



# Pulse

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Cover Art: Untitled by Kay Shanda.

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## 21 Pilots

By Matt Peters

In releasing their first full-length album, *Vessel*, two years ago, indie-pop duo Twenty One Pilots succeeded in introducing a refreshing new style to the alternative scene. Their distinct blend of "indie-tronics," coupled with contemplative lyrics and energetic live performances have earned them a reputation as modern pioneers in an increasingly formulaic (though broadly-defined) genre. *Vessel* is the embodiment of all traits contributing to the band's musical success.

Initially the album's most distinctive quality is its instrumental composition. While most of the album is "heavily-mixed" – containing many synthesized elements – piano, ukulele, and accordion are equally present throughout. Furthermore, it's quite difficult to trace the band's influences as *Vessel* contains elements of hip-hop, folk, techno, rap-rock, and numerous other subgenres. The "About" page of their (official) website describes Twenty One Pilots' style as "piano-driven schizoid pop."

While their style may be strange, their physical make-up is even stranger. Twenty One Pilots consists of only two members – Josh Dunn (drums) and Tyler Joseph (piano, vocals, ukulele, other) – a combination that challenges the typical "full-band" structure of many alternative acts. Furthermore, they seem somewhat out-of-place in the Fueled by Ramen camp – an Atlantic Records subsidiary known for signing punk acts such as Paramore and Panic At the Disco. Recently, *Alternative Press* – a magazine that typically promotes "edgy" punk and metal bands – has adopted Twenty One Pilots as a favorite artist. Oddly enough, while Twenty One Pilots' style can more accurately be described as "pop" rather than "rock," they continue to tour with alt-rock acts and attract a more-"alternative" fanbase.

Their lyrics, written almost entirely by Tyler Joseph, are both introspective and existential. Not only is Joseph a master of alliteration (evident in "Ode To Sleep" and "Car Radio"), some songs ("Migraine," for example) employ elaborate metaphors akin to metaphysical poetry. And while *Vessel* explores dark subjects such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and suicide, it's very clear that the band aims to convey a message of hope in spite of conflict. Serving as a sort-of window inside Joseph's mind, the listener is quickly confronted with a series of spiritual and mental barriers that he or she can (presumably) relate to; and then the listener is challenged to overcome those obstacles. Joseph often aims to sound "vulnerable" in his music and that certainly comes across in many of *Vessel*'s songs (notably in "Truce" and "Car Radio").

Accompanying their unconventional style and unorthodox lyrics are Joseph's vocals. One *Sputnick Music* reviewer known as "TheNateman" comments, "This boy raps, croons, screams, wails, and does just about every vocal acrobatic in the book," (sometimes within the course of a single song, I might add). While Joseph certainly has a distinct voice, he seems to have employed a variety of vocal "styles" in *Vessel*. Listeners may notice the stark contrast between, say, the rap-heavy hip-hop jam, "Holding On To You" and the folksy ukulele ballad, "House of Gold." The album is as unpredictable as it is unconventional.

Still, Joseph maintains in his voice, a consistent optimism that is not always pronounced in his lyrics. In fact, this is one aspect that really sets Twenty One Pilots apart as artists. In an interview with *Rock Sound TV*, Joseph describes his approach:

I love to contrast very bright and upbeat sounding music with lyrics that aren't. Almost as if I can get people to sing because of the melody, they start to realize what the song is actually saying. I love to catch people off guard.

A final and very crucial component of Twenty One Pilots' success is their concerts, which fans seem to describe as having a kind of "personalized" element. Accompanying the release of *Vessel* in 2013, a massive touring and publicity platform arose from the band's rapidly expanding reputation. But even before they experienced significant mainstream success, Twenty One Pilots was known for their "high-energy," impassioned performances. Often considered a "grassroots" band, they spent several years developing a devoted local fanbase across greater Ohio before gaining any national attention.

Recently, Twenty One Pilots shows have attracted upward of 12,000 people. And while they

may have graduated from club stages to stadium stages, they've maintained the same personalized approach that allowed them to connect with – and inspire – small crowds of teenagers throughout Cleveland, Akron, and Columbus. According to Joseph, the single, "Guns For Hands" was inspired by a particular show, after which several teenagers credited the band with helping them overcome thoughts of suicide.

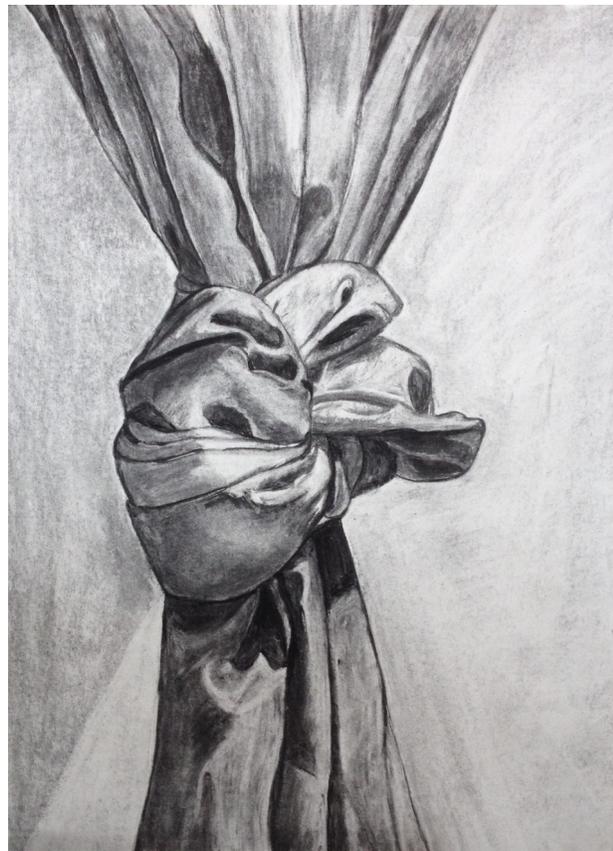
"While many bands claim to be conscious of their fans' attitudes and struggles, it seems to be the primary focus for Twenty One Pilots. A constant theme in Joseph's lyrics is this idea that people should examine themselves before making rash decisions or conforming to patterns set by others. In "Car Radio" – a song based on Tyler's personal experiences, serving as a kind of wake-up call – he states:

Faith is to be awake  
And to be awake is for us to think  
And for us to think is to be alive  
And I will try with every rhyme  
To come across like I am dying  
To let you know you need to try to think.

Whether or not you're a fan, the fact remains; Twenty One Pilots have exploded in popularity. What's more, they've done so in a completely unconventional fashion. From humble beginnings to chart-topping status, Twenty One Pilots have certainly made their mark on the scene in an impressively short amount of time. In 2013, they received a VMA nomination as "Artist to Watch" and an EMA nomination as "Best Push Act." In 2014, they were nominated for four different AP Music awards, including "Best Live Band," "Album of The Year," "Breakthrough Band," and "Best Drummer."

A Lesson in Sewing  
by Angela Shrader

If you ask me, I am unwound  
a spindle of thread undone,  
a maze of knots and loose ends  
I am unraveled  
—unfixable in my mess  
threads peeled out from their home  
peaking over the seams  
threatening to undo it all  
I am undone  
a missing button on your coat  
—lost in the way you lost me  
belonging to the pocket at your heart  
easily replaced and never returned  
If you ask me, I am worn  
time has frayed my edges  
and now  
I am useless,  
unable to keep you warm



Art by Kay Shanda

## And Not a Sound

By Sara Seals

Nadina strolled down the street, the faint, noisy silence of the dark town surrounding her as the crisp, cool night air kissed her face. She smiled as she glanced up at the stars, admiring their cold brilliance. Was there anything so peaceful as a walk in the late evening? She felt the tension in her shoulders, built up from a long day of taking care of what seemed to be EVERYTHING, slipping away.

But as she moved on, she began to feel a tad uneasy. That uncomfortable feeling of being watched... Surely it was just her mind playing tricks on her, and yet she couldn't shake the feeling. It was like phantom fingers drifting ever so gently across the back of her neck, sending shudders down her spine. Her feet unconsciously increased their speed.

There was nothing particularly dangerous about this part of town, as far as she knew. Sure, there had been a robbery last month. And hadn't there been something in the paper about a drug scandal nearby? Nadina hadn't bothered to actually read the article, but her friend had told her something about it. And what about rapists and serial killers? No way to tell when one of those will pop up. Aren't they supposed to specialize in sleepy little towns like this? People always say it's the quiet ones who seem like they'd never hurt a fly who turn out to be the worst ones. Why hadn't she gone to that self-defense class her mother urged her to attend? You never know when you could use something like that.

Nadina's fists clenched in her pockets and she bit her lip. There were two factions in her brain warring for control: the analytical, reasonable side that told her to calm down, and the imaginative, hysterical side that went through every possible bad thing that could happen to her.

The imaginative side was beginning to affect her senses, causing her to hear noises behind her like footsteps and rustling and snapping. She thought she saw figures in the corners of her eyes, only to whip her head around to find no one. A car would pass, providing comfort only until she remembered that the people inside could, in fact, also be a source of danger. Yet being totally alone in the dimly lit streets also seemed a threat to her safety.

The uncomfortable feeling of being watched morphed from gentle caresses to a feeling of being pulled inexplicably toward the shadows. The phantom hands seemed to have grown stronger, perhaps more so than her physical and mental strength. All she wanted was to be home, wrapped in the safety of familiarity and light, of locked doors and the ability of people down the hall to hear her scream if something went wrong. Because here, alone, there was no one. Perhaps even no one to find what was left of her if something *did* happen.

