forget to teach them
the power their victims
can exact in rigamortis?
C-section

by Marguerite Sargent

She preferred the scheduled scar
relished in its ugliness,
foreverness, the service belt
of the martyr
named Woman,
eternally silenced
by sarongs and high waisted Levi’s.
To have a baby born
beautiful,
avoiding the misshapen head
and battle wounds
that come with being
heaved through the birth canal;
stains, birthmarks
of torment branded
into the puckered hairless
skin of a baby—
above the check,
a raised Magnolia
withered into the Red Sheetweaver,
with one mangled leg.
The evidence of a natural birth
evades to risk
the promise of privilege—
a dainty nose,
bow shaped lips,
lively brows,
and a crown that assures:
The Perfect Hairline.
Monsoon

by Amber Neszmélyi

when i was a kid i thought cars were like beetles
especially when they were slick with rain
like armored waterbugs, hardened slugs
humming to wherever

you see them in thick clusters
the highway their african branch
the only difference being that there are people inside cars
but who knows, maybe there are little people in real beetles too
driving them to the grocery store which is your cupboard
or some bum’s can of lonely beans
Elegy for Honesty
by Payal Patel

In the places where thoughts live
There are no such things as justifications
Only lives born with an honest (like a penny’s) purpose,
Shaking and falling and splattering into the backs of throats
Where they are diluted into words,
words, words!—things!—that only have a caterpillar’s
pipe dream of purpose,

Honesty dies as soon as its born that’s why our
Love? Love for another is never the same from one word to another
From feeling it…
I love you
Is really just an elegy for an honest thought.
NUMBERS

by Elizabeth Lewis

you love math and see a sort of beauty in it,
in the honesty that one will always equal another,
ever lying or changing.

when your father was sick and weak and didn’t remember your name,
you wrote quadratic equations on his IV bag
so he could smile
and call you ‘Numbers,’
and it was enough.

they buried him on a Tuesday,
the 4th day of the 9th month.
it started on a Friday,
the 23rd day of the 6th month,
you forgot your own address
on the lease form and had to call a friend
while punnett squares screamed in your brain.

formulas became unreachable, lost to the imaginary numbers,
so you drove to the shore
on the 12th day of the 5th month
to let the sea flood your bones,
and wash away your numbers.

you left 1 note:
“my address is 382 Rosefallow Avenue”—
the only numbers you are remembered for.
I Am

by Onastasia Youssef

I am the author
crying from the rooftop
banging the bell
maniacally as the sound
of my own existence,
clawing a mark
into the streets of time—
They will remember
I was here,
not another
face in the crowd
let the others become
a number indistinct—
I will stand out
on the rooftop banging
my bell of me, me, me
making a mark
of my own existence,
Ozymandias shall tremble
at my own success
if only for a moment—
They will remember
me, me, me
crying from the rooftop
banging the bell
To Rio

by Daeja Baker

Thick, dark veins run through her, like the ones in her hands, visible through homemaker’s labor. They are almost the color of Blackberries— against the beige, red spotted palms, opposite the dark caramel of her hands. Round and always cupped as if she were Holding the spool of a kite, bobbing and weaving under the wind, waiting to be released higher and higher. Her hands move in this fashion—

Dinner is cooking. Lifting the slippery chicken naturally, like one of her children; she sprinkles the meat heavily with brown, green, and tan seasoning.

Her hands

Coated with white, she loses her palms in the flour but her veins remain— hidden as they are. She dreams of

Traveling and speaks of places she’ll never see. Río. She dreams of the losses—

trying to grip the wading sand in the Brazilian air, before it was polluted. The long dead

Chicken is shoved into the high temperature of the oven. It takes me an hour to ask but I do.

“When’s the last time you found yourself… in love?”

“I’ve loved plenty dear. I love you,” she smiles at me, her only daughter, then looks back down, kneading
the left-over chicken dough in

her hands—

before washing them clean.
STOLEN SKIES

by Elizabeth Lewis

We sat in an overgrown park
Waiting for the sun to set.
You whispered my name,
Your breath became the wind
Traveling through restless fields
On my skin.

You reached into your pocket
And pulled out a camera,
Clicked the still frames you wanted to remember,
Capturing the distilled lies as you smiled.

Each lie, a dandelion seed blowing away
With every click.

Our hands touched,
Forming a flawless fusion of flesh.
My words vibrated from my lips to yours,
Like bird wings beating, humming.

The yellow that surrounded us began to drift to a countless sleep,
Slowly drifting further and further towards the ground’s tomb,
Where it will rest forever with the dandelions.

I am left with a sunless sky
Consumed by the moon,
A circular beauty that has yet to be discovered
Without you.

We lived in a stolen sky
That birthed a lifeless photo beam,
A light that guided the phantom
The phantom who was you,
Pointed to the setting sun.

Looking back I realized
The sun
Was
Us.
Long Live the Dancing Bears
by Erin Kuhlmann

A snow globe stands on the third shelf of a bookcase.
Dust clings to the clear orb of two bears
Holding securely to another.
One wrapped in a red scarf,
The other grasps a blush, polka dot umbrella.
Glittery, sparkly clumps of snow
Lifeless beneath the tips of their strong paws.
Evergreen trees paint the circular base.

A gift given by withered, aged hands
Turns the crank five times clockwise,
Cataract eyes watch the brave bears spin and turn.
Smile and delight as the snow blizzards, then calms.
Tenor vibrations sing in time
A chimed melodic tune,
Emits slowly within
The once gleamed globe.
A voice remembered.

Distant is Grandpa whose hands turn the crank.
Consumed in the body,
Lived is the soul.

Timeless the tune.

Forever the gift.

Long live the dancing bears.
Santa Claus Syndrome

by Alison Taverna

I’m on my knees, 9 years
old with banana curls and marble eyes,
as my mother tells me Santa Claus isn’t real.
Pebbles drip on my bare feet
as she tries to collect them
with reason. I sink into the carpet,
folding into a ball against illusion,
but it’s nothing compared to the day
I lost you.
You speak to the class
about the poetry of periods,
words as music notes, the unflinching
desire to pose moments on fingertips.
But I watch as the line breaks
cracks your spine,
verbs eat all motions
and imagery weakens your vision,
as writing edits your life away.
“He’s not real. But he needs us to believe,”
my mother whispers,
so I write my veins out for you,
hand you hope in Times New Roman,
and it’s easy, too easy, to make you believe,
this isn’t an illusion.
The Rules
by Ashleigh Fox

No, I will not say how I feel
while your ocean eyes question mine.
This is the game we play
and you make the rules clear.
We work well in the ways
of our tug-of-match,
a rope tight with giving and pulling
but once devotion is spoken,
we might fall.

Now we can sit with this silence
all day, if you'd like,
while it hangs in the air
as the maple seeds fly
till it wraps round us tight.
I am not one to lose
in the game you've created,
I've changed all the rules
without a blink.
Nine to Five

by Shannon Ward

I knew from the moment that their little hands heaved her body from the murky waters of the river that Lily Baker was going to die.

It says so right here on today’s schedule—see?

Her youthful face was as pale as ivory, framing too-bright red lips. Dark spots pulled at the soft flesh underneath her eyes. Small patches of ice-fire burned her cheekbones. Water seeped from her hair, dark as ebony wood, yet as silky as the morning sky.

Framed against the snow, she looked like a fallen angel.

Her white gown was soaked and muddy—what would her daddy say? He specifically told her not to play with her friends near the river. The bank was far too slippery and once you went through the ice, the current kept you down there.

