2001

Calliope Manuscript Day 2001

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Manuscript Day
2001
Calliope
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Linda Denstaedt ......................................................... Clarkston High School
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Midnight Drizzle

I thought sitting alone
  in the rain
  after midnight
would make me a poet.
My pores absorbing
depth, intensity
Every drop a subtle shock.

But as I watched my toes
numbing in the dark grass,
the hair on my arms and legs startling alert,
my shirt beginning to stick to my shoulders,
I noticed the artificial orange glow
of the neighbor’s Halloween lights.
Thoughts interrupted,
    I walked inside
wet clippings clinging to cold feet.

The rain wasn’t angry enough anyway.

Meghan Laura Jarpe
Music Teacher

Ocean blue eyes, silver hair, bright red sweater engulfed with cologne
"Hello, Queen Mary, are you ready for the tortures tonight"
I smile and head to the antiquated mauve chair
Heat engulfs the room, I slip off my peacoat.
Piece by piece I assemble clarinet
He asks if I'm alright, too hot too cold, need anything
I say I'm fine, he smiles
He talks about his latest performance, eyes illuminated
music is his love affair.
He strides to music shelf, Mozart, Schumann awaiting
He gently picks up saxophone
"I've got this new piece you just have to hear, it's incredible. Just don't mind me,
I'm a bit rusty."
Clear fingernails create rapid arpeggios subsiding into
translucent G
creating
sweet melody of sunsets, rainbows, promenades through the forest
I glance at his serene face, and notice his expanding smile
I didn't think it could get any bigger.
He soon crescendos into the untamed waters of vengeance, battles, and sins.
I glance at his cluttered desk and see photographs:
uniformed sailors WWII,
he isn't smiling there.
The untamed waters lapse against the shore,
leaving poignant tones
that have survived the parties, wars, money, friends
behind.
He plays a G the music ceases,
the journey is over.
He remains,
eyes glow brilliant blue
A couple seconds go by,
"How did you like that"
I glance around his room:
Dickens, Fitzgerald, numbers, phone books, paper, philosophy books--
no space anywhere, completely full.
Even outside, footprints surround newly planted lilies.
He is incredible.

Mary Wisniewski
A Pawn in the Calm of Winter

A morning sky made of ivory.
Fog floating in the first of winter.
I pick up my shovel and clear
out my driveway. Every snowflake,
A landscape, transparent through sky blue
curtains, following the clouds.

A midnight sky consuming the clouds.
A chess piece made of ivory.
A pawn played to perfection, covering blue
seas, frozen over by the calm of winter.
In my hand I hold a chess piece, a snowflake,
hiding behind its shadow under the clearing.

An afternoon sky showing its blue
face. A robber escaping down a clear
highway. He encounters the pawn in the last of winter.
Dancing circles around him in the clouds.
In the robber’s hands is a necklace of ivory,
dangling in front of the gullible snowflake.

The pawn is in stand-still, bones made of ivory,
waiting for an end to an inevitable winter.
Through his eyes is a canvas which is clear.
Time is reaching an end for the snowflake.
He is presented with two worlds. One is blue,
the other covers that color with a mask of clouds.

The change is obvious in the snowflake.
He has chosen to discard the world of blue.
In one hand is the hand of the robber. The necklace of ivory
is firmly grasped in the other. Again he hides behind the clearing,
making his way to where the two worlds meet. Clouds escaping in the final days of winter.

The pawn stands alone in the world of blue. He lies on the left shoulder of the clear, opaque, conscience. He checks his watch for the end of winter. The evaporating sky dissipates the clouds. The pawn is not jealous of the necklace of ivory, his decision, someday, will surpass that of the snowflake. Until the day of ivory signals the change of winter. Until the clear sky is covered by the snowflake. The pawn, in the land of blue, will rest high above the clouds.

Jeffrey Barrett
Driving Poems

I.
We shoot quick like red blood cells
slide along I-94 Easbound from Milwaukee
a brotherhood of two-doors, sedans, minivans, SUVs,
gliding together in a vein, through a tunnel that drips
yellowish light onto the metal shells
that we call cars.

Earlier I saw Caution: Oxygen Inside
written with sticky letters on the back
of a red Buick; I saw the old man
with an oxygen tank; a billboard towers commandingly
above the interstate, declares Heart of Chicago.

II.
I have always seen faces
on the fronts of cars:
headlight eyes at dusk,
smiling, frowning, sneering grilles.
When it’s late and I’m driving,
I’ll pass a lone pair of glowing eyes,
hovering above cold night pavement.
III.
I want to race these clouds
with my white Dodge van
us weaving quick through cornfields
them flying urgent across the sky
’cause the roads aren’t headed to the finish line
I’ll look out my window
my eyes pointing up past tall stalks
see if those clouds are catching up.
We’ve slipped past cops before,
on roads made of gravel
but I’m not sure how the van will handle
in a field of corn.

IV.
I drive while asleep tonight, falling
slow through trees stained by smoke.
I and my van drift across Coloma, liquor oozing
out of bars, one-story houses, teenage pockets.

Red Arrow Highway winds and twists before me,
my van knows the road and I lean back,
roll down the windows,
listen to the crickets sing with the moon.

Glenn Alan Lester
untitled

Deal with it alone
again
on this damp carpet with
the purples humming back and forth, silently,
mutely. I say let them find the quiet and wreck it.
It is like summer again; my pillow warms
me like no other.

If I could I would bloom
like an umbrella and rise up from here, over the churches,
over the pale arched crane’s neck, above even the clover
and never speak to you again.
But as I am only here to be blonde and
fifteen, I suppose that would not do.
Words blow out of me. It can’t be helped.

Instead I am stuck to the
floor like sugar. It’s just me again,
here deep within the bed, sounding off
and carrying on as
if when I died I would finally be alive.
But I am all clamped in. See?

I do not
move much from this spot....
You shouldn’t worry so.

But if I were to say to you,
in a sequence of words and punctuation,
that I do not stay here with myself for long,
would you know?
I can see the days you
spent beating yourself like music.
    Shhhhh.
    It is only me.

I dwell in these turbulent fields
and daisy mines.

*Kalei Iden*
Sneaking Out

I stood in your front yard,
gazing through my reflection in your bedroom window
ready to tap on the glass.

Inside
tall blue pillar candle
burned
slow and smooth
sketching long shadows on the wall
swirling rivers of indigo from curved wax edges
to the base of the flame

your music penetrated the glass
guitar raindrops strumming on the pane
melodic and even tones
and the occasional crackle of a page turning in calloused fingers
my lungs heated with the strong citrus candle scent
familiar like lemon fruit loops
yet bolder, juxtaposed over faded patchouli

I watched you read, waiting for me
elbows rested on your knees,
and I could feel my hand on your back
arched over
soft flannel
I wish I could drink you in like soup,
warming my stomach as it flows down my throat
straight to chilled colorless fingers

I tapped, wanting the window to shatter at my feet

Andrea Catharine Steves
Ice

Four men from World War II
killed not by guns,
but by mountains.
Four men from World War II
buried not by dirt,
but by ice.
The hard encasing preserved the site
for six cold decades.
Picks and chisels exhumed signs of life.
Jackets, toothbrushes, and food lay
scattered around the dead bird.
Four men from World War II
lost
for six cold decades.

Kerrie Krahn
Self Portrait- A Mind in Disarray

Though tangled and messy,
It will still withstand the cat’s game.
After the anguish, it is unable to sort itself out and straighten its strings once more.
This disheveled mass of yarn,
Is only seen as a chaotic toy,
Or,
if intertwined with others, it can be a work of magnificence.
But once more the cat has found it hiding,
cowering on the shelf behind stacks of dusty photos,
waiting apprehensively for the cat’s viscous attack one more time.

Georgina Walker
Night

Orion’s belt pulls me in.
My feet graze the water.
As the moon winks invitingly at me,
the clouds hold me tight.
We dance together.
The waves provide our music,
the stars our sparkling dance floor.
Then Mother Nature flashes the porch light,
by letting the sun rise.
Gently waking me.

Kathryn Eklund
I
Wish
You
Would
Understand
That
I
Am
Not
All
Spine.
Not
Everything
I
Say
Is
Barbed,
Nor
Is
Every
Drop
Of
Saliva
Poisoned.
Not
Every
Tear
Is
Guilty.
I
Don’t
Release
Quills
At

Every
Touch.
This
Forked
Tongue
Licks
Wounds
And
Sings
Hymns.
There
Is
A
Lot
In
Me
That
Is
Softer
Than
A
Peach
And
Twice
As
Bruiiseable,
As
Impressionable
As
An
Inflated
Balloon
And
Equally
Fragile,  
As observant as a  
Mirror and nearly as honest.  
My spine is more cord than bone,  
Willing and able to  
Wrap around  
You.

