

# Alchemist



# Review

## 2020



# Alchemist Review

A journal of literary fiction, poetry, and visual arts dedicated to publishing dynamic works by emerging writers and artists in the University of Illinois Springfield community. With an appreciation for print culture, as well as digital technologies and mixed media.

The Alchemist Review provides a forum for collaboration and exploration within the ever-evolving world of literary publishing. The journal is edited by undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Illinois Springfield.

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# Plumbum

If you panned the blood by a 9-mm bullet launched from the Beretta clenched by a man frustrated by the injustice of a false promise known as liberty, like you did on the river for gold on your 3rd grade field trip, you would find, clustered at the bottom of the pan the five major minerals the body depends on most for biochemical functions. You might even, if your technique was advanced enough, spot within the flecks of calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sodium and magnesium, a vein of iron or copper or zinc or another trace element that's deposited in and moves through the fluid your body bottles up.

The human body, as it seasons, dries out. We start with three-quarters water and end with a little more than half. Except for those living here. Their bodies are disproportionately dry because they're composted of an additional element. It's the solution which makes us all up. No one ever expected the element that is so vital to our existence to be the poison that kills us.

Slowly.

Its name

comes from the Latin

word for waterworks.

Lead in the water.

## Timothy Eggert

Lead poisoning.

Contaminated water.

A paradox.

When humans ingest lead-code for systematic environmental racism-the body is vulnerable. At a molecular level, lead hijacks calcium's place in the brain and effectively stops communication between neurons-done by neurotransmitters-so that the wrong signals are sent at the wrong time. Your brain stops growing. You stop learning. You lose your memory. You won't remember drinking water that was unsafe; you can't remember a time when water was safe. As lead seeps into the brain, causing mistrust between its parts, so too does doubt replace vital element. To them, bodies are easier to control when they are one part less fundamentally human.

Scientists called *Legionella Pneumophila* an invasive species because it grew in the water and spread in people's lungs. It killed twelve Flintoids. I used to think I was the same. Invasive. Because all I could do was observe and empathize. I wrote stories about the crisis and how it affected the community I injected myself into, wondering if I earned the right. To be here. To tell someone else's story.

I learned it can be dangerous to call yourself a writer, when no one else is listening. It can also be dangerous to drink water.

# *At the Expense of Being Overdramatic*

Until I reach the end of this epic  
journey  
through the coats and boxes,  
the vacuum and the wrapping paper,  
the old shoes, torn up shirts used as  
rags,  
the dust-covered Monopoly box no  
one's touched for ages  
because everyone fucking hates  
monopoly,

the abandoned, the abused,  
the mistreated, the beaten,  
the killed,  
the beautiful, the misunderstood,  
those without hope,  
those without love,  
those without a hand reaching to pull  
them up  
out of the metaphor,

I will plant my rainbow flag in your  
face,  
and I will blast your world full of glitter  
and glue  
and drag  
and femboys  
and leather sex dungeons  
and higher occurrences of alcohol abuse  
and “yas queen slay,”  
and musical after musical,  
and holding hands in public,  
and love.

Alex Fashandi

Love for myself,  
love for all those like me,  
love for my partner, love for my  
enemies,  
love at the end of a long day,

when we all,  
habitually,  
let out a sigh as we close the door  
behind us  
knowing no one can do us any more  
harm—  
a harmony of relief as everyone gets  
home safe.

# *Tears of Consciousness*

Carson Meyers

I question and wonder  
About the fabrication of reality.  
The holy presence that seems out of  
reach.  
The threads of life that sew together  
our picture of actuality  
Remain jumbled, unclear, and obscure.  
Like my dreams

I can rely on no indication of the  
present  
To unravel the mysteries of tomorrow.  
I have no seer to guide me,  
My predictions murky and imprecise

Yesterday's regrets linger in my mind,  
Caught on the ragged edges of broken  
glass.  
Reflecting on past experiences.  
Modern science informs me that these  
shattered fragments  
Are the sum of my existences.  
And yet, once in a while,  
I glimpse a stranger in the mirror,  
A slumbering soul whose higher  
intelligence  
Transcends my mortal instincts.

What is the meaning of this life?  
I did not come into this world  
Knowing my purpose.  
I had no tangible path of  
enlightenment,  
I entered this world through a portal,  
Poured forth in a river of blood.

A vessel embodied with survival  
instincts,  
Which were pruned over generations,  
To best sustain life.

And here I am.  
Living, but for what?  
I am not but twenty,  
And no more wiser to divine  
perspicacity.

Is man's quest for spirituality naught  
but a strange fantast?  
Dreams of celestial beings with  
golden-feathered wings pure of vice?  
Daily invocations to archangels and  
saints,  
Give us reason to believe they are  
waiting to give us entry behind the  
pearl gates?

If my emotions are what make me  
human,  
My love is fire,  
And my wrath is ice.  
The corrupted exploits of man  
Freeze the burning embers of love  
Until a thousand sleepwalk  
In a cold and desolate world, void of  
morality,  
Looking but not seeing past the mortal  
veil in front of the mind's eye  
Do chords of savage emotion tether our  
souls to our mortal forms?  
Become shackles,



Chaining us to a world  
Now, beyond the sweet fruits of divine  
intervention.

# ***Veins of the Night***



Felicia Tinder

# *Regrets from the Past*

## Jermaine Windham

I woke up lying down in a clear green field with nothing but the air flowing around me. It felt really peaceful to lie there as the Sun stares down at me and touches me with its radiant light. I couldn't help but feel as though I stood out too much. I'm only getting in the way of nature's beauty, but that wasn't enough to make me move from this spot. I was at ease until I saw flower petals dancing around the corner of my left eye. They seemed to be the petals of pink and white carnations. I've never seen any carnations or flowers of any kind in this field, so I was shocked. I followed the movements of the petals with my eyes and saw my little brother smiling above me dressed in mostly white with his toned black hair swaying in the direction of the wind. There's a faint but visible white light that always surrounds him. I turned my attention back to the carnation petals just to find that they have all fallen around my little brother.

"Why are you sitting here all alone?" My brother asked much to my personal annoyance.

"Well I guess I'm not so alone here, now am I?" I responded with a patronizing tone. After a whole minute has passed, my brother didn't respond back. He just looked down at the petals in the grass.

"Listen I'm..." I began to speak until he cut me off.

"Hey, didn't you have a date with Lorraine today?" He briefly asked.

"She said we were hanging out today since it's a nice Sunday and all. I don't think I want it to turn into anything more than just hanging out." I announced as I quickly brought myself up to my feet and fixed my dark black hair to look more presentable to me at least. My little brother is annoying, but I love him. I tied my shoes expeditiously and began pacing towards the exit of Union Park. I made sure to avoid heavy crowds on the way despite how implausible it seemed.

We were now walking through the long streets of Chicago. I was walking with my hands in my pockets looking down while also faintly looking ahead. My brother, on the other hand, walked with large amounts of pep in his step that it was almost humorous to look at and it surely made me smile.

"Ethan, I have just one question. Why are you coming with us? Go home!" I demanded.

"You said you weren't going on a date and were just hanging out, so I decided that I wanted to come too!" Ethan

replies still keeping up with his perky attitude.

“Well you already come this far. I might as well let you tag along. Eight-year olds can really be a handful.” I said even though I was relieved to not be spending time with Lorraine alone. Every time I’m alone with her, I end up feeling nervous around her. “You’re walking so slow Brother, I’m gonna go knock on her door!” Before I even began to speak, he sprinted off joyously. Before he knocked on the door, I heard a thud coming from the bushes in front of Lorraine’s home and I ran as fast as I could just to find that it was Lorraine herself. She jumped out of the bushes and scared the life out of Ethan as he fell down on her porch thankfully unbruised.

“That was mean Lorraine!” Ethan shouted.

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. I meant to scare Aiden, not you.” Lorraine replied laughing loudly. I was glad that it wasn’t me because I’m prone to being frightened easily even though I’d hesitate to admit it. Lorraine is a childhood friend of mine. She is fifteen years old and so am I. She is a tall female with light brown hair and eyes.

She wears casual stuff daily except if it’s for church. “

“As long as it’s comfortable.” Lorraine always says. She’s a very bombastic individual and very active. She doesn’t go through life standing still. She’s constantly moving and never backwards. She is athletic and loves to play sports.

“Okay let’s go. We are going to play basketball with some other friends of mine.” Lorraine announced.

“Basketball? You know I don’t like to play.” I responded.

“You have to live a little. You’re holding yourself back. I personally believe that everyone wants to tell the world that they are here in one way or another. I’m not asking you to be good at playing. I’m only asking you to try to play with us.” She said with a bright smile that gave me an unnerving feeling of warmth.

At this point, it was impossible for me to say no. “I’ll think about it.” I hesitated. Lorraine nodded and proceeded walking as me and Ethan followed.

"Are you good at basketball Lorraine?" Ethan asked while we walked.