Ah, but what does that matter to me? You humans get yourselves into your own predicaments.

I’m just the one who cleans up afterwards.

I moved closer. The frightened children did not notice me—they were too busy crying and stomping around in the snow, watching their hot breath stream as they panted, openmouthed.

No breath came from Lily’s mouth.

No breath came from mine either.

I knelt down beside the girl, taking a knee on the ice. Not shifting a
snowflake. Even though I was just inches away from them, no one saw me. No one ever seems to. It’s a lonely career, but at least no one bangs down my door for handouts.

Jobs like this one aren’t exactly my favorite. But it’s not my place to question it. I’m just like you—with a boss breathing down my neck, waiting for the quota to be filled.

I sighed, placing my hand upon the girl’s chest, right above her heart. I wasn’t worried about disturbing her. After all, I’m more agile and more adept than any thief. I make my living stealing things of far greater value.

My spindly fingers tensed, preparing to submerge through her flesh. Preparing to ravish yet another soul.

I watched my palm disappear into her, not leaving a mark.

It sunk deeper. Reaching. Grasping.

I almost had a hold on the treasure that I sought.

At that moment, I witnessed the world. Her finger twitched.

A smile carved its way across my face. And I withdrew.

Life radiated from her in deep shallow gasps that bit at my face.

I stood, my heart aching with relief.

Shocking, isn’t it? That’s right.

Death has a heart.
The Allegheny
by Eva Houser

The Allegheny River
speaks with the flow of water.
Skullers’ oars plunge into
her swift current
and out again, with a splash.

At dawn a blanket of fog
hovers between her banks.
Barges heaped with coal
cut through the haze.
Vessels play in her motion.

Stars radiate with vigor
off her wavelets.
Riverboats celebrate and parade themselves
to and from the city lights:
While their music dances into the dark.
As an Only Child
by Alison Taverna

I need siblings to keep me company
when my parents die.
An older sister named Charlotte.
She’ll leave the house with wet hair
and place a hand on my lower back
at dinner parties. A younger brother,
Cody, with a sense
of sarcasm that pulls from indie classics,
like Ghost World, and Bill Cosby impressions.

When our parents die,
we’ll take turns eating the grief.
Charlotte will organize pictures,
order aluminum pans filled with chicken
for the reception, highlight the will with pastel tabs.
In public, she’ll dab the tips of her eyes
with a tissue, then lock herself in the bathroom stall,
and sink to her knees.

At the wake, Cody will shake hands
with every guest, telling funny stories
about the Shoe Flicking Incident of 1998
and Dad’s annual WWE match with the hedge clippers.
Halfway through he’ll slip
into the back parking lot and kick
car tires until his toes curl,
hating the rubber for holding so much air.

I’ll need my siblings to brace me
as I try to climb into the caskets
to curl next to a warmth
that has already gone.
Then, in the weeks after,
when Dad’s stamps arrive in the mail,
or when Mom’s meatballs disappear
from the freezer. I’ll need
my siblings, when, I dial
the home phone by mistake.

When I forget the way
our parents laughed,
or the sound of their slippers,
I’ll ask Charlotte and Cody.
We’ll sit with feet tucked
on the living room floor, empty
pizza boxes encircling us,
helping each other remember.
Eventually, we’ll fall
on our backs, lending to distracted silence,
as our tears cushion
to our paper plates.
Violet at Dusk

by Daeja Baker

Riding the wind
on tails of dark creatures
through thick wisps
of secrets in the air
waves in the lining of her hands
blowing someone a kiss
only she knows—
what makes her violet.

The day she rode the horse into the river
and found her sea lover, she knew.
She knew the girl like she knew herself;
on the ledge of a building
forgetting anything that wasn’t
in the fullness of the air passing her arms
as she falls through.
The fire of a lost love
put to rest, laid bare her soul
now level at sea—
under her watery breath
and between the thick line
of wet and pleasure sand,
that’s what makes her violet.

Rolling round in the deep
beat of the heart she once knew
her finger caresses each creature
coming across her hips
moaning tides into her hair,
striding waves into her,
lingering her crevices
with cocktails
letting the fish scent of her
sea gasps
be the reminder
of things that happen at sea level
of things that make her violet.

Rumor has it
the rapture of her heart
is the whip cracking Earthquake we feel
chain pulled Tsunami that washes us
and the dragon herded Hurricane that wipes us
Clean of safety.

She clears her path into humanity
with strife of her heart’s palpitations
of blue moon, of blue men, and of blue moments.
Rumor has it, the sea she once died in
with a red fury of the Devil’s kindness
is what makes her violet at dusk.
The Listener

by Sally Ramirez

Thursday was liver and onions day so the entire diner held a rancid smell that made Ana want to head back to the trailer and take a bath. But Dave made certain when she drifted in with her suitcase three weeks ago looking for work and a room that she understood his rules. Rule number one: One bath a week. Rule number two: Uncle Dave. No matter how old or unrelated the subservient candidate, it was Uncle Dave.

Ana had to pick and choose which day to bathe and for the third week in a row she settled with Sunday. Water was hard to come by in Barstow, California. In the summer of 2010, during a record high heat wave reaching three digit numbers, Barstow Marine Corps Logistics Base Nebo notified town officials that the base water system showed high levels of perchlorate. A year later town official Luke Wilton was forced to spray paint their town sign: MOJAVE population 55. Old fliers lay strewn through the half-a-mile town, headline reading: “Golden State Water Company Aggressively Investigates Water System.”

Customers were few and far between at Uncle Dave’s Diner. Occasionally a truck driver would stop for a cup of coffee and a drag of a cigarette before continuing on Route 66 again. Dave had a saying around the diner that made its way above the archway of the entrance: NICE TO MEET YOU! WE’LL NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN. Ana never saw the same customer twice and she liked it this way. Truckers would leave their old magazines and newspapers behind and she was getting in the habit of collecting the papers and nailing them to the walls.

Ana thumbed through the weathered pages of an old Los Angeles Times, the headline reading FOR THE DEFENSE OF DEATH, DR. KAVORKIAN DIES AT 83. She pulled up a barstool to the counter and sat. The loud shrill of metal on linoleum floor shrieked through the empty diner. She stared at the black and white photo of Kavorkian, one eye gouged out and faded, withered with age. He looks
like someone that would take the liver raw—without the onions, she mused to herself. Yeah, he seems like a good listener...

The chimes blew respectively in the wind outside of the diner. Ana propped up to see the man walk through the front door. This was one customer that didn’t abide by Dave’s rules. The loyal customer of Uncle Dave’s Diner at a diner that didn’t have loyal customers except for the locals, and this man wasn’t a local. Though, he met with the locals. Or at least, he had been for the few weeks that she had been serving there. He’d come in and sit in the corner booth, request black coffee and ten minutes later a townspeople would walk in and have a seat with the man. There was something about the way he wore his charcoal grey blazer and slicked back hair that screamed that he wasn’t from these parts, nor was he looking to settle. Ana inquired about him to Uncle Dave before, but he wasn’t aware of this guy until three weeks ago.

