LIMITED EDITIONS

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Community College of Philadelphia
Limited Editions considers poems, short stories and creative nonfiction from all students enrolled at the Community College of Philadelphia.

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• Include name, email address, and phone number with each submission. Please retain copies of submitted manuscripts because they may not be returned.

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Faculty Advisor’s Note

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## Limited Editions 2013

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The Story of Maggie

Ryan Laverty

I am a goddess, gleaming in the sun, reflecting streetlights when the night envelops the world. I am strong, all powerful. I am without feeling, without pain. Encased in metal and wood I live to defend honor. I also strike fear in the hearts of men. My emotions run cold and they do not discriminate. I am passionate, in an instant I burn with an inner fire unheard of. I can be silent but I will be heard. The echoes are heard throughout the streets, in the city, inside your homes. I am beauty! I will be held high and bring the might of justice. I bring protection to the good will of humankind. I am the judgment to all those that oppose.

Partnered with honor, duty, service I become everything I want. With my partner I am spoiled, bathed, cleaned and become nerves of steel for anyone holding me. Bravery rides along with me. Please, know there is nothing to fear. Not when I am around. With my partner I am heroic, becoming more than a possession, becoming more than power. Saving lives is what I do. Innocence will stand behind me to fight evil. Fight with honor, fight without fear, fight with courage, fight with me!

I am confused removed from my home. It was so easy to betray the forgotten goddess of power and justice. Mistreatment, abuse, violence are all I see now. My body has been scarred and battered. My identity filed away, no way to track me, to find me, to report me missing. I am mishandled and over used. No more protecting honor I have become someone's bitch. I still echo through the night, in the city, maybe in your homes. But silence is the key to my future existence. I must never say where I am or who I am. I am losing faith in myself and in the people I once protected. I am dropped, thrown, kicked. I try not to feel this pain. I do not look as beautiful as I once was. Tarnished and dirty, I stay hidden away unprotected, unguarded, and without any respect.

I will rise up again. I will find the courage once lost. I will be brave for all that I fought for and who I willed against. We must never forget me. My name will be screamed by everyone. They will rejoice with my return. I am too strong, too beautiful to be treated this way. My power is too great for the ones who choose to use me. I will make the ones who forget about me pay. I am anger and I am force. You will know my name.

I am lost in a patch of grass in an empty lot. I know I am still in the city beneath the moon. I am old, dirty, and used up. My metal and wood that once protected me and my people are slowly being eaten away. Rot comes to the once beautiful wood. I was thrown out, given away, never to be seen again. I am in pain and fear the worst has come. I pray to be found, I pray for better days, come sunrise, please let me be found.

Small voices are heard, the weeds rustle within the breeze. Glass bottle glisten in the morning sun, the chill of dew drops. A cat walks by and gives me a quick sniff and continues sauntering off into the distance. I struggle to stay awake; my power seems diminished. I am lonely, cold, and tired. Oncoming footsteps creep upon my lying cold body. I am held briefly and the warmth of the touch is sensuous. I have hope again; I want to be held, be given life again. Once again, I will be strong and powerful. I am held again and embraced. Anxiety is felt in the air; my new friend seems unsure what to do.

Clean, I feel clean again! I feel loved I feel the honor that I lost. I begin to feel like the goddess that I am again. I meet new people, they are charming, exciting, and I take in all the joy I bring them. They
raise me high in the air, cheering my name. Cheering for the justice, courage, and power I bring to human-kind!

I feel a brief squeeze. I feel my fire begin to burn inside me again. I am alive and well. Power and fire comes with me. I have been awakened. Screams and the colors scarlet overwhelm me. I am confused once again. Acrid smoke rises, I smell something burning. A child lies below a swing. He struggles to breathe; gurgling he tries to cry out. Blood empties on to the concrete running down the sides of his face. The hole in his stomach is large and open, charred flesh, intestines in strings of red is seen. I am dropped to the ground and lie beside this child. I have taken innocence.

I am fear, bathed in blood, I am a demon from hell. I bring darkness, hate, and pain. Injustice thrives inside me, tragedy pours out of me, violence is my life line. The boy lies cold and dead as the steel I am made of. The wood and metal that were once beautiful are now covered in coagulated blood. People are screaming once again, but no one is rejoicing from my return.

Maggie is my name and I am a goddess that lies in a pool of a child’s blood. I am death and destruction. You can find me on your streets, in your city and maybe even in your homes.
The Wolf Falls Asleep with a Belly Full of Stones

Jeffrey Bumiller

There was a girl in New Zealand who claimed she had been bitten by a shark.

No one believed her though, they told her the blood she was coughing up looked too much like Coca Cola.

One night I sliced my hand open while making carrot soup.

No one believed me either. I called my dad, my neighbor, my boss, as well as the number for an organization called Bonus Arm.

Everyone was sure that I was overreacting. The truth is, I was hardly reacting at all. I was waiting for someone to panic for me.

I was bleeding slowly, indolently, the blood crawling out of my hand, wholly averse to toil.

It dripped down the length of my hand and off my fingers into the open mouth of a waiting wolf.
that had snuck into the house
in search of food and warmth.

I ignored the wolf out of stubbornness.
Out of boredom I flipped on the T.V.
while I waited for someone to call
or stop by to check on me.

I sped past a show called
“Yeti Riot” and another
called “Speed Seance”
which claimed to “Really
get things done.”

Finally I settled on a documentary
film called “Combat Echo”.
The strange sounds of war
seduced me somehow and I sat
down on the floor to rest my eyes.
I felt my hand begin to throb
the blood oscillating a little
faster through my body.

I had never been
that close to a wild
animal before.

The wolf was mollified, snoring
right beside me, its belly distended.

My eyes were giving into the weight
of the night. I noticed the give and take
of the wolf’s chest and its snout,
red with my blood, just before I slept.
The Seconds

Shane Johnson

Tick

Is your partner here?
I heard the satellite fell on the same day.
I thought you were ready, and wanted to tell your family.
I was supposed to meet you on that bridge.
Why were you sitting right on the edge?

Tock

I wish I could've seen you two together.
Was the satellite important?
I didn't know where you were until I saw the paper the next morning.
Would you have jumped if I was on time?
I got distracted by the object that fell from the sky.

Tick

I've always known, and I've always loved you.
I don't understand.
I sat outside your sister's until evening waiting for you to show for dinner.
I just needed a ride to the dinner at your sister's.
I didn't see you sitting there.

Tock

You didn't have to feel ashamed.
We thought you had changed your mind about dinner, and ate without you.
I was so excited to meet your family, and see where you came from.
Was jumping always in your plan?
I can still feel where my back hit into yours.
Tick

I thought I raised you to stand up for who you were.
If I had known what was wrong I would have ran to help you.
Why didn't you let me know that it was too soon?
You seemed so much happier these past few months.
I saw your smile turn into surprise.

