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Art
Caitline Solsaa

Poured Painting 1

Poured Painting 2
Fiction
Nocturne for Dusk
By Becca Simon

The darkness sounded closer than before; it tickled her fingertips and teased her nostrils and lingered on the air like pestilent smoke. Cold concrete greeted her bare, shivering hands as she settled herself on the sidewalk against the harsh wired fence surrounding Autumn Creek High School on the corner of 1626 Willow Street. She breathed a puff of hot air onto her trembling hands and clutched a long, rigid cane close to her chest, regretting with every frigid nerve in her body that she had not brought a warmer coat or a pair of mittens.

There was hardly a sound, save for the distant shuffling on the pavement that she guessed was the old man across the street going for his evening walk, and the hushing whisper of the breeze that stung the silent atmosphere.

It was the waiting she hated most. The waiting now; alone, usually spent bundled against the fence, waiting for the thudding roar of the after school stampede to soften while she waited for her only friend, Jane, to dissemble herself from what she said were after school obligations, her voice always filled with vacant apology. The waiting in class, at the back of a classroom—the rest of the class loafing about as a harsh, raspy voice screeched textbook definitions into her ear as if through a megaphone. The wait every day as she trudged through the halls, hoping that the bustling conversations might eventually be directed towards her. The wait that never seemed it would end.

But all things come to an end.

The whirring clicks of what could only be a bicycle grew louder and louder until they were right next to her and came to an abrupt stop.

She froze and gazed up at the bicycle’s rider, but her eyes saw nothing. She—Luce, an eighteen-year-old senior at Autumn Creek High, had been blind since birth.

“What did you call me out here for?” A young male’s voice spoke, an edge of discomfort in his otherwise soothing voice. She heard his bicycle fall to the ground with a crash and in an instant he was at her side, his hands clasping her quaking ones. They didn’t feel as warm as usual.

“Tell me what the sky sounds like today, Harper.” Her voice was hitched.

“Can’t we just—”

“Tell me what it sounds like,” she whispered, “please.”

Silence filled her eardrums, followed by a sigh.

“It sounds like a violin, pitched low and whispering through the wind. It hits some high, sharp notes, kinda like it’s whining in pain—I mean with this cold, and all—but it isn’t all sad. It hits some warm, rich, red notes before it fades away.”

“That sounds beautiful. It’s dusk, isn’t it? I wish you would play that for me.”

He laughed a little. “I don’t play the violin, and I didn’t bring my guitar—you called me here on such short notice.”
She felt her mouth dry up.

“Did something happen?”

She didn’t answer. It was a funny thing, blindness. She couldn’t see but sometimes she swore the darkness got stronger.

“You’ve been acting really funny lately, Luce.”

The wind gained velocity, accompanied by a symphony of wails that beleaguered Luce’s hair and whipped it like daggers at her face.

“Do you ever wish you could just... freeze an emotion? Freeze it, lock it in place, and never let it go?” She released his hand and buried it in her lap, clenching her hand into a fist. Harper issued no reply. She wondered what kind of expression he was wearing, what the shape of his eyes felt like, if they sounded sad or perplexed. Perhaps he was angry with her. Perhaps he sensed what was coming. Perhaps he had even been waiting for it.

“You’ve told me, time and time again, not to listen to the doubts in my head. I—I don’t want to listen to them, I really don’t... but lately things feel odd, Harper, and I’m scared.”

She waited for his usual instant reassurance, but there was none. Only the sorrowful mourning of the wind.

“*Every sour thought that creeps around in your brain is a monster, and it has a weakness: you can defeat it with music!*” is what he used to say, always full of empowering words, dispelling all of her disconsolate emotions with a soulful strum of his guitar. “*You are more than what those worthless hacks in school think of you - screw them! Your blindness doesn’t isolate you from the rest of the world, not if you don’t let it. Only you have the power to do that.*”

And she had certainly felt isolated, lonely, and forgotten that first day—the day she was left alone to feel the pouring rain soaking through her clothes, Jane nowhere to be found and her mother taking a surprise trip to the ER rather than picking her up from school—the day she met Harper.

He hadn’t told her to get out of the way, or asked if she was lost; nor did he whisper, “Is that girl blind?” from afar. He only sat down beside her, asked her how day was, and how come she waited alone here every day—and told her she was pretty.

She had nearly taken a mindless whack at him with her cane, certain he was mocking her. But his tone didn’t expose any trace of dishonesty, and he continued every day afterward to compliment a feature of her face; even her eyes, vacuous and unseeing, which she had always thought of only as useless foggy barriers that imprisoned her from experiencing the world the way others did.

The year she spent with him was the only time she ever felt she had experienced light. When he was around, she didn’t feel that tugging blackness pull at her heart, she didn’t feel like a shadow standing still while the rest of the earth moved; she felt whole, and sometimes, she even forgot her blindness.

They met in this very spot nearly every day without fail, and Harper always had his guitar. She explained how she interpreted sights, colors, and experiences with sounds—and he would do his best to repli-
cate them on his guitar. He could play her a different melody for every hour.

But nothing lasts forever; as the seasons changed, so did Harper. He no longer appeared by her side every day, and when he did, their encounters were brief, curt, and void of substance. He no longer brought his guitar.

The darkness had gotten darker again.

“Things are hard right now,” came his reply at last. His voice sounded detached and remote. “Just . . . stressful, y’know? We graduate soon.”

That’s it. No comfort in his voice; no sympathy towards the wretched state of her emotions.

Panic laid siege on her body, crumbling the resolve she’d built, brick by brick, to speak openly with Harper about her private ruminations.

Maybe she’d been wrong to call him out here. Maybe he really was just caught up in the whirlwind of pre-college preparations. Maybe she was being too clingy; maybe she was nothing more to him than what her blindness was to her: a burden.

She couldn’t tell if the erratic squeals that invaded her eardrums came from the wind or the instability of her own mind, rising and falling to match each uneven intake of breath.

Still, every fraught nerve in her body fought against her instinct to mute her voice the way she was used to. Say something say something say something! Her mind commanded her. Nothing will ever change if you do nothing!

But “It sure is surreal, isn’t it? It almost felt like this time would never come” is all she could come up with. A shallow, empty, premeditated and expected response. “It’s okay to be scared. Everyone is.”

Remorse surged through her like a drum. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t detach herself from her fear; instead she kept her feelings locked, silenced, and buried behind a wall of stubbornness to say what was on her mind. Harper always used to fill the gaps in her words when she couldn’t.

She’d never been very good at keeping her emotions in check. She could hide them, keep them stuffed under an airtight lid, but they never left. Since she’d met Harper, he’d become her crutch, her rock to keep steady; she had almost forgotten how to wade through her feelings on her own.

“I’m glad you understand, Luce.”

She could hear him shuffling his legs together in agitation. She imagined the warm, rich notes he had described to her before turning to ice.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about too.”

She stiffened.

“We’ll both be going our own separate paths soon, right? It’s gonna be a big change. So maybe . . . maybe it’s time for us to change, too. Go our own ways, start over. A fresh start is something you’ve always wanted, Luce, right? It’s nothing personal.”

Nothing personal, she wanted to spit, would you be saying that if I wasn’t the poor, incompetent blind
If confidence had been her ally, had she been able to escape the dissonance clanging through her brain and forcing her into resignation, she might have said something. She might have asked Harper why, or offered to listen to whatever weighed on his mind. She might have asked him to dispel the rumors that Jane kept spewing like bile—rumors that he was seeing someone else.

“Seeing.” What a funny choice of words.

A cacophony of hot anger shot through her veins and the wind picked up its assault on her face. Why should she care enough to inquire about his well-being when he didn’t lend an ounce of concern towards hers?

“You’re right. Absolutely; it’s absolutely for the best. This is just child’s play after all, right?” She laughed.

Next to her, she heard Harper exhale in relief. He placed a quick kiss on her cheek and squeezed her hand.

She didn’t move.

“It’s been fun, Luce.” His voice was farther away now. He must have stood. “Find happiness, wherever life takes you! Maybe we’ll meet again sometime.”

She heard him give his bicycle a rough kick, and just as quickly as he’d come he was gone again, bicycle tires whirring and clicking until they faded out.

The wind suddenly ceased. It felt as though the chorus of sounds Harper had described suddenly shattered around her, leaving nothing but a deafening nothingness that seemed to stifle her. His missing presence left no room for the fury that had vexed her prior. Through the silence she could hear her thoughts clearly. She wasn’t angry at Harper. She was angry at herself. His music had never reached her. Despite his coaxing, she’d never let herself become more than a Blind Girl. And now she felt more isolated than ever.

Someday he might come back. Someday, if she waited long enough, he’d show up with his guitar wearing a smile in his voice and play until the night became still.

She would keep waiting, curled up against the fence, until her classmates thundered out of the school for the last time, until she stopped wishing she was more than a shadow on a wall, until the sounds ceased to make any noise—waiting for Harper’s return.

But Harper’s music would never return to the corner of 1626 Willowstreet.

She could no longer hear the sounds of the sky.

The darkness crept into the silence and stayed there.
Skin Deep
By Becky Malsam

As her vision cleared, she found herself staring at a nearly perfect imprint of her face on the deflated air bag.

*God, I must look like hell if all my makeup is on the bag,* she thought groggily.

This day couldn’t possibly get much worse. What should have been a glorious day of shopping and relaxing at the spa, became a progressive source of embarrassment. Her credit cards had been declined and she was positive she heard whispers and giggles behind manicured hands.

