

FROM SAC

Life
DEATH

2014

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Welcome to the world of writing.

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Edited by Elison Alcovendaz, Tess Perez, & Jon Alston

Layout & Design by Jon Alston

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We are volcanoes
erupting fiercely when we're young
cooling and weathering as we age—
we will nourish the ground behind us.

On the Mountain

Those who brought their vehicles to Coleman Bevel for repair knew him only as the man who fixes things. The shop consisted of one garage space and scores of toolboxes cluttered to the brim with grease-laden tools. The filth accumulated so heavy, no amount of cleansing would make them new. The same

was said of Coleman's hands, rendered black and oily from his years of fixing broken parts. He wore only his overalls and procrastinated their washing. When asked about his stains, he would shrug and rub the grease between his thumb and forefinger and, watching their faces, would smear a long black line down his blue overalls.

He owned Dave's Auto Repair between K-Mart and Shawl's Party Rentals and, further behind the shop, the restaurants of Hamburger Hill loomed before the hills and the breeze often sent down the scent of char and frying oil. Most of his days were spent seated outside the warm office adjoining the garage, spitting chew that popped into his Folger's can in almost rhythmic timing. A Pepsi-Cola machine, long unplugged and empty, stood in the lobby, dust-covered and lonesome. Coleman had offers to sell the antique machine but claimed it still smelled of Perry Aust and would not part with it.

When a customer arrived, Coleman simply listened to the vehicle and, within minutes, made a proper and accurate diagnosis. Even when manufacturers inserted computers into the engines, he only used his senses. His vision gave Coleman a mythic quality among the residents. An aged prophet that speaks to metal. Some even believed he lived in the garage among the parts and tools like some mad pied piper. Enchanted instruments of his trade. However, his dwelling resided behind the shop, one bedroom stripped of luxury. He slept on an old army cot he stole after his discharge. He used no pillow and only a thin sheet to warm him.

Several believed that ever since Port Lake, Coleman Bevel had existed. At times, he may have believed this myth. His father took him fishing along the channels of Lakeside Park before the county parks lost money and the weeds and hydrilla overtook the surface. He recalled roads only of dirt and homes spread miles apart, connected by pear orchards or

post and rail. As a child, he walked those dirt roads and smelled the clouds of dust risen from the earth and the fallen fruit ripe with ferment. Blackbird flocks shape-shifting above the tree tops. The smell turned artificial, heavy and rank with tar as the road to their home turned black. Then the bitter fragrance of moist earth at his mother's open grave.

Contrary to his legend, Coleman had not lived in isolation. While stationed in Greece, he crashed, drunk, into a bicycle while running the streets, breaking the toe of a young woman named Kassia. She was born in Patras and attended college in Athens to study philosophy where, she believed, true enlightenment originated. After the war and his discharge, he remained, traveling to Patras to meet her family and ask her father's hand. Her father accepted him, but, without Coleman's knowledge, would eye his skin with a mixture of rancor and fear he would not voice. After the wedding, they purchased

a cottage at the base of Mount Panachaikan and, on warm nights, swam in the shallow, sandy inlets of the gulf, letting the water slide over their moist bodies as they leapt from outcroppings and slid into the waves. Two months after the ceremony, Kassia discovered her pregnancy while shopping in the marketplace. Though scared, they discussed parenthood and the life they would provide for their child into the night. On the day of the birth, Kassia struggled for a day to bring the child into light and it arrived a silent son.

After, when Coleman touched her hand, she shied from him and rolled to her side. Words repelled her. His consolations passed over her, and she leapt to the sea from the white cliffs of Mount Panachaikan while he walked the fish market in search of dinner. Her father cursed Coleman's seed as a 'black demon' and threatened to take his life if he remained in Patras. That evening, Coleman slipped from the cottage he shared with his wife, leaving everything behind, and headed

toward the docks. He hid in the bowels of a large cargo ship for several weeks until it landed in Massachusetts. He spent the scant money he brought with him until he stammered out one night and broke his front tooth on a curb. When daylight shone on him, supine on the sidewalk, he saw his reflection in a shop window and a bitter taste flowed through his mouth. He never looked at himself again.

His thumb carried him three thousand miles west. His arrival in Port Lake came unannounced like some mendicant staggering through silent streets for a voice to hear. His scorched body, weary and burdened from coast to coast, soldiered on the dusty roads before collapsing in front of Dave's Auto Repair, owned at the time by Perry Aust, a heavy, robust man plagued by a voracious sugar addiction. Perry witnessed the fall and rushed out, Pepsi bottle at the ready, and poured pop over Coleman's face, the rivulets of dark liquid washing across his skin.

There Coleman rested and began his craft, shadowing Perry as he tinkered with engines and parts of the wounded vehicles given to his care. The young, wandering apprentice spent his first years cleaning tools and parts, handing the instruments to Perry even before he asked for them. When Perry had finally acquiesced to allow Coleman to work on a client, he finished replacing a timing belt and alternator within twenty five minutes. Perry shook his head and, afterward, reminded him that they were paid by the hour, not the minute.

Two years later, Perry Aust died half-immersed in the engine of a 1961 Chevy Bel Air, his lower half limp against the right fender. Coleman pounded on his chest and listened for breath. When the ambulance arrived and lifted the heavy, covered body onto the stretcher, Coleman wondered if maybe his father-in-law's words had merit. He inherited Dave's Auto Repair by a stroke of good fortune due to the rancor Perry's only

child bore for the place. He sold it to Coleman for fifty cents since he had to put a transaction amount on the deed.

Coleman continued to fix things. He harbored a subtle hatred at the work of his hands. His mind knew, repressed to the crevices, that what his hands fixed time would break again. At night, he dwelt on this notion and often, if he slept, would dream of that 1961 Chevy Bel Air and no matter how many times he turned the key or pondered the dilemma, the car remained lifeless and he could feel the stare of Perry Aust tisking from heaven.

During the recession, Coleman sold the Pepsi-Cola machine to an antique dealer who needed brake pads for twenty two dollars. The decision pained him but he used the money to buy a fan for the office on the humid, summer days when the algae reeked off the lake. However, after the first warm day, the relief he received from that fan bore at him and never used the fan again.

Coleman lived his hermetic life as a disciple of miracles until an older, nameless lady, widowed by the Vietnam War, came to replace her coolant at Dave's Auto Repair. Then her oil. A week later, her tire pressure. Her garrulous voice overwhelmed Coleman but he listened while he worked with his hands. It was summer and he felt the heat waft from his overalls, bent and determined in the garage. She did not wait in the lobby for her tire pressure. She ignored the "EMPLOYEES ONLY" sign above the door and entered the garage. Coleman, surprised and soft spoken, stood before her, grimy, dropping his stained hands to his sides. He saw the hazy waves between them. They stared at each other and she came forward, lifted his black hand and placed it in hers, running her delicate fingertips across the jagged callouses. Their lips closed in on one another within and without time. The contact of their lips painful and liberating and so intense they pressed into one another as if

digging further for the cure to such enduring loneliness lay on the other side. When his lips touched hers, the lull of traffic from Highway 20 shifted to the crash of waves and, in a surge, he pushed the woman away and began to weep, rubbing the grease across his lips. The widow, enraged, stomped from the garage and Coleman never saw her again.