Tock

It is time to say goodbye. Wish me luck.
I don’t know how mom is being so stoic.
I am glad the service was open to the public, so I can be here.
You were a wonderful friend.
You’re probably wondering why I am here.

Tick

I am sorry I didn’t tell you I knew.
I am sorry that I didn’t know something was wrong.
I am sorry I pushed you into coming out.
I am sorry I wasn’t on time.
I am sorry for what I did.
The basement of my college’s oldest building feels like a corridor ripped out of the dark ages. I tighten my folded arms as I step away from the stairwell — the only way out. The cool breeze of early autumn outside is gone and is replaced with stuffy air, thick cement, and old floors. It’s probably only a few yards to the end of the hallway, but it seems longer. If there are actually classes held down here, I feel sorry for the students.

“Why the hell do we have to come down here to watch this thing?” I shoot my cousin Brad an angry glare. Since my sister died, I’m the only one in the family close to his age. “Can’t we do this in a classroom with a window? Some place at least a little less ancient?”

“Do they have windows in movie theaters? Windows and movies don’t mix.” Brad strolls to the end of the hall, stopping at the last door. “And they got a better theater system down here. It’s where the film club hangs out and their president managed to get the college to spend some big bucks for a good system.” Brad unlocks the door and signals for me to follow him. “I hear he’s tight with the Dean.” He winks at me as he flicks on the lights. On the wall is a big screen television and below it a full home theater system. Brad opens the DVD player and slides a disc out of a paper sleeve. “Plus, I find that this room gives movies an added...dimension.”

I follow him in and settle into the sofa opposite the TV. It’s surprisingly cozy for an old thing. “Do we really need to see this on a theater system? You said it’s just about five or six minutes, right?” I shake my head as I stare at the speakers mounted to the wall a few feet above. “I don’t really need a big cinematic experience.” I sigh. “Or ‘dimension.’”

Brad places the disc in the machine. “Hey, I worked hard on this. I want you to get the full experience. Shannon, you’re the first person not involved with production who’s seeing this. I ain’t doing it on some old picture tube.” He sets the receiver and the television up for the movie and then dims the lights. “Oh, and I got you something to munch on if you stay to watch.” He reaches down next to the sofa and pulls up a plastic bag. “Tortilla chips. Restaurant style. Your favorite, if I recall?” He tosses it to me and puts on his best used-car-salesman grin. “I know these don’t fit in with your new ‘super strict diet’ but now you have an excuse to cheat and nobody ever has to find out.” He raised an eyebrow. “You do still want to see the movie I put my heart and soul into, right? I mean, I could just show it to the teachers first.”

I roll my eyes. “I did promise you I’d be the first to see it.” I swallow hard. “But bribing me with my favorite snack? That’s a cheap shot. So this thing better be really good.”

Brad chuckles. “I don’t like to sound conceited, but I think it’s pretty damn awesome.” He takes a seat next to me.

I pull open the bag. “You still haven’t told me what this movie’s about.”

He flips the remote into the air and catches it. “That’s ‘cause I want you to go into it totally in the dark. It’s better that way.”

I pull out a chip and suck the salt a moment before taking a bite. “Can you at least tell me what it’s called?”

Brad smiles and shakes his head. “I haven’t titled it yet. Quiet. It’s coming on.”

The screen opens on a dimly lit room with some cliché haunting stringed orchestra in the background. “Seriously?” I whisper.

He waves me away.

On the large, flat-panel screen, a girl sits on the floor in a corner. She can’t be any older than nine. She’s dressed in a thin nightgown and her dirty blond hair is a frazzled mess. She’s shaking. Shivering. Or trembling. Maybe a little of both. She’s on a rug and what seems like half of a very stale-looking loaf of bread next to her. She’s nervously fidgeting with her hands and staring at a small metal door a few feet away. The camera is steadier than I expected for an
There’s a loud crash and she’s on her feet in a second. She rushes to the door and slams her fists against it. “Let him go! Bring him back!” She bangs harder until her knees gave out and she collapses in a heap, weeping.

I lean over to Brad. “So where is she? Who’s she looking for?” I’m actually semi-curious about her. Brad smiles and shoves me aside without gazing away from the screen. “You’ll find out. Quiet!”

The door opens for just a moment. A small boy is sent in before the door slams shut again. He’s younger. Maybe six?

“Adam!” The girl rushes to her feet and pulls the boy closer to her. “You’re alive. I heard you scream earlier and I thought he killed you.” She stands back and looks him over. He’s almost naked, with nothing but tattered gray shorts on. “Where’s your shirt? What happened, Adam? Did he hurt you?”

Adam avoids eye contact and remains silent.

“Adam? Adam, it’s me. It’s Emily. Why won’t you talk to me?” Emily cries as she looks into Adam’s cold brown eyes. “What’s wrong, Adam? What did he do to you? You weren’t even this scared when the hurricane came. Remember how scary that was? But you made it. We can make it through this too.”

I feel for the girl. I know what it’s like to comfort a trembling sibling. I can remember doing the same thing at her age during stormy nights.

Emily helps Adam to her corner and sits him down. She takes the piece of bread and gives it to him. “Here. Take this.” She places it in his hands. “I had enough to eat earlier. So you eat what’s left.”

Adam sets it aside.

“Adam, you have to eat.” She strokes his arm. “You’re gonna starve if you don’t.”

Another scream. Adam’s entire body tenses.

I shake my head. “I know where this is going. Couldn’t you be more original?” Brad doesn’t hear me. I turn back to the screen.

Emily grabs her chest. “Who was that? Adam, are there other kids here?” Sweat’s forming on her brow. She looks back to Adam. He’s pretty pale. I doubt he’s going to make it. He’ll probably starve or freeze to death. It’d be totally Brad’s style to show me something like that just to make me cry.

Emily rushes to the door and grips the knob with her hands, ripping it back and forth. Clearly, it’s not moving. “I have to get out of here,” she says.

Thin arms wrapped around her waist. Adam’s trying to pull her back.

She turns to him. “Adam? What are you doing?” She gently moves him off of her and he nearly collapses. “I’m trying to get you out of here.”

He shakes his head. “No. Bad in there. Stay here.”

His voice, so trembling. So broken. It’s giving me chills. I hate seeing kids cry.

Emily wraps her arms around him. “Adam, I have to get you out of here. I’ll protect you from whatever’s in there. I just can’t let you stay here anymore.” She returns to the door and tries to open it again, ignoring Adam’s weak tugs to stop her.

After a minute or so, the knob turns and the door thrusts open. She and Adam go flying. A shadowed figure steps in and grabs her.

“No!” Adam grabs the leg and tries to trip the figure. It carries Emily away unhindered, with Adam dragging along behind.

Then the screen goes black.

I munch a handful of chips. “That was...different.”

“You realize it’s not over yet, right? Do you really think I’d make a movie that ends at such a random place?” He raises an eyebrow.

I shrug. “Well, I’m not the filmmaker. For all I know, you’d consider something like that to be ‘provocative’ or something.” I stick my tongue out.

