



THE RUBICON

TROY UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL:

ISSUE 11, SPRING 2015

VETERAN Spotlight ∞

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THE FOLLOWING WORKS WERE WRITTEN BY VETERANS, FAMILY MEMBERS OF VETERANS, AND ABOUT VETERANS. THE PURPOSE OF THE VETERAN SPOTLIGHT IS TO CELEBRATE AND HONOR THE LIVES OF THE MEN AND WOMAN OF THE MILITARY.

THE RUBICON

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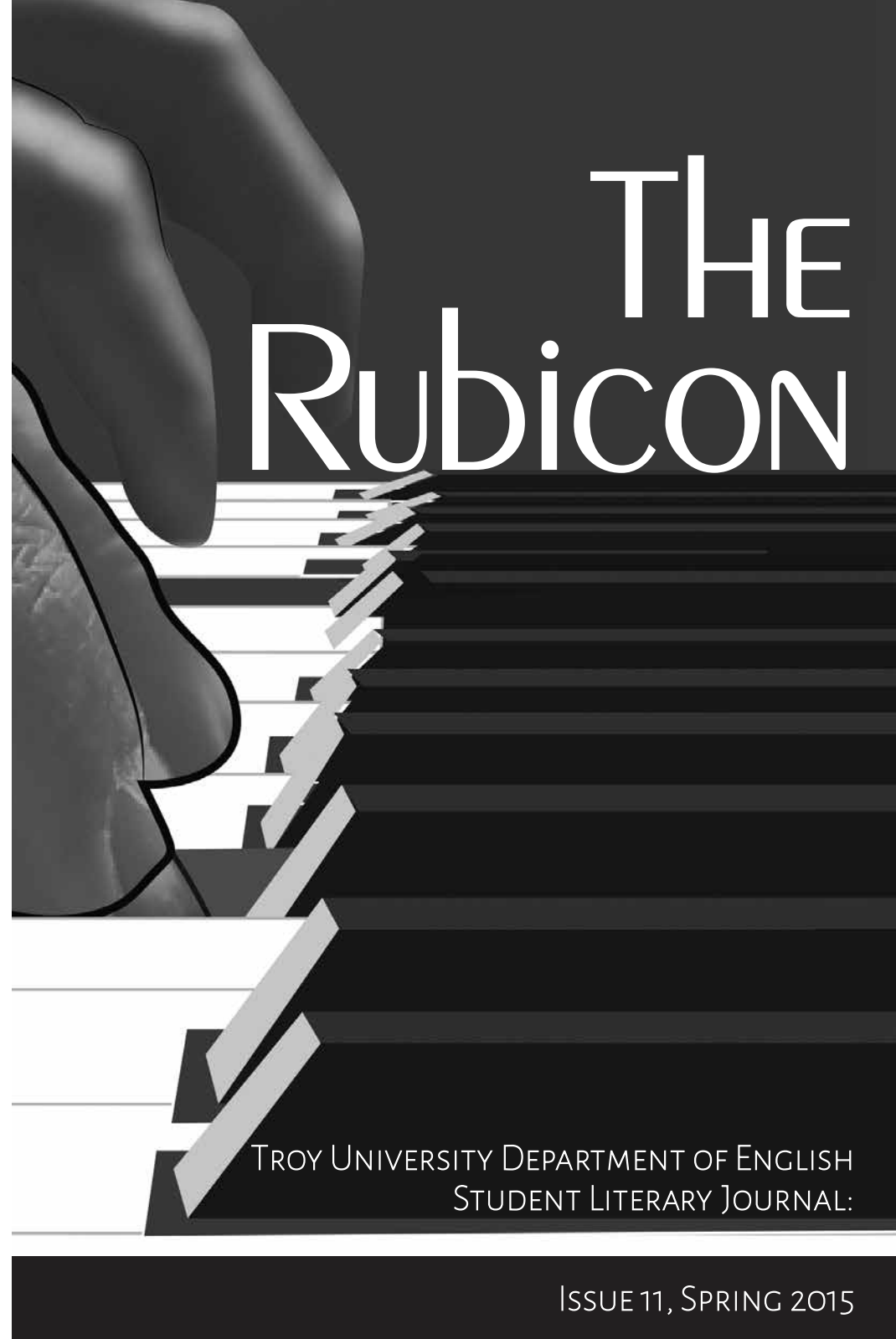
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THE RUBICON
501 UNIVERSITY AVENUE
TROY UNIVERSITY
274 SMITH HALL
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[HTTP://SPECTRUM.TROY.EDU/RUBICON](http://spectrum.troy.edu/rubicon)

ISSN 2153-6279 (PRINT) / ISSN 2159-1733 (ONLINE)



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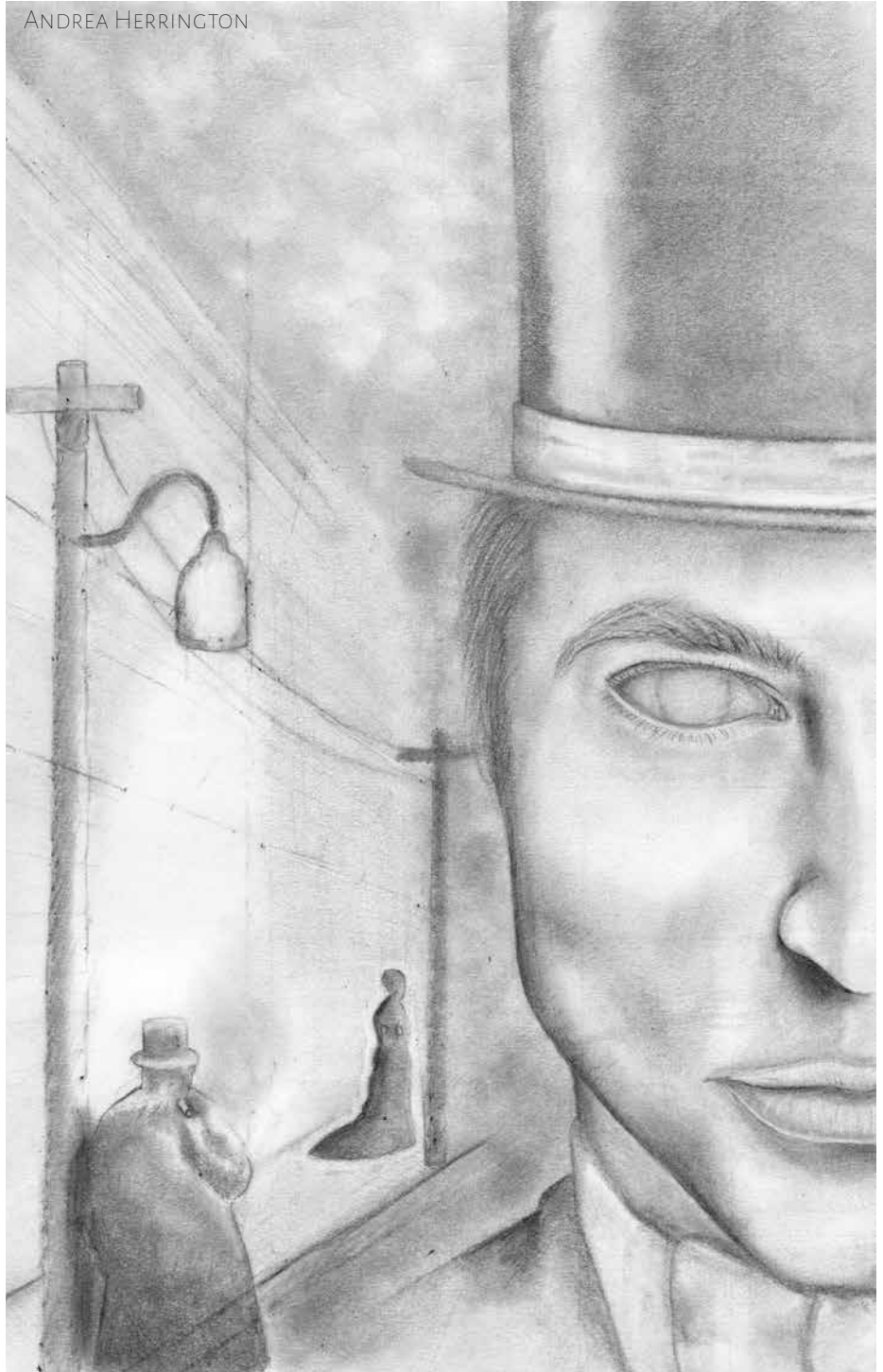
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∞ = VETERAN'S SPOTLIGHT





LOUISE CHENG

A COMING OF AGE ∞

JEFFERY N. WHALEY

Why was it him and not the rest?
He had family and we didn't.
He had more right to life than death,
But the bullet caught him anyway just
outside his flak vest.

For years I've pondered this question.
And self medicated my answer
With no reason in sight.
But somehow have kept walking upright.

You see we'd taken that hill once before.
And gave it right back
As we scratched our heads in disbelief,
And wondered what it was all for.

Could I have pushed my friend
out of the way?
Or maybe just told him to stay
As I went on ahead,
Would he now, not be so dead?

I have witnessed the passage of
that time.
And named my son for this man
who finished his sentence,
As we lost our innocence,
In that coming of age... That day
in 1968.

REST UP

HANNAH EDWARDS

"Are you alright?"
I'm fine.
"There's a lot of pain right here" and
a hand touched my temple.
My mother in her perpetual nearness
to sleep,
Always in her nightgown, always
answering questions for me.
"How long have you been feeling this
pain?"
What pain? I feel nothing, I thought.
"For a few months now."
She touched my hair and smoothed the
loose strands.
I never wanted to look at my mother,
not even through glass.

Her hollow eyes were more than
mine could interpret.
"It's been a few months since your
mother passed away, hasn't it?"
No, my mother is right here.
Ask her.
"Yes" a voice replied.
Prescribed happiness was placed
in a bottle in my mother's hand
And as she raised a pill to my lips
she said,
"Rest up my darling, we'll both be
asleep soon."