"Of course, I am! I can shoot from half court with no problem at all!" Lorraine replied with an amazing burst of confidence. I turned to look behind me at Ethan for a quick moment, and it seemed that the white light surrounding him grew brighter all of sudden making it hard to see him from the waist down. Ultimately, I didn't question it. It'd bring back a terrible nightmare I had about one month ago.

We made it to the outside basketball court, to find four of Lorraine's friends. Two of them are guys and the other two are female. They are all in my class but that's all I know about either of them. They wanted to play a game that was supposed to be three on three, but there was clearly seven of us. Ethan decided that he wouldn't play and sat on the metallic grey bench and I followed. No one questioned me as if they expected me to do just that and so did Lorraine. I heard Lorraine's friends talking about me as if I were death

"Why did you even invite him here Lorraine?" Annoying girl number 1 said while the other girl nodded.

"He's a freak and he always talks to himself as if somebody is there." Annoying boy number 1 said while spinning the basketball on his finger for like one second until he messes up and the ball drops onto the hard concrete. I had no idea what he was talking about when he brought up the idea that I talk to myself. Everything Lorraine's friends said made me upset but instead of raising my fists and aggression towards them, I simply walked away just to get fresh air by strolling a bit. I'm honestly used to the gossip, but I never say anything about it. Before I walked too far, I saw Lorraine slap the boy who called me a freak and yell at the girls who talked bad about me. They all ended up leaving and glaring daggers at me, but I wasn't fazed. I continued walking for a little bit and then began walking back and overheard Lorraine Ethan talking.

"You're fading more and more by the second. Ethan, what do I do?" Lorraine asked shedding a few tears and occasionally choking up.

"There's nothing you can do Lorraine but continue to help my brother if you can. My fate had been decided a month ago. I wasn't able to tell the world that I was here, but you still can." Ethan replies remorsefully.

"I should have stopped you two. Lorraine continues crying with her tears swelling up into an ocean of purified sadness. Before I knew it, Ethan disappeared from the bench. I began walking up close until someone patted me on the back getting my attention.

It was the last of Lorraine's friends, except he didn't say anything about me. "You're Aiden, right?" He asked abruptly.

"Yeah. And your name is?" I asked him, feeling a bit pressured.

"My name is Eduardo and it's nice to officially meet you." He said with a casual expression that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Likewise." I replied being unsure what else to really say. I turned around to get a better look at him and he isn't quite as tall as me, but he is certainly not short. He has blonde hair and has a very distinct slacker vibe to him. I couldn't quite make out why, but that's how I felt. We began conversing with him doing most of the audible talking. Turns out he's into most of the books I like to read like "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee and "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

I was surprised at how naturally we conversed. In the end, he ended up having to go home soon, but promised that next time we can actually play a game of basketball that I really didn't care much about. I appreciated the sentiment, nonetheless. Afterwards, Lorraine walked up towards me finally getting all the tears out of her eyes and instead of looking down, she looks as though she feels refreshed.

I turned behind me to find my brother. This time the white light has been flourished to the point that it's very hard to see Ethan at all. "Brother, I think it's about time you let go." Ethan announced.

"Let go of what?" I felt astonished not wanting to remember the past that I tried so desperately to suppress. I then had no choice, but to recall the past. Me and my brother were orphans to a mother we never knew and a father we never wanted to take my brother to a movie for his birthday. More accurately, it was a day we decided to make his birthday. On that same exact day and time, we snuck out, there was a robbery and an armed relentless man with a gun. My brother ended up getting caught in the incident and I was the failure of a brother who couldn't protect him.



Coming back to the present, my brother ended up leaving me with a goodbye and told me that it wasn't my fault as I hugged his fading body. The carnations that once surrounded him, surrounded him again and plummeted the ground as he vanished. I cried and cried and couldn't seem to get a hold of myself. Lorraine hugged me in a comforting way, and it helped to soothe my anguish and regret.

Two days later, I walked around in Union park alone and saw a quick flash of Ethan with his hair being the most noticeable. I saw a woman in a large black coat even though it's a beautiful day. She looked like someone I was supposed to know, but I couldn't recall. I sat near her and she was crying. "Are you full of you regret?" I asked her, knowing it was a strange question but it felt appropriate. "Sometimes it's hard not to be, but only when you come to terms with your past, you can finally continue to march forward." She replied back to me profoundly

and I smiled.

# ***A letter from a cynic to a rebel***

*to be read aloud as we hold hands  
looking out over the edge of a cliff  
at a burning city.*

Alex Fashandi

As the waves of gusting heat hit our  
faces,  
I could monologue  
about the government and corporations  
but I'd rather we just embrace our body  
and lips.

As the cathedrals of industry come  
crashing down  
and the dome of the explosion spreads,

I could laugh with vindication  
at being right about the end times.

I could give a Cheshire cat grin  
and blame the strongman and the straw  
men.

But I'd rather wrap my arms around  
you  
as the fires reach your back and whisper  
in your ear,

"Hold me tight dear sweet Joseph,  
the horsemen come for us too."

# *Written just before a father was meant to give a eulogy*

"I caught him smoking again,"  
in the garden  
where the lilies  
struggle  
to keep up  
with ever shortening  
hours  
of encroaching winter.

"My son is a bit of an odd one,"  
he paints,  
and polishes,  
and  
picks,  
and cleans his nails  
as if dirt isn't the stuff of eons,  
crusted over every acre of land,  
easily kicked up,  
swept up,  
caked in,  
never unfettered  
from the underside  
of fingers  
where it festers, and dries, and dirties  
the valleys  
of fingerprints and calluses  
uneroded by sweat or friction.

"He'll end up cashiering for a lifetime,"  
and I won't be responsible for what  
transpires  
if the rebels never come  
and he never gets around to being a big  
shot  
toting around his thesis

Alex Fashandi

or a new deal  
like a laureate  
for the revolution

and I won't miss him when he leaves  
to catch up  
to well-to- dos with USC head starts  
and Valley new money.

"His slim cut blue jeans  
will be on the street before the  
weekend,"  
begging, "anything for a dollar,"  
while the passengers  
on the Red Line

pretend  
they  
don't notice.

"He'll end up in trouble,"  
or in need, or without a one  
to show him love  
or courage,  
till he gets caught in a hatchet job  
of downer philosophy,  
and give up on his dreams  
and gives up on himself.

## ***To Lakeland***



Felicia Tinder

# Saturday Night

Pull into the parking lot, right on time. Never be late. Your assistant manager will go purple in the face if you are. Lock up your battered '97 Lexus and race through the parking lot. You're always in a rush. As you spin through the revolving doors, take off your sunglasses or else you'll trip in the deep dark cave that is D.O.C. Don't try to remember what it stands for. Say hi to each of your co-workers, especially Phil. You know what happened last time.

Lock eyes with the rouged hostess as they give you their impression of a deer in the headlights and ask how many reservations there are. Groan inwardly when she tells you *the page is completely full*. Make sure that your nails are long, painted, and filed in the perfect oval shape so that they click on the computer screen when you clock in. Snatch a Nutter Butter from the supplies drawer and wonder who left them there today. Grab the schedule to see who is serving with you. Keep the eye roll to a minimum.

Lean behind the bar at the front of the restaurant, say hi to David, and ask how his boyfriend is. Drop your massive, oversized purse on the dark, marble counter. *Good, he'll be in here tonight* he replies. Wonder how they met and if you will ever find love.

## Katie Himes

Wear comfortable shoes. You'll reach your daily step goal no problem. When ten more customers walk in, pray to God the hostess doesn't seat them in your section. She does. Give her a glare as you pass. The water glasses are near the bar, next to the kitchen window. Each customer receives a cold, icy glass of tap H<sub>2</sub>O as they ponder the extensive menu. Let David know that the metal ice cooler needs to be refilled. The water nozzle also has buttons for Coke, Pepsi, and lemonade. Don't panic when you press the wrong one. Keep the beverage and try again. Walk over and set the water glasses down. Have a great, big smile on your pretty, freckled, uncertain face as you welcome them to D.O.C. Wine Bar. Emphasize the words *Wine Bar*. Your tips depend on it.

When they ask you *what's good here*, automatically list the top three most expensive things on the menu. The more expensive the food, the more money you go home with.

Hover near the standing wine table in the middle of the restaurant. When no one is looking, nonchalantly rest your foot on top of one of the legs with a bored look on your face. Enjoy the fact that you only have one table right now because that will soon change. Pretend

that you're doing something important when the assistant manager waddles by. Fair warning, he's a pain in your ass. Try to figure out whether or not he buys his shoes from the children's section because they look like black Sketchers. All they need are some lights that flash. You can tell when he's coming. He squeaks with every step he takes in those ridiculous shoes. He's the "assistant bar manager", whatever that means. Try

to respect him  
even though  
he's only four  
years older than  
you. Hide your phone when he walks by and awkwardly says *hello*. Resume normal behavior.