Brad’s already moved on to watching the film come back on. He’s really into his own film. Guess he’s just acting like the artist he thinks he is.

I scoot away a bit. He’s shown me a few movies before and we’ve gone to some parties together. He’s my only male cousin and I don’t think he’s got many friends. I always kind of felt bad for him, so I went along with his games even if I didn’t really want to. He seemed grateful enough and it made me feel good to be a friend for him. Still, he would benefit from toning it down a little.

After a long pause that should’ve been edited down a little, a light comes on the screen. Emily shields her eyes. When the light dims to normal, I shut my eyes too when I see all of the blood.

I hear her voice. “Dylan! How did he...?” I peek my eyes open and see her run to Adam and hug him. She says, “What is this place? Adam, do you
know who did this?”

Seeing Adam, it occurs to me that he looks like the boy who comes into the diner with his uncle sometimes. Maybe Brad did some casting there. Although the kid’s a pretty good actor. He really does look scared, even if the direction and script are campy.

Adam doesn’t answer. Emily’s then yanked by her hair from behind. She screams and flails about until she breaks free. She falls forward.

Silence.

“We want to go home.” She cries harder.

She’s a good actress too, better than kids in most movies I’ve seen.

The shadowed figure from before approaches her. He stops a few feet in front of her. “You’re up next. Emily, right?”

“Up next for what?” She looks down and noticed what appeared to be the shadow of an axe. She quickly threw herself to the side, dodging a swing of the blade by only inches.

I almost choked on my chip. I expel partially chewed chip the floor. I try to clear my lungs. My chest feels so tight. I lunge myself from the sofa.

“Brad! What the hell?”

Brad ignores me.

“Brad, turn it off. I don’t want to watch this anymore.” When the movie continues, I shut my eyes. I don’t want these images in my brain.

I hear slices and screams. “Adam!” Emily’s voice is a crackled whisper. It sounds like I guessed right.

Even listening to this is too much. I grab the remote from Brad and pause the movie. “What the hell kind of movie is this?”

Brad jumps up and shoots his finger at me.

“Hey! It’s not over yet.” His face is burning red.

“Aren’t you going to watch the rest? I worked hard on this.” He grabs the remote from my hand. “Don’t you have any appreciation for quality filmmaking?”

I swing a punch to his cheek and watch as he falls back. “Quality? This is horror shit! You know I hate these kinds of movies and you still showed me. Did you really expect me to like it?” I can feel my eyes burning.

“I thought you grew up.” Brad rubs his cheek. “It’s not really that bad.” He flinches in pain. “It’s tame compared to what I’ve seen.”

I hold out my hands. “Look! I’ve seen blood and bodies. I saw my sister covered in glass on the hood of our car. I don’t need to see other people get butchered.” Images of my sister lying lifeless with so many bloody cuts across her whole body flash into my head. “Brad, these types of movies make me think about what happened, so that’s why I don’t watch them. I’m sorry but I can’t watch the rest of this.” I rush for the door. I’m done giving into him.

“I forgot about the accident.” He sighed. “It’s just a movie, Shannon. Gosh, the kids who made this had the time of their lives, I’m sure.” He stands in front of the door. “It’s just a short work-of-art, and I wanted my cousin – my friend – to see it before I showed it to anybody else.”

“Why?” I shoot him a scowl. “What made you think I’d like this? This isn’t like your other movies where you kill burglars. This is really messed-up stuff!”

“I was twelve when I made that. I’ve improved since then.”

“Brad, I’m going.” I try to get around him but he again stands in my way.

He rubbed his chin. “You two were coming home from a horror movie when she died. I remember now.” He eases me further into the room. “It was one of those sequels named after a weapon, right? I forget which one. There were so many. You were bitching that she was trying to guilt you into going. She liked scary movies and she wanted you to like them too. You gave in and then she dies in a car crash on the way home and you blamed the movie.”

“You’re an asshole.”

He goes and sits down again. He closes his eyes and sighs.

I feel a little guilty. He seemed so proud of his work. “I don’t watch any horror, Brad. I can’t even get through cop shows.”

“Why don’t you just watch the rest of just this one? Okay? We’ve already seen most of it. Please?”

I look at the screen. It’s freeze-framed on a shot of Emily cradling Adam’s armless body. I can see the pool of blood around them. “I’m sorry, Brad, but I don’t think I’m the right audience for this.”

Brads gets up and goes to the machine. He pops the disc out and returns it to its sleeve. “Fine, I understand, I guess. Even though I think you’re acting like a baby.”

I shrug. “Sorry.” Seeing how disappointed he
looks as he puts the sleeve away, I ask, “So where did you come up with an idea like this anyway?”

A spark of excitement returns to his eyes. “The idea just came to me.”

“The idea just came to you?” I shake my head. “To make a movie in which kids are killed, just because?”

He turns off the power to the system. “Not just because. It was entertaining. That is why they were killed.”

“Entertaining?” I raise my eyebrows. “I didn’t enjoy that, Brad.”

“I didn’t say it was supposed to be entertaining for us.” He pointed to me and then to himself. “That was just why the characters were killed in the context of the film. It was all just a show. The world today loves death and murder, and we want it to be as graphic as possible. There’s just nothing like watching somebody die a violent death, apparently. It sells. I’ll bet half the students on campus would totally pay to see a longer version of this. I might even try and make some money off of it.”

“So you essentially just made a story using graphic violence to make a commentary on people who like watching it?”

He lets out a sigh and rubs his head. “I take it you’re not impressed?”

“At least the acting was good?” I try to get a smile out of him. “Usually, kids really look ‘directed’ if you know what I mean. I am curious to know how you made them look so dead on your budget.”

He frowns. “Thanks, I guess. I really wanted you to like all of it, though. I really thought it was good.”

“I’m just being honest.” I pat him on the back. “But I guess I know why you wanted me to see it down here.” I look around at the dingy surroundings. “This place makes it all feel a little scarier.”

“It’s a shame I gotta present this in a classroom. With windows.” He smiles.

“Those professors can’t give you a good grade if they drop dead from terror.” I stick out my tongue.

Brad laughs. “Good point.” He puts his arm around me. “You know, I’m sure some of the actors might still be around. I’d love it if you could meet them.”

I shake my head. “I think I just want to get home.”

Brad groaned. “You act like I really had those kids killed. Gosh, you know it was just a movie, right?”

“Yeah...” I shift my eyes. “You know you never answered my question, how did you pull all that off? Like, where did you get the actors? And do those effects? Did it cost a lot?”

He laughs. “Not as much as you might think.”

“So, how did you do it?”

He shakes his head. “No way am I spilling my little tricks of the trade.” He winks.

I chuckle. “Fair enough.” I turn to leave but Brad blocks my way. “Excuse me. I sort of want to get back outside.” I try to walk around him but he blocks me. “Brad! Get out of the way.”

“No yet. I want you to meet the kid who played Adam. He’s supposed to be meeting me here anyway.”