The widow's mark remained with Coleman for years. Her floral perfume would not wash out of his overalls and the aroma reminded him of the buds blooming along the foothills of Mount Panachaikan. The ocean current riding the breeze across his skin. He found the aroma vile and, after the fourth washing, resolved to place the overalls in a metal barrel, imbued with oil and grease, and set it afire. He watched the flames through the night and inhaled, the smoke watering his eyes, naked like some mad shaman conjuring demons long forgotten. The flames continued to burn. The orange light danced before him, casting a tortured shadow up the wall of the

garage. He recalled his father's words, holding his hand as they crossed the parking lot of Rube's Kitchen, describing how shadows are made. He told him even though we all stand in the light, we can never escape our shadow.

Years later, while working under a Honda Accord, Coleman's breath stopped. The paramedics took him north past Little View Correctional Facility to the hospital where he stayed for six days. Doc Rob met him there after the surgeons had finished and advised him he needed to take better care of his health. This prompted Coleman to leave against Doc Rob's orders and he returned to work, though the experience plagued him. In the summer, he taped a handwritten WANTED sign outside of the garage. Within a week, he had hired a skinny teenager named Larry Holiday Jr. to assist him. In Larry he saw a promise of youth he once knew riding his bicycle through the cobbled streets of Patras, where his wife's skirt flitted from his

handlebars and his knuckles brushed against the smooth skin of her legs. He spoke seldom to Larry, gave merely succinct orders, but, when the banners for the Labor Day parade were hoisted on the lampposts and telephone poles along Kelsey Drive, a sadness settled into his heart at the coming absence.

Larry Holiday Jr. worked with Coleman Bevel all summer, learning little about mechanics and spending his shift tuning the radio, searching for grating rock songs that Coleman despised. Larry asked Coleman who Dave was and Coleman smiled and remarked that he had asked that question once. Though Larry's mechanical abilities were lacking, Coleman dedicated his time to instruction. His slow, smooth voice and gnarled finger pointed at wires and hoses and belts within the engines and his paternal tone guided Larry with a delicate patience. When Larry finally installed a battery on his own, Coleman hugged the young man and held beyond the time their relationship mandated.

Larry smiled and listened as Interstate Love Song blasted from the tinny radio.

On Larry's last day of work, Coleman handed him an envelope with no words or ceremony and turned, shuffling to his one room annex, closing the door gently behind him.

The next day, he entered the garage and loitered near the entrance. A Toyota Corolla needed work but all he saw were the floor's blackish stains he knew would never be washed away. He sucked heavy breaths through his nose transfixed on those stains, the chemical scent, and, through the open window, the oceanic lull of Highway 20. A heaviness settled in his chest and the longer he lingered, the weight of the wrench in his pocket sunk. The lull from the window seized him and he only saw the bottom of the ledge and the white froth consuming the rocks. He closed his eyes but saw the sound clearer. He hollered a quick burst into the garage that came back to him and stomped forward. He

removed his keys to unlock the bathroom door but realized he had lost it of his own volition. He stared at the sturdy handle then raised a boot and plunged his leg through.

He reached through the jagged hole, unlocked the bolt, and swung the door open, an aged creak he thought his heart may make. His eyes fixed above the sink, at the distant face reminiscent of his own, and shuffled closer, pushing the shards across the linoleum, until his hands rested on the ledge of the sink. This postponed meeting only lasted a moment and the lull of the traffic crept through the fragmented door. He knew, no matter how many doors he closed, that sound would never leave. He reached into his pocket and slammed the head of the wrench into the face before him and dropped the slick tool into the sink.

He could breathe and his limbs flittered with energy. He trotted back to his annex and tore at the sewn seam of his cot and removed his life that had been buried. He counted it

then hired a nearby travel agent in the plaza next to K-Mart. Within one week, his tickets arrived. He read the departure and destination over and over again and did not sleep until the bus arrived outside Dave's Auto Repair early on that morning. He did not look back through the tinted windows, nor did he lock the doors. The landmarks of his existence faded behind him, past the train tracks, and the hills ahead shrunk before him.

The teal water below caused his body to tense and he whispered to himself he had made a great mistake. The plane bounced down and landed several miles from the sea. He chose to walk the distance and greeted those in his path in the manner of the country. The people moved faster and the familiar landmarks had all been torn down in favor of time. But, above the clamor, the peak of Mount Panachaikan drew him forward like a semaphore. Four hours, spent and drenched, he returned to the cobbled streets.

The house where her family had spent generations now sold t-shirts and mugs bearing images of Mount Panachaikan. He asked a young girl twirling her dress outside the shop who lived there but she squeaked and ran inside. He walked through the dense urbanity, at times confused if he had actually returned, but always caught sight of what he sought. The villagers began decorating for the Patras Carnival and he marveled at the floats and décor. The dirt trail of the great mountain climbed and he climbed with it. Passing the wind farm and casting trepid glances outward toward the sea. His body rebelled but he pressed on against the incline.

When he reached the spot, he paused as if his arrival signaled an end and leaned upon his walking stick with the breeze across his skin. The lull of the ocean below bathed him in memory, the sound cocooned his spirit. A small patch of grass grew at the headstone and he labored to rest next to it. The sea

expanded beyond his vision but he cared neither to move or reminisce. The ocean's song music to ears he had long forgotten to use. He rested his hand and felt the grease on his overalls. He jumped to his feet and pulled and strained at his covering until his body was free. Naked save his briefs, the oceanic breeze caressing his exposed skin, he held the overalls suspended against the edge. The marine water vibrant and vast. The simple gesture of opening his hand had long eluded his capabilities but, as he towered over that thieving ocean, he released the overalls to the wind and they glided down, down, down, and he watched their descent through weepy eyes until it was lost and swallowed among the waves. From the side of his vision, he saw a young, dark haired woman and her son clutched at her chest. Her hair whipped about her face and shoulders and the boy's amber eyes caught hints of the sea's reflection. Their eyes connected for that one brief moment and he

let the cool water stick to his cheeks and his muscles creaked as they learned to smile again.

The City

“A kind of map of the mind, or of life...”

-Alan Williamson

We always sought out our parents' attention
in the houses of our summers,
the hose water on hot asphalt driveways
shaded by tangled American flags.

They were the good old homes,
the backyards where we played games of
quarters
to see whose knuckles would bleed the most,
and the public pools, jumping off diving
boards
with open containers of red food dye
when the adults were around and watching.