She broke into a half-jog, the echo of her own footsteps becoming the march of a hundred unseen enemies wishing only to fulfill her every fear. Why had she set out on this walk? The human body is really quite fragile, with dull senses and bones that snap and thin skin and muscles that may or may not be able to hold off an attack. The brain, so confident in its own abilities, tends to lie to itself and overestimate what it knows and can do. Nadina had watched plenty of kung fu movies, but did she really have any idea of how to do those moves? What if someone popped out with a knife? How would she keep the flickering blade away from her vital organs? Was there any way to come out unscathed? Or—worse—what if the attacker carried a gun? Was she supposed to do whatever he said, or just run like mad? Nadina always felt better when she had a plan, but there were simply too many questions that she had no idea how to answer. And anyways, her hysterical side was winning the battle for her brain, preventing coherent thought.

Dear God, she was going to die tonight. And they'd find her body and someone would have to tell her family and they'd have to figure out what to do with her stuff and who to invite to

the funeral and what to do with the Christmas presents they'd bought in advance and who would take care of her fish. What would the police tell her parents? Would they use the phrase "brutally murdered," or were they required to use something more soothing, such as "passed on"? And what about the person who found her? What would they see? How would they react? Would they even recognize that she'd once been human, as real and complex as their mother or sister or best friend? She already knew that anyone who heard about it on the news would just take it as another reason to shut themselves away from the world. After all, that's what she always did when she heard about the terrible things that happened. The victim was a message of danger rather than someone who had lived and dreamed and felt something right before they died.

Nadina did not know that she had tears in her eyes, but only noticed that it was getting harder to see as she hurtled down streets, trying to make her frantic brain compute her location and where to go so that she could get back to safety. Fear is blinding enough as it is, so tears hardly make a difference.

Finally! That light there was the one outside her apartment building! She was almost there! Doubling her speed, heart about to pound out of her chest and lungs searing with cold air, she slammed into the door and fumbled for the keys. Her shaking hands and anxiety made it difficult to decipher which was the correct one, and the task of inserting it into the lock took an age, one of the most exacting and nerve-wracking deeds she had ever undertaken. She kept nervously glancing over her shoulder, waiting for something to emerge from the darkness and engulf her.

And there it was, the thing that had chased her through the night: her own shadow. The light from above her apartment made the shadow loom large and jagged, and reflected off of the keys in her fumbling fingers to momentarily create eyes and a wicked grin. Without a sound, it whispered to her of her secret fears of mutilation and abandonment and guilt and betrayal and loss. And the shadows of the souls of a million lonely people joined her shadow's undulating voice, telling horrific tales of what can happen in a world where good does not always prevail and the innocent are not always the last to die. Children and parents and the elderly and friends, all hurt at some time by someone they loved or someone they hated or someone they hardly knew. Their sorrow and terror seemed to fill her until there was nothing left of herself—only a husk left exposed to everything corrupt. And yet neither she nor the shadows nor the world enclosed in gloom let out a single sound.

What had she done to deserve this? Nothing. Because the world takes and gives what it wishes. She could just as easily have been confronted with the overwhelming, soul-healing serenity that sometimes pervades the night air. But Nadina was not so fortunate. She was found the next morning by a neighbor heading out to work, staring unresponsively toward the horizon, unseeing, with a look of profound defeat upon her face. She has been sent to a hospital in the hopes that some happiness still lingers inside her and can be rekindled. Heavens knows, she deserves it. But that is a story that has yet to take place.

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Time  
by Erin McNulty

I lost a friend today.

Not from death greed or arguing—

But from time.

Time that turns lovers into strangers, friends into acquaintances, and fire burning passion into a dull ache that seeps into your pores—a tattoo made from invisible ink.

I lost a friend today.

The weight of the silence once so comfortable, crashes down on us like a wave of discomfort that grows in the pit of my stomach.

When did talking become an obligation?

When did seeing each other require an occasion?

I lost a friend today.

Time—that is supposed to heal—has done nothing for us.

It. It has allowed us to grasp the trowel and build. Brick. By. Brick. The mental barriers that tell us there is nothing left to say.

The one that knows me most—now knows nothing.

**I** lost a friend today.

And I wonder if **you** know

As time passes

the void between us grows.



Photo: "Storm Forming" by Jennifer Hancock

Where Fools Once Stooped  
by Amanda Davis

Stone, I waited on the couch,  
Listening with every fiber of my being.  
Unmoved, I squeezed tight my breath,  
    Hoping to hear words which weren't there.  
        But the words that were there  
    Cavorted around me  
Conjuring a haze of muggy, cutting surrealism  
My knuckles turned white as death  
As I abused the already-fraying edges of a throw pillow.  
My sister's voice resonated on the far-away side of the phone.

"I'll go."  
The haze lumped in my throat.  
I went.

Stone-faced, I stooped only inches from the ground.  
Heart unmoved, I suffocated the slightest breath of emotion.

Selfless and selfish  
I wept a dry goodbye  
And sprayed bleach on the blood-stained grass.  
Each squeeze of the insolent trigger  
Broke the night's dead silence.  
We spoke few words,  
Merely pointed.  
    We let the night,  
        The bleach,  
Speak for us.

I hunkered low,  
Scouring for her life in the grass.  
I traced the ground like a fool  
Squeezing the trigger  
Breaking the silence  
Breaking the night  
Breaking the death  
No.

Death was not broken.  
Death lived.  
Death lived in April while Life died.

Her life mixed with the red clay.  
A vicious progression of red and red,  
One evil, the other simply wandering.  
No way to determine the evil from the misguided  
So all are lost, but never forgotten.

I stooped closer as artificial light faded too.  
Cruel Earth.  
Taking her then hiding her.  
Life. Light.  
What else is there to give?

As I stooped  
The cruel earth breathed a cruel sister wind.  
My nose my mouth filled with  
Metal  
Salt  
Bitterness  
Life.  
The wind breathed the taste of her life into me.  
I spit.  
I'll never forget the taste.  
The taste of life.

Again, the fool,  
I trace the memories.  
I trace memories left in the ground.  
Memories now left in the darkness.  
I shine the fading beam on  
The shadows of life.  
I breathe a heady haze of  
A once-dear friendship.  
I wash away the memories from  
What is now a lifetime ago.

Wash it away.  
Thicker than water  
But still washes away.

Hail Mary  
by Emily Stainbrook

*Hail Mary, full of grace,*

The darkness was lit up with flashing lights. Gunfire and grenades screamed; one moment right beside me, the next at the far end of the field. Screams and half-heard commands stole the rest of the night. Loose earth and tightly packed dirt took the skies and hid all of Heaven's light.

*The Lord is with thee.*

Bullets kissed my cheek and thigh. Dirt choked me and rid me of my sight. The foxholes sought to cripple me. Men brushed by me, running to their doom.

*Blessed art thou among women,*

Blood, sweat, and dirt dripped down my face. My breath scratched my throat. My muscles ached. I held my handgun steady. The knife in my boot shifted again; handle stabbing deeper into my leg. My cross bounced upon my chest. My bloodstained Bible rested above my heart.

*And blessed is the fruit of thy womb,*

I could not stop running now, not when I was so close to the finish line. The target tent was in sight. Boss man had asked me to do this. I could do it for a friend. One quick, sharp motion in the presence of cameras. One move to prove superiority.

*Jesus.*

One move to make a new nightmare.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,*

One move to save the world.

*Pray for us sinners*

Please, God, forgive me this one move.

*Now and at the hour of our death*

I was upon the target tent. I jumped over the barbed wire and before the single sentry could raise the alarm, put my last bullet in his chest. I landed in a roll. I threw aside the tent flap, threw my handgun at the guard's face, pulled my knife from my boot, and slit the target's throat.

*Amen.*

Invasive Species  
By Kay-cie Marshall and Natalie Turner

**Invasives are a problem**

So first up is the Gypsy moth.  
Leopold wanted it to make some cloth.  
They scared off Nature's own hot dogs,  
since we lost the hardwood logs.  
We can't control the things we lost,  
all they do is raise the cost.  
Gypsy moths are a problem.

Next up are the little black starlings.  
Which Schieffelin thought were very darling.  
They cause the crops to lose their heads.  
and even force us to our beds.  
Grape flavoring or Starlside,  
bringing back our blue bird pride.  
European Starlings are a problem.

Now on to the Sea Lamprey,  
bye, bye Great Lakes fishery.  
They snuck in through a big canal.  
The fishermen say they aren't a pal.  
The males we catch we'll sterilize,  
or Lampricide we'll improvise.  
Sea Lampreys are a problem.

Zebra mussels have caught our eye,  
they clean the waters so others die.  
Of Zebra mussels there are many.  
The damages of course are plenty  
Native mussels are very few  
Awareness is the thing to do.  
Zebra mussels are a problem.

In regards to Chestnut blight  
the trees put up a great big fight.  
A hitchhiker that's from Japan  
causes changes throughout the land.  
The lumber industry did suffer,  
not even resistance can it buffer.  
Chestnut blight is a problem.

