ON THE COVER:
Caitlin Meadows
The Fight Against Cancer
watercolor on paper
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- Editor: Tempi Hale
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- Visual Art Editor: Dr. Christal Hensley
- Poetry Editor: Dr. Sandy Hiortdahl
- Non-Fiction Editor: Josh Archer
- Visual Art Editor: Donna Wilt
- Fiction Judge: Rebecca Elswick
- Poetry Judge: William Wright
- Non-fiction Judge: Dr. Louis Gallo
- Visual Art Judge: John W. Hilton
- Design: Jonathan Brooks
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Drive down, friend
Drive down,
  Hear engine-rattle
  And throttle
  And thrall.
Turn, turn again
Down old ways,
  Grown up, broken
  And comfortably
  Rutted.
Hear, hear again,
Hollow windshield
  Song. Wind.
  Whispering
  Futile,
Of midnight paths,
Desolate paths,
  Stretching black,
  Returning
  Nothing.
Pass by, friend
Pass by,
  Sorrow.
  White-washed and picketed.
“Wow, I am actually doing this. And not only am I doing it, but I am doing a darn good job at it. I am a 47-year-old college freshman!”

Deep inside I have always known that I could wear the pocket protector of a college student and do it justice. But as I reviewed the first few near-perfect grades of my newly minted college career, I began to wonder how I had transitioned into this life of academia so seamlessly. In my personal and professional life, I had always been successful, quick to make key decisions and emerge from the pack to take command and control of the circumstances at hand. I was self-motivated, self-aware, and self-monitored. Until I read an article on self-regulated learning, I had no idea if this gift was the result of some random genetic DNA transfer, or if something had happened, some critical defining moment in my life that had veered me onto the path of self-regulated learning.

As I combed my past and took inventory of my beginning, my journeys, and my current place in the timeline of my legacy, a portrait started to emerge from the fog of days gone by that had shrouded my memory. It was not necessarily a pleasant memory, but a vital one nonetheless. As a ten year-old boy, I was diagnosed with Type-1 juvenile-onset diabetes. My chest heaved for air. I cried and trembled uncontrollably as the doctor gave me the verdict and the nurse was handing me an orange and a syringe. I was instructed by the physician to practice giving injections with these newly introduced tools of the trade. I dropped them into my lap and, despite my inability to maintain anything other than harsh, short-lived breaths, told the doctor that I could not do it. He grabbed the orange and syringe, threw them in the trash can beside my bed, and said “Fine, die then.” With those words etched into the deepest corners of my memory, my opus of learning began.

I am confident that I am a self-regulated learner. Primarily, I am vigilantly self-motivated, in part as a matter of choice, but mostly as a matter of survival. Death is
one of life’s greatest motivators. After the denial and anger phases of my diagnosis exhausted themselves, acceptance set in, and I quickly understood that to live I had to fight. I knew then that if I was going to control this monster residing inside of me, I needed to know how it worked. My disease was going to test me every day, so I started to study and learn like my life depended on it, because it did. Through this epiphany, I found that knowledge is power - power against crises, situations, circumstances, ideals, and yes, even monsters. This conclusion marked the onset of my transformation into a self-regulated learner.

This approach quickly became the method by which I would handle all aspects of my life. It is this aggressive tactic that has propelled me into a college experience that could not have been scripted any better. Many educational psychologists agree that task value refers to the significance these learning chores have for students’ lives and future educational goals and career paths. I have developed a ravenous appetite to learn throughout my life, and college has become the ultimate academic “all-you-can-eat” buffet.

In addition, I am painfully self-aware. To be a “healthy” diabetic, I had to learn that I could never take my mind off of the task at hand. Each moment of the day dictated the next. Every action I took had some reaction on my disease, which often led me to consider adjusting my strategies or asking for help.

This same cause and effect methodology has carried over into my experience of learning. Each step I take toward learning reveals the next step, slow and careful at first, then moving at a pace my confidence dictates, always ready to change stride or stop and ask for directions. Just as in the regulation of my disease, so it is in the regulation of my learning. It is this awareness of the results of my behavior that allows me to self-evaluate and decide if a change in learning strategies is needed or if a call for assistance
Finishing up, I am critically self-monitored. This characteristic plays out in my diabetes management through countless finger-pricks, constant carb-counting, and endless visits to the doctor for check-ups and blood work. The vast amount of information extracted from a tiny vial of blood, such as HbA1c's (glucose levels over the last ninety days), cholesterol, ketones, and triglycerides, is the only way to determine if I have reached my goals.

This mirrors the studying, testing, and grading process of learning that allows students to gauge their development as the semester passes. For me, as a student, the only way that I can be assured that I am on the correct path to achieving my goal of a college degree is to constantly evaluate and reevaluate my progress in the classroom. The end result is a direct reflection of the effort involved to achieve it.

Overall, as I allow my mind to wander back through the book of my life, I am met with disappointment as I peruse the empty pages that should have told the story of my college education. I have wasted enough time trying to imagine a rewritten past instead of refocusing my aim on the future. Living and learning with diabetes over the years has had a lasting effect and proven itself worthy in the past three months. The confidence and "feeling-of-knowing" provided by life-long learning has paved the way for a smooth and rewarding journey of my college education.
Equine Sunrise, a Haiku

Katie Barnett
Honorable Mention, Poetry

Equine Sunrise
The autumn sunrise
Lays dew on the equine’s back
Like diamonds glisten.
Winter Skies

The night was cold. Deep winter. The sky loomed over Tawson’s head clear and full, obscured only by the frothed band of the Milky Way. The miner’s breath steamed a jagged cloud that condensed to a fine frost on his beard in seconds. He searched the inside pocket of his threadbare Confederate greatcoat and drew out a flask. He swigged, whiskey flushing his cheeks, spreading warmth in his mouth, down his throat. The roan mule, bought in Folson six months ago, tossed its head and blew. It sounded accusing. A complaint against man and his absurd cravings, his yellow desires. Affirming Tawson’s suspicions, the compact animal brayed loudly. The sound echoed off the surrounding foothills and returned shattered. He patted the mule on its thick neck and leaned forward in the saddle, close to one of the animal’s long ears.

“It’s cold, you say,” the miner whispered into the twitching ear. “Want to go home, you say. Well, I tell ya, I don’t need your noise to know either the first or the last.” The mule turned its long head slightly, fastened one gleaming black pupil onto the grizzled rider and brayed once more. Tawson smiled and straightened. “Have it your way then. Can’t teach a mule to be quiet, no how, I don’t suppose.”

The roan had a point. This Colorado air would be the death of them if they didn’t make it back to camp soon. Tawson turned the reins lose, flipped the collar of his greatcoat up, and rubbed his numb hands. Taking back the reins, he turned the mule’s head, leaving the larger Stillwater Creek behind for a smaller tributary, nameless and frozen over. Above, broken mountains stuttered off into the west to join the Never Summer Range. The mule’s step quickened, sensing home.

Needing no guidance, the roan picked its way among the rock-ridden trail leading to camp. The grade was steep, much too steep for any horse. Tawson’s claim was high, clinging to a jutting cliff of mountain slope, just where a half-dozen melt-water streams came together to form the frozen course that dumped into the
Stillwater below.

Tawson shivered and wrapped himself tighter in his coat. The mountain reared dark, jagged, and improbable above him, beyond the blacked-out triangle of the mountain, the sky’s deeper black and the stars. Tawson had a fondness for stars, had since childhood when night hours were spent in idle study of heaven’s secrets. Their cold beauty had no price. They were unattainable and, as such, a safe indulgence for the penniless. No ladder could reach them, nor could any effort pluck them. He searched, easily finding all the familiar touch stones: Orion, the Pleiades, the Bear, all there, the same as he had left them as a poor Scotch-Irish boy in Virginia. Life changed. Men lived and died and were buried. Heaven stayed the same.

The miner furrowed his brow. A grouping of stars, four pinkish-white points, to the left of the shoulder of the mountain, seemed to wink out as he sat in saddle. Just as if they had not been. Strange. Shrugging, he gathered his reins, fumbled the flask to his lips once more, and nudged the mule into movement. His eyes tricked him, or more likely, the little constellation had passed behind the mountain.

They were back, the little group of stars, now twinkling beside a larger constellation he recognized but whose name he could not recall. He had not been sure at first, but now...Even stranger, they were to the right of the neighboring grouping. Not to the left as before. And they were—it wasn’t possible, he knew, but they were, well, bigger. Almost doubled in apparent size. That wasn’t possible. Tawson, no scholar, was still well-read enough to know that stars could neither increase in visible size nor move positions relative to their celestial neighbors. He shuddered, somehow captivated, somehow drawn on. The four lights grew brighter, turning their pinkish hues to a deeper, more luminous red. Beneath him, the mule brayed and danced, endeavoring to buck its rider and turn back down the mountain path.

“Woe, now,” he said,
returning attention to his mount. “Easy, just lights is all. Just lights.” Suddenly light flashed around Tawson, a bright white that blinded and turned the surrounding ground into a dimensionless landscape. Tawson swiveled back in his saddle, gazed up through the spread fingers of one raised hand, and screamed.

The trail sat dark and empty, overtaken again by winter night. A woodchuck, befuddled by the light and sudden disappearance of the man and mule, sniffed at the trail tentatively. Testing the hard-packed ground with one paw, he scurried across to the security of a stunted shrub. Above, four stars winked out and did not return.

***

Tal-Or stood at the viewing screen, watching as the small blue planet spun away from the interplanetary cruiser, eclipsed and finally lost in the brilliance of the system’s yellow sun. She raised a hand, gave a slight turn of wrist. A small control materialized in her palm and was adjusted. The viewing screen polarized, cutting the glare and revealing some - but not all- of the orbital lie of the retreating planetary system. The outer planets, and those rearward of the central star, were beyond the range of the viewer. From behind her, a subdued moan. With what might have been a smile-only Tal-Or lacked the proper organs for such an expression- she turned towards the central examination theater.

Sirius, but they were resilient beings. De-atomization and restructuring was a less-than-pleasurable experience. Few organisms survived it. And the majority of sentient beings were decidedly non-sentient upon awaking -and that permanently. Those that did recovered in no less than eight cycles. He was stirring in fewer than three.

Leaning against the railing, letting arms trail out into the empty space of the theater’s oculus, she considered the human below and his odd companion, what the man had called “mule.” She did this, not as a wonder-depraved scientist, but as a child. Logic
would come later. Logic always came later. The greatest folly of her species—and there were many from which to pick—was lack of wonder. Cold speculation had displaced it. The soul’s desire for the fantastic shunted aside. But these humans, they still knew. Had not yet learned to forget the potential of miracle.

They were odd creatures, humans. Perhaps the oddest. In all her travels, and Tal-Or was well traveled by any galactic standard, she had never encountered such idiosyncrasies, such blatant paradoxes— in a higher life-form. She sniffed at that. Higher life-form. Only a relative term, and yet their minds (simplistic though they were) could and often did ascend to amazing heights.

She checked herself mentally: a calming of neurons, a settling of synaptic connections. Breathed in, let it whoosh out. She was getting attached. Dangerous. You never developed an emotional bond—even one-sided— with the organism of study.