“I don’t think so.” I again try to go but he moves me back into the room.

“He’s smiling but I see an unsettling force in his eyes. “Okay.” I throw my hands up. “Not that big a deal. Where is he?”

He begins to laugh. “I’ll be right back with him. Wait here?”

“I ain’t waiting anywhere. If you don’t know where he is...”

He pushes me down and the lights shut off. I hear a door slam and I crawl my way to it. I bang on the door. “Brad! Let me out. This isn’t funny.”

I fumble my way around to try and find a light switch but I trip. I crawl to a corner and stay there. I hear some bustling in the room and pull myself to my feet. “Brad, I swear that I’ll get you expelled if you don’t let me out now.”

The lights to the room flip on. Adam’s limbless body lies on the sofa. Dried blood is spattered all over him.

“Brad!” I hear myself scream and I hide my eyes as the lights shut off again. I again feel my way to the door. It’s still locked. After a few more minutes, my fists throb so hard that I have to press them against my stomach to try and stop the pain.

I feel the door swing open and throw me back. The lights flip on as I hit the ground. I hear laughing.

“You should’ve seen yourself. You looked so funny.”

I look up to see Brad standing there. Adam’s
body is gone.

I back away as he approaches me. “You stay away from me. You're going to let me out of here.”

He folds his arms. “Gosh, it was just a prank. You seriously need to lighten up a bit.”

“A prank? You showed me Adam’s dead body.” I look around for traces of blood to prove I’m not crazy. I can’t find anything. He must’ve stashed the body in a secret closet or something. “You really killed him. It wasn’t just a movie. I can’t believe I didn’t figure it out sooner. I was such an idiot. You practically told me that this was some snuff film.”

“Snuff film?” He feigns being impressed. “Did you look that up online or something?”

“Cut the crap. You’re a murderer.” I pull myself to my feet and look around. “Are you planning to kill me too? Your own cousin?”

“Slow down. You’re not on camera and I am not planning to kill you. Like I said, it was just a prank. What you saw was a mannequin that just looked like Adam. Poor kid was never able to hold his breath long enough to make a convincing corpse, so we sort of did some creative camera angles where we had the girl who played Emily hold a fake stand-in.” He laughs at me. “But I really had you fooled, didn’t I? That must’ve been some realistic looking fake. I knew I did good but I must’ve really done good. Imagine how that’ll play on Halloween when the trick-or-treaters show up.”

“If you expect me to believe that it was a fake, show me it again.”

His smile disappears. “No, I can’t do that. I put it away already. Plus, if it was real, don’t you think you’d have smelled him? And wouldn’t you have recognized his face in the movie from endless news coverage? My movie must’ve been really good. You didn’t even watch it all and I have you believing it was real.” He chuckles. “I must be better than I thought.”

I feel my fists shaking. I know what I saw. “Let me out of here now.”

“Would you chill out?”

“You chill out, you psycho! I’m getting out of here.” I rush him as hard as I can and shove him down with all my might. I must’ve caught him off guard because he hits the ground without a fight. Then I notice blood on the edge of the table above him. I look down at him and see blood oozing from the back of his head. He’s not getting up. He’s not even moving. “Oh God!” I put my hand over my mouth. I’m too scared to check to see if he has a pulse.

I look down and notice a key in his hand. I take it and try to unlock the door. It works. I burst out and head for the stairwell. I run up the stairs. My legs feel like they are on fire.

It seems like the stairs are longer this time but I finally get to the ground floor, gasping for air. I take only a few seconds to rest. The building is spinning and almost feels like it’s about to crumble on top of me.

I consider going for help, but after seeing Adam dead, I am not sure if I want to get Brad help. Eyeing the nearest exit down the hall a ways, I make a dash for it. I hold out my arms and slam my way outside. I stumble down the front steps to the sidewalk and then sink to my knees. I try so hard to inhale that cool breeze of autumn air, but it’s like it’s disappeared. All that's left is that heavy, stuffy air from that cold basement.

Just then, I look up, and I see Adam again. At least, it looks just look him, only he looks happy. It can’t be the same kid. Brad showed me his body.

The boy is wearing a jacket and is skipping up the stairs with another guy about twice his age. He doesn’t look afraid at all. “I hope I get to film another scene today,” he says. “Brad said he had a great part for me. He said maybe this time I could fight the killer. That’d be so cool!” The boy pretends to fire an imaginary gun. The other guy laughs and ruffles Adam’s hair like he cares for him. The two go in to the college.

“What the hell?” I finally feel a breath escape. I don’t understand this. I know what I saw and this has to be my head playing tricks on me again. That movie combined with Brad’s trick must’ve messed with my head. I take out my cell phone and consider calling the police, but I’m not sure what I’ll tell them. What I think Brad did? What I did to Brad? I feel my hands shaking and I can’t even dial the numbers right. Breathing’s still hard too. I hear Brad’s snickering rising above the city crowds walking by. I know that he’s bleeding out down in that basement, but I can’t shake the feeling that he’s wrapping his arms tightly around me.
Annniversary

Jaz

Jazz
It's been a lifetime
and I'll still take u over an
All-you-can-eat-cajun-catfish-fry
Over
orange marmalade Sundays
and candy apple Saturdays
Over
cheap New Jersey gas
and MTV reality show repeats
Dare I say that I'll take u over
the bright lights of NYC
and the gondolas of Paris?!
Jazz
U're more exciting than
Triple Lutz's
and
Pirouettes
Just putting it out there
that I'll take u over
the illustrious chin of Johnny Depp
and
the beguiling eyes of Jeff Goldbaum
Over the suave of Denzel
and the cool of De Niro!
Jazz
over watercolors
and sun-tanned toes in the sand
Over
the Philly skyline
and the heart-stop
of the Grand Canyon
Over McDee's dollar menu
and daylight savings time
when the clocks fall back
Jazz
over
the
80's!
and
daytime soap operas
Over Broadway and Bavarian crème pie
Over Scrapple... fried hard
and
the look of love in his eye
And I will still take u over
Chimichangas
Freeze pops
Sweet potato casseroles
and vanilla bean cheesecakes
Jazz
over
the fire of the dance floor
and
the freedom of karaoke!!
SAY IT AIN'T SO!
Ahhh...but it is so
’cause Jazz
u're just as good to me today
as u were
when we first met
and my heart
became ur home
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!
Dreams/Careers Spoken Indirectly

Malik Charlton

Ever since I first witnessed it,
I fell in love with the hard fought sweat drenched competition
the use of the orange, brown, red and white objects
being thrown around by hands or lunged by a thunderous fist;
my pop, uncle, grand pop, cousins and friends enjoy it
the outlandish personalities, antics, and the adored lifestyles
something that I have always dreamed of
seeing myself going toe to toe with the champ,
dipping and dodging his jabs,
watching him “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.”

My dreams soon came to reality
due to my small lanky 5’10 frame
and my not catching type of name.

