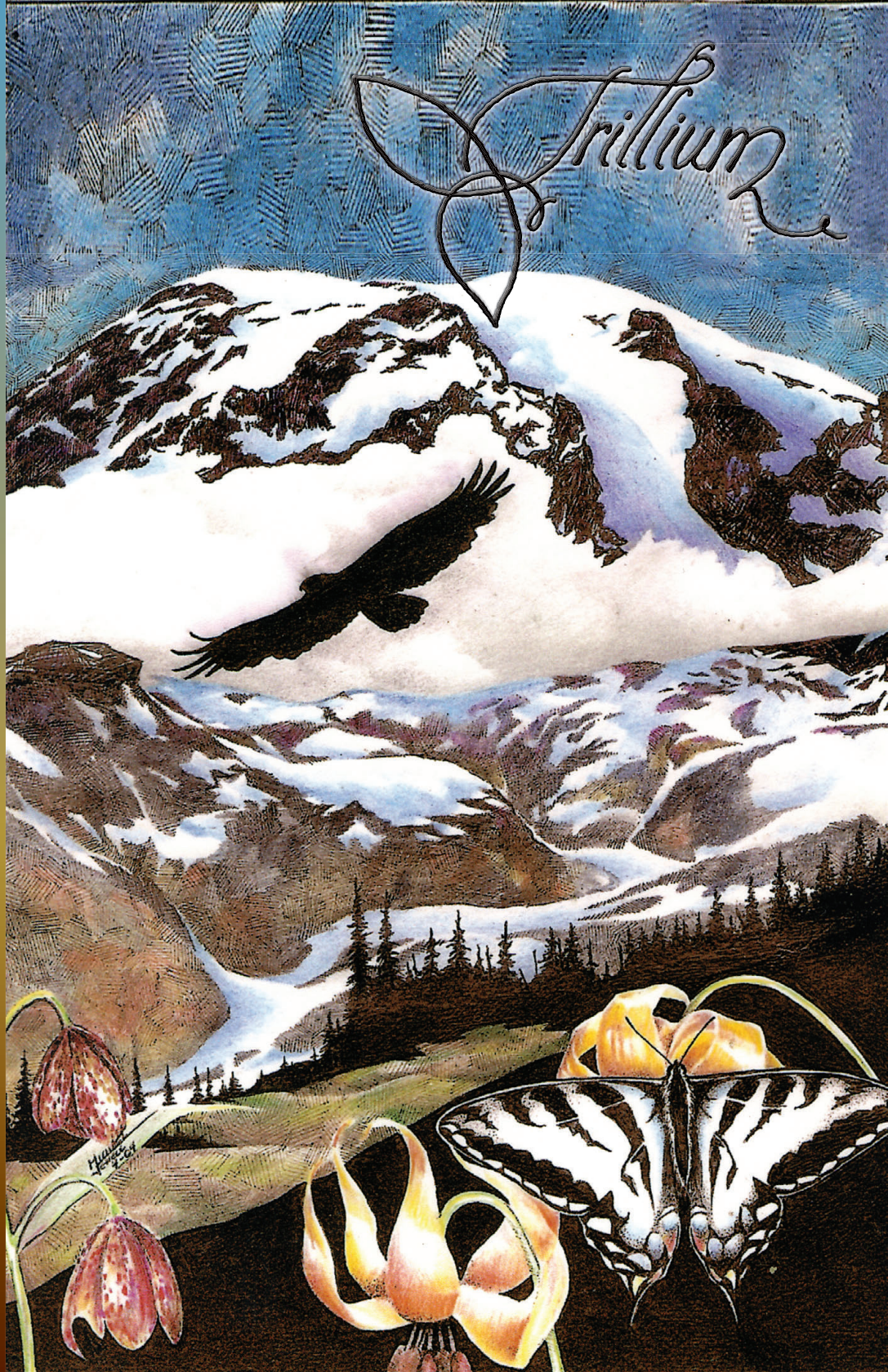




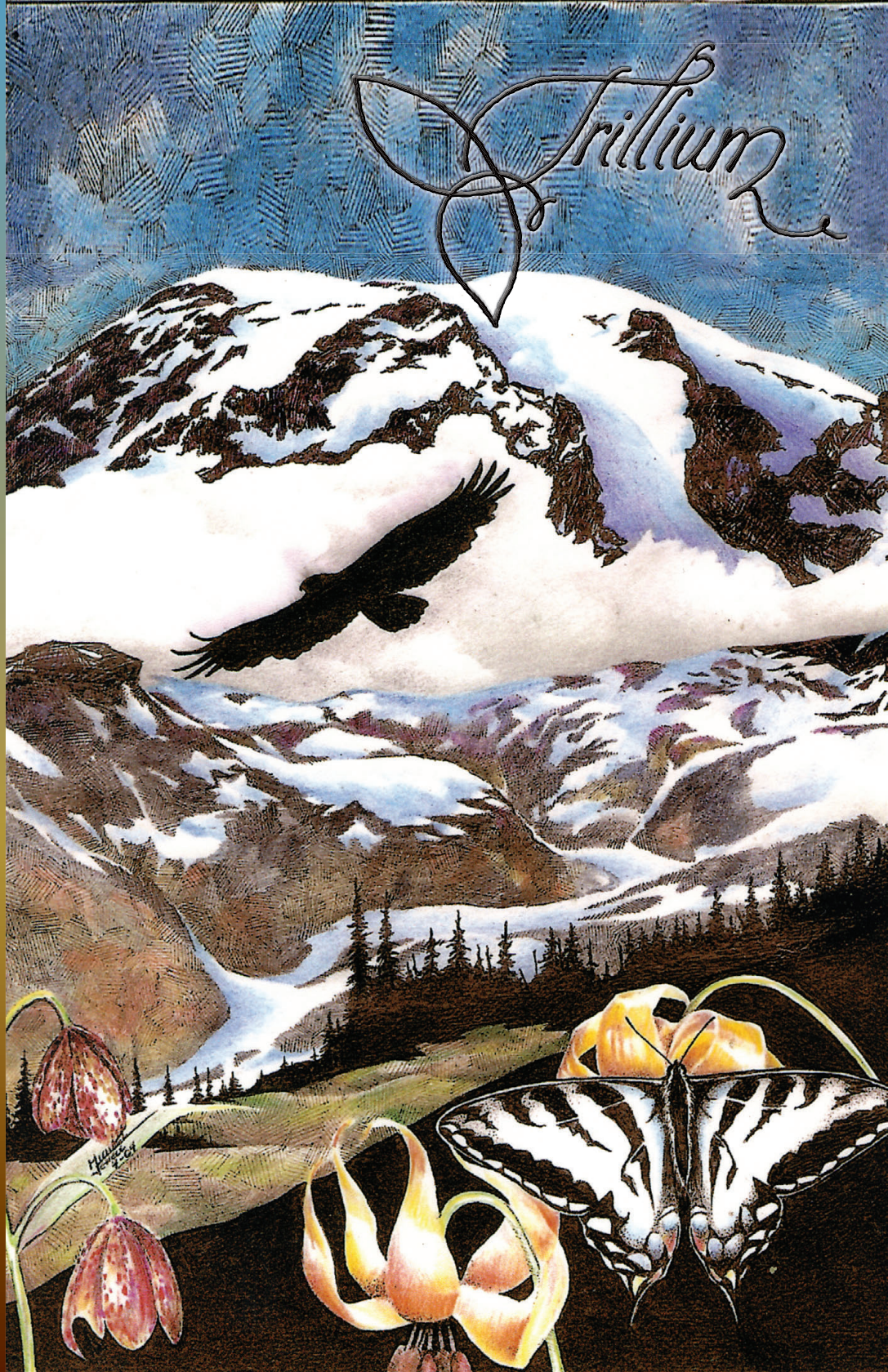
# Tritium



Alaska  
1924



# Tritium



Alaska  
1924

# *Trillium*

Spring 2009



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*Michael Sewell*

Mt. Shuksan near  
Baker, Washington



pen and ink

*Andrey Smith*  
**Ode to the Buck**

With my headphones I zone out  
In front of me I observe the curve of him alone in his  
    own tone  
His body bee-bops when his feet hop  
Consider him the cream crop 'cause there it does not  
    stop  
Immaculate chest pops when the beat drops from the  
    top  
His peers scream when his arm swings  
Then the floor sings from the movement his feet  
    brings  
And you, the observant outsider, would just call that  
    a thing  
But me...  
I call it love and passion mixed  
With his new kicks, his body slips as his soul skips  
    into its own quick trick fix  
Crazy how people would pile single file just to see  
    my fam get wild  
No need for a smile, 'cause the joy poured out his  
    style  
The buckest air glides behind his back, past his sides  
Swivel of his knees guide you on this autobiographi-  
    cal ride  
And you, the silent stranger, would just see that as a  
    pastime  
But me...  
I call it something that the dictionary can't define



*Heather Kindem*  
**Bread Mother**

One of my early memories is the smell of baking  
bread,  
The oatmeal molasses kind she made huge batches of  
With a whole ten pounds of flour and a bottle of molasses,  
The dough was thick and hard to stir with  
long-handled wooden spoon.  
She turned the dough from bowl to counter and  
massaged it with more flour  
Patting, kneading, rolling over, she left the dough to rise.

After it had grown to nearly double in girth,  
She punched it down, added flour and cut the dough  
to size  
To fit the forms of pans she had, the round and the  
rectangular  
And the kid-sized loaf pans, the ones that were for  
us.  
She took a fork and stabbed the dough to reduce the  
risks of bubbles  
And left the dough to rise until, once again, it doubled.

When the bread was nearly baked, she tested it by  
tapping  
And if it made a hollow sound, the loaf was turned  
from pan to table.  
I wonder if she did the same with me and my three  
brothers, pat and knead,  
Leave us to rise and test when we could turn to our  
own tables.

*Michael Sewell*  
**Girl in the Universe**



colored pencil

*Scarlett Aguiano*  
**Star Country**

His mother was screaming, touching her head to the ground each time she rocked forward on her knees. She fell apart in front of him, her face lit up by the flames, her voice more loud than the approaching sirens. The sounds of anguish issuing from her mouth were for them both, because Tyler could not speak. He could not see or even hear Candace, but he imagined how she screamed, too. Her cries filled the inside of his head, cutting off every other noise.

The great fire seemed a demon consuming the house; it thrust its arms out of the windows and feet out the front door. Loud as it roared, it could not match his sister's volume. Sick from fighting the smoke, his brother Brandon sat facing away from the blaze and took gasping breaths. Tiny particles of ash accumulated on their faces. As black smoke reached great heights, the night sky swallowed it in huge gulps.