Apparently Andrew didn’t think it necessary to warn her of the lower daily limits on her credit cards before she went out for the day. Thankfully he agreed to let her keep the appointment with her cosmetic surgeon since she made it before the allowance cut. Helen could make do with last month’s styles, but the chin and cheekbone implants were a necessity.

She reached up to gingerly touch the bridge of her nose, inspecting for any lasting damage. *It’s not broken, it just hurts like crazy. Thank God! My husband would be pissed if I needed another surgery this month.*

Helen brushed a mass of golden locks from her mascara-streaked eyes and tried to remember what just happened. She closed her eyes for a moment to clear her head. *Oh, that’s right. Some jerk with faulty brake lights slammed to a stop in front of me.*

Once she was sure she could move, she unbuckled the seatbelt and shoved the sprung door open. She was shocked back to reality as her Gucci pump became submerged in a stagnant puddle of street slime.

“Son of a . . .” Helen’s tirade was cut off as a gigantic hand entered her field of vision. *Dear Lord, is that a flannel cuff poking its way out of a suede sleeve?* Her eyes traveled up the arm, slowly taking in scuffed leather, until they finally reached what she hoped was a human face. *Fabulous. I’ve just been a wreck with Gentle Ben. He probably doesn’t even have insurance.*

Helen composed herself enough to mold her face into a tight smile and ignored the proffered hand. It looked like it hadn’t been washed in a while.

A surprisingly white smile appeared from the depths of his red beard as he peered at Helen. Her anger brought a rosy flush to her cheeks and made her rather striking despite her disheveled hair and rumpled blouse. The man was momentarily struck by her beauty.

“Howdy ma’am,” the man said still holding his hand out. “Lemme give you a hand there. Looks like you done got yer feet wet.” When he realized she was not about to accept his offer, he hid his hand in his pocket and backed away from the car. “I’m mighty sorry about this. Dang wirin’s been givin’ me trouble on Ol’ Faithful here, but looks like they’re workin’ just fine. Guess you just weren’t looking where you were goin’.”

Helen stared at him dumbly for a moment as she debated the benefits of getting out of the car and decided it wasn’t worth it after all. She could see all she needed to from the driver’s seat. The Benz was ruined. The front end appeared to be slightly wedged under the rusty truck.

She inwardly groaned as she thought about her husband’s reaction. *Something else for Andrew to com-*
plain about. I told him I should have a driver too. He better not change his mind about my appointment.

The man was still smiling at her as if nothing devastating just happened. It infuriated Helen and all her frustration came pouring forth. “It’s hard to pay attention to taillights when they’re covered in filth. That “thing” you’re driving is an eyesore. I’m surprised they allow people like you into the city at all. It’s obvious mountain people can’t drive on concrete. You just slammed on your brakes with no regard for the people behind you! It’s rude. You probably don’t even have insurance! Who’s going to pay for this? I can’t deal with this right now. I assume someone with a cell phone called in the accident so I’m just going to wait in my car until the police come. They can sort this out.” With that out of her system she tugged at the door until it submitted with an unsatisfying “thunk.”

As her rant rose in pitch and fury, the man took a defensive step back toward his truck as if her words were flailing fists. He glanced awkwardly around to see who witnessed this unpleasant and unsettling encounter and decided it was probably time to diffuse the situation.

The man cautiously approached the car and gently rapped a knuckle on the window. She jumped at the sound and glared at the rotating motion he made with his hand. The international symbol for “roll your window down.” After a moment she complied, lowering the window just enough to hear him clear his throat.

For a moment he looked like a little boy apologizing for doing what came natural to him. “Ma’am, I’m very sorry if my appearance startled you. You see, I’m just trying to get into character for my niece’s play later this week.” When he lifted his head his expression was anything but repentant. “But I have to say, your reaction and the idiotic stereotyping was extremely rude and offensive.” With that, he slid his business card through the crack of the window and walked back to his truck.

The small rectangle of heavy weight paper landed on Helen’s lap face-up and she stared at it in disbelief. In an elegant gold leaf scroll, the card proudly announced the man to be Dr. Trey Carver, MD. Smaller letters under that claimed him to be a cosmetic surgeon. Helen closed her eyes for a second to let the information sink in. Well, hell. I can’t have him angry with me. What if he cancels my appointment now? Will Andrew even pay for another doctor? It took me a month to convince him I needed this one. Thusly motivated, she once again shoved the car door open. This time when her Gucci pump landed in the water, she didn’t notice.

Dr. Carver looked up from his cell when movement in his rearview mirror caught his attention. His eyes widened in mildly alarmed amusement and he chuckled under his breath. Helen was hobbling over the uneven pavement with a short, comical stride, her knee-length pencil skirt making the short distance difficult to navigate. When she tapped a glistening red nail on his window, he raised an eyebrow and rolled the window down.

Her garish red lips were stretched in a face-splitting smile. Any attempt at looking contrite failed miserably. “Dr. Carver? I’m Helen Pierson. I have an appointment with you tomorrow. Anyway, I want to apologize for my behavior,” her smile grew even wider. “If you weren’t such a convincing actor, I never would have treated you like that. I just didn’t know. I hope there are no hard feelings and we can just put this un-
pleasant little mishap behind us.” Helen somehow managed to look both apologetic and reprimanding.

As she spoke the doctor perused her face. She was pretty from a distance. Up close Trey could see fine lines around her mouth and eyes. Her lips were puffy and misshapen from too many collagen injections and her eyes were a tad too close together. Trey just nodded his head slowly and returned his attention to his cell, tapping the screen like a pro.

Helen couldn’t reconcile the dirt under the nails with the hands of a surgeon, especially one with the reputation of Dr. Carver. Rumor had it he could work miracles. *God I hope he cleans up well. He really took that play thing seriously.* She waited as patiently as she could for acknowledgement of her apology, shifting just enough to ease the pain from her expensive, but uncomfortable, shoes. Just when she started to squirm in discomfort, he put his phone back in the breast pocket of his jacket.

“Well, Mrs. Pierson, don’t worry about it. It’s all water under the bridge, so to speak.”

Helen’s knees weakened in relief and her hand fluttered like a dying pigeon in front of her chest. She reached out to steady herself on Trey’s truck, saw how grungy it was and pulled her hand back. Trey noticed and allowed himself a small, bemused smile.

“Oh, thank you so much! You know this just isn’t like me at all. I promise to be on my best behavior tomorrow.” She turned and began her slow retreat to her car as if to demonstrate what a good girl she could be.

Trey waited for her to settle into her seat before calling after her. He had the feeling of a man who was entering much needed therapy after a long mental illness. The good Dr. Carver had been placating and taking orders from women like this for way too long. It was time to end it. There were more important people that could use his help, children for example. He started his practice with a desire to make people as beautiful outside as they were inside. Not the reverse.

“Mrs. Pierson? Don’t worry about the appointment tomorrow. Or ever. I’m giving your appointment to someone I can actually help. With your attitude, nothing I can do will ever make you beautiful.” He smiled broadly at her deer-in-the-headlight expression for a moment before pulling his head back in the truck. The screech as he rolled the window up almost drowned out that of Helen. Almost.
The snow had been falling, not too long ago. The slating, grey sky was hiding the early morning sun, and the residents were beginning to busy about the streets. Some cars passed by, smoke emitting from them and the smell of gasoline circulated through the air. Taxis were being stopped by the hollering men and women in suits and thick coats, clicking their heels. And checking their cell phones and watches, their routinely, indefatigable personas began to take effect.

On some streets, children played and twirled themselves around thin trees bordering the sidewalks. On the trees, there dangled ornaments and lights wrapped around them. Even across buildings, ornaments were hung from the wires. They lit up and flashed, illuminating at night. But in the day, they weren’t too looked upon. Except by the children, whose eyes lit up at their dazzling effects and drew on huge smiles as they continued with their parents or other siblings hurrying onto their busy schedules.

Close to the corner of Opal Street, 5th Avenue, there was a coffee shop entitled, “Down-Home Den.” The small, chocolate brown structure was hovered over by the taller, mahogany and grey brick buildings. On top of the displayed sign with a large painted cup of coffee, garner was fringed in dark gold and soft colored silvers. The door was to its left and the windows encompassed all to the right, framing with dark evergreen trimming. The smell of hazelnut espressos and mint caramel lattes emitted when customers opened and closed the door. There were so many customers. Every day, it was always busy.

Across the bustling shop, a man was sitting on a street bench, sipping into his full cup of coffee.

A girl, inside of the Down-Home Den, took notice of this man. She looked up at her mother for a response. But she was far too busy. She was chatting away with her friends as they all sat at a tall round table. Each filled their cups with loads of crème and sugar and kept all the wrappings in the middle.

The girl’s round, sea green eyes kept looking up at her mother and began to tug at her coat.

“Mom, there’s a man,” she turned to look at the man again, then back at her. But her mother paid no mind, as she kept her persistency. At times, her mother didn’t look down, but muttered, “Honey, not right now, I’m talking to my friends.”

The girl furrowed her blonde brows and puckered her lips on her freckled, round face. ‘I only want to know why there is a man out in the cold,’ she thought. She looked around.

The interior was patterned of gold and orange wallpaper. Most all the wooden tables were arranged in the center, like the ones her and her mother were sitting in. With dark evergreen paddings, the lower booths bordered the walls, making extra room by the front counter.

Other customers were around. Ones were laughing and talking about their dreams and troubles, while others talked about what was on the news.

The smell of coffee was all around. The aroma spread to every inch and corner of the shop.