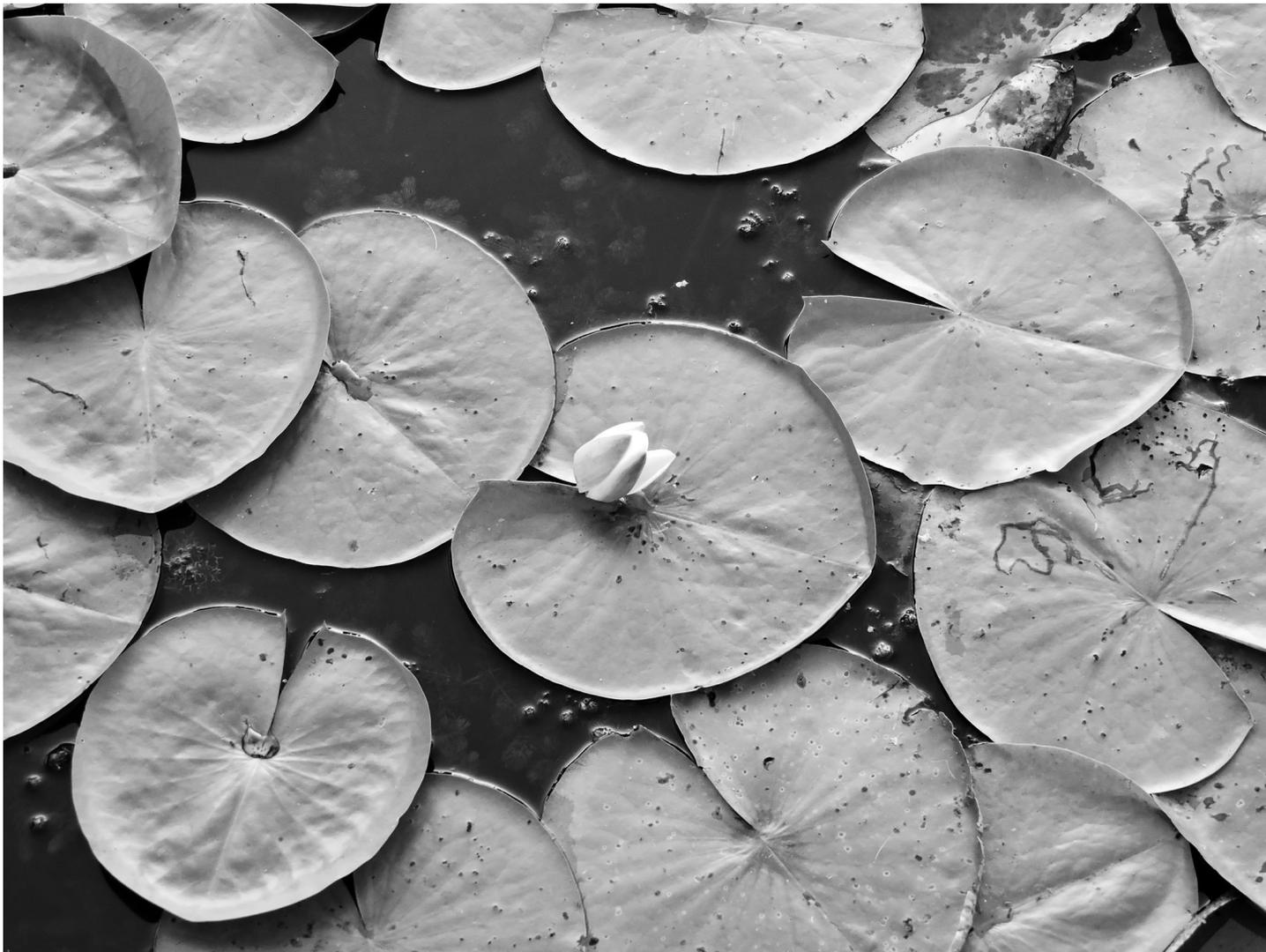


Photo by Jennifer Hancock

SUNS will rise & suns will set  
sure as land is dry & water wet

so count the crests & scout the stars  
find what the horizon hides  
scrub the deck & scrape the sides  
'til you see the sights the skyline bars

Shores are known only after sailing  
trailing the waves & leviathan's way  
ports are built to harbor ships  
but ships are built to sail away



## Will I Ever See Spring Again?

by Paul Bieniek

She softly pets a wool sleeve  
That encases an aching arthritic left arm  
Her statue seated beside a cold window  
That reveals an hourglass of falling snow  
Of memories feather floating away  
Drifting out of reach  
Settling on a cold, forbearing earth  
Where one day soon  
All will lie.

Her kids have trickled away,  
Visiting less often and then never.  
Life trickled away from her friends and disappeared  
She sits in a spacious living room  
That feels like a useless jail cell.  
Or worse,  
An empty doctor's waiting room.

A place for waiting.

A place for ending.

She watches a flat electric rectangle  
To remind her of herself.  
It shows guys and gals in diners  
Eating 10-cent burgers and shakes,  
Holding hands and sharing first kisses.

She wonders,

"Will there ever be warmth again,  
Can memory melt and return,  
Will I ever see spring again?"



Photo by Jennifer Hancock

Penny  
By Paige Barry

When I grow up  
I long to be a penny  
because I love to travel.  
A plastic bag fluttering in the breeze  
I will be lifted-  
delivered to my new home.  
Ah! The things I will see.  
And when I get lost  
and I stray from the path,  
someone new shall raise me off of the ground  
like the treasure that I am.  
I ought to be on my way again.  
And when I reach the end of my trail  
whist me away into the fountain.  
Let the cool water cushion me  
Conforming to my edges like a new mattress.  
And anything you long to be  
You shall.  
I make all wishes come true.

Just A Sip  
*\*song title from Luke Bryan*  
by Chloe Janson

Solace of summer can almost  
be seen through  
the window shade.  
Cans of limited edition Lemonade-  
Rita's shelved.  
A sign that it's almost  
the Sun's time.  
Young and breezy  
daydreams drape the cardboard case.  
Bargaining  
for better days.  
Tip it back and  
the bitter  
sweet taste crosses your lips.  
Like a flash  
to another time  
the sand grits between  
your toes, the salty waves crash

your sense of smell. Just as quick  
as the current, it passes.  
Gulped  
down and the scene  
is gone. Until  
that next sip,  
suntans delay for  
the frigid fight continues  
and Winter's grasp keeps its hold.

Distraction: A Girl's Best Friend  
by Marissa Merriman

I'm watching her sit at the top of the stairs, anxiously wringing her hands, and tapping her foot against one of the carpeted steps. Her tanned skin and blue eyes are tinted red with mascara running down her face. She's involuntarily taking in slight gasps of air because she had been sobbing only seconds ago. Her dark hair is messy due to running her hands through it and grabbing ahold of the roots with helplessness too many times. She now has a cold stare down the stairwell, probably forcing herself to mask the anxiety and stress that she must be feeling. I think it's strange how almost completely silent she can be while chaos brews in the kitchen beneath her.

The eruption of noise woke me up a few minutes ago. I had fallen asleep at the foot of Leah's bed. I remember raising my head off of the floor and looking out into the pitch-black hallway to discover the source of commotion. In spite of the darkness, because my vision is perfect, I found myself staring at Leah's back as she sat on top of the steps. I could immediately sense that something was wrong because her shoulders were hunched over, like something was weighing her down. What was wrong? Why was everyone screaming downstairs? I decided to push myself off of the floor to investigate.

I moseyed my way over and snuck up behind her, pressing my long nose to the back of her arm. She jumped slightly, gasped, and snapped her head around to face me.

"Geez, Alex, don't scare me like that!" she cried, but in a whisper. She was still trying to be quiet for some reason. My ears flattened against my head as an apology. We speak completely different languages, so I couldn't understand a word she said to me, but I could tell from the tone in her voice that I had done something that she didn't like.

Despite this, she instinctively moved over so that I could sit next to her. I happily took my spot beside her and noticed how we're the same height while sitting. That's when I finally took a good look at her. She looked sad, like someone had smacked her nose hard with a newspaper. I hate it when mom and dad do that. But I've never seen that happen to Leah, so why did she look like that? It breaks my heart that I don't understand.

She now stares back down the stairwell, looking even more morbid as the screaming and yelling continues downstairs. My ears extend upward and my head tilts to the side as I strain myself to try and understand their language. This fighting occurs way too often in our house. I can recognize the voices of mom and dad, but I can never fully comprehend what they are screaming about. This is frustrating as hell, especially because I can see how hurtful this is to Leah, based on her frightened reactions. However, it's even more frustrating to know that there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. The only thing that I'll ever be good for is a distraction.

I turn my head back to my friend who now has tears silently sliding down her cheeks. I wish I could lick them away forever. I automatically press my nose against her warm arm to regain her attention. She flinches away because of how cold my nose is, but then she reaches one of her sweat-covered hands over to pet my fluffy head. I shut my eyes, loving the feel of her human touch.

This is short-lived though and she lowers her hand once again as the violence downstairs escalates. We are both cringing from the sound of objects being thrown, but I continue to engage Leah by licking her. Her crying is now audible as she wraps an arm around me, grips my dark fur, and holds me tightly. She holds onto me as though her life depends on it, which makes me realize that I need to find a better way to distract her from the fighting.

An idea strikes me as I break free of her vice-like grip and rush down the stairs as quickly as I can. I hear Leah gasp sadly from my sudden fleeing. I fight the urge to bark to her that I'm just going to get my leash, because she won't understand me anyway. I turn to the right as I reach the bottom of the stairs and head into the bright kitchen, but then come to a sudden halt. The air feels thick and shattered items are scattered across the floor. I look up to see the culprits with my tail between my legs: mom and dad.

I hear Leah's name being mentioned several times, but I can't decipher anything else that is being screamed. Mom is sitting at the table with her head in her hands. She looks drained, as though she'd just taken an hour-long walk in the blistering heat of summer. Meanwhile, dad is parading around the kitchen, knocking things over and yelling about...well, something.

I head towards the sliding glass door, pick my leash up and off of the ground with my teeth, and then turn to face the two of them again. Neither one of them glances my way, so I flatten my ears against my head again and bark as loud as I can in a last attempt to interrupt/end their fight, for Leah's sake. Mom doesn't move while dad looks my way with a bright-red face and clenched fists. He starts to scream at me, but I feel so confused. I can't follow any of it. What is he screaming at me for? What did I do?