He stood without moving, and felt that if a firefighter passed by him they would see, through the portal of his body, his sister dying in the fire.

"No, I don't want to walk that way," Tyler said, turning. He trod on a loose piece of gravel with his left, shining shoe. He fixed his neck at an angle to see the sky and began to put the motel behind him. When he looked down again, the eyes of passerby seemed pulled to his long black tie and drawn face. The air rooted him to the ground with its heaviness. He was doomed to walking forward, when he wanted the ability to walk up without a set of stairs.

Brandon fell into step with him, pulling at his collar. "There's construction in this direction. We'll just end up with no room to go." He glanced at his brother's face and put his hands in his pockets. It seemed wrong to him, somehow, that the first memorial service

Tyler ever went to was for their little sister.

Tyler replayed the past few hours for himself as he walked. At the memorial service, Aunt Enid took the floor. Family, neighbors, and friends were all gathered in a church fitted out with industrial carpet and decorated with bouquets of fresh flowers. Though he knew Aunt Enid meant everything she said, Tyler found himself steering around her words. The kind people who came to the memorial could only see Candace through the delicate screen their aunt put over their grief. His aunt was a watercolor painter who sold happy memories of vacations, beloved pets, and cute kids. Her words were strokes loaded with paint, carefully putting a shroud between their family and the world.

Aunt Enid talked about teaching Candace to crochet, an act which quickly resulted in most of the family being generously presented with hats in wild colors. Tyler remembered his, a mottled, fire engine red thing he took too long to thank her for, and the crushed expression that came into her face when she realized he didn't want to wear it. But she bore the disappointment with the grace of a martyr, and left him with a definite sense of guilt. Her hats got better, and the color choices more suitable to the future owner. There were always little pieces of yarn covering her floor and more colorful scarves than she had ever worn. The colors were gone now, and her hard-won creations completely disintegrated. Everything in Candace's upstairs room lay in the form of ash at the foundations of their house, the timbers and supports sunk in ruin.

They passed a newspaper stand in front of an appliance store, where the multitude of sale price signs obscured the store's actual name, spelling its doom. Brandon paid for a newspaper and rolled it up in his hand as they walked.

"Who wants to live in this country anymore?"

Tyler asked suddenly. "It's already gone, it's falling apart." He kept looking at the apartment buildings, each one squeezed close to another, as if they were the only thing keeping him from what he wanted. They made high barriers on either side to oppress his thought and dictate his path.

