NORTHERN NARRATIVES

A Collection of Poems, Essays, and Short Stories
by Citizens of North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

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Volume 3

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Collected and Produced by the following Fargo Public Library Staff: Krista Aldrich, AJ Bauers, Sunny Branick, Melisa Duncan, Andy Gustafson, Cheryl Lackman, and Lori West.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the third volume of *Northern Narratives*.

Northern Narratives is an annual anthology published by the Fargo Public Library to highlight and preserve the writing of local and regional authors. Our aim is to promote the sharing of our stories and the creation of content that is meaningful to our community; therefore all poems, essays, and short stories featured in this volume were written and self-edited by residents of North Dakota and the Red River Valley. To learn more about the *Northern Narratives* project, please visit our website at fargolibrary.org

Selection to this anthology was done by the NDSU English Honor Society and volunteers based on the following criteria: voice, style, cohesiveness, and the ability to engage readers.

We hope you enjoy this book, and fall in love with the creativity, passion, and humor of our region's writers, just as we did.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Fargo Public Library or the City of Fargo.

Support for the *Northern Narratives* writing project was provided by The Friends of the Fargo Public Library. To learn more about the Friends, please visit fargolibrary.org/friendsofthelibrary.

POETRY

COMPASS

by Steve Aakre

Tonight I scan the gleaming sky
for heroic shapes that ancient eyes
envisioned as their gods, their guides.
Too many points of light emerge,
littering my search with glittering distractions.

Under this deepening sky,
feeling ever smaller,
I find comfort in my compass,
its simple purpose
encircled and encased.
This needle, steely resolve in filigree,
gives not answers, but quests;
directs the course we should, but might not, take.
Moved by unseen force
it stays true, unerring,
while we, touched by dark powers of the heart
veer onto courses of futility,
explorers irrevocably drawn
to polestars that move on.

DIVIDED WE FALL

by Anthony Albright

I've found as I've traveled through life
Rife with opportunities to offer spite
At the height of another's generosity
Their plea for humanity to make sense of a sea
Of troubled identities that wish to be free
From the exterior influences that take glee
Treating them with disrespect; it's insanity

Why can't kindness be the key
To getting through this life?
Why must it be that toxic masculinity
And overt hatred of the one who isn't me
Must be the most powerful forces on earth
Not church, or birth of a baby, or causing no hurt
To your neighbor? Can you do me a favor?

Take what little courage you possess
Grab a loved one or a stranger or someone in distress
Show them kindness and mercy
Relieve their duress.
Show them that humanity does not crest
At hatred for all and distrust of neighbors
At divided we fall, at disrespecting your labors

Show them that together we can be free
A society built upon equality
Newly christened as the altar of democracy
Must always be
With the efforts of a new generation
One that shows that the desire to aspire
To our once great ideals has not waivered

Poetry

We must once again fight
But not ‘gainst each other
Fight the seed of doubt that creeps back in
That tells us we don’t matter that shatters
Our faith in a system that can only be refined
If we fix it, not throw it away
Renewed in a crucible lest it decay.

End

THE INEVITABLE SILENCE

by Ben Austinson

A child lost in winter
broken by the cold
forsaken by the light
but walking places you've never been

A face withered by years
the cracked smile of fate
the bleakness of fading memory
yet, wisdom still avails

Eyes like abandoned mine shafts
hooded by a beaten brow
whispers draped in regret
as you try to find meaning in decay

In spite of your fears
the evening blue approaches
and you're left bargaining for minutes
when no one has the time

A Falling Leaf

by Mark Bratlie

Today a leaf came down to greet me
falling gently on a breeze
With intentions to remind me
of the things I must release

Nature teaches of life's cycles
when to cling and when to fall
There is a time for every season
and solace if we hear the call

But letting go is not so easy
we may need more than just a breeze
Graceful falling takes some practice
and a lesson from the trees

This human mind is often yearning
for some past or future day
But opening to present stillness
allows a more fulfilling way

We cannot control our seasons
grasping only brings more grief
Let us settle in the moment
like the falling of a leaf

NORTHERN EAGLE

by Mark Bratlie

Mighty Eagle
of the Northland
how we love
to see you fly

Banking on
the lofty currents
that you find
in clouds and sky

Majestic both
in size and spirit
you bring us joy
and wonderment

The moments that
you hold our gaze
become a
mystical event

Witnessing your
soaring presence
is from nature
one fine gift

Becoming soon
a precious memory
as our spirts
feel a lift

FEASTING OUR GUESTS

by Dave Jameson

Outside our windows two ornamental crabs
stand fruitful in the leafless, still-life gray
of failing November.
                It is late afternoon.
The sun is nearly blotted out by the featureless
layer of cloud that is the sky. But enough
of the sun's rays win through so they charge
the numberless apples with a cherry glow.

Stone hard crab apples, fiery globes in fruitful
plenty, pendant from the limbs on their thin
stems, a crimson surprise against the gray sky,
and the trees' limbs, the twiggy, apple-
laden ends of them, jitter in the light wind.

An easy wind is a boon of hope for people
desiring to cheer tomorrow's inflated cartoons
in their high flight above Manhattan streets.
But the same breeze here means mauve bus-stop faces
peering up the street, wishing to speed tardy warmth.

And, oh, these red apples? In sunnier
February we'll watch frenetic birds
descend on the trees in jeering flocks,
wilding birds tugging off the crystal red
marbles of crab apples, gulping them down whole
or, more often, letting them fall to the ground.
Can their canny bird tongues detect the presence
of succulent grubs within?

They are pretty birds
whose name I do not know, but how I love the
topknot on each head—cowlick, really—
and I'm sad when their rowdy feasting ends
in a sudden, synchronized flutter.

I think of them
winging their way on north, becoming
good, solid bird citizens of the Yukon, raising
hatchlings who'll fledge their own sleek topknots
before the long flight back to Honduras.

I wish they could stay longer in Fargo,
these hungry roughnecks, their winter gift too brief.

THE SHORE WALL

by Heather Karstens

One grey October afternoon,
alone I go to the shore.
The beach is quiet and pensive today
inviting peaceful meditation.

Though not high tide,
the waterline is well up the sand.
Stretching miles along the coast
stands a sturdy granite wall.
These pieces were placed by human hands
carefully fitting a jigsaw
to create an impenetrable barrier
between the incoming waves of nor'easters
and the homes, gardens and roads on the other side.
Without this wall,
these homes might long ago have been swept out to sea.

Today, with the beach nearly to myself,
I perch atop the shore wall,
legs crossed beneath me.
I take a deep breath
filling my lungs with
invigorating autumn air,
taking note of the tangy scent of salt water and seaweed.
My peripheral vision becomes fuzzy
as my eyes focus on the view in front of me.

Away from the noise of the city
and the bustle of tourist season,
I can hear the harsh sound of gulls wheeling overhead,

fighting for the scraps left behind.
Their conflict claws at my frayed emotions.
I hear geese passing over the salt marsh behind me,
a tell-tale sign of the passing seasons,
and know that winter won't be long in coming.
I dread the looming darkness the season brings.

As many do, much of the time these days,
I find myself feeling anxious, sad,
afraid for the fate of our world
filled with so much hatred,
so much hurt,
so much constant fighting.
My mind is filled with worry,
distraction and a lonely disconnect.

Today I am seeking an escape,
a shift in perspective,
a mental clarity I am struggling to find.
I know I need… something…
to break out of this exhausted, burned-out state.
I can’t begin to tell you what.
I feel lost, searching for something sturdy to hold me,
something that won’t crumble away.

As I sit on the shore wall blinking back tears of frustration,
intentionally breathing in, out,
shakily at first, then more steadily,
my mind begins to open to my surroundings and to close out the rest.

The aggressive sounds of the bickering gulls
fade from my notice,
and all I hear, all I see,
are the waves tumbling onto the shore,
lapping against the sand,
then withdrawing,
subsiding back into the sea

as if content not to stray too far from home.
The rhythm is steady,
consistent,
and oddly reassuring.

As I watch the waves,
realization dawns
that each and every one is different from the countless others,
though equally beautiful.
Yet each one is a part of the whole.
Each one comes from and returns to the same ocean,
the same watery world.
Would that we humans could view ourselves and each other
as critical components of a fragile and magnificent ecosystem,
recognizing that our individuality combined with our commonality
give us strength.

The ocean endures.

The waves wash in and out,
over and over,
restoring its broken pieces to the whole.

Despite my favorite sweater,
I shiver involuntarily.
The crisp October breeze is cool on the back of my neck,
and the chill of the granite wall beneath me
has seeped into my core.
I must move on,
but I know that the same unwavering shelter,
the same ocean with its ever-changing waves,
will be here when I come back.

NEIGHBORHOOD NAMES

by Bibi Khan

Today happens to be one of those days -
I'm at the kitchen table in Stonebridge
Where you cannot find a bridge made of stone
In fact, there isn't any bridge at all

Many days on my walking route
I pass the neighborhood of Fox Run
Though I sometimes see people run
I have never seen a fox run or walk

I've often biked along Rose Creek
Where there is a golf course
But I'm always searching for the rose
And long for a dip in the non-existent creek

I will attest that in Bluemont Lakes
You will find a lake but I've never seen its blue
And if there is a mont - French for mountain -
A magnifying glass will be no help to you

My daughter visits her friend in Meadow Creek
Serenity comes to mind when I hear the name
But alas, the houses have eaten the meadow
And thirsting, swallowed the creek

The list is long and I can go on
But I must visit someone in Woodhaven
Where I've never seen the woods,
As for haven - your guess is as good as mine

VULNERABILITY

by Renee Loehr

Like a tree
Stripped of its leaves,
Exposed to the world,
I have been humbled
By my vulnerability.
My pain and sorrow
Worn on my sleeve,
Like a soiled garment
Few want to touch.

Some are gentle with me,
Tender in expressing sympathy,
While other's remarks
Penetrate my tender surface
Like an open wound,
The hurt seldom
Inflicted intentionally.

Still others,
Not sure what to say or do,
Avoid me altogether,
Afraid of my reality,
Which could just as
Easily be theirs.

POET

by Anna Lynch

A response to Dropping the Stick by Jamie Parsley

I think I would rather not
Be a painter.
Smears across a page
Can never be so clear
As a picture
Painted with words
On the canvas of the mind.

Colors of pigment
Never mix quite the same,
Or shine as brilliantly
As colors created
By an inspired imagination.

No picture is ever as clear
When it is put on canvas,
As the picture in the heart
Painted by simple words
That say something different
Each time they are repeated

SPECK SEASONS

by Shannon Orth-Lawler

While playing in the yard with my children one day,
We met a little speck of dust with much to say.
He told us of his adventures through winter and spring;
Of all the joy that summer and fall can bring.
Speck relayed us his stories without a care,
but they were simply too good not to share!

<u>Winter</u>

On a fluffy white snowflake in a clear winter sky,
Sat a little speck of dust with a twinkle in his eye.
He peeked over the edge as they both drifted down,
and saw many children all running around!

A little girl saw them and stuck out her tongue.
The pair landed upon it; catching snowflakes is fun!
Speck feared for his friend whom he knew could not last.
Upon warm, wet tongues… snowflakes MELT FAST!

Speck tugged at her nose hairs,
He danced all about.
Then **SNIZZFASHIZZLE**!
(She sneezed them both out)

Spring

After sleeping most of the long winter away,
Speck woke in the dark; alone and afraid.
So he focused his mind on thoughts of joy and elation,
Lest his heart be consumed by his own trepidation.

Speck felt all around;
He was walled in quite tight.
So he mustered his courage,
and swallowed his fright.

Speck pushed and he pushed, with all of his might.
When he felt one wall give, he was filled with delight!
He continued to strive, through that lonely spring night.
As the morning sun rose, he was bathed in its light!

