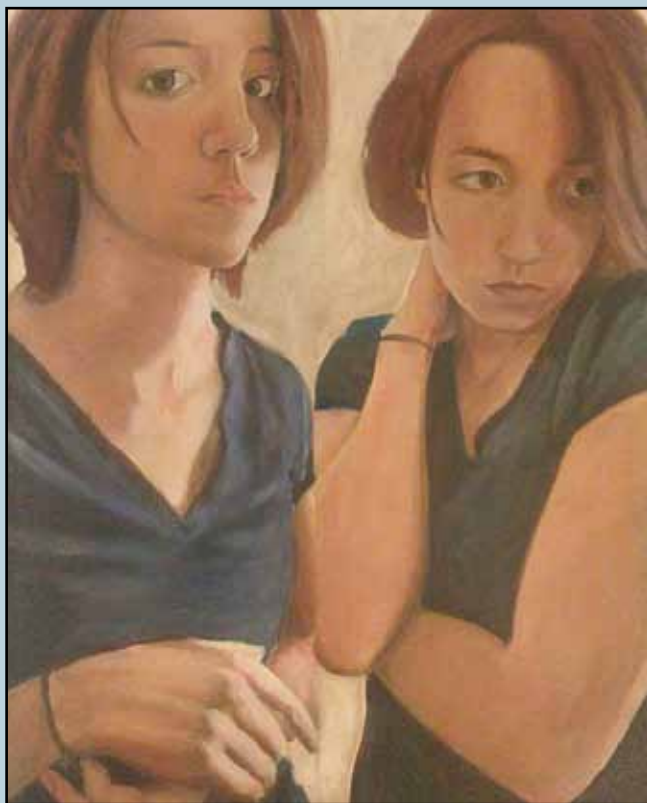


The Metropolitan



Self Acrylic on Canvas KayCee Wise

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2016

The Metropolitan

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by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2016

“What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander.”

Elie Wiesel



The Metropolitan 2016

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects MCC writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://resource.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

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2016 Writing Awards

For her poem “Pigeonhole,” Janie Ensor is the winner of The Metropolitan 2016 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Mekenzie Sutton, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for her poem “things that grew between us.” The second runner-up, Ally Halley, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her story “New Beginnings.”

Pigeonhole

Janie Ensor

They ask:

“You’re indian? You don’t look indian. Haha.”

I am not Indian. I am Native American.

“My great, great grandmother was full-blood,” I say.

“So you’re not *really* indian then. You just have a little in you.”

I grew up on the reservation, there

built my bow. My quiver

is filled with insecure arrows.

“Those places look kinda poor,” they claim.

The delicate red

and turquoise bracelet I have

is shining inside my dresser drawer.

They ask:

“You’re indian? Me too! I think. What are you?”

I am not Indian.

“Northern Cheyenne,” I say.

“Cool. Did you ever dance in one of those ‘thingys?’”

From a sacred PowWow,

my jingle dress now clashes

against my Converse shoes.

“Did you ever smoke peyote? Haha,” they chime.

Our words are that vapor.

Feel free to pluck

feathers from my ancestral headdress.

They ask:

“Are you sure you’re indian? My skin is darker than yours! Haha.”

I am not Indian. I am Native American.

“I have documentation to prove it,” I say.

“Can you really hunt anywhere, for free?”

Ignore the protective

hide, while I disassemble

my dirty white tepee.

“Do you have an animal name, like in the movies?” they say.

Call me Sitting Duck

for scalping all my great,

great grandmother earned.

Night One

Janie Ensor

CPS on the caller ID.
I'm checking the list
of questions we were told to ask.
Remember, it's okay to say no.
"Sorry, we don't have that information yet."
Then how do I know if I can help? What is the point
of this list?
"He goes to Jonestown Elementary.
Not sure where his siblings are. Or
the mother."
I can't let him sit alone at a shelter.
"We'll take him in." What will I say?
"We're on our way." What will he do?
Headed 'home.'
He's rubbing his brown recluse eyes.
Or wiping away tears.
Ask lots of questions. But don't push, don't scare.
"How old are you, buddy?"
"Nine," says a mousy, high-pitched voice.
Keep smiling. Build trust.
"Nine! You look too tall to be nine." False.
He stares out the window, searching
for answers. Try
to be funny. Kids like that.
"I hope your feet don't hang off the end of the bed!"
He didn't laugh. Of course
he didn't laugh.
We're home.
This is where he'll be staying.
Please don't ask me how long.
Project Harmony gave him a bag that holds
one set of pajamas,
one outfit for school,
one toothbrush, and shampoo.
It weighs heavy on his slim frame.