So I studied the people behind the scenes;
the business people behind the iced out frozen rinks,
the nervous people at the top of the crowded obnoxious stadiums.
I studied them from top to bottom
from the way they conducted themselves
to the brand new smell of their new silky jet black suits,
plain Jane ties
how all these positions are occupied by a diversity of bright stand up guys.

This is something that I have been dedicated to all my life,
something that I do every day and every night
this is my life.
This is the fifth time I’ve counted the deep mahogany beams on the ceiling. I’ve counted them from left to right, from right to left; I’ve counted them in pairs of twos and threes. I didn’t come here to do math. He’s staring at me; I know he’s staring at me. I can feel the contempt in his eyes from across the room. The silence between us is too aged to be awkward. The sound of the pencil eraser bouncing off of the yellow legal pad in his hand is maddening. It’s the sound of obligatory tolerance. Shouldn’t he be writing something? Scribbling psychiatric jargon about my defiance, my reluctance to answer his dumb ass “I’m gonna get in your head without you knowing” questions. Isn’t that what shrinks do? Fuck him.

Under normal circumstances, I would be meeting him on holy ground, but since my life has been void of normalcy for the past year, my instructions are to meet here at his “corporate office” in order not be a distraction to the business of the Kingdom. “All are welcome” does not include me.

The panoramic view of the cold and hard neighborhood we grew up in draws me to the window. That and not wanting to appear too comfortable on his jaded leather lounger. I can feel the night air trying to invade my space the closer I get to the glass. Passing by his desk, I try to ignore the 8x10 sized reminders of wedded bliss that surround his computer. His wife is beautiful. The kind of beautiful that envy alone can’t contain. I blow my breath onto the cold glass and etch a heart from the steam.

“Bryce, your time is almost up and you haven’t said more than five words since you’ve been here.”

The frustration in his voice makes the room colder.

“I mean honestly Doc, there isn’t too much I want to say, not to you anyhow. You won’t have to deal with me much longer.”

“I’m not ‘dealing’ with you, Bryce. I want to talk to you. I want to find out what’s going on with you. I’m trying to help you!”

I rub my hands over the two day old stubble on my face, and then across the short prickly hair the clippers left behind on my head. I want to scream.

“You can’t help me! You can’t help gay. There isn’t a prescription you can give me for this. I can’t wash this shit off and Dad can’t pray it away.”

This is the first time I’ve ever fixed my lips to even say the word “gay” around him. Much like my presence, it feels uninvited, unwelcomed. His discomfort with my reality empowers and weakens me in the same places. Brandon, homophobic, I suppose not. Would I agree that he is disgusted by the fact that the son of a prominent Bishop who happens to be his brother is openly gay, absolutely. Again I say, fuck him! Fuck him for despising me behind his smile. I am who I want to be, except when I am here. I turn to face the window again but the glare from the small silver picture frame on the bookshelf catches my eye. Before I can stop my feet from moving and my hand from reaching, the reality of why I am even here is staring back at me. “Bishop James W. Ross and Family” is captioned in the top right hand corner of the picture. It’s a copy of a Christian magazine article written about my father fifteen years ago.

“Bishop Ross is a man WHO isn’t afraid to stand up for the rights of the people of his once troubled West Philadelphia neighborhood, many of whom attend his 6,000 plus member mega-church on the corner of…” Our father stood proudly in between Brandon and me. A man should be proud of the men he’s raising. Our mother died before I was old enough to remember her, but I imagine her there that day we took this picture. I imagine her standing close to me with her arms wrapped around my
chest the way mothers are supposed to wrap their arms around their baby boys. We are almost four years apart, but Brandon and I are dressed alike in the photo even though it was my freshman year in high school: brown oxford shoes, khaki pants with creases so sharp you could cut a slice of pie, white short-sleeved dress shirts, red bow-ties and blue blazers with gold buttons. My father wore his best double-breasted grey suit and a smile so wide that you could barely see his deep set green eyes. He always taught us to “dress the way you want people to view you; if you want to be important, dress that way.” I always thought we looked like clowns in this picture.

The first time I kissed a boy was three days after that photo was taken. I was tired of fantasizing about what it would be like to finally stop fighting it. How nervous I would be, how his lips would feel up against mine. I was tired of living in denial over who I was becoming. I wanted to know what it would be like to turn another boy on, to be turned on by him. I wanted to press my body up against his. I wanted to feel his breath on my neck, to smell his cologne. His name was Evan, and for the sake of all things indulgent, I will never forget him.

“What emotions are surfacing as you look at that picture, Bryce?”

“Are you asking me as my brother or as my psychiatrist? Oh I’m sorry, I mean my counselor! This is bullshit that Dad doesn’t even want me on church grounds? Who the fuck is he to tell me or anybody else not to come into God’s house?!”

“What the hell is your problem? You agreed to do this remember!”

I can feel my blood begin to boil.

“Yeah, I agreed to do this thinking I would at least be able to walk into the sanctuary, but Dad took that right away from me too now, didn’t he?”

I’ve been rehearsing this argument in my head for the past week, but the words I’d planned on saying, the tone of voice I wanted to use, the explanation I wanted to give for . . . everything escapes me. A tidal wave of frustration and anger and disappointment and emptiness comes rushing to the surface, refusing the safety of silence not a moment longer. For the majority of our lives, Brandon and I have had a tangled relationship, to say the least. When I began to gravitate towards writing and the theatre while he played the role of the popular but sanctified football jock, I chalked up my exclusion from his and our father’s comradery to being the artistic outcast of the family. It fit me well. They didn’t understand me, the way I did things, the way I saw things, the way I challenged my father about who God really loves. Up until the day I caught Brandon reading a journal I kept in a cut-out space in my mattress, I thought I could trust him. I never wrote anything about my devilish encounters with some of the boys on his football team or the ones in our church. Some of the things we did in the dark were too condemning to even put into words. But while Brandon and my father were in the den watching a basketball game or sitting in my father’s office making plans for the youth ministry at church, I would climb into bed and bleed onto the pages of that blue spiral notebook. I wrote from the emptiness I felt when our father would hug Brandon a little tighter, a little longer than he would me. I wrote from the loneliness I felt when all three of us were together. I wrote out of anger and jealousy and isolated pride. But in spite of that, I still trusted him to understand that what I wrote in the journal about him and our father was my truth. It was my reality that what I wanted and what I needed from our father, Brandon got a double portion of. I envied him for that and he, in turn, pitied me. Brandon loved me from a different place after that day, and so did I.

I am so caught up in the rush of emotions that I almost don’t hear Brandon answer the phone.

“Yeah . . . yeah Dad he’s here . . . it’s not . . . now is not the ti . . . I have to let him tell me tha . . .”
Brandon steps quiet but forcefully outside his office to whisper to my father the things he doesn’t want me to hear. I am certain that they are trying to come up with a tactical strategy on how to handle me, how to balance the pushing and the pulling, and how to avoid taking any blame for my fifteen month, 18 day and 7 hour exile. From the moment I left, I’ve been carrying this twisted anguish around like a trusty pocket knife cutting away at my resolve to forgive my father for branding me with a scarlet letter. To love God but still be defeated by lust is a burden too heavy for the weak to bear. I am reminded of this weight at the sound of my father’s muffled voice.