**"Fair warning, he's  
a pain in your ass."**

Check up on your one table. The people in the booth seem to have made up their mind, hopefully. Ask if they're ready to order and retrieve the pen from the black apron you're wearing. Seat 1 says *I'll have the grilled chicken pesto panini without the pesto*. Scribble in your note pad. Seat 2 speaks. *I'll have the Wrightwood salad with extra avocado and dressing on the side*. Explain that the dressing already comes on the side and Seat 2 raises her eyebrow. Avert your eyes and move onto Seat 3. Seat 3 ponders the menu and strokes their chin. He has some stubble on the tip.

Eventually, he says *I'll have the classic cheeseburger and, uh, if I could get a beer, that'd be great*. Remember to ask how he'd like his burger cooked. Smile as you write down the orders of your ten wonderfully annoying guests. Input each order into the system while your finger nails click on the screen. Make sure your "assistant bar manager" sees your nails. He'll harass you if anything isn't perfect. Wait by the receipt printer. Don't forget to hang the receipt on the line in front of the kitchen window so César and Rojo can see it. List the items one at a time while *Despacito* blasts from the back of the kitchen. Stick around and talk with Rojo and César. They'll make you laugh. They'll also feed you.

Mentally prepare yourself for the dinner rush. Go to the bathroom before 5:30 p.m. It's a race to the finish line from then on. Roll up your sleeves as you see the revolving doors turn 'round and 'round.

When you see  
your general  
manager, Henry,  
breathe a sigh  
of relief. He knows you need help. He also knows that Phil is waiting tables tonight. You both know what happened last time.

**"Resume normal  
behavior."**



Make sure all the tables have menus as the restaurant fills. Shoot the hostess a threatening look if they aren't pre-set. That's **her** job. Carry Chapstick in your pocket. Your lips will get dry from smiling too hard. Swiftly place water glasses down in front of your guests as they arrange themselves in the next booth. Let them ponder the menu as you retrieve plates of food from the kitchen window. Dance around guests, children, and

Phil as you set a steaming plate down in front of each customer.

**"Tips are your best friend!"**

Say *my pleasure* and *you're welcome!* Tips are your best friend! Find the hot sauce on the shelf below the kitchen window. Familiarize yourself with that shelf. The extra silverware, napkins, and salt shakers live there too.

Don't flinch when David shatters a wine glass. It's a wine bar. Continue to take orders as more parents on "Date Night" file in. Ignore the drama that occurs in the front of the restaurant. Fighting off the hungry wolves is not your problem. Try not to vomit when your "assistant bar manager" says, *look how hot the woman sitting at Table 27 is*. He has a thing for blondes.

Once your table of ten has paid, immediately clear it. It'll inspire them to leave. Take as many plates, glasses, and silverware as you can. Hope that the nearby circus will hire you as their new balancing act. Watch out for water spots on the floor. Quickly round the corner into the kitchen. Yell *CORNER!* as you enter. The blind spot creates chaos. Drop the messy plates onto the metal ledge and place the silverware in the nasty, white water bucket. Look through the opening of the metal shelf and say *hola!* to Fredo. His arms scrub at breakneck speed. The stacks resemble the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

See if anyone else has sat in your section. They have. Fill water glasses and deliver them. Try not to eavesdrop as you introduce yourself. Leave the two bickering women alone as you continue on your way. *She's not my responsibility anymore*. Pick up the pencil laying on the floor. *How dare you say*

**"Don't eavesdrop."**

*that!* Check up on your other guests. *I don't care. She's not living with me*. Make sure there is a battery-operated candle on each table. *Where is she supposed to go?* Direct someone to the restroom around the corner. *Put her in a nursing home for*

*all I care. Print out the final check for one of your tables. She raised us. Don't eavesdrop. Who gives a shit? Mom always liked you better anyway.*

Stay away from Steve. You're positive that he swam in an oil spill earlier today. The dim lighting of the restaurant reflects on his slicked mullet. He sits at the bar. Look busy whenever he tries to lock eyes with you. Drinking is his favorite

hobby. He tells you *let me kiss you on the cheek and I'll*

*give you a 20. Don't panic. He's harmless. But greasy. Let David kick him out.*

Be grateful that the patio isn't open. There's something about wine and the outdoors that turn suburban moms into wild animals. Keep an eye on your bustling section. It's completely full. Master the art of the **speed walk**. Check in with your guests and encourage another glass of Chardonnay. Tell them that the cocktails are excellent. That the Pinot Noir wine flight is to die for. Pretend to be a master sommelier. When they ask you about dessert, give your honest opinion. Keep your mouth from watering. *I suggest ordering the Lincoln Park cookie*

*skillet. It's our claim to fame. It's freshly baked with a big scoop of vanilla ice cream on top. Crack a genuine smile when they look at you with wonder. Tell Rojo and César what you need.*

Laugh when César says *ah, the usual*. Remember to ask him about his little hijo later. Keep an eye on Gustavo. He likes to sneak off to the back of the kitchen. Usually, you'll find him eating the restaurant crackers. Don't blame him. They're good. When you see that several of your tables haven't been wiped down, keep your cool. Poke your head in the kitchen and refrain from hissing. Let him rush past you. You've got more important things to take care of.

Pack protein bars in your purse. Working in a restaurant is absolute suicide for your stomach. When no one is looking, run behind the bar and snatch one from your bag. Place the precious cargo in the waistband of your black leggings. The black blouse

you're wearing will conceal the load. Wait until you're in the kitchen to eat it. Ignore the inner rumblings of your gut. Drink a few glasses of tap H<sub>2</sub>O to keep the monster

**“Introduce yourself again. And again. And again.”**

at bay. Remember that your customers come first. Continue like normal. Write down more orders. Yell them back to the kitchen. Introduce yourself again. And again. And again. The time has flown by and you have yet to notice. The weary hostess seats one table after another. A typical Saturday night.

When the cacophony of voices begins to die down, release an exaggerated sigh. Find an escape route to the kitchen. Scream **“Laugh with them.”** **CORNER!** as you enter. Don’t panic when Phil almost smashes into you with an entire tray of sparkling wine glasses. Look right into his crazy eyes. He sneers at you. Roll your eyes once he’s out of sight. Stifle a laugh when Rojo slowly shakes his head. Reach for the semi-melted protein bar in your waistband. Unwrap it and ravenously shove it into your watering mouth. Feel your face get hot when you look up and César and Rojo are laughing at you. They don’t realize how hungry you are. Laugh with them. Immediately nod when they ask *si tú quieres un churro?* It’s their favorite thing to make. Watch as Rojo sets out *botellas de crema batida, caramelo, y chocolate*. Wash your hands in the drippy sink. Don’t burn your fingers on the dough when you place *el churro*

in your mouth. Cover the delectable *pastelería española* with chocolate and caramel sauce. Add a dollop of whipping cream. *Darle muchas muchas muchas gracias*. Savor each sugary bite. Let the warmth of the pastry fill you up. Lick the sugar off of your perfectly manicured fingers before you give the plate to Fredo.

Realize how long you’ve been in the kitchen. Get back to work. Don’t give your “assistant bar manager” a reason to yell. New guests sit in your section. Impatience is painted on their faces. Goodbye, tip. Apologize profusely. Take their order, quickly. Realize how late it is. Question why anyone would want to eat a meat plate at 10:15. For the love of God, the kitchen closes at 10:30. Help Gustavo clear some of your empty tables. You’re almost done for the night. Wipe the tiny beads of sweat off of your glistening forehead. The chaos has settled down. Henry let the hostess go home early. Hope that he’ll **“Goodbye, tip.”** cut you soon.

Walk the length of the restaurant. Notice the man sitting in the second booth. His lanky arms slink around two voluptuous women. Linger by the front of the restaurant. Open the supplies drawer in the host stand and reach for a

Nutter Butter. Swear under your breath when the box is empty. Hear the click of high heels echo through the cave-like atmosphere. Watch the two curvy women disappear behind the revolving door. The man slides out of the booth and shrugs on his tan trench coat.

Who wears a trench coat anymore? He stands up and something falls out of his pocket onto the floor. Avert your eyes. Clumsily pick up the phone on the wall next to you. Pretend

to talk. *Hello, no, I'm sorry we don't have anymore, uh, wine.* Place your

hand over your eyes as you realize how stupid you sound. The man stares at the condom with wide eyes. Nervously, he looks around and flees from the scene of the crime. Burst out laughing when he's out of earshot. Make Gustavo pick it up.

Close out the check for your last table of the night. Tell them to *have a great night!* Deliver the last few dishes to Fredo. Say *adiós y hasta mañana* to César and Rojo. Clock out and tear off the receipt the computer spits out at you. Grab the cash tips and stuff the moolah in your oversized purse. Smile and say hi to Isaac. Tell David that you'll see him tomorrow. Wonder, again, how they met and if you will

ever find love. Find Henry in the back of the restaurant. Hand him your check-out receipt. He gives you a big smile and says *you're good to go*. His shirt has vertical stripes that make him look like a candy cane. In a good way. Say your goodbyes and bust through the revolving door.