The man entered the diner with not so much as a look at Ana. He settled into the burgundy cushioned seat and looked out the window. Ana slowly turned her paper over and strained to see what he was looking at. The midday sun bore down on his black Pontiac. Waves of heat radiated off the roof of his car, distorting the tan desert sands that lay behind it. It was like he was looking into a void that led to somewhere. Ana leaned further across the counter, using her elbows for support. Her barstool slid out from under her, setting off a sound that was louder than fireworks in a tin barrel. The man’s concentration broke as he instantly stared across the diner at Ana. Ana quickly glanced at the barstool lying on the ground and then back up at the man across the diner. She smiled, suddenly aware of the lingering smell of liver and onions. Ana grabbed a napkin and a bottle of water and strode towards the man.

“Hello,” she said as she placed the napkin in front of him, opened the bottle of water and poured it in his glass.

The man slowly nodded his head once and stared out at the Mojave again. Ana chewed on her lower lip and pulled out her notepad. A surge of anger spurred in Ana. She wanted to hear him speak to her, acknowledge her. She waited, with her pencil and notepad in hand. He didn’t waver. Ana eased into the seat across from him and
pushed the silverware out of the way.

"Who are you?"

He pushed his water aside and looked at the waitress; his eyes worn and distant.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

"What do you need from me?" he asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

She suddenly felt ashamed and looked down at her dirty apron. Dried maroon stains covered the length of her garments. She didn’t know what she wanted, she thought as she stared out the window.

"Are you some sort of therapist?" she asked.
He smiled, amused at the thought.

"I listen."

"So you are a therapist," Amy said.

"I listen."

There was something in the way he said this that reminded her of a meeting she was mandated to attend a few years ago. One by one people would introduce themselves in the circle, without shame or fear. They would wear their names on their chests, proud survivors. “I’m Amy. And I’m a heroin addict.” Twenty-five tired faces stared at her as they said in unison, “Welcome Amy.”
Nothin’ But A Good Time

by Emily Eddinger

“Dude, check out this one.”

It was Friday night, so Scott and his friends were scouting the girls in line outside the Roll-A-Rama. The girl Scott was talking about had on a short leather mini-skirt, a low-cut black tank top, and thick black eyeshadow.

“Hey, foxy! You gonna let me take those fishnets off to-night?” Scott yelled. His boys whistled. The girl turned around and gave them the finger.

“You’ll find me in the bathroom with her later,” Scott said.

Scott and Jerry leaned against the peeling brick of the roller rink with their skateboards at their feet; Mark was sitting on the sidewalk smoking a cigarette.

From behind, the girl could have been Scott’s sister, Jerry’s sister—she was someone’s sister, or daughter. Scott knew that.

“Which bathroom—girls’ or guys?” Jerry asked. His face looked green from the neon light of the Roll-A-Rama’s sign.

“Why, you wanna watch, you sicko perv?” Scott asked. “You some kind of faggot?”

“No,” Jerry said, “I just wanna know which one to avoid.”

They laughed—Scott’s a forced, boyish laugh that faded into the chatter of the line outside the rink. It wasn’t just the boys checking out the girls; Scott saw some of the girls in line look his way several times.

“You know,” Scott said, “it’s hard to tell whether some of these girls are scoping us, or whether they just think we’re assholes.”

Jerry laughed. “Bit of both, I think.” He scratched at his chin where the idea of a goatee was sprouting. “Mark, you wanna bum me one of your smokes?”

At sixteen, Scott was attempting to grow any modicum of facial hair—he desperately wanted sideburns, Danny Zuko-style—and while Jerry’s was coming in nicely, his only grew in spazzy patches on his chin and cheeks. Jerry told him that shaving was supposed to
make the hair grow faster and thicker, but Scott didn’t have all that much to shave in the first place. Once he’d drawn on a soul patch and sideburns with a permanent marker and forgot to take it off before his mom came home from work. She thought it was funny and wanted to take pictures; Scott was mortified and never told anyone.

“Hey Scott,” Mark said, “you never told us how it went with that girl the other night.”

Scott smirked. “Which one?” He didn’t look at Mark, but kept his eyes averted. They wandered to the entrance line, and he mentally flagged the girl in the bright pink windbreaker and the wavy hair.

“Jenny, wasn’t it?” Mark asked. “The one from the Kwik Stop over on Chestnut?”

“Oh, her. She was a prude if I’ve ever seen one, man,” Scott said. “You know how she was all about me that night at Jerry’s party? I took her to a movie the next weekend and she wouldn’t even let me get to second base.” He shook his head. “I paid for her popcorn and everything.”

“Women,” Jerry said.

“Tell me about it. And these girls,” Scott gestured to the line, “they act like they’re interested, sure, but you know tonight we’ll go in there and pay for them to play Ms. Pac-Man, and all they’ll play is hard to get.”

“You know, last week here wasn’t too bad,” Jerry said. “I got with some real nice girl from Woodbury.” He grinned. “Well, she seemed real nice, until I got her in the bathroom stall.” Mark laughed and gave Jerry a high-five.

Scott saw the girl in the pink windbreaker go through the entrance. “I’ll be back, boys,” he said. They whistled and hooted as he walked to the back of the building where the fire exit was. He knocked three times, waited a second, then knocked twice more.

The door opened and Scott’s brother, Ben, stuck his head out.

“What’s up, Scott,” Ben said. He opened the door and let him in; they’d developed the secret knock on the fire exit door when Ben started working at the Roll-A-Rama. “You see somethin’ you like out there?”
“Sure did, sure did,” Scott said. “Thanks, man.”

The disco ball spun above the packed rink, sending flashes of light onto the skaters below. “Nothin’ But a Good Time” was blasting from the speakers, but Scott could barely hear it above the roar of voices. It smelled like grease, bodies, and too much perfume—he could hardly breathe. He scanned the area and saw Pink Windbreaker—sans the windbreaker—on the carpet surrounding the rink, tying up her skates. Her friends must have already gotten out onto the floor; she was alone. He weaved through the crowd that packed the carpeted area.

“Hey,” he said. He was practically shouting.

She looked up. “Hi,” she said. “I saw you outside.”

“I know.” He smiled his half-smile and raised his eyebrows.

“I’m Scott.”

“Jackie,” she said. She finished tying her skates and stood up; with the extra height from the wheels, she was taller than him. The hem of her skirt was at his waist. “So did you guys go to school to be professional assholes, or does it just come naturally?”

He laughed. “Alright, alright, I can take a hint.” He winked for effect. “I’ll catch up with you later.” He made his way back through the crowd and through the fire exit. Ben wasn’t around; maybe he’d finally found a nice girl.

Outside, Scott sat on the ground with his back against the building, relishing the cool air. It was quieter around the back of the rink, away from the chatter of the entrance line out front.

He looked up into the night sky and decided which star he thought was God.

*Jackie,* he thought. He mentally apologized to her. He wished that he could tell her everything and that they could be friends. Maybe she would understand.

He never prayed out loud, for fear of being heard.

*Dear God, I don’t want to be like this. I don’t understand Jerry and Mark. I don’t understand what it is to see a girl and want her. I’ve tried, God—I try every day. Isn’t that enough? Please, God, I can’t be a faggot. Please, just let me have this one thing and I swear to You I will stop praying in secret. Amen.*

Scott lowered his eyes and sat out back for a while, consider-
ing just going home and getting his board back from Jerry tomorrow. He felt the acid rise in his throat and vomited repeatedly onto the cold cement.

He wiped his mouth and spit one more time before he got up and walked back to the front of the building. Mark was gone, but Jerry was still there.

“Hey man, hey,” Jerry said, and held out his hand. Scott slapped it, feeling his fingers linger on Jerry’s palm.

“Where’s Mark?” Scott asked.