A smile beamed on her face and sparked an idea. She began to tug on her mother’s coat again, this time to ask money for a cookie. Her mother heard her and willingly gave her a dollar, asking her not to bother
The girl raced up to the counter. Once she collected the cookie she hid it in her pocket. Then, she peered over to her mother, slowly inching her way to the door. When the coast was clear, she sneaked by her mother’s table and squirmed through a group coming in. The bell jingled and the group was welcomed.

The girl, now outside in the cold, saw the man, hunched over. The snow was keeping a steady pace and no car was coming in or out. She ran across to him. Slowing her pace, until, she was right in front of him.

He was clothed in a patched red coat. His jet black hair hid but flared outward from the knit hat he had on. Dirt and grease smudged and covered a fair amount on his tattered jeans and rain boots. The only part that wasn’t covered was his hands, which were being kept warm by the heated Styrofoam filled with coffee.

‘Does he not know I’m here?’ she thought. Turning her head she almost stumbled over. She regained her balance. Her boots bunched together and she stood tall like a soldier as she spoke, “Hello.”

The man lifted his head. His face was young, covered by a good amount of facial hair. Eyebrows were bushy and his skin was all red from the cold. Deep set blue eyes that were murky, stared at the girl.

She saw the cup of coffee. She turned back and back to him, “What are you doing with your coffee out here?”

He took a sip and looked back down to the ground. Rubbing the cup with his fingers he mumbled, “Enjoying some snow.”

“Oh . . . well here!” She dug in her pocket to retrieve the cookie. She placed it on the bench beside him and smiled.

He didn’t say anything. He only kept sipping from his cup and looking down.

“Hey,” the girl crossed her arms and began to pout at the man, “You’re supposed to say thank you when someone gives you something!”

He looked back up, emotionless, “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” she muttered, beginning to kick her feet in the snow piles that formed. He watched her, adjusting himself. Again, she noticed his cup of coffee.

“Don’t you want any cream or sugar in your coffee? Mother says it’s too strong for her to drink, so she adds a gazillion packets of sugar and like, a lot of crème.”

“I like it black,” he stated.

He again drank more from the Styrofoam as she blankly looked at him, “Black?”

“That’s what it’s called when there is no crème or sugar in coffee.”

“Oh, okay,” she readjusted her purple hat and began to skip around the man on the bench.

“Why are you talking to me? Don’t think you should get back to your mother and father?”

She stopped in front of him and looked at her favorite purple mittens. They were worn numerous times since her mother made them last year.

“My father is at work right now. He’s a doctor. So it’s just my mother and me. We’re going to go”

He sighed, “That’s very nice, but you didn’t answer my question. Why, are you talking to me?”
“I just thought, you looked like you needed a friend . . .”

She plopped down next to him. When she wasn’t looking, the man turned his head and smiled, staring at the road between the sidewalks.

He relaxed. Tapping her shoulder, he pointed up. They both smiled and watched the snow fall. Like falling angels, they danced down to them, kissing them softly upon their faces.

She then introduced some topics she enjoyed, and he began to open himself to her. She talked about her noisy dog she never really liked, and when she was younger, how the tall buildings looked like giant monsters that glowed at night. Then, she talked about the ocean, “I want to cross the Atlantic Ocean someday!” She got up and began to dance around him. By his side on the ground, now was where the empty cup laid.

“I want to be a sailor, and venture out and explore the world. But, I also want to be an actress! I want to be in movies!”

She reached for the sky and began to laugh excitably. A sudden thought hit her and turning back she asked, “Do you think I am too young to love the ocean?”

He chuckled, “I think you’re too young to begin to love anything.”

“Am not,” she cried, “Father says I’m not too young for anything!” She crossed her arms and stared down at him. His hands rested in his lap and he smiled lightly.

“Oh, your hands,” she mumbled, “Aren’t they cold?”

“A little.”

She looked at her mittens. Slipping them off, she handed them to him. “Here, you keep these. I can always tell my mother I lost mine.”

He took hold of them. Observing them, his fingers brushed through the soft material. He smiled greatly, “Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled, the wind began to blow lightly.

Just then, her mother came out from the shop, looking frantically. Her friends, along from behind, called out for her. The girl bit her lip and turned back to the man.

“Uh oh, looks like I have to leave. I think she said we’ll be coming here for a while. Will you be here tomorrow?”

He smiled lightly at her, looking back down to the ground and up again, “Only the heaven knows. They decide what happens to me now . . .”

The girl furrowed her brows and turned her head in wonderment, “What do you mean?”

Before he could respond her mother caught sight of her and waited for the cars to pass before coming over.

“Oh, I better go. You can tell me later tomorrow, promise?”

He only nodded. The girl’s smile grew from ear to ear. She giggled before turning and waving goodbye, knowing she’ll see him again tomorrow. Smiling, he waved back.
Once in the car, her mother started asking her many questions. Her daughter apologized to her and told everything that happened. About the cookie, the coffee, the dancing and watching snowflakes fall and kiss them, and how she told him her love of the ocean.

After the story was done, her mother didn’t know what to say. But, she did ask about her mittens. The girl looked out through the back seat window and smiled, “I gave them to him. I know he’ll give them back. Maybe he’ll give them back when I see him tomorrow.”

But when tomorrow came, he never showed up. Not even the next day, or the day after that. Not even for the next few weeks. Or even the next few months. But every day, she hoped to see him again. As each day progressed, her pipe dreams were slowly diminishing.

Soon, she had forgotten that day. Her mother gave her a new pair of red gloves. She didn’t like them, but had no choice of the matter.

They stopped going to the Down-Home Den. The girl was busy with school and began to take acting classes. She always stared out at the ocean whenever she was feeling overwhelmed or lonely. It always led up to her trying to remember the past. Out of all the memories that she had grasped, she could never remember that day. No matter how hard she tried.

Ten years later, Opal Street, 5th Avenue hadn’t changed very much. All the buildings colors were fading. It was never slow. Except on some winter mornings, when it was just beginning to snow. The girl from before had landed a job as a Barista at the Down-Home Den. She remembered this was where her mother was so obsessed with the amounts of sugar and crème in her coffee. Also, how she was so tired of listening to her and her mother’s dull conversations.

She wore a green apron as the others who worked before her did, and her long blonde hair was in a fishtail braid. She began to wear makeup now, hopefully making more tips for her college tuition. She was saving up for her dream. Her dream to go study abroad in England for acting, and to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

But today was slow. She twirled her pen and scratched her head. She then decided to clean the smudged windows, knowing that they would only get dirty again throughout the day. She grabbed the bottle, the rag and began to clean the upper window.

She concentrated on the insignificant speck and rubbed hard, until she noticed a figure across the street. She squinted hard. Feeling familiar about the moment, she ignored it and continued to clean. It hit her. She gasped and dropped the rag and bottle. The bottle’s top unsnapped and the liquid chemicals poured out across the tiled floor.

She darted, pushing the door open with both hands. The bell jingled. The door closed. She stood outside in the cold, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

The figure across the street was hunched over. His sleek, black hair was neatly kept, combing over to his side. He wore a black suit, covered by his twill coat and had a nice pair of dress shoes that were also black to match altogether.

She didn’t recognize him at first. But she was able to now. Being held in his hands was a pair of old,
purple knit mittens. They were the ones that were worn by an elementary student a long time ago.

He got up from the bench and looked at her directly. He was clean cut now and she could see his square shaped face, rosy with color. A small smile framed those dark, murky eyes from before. And now, turned into crystal, were these aqua opals. She knew they were there all along from her past. She didn’t speak. Tears only fell from her face and the wind blew softly, following its trail to the Atlantic. He broke the silence, “Hello.”

Her face squinted. She broke out into a heartfelt laugh, one that almost made her cry even more. Her make up smearing, her heart, racing with rapture, “Hello . . .”

The snow had been falling, not too long ago.
Rebellion
By Maryah Wilson

The year 2012, everything was to come to an end. That is what everyone says anyways. The Mayan Calendar had predicted it but nothing happened. December 21st, 2012 had come around and everyone was still there. No meteors had struck the earth, no earthquakes shaking the land to pieces, the sun did not envelope everyone in a fireball, and Satan did not come and destroy us all. No, we were alive and well. But, something did happen that day in history. It was something that none of us would have ever expected to happen. Life from space had finally contacted us. It was a miracle. Every country around the world got the signal that they were there and began sending back welcomes.

No, the world did not end in the year 2012. That was the first day of a whole new type of world. A world built of hell and misery from those we tried to contact and welcome to our planet. It was just the first day that the world as we knew it ended. It just so happened that the technology that they carried with them was a far cry above our own. Ships landed in the bigger cities as they came out in waves, those glowing slitted cat eyes reflecting our burning cities. They called themselves Tsaeb and their medieval weaponry seemed abnormally advanced against what our top technology was supposed to be. Somehow not one of our weapons or missiles seemed to make it past their defenses. Mass chaos ensued as they took over country after country. Full armies were decimated in hours with very few deaths on their end and soon the adults that struggled against them were killed, those who obeyed were made slaves. Children got the worst fate of all. If we were strong we were sent as the entertainment of our captors and made to fight against one another to the death until we either died, or we became too old to fight. Some of us have never even seen anything outside of this Coliseum that they had built. Those of us just old enough to remember having an actual childhood, tell the others stories of the outside world. Now, we all serve the vile beings that have us trapped in these metallic hell holes. The world as we know it is now over, and it is only the year 2025. Our hell is not over.