Summer

As the summer days lengthened by the hour,
Speck would rest upon his flower.
When the gentle winds began to blow,
They both would sway; to and fro.

But as the summer winds picked up,
They began to shake Speck's flower cup.
As stormy clouds flashed their lightning,
The static charged him with a ZING!

And as the winds became a squall,
They destroyed Speck's flower; stem and all.

When he got back on solid ground,
Speck found a hole that was safe and sound.
Once the storm had passed him by,
A double rainbow filled the sky!

Fall

As the autumn leaves changed from green to brown,
Our little Speck was winding down.
He tried to find a place to rest;
A sturdy leaf would suit him best.

He found an oak leaf, big and strong.
He'd try it out. What could go wrong?
When the leaf broke away with a crackling sound,
Speck found himself hurtling toward the ground!

He regained his footing with a grin,
Then settled in to surf the wind.
He rode the airs, both high and low.
Then landed that leaf, nice and slow!

Never one to leave a mess,
He put the leaf back with the rest!

AMBER WOUND

by Sarah Page

The Landlord promised to kill her
Swore she deserved to die—
A *Salix matsudana*, Chinese Willow
Carelessly planted over sewer lines
By gardeners who didn't understand
The risk of pervasion into pipe veins.

Strong roots are a sin where they don't belong,
But I welcomed every shade and sound
Of her being despite my different flesh:
Thrum and thrill of her sap-songs,
Fronds tumbled teal-silver by thunder,
Each cool wink of her slim-eyed leaves.
She was the only wild thing trilling in a forest
Of suburban murmurs that drowned my ears.

A thousand days our whispers entwined
As we kept pace heart for heartwood,
But *I* tore away from us first, rifted
Miles beyond her roots' sinuous reach,
Not grasping then that the amber wound
Our parting left could never close over clean.

Many tree rings too late I return to her
Slaughtered silhouette, marking
The promise I knew that man would keep
Carving base silence into her stump,
Wondering if there are no elegies
For one never meant to taste the sun.

Poetry

None that don’t make trite work of her
Daily defiance in keeping form against
A fate that willed and won her undoing—
Yet I must rise and wither under the same sky, too,
Echoes of her susurrus rippling through my arteries,
Greening, greener still, hymning
For all that springs unbidden,
Unsoiled by arbitrary loam and water.

UNNAMEABLES

by Sarah Page

A thousand years after the last humans have
Hushed their bracketing brains, will a rose
Still blush red even if nobody speaks the color?
How will a violet know beyond shades of doubt
That she dons a purple-hued corolla, and not
Something paler—perhaps lavender?

I worry sometimes about the daisies, and if
They will remember their name when there are
No more dictionaries to spell out *Asteraceae*
Or *Compositae*—but then, hasn't nature always
Ignored annual and perennial labels to effloresce
Out of every oblivion?

I want to pick off categories like petals and leave
My head stalk bare of assumptions; never let my mind
Fill with weed-shaming when all is flowers, infinite posy!
I would give up all my words just to admire one sun-faced,
Saw-toothed fleuron without first cursing it *invasive, valueless*
Most *undesirable* "dandelion"—unnameable as beauty.

BLOOD ON THE SWORD

by Victor Pellerano

I am the spirits of broken hearts and bones
Searching for a place, I once called home
But all my landmarks are now gone
And placed where they don't belong
I am the river once wide and strong
Flowing over beds of ancient stones
Stones that covered my Father's land
Now scared by deeds of man

I am the blood on the soldier's sword
Fighting causes since I was born
I wear the feathers that eagles wore
I am the blood on the soldier's sword

I am the moon in the wolf's cry
Searching for the place, where they said I died
But I'm still alive, I did survive
Now I ride with my brothers in the sky

I am the rain, a farmer's friend
Searching for the place, I know I've been
A place where the buffalo hide
A place where the prairies kiss the sky

I am the flag on the battlefield
Torn and tattered with my country's ideals
Ideals of faith in a warrior's pain
Ideals of freedom running in his veins

I am the blood on the soldier’s sword
Fighting causes since I was born
I wear the feathers that eagles wore
I am the blood on the soldier’s sword

Poetry

I AM FROM

by Kabita Rai

I am from a rainy place where houses are made of bamboo and covered with mud, from muddy roads and sitting on the floor in the Pira
I am from the holiday of Holi where everyone spreads colors everywhere like happiness
From the falling flowers in the morning to decorate the house, from beautiful grasses where there is no snow
I am from Christmas Eve, from playing the guitar and dancing in the grace of the Lord
I am from *Pratap, Moti Maya*, and *Harka*
From the family that helps each other, in my darkest hour, they bring the light
I am from the music of love and watching the movie *Kaha Bhetiyela*
I am from "be a good person" and "never date until you are older"
From the family who tells me to cook because I am a girl,
Because it will help when I get married
I'm from a place called Amda, where my mom gave birth to me,
So, I could see this beautiful world
From cooking *masu baat* to celebrate the holiday of Dashai
I am from the family of a hard-working grandfather and
A grandmother who raised me up with manners
From a dad who did not leave me behind when my mom left
I am from playing soccer on the muddy ground in the spring,
To playing soccer in grassy fields in the summer
I am from years of stress, sadness, and change

THESE HANDS I HOLD

by Beloved Smart

A tear too long is what one might have imagined
When hope glides down impossible slides
The play yard sings an unsung song
From these hands
I hold
The color of cream and butter
Butter creamed
Or is it peanut butter
These hands
What hands
I hold
You could break my heart a thousand times
Pierce it over the moon
Sprinkle bits across the sea and leave what was left inside of me
I would remember
These hands
What hands
Your hands
I hold

MEADOW'S WAKENING

by Marshall Stenslie

The meadow's wakening brings forth life, to flourish in the new born day.

The cool droplets cling firmly to the meadow's colorful blanket of life,
The petals bow and sway, as the breeze pushes gently.
Shadows lighten and the droplets glisten, as daylight breaks the night away.

The sun glides silently across the rolling meadow, and its warmth awakens and renews.
The droplets fade, the colors brighten, as the lilies turn to greet the morning sun.

The gentle breeze yields to the strength of the morning summer winds,
The stately stands of vibrant hues, now bend and bow to natures stronger touch.

The butterfly now spreads its wings and darts and swoops and travels forth,
In search of petals to sustain, its fragile life, natures gift to beautify.

The songbird glides from sheltered nest, its radiant coat revealed by light,
Its life concealed within the realm, of natures meadow, serene and still.

All life so silent, quiet, still, now knows the quickening of the day.

IMMORTALITY

by Stephanie Wilson

Gently spin the earth around
Cultivating,
Shaping,
Until damp black dirt pleads
For bright new life

The little life so feeble
Nestles cozily into its new home,
Ready to face the world

Pat the moist soil down and wait,
Nourishing,
Shielding,
Until the seed is grown
And prospering

Until the babe is ready
To arise and readily replenish
The parched soil once more

ESSAYS

MY GREAT WINTER ESCAPE

by Deb Gustafson

Ever since I moved to North Dakota, I have always been told to get out of Dodge in winter, to take a break from the wicked cold temperatures and mountains of snow.

Great advice, but easier said than done.

***

I should have known it would be an interesting day when I-29 looked more like the Indianapolis 500 than the deserted highway it should have been at 3:30am. Oh yes, everyone's thinking like me: Arrive early for the 5am flight, for who knew how many TSA agents would report for duty during the partial government shutdown?

While jockeying with a line of cars for the left-hand turn lane into Hector Field, I had to decide whether to park in the short or long term lot. The practical me decided to go for the short term, because at my age, long term could quickly become problematic.

Luggage unloaded, I forged ahead to the terminal, dodging cars in the crosswalk and fellow travelers determined to get ahead of me in line. Over 200 people were waiting to check in and drop off their suitcases.

I finally found myself in front of a sleepy, weary airline employee, who gamely smiled at me and asked, "How many bags?"

"Counting the two under my eyes, four," I quipped. Sadly, jokes are like lead balloons at 3:50am, so I checked my two bags and trudged upstairs, hoping to escape the rope-a-dope gropefest by TSA. My worries were for naught. Distracted by the Norwegian in front of me, who was carrying a briefcase loaded with Freddy's lefsa and Widman's chocolates, I escaped the agents' scrutiny. Now to find my gate, which shouldn't be too hard…considering there's only two or three to choose from.

Boarding a plane requires a unique skill set. It's all about the zone and being in the zone: the right zone. As soon as preboarding was announced, the passengers swarmed en masse toward the jet bridge door. I felt inclined to join the scrum, figuring I'd find out why everyone was in such a rush; the plane wasn't leaving till we were all on board, after all. Then I realized it's all about the game, the overhead bin game.

And then it began: everyone watching, waiting to see who would take those tentative steps forward to gain first access. Granted, there are many deserving folks who are sick or injured or completely entitled to be walking a bit slower, but do they all need aunts, uncles, and a gaggle of second cousins twice removed to help them get settled on board? I wanted to shout out, "Is anyone adopting?!"

Then came the sneaky cheats, bringing up the rear. A young man hobbled up to the door, gaining much sympathy. Someone so young, valiantly struggling to stay erect. Jeez, he looked familiar. Hey, didn't he finish in the top ten at last year's Boston Marathon? I craned my neck to peak down the jet bridge, only to see the mystery man trotting down to the airplane door, high-fiving a fellow with a walker on the way.

A group of young parents, arms overflowing with young children and car seats, struggled up to the counter to get their tickets scanned and were told to step back a bit. First class would board next.

Let me tell you, there were quite a few of us mere mortals left to board and I was getting nervous. Many folks looked like they were going on six month cruises. Do steamer trunks fit in the overhead? I was beginning to sweat. My wet hand smudged the zone number printed on my ticket. It looked like the letter B. I was quite concerned; the airline employee was only calling numbers. I asked a fellow passenger what B stood for and was horrified when he said, "Damn, they finally put someone in the bathroom!" Good Glory!

By the time I realized I was in Zone 3, Zone 4 had been called. I still have foot prints on my back from when the last person to board thought I was trying to jump the line and just about trampled me. But I

found some bin space, you'd better believe I did! I felt like I had just won the lottery—well, at least a couple of the winning numbers.

***

Amazingly, I had sailed through security and was safely buckled in my seat, believing my travel challenges were certainly behind me. Naivety is not reserved strictly for the young.

Upon arrival in Minneapolis, my luggage was safely placed in the trunk and I settled back into my seat for the drive to St. Paul. I had plenty of time to marvel at the modest mounds of snow along the sides of the roads. Snowmaggeddon had apparently saved its wrath for Fargo.

Dropped off in the circular drive of my hotel, I stacked my luggage, rolling them up an incline to the entrance. Oh, did I mention an icy incline? Apparently what St. Paul lacked in snow was more than made up for with a thick layer of ice.

Looking for the doorman in vain, I realized that at 6:30am I was on my own to shuffle sideways to the doors, dragging my bags.

My goodness, I had another choice to make. Should I use the regular doors or the revolving door? The mischief maker buried deep inside me wanted the revolving door. Go for it! However, I figured I'd get stuck with my luggage jammed between the spinning doors and spend more time trapped between the glass panes than King Tut spent in his tomb.

"Come on," my common sense hollered. "Just push in the door, and the warmth and safety of the lobby are yours!" So, push I did…only to realize I needed to pull. I lost my grip on one of my roller bags, which took off down the icy incline like a runaway R2D2 in search of Obi-wan.

I lunged for the errant bag, grabbing the handle with my fingertips. As my other bag tipped over, I lost my balance and began to do the splits, facilitated by the icy cement.