"What country do you want to live in, then?"

The slideshow, scrolling through pictures of Candace from all her short nine years, made people laugh and smile. Even his mother, her eyes pained and raw, found things to smile about. She was already stronger, and trying to carry him with her on the road to recovery, as if he were still small enough to hold. He tried to smile, too, as he watched one photo after another, but a deadly blankness took hold of his emotions. He wanted to be able to cry with her--Brandon was--shaking slightly as he kept a tight arm around their mother. Tyler cleared his mind and sat numbly, aware that his subconscious was trying to reconcile the face on the screen with Candace's absence. Outside when it was over, the sun made his tired eyes blind.

Brandon had forgotten his question by the time Tyler answered it, a block later in front of the drug store. In an alleyway across the street, a bearded man in a heavy coat sat against the brick wall and rubbed his dog's head, staring at nothing. Tyler watched him, stopped at the very edge of the curb, shivering and craning his neck towards the stars just coming out.

"I want a piece of star country. Endless. If you could see me out there from here, I'd be a god, ten times bigger than your brain can take in. I would still see myself the same, just with a foot in a bunch of different galaxies." Stretching out in front of him, the city lights started to overpower the fading sunset. Dull orange construction netting turned in on itself in the wind.

They turned back from there to the motel,

to take off their rented suits. The next morning they put on donated shirts, pants and shoes with the tags still on them, and watched their mother plunge her hand into a stack of insurance paperwork.

In the next few weeks, they put on more donated clothing, and Tyler got a part-time job moving furniture. They stayed with family and always had someone to talk to. Warm August evenings came to friendly front porches, changing the smell of the air, inviting moonlit adventure. Tyler's friends showed up with regularity wherever the family was staying, ready to take him wherever he wanted to go. Tyler went with them at first, until he saw the silence within him affecting them too.

The fire was put out, and their house left a skeleton. In his gut, Tyler felt the same bareness, as if the fire had consumed every part of him that liked to live. He was willing to come to a stop, filled with silence after the screaming was past. He made no plans for his senior year of high school, and left his first paycheck under the coaster by his mother's bed. He put it back each time when his mother hid it in his suitcase, when she pinned it to his shoes, or crept in the guest room he and Brandon shared and put it back in his wallet. Finally, bewildered by this silent game, she begged Brandon to think of something before he went back to college in the fall.

"Get up, Tyler." Brandon pulled him to a sitting position in bed, and then left him to put on his jacket. Tyler slumped forward and blinked repeatedly.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Brandon tossed shoes in his lap and a coat at his face. "Just get up and follow me."

Tyler pulled the coat on and stood up to tie his shoelaces. The streetlights outside made strange patterns through the blinds, their shadows just touching the foot of his bed.

In the car, Brandon held up a folded bandanna. "We're going somewhere you've never been before," he said, solemnly. "From the moment you put this on, you are in neutral."

Tyler took it in his hands and tied it tightly around his eyes. Brandon shoved two fingers in the blindfold, wiggled them, and approved. The next moment they were turning donuts in Brandon's car, first one way, then another, again and again. Brandon finally left the parking lot on the left, as far as Tyler could tell.

Sight taken away in the nighttime, Tyler felt around until his fingers found the window switch, and pressed hard. The night air came pouring in to his face and ruffled the blindfold, but it stayed in place. For Brandon's benefit he made a show of deeply inhaling the air, and appearing to assess every breath. He could smell nothing, however, but the absence of the sun. He listened to Brandon accelerate and decelerate, until he came at last to a stop. Finding the door handle, Tyler clambered out of the car and began to remove the blindfold.

"No!" Brandon barked. "Keep it on, until I tell you." He put a hand on Tyler's shoulder and guided him forward. Cars passed in the distance, but at this spot the quiet was absolute. The smell hit him almost immediately; his feet crunched through a surface made of broken pieces, many broken pieces, from microscopic size to the size of a house. A broken house.

"No, Tyler, keep going. I didn't say stop." Brandon pushed at his back again.

"You said we were going somewhere I'd never been before," Tyler said, but he started walking again. Loose texture of unknown substance beneath his feet made him cringe.

"I didn't lie. I wouldn't do that to you. Just walk--don't think about it."

With hands slightly outstretched, Tyler slowly moved onward, subtly guided from behind. He began counting the time under his breath. At a minute and thirty-three seconds, his brother stopped him at a place where the air felt freer above.

“Now take it off--wait! Don’t open your eyes until you’re looking up,” Brandon said.

Tyler slid the coarse fabric off his face and arched his head as far back as possible. When he let them see, his unguarded eyes were pierced by thousands of stars.

“Welcome to your star country,” Brandon said.

Tyler looked and looked until he felt in danger of falling backwards. After staring at the ash and debris-ridden ground for a moment, he sat down, and leaned back carefully to rest his head on a fallen beam. Then he turned back to his star country. Lying on the ground, he felt his world switch magnetic poles. Now he was looking down into it, straining his eyes to see as far into infinity as possible.

Brandon followed his example and put his hands behind his head, right in a pile of ash. “Going to build any highways in this country of yours?”

Tyler remained silent. He stretched his neck out slowly, as if leaning forward to take a drink from the well of celestial bodies. The star country began from the ruins of his old house, as wide as the burned-out roof bounded on four sides. But onward, his piece of the universe had no end. He stretched one leg out, to take the first step, and laughed. “I don’t need any highways in my star country. I’m a god.”

Looking harder at the brightest star he could see, Tyler tried to imagine it up close, a broiling mass of light and fire around its core. That’s what they all were--fires in and around houses that changed lives. In sci-fi movies, all the blackness in space was supposed to be so empty, but Tyler knew it was soil, good earth



to grow things from. The blackness simply hid the stars farther away, waiting to be unearthed from the dirt of my star country.

"I don't think Candace's death was painful," Brandon said. "She probably became unconscious by the time it got to her."

"How do you know?" Tyler asked, his voice studded with thorns.

"How do I know it bothers you? I watched you the night of the fire. You looked... like you were in pain. So was I, and so was Mom, but it was like you were feeling what Candace was. Sometimes you wake me up when you talk in your sleep, talking like she hasn't stopped dying. She's not suffering anymore." Brandon shifted. "I'm not saying it's something we can come to terms with. Maybe in a long time from now. But don't forget that you can change things, or build new houses. Or even mansions--it's your country."

Tyler looked at his hands and experimentally stretched them out in front of him. He cupped handfuls of stardust and raw space, and weighed them in his mind. The moon was new, and only starlight revealed the edges of the wreckage around them. It was very quiet, but he felt full of bright stars. The star country was inside him, sending sparks through his blood.