Was there nothing else?
Case worker said he was left
on a stranger's doorstep. Mom told stranger it was
his turn. Guess
it's my turn now.
His new room.
Bunk bed cloaked by Iron Man.
Shiny Avengers poster on the wall. I hope
he likes it.
"Time for bed. Gotta get rest for tomorrow."
"Will I see my mom tomorrow?"
The anticipated plea. The dreaded sentence.
How did my foster care manual say to respond to this?
"Sorry buddy, I don't know. But we're gonna try
to see her as soon as we can, okay?"
His wet eyes look to Iron Man
for strength, for rest.
I will hold you! Kiss your head of black hair
spiking in all directions and say, "It'll be all right."
What I can say is, "Goodnight."

things that grew between us

Mekenzie Sutton

we started: an all-consuming fire. ended: a slow-sad letting go. a sigh. no big flailing struggle fight. just: sleeping without touching, on the couch, in different rooms. wide-mouthed, silent screaming into pillows, then cordial hellos and tv shows. a final nod to the corner where we had been carelessly brushed, rotted; both of us mumbling about cleaning it up. like a horrid season change, moving closer to where it will feel more normal to sleep without you than with. a breathtaking sudden feeling of alone whenever you're around. ripping, re-ripping the wound, desperately hoping that somehow, through all the pain, the light will get in, too.

New Beginnings

Ally Halley

“Freedom’s just another word for ‘nothin’ left to lose.”

–Janice Joplin, “Me and Bobby McGee” 1970

“On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your anxiety today?” Dr. Shapiro sat behind her mahogany desk, pen poised above a yellow legal pad, and gazed at Alice over her bifocals.

Alice Jefferson sat in the wing-backed chair opposite the desk, twisted the spare button of her yellow cardigan, and sighed.

“Better today, I think. A seven, maybe?”

“A seven for you or a seven for a regular person?”

“Oh...for a regular person, probably a nine.” Alice’s green eyes darted around the office as the psychiatrist took notes.

“How have you been sleeping?”

“Once I fall asleep, I sleep through the night, but I seem to lie there a long time before drifting off.” Dr. Shapiro scribbled, and Alice’s eyes were drawn to a picture on the opposite wall of the doctor shaking hands with President Bush, the first one.

“How soon before bed are you taking your Xanax?”

“It’s the last thing I do before going to bed.” More scribbling and Alice wondered how much the leather couch next to the desk set the doctor back.

“Try taking it about an hour before bed and see if that helps, and let’s increase the dosage to two milligrams and see how you do.”

“Thank you.”

“On your way out, make another appointment for two weeks, and we’ll see how you’re doing.”

Clutching her new prescription in her manicured hand, Alice shuffled out of the office. As an actuary, she knew how risky it was just to live. She spent her days putting the odds of insurance holders’ deaths into numbers. The odds of a 42-year-old woman dying at any given time were 1 in 645, but people died in accidents all the time. Some things she could control. She wasn’t going to be a victim of an accidental gun death since

she didn't own a gun, but her odds of dying by gun violence were still 1 in 300. Her fear of water made a death by drowning unlikely, and the most common cause of accidental death, illegal drug overdose, was a nonexistent risk for her. Other dangers, by their very nature, were unavoidable. Her odds of dying in a fall were 1 in 184 and meant that she dreaded stairs and high places. Glass shopping mall railings were a nightmare. A death by car accident had a risk of 1 in 272, but she'd rather trade the control of driving her own car than risk exposure to God knows what germs on public transportation.

On the drive home, she listened to the comforting drone of National Public Radio: "In science news, astronomers are tracking the trajectory of a previously unknown comet, dubbed AMB-1973." The reassuring purr of Robert Siegel explained, "The comet is on a collision course with the sun, and scientists are excited to document this unprecedented event."

Alice lived in a second-floor, one-bedroom condo in downtown Seattle. Lakeside North Condominiums were equidistant from the coast and the touristy Space Needle. Obviously, she would never go up in the Space Needle, but she liked being within walking distance of it. A condo made more financial sense than an apartment, and unlike a house, someone else was in charge of maintenance and yardwork. Financial risk was just another aspect of her life that Alice spent energy mitigating. She never used credit to buy depreciable assets, she maxed out her 401K and maintained a Roth IRA, and she kept six months' worth of income in an emergency fund.

Her home was meticulously organized: a place for everything and everything in its place. Her galley-style kitchen opened into the living room, and she watched *Jeopardy!* while grilling chicken breasts and steaming broccoli. Alex Trebek was interrupted by the deafening buzz of the Emergency Broadcast System.

An electronic voice came over the speakers: "This is not a test. Please standby for an announcement."

An eagle on a field of blue appeared on the screen for a moment before cutting to the Oval Office. The president sat behind his desk wearing a navy blue suit and an aquamarine tie.

"My fellow Americans, earlier today, comet AMB-1973 slammed into the sun. Scientists initially theorized that the comet would be vaporized in the sun's corona. However, it appears that the impact has accelerated the sun's life cycle. Scientists now believe that the sun will burn through its hydrogen within the next 24 hours at which point it will begin burning helium and become a red giant that will engulf Mercury, Venus, and, ultimately, Earth. I have consulted with the top scientists of our generation and they tell me that, regrettably, we do not have the technology or resources to prevent this catastrophe."

The president cleared his throat, and a single drop of sweat rolled down his temple: "I am calling on all Americans to shelter in place as we await this event. Spend your time with your loved ones, pray, make your peace with your maker, and may God have mercy on us all."