Not having done any gymnastics since junior high, I wasn't sure what was going to tear first, my beyond middle-aged leg muscles or the

seam of my pants. Wrong on both counts: it was my zipper that burst apart, teeth yawning wide. I knew it, I just knew I shouldn't have had that donut…okay, two donuts yesterday.

Finally, scrambling up onto my knees, I crawled to the door, pulled it open, and shoved my bags into the entryway.

Now, there I was, the girl who could powerwalk down any airport concourse with multiple bags in tow, unable to repeat the feat with icy, wet boots on the highly polished marble of the hotel's foyer floor. Triple Lutz? Count me in, as I spun and slid in a most spectacular fashion to the registration desk.

The gentleman behind the counter leaned forward to see if I had stuck the landing. He raised his eyebrows almost to his receding hairline and said, "Welcome to the St. Paul Hotel. Your name?"

"My name?" I sighed. "Just call me Grace."

I'm betting about now that you wish you had come along for this crazy ride, even though my vacation was barely out of the gate, and my mid-winter destination was St. Paul, not Fort Lauderdale. Come on now, who really wants a beach ball when they can have a snowball instead?

I WAS A HUNTER

by Nancy Hanson

I grew up in the 1950's before any discussion about gun control. We lived in rural North Dakota and most households had guns. They were not considered weapons of attack or defense. Guns were used to take care of the gophers who dug up your backyard and the various critters who tried to destroy the family's vegetable garden. Sometimes a rabid animal would wander towards the house. Sometimes one of your own animals had to be put out of its misery.

However, the primary reason for owning a gun was for hunting. I come from a family of hunters. We loved the sport and hunting was one of our traditions. We hunted not only for pleasure but also to put food on the table. Many cold winter Sundays we would come home from church and the kitchen would be filled with the aroma of roasting wild duck or goose.

My dad, my uncle and aunt, and my grandpa hunted together. My aunt couldn't always go and there were days my grandpa stayed home. When I was ten my dad asked me to fill in when this happened. I was thrilled to be included in that elite group. I soon became aware of my low position. I was one step above the dogs only because I could talk. On second thought, that might not be true. Our dogs were wonderful.

When we were hunting ducks and geese the dogs almost always found the fallen bird and brought it back. We had dogs that would break the ice with their chests as they swam through frozen sloughs to retrieve. Watching how hard they worked made sitting motionless in the cold, wet reeds almost worthwhile.

When we were hunting upland game we would walk parallel across a stubble field. The dogs worked that field by zig-zagging in front of us searching for birds. As they weaved back and forth it resembled a beautiful, synchronized dance. This scene is one of my favorite memories.

Hunting in shelterbelts was a different story. These rows of planted trees were well established by this time. There were vines and numerous forms of undergrowth which made it difficult to walk between the tree rows. The shooters would walk on the outer edges, one on each side. Another shooter would be posting at the end. Someone (guess who) had to walk right through the middle, forcing the birds from their hiding places.

One afternoon we were hunting in a shelterbelt that was heavily congested with clinging green weeds. I was walking down the middle. I tripped a couple of times and skinned my hands and knee. About halfway through, a branch got caught in my hair and cut the edge of my eye. I was scraped, dirty, and now bloody. My frustration turned quickly to anger. When I reached the end I was a total wreck and not a pretty sight. I made matters worse by bawling my head off and screaming at the top of my lungs. I yelled at my family and told them I would no longer be one of the dogs. If I couldn't be a shooter I never wanted to hunt with them again.

My dad was a man of few words. He handed me his handkerchief and told me to get in the car. He never said another word. I was convinced that I'd be getting a lecture on my bad behavior, so I didn't strike up a conversation.

We passed the turn that would take us home and I was more than a little nervous. We arrived at the next town and parked at the Gambles store. Dad went to look over the selection of guns. He chose a Winchester twenty gauge double barreled shotgun and handed it to me. So, for a brief time, I was a hunter.

The benefits began that same evening. When we had finished eating, Dad said I wouldn't be helping in the kitchen cleanup. He was taking me out to shoot clay pigeons. Before shooting I got my first lesson in gun safety. Dad had a hand thrower. He only threw five targets each night. It didn't take very long but I got out of doing dishes for a few months.

That summer we spent a lot of Sunday afternoons at the County Gun Club. There was baseball all day long. Each little town had their own team. There were horseshoes, volleyball, and lots of open space to run

around in. Concessions were sold in the lodge but most families brought a picnic basket.

The main event every Sunday was the trap shooting. No matter how much fun we were having, we always took some time to watch. Everyone knew who the best shooters were. When they lined up together at the five stations it became the focal point of the day. Breaking all twenty-five targets was not unusual for these guys. It wasn't too difficult to keep track of their missed shots.

Finally it was hunting season. My status had greatly improved. I was given the best position for a chance at the first shot. They taught me to hunt and so much more.

Safety first was the golden rule. I learned to be aware of my surroundings. You always had to know the exact location of each person in your hunting party. It was important to scan the horizon periodically for buildings and other obstructions that could end up in your line of fire. I learned to respect Mother Nature. I enjoyed the beauty of the outdoors but was cautioned to be prepared for hidden dangers. I became part of the team. I knew I could depend on all of them and I had to prove that they could depend on me. Each time I shot a bird, everyone was so happy. It was a great time for us to bond. I felt very special and secure.

There weren't many pheasants in our area at that time. At least once a season we took a weekend to Southern North Dakota. If we left at midnight we would reach our destination in time to shoot. Arrangements had been made with local farmers who gave us permission to hunt on their land. They had lots of pheasants. We brought sacks of potatoes as a thank you.

These were wonderful adventures for me. Dining out was rarely done in our family. To eat out for a whole weekend was quite a treat. The adults ordered big thick steaks. Hamburgers, fries, and chocolate malts were my idea of culinary heaven. Staying in a hotel was a great experience and the hunting was good. I wondered if Mother knew how much money was being spent.

As I entered my teens I realized I had no social life. I mulled this around for a while and then had a talk with my mother. I told her that I didn't want to hunt any more. I just wanted to stay home and be a girl. She was thrilled.

That night at the dinner table I told Dad that I wouldn't be hunting on the weekend. I added that one of my friends had permission to use the family car. She was taking a group of girls to see an Elvis Presley movie. I watched his heart break as total disbelief covered his face. He didn't say a word, he just nodded. My heart was breaking too, but I knew I had done the right thing. He and Mother were talking in the kitchen later and I knew she had smoothed the edges for me.

We never discussed my decision but Dad let me know in subtle ways that he understood and things were all right between us. My baby brother was now old enough to start hunting. This was a big factor in my decision. This is what my dad had actually been waiting for these past years.

Immediately I became a non-hunter. Now I had the opportunity to bond with my mother and sisters. We would send the hunters on their way and take the day off. We went shopping or visiting or maybe just stayed home. Years later, when we were all grown up and married, the four of us would take an over- night or a long weekend. We did this once a year. We had one rule – no kids, no men, and no dogs! We never went far but we seemed to need that time together. I think this stemmed from our special days during hunting season.

I kept my gun for a long time. It held so many memories foe me. Both my sons learned to shoot with that gun. I know they learned valuable life lessons as well as hunting skills because my dad was their teacher. Good sportsmanship applies to all areas of your life as does responsibility.

I finally parted with my gun when I was in my sixties. I sold it to a friend who wanted it for his gun collection. Winchester quit making that model and the value had increased. His grandchildren were old enough to start hunting. He wanted to use my gun to teach them to shoot. I couldn't think of a better place for it to go.

INVITATION TO A CELEBRITY

by Michael Laliberte

Among the clutter I pulled from my mailbox some years ago was a greeting card from country music superstar Trisha Yearwood's mom.

Earlier that summer I'd had the good fortune to get a back stage pass at WeFest, the annual country music festival in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. I was working for a Fargo TV station in a support role, and that pass also gave me access to the performers, if it was possible to break through the clumps of people who usually enveloped them.

I was by Yearwood's trailer when a murmur rose among us loiterers that she was on her way over. She passed by, flanked by a couple layers of cameras, reporters and hangers-on who followed her into the RV for pre-concert interviews. With time to kill, I hung around outside, in a good, central spot for celebrity watching. Also remaining just outside the trailer was Trisha's personal assistant; a smart, confident and personable young woman with whom I made small talk.

Introductions were made and shop was talked, but mostly we visited as strangers about the things that identify who we are and how we ended up there. We had a lovely chat for about twenty minutes before another national act took the stage and I wanted to get a closer look. I thanked her for the company and we exchanged business cards.

That evening Yearwood gave a stunning performance that went beyond country hits and into an exhibition of raw jazz, blues and improvisational talent. The evening weather turned despicable, with cold temps and plenty of wind to drive a steady drizzle straight into the stage, which didn't seem to faze her as much as it did the audience. The closing act, Ray Charles, even called it quits after three songs.

I always get the feeling that artists who have to perform outdoor concerts up here during inclement weather go away with an unfair negative opinion of our home. Like I want to tell them, "No, really, this is a good place. Come back again, you'll see."

Later, I thought about the effort it must take night after night on a national tour to maintain the kind of musical passion Yearwood presented, when the common roadie ballad describes how the towns, the crowds, the countryside and hotels all start looking the same. What chances do high-demand performers have to stop and smell the prairie grass? So later that autumn, I wrote her a letter inviting her to do just that.

In my mind I saw the sunset I watched near Bismarck during one of my quests out west when I pulled off I-94 to take pictures of the inspiring view. In the spirit of that vision, I invited Yearwood to stop her tour bus at some random spot on her next time through North Dakota and see what the rest of us see on the finest days the prairies give us.

It was fall when I wrote to her, which seems always a season of contemplation. I told her fall is not just a change in the year but a visual, if not fully sensuous symbol of the passage of time.

The wind blows down my neck, I wrote, and becomes harder to face straight on while the canopy of colors flies with the birds and scatters in pattering herds before it settles down to wait for the snow. The grey, windy and sometimes wet days make more valuable those autumn reprieves when the sun is bright and warm, the air is cool, moderate and perfectly calm and you can hear every leaf crackle under your step.

Those rare days when you can hear any sound for miles around are the days I used to skip school. It meant more to me than education to drive to the country or the lake, to sit silently and smell, watch and listen to the natural living world slow to a wintry stop.

Sometimes I visit rural cemeteries, I told her. “The town underground,” an old man once told me. I sweep away from the rock block banners the damp, cool cover of the trees’ debris, subtract the B date from the D date and feel the man, woman or child come alive; the autumns they saw, the winter preparations they made, the places they played, the harvests and Thanksgivings they celebrated, the pumpkins they picked and the fleeting fear they felt in their darkest individual autumns.

To stand at their last resting place in the silence of the country is to feel their eternal lives and hear their stories in every creak of a branch, crunch of dry grass and peep of a distant bird. For that moment, when everyone else has long forgotten, they are in my thoughts.

Another autumn of chill to my cheeks marks my age as true as any birthday.

The inviting warmth of the northern plains is not exclusive to those who have rooted here. Though you are known to many, I added in my note to Trisha, the North Dakota prairies wish to be known to you.

When I finished my message, I didn't really know what to do with it because, to be honest, I wasn't really a country music fan and I didn't really know much about Yearwood's songs outside of maybe one hit. It felt strange to address a letter to a celebrity, but I convinced myself that there's no harm and I doubt I would regret it.

With only the business card of a stranger for a contact, I sent forth my little discourse. Is it a snub to send a letter to the personal assistant of a celebrity with a message that is pretty much saying, "Not for you"? Despite my initial innocent considerations, I was feeling a little remorse. That poor young woman who has to travel the country keeping track of the number of grapes in a celebrity's fruit bowl and laundering her underwear was being used as a vehicle for some Fargo hick to reach her famous boss.