Erin Gendron
Mizu ansei (Water Rest)
Reflections on stones
Sparkling aqua illusion
Quietly I sleep

Banshou (Evening Bells)
Rose colored sunset
Dying embers of the day
Goodnight Mother Earth

Sanjou (Mountain Peak)
Great warrior hill
Piercing the sky with his peak
The dead rest for now

Kris Moore
Passing Through

Cornfields, fences, farmhouses,
a city, church spire, exit sign.
Cow, chicken, chicken, cow,
chicken, chicken, horse.
Field of wheat, farmer’s hands
ears of corn, burning sun.
Wind sways stalks to the left,
centered, to the right, down dipping
heavy heads, to the left. Sun
shadowing a farmhouse, loud
children run through green grass
their only pleasure to annoy silence.
A callused hand grasps an ear of corn,
ripping it from slender stalks shoving it
to the bottom of brown burlap.
A farmhouse ending a dusky road.
Sunlight streams in the window
elongating fern leaves across
the carpet. A moment in the lens.
Farmer’s hands, fields of wheat.
Cow, chicken, chicken, cow,
chicken, chicken, horse.
Exit sign, church spire, a city,
farmhouses, fences, cornfields.

Scott Denstaedt
Fight

Drop the gloves, let’s go
Hit ’em in the face
Shot to the back of the head
Knee to the gut throw ’em against the boards
He’s crouched over, furiously knee him in the face
Pull his jersey over his head
Bust him open good
Men in striped shirts pull you apart
crowd cheers loudly
You tell your opponent
"Good fight"

Walter Barnes
bright blue ribbons

jumping beans danced every which way in my stomach. we were
smack-dab in the middle of everything
on a roll
total perfect concentration
never pausing for a second thought
on fire *en fuego* lit up like the Fourth of July.

madness is my middle name
little endorphins race through my blood stream
adrenaline tornadoes through my brain.

your eyes race down the paper
radiating rabid energy as your frantic hands waltz across lines
in a scribbling frenzy.

together, we are unstoppable.
this is our sport and we are
competing to win.

when every question at every station
had been finished and it was time to wait
eleven eternities almost forever when

finally the ceremony started.
third? no
second? no
first? hesitation I couldn’t breathe.
yes.
It was it was us.

We hugged and held hands as we walked to the front where they handed us
bright blue ribbons.

*Sarah Crabtree*
untitled

A stroke of green
the final touch
to a scene
he has worked so much.

Yellow blotches in with blue,
and black shadows reaching to,
A sky with winds and swirls and spins.

Oh Starry Night painted just right.

Katie Shalifoe
Voices

In the darkness,
the blue, chlorinated water luminated.
Above the surface glows
an alien essence.
You float so delicately against the surface,
your hair spread like jelly fish tendrils.
You toss your head back and laugh,
free of the day’s prior concerns--
the agonizing giggles
of toddlers running across the deck.
We simply listen
to the deep African voices
of Midnight frogs.
They cool themselves in the water,
their deep green bodies seem more understanding
as they swim across the pool,
in the alien atmosphere.

_Dawn Marie Kaczmar_
The meows of respect

We shuffle into the enlarged confession box, complete with popcorn and sleeping bags--
All to establish a little stature.
Time for an excavation of our unspeakable sins.

I gaze through the glass of my seated crimes as one chooses a chilled drink.
In the front are the excusable lies told about clean rooms or brushed teeth.
I move in to where the pre-chilled cups are filled with my gluttony, the harmonious trio of Ben, Jerry and my self?
the seven-cherry-cheesecake-slices incident?
The burning admiration for the man with the tight gold band around his left ring finger?
No, it is a special occasion so I dig deeper, further to the back, to the half-forgotten beverage lying muted and freezer burnt.
I tear it from the cooler.

The dime summer day--
the neighbor boy merely four, with his lunch of crusty mac and cheese pasted on his shirt and face.
The kittens, black and fluffy white, pale pink pleading tongues.
Water.
Speckled tub of hose water.
Their swarming furred legs.
They begged for breath.
The unknowing pleasure the ignorant excitement that arose in us as we locked
our elbows and held their weak heads under.  
Their attempted escape, running through  
waggish grass with their sopping fur.  
I shrieked, "Catch them, catch them--"  
no matter the miniature claws  
puncturing my skin  
as they clamor for oxygen,  
Their heart wrenching cries led by our  
squeals of delight.  

Now, in my healed hands, so many years later,  
lies the half-dead kitten, exhausted,  
her eyes glossed over.  
Small, guilty drops of water  
fleeing from her undeveloped lungs  
There she is traded over--  
swapped for their respect  

shown now, in every shocked narrowed eye.  

_Jessica Holman_
Sonnet

You are as constrictive as a snake,
Rigid and demanding in your way,
I bid you gone, though Mrs. Hope will not take.
I sit here perplexed, wishing to obey.

Earnest in attempt, but to no avail,
Your consistency still baffles me,
Perhaps I should drop this poem and fail.
Who needs this contorted writing degree?

Under such standards, I must wonder,
How Shakespeare was able to comply?
I wish not to subside and go under:
This scheme continues to pass my mind by.

Dearest Sonnet, what must come of thee?
If I knew, I would express you my glee!

Christopher Jon Olsen
I Am An Egg

I am an egg
Hard boiled from a scalding past
I try to be overeasy
even as I fry in the pan

Some people want me scrambled
I don’t know why
Perhaps they are deviled
I pity their hateful yolks

I am fearful of the wire whisk
For it is the tool they use to beat me
That way they can make me into
anything they please

I am my own recipe
Take me as I am
And I will do my very best
to make the rest of your day enjoyable

David Johnstone
tarantinoesque

"Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal."

--T.S. Eliot

Johnny and I needed a poem; we were literary desperadoes driving with the top down along forsaken highways in Death Valley

shotguns in the back seat; suits still stained with blood, mud from a dirty limerick and the job we pulled in Bristol

The fella there didn’t have it; But we beat the name of a bank From him: First Third National, the first line of an unwritten haiku, in Barstow

We pulled up at noon; tasting the gray dust that rose up around us like death shrouds, mist that cloaked Odysseus and Aeneas

It was a teetering fortress; bars across the windows the door squeaked with fear when we drifted in an onomatopoetic scream
A muse of blood sang in me;
from the fold of my coat I pulled death
Which embraced me like a winter rose
and shot the guard in the back
Crack of a shattered spine

Like a puppet without strings
he collapsed against the corner
streaked the wood crimson
Lips locked in a death-kiss
With the splintered wall

Johnny’s face
was flecked in blood
from the girl behind the desk
A few blasts took the bars off the windows
Like the teeth of the poet we shot back in Bristol

By luck
the safe was open
the poem flapped in the wind
Vergil would have been proud
As we drove away with the top down

Chased by the sound of a thousand Sirens

Joshua Graham Buursma
Part One: Brewing

Toby Ratison ran his index finger along the hem of a styrofoam cup. With one tip, the boiling coffee crept along the rim like a hesitant diver. It proceeded down the side of the cup and leaked onto his pale hand, simmering and bubbling before assimilating into the flesh. Toby let out a boisterous yelp and sprang from the cedar seat to get a tissue.

"You're such a pussy," said Bysche. "A little coffee on the hand and you're howling like a woman."

"I'm only being cautious, that's all," Toby whimpered, running the Kleenex neatly along the thin bone of his wrist. "And besides, I don't like the feeling of things on my skin."

"Well, if you're out with Elizabeth, get used to it."

Bysche reached into his bulging pocket and pulled out a firm pack of Marlboro cigarettes. He chose one like a child choosing the first present to open at Christmas.

Bysche and Toby had been going to the restaurant for coffee almost every night that summer. They had been best friends since the seventh grade, at a time when both shared a passing belief that some day they would be successful men with women lusting after them left and right. Toby's only present testament to this was Elizabeth Parker, whose tiny features and frame paled compared to what they had in mind.

"Elizabeth's a sweetheart," Toby would often say. "It's the rest of her that seems a little sour."
The interior of the restaurant was drab and insincere. The off-white wallpaper was starting to fade, the numerous ledges collecting calendars of dust. Old-time photos lined the walls in a chronological array of what the building had been before a cheap diner: in one picture, a little girl holding a Golden Retriever puppy in the front of a pet shop, and in another, a contented prostitute using a tiny mirror to apply her lipstick while a house of ill repute hung loosely in the background. Often an unsuspecting customer would find the remnants of these scattered around the interior: a petrified tablet of dog food, a piece of lace, a pubic hair in one of the seat cushions. All this while Henry, the owner, served hot apple cider and coffee to the people.

"All these people outside, and nobody cares to stop in."

Henry stared across the street at the large crowds that always seemed to be walking away from, rather than towards, his establishment. He balanced his large head like an egg on a spoon.

There was a county fair going on a block away. There was the usual bustle of townspeople and their cars full of screaming kids cramming into parking lots, the squeaking of the old ferris wheel which pridefully displayed the name of the town as if it were an advertisement for a casino. The overpriced food and cheesy camaraderie were matched only by the attitude of the employees. Spend twenty dollars on games to win a pinwheel blade, they chanted with their greasy moustaches and soiled shirts. Somewhere outside, the world was in motion.

Steadying the cup, Toby called over to Henry.

"Do you think I could get one to go?"

Henry smiled. He leaned into Toby, his sour breath tickling Toby’s ear.

"Sure," he said. "But where in God’s name are you going?"

He hinted that Toby might be going to the fair.

"Home."

Bysche glanced at his watch.

"It’s getting late. Soon the night will be black as cat dung."