Alice sank down on her couch and stared, mouth agape at the now-snowy screen. Was this a prank? How could this happen? She didn't have family in Seattle. Her parents were both gone, and she was an only child. She had an elderly aunt in Miami but didn't know how to reach her. She needed to talk to someone and had no idea who to call. She had spent a lifetime protecting herself from risk, and human relationships were a risk she avoided like all the others. She scrolled through the contacts on her phone and stopped at "Boss." The call did not go through; a recording explained that all lines were busy.

"Well, I can't stay here. I'll go insane." She went to the kitchen and pulled the magnetized grocery list off the refrigerator. Alice sat back down on the couch and started writing.

TO-DO

Go up in the Space Needle

Kiss a stranger

Sing karaoke

Drive a convertible

Set a zoo animal free

Go to Mt. Rainier

As she finalized the list, her living room went dark. No electricity meant that the elevator wouldn't be an option, and she'd have to take the stairs to get out. She used her phone to see in the hallway and stairwell. Outside her building, the streets were eerily absent of human activity. Two squirrels chased each other across the sidewalk in front of her and scampered up a tree. She headed up Broad Street but didn't see a soul until the science center. She wasn't sure what to expect at the Space Needle, but she certainly didn't expect a party.

The fountain in the courtyard was now a reflecting pool without electricity running the pumps. Music was blasting from somewhere, and a dozen or so people were mingling at the entrance. As she climbed the stairs to the ticket window, a young man with blond dreadlocks in board shorts and a Van Halen t-shirt stopped her. "It's closed," he said.

"Thought it might be, but I need to get in there." Alice looked down at Van Halen's skateboard. "Can I borrow that?"

"Sure, but what do you..."

Alice picked up the skateboard and rammed it through the glass doors.

"Whoa. You're crazy!" Van Halen exclaimed.

"C'mon." Alice grabbed his hand and looked for the stairs. Finally, all those hours on the Stair Master were going to be good for something other than giving her the butt of a college co-ed. A sign over the stairs boasted, "Just 848 steps to the best view in Seattle!"

"Perfect."

Alice could have run straight to the top, but with Van Halen in tow, it was slow going. She was impatient, so the fifteen minutes it took to get to the top seemed a lifetime. Van Halen was doubled over and gasping, "How are you not even out of breath?"

Alice shrugged. "How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Awesome." She wrapped her hands around his head and pulled him toward her. Alice maneuvered to kiss him and...their teeth clinked together.

"Ow! Take it easy, lady!"

"Sorry. I thought we had a moment."

"Well, we're here now. Let's check out that view."

They walked to the observation deck and gasped. The bay was a glassy blue, and Mount Rainier's snowy countenance was naively timeless. From the top of the world, she could almost feel hopeful.

For a moment, Alice forgot she wasn't alone. "I can't let that stand. I can do better," she said out loud.

"What?" As she turned toward Van Halen, he cradled her face in his hands and brushed his stubby lips across hers. She closed her eyes. He smelled like ramen and Cheetos. He smelled like youth and rebellion. Alice opened her eyes. "Thank you," she said. "Let's go." Grabbing Van Halen's hand, she marched back down the stairs.

The party was still going in the courtyard, but Alice was on a mission.

"Where are we going?" Van Halen asked.

"I need a convertible." Alice started back up Broad Street with designs on finding a car with the keys in it.

Seattle being Seattle, the pragmatic Seattleite did not drive a convertible. Alice knew the odds of finding one were slim, but she was determined. "Jackpot!"

Van Halen was confused, "That's not a convertible."

"True. It's better. It's a Harley with the keys in it."

"I don't know how to drive a motorcycle."

"How hard can it be?" Alice climbed onto the bike and was trying to balance it while on her toes and simultaneously kick up the kickstand. "Get on." Van Halen squeezed in behind her, and she turned the key. Nothing happened. "Why isn't it turning over?"

"Maybe it's out of gas." He peered over her shoulder, "Shouldn't we be wearing helmets?"

"Seriously? Why?"

Van Halen shrugged. "What's that button?" he asked as he gestured to her right hand.

"No idea." But Alice pushed it, and the bike sprang to life. "I did it!"

"Where are we going?"

"We're on a rescue mission! Next stop: Woodland Park

Zoo!” From her tippy toes, Alice shifted her weight to pull away from the curb, and felt the bike tipping...and tipping...and tipping! They managed to hop off before getting pinned under it and promptly stood up to look around for witnesses. Luckily, their only company was a squirrel.

Van Halen threw up his hands. “Now what?”

“Now we fall back to Plan C.”

“Plan C?”

“Yeah, this way.”

Alice started trotting back to her house. They climbed into her car and headed north. With the best traffic conditions, the drive to the zoo was twelve minutes. With no traffic, they should make it in ten. “Just enough time. How do you feel about Gloria Gaynor?”

“Who?”

“Never mind.” Alice synched her phone to her car stereo and took a deep breath.

At first I was afraid

I was petrified

Kept thinking I could never live

Without you by my side

But then I spent so many nights

Thinking how you did me wrong

And I grew strong

And I learned how to get along

And so you're back

From outer space

I just walked in to find you here

With that sad look upon your face

I should have changed that stupid lock

I should have made you leave your key

If I had known for just one second

You'd be back to bother me...