A couple of months passed, long enough for me to mostly forget I'd sent it, when a greeting card arrived with only my address on the front along with a flowing graphic that simply said Trisha Yearwood.

The handwritten note inside read, "How beautifully you express yourself. Your letter and lovely card will be passed on to Trisha. Thanks, Gwen Yearwood (Mom)."

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

by Kenan Stoltenow

I used to love toothbrushes. I would carry one in each hand everywhere I went. Sometimes, I would put a third one in my mouth, just for good measure. I have an old photo of me and my brother sitting at the piano bench. My brother is older, perhaps nine or ten in the photo, and I am barely big enough to sit up by myself. He is practicing his lesson while I am sitting at the upper registers, innocently banging away at random notes with, you guessed it, a toothbrush in each hand, a third hanging from of my mouth. I can remember trying to play what he played; I also made up my own melodies, not fully realizing what I was doing. Perhaps this was just the workings of a curious child at the keyboard, but I firmly believe this was the voice of music within me trying to escape.

As soon as knew the word "piano", I would not stop begging my mother to throw me in private lessons. But we lived so far from the city and my family could not afford the money nor the time to drive back and forth. It wasn't until we moved to Moorhead, in first grade, that my mother finally relented and shoved me in my first piano lesson. I was instantly hooked. I practiced my lessons constantly, slaving away at "Hot Crossed Buns" until I could play it perfectly with ease. I remember putting on my older brothers' tails and flinging them behind me before regaling my family with "Come See the Parade" for the fiftieth time that day. By the time I was in middle school I was playing original piano works by Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Joplin, and even Gershwin. I had also taken up my second instrument, the double bass, and started audition for orchestras in the Fargo-Moorhead area as well as greater Minnesota. I had developed a relationship with music I was unable to comprehend. Music had become an extension of my personality, a vital part of my identity. Yet, I was still unable to appreciate music to its full potential, and like the time old saying goes, "you never realize how good something is until it is gone."

By the time I was out of middle school, my life was amazing. But then high school happened, as it does to almost every American. But my high school experience was hell. I had been homeschooled up to this point, so transitioning to high school was a bucket of ice water to the face. I found out that not everyone in the world was like my family *gasp* and that I could not go to the bathroom whenever I needed to, even if it meant I would wet my pants (true story). But that's small potatoes. High school was difficult because it showed me that my greatest asset, my musical ability, would become my greatest hindrance. Right off the bat, I knew I wanted to be a part of the musical theatre clique. So, come sophomore year, I auditioned for the show and got the largest role of anyone in my grade. This did not bode well for the kids in the theatre clique. No one told me that in order to be liked in a group I had to work my way up from the bottom; under no circumstances was I allowed to be good right off. This led to a lot of inner turmoil because I didn't want to downplay my musical ability, but in the same light, I wanted so badly to be accepted by this group of people. Music was the way I communicated, whether that be through piano, bass, or singing, and the people in the program just couldn't speak my language. However, after a lot of misguided thought, I caved. If they wanted someone who was less talented than them, I would dumb myself down. I quit the piano after ten years and kept my involvement with orchestra on the down-low. I let them control me; my thoughts, my talents, who I talked to. They were happy, but I was miserable. I had given up the most important part of me. I felt like a foreigner who was forced to abandon their native language to appease the masses. I could not put my finger on it, but an imperative component of who I was and how I communicated was lost. And this went on for two full years.

Quick recap of my mental state before my so called "awakening". I had the most controlling, awful friends imaginable and I was trapped in a very unhealthy relationship that resulted in many sleepless nights. As one can imagine, I was feeling pretty down about life. And when I say down, I mean I somedays were so bad all I could do was lay in bed and stare at the ceiling. Life was not good. 'Twas the first week of August 2016, things were hot and humid, and I was contemplating

whether to go to the All-State orchestra camp that was taking place the following week or not. Normally, I would jump at an opportunity like this, but emo me was actually thinking about not going. My mom had already paid the fees and I was signed up to go, but my girlfriend at the time would not allow me to leave her for a whole week. We had a particularly heated discussion where she said things like, "I will not be able to function without you while you're gone," and, "if you come back and I killed myself, it's because you left me." Dramatic brat. I tried explaining to her that orchestra was the last piece of music I had in my life, and that missing this would be the final nail in the coffin. She refused to see it my way, leaving me with an impossible decision: go to music camp and risk losing my girlfriend (a tragedy at the time), or, stay home from music camp and lose the last shred of life I had. However, even Beelzebub has his good days. Two days before departure, my girlfriend finally gave me the okay to leave. However, she demanded that I call her as much as possible and text her back within ten minutes "or else". Too bad the cell service at the camp was horrid, so a lot of our calls "lost connection" and ALL my text messages were "dropped." I admit, that was a rather crappy thing for me to do, but I wouldn't trade a second of it, not for free college tuition.

I guess you could call it an epiphany, or a sign from the gods, but I can remember my "wakeup call" like it was yesterday. When I arrived at camp that day, I felt completely and utterly terrified. I felt like my brain was going to fall out of my butt. I did not know anyone. I did not know where I was. My parents made me drive all the way there BY MYSELF. And I barely even knew the music we were going to play that week. Add on top of that a twenty-five-pound instrument and ninety-degree heat. I was one unhappy camper. But something still made me walk inside the concert hall. After finding my seat on the back-left section of the stage, I began to warm up. Rosining my bow, tuning my strings, practicing my runs; it all felt like second nature, helping to relieve some of the stress I had in coming. The notes from my bass floated across the room, bouncing off instruments, musicians, the walls; it was like I was laying invisible lines of poetry that I thought only I could read. Little did I know, I was no longer invisible. As the conductor stood on the podium, everything fell silent. He announced,

“We will be starting with ‘Overture to Candide’.” Papers rustled as he held his baton, waiting for the musicians to get ready. With a crash of sound from the bass drum and the opening fanfare ringing from the brass section, the conversation started. A whirlwind of ideas flowing from the brass to the upper strings, from the woodwinds to the low-strings. It was all too much. Although I had played in countless orchestras before this, my senses were overloaded. It wasn’t the volume that was so overwhelming, but the fact that I could hear the other musicians talking. They were speaking my language. I was shaken. So many feelings, so many ideas, so many stories, all being communicated in a way I understood. For the first time, I was not the only one talking or listening. I didn’t have to hide my musical ability anymore to fit in. I didn’t have to pretend to be someone else. I finally had a group of people who not only heard me but pushed me to become more fluent in a language I didn’t even know existed. The soundwaves mended me, penetrating deep inside my brain with their gnarly vibrations and pulling me out of my depressed stupor. Everything came crashing back to me at once. A new-found confidence manifested itself within me, bringing back my love for music, my happiness, and most importantly, my personality. The music enveloped my soul and my heart, healing all that was broken and finding all that was lost. I had found my voice again. I could finally talk, yell, scream and be heard. It was the best therapy of all. It took five days straight of ten-hour rehearsals to fix me; and to this day, I credit All-State with saving my life.

People often ask me what it’s like to understand music as a “second language”. This question is a very difficult one to try and answer, primarily because music in it of itself is a way to communicate emotions that cannot be put into words. How does one verbally describe something that transcends common language? This is the question that has plagued me when trying to answer the former. However, I will do my best to explain. Much like different languages, music has words that English does not. But these aren’t words in the traditional sense, they are words in their purest form. The “words” in music are ideas without the corruption of being confined to a simple arrangement of consonants and vowels. Lust, delight, anger, astonishment, fear, passion; a full variety of feelings and ideas derived from the five ledger lines and

thirteen notes. Music is a language that everyone hears but not many can truly understand. Intertwining harmonies and melodies, rhythms and chords, create thoughts and emotions that are not so easily transmitted through spoken language. These "words" transmitted through music are complex beyond comparison, yet they are communicated with an efficiency that is unparallel. Speaking the language of music is like telepathic communication: ideas flow freely between minds.

After attending music camp and realizing how awful I let my life get, I decided to turn things around as soon as I got home. I dumped my girlfriend the day after I got back. I also stopped letting my friends take advantage of me. They ended up hating me and trying everything in their power to sabotage my high school career, but I refused to let that bother me. I had a network of friends who I could actually count on. My All-State friends accepted me for everything I was, and they would always be behind me no matter how far away we were. I had a full orchestra backing me up, and how many people can say that? It's hard to put into words what almost losing your life feels like, but in hindsight, a quote comes to mind: "Your life begins the day it almost ended." I am unsure who said that first, but All-State made me realize how precious life is, and taught me to never lose my voice again. From that day on, I started living every day with a newfound confidence I did not know was possible. I vowed to always try my best to be my best. Although the journey has been far from perfect, it is far from over. It hurts to think about my past childhood, and the loss of innocence that comes with age. I can't tell you how many times in high school I wished I could go back in time to when all I had to worry about was where I was going to hide my toothbrushes. But thanks to music, I am no longer afraid of the future. My life is a symphony, full of movements conveying a roller-coaster of pulsating emotions. But, amid a vortex of soundwaves, one thing is for sure:

the best is yet to come.

WORDS AND I

by Alyssa Svidersky

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disclaimer: this paper was written without spellcheck

I can't spell. Plain and simple, words and I don't agree. There is just no order in it. I understand math, there are rules, and only one right answer. Words are different. You can try to ~~rite~~, ~~right~~, ~~wright~~, write words and there's no ~~rime~~, ~~riem~~, ~~ryem~~, rhyme, or reason. My story with spelling is not one of overcoming, but more of acceptence. For me, it's always been a shot in the dark. Close your eyes and slam your fingers againt the keys, for all I know you might be right.

When I first started writing it wasn't a very big deal. I wasn't alone in my bad spelling. But as I grew up I slowly realised my friends could spell all these words and I was left in the dust. I stopped volenteering to be the writter in the group, I dredded having to write on the board, and I learned to always turn on spell check. My mom started to notice that I still wasn't grasping it. I was doing great in every other subject, but my spelling tests were points of humiliation. She tried to work with me on my spelling, but things just didn't click.

In 5th grade, the class was split in two for spelling tests: some people got the normal one, and the more advanced students got the harder one. Lila sat across from me, Lila was smart, Lila always had a Harry Potter book on her desk, Lila got the harder spelling test. I remember very vividly, sitting with that dredded yellow spelling test, and the teacher asked us to spell 'finally.' I panicked. Finally? Finaly? How many 'l's were there?? My mind came up blank. In a moment of desperation, I peeked up at Lila. She was just sitting there reading a book, waiting for her harder test. I glanced at the book she was reading, *Finally 12*. No, no way. This couldn't be. The universe does not line up like this for me. I paniked. Was this cheating? I don't cheat, I've never cheated. Do I take this help from the universe? I slowly wrote it down on the yellow paper, and right then and there I promised myself I would never, ever, forget how many 'l's there are in 'finally,' and I've stayed true to that.

After 5th grade, I'm happy to say we had no more spelling tests. Everything now had to be typed, and thank goodness for auto correct. But it still didn't help the everyday writing. It's hard to think of specific events because this is just how my life is. I don't know how to spell anything, ever.

In middle school, the song *Fergilicious* became popular. Everyone knew it, everyone loved it. Although it wasn't my favorite kind of music, I still enjoyed it. Most of it. Everyone knows there's that one-dredded- part in the song where they start spelling. That's when I tap out. To this day I have to just mouth random letters when Fergie starts spelling out 'delicious'. I can never get it. Recently another big hit came out by Marshmellow & Anne-Marie called *FRIENDS*, and yet again, they thought it was a good idea to mix spelling and music. While 'friends' is easier to spell than delicious, I still did not appreciate it. These situations were easy to cover up, but it was the everyday things that always brought the most embarassment.

Senior year I started working at an ice cream shop with some pretty unique flavors. Everyonce in a while, we have to make new flavor signs for the ice cream, and this always makes me panic. Most of the time the flavors were on the board and I could just copy them. Except this one time.