“He’s chasing some tail that was leaving. Grabbed his board and ran mid-sentence. I guess he was waiting for her to come out.”

“Bet it was that Lucy chick from last week.”

“Actually, I think it was,” Jerry smiled. “So?” he asked.

“So what?” Scott said. He smirked. “Her name was Jackie. She was a nice girl, but I wouldn’t have her again.”
Kasota

by Erin Kuhlmann

Erected high on a slab of granite stood the jagged outline of the ‘Minnesota Welcomes You’ sign. The letters were painted a warm red and flowed together in an elongated script. The words lay deep within a type of stone I’d seen before. It was the same pastel tan as the steps leading up to the front door of my house back in Minneapolis. It’s a rock called Kasota and is commonly found in places like Mankato, Minnesota. It’s a smooth stone that feels like polished wood and has tiny pieces of limestone encased in its contents. The jagged pieces of white limestone sparkle ever so slightly when the sun hits them at the right angle. Even though the sky was overcast with spring clouds as I drove down the interstate, I could picture the tiny facets glinting in the heat of the afternoon sun of summer.

The sole of my flip-flop presses down on the accelerator of my forest green Subaru, the welcome sign growing in size. The odometer needle wavers around sixty and sixty three and the gas tank reads full. My left hand perches on the top of the steering wheel, while the other hangs loosely on the shifter. The car smells like orange creamsicles thanks to the Popsicle air freshener I’d gotten as a stocking stuffer that past Christmas. I didn’t even think twice about turning the radio on because up in the nowhere land of North Dakota and Minnesota all that plays is the top forty hits of static. It was just the dull hum of the engine and the faint whooshing of the car fan set to cool.

The trunk is filled with cardboard boxes, each ones’ four flaps bulging at the top. Each box jingles, clashes, and tings from my plates, pots, and pans hitting each other every time the tires on the car hits a small pot hole or bump along the long stretch of black asphalt. All my clothes from the closet in my apartment had been shoved into garbage bags. I didn’t want to bother taking time to carefully fold every shirt and pair of pants I owned and match every sock together. I didn’t want to stay in North Dakota any longer than I had to. I was done. Over everything that embodied my two year stint in that flat
land of yellow grass and roaming buffalo. I was over the nothingness I was leaving behind.

North Dakota State University’s acceptance letter arrived after a long winter of small envelopes baring no route for my future academics. Each one page letter read the same: my application had been denied. When the envelope, which hardly fit in the mailbox, had come I knew it was my one shot at college. Without hesitation I sent back my decision to Fargo and planned on attending classes that fall.

My first semester, I tried my hand at athletic training. My second semester I juggled radiology and a relationship. I drowned myself in bone, muscle, and nerve structures and spent late night hours in the gross anatomy lab, while Ryan fooled around with my good friends back at his dorm. After our split, I devoted my life to anatomy lectures, biology labs, and medical terminology, but without the same vigor I had before.

It was just my anatomical body without the soul.

It took two years to realize that I was unhappy with where I was living, where I was going to school, and what I was spending countless hours studying. That being an empty shell of someone I used to be wasn’t worth it anymore. Ryan wasn’t worth it anymore. Those girls I called friends weren’t worth it anymore. The life I was living wasn’t worth it all. I didn’t want to become a doctor anymore or the sad loser walking around campus by herself. I was sick of examining skeletons, veins, layers of skin, and tissues while trying to keep up with peers who were sharper minded than me. I was exhausted from trying to become someone I wasn’t; someone who would never live up to the standard professors put up or the girl who would let her life fall apart because someone hurt her.

That’s what got me into my car with all my belongings heading the right direction: home. I knew staying one more day in Fargo was keeping me from something bigger and better for myself. I was starving for a life that didn’t make me feel alone. So I paid my last month of rent and started heading south with all the fragmented pieces of my former self to keep me company on the four-hour drive home.

The welcome sign at its largest form, sitting right in the
middle of my windshield, swelled my mute heart and brought out months of tears I had been incapable of shedding. That seemingly dorky sign moving from the front windshield to the passenger side window was the best damn thing I had seen in months. I didn’t pull over or stop when my vision became so blurry I had trouble focusing on the road in front of me. Shapes and colors blended together in figures like something you’d see on the canvas of a watercolor painting.

It took mere seconds for the sign to grow smaller in my rear-view mirror. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and pressed down a little harder on the gas pedal. I told myself I wasn’t going to look back again because I knew I had crossed the border into familiar territory. It was the first time in two years I felt like myself. And it was the first time in a year I felt like I could actually breathe. I was just happy to be in my car, driving down Interstate 94, and the Kasota sign welcoming me home.
My Immortal
by Melissa Frye

He barely speaks more than two words of greeting as I open the doors to the dorm to him, offering entrance into an inner san-
catum. He accepts this offering without blinking an eye, as if it were his right and not a privilege.

My father has flown all the way in from Oklahoma to visit his estranged family. Not that my sister is estranged from him. They speak twice weekly over the phone, more if the grandkids are sick. My father makes it his prerogative to phone up my younger brother monthly so they can discuss life, work, and anything else an only son and a devoted father can think of. It’s really only me that is estranged from my father, like I was something lost in my parent’s divorce and not his child.

I escort him into the piano room of the dormitory, wincing at the actual lack of splendor to this place. My father prefers sleek and modern, clean white lines and almost hospital-like sterility. I’m too romantic for that concept. I prefer my rooms made of dark wood, old history, and a touch of dust. He takes his place on a sofa, flicking at a spot of lint on the warm yellow colored upholstery. I can’t split the image of this stuffy middle aged man from the mud slicked father that taught me how to bail hay and plant garden rows in straight lines. Where’s the calluses, the dirt, the worn but sturdy expression of a modest life? He seems so soft now. Not in the face, not behind those sharp blue eyes, but in the body.

He’s getting old, I realize with a start. It’s the same strange feeling I got when I was sixteen and I realized my father was eye level with me, that I didn’t have to tilt my head back so far my neck hurt to look up at him. The realization that I had grown tall enough that my father could no longer menace me with his size had stolen the words right from my mouth at sixteen. At a little over twenty, the realization that my father was old hit me with the same speechlessness.

I took my seat a little too heavily on the piano bench, my elbow bouncing off the keys with a jarring, out of tune chord. My
father’s face pulls into a grimace as I smile meekly and rub my elbow. He looks away as if to lend me some time to compose myself. Or ignore me. I’ve never been able to tell with him.

I study my father for a moment, wondering why I hadn’t noticed the signs of his aging before. My father has been bald for as long as I remember, but the sparse ring of hair around the base of his skull had always been an astonishing shade of ginger for years. True, we hadn’t seen each other in three years, but I could still picture my father’s red hair clearly. Now, all the hairs are gray and have lost their youthful curl. His beard is nearly a perfect white around his sagging jaw. His face is heavy and sunken, and his eyes are lined with wrinkles. Everything about him, everything I remember, seems faded now when I’m faced with the reality of the man. His mortality strikes me hard, like a blow to the chest. He was my Zeus, my immortal image of fatherhood growing up. He wasn’t an ideal father, he was far from even a good father, but there were times, such wonderful times, that I remember him being perfect in my eyes. Now, as I gaze at the man in his mid-fifties, I wonder where that sense of wonderment has gone. I look at him now and I see just a man, flawed and corrupted.