“Hey!” Van Halen smiled, “I know this song!” and he chimed in. They sang all the way to the zoo. The parking lot was empty, and they were able to drive right up to the entrance. They hurdled the turnstiles and approached the first exhibit, the African Savana. It housed the zebras, giraffes, and ostriches.

“How do we get in?” Van Halen wondered aloud.

“There must be an employee access point.” Alice started searching the trail for a “Zoo Staff” sign. Twenty yards west of the main exhibit entrance, she found a wooden gate partially hidden by bushes with a “Restricted” sign on it. “Over here!”

Van Halen came up behind her. “How do we open it?”

“Are you tall enough to reach over the top of the gate? Can you feel around for a latch?”

He leaned up against the gate for maximum reach and fumbled blindly. “Got it!” Alice heard a click, and the gate swung towards them.

“Great, now open it as wide as it will go.” They stood out of the way on either side of the gate, expecting a stampede of animals running for freedom, but nothing happened. They peered around the gate and saw only more bushes. “Where are the animals?”

The animals were grazing in the exhibit, acclimated to their simulated environment and unaware of the opportunity for escape. Alice entered the exhibit to try and herd the zebras toward the gate but was blocked by a deep, concrete aqueduct that served as a secondary barrier to keep the animals contained. It wouldn't deter the humans from getting to the animals, but there was no way they could coax them back over it.

“I didn't plan for this.”

“You had a plan?”

Alice laughed, “Okay, not really. I just thought this would be easier.” She pulled the list out of her pocket.

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“Well, we don't have time to deal with it now. How do you feel about a road trip?”

“I got nothing better to do.”

The trek to Mt. Rainier was two hours to the south, so they stopped at Marketime Foods for some supplies. The grocery store was abandoned but unlocked. Without electricity, they had to force the automatic doors open manually. They grabbed only the essentials: bottled water, blankets, marshmallows, Twizzlers, Milk Duds, sunflower seeds, Cheetos, and beef jerky.

They munched in silence for the first half of their journey as Van Halen struggled with his sun visor. Alice was struck by the ordinariness of the sunset. Could it be a mistake? Shouldn't it look different if it was dying?

"So, are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Mt. Rainier."

"Why? Wouldn't that just get us closer to it? Shouldn't we go underground or something?"

"Underground won't be any safer. At least the mountain is a beautiful and serene place to be when it happens."

"Fair enough."

The park entrance was unmanned but had an information board with trail maps. For practicality's sake, they picked the closest, shortest trail on the map. Spray Park Trail was only three miles long, one-way. As they unloaded their meager provisions, Alice regretted not bringing backpacks and flashlights. The twilight was still lingering when they set out on the trail, but once they entered the forest, their progress was slowed by the darkness and uneven terrain. The trail in the forest was an obstacle course of rocks and jutting tree roots. Their eyes adjusted to the darkness somewhat, but they had to tread carefully to keep from falling or turning an ankle.

The wilderness around them came alive in the dark. Alice could identify some of the music bouncing off her eardrums: the rhythmic whir of cicadas, a hooting owl in conversation with a lady owl barely within hearing distance, and a pack of coyotes that sounded uncomfortably close. She didn't recognize the throaty song of the bullfrogs, but their contribution to the cacophony indicated the trail was close to a water source. Alice estimated they had been hiking for an hour when she started to hear the waterfall. Soon after, the forest cleared, and they were in a meadow at the base of the mountain. The glaciers on its peak

reflected the moonlight, and the meadow had a glorious view of the spectacle; they decided to set up camp here.

They spread out the blankets and blatantly flouted the prohibitions against campfires that were printed on the map and multiple signs throughout the park. "What are they going to do," Alice snickered to herself, "arrest us?"

Dinner was beef jerky and toasted marshmallows. Mosquitoes feasted on the pair of campers. Alice's stomach was unused to a convenience-food diet, and it let her know it. As they lay back on the blankets and stared up at the heavens, she grimaced through stomach cramps. She was exhausted but conflicted about whether she should try to sleep. Should she sleep to reduce the agony of waiting or stay awake in case it happened during the night so she could be ready for it? Was it better to meet it eyes wide open or to not see it coming? She couldn't decide. Ultimately, fatigue made the decision for her, and she drifted off to thoughts about aerial views, motorcycle mishaps, and zebras.

Alice felt that she had just fallen asleep when she was awakened by the stifling heat. The forest had grown quiet except for a strong east wind. Directly above their heads, she could still see stars, but the horizon in all directions had an ominous red glow. Van Halen was awake now and coughing. The air was so stifling that it was hard to breathe. They ran to the river in search of relief. Totally submerged, with only faces above the water, they watched their last sunrise. As the red glow encroached on their watery refuge, they were momentarily dazzled by the opalescent colors of the burning atmosphere. When the solar wind rolled across the meadow, Alice and Van Halen were instantly vaporized, their bodies reduced to atoms. The sun scorched the land and boiled the oceans dry. As the sun absorbed the moon, Mars became the new Mercury, and 342 million miles away, orbiting Jupiter, Europa's frozen seas had begun to thaw.