"Hey, could you go grab a tub of Cantaloupe from the back?"

"Sure!" I respond eagerly.

"Oh, and make a sign for it, we don't have it up on the board."

"…." I freeze. I'm standing there, pen in my hand, heart beeting fast, sweat starting to wrinkle the paper under me hand, and I'm waiting. I search the blank dictionary in my head, buying time. I do the casul, glance around the room-like anyone walks around with the word 'canteloupe' printed on their forehead- but again come up blank. At this point my boss has noticed my hesitation and asks if I need help spelling it. I had to answer, mortified, with a "yes." Me, a 17-year-old, who's first and only language is english, can't spell cantaloupe.

A similar incident happened at my other job. During lunch time, the coffee shop serves soup, and it's different every day, so we have a sign.

Essays

Last week my manager handed me the sign and told me to write ‘Beef Noodle’ and my heart stopped. My hands started sweating, and I went into panic mood. Was it ‘noodle’ or ‘noodel’ they both sounded right. I took my best guess and slowly wrote ‘noodle.’ I quickly put up the sign before my manager could see it, and then once my shift was done, I jumped on google to see if I had made a fool of myself. I had not. *sight of relief* These are the most embarassing incadents because they’re the words I should know, they’re the ones people just expect you to know, so you can’t ask.

One of the worst situations is when a child asks you how to spell something. It’s no longer a teacher, or a yellow spelling test, or a friend, but instead a small child. At what point does it become socialy unacceptable for you to ask for spelling help, and instead, you become the adult that’s supposed to be all-knowing. Now I have kids ask me to spell something and my stomach drops. They are relying on me for knowledge that I don’t have. It’s my responsibility to make sure they don’t turn out like me, I can’t currupt them.

These are just a few memories that stand out, it’s more of a constant presence. I’m always on the edge of panicing, always terrified someone might ask me to spell something; so, at any moment, my flight mode is ready. At this point, I have accepted that this is how my life will be. I will never be confident drawing a poster without google pulled up on my phone. I can’t write hand written letters. And I will raise my children with a dictionary at my side. All I can say is thank goodness I was born during the time of spell ~~chee~~, ~~czech~~, ~~chekk~~, check.

A SURPRISE ENDING

by Van Tran

Score!!! The result was 7-1, and we were the winners of the basketball game. I was so excited and could not wait to share on social media. When I got back from the game, I was sweating as I looked for my phone inside my backpack. I had eleven missed calls from Mom. This was definitely not a good sign. In my mind, I could predict a thousand storms that were now about to start. Did she know that I skipped classes? Or maybe she knew that I had bad grades in chemistry? For sure, I was going to have a lecture about not answering her call. I calmed myself and called her back. *"Tại sao con không nhấc máy điện thoại của mẹ?*[1]*"* She asked with a bit of anger in her voice.

"Sorry mom, I was playing so I did not know," I quietly whispered.

"I need to tell you something," she continued, "As soon as you graduate middle school, we will take off and go to grandmas. You will go to high school there." What? I was going to my grandma's? She had been living in the United States since for as long as I could remember. We barely saw her. I remembered I had met her only three times since I was born, only because she came back to Vietnam and visited us. After talking to my mom, I was left in confusion. What was I going to do in the United States, when I was not even fluent in English? What about my friends here? What would happen if I had to learn everything in a new language?

I decided to share 'the news' with my best friend first. When I told her, she could not hold back her feelings; she burst into tears and kept hugging me. I had to admit, I felt extremely devastated inside, as well as a bit frustrated. I did not plan for any of this. I felt like things were so out of control and I couldn't do anything about it. *"Khóc lóc cái gì! Thời đại này rồi, 2017 mà còn không biết dùng FaceTime với Snapchat à?*[2]*"* she asked me. I just smiled at her.

I went back home, tired from all of the emotion. My sister had just flown back from Ho Chi Minh City with the paperwork for my mom, my sister, and I to take off to the United States. At that moment, finally confirmed it was not a dream. As I was sitting in the kitchen, I caught my dad's eyes. He seemed to have some conflicted feelings. He did not want us to go, but he did want a better future for me and my sister. My dad worked for the government, so he could not go to the United States. I loved my dad. "I bet you would miss my professional back massage, right?" I teased.

"Bố nghĩ bố sẽ nhớ nhiều hơn thế đấy,[3]" he answered, trying to hold back his feelings.

Later that night, my mom told me to pack things for the long journey ahead. When I was packing, I realized that there were a lot of memorable things that I could not carry away with me. There was the first horror book I bought and the stuffed animals I used to sleep with every night. I was pretty sure that my cat knew that I was going somewhere. He sat in a small corner inside the suitcase and looked at me like he was wondering if he could come with. It actually broke my heart. I knew I was going to miss him a lot. *"Mình sẽ ở bang nào ạ?[4]"* I asked my mom with curiosity.

"North Dakota," my mom said with the Vietnamese accent.

"Why? I have never heard of that state. Why don't we live in a big city like Chicago or New York?" I asked with confusion.

"Because our family is living in Fargo, North Dakota. I want you to live with them, they can take care of you," she responded. I did not know where Fargo or North Dakota was. I quickly grabbed my phone and Googled "Fargo" and all I saw were pictures of snow. Was that a city or was that the North Pole?

My last day in Vietnam was March 16th, 2016. There were tears, but also blessings. Our first long flight to the other side of the world lasted about 32 hours. My back hurt because we could not lie down. After a layover in Tokyo, Japan, my first destination in the United States was Chicago, Illinois. The paperwork at the Custom and Border

Protection booth was complicated, and our English was not good enough to understand what the people were talking about.

Eventually, we got to Fargo. My aunts and uncles were waiting for us at the airport. When I got out, they were approaching us and waving at me. “You look a lot taller than last time I saw you,” one of my aunts said.

“And prettier,” my another said. I blushed and smiled. They helped me load my luggage into the car and drove me to my grandma’s house. They arranged a small room for us at my grandma’s. That was to be our new home.

The day after I arrived in Fargo, it was snowing. This was the first time I saw snow in real life, so I was super excited. The temperature fell below fifteen degrees. In Vietnam, the lowest temperature in winter was forty-one degrees. My body had not adapted to the cold, so we decided to stay home. My aunts and uncles came to visit us and gave us many warm clothes, they also made us some food. When the weather was warmer, we went outside with my aunt. That day, I had to wear a lot of layers like a sweatshirt, boots, a scarf, gloves. I looked like someone who lived in the North Pole. However, everyone else I saw was just wearing T-shirts and shorts. I was wondering how they survived in this weather by wearing things like that. I would normally wear those things on a sunny summer day in Vietnam.

My aunt took us to Target, Walmart, and the West Acres mall. The first time I went to Target, I knew I would soon be addicted to it. I liked the way things were organized, and they offered many different things. When I walked in the store, all I saw was red. The longer I looked, the more curious I got. Why was everything red? The first area I went to was the clothing department. I loved how they organized all the clothes, they were color coded and had put together cute outifts on the fake people. The second area I went to was the food department. I loved how orderly everything was. When I started to look around the store more, I noticed that some stuff had yellow price tags that showed a price that was even lower than the display! I couldn’t believe how cheap things were. One of the best things I found out later, was that you can use an

app to get even more of a discount. I decided that one of the best things about America is Target.

I soon started school and attended high school as a sophomore and soon adjusted to life in a new place. I was kind of nervous and kind of worried because the system of how the school worked was very different from where I came from. Though, it was fine because everything seemed exactly like in Hollywood movies. I had my own locker to store all my personal things and all of the textbooks from my classes. Students were not allowed to bring backpacks to classes. In Vietnam, we were allowed to bring our backpacks to every class. Another difference was that I did not have to wear a uniform at my new school in America. In Vietnam, all of the students had uniforms and I really liked it because I never had to decide what to wear each day. One thing that I was worried about was how the other students would treat me. I was so scared because in Hollywood movies they are bullies and I was worried that I was going to be bullied because I was different, and I do not speak English well, but I was not. Everyone was really nice.

At first, I felt very lonely and sad in Fargo because there were not a lot of Vietnamese people, probably because it was too cold for them. Things got better for me when I made more friends. I started gaining more confidence and talked to more people. That helped me learn more English and it also helped me to make friends. They showed me new things about their culture. I met new friends and joined some clubs too. It turned out that the 'North Pole' is not such a bad place to live.

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Vietnamese Translations

[1] "Why did you not pick up my call?"

[2] "Why are you crying! It is 2017, don't you know how to use FaceTime or Snapchat?"

[3] "In which state are we going to live in?"

[4] "I bet I will miss more than that."

SHORT STORIES

A CHATAH CREATION MYTH

by Anthony Albright

There were two siblings, of one Chatah people, a boy and a girl. These were named Chickasaw and Choctaw. They wanted to remain together in the West, but they were hungry and could not feed all their people. The berries would not sate. The camas grew shabby. It was resolved that they should go to the East and search for food. Chickasaw, the boy, stayed in the West longer and looked to the Great River for food. Choctaw, the girl, took the holy relic, the Iti Fabussa, and left for the East. Each night she would place the relic in the ground. In the morning, she would go in the direction that it leaned. Choctaw followed the Iti Fabussa to a place where tall grasses grow.

Back in the West, Chickasaw saw wolves eating along the river. He transformed into a wolf and looked along the river bank for food. He saw there two women collecting drift wood in the Great River. The women saw him and the older of the two looked to the younger, saying, "That wolf will eat us if we stay. We should go home and be safe," but the younger of the two convinced her to stay, saying, "It is cold at home. We need to collect wood for the fire so that we can cook our fish." The older of the two relented and agreed to remain there until they had collected enough wood for the fire.

Chickasaw heard their conversation and knew that he could not approach them as a wolf and so he transformed into a baby and floated down the river on the side of the two women. The younger woman pointed at the baby floating down the river and said, "We must save this baby. It has washed downstream from the crossing and its parents will be looking for it." The older woman said, "That is not a baby, but a wolf. He will eat us if we take him home." The younger woman said, "A baby cannot be a wolf, any more than we can make a fire without wood." The baby floated toward the women and the younger one plucked it out of the river. "We have enough wood now," she said. The two women went home to their cabin and began to make a fire.

Chickasaw remembered that the women said they had fish. He did not know what fish was, but remembered they would cook it, so he thought he should find out. He cried out but the women did not understand his language. Soon the women grew frustrated with Chickasaw's crying, and placed a cold fish tail in his mouth. Chickasaw savored the fatty tail and allowed himself to pass off to sleep. The women were happy to hear that the baby had stopped crying and went out of the cabin to collect more wood.

While Choctaw was journeying to the East and following the Iti Fabussa, she came across a beautiful sunrise over a yellow plain. When the light of the morning came over the yellow plain, it seemed the grass was on fire. One such morning when the plain was alight in a fiery glow, a woman appeared before Choctaw. Choctaw asked the woman, "Can you help me feed my people?" The woman replied, "Follow me until there is no shadow and then wait for tomorrow. When I rise again, you shall have all the food you need."

Choctaw did as the woman instructed. She followed the light of the woman eastward across the plain until there was no more shadow. Here she camped and placed the Iti Fabussa in the ground. The next morning, the woman appeared again and gave Choctaw a handful of colorful seeds. "Place these with your brother's food in the ground and you shall have all the food you need for your people," she said. She continued, "Great green grasses will grow with golden hairs. These grasses will house your people and you can eat the fruit of them." Choctaw wondered, "What will we eat while we wait for Chickasaw to join us?" The woman said, "You shall be hungry a long time, but it will be worth it in the end. Whatever you do, though, you must not kill and eat the animals of this plain. They are for another people. Go where your Iti Fabussa tells you to stop and plant the seeds there." Choctaw thanked the woman but wondered how she would stop her people from eating the plentiful beasts of the plain.