Inhale the crisp air of Saturday night. Walk through the parking lot, no longer in a rush. Hear the echo of your footsteps on the gravel. Notice the clear sky. You can see the stars tonight. Unlock your trusty, but dusty, '97 Lexus and clamber inside. Find something good to listen to on the radio. Back out of your crooked parking job. Turn out of the parking lot and drive into the clear suburban night. You'll do it all again tomorrow.

**“Notice the clear sky.”**

A single serpent strangles my heart  
It sits mouth wide and gaping  
Waiting to strike  
Scales stubborn  
Set in it's ways  
Refusal to change  
It tightens and tightens  
It's coil causes turmoil in my uneasy  
heart

Then you reach in  
Pluck it out  
And attempt to squash it  
So tiny and frail

I reach out and snatch it  
Cradling it  
Protecting it  
And glaring in your direction  
Because it's mine  
This tiny, vicious serpent  
I need it as it needs me  
Because certain things shouldn't  
Be let under the surface

Fala Earl

# *To Save for a Rainy Day*

Stars racing down an abandoned road  
Dark visages hidden by the night  
Pedestrians cower behind what cover  
they can  
As white-hot trails leap up from the  
pavement  
Only to turn cold to as they crash  
against mortal flesh

Mornings like these draw up vague  
memories  
The smell of wild water  
The silhouette of a person no longer a  
person  
Baiting  
Drawing back  
And casting a simple hope  
As the world ripples

It's strange somedays to think  
The disgust  
The anger and melancholy  
Borne into the world on days like these  
As I watch the beauty of numb  
fingertips  
And ghosts rowing through raindrops  
from pale lips  
The stars blink out  
Replaced by machine's metal faces  
And the world has changed again.

Fala Earl



***Old Time Canton***



Felicia Tinder

# *Trains Aren't Fun*

Samone Patterson

I glance out the window at the world that dies and is born again in an instant. In the window, I see the reflections of those in front of and behind me. Those tired faces look at a different world than mine. They look out the window and the window looks back, but I see a vastness that only a dark pit knows best. The horizon is telling me that there is an entire world outside of this train. That this train is only a small vessel that rides on it, and I, a small vessel that rides on the train. I stare out the window until my eyes become blurry and the world morphs into a new one. The vastness disappears and the worlds, appearing and disappearing, blends into one.

“NEXT S8T%W WILL BE @4BF9#0!!!” One of the conductors says over the intercom, but because of the loudness of the train, I can't hear all that he is saying.

It's not my stop yet, that is all I know. It brings me back to the train and I am no longer blurry; I can see. People started getting up and grabbing their belongings. They grabbed their things with dusty eyes and dry skin. It had been a very long train ride for them; you could see it in their faces. The longing to get off was very clear in each one of them. The relief of not being

confined into a small space for hours is also shown on their faces. Their eyes are like looking at the sun through an old dusty window. The train finally stops and the people huddle off. Leaving the train to go wherever their journey takes them next. After a few minutes, the train starts moving again, steadily bumping along the tracks. And once again, I stare out the window looking to see where I am in the world.

“Tickets! Have your tickets out!!!” One of the conductors announces over the intercom, as another one is going down the aisle. He goes through scanning everyone who just got on tickets. There is a woman and her child I hear a few seats behind me. The woman is trying to calm her crying child and looking for her ticket at the same time. The conductor is very patient, he always is. After a considerable amount of time and lots of screaming, the mother has found her tickets and has silenced her child. The conductor moves on, scanning more tickets, silently. Then, in front of me, a woman who is alone is looking for her ticket. She looks for a little bit then she just starts crying.

"I wasn't supposed to take this train alone" She crumples into her own hands. "He was supposed to come with! I don't want to be alone again! Why didn't he come with me!?" She screamed in anguish. The conductor puts his hand on her shoulder and just looked at her with those kind understanding eyes.

"Yes, perhaps you're right. Maybe this is for the best." She said after being exposed to his gaze. She had calmed down quite a bit. Then everything returned to normal; he kept scanning tickets and moving on down the line. Until he came upon a man who was such a snob.

"These chairs are too lumpy. There's barely enough space to even breathe on this godforsaken thing. There's not even a movie that's gonna be played. And it smells. The Wi-Fi sucks. Where's the dining car ? I have to get up before my legs stick to these disgusting seats. The

**"Yes, perhaps  
you're right.  
Maybe this is for  
the best."** air is too stale  
and thin here.  
Excuse me Mr.  
"conductor," I  
believe there's  
been some sort  
of mistake!" He

gets up and walks up to the conductor.  
"I don't think someone of my stature  
should be on a train of such low quality.

I shouldn't be sitting in these rinky-dink seats that probably have some sort of STD since it's clear that no one has been washing them!! I demand that I be moved to someplace that is somewhat clean. Or I'll get off this train right now!"

There was silence. I couldn't see the man, only hear him, but all I heard was the conductor just scanning his ticket.

**No sound but the  
train rumbling  
over the tracks,  
swaying as if it  
were a boat.**

Then shuffling  
of feet against  
the carpet. More  
silence. Then I  
heard someone,  
most likely the  
man, plop down  
into a seat and

grumble something quietly.

Everyone was seated and everyone had a place to sit, so the train returned to the quiet again. No sound but the train rumbling over the tracks, swaying as if it were a boat. I stare out the window once again, trying to get lost in thought. And then I did. I became so lost that the world around me vanished. I sailed away in the ship that was my mind, and there were no maps or charted courses. I sat there, looking out the window, thinking to myself and reminiscing of forgotten times. Of places that were. Of people who were.

Of things that made sense. Of the things that no one really thinks about. Of the t-

My thought was cut off by something. My ship that was cast off into the immense sea was pulled abruptly to shore by the terrible wailing of a screaming child. It was the child of the mother that sat a few seats behind me, of course. It was screaming for its life and probably

crying its eyes out too. No one said anything, but we all thought the same thing "Please shut that kid up." From what I could hear.

it was a 4-year-old girl, and her name was Susie. I only know this because her mother kept saying, "Susie dear, you're 4 years old. You can't be crying like this every time you don't get your way. And look there are many other kids on the train and you don't hear them crying." I'm assuming that Susie didn't care how old she was or how many kids there were because she didn't stop crying. I could hear toys being thrown around and seats being kicked.

I heard one old woman in front of me say, "These rides are always harder for

the children, the poor dears. Just the other day I heard about a whole train of children; all of them stuck in one place.

"Harder for the children? Ha, harder for us that just want peace and have to listen to the children."

"Betty! You should be ashamed of yourself. That sweet little girl didn't want to endure this ride any more than you did. I simply cannot believe you."

"You can't believe Meee?! Is that what you just said to me, Margret?" I didn't know what was happening but apparently, there was a lot of history between the two and Margret just crossed the line. I was actually hoping to know more but the conversation ended with Margret saying, "I'm sorry you're right, but you have to admit it's never a nice thing to hear a child cry." Then I heard a dry "Yeah". And that was all. It seemed like a very interesting story, the kind that would make it into a book or you can listen to over and over

again. But that story ended before it began. And all that's left of it is a screaming kid whose mom is clueless. Susie probably would've kept crying for another hour or so, but finally, her mom

**I sat there,  
looking out the  
window, thinking  
to myself and  
reminiscing of  
forgotten times.**

**"You should  
be ashamed of  
yourself."**

decided to give her something to drink then Susie went immediately to sleep. Peace was finally restored but how long will that last.

Now that it was quiet again, I return to my past. The window reflects who I am and who I was. The silence of the train and the swaying motion puts me into a meditative state. My eyes gloss over as I look out the window. Reflecting on my youth and my promising future. Susie made me think about when I was her age. A time when everything was bright, and I had not a care in the world. But I had to grow up. Went to college, graduated, met the love of my life, then I-

"Whyyyyy?!" The woman that was crying earlier was crying again. "I don't want to be on this stupid train!! I don't want to be alone! It's not fair it's just not fair!!" She was crying so loud I actually missed Susie, but if she didn't

**The window  
reflects who I am  
and who I was.**

stop crying soon,  
I'm fairly sure  
we'll be hearing  
Susie again.

I couldn't see the woman, but I could only imagine what she looked like based on her wails. Her face contorted with anguish and misery. Her eyes were puffy and red with tears flooding her

face. Her nose oozing so much snot that- never mind that's too gross to think about. Her hair probably all over her face and head that you couldn't see how much pain she is in. Her tears endlessly. She kept crying and screaming that the world was on fire.

Then the conductor that silenced her

**I couldn't see  
the woman, but  
I could only  
imagine what she  
looked like based  
on her wails.**

before came,  
sighs of relief  
were heard.  
He walked  
up to the  
woman and  
sat next to  
her. I tried to  
see what was

happening, but the seats hindered my view. There was silence and sniffing.