Sirius, but it was the first rule of Galactic Zoography.
Pirate Bones

Kevin Carrier
Second Place, Poetry

i built my home
from pirate bones
i found swimming
in my veins
oblivious to red lights
and white noise
of satellites
and radiation
silver suns
burning bodies
and synthetic fibers
molding generations with fire
perhaps when this is over
you will remember what was said
savor what was felt
when we held life closely to ourselves

when we drained the fifth
of cheap vodka
we bought on the way home
smoked in silence
I, staring at the glowing tip
of your cigarette
the smoke curling
blue from between your lips

perhaps if we were destined to grow younger
we would tire of guilt and worry
our souls would melt
and sense love once again

and now it has come to this
when we convince ourselves
the noises we hear
are just the wind
and not the passing of time
I was standing in a hospital holding a white handkerchief filled with change. All four corners were tied together so I could hold it like a little sack, like Huckleberry Finn, only not on a stick. My grandfather fixed it so I wouldn’t lose the money he had given me. I had pennies, nickels, dimes, and some quarters, but my hands were too little to hold all of the coins. Luckily, Papaw always had a clean, white handkerchief in the front pocket of his suit. Sometimes it had his initials in the corner stitched in light blue thread. He held my hand good and tight on the way to the gift shop. I was a little scared, but Papaw was a soft spoken, calm man that always made me feel safe.

As we walked, I looked at the floor. It was white and shiny with big squares. If I tried hard enough, I could almost see my reflection. I raised my eyes to look at the nurses coming out of rooms, and they smiled at me. I recognized them because I had a Barbie doll with the same white uniforms, white shoes, and little white hats that blended perfectly with the floors. There were bright lights all around and voices coming out of the ceiling, high pitched voices that made me want to cover my ears. Unattended carts lined the hallway. I wanted to touch the folded towels placed neatly in the middle compartments, but I had been taught never to touch things that didn’t belong to me unless I was invited to do so. I imagined they smelled like sunshine.

We stayed toward the middle of the hallway to avoid the shuffle of people getting on and off the elevators. They, too, smiled at me as they went by. I didn’t know why I was there, but my grandfather was still holding my hand, guiding me. As we passed a carpeted area with navy blue matching chairs and miniature couches displaying bold print, the smell of coffee lingered in the air. Newspapers and magazines were stacked in an orderly fashion on tables placed at random throughout the room. Almost every corner was decorated with green, leafy trees that gave the impression of being outdoors. Pretty, oversized
lamps adorned a few of the tables, but spacious windows eliminated their need at this time of day. The entire effect reminded me of a big living room for people with an abundance of visitors who liked to read. Even though it appeared homely and cheerful, the people sitting there looked worried and didn’t smile. They looked like my mom did driving to this place.

We entered the elevator closest to the big living room and Papaw let me push the button. I didn’t know if we went up or down, but when the doors opened, there was an enormous, flickering sign in front of us that read “Gift Shop.” We proceeded through the double doors, and it was like a wonderland. The aroma of fresh flowers filled the air as I gazed in awe at the colorful trinkets on display. Big, shiny, colorful balloons were tied to flower arrangements in wicker baskets and placed on various counter tops. Sunlight coming through the windows emphasized the splashes of color and made the balloons appear to dance. There wasn’t a spot in the store that wasn’t filled with some form of treasure. Music was playing and it made me think of teacups. I liked it there, the lady behind the counter smiling at me. She didn’t look at all worried. Papaw waited patiently while I eagerly searched through every shelf in the store. After much deliberation, I finally decided on a little, wooden jewelry box with a ballerina inside. When the lid was opened, music played and the ballerina danced around in circles. I placed the jewelry box on the counter along with my money sack. The nice lady’s smile grew, and she told me to keep my money. Papaw must have told her that it was my sixth birthday.

We went back to the big living room and sat in those melancholy blue chairs with the worried people. Papaw said we would wait there, but I didn’t know what we were waiting for. He kept telling me that my mom and brothers would be back soon and we could go home. He said everything would be alright, but I didn’t know what was wrong. My stomach started to ache because he looked like the worried people, too. Someone had turned on the
pretty lamps because the sun was going down. I wondered if Daddy knew where we were and if he was worried, too.

Earlier that day, my mom put up party decorations and finished decorating my birthday cake. My dad was working, but it was almost time for him to come home. Just a little bit longer and I could ride the bicycle I had seen in the garage. It was pink with different colored tassels on the handle bars. A white, wicker basket with pink flowers snugly sat on the front, and a bell I could jingle with my thumb was on the right handle bar. A big, red bow with a birthday card was tied on the seat and ribbons were threaded through the spokes. I wanted to sit on it, but knew I wouldn’t be able to fix the bow if I removed it. This was going to be my first big girl bicycle, and I was already proud of it. It was really hard to act like I didn’t know it was there.

I climbed on the back of the couch, pressed my nose up against the front window, and watched the driveway. I vaguely heard the telephone ringing in the background, but I was too busy waiting for Dad to pay attention to anything else. I didn’t hear my mom talking on the phone or my brothers in the kitchen. I only remember the look of panic on her face as she commanded me to get in the car. Her tone was one I didn’t argue with, and I did as I was told.

She cried on the way. I had never seen her like that, and it made me want to cry, too, although I didn’t know why. My brothers were older and remained quiet in the back seat. Nobody talked to me. My paternal grandparents were waiting for us when we arrived at the hospital. My grandmother hurriedly took my mom and brothers down a long hallway, and I watched them get smaller and smaller before they disappeared around a corner. I turned around and ran into my grandfather’s outspread arms.

The next time I saw my dad was at his funeral. I was oblivious of my surroundings, people’s voices, and their faces. My eyes were fixated on a casket. Someone took my hand to urge me closer,
but I was afraid. I timidly touched the shiny, dark brown wood for only a few seconds before I was lifted up high enough to see. My grandmother’s voice whispered in my ear from behind, “This is your daddy. He’s sleeping now.” I stared at the stranger’s face.

Years went by, and even though my life was filled with happiness, I knew something was missing. I slowly began to ask questions about my dad, and the astonished look on my mom’s face clearly illustrated the situation. Then and only then did she realize I had virtually no memories of my dad. She was heartbroken. Along with everyone else, she assumed I had accepted his death and adjusted. Because of my age, special care had been taken to ensure I understood all that was happening at the time. The bond I had with my dad was so strong, it was inevitable that I would be the most affected, and she had held my hand every step of the way.

She watched my face as she spoke, looking for emotion or recognition. I listened intently as the painful details replaced blank spots. My father was hit by a drunk driver on July 2nd, my sixth birthday. Sadly, he wasn’t wearing a seatbelt and was thrown from his jeep, causing a massive brain injury. The hospital with the gift shop was in Kingsport. Her hands clinched as she told of seeing him, speaking to him, holding his hand. Tears were in her eyes when she remembered him yelling out her name if she let go. She also told me they had divorced before the accident, and then paused briefly as if waiting for questions to come pouring out, but still nothing. Over the next several days, his condition had gradually declined, and my grandparents made the decision to transport him to their home in Chattanooga. My dad, Harold D. Bailey, lived for 13 months and died in August, 1969, at the age of 36.

When my mom finished, I realized I should have felt something. Regrettably, it was like reading a newspaper article about a tragedy in someone else’s life. I struggled with my reaction. How could I forget someone so important? Over time, and with
the help of counselors, I was able to grasp the situation. Being so young, the only way I could accept his death was to dismiss it from my mind, to forget he existed. And the guilt was overwhelming. I didn’t remember his life. It’s difficult to miss something you’ve never had. It’s even more difficult to know you had something, but lost all memories of having it. My mind had robbed me of one of the most important people in my life, and the sense of loss was acute. I wanted, rather needed, my dad to know he wasn’t forgotten by choice. He was forgotten because the love I had for him was so strong, it was the only way I could grow up without him. How could I let him know?

The answer came many years later with the birth of my daughter, the most beloved and cherished person in my life. What better way to pay tribute to Dad. Naturally, I named her Bailey.

Today, my one vivid memory is watching my dad from the living room window as he carefully removed a bicycle from his jeep. Crouching in the driveway, his hands diligently threaded ribbons through spokes on the wheels and tied a big red bow on the seat. He must have sensed someone was looking because he glanced up and laughed when he saw my face pressed against the glass. I quickly scampered away, giggling because I knew he would keep our secret.

I don’t know what ever became of the bicycle, but the card attached will always remain in my special memories box. It simply says, “To my baby girl, the apple of my eye. I love you always, Daddy.”
As I Walk

Along the trails,
And mountain streams,
Among the trees,
And valley green,
I walk alone,
Through morning light,
I walk alone,
Until the night.

As twilight falls,
I walk still on,
I hear night sounds,
Crickets, frogs and whippoorwill,
I stop to listen,
Long and deep,
To the sounds and secrets,
The forest keeps.
And as my journey,
Draws to an end,
I sit by the fire,
And breathe in the blends,
Of cool air and warmth,
My soul is content,
With where my day started,
And how it was spent.
Church House Meeting

I

It is evening. Child’s Summer.
Long passed, forever close,
The air is cool and sweet,
Perfumed with honeysuckle.
Draped over with oak,
Maple, mountain laurel.

The church is straight,
True, and square,
Clapboard sided,
Pure white, steepled modesty.
Resting on river rock,
Foundations firm.

Laid with sure hands,
Whose flesh,
Long since moldered
Upon opposite hillside grave,
That final long home,
Their owners gone,
To their sure reward.

II

In tow with my father’s shadow,
I surmount steep steps.

And enter in.

Floorboards creak beneath me,
Scuffed, scarred, and stout.  
Straight backed pews –unpadded-  
Line the narrow isle,  

Ahead the pulpit,  
Hoary, vastly ancient, honored lectern,  
Beside it, four more benches,  
-the “Amen Corner.”

A sense of time permeates:  
An aged wood odor,  
A welcome to weary pilgrims.

III

Wiry men, with muscled forearms,  
And darkened brows stir,  
Shaking hands with brothers,  

While print dressed women,  
Bustle broadly about,  
From pew to pew,  
Talking gregariously,  
Fawning over children,  
Gasping and exclaiming,  
Generally bedeviling,  
My young frame.

IV

The crowd settles.
My father takes his seat
On the front pew beside
The loudly cologned pastor.

At my father’s side,
I take my place.
The song leader stumbles
Into Canaan Land,
As I lean against my father’s breast,
Taking in his deep bass.

The last notes fade followed by,
Alter prayer: a roaring
That deafens, shakes, and vibrates,
Resonates in wood, in heart, in Soul.

Climbing cacophony:
God’s discordant orchestra,
Called, justified, glorified,
Fallen, faces down, knees bent,
Brows broken with sweat,

More than conquerors, these simple,
These peculiar, honest, and humble,
Striving in soul, solid, speaking plain,
To their Jesus, their high priest, mediator,
First and final intercessor.

V

My father steps to pulpit,
Pilot at his wheel,
Worn black leather
Bound Bible in hand,
He announces his text.

Voice sure, strong, confident,
He reads;

The mighty God, even the LORD
hath spoken, and called
the earth from the rising
of the sun unto the going down thereof.

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God hath shined.

Our God shall come,
and shall not keep silence:
a fire shall devour before him,
and it shall be very tempestuous
round about him.

He shall call to the heavens from above,
and to the earth,
that he may judge his people.

Gather my saints together unto me;
those that have made a covenant
with me by sacrifice.

The last syllables fall. Silence.

A clearing of throats. A cough.
Whisper of thin leafed paper,
Stirring of fans above.

He resumes, reveals his thought:
“The New Covenant of Christ”

And begins.

Slow building,
Full, firm rising inflection,
Falling rising,
Running high and fast,

Hands talking, adding color,
Dimension, dynamics, driving deep,

The rising and falling,
Wave breaks. His voice goes,
Low, sweet, sonorous,
Plunging into matters,
Meant for careful consideration:
The strong meat of his message.

Soaring back to spiritual heights,
The congregation responds,
With palpable energy,
With shouts of victory,
With amen’s of support.

On he continues,
Sweat running, streaming
Down neck, soaked collar
Loosened, tie discarded,
Suit jacket cast off,

Chest swelling, shoulders heaving,
Arms outstretched, flung wide, drawn close,
An athlete aspiring to run his race well.
To finish his course.