He’ll be dead, not soon I hope, but someday. I’ll be sad, but I won’t be broken by his passing. I will regret that we never really knew each other more than I will regret that he is dead. I will realize that we are like strangers passing each other in a hallway. We’ll see each other, perhaps note the similarities in our features because amongst all of his children, I share his face the most, but we will never meet. We will tip our heads in greeting and keep going on with our lives. My father and I will remain strangers for as long as we both shall live.

With that in mind, I ask him if he’d like a tour of the campus. He politely agrees.
Perfect Rapture: An Excerpt

by Melissa Esposito

The icy breeze bit at my neck. My lungs burned from the rush of air flowing into them. I gasped, drinking the air in faster than my body would allow. Inside, my bones ached from the grinding.

My soul kept shifting inside of me, faster than the rapid beating of my heart. It fluttered against my ribs, a trapped butterfly struggling desperately for release.

I looked down at my bare feet, surrounded by the soft falling snow. My footprints surprised me; the identifying marks were incomparable indents in the cold blanket covering the forest floor. Goosebumps pinched my pale skin, crawling up my legs. My bare body begged for shelter from the elements. My platinum blonde hair fell straight around my exposed breasts.

I was seeing life from different eyes. For the first time, I was human.

I walked through the forest, the smell of my naked flesh leaving me vulnerable. Tall evergreen trees stood, giant soldiers of the forest, the branches dusted with untouched, glistening snow. I felt them watching me from the protection of the shadows. Brilliant white light flooded through the gaps in the dense wall around the wood enclosure, setting the ground around me on fire. The snow glittered, uncorrupted diamonds from the sky. My heightened senses were the only thing not torn from me. I breathed in the crisp air and I could taste them. I caught the last few wisps of dried metallic blood drifting through the air. The rusted smell of fear poured off of them in waves. I trembled; the cold, harsh wind punished me. I wished I had my heavy white winter coat back, but I had shed my fur when I had welcomed my new pale skin to cover me.

Two burly wolves emerged from the shadows. They tensed, the hackles on the back of their necks rising. The male that had padded out from underneath the trees on the right was my alpha. He stood, unflinching, his night-black coat quivering. On the other side
of the clearing was a smaller wolf. He was younger, a less experienced alpha of a new pack. His tawny muzzle curled back into a snarl, sharp canines threatening.

I stood perfectly still, praying they would not recognize me. I had betrayed my alpha and had been a traitor to his rival. The icy wind tore through the forest with an unrecognizable force, carrying my crisp scent to the sensitive nostrils of my packs. In one single moment they both leapt off the ground, muscles bunching and flexing under their weight. The two alphas collided in the air above my head, teeth and bone crashing together with a sickening thud.

I seized that moment to run. I bounded through the forest, the numbing snow stealing my speed. I heard the pounding of their powerful strides covering the ground I had placed between us. They easily trapped me, and tore at my ankles, ripping the newly formed soft skin. Like a bird furiously beating its wings against its confines, I was trapped inside this new flesh, the wolf inside me struggling for release. The dagger-like teeth sank deep into my leg, tearing away flesh, paralyzing me with pain. Blood poured from my open wound, hot metallic liquid staining the snow. The damp sour smell of mildew and fur invaded my nostrils as they attacked, opening more gashes. The searing pain stole all conscious thought from me and I knew this was a fight for survival. They relished the taste of my blood. They tasted power and strength in the crimson liquor that flowed from my body.

I cried out, low, guttural and savage screams reaching the surface. I kicked and punched at the merciless creatures. In the next moment my soul broke free, wrenching me apart from the inside out. Bile worked its way up my throat; the taste of raw animal remains ripping through my stomach as I was shifting. In one shudder emerged the wolf that I was, large and glorious and white, my sharp teeth sinking into my alpha’s side. The monstrous wolf threw me onto the ground, pinning me under his enormous frame.

Then I was a girl, platinum hair tangled around me, body defenseless against my fate. When I thought they were going to kill me with their savagery, the animals sprang apart, ears alert, eyes as wide as a doe’s. They skittered into the protective darkness of the trees.
Even though the animals had been ruthless, nature had been even crueler. I had been left for dead, a pitiful wounded girl abandoned to bleed out the entire contents of her body into the snow. I closed my eyes and shuddered, wishing for the release of death.
Summer in the City

by Rachel Reed

Despite having grown up in a mostly residential neighborhood, as opposed to the oft-imagined urban concrete jungle, New York City is New York City. Even with the lush and expansive (albeit human constructed) fields on Central Park, there simply isn’t much untouched land to be found. My parents traded Cobble Hill, Brooklyn for Bayside, Queens’ superior school district, safer streets, and in the hopes that my mother’s children would understand nature as she did. Having grown up primarily in upstate New York and Georgia, when my mother thought of nature, she heard the swift, stirring gurgle of her grandparent’s creek, the delicate brush of moss against her cheek, the careful examination of fungal “fairy rings,” and deer fawn’s trot beneath her solemn gaze.

My younger sister and I always preferred being outdoors to staying cooped up inside, yet the communal apartment playground, with its cold, steely see-saws, grey rubber mats, and creaking, rusty swings proved a far cry from my mother’s memories. Aside from a two-year rebellion in rural Colorado, my father was a city kid, born and raised; he took no offense to the playground’s peeling, leaded paint, or not in the same way my mother did. Yes, her children played outdoors, but they climbed mass-produced metal, not maple’s twisting limbs; the courtyard didn’t have seed, it had sod; sounds of traffical ways obscured the robin’s morning song.

When I was seven and my sister four, our single-income household groaned loudly under the strain of various bills, an aging clunker of a car, and city-employee cutbacks. This meant that the summer day camp I knew and loved was completely out of the question for that year, and, as it turned out, the next. By then, my mother had been out of work for nearly eight years, and while the choice was hers, she was tired. She was used to summers with one small child, not a mischievous toddler and a somewhat sickly second-grader. Without a car, cash, or other neighborhood children, circumstance forced us into cramped, suffocating quarters. We made the most of it
in a cheap community pool, glitter and papier-mâché, and scavenger hunts on rainy days. It was great fun, but occasionally monotonous; even children can grow weary of pipe cleaner dragonflies.

Thus, the summer of nature expeditions was born. Armed with bug spray, sunscreen, and water bottles, we marched to the local army reserve. Though no longer active, Fort Totten served as an occasional training base and a relic of what once was, while the nearby wooded area surrounding Little Neck Bay remained largely untouched. My mother checked for poison ivy, then, holding each of our hands lest we trip and scrape a knee, led my sister and I into the unknown.

The odor struck me first; this was not the ashy, urine-tinged scent of city air, but a new, damp, dense perfume, similar to potting soil, but coarser and deeper. Our mother showed us multicolored fungi that clung to fallen logs, the flaking skin of the sycamore, the decaying detritus of last year’s autumn leaves, and a lone, far-off opossum in a tree. Time in “The Hundred-Acre Wood,” as I thought of it, replaced the pool for a couple of days each week. Everything about us changed: our hair adopted spider’s webs in place of chlorine’s crust; our feet adapted to the confines of our sneakers; our hands were busied by flower-pressings instead of crayons.

What began as foreign and wild soon became familiar. As time went on, we expanded our horizons, hungrily searching for new experiences. If it wasn’t too hot and we were feeling adventurous, we walked along the bay, sifting through sand for ecru seashells and shiny, blue-black mussels. We watched horseshoe crabs float lazily to shore, and ducks dip their heads in search of lunch. Each day, we went a bit further, until we made it to the marina nearly two-miles away. Our mother rushed us along to make dinner, and we returned home freckled, tired, and dirty, our minds at rest, satiated with discovery.