UNTITLED ∞

HANNAH EDWARDS

I never knew the meaning of war.
 I always imagined men running at each other
 on a battlefield, sword drawn, shotgun raised.
 I always pictured these great men lying in
 trenches waiting for the cannon sound.
 I had this vision in my mind that an older
 soldier would come to the aid of the younger
 ones, clapping him on the shoulder, the men
 showing off pictures of their girls back home.
 I had this idea of war, but I never knew the
 meaning of war.
 I had been close to the frontline. I had tasted
 the metallic air and felt the tension.
 I had walked the battlefield of airports and
 bus stations and military bases.
 I had waved goodbye to uniforms gently glid-
 ing farther and farther away.
 I had kissed foreheads and hugged rugged
 bodies and said “I love you’s” as the plane
 readied to go.
 But I had never known the meaning of war.

A young Navy man of barely nineteen taught
 me once that “there is no meaning to war and
 that’s why there will always be war.”
 And I realized that war was not my best friend
 leaving home or my dad going overseas again.
 The war was not guns and bullets and murder
 and innocence.
 The war was in the leaving. The battle was
 justice over comfort, freedom over happiness.
 The war was family against state, unity of the
 whole comes at the price of unity of a few.
 I had never known the meaning of war until
 I realized I was fighting a war to continue
 loving those I could no longer hold or love
 so actively. I was fighting a losing battle not
 against those who guns raised were defending
 their own, but against time itself. Time and
 her cruel brevity.

I ONCE KNEW A MAN

HANNAH EDWARDS

I once knew a man who ate his words.
 Every sentence he said, every lie or truth that leaked
 from his bleeding lips was served for him at every meal.
 I once knew a man whose hands were glass and his bones
 were carvings of past conversations.
 I once knew a man who could tell stories to make your ear
 drums burst not out of the loudness of his voice,
 but of the consistent, persistent steady beat of his words
 pushing pounding pouring themselves into the very pores of your skin.



ALISHA MERRITT

COFFEE AND ASH

CORINNE JACOBS

Our love is like the slender
white roll of tobacco and chemicals
(menthol flavored, to be exact)
oh, so carefully poised between the
pointer and middle finger.

It started with your thumb
tracing down that Bic lighter,
engaging the flame that would
initiate an unfamiliar passion at your will.

Then comes that first puff:
sweet,
calculated,
savory.
Breathing in the worst and the best of me.

The smell of a long lost lover wafts:
smoky and suffocating.
A scent I used to associate with danger overwhelms me.
It burns my throat and my lust, making me gasp for pure air.

Second puff. The smoke beckons to me just as your eyes:
A hungry look that devours the girl wearing your favorite
sweater.

Exhale that death wish into me.
Our first kiss: a permanent taste of coffee and ash
in my mouth. From ash we were born and to ash
we will return. The beginning of my end.

It ends with the scent of cigarette smoke that clings
to my clothes and hair long after you're gone and you...
burned into my memory like the butt of the cigarette
smoldering in the ash tray.



SARAYA WILLIAMS

STACKS OF NOTEBOOKS IN HEAVEN

STACY PRATT

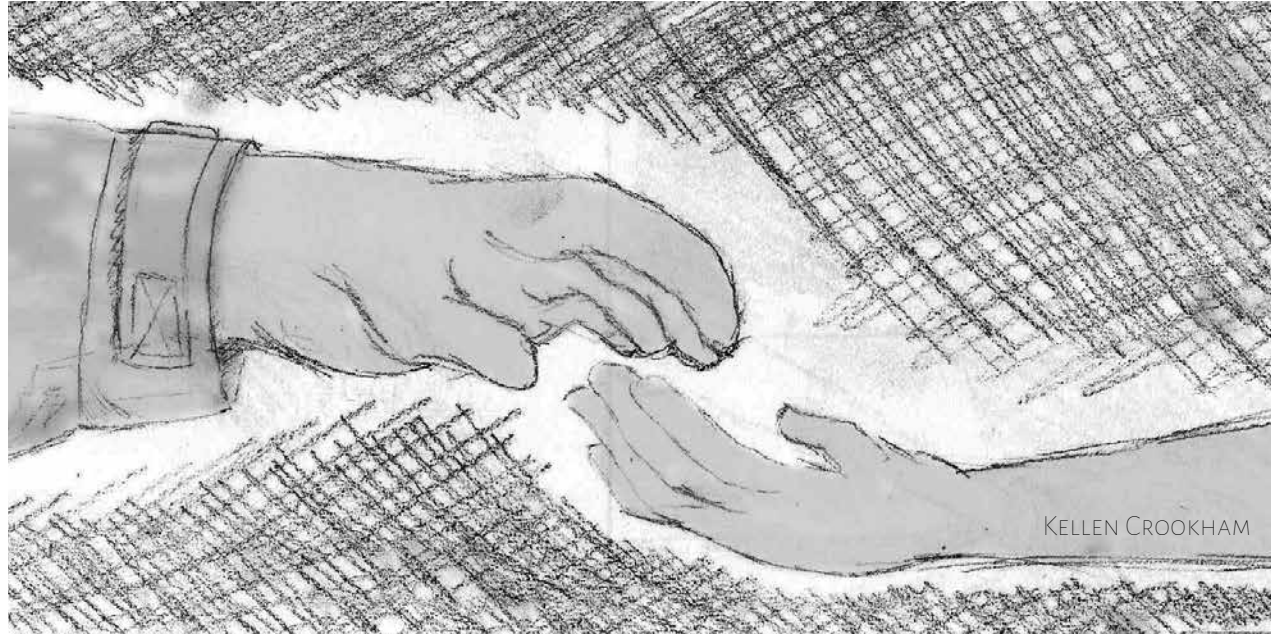
Stacks of notebooks in Heaven,
3 ring binders with loose leaf,
Spirals with perforated edges
For easy removal.
White, Clean, Virgin
Crisp ruled Paper
With endless potential.
Unmarked by the ink in our pens,
Or the lead of our pencils.
No secret love letters
To or from
Faces that can't be remembered.
Not filled with to do lists,
That didn't get accomplished
Or grocery lists with items not crossed out.
No Scientific Theories to study for class,
That are disproved after 10 years
When Pluto is no longer a planet.
No ineligible unfinished Stories,
Written by a child
Wanting to grow up too soon.
No Thoughts or feelings expressed
That are no longer perceived
Because there is a new life
Forming in the old one.
Changing perceptions
And creating new possibilities.
Just white, clean, virgin
Crisp ruled paper,
With endless potential.

BURNING METAL IN IRAQ ∞

BY LAUREN COX

Thud, Thud, Thud, of the blades
 Moving to the beat of my heart.
 It's familiar, its home
 The absence is what bothers me,
 The silence is haunting.
 When it is there, he is not.
 That eerie silence,
 Penetrating my world for a year too long.
 The arid desert land has kidnapped him
 Into danger, into war
 The phone rings
 It's him, saying he's okay.
 There was an accident
 My tears flow as a constant steam,
 Like rushing water after the dam has broken.
 The thud, thud, thudding of this bird
 Will be silent forever.
 The red-hot flames consumed it in a corkscrew of smoke
 Leaving no evidence of what it used to be,
 So majestic, so free
 It's the silence, not the noise
 That tears me to pieces, held together by scraps of
 memories and brokenphone calls
 The constant worrying
 The bleak thought that.
 That there is a chance
 He won't make it home
 That I won't see his face ever again.
 I'm stuck here, home, same
 While he is alone, in the unknown, and missed
 These thoughts I must put aside,
 I must be strong, I must live in my dreams
 Alone with the Thud, Thud, Thudding of my heart,
 That is waiting for him,
 And hoping my wish will come true.

Thud,
 I watch as they march into formation,
 anxiously awaiting their dismissal.
 Thud,
 As my heart pounds, his face popping out



KELLEN CROOKHAM

like a precious pearl.
 Thud,
 Of my footsteps as I run into his arms;
 "Daddy!" I scream.
 Thud
 Other families, other reunions
 Thud
 Of everything in its right place
 Thud
 Thud
 Thud

DESCANT, YET AGAIN

SUSANNAH MCQUITTY

Water under fragile bridges; it is slow
 so many memories being pushed and pulled
 familiar pains pressed against its banks,
 the lapping gentle as latent sighs
 which we hid, or so bitterly heaved
 behind the lurid lies of Love and Sacrifice:
 brute honesty is freedom: honestly
 We built those bridges and were burned.



DESTIN SÁLYERS

Portrait of my Grandfather

ABIGAIL MICHELINI

Your story is the wide blank of a page.
It is every necessary silence,
the way a snowfall chokes out the growing green
until spring chortles and sneezes again.

In the white out, the quiet clutching our throats,
a few facts survive:

The only one of six with blue eyes, the very same that pair my brothers',
and one of them with your ears.

Married three times, you must have been stubborn, like your mother
who left

Italy with a barber for a new life, unplanned, un-rich,
and eventually unhappy.

Handsome, devastating to the families you left behind
like they were white noise, with all the words
you never said or even meant to say
burning at the back of their throats.

But you know none of this, standing there, hands on hips maybe 5 years old
or 6,

looking stubborn. Under the white-hot sun
where its shadow is absent,
my father stands and carries your name.

Child's Play

ALEX MILLARD

I found you as a child
with eyes wide and
blue as the public pool
named babysitter —belly full of
hose water
And you thought to drown me
like the bees,
wet wings writhing,
plump fingers pushing and picking and placing them —clinging
in and under the chlorine bath
"It tastes like summer", you said
when I choked —spat sweat salt and
chemical
colouring and hated you,
but my head was mother's dime-store paperbacks and
you were supposed to be profound
We had the sex that children have, swapping neon knickknacks and naivete
in lieu white lies and titles
—future sodomites
I was your boy-wife
with eyes green as what I'd
grow to be —belly full of pool water, dead inside as the bees you drowned.





WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE (WARFARE TRAINING CENTER, CAMP GONSALVES) ∞

STEPHANIE HOPPER

Rain. Yes, it was rain. Shit. More rain. It wasn't as if we weren't wet enough. There was Mother Nature offering another cold shower to the densely populated forest around us. She didn't care that we were still wet from her previous release or that we were cold and exhausted. The jungle needed the rain to thrive. The North side of the island had to contribute its part to ensure the water supply remained adequate for the entire island of Okinawa.