After receiving his M.A. in business management, Brandon allowed my father to talk him into staying in Philadelphia to head up the counseling and crisis center at the church instead of taking a six figure salary position in St. Louis. Brandon wanted to leave, but the bond of loyalty he has with my father and the church is too strong. So like the good son he is, he stayed.

Wiping the tears away from my eyes, I am able to take a good look around Brandon’s office. The beige walls are littered with his awards and certificates of recognition, his degrees, pictures of his travels and of him and my father, our father standing side by side with local and national clergymen and dignitaries. In the few seconds it takes for me to scan the room and take in all that his life has become while I was too busy fulfilling my every carnal desire, I submit to jealousy. His accomplishments sting in the same way it stings to see an ex-lover doing much better without you. The weight of shame gets heavier as Brandon steps back into his office, but the look on his face is familiar: defeat. Dr. Ross is no match for the Bishop. Respect and submission are on in the same in that man’s eyes. I sit back down on the lounger.

“What did he say about me?” I let my words drift into the stagnant air, unsure if I’m really ready for the answer.

Brandon sits down in his analytical chair and stares blankly into the night sky.

“He said he doesn’t want to see you until you’re ready to ask the Lord for forgiveness for your sins. He said that Deacon Barnes told him that where standing in the parking lot of the church two weeks ago after service but left before Dad come outside. That’s the only reason he sent the letter to Aunt Margie for you to come back, he thought you were ready to . . . turn away from your lifestyle. He said he didn’t want you to be embarrassed by the rumors going around the church, so he asked me to counsel you instead of a stranger. He said . . .”

“Did he say whether or not he loves me? Did he tell you to tell me that he still loves me?! Did he say that?!” The words cut my tongue as I speak them. My nostrils are flaring, my heart is racing and Brandon refuses to match my gaze.

“You can tell Bishop Ross that I ain’t embarrassed about a damn thing! His ass is the one that’s embarrassed because he raised a gay son! Oh fucking well! And yeah I agreed to let you ‘counsel’ me but that was because I knew that this was the only way I was ever gonna be able to come back home! I hoped that all the love and forgiveness he preaches about had finally sunk in and he was ready to accept me but clearly that’s not the case! This whole thing is bullshit!”

“So, what, are you going to leave again, huh, Bryce? Is that all you know how to do?”

“Fuck you Brandon! Why can’t I have what you have with him? Why can’t I be the favorite son for once? What fucking difference does it make? When I left, it was because he told me to leave, not because I wanted to!”

“He told you to leave because he caught you in bed with his associate pastor! Oh but that’s not what want to talk about huh? That’s what you want people to forget! You had no respect for his position as a man of God or as a father! What was he supposed to do? He almost lost everything Bryce, everything he
worked for, everything he stood for because of you!”

“Because of me!?”

“Because of you not being man enough to just tell him that you were... gay! You thought he didn’t know?”

Just like that, my whole world is washed away like a sandcastle built too close to the shore. The fortress of rebellion it has taken me years to build is compromised the moment I accept the truth. He knew all along. I can’t catch my breath.

He would introduce me to a new girl at church almost every Sunday and then talk about how pretty she was or how smart she was for the entire ride home. When we were really young, he would go out of his way to make sure that anytime he was away somewhere preaching that we stayed with Sister Rosa because he knew that her daughter liked me. He made sure that Brandon and I were active in the youth ministry and when we were old enough, the singles ministry. In his attempts to protect our purity, he asked us to make a vow to the Lord to remain virgins until we were both married. But he made me take my vow a step further by asking me to wear a ring engraved with scripture on my wedding finger. He said that whenever I was tempted to do anything that was out of the will of God, that I should look at that ring and ask myself if hell was worth it. I pawned that ring for $25 the day I left. I am numb.

“Look Bryce, I’m tired of being caught in the middle, I am. This whole situation is exhausting and I’m not going to let it wear me down. I’m not saying that you need to apologize to Dad or anyone else for who you are, but you need to apologize for what you’ve done. As dysfunctional as this family is, we are still a family.”

The Ross boys and the word “family” has always seemed like oil and water to me. The sincerity in his words renews my acquaintance with emptiness. The idea of standing face to face with my father brings fear, rage and a longing to be close to him. I want to leave, I need to leave and figure out how to put my life back in order, if there ever was such a thing.

“Brandon I’m going home. I don’t know when I’m coming back, but I am coming back. Tell Dad... tell him I’m not running anymore.”

The look of discontented exhaustion on Brandon’s face should have stopped me in my tracks but I keep moving towards the door. Everything in my line of sight is a blur, my head is pounding and all I can think about is lighting up this joint in my cigarette box.

“Bryce! Bryce when are you coming back?” I should care enough to give my brother the dignity of looking him the face, but I don’t.

“When I’m ready,” I say over my shoulder and close the door behind me.

The hallway leading to the elevator feels more like the corridor of a mental hospital than a converted office building. I walk pass a mirror and look at my face. My reflection is hollow. I turn away. Just as I reach for the elevator button, the door opens. My father looked me directly in my eyes. He looked at me the way a father looks at his son the moment he realizes that he is no longer his little boy, but a man. My jaw locked and knees become weak but I refuse to let him see me fall. I back up as he steps out of the elevator. His authority dominates my space and I struggle to unclench my tongue from the roof of my mouth. The Bible he is carrying in his right hand is the one he’s used to preach from since Brandon and I were in elementary school. I used to think it looked like an old English dictionary with its thick brown leather binding; today it looks like a gavel ready to pronounce a final judgment on my life. He stands in front of me the way he stands in the pulpit, strong, upright and unmoved by any excuse he reads on the faces of his congregation as to why they can’t or won’t serve the Lord with the fear of damnation like the children of Israel.
“Do you hate me, son?”
“No sir”
“Do you think I hate you?”

My hesitation to respond infuriates him. “Love the sinner, hate the sin! Isn’t that what you’ve always heard me say?”

His voice rattles me to the core. I hold my head down in shame.

“Look at me! The pain you’ve caused me is not because of the life you chose to live; it’s the pleasure you took in flaunting it, parading in it like God doesn’t know what’s in your heart.”

The salt from my tears warms my face and the lump in my throat begins to suffocate me. The way my father raised me, raised us, was far from perfect, for him to now stand here and shift the weight of blame to me burns a whole in my heart, right next to one left by the death of my mother. If my memories could speak, their words would bring balance. I have always had to defend myself with him, always on guard. And even now, the thunder in his voice silences my manhood and I am but a helpless child before him.

He places his heavy hand on my shoulder and forces me to look at him. “Jesus still loves you, and so do I.”

Before I can open my mouth to reply or open my arms to embrace him, he moves his hand from my shoulder, steps around me and walks down the hall to Brandon’s office.