Painted Toenails

Anu Kovilam

What

I want you to see
is a pretty side of me
something like
a shade of Deep Blue,
something that expresses my complexity.
Are you looking?

The brush strokes are
petite, careful, not
too loud,
too grand,
but something to
make your head turn.

And after a hard day,
when all that's with me
is my charcoal soul,
my nocturnal tears
will crawl down my cheeks,
down my
Never-Quite-There body,
until they reach my toes,
wash off that Deep Blue
and remind me of
What's really there.

Sometimes I forget.
Maybe that's why I'm crying.

Crybaby

Andrew Clegg

Every once in awhile, a person will take an action that largely defines who they happen to be at that time, or who they are going to be in the future, or at least, who they want to be. These actions can be deliberate and even artificial, but most of them, I think, tend to materialize organically within the space of a moment. I experienced more than a few of these moments throughout my childhood, and almost all of them defined me as a crybaby.

For instance, when I showed up for the first day of second grade with an embarrassing lack of knowledge on the subject of how to read words, I put my head on my desk and began to bawl my eyes out. In the fourth grade, I slipped on a piece of paper, landed flat on my butt, and promptly burst into tears. When, in the sixth grade, I found that I had lost my favorite pencil in the world, I threw an absolute crying fit (I suspect to this day that it was stolen by my "friend" T.J.). This sort of thing happened with enough frequency that the notion that I was a crybaby became widely accepted as fact among my classmates, and I, unfamiliar with the concept of self-esteem and unaware of my capacity for change, accepted it as well.

There was one moment, however, that would, above all the others, solidify my crybabyhood for years to come. This moment took place on a summer afternoon in the year 2006.

Despite the events that were about to take place, the afternoon was a tranquil one and possessed a quality that would easily satisfy any child's boyish curiosity. The summer rain had left puddles perfect for jumping in, and the almost pleasant scent of dead worms lingered in the air. In such basketball-friendly weather, I would have been a fool not to have found myself on the court outside of Dodge Elementary, losing to T.J. in a game of Horse.

DONK! My ball had just bounced from the backboard, off into some ridiculous and unintended direction.

"You suck at this," T.J. commented.

“I know,” I stated without disdain.

After a few more minutes of our playing Horse and accumulating a few more letters, Missy and her gang of she-friends arrived. Missy lived next door to me, and up until this point, had generally greeted me with a smile and a wave. It became clear, moments after her arrival, however, that such niceties were not on her agenda. She and her companions expelled a series of disparaging remarks about my basketball skills, my hairstyle, and my bodily stature.

“Go away,” I said. “Leave me alone. That’s not nice.” Such foolish suggestions were beyond acknowledgement. Effortlessly, my basketball was swiped from my hands by one of Missy’s followers.

It was at this point that T.J. had made the decision to leave. And so, in the midst of my feeble and ultimately fruitless attempts to reclaim my basketball, Missy stepped forward, ready to deliver her final crushing word. An arrogant smirk danced across her face. In a tank top and sweatpants, she somehow managed to maintain her intimidating demeanor. Her cold, unfeeling eyes remained still, as she spoke three words that would continue to haunt me throughout my adolescence: “You’re a nerd.”

I collapsed in on myself.

Despair gripped my body. I couldn’t breathe. Tears pooled in my eyes and snaked down my face. I crumpled to the ground and hugged my legs to my chest, effectively forming a pathetic weeping ball. I was peer to no one but the half-dried worm on the pavement next to me, pitifully inching its way out of a puddle.

Why would she have said that? I thought.

What’s wrong with me?

I’m a big, stupid nerd. It must be true.

Upon witnessing such a display of hilarious weakness and insecurity, there was nothing for the girls to do but laugh at the situation that they’d found themselves in and enjoy the absurdness of the small sobbing boy who had suddenly fallen at their feet.

Within the deplorable clump on the ground, something was happening. Despair was being transmuted into pure seething rage.

“LEAVE. ME. ALONE!” my anger demanded of them.

“No,” said Missy, sadistically delighted with herself.

Without hesitation, I betrayed my partner, the worm. (The poor thing was still clinging to its last amounts of life-preserving sliminess.) I retrieved it from the ground, and hurled it toward my tanktop-clad oppressor with all of my meager might. The sight of Missy screeching and backing away from the airborne invertebrate was quite satisfying.

“Ha! You’re scared of worms! You’re a girl!” I sputtered at her in a tempest of tears and spit, hoping that perhaps her friends would all laugh at *her* for a change.

That was not to be the case, however. Quickly recovering from the temporary invasion of her dignity, she placed herself directly in front of me so she was inches from my face, and her stern expression dominated my view. “Do you want me to strangle you right now, boy?” she threatened.

Entirely convinced that she was capable of strangling me, I trembled. Fear, woe, and anger surged from within my core. It was a bit more than I felt I could wrestle with, in both emotional and physical senses. I began to cry even more (if such a thing were possible) and ran towards home.

“Um yeah, and I think I’ll be keeping your basketball!” she yelled after me.