Carried along on wings,
Not his own. A mortal radio,
Transmitting a message,
Static laden but clear,

Comfort for the simple,
Confounding to the wise,
Worked with care,
Planned extemporaneous,
Melodic message moving through
Blasts and fits of scripture.

VI

Drawing to the last
Irrevocable conclusion,
-only one- my father
Closes his Bible,
Tucks it under arm,
Recovers jacket,
Drapes over shoulder,
And steps from stage,

Standing in isle,
His voice somber intones,  
As he opens the alter,  
And piano plays low,  
A few verses of scripture:  
Old offer eternal.

While piano enters,  
Solemn final verses,  
Returns slow to chorus,  
And stops.

Finished, he bows his head  
Thanks God. And closes.  
Again a man.

VII

Fellowship follows,  
Once more the bustle,  
Again the press and stir,  
Whir of fans,  
The mighty creak of floors,

Circulation of members,  
Fitly joined: this jubilant,  
Joyous body of Christ’s,  
Meeting concludes with song,  
And, after word of prayer,  
Dismisses into Child’s  
Summer night.
“If I have to do this one more time, I don’t think I’ll be able to face another day,” I mumbled under my breath as I dug the shovel in the ground. The blisters on my hands were sore from the splintered shovel. I had bandaged them the week before, but today they were raw again. “How many times do I have to go through this pain?” I stabbed the shovel into the hard earth. My name is Riley Cosgrove and digging is the story of my life.

My family owns miles of land here in Kentucky. We have tended crops, fed animals, and attended church every Sunday for the last 15 years. Until this summer, that is. My daddy worked in a coal mine with my oldest brother, James. Momma died a few years ago giving birth to my baby brother, Tyler. I have been the lady of the house since Momma passed away, but especially, I have been taking care of Tyler. After Momma died, I cooked and cleaned for the boys and did the wash. I had to step up and take responsibility for my family.

This past spring started out like it does any other year. We planted our crops for fall harvest. We had newborn calves and baby chicks running around and wild turkeys and geese flying over our heads. Yes, everything was the same except this year some new neighbors took over the abandoned farmland adjacent to ours. The farm was bought by a man named Greenly from Ohio who wanted to move to the country and raise a family. These new neighbors were mysterious and dark in a way I had never seen before. They kept to themselves and didn’t talk much to any of our neighbors, or the townsfolk. No one seemed to know much of anything about them.

About a month after the neighbors moved in, I baked a cake as a welcome gift and introduced myself to them. They told me their names were Mr. and Mrs. Greenly. They thanked me for the cake, but abruptly sent me on my way. Not friendly at all.

The Greenlys seemed strange and different in a way that I couldn’t put my finger on. Mr. Greenly was a tall man. He had a roughness about him, and leathery
skin. The scars on his elongated face made me imagine some terrible, childhood illness he may have had. Mrs. Greenly was a fearful woman. The somberness in her eyes showed a lack of courage. She was an empty soul. Although there were Stargazer Lilies, striped with crimson and white, surrounding their house, there was also a stench that arose like the dead from their house. The place possessed a sorrow that I didn’t want to be a part of. Something evil.

Days and nights passed and we saw less of the Greenly family. I was beginning to wonder if they had moved, or hoping, rather, they had actually moved away.

Late one night, I heard a loud explosion. I looked out my window and from a distance, I could see the Greenly house, smoke pouring out of the windows and firing blazing as tall as the trees. I screamed to daddy, “The Greenly house is on fire.” Daddy woke up James, threw on some clothes, and raced out the door toward the Greenly house. I stayed back to keep an eye on baby Tyler.

By the time Daddy and James got near the house, it was engulfed with flames and smoke. I wrapped Tyler in a blanket, and stood down near the road, but away from the awful smell of burning timber. Mr. Greenly was standing outside crying. I heard him say that Mrs. Greenly was still inside. “Please help me find my wife!” he called in distress. Daddy and James both rushed in the burning house to try to find Mrs. Greenly. A few moments later, Daddy came out with Mrs. Greenly lifeless in his arms and covered with black soot all over her body. He tried to wake her, to breathe air into her lungs. When she finally awoke, coughing and gasping, Mr. Greenly grasped his wife in his arms and held her.

James had not come out of the house yet. Daddy yelled his name a couple of times and there was still no response. Daddy then ran into the black, smoking house to find James. A few minutes later, he came running out with James in his arms and a horrible sadness on his face. James wasn’t breathing nor was his heart
beating. His clothes had burned off his body, and pieces of ash curled and wafted around him. I held Tyler close to me and stepped toward the heat of burning house and James’ burned body. Daddy laid him on the grass. His entire body was burned terribly. His face didn’t look like my brother’s. James was dead. My brother risked his life for someone he barely knew. He was gone in an instant. My world began to shatter like fragile glass.

A few days later we had to bury James. We didn’t have much money for a proper funeral, so we made do with a ceremony close to home, on our land. We buried James beside Momma. I made sure that I had the most beautiful Stargazer Lilies, picked fresh for his graveside. But, first, I dug his grave. The sky was hazy from the storm the night before and the ground was still moist from all the rain. I forcefully stabbed the ground with the dull edge of the rusted shovel. It seemed as if I was digging clay for days, when in reality, it was a few hours. Finally, I came to a stopping point; my arms and hands were aching and throbbing. I looked up at the rim of the grave, five or six feet up, the hazy light floating above the dark box of earth.

A week went by without any visitors. For some strange reason, I wanted to see how Mr. and Mrs. Greenly were doing. I knew they were trying to salvage what was left of their home, so I packed a few sandwiches and headed down the hill to the Greenly land.

As I approached the house, I saw the sheriff’s car in the driveway. He was talking to the Greenlys. I greeted them and asked, “What’s all the commotion about, Sheriff?” He mumbled, “Looks like we still have a crime scene to investigate. We found the chemicals that started the fire.” Mr. Greenly gave Mrs. Greenly a peculiar, nervous look. I offered a sandwich to everybody and asked, “Is there anything I can do to help out?” Sheriff shook his head and walked into what was left of the burned house.

That evening, the sheriff came to our house to deliver the news about the fire investigation.
He mentioned that the fire was accidental, but it was initiated by methamphetamines exploding from a homemade laboratory inside the house. This caught me off-guard! Horrible thoughts raced in my brain. I went back and forth contemplating blame and anger. I wanted both of them to suffer for putting my brother James in harm’s way. He was heroic. His life was wasted.

The sheriff could see that I was upset. He bent over and said, “The police have arrested the Greenly couple. Taken them to the station already.” The sheriff asked me to come to the station and give a statement about the fire, and my brother’s death. I wanted nothing more than to see the Greenlys punished.

A few weeks later, Daddy and I served as witnesses at the trial. We testified about what knowledge we had of the night the fire exploded. Mr. and Mrs. Greenly were sentenced for the crimes they committed.

On the way home, Daddy didn’t feel well. He didn’t look that great either. He kept coughing and gagging while in the car. I took him home, fixed him dinner and told him to take a warm bath. I told him that if he didn’t feel any better by the morning, then we would visit the doctor.

Come bright and early the next morning, Daddy was sicker than the day before. He complained of his chest and lungs hurting, and said it was hard to breathe. I managed to get daddy to the doctor, even though baby Tyler was fretful, too. The doctor x-rayed Daddy, and did some tests on his lungs. The tests took a few hours, and Tyler grew impatient. I promised him we would go out for some ice cream after Daddy was finished with all his tests. That seemed to satisfy him just fine.

That was the last time Tyler or I saw Daddy alive. Daddy died later that day from chemicals in his lungs that he inhaled while rescuing Mrs. Greenly. The doctors said, “It didn’t help the fact that he was a coal miner most of his life as well.”

Daddy was buried beside James and Momma. The same shovel. The same clay earth. I
stood above his grave that I helped dig. “Why did I have everything taken from me?” I cried to heaven. “I miss them. My world is cold and still. I feel numb. I am dismayed. I feel trampled.” As I kneeled to say a prayer, I promised Daddy that I would be strong for Tyler. I promised my family that they would be proud of Riley Cosgrove.

Tyler and I visit Momma, Daddy, and James from time to time. We bring fresh cut lilies to their graves. The beautiful Stargazer Lilies that explode with crimson and white streaks from top to bottom. Although the flowers are in bloom every spring, the life here has died. The days go by. I pretend to be satisfied, but there is emptiness inside.
The waitress arrives ex nihilo,
A beer follows:
First rate prestidigitation,

Froth topped ambered alchemy,
Barley into gold,
Heaven from Hell,
Or maybe it's the other way 'round.

Cool against skin, warm against soul,
Beading and pooling flattened worlds:
Onto battered table top universes,

While rain outside patters,
And runnels of water streak,
Down panes, turning the world,
Surrealistic, skewed,
—slightly daliesque

In the back, a cracked tile kitchen,
Hums mutely harsh and flickering,
Fluorescents flooding,
A cozy hell, this place,
Set into a half-deserted
Downtown block.

Downtown...
Down-town,

Down, dead, decayed,
Empty as a rotted oak,
Vacuous as a lunatic soul
Down, dead, decayed,

Not such bad words.
Words with ghosts,
Or the ghosts of ghosts.

Drifting specters,
Lost in time or place,
-or their own special purgatory.

The rain slows, stops,
The parking lot glistens,
Black casting back,
Deep plunging reflections,
Of slow street traffic.
I thought I could get through this. I believed in him and myself. The drive from the recruiting office to the airport seemed long, but in reality it only took about twenty minutes. He wasn’t authorized to ride with me, but I could trail behind the car of the recruiter. I saw the woman driving behind me, the terrified mother of the other future soldier riding with mine. After memorizing every turn and bank in the busy interstate, we finally made it to the airport and parked in short-term parking. I felt him looking at me as I stepped out of the car and made my way downstairs. The closer I got, the more I needed to be held. He was scared, but to soothe me showed no fear. I passed through the front doors while he waited for his ticket. My thoughts raced, "I can’t do this. I can’t let him go. I need him. I can’t be alone."

I heard a voice beside me say, “It’s time for you two to pass through security.” I recognized the recruiter, the one who greedily took him away from me, the one who was being paid for sending my love away, the one who also understood what we were going through. He knew the hurt I felt. He knew what we were about to go through. What Dakota witnessed was still in that man’s mind from his own experience. Then, suddenly, I was calm.

I looked over and saw a mother and daughter weeping a little, enough to show their pain. I watched the girl as she carried a ridiculously large duffle bag, and I laughed a little inside. Dakota was carrying a small drawstring bag. I thought about what I might have packed for boot camp. I remembered the list I had read for men and the list for women. Neither of them was very long, but personal hygiene products needed a little more space for women than men, so I understood.

I felt him roughly slip through my fingers, like he was trying to leave a part of himself behind for me. I felt his comfort through his warm embrace. As his warm lips touched mine, I realized this would be our last kiss for two months, so I tried not to break apart. I was on the verge of tears. If he didn’t go in that instant, I would have...
broken down and begged him to stay. He understood my feelings when I looked at him with salty, water-flooded eyes and turned away. One last hug and he turned around to look at the other recruit. Together they walked through security. I stood still and watched until I could no longer see either of them.

I felt the cold of the room surround me and decided that I needed to sit down. I found myself moving toward the row of chairs in front of the window where his plane would soon be in sight. I felt a patterned vibration in my back right pocket, and I quickly jerked it out. My phone fell, and embarrassed, I turned to see if anyone saw what I did. Nobody seemed to notice, so I picked it up and saw the text from Dakota that read, “I love you more than anything. Thank you for supporting me. I will back before you know it.” I stared at the words. He then went on to ask, “Hello? Are you there?” and “I miss you already. Are you okay?” I finally snapped out of it and replied, “Yes. I can’t wait to hold you again.” He let me know he was walking out toward the plane and had to turn his phone off.