Toby always appreciated Bysche’s articulate use of language. The stars were like specks of sunlight on an empty sheet of horizon.
As Toby walked the empty streets alone, his thoughts turned to Elizabeth. It seemed as if it had been so long since he’d seen her, the tiny pale girl with the overbite. She had worn braces for age eleven to the beginning of tenth grade, when she realized that no invention would prevent her from perpetually resembling a walrus. At the coffee shop, customers would walk up to her and give her kudos on her wonderful impression, not realizing that she wasn’t making a face. Elizabeth attested that it was a good way to meet people who like going to freak shows and shooting puppies.

Toby’s freckled nose shriveled at the smell of gasoline in the air. That was what Honore Street always smelled like: gasoline. Gasoline, and cat pee, but never both at the same time. This was the one benefit of the area.

As he looked into the horizon, he leaned up a little, so that he could see the sun finally setting near the Cumberland Farms. As he reached into his pocket to pull out a cigarette, he heard a voice squeaking through the layers of humidity.

"Toby."

He turned around to see Elizabeth and her teeth staring at him from the car.

"I’ve been following you for half an hour, asking if you wanted a ride."

"I didn’t hear you."

"That’s because you’re dim. I could have run you over and it would have taken you a couple of minutes to realize you were dead. Never go to New York City, okay? Not even if you win something."

Toby took his hand out of his pocket and walked across the front of Elizabeth’s strawberry-colored Mitsubishi. Ducking into the passenger side, his behind barely touched the seat before Elizabeth started driving. He looked for the speedometer and remembered there wasn’t one. He sadly discovered the same was true for the seatbelt.

He played with his coat button, which had grown dull from his constant fiddling. He stuck his foot into the groove of the floor, tilting it from side to side. He glared out the window at passing streets which eventually began to look alike, pressing their cold concrete into your skin.
until you were left cuddling up to a brick because it reminded you of home.

Elizabeth sifted through her purse, which at this time appeared to be pregnant. She shuffled through the leather model, discarding random materials, phone numbers, empty packs of gum. Toby was starting to shake.

"I talked to my father today. I've never understood that man." She laid a pack of cigarettes on the dashboard. "We talked about Marjoram."

Toby couldn't stop staring at his shivering hand. Rivers poured into deltas of veins, tributaries nestling blue ropes. His heart was pumping at an alarming rate; he felt a headache coming on.

Elizabeth muttered ("Not this again") as he vomited out the window.

Lifting his heavy head, every part of Toby's body ached. He rubbed his stomach, which was so tender with sweat that it felt soft as dough. He removed his hands and glared at the five pink dots where his fingers had been. Slightly entertained, he pressed again, this time deeper and more direct.

Elizabeth leaned across Toby to turn the window crank. It hesitated, squeaking, and Elizabeth squealed in surprise as it finally began to shrivel upwards, and afterwards she smiled. She felt as if she had just raised the Red Sea. In an abnormally didactic mood, she turned to Toby.

"You're drinking too much coffee."

Toby moaned and rested his aching head on the dashboard. He watched as trickles fell down the glass and it began to rain.

"I think you should take a breather for a little while, Toby. You're always either working or at that coffee house. "You're up to twenty or thirty cups a day, it can't be healthy. You need to relax--"

He nodded.

"--get some sleep--"

He nodded.

"--you need to fix your wardrobe."

Toby looked down at his clothes: a filthy white undershirt covered with a dirty red t-shirt, pants that were ripping at the cuffs.

"Look at your shoes."

They were falling apart.
"I guess I should do something soon."

As they approached Toby's house, Elizabeth leaned in and gave him a kiss on the forehead. He smiled at her, squeezing her hand. He opened the car door and she was gone before he could even say goodbye.

He looked at the moon, obnoxious in its orbit. He looked at his shoes.

***

There is a certain amount of revelation that follows fatigue. As Toby Ratison sat in the quiet living room of his quiet apartment, watching the sun rise while sitting in his large chair, a pile of thoughts flowed through his tiny head so quickly that he had a difficult time distinguishing what was what. He awkwardly stuck his fingers in the fold of the armchair. Pulling his grandmother's security blanket from the inside, he nuzzled up to the worn fabric and stuck his pudgy legs on the coffee table. He reached his arm across to lift a small cup of espresso, neatly brewed and flavored with a bit of raisin.

He ran his hands through his hair and grabbed four brown clumps from the top. At only thirty, his hair was beginning to fall out in clusters as if he were a shedding stuffed animal. Groaning, he put the hair back and settled down and fell asleep.

"Toby! Get the hell out here! Don't you know it's Saturday morning! Time for coffee, time for tea!"

He opened his eyes to see Bysche had somehow broken into his home and was now shaking him violently.

"What? Jesus, Bysche, you nearly killed me. How did you get in here?"

"Don't you know it's time for coffee, Toby? No coffee for me; I've already had six or seven cups. It's you I'm worried about. Don't you give a noodle about your health?" He nervously paced across the carpet of the room. He was very loud.

"I ... er ... I suppose we could get coffee now, if you'd like. Although it is very early, I doubt the shop will be open and if it is, then we will be--"

Bysche, deciding he had heard enough, lifted Toby by the forearm and dragged him down the rouge corridor and outside. There was protest from
Toby, but Bysche’s harmonious shouts droned out his tiny piping, beat by beat.

What a wonderful friend! What a hard-won companion! You have a lovely walk!

Part Two: The First Taste

There is a certain sting in the air of morning which gently seduces the senses into sleep. Toby uprooted a toaster from the counter and used it as a mirror to inspect his eyes, which at this point resembled golf balls with a bad case of the measles. Heaving the metal towards the door, Henry had to swerve in order to hamper decapitation.

"Whoa, settle down there, Toby. Can I get you a coffee?"
"Uh-huh."

He was getting obnoxious. Toby is often like this in the morning, like a cranky little boy who complains to his mother that he’s fed up with going to school. He blamed Bysche for the unfortunate act of waking, this terrible moment of animation.

Cars were passing by on their way to work. Those who worked on Saturday morning drove with their radios off and their coffee out of its holder, neurotic and keeping their eye on the road, for fear of catching some blue-collared man relaxing with his family on the lawn. Toby respected truck drivers because they never seemed to care what anyone else was doing. They had something to deliver, and were the only people that seemed to actually serve a purpose and get something done. You pick something up in one town, and drop it off in another. He knew he could never be one himself. He imagined carrying that load around would feel a little like being pregnant. He wouldn’t want to give the things away.

In the restaurant, the radio was always tuned to country, and Toby had to specifically tell Henry to turn it down. It wasn’t necessarily the volume that annoyed Toby, but the fact that if the music was ignored and the few morning customers continued on with their conversations, Henry would start
dancing. And when Henry started dancing, it was very difficult to get Henry to stop dancing. Toby had unfortunately seen this occurrence at its peak when he walked in on a slow day to find Henry dancing on the table top, fully outfitted in cowboy attire and howling violently. From then on, and for the next three months, he insisted on being referred to as "Hoss." Experimentation was not to be taken lightly.

Bysche was reciting "And One For My Dame" when Toby interrupted.

"So what exactly are we doing here, huh?"

Bysche looked shocked. "We’re drinking coffee. What did you think we were doing, knitting scarves?"

"I thought..." Toby’s thoughts trailed off. He poked the coffee with his red straw and achingly looked out the window.

There was a tiny man, not yet seventy, crouched outside, peering in at him. He had a scrunched-in sort of face and a slack jaw and it looked as if he was about to do something unexpected. As he gently kneeled closer to Toby, almost to the point where he was totally hunchbacked, Toby noticed that his purple tie clung to his neck like a sloth against a tree.

The man walked off and Toby shuddered. He looked down and realized his coffee had spilled on the counter and leaked onto his pants.

I’m always spilling everything, he thought. I can never keep anything contained. And therein lay the issue, I need to figure out what to contain and what to keep--

"Wow!"

--what to keep hidden. It’s all in moderation, the balance, keeping every detail in perfect place.

"Here’s some napkins. I’d let you wash off in the bathroom, but Lucy’s on strike."

"So she’s not cleaning the bathrooms?"

"No, that’s where she’s picketing. It’s doing a hell of a job to my business. You walk into a bathroom and find an old woman crouched in the corner as soon as you shut the door, and you’re bound not to come back to this place."

A distant voice yelled out, "Damn straight!" and Henry pointed at the Men’s Room.
There was a certain air in the restaurant that day, something quite peculiar that seemed to resonate among its customers. Was it a faulty coffee mug, a draft? A white floor of fog lingered about the floor and walking through it, Toby felt colder than he had been in the longest time.

A moment of reflection was taking a nap on Bysche. It sat upon his shoulder and wrinkled his lapel. The three were like sitting ducks at the coffee house; blasted conversation dominates everything. Why is it wrong to be quiet? Is there a penalty for not filling the air with words, even if it is babble? Toby felt as mute as a ceremony of Advent. Catholics, the Ratisons would gather around four candles, three purple and one pink, and one of them, either Toby or his sister Lisa or maybe even Timmy, would either laugh, sneeze, or cough, invariably snuffing out one of the candles in the process. More often than not, their Christmas tree would spontaneously combust. Toby’s mother asserted that it was because of their manners during holy services. From a young age, Toby had been taught that Jesus was very serious. He thought it might be a little harrowing to have to be that serious all the time. He’d end up bursting out laughing once he hopped into bed, or madly howling in the shower where no one could hear him. It was Toby’s belief that wonderful things should not be hidden.