I cried the whole way home, which was impressive considering it was a fifteen-minute walk. The few strangers that I walked past either gave me an odd look or tried to look somewhere else.

The moment passed. Left in its wake was a boy who knew exactly who he was: a walking flight of stairs, a social outcast, the nerd, the crybaby.

Where I'm From
Karina Ortega

In the manner of George Ella Lyon

I am from my iPad
from Funimation and Sally Hansen.
I am from bricks and cement.
(Strong, musty smell,
trapped underneath.)
I am from the cherry blossoms
the marigolds
whose colors brighten the altar of our dead.

I'm from tamales and dark hair,
from Jose and Cecilia.
I'm from the stubborn
and the always late,
From Speak up! And Quiet down!
I'm from the rosaries'
Prayers to the Virgin Mary
and Sunday church day.

I'm from Mexico and Omaha,
tacos and atole.
From the sight my grandfather lost
to the liquor,
the leg my father injured
to put bread on the table.

On the wall an old picture
a forgotten face,
a distant memory
taken too early from me.
I am from the hardships
Lived by my parents
So I could have a better chance.

Fading Smoke
Tierra Strawn

In Remembrance of Grandpa

A new day approaches as sunlight touches the top leaves of the Buraga trees. Not far below the edge where the leaves stop on one of these 3,000-foot tall trees is a nest inside the trunk. The sun is able to shine just enough for light to get in, but it dares not get any farther than a little bit past the entrance.

Mikyí has just woken up and is already whining to be fed. Ee comes and picks her up, surrendering her fingers over as substitute pacifiers. She walks over to find Roro sitting near the edge of the nest, doing his usual routine. "Ugh. How many times must I say it?" Ee speaks in an irritated way. "You really need to stop making smoke. It will be the end of you, and there are Young living here as well."

"Leave it be. The Young will be fine. And please, leave the choosing of my end to me," Roro responds calmly.

"Věn póroma. (*You are far too simple of an Old.*)"

"That I will be proud of."

A few feet away, listening in on the conversation, is Kikyáre hidden underneath a bed of autumn leaves. He's been awake since right before dawn, watching with curiosity. He waits for the clear as Ee walks away. In the next moment, he pounces out of the leaves and edges ever so slowly on all fours towards Roro. Kikyáre is mystified by the smoke being made as it gently floats up in the beginning and fades away at the end.

In the middle, it looks as if it shifts into shapes and forms like the clouds in the sky. Kikyáre lies down on his stomach and watches as the smoke changes from a curled snake to a dancing hand. Taking his own hand, Kikyáre reaches out in hopes of touching the shapeless figure. He moves slowly and with caution.

Only inches away, Roro stops him in his movements. "It's better not to disturb the smoke or else it will fade away faster," he speaks. Roro carefully puts down his smoke stick as Kikyáre pulls his hand away, then goes back to his smoke-making.

This calm being, full of understanding, always seems to know what's all right. He then turns his head to find Kikyáre wanting to ask a question.

"Why do you keep making smoke every day?" he says.

"I do it to see the stories it tells. You've noticed how it shifts and morphs into new forms, correct? The smoke has a way of keeping my imagination from dying."

Enchanted and somewhat taken in by Roro's words, Kikyáre silently wishes he could make his own smoke to tell his own stories. Glancing up, he asks out loud, "What if I made my own smoke?"

"That is not what many would call much of a good idea."

"Why is that?"

"Making smoke may seem well and good, but it comes with great consequences. Look closely, Kikyáre. Your Roro did not always look this way. There was a time when his face was not bathed in ash. His teeth were not as golden as autumn leaves. His gums were not as dark as a moonless night sky. When I began making smoke, I was barely no longer a Young. Plus many other things with it, I have taken on many consequences. Heed every word that I say: Enjoy your time as a Young while you still bare no burdens. Such sufferings are only for those who are Old. I tell you to live life long and well."

This aged being, speaking as if he were a Wise, says his piece with only concern for the curious Young. Kikyáre heeded as told, and now he understands. Making smoke comes with a price, sometimes even a dire one.

Days later, a morning comes when Roro is no longer sitting at the edge of the nest. The night before, a death ceremony had taken place. Roro could no longer stay amongst the living. The day is now silent, but it is an empty silence. Kikyáre has lost one of the only reassuring comforts he ever had in the world.

He sits at the edge and stares into space when Ee walks over to him. He turns to find her upset and glaring with disapproving eyes. "Is everything all right?" Kikyáre asks. For an almost everlasting moment, there is a pause.

"I told him," Ee then answers. "I told him it would be his end, but no. He was too carefree and wouldn't listen."

"Ee...?"

"I'll tell you this, and you'd be best to listen. Making smoke can have no good come out of it at all. Whatever mystified nonsense your Roro told you about smoke-making, you wash it completely from your mind. I forbid you from ever making smoke, even when you do become an Old."

After her scolding words pass, Ee jumps from the nest to go hunting. Mikyi is left soundfully asleep until she gets back. Kikyáre is still at the edge and stares back out into space. Many thoughts flood his mind of everything that has happened. He is confused mostly about the words his Ee had said. Why would she say such things, he thinks. Did Ee not like Roro? She always did speak roughly to him.