As they started down the runway, I moved toward the balcony outside. It was freezing, but I managed. I saw him wave from the window on the plane, and it made me giggle a little bit. I watched the plane take off and stood there until it was no longer in sight. I prayed for it to turn back around, a storm to head their way so they would have to come back, but that wouldn’t happen. I gathered myself and inched out toward the car. I took out the pink ticket and handed it to the guy at the window, who then charged me $3.00 for my time.

I received a text a while after I got home, and it was Dakota letting me know he landed safely in Knoxville and had two more flights and a bus ride before he reached his destination in Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. I had small conversations with him about what I did all day and even got a phone call from the airport in Charlotte. My day mostly consisted of lying in bed and playing with our Great
Danes: Pepper, Durango, and Little Bit. They usually comfort me, and I needed their love.

I finally received the text announcing his arrival in Oklahoma City, and he told me that he had a two hour bus ride with all of the other recruits before ending up in Ft. Sill. He let me know he loved me and wanted to make sure I kept my phone on me at all times.

By the end of the first two days, I was desperate to hear from him. When I finally did, I got to speak with Dakota for the next week and a half before he started Basic Training.

From then on out, I waited patiently for letters. I received the first one as a bundle of letters thrown together due to lack of time to mail them out. They were written on small notepaper from a pocket-sized notepad that he kept in this pocket at all times, so he could write me as soon as he got the chance. We wrote letters back and forth, and I started ritually going to Walgreens to print off pictures of the goings-on at home to keep him updated visually as well. Time inched by, and I felt surprised at how comforted I was from just his handwriting on a piece of paper.

I started arranging a trip with his family to pick him up after graduation and family day. We ended up riding in his mother’s Honda Accord. I sat in the back with his 11-year-old brother, Caden, while his mom and step-dad, Terry, sat up front and took turns driving. They were not there for his departure at the airport, but they really seemed committed to this trip, only stopping for restrooms and a short nap. Nevertheless, this ten hour trip turned into a 12 hour trip.

We finally found the Motel 6 with our reservations and settled in. I ended up on one of the double beds with Caden for the night, and his parents took the other one. I could barely sleep. I started to feel my nerves getting the best of me, and I began to shake. I took a hot shower and calmed myself so I could rest. Tomorrow was the big day.

His parents left to fetch some hot chocolate while Caden and I got ready. They came back with a
biscuit and cup of hot chocolate. I started fixing my hair and make-up while I took the first and only bite of my biscuit. I was nervous again. I missed him more than anything. But I bottled up my emotions so nobody could see my sadness and emptiness.

We began our 20 minute drive to the military base and finally arrived at the auditorium. His mother, Mandy, and Caden stepped out of the car first, followed by me, so we could find a spot in line while Terry searched for a parking place. I found myself standing next to a woman with a baby whom I recognized. Her name was Lindsey, and she was one of the members on my support page on Facebook. We had talked once before, because in a letter, Dakota said that this woman’s husband was one of his friends. Though we didn’t speak that day, I felt comfortable.

We inched closer and closer to the doors and found our way to the entrance. I could see him. I was hoping he would look out of the corners of his eyes, but they were directed to the front. Then, he gave me a smirk and looked at me without moving any other part of his body.

They had changed him. The change wasn’t huge, but I could tell he had become slightly more disciplined. Someone in his row dropped something metallic, and everyone seemed to grow owl eyes. I giggled. We were allowed to take pictures, so when I felt it was convenient, I took a few. Sitting through graduation took an hour. I wanted to jump over in Dakota’s lap and snuggle up to him. It had been two months since I last held him. Before those two months, we were never apart. Finally, everyone stood up and the soldiers were released to formation outside.

All of the parents rushed out for pictures and hugs. I waited beside his family and watched him walk toward us. I must have looked shocked because I received an odd look from him before I felt his wide hands touch my back and his chin against my shoulder. I couldn’t let go. I squeezed him as tightly as I could until he let out a grunt. I released slightly and looked up at
him. We stared into each other’s eyes until Mandy spoke up and said, “Alright lovebirds, let Momma have a hug.” I let go and gave him time with his family. After all, they went through the trouble of getting me here. And I respected that fact. He did say, though, “If you are not with them, I’m not coming home.” I burst into tears before I could think another thought. His smell, the way his skin felt, the cute, little giggles he gave me when he smiled - everything was familiar; everything was him. I was happy, truly happy, again.

He used his two week holiday leave for Christmas. Time went by so quickly. Before I knew it, I was driving him back to the airport for his second flight, for his second training session at Ft. Leonardwood, Missouri. We cuddled as long as possible in the waiting room at the airport. I was surprised by the amount of other people dressed in camouflaged uniforms leaving on the same plane. I watched as they said their goodbyes and kissed their children and parents.

Out of nowhere, Dakota asked, “Do you want your late Christmas present now?” I wrinkled my eyebrow and shook my head. “Yes.” He sat there unmoving and touched his forehead to mine. He began to look nervous and his body temperature rose. They called his name to board and he looked up, sighed, and looked back at me. He smiled and asked me to close my eyes. Then, “Open them.” I saw a tiny, red box with white padding, holding a gorgeous, white gold ring with a black diamond centerpiece surrounded by white diamonds. I gasped and let out a noise that I still don’t understand. I began to cry and laugh. He stood up with me, got down on one knee, smiled and asked, “Will you marry me?”
A forgotten warrior goes
Step clod after stomp
Down the wearied street
-- Lest ye see,

The heavy pack
The pain, the misery.
Such is that burden under the heat.
-- Lest we forget,

The Passion - the agony, or pain,
Are not the nations borne
Yet, the forgotten warrior goes
Step after tedious step.

The nation ungrateful,
The press in throes
Step clod after stomp
Who would wear those clothes?

While for love of family
The forgotten warrior fights
Uniformed, and focused
endless into the night

The Agony - the passion, and pain
Are not the nations borne
Yet still, the forgotten warrior goes
Step after tedious step.

Lest ye chose to see
Down that wearied street
Or share the burden,
   Suffer under the heat

Apart the nation grows
   Oblivious as it sows
A patchwork feeling
   Step clod after stomp

The Pain - the agony, and passion
   Are not the nations borne
Yet forever, the forgotten warrior goes
   Step after tedious step.

Down the wearied street.
The Fight Against Cancer

Caitlin Meadows
First Place, Visual Arts

watercolor on paper
My Mummy Head

Katrina Gibbs-Macdonald

pen and ink on cardboard
Diagnosed as Human

watercolor on paper

Caitlin Meadows
Honorable Mention, Visual Arts
Even God Rests

Caitlin Meadows

watercolor on paper
Bird’s Eye Books

mixed media on cardboard

Michelle Miller
Honorable Mention, Visual Arts
We walked slowly down the white hall
The mourning begins as we pass
each room
Taking a stance by the door
People watched what we had come for
Skin and skeleton
Looking on with a tearful eye
I noticed a movement
slight then more
Glancing gleefully above her bed
She pranced and gawked at the tears
Laughing throwing her head back
I watched on and on until she stopped
and gave me a wink
No one noticed just felt the pain
Walking out of the room with roses
I was the only one smiling
Icy hooks sunk into my flesh as I watched
Spiraling tendrils slip beneath the murky
water lying still as the dead in coffins
Sheer lightning spiraled into my heart
while hands clawed beneath the surface

My body was gone before my feet could chill
as frantically our fingers entwined and I pulled
Blankness greeted us on the shore while air took its time
and I kept a vigil eye on your pallor failing to come back
The sky echoed my heart and turned to black and grey

Pandora had opened the box and taken you from me,
and this time hope was long gone with the rest
Hazel met pine and we stared as the air arrived
with that last piece of humanity at its side
From that day I knew, you were the light
Self-portrait

Daniel Neubrander
Second Place, Visual Arts

graphite on vellum
Tree Frog
charcoal on vellum
It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.
Sailor’s Delight

Erin Ryder

color photography
Live in the Gray

Zachery S. Sturgill
digital photography
Poison slips across pink rose
like snow inside your eyes
Sometimes it is a vagueness
spanning for years at once

Others it is rich and deep
brewing a storm of no escape
Time here is endless
meaning is long forgotten

The strongest root is often
plucked by the smallest breeze
You and I were petals in autumn
Once a part of a constant dance
Now a raw slice in a mirror

I reach out to touch the shards
recoiling at the echoing sting
Somewhere within I grasp who
you were as the light fades

Hopelessness consumes me
like clouds around the moon
I wish I could find the words
the petals whispered that day
Untitled

Katrina Gibbs-Macdonald
Third Place, Visual Arts

acrylic on canvas
Tell-Tale Tessellations
ink and graphite on paper
CASE #02041937:  
THE CASE OF THE POISONED APPLE  
Erin Ryder  
Third Place, Fiction

My day starts out like any other. It’s a Monday. I hate Mondays, nothing good ever happens on them. I wake up, get out of bed, head for the shower. The water’s cold. The lousy neighbor must be siphoning all the hot water again. Once I’m done with that, I get dressed, go downstairs, make myself a cup of coffee. Then, it’s time to head to work.

My name’s Avery Sullivan. I’m a detective with the Faerietale Bureau of Investigation. My job is to find out the dirt on anyone and everyone, then report back to the Chief. I’m the one they call when there’s a case that can’t be cracked. When a suspect won’t talk. When things just don’t make sense.

I’m also a cat – an orange tabby. I may be small, but you do not want to mess with me. (Just ask any of the mooks I’ve helped lock away.)

Anyway, like I was saying, the day starts out normal – until I arrive at work. Turns out some jealous queen tried to off her step-daughter last night.

I look up from the report at the Chief, who sits across the desk from me. He’s a wolf. Big, but not bad. The smart Rookies learn that lesson the first day. The stupid ones, the second. Those who haven’t learned it by the third day usually end up with promising careers in mucking out the stables of some nobility, or – if they’re really lucky – royalty.

“I take it you want me to head the investigation?” I ask the Chief.

“You got it, Sullivan. You’re our top interrogator. I’m sure you’ll get the job done.”

“So how many interrogations we talking here?” I ask, taking a sip from my mug of coffee.

“We’ve managed to round up eleven persons of interest,” he says, and I choke on my coffee.

“How many?”

“Eleven,” he repeats.

I sigh.

“What can you tell me about them?”

“Well, we’ve got the Queen, for one. Charges of attempted murder, and we’ve got her in protective custody. The citizens are getting really worked up over
this.”

I nod, signaling him to continue.

“Then we’ve got some Prince – a suitor for the princess, most likely. And then – get this – apparently the princess was living with seven other men – dwarfs – before her stepmother found her. We’ve talked to the hospital, and they said the princess will likely be able to talk later, if you’re interested in her side of the story.”

I mentally tally the list. “That only makes for ten interviews though,” I frown. “Who else is there?”

The Chief begins to shuffle papers around on his desk, and stops looking at me. That can only mean one thing….

“There is a Mirror,” he says, trying to sound casual. “Belongs – or, rather, belonged – to the Queen. It’s really quite powerful – some say it was blessed by uh, by the faeries.”

He coughs and continues to busy himself with straightening the papers on his desk. I sit back in the chair, thinking about what he just told me.

“I could get another detective to cover it for you, Sullivan,” the Chief offers, returning his gaze to me. “Nine, maybe ten interrogations are a lot for one person to handle.”

I rise from my chair.

“No, I can handle it.”

“Are you sure? I know how you—”

“I said I can handle it.”

The chief frowns. “If you’re sure…”

“Positive.”

“Alright,” he reluctantly consents. “But if you change your mind, you know where my office is.”

“Don’t be expecting me – I won’t be changing my mind.”

And with that, I turn and walk across the floor, exiting the Chief’s office with my assignment portfolio under my arm.