There were the personal rites of passage:
walking the german shepherds and black
labradors
to the wooded creeks that expunged funny
smoke odors and slapping sounds under the
bridge,
running miles on the main street's dirt
sidewalk
to the closest McDonald's for a large
strawberry shake.

The one rule was to be inside by the time
the first signs of night arrived

and we asked why the sun had to go down so
fast,
pretended to understand the laws of physics
and time
in the simple explanations whispered to us.

(One morning, a man clearing out road kill
found a boy's body in a drainage ditch
next to what was left of the raccoons and
possums.

The boy's grip still cemented on his bicycle
hand bars.)

Under our forts composed of bed posts
and dark-shaded linens, we listened
to each other's horror fables in an attempt
to desperately prove how every single one of
us
knew what danger was and how to conquer
it.

It wasn't until later in our lives that we
realized

at that age, we were no longer invincible
and learned all there was to know of
independence.

Cup of Fury

When my father looked to see my reaction, I first looked to Peter to see his. Peter always behaved correctly. At the moment his face had gone pale. He was obviously sick over it. I turned back to my father and mimicked the same expression. I believed it was the response he expected. The photograph was

unsettling, and yet, the truth was that it didn't really disturb me.

I was ten and Peter was twelve. We had been on vacation in Europe for three weeks already. We'd seen the magnificent landscapes of Bavaria and Switzerland, visited old fortresses, cathedrals, museums, and grand chateaus built by provincial kings of the late middle ages.

The concentration camp at Struthof was something different, and wholly unexpected. I had heard of Nazi death camps, unimaginable places where millions were killed during the Second World War. This was the first time I had come face-to-face with the sight of one, and none of what I saw seemed real.

The picture in question was hanging on the wall inside the museum gallery. It was an ancient photograph of several small boys, all about my age. Each was naked, bare skin clinging to their bones.

The walls of the gallery were adorned with similar photos. So many images of death.

Nude, lifeless bodies, rotting away by the hundreds. Men, women, and even little children; some strewn randomly onto the earth, others stacked into orderly piles. Every one of the corpses was so thin and bony that they were barely recognizable as human.

Our guide spoke to us in English, which she pronounced with a distinct French accent.

“The Natzweiler-Struthof camp was built to hold political prisoners.” She said. “After the Nacht und Nebel Directive in 1941, anyone suspected of activism against the Nazi regime was sent here or to similar camps.” She paused. “That is, unless they were executed first. Captured members of the underground resistance, as well as those caught helping grounded American and British pilots. It also held Jews, Gypsies, and other minorities, including homosexuals.”

She continued. “It is the only death camp that was built in France, although technically

Alsace was part of Germany at the time, annexed by the Reich after the invasion.”

Prior to entering the museum, we'd been to see the gas chamber, which was outside the gates.

“Struthof was a ski resort before the war,” our guide had told us back at the gas-house. “The Nazis converted it during the occupation. The gas building we are standing in actually used to be the dance hall of the old hotel.”

The chamber looked like a large empty bathroom. Tiled walls over a concrete floor. It reminded me of the showers in the boys' locker room at school back home in California.

“Prisoners who had been selected to be gassed were brought here. Their clothing was stripped off, their heads shaved, and then they were forced into the chamber. The door locked them in, and poisonous gas came through the vent you can see on the wall over there.” She pointed to a narrow slit about

thirty centimeters wide. “Once they realized what was happening, it was too late.”

What a terrible way to die. Still, I was unmoved. It was not that I didn’t care. In part, I suppose it was because it took place so long ago. History, it seemed, was always about war and death.

The museum, which housed the photo gallery, had been built directly on the foundation of one of the old barracks. It was warm and cozy within, a comfortable setting erected in memory of those who died without any shred of comfort.

Most of the other buildings no longer existed. When we went outside I looked over the ruins of the camp. It lay on a downward slope, a large empty field on a hillside in the Vosges Mountains. There were concrete outlines in the ground where numerous barracks once stood, the final living quarters of the victims. I tried to imagine this place filled with thousands of people.

Beyond the barbed wire fence was forest, thick and lush, the beautiful vegetation of the Vosges. Towering in the distance were endless rolling green hilltops. The camp seemed out of place. Such a contrast to the spectacular view, an awkward strip carved out of nature.

Our guide led us down the hill, past the old foundations where grass was pushing its way up through cracks in the concrete.

At the bottom of the grade we entered one of two original structures that remained, a building called "The Kitchen", which I assumed was where they prepared the food. Once inside, we were shown the oven, an enormous machine made of brick and clad in iron. But this oven was not used for baking.

Something within me was giving away. A woozy feeling came on as all I had seen started to become real. Still, I pushed the upsetting thoughts aside.

We continued through the building. In another chamber we saw a large table

covered in white tile with a sink at its base. On this rigid slab, the Nazi doctors used prisoners as subjects for some of the most terrible medical research ever performed.

I whispered to my father, “What kind of research?”

He merely shook his head.

As we moved from room to room, I noticed something that our guide did not mention.

“What are those poles, Dad?”

Three long iron rods, each five or six centimeters thick, were hanging from chains attached to the ceiling.

My father waited for the rest of the group to exit the building. He then took one of the dangling pieces and lifted it slightly so that Peter and I could see its base. It was curved up into a hook, the end carved to a sharp point like a spearhead. It resembled a fishhook, but it was so big. Big enough to hook a man.

“Sometimes, Alex,” he said, “as a means of torture, the guards would lift a prisoner up

and pierce him right in the ribcage. He was left to hang, for days, or until he died.”

I put my hands protectively over my chest. I could almost feel the penetration of that enormous, rusted tip through my own ribs, and the pain of being suspended on the iron with no hope of release.

Outside the building, at the lowest point of the camp, was the ash dump. It was a grassy ditch, at least thirty meters wide, with a cross-shaped flowerbed in its center. It had been filled with earth after the liberation and recreated as a monument.

The guide pointed us to a photo posted nearby which displayed the same site when the camp was in operation. The dump looked like a giant sink made of concrete, the size of a public swimming pool. At its base was a barred drain where the rain and melting snow had washed down the ashes of unknown thousands of people. Their remains had mixed with the soil below, returned to

nature, and grown into the lofty trees of the forest.

I could no longer ignore the creeping realization. The gassing. The starvation. The torture table. The hooks. The oven. The ashes. All of it. Death surrounded me. It lingered in the air like a thick, dark mist.

I did not understand. Were the Nazis purely evil? Was there no other way to satisfy their hatred?

I turned to my father. I had so many questions. But when I saw him I said nothing, for he merely stared on silently with an air of solemnity and reverence.

Back at the top of the hill a memorial for the dead had been erected. A tall, monolithic statue stood overlooking the camp. It was rounded into a spiral, slanted diagonally so that a center peak pointed unabashedly toward the sky. The outline of a human figure was carved on the inner side, its form thin and deathly, like the bodies I had seen in the photographs.

Somehow this image, etched forever in stone, represented so well the terrible suffering that took place. At least to me it did. But I was never a prisoner. I was incapable of seeing it through the eyes of those who lived and died here.