Separated from our parents they trapped us underneath the Coliseum. The smell of the sweet air outside seemed to be just a far off memory, the blue sky now representing the heaven we wish we all could escape to. The dank cell entrapping us seemed to glow with the eerie blue light of the cells that lined the walls. Those very cells that powered the Coliseum, and what we all now call home. The same energy that lined the walls is what chains us in this place. A collar around each of our biceps shows the Tsaeb version of our name. It is the only word we know to read in their writing, but some of us are figuring out other words as well. We are learning, adapting, waiting, but we first must survive. The whimpers of the other children in the cell bring back the memories of what had happened and what we were now going through. Soon, day would come again and we would have to fight once more to survive. My name is Aryn, and we are the Revolution.

Leaning against the cold metallic wall, I could only take slow calming deep breaths trying to ignore the burning wound along my calf. Bandages and ointment sat next to me as well as a single cloth with water to wash myself of the sweat and blood. The smell in the cell was nearly overwhelming in the sweltering summer day. Too many people in such a small area was not a great idea. Once I had caught my breath from my fight
just a few minutes ago, I grabbed the wet cloth and ran it along the wound hastily to wipe up as much blood as I could. Hissing in pain from the burn of the herbs in the water, I quickly threw the rag in the bucket and grabbed the bandages and wrapped the gushing wound. My fingers fumbled with the cloth as I growled angrily at getting the wound in the first place.

“Knicked ya didn’t they? Yer getting sloppy if they got ya after this many years,” a rough voice muttered from beside me. Callused hands shoved mine to the side and grabbed the bandages, wrapping it easily before tying it off tightly and slapping the wound. Dark eyes with a red tint to them stared back at me from the darkness.

“Oi that hurt ya know. Why you gotta be so rough there Kaine? Just cause you been here longest don’t mean you gotta be so rough with us young’uns,” I whispered as I kept back my hiss of pain. Stretching my legs out in front of me I could feel the dirt below scratch my legs but it felt cool against my heated skin. The roar of the crowd above shook loose dust onto our heads as they stomped their feet. Closing my eyes, the roaring crowd flashed into my head as I stared down at the blood dripping from my hands as my daggers squelched in the wide eyed teen before me as I pulled away. Shaking my head with a sigh I opened my eyes. “Looks like the underdog won again. Wonder if it’s from our cell. Whens yer fight Kaine?”

“Tomorrow I’m thinkin. Don’t know fer sure. Can ya move at all there Aryn?”

“No. My muscles feel like that goop they call food here.”

The sound of splashing water caught my ears before the cold cloth met my blood and dirt covered arm, and a warm body sliding behind me was a relief from the cold steel. Tilting my head back, I could only see the short dark hair of Kaine along with the scars along her neck. The blue glow from the wall behind me gave her a darker look, showing her warrior status and her cold demeanor that let her survive just as I have. The soft cloth that covered our bodies was a synthetic material that was like leather but was a black color with a red stripe of dye signifying what cell we were in and who was the owner of said cell. Pure white markings down the left side of our chest gave way to how old we are and how many battles we have won.

Booted feet echoed down the metallic hallway as well as the sound of something being dragged. Quickly Kaine and I stood on our feet, and ushered any sleeping kids to the waking world and to their feet. Getting them in rank order from most fights won to the least, we stood at attention, hands behind our backs, feet shoulder width apart, and heads bowed looking at the ground. Kaine stood to my left at the front of the line, and I could see how tense she was as the doors opened with a soft click and disappeared above.

Two warriors stood at the entrance to our cell dragging a small bloody body between the two. They both wore armor similar to ours but white in color and had the Imperial insignia from the race that took us over. Their skin was a deep brown color that looked like fur and their hands were similar to paws. They looked like a humanoid version of cats we used to have roaming our streets and homes. The taller of the two stepped forward and threw a pouch of bandages and medicine in the middle of the room before they did the same to the body.

Soft growls echoed as they looked at us and spoke their commands. I kept my head bowed respectfully
trying not to listen in. I wasn’t the highest ranking thus I was not allowed to know the commands until I was told them by Kaine, who was nodding in acknowledgement. Soon the two left and everyone raced toward the small body in the middle of the floor.

“Tsar said that he won but barely. He’s been injured pretty bad and that he won’t fight for a while. Master Prog is good enough to let him rest til he’s good enough to fight again. But we gotta get him all fixed up like. ‘Parently he tangled with the other young’un for a while before they gained the ‘vantage and nearly killed ‘im. But lil Tor got hold of his dagger and stuck it in the young’un from cell J.”

“I wonder when this will end Kaine. We’ve been doin’ this for years with only slavery to sight or death. They’s just young’uns and if they don’t die in battle or the wounds, they die from sickness from these damned cells. You remember how many of our year mates we lost just to the cough. It just started slow before they was gone.”

“Aryn we just keep fightin, don’t worry ‘bout what happens less it affects you. Keep your chin down, eyes forward, and ears open,” she said as she ordered the others to use the water bucket to wash Tor down and bandage him.

“I think this is the most I ever heard you speak Kaine.” I could only smirk knowing that if she was fine with everything as it was at the moment then I was too. But I knew both of us wanted out of here as soon as we could. We wanted our freedom back.

“Yeah well . . . shut up.” Kaine walked over to her spot in the corner of the room and sat back down, one leg straight out the other bent with her arm resting on the knee. Her head bowed once more as she relaxed before her fight in the morning. “Rest. You and I have a busy day tomorrow.”

Laying down, head cradled on my arm, I stared at this battle hardened woman next to me and smirked. “G’night Kaine.”

“G’night Aryn.” Turning my head up at the ceiling I couldn’t help but smile even though dirt flittered through the air, giving everyone a fine new coat. A new beginning. A new hope. A better future might come to those who fight for it.
Never Going Back

By Mina Solinger

When asked to describe the word “home,” people will say that it is a place where they’re always welcome. This is where they feel free to be themselves, and to be surrounded by people who love and care for them. It’s their safe haven.

Mine, however, is not like this. My home can be described as abandoned and desolate, both spiritually and physically. The only reason I’m here is because of my sister, Jenny. She wanted me to move my stuff out of the house before it was sold. I stood in the driveway, shaking. I haven’t been here in a really long time, but the building looks exactly the same as when I left. The brown paint is starting to fade and the windows were in need of some TLC. I could tell that the yard hasn’t been maintained in a long time because the grass is as halfway up my calves. The beautiful rose garden that was the envy of the neighborhood is now hidden by the tall grass and weeds. Broken stone steps lead to the white door with the spiral window; the one I slammed all those years ago.

When I walked through the front door, I immediately tensed up. All of the pain and sorrow from those years show on the walls. The grey paint is darker in some places and chipped away in others, exposing the white wall underneath. There are only three pictures hanging up by the door. One is of Daddy when he was younger and is dressed in his military uniform. I don’t remember much of him. He died in The Great War a long time ago. Mama said he was a good man and a wonderful father. The other two pictures are of Jenny and me; one from our childhood and one from when we were older.

The first thing I noticed when I walked in was the dining room. The table still has one broken leg. The phonebook is still under it. Around it were three wooden chairs. They are in the same sorry shape as the small table. Just like everything else in this house, they were beaten and destroyed beyond repair.

The kitchen used to be the only thing that wasn’t dingy or wore out in the house. Mama loved to cook, even though she burnt or overcooked everything. She would always say that a clean kitchen is a happy home. Chuckling, I remembered so many times Jenny and I would run in after playing outside and putting dirty prints on everything. Mama was not happy and made us clean it up. Now everything covered in a few inches of dust and dirt. Spider webs have formed in the corners of the small kitchen window and the single stainless steel sink. Feeling slightly uncomfortable, I quickly walk through toward the living room

“Jenny? Are you here?” I yell. I noticed that the yellow couch had a red blanket piled up on corner and boxes are placed around the old wooden staircase. She’s definitely been busy. The only thing that was the same was the rocking chair next to the huge picture window.

“Have a seat, I’ll be right down!” she yelled from upstairs.

Sitting on the wooden rocking chair, I began to think about all the memories in this house. There were ones from my childhood that make me smile. I remember when Mama would sit me on her lap and rock me to sleep. When she was in her good moods, she used to tell Jenny and me stories of princes and princesses, knights and their battles, and queens and kings who ruled far off countries. I remember all of the times she
would randomly start cooking in the middle of the night. There used to be a wide variety of edible and inedible foods on the table after one of these episodes.

I also remember when things weren’t that great. Since there were so many deaths from The Great War, there wasn’t a lot of money given to the soldiers’ families. That meant that Mama had to work hard to provide for Jenny and me after Daddy died. She used to work odd hours and long shifts to keep food on the table and clothes on our backs. Things were tough and money was always an issue. For a few years, we rented out one of the rooms in the house to get extra money. It worked for a while, until people wouldn’t pay their rent. They stayed for a few months and then left. Some of them used to call Mama crazy. They would say that she was off her rocker and should be in an institute. Back then, I never understood what they were talking about. I never thought Mama was crazy. It made no sense to me. One day, I asked Jenny why everyone said she was crazy. She always told me not to worry “my pretty little head about it” because some people are just rude and mean. Over time, Mama began to check in and out of reality. When she did this, she would have this vacant expression on her face and sit on the couch, staring out the big picture window.

Suddenly, the memory of my last night here hits me like a ton of bricks. I close my eyes and try not to think about that horrible night. I remember trying to pull her out of that state, but with no success, sitting up with her for hours. When out of nowhere she gets up and looks at me saying, “He wants me to follow him.”

“Who are you talking about, Mama?”

“He wants me to be with him.” She whispered, tears rolling down her check. “I can’t stand to see him so miserable.”