As I lean against the wall by the water cooler, I look over the reports. Looks like my first interrogation would be with the Queen herself.

I study all the info available on the page – Royal, jealous, willing to do anything to be the
Fairest in the Land; just your stereotypical, evil, tyrannical, faerietale stepmother, queen.

I close the file and walk towards the slammer.

I arrive and flash my ID to the guards. They let me in and lead me to the interrogation room, where the Queen is waiting for me. I examine her through the one-way glass, deducting what I’ll be up against.

She doesn’t look so tough. In fact, I’d say patrolman Wazowski’s cooking is scarier than she is.

I nod to the guards, and they unlock the door and let me in.

The Queen barely acknowledges my entrance, and after a brief glance, resumes staring stubbornly at the wall. I stifle a sigh. This is going to take a while…

I take a seat across the table from her and drop her file onto the desk.

“Okay, Your Highness,” I say. “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. Easy way is you cooperate, and this’ll be over a lot sooner, and we can both get out of each other’s hair. Hard way is, you stay quiet and stubborn like an old mule, and we’ll be spending a lot of quality time together, I can assure you. So take your pick.”

She doesn’t say anything for a while, just stares at the wall. Finally, she turns her icy glare towards me. I calmly take a sip of coffee from my mug and flip open the file.

“Okay, Highness. The word I have is that last night you tried to off your step-daughter. Why?” (I’ve never seen the point of skirt ing around the issues at hand, and taking forever to get to the point.)

She regards me coolly. “It wasn’t me,” she says.

I arch an eyebrow. “Oh? And just who do you say did it? The tooth faerie?” (Personally, I wouldn’t put it past her…)

“I’m sure you’ve heard the hearsay,” the queen says. “It was an old hag.”

“An old hag who sounded suspiciously like you with laryngitis,” I point out. “And what about the peddler with the comb, or the travelling merchant with the corset?”
"The poor dear is so naïve and gullible," the Queen sighs. "I don't know how she was able to survive for so long."

"You sound so concerned," I remark dryly. "I'm touched. Really."

She glares at me. "If your so-called police force weren't so incompetent and actually cared, perhaps things like this wouldn't happen!"

I slam my mug onto the desk; coffee sloshes over the side. "Don't you dare insult the force," I hiss, ears flat against my head. "We work our tails off to protect ingrates like you. In fact, right now we've got what seems like half the town's population calling for your feet to be put in hot iron shoes and then made to dance until you die, while the other half is worried you'll keel over from rage at any second or throw yourself off a cliff or some other such nonsense. We 'incompetents' as you call us have likely saved your ungrateful, sorry life."

"Temper, temper," she scolds, wagging a finger at me.

That's it. I can't take anymore of her stubborn, rebellious attitude. I get to my feet and snatch up the file from the desk. "Leaving so soon?" Her voice is sickeningly sweet. I ignore her and storm towards the door, hitting the button beside it to signal the guards to let me out.

I push through the door as soon as it opens and stalk down the hall. I'm going to need some time to cool down before I interrogate anyone else.

About an hour later, I decide I can probably handle one of the dwarfs.

This questioning, however, would be a bit more casual. No locked-in rooms, no guards. Just me, a dwarf, and my office.

I glance up from the file, and at the dwarf in the chair. "Okay, sir," I say. "Tell me everything you know."

"Well, most of what I know is about gem mining. You need to be sure to use the right pick, see, and --"

"About the case...."

"Oh! Oh, I see. Well, what would you like to know?"

"When did you first meet
Princess White?”

“Well, she found our cabin in the woods – poor girl seemed quite distressed. It seemed she’d gotten herself into some kind of trouble at home, and was running away.”

I write this down. “Mm-hmm. And you and your friends thought it was a good idea to leave an emotionally-disturbed teenager alone at home, when you knew her stepmother was likely looking for her?”

“Well, we never thought she’d actually find the Princess.”

“Unfortunately, sir, I didn’t think it could happen to me is one of the main reasons I still have a job.”

I turn a page in the file and return my attention to the dwarf. “The reports I have says that someone tried to…dispose of the princess two times before the ‘apple incident’ Why didn’t you report those when they happened?”

“To be honest, we didn’t think we needed to,” he replies sheepishly. “We just thought they were accidents.”

I hold my stare. “I can see how you’d think the corset being laced too tightly was an accident,” I say, “but an obviously-poisoned comb in the hair?”

He just shrugs. “We’re simply miners,” he said. “Not fashion or poison experts.”

“Fair enough,” I sigh, closing the file. “That will be all for now. I’ll contact you if I have any more questions.”

He nods and gets up, exiting the room, leaving me to prepare for the next session of questioning.

The other dwarfs basically have the same thing to say as the first one had. They didn’t think the Queen would find the princess so far away in the forest.

Examining what I’d learned so far, I decide it’s time to visit the Princess herself. I arrive at the hospital at half past three – the interviews have taken almost my entire day. I show my ID to the nurses at their station, and find out the princess’s room number. Upon finding the room and entering it, I see that the Prince is here as well. Just as well – I’ll need to interview him too.

They seem wrapped up in their conversation, and don’t notice
me standing in the doorway.
    “I love you more,” she says.
    “No, I love you more!” he replies.
    “No, I love you more,” she croons.

As much as I hate to stop this...touching public display of affection, I need my interview.

I clear my throat, and they look up.

“Oh, look, Snugglecakes!” the Prince exclaims. “It’s that reporter they said was coming.”

“Detective, actually,” I say, entering the room. “Detective Sullivan. I’m going to have to ask you both some questions.”

“Ask away!” the Prince flashes what I can only assume he thought was a dashing smile. “We both are open books.”

“Good to know,” I mutter, pulling out my casebook and a pencil. “But I’m going to have to interview you individually,” I add. They stare blankly.

“In private,” I prompt. They still don’t get it.

I stifle a frustrated sigh. “Sir,” I address the Prince, “I’m going to have to ask you to step outside while I ask the Princess some questions.”

He looks startled. “But I can’t leave my beloved alone!”

“She’ll be fine, I assure you. I won’t be long,” I add, upon seeing his distressed expression.

He reluctantly consents, and walks towards the door, pausing at the threshold.

“I’ll be back soon, Lambypie,” he croons, blowing her a kiss.

As soon as the door closes, I turn to the Princess.

“Alright, ma’am. When did you first notice your stepmother had it in for you?”

She frowns, her mouth jutting outwards in a pout. “Hmm. Let me think.” After a pause, she adds, “I guess it was a few months ago, when she sent a Huntsman to try and kill me.”

“You didn’t notice her hostile feelings before then?” I ask incredulously. “From what I hear, she treated you like a slave!”

The Princess shrugs. “I just thought she was giving me extra chores to help me learn how to be a good wife,” she says.

I decide not to bother
pointing out all the things that were wrong with that logic.

“And so after the Huntsman let you go, you ran into the forest and came across a cottage, and just moved inside, even though it was obviously inhabited?”

“It was just so dirty,” she sighs. “I thought I could clean it up for them, to prove to them I was worth keeping around, so maybe they let me stay.”

More skewed logic, but I hold my tongue.

“And you were never suspicious of mysterious ladies appearing out of the forest? Ladies who just happened to be travelling alone, bearing gifts?”

“They were just so sweet and kind,” the Princess sighs. “They didn’t look like they could hurt a fly!”

I begin to realize I’m not going to get any useful information out of her. As much as I hate to admit it, the Queen was right – the Princess really is naïve and gullible.

“I believe that will be all, thank-you,” I say, rising from my chair. “If there are any more questions, someone from the Station will contact you.”

I leave the room, and find the Prince pacing the halls.

He darts over upon seeing me and starts to enter the room.

“Not so fast, please,” I say, holding up a hand. “I have a couple of questions for you, too.” I flip open my casebook and turn my full attention to the Prince. “How did you first meet the Princess?”

“I was riding by on my white stallion, and heard her singing in the gardens,” he replies. “She has the most beautiful voice….” his eyes grow distant, and I hurry on to the next question.

“So later, you were just riding along again, saw the dwarfs carrying her in a glass casket, and decide to go kiss a dead body?”

“Yes,” he sighs heavily. “Alas, I was unable to kiss her in Life, and so I decided that even a kiss in Death was better than no kiss at all.”

That sounds utterly morbid and creepy if you ask me, but I wasn’t asked my opinion, so for once, I keep my mouth shut.

“That will be all, thank-you.” I
close the casebook. “You can go in now,” I nod towards the door, and the Prince rushes inside with a cry of “Muffincakes!”

As for me, I head back to the Station. I still have one more interrogation, and I am not looking forward to it.

I stand alone in the interrogation room, save for one object: a Mirror. A magical, faerie-blessed Mirror as a witness. Just my luck. I hate faeries. Their possessions are a close second.

I sigh and try to put away my prejudices. Looking at the scrap of paper in my hand, I read the incantation aloud from it.

At first, nothing seems like it’s going to happen. But then, in the middle of the Mirror, I see a masked face begin to swirl and come into focus. It looks at me. I look at it. Finally, after it becomes obvious it’s waiting for me to speak first, I do.

“Okay, look: I’ll be honest here,” I say. “I don’t want to be here. I want to be out of here as soon as possible. So I hope you won’t mind that I’m not spitting out perfect iambic pentameter when speaking to you.”

The Mirror doesn’t respond, and just continues to stare at me. I flip open by casebook and get my pencil.

“When did your owner, the Queen, first receive you? A wedding gift, perhaps? A family heirloom?”

The Mirror does not respond. I wait for five minutes for it to respond, but it remains silent.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter, snapping my casebook shut. “You know what? Just forget it.” My hand is on the door handle when I hear it.

“I have had many owners, Avery Sullivan.”

I freeze. How does the Mirror know my name? I slowly turn to face it.

“I have had many owners,” it repeats. “The Queen – though she was not a queen then - tricked my former owner into making a deal he could not win, with me as the prize. She kept me hidden ever since then, until she came to this land, and heard of the widower king. She used me to gain his trust, and the throne.”
I stand there, letting all this sink in. So the Queen is an ex-con, eh? I try not to think of the damage that would do to her already-ruined reputation if that tidbit of information were to be leaked to the press.

“So, um…” I start. “The Queen was using you for your fortune-telling abilities, I take it?”

“And for narcissistic purposes,” the Mirror adds dryly.

I cough in an attempt to hide the smile I feel twitching around the corners of my mouth.

“So that ‘fairest in the land’ stuff,” I say. “I take it you were required to say it, or something?”

“Forced to be forever truthful,” it says. Either it’s my imagination, or the Mirror actually sounds disdainful about it.

I glance over the notes in my casebook, but see no pressing questions to be asked.

“Well…” I say. “I think that’s everything. Thank-you for your time,” I add, then turn the doorknob.

“One last thing, Avery Sullivan.”

I pause with my hand on the doorknob, left ear turned backwards, waiting for him to speak.

“The past may have already been written,” he said, “but the future doesn’t have to be. Remember that.”

I find myself slowly nodding.

“I will.”

I turn the doorknob and leave the room, heading for my office so I can write up my report for the Chief.

Case Closed.
2:45 p.m. The bell had just rung for school to let out. I had been anxious all day for that bell. The leaves were changing colors and falling gracefully to the ground. I sprinted to my truck, leaving my friend far behind me. The time had come. Our destination wasn’t far away, not even a minute up the road to her boyfriend’s house.

There he was, my boyfriend waiting on me with the bag. That dreaded bag. I walked by, not giving him a second glance. Tears started to well up in my eyes because I knew. With some distance, he followed me into the bathroom where my nerves had officially taken over, my body trembling with fear. He placed the white bag on the counter and turned to leave the tiny, claustrophobic room. I took a deep breath, holding in my tears. He turned and assured me he wasn’t going anywhere. He closed the door and turned to have a seat on the floor.