Now he's pointing towards the hallway that I had entered the kitchen from. My ears shot right back up as I realized that he was telling me to leave. So I flee right back out of the kitchen, now knowing that a distraction is not the solution to whatever problem they are having.

I rush back up the stairs and drop my leash into Leah's lap. She stares down at it, taking it into her hands as I pant and drool onto my paws. This is exhausting. I blink at her, really hoping that she can make the connection. I see conflicting thoughts running through her mind just by her facial expressions. I let out a bark and finally, she looks back up at me nods once. She wraps the leash collar around my neck and we both stand up.

We rush down the stairs and Leah rips the front door open as soon as we reach it. Humid, summer air hits us like a Frisbee thrown too hard, but this doesn't stop us. I take the first steps outside, into the darkness of the night, hoping that Leah will quickly follow. She takes one last look inside and then slams the door shut behind her. I sprint with my best friend into the peaceful darkness together.



Photo by Jennifer Hancock

Sandy White Powder  
by Paul Bieniek

Sandy white powder  
Surrounding my cold calves  
Feels the same  
As when a coyote licks and rubs against its young  
Life is transient  
A sea of brief white  
We have to enjoy the submersion  
The sea only sparkles for a short time  
I lie down in the white  
Let it engulf my body  
Life enveloping me

Philos Adelphos  
by Angela Shrader

The city is still crawling  
—the clock is an exclamation of time.  
cars with beady eyes scan the dark,  
scurry through streets in shiny coats  
gobbling up the ants on the concrete

The buildings blink their bright eyes,  
flits of darkness dancing across their pupils  
I am in this gaze for a moment  
The light goes out  
I am gone.

No one notices the bobbing of bodies on the sidewalk,  
masses swarming to keep warm,  
the desolate dark of slick streets denying all of home  
or shadows that wave in the glow of night  
whisked away by white beetles crying out, impatient

We are all a part of the buzz  
a quiet hum that runs through the faceless  
covered up by the cloud of manhole cover smoke  
seen and not seen,  
we melt into the sound.

Filed and Numbered  
by Erin McNulty

If my mother had listened, I would not have been born.

When I think about my mother throughout my childhood, I imagine sky-blue linen, white sneakers and the soft smell of hospital antiseptic mixed with baby powder. My mother is a nurse, a career choice that runs throughout my family. With one grandmother, two great-aunts, an aunt, and my mom working in a single hospital—dinner conversation revolved around knee surgeries, pregnancies, and doctors who didn't know what they were talking about.

In my formative years my mom was an OBGYN; her job was to bring life into this world; I cannot imagine how difficult it was for her when she was unable to carry a child herself.

My mother had her first miscarriage in 1983. To bring her spirits up, my grandmother took her to dinner with women who worked on my grandmother's hospital wing. Before introducing my mom as her daughter-in-law, my grandmother went to the restroom, leaving my mom alone with my grandmother's co-workers.

Unknowingly, the women began talking about how my grandmother's daughter-in-law had a miscarriage, asking each other how the couple could want to have a baby when the father was crippled.

"Why take the chance?" they asked.

A chance.

The chance of my mother and father having a child with muscular dystrophy was one in a million.

The chance that my mother would stay at that dinner— incredibly slim.

Three miscarriages later, my parents had my brother, and then me—two perfectly healthy babies with normal liver enzymes.

When memories of my father come to mind, I think of the time Orlando's hot sun relentlessly beat down on my seven-year old head. I still feel the beads of sweat dripping through my ponytail, causing my head to tickle as it dripped down past my neck.

"Mommy, even my head is hot," I said to my mother as we passed Cinderella's Castle. The hopes and fantasies of being a princess in the "Most Magical Place on Earth" could not distract me from the blazing heat that radiated from the brick pavement on to my legs.

My legs.

My legs were tired. Four days of walking at Disneyworld had taken its toll on my small body. I looked at the babies in strollers that passed me by, envying them for their personal chauffeurs. I didn't want to walk anymore.

"Why don't you ride?" My mom asked me as my dad stopped his momentum. With a smile, I crawled onto my dad's lap and sat on his left knee.

Instantly my father took off like a rocket in Cape Canaveral. I felt the humid warm air against my face as he zoomed past my mother and brother laughing...my knight in shining armor on his mechanical steed. We went past a fountain—a statue of Cinderella feeding her mice friends and he spun me around so the mist hit my face like a refreshing ocean breeze.

I leaned against his chest and giggled as his stomach bounced me up and down from his laughter. People who saw our commotion stared at us. I ignored their judgmental looks. I was the envy of every limousine baby that passed by, because I brought my own ride to the amusement park—my dad and his wheelchair.

His legs.

As I got older, it became harder and harder to ignore those judgmental looks.

When I was nine, the parents on my peewee basketball team complained about my father's ability to coach. A woman with spikey hair and a sharp tongue told the league that a man who could not throw a ball could not possibly coach others the skill. The league believed her. My father was

asked not to coach the next year.

When I was eleven, my father had to sit in his handicapped accessible van for two hours while my mom and I were in a meeting, because they changed the location to a venue that included more steps than Rocky's famous jog.

When I was sixteen my boyfriend's mother asked if I could have children that are "like my father." I replied, "I could only hope."

In my head, I can see their faces...old women shouting in my father's ear, because a wheelchair obviously affects your hearing. Waiters refusing to ask my father what he would like to eat, because a wheelchair affects your communication skills....right?

It is all about categories. When people see someone different, something they don't understand, they rely on what they know. It's as if that old woman thought, "A man with graying hair in a wheelchair must be deaf because that's what I am used to."

We are all so busy we sort and alphabetize one another, people who look like As go in folder one, Bs folder two...how can we realize that life is not that linear? My father is not disabled, our logic is.

My number was one in a million, but what if I was that one?

Over 56.7 million people live with a disability in the United States. Of out those, 38.3 million people have severe disorders like my Dad.

While this statistic includes people who are blind, deaf, suffering from cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, mental illness, autism, cerebral palsy, dementia, muscular dystrophy, and multitudes of other illnesses, they all have been filed under one category "D".

"Different."

"Damaged."

"Defective."

"Defiant."

"Determined."

When did society learn to catalogue everything?

As children, we are taught the difference between "similar" and "different." I can still hear my first grade teacher saying, "Erin is wearing red, Zack is wearing red, therefore they are similar. I am wearing green so I am different." However, when did different become a devastating term?

One day my dad went to our local shopping mall. In line, a small four-year-old boy with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a round cherubic face noticed my father was different. He looked at him and he asked, "How come you get to ride?" The boy's mother turned fifty shades of pink as she stuttered and apologized for her child's rudeness. My dad, always patient with kids, simply responded, "My legs don't work likes yours do, so this chair is how I get around." The boy, satisfied with this answer, nodded his head and asked, "Well...can I have a ride?"

The mother scolded her child, telling him he was being impolite as her face turned to a darker, bashful shade of pink. My dad's response? He told the boy to "climb aboard" and gave him a ride up and down the aisles while his mother paid for his clothing.

As children we accept differences, it's when we get older that it becomes a challenge.

Imagine that you are different. Disabled. Defective.

Imagine, that you are struggling trying to climb a staircase—your body letting you down because of a degenerative disease. You stare at the stairwell, legs jiggling like gelatin, your feet as dense as lead as you hesitantly take your first step. The only entity you feel is the weight of your lungs as you inhale a quick intake of breath. Your heart is in your throat beating faster than the silent hum pulsing from the buzz of an artificial light. Shakily you continue to take tentative steps up the stairs, hanging on to the handrail for dear life.

Sweat beads down your back, pooling at the line of your shirt, while you feel the weight of an elephant on your chest. Your vision starts to blur as the stairwell doubles into two unconquerable monsters...with the next step you nearly fall.

A line forms behind you as a man sighs and looks at his watch. You hear one person say, "Well...are you going to take all day?" While another looks at you with an eye roll.

Instantly you feel guilt. You feel pressured. You feel judged. You feel like you are different.

After all, it is only a stairwell...everyone should be able to climb—but you are one in 56.7 million.

## The Legend by Abby Romesberg

The Man, The Myth, The... well,  
That's not the story. This is different.  
You, so powerful and strong,  
Want to be known by all  
Want to be, Legendary.

What have you done to attain that goal  
Something, nothing, everything  
You go one step forward and twelve steps back  
You ruin yourself  
The failure of your goal is your own fault  
The rise and epic drop of your ego  
That is worth watching

Supportive is what I like to be  
Only when it is deserved, respect will be given  
Not this time.