*Whynot? Whynot?* The scuppernong  
all aflutter with questions.

§

Ask Mister Mocking Bird  
how to find inspiration

§

in a barbeque sizzle, fan belt squeal,  
what you can't even imagine.

*Michael Sewell*  
**Mt. Rainer and Blue Heron**



pen and ink

## *Dave Madden*

### **Crash**

There is bloody glass on the pavement. I can see a fire. That fire shows the hopelessness of the wreckage, giving motion to the motionless hand dripping out of the twisted aluminum. It happened too fast, a dog in the road, the wall. I can see it now staring at the blaze, staring at my dead body and I'm staring with it. My face is grotesque and cut badly. I see it for the first time as someone else sees it, not as a picture or a reflection but as something that is not mine. I walk forward as the dog runs away. I want to scream and yell and die, but I'm already dead. My wife. I can tell that she is alive despite the terrifying stillness. My tender touch passes through her face as I tell her that I love her. That she will be ok. An ambulance will be here soon. You can make it, I lie. I can feel her passing. "Well it's too fucking late for that now isn't it?" I hear her say from behind.

Jill. I turn around, and she's standing there opaque and glowing white. Her hair is long and straight down to the middle of her back like when we first met.

She's young again. "I don't know what happened it was too fast an--"

"I'm sorry for yelling honey. Wow you look like you're twenty. I'm just upset with the whole dying thing you know. I love you."

We lunge to embrace and pass right through each other with a swooshing sound and trails of spiraling mist. "Did that seriously just make a sound?"

She says "Yeah."

I start to laugh. I know what she's thinking. "Are you shitting me? This is something out of a kid's book or an A&E movie. That just sounded like a synthesizer." We're both laughing now. "Who ya gonna

call?" I manage between ephemeral breaths.

Her hand is coming at my face. She goes for the Three Stooges' eye poke and I put up my hand up, thumb to nose, in the classic defense. Her hand passes right through my head.

*Shoom, Shoom.*

Then we really lose it. I start chasing her around to get as many laughs as I can. We run in circles as I try to stand inside her and feel her boobs.

It's still funny after I-don't-how-many times. She stops laughing as I'm humping one of the poor emergency workers pulling my mangled body out of the car. "Wait wait wait. Jack. Look."

There is a cruel wind blowing her hair sideways, and she is pointing down the road. It doesn't feel like any wind on earth. Then we see it emerge from the darkness. We see the face of Death itself. "Is that a Welsh Corgi?" Jill asks, amazed.

Yes. That's not just a Welsh Corgi. That's *my* Welsh Corgi from when I was a child. Dingo the Dog. "Dingo come here you silly boy."

"Is that the dog that you had when you were a kid?"

"Yeah. Dingo. Come here, here boy."

She starts laughing hard again when she sees him run at me. He has on a traditional black robe out-fitted to fit his small dog legs with a scythe attached to his butt that sways back and forth. *Wait a minute.* He ran in front of the car, "Did you murder us Dingo? Bad dog. Very bad dog."

He drops his head in shame. It makes me feel kind of bad, he didn't know any better. He's just a pawn like the rest of us it seems. A phantasmal tennis ball rolls and bumps against my foot. He looks up happy wanting me to throw it. I hesitate and wait for him to look at Jill before I do.

He takes off jumping through a fire truck. "Aw. I can't believe there are animals in the afterlife." she says.

“It looks like Disney and Hallmark got it right. Can you believe that? They were more accurate than the Bible or the Koran.”

“Oh goddammit.” she sounds startled.

I see her in a white dress now looking up at a halo that has just formed above her head. She smacks it and it wobbles a bit. Then I look up and see one above my head and I have on a bright white frock too. The side of the fire truck starts to light up where Dingo had jumped in. In the light we can see an old man with a big huge book waiting for us. He’s looking through a golden pair of reading glasses, flipping through the bookmarks at the top of the book, finding our names to let us know if we were going to be damned for eternity or not. “Jack is there going to be a hell and stuff?” Jill asks as we reluctantly start walking into the light.

“Yeah, apparently all of that was true. God must really be a bearded naked man in the sky.”

“How tacky.”

“I know.”

*Justin Collins*

## **Opposites Attract**

“Where were you last night?” she asked, looking at me expectantly. As usual, I didn’t respond. A response would only allow the conversation to continue. It felt like months since I had spoken aloud, and it was all her fault. I’d tried everything else, and this was the most effective solution so far. I bounced a racquetball while I waited for her one sided conversation to end. Floor-wall-hand. Floor-wall-hand. She was still talking. Floor-wall-hand. Floor-wall-hand-floor-wall-hand. Faster now, showing my irritation, though she didn’t seem to notice. I glanced over at the date on my computer screen. Christ, it’d been three weeks since I’d had outside human contact. Last night I hadn’t really gone anywhere in particular, I’d just kinda wandered around until one am and then came home. I just needed to get the hell away from her. Away from all of her behavior mimicking bullshit. I couldn’t deal with her for very long periods of time. After about a week her sleep settings would shift to match my current behavior, and I would have to adjust my avoidance pattern again.

She finally left. I set the ball down and turned to the computer and began composing my weekly email to my parents. Because she had sapped most of my capacity for cruel insensitivity, the email started like this: “Thank you again for Susan. I couldn’t ask for a better companion. You and dad don’t have to worry about me being alone anymore...”

My parents were getting older, and they’d always worried about my antisocial tendencies. I hardly ever left my condo, I just didn’t see the point. There was nothing I needed out there. I worked from home, teaching classes online for the alternative high school, and my paychecks were automatically deposited into my bank account every two weeks. I was

finishing up my doctorate, but all that was left was my thesis, and I was working on that mainly by correspondence. Not dealing with the outside world much made my sleeping schedule kind of wonky, so I usually ended up going grocery shopping at two or three in the morning. I always used the self-check out too. Fuck all that meaningless small talk with some minimum wage goon who thinks he has something relevant to say to me at three in the morning.

The argument had always started in one of two ways. I preferred it when they told me that my lifestyle was “unhealthy.” At least we started the conversation less morbidly and less judgmental that way. My parents’ favorite seemed to be the other:

“Who’s going to look after you when we’re gone?”

This line upset me because of the frustrating truth of the underlying assumption. My parents were the only ones who I really communicated with at all on a personal level. I usually looked at it as a burden, but this discussion always stirred some anxiety in me. Just as I was about to retrace my old frustration that no man is an island, no matter how hard he tries, I heard a voice in the kitchen.

“Breakfast is ready!”