As the elderly blue sun leaned into the clouds, dotting them with purple liver spots, Toby glanced at his watch. Nine fifteen. He would have to get back home soon, maybe he could sleep, maybe he could take a nap and wake up around noon, spend the rest of the day doing something productive. Aware that he had not lifted his eyes from the table until now, he looked to his right to find Bysche picking his nose. Toby always appreciated Bysche’s articulate use of his fingers. He could have been a concert pianist; he was very precise.

"I think I’m going to leave now, Bysche," Toby declared, and hopping up from the seat, he laid a tip on the counter for Henry.

"So tonight, then? Toby? You’ll be here tonight?"

He was already out the door.

***

Unfortunately, Toby had been so wound up in his own thoughts that he hadn’t heard exactly what his friend expected him to do that night. It most
likely had to do with drinking coffee, but he could never be sure. He had known Bysche long enough to know that he always seemed to do the unexpected.

Having no idea what to anticipate, at about six o’clock in the evening, he shut his tiny door and ventured from his little brown house to the coffee shop, hoping to find them there. Bysche was there, in fact, and so was Elizabeth, although she was asleep. Her head nestled upon her chubby arms and with her light blond hair and her long white shirt, she looked rather like a round apple without its skin, rolling back and forth across the table.

As soon as Toby walked in, Bysche jerked up, his bloodshot eyes squinting at Toby.

"We’ve been waiting here nearly an hour. We were about to leave." Stuffing a Kleenex into his shirtpocket, he nudged Elizabeth. Her thick eyelashes blinked wildly and she came awake, giving Toby an evil look.

"Be a little earlier, please. You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting. I have some coffee brewing at home. It’s French roast.

Toby nodded. With his head down, he approached Bysche, careful not to make any sudden movements.

"So," Toby muttered under his breath, "we were going to..."


"Alright, enough. I’ve had a tough day. If you want to go to the carnival, we’d better hurry."

Elizabeth grabbed her army green colored jacket and jammed the cigarette she was smoking into the volcanic ashtray. Slamming her purse upon the counter, she struck the bench and swung the handbag over her shoulder. Toby, startled, held her hand and she eventually settled down. He knew what day it was. He knew it must be hard.

Toby had been with Elizabeth for a year and a half, and he had yet to meet her father. He often wondered what he was like; Elizabeth didn’t discuss him as much as she gave elusive clues, enough to let him form an opinion after months of casual discussion. A characteristic of constricted
conversation is that it seems to tie itself together in a knot. Elizabeth was wary of discussing her childhood, a car that always seemed to drive on the wrong side of the road.

A rather extroverted child, Elizabeth made many attempts at getting attention, especially from her father.

"He seemed so out of reach."

She recalled a time when she declared to Mrs. Sunkle and the rest of her second grade class that she had formally changed her name to Diana. Hamilton was highly interested in astronomical proportions. Elizabeth spent the bulk of her life trying to become her father’s moon.

Toby remembered the night, one year ago, when Elizabeth tried to call her father on his birthday. His girlfriend answered the phone in a husky voice, and Elizabeth, shaking and shivering and weak as a mouse, quickly let go of the receiver. Toby spent the rest of the night holding her and reading "The Little Prince." She laid her head on his stomach and nodded off.

"I love you, Toby," he remembered her saying, just as she was falling asleep. "I’ve never said ‘I love you’ to anyone before. Nobody’s ever said it to me."

***

"Clutch first!"
"What!"
"You’re driving off the blasted road! You’re going to break my car! I hope you have insurance! No!"

It is an underestimate to say that Elizabeth was not the world’s best driver. She hugged the road as if it were her best friend, half of the car on the highway pavement and half down by the trees, toppling over dead raccoons. The only thing that could reasonably compare to the experience of being in a car with Elizabeth was a thrill ride at the fair a couple of years ago called "Kamikaze." This lovely machine sent its passengers up, down, and sideways until everyone boarding eventually lost his or her sense of hearing and motor skills. It was disassembled and declared a hazard after Walter Bell claimed it had jolted him sterile. Elizabeth’s driving was equally disturbing.

As Toby glared out the window, the fair came closer and closer into
view. It seemed much more elaborate close up than it appeared to be at the careful distance of the restaurant. Green and blue pulsating lights decorated the entrance. The town had chosen them because they represented the patriotism of the town, and the recent economic boom, which had won the envy of local communities. Blue and green lights were also on sale at the Safeway.

There was an overweight man taking tickets at the entrance. He needed a shave and smelled of sauerkraut.

As the three paid for their tickets and marched through the turnstile, Toby looked up to see that a fireworks display was beginning. Taking Elizabeth by the arm, he led her to the fountain where onlookers gathered to view the hot, sparkling spectrum of lights. Bysche trotted along after them, an amused grin on his coffee-stained face.

Blues exploded, reds climaxed, yellows shined. The dampness in the air made the explosions even more fantastic and seemed to douse the atmosphere in a thick coat of heat. As many rockets blazed and flew into the sky, Elizabeth kneeled into Toby, who responded by rubbing her chin. Bysche responded in a negative manner; it was like watching a romance movie. Sickeningly sweet.

The crowd cheered. There were many gathered there on the last Saturday of the carnival, families of eight or nine conglomerating and pretending to be of equal mind. There was a hint of sarcasm in the event, the fact that it seemed unreal, as reluctant teenagers pretended to scoff at their unruly parents winning prizes for their younger brothers and sisters, the feel of authority, its overwhelming impression shooting itself like a spire across the dartboard; a hit, a miss, a bull’s eye on the panel of time.

As the display ended and many families spaced out across the lawn, Toby and Elizabeth reverted into the disclosed corner of the park. Hoping to find a shortcut, Bysche pushed past them in a vague attempt to display his expertise. The full moon hung in the sky like an interference.

After walking for a bit of time, Elizabeth and Toby came upon the Game lane, where games of chance and skill lined the street generously. As the two entered the main area of the quarter, they spied a game of darts: quick, comforting, and easy to conquer. There was little or no skill involved
in this, which was why it was the first one Toby chose to win Elizabeth a prize.

He quickly took hold of her hairy arm and made a beeline for a glowing orange stand. The man handling the tickets was at least twice Toby’s age, he was a stranger but also oddly familiar. Although his hair was gray, his black moustache seemed quite peculiar against stone-colored skin; this made Toby uneasy and he nervously handed the man a wrinkled one-dollar bill. The old man swooped it up in one dashing, forward movement that surprised Toby so that tiny goosebumps billowed up from his flesh like a thousand mushrooms. He became even more reserved when the man handed him the silver dart.

It was enormous and felt heavy as a cannonball in his sweaty hand. One wrong motion and it would cut his flesh into even slices of meat. Drawing back the blade, he weakly flung the metal upon the red and black dartboard which seemed hundreds of feet away.

It barely touched the circle.

The old man hopped out of his enclosure and stepped towards Toby. Taking Toby’s forearm, he placed it further back, leaning his elbow against his chest. "Try standing this way. And shimmy a little closer to the board."

Toby, a little embarrassed, obeyed.

Trying a second time, he leaned his right foot into the spongy grass. It bounced upon the blades, and he began to lose his grip on the ground. He quickly lunged the second dart forward as if it were a shot-put. This time it came closer, so that it gently petted the board.

"One more."

Sweating profusely now, Toby gathered his strength and looked at Elizabeth, who was at the petting zoo. He giggled, released the third dart, and resumed staring at her, with a smile.

He squinted his eyes and peered at the dartboard, noticing a huge dart poking directly from the centre.

"And he wins!"

Flushing, Toby was filled with pride. He gallantly trotted up to the booth, and grabbed a tiny blue bear with "Honoré County Fair 2000" printed in large, bleeding letters, and handed it to Elizabeth, who smiled at her
decidedly talented Toby.

The old man put up a sign saying, "Game closed. Come back tomorrow." He was out of sight.

Walking down the unlit street as the fair came to an end, Toby nuzzled Elizabeth, placing his head on her rounded shoulder. Crickets chirped loudly in the distance; they were everywhere.

"What was the line in that Snodgrass poem... Heart's Needle..."

"What?" Toby was staring at the moon.

"W.D. Snodgrass... There was a line in his poem. About crickets."

Toby recalled as much of the poem as his clumsy mind would allow. He thought for a moment. "Oh!" He recited, "'I'm told a friend's child cried because a cricket, who had minstrelled every night outside her window, died.'"

"That was it." Elizabeth smiled. She glanced at her watch. Panicked, she suddenly realized--

"Toby, where's Bysche?"

Part Three: Sugar and Crème

A dear friend. A humorous companion. Gone in a flash? Hardly. Even Toby could not deny that he doubted Bysche had disappeared, believed he would come back soon. Bysche was a lot like a cat who would wander from home and return the next day, often with a dead bird in his mouth. He believed Bysche would be back as soon as possible.

He really did.

Toby had a particularly difficult time sleeping that night. A bunch of thoughts ran through his head, what if this, what if that. He reminded himself that Bysche was not a child, that if he wanted to leave the fair, he had every right to and he and Elizabeth need not be alarmed. But he wondered how, if he did go home, the car he so cautiously entrusted to Elizabeth, his car, could still be in the parking lot. He wondered why, if Bysche was home, he didn't break into his house, as he did nearly every morning, and how Bysche could so quickly and slyly slip between their fingers. They cared
about him. He hadn’t ever told him that. It had always been implied.