Kikyáre begins remembering the times when he would sit next to Roro and watch as the smoke floated up and faded into clear air. It would form like clouds and sometimes come in puffs, but now it won't ever happen again. Kikyáre is alone and has no tears left from last night to shed. There would be no more Roro sitting at the edge of the nest, no more smoke-making. All the smoke is gone. Kikyáre knows it well enough because it all faded away.

The Hunt

Brian Duroche

I left camp two hours before sunrise. There was a light fog and mist in the air that felt refreshing as I trekked one and a half miles to my destination. As I found my way through the dark—stumbled twice and did not break my neck—I arrived at the tree that I had cleared out for my hunt days earlier. This site overlooked a rushing freshwater stream, where mountainous terrain glistened with bright green, gold, and brown colors on the far side and open, sun-driven golden meadows to my back. I picked this spot because it was the only crossing within a mile in each direction to access the other side of this small river. There was a game trail, fifteen feet wide, that ran from the far side of the creek to the other and directly under my setup in the tree I chose. This gave me the opportunity to catch the bears coming or going.

My view on trophy hunting big game was not always about the kill or the size of the mount hanging on the wall. It was not about the amount of meat that was packed into the freezers after the hunt. It was definitely not about the bragging rights that so many people embedded into their own small little minds to boost their egos about their successes as hunters. My view on trophy hunting big game is about the experience, the adventure, and the bond created with nature as a whole. This was my experience, and this experience was real.

I acquired the nickname “Cat” before I was in kindergarten, and as I spiked up into the tree and got settled in for my morning hunt, the name seemed to fit. As the damp fog started to lift and the cooling mist diminished, the sun began to crest the horizon from my back, and the world of wildlife slowly emerged. The birds were singing. The coyotes were howling. The grouse began cooing—when suddenly all hell broke loose, loud crashes in the woods all around me, and a small moose came busting by directly under my tree running at full speed. The next thing I saw was a gray wolf in full pursuit and gaining ground. The rest of the pack appeared, and four more wolves were involved in the hunt.

The first thought that ran through my mind was, “Damn, it is nice to be perched up in a tree.”

As the morning was coming to an end, I found myself admiring two eagles circling overhead in their majestic flight. Suddenly, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I slowly turned my head to see a good-sized black bear on the mountainside across the creek. The bear was 200 yards out and by no means within bow range. I was on the bear, and for the next six hours, that bear had my full attention.

After several hours of my watching this magnificent animal roam around on the mountainside across the creek, the bear finally started coming down towards the crossing. The stream was full of salmon and was roughly a thirty-yard shot. I knew it was dinner time and just a matter of minutes before the bear would be within bow range, but time was working against me because it was getting late in the afternoon. Darkness was approaching fast.

It was close to sunset, and for thirty minutes I had the bear within twenty-five yards, but this animal would not give me a clean shot. I kept waiting. The next thing I knew, it was too dark to shoot. I watched the silhouette of the bear at near dark walk directly under my tree stand and go about 25 to 30 feet and stop. The bear started walking in circles. My heart sank. Instantly, I thought, “This cannot be happening.” This bear was bedding down. As I watched the bear smash the brush and grass down in a ten-foot circle, rolling around in it like it was scratching its back, I knew full well that it was making its bed. Now, I have a bear bedding down below my tree that I am hunting out of in pitch darkness—this was not a good scenario.

There I was in the middle of nowhere in Alaska. I was a mile and a half from camp. I was up a tree with nowhere to go but up. Going down was not an option at this point. I was hanging out in a tree for the night. I felt pretty good about the predicament I was in, though, because the wind was in my favor. I had a Ruger fifty-caliber sidearm packed full of 150-grain wad-cutter hollow-point bullets, a quiver holding eight Terminator expandable bone-crushing broadheads with a two and a half inch diameter cutting ratio, and I was sporting a fourteen-inch

military issue survival knife to get me by. I was feeling somewhat confident as I assessed the danger I was facing.

As the night dragged on, I heard the bear breathing and at times snoring as it wrestled around on the ground trying to stay comfortable. The smell of this animal was horrendous. The air was full of a musky, damp, and moldy aroma entangled with a twist of excrement and urine. I found myself thinking, "Do bears shit in the woods? No, bears shit on themselves." It was around three-thirty in the morning when my leg went to sleep. As I quietly maneuvered to wake up the dead limb attached to my hip without waking the sleeping bear below me, a branch caught on my holster and released the restraint snap, which allowed my sidearm to fall to the ground twenty-two feet below. As I heard the sound of my pistol hit the ground, I immediately heard the bear growl and thrash around in fury. My heart started to beat ninety miles a second. Bears climb trees. My adrenalin kicked in because I was sure that I was going to have to go into battle. I was at full alert; I listened while the bear ran in all directions as it went ballistic in the dark. The bear acted like it was in protection mode. Surprisingly, everything settled down, and it seemed that I might live to see another sunrise.