Chickasaw awoke in the cabin and found that the two women were not there. He decided to go out and look for the source of the fish. He soon came across a lake and saw that the women had trapped all of the fish of the water there, with the lake only steps from the river. Chickasaw decided to take the fish, but he did not want to be selfish.

He found near the lake the three digging sticks that the women had used to dig the lake. He took these sticks and used them to dig away at the loose dirt between the lake and the river. When he did so, he found that there were eggs there in the lake. He took the eggs and some fish and then used the sticks to connect the lake to the river.

In this way, Chickasaw filled the Great River with fish from the lake. He also took with him the fish and the eggs, preserved in a simple bucket. He joined his people on the banks of the river and set out to meet up with Choctaw, following the trail his sister had blazed before him. The women of the lake returned to their cabin to see that the lake had been drained into the river. The older woman looked at the younger, saying, "You see? This wolf has robbed us." The younger woman replied, "No, he has restored the fish we robbed to the river. Now they belong to all the people of the Cowlitz."

Choctaw followed the Iti Fabussa along the plain until she came to a place where it stood tall overnight and did not lead her people in a new direction. Here she scavenged the area for food but found the terrain difficult. It was hard to find plants to eat. She remembered the beasts of the plain and decided to go back to the plain alone to kill one to feed her people. She found a large family of the great beasts and transformed into wolf. She snuck up on the family and attacked a smaller one of the beasts and butchered it for the meat. She could not carry the entire beast back and so, left the head, legs, and guts behind. As she went back to her people, the plain she left behind where the beast had died turned a little blacker. The beast was absorbed into the land and turned black because it was not made to become a part of some other creature. When Choctaw returned to where she had left her people, she found that they had killed creatures of the area and were already fed. The meat she brought back from the plain went mostly to spoil before it could be eaten.

Chickasaw made good time along Choctaw's trail. The two were reunited under a high sun. The days here were longer and warmer than they had been in their home in the West. Choctaw told Chickasaw of the lady and the seeds. Chickasaw gave Choctaw the fish and they placed the seeds inside the fish and planted them in the rich soil. Here there grew many long and tall stalks of green grasses. Chickasaw and

Choctaw called the grass maize and were happy as one Chatah people until one day, during the harvest, the woman of the plains came in the morning and spoke to Chickasaw. She said, “Your sister has killed a beast who belonged to another and has stolen from me. She also did not use all of the beast and therefore must die.” Chickasaw begged for the life of his sister. He asked the woman, “Please, will you spare my sister’s life?” The woman replied, “I will spare her life, but she will struggle to plant her seeds without your fish, for the land will not support you both. You must go to the north and settle there, as a separate family.” Chickasaw said that he would do as the woman asked.

Before Chickasaw left, he built a mound to commemorate the time that they spent together. Here the Chatah people became two, the Chickasaw to the North and the Choctaw to the South. While they both remember they are Chatah, the decisions they made have made them forever separate.

End

BONES

by Dakota Breen

I drive past a fifteen- foot metal cutout of a Tyrannosaurus Rex that stands on the south side of the road. A butte painted with different layers of sediment rises up from behind the cutout and to the right of it stands another metal sign reading Dinosaur Daze. Most wouldn't think this sparsely populated land in North Dakota had anything to offer besides an abundance of tumbleweeds and worn farmhouses, but the area known as the Hell Creek formation is a Paleontologist's goldmine. Every year the town holds a celebration to honor the resurrected bones.

I follow the highway around the butte. Crossing the short bridge that connects the town with the rest of state. I look down into the canyon carved by the river which is covered by snow and ice. If I didn't already know it was there, I wouldn't be able to tell there is a river down there at all. It's just a crack in the Earth waiting to swallow the whole town my mom calls home. I follow the river's path until it disappears from my view. The rugged landscape carved by the tiny river and time hides the rusted fossils. Thousands of tiny imprints of past life. About halfway across, I feel the urge to keep driving straight on into Montana where I'm supposed to eat Christmas dinner with my aunt.

"Do you plan on seeing your mother on your way through?" my grandma asked me earlier that day. Grandma sat in her usual spot at the kitchen table next to the phone. She had a bird glossary in front of her. She'd just identified the bird feeding in her yard as an Evening Grosbeak. She worked her wrinkled hand at peeling an orange.

"I think I should."

"Yeah, she called me two weeks ago. I couldn't understand a word she was saying. That damn place. I have no idea why she thought she could be sober and off meth while living there." Grandma is my dad's mom. She's the one who made sure we got up for school, had

something to eat, and a safe place to sleep when my mom wasn't there. Still, she always worries about my mom.

***

The first time my mom was in rehab I was six years old; my brother, Jason, was seven. My dad and mom were still together then and he, my brother, and I had driven three hours to pick my mom up from rehab. My dad was driving. My mom was in the front passenger seat. She took out an orange bottle the doctor gave her to help her sleep from her purse and popped six or seven pills into her mouth. Dad slammed on the breaks, "Dammit, you're just out of rehab. Your kids haven't seen you in a month."

He reached over and yanked the bottle out of her hand and chucked it out the window. White pills bounced all over the road--a visual memory that has always stuck with me. My mom yelled and slapped my dad before opening the car door and walking away from us. My dad drove off leaving my mom behind. Jason and I turned around in our seats and looked out the rear window. She looked up as we drove off and I could tell she was crying.

My dad took us to a hotel room where we stayed by ourselves. I don't know where my dad went. He came back hours later without our mom and smelling like beer. We kept ourselves busy while our parents were out by jumping from bed to bed in the hotel room hitting each other with pillows. Exhausted from laughing, we collapsed on the beds trying to catch our breath. In the absence of our laughter, my brother asked, "Do you think mom is coming home with us?"

I thought for a moment. I understood from a young age that having mom at home meant more fighting between her and dad. "I don't want her to come home."

Jason raised himself off the bed so he could look at me. Anger washed his face, but his eyes hinted at tears. He drew his arm up and punched me as hard as he could in the arm. "I hate you!" he said. We both started crying.

The next day my parents were officially separated. My mom left my brother and me with our dad and grandma. My brother took it harder than I did. I'd been able to see how much easier life was without her around. No more hoping that my parents wouldn't kill each other during a fight. No more wondering if she was going to wake up in the morning. No more worrying about where she was when she didn't come home for days. We heard from her a handful of times by phone each year when she'd been drinking or on those rare occasions when she had a stable life and my brother and I could visit her. She spoiled us with food, clothes, and money as a bribe to make up for everything else. She always had a different boyfriend. All of them had shoulder length hair in varying colors, teeth that told they hadn't been to the dentist in awhile, and a wardrobe they'd owned since the late seventies and early eighties. Each of them was nice in their own way. They'd buy us candy, take us fishing, and try not to push my mom around too much when we watched their drunken fights.

The last time I saw my mom was in September. My brother drove seven hours from college where we both attended to get her. A nurse called from a hospital saying they couldn't release her until someone signed a waiver agreeing to watch over her. My mom's boyfriend beat her again. She stayed with Jason and me for a week. She hid in my room for the first few days until the purple bruises on her face turned a dull yellow. When she finally emerged, she'd been off all the drugs for five days. She was suddenly a mom who lived for cooking and cleaning for her children. I'd seen this façade before and knew it would be over in a couple days. My mom was never a mom for more than a couple of days. Still, she decided on her own that she wanted me to take her to rehab so she couldn't check herself out.

The clinic was located a almost 400 miles from where I lived, but only 100 from where my had just escaped her relationship. I skipped a day of classes to drive her there to save my brother from having to make another trip. Besides, it was one of my mom's good days. The morning we left I woke up to the smell of bacon. I went into the kitchen to find my mom with Jenn, my brother's girlfriend of two months. They were talking at the table over a buffet of breakfast foods. My mom wore a purple blouse and jeans on her tiny frame and looked the part of a

normal mother. The only off characteristics were her missing top teeth and her looking way older than any 45-year-old woman should. My mom stood up when she saw me and asked, “Hey honey, how do you like your eggs?”

“I don’t like eggs.”

“Since when?”

“Since forever. I’ll take some of that bacon though.”

She grabbed an empty plate and loaded it with bacon and French toast. “Syrup and butter are here on the table,” she said as she handed me the plate.

“Thanks. You’re going to be ready to leave in forty minutes?” I asked. I put a glob of butter on my French toast and covered it in syrup. I sat down next to Jenn and poured myself a glass of orange juice in the cup my mom put in front of me.

“Yes, I’ve got everything packed. I just need to clean up this mess before we leave. I was just telling Jenn how I might come back after rehab and rent an apartment here in town so I could be closer to you and Jason. What do you think?”

I chewed slowly. “Yeah, sure. That sounds great.”

“Then your mom can come over and cook for us all the time. She’s great,” Jenn said. I smiled at her while taking another bite of my French toast. This was the first time she’d met my mom. I knew that days like that day were rare.

It took us four hours to get to the rehab clinic from where I lived. My mom spent the whole trip talking about her plans for when she got out. She was going to find a place close to where Jason and I lived and stay with her two dogs. Her dogs were with her boyfriend and the first thing on her list was getting herself and those dogs away from him. Then she was going to get a job as a cook or a housemother at one of the local sororities. She was going to get some counseling, too. I nodded at the appropriate times and added the occasional “that sounds great” or “good idea” when it was needed.

I pulled up to the clinic and helped my mom carry in her two large, black garbage bags filled with all of her belongings. From the time I could remember, she had always made her move from one place to the next like that. With only what she could carry on her at the time.

I helped her fill out all the paperwork that the lady behind the glass window gave us. I noticed my mom only put alcohol down as her addiction. When a nurse came to take her to her room, we hugged. My mom cried a little and handed me a card with the words "Thank You" written on the front. She told me to read it after I left. I read it as soon as I got to my car. I wanted to feel something as I read the words on the card, but I couldn't. I'd heard them before.

> *Hannah,*
>
> *I know I don't deserve forgiveness from you or your brother. I appreciate all that you've done for me this past week. I'm so proud of you and all that you've accomplished by going to college. You're a beautiful young woman and all your good qualities you have in spite of having me as a mother. I know you will always have the strength to overcome the bad things in your life. Always keep a smile on your face and a twinkle in your eye.*
>
> *- Love Mom*

For the thirty days my mom was in rehab, we talked every other day. Three days after she got out she relapsed and moved back in with her abusive boyfriend. I didn't hear from her for two months. A week ago she called me while I was sleeping at three-thirty in the morning. "Yeah, I'm just calling to let you know I'm alive, but I had to call from a friend's phone because they have my phone tapped," she explains.

"Tapped? Who's they and why do they have your phone tapped?"

"I think my neighbor is working for the DEA. They are trying to come down hard here, so don't call my home phone for awhile."

"I'm not trying to make a drug deal with you, mom."

"Just don't call the house, okay?"

“Okay. I’m coming home over Christmas so I’ll probably stop by.”

“Alright, I got to go because I’m using Anne’s phone. Love you, bye.”

“You too.” Click.

****

On the other side of the bridge, I take the first left. It’s paved in gravel like all the roads in the small, rural town besides the highway. Most people just pass through. All the houses look like their occupants were long gone. The houses need new paint jobs. A lot of them are abandoned. Junk is piled up in all the yards. A large, black dog roams the alley nearest to me sniffing a snow-covered lawn mower then moves to a bike tire propped up against a garage. I plow my way through the snowdrifts in an alley in the center of the tiny town. I park my car next to Keystone Hornet camper my mom calls home.I knock and shrill barking greets me from behind the door along with a hollered, “Come in!”