The coffee house was a mess on Monday morning. Henry hadn’t cleaned. Slouching, he leaned upon the counter and waited for Bysche. A constant customer, Henry often expected Bysche’s arrival before the restaurant would open for early bird specials at six a.m. Henry started sweating. It was noon.

"I don’t know where he could have gone," Toby asserted. "He was following us. He really was."

"Maybe he is playing a joke, dear," Elizabeth commented to Henry, who at this point seemed very alarmed. She held his hand as he leaned his heavy head upon her shoulder.

There were many new customers in the store that day. Those who had heard rumors of a frequent customer lost, and wanted to be seen in such an infamous establishment. For once, Henry was getting customers.

The damp, wet weather was hanging on the rack. Bugs clung to the windowsills, trying to coerce their way inside. Normally this would have bothered Henry and he would have covered the area with a thick coat of bug spray, but today he simply watched the bugs as if they were a tiny motion picture. He itched at the four mosquito bites poking out of his arm, looking like white pinpoints on his tanned skin. Scratching deep, he had to draw blood before getting any relief. Glaring out the window, everything seemed to move in slow motion, obnoxiously before him.

Elizabeth and Toby had to take up serving the customers. After years of going to the coffee house, one would think that Toby would be capable of making a goddamn cup of cappuccino. But the golden machine sputtered lazily and Toby panicked his way through four or five cups of coffee, served fresh on sticky, flowery plates. Elizabeth had trouble with her balance.

The day ended like it began, Henry still sitting in his stool and Elizabeth and Toby on their feet.

"Thank you," Henry smiled. "I was hoping you’d help me, I’m a wreck." His mouth was wide open, clean as a cat’s.

"Don’t worry about it, Henry," Toby said, and patted him on his chubby back, his hand rubbing the thick flesh upon his shoulders.

Hoping that maybe Bysche was at his house, Toby and Elizabeth got
in the car and Toby gave her the directions to his home. Already emotionally bereft, they carefully eased up the driveway. Bysche lived on Vernon Street, an unfamiliar, strange dead end avenue where most of the purple, dilapidated houses were occupied by Eastern European gypsies. Toby often dreaded visiting Bysche here because it was so odd to talk to him. The environment of the coffee house seemed so relaxed. To see Bysche in his domestic element, full of poets, gypsies and gun-toting drug dealers was simply odd.

Peering out the window, Toby glared at a couple walking down the sidewalk, a cane in each quivering right hand. They seemed to take each step painfully, each movement of the knee a difficult maneuver. Bending by the waist, the old man adjusted his glasses and peered at Toby just enough to make him wonder. The couple resumed their exaggerated walk and continued onwards towards the rail.

Emerging from the car, Toby placed his feet on the ground and pulled himself up. The murky surroundings and unpleasant smell lingered and made him sick, as Elizabeth walked him up the stone steps and knocked on a weak door.

No answer.

Turning the knob, Elizabeth pulled hard enough to tear it off. Beginning to whimper, she attempted to place it back in its original position but it seemed much too large for the hole. She dropped the rusty contraption.

"What are we going to do now?" Toby whimpered.

Elizabeth raised her bow leg and heroically shoved it into the door, causing it to collapse with a loud clunk.

She smiled. "That's what we'll do."

Toby turned solemn after peering in.

It had been January since he had last been in Bysche's house. Eager to see his friend's new abode, he speedily drove up to the establishment only to find Bysche asleep in his bed. Apparently it was quite easy for Bysche to forget when people would arrive, so that it did not necessarily alarm Toby when he was not in his kitchen, lazily sucking on a coffee bean.

As Toby and Elizabeth mechanically made their way up the stairs, Toby paused at a collection of stinkbugs and their pitifully slow movements in a broken corner of the house, assimilating into one large, terrifying
Bysche was not in his bed. He was not in the kitchen. He was not in the bathroom (which was the first place they ought to have looked). With a desperate look in his eye, Toby descended the staircase in the same brutal manner in which he had ascended. Tired, he hugged Elizabeth, running his hands through her stringy, unbearable hair.

She whispered, "This is probably not the best time to tell you you’re being interviewed."

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Toby blinked. "What? When? Where? Oh my, how could you!"

"It’s in an hour. A man from The Honore Times stopped by the restaurant while you were in the loo. He offered lots of money, Toby, I couldn’t have let you say no."

"Elizabeth, this is an outrage! How dare you!"

"He only wants to talk about Bysche for a bit! It’s going to be a lovely, emotional piece with as little bombast as the town press will allow."

Without staying to hear another word, Toby dashed out of the house, running as fast as he could, as fast as his swollen legs would carry him. He ran down Vernon Street, past the poets and the gypsies and the twenty-somethings selling bags of blow. He sprinted past the carnival, or what remained of it, the ferris wheel disassembled and looking like a terrible machine. He jogged past Henry’s Restaurant, eyeing the reporters. Elizabeth had lied. There were dozens of men in tweed suits waiting for Toby to enter the establishment so that they could attack him like pit bulls, fresh for a fight. Henry, grinning a fake grin and serving coffee to the malevolent men, must have been in on this as well. Feeling betrayed, Toby sunk his heels deeper into the ground and darted past it all.

The road was becoming bare as a Van Doesburg painting, and Toby’s gait became slower as he moved along the gravel. Swinging his arms in the air, he was tired as a dog. Staring up into the sky, he shouted out into an empty horizon.

He collapsed immediately after.
There was a sudden spurt of energy -- which way, this way? The confusion had caused Toby to pirouette in circles, unaware of where the emotion would lead him. All he knew was that he was being led somewhere -- like a misshapen magnet, teasing at its course, hideously asymmetric. Exhausted, his feet seemed to move by themselves, first the left and then the right, sometimes overlapping and leaving boot-shaped prints in the mud. He simply followed them, followed them anywhere because the actual destination was not as important as this journey and its indecisive pivots.

One of the more remarkable things was the color of the sky. Its streamlined shape resembled that of a rainbow trout, the spiky clouds like scales on the horizon. At dusk, the trees swayed cautiously in the open and terrified field, the grass keeping still as if in a state of ignorance. As Toby wandered for minutes or hours, his legs becoming weak from the trip, he opened his eyes (his eyes were closed, did he want to see where he was going?) to find that his feet had stopped moving and he was standing at the front door of a rather large green house.

"This is odd," he thought, and looked at his watch and noticed that it had stopped. He figured it must have been after he left Bysche’s house, it was working alright on the drive. Cautiously, Toby walked closer to the house, until his pointy nose was this close to touching the chipped wood of the doorway.

He looked around to notice that the house was in the middle of a treeless field, no one in sight. This frightened him. Not only had he never seen the house, but the eerie surroundings only added to his anticipation. Why had his feet led him here? Was it only psychological, could he really be so drawn? His terrible ache for Bysche overpowered his fear of the bizarre landscape, caked in suspense, and without thinking, he quickly forced his hand to knock on the door, three separate times.

A slight bolt of happiness shot through him when he realized that there was no one answering the door and the house must be abandoned. But this feeling was quickly thwarted when he could see the small body of an old man, fourteen shades of white through the dirty screen.

"Hello," Toby said, surprised. "I’ve lost my way and I was
wondering if you could give me some solid directions. I’ve collapsed and am a bit ill and in desperate need of an indication as to where I am."

"Of course," he said. "Come in."

The entry reminded him of his grandmother’s house. He enjoyed those long summers in Ohio, each day like a drop of sand sliding down the hourglass. He noticed that even the wallpaper was similar, green vertical stripes with mint leaves, very old fashioned, very grandmother. He smirked at the white bedpan situated in the corner of the room.

Glaring up at the old man, he could see him more closely than he had in previous instances. He was set aback. He looked so completely familiar, like some long unmentioned connection was swimming up to surface. A few seconds later, the details clicked in his head so quickly that he hopped a bit, then reverted to ground position, slightly ashamed.

"You’re the man," he said, with a proud recognition, "who was working at the fair. I won a bear from you for my girlfriend!"

The old man smiled. "Yes, I worked there this summer. I don’t get out much while I’m here, you know, and so I thought it might help me out. I was very surprised by your technique and approach; I remember you."

Approaching Toby, the old man smiled delicately and placed his three fingers on Toby’s arm.

"I’d like to show you something I’m just so proud of."

The man slowly led Toby into an open room. Following a white, fluorescent light, Toby reluctantly followed the man; he seemed paramount and engaged.

He was in awe. The room was a radiant green from a distance, but until this time he had thought the green came from some artificial device. The room, the side of a classroom, was filled with plants. On the desk, scientific devices such as microscopes, periodic tables, and counters were arranged neatly around a giant pitcher plant. A slice of bog laurel sat expectantly on a chair, the spongy xerophyte dripping with cold water, smelling like shrimp. Snakes and bugs lay foetus-style inside yellowing formaldehyde tubes, growing cold.

Toby’s mouth opened. "You’ve got some place here."

The man blushed. "It’s just a hobby of mine, like a book that never
reads to the end. I enjoy science, I should think that’s obvious. I’m highly interested in astronomical proportions."