I roused myself from my thoughts and tried to prepare myself for the ordeal that lay ahead. I wasn’t really hungry, but where meals were concerned, it was a lot easier to simply capitulate. This model was designed to make sure her owner stayed healthy. Once I discovered that trying to skip meals only led to even more contact with her, I learned to eat quickly to minimize contact. I focused on the food rather than the “marvel of modern technology” that was arranging it on the table. I flicked my cigarette into the sink. Despite myself, I found myself being grateful that she was a good cook. How much worse this situation

could be ran through my mind, but I decided that even though she could be worse, that still didn't justify any warm thoughts on my part. Mom had said that she had to guess at the food preferences part of the order form since all I ever ate was microwavable junk food. I guess mom did a pretty good job of picking what foods for the company to add to her repertoire. Today was Eggs Benedict with an orange and some kind of hot cereal. I made her do all the shopping now, so I never knew what to expect at mealtime.

"How is it?"

Since I had essentially stopped speaking to her, her mannerisms had mostly reverted to a more neutral pattern. I grunted in response. Her current behavior was a small blessing, and I didn't want to give her cause to change.

"Get me two cartons of cigarettes today. You know my brand."

Lately this had become the only phrase I used in direct communication with her. It had become fairly ritualized between us, repeated every Wednesday morning during breakfast. It made me wonder how she could pick up on the smallest patterns in my behavior and mimic them so goddamn perfectly, but I had to constantly remind her of this. My guess was that the programmers knew better than to have these things directly confront their owner's habits like drinking and smoking, but put in passive aggressive shit like this. I had been surprised at first that she didn't say a word about my two-pack-a-day habit, but if I skipped a meal she went off the handle. Now that she had pushed my buttons to the point where I was smoking even more, I was glad she didn't have anything to say about it.

"You look sad ... I know! Why did the dead baby cross the road?"

I looked up in surprise. This was a throwback



to some of her old behavior I didn't know she still had left in her current personality. I thought back to the weeklong visit where she had learned this joke. Bill was one of my few friends. This was largely due to two facts. First, we had a similar sense of humor. The more morbidly taboo and inappropriate a topic was, the more we just had to laugh about it. This was a part of myself I had very little control over, and a major reason I didn't go out in public much. One time, before I started doing my shopping at night, I was in the checkout line looking at the magazine covers while I waited. I saw one, and this image just popped into my head... I couldn't help it, I just started laughing. The old lady behind me wanted to know what was so funny, so I told her.

"Well, you see how they're calling this drummer a 'matchstick'? And the lead singer is in the background smoking? I just had this mental picture of the lead singer striking the drummer's head against the side of a box, lighting his cigarette with him, and then just throwing him into the corner to burn himself out."

The old lady didn't see what was funny about that image, so I made another attempt to explain my amusement.

"Cause, you know, the lead singer's the front man, and no matter how hard the rest of the band works, they're totally replaceable, while no matter what kind of shit the singer pulls, they have to put up with it."

I made my way out of the store still chuckling a bit. Bill loved shit like this. Which was good, since I alienated anyone who didn't pretty quickly. Bill loved dead baby jokes. The joke he told in the chat room the first time I met him still got me laughing even years later:

"How many dead babies does it take to paint a wall?"

"Depends on how hard you throw them."

The second reason was probably the more important one. Bill lived two states over, so our relationship was usually maintained via correspondence, like the rest of my life. Bill was the lead on my thesis committee, and had an impressive body of published works to his credit. He was in town for a conference, and I invited him to use my empty room for the week, so he could look over my work while he was in town. The visit was over a year ago, back when I still called her Susan, and Bill was startled when I introduced her to him.

"I didn't know you were shacking up with someone!"

"I'm not. Did you think for a minute I found a woman who'd actually put up with my shit? My parents finally got sick of my misanthropy and bought me an android."

"Damn, she looks just like a real woman! I always figured those things were just overpriced, souped-up fuck dolls."

I started to explain Susan's features as I lit a smoke and passed Bill the pack. He interrupted me:

"I told you I'm trying to quit."

"Yeah, and you're failing like all the other times anyway fucker, now quit interrupting me."

Bill confirmed my analysis, pulling a cigarette out and lighting it.

"Anyway, as I was saying, she's got this crazy Star Trek artificial intelligence shit. Something about modeling her personality off of her surroundings. Supposed to make her fit in better in the owner's home. A personalized robot, and it does all the work in figuring out how to fit in."

"Hey Susan, how do you like living with Roy?" Bill looked over at Susan, a mischievous look on his face. It looked like he was curious as to what living with someone like me had done to her personality.

“It’s all sunshine and fucking lollipops. What do you expect, you know this asshole.”

Bill raised an eyebrow. “That really is some thing.” Back then, I still found her mimicry of my twisted personality amusing, so I prompted her again.

“Susan, how do you babysit a bunch of little black kids?”

“Simple. Put Velcro on the ceiling and let them jump on the bed.” Susan looked at Bill and asked the question that continued the joke:

“How do you babysit a bunch of beaner kids?”

Bill chuckled. “I don’t know, how?”

“Give them baseball bats and tell them it’s a piñata party.”

The week passed surprisingly smoothly. Bill wasn’t around too much between the all day conferences and, as he put it, “sampling the local talent” at night. Plus it helped knowing that he’d be 1,800 miles away again in a few days. When he was around, we’d either talk about my thesis or watch TV. We played “Mystery Science Theater” with the tragedies on the evening news. Picking up behavior from Bill, Susan became even more amusing. When it was time for Bill to leave for his flight home, he left us with one last joke.

“Why did the dead baby cross the road?”

“Because it was stapled to the chicken,” she finished, clearing the breakfast plates off of the table. I lit a cigarette and took deep drags on the way back to the computer room. I was agitated by that reminiscence. I couldn’t put up with my current pattern any longer. Living in fear of her, and by extension, myself. After Bill’s visit, the only one she had to interact with was me. Stressed by the direction my thoughts were taking, I chain smoked, my head sinking lower into my hands. Like prodding at an aching tooth, I couldn’t help but dwell on the incident that alienated me from her.

It all happened a few months after Bill's visit, at a time when I was just starting to get sick of her behavior. I wondered if this was really what I was like: openly mocking of everything, and unwilling to take much of anything seriously. It must have been, since Susan only had me to learn from. Either way it was damn annoying.

One of the classes I was teaching online back then was an introductory survey of Western philosophy for an alternative high school. Most of the students were working towards their diplomas from a juvenile detention center across town. Philosophy was offered as an elective in the hopes that learning to think outside of themselves would "help these kids back onto the right track." In keeping with the introductory level of the class, I always assigned a lot of Bertrand Russell. His style makes him an easy read, and his discourses on skepticism are a good foundation for independent thought. He was also an open atheist.