It’s no wonder, then, that these spaces made up my home. These were the woods I ran to as a troubled teen. This sand coated the pages of my books. Those waters swelled with tears after my grandmother’s sudden death. I walked the length of the bay towards my summer job, forgoing a twenty-minute bus ride for an hour-long
stroll. Even now, when I return home for spring break or the odd weekend, I ask my sister to walk to the water with me. If I’m lucky, she’ll reluctantly come along, soon acclimating to the change. For however briefly, we become children again. Our hands grasp and the world is ours, our mother’s watchful gaze existing for us alone. We play hide-and-seek behind trees and then splash each other in the surf. It’s not until we reach the marina that we pause, purchase Italian ices, and sit on the dock. We turn our eyes to the sea and our hearts bob with the boats, longing for what was while being content with what is.
Rocking

by Courtney Druzak

I am five years old and I am obsessed with airplanes.
It is not because I am fascinated by the life of a pilot, the outfits of a stewardess, or how the engine works. I don’t care to know how long a plane is from tip to tail, wing to wing, how fast they can go. I don’t know the difference between a Boeing or a fighter jet or a commercial passenger plane. I have no desire to travel. I am merely transfixed by the lights that move across the sky at night, the rumble of the engines as they push through the still night air, straining against the atmosphere.

From the window in my bedroom, I watch them nervously. I’m nothing but frightened at the idea of such large machines moving through the sky above my head.

“Don’t worry,” my mother says. She is still young, her hair a full, chocolate brown. She sits on the edge of my bed, waiting for me. I ignore her when she pats the bed, a suggestion that I should climb into it to sleep. I stay at the window, hands gripping the wooden ledge.

As the plane travels across the night sky, one light flashes in and out of sight through the leaves of the giant oak tree that stands guard in front of my window. My heart pounds a little more furiously at the roar of the plane overhead. It sounds too big, too loud to be that small speck of light in the sky. Its pressure is continually building in my ears. I freeze, sure it is going to come crashing straight through my window, nose first, into me. Wood and glass will shatter against my face, great metal screeching and rending noises will erupt from all around us, and my mother and I will be found lifeless, pushed into the backyard by the giant plane, now only rubble and smoke and ash.

We don’t stand a chance. I shiver in my pink nightgown.

“Courtney,” she finally calls, exasperated, “get in the bed.”

“But the plane…”

“What about it? It’s passing right now.”

I listen. The roar of the plane is subsiding. I imagine this
is what it would sound like if God himself tore a hole in the sky over our heads. I imagine this is what it sounds like when a spaceship lands. I imagine this is what it sounds like when I’m going to die. Too many scary movies I’ve watched with my cousins. I look back at her desperately.

She’s rolling her eyes. “It’s just a plane. Really. It’s fine.”

“How do you know?”

She yawns. “The light. The red light you see flashing in with those other white ones. Anytime you see a red light, you know it’s just a plane up there at night and that it’s gonna stay right up there.” Finally, she manages to tuck me into bed, quickly plants a kiss on my forehead, and leaves, still yawning. I roll over in the darkness, staring back out the window.

I heed her words in the years to come, searching for those red lights in the Pennsylvania night sky.

“The people on Flight 93 were heroes, but they were going to die no matter what.”

This is what Heather Penney tells a reporter ten years later, in September 2011, days before the tenth anniversary of the terrorists attacks on 9/11 in the United States. Ten years ago, she was a lieuten- ant in the Washington DC National Guard. At the time of the attacks she flew an F-16, short for Fighter Falcon, forty-nine feet, five inches long, sixteen feet tall, nineteen thousand pounds of plane. They are what come to mind when one imagines fighter pilots zipping through the skies, performing loops, outmaneuvering other pilots, bringing them down, protecting the homeland.

Heather’s job that day was the same as the hijackers: kamikaze mission.

“We wouldn’t be shooting it down. We would be ramming the aircraft because we didn’t have weapons on board to be able to shoot the plane down,” Heather tells the reporter.

No fully armed F-16 fighter jets were on standby that clear September morning. No one suspected that they would be needed at the Andrews Air Force base outside Washington, where the sunlight glinted off the steel and glass of the planes. Orders from the White
House told them to take out hijacked Flight 93 before it could reach Washington, D.C. Without any heat-seeking AIM-9 missiles loaded into their planes, Heather and her fellow pilot, Marc Sasseville, had to come up with a new course of action.

“Sass looked at me and said, ‘I’ll ram the cockpit’... and I made the decision that I would take the tail off the aircraft.”

Heather describes being emotionless as she climbs into her F-16 and takes off for what may have been the final flight of her life, running on a cocktail of instinct and adrenaline. Emotion ceased to exist in a world where she was hurtling at speeds up to 1500 miles per hour to rip the tail off Flight 93. “It was really just, dear God please don’t let me screw up.”

The White House flexed a defensive reflex and the F-16 pilots responded.

My brother is nearly two years old when we realize something is wrong. My mother notices it first. She is still perceptive, despite the fact that she now hides grays with blonde highlights in hair that use to be as brown as my own. Josef cries. He fusses. He kicks strong baby legs into the air and jostles from side to side in his crib. There is no pacifying him.

“It’s something in his head,” she diagnoses. Only ten years old, I nod knowingly along with her.

When we take him to Dr. Bell, a local Beaver County pediatrician, he pronounces her correct. He states there is an imbalance inside his ears.

“Fluid. Fluid in both ears.”

My mother and I exchange nervous glances in the white and sanitized doctor’s office. “What does that mean?” my mother asks seriously, frown lines deepening around her mouth.

Dr. Bell frowns too. He is a short man with coke bottle glasses. A brown band with a little silver satellite and light bulb he uses to peer down throats wraps around the circumference of his head like a homing beacon. “It’s just fluid. Not too terribly uncommon. We can correct it with surgery.”

“Surgery?!”
I’m speechless. The child isn’t even two!
He smiles whimsically at us. “Minor. We just insert tiny tubes into his ear to help the fluid drain. Both of them, in this case. They should come out on their own. Or, if they don’t, we can easily remove them.”

“Oh.” My mother pauses. “What about the rocking?”
Dr. Bell blinks at us. “The rocking?”
“He rocks,” she explains, “back and forth, back and forth, back and forth—”

“Oh, oh,” he says. He smiles, he understands. “That might just have been his way of finding relief from it. It’s awfully uncomfortable to have all that pressure and fluid building up in your ears. A kind of burning pain. I’m sure it’ll stop in time.”

Where are the safe red lights in the Pennsylvania skies?
Tom Burnett enters the Boeing 757 early on a clear September morning in 2001. It is a commercial passenger plane, divided into first class and economy, filled with two pilots, several flight attendants, various breakfast options, fellow passengers, and, unknown at the time, four hijackers. He sits down comfortably in seat 4C in first class, awaiting breakfast and the hum of the engines against his eardrums, the pilot’s voice welcoming the passengers and preparing them to climb into the sky. On the ground, his wife Deena and his three little girls are awaiting his return. Tom, whose wife had previously been a flight attendant herself, often gets on a separate plane when they travel so that an accident would not leave their children parentless.

Flight 93 is scheduled to take off at precisely 8:01 AM from the Newark International Airport. It will travel to San Francisco in six hours and deposit its precious cargo, Tom included, into a white, sanitized airport in California. From there, they will continue the routine of their lives. Tom will make his way home to Deena and their three girls in time for dinner.