The legend is someone who will own their actions  
In a positive light they will glow  
This legend is no man, this legend is a woman

a strong and powerful being  
who takes responsibility for every step and miss-step  
who embraces the bad to help her grow  
and don't underestimate how fast this wildflower  
can grow, how far she will go

you gave her the power  
the one thanks you will ever get,  
will be lighting the fire, blowing all your hot steam  
that picked up her wings  
being so in-human that you made her laugh

the man who only desires to be a legend  
the man who only assumes the role that his ego provides  
will sink slowly into the quicksand

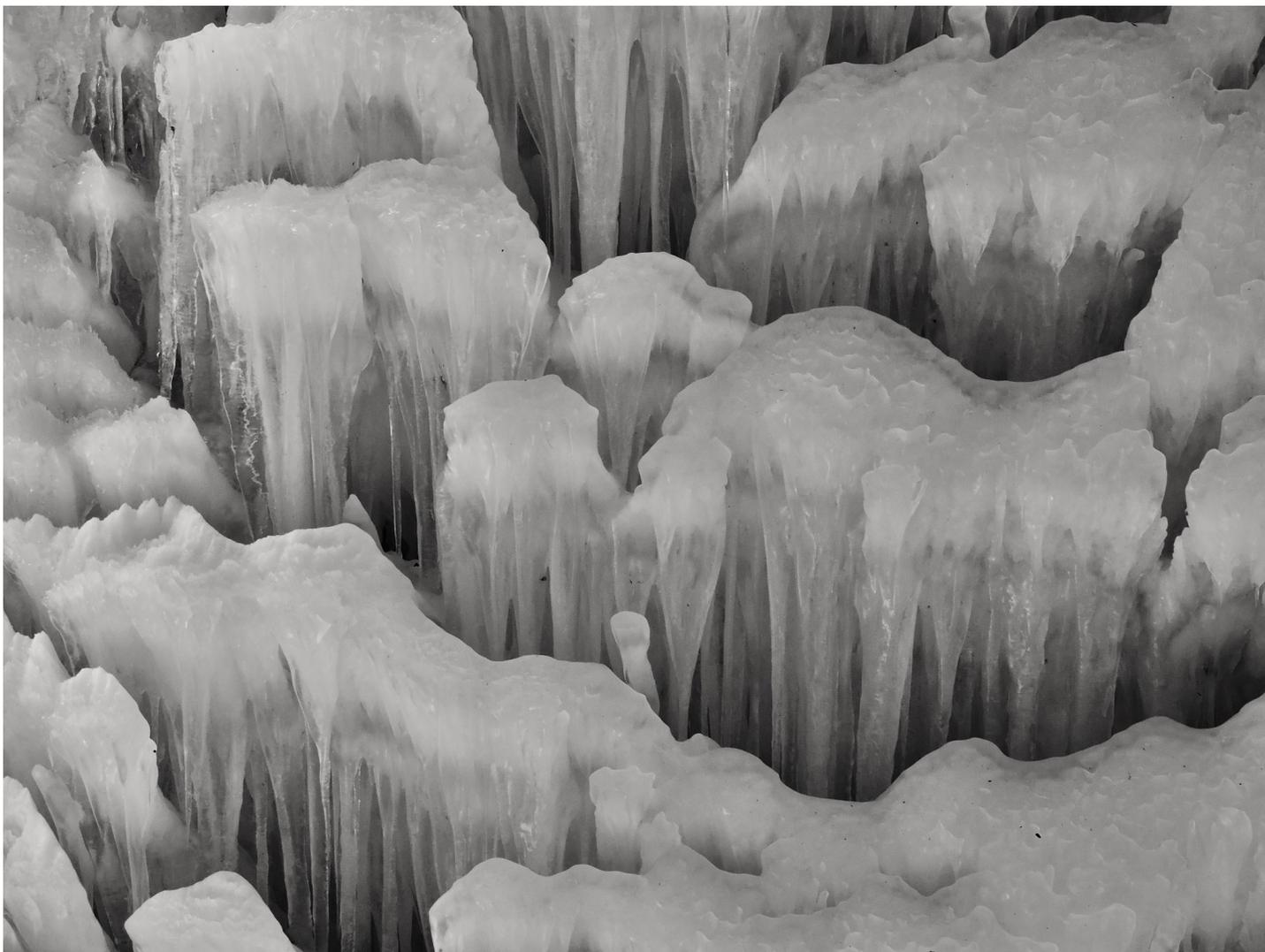


Photo by Jennifer Hancock

A Thin Web  
by Matt Peters

I've tried to make sense of it all,  
but reasoning fails, which leaves me falling  
down again, to where I began  
to misunderstand this life.

If the only absolute  
is the knowledge that there's no truth,  
keep your relativism subdued (because)  
Why would it matter?

Does the wisest man in the world  
know that he knows nothing?  
Or is there something to be said  
about the words written in red?

If fact is fiction, then why this friction?  
Fighting for lies has become your addiction.  
So eager to start a war, but what are you fighting for?

I built my house on solid ground,  
but someone came and burned it down.  
No matter now, the truth I found  
will keep me going.

"One ring to rule them all," one king who never saw  
Rome wasn't built in a day, and it fell just as slowly.  
Empires rise and fall -- emperors wise and strong.  
Rome wasn't built in a day, but it fell just as slowly.

These things we depend on for 'peace' and 'safety';  
thin air, empty shadows, and wishful thinking  
is all they'll ever be.

So gain the whole world and forfeit your soul.  
Sustain your own world, where you're in control.  
They're selling you lies and you're already sold:  
a slave to your throne, a grave paved in gold.

"Better the little that the righteous have  
than the wealth of many wicked."

This world is more fragile than we ever thought.  
We learn from our past, still we're never taught,  
the earth spins too fast 'round a sun too hot;  
the Son forgotten -- selfish, rotten.

Pen is to sword as action's to words.  
It's harder than it seems  
to tear apart, repair the hearts  
inside us cold machines.

"A loveless life is a living death."

Easter Dinner  
by Jenna Skoglund

I was sitting on the floor of the cold, white-walled bathroom with my back against the door, my body shaking with every breath in and sob out. I wanted to avoid showing my family my puffy, blotched face at all costs; I knew my parents were angry with me for dealing with this during Easter dinner, but I also knew I wouldn't be able to hold it together even for the amount of time eating would take. My whole world was crashing down around me. *It was all my fault.*

Our fight that day started simply enough, with just a text message I sent that read, "Happy Easter! I hope you're having a great day!" It was a peace offering. A stupid argument from the night before had left both of us pretty miffed, and I knew I would have to make the first move at apologizing.

"No one gives a shit," he replied. It set my blood boiling. He had set my olive branch on fire. It wasn't uncommon for him to react like this, but lately it had become too much for me to handle. I knew I didn't deserve to be treated like this.

He had been driving me crazy for weeks. If I was honest with myself, it had been more like months. I knew the time was coming for me to break up with him, but after dedicating nearly a year to our relationship, that was something I knew was going to be difficult for both of us to handle. I don't know what had changed in our relationship, but I was starting to fiercely miss the boy I fell in love with on a summer's day when we worked together at camp. Instead of the sweet demeanor he used to have, I was becoming more and more used to his sneer, as we fought at *least* once a week. I was setting the dining room table when I got his response, and with my teeth clenched and my mind reeling, I moved to the family room on the other side of the house.

I angrily dumped myself onto the couch and started texting him back ferociously. *On a holiday? Really? You want to do this now?* I thought to myself. I don't remember exactly what we said in the rest of that afternoon's exchange until I became fed up altogether and told him that our relationship just wasn't working anymore. I was done.

That's when his attitude shifted.

Where he had previously been angry and defensive, he immediately became frantic and apologetic. "You can't break up with me," he said. "Not right now. You can't do this to me." I held my ground as much as possible. I said it was for the best. We weren't working anymore. He said I was wrong. I said I still loved him. He said I didn't, because if I did, I wouldn't be hurting him like this. My heart was beating fast, but I knew this was the right thing to do.

At one point, mom came to the family room with a dishrag in her hands, and told me to get off my phone. "Your grandparents are here," she said, clearly frustrated. "You're supposed to be visiting with them."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm little busy right now," I tried to explain. "We're getting into a huge fight. I'm trying to break up with him, and he's not having it." Mom rolled her eyes and left the room angrily. I could feel her irritation as she walked away; this wasn't the first time I had blown off my own family for my boyfriend, or even for a *fight* with my boyfriend. I had tried explaining to them before that he has bipolar depression and that he didn't mean what he was saying to me, but my family just saw it as me babying him and making up excuses for his rudeness towards me. I was honestly surprised my mom wasn't a little happier that I was trying to break up with him at this point.

My phone buzzed again, which brought my attention back to the conversation at hand. "I can't talk to you anymore," the small text from him read. *Wait...* I thought, *what does that mean?* "I can't live anymore. Don't bother trying to look for me." I sat up and gripped my phone with both hands and read the text again. This was not how I was planning on this conversation going.

As the next text appeared, my body tensed up even more and tears formed in my eyes. "They'll never find my body, so don't bother looking. One last ride into the sunset. Goodbye."

*No*, was all I could think. I knew he was going to be upset when I broke up with him, but I never could have imagined a response like this, even with his depression. I wasn't prepared. I went into what could only be explained as shock. I started crying and shaking and trying to get him to respond one more time to my texts. For every ten or fifteen I sent, I would get one back. *That's all I need*, I thought.

Mom called me to dinner. I stood up. Instead of heading back to the dining room, however, I ran right past my family into the first-floor bathroom and locked the door. I knew they were pissed when I heard my dad say something under his breath about my "stupid boyfriend problems." I didn't care what my dad thought at this point... he had no idea what was going on. The one person that had become so incredibly important in my life over the past year was threatening to end his own... *It was all my fault*. Sitting on the countertop in the bathroom, I continued to text and call him frantically. I knew he wasn't thinking clearly. I knew it was an episode, and I knew that I had triggered it, but I didn't know how to get to him. I *needed* to get to him. Each time I heard the phone ringing in my ear, I sent a prayer up to God to make sure he was okay. *Please*, I begged. *Please answer the phone... Please be okay...*

Time passed in the bathroom, and although I could hear my family chatting at the dinner table, all I could think of was how many more seconds he would be alive. I was calculating how long it would take me to get to the bar he frequented on the other side of town; I was sure he was still somewhere near there... he never strayed too far when he was upset. The laughter and forks scraping on plates in the dining room was all white noise at this point. *I had to get to him*. The threatening texts just kept coming. Scary as they were, they still reminded me he was alive. He wasn't gone yet. He was still talking to me.

My phone buzzed again.

"There's no point to living," I read, the text blurred through my tears. I reassured him that, surely, *surely* there was a point after me. I'm not the be-all-end-all. He thought differently.