He looked at me and said, “I am ready if you are.”

I slowly reached for the bag and placed it on my lap. I didn’t want to look at it. I reached in and felt the cold cardboard box. I pulled it out and placed it on the counter. The front read, “First Response - So You Can Get Pregnant Sooner.” I read those words to myself over and over again. I thought, “What if I am? Can I do this? What will my mom say? Will he stay with me?” I could tell that he was as anxious to know if our lives would be changed forever. I slowly separated the cardboard from the glue keeping it together and pulled out the long, foil package. It was time.

Once I had finished, I placed the stick on the counter. The directions said wait at least three minutes, but that was impossible. Almost immediately, I looked and there it was. That dreaded, second pink line. I was pregnant. So many emotions hit me at once it was hard to know how to feel. I collapsed on the floor sobbing, my tears soaking his shirt and my mascara leaving tiny black smudges on his sleeve. Without saying a word, he knew. He held me so tightly that I could feel his heart racing. Suddenly, I heard his breathing increase and felt a tear fall into my hair. He kissed my
head then pried me off the floor. “Let’s go,” he said. “We have a lot of planning to do.” He always knew just what to say to put a smile on my face. We left the room, hand in hand, and embarked on the longest half mile ride to my house we could ever imagine.

The months passed as family became more accepting and excited. By 12 weeks, my appearance hadn’t changed much, but it was time for my first ultrasound.

The excitement I felt walking through those sliding glass doors of the doctor’s office was overwhelming. “Mckayla Bacon?” I immediately hopped up and followed the nurse into the back room. The lights were so dim that all I could see was the illumination of the screen on the nurse’s face. I lay down on the paper covered chair and lifted my shirt. She explained what all she would be doing and what I should be expecting my body to be doing at this stage in my pregnancy. I jerked as she squeezed the warm gel onto my stomach. She moved the device all around while I stared anxiously at the screen trying to decipher everything. Suddenly, there it was - my baby, no bigger than a pea, just a tiny dot in a pool of black mass. Tears streamed down my cheeks as reality hit me harder than before. I had fallen in love.

Weeks turned into months. My due date was only a couple of months away. My belly had grown tremendously, and my stretch marks had become darker and more apparent. Six and a half months in with only two and a half to go.

Being a senior in high school, senioritis hit months ago, and on top of being pregnant, it was a wonder I even showed up some days. Walking from class to class my feet lost all circulation and appeared as though they had a mild case of Elephantitis.

The day of my 3D ultrasound was the most anticipated besides my due date itself. This would be the first time I could get a real feel of what my baby boy actually looked like. Seeing his little hand beside his face and being able to count ten fingers and ten toes, I
was ready to have him.

Now, weeks dragged on, seemingly on purpose because of my anticipation. I had a month and a half to go and so much left to do.

I registered for my baby shower, which was the hardest thing to do at the time. I wanted absolutely everything I saw. I needed two cribs in case one broke, bibs that matched all of his outfits, and even a potty seat in case he was an early learner.

My baby shower was more than I expected. It was country themed with daisies on each of the tables and tiny cow handkerchiefs. I was astonished by all of the gifts I received and all of the people who attended, but most of all I was thankful for all of the support from everyone.

Once all of the guests had been thanked and the gifts packed up, we headed home for a long night of arranging and putting together. Once everything was placed in the living room, I realized I had gotten more stuff than I could handle. Where would I put it all? We took everything out of the boxes, grabbed some C and D batteries and went to work. Three and a half hours later, the swings and bouncy seats were good to go and all of the other things were in their proper place.

May 1st. Today was the day. I finished up all of the paper work and tried to make the cold, crisp sheets of the hospital bed as comfortable as possible. I fixed my eyes on the clock directly in front of me. 8:33 a.m. I watched the red second hand tick by tick. Seconds felt like hours, hours like days. Once I heard the hollow knock on the wooden door, my stomach dropped. They told me not long ago they would have a nurse come by tomorrow and check to see if I had dilated anymore. Was something wrong? Why had they come back so soon?

My OBGYN walked through the door, and I could tell immediately by the long expression on her face that something was wrong. She came over and sat next to me on the bed. She grabbed my hand and I immediately started to cry. She explained to me that I was going to have to have a C-section because
his umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck, and if I tried to have a natural birth, it could cause serious complications. I broke down. I was shaking so hard I was practically convulsing, which was the last thing I wanted to do. Just the thought scared me. After she assured me that I was in the best of hands and would be well taken care of, she gently patted my hand goodbye and said that she would return to take me to the operating room in a couple of hours.

My contractions got stronger and closer together. The pain I felt was truly indescribable. The anesthesiologist walked in with her dark brown hair pulled up in a transparent, blue hair net and explained all of the complications that could occur and made me sign the papers stating that I understood. All of the frightening things she said made me not want to go through with this anymore, but all I could think about was Zayden and what was best for him. I had to scribble down something. She sat me up and told me that she was beginning my epidural. I felt a bee sting-like prick go deep in my lower back and an instant pang of cold rush through my lower body. Almost instantly, I was numb. She gently laid me back on the bed, gave me a reassuring smile, and left the room.

Shortly after, in walked my OBGYN. She asked if I was ready, which immediately threw me into a panic attack. It was impossible to stop shaking and crying, and I was barely able to breathe in between sobs. I knew that I couldn’t wait any longer, though. I had to go. Minutes before, Dustin, my boyfriend, went outside to clear his head. It had been a hectic, dramatic couple of days. I heard the creaks of the worn hospital bed and the locks on the wheels release and I began to move. I could feel my bed shaking from my trembling. The twists and turns of the hallway ended in seconds. I heard the loud buzz from the door leading into the operating room. I couldn’t do this. Dustin hadn’t come back yet. I couldn’t do it by myself.

As they were hanging the curtain-like sheet between me and my belly, they explained to me that
if he didn’t return in five minutes, they were going to have to operate without him. I took a deep breath and thought, “How could he leave me to do this alone? Doesn’t he want to be here?” I closed my eyes so tightly no light could seep through.

Hearing the clank of the door, my eyes flew open. Were they about to begin? Was he finally coming to my rescue? It was silent for a minute before I felt his rough hand grab hold of mine. I cried with relief as he gave his quirky smile. Then his focus was stolen by what was behind the sheet. My anesthesiologist asked if I could feel any pain and I replied, “No, but I am scared that I will be able to feel the incision.” I heard a low chuckle and then my doctor’s smiling voice, “Honey, I have already started.” What! How could she do that without telling me? There was no time for anger, though. I was seconds away from meeting my baby boy.

After what felt like hours of tugging and stress at my lower abdomen, I heard the breath-taking, heart-shaking cry of my baby boy. Nothing could wipe the smile off my face. I looked to my left, where Dustin had been standing, and my son was there with his cotton top hair and his heart-tingling cry. As they carried him away, I looked back up to Dustin and drifted off to sleep. Come to find out, they had given me more medicine because I complained of pain during the procedure. After that I was just physically and mentally exhausted. Minutes later, I woke up in the same, cold room in which all of this had started. No one was around and it was quiet except for Pawn Stars on the television. I heard a knock at the door and before I even had a chance to register who it was, my friends and family rushed in to congratulate me on my precious baby. So many questions were thrown around that I never got to actually answer any of them.

Suddenly, the door creaked open, and I heard the squeaky wheels of the baby bed. There he was. This was my first real look at my son. I instantly wanted to hold him. The nurse placed him in my
arms, and the connection I felt cannot be described. Feeling his little heart beat almost in sync with mine sent a calming rush through my body. It all had finally become real. I was holding my miracle I had created. God blessed me with a healthy baby boy that day, and I wouldn’t change one second of it.
It was eight past nine, and the doorbell seemed to be the only barrier between me and the inevitable. The chocolates I possessed were well past their expiration date, previously layered with nearly an inch thick of fossilized dust. My right hand was probably the most unoriginal, carrying flowers I’d picked on the side of the road, not particularly colorful, and to be completely honest, they were dying.

Truth be told, I was kind of obsessed. Not the creepy, follow you home, steal your clothing and fondle it to sleep obsessed, but a much healthier notebook filled with all her likes and dislikes obsessed, encrypting the key to figuring out how I could grab her attention, even for a second. I hate underdog stories, and by God I knew I was in one, soaking up the role like some modern artists soak up praise from their undeserved fan base, derived from a penniless talent. Regardless of my chances of success, I trudged on, and I swore an oath to myself that it would not be in vain, even if it felt that way. After all, I wasn’t hideous according to some rather attractive female cousins, and a particularly cute freshman who claimed I was heaven on earth.

It wasn’t often I could leave myself to my thoughts, and today was no exception as Jeremy bulldozed his way through a group of eighth graders, throwing his arm around me.

“Hey man, you coming over tonight?” my friend Jeremy gasped, running from class as if it was the cornerstone of hell, the breeding place of the plague.

“Would, but I can’t. I have a crap-ton of stuff to do later this evening, man, some new info for the bank,” I said, staring at his pit stains in disgust.

“Dude, I swear this thing you have going on isn’t healthy, and man to man, I’ve been praying for you.”

I chuckled and locked eyes with him.

“I’ve seen you on Saturday mornings, hung over with nothing but you skimpy stained underwear on, clawing your eyes as I turn on the lights to make you go home, yet I say nothing to you”
“That was one time.”
“You seemed like a natural to me.”

He curled his fingers and shot his fist at me, pulverizing my muscle tendons, leaving my scrawny little arms as limp as the steamed vegetables he claimed were the foundation of his vegetarian diet.

“Geez, dude, just kidding!” I grunted, rubbing my arm furiously in an attempt to dissipate the pain.

“Shit,...Mr. K!” Jeremy cried, sprinting into the cluster of indistinguishable students.

Mr. K was our lovely principle, a balding, fat man who had a sixth sense for trouble, or in Jeremy’s case, weed. He had obviously smelled the thick stench pulsing from my best friend, and was on a witch hunt to find the source.

“Good evening, Charles. I was just wondering if our friend Jeremy has talked to you today,” Mr. K questioned.

“Nope, I think he stayed home sick today, haven’t seen him once.”

Un-happy with the answer, he simply walked away knowing he would get nowhere talking to me, or anyone else at school for that matter. Our school was normal, with as many cliques as you could count, but when it came to teachers and faculty, we were as tightly knit as a group of tree huggers, locking hands as they defended a forest from the evils of modern expansion. We stood as one and fought for each other, regardless of who we were.

I walked through the halls after gathering my things, passing by the other students invisibly, my mind dead set on her. Every day I walked by locker two-seventeen in hopes that I could catch a brief glimpse of her beautifully round face, small nose, and plush lips. Her long legs wrapped in pure denim that curved up and down tempting me. Sadly, today she was absent, and my anxiousness dropped, leaving me with nothing to think about on the walk home. Truth be told, I was a broken man without her.

“Mom, I’m home,” I shouted in a monotone voice as I did repetitiously every day after
school.

The walls carried my voice throughout the expansive house, echoing these meaningless words, back and forth, as if it was a question and not a statement. She said nothing, and noticing that her car was gone, I realized I had the place all to myself. I rushed downstairs and grabbed my notebook, eagerly flipping through the pages.

It took me a while to find a blank page, but when I did, I nearly shrieked. It was a blank canvas for information that could direct the rest of my life. I didn’t merely just plan, I wrote down schematics for my future, and if ever given the chance, what I would say to her, my tone and my posture being nearly exact. I laid my head down and thought of this sweet moment, just conversation between the two of us, over some beer in cheap red cups, sitting by a fire just talking.

I woke up with a loud ringing circling my ears as I got up and staggered around my room, trying to figure out just what day it was. My wrist-watch read five-thirty, revealing I’d only been asleep for a little over an hour. The doorbell rang once more, and I ran to answer it before whoever it was left.