This is the plan before four men, dispersed throughout the plane, stand up silently in their seats. They slip on red bandanas and take control of the plane with the use of hidden knives. They turn it
sharply forty minutes into the expedition, somewhere over Ohio, and send the plane, Tom, and hundreds of other passengers careening into the Pennsylvania skies. Its target is Washington, D. C.

The rocking doesn’t stop.
Josef has turned two in June, and now it is August 2001. I am back in school, in fourth grade, ten years old, glasses, books, and always askew brown hair. My parents are in disagreement over what George W. Bush is doing for the people of the United States while in office. I am studying, and Josef is endlessly rocking, rocking, rocking. He makes my head hurt.

“Can’t you make him stop?” I whine at my mother. “He gives me a headache when he does that.”

My dad clucks at me. “Now, how is that possible?”

“I dunno, he just does!”

My mother sighs. “There’s nothing we can do, Courtney. He likes to rock. The rocking helps.” We all stop and stare at Josef for a long moment. He is in his playpen, stretched out flat on his back. Both of his legs are upright and bent at the knee so that his feet are firmly planted on the playpen bottom. He has thrown his head back and positioned his arms on either side of his body. His face and blonde hair are covered with his blue baby blanket, effectively blocking out the light and encasing him in a calm, dim atmosphere. With the integrated use of his arms, feet, and hips, he is pushing himself first to one side and then the other. The playpen lets out faint, soft metal groaning noises in protest. He picks up speed as he goes, humming faster, starting to sound like an engine. Rocking rocking rocking.

Flight 93 in early September 2001 is being hunted down by Heather Penny and Marc Sasseville in their F-16 jets. They are getting closer with every minute, Washington’s knee jerk patterned into their brains and actions. The passengers inside the giant Boeing 757 don’t know this. But they do understand what is happening. They start fighting back against the hijackers.

Fourteen minutes before Heather and Marc can reach the plane, the passengers regain control and bring it down just outside of
Shanksville, Pennsylvania, not too far from Pittsburgh. Flight 93 is a smoking pyre on a hill on a clear September morning.

“They locked down the schools!”
This is the first thing my mother cries when she sees me entering through the front door after yet another day in my fourth grade classroom on September 11, 2001. I stare at her in complete loss. Did they? Really?

“Look—”
Immediately she has me in the door, the lock turned, my backpack off my shoulders, and my face in front of the TV. Great blossoms of grey smoke and ash are curling skyward across the screen. Firemen in firefighter uniforms. Policemen. Expressions of horror on the faces of witnesses and the solemn voice of the reporter. I stare in confusion. “What—Mrs. Pucevich had the TV in our classroom on for a minute, then she turned it off quickly, but I…”

“Terrorist! They flew planes into the skyscrapers in New York! One crashed just outside of Pittsburgh!”
I can see the panic like tightened wads of metal in her eyes. They are bright with adrenaline.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Still out of town…”
We watch the screen for a while. It’s like one of those movies my parents watch where they make me leave the room. I have to turn away. I can’t stand watching some of my oldest fears come true. I take my eyes off the flashing lights of a police car and stare at the white walls of our living room. The room itself is half in disarray, my mother obviously having left her cleaning of it for another time. It takes me a moment to realize something is odd.

“What’s that noise?”
My mother is still fixated on the screen. But I know anyway. She has left Josef in his playpen.
He’s swaying from side to side, rocking and rocking so furiously that the playpen is squealing like metal grating against itself with each movement, visibly shuddering. I stare at him through the mesh sides of the playpen, transfixed. Past the sirens, I think I can
hear him humming one of the songs from Bear in the Big Blue House to himself. This has become such a typical action for him that it seems to have patterned itself into his brain. He’s running on instinct here, letting his body take over and control the situation. 

“Courtney, Courtney, look—”

I don’t turn around. I stare at Josef’s rocking. This simple physical motion has propelled him into some other world where there are safe red lights in Pennsylvania skies. Did I think it was annoying? The kid is brilliant. I watch him go back and forth for several more minutes, allowing my mind to go numb with his.

“Courtney—”

My mother knocks me out of my reverie with Josef. I turn to face her and the TV. Josef ignores us. He continues his endless rocking, even as somewhere in the skies over Western Pennsylvania, Heather and Marc have been called off. Flight 93 is burning.
The Customer

by Elizabeth Minutello

Janice leaned down and pulled a loose thread from the headless mannequin’s green Heritage tiered skirt. Smooth jazz played softly on the store’s loudspeakers over her head. She stepped back to inspect her correction before leaning back in to adjust the ruffles of the matching empire blouse. Even after last month’s promotion to Store Manager of the South Hills branch of Banana Republic, she was still picking up the slack for her co-workers. I may have to start threatening to fire people. Again. Janice thought, taking a final appraisal of the outfit. Perfect.

Janice ran a manicured hand through her blond hair. She turned and surveyed the store floor. Male and female models pouted from their advertisements, shamelessly begging for her attention. Cashmere sweaters, jeans, and long-sleeved shirts were neatly folded on the black lacquered tables. Dresses and jackets hung on wooden hangers on clothing racks. Other headless mannequins proudly displayed their chic outfits. It was a sight to entice any fashion-conscious individual and yet the floor was empty of customers. Not even the “sale hounds” were here, the ones who scouted the store before a big sale. They bought nothing, but scribbled down their favorite items in notebooks for later reference.

It was only October. Their next sale was not until Black Friday. Janice repressed a shudder. Last year’s Black Friday sale had begun at midnight. With her parents out of town, she had been fortunate enough to skip the ceremony of eating and just sleep. She had been the only well-rested, sober employee in the store. However, the calm individuals outside of the locked store doors had, by 12:05 AM, transcended into a mob of clawed, outstretched hands and vulgar screams. Even Janice had needed three black coffees and two chocolate-covered biscotti to regain her sense of well-being when the sale had ended at 1:00 PM.

Ding! The entrance alarm announced the arrival of a customer. She heard the whisper of a skirt against the floor. A woman. Jan-
ice took a deep breath and began to search for the customer, her first of the afternoon. She clasped her hands in front of her and plastered a friendly smile across her face. “May I help you with anything…?” The word “miss” caught in her throat. Dear God.

It was one of them. The customer wore a brown peasant skirt that reached to her ankles. The material appeared coarse as if it were made from burlap. A red tie-dyed T-shirt hung loosely over her thin frame. A multicolored beaded necklace hung from her neck. Her chestnut hair, held in place by a black cloth headband, was in hundreds of tiny braids. Hippie, Janice internally groaned. She usually passed customers like her off to one of the younger sales clerks like Amy or James, but they were in the back taking care of a new delivery of peacoats.

The customer had not heard Janice. In fact, she had passed her and was digging through one of the clothing racks. The thought of those grungy hands leaving stains on the dresses, the cheapest of which sold for $120.00, was enough to make Janice nauseous. She raised her voice.

“Miss? May I help you with anything?” The customer’s head dodged about as if trying to decide which direction to turn before settling on the left. Janice saw a dreamy look in her green eyes as if she were thinking of something far away.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the customer said, “Your voice sounded like it was part of the music. And my name isn’t ‘miss,’ it’s Diana. Not the princess. The Goddess of the Moon.”

“What a lovely name. And I suppose you’re trying to find a lovely outfit?” Janice gestured to the rack. “I’m not sure if we’ll have anything to your taste.”