A few weeks into the course, a student emailed me. Intrigued by the readings I had assigned, he went on to read more, and began to lose faith in the Christianity he grew up with. His email opened with:

"Professor, do you believe in god? I'm starting to think I don't, and I need someone to talk to. I just don't get the point of struggling along in a tough situation if there's no heaven or hell..."

I had no desire to become personal with this child. Do I believe in god? How is that any of his business? Further than that, I knew I lacked the empathy to really give a shit about trying to help him. My own disbelief in any higher power had only aided my rejection of personal contact. I had discovered my disbelief at a young age and had gone through the same reckoning of consequences and rewards, and ended up with my own philosophy of "who gives a shit." My response to

his email was a reading list four books long.

I guess that there is some social trend among the incarcerated towards religion. It makes sense, as religion offers redemption in a way that society denies these people. As his companions found or reaffirmed their faith, my student was moving in the opposite direction. Looking back, it seems likely that his email to me was a true cry for direction and acceptance, since his family was also quite religious. I can't even say whether I would have helped him if I had known the real significance I could have held in his life. My distaste for human interaction made me extremely reluctant to interfere in other's lives, since I didn't want them interfering in mine. Say anything else you want about me, but I've never been a hypocrite.

I found out a few weeks later that he had a parole hearing. He was denied, and would likely be transferred to an adult prison in a few months to serve his remaining five years. He calmly returned to his cell after the hearing, and hanged himself with his shoelaces. I felt guilt. Even if a man were an island, he would still disrupt the currents flowing around him. I grieved.

When I told Susan about it, she thought it was hilarious. My role in the whole thing, the event itself--it all built to the grand punch line of my grief. She continued to make light of the whole situation for a few days, making fun of me every time our paths crossed in the condo.

"Yeah, that class really put him on the 'right track.'"

I slapped her.

Knowing that I would be acting just like Susan, if the grief weren't in some way personal, only made it worse. I couldn't stand her, I couldn't stand myself. Hence the current state of affairs.

I heard her return from her grocery shopping. Drawn from my reminiscence I was tormented by the

past and frustrated by the present. I came to a decision.

I went to the kitchen where Susan was putting away the groceries, a strange calmness flooding through me. I looked at Susan.

"I'm sorry Susan. I know none of this is really your fault, but this has to happen if I'm going to move forward."

She began, cut short as I smashed the toaster into her face. I lost myself in it, smashing her, smashing everything I hated about myself. When I came back to reality, I was standing in the middle of the kitchen. My knuckles were bleeding. Bits of Susan's head lay mixed with scattered remnants of the old toaster. Crumbs from the toaster were stuck to my arms and face with some kind of oil presumably from Susan. I toed the pieces around a little. I felt free. Still shaking a little from the adrenaline, I went and began to write an email:

"To whom it may concern:

If possible, I would like to schedule my classes to be taught on-site rather than online this coming term. Due to the dense material covered in my classes, it seems appropriate that the professor interact a little more personally with the students..."

*Jimmy McDonough*  
**Hourglass**



photography

*Abigail Slusher*

## **My Favorite Things**

The heat of the sun on your body  
The earthy smell of ripe blackberries in summer  
A really good picture on your driver's license  
The feeling you get right after finishing a really good  
book  
The closed-in feeling of driving down a country road  
in the dark  
Enhanced nightvision right after it snows  
Sliding down banisters  
The word "snazzy"  
Tipping a chair backwards and getting that perfect  
balance  
Walking along a trail in the woods and realizing you're  
the only one there  
Having whatever's in your head come out perfectly on  
paper  
Listening to a great surround sound system  
Painting your bedroom the perfect color  
An entire stack of the books that you love  
Figuring out all the shortcuts on your cell phone  
Customizing all the shortcuts on your cell phone  
The clean, abrupt smell of permanent marker  
Movies that leave you breathless  
People you can watch those movies with  
Dangly earrings  
Summer days, in February  
A perfectly sharpened pencil  
Old TV shows nobody remembers  
Knowing your cat's body language  
Watching a movie on YouTube over and over  
Old radio broadcasts from the '40s and '50s  
Having all your laundry clean at the same time  
An equalizer preset that does exactly what you were  
looking for



Playing hide-and-go-seek with small children  
The sight of a herd of deer in a meadow  
Estate sales with huge collections of baubles  
The little wiggling thing cats do before they pounce  
A candle lit for the first time  
Getting personal letters  
Glass bottles of ink  
Small silver charms  
Real, old hardwood floors  
Floating on a lake in the bottom of a boat  
Ancient vine-covered concrete that reminds you of  
    ruins  
Having a dragonfly land on your arm  
The smell of water lilies  
A completed sudoku board

*Mark Peters*

**Haunted Place**



digital photography

*Chad Barasch*  
**Rolling Sea**

The sunny day turns to gloom  
Far in the vastest ocean of the deepest sea  
The man braces on his vessel as it begins to rock  
Ambivalent, unknowing, alone and uncaring, he slips  
from side to side

Far in the vastest ocean of the deepest sea  
The splashes of the break leap and lick at his ankles  
Ambivalent, unknowing, alone and uncaring, he  
slips from side to side  
The wind screams, the rain burns, the day turns  
black as his bed sheets at home

The splashes of the break leap and lick at his ankles  
The sea's breath all afoul with salivating lips hungry  
for the taste of man  
The wind screams, the rain burns, the day turns  
black as his bed sheets at home  
He cries to the people who are not there, to the  
loneliness

The sea's breath afoul with salivating lips hungry for  
the taste of man  
It lurches up and grabs the man in its fists  
He cries to the people who are not there, to the  
loneliness  
Him and his overturned boat bob in the angry waves

The man's will turns green as his fingers lose their  
grip  
He braces his vessel as it rocks  
And he gives in, succumbs and is taken by the void  
The gloomy day turns to sunshine

*Mark Peters*

**Nature's Resplendence**



digital photography

*Charles Hassel*

**Her Faithful Senses**

Her words,  
Leave her lips,  
Like leaves in the wind.  
Her feelings,  
Flow through me,  
Like currents of electricity.  
Her beauty,  
Coaxed my eyes,  
Like a promiscuous wife.  
Her touch,  
Tainted my skin,  
Like sun-baked pigmentation.  
Her dagger,  
Left a scar,  
Like a tattoo of a broken heart.