"It's too late," he said when I finally got him to answer the phone after nearly a hundred times trying. "I've taken everything I could find." I started screaming at him. I was all but incoherent by this point. "I'm going for a ride," was the last thing I heard him say.

He didn't even bother hanging up the phone as he got on his motorcycle across town. He just put me in his pocket. All I heard for the next twenty minutes until the line went dead were my sobs, the sound of me screaming his name, and his bike engine revving up and dying out against the cold spring wind of Easter.



Photo by Jennifer Hancock

Retribution  
by Emily Stainbrook

King Amulius sat in his favorite chair in his study, a large ornate room with gilded bookcases and books, jewel incrustated tables and chairs, and sanguine colored curtains and carpet. He gazed out the window on the wall right next to the chair. It was his aperture to the outside world. He was watching the dark storm clouds crawl across the sky. They were obstinately clinging to their raindrops to the point of bursting.

A year ago, he would not have longed for a crisis to keep his attention. A year ago, he had longed for peace instead of the coming maelstrom.

But a year ago – at this very hour – he had made a decision that had cost him all that he had had and more.

*"Please, Amulius. I made a terrible mistake. Please, I need your help."*

*"You need my help? Do you really? As I promised you last night, I have no help for you."*

If only he had given her aid.

It was raining now. The rain fell with such force that it endeavored to shake the window from its frame. The thunder reverberated from the walls that circumscribed the village. The lightning bleached the color from the room. The fire could no longer hold the chill of the night at bay.

If he had assisted her, she would still be here, and he would be happy the violent weather had come. The lightning came again and illuminated a single figure in the castle courtyard. Was it *her* or a trick of the light and atmosphere?

The King catapulted from the chair and pressed his hands on the cold glass. He exhaled in a gasp and condensation appeared to block his view. He wiped the proof of his surprise away with the soft inside fabric of his *roquelaire*. He looked for his ladylove again, but she was gone.

King Amulius recoiled from the window, his hand fettered to his chest. His heart was threatening to fracture his sternum. "Romulus!" he yelled, rushing to the door.

The Captain of the Guard opened the portal, and asked, "What is it, my king? Do you have need of something?"

"No... Never mind." King Amulius decided that he had been mistaken. It could not have been her. His love is dead.

"As you command, my liege," the Captain of the Guard bowed from the room.

The King turned around, and could think one word:

*Evelyn.*

Standing in front of King Amulius was a woman. She was clothed in her funeral dress, and was drenched and covered in dirt. King Amulius was held immobile. He could scarcely breathe. What was this gaunt specter that dared to come to him in the guise of his former lover?

The apparition that took the form of Evelyn, but was not, moved about the room as she once did. It went to the window to watch the rain, and then to the bookshelves. It trailed its hand across the back of his favorite chair, and then looked at him, like Evelyn had once. It waited there, as she would have – waiting for him to make the first move. As always, he did.

"Evelyn," he said, barely above a whisper. His longing, wants, and needs all surmised in one word. At this point, he did not care that this thing was not Evelyn. It looked and acted like her, and he longed so much to hear the sound of her voice.

She did not speak his name. Instead, she voiced the name of another. The name of a man he had entrusted with his life. This was the soldier who had pledged to defend the king – even at the expense of his own life.

"Romulus."

Enraged, King Amulius screamed. He shot forth his rage and pain at the betrayal, and decided to destroy the faux-Evelyn. He unsheathed his sword, and with another mighty wail, charged the specter.

“What are you doing, my lord?”

King Amulius pivoted. Romulus stood in the room with his sword ready. The King could hear his ladylove’s giggle, but Romulus, his betrayer, gave no sign that he had heard.

“Do you hear anything?” demanded King Amulius.

The Captain of the Guard listened silently for a moment, and then replied, “I hear nothing, my lord.”

King Amulius was slow to nod. “Then begone.”

When the door closed, Evelyn appeared in front of King Amulius. He gasped crazily and made a wild stab.

The monarch felt a quick pain in his gullet right before he slid into a pool of his own fluids and fell to rest on the floor of his study.

Romulus would linger long enough to tell everyone that it was a suicide – a sword through the king’s own belly.

## Virtues

By Brittany Ste. Marie

Do you believe in love?  
Its soft appearance so divine  
Do you believe in heroes?  
Just like “Once upon a time?”  
Do you believe in Fate?  
The cruel or the kind?  
Do you believe in justice?  
With all of its truth in mind  
Tell me, do you believe in love?  
Everlasting in time

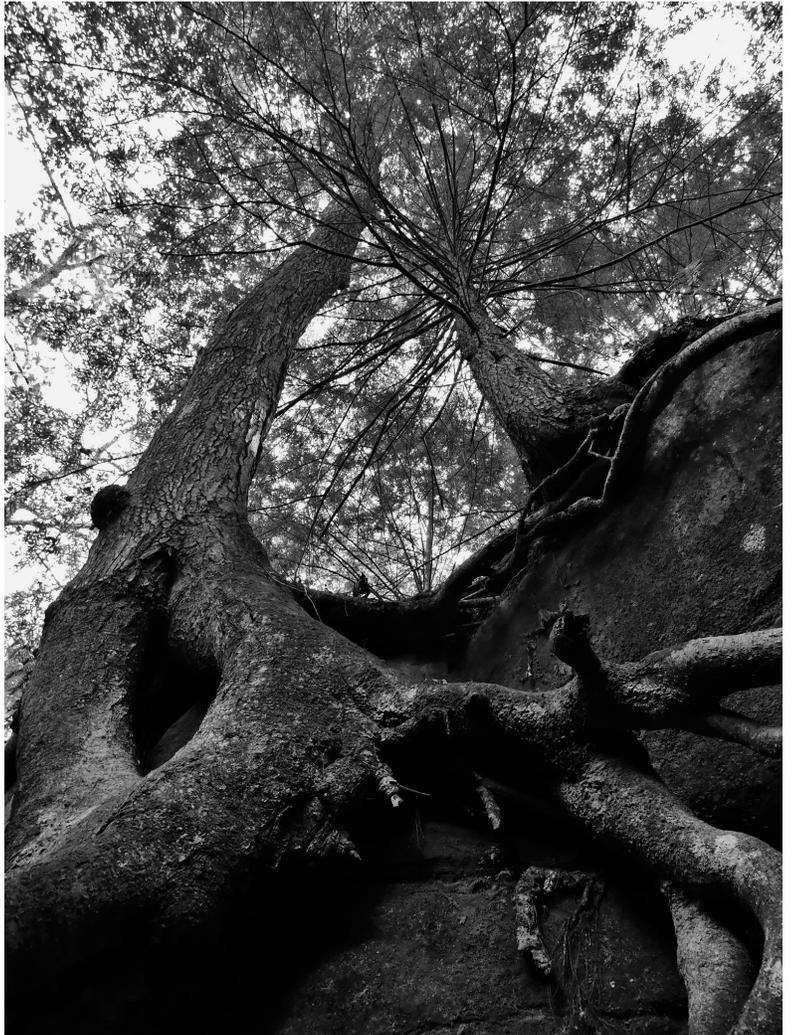


Photo by Jennifer Hancock

Murder of Crows  
By Andrew Knizner

A murder of crows breaks the morning's silence as they fly eastward, high above the steep valley, charging towards the day's first light just around the horizon. Their flapping wings slice through the residing fog as it slowly pours down gentle sloped ravines finding its way to the curvy creek below. The heavy fog gives weight to the air, filling the space between the pines and their needles with wetness. As a white-tailed deer meanders through trees down to the eroded stream the thick mist forms dew on its dark fall coat. Droplets of water collect and grow with each of its steps and slowly hair-by-hair, the droplets trickle down onto its white underbelly where they shakily fall, splashing on the leaves below.

The crow's caws agitate the motionless leaves of a white sycamore feeding from the stream and as they echo throughout the woods spreading like rings after a rain droplet splashes against a still pool of water. The alarming noise causes gray squirrels to drop their acorns and run, their nails scratch off small chips of bark as they climb up the towering white oak trees to safety. Secure in a nook of a limb with their eyes toward they sky they flick their tails back and fourth in concise bursts warning others a predator may be near. As the yelling of the crows fade over the hills, one by one, they lower from their hideouts and return to forest floor to scavenge for acorns, turning over one leaf, and pushing away the next, until the small, round prize is in their claws.

A black cloud moving across the bright sky, the group of shadows competes against their creators high in the air as they both move quickly across the field unaware of the two red-tail hawks standing motionless below. Perched amongst the dense interweaving branches of old red oak trees that line the edges of the overgrown field in rows, like the corn that was once harvested year after year. Slowly, meticulously the hawks hopscotch along the tree line, one moving past the other, only to be passed moments later. Their eyes scan inch by inch, searching for the slightest movement between the maze of sharp briars and dead, dried up weeds that once ruled during the summer months. A flicker of white, a blur of brown; two sets of eyes stare as their prey feeds on the bark of low-lying bushes, unaware of the predators above. In one fell swoop talons tear through the rabbit's thick winter coat and crimson red blood splatters onto the killer's feathers as they tare meat from bone.

Anna, You Need A New Couch

By Marissa Merriman

"Do you know what it feels like to constantly dwell on something for three years?"

"I do."

"*No, Anna, you don't.* You think you do, but you don't."

"Well, then explain it to me."

"I shouldn't have to, you should already know!"

"I want you to make eye contact with me while you talk."

"Stop it, Anna. Tell me *exactly* how you would fix this, just like you used to." Kyra demands condescendingly, with her ghostly-white hands clenched together. Her blonde hair falls in front of her face as she looks down at the floor. She always highlighted it red when we were fourteen, but I finally talked her out of it years ago. I love her "Barbie-doll" look.