Behind the statue, extending for hundreds of meters, I found dozens of rows of tombstones. Each had a white plaque attached with a name embossed. I suspected they were only markers, laid above empty ground as a tribute to the victims.

I walked among the graves for some time, alone.

The sky was a deep blue with high, scattered clouds that crept up on the sun, casting an occasional shadow over it, though only for a short while until it shined through again.

The sun was bright and hopeful. It gave life. It caused flowers to grow among the granite tombs. It shed light on the forests and

illuminated the breathtaking green of the hilltops in the distance.

Humanity endures under such light. We live. We die. We love and we hate. We fight and we kill. But collectively we grow.

Submerged

The bubbles, the air escaping
my lungs.

But you don't let me

you bring me up.

I stood at the rock's sheer side

No toes testing water

I have to dive –

–

–

–

I'm all in

and if you're there with me

when I splash-land in the cool pool below

then we both win.

In a Place Outside of the City

In attics and in dens children flip through yellowing photo albums to seek their origins in the faces and eyes of the departed. For years the older generation had skirted the issue, fabricating tales of emphysema and consumption, diseases done away with time and the advancement of modern medicine, as

though the very mention of outdated illnesses might also eliminate the curiosity of the young, the unconvinced.

Still, when they've grown, these same children continue to dig up old journals and request microfilm from libraries, slide after slide cursing their family name, the burn spots and splotted ink of old headlines looking more and more like blood and grime than truth.

Boys of a certain age pushed the buzzer all day long and ran, their friends perched behind dumpsters and corners, all of them hoping to glimpse what lay inside. More often than not it was only security, a strongman with a shiny head and black boots. The man's crude voice would echo through the empty streets as he threatened to split open the skulls of those who dared test him.

Sometimes, when perhaps the strongman was preoccupied with an unpaid bill or else distracted by an urgent call of nature, a

young woman would appear in the doorway, and the mere sight of her proved to be worth the foolhardy risk. This slender girl of twenty would dart her eyes from left to right, scanning the street until these boys made themselves known through whistles, cat-calls and applause, at which point she'd shake her head and smile, beckoning them inside with a slow, curved finger, the large wooden door closing slow behind her.

Rooms so hot all year long that men could taste coal on the tips of their tongues and in between teeth; in this way they'd sweat out a despair held within.

But even the most alert among them could not distinguish passion from danger; they'd mistaken the scent of sulfur for spoiled makeup or perhaps fragrance mixed with sweat, an intoxicating mix that led them to self-congratulatory sleep.

An era before forensics. Days of conjecture and pure speculation. As the original theory goes, velvet curtains specially ordered from New York City had been installed in every room with no regard for their proximity to wood and gas stoves. Whether or not these drapes ignited the original flame remained inconclusive; experts would only note that the curtains had been installed two days before the event, and not a spool of the plush red lay intact among the ash.

But only a fool could believe that fabric was to blame for such unprecedented horror. No, those who wanted a better tale believed that this was the work of a jilted lover, a woman gone mad, who for months had plotted revenge on her adulterous oaf of a husband, setting fire first to the rosebushes outside the compound, and then shimmied her way through an open window into the kitchen, whereupon she loaded the ovens with bottles of kerosene and replaced a boiling pot with pinewood logs.

Acts of desperation, once considered noble. Used to be a man would duel for his woman, and not only go to war for her but start one.

And so myth built a gangster who ordered his underlings to firebomb their competition and escort the servant-girl, the sole survivor, to safety. The way some liked to tell it, this charwoman inhabited a small adobe house just outside of town, denying until the day she died that she'd ever received blood money, insisting that she'd purchased her bungalow outright with the help of sympathetic donors from the community, from endless insurance claims and lawsuits filed on her behalf.

How stories started and spread was anyone's guess. Either way, the zealots had a hand in it, rallying their cause against social ills. The response team, too, had used the incident to demand more men, more money and resources to prepare for and prevent the next one.

Soon, though, a series of train hijackings stole the spotlight. The population's attention proved fickle, diverted by a parade, by holidays and paleontological discoveries in faraway lands.

Summertime. In the wheat fields where they had been shucking corn, three farm-children claimed to have been visited by a benevolent spirit. The youngest, a girl of seven, fell silent and was bed-ridden for days afterward and when she rose, she was found cured of what would later come to be known as respiratory tract infections, which she had suffered from since birth. The middle child, a cross-eyed boy of nine, told the papers all that he could: that it had begun with a low murmur, a woman's voice calling them toward the creek, but once there they spotted only a family of rabbits across the way and a lone deer sipping downstream. The following day—same hour, same chore—they followed the voice again, but this time, high in the

branches, they spotted a young woman with a pale face and an impish grin looking down upon them. Concerned that she might fall, they begged for her to come down, but as the sunlight shifted through the leaves, they were temporarily blinded; once they had recovered their sight, she vanished.

In each successive encounter the woman came closer and closer to them, sometimes standing in the middle of the creek or sitting upon bales of hay. Her mouth did not move, but the children claimed they could understand her through gestures, though they could not explain to anyone—not even themselves—how this was so or what had been communicated.

They kept her a secret at first, but when their mother had discovered them standing in silence outside the barn staring at nothing, she grew distraught and had their vision and mental health checked at the clinic in town. The physician claimed that the children were both mentally and physically sound, and he

assured the mother that they were only playing the kinds of games invented by youth. When, however, this game did not stop, the mother pressed them until at last the eldest, a lanky girl of thirteen, cracked. The three children sobbed in unison, for fear that they would be punished, or that the woman would no longer come now that they had spoken aloud her existence.

But the sightings continued, and the mother, unsure of what to do, invited a priest to bless their home and to exorcise any evildoers from the land. Word soon spread, and from three towns over, a hypnotist came to place the children under a spell to discover what they knew. Only the boy answered, knocking his heels against the chair legs with each answer, but the story remained unchanged, and nothing he hadn't already confessed came forth from the dubious experiment.

Nearing the end of summer, a farmhand kept an eye on the children round the clock.

At that point, the sightings came to an end; the children returned to folding clothes and making baskets, and there was no longer any voice or apparition to fill the ever-expanding recesses of their minds.

Wind blows leaves, dust, and twigs across the gravel lot; the very same which once cooled pies on windowsills at night and served as a welcome relief on scorched summer days. Sometimes it became so harsh that it blinded men or formed itself into a dark funnel cloud. When it reached such a state of fury, it went where it pleased, took what it wanted, damn the consequence.

The Great Equalizer laid flat everything in its wake and threatened a good deal more in its unpredictable trajectory.