She headed straight for the kitchen and yanked out the utensil drawer, grabbing the big carving knife. I rushed to her side and attempted to grab the knife from her. She stabbed herself before I could even try. The rest of that night is still a blur for me. I only remember her saying they need to be together. A few days later, I left the house. I couldn’t stand to be there anymore.

Wiping my tears, I looked away from the window. I hope there is a place that can once again be called “home.” I stayed at a friend’s house before Jenny convinced me to come and move in with Aunt Sarah with her. “At least until you graduate high school,” she said. Aunt Sarah had a little house in the country a couple minutes away from a small town. I know why Jenny wanted me there. Aunt Sarah was every supportive of me, especially since I had problems coping with Mama’s death. She and Jenny put up with every mood swing and one-sided shouting match that first year. I’m still surprised I wasn’t sent away.

“It’s about time you showed up!” Jenny said harshly as she walked down the stairs, carrying a small box labeled Pictures. “I was afraid I would have to do all of this myself,” she huffed and set the box on top of the one at the base of the staircase. Looking down, I rubbed the remnants of tears from my face. The last thing I need to do today is have a discussion about Mama’s death. Maybe one day we will, but not for a while and especially not now.

She had lost quite a bit of weight since I last saw her. It wasn’t a lot, but it was noticeable. Her red fitted shirt clung to her hour-glass figure, which also was emphasized by her dark wash jeans. I slowly walked
toward her, watching her as she dug around the pictures box.

“Here,” she said, “I found these in your old room. Do you still want them?”

I shifted through the handful of photos and a small smile began to form on my face. They played out in my head like scenes from a movie, each one telling a story about my past. One was about the time when Jenny and I played in the park a few blocks down with a few neighborhood kids. It was autumn and the leaves are their usual crunchy, crimson and gold colors. Another photo was Jenny’s thirteenth birthday party, complete with cake, balloons, and presents. She was blowing out her candles in this snapshot. But to her right was Ma-ma. She looked energetic and full of life—happy.

The next photo was Mama sitting on the old rocking chair near the big picture window. I could tell by the way she was dressed that she was still in the early stages of her mental breakdown. She was still vibrant and energetic, but I could see the lost look in her eyes. I almost lost it every time I glanced at her face.

“What is home, Jenny?” I asked, trying to keep the tears from flowing down my face. “Did you ever find a place that you call ‘home’?”

Jenny stopped stacking boxes and slowly turned to face me. Her face was stoic, but I could see the emotions that played out in her eyes—sadness, grief, and understanding.

“Home is where your family is,” she said with as much conviction as she could muster. “It’s where you are loved and safe.”

How dare she? After all that we’ve been through, how dare she say something that? I laughed, throwing the stack of photos on the floor. “Don’t give me that line!” I shouted, “This place used to be what we called home, remember? Or have you forgotten that already?” I wanted to yell at her, blame her for all of my doubts and problems. But I didn’t. I clamped my mouth shut and looked at the opposite wall.

“This place used to be a home,” Jenny whispered. “After Daddy passed away, this place changed into that nightmare. Or have you forgotten that already?” I glanced back at her, noticing the tears that had welled up in her eyes.

“I don’t remember when this place used to be like that,” I muttered. “I wish I did, though.”

The silence weighed the both of us down, unsure of what to say or do next. Time seemed to inch by slowly, only measured by the sound of the afternoon traffic outside the window.

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said,” I apologized. “This place just brings back a lot of bad memories.”

“I know,” Jenny said quietly, “Me too.”

Together, we went through a few boxes and sorted them into piles for us to keep or to donate. After that, we packed everything up and parted ways. I knew that Jenny was right; that the place we used to live was a home. It was a place where we were loved, cared for, and kept safe. But all of that changed so quickly that I don’t remember what it used to be. All I know are the demons that the three of us faced and how difficult life was. That’s why I could never go back. It was a reminder of how horrible my life was and how bad it was for Mama.

On the way back to my apartment, I realized that I’ve never truly had a home. It was more of a place
that my family lived after Daddy passed away. Maybe one day I will find a place that I can call “home.” And maybe it’ll be with someone I truly love and care about. But it hasn’t happened yet and I know it will someday. But until then, I’m going to keep searching for it—what it truly means to be home.
An Odd Contract
By William Holler

Cindro, the City of Eternal Night. Cindro is the largest city on the continent of Gheed and is one of the busiest cities in the world. While it is a major trade city, most people come here for entertainment. There are some who say that there is no sight that compares to looking upon Cindro from the viewing terrace on Kragg Mountain. Aldous Royce thought those people were a bunch of pretentious, untraveled, uncultured dumbasses, who should try to get out of their sheltered lives once in a while, and see something that actually was amazing, like the Floating Ruins of Minken. Royce was in Cindro more than any other city, because that was where he got most of his work, it was where most of his contacts and targets were, and because it was easy to blend in, even for someone like him.

Aldous Royce was not his real name, but he had forsaken his other name when he had been exiled. He was the best and most feared (and respected, for that matter) assassin in the world. He never failed a contract, he rarely asked questions, he was quick and best of all, he was efficient. Skills like his were a commodity, and he was in high demand. Royce was a sand elf from the Shiilkor Desert, in northern Gheed. His people were typically quite solitary, keeping mostly to themselves, and only interacting with outsiders when absolutely necessary. When he was young, Aldous had gotten into a dispute with another boy over a matter of honor. They agreed to duel, as was the custom of their people. The other boy yielded, but Aldous was overcome with rage, and ended up killing the other boy with his bare hands. He was exiled, and would be killed if he ever returned.

So, he joined up with a trade caravan crossing the desert, and eventually made his way to Loten, the capital of Gheed. He became an assassin, and made a name for himself. He was famous for being one of the few elven assassins, and never using poisons or magic in his assassinations. After several years of building up a reputation, he tried to retire for a while, to get out and see the world. It worked, for a couple years, at least, and he got around to travelling all over Gheed and seeing the Ten Wonders of Minken, the continent west of Gheed. What he didn’t realize was how much he missed his old life, so he went back to it. He got back in touch with his old contacts and informants, and, after a few years hard work and eliminating some competition, rose to be the most feared and respected assassin in the world once again. He only had one rule: No children, under any circumstances.

So, here he was, in Cindro again. He had been here more times than he could count. In fact, most of his contracts involved coming here, whether it was to meet the contact, or find his mark. Cindro was just a popular city. He made his way through the city towards the Temple District. He was always somewhat surprised when a priest would request his services. Surprised that they would actually hire an assassin, and also surprised that they had the amount of coin he required. Being the best assassin in the world was expensive, and priests didn’t usually have too much money.

He was supposed to meet the man in front of the Temple of Gol, the water god. As late as it was, there were still many people milling around the Temple District. It was true what they said, apparently. Cindro never slept. He recognized the contact the second he saw him. A somewhat fat man, wearing the robes of a disciple
of Death, King of the Gods, with a nervous look on his face, as if he was expecting someone to kill him, instead of the other way around. The man’s face brightened up a bit when he saw Royce. “Ah, you’re here. Good. I need you to—” Royce cut off his next word with a raised hand, “Come, walk with me. I was told what you want me to do, but I want to hear it from you.”

Royce set off to his left, towards the Market District. “Yes, I understand this may seem odd to you, but didn’t your man already tell you?” “Yes, but I want to hear it from you. You must understand, I’ve never taken a contract like this before.” He realized he may have been walking a bit too fast, since the priest was almost running, trying to keep up with him. “First, what’s your name?” “Gibbs, sir, my name is Mandris Gibbs.” “Well, Mandris Gibbs, how and why do you want me to kill you?” Aldous asked. “Well, Mr. Royce, I’m fairly impartial as to how the deed is done, as long as I’m surprised. I don’t want to see my death coming. As to the “why,” well I’m sick of life. I hate the things I see every day. I’ve seen men robbed blind and no one, not even the guards, helped them. Just the other day, I saw a man mugged in an alleyway, between the Temples of Death and Khav. The mugger took the man’s coin purse, and all his valuables, then stabbed him for no reason. The man had been perfectly cooperative, never shouted or protested or anything, and the damned mugger killed him anyway.

“It makes me sick to see what the world has become. I am a priest of Death, and so I can’t kill myself, lest my soul be tortured for eternity. Everyone knows how my Lord views suicides.” “So, let me get this straight; you want me to kill you, because you feel that life is hopeless and worthless, and can’t kill yourself, because you want to ‘save your soul’?” Aldous inquired, genuinely interested, “And you know I’ll kill you, but you want me to surprise you?” “Well,” Gibbs said, “Yes, that’s about it. And, yes, I realize that you may feel some obligation to convince me otherwise, but I must tell you, my mind is set. If you won’t do it, I’ll find someone who will. I came to you because you’re the best, and I need the best. I’m confident of your skills, and I trust you’ll do what needs to be done.” “Okay, when do you need to be dead by?” “As soon as possible, I would hope. Now, take this.” He drew a key from a pocket of his robe. “There is a small box on a dresser in my bedroom. The box contains your reward, and will only open upon my death.” Aldous took the key, “Alright. Meet me at the viewing terrace on Kragg Mountain tonight. I want to show you something that every man should see before he dies.” “I’ve lived in Cindro all my life. I’ve seen the city from the mountain.” “Yes, but you have not seen what I’m going to show you.” And with that, he disappeared into the crowd.