Exhale.
The Cycle Recycled

Paul Eberle

Morning of 10-11-12
Wake up, Fall is here,
but you are in an office-
Where is nature?

I gotta get out of this rut., Cliché. I sit thinking this while tapping on the keyboard with a vigorous intent to complete my current task. The tapping stops momentarily; it is now time to click my mouse with both ferocity and anguish because a new ordeal to investigate came about that needs to be handled urgently. The phone at my desk then rings just once, pulling me out of my working trance for only a moment.

The single ring is due to the fact that my phone is resting off its hook, inviting all the annoyances on the other end of the cable to be held in limbo by “Audix,” the friendly computerized voice-mail system. I may check it later, if time permits, for now, more pressing matters need attending to. Without delay my phone rings again, and at the same time I am both grateful to be avoiding the histrionics that are associated with the person on the end of line, and I’m anxious as well, knowing at some point I will be dealing with whatever situation is causing my phone to leave its restful state.

A dozen or so clicks and taps later and an aggravated architect arrives in my cubicle. Standing behind me, arms folded and hip cocked arrogantly to the side, she blares, “I called you because I need help with something now, and you’re sitting down here with your phone off the hook?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m working on a project that needs to be handled now.” I state this with calm in my voice despite the agitation corrupting my mind. “I just don’t have the time to be working on anything but this right now. If you let me know what you need, I can help when I’m finished with this request.”

“That just won’t do!” my agitator, Betsy, firmly states. “You need to help me now!”

“And you need to go fuck yourself!!!”

It is a statement that just unconsciously released itself from the depths of my overworked brain. The words are not supposed to be expelled from my thoughts in that manner, or at all, but alas, the obscenity is released on an unexpected but highly deserving individual.

Those are the last words I utter at work that morning aside from “I understand” and “can I get a box to pack up my belongings?”

Ten years at the reputable architecture/engineering design firm, and my employment status goes up in a flash. I know I can apologize to Betsy, my higher ups, insist it will not happen again, and maintain my working status. I don’t want to, though.

Contemplating a shift to another profession has been an idea that was stewing in my mind for some time before this incident, but the pay was good and the never-ending stream of bills kept me in the repetitious cycle of work, work, play, pay, work-work-work, pay-pay-pay.

I sought a profession where I wouldn’t have to be hunched over a keyboard behind two glowing monitors in a grey cubicle; a job where I didn’t feel my eyes getting weaker and my wrist getting more carpal tunnelier, a profession where the person benefitting from the work I put in is myself, not a large publicly traded company. I no longer had the desire to help sew a CEO’s golden parachute while I prepared to jump out of the plane with a plastic bag full of holes.

The simple and offensive statement that seemed to slip out of the hidden corner of my brain, “go fuck yourself!!!” was the inner Paul in me saying, it’s time, you need to leave this job. The rational and analytical side of me would have liked to do this officially; put in my two weeks’ notice, save up some extra dollars and leave with an impeccable track record and references.

The inner Paul who walks for hours for the hell of it, the one who would rather eat a berry
off a bush than a burger off an assembly line, the inner Paul who would rather be chilled in a tent in the woods than wrapped in blankets in bed, who would rather write a haiku than send a text, he is elated at the opportunities that life now presents him. That inner Paul is unsure what the extent of those opportunities would be, but he knows they are there for the taking, and take he will.

Midday of 10-11-12
A new day has dawned.
Opportunities abound-
For the soaring dove

My first order of business is acquiring a variety six-pack of beer; two amber ales, a spicy toasted pumpkin lager, two strawberry wheat ales from Lancaster County and a strong dark vanilla porter had me eager to get home. Upon my arrival I go right up the stairs to the back bedroom. I waste no time in sliding open the window, then the screen. Leaning out the window I place the beer onto the roof of my kitchen, which abuts from the back of the bedroom. Then, I begin warming my way out of the window, being careful not to smack my head. From the roof of the first floor kitchen I turn to look up to the second floor roof and take in hand the rusty chain-link ladder that is precariously hooked to the chimney of my row-home. I make my way up, ladder shaking, six-pack clanging. Once ascended, I perch myself on the bump separating mine and my neighbors homes and a pigeon soars above. I use a lighter’s leverage to pry off the cap of a chilled amber ale. Eagerly I bring the bottle to my lips and toss my head back. The flavors satisfy my palate and eagerness. The journey to drunkenness begins.

Putting the beer at my feet I notice my palms and knees have acquired a black residue from the tarred roof; knowing I won’t have to scrub them vigorously before work the next morning causes my cheeks to rise slyly. I would scrub them anyway, because who wants filthy hands, but I wouldn’t have to is the whole point.

After imbibing in another nice long bubbly sip of brew, I turn my attention from my beautiful dirty hands to the landscape of beautiful dirty Philadelphia, which lies before me. I gaze, taking it all in. The Ben Franklin Bridge off to the left, taunting the Delaware River below with its sturdy structure and comfortable seat above its foe. City Hall and the William Penn statue, which stands with pride at its peak, are being obscured from my sight by the sole tree in the nearby park, which is decorated with wind-blown plastic bags like a Christmas tree with tinsel. The Liberty Centers are pointing to the planes circling above, and the Comcast Center reflects light from its 58 stories of glass.

I close my eyes and feel the sun on my face. In my mind I trace the rays of the sun; they are spit from the fiery ball of gas into the depths of space where they travel for roughly 8.3 minutes before striking the edge of the earth. After being redirected by the Thermosphere, Mesosphere, Stratosphere and Troposphere, the rays continue their journey. However, I envision many being intercepted and redirected by flocks of birds and fluffy sheep-wool clouds. The rays that were not interfered with at this point greet the City of Philadelphia, where the Comcast Center kindly meets them and reflects them with his rows of glass panels. In the final journey the rays jump from those glass panels in Center City to my face on the roof of a Port Richmond row-home.

After witnessing this great journey internally and feeling the warmth on my face, I sit in disbelief; how was so much heat still maintained by these invisible rays despite the 93+ million miles they just travelled? This deep reflection makes inner Paul happy. Things are going to be different.

Evening of 10-11-12
Reach for stars – and fail
Disappointment is normal
when life takes its course

The alcohol is increasing its presence in my blood at this point. Despite the October chill and my short sleeves I am in a comfortable state. The final two beers lie in waiting in my refrigerator for later, but my stomach is requiring chicken fingers in order to soak up my belly full of suds, which is the reason I descend from the roof to begin my current short walk to the corner bar.

It is a bar that is frequented by locals, is
cheap, and full of patrons disappointed in life. The bitchy ex-wife, the credit stealing boss, the abusive husband and non-appreciative children were the types of stories shared at this establishment. Today, after eating chicken fingers and drinking beer in peace, I finally got to share a tale of regret with the sole patron in the place, and the bartender, “I got fired today!”