"What do you want?" She said angrily through sniffles. "If you're here to tell me to shut up then you better leave. I need to get this off my chest before it's too late. You can't possibly understand what I'm going through so just leave." Pause. Silence. "LEAVE!!" she screamed with a shrill voice that didn't seem human. But in fact, he didn't leave. He stayed. I didn't see what happened, but I heard movement followed by more sniffles. It was silent

for a while, so long that I thought he left without me seeing him get up. But the silence was broken by two simple words.

“Thank you.” Is what the woman said.

The loud woman that was screaming from the top of lungs and crying her heart out for all to hear had said thank you. It wasn't just that she said thank you, but it was

the way she said it. It was said so quietly a mouse would have trouble hearing it. It had a stillness to it layered with

a calmness that it was almost certainly serenity. And said so quietly that I probably was the only one to hear it.

**I sail the vast ocean once again with no destination in mind.**

I sail the vast ocean once again with no destination in mind. The hum of the train is a Siren that lures me deeper into my subconscious. There the woman pops into my mind. Her tears parallel mine, as well as her sadness. My life has always been filled with difficulties small and larger. Difficulties that sit with you and follow you no matter where you go. My boat jostles a bit, moving against the waves. Not a cloud in the sky before now there a few, so puffy and white

you could almost grab them. But try as I might, I cannot. It reminds me of home. A place where I often think of, but it's always outside of my grasp.

The woman is right to cry and curse the world. This world is not a fair world. It doesn't care who you are or what you did. It plays by its own set of rules, and every living thing doesn't have a clue. The world has only one rule that we know and it's that the world is unfair. In this unfairness, there is a sort of fairness. Anything can always happen. We play Russian roulette getting ready in the morning. We play poker when we leave the house. We roll the dice when we go to the bathroom. But we live with our odds, and the world can strike whenever, wherever. That's the rule the world lives by and we live by. And that's something that I--.

“I CAN NOT TAKE IT ANYMORE!! Some sort of action needs to be taken right this instant!” It was the man from

before. The man that believed that he didn't belong on this train. The man whose voice radiates privilege like a bad cologne. This was a man that was intent on getting his way. He was 4-year-old Susie in the mind. He would scream

**The world is not a fair world.**

and cry until he got what he wanted. However, this time, he was going to learn that the world isn't fair. The world doesn't care that he doesn't like the train. He's on the train and there's nothing he can do about.

"WHERE IS THAT SNOBBY CONDUCTOR??" He was already out of his seat looking around like an untamed beast. He was a wild yahoo ready to attack anyone that dared question him. There were a few brave souls that tried to calm the malicious mongrel, but there was no use. He was a beast. "All of you sit down and shut up!!" and with that everyone sat down.

"Do you know who I am??" He looked around and waited, but no one said anything. There was some confusion in the seats. I certainly didn't know who this guy was, and based on their reactions, I'm pretty sure they don't know him either.

**Do you know  
who I am??**

After much  
silence and  
confused

mumbles, he finally said "You people are disgusting. How could you not know me? You people are the most close-minded and cave-dwelling people, I have ever met. I'm glad none of you know me because your small thoughts

might ruin my image." It didn't take long before these nice people were ready to tear his name brand clothes apart. I could happily look out the window and get lost in the vastness, while this man is fending off these people. But I don't think I will. The conductor was back; he must be sick of coming to our car. The crowd sees him and drift back to their seats. There is an air of relief. Even the man who caused

**I certainly didn't  
know who this  
guy was...**

all of this  
is relieved.  
Although he  
didn't want to  
show it.

"It's about time you came!" He rushed towards the conductor. "These people are savages; they were about to attack me. I told you this train isn't meant for me. It's filled with annoying crying babies, screaming women, and don't forget about the savage people. You mix that in with the disgusting seats, stale air, and the horrid bathroom; I dare say I can't take any more." The man goes to pick up his suitcase that is brighter than the rest.

"I don't care where the next stop is, I'm getting off and finding a new train."

There was the usual silence. Then I heard a small rustling like someone



pulling something out of their pocket.

“What is that?” The man sounded annoyed. “A mirror?” There was silence. The type of silence that’s layered with suspense.

“Is this some sort of joke? Is this a treat mirror or something? It’s not really funny.” The more he kept talking the more panic and tension I heard in his voice.

The seat next to me was empty so I moved so I could see down the aisle. I saw the man and the conductor standing in the middle of the aisle only a few seats down from me. The man was holding the mirror and looking at himself. I couldn’t see what he saw, but I wanted to. I wanted to see the shocked him. I wanted to see what the “joke” was. This was my first time seeing the man. He was a sight, but more intriguing than him was what he was doing. He was touching his face like it was about to fall off. The mirror was held firmly in his right hand while his left molded his face back to his skull. What I wanted to see was the mirror, but I couldn’t move anymore. Anymore and they might see me. So, I

**I don’t care where  
the next stop is,  
I’m getting off  
and finding a new  
train.**

just sat there watching it for the slight chance that I might see what dwells there.

“I understand now.” The man said as he gave the mirror back to the conductor and sat back into his seat. I had been so fixated on the mirror that I didn’t watch the conductor or the man. They had an exchange that I wasn’t aware of. There was a secret between them just like the conductor and the woman. The conductor waited with mirror in hand looking at the man. But just as I had been fixated on the mirror the conductor was fixated on the man that he didn’t see me. He didn’t see me quickly jump up and swipe the mirror from his hand. I had grown tired of the mysterious unknown. I had a burning question that needed to be answered. I had a chance, so I took it. I grabbed the mirror and I looked at it. The conductor didn’t try to stop me because he knew. He knew that I

was going to grab the mirror. In fact, it felt that he was waiting for me to take the mirror. He knew what I would see and what my reaction would be.

**He was touching  
his face like it was  
about to fall off.**

“I understand now.” Is all I could say. I looked at the man sitting down now.



He looked smaller and dull. He was a firecracker. Not the colorful explosion in the sky, no. He was the dull smoking husk that firecrackers came out of. The husk filled with dry gunpowder and sulfur. The husk that we throw away to get ready for the next firecracker to light. He was just a husk.

I sat back down in my seat by the window. The conductor put the mirror back in his pocket then left without a word. I looked back out the window and thought about what just happened. Why the woman was crying. Why the loud man was silent? What the mirror told me.

Everyone on this train has two things in common. One, this train full of people is going somewhere, and each person on this train is going to different places. The second is that we're all dead. A chilling fact that I'm still coming to terms with. Though I knew all along.

**I understand now.** It was always there beyond the waves of

my mind. Lurking in the breeze that blew my sail, and the gulls that flew overhead. I'm dead. When I looked at the mirror, I saw a skull with my clothes, that's when it clicked. The puzzle piece holding all of the secrets was placed. I'm dead.

Death is truly the fairest of them all.

It comes for everyone. Doesn't matter if you're a man, woman, or child death will come when it's your time. It knows all about us, our troubles and secrets. It has watched us for the beginning as we waddled in diapers. It sits patiently waiting for our time to come. Waiting for us to get on our last train. Waiting for us to get off at our stop. Whoever

**One, this train full of people is going somewhere...** does not matter, and no matter how much you try to fight it, it

will keep chugging on. Death doesn't sleep or eat, for it's not human. Death is something that we all fear but it has never wronged us. When it's our time it helps us get where we're going. Going.

"Where am I going?"

I looked out the window, it was dark now, but I could still see fields and a few houses. Where was I going? I never really believed in any religion so would I be going to hell. However, there could be another place for people like me. Where will my stop be? Do I have to get off? Why a train? How will I know if I get off at the right stop?

The many questions blur into one thought, "I'm dead". I'm no longer living my normal life. Everything I had is gone now. I have no one to sit with me. No one to talk to me. No one to tell me they love me. No one to support me. No one to help me fight my battles. No one. The tears came naturally, I guess because I didn't know they were there. I looked at my hands; they were shaking. I looked at the window and only saw my reflection. It wasn't the dead me but the alive me. I stared at myself for a while.

"I look better as a skeleton". I softly laughed to myself. Then silence. I sat there smiling to myself while my ship sailed for the last time.

I thought about many things. I thought of the people I left behind. Of my dogs. Of my job. Of my college years. Of the person that gave my life meaning; he will be so lonely without me. Of the birds in the sky. I thought of many things, one was the answer to one of my questions. Why a train? Trains are one of the most boring ways to travel. There's no movie or music. They pack

**Where am I going?**

as many people as they can into them, so it's crowded. If something is wrong with the heating, then you just have to deal with it. Trains aren't fun. Trains aren't supposed to fun; they're meant to take you from place to place. Death isn't supposed to be fun; it only takes you from place to place. That's why a train. Although, life isn't supposed to be fun too; its purpose is to take you from experience to experience. Looking back, my experiences weren't that bad. I had a lot, maybe more than the norm, but I still would say I had a pretty good life.