As dawn approached and visibility was on the horizon, a slight breeze sent chills straight to the bone. The bone-chilling breeze worked perfectly in my favor and kept me downwind from the bear. I thrived on these extreme conditions because it seemed the cold awakened my senses, and the discomfort kept me alive. As the horizon filled with light, I tried not to think about how bad I had to piss. I could make out a dark spot on the ground below moving around. I slowly reached out with my left hand to grab my bow that was hung on a branch next to me in the tree.

I was overcome with excitement as I fletched an arrow on my bow string in the early light of dawn. With bow in hand, I detected the bear, and I knew the animal was within range to take my shot. The sun was coming up, and legal shooting time had arrived. I was at full draw with my opportunity to harvest this animal when I saw movement on my left. I shifted my eyes and saw two young bear cubs that had wandered out of the

brush. The cubs ran straight toward the bear below me that I had dead in my sights. I paused to take this all in.

The danger level at this point had just risen tremendously. There were now three sets of eyes and six nostrils that could possibly detect my presence, so I kept the mother bear in my sights and was ready to let my arrow take flight at any time. The mother bear walked up the path toward the cubs and eventually got a safe distance away; finally, I could let off of my bow and watch nature at its finest.

The mother bear met the cubs halfway at first glance. She began to lick them with her enormous tongue. She pushed them back a good two feet with each swipe. She was giving them their morning bath. I sat and watched nature in its fullest and admired the beauty of it all as I had done on every hunt I had ever been on over my lifetime. I watched the family of bears as they wandered off into the wilderness and out of my sight.

Where I'm From

Ariel Lauf

I am from green glass ashtrays targeted at Mommy.
From Camel Cash
And nips from his peppermint schnapps bottle on a blustery
December afternoon.
I am from hallways filled with deafening rage, juxtaposed with
lush ripe gardens,
Filled with life.
I am from shiny new gifts from Grandma,
And secondhand replacements from the pawnshop when things
went badly.
I am from the scent of big breakfasts on peaceful Sunday
mornings,
Eggs and potatoes and bacon nestled snug in a warm tortilla.
I am also from the scent of spent cigarettes and used beers on the
bad mornings,
As I perpetually sift through the wreckage.
I am from fingers worked to the bone, self preservation, and
survival.
I am from grit and gravel, the sugar and the s**t, the Hell located
just outside the corridor into heaven.
I am from the last mile in a grueling march of survival,
I can see the red ribbon stretched across the finish line,
Demanding to be broken in retribution.

Contributors' Notes

Janie Ensor was raised on a Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana and moved to Omaha, Nebraska when she was twelve years old. At MCC, she recently completed an Associate of Applied Science, a Certificate of General Management, and a Certificate of Professional Communication. She loves reading fiction novels of any genre and writing free verse narrative poetry, most of which stems from personal experience. Her other interests include playing the piano, being outdoors, and travelling with her husband and two dogs whenever possible. She and her husband also stay busy as foster parents, providing a safe place for kids in need as best they can.

Ally Halley grew up in rural Kansas and lived in Alaska and Turkey before settling in Omaha where she has lived for nearly twenty years. She is a financial analyst, mom, wife, and zombie enthusiast. As a pathological planner, she aspires to spend more time living life than planning it. Now that her sons are grown, she is flitting from one long-forgotten interest to the next. She took lessons to learn how to sing her favorite Italian aria and frequently belts it out, all alone, in her car. Creative writing is her latest foray into unadulterated joy.

Julia Konwinski is a native of South Omaha. Her heart has always been in art. After graduating from Bryan High School, she attended Universal Technical Institute where she completed her Associate of Commercial Arts degree. Julia has utilized her passion for art in the career field through both sign design and glass etching. She is currently attending Metropolitan Community College pursuing an Associate of Arts degree. She aspires to one day have some of her personal artwork displayed in local galleries.

Anu Kovilam is a sophomore at Creighton University, majoring in political science and minoring in philosophy. When she's not studying for classes or running around campus, she can be found scribbling in her poetry journal, singing Carnatic music, doing social work with the Cortina community, or judging high school speech tournaments she used to compete in as a student of Millard North High School. Poetry in her life serves as respite from the stresses of daily life and is a way in which she develops herself on a personal and artistic level.

Tierra Strawn was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. She first took classes in liberal arts at Metropolitan Community College and is now majoring in two-dimensional studio art at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. Tierra has always loved writing fiction and drawing her own original characters, which has led her to continuing these practices as a future career. She has a passion for telling stories and is currently working on writing more fiction and drawing her own comics in her free time.

KayCee Wise spent the first 11 years of her life in a small town south of San Antonio. She is the youngest of six, but most of her siblings moved out of the house by the time she was seven, so she grew up feeling like an only child. Public school was a struggle for her. She got into trouble for drawing in class or doodling on assignments, but at home, her artistic interests were supported. Her family moved to Fremont, Nebraska when she was eleven. KayCee took her first real art class in the eighth grade. After that, she knew she was meant for art. She is now enrolled in the arts program at Metropolitan Community College. Since attending, she has blossomed artistically and found a clear direction for her work.

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Locked Acrylic on Canvas Julia Konwinski

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