I open the camper door and to find her two border collies jump up in my face barking. Behind them my mom sits at a makeshift table smoking a cigarette. “I was wondering if that was you.”

“Yeah, thought I’d come check out the loony bin,” I reply. I make my way past the dogs and my mother stands to hug me. I’m five-foot-three and I tower over her.

“You look damn good, honey. Have you lost some weight?”

“Yeah, a little.” My mom’s lost some weight too. Her face is gaunt and her skin clings to her cheekbones. Her bleached blond hair has two-inch black roots.

She walks over to the fridge. “You want something to drink? Coke? Orange juice?”

“I’m good.”

She grabs herself a coke and I sit down at the table. One of her dogs jumps up on me and I pet him as my mom sits down across from me. Not looking at my mom, I say, “You have a lot of people worried. I

thought I was going to find your body when I came here with the calls you made a couple weeks ago. Everyone has been trying to call you back and you haven't been answering."

I look up and make eye contact with her. She smiles, pulls a cigarette from the pack sitting on the table, and looks away briefly while she lights it. I notice all the nails on her hand are chewed off. After a couple drags, she says, "That last trip was a bad. Fuck. Shit makes you so paranoid it's almost not worth doing it."

"Why do you do it then?"

She takes a few more drags. "So I suppose you're heading to Montana to see your aunt? That's good, I'm sure she'll spoil you like usual."

"Yeah, she's cooking a roast with potatoes, carrots, and dinner rolls. I'm going to stay the night then head back to Dad's house tomorrow. Should I stop by again?" I ask. My mom looks around the camper at everything except for me.

"Sure, if you want. What time will you be by?"

"I don't know. It depends on when I wake up. Probably ten or eleven."

"Alright, sounds good," she says.

I spend the next twenty minutes telling my mom how my dad, Jason, and grandma all are. I appreciate that she doesn't tell me about her life. She knows I don't want to hear about it. She saves her stories for Jason who is still able to muster up some sympathy for her. She offers me some Vicodin and sleeping pills. I knew it was just another bribe. They'd changed from candy and clothes into money and drugs since I'd gotten older. I take them anyway.

The next twenty or so hours are spent at my aunt's who, just as expected, spoils me rotten. We spend hours catching up about college, life, and family. Time at my aunt's always leaves me feeling recharged. It isn't until the next morning as we hug and say our goodbyes that I start to feel nerves over going to see my mom again. She was okay yesterday. Maybe she would be again today.

I drive into the small town again at ten-thirty the next morning and stop at the camper. I knock, but don't hear an answer beyond the barking dogs. I open the door to find the dogs again, but my mom isn't there. The camper is a lot messier than it was the day before. The dogs have tipped over the garbage can and spread trash all over. A curtain hands diagonally by one end of its rod across a window. The remnants of a plate lie on the floor.

I wait around for twenty minutes before I take the rest of the Vicodin out of the bottle she left on the table and leave. I don't like to take pills myself, but I want to see if she'll notice they're gone. I doubt she will say anything. When I drive onto the bridge out of town, the black dog from yesterday is lying dead on the shoulder. There's a blood trail from the middle of the road to where it lies now. I slow down to a crawl thinking I should get out and see if it's still alive. Another look at its mangled body convinces me that I'm not going to be able to do anything to save it. I grip my steering wheel. I fight it, but a sob escapes my mouth. I'm still bawling as I drive past the metal T-Rex and leave the unburied bones behind.

LIONESS IN THE GRASS

by Brad Hall

Since the company announced this morning that they were laying off ten percent of us today, I opted not to start any projects for the moment. I'm biding my time until I find out if I still have a job by staring at the photo on the wall across from my desk. It focuses on a young gazelle drinking from a stream in the foreground, away from the herd grazing the African savannah in the distance. After looking at that picture seemingly a thousand times, I found the hidden beast only recently. Near the thirsty gazelle, almost completely concealed in the high grass, crouched a taut lioness ready to strike. Such a clever beast. Now I can't help but stare at her. I wonder if anyone else has seen her.

Maybe losing my job wouldn't be the worst that could happen. Work controls me, rather than the other way. The day-to-day drudge drains me of any inspiration and energy. None of us want to work here anymore, but I think we want to leave on our own terms. When the board announced last month they intended to explore measures to bring costs more inline with profits (or lack thereof), fangs came out. What is the first thing companies do in situations like this? Cull the weak, ineffective or just generally disliked personnel. Everyone shored themselves up, unwilling to give any reason to be one of the people to be severed.

Management distracted us after the announcement by changing up the space while they made the final decisions. They painted the walls brighter colors, laid new carpet, added plants to corners everywhere to create comfort. My team sits near the floor's kitchen where every Monday morning this past month, management stocked it with bagels; every Friday they stocked it with doughnuts. It assuaged that dread, gave us the impression that things improved already. Morale rose, tensions eased.

Some of us still saw through the trappings and waited for the something that still loomed. There's a jungle in here that hasn't left, just evolved. Employees morphed, becoming chattering mynah birds and

grumbling hippos. Every Monday, two men from the accounting department lounge near the bagels and bark like a pair of hyenas behind my cubicle wall. My own team became beasts of their own makings.

I call Victor the Vulture, the most tenured, as he sits on his perched desk near the entrance to our team's nine cubicles. His tall, thin body creeps away from his desk to ask for reports and updates but keeps a personal distance. He wears dark turtleneck sweaters but I wish that he would cover that bald, liver-spotted head more than his throat. His head swings upon his long neck as he looks this way and that while he walks. He cranes his head to look over our shoulders. The other team members don't realize what he is doing today. Victor has been through layoffs like this before. He waits close by as victims collect their personal artifacts before leaving for the last time. When they are gone, Victor settles upon their desks and picks the leftovers apart for the bones. Staplers, coffee cups, promotional trinkets, nothing is sacred. He looks at my desk over my shoulder; I can hear him breathing through that stuffed nose stretched off his face. He is taking silent inventory of my desk now, if I happen to be one of the selected. I turn around and stare him down. He smiles beneath that beaky nose and moves away.

Behind my desk, at the end of a worn trail in the carpet, Ian the Ground Squirrel and Donna the Grey Crowned Crane talk quietly about what needs to be taken and what needs to stay if either is severed. I can hear Ian's apprehensions rising. "If I go, please take this keyboard for me. I bought it and they might not let me take it," he says. He's survived most of the team replaced over time. The man pushes up his thick glasses and slumps forward as he talks. He keeps his hair clipped so low that it seems like felt. He brought six single-serve bags of chips that he opens and eats one after the other as he talks to Donna. His hands tremble in the bags. His oversized front teeth stick out, stained from the chips. He pauses to wipe his mouth. Donna just listens and coos sorrowfully.

Victor walks by slowly, looking at the bags of chips. Ian reflexively curls down upon them, clutching them close to his chest and waiting for Victor to go. Ian is neither predator nor much of a self-protector.

Donna waves Victor away. She starts talking when Ian stops. Her

high-pitched voice prattles along and moves from topic to topic. Next to Ian's earthy shades of attire, her bright plumage directs attention back to her always. The hair that she's tufted on top waves breezily over her brow.

More than any of them, I hope they fire Amy the Snake. She is a creature that cannot be explained. I feel Amy's eyes watching me as we wait. She wants them to fire me. She's angled for it since she arrived.

Amy joined the team four months ago. Day one, she smiled and exchanged polite small talk. Day two, she insisted upon setting up a desk around the corner, away from us, in some space where we'd stored file boxes up until she arrived. "I need more private space for my phone conferences," she said to our boss, Randy. Randy spends so little time with us, he agreed without thinking and tasked Ian and me to clear the space for Amy. Amy watched from a chair as we hauled away the boxes and set up the desk, demurring that she didn't know where to move things so she would just wait for us to move them. When we finished, she decorated her space with an assortment of business idiom and inspirational quote pictures to convey business wisdom more polished than ours. She arranged some of the larger potted plants across the front of her cubicle behind which she could hide. After day two, we rarely see her through the plants.

Her clothes, meant more for executive attire, are several cuts above what the rest of us wear. Rather than use the kitchen coffee maker, Amy brought a new one and eliminated one more reason to deal with any of us. Fully sequestered in her cubicle, we suspect that she works less on company business and more on ways to bolster herself and undermine her own team.

When someone breaches her space, Amy sits primly at her desk, legs folded beneath her chair, hands clutching a mug of tea that always seems freshly brewed. She smiles in the way that one does while choosing words most appropriate to rebuff the other. She seems impatient for anyone in her cubicle to finish what they need to say and leave her to her business.

Randy thinks she brings new energy and insights to the team. I tell him that Amy causes grief and that he is only impressed because she

reads the kinds of business inspiration books that he wishes he read. Randy doesn't appreciate honesty. He smiles at me in the same way that Amy does before he responds. Randy can't say enough good things about her while we struggle to find anything good to say about her. She spends her days in her cave taking doctorate-level coursework unrelated to her daily work, at least that is what she tells us she must do to get through the semester quickly. I encountered one of her former coworkers from another company who told me that Amy earned her master's degree at her previous employers' time and expense and abruptly quit when she finished. I believe it. I hope that she earns her doctorate soon and just goes.

I squeeze my pen in each meeting she attends, waiting for her to insert her lofty ideas and drag out some reference to her schooling to validate what she is saying. I struggle to breathe around her anymore. I can't see what she's done to keep her job, but Randy adores her.

Randy and his superiors take to immediate task Amy's recommendations regardless of how little they fit with her job or apparent expertise. They eat it up despite her failure to finish anything so far in the job for which she was hired. Randy has no idea that she goes over his head to bend upper management's ear. On several occasions, I heard through the ceiling vents shared with the conference room next door as Amy informed Monica, Randy's boss, of the mediocrity that he and the rest of us bring. If Randy knew how poorly Amy spoke of him, would he still praise her insights? She knows how to fawn over the right people to win them to her side. Randy might be the one on the chopping block today. If he goes, Amy will take his place. No one wants that except maybe Monica.

The first time the company did layoffs, they only called the people who were being terminated, so that very early in the day, people burst into tears at the sound of their own phones ringing or refused to answer them outright. Employees inadvertently answered customer calls by exclaiming, "Not me, I'm not going!" The debacle resulted in changes where all employees now received phone calls in no particular order; everyone goes upstairs regardless of whether they are being let go or not.

Victor, as always, gets the first call. He takes the call with temerity, confident that he is not one of the selected. Sure enough, he returns ten minutes later, stone-faced as always. Another cut survived. He nestles back down in his perch and waits.

Ian's phone rings. Before he is back, Amy's phone rings. As she passes my cubicle, she smiles, puts her fists under her chin in mock friendliness. "This is so nerve-wracking," she says in a sing-sing voice. She's quite casual about what is happening. She laughs at her own jokes. I ignore her and she leaves.

Donna is quiet, completely focused her own phone. Victor watches the elevator to see the people as they return from upstairs. I decide now is the time I might not ever get again. I hustle into Amy's desk area.

I'm back at my desk minutes later when Ian returns. He gives me a smile and thumbs up. His chair creaks when he sits back as far as his chair allows. He exhales loudly. He tears open the throat of another bag of chips and he settles into feeding from it.

My phone rings. I head to the elevator.

The upstairs has larger offices and more expansive conference rooms but it is in complete disarray from the renovations started last week and nowhere near finished. Light fixtures hang awkwardly among ladders. Wiring for the electrical and networking hangs in bunches from the ceilings and runs along the walls. The carpet is fresh and covered with plastic to protect it during construction but now I wonder if it is instead to prevent the bloodshed from this slaughter from soiling the carpets prematurely.

People from other teams are streaming back and forth from the elevators with a mix of emotions spread out among them. I sense the jungle here. The branches and the vines hide among the wires. The most carnivorous beasts feed on us one at a time. The sounds in my mind amplify from the fear and distrust amid the sense of impending death. My heart beats fiercely. I feel the tension in the backs of my calves, muscle tensing and ready to flee.