“I would be surprised if you didn’t have what I’m looking for.” The customer smiled broadly, displaying teeth coated in a thin yellowish film. “Surely your store has black dresses.”

“We wouldn’t be Banana Republic if we didn’t keep such a fashion staple.” Janice hid her grimace and motioned for Diana to follow her. They walked to the back of the store where a red sign in white lettering announced the clearance section.

“Excellent!” shouted Diana. “I wasn’t looking to spend a lot of money, you know.”
of the green.” She strolled around the rack until she reached the band that marked the size 12’s.

Because you need the rest for pot? Aloud Janice said, “It’s amazing how customers seem to find what they need in the clearance rack.” Janice noticed a size 8 red cashmere sweater from last year’s collection hanging in the size 6 line. She deftly pulled it out and placed it in the correct size line.

Diana watched, her eyes becoming sharp and focused.
“Are you a Virgo, aren’t you?”
“A what?” Janice vaguely recalled the name from glancing at the daily horoscopes in the Post-Gazette as she searched for the New York Times Crossword Puzzle.

“Virgo the virgin. An Earth element. If you’re born under that sign, you’re doomed to be a major perfectionist.” Diana stopped flipping through the clothes for a second and pointed a forefinger to her chest. “Now I’m a Pisces. That’s a fish. Water element. People with my sign are more open-minded and adaptable.”

“How interesting”

Diana steadily moved down the row of hanging clothes until she came to a black lightweight wool pleat dress with short sleeves. Janice could see where the price had been repeatedly crossed out by a pen. The original price had run somewhere in the $150.00 range. Now it was only $40.00. “It’s perfect,” Diana breathed.

“I’m sure your boyfriend will enjoy seeing you in it,” said Janice who imagined a long-haired man wearing only a pair of faded torn jeans and reeking of ‘medicinal’ smoke and calling himself Zeus.

“Boyfriend?” Diana cocked her head and stared blankly at Janice. “This isn’t for a date. My grandmother’s funeral is the day after tomorrow.”

Janice felt her face begin to warm. “Funeral?”

“Yeah.” Diana sighed, “But at least Grandma accomplished the two things we all want: a long life and a peaceful end. I will miss her, though. She always made it a point to come to all of my violin recitals.”

“And you came here for a black dress?”

“Every woman knows a quality black dress pays for itself

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again and again.” Diana looked down at her ensemble. “And I can hardly wear this to the funeral.”

“Your outfit is…” Janice breathed in looking for the right word.

“Eclectic? I know. I find that it helps me to catch people’s attention. It really leaves an impression on them.” Diana folded the dress over her arm. “I’m ready to make my purchase. Do you take American Express?”

Janice nodded and struggled to keep up with Diana’s quick stride as she led the way to the check-out counter.
Fly Me to the Moon

by Emily Eddinger

Hannah’s wings sprouted when she was nine years old, when the doctors discovered a hump on her back. Scoliosis, the doctors said. A twenty-four degree curvature of the spine, they said. She’ll have to wear a brace, they said, until she stops growing.

About a month into wearing the brace, Hannah still took it off every chance she got. Hannah’s mom kept finding it hidden around the house—in the kitchen cabinets, behind sheets in the linen closet, under Hannah’s bed.

“Hannah,” her mom said after she’d found her brace hidden in the dryer, “I know that it’s scary, but wearing your brace will stop your curve from getting worse. You don’t want to have to have surgery, do you?”

“Mom, it’s not what they think it is,” Hannah said. “If I wear it, it’s going to keep my wings from growing.”

The brace was a hard plastic torso container with Velcro straps in the back. There was padding on the inside that molded to her body. Not only was it inhibiting the growth of her wings, but the undershirts she wore beneath it were itchy and parts of it rubbed under her armpit until her skin was raw. The doctors instructed her to wear it all the time, save for exercise and showers.

Her mother shook her head. “Hannah,” she sighed. “I’m not paying for them to put rods in your back. Go put on your brace.”

Hannah found the ultimate hiding spot for her brace at school. She’d visit the bathroom in the morning before Language Arts, remove her brace in a stall, and then wait until the fifth grade girls finished applying their makeup. Then she’d climb up on one of the sinks, move the ceiling tile just enough so that she could get her brace up there, and then return the tile to its original position. She found lots of interesting items in the tiles: hall passes, baggies of pot, detention slips, but she figured that hers was by far the most interesting.
She could feel her wings sprouting when she sat against chairs without her brace.

The only other person besides her mom that knew about her wings was her best friend, Ellie.

“Wow!” Ellie said. They were on the playground during recess, sitting off on the side, pulling grass out by its roots and tying the blades together.

“I know, but don’t tell anyone,” Hannah said. “I want to know for sure that they’re not going to be more than chicken wings.”

“Will you have feathers?” Ellie asked.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. She thought about it. “I’ve never seen animals that have wings without feathers. I suppose I will.”

“Will you take me places?” Ellie asked. “Can we go to Canada? Can we go to Mars?”

“Wherever I go, I’ll take you with me, Ellie,” Hannah said. Ellie beamed.

“I want to go to the moon,” Ellie said.

Hannah and her mother traveled four hours to Philadelphia every three months to Shriners Hospital for Children. The doctors would poke and prod Hannah, ask her questions, and finally measure her curve. It had not progressed in her first visit post-bracing. In her second visit, it increased five degrees; her third, six degrees.

Hannah could start to see her wings. She was excited.

At her one-year visit, she and Dr. Smithfield—who told Hannah to call her Janet—were alone in the examination room.

“Hannah, your mother tells me you haven’t been wearing your brace as often as you’re supposed to be,” Janet said. “So, how often do you wear it?”

Hannah wasn’t sure whether she should lie or not. She looked at the wallpaper in the room, which had cartoon dinosaurs on it. An orange brontosaurus was looking out at her and saying, “You can do it!”

“All the time,” Hannah said. “Except when I shower or have gym class.”

Janet made a note on her clipboard. “Now, Hannah, what I’m
about to tell you might sound scary, okay?”

Hannah nodded.

“I’m telling you this before I tell your mother,” Janet said. “Your curve is almost forty degrees. That means it’s time to start discussing surgery.”

“I don’t want surgery,” Hannah said. “I don’t want to wear this stupid brace and I don’t want surgery.”

Janet took a deep breath. “Hannah,” she said, “severe scoliosis can be crippling later in your life. You might develop heart and breathing problems.” Janet held back on some of the scarier aspects, which included difficulty walking and possible damage to the nerves and spinal cord. “I’m here to help you in any way I can; that’s all I’m trying to do. The brace and surgery aren’t meant to hurt you.”

“But my wings,” Hannah said softly.

“Excuse me?” Janet frowned.

“My wings, my wings!” She grabbed the sleeve of Janet’s shirt. “Don’t take them away; please Janet, don’t make me lose my wings.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me, Hannah,” Janet said.

“I never had scoliosis.” Tears trickled down Hannah’s face. “It’s just my wings growing in. You’ll see.” She crawled off of the exam table and into Janet’s arms. “I’m waiting for my wings.”

Hannah’s wings were clipped in November of that year, when her curve had progressed to 54 degrees. Rods and screws were fused to her spine in order to lessen the curve. She didn’t return to school until the following February, after the physical therapy. Ellie cried when Hannah told her.

“We’ll never know if you would’ve had feathers, Hannah,” Ellie said. “We could’ve gone to the moon.”
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