The wind whipped through the concrete pillars of the makeshift outdoor classroom and brought sprays of rain with it. Someone coughed. I pulled my gortex jacket up and attempted to concentrate on the instructor in the black shirt who was standing in front of the classroom's only wall. Another cold sprig of rain across my face drew my attention outside the crowd of approximately 80 Marines and Soldiers squished together on the concrete rows of seats and huddled together for warmth. We were in the heart of nowhere. It was the middle of December, and we were the chosen few honored to be called the newest students at Camp Gonsalves.

I watched the thick branches of the trees bend at the wild wind's command as the Sergeant rambled on about some poisonous leaf he was holding up. I knew I should have been concentrating, but I couldn't feel my nose and

my butt hurt. At that moment, that seemed more important than a damned leaf. It didn't help that we had just observed the Sergeant hold up a large glass jar containing a golden orb weaver.

"It has a leg-spread of up to 8 inches. This bad boy is one of the deadliest creatures you will encounter while out here in the jungle."

Oh, God! It was a spider. A huge spider. It was bigger than my hand!

The Sergeant held the jar high in the air, and the black spider spread its skinny legs covered with yellow and red rings out across the side of the jar as it attempted to escape. Varied sounds of disgust erupted and mingled with the ripple of students shuffling in their seats.

The rain against my already-tingling exposed face was almost more than I could bear. I squirmed and shifted my weight in an attempt to retrieve the feeling in my backside. I just had to pick a seat that was closest to the exterior. I sniffled and drew in a deep breath of the crisp, fresh air. My nose was numb. I peered down and kicked my red-clay-covered boot at the floor. So much for the spit-shine. At least we had a roof over our head.

It had been pouring during the rope management class and when we had been hiking across the rugged terrain to the spot the instructor designated as the place to practice our hasty repels. Even while holding on to the flimsy, yellow rope that lined some of the steeper ravines, I had slipped twice on the damned slick, red clay. Twice, I had felt a surge of pain as my hip made contact with the buttstock of my rifle. One hand instinctively moved to the sore spot. It was tender, and I just knew it was going to be bruised. Damn the rain. And damn that slippery, red clay. Damn the wind. And damn spiders, and bugs, and...

Did the instructor say snake? The word had drawn me from my reverie.

My vision darted to the front of the classroom in time to see him hold up another glass jar. There was a snake inside. Its olive-brown body was covered with elongated brownish spots that resembled the shape of distorted diamonds outlined in yellow. It was as big as my fist, and protruding from four coils was its large head peering out at us with yellow eyes.

"This is an Okinawan habu snake. It is a pit viper and is extremely poisonous. It is important to remember that you are in their home. They are not the invaders. You are."

The Sergeant turned around and placed the jar on the table behind him. The Jungle Warfare Training Center logo on the back of his shirt was a green diamond. Inside the green diamond was a habu snake bearing its venomous fangs as it wrapped around a sword. Another instructor hurried to the front of the classroom. Each Sergeant took a long, metal pole and grasped separate ends of the snake with the clasps at the other end of the poles. They stepped away from each other and stretched the snake out to its full length.

"Habus average four to five feet, but they have been known to grow as long as eight feet. This guy right here is 5'6."

A fleet of gasps erupted into the air. There was more shuffling. Holy shit! The snake's body is longer than I am tall! I was amazed and disgusted. I

couldn't look away.

As the two Sergeants placed the habu back in its jar, the Staff Sergeant moved to the front of the class.

"Take ten minutes for headcalls. Then, fall into formation and prepare to hump to the LZ field to practice echelon movements."

Over the hills and through the woods we went. Except we weren't going to Grandma's house. And, we weren't exactly in ordinary woods. With images of spiders, snakes, and all kinds of crawly things in my head, I couldn't shake the feeling of paranoia as my attention sporadically moved from the thick brush around my feet to the dark forest around us. The copious branches allowed little sunlight to sneak through. Was that a snake or a gnarled branch?

I felt itchy as we made our way through the dense trees. I longed for more than a "baby wipe bath." I wanted a long, hot shower. My stomach growled. I wanted a hot meal. After about twenty minutes of hiking, we finally saw an enormous clearing ahead. The rain had ceased for the time being, but the clear area appeared to be a cluster of small lakes rather than a landing zone. As we were dismissed from formation, the Staff Sergeant broke us off into groups. For the next hour, at the orders of the instructors, we practiced our tactical movements.

I'm up! They see me! I'm down!

Shit! My hip!

I'm up! They see me! I'm down!

Splash! I slid face-down into the chilly water.

I'm up! They see me! I'm down!

I'm up. A combination of brown blades of grass and mud clung to my soaking cammies. We moved onward at the silent command of our team leader. I was freezing. My entire body felt numb. The water had seeped under the protecting gortex. My blouse was saturated. It had seeped into my boots. My soggy socks were unkind to the blisters that had formed on both little toes and both heels. To my aching body's relief, the Staff Sergeant called an end to our training, and we were dismissed for an hour for chow.

I reached up and wiped mud away from my cheek. It began to drizzle. I heard laughter and cheering. I scanned the LZ field scattered with camo-covered bodies. A group of Marines had started a competition. They each took turns running and sliding to see who could slide the furthest. The group had caught the attention of several others. I hurried over to get a closer look. Two lines had been created. They had designated a Marine to tell the contenders when to drop and slide. The winner got to stay at the front of his/her respective line to continue the competition, and the loser had to move to the back.

A crowd had formed. Marines and Soldiers shouted encouragement at the competitors. Although we didn't know each individual student among us, we still cheered for every winner.

It looked like fun. I got in the shortest line. As I waited for my turn,

Mother Nature decided we needed another downpour. I stood there shivering. Finally, it was my turn. The guy next to me looked at me and nodded. I nodded back.

"Go!"

We took off running.

"Drop!"

We dropped and slid. Water covered my face, and I closed my eyes and kept sliding. I came to an abrupt halt and lifted myself up on my elbows so I could observe where my opponent had landed. He was behind me. I had won! A thunderous cheer exploded from the crowd. In that moment, I forgot my aches. This was what it was about. Camaraderie. After a long day of training, we had been dismissed for a mere hour, but instead of resting and eating our chow, we had come together to invent some form of entertainment to take our minds off of spiders, snakes, ravines, and the other various dangers that lurked out there in the jungle that surrounded us.

It was still raining. I was covered in muck. A clinging blade of grass tickled my cheek. I plucked it away and held my face up to let the rain wash over me. Sweet rain. Cleansing rain. Wonderful rain. Rain.



SARAYA WILLIAMS

EMANCIPATOR

HUNTER STEWART

The man with the dead eye blew another cloud of smoke into the cold night air. The smoke glowed blue through the moonlight reflected off cobblestones, giving the sense that spirits walked these streets. Spirits of men whose blood once ran cold. This smoke was exhaled from the lungs of a man who, with such things, was familiar. He was a man who made a sport of turning men into spirits and women into angels.

This man waited at the corner of a street which had become a popular setting for this game of his. The cigar in his mouth kept him warm, the ember of which starting to fade like a star at dawn. His dead eye preferred the dark. It was easier to spy the beauty he needed. Beauty he could make ethereal. Most women had spirits inside them, but not the ones his dead eye spied. His special eye could see the angels hiding in certain women, the prisons.

These prisons of flesh were different than the prisons built by Man. They imitated women and used Man's sympathy against him. If Man was made in God's own image, the prisons were made in Woman's. This tool of theirs had almost ended his life on many an occasion. Such fear he saw in their eyes. It amazed him how such things could feign the most primal of instincts. He had learned not to look into their eyes, lest he fall under a sympathetic spell. His very first prison had escaped this way and caused the death of two innocents, a man and a woman. They were his most painful kills.

The smoke turned from a smooth blue to a golden gray but only in his special eye. An angel was near, and she glowed so bright. Angels were not meant to be trapped on this Earth, bound to the cold ground by blood and flesh. They were meant to fly above such things, and his eye would make it so.

The man with the dead eye dropped his expired cigar into the puddle at his feet. He descended into the alley which the angelic light shone from, knife in hand, ready to release his angelic captive.

He approached the small home where the prison hid. There lay a small outhouse behind it resembling a lone column. A single light ignited within the home, golden light shining through the edges of the door frame facing the outhouse. The door looked pure black against the golden frame, resembling a gateway to heaven itself. As the prison opened the door, the light lay against her like wings forming an angelic silhouette. The image made him grin, a gesture he believed God was miming. Man was made in the Lord's image, after all, and he was doing the Lord's work. It was a good sign.

He watched her walk from her home to the outhouse behind it, cutting her off at the entrance to the outhouse. He grabbed the prison which was holding the angel, covering the mouth to keep it from calling for help.

The prison attempted a scream which fought against his palm. Her lips were warm and soft against his callused hand. It gave a strange comfort like a hot bath which stings as it soothes. The prisons always had such soft walls,



LOUISE CHENG

like silk warmed in spring. He had thought once about taking a piece of a prison with him, but realized that souvenirs were too risky. The warm spit running down his hand excited him, and he plunged his knife into its heart without delay.

Warm blood erupted from the wound and oozed steadily from it as he removed the blade. The prison's breathing came to stop as it slumped onto the toilet. He cleaned the knife with his hands, slipping his fingers towards the point. He wiped the blood on the prison's forehead in the shape of cross.

He closed the door and said a silent prayer. The dark around him became illuminated, but only in his dead eye. The angel had been freed, and he felt warm despite the frost soaking into his boots. A single tear streamed down his face. His dead eye no longer cried, but it didn't have to. There was no need to cry after seeing God's grace. He wiped a tear from his face and pushed those thoughts away. He stared at the moon with the only eye that could see it and started to walk away from his prison break.

"Momma," he heard a voice say. He had never heard any of the angels speak before, but this little voice in the dark made him think he just had. Of course, this was a ridiculous notion. Only his eye was dead, and eyes could only see.