Another round of whiskey for the men returned home from the war. They've been home for three months now, but they've no shame riding out the hero bit so long as it

gets them discounted drinks and laid. In a few hours they will go upstairs, good and drunk, to once again prove themselves men. The youngest of them, an auburn-haired boy of seventeen, coughs into his fist after every dropped glass, his fellow comrades and superiors laughing and haranguing him to take his medicine like the good soldier he is, the one he ought to be; he had, after all, been in combat and seen men die, hadn't he? He downs the dark brown liquid again and again, each swallow more harsh than the last, until at last his head drops to the counter, his pink tongue lolls about like salmon inside his mouth; the others clink glasses and shout hurrahs all around him.

It's his first sound sleep since before the war, and he dreams of being back in the trenches. The slush and crunch underfoot, the straps of his canvas bag digging into his shoulders, the sweet smell of rain punctuated by gunpowder, and later, the ineffable stench of the dead.

His comrades had performed bizarre rituals to amuse themselves. One sucked on bullets as after-meal mints; another nicked the fleshy underside of his hips with a hunting knife to mark days passed; and yet another, upstairs long before the night's drinking had begun, discussed at great length and in graphic detail his sexual proclivities and perversions.

All of the men had survived just as he had and would spend the rest of their lives, just as he would, asking themselves why this was so.

In another dream he was alone in the trenches as he'd never been, and when at last he stomached the courage to pull himself up to the azure world awaiting him, he saw men from both sides of the conflict seated at a large banquet stretching from the homefront to enemy territory. A marvelous feast for miles on end, consisting of sautéed lamb and roasted duck, buttermilk biscuits and cornbread, boysenberry pies and gushing foun-

tains of cheese and chocolate. He reached first for a goblet of wine, but once brought to his lips realized he hadn't the capability for taking in a single drop, for his mouth had been wired shut. The drink dribbled down the front of his shirt, staining his otherwise spotless uniform. Upon closer inspection he saw too that his fellow soldiers and combatants had suffered the same affliction; they looked to him as though he alone held the key to relieve them from their collective misery. Whereas the others had resigned themselves to quiet starvation, he grabbed hold of all that he could—a turkey drumstick, a vine of grapes, a slice of ham—and pressed it to his face, hoping that his body might remember how to consume food, digest and live. When at last all of this failed, he grabbed a steak knife from the center of the table and with two hands inserted it blade-first just beneath his nose.

He awoke with a start and found that he was in the middle of conversing with a young

woman behind the bar. She wore a purple robe of silk tied together by a loose-fitting belt, and he could gather that little else existed underneath. The woman, he somehow assumed in his semi-conscious state, was one of the girls from upstairs who'd come for her morning espresso. She was talking to him now of a man to whom she'd once been married from the age of fifteen, but who had left her long ago once he'd gotten it into his head that he should move abroad and try the life of a painter. This husband of hers left her penniless and alone and when she could no longer bear it, she took to the streets discovering each night that she would do the kinds of things she never thought herself capable of doing, all just to stay alive and to hopefully, eventually, earn enough to fund a voyage home, thousands of miles to the east.

Hard to say if she'd been playing him for a fool. He hadn't spoken to enough women, especially those of her profession, to know

when they were telling the truth or only trying to bend him to their will.

But in this regard, he hadn't been quite so innocent, either. When he came home, it wasn't at all possible to tell his family that he'd been frightened sick during his entire tour of duty. In fact, no one had wanted to discuss it at all. They thanked God he was home; they hugged and kissed him, cried grateful tears over him, and then life went on. Everything he'd seen and done—some good, most awful—he had no choice but to keep to himself. Other soldiers had written and sold books about their experiences, and although some of them captured in essence the whole ordeal—what they'd survived—each always fell just short of getting it right.

He followed the purple robe upstairs, and after they'd both undressed, she asked him what was the matter. He told her that he hadn't been with anyone since before the war, which was only a small untruth since he considered all of life to be a never-ending

battle. She understood. There was a girl before the war, he continued, a fragile thing whom he wrote each and every night, telling her of all the gore and violence that had become his every day, a great deal of which he himself had inflicted and come to own. Probably he'd said too much which was why she no longer held up her end of the correspondence. When he returned home, she was already with child.

The woman lay by his side, head propped on her fist, waiting for him to go on. Some men liked to talk.

The boy-soldier stared at his hairless feet as he recalled the first open wound he laid eyes upon, a man's entire chest cavity exposed to the high grass and wind, how he gasped his last breaths as blood trickled from his mouth.

He believed he saw the man's heart beating beneath his ribcage, but knew that this was impossible; after all, he didn't stop and stare as a medic must, but instead

turned away, and only long after they'd tossed the wretch into an unmarked grave, he knew then that he would never know for sure what it was he saw.

This last part he didn't tell her.

Finally, the woman used her charms and hands to pull him from his thoughts, and after they'd finished, he put an ear to her flat chest and listened for the pulse of her heart; once located, he awaited a synchronization with his own.

An overexposed photo: a flash of disembodied leg, a woman's, ascending a wooden staircase. A calf so toned she must've had other hobbies. Tennis perhaps. Cycling. Did she do these things because she enjoyed them, or because they were all that was available?

The rest falls into place: a small woman, dressed in colorful, breezy cotton for the house was always humid. Comfortable, stylish, seductive. Easy to slip in and out of.

Dimples, of course. A tiny mole to the right of the bridge of her slender nose. A full head of shiny brown curls and a perpetual look of having just awoken. But when it came to conversation, alert. That way of drawing a stranger in like they were the oldest of friends picking up on a conversation they'd left decades ago. Even the most off-balanced of them she could understand, put at ease. Love, she had always suspected, was a quieting of the mind, shutting down the factory gears and letting music run its course through a person's veins.

Some men, though, were not yet ready—or in some cases, incapable—of hearing this music. These deaf men slapped her about and choked her, spat upon her, rubbed their coarse whiskers against her neck and cheeks. With these men she'd stare up at the ceiling, or bury her face deep into a feathered pillow thinking of nothing, trying only to stay awake.

Like most others she took drugs but never as a form of payment—house rules. But a tip was a tip, and she liked her downers more than her uppers: opium, a bit of morphine, Tilden's Extract. Under the influence she traveled to thoughts she hadn't visited before, from this point to that, but one step back was as far as she could go, and from there she would only move forward in a different direction, a wild uncertainty she never could've anticipated or dreamed up in her regular frame of mind.

There were days she would like to have forgotten. Days where she floated from room to room, person to person, maintaining civility and dignity as best she could, but where every word and gesture lacked any substance—commentary about the lack of rain, where one was from, what he did for a living, how the price of rum had risen in weeks past. On better days she remembered what a schoolteacher had once said: "All men are united in their suffering." But good days

were few and far between, and her concept of hardship turned into a kind of unspoken competition with herself and those she encountered.