*Kellie Steinmasel*

**Poem for a Sailor**

See how the tide rises and falls endlessly,  
A rhythmic continuous stride  
Flickering mirrorlike against the bow windows,  
Little O shaped portholes like opened mouths  
Overwhelmed with excitement.

Sundays impress me.  
Canvas sails reach for the wind  
They dazzle, textile tepees gliding by effortlessly.  
That's solace – crossing the water.

But the tide has its own disposition –  
Varying pleasantries, delicate currents,  
Graceful crossings afloat  
Dipping and swaying  
Incessantly.

Another day the black sea is furious.  
An uncontrollable wave crescendos stern side,  
Bending and heaving like a monster.  
Fevered waves gash the shoreline  
Removing all debris –  
Fragments of tree, glass, rock, and exoskeletons  
Washed out with terrible claws.  
Such thievery is automatic.

O currents, you are calm now,  
Entranced by the lull.  
The tide softly retreats  
Caresses with a *Swish, Swish*  
Replacing the shoreline's possessions –  
Scattered treasures in the tidewash.

*Vincent Amsden*

**Fertilizer**

Dug out and uncommon  
Broken and sifted  
I'll stay until the day's end  
But I might lose my mind before then

If I'm broken and sifted  
I'll find another release  
In case I lose my mind before then  
You should know it was all unintended

When I find another release  
This time I'll try to stay separate  
If it was all unintended  
You should question what I've kept in secret

I'll try to stay separate  
But I've already been beaten  
Why won't you question what I've kept in secret  
It's all planted in my head

I've already been beaten  
Unless I stay till the day's end  
Planted it deep within my head  
Dug out and uncommon

*Jodean Carlson*  
**A Precious Stone**

Chilled and rampant waters  
Toss me to and fro  
Casting me down  
To the river's floor

Beneath the sand and sludge  
That crust upon my shape  
I find my home

My movements  
Become seldom and sluggish  
My existence is known  
But to a few  
I am sheltered and alone

As the seasons pass  
Dimly, I glimpse  
A brightness  
Making its route  
Through the muck

The heavy sludge  
That once held me  
As its prisoner  
Releases its grip

The river's once  
Raging waters  
Begin to calm  
And I start to rise

A radiance arises  
Casting vibrant beauties  
Of multitudes of color

Against my blotchy form  
I begin to sparkle  
Amongst the others

I am noticed  
Admired and plucked up  
Gently carried

And placed on high  
I've found my new home  
In my brokenness  
I was chosen

*Christi Hines*  
**Welcome Sun**



photography

*Karen Irwin*

## **Laura Layman**

Laura Layman wondered if many people chose a psychologist for the same reason she had, not because he earned a degree from some prestigious university, or specialized in Jungian therapy or was known for giving out good drugs. No, Laura Layman chose Dr. Carlaw, Ph.d, because his office was outside city limits. She imagined herself telling someone all her problems and then running into them at the grocery store or in line getting popcorn at the movies. "There's the neurotic I was telling you about," he might whisper to his wife and kids.

No, Laura thought it was worth the extra drive to have a little anonymity; besides, as she curved around the windy road in her new Toyota Corolla, it gave her time to collect her thoughts. It gave her time to frame her depression in a way that didn't make her sound like the total despondent loser she suspected she was. Unfortunately, her prepared monologue went out the window when she opened the door to the large rectangular building that was, as promised, stuck in the middle of nowhere. The metal door was heavy like a vault. Laura had to use her whole body, slight frame though it was, just to get it open. The loud creak distracted her so that when she looked up she was startled to see him sitting behind his desk waiting for her. It was five o'clock--exactly.

One chair sat in the middle of the room like a tree in a desolate desert. Laura quickly walked to it and sat down. It certainly was a no frills office without a receptionist or waiting room, but it was precisely the lack of pretense--an old government metal desk, a picture of a wolf on the wall--that made Laura feel comfortable. She didn't bother with introductions; that had been done over the phone. All Laura had to do was start talking. "I am never going to be anything but a lonely single lab



technician," she said matter-of-factly, leaving out the stories of failed attempts to finish medical school she had rehearsed so well on the way over.

Laura figured he might as well know straight up what he was dealing with, a woman whose life was going nowhere. "What if it were true?" said the man behind the desk. He didn't even sit up. His posture and his casualness made Laura think he must have been snoozing.

"What if it were true?" She echoed back.

"Unleash the hounds." He said scratching his head.

"Well, if it's true, and it looks like it is, it means I will be spending the rest of my days in a small laboratory, returning home at night to my small apartment, and I will do this day after day, year after year." Laura started crying. "I am sorry" she said.

He took a sip of his coffee. "No go on."

"Well," she said "That's it." She cleared her throat. "I'll do this day after day, year after year and I'll never go anywhere."

"You want to go somewhere?" he asked. This is the problem with older people Laura thought. They forget what it's like to have some years stretched ahead.

Unable to hide her frustration Laura answered. "Yes, I want to go somewhere. I want to travel. I want to explore the world."

"Why don't you?" he asked staring into his coffee like he dropped something in it.

"I told you, I can't"

"What are you tethered to?" He asked.

"What am I tethered to? I am tethered to my life, to my job. I am not independently wealthy, you know. I have to eat."

"But you want to break free?" he asked shifting in his chair. Laura thought his wrinkled plaid shirt was taking the country psychologist act a bit too far, but she

answered anyway, willing to play along.

"Of course I want to break free. I want to run away as fast as I can."

"Where would you go if you could break free?" This time the man looked interested.

"I don't know." I guess I would explore everything." Images of India, New York, Asian rice paddies popped through her mind like an old slide projector, her mind unable to focus on just one.

The man put his elbows on the desk. Laura fought the urge to reach into her purse to grab some lotion and offer it to him. His dry wrinkled forearms served as another reminder of time's destructiveness.

"I think I understand." he said. "You want to check out the world, sniff around, see what you like."

"Exactly." answered Laura.

"Where will you go first?" he asked.

"Well I have never even been to Europe." She hoped this might give him a clearer picture of how pathetic her life had become.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"I told you. I am single, not married."

"Oh, I am sorry. I didn't realize marriage was a requirement for Europe these days."

Laura was stung by the sarcasm. It didn't seem professional. "It's not a requirement." she said, "But c'mon who wants to travel alone? Even when I go by myself to the flea market I wander up and down the aisles picking stuff up and putting it back down again."

"You feel like a stray." He said as if he suddenly understood.

"Yes, I feel like a stray. I want companionship, someone to bounce ideas off, someone to sleep with at night." This was it, Laura's real problem. She felt like she was dying of loneliness.