He squinted with his living eye to see a small girl holding a ragged bear-like toy. The girl was as beautiful as any angel he had ever seen, but no, she did not shine like the others. This beauty was only human.

"Hush, little one," he said, raising his voice only loud enough for her to hear. The sound that emerged from his throat was scratchy like a worn violin. The voice was almost unfamiliar, like seeing a face one recognized but having no concrete memory of why.

"Where's my Ma?" the beauty asked hiding half of herself behind the wooden door frame. She was so innocent in her ignorance, her belief that that a door could stop him. It made him smile, the muscles in his face tensing under another unusual gesture.

"Do not worry, little one. She is free. She flies, now, with God." He continued on into the street, and she did not follow. His boots rapped against the cobblestones echoing music to the heavens of his victory. He lit a new cigar and breathed in the smooth, blue smoke.

As he stood on the street that he watched so many a night, the image of the little girl hung suspended in his thoughts. It brought forward another distant image of a young boy, half blind and motherless. The thought gave birth to another. Maybe this was the last angel? Maybe he could stop? The Man with the dead eye blew out the blue smoke only to see the same golden grey he always had. No, he thought, pushing the idea away. He had work to do. Another angel needed freeing.



JONATHON GUICE

CROSSING PATHS WITH MING ∞

LESLEY STUKEY

It was a brisk and breezy day in 1994 when I was having lunch at Pier Five, the enlisted club in Earl, New Jersey. Out of the blue, I heard a familiar voice ask if she could join me. Much to my surprise, it was Seaman Ming, a female sailor who was stationed with me on board the USS Detroit AOE-4. Even though Ming and I had deployed, slept, and ate on the same ship, our work schedules and circle of friends kept us at a friendly distance. So, the surprise was not in seeing Ming; it was her asking to join me. We ate and had, what I thought was, general conversation about life in the Navy as a single parent with kids and then we parted ways.

When I joined the United States Navy in 1991, I was a young single mother of a 2 year old little boy named Kendall. He was the motivation for me leaving the familiar streets of Atlanta, Georgia, to search for a life with both security and financial stability. Since most of my time on board was spent haze gray and underway sailing the high seas, I was separated from Kendall and unable to physically be there for him as I once had hoped. That, at times, made being stationed on a ship very difficult. However, I never lost focus of my reasons for joining the Navy.

Ming and I, along with seventy other women, were among the first females to join the crew of six hundred men on board the USS Detroit. The ship was 265 yards long; almost the length of three football fields. When deployment ready, it maintained a crew of 1200 sailors and Marines. Its mission was to patrol and secure the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf while supplying food, ammunition, mail and fuel to ships in the 6th Fleet until it was decommissioned in 2005. The USS Detroit was also my second duty station after being stationed as a dental technician with the Marines on Parris Island in South Carolina for two years.

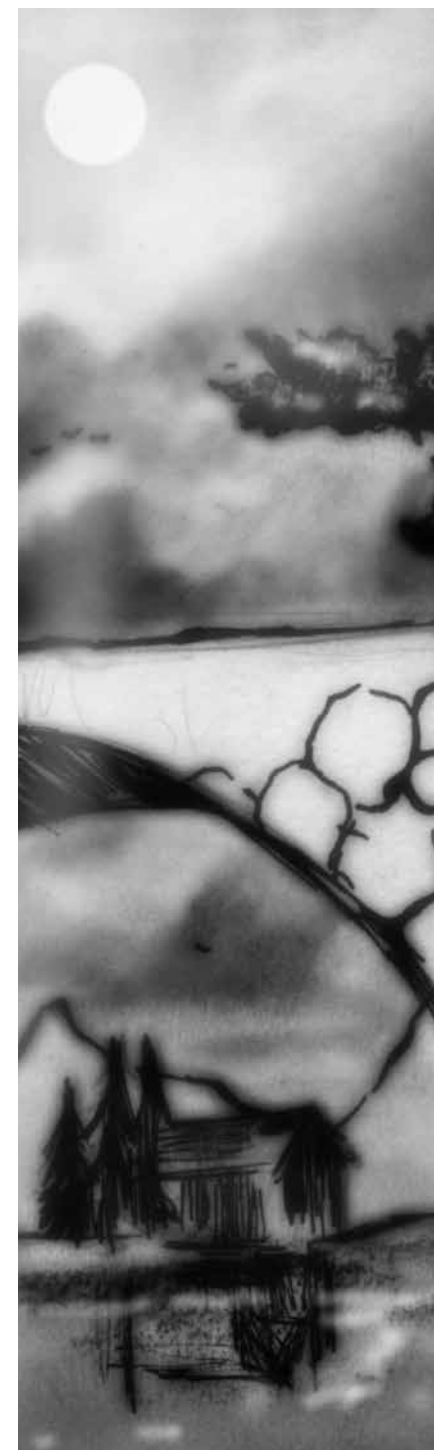
A few months later, Ming was transferred to another duty station and I was not to see her again for ten years. As chance would have it, Ming and I would cross paths again in the rental office of condos where my family and I lived at the time. “Hi,” we both said in unison. “Weren’t you stationed on board the USS Detroit?” During our exchange of words, she explained to me the significance of our conversation at Pier Five and why she considered me her angel. Ming, now Blanton, revealed that she had gone into Pier Five that day ten years earlier- not to eat lunch, but to wait for her ride to transport her to an abortion clinic. Our conversation about my love for my son and him being my motivation for joining the Navy saved the life of her unborn child; which she later named Kendall, after my son. As I stood crying in disbelief, she hugged and thanked me for listening to her and offering my kind words of advice. She also said that I inspired her and gave her the courage she needed to give life to the joy of her life.

As fate would have it, Ming and I crossed paths again almost eight years later in 2012. We both still live in Virginia Beach and both of our children attend local public schools, only miles apart. She told me that Kendall would be graduating from high school in June and attending Virginia State University in the fall. We chatted, embraced and I was thanked again for her gift. We also exchanged numbers promising to keep in touch. The social media site, Face Book, has not only made it easier for Sherita Blanton and I to keep in contact, but it has also

allowed me to see Kendall’s growth into adulthood.

I have often heard people say that a few kind words may save a life, but I never expected to reap the fruit of that labor, especially from someone who I barely knew and also never expected to see again once she left the ship. I sometimes wonder what influenced me to have lunch at Pier Five as opposed to having lunch on the ship like I normally would have done. I do not have an answer for that, but whatever the reason, it was a force much larger than either of us could have expected. Because of my experience with Ming, I am a better person. I listen when people, strangers included, talk to me. I try to empathize with their situations and if nothing else offer a hug or a friendly smile. I have heard some incredible stories over the years; some made me laugh, while others were inspiring and/or sad. In either instance, I feel blessed to be a person that other people feel comfortable sharing their life’s stories with. But, none has come close to me crossing paths with Ming.

Crossing paths with Ming changed both of our lives. She was given the gift of motherhood, while I was given the gift of purpose. Kendall, now a sophomore, is majoring in Education. Imagine the irony in that; he will have the opportunity to educate and influence the lives of many youth and adults to come. And, it was all made possible by Ming and I crossing paths twenty years ago in Pier Five, the enlisted club in Earl, New Jersey.



Why is 'Why' Important? ∞

MICHAEL THOMPSON

The smell of burning garbage filled my nostrils as it did most every night around 11:00 PM. Most of us agreed that the smell could only be described as a mixture between a used diaper and burnt popcorn. At 103 degrees, it was a hot, dry night in the Arabian Desert. I approached one of the main entry control points for the base we were charged with defending and observed an Airman who looked particularly despondent. At one point, while talking to Senior Airman Crane, I asked how he felt about his deployment so far. Airman Crane quickly replied with no small amount of disappointment that he was “here to collect a check”. After a bit of prodding he revealed that he’d rather be somewhere where he could make a difference.

After Airman Crane had an opportunity to vent, I tried to put things in perspective. I explained that while the fighting in Afghanistan was more dynamic, its objective was limited to preventing the resurgence of the Taliban as there was no expectation that a stabilized Afghanistan would become a regional power broker. On the other hand, we were supporting a mission to train and equip the region’s most influential state; a kingdom that provides the best chance for stability in the Middle East for the foreseeable future. In this context, it became clear to Airman Crane that the mission he was a part of had some long term implications that stretched far beyond what was happening on the other side of the Persian Gulf.

There are a great many things that are expected of Non-Commissioned



Officers (NCOs) in the U.S. Air Force. Chiefly among them is an ability to articulate a senior leader’s strategic vision to subordinates in order to positively influence productivity; a vision that requires a generic grasp of the bigger picture. While this vision is available in print, it’s almost certainly not proliferated in practice. This leaves many NCOs ill equipped to accomplish one of their most critical tasks. Motivating people to perform at their highest level is exceedingly difficult if you don’t communicate the “why” effectively.

To begin with, most communication in an organization like the military takes a top-down approach and is directive in nature. While this is effective in some situations, it won’t help an NCO inspire his or her subordinates to perform their duties more effectively. Initiating a dialogue to promote more effective communication is not always easy, but listening is often a good place to start. That may sound easy but there is a difference between looking at people while they speak to you and being truly attentive. In fact, “True attentiveness signals respect for people of all ranks and roles, a sense of curiosity, and even a degree of humility” (Groysberg and Slind, 79). In addition to active listening, asking questions that will lead subordinates to the desired conclusion is also an effective way to engage with them. In this respect, there is an element of originality in the drawn conclusion, perhaps even ownership. The concept of “conversational intentionality”, as described in the article “Leadership is a Conversation”, details how leaders can explain organizational strategy to employees in order to generate “consent rather than commanding assent” (Groysberg and Slind, 83). This concept requires leaders to ask and answer pointed questions in an effort to find a logical common ground with their employees.