Mornings she spent alone by the creek. There she liked to watch the sunrise, a magnificent splash of color that spilled high above and through the sycamores, and she'd dip her feet into the cold, cold water, a morning ritual inherited from her grandmother who once said that doing so would lead to a long, robust life. And although she'd long passed the point of wanting such things for herself, she still enjoyed the icy shock and sensuality of digging her toes into the mud-bed for its immediate warmth. In this way she could sit, pondering the current lives of long-lost friends and relatives. On occasion she'd think that everyone was capable of seeing the spectacle she beheld, if only they had the discipline to rise when she did, to put all else aside for the moment and to look.

Sometimes, though, when maybe the sunrise wasn't so moving or at its best, sinister thoughts crept up inside of her. She'd think about the axe wedged into a stump behind the barn, how she'd pull it up with all her might and charge head-first into the house, swinging at whatever stood in her way. There was also the Remington repeater in full display above the bar, never kept loaded, but a box of ammo was only a buck-fifty and a short trip into town. In their sleep is how she'd do them, each and every one, dragging her nightgown from one room to the next, down pillows atop their precious heads to muffle the sound, smoke and feathers dancing in the moonlit rooms.

The ringing. Breakfast time.

If only she could stay this way with feet submerged an hour more. Forever.

It starts with land. Land turned into property and onto the acreage a home is commissioned.

Laborers marvel over the size of the project; they wonder what its owner, a bachelor of thirty-seven, intends to do with three floors and a dozen rooms. A dormitory, perhaps. A hotel. At the end of the workday, the workers return home to their small wives and houses to scorn their ungrateful children.

Over a bland dinner of potatoes and unsalted pork, one laborer contemplates every wrong decision he's ever made: marrying into this family instead of that; choosing not to travel West with friends; lacking foresight in his youth to pursue an education. The wife in her knitted bonnet offers a weak smile, and after his meal the man goes out onto the porch to smoke his pipe.

This is not good enough, he thinks. This will not do.

Through the window he watches his woman clear the table, catch crumbs with an open palm, and then wipe away a green

streak from the baby's mouth. He wiggles his toe through a hole in his shoe and the sight of it leaves him filled with dread and longing. He pulls off his shoe, dropping his pinch of tobacco in the struggle, and though he intends to chuck it far off into the yard, the shoe hits the porch railing, which in turn chips away at the already decaying wood. He swears.

During his smoke, he thinks to join a mining expedition. Some years ago he'd read in the paper about coal miners in the North who'd struck gold. Their happy dirty faces made the front page, and for a while the story had given him hope that his whole life could change in an instant.

A bank heist was another option.

He puts away these silly images of himself: black lung and halfway to the earth's core; splattered head to waist with the insides of a teller. His was meant to be a tame and mediocre existence. The sooner he could

accept this, the happier he'd be. The happier they all could be.

The following week on the job, he begins to steal. At first it's easy pickings: he lines his pockets with screws and nails, fixes himself a belt and necklace of copper wire, tucks a thin hammer and screwdriver into his socks. In a bunker back home he stockpiles these goods, and plots to transport them across county lines come spring.

Soon, the thought occurs to him to apply his new hobby to other aspects of daily living. Why buy a piece of fruit from the market when he could simply walk off with it? An unexpected rush flows through him during this initial act, a feeling from boyhood; it is the manic thrill of being alive.

The cabinets and ice chest at home are filled to the brim. The wife asks no questions; she is ecstatic to come home to a well-stocked pantry—to a loyal, loving husband who can provide.

But too quickly this sensation dissipates and his actions become normalized. He continues to thief but takes greater risks, as he recalls a business principle that the reward in turn shall also be greater. He leaves the markets and shops with bulging pockets. He no longer looks over his shoulder.

Lying alone in bed one morning he wonders if this is what he really is, what he has become: a petty criminal. A small-time crook. Somehow it seems that his life has gotten away from him, and he worries that his sins do not accurately reflect the man of principle and righteousness he'd once envisioned himself to be.

He's never caught. Instead, he learns from co-conspirators how to operate on a grander scale. They bribe bookkeepers and cut back-end deals with local proprietors. It's astonishing for him to see how far a bit of confidence and intimidation can carry him.

It's only a matter of time before he purchases land of his own and a crew of men to keep close.

When it went, it went, and so did everything else right along with it.

Death, the oldest profession of all.

All they kept were words they couldn't speak and wouldn't write. They couldn't defend themselves, nor should they have had to.

From the age of four, a boy learns the works of great classical composers.

His parents are no music lovers themselves, but they come across a used piano at an estate sale and think to put it to use. The mother plays a chord here and there, a ditty she remembers from grade school, and the father is able to play somewhat well, but his arthritis flares up, and he stops trying.

At first the boy pounds his fist on a clump of keys, then runs his left elbow along the lower end. He wonders why his noise sounds ugly and blunt compared with what comes from the crackling records his mother plays every morning. Fortuitously, he strikes a similar note in one of his favorite songs and then loses an afternoon picking the needle up and placing it three-fourths of the way in, then playing his note at the same moment it occurs in the song. He finds another note and then another, until at last he's acquired part of a melody. He shows his mother what he's able to do, and when he finishes, she kisses him on the head and tells him how very good he is. He shows his father, too, but the man only tells his son that his timing is off, that the positioning of his hands are all wrong and that if he wishes to make any kind of real progress, he will need to learn from a professional.

And so his father hires a solemn Russian woman to teach the boy how to play. The

piano teacher only looks at the boy's hands and at the notes in front of him. When the boy plays an incorrect note or fails to keep time, the teacher strikes him across the back of his hands, and he is told to start from the beginning. By the end of the month, his hands are covered in welts. Because of this, his mother makes him wear mittens, even though it is springtime and warm.

When he is six he performs his first recital at school. Though the audience is quite small—only a handful of classmates and their parents, all of them grim and exhausted—he worries that he will fail them, that they will not be entertained or pleased with his performance. But with an act of faith he begins, only to falter once he realizes his counting is labored. For a moment he forgets what numbers are, the syllables in his head sounding alien and incomprehensible. Two wrong notes ring out, and a loud cough rips through the audience, though its owner remains anonymous among the dim faces. He

manages to continue, keeping good time and no longer doubting himself.

Afterward, his parents meet him outside on the church steps. His mother smiles, and then pulls her hands out from her jacket pockets to put them soft and warm around his ears. She brings his face to hers and tells him how very proud she is. His father looks off and nods.

The mistakes stay with him for the rest of the evening; they keep him up at night. They have followed him home and in the dark the black measure appears upon his bare walls like shadows from a spinning lantern. He tries to imagine his performance as a whole, but there are only the undesirable seconds he recalls. Time collapses upon itself, and that first production dissolves into his memory as an endless loop of inadequacy.

The following morning, he tells his parents he wants to quit, but his mother tells him he has a gift, and that it would be a shame if he didn't pursue it. His father only reminds him

how much the lessons cost, how much they've invested in him already, and how he refuses to see him dawdle away his best years of learning. The boy listens, and although he doesn't care for their answers, he comes to accept and believe that there might be some truth to them.