She's glaring at me now with her dark-ash colored eyes. They used to be blue, but I think that the internal fire in her stomach, triggered by anger, changed the color. She once described it as a fire that was uncontrollably lit and extinguished against her will, constantly eating away at her stomach and making her nauseous. I've known her long enough to know that the fire is blazing right now.

I write that down.

Not only is she angry, her jaw is clamped shut, and her leg is anxiously bouncing up and down. She has an anxiety problem. I know, because I diagnosed it myself, but why is she anxious around me? We are best friends, sisters! I love her so much, but she hates me. Why? I didn't do anything wrong.

She also looks sleepy. Her eyelids must be heavy because the bags underneath them are still as big as they were three years ago. That constant commotion of chaos within her brain must have never stopped. She never could figure out what was wrong with her, which is why I stepped in as a best friend to analyze her life and explain her problems to her.

I write that down.

She's currently sitting on the greenish/yellowish couch that we bought together. It's comfortable, but it suddenly appears uncomfortable for Kyra. It's an old couch, but when we first sat on the soft-texture, she said that it felt safe and comforting, like soup. It was something that soothes sickness and keeps us warm. However, she commented on the stiffness and vomit-color earlier today. She perceives the couch as "trying too hard." Supposedly, the only reason for me keeping it is to "salvage an outdated furniture style" that no longer belongs in our room.

As for the rest of the room, the floor is dark-colored hardwood, even though it used to be rosewood. Dirt from the outside accumulated on the floor over the years and stained it dark. Kyra doesn't mind it, but it bothers me. Kyra doesn't understand why I desire to spend money replacing the floor when I desperately need a new couch. The only furniture we agreed upon was that couch, and she doesn't like it anymore.

I also chose a vintage design, blue and red wallpaper. Kyra chose the black, leather, reclining chair that I'm sitting in, right across from the couch. The desk that Kyra picked out was on her left, with a black computer chair next to it and a PC computer monitor on top of it. There are no windows, so my bright, elegant lamp is sitting on top of a nightstand to Kyra's right. It sat right next to the candles, filling the room with midnight pomegranate, Kyra's favorite. My large, white shelf was stacked with books to my right, opposite of Kyra. They ranged from my teenage-girl novels to psychology texts.

Our style tastes have always been very different, and that will never change. Kyra loves the dark. I, on the other hand, need the light. But so does she, whether she knows it or not.

She is rolling her eyes at the long silence. I know she thinks that I'm not listening to her. She thinks that I am just focusing on *my* own thoughts. She thinks that I will never understand, no matter how hard I try. *That pisses me off.* I understand more than anyone, I'm her best friend. She needs me. I *know* she needs me.

I write that down.

"That's not exactly how this works, honey." I sweetly say. Kyra gives me another glare. What did I do wrong that time? I'm being comforting. That's my job. I'm supposed to be motherly towards her when she acts this way. I want to tell her exactly what to do, but she won't talk to me; she never did.

"Then how *exactly* does this work, *dear*? Because I sure as hell don't know how else to explain it to you." Kyra snaps. I force a deep breath, uncross my legs, and push my straightened brown hair behind my ears. My make-up covered amber eyes find their way to the floor, no longer making eye contact.

Why does Kyra have to be so difficult? She needs my help, isn't that why she came back here?

"I want you to tell me how you feel." I reply, looking back up at her. I feel frustration boiling up inside of me again, but I don't show it. I have to be perfect in every sense of the word, or she won't trust me. And I am perfect. I am.

"Why are you still doing this? We're twenty years old now, Anna. This isn't working anymore, it never did! Just like this fucking couch. It doesn't belong anymore!" Kyra yells. I ignore the comment about the couch. I don't understand why she keeps bringing that up, and why is she frustrated with *me*? She's the one who can't get her shit together.

I write that down.

Afterwards, I blink worriedly at Kyra and bite my lip. As usual, I cannot figure out what happened to cause my sister to become so closed off. No matter how much research I did or how hard I tried to get Kyra to talk to me, it was like prying information from a brick wall. All I want is to flick on Kyra's light switch to finally bring her back to how she used to be. I love her. I want to see her smile again.

"I'm doing this because I love and care about you. You need me to help you, but I also need you to help me out a little by telling me what's wrong." I explain. Kyra shakes her head.

"I don't want this, Anna." She whispers with exhaustion and I nod.

"I know, honey. But this is something that you have to do to start feeling better." I respond confidently. Kyra scoffs...at what? Me? *I'm* right. She *knows* I'm right. Yet, she's shaking her head at me like a five year old having a temper tantrum.

I write that down.

"You still don't get it. Why did you apologize after all this time if you clearly need me to remind you how I feel about how you treated me after our fight?" Kyra asks. I sit back in my chair, stunned by the question. Sure, I apologized for the fight itself, but I still did nothing wrong. She started it.

"I treated you fine. *You* came back here to see me, remember?" I ask, feeling very confused. Kyra throws her hands up in the air and stands up from the couch. I sit forward in the chair again, ready to defend myself if necessary. Kyra can get very violent sometimes. I never have nor will start a fight with her. She paused and then spoke.

"I want closure. I apologized for snapping at you, but you did more than just snap back at me. Now, years afterwards, you stupidly think that a fake apology will establish forgiveness!" She screams angrily. My jaw falls open.

"I was sorry about how everything ended back then. All I did was cut the toxic people out of your life so that you could go back to normal. I protected my best friend and *you* pushed *me* away." I defend myself. Kyra runs a hand through her blonde hair.

"Well, I don't need your charity anymore. I know better now." She states. Why did I even apologize? I am the perfect friend, the perfect person. I did *everything* right.

I write that down.

Kyra snatches the pen right out of my hand and snaps it in half. She hands it back to me. I gape at her.

"Write this down. I don't need this 'therapy' room anymore. I never really did." She whispers harshly, walks towards the door, and opens it, allowing light from the hallway to pour in. She turns around one last time.

“And again, Anna...you need a new couch.” Kyra adds, before walking into the brightness and shutting the door. The light bulb and candle burn out. Darkness suddenly surrounds me. I don’t know what just happened...but I guess *it is* time for a new couch.

I write that down.

Constructing Tradition  
by Angela Shrader

When you first fly into Japan as a foreigner it is not what you expect—from coast to coast there is concrete. You strain your eyes to see as far as you can across the land of the rising sun, but there is no green. History and photographs deceive your mind, making you believe Japan is lush with bamboo, shoji walls, and Buddhist gardens that burst with bright lotuses floating atop green lily pads in golden koi ponds. But all you really see is grey, and so landing in Osaka brings a slight and immediate disappointment.

Initially it is easy to get caught up in the buzz of Japan. The cities run like clockwork—the people, the transportation, the lights. When you step foot on their land you become one with the city; you don’t have time to trail behind. As people say, there are places to go and people to see, and the Japanese, albeit kindly, are busy with both. Kyoto is no exception to this way of life.

Kyoto is bustling city, swimming in history and tradition. If you walk through the historical Gion district of Kyoto you find that somehow this city suddenly transforms from apartment complexes, businesses, and paved streets, to traditional Japanese houses and cobblestone walkways. Walk across the street from a certain bus station and there is a castle surrounded by a mote. At the end of all the modern shops on Shijo Dori street, the entrance to Yasaka Shrine greets you unexpectedly with bright red torii gates and hundreds of paper lanterns lined up like soldiers. Occasionally, you walk through the streets downtown and see a maiko walking with her makeup and geta. If you’re lucky, a beautiful geisha in a traditional kimono will be posing on a bridge for a photo shoot. She is stunning—black hair decorated with pink flowers and silver combs, her eyes lined with charcoals and bright crimsons. She looks as though she has stepped out of a page of a Japanese history book. You’re guaranteed to do a double take because all you can think is how you’re possibly seeing this when you just walked past another foreign tourist in khakis and a Hawaiian shirt. But this is the mystique of Kyoto—a city immersed in the jarring, yet belonging, tradition and rich history of Japan.

If you travel northwest of Kyoto by shinkansen, then by train, and then by bus, you eventually reach a village known as Shirakawago. From the train you watch the scenery speed by becoming less and less the concrete grey and more of the deep greens you expect of a bamboo-filled Japan. The green hillsides at the base of mountains are decorated with rice fields on manmade plateaus. The hills scoop out into valleys that cradle brilliantly blue rivers outlined by jagged but pristine rocks. As you travel the lands becomes more whimsical and enchanting until you finally stumble upon Shirakawago. Nestled in the foggy mountains of the Japanese Alps, this village is cooler. The heat of the pavement trapped in the buildings and streets of the city is gone. Here it is light and refreshing when you step outside. The bus drops you off in a parking lot. You must walk across a long suspension bridge that hangs over a river. In the summer it is half river, half a dusty mote of rocks and dirt. When it rains it grows to a roaring river with runoff from the mountain. The river protects the village from the outside.

When you step off the bridge into Shirakawago, you realize it is not like the rest of the cities in Japan. The roads here are mostly dirt and gravel, with the exception of the main roads built in for tourists. The houses are gassho zukuri—a style of traditional Japanese house built with steep, thatched roofs. They are dispersed throughout the village, popping up like brown toadstools among the fresh green of the grass and rice fields. Beside the homes, another incongruent mixture of Japan shows up. Next to these houses, which seem almost primitive in nature, cars are parked,

reminding you that you are not so far away from reality as you may have believed. Although the village exists outside of the hum of the city, the modernity seeps its way in.