Establishing this dialogue is only half the battle however. It’s also critical for leaders to demonstrate how a subordinate’s actions influence the mission. Put quite simply, knowing why something is done can be a powerful motivator. This tact has its detractors among my peers. Many feel that by virtue of their position, they are empowered to give an order with no questions asked. While I agree that this method has a time and a place in the military, it’s not fit for everyday use. Oftentimes it’s not simply a matter of connecting a task with the mission, but reinforcing why the mission is important. This power of significance was illustrated in a study conducted by a research team from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School led by Adam Grant. In short, the study measured groups of people who worked in a university call center that solicited donations from alumni to pay for scholarships. One group read stories prior to beginning their work day about how scholarship recipient’s lives were improved while the other groups did not. The employees who had been reminded of the significance of their work raised twice as much in donations than their counterparts (Pink, “Think Tank...”). These

results serve to remind us that, “It’s often difficult to do something well if we don’t know the reasons we’re doing it to begin with” (Pink, “Think Tank...”).

The final consideration, and perhaps the most overlooked aspect of leadership, is empathy. There’s a saying in the military that’s used to describe someone typically known for strong leadership: “He didn’t forget where he came from”. People fitting this description are typically leaders whose words carry considerable weight. That says a lot considering an aptitude for leadership is not always a pre-requisite for advancement in the enlisted corps. Even when leaders attempt to communicate with subordinates in a more meaningful way, they often fail to relate to their audience and end up sounding as if they’re preaching. In describing the importance of empathy, perhaps Machiavelli said it best when he wrote: “For in the same way that landscape painters station themselves in the valleys in order to draw mountains or elevated ground, and ascend an eminence in order to get a good view of the plains, so it is necessary to be a prince to be able to know thoroughly the nature of a people, and to know the nature of princes one must be one of the populace” (Machiavelli, 2).

Senior Airman Crane stopped me one day a few months later. He told me that our discussion that night had really helped him feel better about his deployment; how everything made more sense now. I had never felt so proud to be an NCO. When Airman Crane said that, it occurred to me that while our discussion ultimately resulted in him giving a bit more scrutiny to each ID card he checked or vehicle he searched, he also felt better about what he was doing with his life. While there are clearly situations when orders should be followed without question, it’s important that we not rely on that approach to compensate for a lack of effective leadership. However, if you choose to focus on the “why” as a leader, do it not in the name of productivity or unit cohesion, but in the recognition that everyone’s desire for fulfillment and meaning is equal to your own.

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GLARES OF THE SUN

JAMIE BENNETT

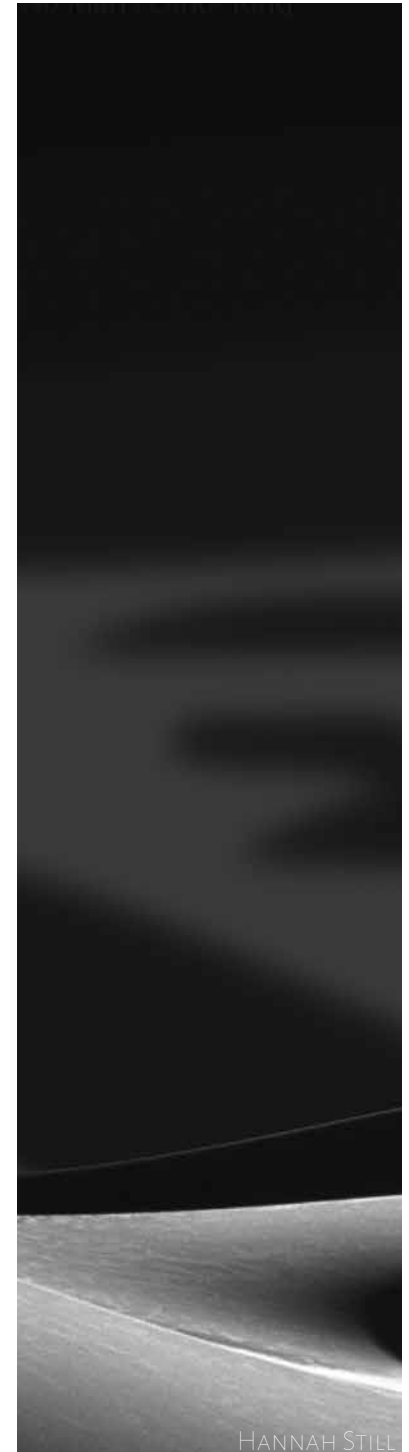
Part 1.

The sun glares its stark rays through the clear glass windows of the room. It sits its shadows against the wall and leaves them growing like vines against the muted gray. The flat linoleum is almost bleach white, excepting the ugly black marks of rubber that scatter across its surface. It is almost perfect. There is a welcoming sound, a gentle hum of background noise. The room itself is barren, almost, save the bed and the chair. At least, it is bare of anything that could be called furniture. Everything else there seems to invade the space. There is very little area unmolested by the machines. A steady beat of a heart is measured out, the sound unimportant to the rooms inhabitant.

Part 2.

When she was a child, she was fortunate to have been small and mostly unnoticeable. She would hide and listen to the conversations of the adults around her, of which she had always found to be far more interesting than her own miniscule imagination. Her favorite time to hide was during the luxurious dinner parties that her parents threw. No expense was spared in the wining and dining of the other elites, though it was nothing that her parents could not afford. She would hide in the corner of the immense living room that they only ever used for these sorts of events and watch as her parents contemporaries sipped delicately from crystal flutes filled with the most expensive of champagnes. They nibbled at caviar topped crackers and conducted polite conversations. The talk was her favorite part.

There was much talk about her parents, of whom she knew very little as



HANNAH STILL

they were always busy and had to leave her with Hilde, her nanny. Yet, hiding behind the rich material of her parents wine red divan, she gained snippets into the lives of the strangers that she called her parents.

“Leland is such a dear.”

“Josephine is a treasure.”

These words she held dear to her heart, and it warmed her to learn that her parents were kind-hearted people, well-liked and respected in the community. Yet, of all of these, her very favorite talk was to hear about her parents together.

“...the loveliest couple, really. Never seen two people more suited.”

“I tell you, those two belong together.”

“If only my Jacob and I could be a bit more like them, maybe we’d be happier.”

She would sit there and soak up the praise given to her parents, throat clenching and eyes tearing as she saw them, preening beneath it all. She was proud of them. There she would remain until Hilde, going to check on her in her room and viewing that she was not there, would come to her secret spot, the same every time, and pluck her from behind the divan saying, “Jenna Rhys, you know better than to be at this party. To bed with you, and no dessert tomorrow for bothering your poor parents!”

She would prop Jenna on her hip, scolding loudly in her accented voice, as she escorted her back to her room in the east wing that she shared with Hilde. As they left, she would look back and view her parents, together, in all of their perfection and promise to herself that one day she would be just like them.

Part 3.

On another day, when she was hiding, yet again, this time under the immense staircase that led to her parent’s wing of the house, Jenna was able to see just what made her parents relationship so special. She already knew that her parents were different from the parents of the other kids at school. Her parents were still together. They were not divorced or getting one.

They were not constantly fighting about who would get custody of her or making schedules for when they would see her. No, her parents were still together. They didn’t have to worry about when they would see her, that’s what Hilde was for. Jenna already knew all of that, but she never knew exactly why her parents were still together, when other parents weren’t.

Hiding behind the table under the staircase she waited to catch a glimpse of her family. She waited so long that the sky was beginning to darken and her eyes threatened to close at any moment. Finally, her parents stormed into the atrium, not really bothering to be quiet, as she should have been on the other side of the house, in the wing she shared with Hilde and unable to hear them.

Their raised voices echoed in the open space. Jenna watched with wide eyes. She had never heard her parents speak that loudly. When it seemed as if their voices had become tangible, so that they rebounded and ricocheted from the walls, her mother picked up the crystal vase that sat atop the table Jenna was hiding behind and threw it at her father’s head. He ducked and it smashed against the wall with a sharp crack. The silence that followed, as her father watched to water drip down the wall and looked at the mess of shards and flowers that littered the floor, was just as palpable as their voices before had been.

Swiftly, he turned to her mother, walking quickly across the polished wooden floors, and slapped her across the face. Jenna’s eyes widened further when her mother slapped him back. Then she punched him and it seemed that their ensuing fight went on forever. Finally, her father managed to wrestle her mother to the floor, her hair pooling under her, loosened from its bun when he pulled it. His scratched and bloodied arm was across her neck, holding her down. The space was filled with their ragged breaths.

“Are you done now, Josephine?” Her father asked calmly, putting more pressure on her mother’s neck.

“For now.” her mother rasped back, glaring

up at him in defiance.

Her father smiled and pulled her mother up. He kissed her tenderly, and her mother kissed him back.

"I love you." He said to her, gripping the back of her neck with his large hand. "I know," her mother replied stiffly, "I love you, too."

Still smiling, her father led her mother up the stairs, toward their rooms. Jenna waited a few minutes before she crawled from her hiding place. Her heart beat in excitement at what she had just witnessed. She ran back to the wing of the house that she shared with Hilde and went back to bed, where she fell asleep contemplating what she had seen.