The sun had set by the time Aldous made his way up to the viewing terrace. Gibbs was already there, looking stressed and a little angry. Aldous’ black outfit helped him blend into the shadows, and standing still, he was nearly invisible. “Where is he?” He could hear Gibbs muttering, “When someone asks you to meet them somewhere, it’s customary for them to be there first. I thought assassins were supposed to be punctual. Ten minutes; I’ll give him ten minutes, and then I’m leaving.” He sat down near the edge of the terrace, and looked over the city. Aldous stepped forward lightly, his feet making almost no sound, but Gibbs chose that exact moment to look around. "Ah, good, you're finally here. Now, what was it y—AAAAHHHHHHHHH!" His words were cut short as Royce placed his foot on Gibbs' back and gave a firm shove. Royce waited for a few
seconds, until he heard the satisfying crack of Gibbs’ body breaking on the rocks below. “They really need to put a guardrail up here,” he said to no one but the darkness around him.

He entered Cindro through the Temple Gate, and made his way over to Gibbs’ house. He picked the lock on the bedroom window with ease. “What kind of assassin uses the front door?” he thought to himself as he slipped inside. The bedroom he entered was dark, and the moon provided little light. He drew a candle from one pouch on his belt, and a tinderbox from another. He lit the candle and looked at his surroundings. The bedroom was sparsely furnished. There was a simple king-sized bed against one wall, a wardrobe with only one robe in it, also of a priest of Death. There was a dresser in one corner, with only one change of clothes. On top of the dresser, there was the box Gibbs had told him about. It unlocked and opened with ease, clearlysignifying that Gibbs was well and truly dead. The first thing he noticed was a neatly folded note. It was covered in small, neat writing:

“To whoever has killed me:

I would like to convey my deepest gratitude to you for doing so.
You have done me a great service, and I would like to repay you.

In this box, you will find a pair of daggers. They are forged from magical obsidian and have been enchanted to never break or dull.

Whether you decide to use them for yourself, or sell them, you will be gaining a great reward.

Feel free to take anything in my house that you desire, and once again, thank you!”

Royce folded the note closed and looked into the box again. There was a pair of very finely crafted obsidian daggers, just as the note had said. They were single-edged, and forged in a shallow 'V' shape. They were almost a perfect fit for his hands. They felt like they were made for him. Oh, yes, he was sure they were quite valuable, but there was no way he’d be selling these. In all his years as an assassin, he had never gotten a reward quite as good as this. They would make certain parts his job much easier. He still felt a little bad about killing a man he felt hadn’t deserved it, but he would get over it. He always did. Now, it was time to see if he had another client. There was always more work to be done. The way he saw things was that as long as there’s two people left in the world, someone is going to want someone dead.
Creative Nonfiction
The Ancient Spirit
By Maryah Wilson

An ancient art of martial arts passed down from teacher to student. The loud single roar of a dozen students yelling in sync with each other in time to the Master’s count, the heat of their bodies rises as they punch as one, the energy that filled the room was overwhelming. The group worked as one almost like a military camp, but this is just a single group of a larger organization.

Strongheart Martial Arts Academy is a small school of Taekwondo, Kumdo, and Hapkido that is led by Master Nathan Schutz, a fifth degree black belt. According to Aaron Kern, a brown belt that is testing to red in a week, Schutz is the student of seventh degree black belt Grandmaster Eric Greenquist. But he also said that what they are learning is not pure Taekwondo that is taught as a sport in South Korea, but a mix of other martial arts into one. It was just easier to call it Taekwondo. He commented that “it is a style that Great Grandmaster Moo Yong Yun created that is based on Taekwondo but is an evolved version. We are part of his teaching so we follow his style.”

I soon asked who Great Grandmaster Moo Yong Yun was and Aaron told me, “Great Grandmaster Yun is a tenth degree black belt from South Korea, and he was taught by Great Grandmaster Kim. His headquarters is in North Dakota. He has schools all across the Midwest. But while he was in South Korea, he was the South Korean President’s personal bodyguard.” Observing Aaron afterwards showed that he knows quite a bit of knowledge of his school and of the martial art that he was learning. He showed great pride in learning from this great teacher.

Waiting for them to break into groups, each student stood at attention, but their attention level varied by belt rank. The higher ranking red and brown belts in the front stood like they were in the military, feet apart at shoulder width and hands either in front or behind them. The next level wasn’t until orange belt who stood the same way, but their heads turned, and their feet shifted on the floor. The no belts, who didn’t wear a belt or uniform, seemed to have a much more lax stance as they shifted quite a bit, arms moved from position to position, and their heads turned quite often.

As the teaching began, there were no papers handed out as to what they were learning that day, there were no chalk boards or white boards, and no charts to look at for the students to figure out what the instructor was saying. Each move they learned was demonstrated by one of the black belts and the instructor, piece by piece, at a slow pace, and then once at normal pace before letting them go. The lower ranking belts’ techniques seemed to be very simple and easy to learn, but the higher ranking the belt, the more complicated the technique seemed to be, as well as more dangerous. The black belts didn’t seemed to be concerned that they were sweeping each other to the floor; the sound of their bodies impacting would make any normal person cringe from the sound or the thought of his or her body doing that.

Just as you could see the small groups getting tired, sweat dripping from their hair, white uniforms dark, and chests heaving for air, the instructor yelled at a simple command of “Ku man,” a Korean command to stop but that sounds similar to “come on.” This simple command that most people would have a hard time
understanding, instantly stopped all motion in the gym. New instructions were given, no demonstrations made as they were to understand what subject they were supposed to already know. Just as the instructions were given, they were told to “Face your partner, chareut, kyung nae, she jok.” Once more each command given was in Korean, but each student knew exactly what to do, and they waited for the command to face each other, stand at attention, bow, and then begin the work that was assigned. Kicking, sweeps, counter attacks, a special pattern for each belt level, and grappling were learned back to back. You could see that there were different levels of learning, as well as someone who was better at one subject than another.

The cross culture that was happening was interesting to see. Each of these students were completely American doing a martial art that dates back nearly to two thousand years before. But they were learning the subject of self-defense along with Korean words and culture thrown in. This is not a martial art meant to use for fighting and self-defense, but to help discipline yourself. Aaron also told me that “you can use Tae Kwon Do in your everyday life with the five tenets that are taught: Courtesy, Integrity, Self-control, Perseverance, and Indomitable spirit.”
Don’t Fear the Reaper  
By Mattie Hoyle

People like to theorize things like life after death, or Heaven and Hell, and all the various beliefs of what comes after. I grew up with a Roman Catholic basis, but now I consider myself agnostic. My mother was distraught when she first heard me tell her that I don’t know if I believe in God. However, I don’t think that a person should decide how they should act based on a fear of retribution by a higher power. It is my firm belief that you should make choices based on what you see as being right and good. Think what you will of it, but what I believe and what you believe won’t change what I’ve experienced.

In February 2011, on a clear but windy day, I rolled my car in the ditch on my way to work at a bar. I was in a hurry, like any other day, and the night before it had snowed; however, not enough to make me think twice about my speed. The road was clear, up to the end of a band of trees just about a mile north of town. I saw the snow drift over the road and started to slow down. However, my tires didn’t line up with the previous tracks. My car hit the center drift and turned at a diagonal angle, sliding as I watched in horror and hopeless to stop what I could see was coming.

My car slid along before finally going off towards the ditch and into the banked snow, driver’s side first, at the edge of the road. For a tiny second I thought that I would just get stuck, and it’d be ok, but then my world flipped upside down. I remember the bright blue of the sky, the loud roar as the snow managed to break the passenger window and rushed in and the icy chill it brought me, the sound of crunching, twisting metal, the feeling of the ceiling as I pushed myself up, and finally, the car being righted.

I sat there in awe as I looked over to where my passenger window used to be, now fragmented and scattered throughout the inside of my car. I reached into my pocket and tried to find my cell phone to call for help. Fumbling and hands shaking, it took a couple minutes to finally find my phone and figure out how to call again. Eventually able to make some coherency, I called my dad in a panic so he could get some help and then my friend so she could let my boss know—I didn’t have his number at the time—that I couldn’t make it to work. Afterwards, I sat there and looked down, blood covering my coat and splattered on my pants. Lifting my hand to see it drip down, I started to bawl.

After my dad helped me out; I looked at my car. The driver’s side was nearly untouched while the passenger’s side was dented and distorted. The cop arrived and I continued to cry. He ended up letting me off with a verbal warning, and everyone there believed that I was crying my heart out because I was afraid. But the truth was, I wasn’t.

Somewhere in that twisting and turning and crushed mess of my car, I felt at peace. It was as though half of my soul was on the other side. I was complete and whole for the first time for as long as I could remember. The truth was that it tore me up inside to leave my other half behind again. I wanted to go there, to become whole again. However, I also came to realize that it isn’t my place to decide when to join that other piece of me, and I want to be able to share this world, both the good and bad, with me.

I’m not sure if I’ve ever been afraid of death, because even when I was younger, I would dream of
death and contemplate it for hours by myself. My dreams weren’t the nightmares others used to have, but rather peaceful ones, like the painful struggle of life was over. All that remained was peace. I understood that it wasn’t “normal” and that I was odd for doing so. What I didn’t understand was why I was like this.

Since the accident I’ve come to realize that perhaps the reason I don’t fear death is because I have always felt that connection with it or through it. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to understand why I feel this connection until I do pass away. However, I have come to recognize that while I do not fear death, I am not going to rush toward it either.
I had been in Japan for almost two weeks, visiting a friend, and was due to fly out the next evening. My friend’s roommate, Mel, had taken me out with some of her friends to visit Chinatown Kobe. It was while we waited for the train that would take us back to their neighborhood that I met “her.”