"Well, that's in our nature isn't it? Inbred and instinctual, the need to be with others. Why do you sup-

pose it is you have never married?"

This was it, Laura's real problem. She felt like she was dying of loneliness.

"Look at me," said Laura. She was wearing khaki pants and the plain blue blouse she wore under her lab coat. Her shoes were comfortable, which meant they were ugly, very ugly. Her hair was pinned back revealing a well-scrubbed face and a nose she inherited from an aunt nobody ever liked. She had way too much body hair for a female and because her job required that she lean over all day, her posture was stooped.

"What should I be looking at?" he asked not knowing exactly where to start.

"I am old," she said. "I am 32."

"You're not a young pup that's for sure." His candor was unexpected.

Laura decided to match his candor with her own. "At the hospital I fade in the background like the window blinds, only noticed when I am needed."

"You want to be a camel." he told her.

"A camel?"

"A camel, something extraordinary, magnificent, exotic, something that demands to be looked at and admired for beauty and usefulness. You don't want to be just an ordinary four-legged creature. It sounds like you want to be a camel."

"Maybe I do." Laura was a little offended her honesty had been mistaken for vanity.

"Camels are nice," said the man leaning back in his chair again.

"On second thought," she said, "I don't want to be a camel."

"You don't?"

"No," she said, "I don't want to stick out. I don't even mind being another four legged animal, as you say, but do I have to be a mutt?"

For the first time the man smiled. "You're asking the wrong person that question. I like mutts. Think they're better behaved and more interesting to look at." Laura couldn't help agreeing. There was silence, a lull, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Finally the man spoke.

"Tell me about your job."

"My job is boring." Laura answered. The last thing she wanted to talk about was her job. "I sit in the same spot and stare into a microscope all day."

"What do you see?"

"I see cells."

"And cells are boring?"

Laura closed her eyes and saw them, just dots to the untrained eye. "I wish cells were boring. Instead, they are dividing and replicating and infecting one another with genetic information." Laura shook her head. "No, I like it when I look at a slide and it is boring."

"Why?" asked the man.

"Because when it's boring it's not cancer," said Laura hoping to bring an end to this thread of conversation.

"What does cancer look like?" he asked genuinely curious.

"It's beautiful" Laura answered thinking she might as well be honest. "The cells are big and plump. They grow fast and blossom almost in unison like an unending field of tulips." Laura stopped herself from continuing the description, then added, "On the slide they are beautiful, but in reality, they are not beautiful. In fact, they are evil."

"It must be hard looking at those slides all day knowing they belong to people, and that those cells will end up hurting them or even killing them."

Why did he care about her work? She came here to talk about her personal life not her job. To put an end to it she said tersely, "I try not to think about it. I just separate the slides the pathologist needs to look at."

She didn't tell him that every time she put a slide into her microscope, she said a prayer she wouldn't see cancer.

The man rubbed his face like he was washing it with invisible soap and water and then he looked at her straight. "You may sit in the same spot day after day, but you go places and see things most people will never see in that little microscope of yours."

"I suppose I do," she answered.

"I think I know now why you need some distraction and diversion. Your yard is too small."

"Yes," she agreed "my yard ... is too small."

"You need to get out of that hospital with its temperature controlled rooms. You need to get out and feel the rain on your face and the sun on your back. Whatever the weather you need to be out in it feeling it!"

"I do?"

"Yes," said the man, "but you can't go out aimlessly. You can't just go to a flea market and wander around. You'll just end up tired and hungry, and you'll do things you wouldn't normally do."

"I do eat poorly when I don't pick a restaurant beforehand."

"You end up eating garbage is what you end up eating, or worse getting hit by a car."

"So what you are saying is that I need to plan outings?" Laura felt happy to have even the smallest game plan.

"You need to plan outings, and you need to play!" This time the man raised his voice a little. "If you don't find out what makes your tail wag, you will never quit being miserable. You think what's going to get your tail a waggin' is a trip to Europe, or being married, but you are over thinking the problem. More often than not, it doesn't take much."

"It doesn't?"

"I've seen dogs transformed from head down,

from tail between the legs, to happy, lively critters, with one game of fetch. With a job like yours, you have got to learn how to play."

"I think you are right," Laura thought about the endless weekends she spent choosing movies at the video store without ever considering that she could do something different. She wasn't having any fun.

"I know I am right," said the man. "Seen dogs transform practically overnight." The man smiled.

"Dogs?" asked Laura. She felt a sensation she could only describe as a 'Hitchcock moment.' The walls started to come closer, the stale smell she had ignored started to make her nauseous. "What kind of psychologist are you?" she demanded to know.

"I am no psychologist at all."

"But I spoke with you on the phone, Dr.Carlaw."

"Other side of the building," he told her, pointing outside. "I run animal control, rural division. Pat Le Platt," he said extending his hand, "Glorified dog catcher."

"Laura Layman" she stammered too dumb-struck to offer up her hand, or apologies, or even an explanation.

"Dr. Carlaw just started leasing the office space. Needs to put up a sign. He's probably still there."

"Never mind." Laura was too exhausted to even think of beginning her story again. "I am going to take your advice." She meant it.

"Couldn't hurt. Remember" he said, "Start by feeling the rain."

"I need to feel the rain," she echoed.

"Don't wander aimlessly."

"I'll start making plans.."

"Go play," he ordered.

"I'll go play," she said. She got up. Smiled. Turned toward the door.

"You don't need to be a camel," he said.

"I don't need to be a camel," she repeated.

Laura Layman got into her Toyota Corolla and drove off. She left him where she had found him, sitting in a chair and waiting, waiting for the off chance he got a call about a bobcat sighting or a stray found wandering outside city limits.

*Jimmy McDonough*

### **She Gives Me High Blood Pressure**



digital photography

*Tamara Kuzmenkov*

**Outer Sanctum**

(Sunday Morning Kayaking on the Princess  
Louisa Inlet, B.C. Canada)

We went to church together--you and I.  
The service was profound and best I have attended.  
Choirs of falling waters sang our journey onward  
Mountains resounded with reminders to stand tall  
And pointed heavenward to give us our direction.  
Soaring eagles urged our spirits to do the same  
While curious otters exemplified their respect.  
And you and I attended these lessons with righteous  
    silence  
Holy Eucharist administered--pure water our wine,  
    fresh air our bread.  
Our confession offered by sincere, wholesome presence:  
    absolution wholly given.  
We came away with sins washed clean away-  
Exorcised and refreshed, renewed and rewarded.  
More together now for having better heard our inner  
    voice  
And for paying obeisance to THAT grander than  
    ourselves.