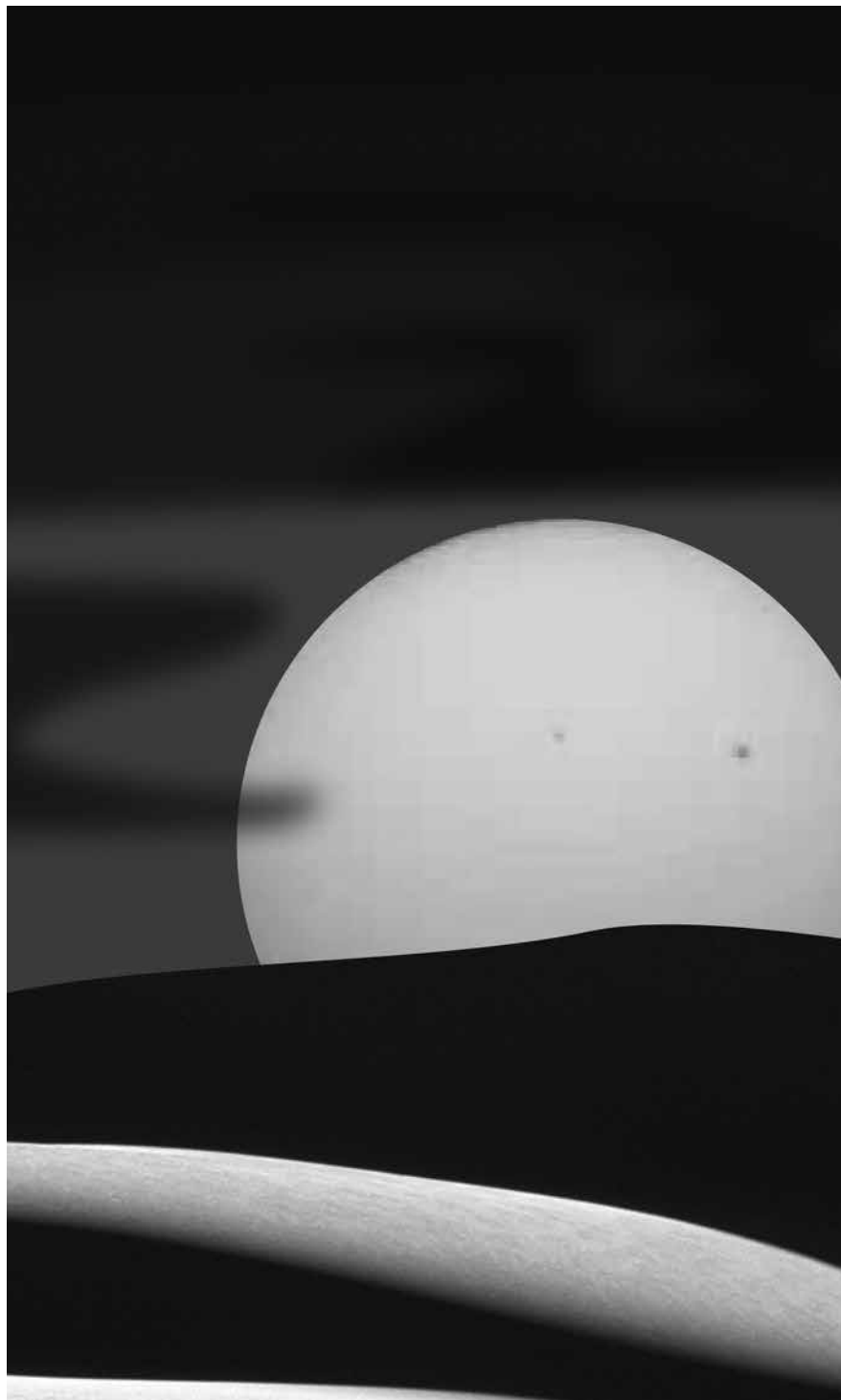
The next night, at yet another one of her parent's parties, she was hiding in her usual spot behind the wine red divan. She could see her parents, her mother in a high-necked gown and her father in his tuxedo. Her mother had her hand on her father's injured arm as he led her around the room. They looked elegant and cheerful. From time to time, they would stop and her father would gaze at her mother a moment before her mother would look away, in a world all their own.

Jenna watched on in happiness and envy. She wanted that for herself. She wanted to be loved like her parents loved each other. She vowed, then, that she would find someone who would love her more than they loved each other.

Part 4.

She wakes up in an unfamiliar room, not for the first time. She shakes off the wisps of memories that still cling to her mind. She looks around her, taking in the room and the machines that she is hooked up to. She realizes that she is not alone when someone leans over her bed. His face is shadowed by the setting sun.

"Ah, it's nice to see that you are



awake," the man says as he presses a button on the side of her bed, "I'm just going to call in some nurses to check your vitals and some other things. My name is Dr. Jefferson, by the way. Could you give me your full name?" he asks looking down at the clipboard he is holding.

She pulls her hands to her temples, careful not to jostle the I.V. in her arm, as she tries to process his rapid speech.

"Yes. My name is Jenna Kensington." She answers as two nurses walk into the room and busy themselves with checking her vitals. She briefly wonders why this took two nurses.

"Great," the doctor says gaining her attention again, "Mrs. Kensington, I would just like to ask you a few questions about your injuries."

She nods to show she would not mind answering his questions.

"Do you remember how you were injured?"

Jenna squints her eyes, trying to remember through the haze in her head. "I remember falling down th-

"Jenna!" a handsome man stands in the doorway, looking immaculately put together.

"Bennett!" she calls back, happy to see the familiar face of her husband.

As he smiles at her from the doorway in his customary three piece Italian suit, she feels butterflies in her chest and a sudden rush in her belly, tight with anticipation. She could not keep the smile from her face.

The doctor and the two nurses have paused in their duties and stare sideways, in a poor attempt at being inconspicuous, their faces uneasy and their pallor's suddenly pale. The doctor clutches his clipboard a bit tightly, his knuckles whitening and his face flushing red.

Jenna was used to these reactions,

the jealousy and envy that always seemed to crop up when people witnessed the love between her and Bennett. Bennett, in his usual self-assured way, never noticed these things, just as he did not notice now.

“That was a nasty spill you had there, honeybee. Let’s not worry me like that again, he says, his smile tightening in what she knows to be worry. He is always worried after she hurts herself.

She reaches out her hands to beckon him closer, still aware of the eyes of the hospital staff. She doesn’t care. He walks forward, his leather shoes scuffing the white floor. Bennett leans down to kiss her and her belly tightens further. She has found the perfection that she had longed for, and it is more than even her parents could have wished. The setting sun moves across the sky and the shadowed vines creep toward the ceiling, darkening the room until all that is left is the artificial glow of the fluorescent lights.



THE DRESSER

SUSANNAH MCQUITTY

Upstairs, there was an old white dresser.

She pushed open the creaking trap door and set up the ladder. Rising from the glow of the world downstairs and breathing in the airborne mold and dust, she coughed.

She grabbed a lumpy pillow, dropped it in front of the dresser, and sank down. Something crinkled in her back pocket.

The paint was thin around the top edges of the dresser, chipped in places. There were scratches and nail polish smears, and makeup fingerprints around the top handle; a memory of hands groping for something to pull.

Dust resettled before she reached out and brushed the makeup stains with her fingertips, careful not to disturb the layer of snowy powder on top of the dresser. She took the handle of the top drawer and pulled.

Vanilla and pressed flowers. It was the smell of old books and golden-lit libraries, of college and of studies, with the faintest hint of black coffee lingering in the background. Charlotte Bronte; that’s right. Her hand shuffled the papers inside, persistent yet without a clear purpose, stirring the scents upwards. Almond and a tremor of chocolate. Loneliness with a purpose.

She did not take anything out.

The drawer rumbled as it closed, and her hand dropped to the second handle down. There were less fingerprints on the white paint, and a moment passed before she opened it.

Bonfire smoke, the smell of starlight. She could feel the grass between her toes, the lawn chair beneath her. The sweet dwindling aroma of red maple leaves lacing the harsh scent of smoke. The empty metal chair beside her, vacated moments ago, once white but now tan with use and rust. *Jane Eyre* rolling in her hands in contemplation: “*I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being, with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.*”

Inside the second drawer, her fingers found the binding of the book. She lifted it out of its place, fanned the pages. *Vanilla and pressed flowers*. She glanced down, did not truly read, only glanced, until the pages nestled apart in halves and her eyes settled. “*Because*”, he said, “*I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you - especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame...*”

She lowered the book and looked at the bottom drawer, the rest of the quote resurfacing in her mind: “*As for you, - you'd forget me.*”

The bottom drawer was almost perfectly white. She did not want to pull the handle, so she pushed the second drawer shut.

It rolled open almost of its own accord, soundless. There was very little in the drawer to weigh it down, only a single folded square of wide-ruled notebook paper. It was yellowed and worn on the edges.

She took it, but did not open it. The words written inside in sloppy blue pen were embossed from behind when the note was folded like this. It still smelled like the cigarette smoke from the library copy of *Jane Eyre* he had snuck it into, just to make sure she got it. She stared at it for a long time before she reached for her back pocket, removing a crisp, silver-rimmed piece of cardstock.

At the top were the words “*You are Formally Invited,*” written in calligraphy with blue ink, and they were embossed.

She placed the invitation in the drawer, in the very middle, and pushed it closed. The note she gave to Jane, folding it in the pages: “*Even for me life had its gleams of sunshine.*”

Perhaps. She stood, the book under her arm, and replaced the pillow, backing away from the old white dresser towards the light glowing from downstairs.

Perhaps. But hers was the white light of the stars, and she could already smell the bonfire outside.

FOR THE SAKE OF CURIOSITY

RYAN TAYLOR

I grew up with people telling me over and over again that there's something wrong with me. I would always avoid their stares, feigning denial over what I knew to be true – they were right. There is something wrong with me; there always has been, and I'm glad.

It all started with little, harmless experiments. I'd kill an animal and dissect its body. While maybe not normal, it's not as if this is unheard of. No one cared too much about this act of violence because we're talking about creatures many people view as pests: rodents, birds, insects, whatever. It was seen as a stage of adolescence and something done for the sake of curiosity. But I knew I was different, even then. There was something wrong with my brain – something great. I wasn't doing these things just because I wanted to see what the insides of a creature looked like. I did it because of some sort of uncontrollable desire that came from some part deep inside of me. I wanted power. I wanted these animals to know that, in their waning moments, I was their god, and I was merciless.

Now, why am I proud? Why do I boast? I know you want to know. It's because I'm different. No one wants to be ordinary – not really. People want to fit in, but they don't want to be indistinguishable from the mass populace. People who are ordinary aren't remembered. They're lost to the passing of time – sheets of paper that blow out from a notebook – sheets of paper that the owner doesn't bother to chase because what's written on the paper is of little to no importance. That's not me, and, for that, I am glad. Think of *Beowulf*. Why did he fight the monsters? It wasn't because he was intrinsically good; it was because he wanted to be remembered. He knew if he were remembered that he would never truly die.

I have begun to digress. Let me continue. My parents didn't start worrying about me until I entered my teenage years. I was unpopular, with my only friend being myself. I stayed in the background, drawing pictures of violence – violence against my enemies. It was a way of releasing the anger within me and imagining something I so desired, and I continued until I was caught. I still remember sitting next to my mother in the stuffy office of the school principal.