Blood and offal seem to mix at my feet. I think I hear the grumbles of the lions and cheetahs. I know they're behind the plastic sheets and

loosely hanging doors. A stampeding herd flees somewhere beyond the cube walls. A cacophony of the hornbills and the crying of the chimps rise overhead. I smell death amid the odors of paint, freshly cut wood and carpet. I make my way through the bedlam to Randy's office near the back wall.

Randy sits beside Monica, his boss. Her lips offer a weak smile. I sit across from them at the table. I swear that I feel a lioness purr near my ear. It's so close that I feel its nose against my neck. Its tongue clicks as it opens its maw wide in anticipation of this meal. I try to think of anything but that lioness. 'Promotions will come after this,' that is all that I can think.

I can't hear Monica over the animals crying all around me and the sound of my own blood pulsing in my temples. The room is darker than it should be and the furious shouts of the animals scare me. Eyes of macaque monkeys appear to stare at me through the shutters. I think I see raptors darting overhead, cutting through the lights. The conference room walls rattle with the beating animal fists just outside. My heart thumps wildly beneath my breast. I feel the teeth of the lioness around my neck. She snaps her jaws closed. At once everything stops, the sounds and smells and the lights. All of it melts away to reality and I hear Monica say, "I'm sorry."

My body goes limp, just like the prey succumbing to the predator, but I hold myself up meekly. Monica slides the papers across the table just as a Human Resources person joins us. Monica speaks but I hear nothing in this silence. I nod and flip through the papers, pretending to understand. They wait for my questions, but I shake my head. Monica's mouth twists into a pitying frown. She offers her hand. I ignore it and walk out to the stairwell.

Donna got her call so she is headed upstairs by the time I return. Victor knows my fate by the vacant look on my face. His head bobs. Ian wipes his hands on his pants and hugs me. He cries and I wonder why I don't. I put an empty box on the desk that Ian helps me pack while apologizing through his tears. I just want to leave now.

Amy leans against my cubical door, clutching her mug of freshly brewed tea. "Don't forget your 'Woman of the Month' award," says

Amy. Her smile says she pities me and that she's won another small fight in the unnecessary war that she's waged against everyone. She damaged our individual reputations enough to save herself; to her, it's what she needed to survive. She culled this sick, sad herd. She'll do it again wherever she goes from here. But instead of the snake, I see now that she is gazelle like the rest of us, sacrificing her own kind for just one more day of reprieve.

I pick up the award, something that I was given well before Amy happened along. I toss it into the trash bin. Amy frowns at my foolishness. She wishes that I would take this more nobly, I think, but I am beyond caring about what she wishes. This whole thing is not noble. Still, instead of death I've found something else. I'm not the gazelle cowering in my weakness. My own rational humanity taken back, I'm free in a way unimaginable just an hour before. The lioness didn't consume me, but in that moment instead the lioness became me.

"Have you looked for other jobs yet," Amy asks.

I stare back through her false sympathy. Her eyes meet mine and I harden my stare in defiance. She looks away. I say, "Do you mean in the time between me finding out that I've lost my job until now? No, I haven't had a chance yet."

My sarcasm tell her that I am done placating her. "Good luck," she says, rolling her head back and around as she walks away. "It's a jungle out there."

I finish packing my box, then take that photograph off the wall and put on top. It belongs to me now. They owe me that much in the end.

Amy sips loudly at her tea. I snicker when I hear this. Ian looks pensively at my delight. I want him to read my mind, to know that I'm all right. He can't understand because he's still a fearful part of this herd. I hear her sip again. "Hot," she gasps through burned lips and tongue. I roar with new pleasure and relief. I walk around the wall and face her one last time. Amy won't look at me now. She's trapped uncomfortably. She says, "You need something before you go?" She sips again. I laugh again to see her drink that tea. During the short time when Ian and Amy went upstairs and the other two were focused on other things,

I spoiled her watering hole. I replaced the clean water in Amy's coffee maker with water that I scooped from the bathroom toilet using her mug. Temptation rises in me to tell her that she is sipping water steeped in the excrement from every one of us. Instead, I scoop up my box, wave Victor over, and hurry away from the potted plant forest.

End

THE BLIZZARD

by Heather Karstens

The snow had been falling dense and fast for days. It started as a scent in the air, a certain heavy grayish-white color in the low-hanging sky, a feeling in my bones. The flakes came lightly at first, a few bright white flurries drifting down to land on my eyelashes and melt on my wind-nipped cheeks tingling with the chill and the damp. I picked up the pace hurrying through my chores to prepare for the incoming storm. The ground was frozen allowing me to move faster without the mud. I brought load after load of logs and kindling indoors knowing we would need to keep the woodstove well fed. The kerosene lanterns were filled, and the matchboxes were safe and dry by the stove.

With the eager help of our collie, Charlie, I rounded up all of the animals and ushered them into the barn. These cows, chickens, sheep and horses provided our family with dairy, eggs, wool and farm labor – all resources we could not afford to lose. They were part of our livelihood, but I also had a bit of a soft spot for these creatures and worried for their wellbeing in the approaching storm. All had a good meal. Then I refilled their water troughs and replenished their hay.

Finally, I stepped back outside into a now biting wind closing the barn door firmly behind me. The snow was coming faster and heavier. The ground was now coated with more than a dusting of white, and I struggled to see the way before me as the wind-driven flakes stung my eyes. I was grateful for my navy blue and hunter green flannel shirt and jacket, my warm hat with flaps over my ears, and my heavy work gloves. My broken-in boots had good traction so I made my way across the land without too many slips and no falls.

As I stepped in the door stomping the snow off my boots, the welcoming fragrance of a savory beef stew chock full of the autumn's root vegetables greeted me. The warm, sweet smell of baking bread also wafted my way. The wind was howling by this time banging a loose shutter angrily against the side of the house. Though only late

afternoon, darkness was coming fast on this early December day. Peering out the window, I could see shadowy drifts of snow piling up in waves across the yard and climbing the exterior of the red barn.

After shaking the snow off my shoulders and shrugging off my coat, I wandered into the kitchen to find my mother and sisters hard at work. The room was cozy with the heat of the woodstove and the warm conversation bubbling from the ladies of the house. My youngest sister, Gertrude, sat at the table darning woolen socks while Mother and my sister, Matilda, stood at the stove. All signs of the storm raging around us were banned from this space.

The rest of the family soon arrived, and just as we sat down to supper, the wind gave a cry like a banshee causing the entire structure in which we were ensconced to groan in protest. The lights began to flicker, and midway through the meal, the power went out. We finished the meal by candlelight. The mood in the room was more subdued now as if we all recognized somewhere deep within us the instincts of our ancestors who settled on these wide open plains telling us that we humans should respect and fear this powerful storm. It was stronger than we, and we were powerless to stop the destruction.

Knowing that the animals' water troughs would be frozen over by now, I grabbed the shovel I had propped by the door and began clearing a path through the drifts to the barn. Once inside, I broke through the layers of ice allowing the animals to drink. Then I headed back to the house well aware that I would be doing this again in a couple of hours.

Common sense dictated that we should try to get some sleep, and the prospect of the substantial weight of a heavy quilt pulled up to my chin was enticing. I set an alarm to ensure that we would wake to check on the animals, then I scurried into bed extinguishing the lantern on the nightstand. Without the glow of electricity, I found myself in total darkness unable to see anything but black. The night enveloped me, and sleep greeted me with her blissful embrace.

The storm raged on. All night long, then through the next day, and the following night, and the day after that as well. This forced confinement put almost everyone on edge. With no mail and no newspaper delivery possible, my elder brother, Henry, and our dad

examined every minute detail and argued over every article in the last paper we had received before the snow began. “Mr. Churchill is a bulldog,” Henry began, “but the Brits are paralyzed by these bombings. Every day! What kind of monsters attack innocent women and chidren in their homes? What kind of a man stands by and lets it happen without jumping in to help our allies? President Roosevelt needs to step up!” “Son,” my father responded wearily, “if you had lived through the last war, you would understand. You would not be in such a hurry to interfere. Don’t be so foolhardy!”

Meanwhile, disappointed to be missing her usual social gatherings, the older of my two teenaged sisters, Tildy, snipped at the baby of the family so much that our typically shy youngest sibling began to bite back. “How *could* you?! You know I adore that ribbon! I want it to smarten my blue dress up for the dance, but you bought it!” Tildy accused. “Perhaps if you didn’t spend all of your allowance the day you receive it, you would have money to buy nice things when you want them,” Gertie fired back. I was reminded of the days when Mother had to separate two bickering little girls. She would send them off in different directions outside to play.

Now, with no electricity and a need to ration the supply of firewood, no notion of how long it must last, we were all barricaded in the kitchen huddled by the heat of the stove for the daylight hours. Mother set the girls to work knitting blankets for the small hospital in town. A wise woman, she channeled their bickering energy into competition promising to judge the best blanket when they were done. The older of the girls, never a fan of the adage “haste makes waste,” made quick work of her yarn basket. The younger took her time working with precision and accuracy. Her piece would be of a fine and lasting quality when finished, though it wouldn’t be done as soon as her competition’s work. Gertie took great pride in her handiwork, and rightfully so.

For the politically charged men of the house, Mother also had a plan. She dumped the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle on the kitchen table and hid the box refusing to share the design. Then she told them they had to make peace and learn how to work together. If the puzzle wasn’t finished by supper time, there would be no place for us to eat our meal. Henry and Dad grudgingly began picking through the pieces. Before

long, their quarrel was forgotten as they assembled the cardboard-backed scene. Satisfied with her peacekeeping skills, Mother returned her attention to her endless baking.

That left me. I was always the odd one out, the quiet, stoic type that was easy to overlook in a room and often forgotten. Some might find this hurtful, but I didn't mind. I generally preferred the quiet, the company of my books and my feathered friends. Boisterous crowds, even small ones, tended to overwhelm me, and I would retreat. That day, I sat at the table with my sketch book capturing portraits of my companions which they would never see. The contentious atmosphere had left me feeling tense and anxious. As bitterly cold as it was, I still cherished the opportunities to venture out into the storm for chores and a few moments of peace.

My circular pattern of shoveling the path to the barn, caring for the animals, then coming back to do it all over again continued until I had cleared a tunnel six feet high on either side between the snow drifts. Finally, by the morning of the third day the storm ceased just as quickly as it had come. The sky was still overcast and hazy, but the wind died down, and the snow lightened then stopped.

After days of all of us trapped in the house together, I was desperate for a break. Much of the necessary repairs would have to wait until the snow banks grew shorter and the thaw came. So I set out across the fields on foot, snowshoes strapped to my boots, feeling as though I was trekking on tennis rackets. Still, the silly-looking contraptions served their purpose and allowed me to march across the top of the snow. When a man is alone, he can either feel lonely, or he can embrace the solitude. I did the latter.

My little friends, the chickadees, were my steady companions hopping and flitting along at my feet hoping for a share of the seed in my pocket. They chirped eagerly in greeting delighted to be out in the morning sun. Wedged among the wind-worn bark of the tree trunks, a layer of snow shimmered diamond-like. As I made my way into the timber, I narrowly missed a small avalanche of cold and wet set loose from a branch above me by a frantic squirrel chasing an escaping nut.

Moments later, I froze in my tracks as a doe wandered into my path from the dense underbrush. She stopped and our eyes locked - mine icy blue, hers warm amber. I was mesmerized by her auburn coat and sleek form. After studying me for a time, she moved off into the woods breaking the spell. I inhaled deeply taking in the fragrance of pine then sighed releasing the tension from my body. The blizzard had passed.