From then on, he resolves that when he plays, he will do so only with the utmost perfection. He practices until his welts have healed, until his Russian tutor has nothing to do but listen and turn the pages for him. His mother buys him a secondhand suit, and together they attend concerts in in the city, where talented men convulse over polished grand pianos, drawing the air out from the auditorium and leaving their audiences suffocating and wanting and hysterical.

On the train rides home from these performances, his mother hums her favorite melody from the evening as he stares out the window, wondering when his time will come,

wondering if he has it in him what it takes, if he has it in him at all.

He continues to play flawless recitals at the school, and even though more and more come to see him, he begins to view his followers as unsophisticated nobodies. They are nothing like the pretty city women with their fur coats and done-up hair. They are nothing like the dashing men with silver timepieces who seem unimpressed with their high-class women. These are the people he wishes to play for. It is their praise and adoration he craves.

At night he fantasizes himself up on that grand stage, playing like he's never done before, as if his body were no longer a part of him, that it did not and never would belong to him. He sits in the front row of the auditorium downtown and marvels at himself, at the glory and magic emanating from his body possessed.

After a holiday performance at the school, he announces to a sold-out house that he will

no longer perform for them. He thanks them for the kindness and support they have shown him—he reads this from scrap paper taken from his front shirt pocket—and then walks off the stage while the crowd chatters and seethes their displeasure. His parents, too, are shocked that he's made such a public revelation without their knowing. This time, though, unlike when he told them he was quitting for good, they are not upset. They do not scold or lecture him. They recognize his sincerity and allow him to pursue loftier goals. Here, on this night, he receives his first taste of respect. How it must feel, he imagines, to be an adult.

In his teenage years he enjoys moderate success as a pianist in the city. During the day he washes dishes and evenings he plays small nightclubs and restaurants for city folk. On weekends he auditions at large venues.

The competition at these auditions, however, proves fierce. There are boys and girls younger than him, some even half his

age—prodigies, someone calls them—and he watches them, astonished. Alone in the middle aisle he feels cheated as he watches; the image of his tutor burns in his mind, and he curses her name, her pale, plain face. How she'd taught him nothing. Nothing at all. Whether from the beauty of the children's music, or by the failure he now recognizes himself to be, he's overcome with emotion. He curses his mother. All this time, all along, he'd been a fraud.

In a month he's fired from his last odd jobs for missing too many shifts, and for showing up to the job intoxicated. But he does not let this bother him. Instead, he feels liberated, able to come and go as he pleases. He walks for miles and drinks and waits for the day he runs out of money.

On one of these walks, he happens upon a house just outside the city. Inside, they have more to drink and young, pretty women who, if not for their overdone blush and sultry

evening gowns, resemble the elegant city women he once aspired to entertain.

When one of the girls learns he can play, he does an upbeat number while she sits on his lap. A small crowd forms around them. Her voice is shrill and off-key, but no one seems to mind, and when they finish, those around them applaud all the same. They buy him drinks and feed him. Later, they offer him a small room behind the stairs. It isn't much, but the bed looks plush and comfortable, as if they'd been expecting his arrival for quite some time.

He lies in bed to the sounds of the party outside his bedroom door, a brouhaha of clinking glass, laughing and singing that reminds him of being a child on New Years' Eve. He wants to be a part of it still, the wild and reckless joy beyond the thin door, but his body does not cooperate, and his head sinks deeper and deeper into the cold, lush pillow.

Midnight in South Lake Tahoe

After the casinos
and the winning cash out slips
acting as coasters
for the free vodka drinks,
the hotel pillows harden
inside the lakefront
rental room illuminated

from the television.
Shows about killers,
their victims and methods,
hatched out plots and executions,
but mostly their desires.
Outside, the waves haven't turned
to summer temperature yet
and their coldness coats
the sand further
with each new current.

Somewhere near, a dog relieves itself,
turns to sniff the uncovered tracks,
and howls up for an owner.

Carousel

*I don't like when you say I remind you of
people. I'm me.*

You're watching a movie. Images sounding like romance, sounding like gunshots, like people saying the sounds of words. She wants to be Billie Holiday. Her image singing the blues, while her 'I' suffocates in an unmarked grave in Florida.

Who would you be if you didn't have the Pride Center? If you didn't have school, your friends, who would you be?

We aint never been to no amusement park, got on and swung from the big metal spinning top looking thing with all them lights, rainbow lights when it's dark and cloudy. I had my eye on this one seat look like a birthday cake. Powder blue, gold trim, had wings on the side. Man, usually the seats pitched together with bars and different colored tarps. How they expect you to sit on that uncomfortable mess, I don't know but these sights are something else. I may get on and if I do, I'm going to get that seat. But now I see another chair that looks just like mine with a different rider. Swear it's a mirage or someone fell asleep at the movie projector, running the same clip. Don't they know birthday cakes are supposed to be special? Personal? I probably should be somewhere else like the water rides or the highflying attractions. Swings' kid stuff anyways and I got to get grown sooner than later like, daddy say.

I'm going away from your blues.
Away from your middle class black
Girl trying to be black and whatever (you
claim) queer means,
Feminist ass that can't fall for the sake of
falling, bruise for someone else
Or throw away your head wrap, long skirts
and Thelma and Louise boots
White male camouflaged in a black woman's
body.
I watch a movie clip of Hitler giving a speech,
burning his blood,
A movie clip of Malcolm X saying things
Watch you talk the talk of Pharaoh,
After the seventh plague.
I would welcome you to the land of milk and
honey
But you are no giant killer.

You are theories.

You are a Pride Center.

You're a show at an amusement park that
hasn't changed its act eight years.

It ain't a question of whether you believe something or not. It's a matter of what you want from something. Nobody's gonna give you a ride on the carousel if you sittin there dwindling your thumbs and nobody's gone ride it just cause you asked. It's not about the rider, there's a whole picture. Seats carry people, and people don't have no idea what they're doing there, they're just riding, you're watching them—connecting-like. A kid's in my seat—I'm a kid on the carousel—my story: their story. I'm my turn in line. Me walking away. And if I'm swapping stories with this person, they're taking a part of me and I'm doing the same with them—not knowing it.

Why don't girls like when you tell them they remind you of someone?

Because they don't want to be like anyone else. They want to be original and unique.

I'm in the place
Before the image contorts
To an edit—
Away from you who will not break
your vanity mirror
your movie projector
And sing the blues.
The camera will eventually
Run out of film.
I will not wait for your blues.
I will not wait for you to raise from the dead.
I will not wait for the camera to
Stop and reload.
A dark space can't be filmed
With stage light.
You are two plagues away.

We are in the land.

It's silly. There aint no point in lines for a carousel. Either ride or don't. Roller coasters, safari rides, those is different. People too excited to ride a fast ol scary ride that could kill em probably—and lines make you sit and think: dag, do I wanna ride around in creek water just to see what you see on TV or a museum some place? A carousel different. The type of ride you sit through and let it take you somewhere. Flying don't have no restrictions unless you make em.