I'm sorry, Ma'am, but we had to ask you to come because of some very disturbing pictures your child is drawing.

"Yes, I'm aware of the pictures, but he's not doing any harm, right?"

He's not doing any harm right now, but we're worried about what he may do in the future.

"What are you saying?"

I, as well as the school counselor, believe your child needs to seek help from a psychiatrist. We're worried about him.

And so it began.

Tell me about your enemies, Victor.

The psychiatrist would say.

"What do you want to know?"

What did they do? Why are they your enemies?

"They were mean to me."

How so?

"They never talk to me."

Do you try to talk to them?

"Yes."

And they ignore you?

"Yes."

How does that make you feel, Victor?

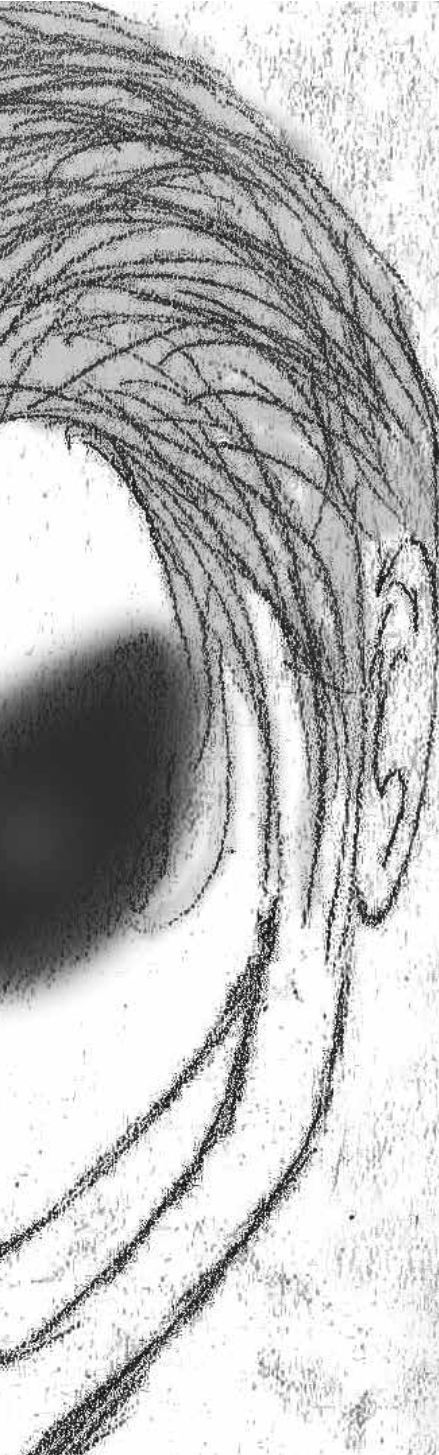
"I want to kill them. They deserve it."

I was put on medication, but it just made me tired – a shell of a person with no motivation to do anything. I guess that's what they wanted me to become. I continued going to the psychiatrist, where I had my pills replenished. I took the medicine until I moved out on my own, at the age of 18.

The day I graduated high school, I packed my backpack full of clothes and other necessities and left. I didn't tell my parents. They wouldn't have cared too much anyway. I had enough money saved from working at a pizza place to support myself for a while. I spent nights wherever I could as I drove across the country, in search of some form of happiness, like so many teenagers before me have done. But I wasn't like other teenagers. I began my experiments again, but this time they weren't



KELLEN CROOKHAM



little or harmless.

Please, please don't hurt me.

They would beg. Oh, they would beg, but what reason did I have to care? They were useless to the progression of society. I was doing everyone a favor. It was during this time that I fulfilled my birth name – Victor. I was a modern Prometheus, or at least I wanted to be. I resumed my dissections and attempted to bring my victims back to life, sometimes swapping body parts just to see how they looked and whether or not it changed anything. *Can something dead be brought back to life? Can I kill someone twice?* I would ask myself these questions before going to sleep. But these twists to my experiments made no difference except to fulfill some dark part of my inner being.

I escaped capture for a long time, longer than I anticipated. I half expected to be caught before I ran out of money, but I wasn't. I don't even remember how many people I managed to kill, but the process was the same every time. I'd kidnap a person, never really caring who, and take the person to the woods nearby, where I performed my experiments.

Why did you do these things, Victor?

Because I am a god. I see you flinch, but I'm serious.

I met a friend along the way – an ugly bastard of a dog with one eye. I named him Cyclops, and he called me Hephaestus. I asked him why, and he said: *Because you capture the scum of society as Hephaestus caught his cheating wife and his wife's lover. Your weaknesses are based on perception. You may not be perfect in the eyes of society, but you are the most perfect of the gods.*

So my new name stood.

The dog spoke to you?

Don't you speak to your animals?

Yes, of course, from time to time, but they never answer.

Are you sure?

What? Victor, that's not why I'm here.

Please don't call me Victor.

Hephaestus.

Yes?

You're the one who wanted me to come.

I wanted to tell my story.

This isn't a confession. This is a brag.

Does that matter?

Your execution date is a month from now. You have been placed under the highest security of any prisoner in the history of this state and are only allowed to speak to someone when it is arranged months in advance with all possible precautions taken. Your life has been all but ended, and it is the fault of no one but yourself. The glass behind which you sit cannot be broken. I would have expected some sort of remorse from you – a person who is stuck in a position such as you are. I'm not here to listen to braggarts. I come when a prisoner wants to make amends with the Lord.

Why should I feel remorse? My victims deserved it.

Is that why you did all of this? Because you're some sort of vigilante?

Of course not. I'm not that holy.

Don't use that word like that. You're not holy.

How do you know? You're a priest, sure, but that doesn't make you better than me in the eyes of the Lord. After all, neither of us has met him.

Stop.

Whatever you say.

Do you have anything else you want to say to me? I refuse to continue to be a part of one of your warped fantasies.

Do you really want to know why I killed all those people?

Why?

For the sake of curiosity, of course. Why else would I do it?

THE WIND FROM THE EAST

TYELER RAYBURN

The Wind from the East carried from its evil origin a chill, a whisper of war to come, as we shrank from its cruel sweep into mounting gloom growing in the twilight, silent as never before, stagnate, as if drawing its last breath.

The smallest of us lay folded, knees in hand, her face begrimed with soot, shivering, her name being Maysan, meaning Starlight; and ever did she shine throughout that brooding darkness, through which no light pierced through the haze but her. (darkness: a haze through which no other light pierced through)

As day retreated to its westward sleep, ever we remained listening, cowering under the intensifying chill, each minute passing as unto a life age of the Earth.

Purple faded into sombre gray as day end was stricken with ash, and as the last light of the Sun faded into the West, so did our hope.

At length in the hush of night a blink of red pierced the horizon, rising and sinking in the same direction as came the whispering Wind, carrying now the echo of drums, beating slowly at first, then with a deepening rhythm accompanied by brighter and countless flares--the eastern sky "sparkling with fireworks" as she described it, if only it were so.

If only the persistent, impending boom in the distance really was the march of parade drums.

If only the parade wasn't getting closer with each eternal minute fleeting. If only we were not alone.

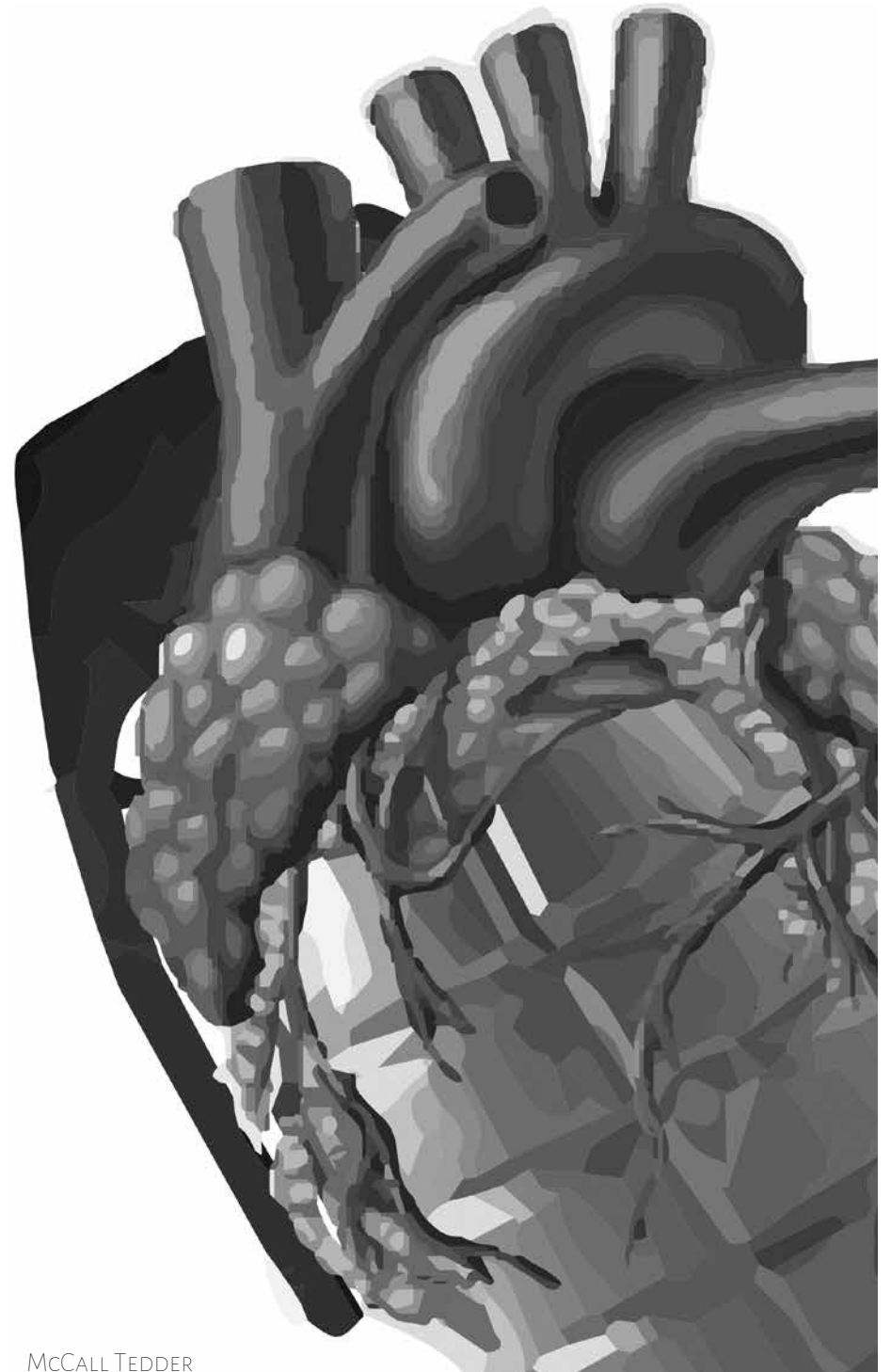
Three moons ago had the fires been lit and every night since they crept closer. Out of the sky rained embers and through smoke inflamed we had come to the edge of war where day and night clashed until we could go no further.