“Really? Sucks. You don’t seem to care though,” says the overdressed undertoothed gentleman, Dennis, who missed work today because his car broke down... again. As he turns to me I see he’s trying hard to detach his eyes from whatever awful “Housewives” show that he and the bartender are watching on the flat-screen in the corner.

“Let me get a shot a Tully?” I ask Bridgette, the bartender. I turn to Dennis, “It was a good job, but I’m relieved it’s over with. The vicious circle has finally ended and I can move on.”

“Wha? What kinda circle you been workin for?” he asks, already quite drunk. While laughing contentedly in my head at his statement I simply smile and search my thoughts for an explanation.

The words are not easy to gather. The arrival of the shot couldn’t have been more timely, as it gives me an extra moment to process an answer, “thanks.” I lick my lips while drawing the glass ever closer, with much care, as the expensive liquid dangles close to the edge. With the glass to my lips I throw the hot alcohol down the hatch, giving a little head-bob dance after. “Chp, chp.” I savor the flavor; it is harsh, hot, but eerily comforting. I turn to answer Dennis.

“A vicious circle, or cycle, is when one action leads to another action, and that action leads back to the first, and it keeps repeating. Like, I got my job so I could pay for some simple things; food, phone bill, shelter. Then with that job I got more money and spent more, getting more bills just because I had the money; cable, internet, eating out and drinking. I didn’t love my job, but I didn’t hate it, I just did it because I was used to it and used to the way I lived, the way I do live, which is the same way every week, swirling about in my circle.”

“Huh?” Dennis squishes his brow, processing slowly. “Eh, I think I got it,” he says, although his voice sounds defeated. The explanation has too many words, I try to find new ones as I sip my beer.

“Okay, how bout this,” he’ll understand this one, “a vicious cycle is like picking a scab. If you pick it, it will bleed and grow back, and you pick it again, it grows back again, until you finally stop picking at it and let it heal properly. That’s the circle.”

“Well I’m glad your vision circle is over.”

“Can I get another shot?”

I watch Bridgette’s rump as she walks behind the bar, bends over to grab the bottle with her knees locked straight, and booty pointed my way. She straightens and proceeds to pour liberally into an on-the-rocks glass. She walks back over and winks as she places the large quantity of booze in front of me and takes a single dollar from my pile of cash that’s sitting on the bar, and places it in the register. I count my money, leave a fat tip, “G’night Bridge,” shoot the glass of booze, “eck, later Dennis,” and depart.

“Let your scab heal,” I hear Dennis mumble as I walk out.

After a few steps I feel hairs raise and rub my fingertips over the goose-bumps that are now upon my arms, wondering if they’re present because my body is cold but my mind does not know it, or if they’ve arrived because the last shot hit the nauseous nerve in my belly.

The answer is delivered without delay. My mouth waters in an uncomfortable way. I swallow, and try, to pace, my breaths. Eyes shut, to the street, to the world, to light. After, a few, more breaths, I open-my-eyes-and-stabilize. The walk resumes and I look at my phone thinking, it’s still kinda early, no more whiskey tonight.

Late night 10-11-12
These words must have been written in the same fashion once in time before

The alcohol content in my blood at this point of the night has stabilized, yet is quite high. Speaking of high, I’m now that too. I smoke and browse the internet looking for jobs. Not in the help wanted section, but in the news.

“Hurricane Ravages Coast – Search for Boater Continues.” I could join the Coast Guard.
Nah, too much of a commitment, plus I don’t know shit about sailing.

“Lost Hikers Found.” I could be a Park Ranger. I already took the test and did well. Why didn’t it work out? Oh yeah, because of a similar headline years earlier, “National Parks face severe funding crunch.”

I continue jumping around various web pages and ideas blossom with each varying headline and website. I find errors and gaffes present in all of the content I read. I can write articles like this, is one thought, another is, I can edit and do layout better than this. There is an article on green energy and I picture myself assembling towering windmills. A site on organic farming makes me search the real-estate listings for cheap land that I can turn into a personal farm.

So many chances to do something new, do something where I am active; tilling a farm, assembling parts, covering a story, none of these jobs involve the sedentary lifestyle that has slowly gone from a small part of my life, to being my life. I click a link to a brewery and it hits me, I can’t believe I didn’t think of this until now, I still have two beers left in the fridge!

I rise and begin sludging my way drunkenly to the kitchen. “-rii-owww!!”

“Oh shit! I’m sorry Meow-lix.” The name given to him by my brother is Alexander Bobcat Crowley, but since he started talking so much after he turned ten I’ve been calling him Meow-lix. Regardless, he was not fond of being stepped on, and I am not happy to have stepped on him.

I grab the vanilla porter as my dessert/nightcap.

Early Morning 10-12-12
“What Repetition?”
The crabby crab asked the crab,
“What Repetition?”

I wake up to my phone ringing, along with my head, and instinctively answer the phone as such, “Oh crap! I’m sorry I’m late, I’ll be in shortly.”

The number on the caller ID is from my former place of employment. It’s my old boss on the line. After recalling my termination that oc- curred hours earlier I feel silly. My boss starts to talk but I cut him off, “Sorry Bob, that was just my instincts kicking in, I had a late night and just forgot I’m done there. What’s up? Is there some paperwork I need to fill out to make this official or something?”

“Well Paul,” I can tell from those words something unexpected was about to be said. “Actually, I was wondering if you could come in to work today?”

“…”

“You know you are a valuable worker, and we need you here.”

“…” I envision an axe in my hand turning into a keyboard, the tree I’m chopping morphs into a computer. I realize I’m in an apparent conversation and grunt.

“Um, Betsy felt really bad she got you fired and said she wanted to ‘set things right,’ that you ‘are always there to help her and that she instigated the whole incident.’ The paperwork for your dismissal hasn’t gone through yet, so you are technically still on the books.” He pauses, waiting for a response.

“…” I offer none.

“So? What do you think? Can you be in by lunch? We really need you. You don’t want to start over somewhere else, do you?”

My head is pounding, still suffering from that giant shot of whiskey, my mouth is past parched. I got my job back I think, dejectedly, and that credit card bill is due in a few days. What an opportunity.
My Black Children
Michelle Clarke

Come home, wearing their new school clothes
tear stains on their faces, dirt in their hair
rips in her stockings, holes in his tan khakis
questions in between heart-breaking sobs
"Mommy, why do they call me Black?"
"Momma, what did I do to them?"
My young children ask me
But, what do I tell them?

Do I say, Mommy is sorry
But those children are right
your hair is nappy, your clothes secondhand
your shoes have been by others before you
Or, do I offer them comfort?
Do I say, don’t listen to them
they are bad children with no manners

Do I look my children in the eye and lie?
Tell them, it will get better
discrimination will end
when I know that it won’t, that even I deal with it.
Should I tell them the truth?
That we are Black, but they should be proud

So I wonder what to say to them
My Beautiful Black Children... 

As I wipe the tears from my daughter’s face
And see her big brown eyes, do I tell her its ok?
Mommy Will Always Love You.