Just then the conductor opened the car door and walked in. I peeked over the seat in front of me. He scanned the car and all its inhabitants. He met eyes with a few of them; one of them was me. He then pointed up to a flashing digital sign that read "Your Stop".

"But what does that mea-

"NEXT STOP  
WILL BE  
YOUR STOP!!!"  
one of the  
conductors  
said over the  
intercom.

**I thought about many things. I thought of the people I left behind.**

I sat back down in my seat fully. I was a little nervous but what did I have to lose I'm already dead. I can't stay on this

train forever, plus I was curious. So, I sat and waited for my stop. I prepared myself mentally for whatever. I thought about all the life I lived in my short 26 years of my living. Everything I worked and lived for is dead. It's dead and it's coming with me. It sits on this train with me. It knows that I'm scared, but it also knows that I won't let that stop me. It knows all the things that I have been through. It knows about the dark alleys I had to walk through coming from work. It knows about the doctor's test results. It knows about the possum that lives in my trash can. It knows me, and I know it. Death isn't something you can fight or beat, but it is something I can live with. I won't be controlled by my fear of death.

The train stopped. I got up and walked to the door with the few people he looked at earlier. Some of those people included the crying woman and the

**Your stop.** loud man. We all shuffle to the door getting off one at a time.

When it was my turn, I got off and looked around.

There was nothing but darkness. The vast fields and houses I seen through the window were absent. There was just nothingness filled with darkness. I

stood there next to the train thinking about what to do next. Then I saw some of the people that were in front of me walk into the darkness. They were gone as soon as they stepped into it. I didn't hear anything. No screams of the damned or no tears of the forgiven. There was no sound. It was like the darkness swallowed everything: the people, the sound, and light. I saw the loud man get off next. He looked at the

**Death isn't  
something you  
can fight or  
beat, but it is  
something I can  
live with.**

darkness and began to cry as he walked into it. But as soon as he touched the darkness his crying stopped.

Next, the crying woman came; she had runny eyes and smeared lips. When she got off the train, she stood a few steps from the train. She didn't move, and she didn't cry.

I was ready for almost anything, so I thought this would be the only chance to ask her the question. I cautiously walked over to her.

"Excuse me miss?"

She turned around and looked at me. There was a bit of fear in her eyes, but

it quickly subsided. She was a pretty woman even with her stained face of grief. She stood there staring at me.

“Ummmm... so earlier on the train, you were crying, and the conductor sat next to you, and even though he didn't say anything you said thank you, why?” I felt pressure on my chest for asking.

She looked down at her hands and said:

“He didn't say anything; he just **Excuse me miss?** held my hand.”

I looked at her hands and I looked at her face. She was smiling even though she had a drained look. A quiet sadness that made my strong will shake. So, I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed her hand and walked into the darkness.

We die and we all have our places to go, but we don't have to be alone.

I held her hand as walked into the abyss.

**Thank you.**

“Thank you”. It was the same calm and quiet ‘thank you’ she said to the conductor.

My eyes blurred, but my ship sailed on.

# ***One Bad Day***

You feel it coming the day before,  
Maybe even in the moments  
You smile, laugh and go about life  
But it's already centering  
Waiting.  
Ready for the perfect second to strike  
And when it does-  
When it does it isn't pretty.  
The culmination of a week, year, decade  
Some live to see a century  
No matter how long  
It builds indefinitely  
'Til it's far too much  
And it caves inward  
Unloading that internal enemy  
Releasing all that pain, frustration and  
lack of energy  
It all falls inward bashing open your  
head  
Blood in torrents and voices spilling out  
the rivers of the dead  
It's too much,  
Too much  
  
But on the end of the day it helps not  
hurts  
That splitting of the head

## **Fala Earl**

Watch it escape  
All the negativity and stress kept locked  
in tight  
No transferring  
It's Alchemy  
The way it bottles up dread (disappears  
into the night)  
And looses a fog that cleanses  
Turning Icarus's ambition back to  
Prometheus's heart  
Join the land of the mortals  
See how we built up to heaven  
No common language were we fed  
We strived and survived  
Now suffer and endure  
This isn't the end  
This is where you begin.  
Head up,  
Now ground both feet to the floor.

## *Mini Mall*

The only thing shining now is the  
Christmas tree.  
Most of the stores are boarded up  
And your ex-girlfriend runs the cash  
register  
Of my favorite record store. You put  
A dollar fifty in the vending machine  
And we make a lunch of Mello Yello  
And a bag of Lay's chips. We had to  
pick between  
My Chemical Romance and Bright  
Eyes, which  
Says a lot about both our relationship  
and also our music tastes.  
I stand on my tip-toes to kiss you even  
in my two-inch boots,  
And I feel my ankle twist as we fall  
onto a bench.  
You ask me what's wrong and I say  
"There is no place I'd rather be."  
And even as we stare down the little,  
neglected  
Hallway that once housed our favorite  
stores,  
And we leave, without making up our  
minds  
I think I know I meant it. I think I  
know  
You are brighter than the Christmas  
tree.

Brittani Miller



# *Two Days in the Village*

## **Day 1**

In the councilman's cottage, his wife shuffles her feet against the fabric of the hammock strung between a couple of maples in the front yard. A mosquito bite irritates the arch of . The long skirt of her dark gray dress serves as a sort of fan for her legs, whipping against her shins in the breeze that passes through the cracks in the tall wooden fence lining the yard's perimeter.

She yawns and passes a hand through her soft red locks, still too short to be pulled out of her face. She returns the hand to its eight.

The timer in her apron pocket calls shrilly, telling her , just as the ring shushes, and stands. The shower from two hours prior doesn't seem to have helped relieve the stress in her neck and shoulders from the odd angle she'd woken in. She shrugs it off, working through the soreness.

The kitchen is uncomfortably warm from the preheated oven. She stops before the nearest counterspace, where a large tea towel covers a couple of balls of dough, one slightly smaller than the other. She lifts the towel and dusts her hands with the flour them , then transfers them to a greased baking

sheet.

Her son's voice comes to mind as she pinches her thumb and index finger together. "Let me do the next part!" Since his fingers were so small, he'd add the middle one to the mix and set them into the center of the dough balls, joining them together.

"Belly button bread," she whispers simultaneously with the memory of her son's exclamation.

The wails begin immediately, no gradual increase in volume, but an instant protestation for nourishment. The councilman's wife leaves the dishwater and dries her hands on her apron. From the kitchen, she passes through the narrow hallway into the far bedroom. It's a small space, with only the necessary pieces of furniture. She goes to the crib set against the opposite wall, where her son has managed to sit up, his round face red from the strain of sobbing. His eyes, what she can see through his squinted lids, are like blue pools.

"There, there," she consoles as she reaches for him. "No need to get so emotional." He latches onto her neck and sobs into her shoulder, pinching



the soft fabric between his lips. She carries him out to the main room and sets him in his highchair at the end of the table in the dining space. After she pries his fingers loose from her dress front, she hurries to the ice box stored in the cupboard beside the sink. She takes the jar of milk and pours it into a bottle, still dripping from the recent washing.

Like magic, he goes quiet at the sight of the bottle. He takes it between his small, pudgy hands and gulps rapidly. Before moving back to the dishes, she smiles and strokes his soft, dark locks once, twice.

She recalls a similar occurrence almost twenty years earlier, when her first son cried incessantly before finally finding satisfaction in his bottle. Her boys are almost identical—if not for the eyes, it'd be impossible to tell them apart. That'll never be an issue, though.

*"Have you accepted that? Our son gets to live in the Kingdom and we stay here?"*

*"Like I said, it's our job—"*

"Oh, dammit!" She breaks from her sober reverie when the large knife slashes her thumb. Several drops of blood fall into the sudsy water before she uses her other hand to cover the

wound. It drips across the floor as she rushes into the bathroom.

Once she's applied a bandage and feels it's safe to return to her work, she exits the bathroom and finds the mess she's made on the hardwood surface, and suddenly, she's thrust back less than a year prior.

She remembers the ceremonial dagger, the one dripping with the intermingling blood of seven village citizens, one of them her sixteen-year-old son's; she remembers how her husband's blood began to pool on the floor as he lay dying, that same dagger lodged in his chest.

Every instant of last year's Departure Day returns to the front of her mind, as vivid as if it were yesterday. Her son was the youngest of the seven chosen to make the trek to the paradise at the top of the mountain known as the Kingdom, where they would be greeted by the Almighty Himself and live in glory with Him. Getting there, of course, involved more than a long, arduous hike.

She wonders if her son changed his mind after witnessing the "departure" of his fellow villagers; she wonders if he

was the first to go, or the last—surely his father, the mayor, wouldn't have placed him in the middle; she wonders if he thought of her before he died. When the mayor returned home so late that night, she'd hoped that it meant there was a chance he spared their son's life. She'd never know the real reason for his lateness, but she came to her own conclusion, that he was burdened with guilt over sacrificing his child.