Restless was our sleep such that dreaming and waking were merged into one terror, of light and darkness and drums in the deep.

Maysan, ever shining, with hand in mine, gave me peace and I to her likewise, and thus we waited. What was left of tomorrow passed and yesterday faded into memory as if years had worn away.

When through the ash-ridden veil at last we could see a hint of golden morning there came a roaring like thunder, not of any storm of sky but of war above and about us and with one final breath the world went dark and all things came together.

"Come" said the Wind to my ear, still ringing from the flashes in the night; and to him I and the Last Light of the World replied "gladly."



MCCALL TEDDER



ALISHA MERRITT

THE PIANO MAN ∞

CALEB HUMPHREYS

My father was a rock. Stern and stead and concrete. He did not drink, not a drop. Never smoked, never did drugs. At least, he never said otherwise. He was a man without vice. Of course, I know next to nothing about his life before he married mom. I do know that he was a Marine. That he was married and had two kids. One of the kids was not his, which is why he got a divorce. But he never really talked about that either.

Anyway, the point is that my father rarely talked about his past, so when he did, I listened. His secret dream, he once let slip, was to learn how to play the piano. At the time, I thought that this was rather childish of him. I mean, he was close to seventy years old. I just could not picture him playing a piano. His giant, calloused hands were more suited for swinging a hammer than playing Mozart, or, more realistically, “Chopsticks.” But, what did I know? What did I dream about? What did I secretly aspire to do or be?

Sometimes I think that I did not really know him. Not well. Not as well as I should have. Definitely not as well as a son should know his father.

Years passed. Mom died, cancer, and my father became more serious, accomplishing a feat that I had never thought was possible. He was more despondent, more withdrawn, even from his own children. He never opened up to me again. Still, I had not forgotten about his secret dream, the one that he had once shared with me.

It was his seventy-fifth birthday. What do you get a seventy-five year old retiree who has no hobbies except for yard work and watching the weather channel? My answer: *Rock Band 3*. You know, that video game where you can pretend to play music. The game came with a plastic guitar controller, an electronic drum set, a microphone, and even a small keyboard. Essentially everything a person would need to start their very own living room rock band. The gift was a joke, bought at the last minute. The last minute when the combination of obligation and panic forces you to choose something, anything. Admittedly, it was a bad decision. Especially so because my father did not even own a video game console, a requirement for actually playing *Rock Band*. In fact, I doubt if he had ever played a video game in his life. So the present was basically a *Rock Band* bundle-sized waste of space.

He ripped the wrapping paper off to reveal the *Rock Band* box and logo. My father’s face showed only confusion. It was like I had given him a gift meant for someone else. He continued the unwrapping process though,

probably under the belief that I had simply used the box to wrap up some new power tool. In the end, once the box was completely opened and the contents laid out, I actually had to explain the gift to him. He was disappointed, to say the least.

Looking back, piano lessons would have been a better choice. I made up for the stupid gift by taking him out to eat – something that he never did after mom passed. I think he was afraid of eating alone. Anyway, we laughed and joked about the *Rock Band* debacle over our steaks. After dinner, I dropped him off at his house, a small one story cottage with a big yard. He had moved there after mom died. Moved so he could get away from the memories and to get away from the stairs which he could no longer handle.

I rolled down my window and wished him happy birthday, promising to come back and visit again soon. And then I drove away, heading back to the city.

Two months later, I finally made good on my promise and returned. I remember standing outside and knocking, ringing the doorbell, pounding on the door.

I checked the yard, hopeful, but he was not outside. His pickup was still in the driveway, so I tried calling. There was no answer. I found the spare where it always was, in the toolbox in the shed, and to let myself in, calling out for him as I did so. Yelling. He was, as it turned out, playing *Rock Band*. Jamming out to Billy Joel's "Piano Man." And he was even singing along! Well, singing is a relative term. It was more like he was talking the lyrics while vigorously bobbing his head.

Now, this was the man who couldn't even use a smartphone because his fingers were too big. A man who had to type one letter at a time, henpecking at the computer keyboard for hours just so he could write a single page filled with errors. A man who had to call one of his kids so we could walk him through how to send an email.

I stood there, in the doorway, stunned. Not only had my father gone out and bought himself an XBOX, but he had mastered the piano, albeit on a video game. Learned to play on a child-sized keyboard that was currently sitting on his lap.

I couldn't decide what to watch: my father and his goofy grin or his in-game avatar, which was twitching and gyrating on the screen of the tube TV. The pixelated character appeared like he might be having a seizure next to its digital piano.

I briefly wonder how my father had managed to hook up the XBOX. Surely he hadn't done it himself? Maybe he had one of the neighbor kids help him.

The customized avatar was young. Barrel-chested, ripped muscles, a Marine Corps tattoo on his upper arm. Wearing Aviators, camouflage pants, combat boots, and a white, sleeveless shirt. Shoulder-length black shaggy hair.

My father, the avatar's physical counterpart, was wearing stained blue

jeans, Crocs, and a flannel button-up. His gray hair was receding, but still present at seventy-five which gave me some hope for the future of my follicles. Wrinkles, hearing aids in both ears, gold wedding band still on his finger.

Growing up, my father was larger than life, but, watching him play, he looked so small, like he had begun to shrink into himself. Maybe the avatar was who my father saw himself to be, maybe who he really was. Certainly, he wasn't the man before me who had woken up one day and had suddenly gotten old. He wasn't the one who lived by himself and spent more time watching the news than he did socializing with real people. Who went to church every Sunday and Wednesday night, but didn't have any real friends. No, maybe he really was this *Rock Band* playing piano man.

His fingers danced over the keys, blue veins like rivers and tributaries coursing under the surface of his skin. Feet thumping, mouth moving.

I said nothing. I wasn't even sure if he knew that I was in the room with him. I didn't know if I should announce my presence or pull out my lighter and wave it around, so I did neither. Just stood and took it all in. When the song was over and he realized that I had been the only fan in his imaginary audience, he would tell me that *Rock Band* was the best present he ever got.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:

First and foremost, I want to thank you, the reader, for picking up *The Rubicon*. In reading through our journal and appreciating the fine detail and artistry of the design and artwork, you are supporting a large network of students here at Troy University who worked incredibly hard to share their work with you today. When you read *The Rubicon* and share it with the people around you, you are helping us grow, and this exchange is invaluable. We hope to continue to gain a larger presence on campus and in doing so carry on publishing a literary journal of quality that is representative of the talent of your peers.

It is important to note that putting together *The Rubicon* is an intensely collaborative process. The publication of this journal would not be possible without the support of the Department of Art & Design. Besides their monetary donation, the Department of Art & Design facilitate the production of the artwork and the final design and look of *The Rubicon*. In particular, I would like to extend my gratitude to Sara Dismukes, Beverly Leach and Greg Skaggs for their instrumental role in getting *The Rubicon* to print. I would also like to thank Department Chair Pamela Allen for her leadership and continued endorsement of this literary journal. It should be noted that while the student work is to be celebrated, without the backing and guidance of the faculty of Malone, *The Rubicon* would not be possible.

Of course, no one can discuss *The Rubicon* without also discussing the efforts of those in the English Department. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Ben Robertson, our faculty advisor, for his mentorship and his editorial support as well as Department Chair Dr. Stephen Cooper for his ongoing dedication to our cause.

I would also like to thank the President of the Troy University Student Veterans' Association Erin Byers, Stephanie Hopper, and the Troy for Troops office for their support of our Veteran Spotlight. I must also recognize the efforts of Mr. Michael Orlofsky who led a creative writing workshop for veteran and traditional student-writers alike. Without their diligence and dedication, we would not have been able to feature the many voices and stories of the men and women who have served our country. It is through your willingness to collaborate that you have helped *The Rubicon* honor the service of these patriots.

I do want to take this opportunity to thank Sara Dismukes and Chris Rich for their donation of Studio 116 in Brundidge for our semester-end launch on multiple occasions as well as Vicki Pritchett and the Johnson Center for the Arts for their donation of The Studio for this spring's launch. Thanks to Dr. Diane Orlofsky, Dr. Robert Gibson, Dr. Michael Huff, Dr. Bret Woods, and Quinton Cockrell for the donation of their time and efforts in putting together the performances for these launches. The use of these spaces and the entertainment provided by the John M. Long School of Music and the Theater Department have truly made the publication of *The Rubicon* feel like a community-wide celebration.

In closing, I would like to say that it has been my absolute pleasure to have worked with the officers and editorial staff members of *The Rubicon* in my year as Editor-in-Chief. Their positivity and willingness to work hard have not only helped *The Rubicon* become what it today but have set a remarkably passionate and driven tone for the coming years. I want to extend a special thanks to Dean of the College of Communication and Fine Arts Dr. Larry Blocher and Chancellor Jack Hawkins Jr. As administrators, they have helped foster the collaborative and inter-disciplinary community that makes up Troy University. It has been my privilege.

Sincerely,
Naomi Marie Perez
The Rubicon, Editor-in-Chief

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