Stepping back, Toby clumsily knocked over a metal table and the papers that it held. The man, unaware, helped him up and helped him clean himself. Trying to appear composed, he touched a coarse, thick-leafed plant that seemed to be set aback.

"That’s my dieffenbachia," he noted. "Quite an interesting subject. In fact, recent studies have found that it has quite an interesting characteristic."

"W...w...what would that characteristic be?"

The man smiled. "Two dieffenbachia plants were planted together, adjacent, in the same pot of soil. Each of the plants had electric devices attached to them. Apparently this tropical plant emits very tiny waves of energy. These devices measured these waves and after careful study were placed at a neutral point. One of the plants was taken out of its soil, and mutilated in front of the other plant. For the next few days, students monitored the remaining dieffenbachia’s emitted waves."

Toby, half-listening, noticed something quite peculiar on the desk. A pack of Marlboro cigarettes lay there, but seemed out of place. He doubted the man smoked, and the pack was so dubiously distorted that it resembled a trash bag. Hamilton went on.

"The first lab student walked in, and the waves that the remaining plant emitted appeared normal. There was little or no change."

Toby, only barely listening with the funnel of his outer ear, saw that on the other side of the room lay Bysche’s trademark coffee mug, tall, overflowing, and unemptied. Or, it looked like Bysche’s. He was becoming very uneasy.

"The second student measures the emitted waves. They are normal. The class is becoming irritable; confused."

Heart rapidly beating, he continued to search the room, silently pleading for the old man to finish his blasted conversation so that he could continue to look for clues in this frightening diorama.

"Until the third student comes in: the same student that mutilated the first plant. The dieffenbachia waves start going out of control, there is a
noticeable change. The plant could sense its demise, could sense that something was wrong. He could sense his friend’s departure. And so you see..."

Toby had collapsed again. Maybe forever.

Epilogue

"Get me a cup of black coffee, Henry." Toby stared out the window at the lack of customers. It surprised him how quickly sensationalism died down, like a mayfly in the August heat. Cupping his hands around the mug, he sipped the bitter liquid, guzzling it down.

Elizabeth sat adjacent to him. Leaning into the counter, she toyed with a purple umbrella drink decoration. It floated inside the exilier like a tiny boatman searching for a raft.

Bysche had returned last night. No one was yet aware. He crept back into his tiny house, half expecting some soul to be there in the darkness, waiting to hold him. He arrived to darkness, and nothing else, set himself down on the mattress, and fell asleep. The brisk eye of morning did not wake him as it usually did. He slept a long time, suffering through dream after dream of replay. It made him cry. He slept so long that he did not arrive at the coffee house until three in the afternoon.

As the little bells rang in the doorway, Henry turned his head to see a round, shaking man step over the threshold. "I’d like a cup of decaf," he requested.

Henry smiled, and commented, teasingly, "Well, you sure are playing it safe."

The young man grinned, and placed a tall mug on the table. "I’m only being cautious, that’s all."
**Untitled**

*by Krista Kovalchuk*

**Part I. Childhood**

Quiet, so quiet in the room. Little Peter learned to listen to this quietness. But no, he is not alone. A clock on the wall that makes the time pass very slowly. He is still living in this room.

It has been an hour since Peter has been sitting by the window. Today they are late.... He doesn't want to sit by the game that his mother got him anymore.

The quietness is interrupted by the telephone. It is probably Mother, and again she will apologize. Yesterday she said that soon there are going to be three of us living at our house. Third, he... Thoughts started jumping everywhere. For some reason there is no urge to think about him...

Yes, it is her calling. She says she will be late. Well, nothing new... I will go wait outside. Oh, yeah. Forgot, today I didn't understand the math. I will take the books too ...

The waiting isn't long. They are coming. Mr. George, as always, has a cigar. It, unfortunately, is never separated from his face, such a kind face, and his very kind eyes. Mrs. Katie is blabbing something. Her kind blabbing is always with her. It makes the house so much warmer. The first thing she wants to do is to feed everyone. And Mr. George, as always:

"So what's new in school, Petrick?"

Peter liked his kind "Petrick." He knows that that's the way his name sounds in Ukrainian.

They don't have kids. They found each other during the war. Mr. George is from Ukraine, and his wife is from Germany.

That is all that Peter knows about them.
Part II. The Loss

Tragedy came somewhat unexpectedly. Sickness. It’s ready to take Mr. George away. It won’t give in and is so determined. He cannot be saved. Too late. Coming back from work, Peter runs to their house. Fritzi lies by the front door. He understands everything. This time he doesn’t welcome, as always, with a gentle bark. Lies, following Peter’s every step with a sad look. No one else is home. They are at the hospital. I decide to take downstairs heavy boxes which Mrs. Katie liked to keep in the basement. Suddenly, the eye stops at the working table that belonged to Mr. George. Everything so familiar. They spent so much time together. They built things together. He was an engineer that worked on radio "stuff." He wanted to show Peter everything, teach him. Memories about fishing, walks, and work on the boat all come back. His fatherly care, good advice, and his kind eyes...

Now he is leaving for eternity.

Part III. Mary

"Dad, Oma is finally here. Look how much stuff she brought. Look how many presents!" That’s how happily Peter’s son George shouts. He has two. It’s little George’s third birthday. And as always, all of the organization Oma took upon herself. That’s how the kids call Mrs. Katie. And especially today, when it is her favorite’s birthday.

Peter got married not too long after Mr. George’s death. No, he didn’t get the education that his father wanted him to.

She came like a spring rain: warm, kind, and desired. She conquered his heart and his soul.

It seemed as if the whole world was against him, against his wish to get married, especially his mother. She didn’t dream about a daughter-in-law like her. Everyone. She is not a match for you. Mrs. Katie kept quiet. In her eyes he found worries and hope.

He didn’t fool himself. Mary was a good wife to him. She made him go back to school. He for sure will be an engineer...
Part IV. A Visit

Mrs. Katie didn’t have guests like that yet. Her brothers’ and sisters’
grandkids decided to visit their lonely aunt. Everything was getting ready as
though the kings were coming. Well, yeah. Everything had to be shown.
She liked her guests. All of them were beautiful and determined.

For some reason, Peter hadn’t come yet. He was busy somewhere.
The meeting came out to be unexpected. Her eyes saw the observing
looks from everywhere. She saw that her guests didn’t like the two young
people that just entered. The language barrier made the situation even more
uncomfortable.

In Katie’s family, everyone talked about the fact that she was going to
leave everything she owned for Peter. Well, why? For these two people?
When the couple left, she felt that everyone was very quiet. And their
behavior said one thing: "Oh, dear aunt. What did you find in them?
Everything for those strangers?"

Yes, for those two. Actually for their kids. Well, the time will show.
And for all of their questioning looks that she found in their eyes,
Katie was ready to answer one thing: "I found in them my life."
THE END OF A GREAT CIVILIZATION...

The Last of the Arda

...THE BEGINNING OF AN EVEN GREATER LEGACY.

by William Daniel Blond II

Prologue: Last Resort

The boy was feeling strange that night. Enemy forces had not been seen for hours and his side’s forces were completely depleted. The dead outnumbered the injured; the injured outnumbered the survivors. As he walked among the dead and dying, their cries of pain and agony rang in his ears; the boy only wondered why he, a simple slave, had lived through the onslaught.

He walked aimlessly. After waiting at his dying master’s hut, the doctors had told him to leave. He could not stand much more of the waiting really, and enjoyed a good stroll when he could get it. This, however, was not a good stroll. This stroll was littered with the doomed and their death throes. He tried to block it out as he ventured to a hill at which he’d spent most of his free time. It was at this hill that he could watch the sunrise.

The sun rose slowly into the air as it gave off the warmth of morning. The dark blue of night was washed away by the light blue dawn as he gazed outward onto the battlefield, miles away. The boy was a slave to a warrior of a secret encampment. The warrior was one of many who roamed the camp. It was one of righteousness and a good cause. The camp was a sort of tribe, which was rival to a neighboring tribe, who went against all they stood for, or at least that’s what he knew. They called themselves "The Civilization of Arda," and the rival tribe was called "The Dark Arda."

The boy was kept in the dark, for the most part. His master would
leave when the battle came close to home and he would be left to tend the
house. He rarely ventured from the house, and when he did, he learned
nothing from the people that he stayed with. From what he'd collected, they
were an ancient civilization, the two tribes. A war had been going on
between the two for thousands of years.

There was a smell in the air, one the boy could not explain. The more
he thought about it, the more he found it was not a smell. It was a feeling
deep inside him, telling of something amiss. He felt as though he was being
found out, and that he was out in the open. He was told that the camp was
hidden and that only their tribe knew of its location.

"Boy?" said a voice from behind him. The boy trembled as he spun
around. He looked at the face of a ragged messenger. The messenger was
wearing the traditional garb of the Messengers of Arda, which consisted of
tight-fitting clothing and lightweight letter holders. He wore boots fashioned
for running, and by the looks of him, he was suffering from exhaustion.
Sweat ran down his face, accompanied by sparse streaks of blood. Every
breath of his was a struggle. He leaned heavily on a crutch.

"Yes... sir?" asked the boy.