She's pulling a pan of roasted potatoes, onions, peppers and sausages from the oven when the councilman enters the cottage. The initial sight of him still confuses her; despite nearly a year of marriage, she hasn't gotten used to the difference between her spouses.

The mayor wasn't small by any means, but wasn't as broad and bulky as the councilman.

The mayor's eyes had been the lightest shade of blue she'd ever seen, while the councilmans were shimmering hazel jewels.

The mayor's hair—what he had left of it—was a shade of brown so dark it was almost black while the councilman's was a soft chestnut, a shaggy mess when he didn't have it slicked back with a special oil he splurged on during supply runs in

the city. "Hello, dear," he greets her in a deep, jovial tone. "And hello, my little monkey!"

In his brown corduroys and white button-down shirt, he's like a teddy bear moving to the highchair to engulf her son in his arms.

He accepted the child as his own, long before he was born. As he cuddles the giggling infant, she can't help but remember.

She fled the mayor's cottage with only a satchel containing a few articles of clothing and some books she'd smuggled into the village for her son, ones he'd read often and scribbled notes in. It was a light enough load that she didn't fear being overburdened by it. Thank God, because she'd needed those books when she discovered the outcome of her son's journey up the mountain.

Many years ago, the mayor had told her about what happened on Departure Day, leaving out none of the gruesome details. She'd been relieved to discover that, as the mayor's wife, she wouldn't go to the Kingdom, but would instead help the mayor—and the councilmen—prepare the people who could. In spite

of her knowledge, she wasn't prepared for the sight that awaited her at the top of the mountain. Graves, marked by an army of steel rods posted in the ground, were set before her, and in between were the remains of the chosen few for that year. Their throats had been slashed, their blood dried on their bodies and the ground where they fell.

But there were only six.

She began scanning the grounds, then ran toward the shadows among the trees. Just as she reached the crowded expanse of trunks, she caught a glimpse of a soft white mound, not dissimilar to how the others looked. Dropping the satchel, she bolted toward it.

His pale throat, long and thin like the mayor's, was untouched. He appeared to only be sleeping. But that fantasy ended the moment she pressed her hand to the back of his head. It was an instant kill, unlike the others.

At least he hadn't suffered.

But that acknowledgment wasn't enough to ease her burdened heart. She collapsed onto his body, hanging on desperately to the only good thing in her God-forsaken life. The councilmen found her there an hour later, asleep, her head resting on her son's chest. The

village's new leader, barely younger than the mayor, took no mercy as he pulled her violently away from the body.

She screamed, kicked, protested. All the way back to the village, she pleaded for them to kill her. It wouldn't be so. She received the Punishment, not such an original name, but miserable, nevertheless. She was stripped, her hair shorn into an uneven bob with the dagger she'd used to kill the mayor, then the new mayor took a whip, one she recognized from the mayor's study for this exact occasion, and delivered first ten, twenty, then fifty lashes.

It had been the youngest councilman, barely younger than her, who suggested marriage over seclusion. Instead of rotting away in the meetinghouse cellar, she could marry him, which could eventually lead to repentance and acceptance back into the congregation. The new mayor had been reluctant, and if not for the majority approving the proposal, he would've tossed her into the cold abyss below the ground.

The councilman rarely smiled. His face was always quite sober-looking, and the way his thick brows arched over his eyes, it seemed like he had a

menacing spirit. It wasn't until their wedding night, after they'd settled in his little cottage, in the small master bedroom, when she saw a change in his demeanor. He stood before her in the typical black of meeting day attire, and bending to her level, he gently kissed her cheek and moved forward with an embrace. A surprisingly warm, comfortable feeling washed over her in that instant, and as she began to relax, his expression lightened.

He rests her son on his hip, still giggling, and approaches her. She lowers the spoon she's been using to scoop the food onto a serving platter and manages to wipe stray oil from her fingers before he wraps his free arm around her shoulders.

"And how was your day?" he asks as he kisses the top of her head.

"Fine," she replies, though she knows she's not completely honest. But spoken in just the right tone, he interprets the word as a joyful one.

"I'm sorry to tell you so late, but the mayor has decided to join us for supper."

"Oh?" She escapes his hold and moves to transfer the platter to the oven, where it can keep warm while she

tries to decide how she'll feed another mouth.

"Will his wife be here, too?"

"Yes, her too."

*Two* more mouths to feed?

At least there's plenty of bread.

The new mayor is a tall man, his body lean and sculpted like a man who takes pride in his appearance more than time to work in his yard. While the community had been devastated to lose the old mayor, they seemed rather glad that the new mayor had finally come into power.

He dressed like most men in the community, only his clothes were well pressed and lacking in any kind of grime. Villagers helped him with daily responsibilities. As the mayor, he has more important things to do than work in a field or keep up his lawn—he is a messenger for the Almighty, a direct line between Him and everybody else.

Despite her dislike of the man, the councilman's wife can't help but acknowledge how attractive he is. Possessing a strong square chin, sharp cheekbones, a straight nose, silver-blue eyes and thin pink lips set in a position that announces they spend a lot of time

kissing, she thinks he'd be successful in the movie business. If nothing else, he could be the egotistical boyfriend the heroine dumps for the nice guy.

The new mayor's wife is a squat figure, barely over five feet, and carries most of her weight in her chest. In a dark green calico sprigged with yellow blossoms, her attire compliments the gold of her long, straight locks pulled back in a knot at the base of her neck. She smiles with the façade of being a polite woman; no matter how hard she tries, the councilman's wife knows the happy little woman is just for show.

"Welcome," greets the councilman as he passes the baby to his wife.

"What is that I smell?" He sniffs the air with great emphasis, acting so pleased that the new mayor's wife has bread stuffing, the familiar overcooked onion fumes infecting the air.

It doesn't go with the rest of the food, the councilman's wife thinks, heaving a sigh that manages to go unnoticed by the guests. She directs the new mayor's wife to the table, indicating a spot for her to place her contribution.

"The Almighty has instructed us to push up Departure Day this year."

The councilman's wife halts her fork midway to her mouth when the new mayor makes the announcement. She lowers it back to her plate, letting it clatter louder than she intended.

"Instead of two more months, we have two weeks," he added, wiping away a drop of oil from the corner of his mouth with a cloth napkin.

Everyone looks at the councilman's wife. Silent for the entire meal, she sees they're expecting a more elaborate reaction from her. Instead, she keeps her eyes lowered, lifts her fork again, and chews on a piece of sausage. Unfortunately, it's become hard to swallow, so she continues to grind the meat until the lump subsides in her throat.

Normally, councilmen's wives are not exempt from being chosen for Departure Day. Since she's been marked as a criminal, she cannot be included. It wasn't such a disappointment, especially after the baby was born. At first it infuriated her, finding out the mayor's wish for another child had been fulfilled. She spent the entire pregnancy loathing the life inside her. When she felt it move, when the little feet kicked, she grunted

in frustration; when she had to empty her bladder multiple times a day, she growled; when the sixteen-hour labor began, she cried.

It all changed when he appeared to her in the flesh. She saw a familiar face, one she thought she'd never see again, one that was slowly losing clarity in her mind. She was glad she still wouldn't be chosen; perhaps this time she could do something to change *this* son's future, and make up for her failures that last time.

She *would* change her baby's future.

## Day 2

In the councilman's cottage, his wife moves beneath the covers of their double bed, groaning as she wakes.

The councilman watches the process, having been awake for nearly an hour already. Even with the creases on her face and stray gray hairs in her red locks, she's still the most beautiful woman he's ever met. He wishes he could kiss her lips before the slight pout disappears when she's reached full wakefulness, but he remembers the vow he made almost a year ago, never to touch her unless she approves, and if it appears his actions are unwelcomed, he

immediately backs off.

He wishes she could be happy. On a night not long before the baby was born, just as they'd settled down in bed, he asked to hold her. She nestled herself against him, her head resting on his shoulder and his arm around hers. Their hands rested together on her large belly, feeling the baby move within her.

"I love you," he said against her hair.

"Then take me away from here," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone, fingering the fabric of his cotton nightshirt.

Another day, she said, "You want me to be happy here, I understand. But I can't. If you really loved me, you'd see that."

*If you really loved me...*

Why couldn't she see the benefits of living in the village? The world beyond it was a cruel place, judgmental and defiled by sin. There was happiness here, and a way to be close to the Almighty.

She was still distraught over her son leaving, though not so greatly that she felt inclined to murder anymore. Truth was, he'd been partly relieved the mayor died. He was still young, not yet a councilman, when she arrived in the village. Nervous, yet full of hope that it

was the right place for her, he became instantly infatuated. He sinned over her, pining for her as she wed the mayor, had his child, and became established in the community. On the rare occasion he was close to her, his body would grow warm and tingle with the urge to hold her.