Lines. You should be able to go on when it's time. Not cause the conductor or some thin rope says so.

I get on before we leave, before the front gets crowded, and I can't find my family. When you ride a dipping happens. Probably from the weight of the riders or maybe it's a trick the conductor plays or maybe it's the ride, liable to mess with the flight. Even so, you're moving, along with rainbow lights flashing against a black sky, on the brightest ride in the park. I'm watching the folks in front of me with their arms out or looking out to see the people. I look out to the park—the lights of the stands and rides look like firefly's beaming all over a king size backyard. I stretch my arms out—go limp.

The **THEME** for 2014 *was* **Life** and **Death**. But not just people dying or people being born. True Life. True Death. The Death we don't speak about, the birth that is uncomfortable and confusing. We're talking metaphysics, here. Think beyond your grandmother's funeral, the birth of your first child, that time you found a dead Blue Jay on your door step that your cat brought you as some sick joke. We didn't want that. Consider: what does it really mean to die? what does it really mean to be born? what does it mean to exist, then not? what does the fox say? That's what this issue is all about.

(the) Contributors

Jordon Briggs

(Carousel)

First, thank you, God. Cherishing what's around me is important. This makes curiosity more accessible to me as an artist, writer, and critic. Things in the world become wondrous and I can't do anything but start writing, thinking, and exploring that wonder. Thank you to Tess, Jon, and Elison for providing this platform for local writers. Thank you, parents, grandparents, and friends.

Visit me on my film and art review blog whatsbeenscene.tumblr.com. I got to promote a little!

Marc André McAllister

(Cup of Fury)

Marc André McAllister is a French-American author and artist who has spent his life between Northern California, Strasbourg and Paris. After a successful career as a software developer, he has returned to school to finish a degree in Philosophy at Sacramento State. He relies largely on the cross-cultural experiences of his youth as inspiration for his writing. His written work has been featured in the literary publications, Page & Spine and Linguistic Erosion. His visual art recently appeared as the cover work for Fall 2014 issue of The Milo Review. He is currently completing his first novel, "Summer Rain."

Marc can be contacted via his web site at:

www.marcandre.com.

His visual art can be viewed at:

lookingglassscene.blogspot.com.

Nate McQueen

(On the Mountain)

N.T. McQueen is the author of the poor-selling novel, *Between Lions and Lambs*, and the even more poor-selling novella, *The Disciple*. He has an MA in English from CSU-Sacramento after enduring through classes of Henry James and literary theory which he suspects the department awarded the degree out of sympathy and the fact he didn't gouge out his own eyes. He lives with his long-suffering wife and is incapable of creating male offspring as evidenced by having three daughters. To compensate for this inability, he bought a crimson-burgundy betta named Mushu.

He is no stranger to failure and has received Tolstoyian sized volumes of rejection letters from journals, magazines, literary agents, and publishers. However, he is well equipped to handle disappointment due to his

fanatical, if not masochistic, investment in Northern California professional sports (The recent success of the Warriors, Giants, and 49ers as relevant in the sports landscape are welcome but not the norm).

He enjoys reading authors such as Cormac McCarthy, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Kurt Vonnegut, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor to name a few. He dislikes authors who ramble on with a pretentious and haughty diction, dragging out sentences to illustrate how gifted they are in superfluous words and to revel in the narcissism of their own mellifluous cadence while sacrificing substance and emotive qualities for the mere pleasure of witnessing their own genius at work and never consider how arrogant and self-aggrandizing their fiction really sounds, all the while the length of their sentences stretch onward and forward without an end in sight as we are victimized by a megalomaniac.

The piece, "On the Mountain," is part of a collection of short stories titled *The Hills On All Sides* which no publisher will touch and will probably be self-published since it does not take place in a dystopian future where vampires and billionaire playboys fornicate rather violently while falling into a fantastical notion of romantic love as they lead a rebellion against a corrupt political system. Instead, "On the Mountain" deals with a black mechanic and his struggle to overcome the loss of his wife and child and the self-imposed prison he has placed himself in. The story and collection are based on where N.T. McQueen grew up which is a small town nestled in the mountains and is modeled after Winesburg, Ohio.

Other idiosyncratic facts about N.T. McQueen:

- Has no toenail on his big left toe
- Hates the sound of dry deck wood on his bare feet.
- Loves Swedish Fish
- Secretly enjoys the theme song to Growing Pains
- Cried while watching The Elephant Man
- Thinks Dane Cook is not really a comedian
- Finds horses to be terrifying, malevolent beasts bent on the destruction of humanity
- Likes beer

Tamer Mostafa

(The City / Midnight in South Lake Tahoe)

Tamer is a Stockton, California native whose writing has been influenced by many, but directly affected by the teachings of Joshua McKinney, Alan Williamson, and Joe Wenderoth. His work can be found in past issues of *Confrontation*, *The Rag*, *Poets Espresso Review*, *Stone Highway Review*, and *Phantom Kangaroo*.

James Tan

(In a Place Outside of the City)

James Ryan Tan was born and raised in Sacramento, CA. A graduate of Seattle University, James earned his MA in creative writing from Sacramento State. James has previously worked as a writing center consultant and has volunteered with AmeriCorps. He currently works at Sacramento State and resides in Elk Grove, where he enjoys reading, listening to records, and spending time with his girlfriend, dog and cat. Though James has mainly been inspired by traditional, literary short fiction, “In a Place Outside of the City” was primarily based on dreams, travels, supernatural stories, conspiracy theories, a bottomless supply of Catholic guilt, and a professor’s suggestion to “write something long.”

Brettin White

(Unnamed poems)

I have been a writer ever since I could dictate journal entries to my older sister, before I knew how to form the letters myself. My grandpa was my first mentor, and my childhood obsession with Harriet the Spy, along with the encouragement of my poetry teacher in sophomore year, solidified my identity as writer.

I left the only home I knew upon graduating high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After playing hopscotch through Texas and Mexico for a few years, I landed far away in the Sierra Nevada foothills. I have lived here for almost five years now, five years that have transformed me as a writer, as a performer, as a person.

My writing has been a way for me to process memories, traumatic experiences, spiritual epiphanies, anything I needed to creatively think through, without a defined audience in mind.

Little by little, I have begun to share my poetry with more people. Reading and reciting my poetry locally gave me a sense of community and purpose regarding my poetry, specifically. My writing improved vastly as I absorbed the craft from other poets and my unique voice emerged more clearly. I was invited to read at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference at Weber State University, and the most motivating message I took from there was that writing is not an indulgent hobby - it is a vocation, which means it deserves the time and sacrifice it takes. Most of my poetry begins as a sort of prayer, and it's in the context of poetry that faith works best for me

I wrote a series of poems on Easter Sunday by Deer Creek, one of my favorite nature spots, where I can be alone; these two poems come from that series as I contemplated life and death, sacrifice and resurrection, by the icy, flowing waters.