"I have this message...", responded the messenger as he coughed.
"This is for the Keeper. I must take this to him, but as you can see...," he
coughed again as he indicated his crutch and bruised limbs, "I am spent. The
Keeper lives on the Mountain of Arda.... Would you take this to him?" asked
the messenger. A look of thoughtfulness was in his eyes. The boy stood
there as confusion washed over him. He went to tell the messenger that he
was the wrong kid for the job but the man interrupted him.

"Please!" said the man with insistence and fear in his eyes. The boy
looked onto him with pity and understanding. The people of Arda never took
on a task without meaning to accomplish it. To fail at a task given to you
was to fail at life itself. The boy nodded solemnly and asked to hear the
message. The messenger shook his head and reached into one of his letter
carriers to remove a tattered scroll. He faltered as if the scroll had a massive
weight, and his eyes flickered. As soon as it touched the hand of the boy, the
messenger fell to his knees.

He raised his arm with great effort and pointed a finger toward the
The boy looked at his chest in disbelief as the messenger motioned for him to move aside. As the boy moved, the man indicated a mountain resting in the distance. The boy looked onward at the mountain that was rumored to be impossible to climb. The sweat of nervousness ran down his face as he gazed. The mountain reached up into the clouds and held dense forest about its feet. His stare was abruptly interrupted by the sound of the messenger falling to the ground.

The boy rushed to him in aid, but it was in vain; the man was dead. He said a few holy words that were spoken at burials he’d been to, and then focused on the matter at hand: getting this scroll to the Keeper of Arda. The boy felt sick at the sight of death, but something drove him to shake it off and get his task accomplished. He strode off in the direction of the mountain.

After twenty minutes of walking, the boy made it to the perimeter of the mountain that was covered in dense forest. The boy lived an isolated life. For his fourteen years of life, the boy had not even ventured into the woods. Trees and related environments were foreign to him. The travel through the dense forest was a mission in itself. One mile of forest, he was told.

His arms had grown bloodied and scarred. His clothes had been dirtied and torn as well. While traveling through the forest, he had thought about abandoning his quest, but just then a black squirrel perched atop a tree branch chattered at him. He’d heard squirrels before, but this one sounded as though it was mocking him. As he went to approach the critter, his foot was caught by a root and he fell on his face. The muddied earth welcomed him, as the forest went wild with the sounds of birds and owls and small mammals, all making mocking noises and gestures.

This forest was attempting to defeat him, thought the boy. He felt a fire go ablaze within himself. This forest and he would both be in competition, but it would not emerge the victor. The boy would make it through this wood if it were his last action. He pulled himself up from the mud and trudged onward.

Three hours later he made it through the forest. He looked back with an air of pride in his lungs. He puffed up his chest and looked back toward the mountain. He shuddered. The mountain had a set of stairs that ran up it. They were covered with grime and mold for the years of decay and
disuse, yet underneath he knew was fine craftsmanship and precision. The staircase was about four feet in width, and the steps themselves were a foot wide and tall. He walked to the edge of the steps and looked upward.

The sun climbed into the air and reflected off the mountain and onto the steps that flickered gold in the light. It was two hours till noon, thought the boy. If this message was as urgent as he was told, he wasn’t making good time. He needed to go faster. He placed his right foot onto the first step with uncertainty to make sure of its support. It held, and the boy dusted himself off and stormed up the steps. The boy traveled at a moderate pace. After half an hour he came to the ring of mist surrounding the mountain and engulfing the stairs. He shrugged his shoulders and entered the mist.

As he traveled through the mist, horrible weights lay upon his shoulders that were so heavy he could have shrugged them no more. Every step became a struggle as exhaustion swept over him. He counted time. Fifteen minutes had gone by and he’d climbed about three steps.

"This is impossible!" he shouted aloud in defiance. Something deep within him held him down and kept him from going further. He could not identify what it was, but it pulled at him from the inside. He felt victory over the forest and defeat by this mountain at the same time. He was gripped by a feeling of winning something only to have it torn away from you because of your own weakness. He fell on the steps and lay there exhausted. He was a failure. He opened his eyes and looked across to meet eyes with the hollowed out sockets of a skull. He was too tired to pull back in fear.

"He let his weaknesses overcome him," said a voice in his mind. The boy looked around dizzily. "He was a failure to himself, just as you are."

"Who are you? Why are you disturbing me? Can’t you see I’m lost?" the boy stated.

"You’ve a long way to go, boy. Pathetic, you are."

"If you believe this is so easy, show yourself and climb up these stupid stairs yourself! I am not one made for such conditions."

"Self-appointed, the best critic is. You are your own weakness, boy."

"What good are you doing me by telling me such things?"

"Stop it! Only when you are broken may you rebuild yourself!"

"Stop speaking in riddles, man!"
"Too far you have gone to quit now. Don’t be pathetic! The weak are those who quit before they have lost! If you wish to give up now, look across the step you are on, and look at where it gets you!" said the voice as it echoed through his mind. "Look at myself," he thought. "I’m so delirious with exhaustion I’m carrying on conversations with myself!" The boy lay there deep in thought.

Why did he make it through the forest if he was to die here? He was a fool, he thought. Striving to conquer the forest was only prolonging the inevitable. He was doomed, and he knew it. He looked at the skull with pity and friendship.

"Well, looks like I’m ending this chapter just as you did yours... Farewell, brother!" the boy said as he closed his eyes and awaited the cold finger of death. As he lay there, he felt a coldness sweep over him. The cold seeped into his ears and flooded his mind. Thoughts of pity and hatred flew through him. The cold crept through him, engulfing his body as it slowly moved toward his heart to seize it. Death was to claim another victim. It was then that a fire burst into existence and pushed away the cold.

His eyes opened and burned with a reddened fury. He was destroying himself. The only reason he’d gotten this far was because of him, and now he was going to die here amongst the bones of failure? No, he shouted in defiance. He forced his eyes open and tore away from death. He took all feelings of hopelessness and failure and pushed them back into his subconsciousness. When he was finished, he found himself lying on the steps with rats and other rodents nibbling on his hand. He recoiled in disgust and threw the creatures from him.

He cast his gaze down the steps and looked at all he’d accomplished by will alone. He remembered the mocking chatter of the squirrel, and then he turned his eyes back up the mountain with the red glare of fury in his eyes. Up there was what he would accomplish before the day was done. The weight was lifted and the steps came more easily to him.

"What we supposed ta be lookin’ for, again?" Beeder asked. He was a small, winged creature with yellow, beady eyes. He stood about three feet in height and had an eight-foot wingspan. His skin was a dark, mottled green.
that was unwashed. He was in flight through the mountain's mist and was surrounded by others of his kind. They were a squadron working for the Dark Arda in search of a messenger that was delivering a message to the Keeper about an oncoming army of the Dark Arda that had discovered the location of their camp. If this was given to the Keeper, he might be able to make an evacuation.

The Great One, leader of the Dark Arda, had ordered his army to destroy everyone. The Great One had managed to get his army's presence past the Keeper of Arda, and if a messenger were to get warning to him, their mission would be foiled. So the Great One sent his most elite spies: the Urds. The Urds were small creatures capable of flight and with good eyesight. Their mission was to kill the messenger before his message was sent.

"We're supposed to be lookin' for a messenger!" said Gorim. Gorim was their leader. He was stronger, faster, and more intelligent, even though Urds were not intelligent to begin with. They were smart enough to respect power, which is why they had Gorim as their leader; he was the most powerful. Another Urd came up to meet them.

"Spech! You find anyone on the steps?" asked Gorim. Spech panted and gave a nod.

"Das one messenger on his way up!" said an exasperated Spech. The Urds, after a signal from Gorim, moved into a special formation.

"Well, boys, looks like we got him! Let's set up for ambush positions!" he said, as he motioned for them to land, and the squadron swooped through the mist and landed at the top of the mountain.

An hour had gone by and the boy finally reached the top. He was told as a child that a magnificent temple rested at the top of this mountain and that a powerful warrior-sage lived in it, along with his most trusted bodyguards. This warrior-sage was said to be the Keeper of Arda, or the leader of the Civilization of Arda. It was told he held massive power, and might that was unbelievable in most respects.

He looked around. Pillars were everywhere. Most of them were destroyed and lay in shambles on the ground. His feet stood on a tiled path.
The tiles were covered in grime and moss. He scraped his toe along the tile to reveal a silvery shine beneath. He eyed the tile and followed it in the direction of the path to see that all the tiles were made of the same stuff. He admired the path's beauty as he strolled along it.

He came to the middle of the path and noticed a bunch of fallen rubble from the pillars. They lay everywhere like sitting stones. He heard a rustle in the distance and jerked into a defensive position. A high-pitched voice rang out of the mist:

"Attack! Charge! Everyone... Attack?" the high-pitched voice faltered. "Hold! Everyone stop!" the voice commanded. The boy stood there, ready for the attack. From out of the mist he could grasp two red pinpoints. They bobbed up and down as they came forward, and then a short form emerged from the mist. It was about three feet in height and had a set of dark leathery wings tucked behind it. Its eyes were a beady yellow and its teeth, which were sharp fangs, matched the color. It was slightly reptilian looking and had a dog-like muzzle. Its skin was scaled and was dark mottled green in color.