Marrying her was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. He'd remained single, should the mayor leave the earthly world—and his wife—behind.

He tried to be better to her, to let her know he cared. She'd settled down somewhat after the baby was born, and a routine started to form. He hoped that soon they could demolish the fence surrounding his property—his wife would no longer be a prisoner.

The councilman's wife reaches across the bed, finding him there, welcoming her with his own arm. It's the choosing day, her first opportunity at leaving the confines of the yard. She kisses his nose, and he kisses hers in response. They exchange smiles, and then she rises. She'll bathe first, since breakfast must be prepared before they depart for the meeting house. She moves toward the

bathroom, discarding her pajamas in a basket set just inside the entry. He can't help but wince at the sight of the scars, still pink and defined on her pale back.

She closes the door, and the sound of water plunging into the porcelain tub lulls him into a brief slumber.

The councilman's wife fries eggs and potatoes for breakfast. She converses with her son while he plays with the yarn doll she made for him. When the councilman appears, dry and dressed in his best suit, she smiles and goes to kiss him before plating his meal.

They eat in pleasant silence, then, as she begins to gather the dishes:

"Have you ever thought about us having a baby?"

She's standing before the sink, her back turned to him when he voices the question so, fortunately, he doesn't notice the pained expression that covers her face.

Yes, she thought about it. If they'd met under different circumstances, of course.

He was a good man, if you took away his choice of religion.

There would be no convincing him that leaving the village was best for

them. When she got out, she'd only take her son. It would break the councilman's heart, but maybe then he'd finally understand how she felt every day.

As they exit the cottage, walking down the gravel path that leads to the gate, she notices that the garden needs tending. An army of weeds managed to sprout overnight. The petunias lining the path, though, are getting along just fine, the petals the same dark shade of purple as the councilman's wife's dress.

When she gets out and settled in a new home, she'll plant more petunias, and hopefully her son will help take care of them. She transfers him from one hip to another as they pass through the gate, then takes one more look at the cottage. It will be the last time she lays eyes on it.

The entire village is gathered in the meeting house, families arranged by rank on the benches. The councilman and his wife pass through the crowd, making their way to the front bench. Their designated spot is at the end closest to the wall. The councilman gathers with the rest of the authorities

and after a brief round of small talk, they move as a whole to the back room, the mayor's study.

Natural light streams through the windows lining the walls. As if on command, a strong ray touches the box on the podium where small, tan slips of paper await the drawing. The councilman's wife bounces her son on her knee, singing softly. *If I could save time in a bottle, the first thing that I'd like to do...*

She gets through only a short portion of it before the new mayor's wife plops down beside her.

"What a lovely day," she says with that fake grin the councilman's wife despises.

"The Almighty has truly blessed us."

"Yes, he has, hasn't he?"

"You must be glad to finally get out beyond the fence."

"I am."

"You must be so grateful to your husband, such a kind man he is, taking you in and all, especially with another man's baby."

"Mm-hmm." She can feel her neck growing warmer by the second.

"But then, it was the mayor's son, and how he resembles him!"



It takes all she has not to yank her son away from the mayor's wife's reach. The other woman strokes the baby's delicate cheek.

"Perhaps one day this son, too, will be chosen to go to the Kingdom."

"Wouldn't that be something?"

The councilmen return to the main room, settling in their seats. The mayor's wife smiles and nods toward the councilman's wife and moves to the other end of the bench.

The councilman settles beside his wife, flashing a casual smile in her direction just before the mayor appears before the congregation. Silence falls over the entire room, except for the faint sounds of nature beyond the meeting house walls.

The mayor stands beside the podium, detailing the history of the village and Departure Day, dating back nearly a century. He honors all past mayors by name and lights a candle for each of them set on a table behind him.

Finally, the moment they'd been waiting for.

He goes to the box set on the podium and slips his hand inside to pick the first name, then second, and so on until seven names are called, all in a

wide range of ages. The councilman's wife notices that the youngest this year is thirty-two, another councilman's spouse, with five children. Her eyes water as she watches the woman stand proudly alongside the other villagers chosen to live in the Kingdom, as she watches the mayor deliver a blessing, and as she watches the crowd applaud for this year's honored few. While everyone stands, the councilman's wife remains seated, her cheek pressed against the soft peak of her son's head.

There's a break in the festivities for preparing the feast. The councilman minds the baby while his wife moves about the kitchen, assembling the casserole she's contributing. She cooks chunks of sausage and onion, then mixes them with potatoes and tomatoes in a baking dish she puts in the oven to bake for a while. It's ready just in time for them to return to the meeting house.

Tables have been brought in from the storage shed in the back, benches set on either side of each, and what aren't needed lining the walls. The councilman carries the baby and his wife the casserole. He hangs back with

the other councilmen at the head table and she goes to the buffet table behind it to add her dish to the others.

The mayor instructs everyone to gather at the tables and stand with their heads bowed as he gives the blessing. "Now, may we come together on this beautiful day and fuel our bodies and spirits with the bounty the Almighty has provided us."

With that, applause erupts and the line begins for the buffet.

The councilmen and their wives are at the head table with the mayor and his wife. Their children are at a table nearby, all of varying ages, from teens to toddlers. Only the councilman's wife keeps her son close, balancing him on her lap while she eats from the plate the councilman has prepared for her.

It's difficult to swallow, though somehow she manages. She thinks back to this day last year, when she was being congratulated on her son being chosen. She remembered how the mayor exclaimed his joy at his child getting to live in the Kingdom. And she remembered the look he gave her, a silent one only she could interpret, indicating he intended to have another child, no matter how hesitant she was.

She holds on a little tighter to the baby. He's the generator that will build up the determination to leave.

With a fake gag, she excuses herself from the table and goes to the back room, the kitchen, where dishes will be washed and some of the food was kept warm. Her son settled on her hip, she spots the matches on the counter beside the stove. Quickly, she goes to each burner and starts the gas. The squeal of it coming on, then the subtle scent of its poison indicates she must leave if she intends to follow through with her plan.

She takes the box of matches in one hand and scurries to the back door. The sound of footsteps approaching the room lead her to act quicker. She swings the door open and sets her son down on the wooden step. He only moves to grab his tiny feet, entranced by his toes as she strikes one, then two matches and leaves them burning on the countertop.

The mayor's wife appears in the other doorway just as the councilman's wife turns to scoop up her son and flee through the back door. The mayor's wife shouts first, then other voices join in. The councilman's wife doesn't pause

to listen to the exact words; she knows well enough what they are.

Her son starts to wail with the jolts of her pounding steps. She runs down the path passing through the village, never looking back, not even as the meeting house begins to blaze. She runs away from the mountain, into the woods, onto a route that she hopes will lead her to the highway. While it's not the same road they take on city errands, she has to hope that it goes to the same place, or at least the same general region.

When she comes to a cornfield, she can hear the hum of traffic beyond. All she must do is pass through the stalks. Quickly, with the sound of a pursuing mob in the distance, she lifts the hem of her skirt and wraps it around her son, her thin white slip the only protection she'll have for her legs. Satisfied that her son is as shielded as possible, she barrels into the rows. She can feel the sting of cuts along her cheek and hands. It's all worth it as she stumbles through, her son held tightly against her breast, his wails toned down to a whimper.

Then, she sees freedom, the end of the rows.

Then, disappointment sets in as she

discovers it's only a dirt road, the same one they travel to reach the city.

She doesn't let it destroy her, because she reassures herself that the highway is still not far off, just a little ways away.

What does destroy her is the sound of wheels rolling over the dusty surface, and the purr of a familiar engine. Her son still held firmly against her, she sets off on a sprint.

"Wait!"

She knows that voice. It's the councilman's.

She won't wait, she won't look back. She keeps going.

The wheels stop rolling, the engine continues to hum, but then the heavy footfalls of another runner mixes with it, and she knows he's decided to follow her on foot.

And while she's lighter, her strides aren't as long as his, and he soon reaches her. When his hand catches the back of her dress, she cries out, and uses one arm to tear at the councilman's cheek. She can feel the separation of flesh from his face as her nails come away from him, and his moan of agony tells her she reached her target.

This strike doesn't force him to release her, though, but instead has him

tightening his grip on her dress. He uses his other hand to grasp her arm, and with that solidity, he transfers the one hand from the dress to her other arm.

“Back off,” she growls. “I already killed one husband, and I’m not afraid to do it again.”

It hurts him worse than the scratch.

He swallows the pain and says,

“What did you—?”

“I won’t subject another one of my children to that kind of life again. I can’t lose him, I can’t. Not again!”

“But the Kingdom—”

“Fuck the Kingdom!” she screeches.

He sees her knee rising just as it collides with his groin.

The pain floods him, and he must release her. She escapes his clutch before he can catch her again. As he writhes back and forth on the ground, he shouts.

“Mary!”



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