She was a tiny thing, a little more than half of my 5’10” height, and her teeth glittered with metal caps. Her hair was short, dark, and obviously unstyled, and despite her older age, had almost no white or grey in it. This made it so even though her skin looked like sagging leather, it was difficult to judge exactly how old she was, especially since she wore loose grunge jeans and a red plaid lumberjack shirt with a light blue and black book bag. Her gruff Japanese appearance was at odds with her voice, which carried an almost Russian-like thick accent, as she broke into conversation.

When the train arrived, we sat with her between us, as she talked about her family. She showed us pictures of her grandkids, and talked proudly about which child played which instruments. She loved music, and proceeded to pull out a notebook of handwritten lyrics to probably hundreds of American songs. Each song was carefully scrolled with the name of the song and artist; she had some of the most beautiful writing I had ever seen. It was the old script that people used to use; the kind of writing you only see from grandparents and older generations anymore. I gushed over how nice it was, and she told us that she had taught herself English. She even wrote the lyrics to all of those songs by ear; there were spots she must have revised because a word or two was crossed out and replaced with the correct wording. She’d flip through them, pointing out her favorites and singing a little bit of each one. Her thick accent and out of tune singing just added character to the songs from almost every era. She warbled out “I Will Survive” among the normally private and quiet passengers, but it wasn’t embarrassing because she wasn’t embarrassed.

She would occasionally get frustrated with her accent, complaining about how she spoke with “broken English,” but her English wasn’t “broken.” It was low and thick, and after two weeks of most people avoiding the scary white girl, it nearly brought me to tears. The best part, however, was when she pulled out her last two notebooks.

Holding one in my hands, I slowly flipped through the pages. Inside were short messages addressed to her, written in languages from around the world, all of them wishing her luck and good health. Some were only a couple of lines, while others filled the page with drawings of where they came from. Some of them were very good, like an artistic rendition of the Eiffel Tower; others were just doodles by an amateur, little scribbles of whatever the person wanted to draw. As I continued flipping, I noticed that the entire notebook was full, 100 pages of people I’d probably never meet, but she had.

She pulled out a second notebook, this one only half full, and as Mel wrote her entry for Australia, I looked back at the dates in the filled notebook. The first entry was from 2010. In a matter of less than three years, this little old lady had probably met more people from more places, and actually sat down and talked with them, than most people would in their entire lives. That thought alone was humbling. She had never even
left Japan, though she talked dreamily about how she would love to go to see the places that people came from.

I added my own note to her collection, “I really enjoyed talking with you, and I hope everything goes well for you.” I wanted to write more, to talk more, to read more, but I barely had time to scrawl that short message before arriving at my stop. She pulled out a small plastic bag and pressed a delicately folded tiny paper crane into each of our hands before waving goodbye. I watched as she put her notebooks back in her backpack and couldn’t help but stare in wonder at the small glimpse I got of her world in those notebooks.
Wolves and Hyenas
By Mattie Hoyle

I stood there, too afraid to go near the small squares of lockers that the other girls had massed around. Instead, I was about five feet away, my school bag on the cold linoleum floor beside the strange brown bench. An island of darkness in the bright white and pale colors of the locker room, dark brown wooden boards bolted to a black metal frame that came up for another overhead shelf. I could’ve hung my bag on the hooks below that shelf, but I just wanted to get changed as quickly as possible.

I was almost done, almost in the clear, when they moved towards me in various states of undress. They seemed to smell my fear, surrounding me like a pack of hungry wolves waiting to attack. The usual taunting persisted, and I rushed even faster to tie my shoes, so I could get to safety, where the coach was.

One of the girls stepped out from the pack and started taunting me more and more. Suddenly, a second seemed to want to “one-up” the first, and wiggled her tiny self over to my school bag.

“I’m going to pee on your school bag,” she cried gleefully as she began to wiggle her hips towards it, like it was a target. If she had been a guy it would’ve looked like she was taking aim, but it was awkward watching a girl do it.

There was only a brief pause as I stood there quietly in disgusted shock, and then the rest of the girls, sensing my reaction, began to chant their approval of the idea. “Do it!” “Pee on it!”

“Get closer!” another girl called as she nudged the thrusting and wiggling girl so that she was now over my backpack. When she began to crouch over my backpack like it was a toilet, I snapped into action. I dove for my bag, and clutching it close to my chest, dashed out of the room in time to hear their squeals of laughter.

I had thought they were wolves, but wolves don’t laugh; they bark, growl, and howl. Wolves are majestic and noble creatures that sing songs of the hunt, sorrow, or wonder. These creatures were no pack of wolves. No, this was a cackle of hyenas with their sickening giggles, oily taunts, and fake smiles. I had learned about those fake smiles long before.

Two years earlier, in fourth grade, there had been a split in the girls, a struggle of power between two groups. The first group was the most popular girl in class, her new best friend, and the girls that chose to side with the ones currently in power. The second was her old best friend and the girls she had convinced to join her, most likely trying to use this as a chance for power. I stood on the sidelines to a certain degree, though at the time I was curious as to what was going on. I watched as girls from one group infiltrated the other, smiling those fake smiles, and then returned to their own group with whispers of the terrible things the other girls had said, and both sides would get angry. This went back and forth for what seemed forever, but was most likely only a matter of a week or two.

The teacher had found out about it, and had decided to end it. She pulled every last girl out of the class and had us stand outside the door of the classroom. Outside the classroom the groups instantly divided, and I stood quietly, not really a part of either group. The teacher closed the door behind her, and looking at the girls told them simply.
“I don’t care why you girls are fighting, but it ends now. If I so much as see you fighting with each other, I will send you to the principal and call your parents. You all have to play with each other, do you understand?” she said eyeing us all. Most of the girls instantly put those fake smiles on, and agreed.

As I reached the gym, clutching my backpack closer, I realized that the coach wasn’t there yet. In a blind panic, I hurried over to the ‘ladder climb’ that was on the wall and tossed my bag between the bars that looked like a vertical monkey bar attached to the wall. I hoped that since I was taller than most of the girls, that they wouldn’t be able to pull it out as easily.

The gym was small, old, and some of the ceiling tiles had been taken out by kicked balls at various points over the years. In the southeast corner, halfway up there was an opening in the wall that you could look into the gym from the hallway that I had just passed through moments before. I could hear their giggles, and if they had been wolves or dogs, they would’ve howled upon finding their prey, but these were hyenas. They laughed through the bars meant for safety purposes, a feeling of caged dread clenched at my chest. They continued their calls for the girl to pee on my bag.

I stood there praying, hoping, and wishing that someone would come to save me. But as their heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway towards me, I knew it was hopeless. They swooped in on me, and within seconds, they began trying to pull the bag out from behind the bars. I hurried to save it before they got a hold of it, but then their attention was no longer divided between me and my bag. They circled me, trying to snatch it from my grasp, like the cackle was biting my heels, waiting to devour their prize. So I finally did what I always did, I ran.

Sobbing and running down the hallway with the barred opening to the gym, I could hear their laughter echo. I paused as I saw the principal walking calmly down the hall towards me, but as I ran past she didn’t say a word. I wasn’t going to tattle, because I’d seen what good that does. It’s one thing to be found out, but it’s another to tell.

Several years later, after I graduated and moved away, I came back to visit my family. My little brother was telling me about a meeting his class had been called to, where the teacher had asked if they thought bullying happened in their school. He told me that they had all said no, and I could just imagine the fake smiles of the girls in my class as they assured the teachers that bullying didn’t happen here. I knew what hid in locker rooms, hallways, and behind closed doors, secrets. I was angry then, but as time changes, so do people.

Now I accept that those girls have changed. Once during my senior year, when I brought up the incident to the girl who had threatened to pee on my bag, she was shocked and told me she didn’t remember it. She apologized profusely, and as hard as it was, I’ve come to accept what happened and forgive them. I have to, because if I don’t believe that they can change, then I can’t either. I’m stronger now. I won’t be prey for hyenas, but I won’t become a hyena either. I’m a wolf.
Photography
Photos by
Anonymous
Photos of Japan by Mattie Hoyle

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“Icy Beauty”
By Mattie Hoyle

Photos by Megan Holm
Photos by Megan Holm
Poetry
Friendship
By Anonymous

The liquid is orange, like a fake tan
It’s my stomach with a slam
Everything is blurry once more
Are we walking out the door?
Can she feel me slipping?
I hope she won’t be missing?
I shouldn’t have done those lines
My eyes are exploding like mines
My death was painful but quick
And she’s blaming herself for this shit
She drags my body back to the car
Buckles me in like my mother who’s not far
Why is she driving? Where will she go?
I made her hit this low.
She is dumping gas all over the place
For one last time she touches my face
She takes one last cigarette from my pack
I remember all the time she had my back
The match is gold with fire
And flames rise higher and higher
She didn’t even scream when death comes
She was always that brave
My best friend goes to heaven with wings of white
I knew I could never make that flight
But with great surprise I feel God’s grace
And I met her with a warm embrace
Ghost
By Anonymous

Like glass the way is clear
Who knew it would be so near?
Forgiveness washes over me like rain
I knew I didn’t hold all the blame
Tears fall without reason
Oh how I missed the season
A year has barely past
Since I breathed my last
He knew that I didn’t fall
I could never make that call
One push and rocks did the rest
He had acted his best
The guilt has finally got him
And let’s be honest he’s pretty dim
The gun is raised to his temple
My spirit just tumbles
The sound explodes like the crack of a whip
Death isn’t a good tip
My ghost is gone
And I’m in the distance from now on
His ghost wonders without a grip
I know he will hang on for a little bit
Because haven has no spot saved
Hell waits for the killer who maimed
Poem
By Annie Rich