I swung the door open hastily, hoping to God it wasn’t my mom wondering why the door was locked.

“Hello,” I said, half-awake, my hair blown sideways.

“Hi, I was wondering if you would be interested in some…” It’s then I heard her voice. It’s then I realized just who was standing directly in front of me.

“Margo?” I said in a stuttered daze.

She stopped in her sentence, and looked up at me from her poorly recited paper.

“Uh, yeah?” She replied.

“What’s up?” I spewed, my heart working in tangent with the devil attempting to bring my now wobbling legs to the ground.

“Probability and statistics kicking my ass, but other than that nothing” she replied sarcastically, her head drooped, and eyes half-way open.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” she
asked.

I chose to reply with utter silence, because obviously that was the way I rehearsed it, the mysterious man who has a complicated past, or in reality, the small boy who was trying not to crumble in the presence of his savior.

“That’s right, you’re Charley, and my friend knows your friend Jeremy, the one that comes to class with pot brownies like every other day.”

“Yeah, I’m ashamed to call him my friend really, but at the very least he keeps things interesting.”

“Didn’t he also spray paint a giant erotic panda bear on Mr. K’s desk?” she asked with a cute smirk on her face.

“That was actually an accident, but my God, it’s a long story”, I said trying hard not to laugh remembering the harsh interrogations that followed that night of mischief.

“You know what? I’m tired and sweaty and kind of hate my life right now, so I could totally go for a long story about vandalizing government property. So long as you let me take a break in your nice air conditioned house.”

“Deal!” I said as my voice cracked, clearly emphasizing that I in fact had not hit puberty, or maybe I might be so lucky as to be caught in the transformation, showing the world with every womanly shriek and octave hop. The edge of her lip rose ever so slightly, as she fought hard not to laugh.

The funny thing about this situation was I didn’t see anything coming. My hair resembled that of a mad scientist, my home at the time had a strange funky odor looming about that resembled my mother’s stuffed cabbage made days earlier, and the woman of my dreams just strolled through my front door casually, wanting to talk to me, I might add.

“Hey, I hate to ask, but can I please have a glass of water? My bottle went dry like years ago.”

“Want some Gatorade? My mom bought at least 2,000 bottles of it whenever PriceMart went out of business. She purchased every last one on sale for, “all our future Gatorade needs.” Her bargain
shopping is almost blood-thirsty”
“Sounds like my sister. She can almost quote the local coupon books; it’s sickening really, but yeah that sounds awesome.”

I went in the back of my house and down the creepy-ass stairs to the cellar where the mother load of Gatorade was held. I grabbed perhaps the most sketchy looking bottle closest to me, to keep my angel (I know it sounds creepy) from waiting. I sprinted upstairs and went straight to the faucet to wash off the cellar’s droppings that had accumulated over the years since my mother’s purchase.

“Hey, I hope you like the blue ones. They’ve always been my favorite,” I said as I handed her the mostly clean bottle, free from grime, dust, and the occasional roly poly.

“Jesus Christ! There’s a God damn spider on your hand!” she cried, repulsed. Immediately I felt the strongest prick in my entire life pierce my right hand, making it go numb almost immediately. I swiped it clean off my hand to reveal two black holes oozing with a yellow viscous fluid.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” I yelled, my head feeling dizzy and my hand burning relentlessly.

“Are you okay?” she cried scared out of her mind.

“I d-d-don’t k-know…”

The room became a blur, as the images I saw morphed together into one, inducing nausea and pain throughout my body. I hit the floor violently as she rushed over to me picking my head up trying to grab my attention. I couldn’t see anything but white light, and I felt as if I was floating. The pain began calm, and I felt my nerves relax.

And then, she hit me, literally. Her hand struck my face, deeply penetrating each and every pore, my skin rippling violently. I woke up and saw her there, my head resting on her knee, and took a moment to thank Jeremy for his prayers, because whatever this was, it was from God.

“Sorry, you seemed like you were drifting off,” she whispered.

“You’re cool; it’s okay,” I mumbled.

“So reminded me then,
Charley, exactly how does the panda vandalization begin again?"

"The way anything else does with Jeremy, a dirty thought and a fat joint," I slurred.

That’s all I could remember past that point. I’m sure she smacked me a good amount of times though, in an attempt to keep me awake until the ambulance arrived. It was funny, the whole situation really, and the more I thought about her, the more it perplexed me. In every way she was someone completely different from the way I expected. This prime example of perfection, a goddess among mere mortals; it was wrong. She was normal; she was real.

I guess that’s why I’m standing on her front porch right now in my hospital robe. I never thought she would hang out at the hospital for as long as she did, but I’m happy she didn’t leave.

Maybe this time I’ll be able to finish my story.
Thanksgiving was not a normal day for anyone, but this one started out normally for me. I woke up that morning to the siren-like sound of my alarm clock - time to get up and keep an eye on my two-year-old son. My ex-wife and son’s mother was asleep on the couch in my room. We didn’t have much space in the house, which is why my room was out in the living room, so her sleeping on the couch was better than us sharing a bed. As I got up and wiped the sleep from my eyes, I could hear Jean’s snores signaling that she was still asleep. I could also hear my son, always the early bird, up and about in his room. When I opened the door, the sound of children’s songs was playing on his television in the room. We kept the TV on as a night light for my son. I picked him up, gave him a kiss, and then went over to his changing table to change his diaper. After the task was done, I quickly threw away the rotten smelling diaper, wrenching my nose as I did so, placed him on the ground, and closed the baby gate to his room. I watched Netflix while my son played with his various toys.

At this, my ex-wife, Jean, came into the room. I could tell she was still sleepy, her hair a mess and her pajamas ruffled with wrinkles from the night. “How’d you sleep?” I asked paying more attention to my show than her.

“Okay.” She stifled a yawn, turning and waving at our son as she came into the room. “Hi,” she said in a baby voice, getting Daniel to smile. She sat on the love seat that was in the room, while I was sitting comfortably in the chair. She looked at the television. “What’s this?” she asked as she stared at the dinosaurs that were on the screen. She could tell that they were costumes, puppets really.

“It’s a show called Dinosaurs, like a modern day family, only with dinosaurs and in the prehistoric period.” She mumbled something under her breath I couldn’t understand and then paid more attention to her phone than the TV. I knew she was talking to her boyfriend. She was doing that a lot lately. I was a little jealous, more so that she had a relationship and I didn’t.
My mom soon came out of her room; I could see that she had just gotten up. Like Jean, her hair was a mess and her pajamas were wrinkled, but her eyes were half closed as they got used to the little light that was in the room. “Are you going to fix supper, or should I?” She was talking about Thanksgiving dinner. We usually started it in the morning because it took so long to make. But why was she asking me? I didn’t make supper. That was Dad’s job. But ever since he started chemo, he had been so weak he could hardly get out of bed anymore.

In addition to cooking, I also took up grocery shopping as well. Again, this was a task that my dad usually would do. Today, though, I didn’t feel like cooking. “Can you do it? I’m just not motivated enough to cook that much food,” I responded as I turned to face Mom.

“Okay, whatever.” She started to walk towards the kitchen, but stopped. Turning to me she asked, “Are you going to spend some time with your father?” Her tone gave me pause. I had conflicting feelings about spending time with Dad the way he was. I had always seen my dad as a strong provider for our family. When he worked he always made sure that we had money to survive as well as splurge a bit every now and then. When he retired, due to problems with his knees and back, he still provided for us by doing the grocery shopping and the cooking. I never once saw or thought of him as weak. Seeing him now was hard for me. Plus, I didn’t know what to say to him. As I thought about it, I heard a TV audience laugh, which didn’t help the mood. I paid no attention; my mind was focused on what I should do.

“Maybe.” That’s all I could say. I didn’t know how I could see him. It was hard before when Dad was going through chemo. He was so weak then and exhausted from the treatments. All he would do was lie in bed. He had gotten where he had to wear adult diapers, or briefs as they were called. And he got worse from there; the sound of his oxygen machine could be heard faintly from down-
stairs. I couldn’t hear it from my son’s room, but I could from my room.

“Well, you need to. I’m going to send Rhonda and Rusty down to keep him company if I’m going to be cooking supper.” Mom walked down the hallway and into the kitchen. She disappeared as she went through the doorway.

I turned to Jean, “What do you think I should do?” I couldn’t think straight. Everything had been a normal day, aside from the holiday, until my mom mentioned my dad.

“Do whatever you want,” Jean said; then her phone rang. “He’s calling me; get out,” she said rudely. I glared at her as I got up to leave the room. After saying goodbye to my son, I closed the door to give her some privacy.

I walked back to my room, turning my head to the sound of pots and pans being moved around, seeing my mom hustling and bustling in the kitchen. I kept walking and plopped down on my bed, which creaked under the pressure. I could’ve sworn I heard a spring burst. I picked up the book I had been reading and tried getting into it. But I couldn’t. I kept thinking about my dad, about how he looked, about how he felt, what he was going through. I didn’t cry, though. I couldn’t. I put my book down, unable to think about it. My thoughts were on my dad. “It would suck if he died today,” I thought.

I got up from my bed, walked over to the stair case, and got ready to tread down the steps. Before making my decent, I turned to my mom in the kitchen and said, “I’m going downstairs for bit to see Dad.” I don’t know if she heard me; she was focused on getting the 15-pound turkey into the cooker. I shrugged my shoulders and then started down the stairs at my usual pace. At the doorway, however, I paused.

I could see my dad from behind; he wasn’t moving. “Could he be?” I thought with more curiosity than worry. I walked in the room, slowly, my knees weak and feeling sick to my stomach. Even though I was curious to find out, I dreaded the answer.

As I got closer to Dad, I could hear his faint breathing. He
was still alive! I breathed a sigh of relief. Walking over I heard the sound of an old Western playing on his TV. He was watching, but didn’t seem like he was into the movie. I sat down next to him on the couch by his hospital bed. I looked over to him, the TV, and around the room. Taking in the sight of the fireplace and the computer that hadn’t been used in a while, I realized I was paying attention to everything but my dad. I finally turned to him. He didn’t look well, not at all like the person I was used to seeing.

I racked my brain for something to say. At first I thought about saying, “Hey, Dad, how are you?” But that was stupid. I wanted to see if a little bit of my dad was still left, to see if he would reply with his smart-ass humor, the kind of humor that I picked up and often used. I would’ve expected a response like, “How do you think I’m doing?” But I thought better of it. Then I thought about asking him what he was watching. But he wasn’t into the movie, so I doubted whether he could tell me anything about it. I decided to say the only words that I could think of to say: “I love you, Dad.”

He turned to me. I swear I saw life come back to his eyes with those words. “I know, Robert,” he breathed out. Then the light went away, and he turned back to the screen. I thought he was gone, but he was still breathing, faintly. I got up, patted his hand a couple of times, and took my leave. Before I went back upstairs, I opened my sister’s door.

“Rhonda, get up. Mom wants you to be in there with Dad to spend some time with him.” My mentally-handicapped sister got up; she mumbled a reply as I closed her door. When I was almost up the stairs, I heard my sister’s door open once again. Ignoring it, I went to my brother’s room. He was mentally-handicapped as well, and I knew he would be up watching football. I opened his door and, like with my sister, said, “Mom wants you to go downstairs to spend some time with Dad.” “Okay,” he replied. I knew he was reluctant to leave, but he got up anyway.

I went back to my room and
picked up my book. Mom was in the kitchen, still working on Thanksgiving dinner. I tried reading. But I still couldn’t get into it, with my dad fresh on my mind. I had overheard the hospice nurse say earlier he’d be surprised if my dad made it through the week. He was still with us, though barely, which meant he could be gone at any point. He was in pain; that much could be seen. I wanted to spend more time with him, but I couldn’t handle the sight of him in that state compared with how I remembered him.