The uniqueness of Shirakawago is in its *gassho zukuri* houses and the history of their construction. The houses are individually designed to withstand the harsh heat of the summer and the pressing cold of winter storms. The roofs are built to withstand strong winds coming in from the valleys and are all built parallel to the wind. Constructing a *gassho zukuri* house was developed from years of necessity. Groups of isolated people in the mountains of Japan learned the best way to construct the houses and their roofs, and now it has become a way of life. A roof must be made in a day or else it will mold and rot. Neighbors in the village must come together to build the roof. The process begins with straw they have harvested from their farms that has been grown and dried over the seasons. If starting from an old roof, all of the old straw must be removed and sorted from the good and the bad. New straw must be bundled and added to the roof first, followed by new straw mixed with good old straw which is added at the top of the roof. Once the straw has reached the correct thickness, the roof is done and the neighbors eat, rest, and celebrate their accomplishments.

If you look at the roofs as you walk by the houses in Shirakawago, you can always tell newly constructed roofs from old ones by looking at their thickness and the color of their straw thatching. New roofs are thick and golden. Old roofs have been rained on and pushed down by snow storms. When they emerge in the spring and summer, they are chocolate brown, sprinkled with the emerald hues of moss. The people and houses survive here by their traditions, unchanged by the turning of the world, but molded by that which the world has given them. Shirakawago shows these traditions to the world, opening its gates to foot traffic only during special hours and days of the week.

The odd thing about Shirakawago is its sound. When you sit in the doorway of a *gassho zukuri* home, seated on a *tatami* floor and your feet hang out of the *shoji* door, you begin to notice the sounds. As you look into the village, you are surrounded by mountains filled with pointy evergreen pines that peak out of the haze of a rainy day. The raindrops become short ticks that drum against the creek below your feet. The peaceful silence of Shirakawago is its sound. When you leave the village and return to the city, you begin to realize that this peace is a part of all of Japan. The subway dings when the door opens, and the people inside whisper quietly. In a Shinto shrine filled with people, you can hear the rustle of Japanese maple trees or the soft *click-clop* of two women's *geta* against the ground. Hand claps in the distance, a hallow bell being rung, the sounds of the cars passing by all melt together to form a sound.

You can see bits of this tradition in everything the Japanese do, whether it is a unified sound of peace or people coming together to create a safe haven. The shrines, temples, and castles that blossom among the concrete cities are like vines crawling up to escape the westernized world. It is a strange part of Japan in which the past melts into the present.

All around Japan you can begin to see the changes in their way of life. The westernization that has become so popular in the east has begun to whittle away at the beauty of over a thousand years of traditions. In its own special way, Japan has turned itself into a living museum. This is why you can walk down the small streets of Gion and catch the eye of a geisha. This is why a small Shinto shrine is built among the shops of the shopping district. Japan has adapted to modernization, just as the *gassho zukuri* have developed, despite the world around them becoming new. Japan's traditions and history have had to learn to thrive among the modernity. The pressure of westernization has molded Japan into something new, just as the winter reveals the *gassho zukuri* roofs to be strange but beautiful. It is this constant changing, but thriving of a culture and its traditions that makes the country come alive. And if you look close enough over the city from the mountains, you can see the green among the concrete.

#### Footnotes

*Shoji*: traditional rice paper doors used in Japanese houses.

*Tori*: Shinto shrine gates characterized by reddish-orange color, two vertical posts, & two horizontal posts.

*Maiko*: a geisha in training, often characterized by similar fashion to that of a Geisha.

*Geta*: traditional Japanese footwear made of wood, much like thong sandals, worn with kimono.

*Shinkansen*: Japan's high speed "bullet train"

## Nightmare

by Emily Stainbrook

I stood in the middle of my mom's section of the hotel room. My arms were crossed, and I was looking out the far wall. No, I don't have x-ray vision. The wall is made entirely out of glass, just like the wall to my right. Out both walls were cameras that moved back and forth. They were high tech stuff that some supergenius had invented. I could see cameras hanging off of every surface that could hold them.

My sister was sitting in a chair facing me and the solid wall beyond. She was slumped down in the uncomfortable green chair. My sister had brown hair and eyes and freckles all over her face. She was wearing a gray t-shirt and teal sweatshorts.

My mom was sitting half on, half off the queen size bed eating her dinner. My sister and I had already eaten. Mom was picking at her food.

"So none of us have any idea why those people might be after us?" my mom asked again, for what had to be the millionth time.

"Those people are batshit crazy, Mom. They don't need a reason," I said, glaring at the cameras.

My sister sighed.

"Language," Mom chastised me absently. She didn't really care anymore. My language was the least of our worries.

Mom played with her food for a moment longer in the silence, then she pushed it away. The bedspread, I noticed idly, was hideous.

"Any idea who they might be?" my mom asked.

My sister shook her head. Normally she was more vocal. Normally I wasn't so snarky. My mom seemed tired. This... whatever was going on couldn't last much longer. Something would break, and that something would be one of us – then all three of us are doomed.

I couldn't hear the man in the other part of the room, but I knew he was still there. He hadn't said anything since he had been assigned by the police to guard us three days ago. I knew he was still there because I hadn't heard the door open. We had all the locks set, so it would make noise.

"It has to be a supergenius," I said suddenly, and as I said it, I knew it to be true.

"What do you mean?" Mom asked. Viv, my sister, looked at me like I was crazy. The supergeniuses were closely watched because they are some of the most powerful superpeople. With minimal effort, they could set the countries of the world against each other *and* set off all the nukes.

"Those cameras were designed by a supergenius. Everything the cops use was designed by one supergenius or another. It would take another supergenius to upset them. We should ask a superhero to give us a list of all the supergeniuses."

As soon as I finished speaking, two pistons in every single camera that I could see, rose up and down like shoulders trying to get loose. Then they shuddered to a complete stop and the blinking lights on them stopped blinking.

There was a short beat where everything seemed to freeze, and I couldn't catch my breath.

Shit.

I turned and ran through the hotel room. Our black Labrador retriever was curled up on one of the double beds. The man that was supposed to be guarding us sat on the other. I ran for the bathroom, which was right next to the entrance. The bathroom was small, and the door had problems getting past the toilet to shut. I didn't bother trying to shut the door, it would make too much noise and whatever was coming would know I was there. I crouched and hid in the farthest corner I could. I was between the door, the tub, and the toilet.

The dog came to me, wondering if I was okay. I grabbed her collar and made her sit on my lap. Everything seemed to be moving so slow... but I felt that I had no more time left.

I was out of time, and I couldn't get the lump in my throat to go away.

There was an explosion and the door splintered into pieces into the room. Dust was everywhere, but most of it stayed out of the bathroom. It was hard to see what was going on. The dog flinched and barked. I pulled her closer and shushed her. It was important that she not make a sound. The muscles in her legs were quivering, but I held her tight.

A man in black walked into the room as the dust was settling. He raised a gun in his right hand and fired into the walls from left to right. Our neighbors panicked. They shouted at each other. They screamed in fear. I heard a female voice under all of the noise that sounded like it was answering questions from a 911 operator.

The only thing I could think, as I clutched the dog tighter, was that those bullets were going to go right through the walls to shoot the neighbors. The walls here were very thin.

I could only see the man. He stood in front of the bathroom door, but for some reason, I knew that Viv has straightened up in her chair, but hadn't gotten out of it yet, and that her eyes were as wide as they could go. I knew that my mom was sitting on the floor between the bed and the wall and in front of the nightstand.

The man with the gun started shouting about how someone owed him something and how someone wasn't right – how someone was lying and different from how they should really be.

Then he fired his gun again. And I knew – the same way I knew what Viv and my mom were doing – that he had just shot the policeman that was supposed to be guarding us, and just as quickly, I knew that my family wasn't the target. Our guard was. There was a wet *thunk* and I heard something make a sickening *crack*-ing noise. I closed my eyes and did my best to pretend that I had no idea what the noise was from, even though I knew *exactly* why.

"You should be black instead of white," the lunatic screamed. And even with all the stuff I knew about what was going on, I had no friggin' idea what that meant.

The crazy, gun-toting loony started looking around the room. Then he asked, "Where's the dog?"

For some reason, I'm able to answer, and even stranger, I do answer. "The dog's in here," I said.

"Ahh," the crazy guy said, and then he smiled at me, like I'm his friend or something. Then he raised the gun and fired it before I had a chance to process the situation. My dog got shot in the ribcage, and I started crying, because my dog's just been hurt and because I know that my dog is going to die.

My dog's going to die.

"Oh, don't worry," the lunatic says, "I don't think she'll die. Do you think she'll die?"

Then my smartass personality came through. I looked at the wound in her side. It's bleeding like mad. "I don't know," I snapped through my tears, "I'm a student, not a doctor." I pressed my hands to her side, trying to stop the bleeding without pressing so hard that I cause her more pain.

The man laughed, and then he left.

There's a man bleeding in the other part of the room, and I knew that I should help him. But with that eerie certainty I had about my dog, I knew that the man was already dead. So I didn't move to help him. I made my dog more comfortable on the hard tile floor. She's whimpering and she's not moving and that's not like her because she's always moving. She never sits still for long even if she's sleeping because she's a really light sleeper.

Everything is really quiet now. I suddenly don't know what the rest of my family is doing, and my tears are falling like Niagara. I don't hear the neighbors, but a couple of TVs are still blaring. I hear a couple of sirens in the distance. They're too far away, and I doubt that they have a veterinarian on hand.

So I was right. My dog is going to die, and I can only pet her cheek with my bloody hand and tell her that it's going to be okay. That everything is going to be okay, that she'll be up and chasing birds and raccoons and bunnies in no time.

The sirens get insufferably loud by the time Mom and Viv come over, and my dog's breathing was becoming less labored, and I couldn't help but think that was a bad thing. Viv is shaking with sobs and clingy. My dog gives a shuddering sigh, and then doesn't breathe again.

Not once did a superhero come to save me.



Photo by Jennifer Hancock