I want to be her.
The blood & bone wrapped so pretty around the stone.
Eyes filled with desire, otherworldly fire
To be as one
Tangled locks of hair and thighs that are bare
touch my soul
But, it is all but a moment
Her eyes grow dull, her skin turns grey
The tangled locks that shone in the sun lay ripped away
What have I done
I wanted to be the one
I wanted to be her.
I loved you the way wolves howl into the night, constantly searching for Hecate, chasing her into the daylight.
I used to wake up to the feeling of you on my skin, dreams still dancing on cold air, before I’m awake, it’s like you’re still there.
And we spun in circles under the stars, and you still smiled with your eyes. Back when my dreams could still carry the weight of my denials. Back when I was still capable of love.
But I do not dream anymore.
I spend my nights building sandcastles so big that the weight of a thousand seas could not topple them. I spend my nights shooting arrows through the hearts of fleeting hopes.
You are no longer the moon.
Swimming Lessons

By Dawn Rouse

You see, the hardest lesson you will ever learn is that there are some paths you were never meant to take
You will discover that despite all of its infinite wisdom, sometimes fate gets it wrong
Sometimes your heart leads you astray
I learned hardest with you.
You were sweet like plums; you beckoned red lips and naïve teeth
I bit into you expecting nectar, but all I got was a mouth full of poison
I found you where the lava meets the sea; constantly burning each other up and putting each other out
They say everything happens for a reason, but there was no lesson in you not loving me
There is no optimism in injecting another’s soul into your marrow
You see, some love will make a home in your bones
Some love will grow wildflowers in your ribcage, but where some love grows gardens,
You set fires.
You burned down forests.
I suppose looking back you were inevitable, given the choice I would always walk down your path
Because for a brief moment
We were invincible.
We hurled toward each other at the speed of light
We were falling comets,
We conquered nations,
We danced in the storm,
We had no fear of the night for we created the constellations,
My darling they named hurricanes after us!
If only we had learned to tread water.
In the end we were just tiny oceans, and we swam in each other for as long as we could
There were no life rafts, no passing ships,
There were no fleeting hopes
We just drowned.
The Last Time
By Lindsey Wilson

If I chopped my hair
And changed its color
Would you even notice?

If I wrote you a song
And played it in front of you
Would you notice?

If I painted my face with so much makeup
That I looked like a clown
If I wore all black one week
And the next pink
Would you notice?

If I went out of my way to keep our friendship
And the next day
Say nothing but insults
Would you notice?

What would it take for you to realize
That the one friend who always sticks by you
Is the one you’re in the most danger of losing
Do you notice?

You can push me away
And I’ll always come back
Especially when you need me
You can forget I exist
But when you want to hang out
I’ll be there
When everyone else deserts you
And you’re feeling alone
I will help
But you don’t even notice—

But this time
This is the last time
Because you don’t notice
You can’t see past the end of your nose
This is the last time I’m asking you this
But will you notice?

And what about me?
I let you treat me like this
Over and over again
I let you abandon me
Then let you keep coming back
Because no matter how you let me down
I won’t do that to you
You use me when you need me
I let you
You walk all over me
Over and over again
But this is the end
And I’m done
I’m standing up for myself
Because I’ve noticed.
And I’m not OK with it.
Screams in the darkness fill the air
The goosebumps rise on the skin who dare
To seek out what exists in the Dragon’s Lair.

Treasures are heaped high all around
As your sword of courage is held firmly sound
In your shaking hand. Your ears searching for any sound

A deep breath here
A soft scuffle there
The feeling of impending doom is hard to bare.

Finally the true treasure you seek is seen high
Nearly reaching, reaching that of the sky
But first—you must try to stay alive.

From the great lurking evil of the Dragon’s ire
And his heated flame of great white fire.
This simple hunt has become much more dire.

With a swing of your might
You miss. As the beast takes flight
And charges you, red eyes alight.

Dodging right, and dodging left
You swing your sword, out of breath.
A final charge is your true test.

The burning of blood upon your skin
The roar of death throes signal your win
As the great beast dies with the rest of its kin.
Dreams
By Maryah Wilson

Rainbows curl through fluffy clouds
Pink song birds swirl all around
Clear blue skies move endlessly
All within the open breeze

Dancing bears
Painted wings
Can you hear
The angels sing

Emerald leaves dance all around
Children’s heads sleep on the ground
Memories fade while flowers wilt
Songs of peace are full of guilt

Dancing bears
Painted wings
Can you hear
The angels sing

Streams of clear blue water wind
All throughout the countryside
As bloodshed threatens to overthrow
These peaceful dreams I call my own

Dancing bears
Painted wings
Can you hear
The angels sing

Memories fade while fog is burned
The sun shall rise while clocks are turned
Grass grows green and flowers bloom
Trees grow tall to touch the moon

But as dancing bears
Break painted wings
I truly miss
When angels sing
That Which Is . . .
By Maryah Wilson

Have you seen which is that?

That which is said,
That which was seen,
That which was heard,

Never understood.

Seen in the light,
Said in the dark,
Heard in time,
Which is that.
The Stars
By Maryah Wilson
Her eyes, even through the haze of smoke, shone like two twinkling green stars
Eyes that cut through my heart and tore me open for all to see.
Those ruby red lips restarted my reluctant heart to beat once more
The pristine flawless skin cascaded like cold waves upon my heated soul
I watched her saunter over to me, those eyes never once leaving mine
The scent of flowers and passion fruit igniting my senses and overloading my mind
I could only watch, mouth agape as she gave me a sweet smile and reached over my shoulder for a drink
My eyes threatened to flutter shut as I stared at her voluptuous chest seated before me
As she pulled back, I leaned forward, missing that scent, her warmth, her everything.
The alcohol in my system leaving a haze on my mind as I gently grabbed her wrist
Looking up into those green stars, I could see surprise and humor swirling through
I opened my lips, to try and sweet talk her into staying with me, but my mind could not form words
My mind was now locked tighter than Fort Knox, my tongue twisted more than Hitler’s mind
Words seemed to float from my mind as balloons do in a tornado.
Taking a short breath, then another, then another I watched as laughter filled the stars
“Will you get a drink let me?” And then the foolishness returns just as Icarius returned to the sun
Her dainty wrist left my sweat covered hand and I could feel rejection fill me
My gaze dropped to the ground, but those expanse of legs that stretched as far as the eye could see
Seemed to just fill my gaze and my heart picked up the fast beat
But those legs never moved an inch, the body of the goddess before me unmoving
Then a hand soft as silk caressed my heat reddened cheek.
Dainty fingers lifted my chin, forcing my eyes to meet these angels as I swallowed the boulder in my throat
The corners of her lips drew up, giving me a flash of the pure white pearls seated behind
Oh those lucky pearls, getting to be inside those luscious lips.
Just as my eyes met those stars once more, they seemed to be getting bigger and bigger
My heart beat faster and faster that I was afraid, no, terrified that it would explode
I was afraid that this goddess before me could hear it beating as loud as a rock concert
Then those luscious ruby red lips met mine and my heart stopped.
Minutes seemed to pass, then days followed as my mind blurred.
When we pulled apart, a startled giggle escaped me. “Eh heh, you pretty.”
Oh god why does stupidity have to tumble from me as
I didn’t think my heart could take anymore, when those delicious lips met mine.
Everything in me just froze as silken fingers stroked my rough cheek
Her body pressed into mine as she coaxed me out of my seat to standing as she gently led me
I didn’t even realize I had the capability of walking as she led me out to the dance floor.
Oh, beauty of mine eye, temptress of my heart, where do you lead me oh siren of my soul.
When cold air left swirled around our heated skin, and pumping music faded
I realized we were not where we used to be,
Everything felt as if I was watching from a movie screen as this succubus led me to her car
Slowly entering, my mind screamed do not do it, do not follow
Oh everything was going to either end very well or very badly, and I did not wish to see.
Please oh Heavenly Father, Holy Mother and anyone else listening, please stop this
I do not wish to go just yet, I do not wish to die at this young age
Then those luscious scarlet lips opened once more and my heart pounded with dread.
“You’ve had way too much to drink, time to go home.”
Values
By Mattie Hoyle

Such a dismal delegation
of false truths and tribulation
the massive congregation,
with endlessly deep pockets.

It is by no surprise,
that we see our demise
is quickly on the rise,
unlike our great rockets.

Something for nothing
now considered winning,
as some give up everything,
to fill those deep pockets.

Hard work is distorted
and welfare reported,
whose values once sported
live only in old lockets.
Where All That Flushes Goes
By Mattie Hoyle

Ever wonder, while sitting on that throne,
where it is that all that flushes goes?
Like there’s an alternate dimension,
lost in the winding, twisting, turns of pipes.

A place far away, where maybe, just maybe,
all the random objects that fit into that porcelain bowl,
all the pets that didn’t quite survive your childhood,
and the inevitable swirling turds find their forever homes.

And then you wonder, “Are they happy there?”
In amongst their fellow flush-ables,
perhaps they find a kind of peace,
or maybe they plot to someday overthrow us.

Should we be preparing for an invasion of poopy proportions,
one that will leave a stench, that no amount of breath holding
nor cases of air freshener can even hope to quell?

And finally you remember,
as you stand and watch the water swirl,
you really don’t want to know,
where all that flushes goes.