“Mom! Mom!” My sister’s frantic voice echoed through the house. “Daddy’s dead!” When I heard those words, I threw my book to the side and rushed downstairs, my mom hot on my heels. When I got to his room, I paused again. I saw my dad’s head cocked to the side, hanging, unmoving. I couldn’t hear his ragged breathing anymore. I only heard the oxygen machine and the television. I rushed to shut off the TV, but I couldn’t figure out how to without the remote. “Where the hell’s the remote?!?” I shouted.

“Rusty knows how to turn it off.” It was ironic. We were focusing on turning the television off rather than my dad’s unmoving body. It was as if we were trying to ignore the obvious for as long as possible. None of us wanted to face the truth - Dad was gone. Listening to my mom, I let my brother turn off the TV.

I stared at my dad, finally taking in his state: his head cocked to the side, his eyes glassy and hollow, staring off in the distance, yet staring at nothing. His mouth hung open. His tongue stuck out, yet was limp like the rest of his body. I went over to him, getting closer for a better look. I thought maybe he was still there. I just needed to get closer. If I did, I might be able to see one small speck of life in his eyes. But the closer I got, the more he appeared to be gone.

“Russ, Russ, I love you,” Mom sobbed. She held onto my sister while she cried. Rhonda yelled, “Mommy, Mommy, I’m scared.” My brother stood still; he was always unable to express his emotions. I knew, though, he
would be crying, too, if he could. I still didn’t cry, however. I couldn’t produce the tears. I felt numb. My mom watched as I walked past her up the stairs and through the front door to the yard. From there I walked to the edge of the brick wall that separated our downhill driveway from our front yard. The cool, crisp air of fall didn’t affect me. I was outside in a t-shirt and shorts, but I couldn’t feel anything.

I sat on the edge of the brick wall, staring at the bumpy asphalt of the driveway. If you had seen my eyes, they would’ve looked hollow. They would’ve appeared as though they had no life in them. If I were to lie down, perhaps someone would think I was dead, too. Without Dad I felt hollow and empty, nothing inside except somber thoughts.

“I’m a loser.” I couldn’t stop criticizing my life. “The only thing my dad saw come from me was my son.” I then wondered, “Was my dad even proud of me?” Looking at my life so far, there was nothing that a father could be proud of. I had no job, I was a college dropout, and I mooched off of my mom. The only accomplishment I had was my son. But I didn’t have the type of family I wanted my dad to see.

The tears finally came. I sobbed as little liquid drops hit the pavement under my feet. “Dad, I’m sorry I’m such a loser.” The tears started to come heavier as I went on. “I wanted you to see me succeed. I wanted you to see me graduate college. I wanted you to see me get a teaching job. I wanted you to see me become a best seller. All the things I wanted to do with my life that I was waiting for so long, I wanted to share those moments with you, Dad.”

It was my dad that gave me a love for reading. It was my dad that inspired me to be a teacher. It was my dad that inspired me to be a writer. I wanted my life to be better. I wanted my life to be something my dad would be proud of. “I’ll make my life better, no more waiting around for it.”

My dad helped me get to where I am now. Even though he died, it was because of his life insurance money that my mom was able to pay off my school
debt. Thus, I was able to go back to school. I was able to get a new laptop as well as a car. These things helped me with school and helped me find a job. My dad made me want to do these things, and he was responsible, in a way, for making these things happen. I would give it all up, though, just to have my dad back, so I could hear him say, “I’m proud of you, Robert.”
Judges

**Rebecca Elswick**, this year’s Fiction judge, is the daughter and granddaughter of coal miners. She lives in southwestern Virginia with her husband and three children and at last count, five dogs. She teaches English and creative writing and is a teacher consultant for the Appalachian Writing Project at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *A Cup of Comfort for Dog Lovers II* and Christmas Blooms. Her most recent publication was “Keep Your Fork” a short story in the *Notebook: A Journal*. Her short story, “Abby’s Secret” is forthcoming in the anthology “Broken Petals” in March. *Mama’s Shoes* is her debut novel. Summary of novel: *By the time Sylvia Richardson is eighteen, she has buried her parents; given birth to a daughter; and become a widow. It is 1942, and World War II has destroyed Sylvia’s dream of dancing in red heels through life to the melody of a Hank Snow record. Instead, she is raising her daughter, Sassy, alone in the coal mining town she vowed to leave behind.*

**Dr. Louis Gallo**, this year’s Non-fiction judge, was born and raised in New Orleans and now teaches Creative Writing, modern and contemporary Literature, and other Literature courses at Radford University in Virginia. His work has appeared in *Glimmer Train, Berkeley Fiction Review, Missouri Review, Southern Quarterly, New Orleans Review, Mississippi Review, Portland Review, storySouth, Bellingham Review, Greensboro Review, Tampa Review, The Ledge, New Oregon Review, Pennsylvania Literary Review, Rattle, Baltimore Review, Texas Review, American Literary Review, The MacGuffin, Modern Poetry Studies, Critique, Thema, Green Hills Review, Italian Americana, Louisiana Literature, WIDE AWAKE IN THE PELICAN STATE* (LSU fiction anthology). From Oct 2008 to August 2009 Dr. Gallo has published over 64 separate poems, stories and essays in both print and net journals, including *The Southern Quarterly, Flash, Bartleby-Snopes, Raving Dove, Segue, Contemporary American Voices, Poetymagazine, Babel Fruit, Mused, Skyline Review, Houston Literary Review, Paradigm, The Vocabulary Review, Tipton Poetry Review, Poetry Midwest* and many others. Two poetry chapbooks, *THE TRUTH CHANGES* and *THE FASCINATION OF ABOMINATION*, were released in 2010. He once won the NEA South Carolina Arts Commission Individual Artist’s award. Another story was reprinted in *The Bench Press* anthology in 2005. Dr. Gallo is former editor of *The Barataria Review*, a literary magazine that published some of the earliest work Julia Alvarez and Ellen Gilchrist; a former editor of *Books: A New Orleans Review*; and a contributing editor of *The Pushcart Press*. Dr. Gallo’s personal interviews with William Burroughs, Walker Percy, James Purdy, Susan Sontag, Miller Williams and others have been published in varied newspapers. He founded the Mardi Gras Poetry Readings in New Orleans, which still thrive now as The Maple Leaf Readings. He has served as an editorial consultant for Houghton-Mifflin, Longman and Prentice-Hall. He has served on academic panels at the MLA, the AWP Writer’s Conference, the Winthrop College Writers Conference and others. Dr. Gallo received his BA from Tulane University, his MA from Louisiana State University and Ph.D. from the University of Missouri.
This year’s visual art judge is **John W. Hilton**. He is a native of Kingsport, TN. As an artist, he makes prints, drawings, and paintings using animal and figurative imagery. He currently teaches as an adjunct instructor of print-making and foundations at East Tennessee State University. He also teaches Art Appreciation for Jackson State Community College. His educational background includes a BFA from ETSU and an MFA from Clemson University. He has studied art at the Charles E. Daniel Center in Genoa, Italy and the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. When not making art, he spends his time with his wife, corrupting his children, playing with his dogs, and occasionally tries to outsmart a fish or two.

Contributors

**Mckayla Bacon** plans on being a chemical engineer and working at BAE Systems. Her number one goal in life is to be a good mother and supporter for her beautiful son, who is the light of her life.

**Katie Barnett’s** passion is horses and how naturally beautiful they are. When she wrote her Haiku she wanted to give people a little of what she saw every morning.

**Kevin Carrier** is a Theatre Major at Northeast State and is a native of Bluff City Tennessee. He has had work published in *Echoes and Images* and in the online literary journal *Blue Fifth Review*.

**Andrew Christian** is a twenty-eight year old student attending Northeast State Community College. He is currently majoring in English and plans to get a Master’s Degree with aspirations of becoming an English professor. Andrew’s stories and poems have been published in *Echoes and Images*, *The Clinch Mountain Review*, and a variety of other publications.

**Beth Edwards** is a current student at Northeast State. She has an Accounting degree that she received in her 20s, but after a lifetime of working decided it was time for a career change. Beth is married and has a 23-year-old daughter named Bailey, who is her pride, joy, and inspiration for this story.

**Charles Stuart Forstall** is a transitioning Army veteran with five years on active duty and a 15 month deployment to Iraq. He is the founder and current president of the Northeast State Student Veterans Organization, and the editor of the newsletter called “Bootstrap”. He is majoring in Pre-engineering, Electromechanical, and Welding and as of right now the future is still in the future.

**Katrina Gibbs-Macdonald** is a young artist studying at Northeast State. She has loved art since she was a child and draws inspiration from her father’s artwork. She states, “I intend to spend my life creating beautiful art for the world to see.”
Caitlin Meadows is a psychology major with a minor in art. She states, “To me, art and psychology have always been connected. Art is an expression of the mind and I’m very thankful to have the ability to express myself through a creative outlet. Art will always remain a significant part of my life.”

Michelle Miller is a sophomore at Northeast State and is majoring in photography. She plans to attend ETSU in the fall of 2014 and then off to culinary school to “see where my heart leads me.”

Daniel Neubrander states, “I have drawn seriously for about 4 years; however, from an early age, I loved to put pencil to paper. My oldest brother was probably the one who inspired me in pencil art, for when I was 6 or 7 we were the family’s pencil artists. Yet, as of now, I have never taken drawing lessons. I learned from books.”

Robert Northrup is an English major at Northeast State. He loves to read and write, though he is still working on his craft.

Ashley Pierce is a wife, a mother, a sister, and a daughter stating, “My family means everything to me and without them I would be lost.” She is currently an Advertising Public Relations student at Northeast State and states, “I can’t wait to see where my future lies.”

Heather Russell is a 31 year-old English major and currently a sophomore, who has recently returned to school. She enjoys reading, writing, and drinking wine. She has two adopted children with her wife.

Erin Ryder was born and raised here in the mountains of East Tennessee. Some of her hobbies include photography, writing, and staying up later than she should.

Michael Stalvey was born in Florida and moved around quite frequently with his family of five. “I’ve lived all over the country, not because my parents are in the military, but simply because they like to. I’ve been doing very light writing for the past few years, but only this fall semester have I learned that I love it.”
Zachery S. Sturgill is majoring in Interior Design. He enjoys coming up with various new designs to improve house layouts and landscapes. He is a fan of the theater, old films, and writing but states “nothing beats spending time with my family.”

Kelly Tolley lives in Jonesborough, TN with her husband. She enjoys pursuing creative outlets such as painting, drawing, and writing.

Cassandra Walls has been a writer since she was eight. She is a currently living the double life of a student double majoring in Psychology and English. Her goal is to help people fix their issues and spread literature to blossoming minds while finding time to publish that novel she is procrastinating on.

Kassidy Younce is a freshman at Northeast State. She currently holds two jobs and maintains a wonderful marriage.
Echoes and Images 25

Echoes and Images, Northeast State’s student literary magazine, invites submissions of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and visual art.

Prizes will be awarded in each category:

First Place: $50.00  
Second Place: $35.00  
Third Place: $25.00

The competition is open to current students at Northeast State.

All entries must be original and previously unpublished, and contributors agree that the submitted work may be published by Northeast State in Echoes and Images or other college publications, in print, or online.

Students may enter in all four categories.

Poetry, Fiction, and Non-fiction must be submitted online through the Echoes & Images website. An online entry form must accompany each submission.

For Visual Art, students must submit their original works to the Humanities Division Office, H129, and each entry must be accompanied by a fully completed entry form obtained from the Echoes and Images website.

Results will be announced early in the spring semester.

Visual art entries must be picked up by the end of the spring semester.

Entries should be submitted in the Humanities Division Office, Room H129.