The boy took two steps back in fear as more of the grimy looking creatures landed around it. He was now surrounded by twelve of them. All of them were snickering softly. The first one came forward with confusion in his eyes.

"We were gonna waste ambush tactics on dis? Look at him! He don't even got no Power!" said the creature. Another of them spoke up.

"Say, Gorim! What we gonna do wit' him?"

"I dunno! Kill 'im?" replied Gorim. The boy stood there in shock as the thing approached him. "Whatsa matter? Ain't you ever seen an Urd before?"

"What are you going to do to me?" asked the boy.

"Kill ya. We can't have you deliver dat message."

"But I have no message."

"What's dat?" asked Gorim, as he indicated the scroll in the boy's quivering hand.

"This? This isn’t a message." He held it up, with the wax seal in his direction. "This is my mother's. She wants me to give it to someone down
there." He pointed down the mountain.

"You mean 'a tell me dat you live up here?" The boy nodded. "Den I call you a liar, liar. Besides, dat's the Seal of Arda. We got you, boy."

"But I don't even know what's on this! You cannot murder me for carrying a scroll."

"Don't think of it as 'murder.' Think of it as," Gorim paused to pat his belly, "fillin' our bellies..."

The sun reached its peak and the light shone down on the mountaintop. The majority of the mist cleared. Storm clouds rolled in from the east. The boy was in panic. He had believed it was going to be difficult to send this message back at the forest, but this was not what he had expected. Gorim stopped rubbing his belly and walked to the edge of the mountaintop. He waved toward the boy and beckoned him. The boy reluctantly walked over with him.

"You's a sad boy. I figure I tell you why we gonna kill you. It would be unfair to kill such a sad boy without him knowing why," said Gorim, as he motioned toward the plains and meadows lying below, miles away from the camp. The boy looked onward, not sure of what he was looking for, and then he saw it. The storm clouds from the east cast a shadow on it. It was an army! It slowly poured across the countryside like molasses, man after man. The boy's mouth gaped open in disbelief.

"They're headed straight toward...," he stammered.

"Your camp," said Gorim.

"But that's impossible! Our camp's location is known only to us!"

"Yes, dat's true. Was hard to find. We would've never found it on our own."

"On your own?" the boy repeated. A person's face flashed in his mind.

"Yeah, we find him starving for food and he told us all we wanted to know when we took him in," said Gorim. "Looked remarkably like you, boy. What was his name? Mialdokolo, I believe?"

"Mialdokolo," the boy repeated. The name was far too familiar. The face in his mind's eye took shape and he knew immediately who it was. Like him, Mialdokolo was a slave. He was a friend with the boy for as long as he
could remember. All while growing up, the boy knew he was a sick mind waiting for an opportunity to strike. He cared nothing for others’ feelings and did not care about today, but about tomorrow, and who would rule tomorrow. He was nicknamed the boy’s twin because of their remarkable resemblance to each other.

He was exiled from the Civilization after he allowed a girl to be attacked by a beast and did not call for help, or try to save her. It was said that he watched with eager eyes as the beast killed the girl. The Keeper of Arda ordered him to be turned away, and he was exiled from the camp. No one was known to be exiled and survive it, and life went on in the camp believing he had died.

The storm clouds swirled overhead and the boy felt the first drops of rain. There was something strange about this storm, though. With it came darkness. Almost immediately, daylight on the mountain was blocked out completely. All the boy could see were the dark mottled spots on the Urds that glowed in the dark.

"The Great One say he must destroy every last one of the Civilization of Arda. Not a single survivor can there be. True victory can only be achieved when yer opponent is completely destroyed, or so says the Great One."

"Of course, you know our army is depleted?"

"Oh, sure! Dat’s the fun part! The Great One isn’t sending dis army to have a war; he’s sending dem as an extermination squad," Gorim said, with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle.

"You are sick!" the boy stated with disgust. He slipped the scroll into a pouch at his belt as he backed away. There were people down there he knew and loved. Though he was a slave, he was never mistreated or hurt. The people, though not linked by blood, were his people. These creatures were working for a person that was going to mindlessly murder women and children and the wounded. He stepped back in frustration.

There was nothing he could do. There he stood, knowing he was miles from the people and only inches from creatures that would kill him before he could warn the Keeper surrounding him. He stepped back and then he stopped. Tears rolled down his face. He kept asking himself why he’d
been so foolish. If he had only refused to let himself get defeated on the stairs he would have been able to tell the Keeper, and the camp would be saved! The people of the camp would be senselessly slaughtered, all because of him!

"Awww..., look at dat! He's cryin'! Don't worry, your death will be quick and painless," said Gorim, as he stalked closer to the boy. "Sorry 'bout dis, boy!"

The boy brought his fists up in front of his face. His face grew scarlet with anger and frustration. He stomped his foot and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"STOP CALLING ME BOY!" he said, just before it all went black.

The Army of the Dark Arda marched across the plains on their dreadful mission. Theirs was one of death and destruction. This was not an army: it was a legion of death bringers to the opponent. There was no army to defend against it. The General looked forward into the distance.

"Looks like the storm will drown out the sound of the cavalry," he said. The General called for a halt. The army and cavalry were halted. The General dismounted to give his victory speech.

"Well, boys, this is a very important mission. We are to exterminate every single Ardaian down to the very last one. There can be no survivors. Take no prisoners! Cha--," he was cut off by the sound of his army in awe. They all motioned toward the Mountain of Arda where a huge beam of light crashed from the clouds above and down onto the mountaintop. It resembled lightning, but it was more focused and less random in its movement. Though miles away, it cast enough light for the whole army to make out the detail of the landscape.

The beam persisted for a minute and then disappeared. Following it was a massive booming noise. It was equal to five times the crash of thunder. The boom lasted for thirty seconds and then ceased. The ears of all the men heard long drawn out ringing. The men everywhere in The Dark Army were quieted and hushed. The General ordered silence and they were silenced almost immediately.

The Lieutenant scrambled up to the general with fear in his eyes.
"Maybe the messenger wasn’t found by the Urds, Sir! Maybe they were destroyed!"

"Shut your hole, Lieutenant!" shouted the General. "We shall await their return!"

"But, Sir!"

"I said we should await their return, Lieutenant. The thought of someone in that capable of an attack is absurd! What part of that don’t you understand?" he said through his teeth. The General was a husky man of around five foot two inches in height. Many people had to look down on him to speak with him and he wasn’t looked at with much respect, but when he talked through his teeth, those who didn’t follow through were never heard from again.

"I was just suggesting, Sir," said the lieutenant. The General beckoned the lieutenant. The lieutenant hushed and walked cautiously toward him. He waited at the General’s side nervously. The General motioned him closer. Without warning the boot of the General collided with the lieutenant’s face, sending him to the rain soaked floor.

The army waited in uneasy silence for ten minutes until a group of eleven Urds flew in. They landed in front of the General, and he ordered the lieutenant to make a headcount. The lieutenant finished counting heads and reported the results to the General.

"Eleven, shir!" he said in a broken voice; the lieutenant’s now missing teeth became evident.

"Eleven?" asked the General in disbelief as the lieutenant nodded in confirmation. "Spech, where’s Gorim?"

The boy awoke with a start. He was lying on the ground, and his head felt full of buzzing and his sight was blurred. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils. He looked in the direction of the smell to reveal a smoldering pile his foot was lying in. He jumped up with a start, and shook his foot about to put out the flame. After he extinguished the flame, he approached the pile.

It seemed to be flesh that had been charred and blackened to a pile. The smell made him want to gag. Each moment he examined it, he grew
sicker. Just as he was about to discover the nature of the pile, the stench became too much and he was overwhelmed by sickness. He ran from the pile and purged himself. He stood there a moment, then looked back to the pile. He purged himself again.

The boy chose to leave the pile be, and walked along the path in the direction of the Temple of Arda. It was strange, thought the boy, that all around him was silence. There was the rumble of the storm but nothing more. He picked up his pace and raced for the temple. The clouds gathered all around him, and darkness washed over the mountaintop. He looked up at the noon sun and saw with surprise that it was nowhere to be seen.

It was almost completely dark when he reached the doors to the temple. The temperature had dropped significantly, as he could almost see his breath. The doors were massive in size and reached well over his height by at least three times. They were very weather worn and aged. The huge hinges the doors were held up by were long since rusted. He approached the doors and grabbed a rusted doorknocker and attempted to move it, but to no avail; it was held motionless by the years of rust.

If this was such a magnificent temple, thought the boy, then why are these doors so ill used? He began to wonder if the Keeper of Arda was even alive or if he even existed. This was madness! He had wasted his time by...

The doors to the temple creaked open loudly. They swung inward and a voice beckoned for him. The boy eyed the interior suspiciously, and then slowly entered the aged abode. After he took ten paces, the doors swung shut behind him, and the last of the stormy air rushed in quickly. He looked around in amazement; the interior of the temple looked as new as it must have been the day of its creation.

Huge pillars, like the ones outside, were in a row going down the room. A row was to his left, and a row was to his right. They stretched down the temple’s length. The boy noticed quickly the torch holders with torches lit already. There were five of these torches on each pillar. the inside of the temple was very well lit, which gave the boy a good view of the altar lying beyond.

He paced toward the altar with a moderate pace. The ceilings, walls, arches, supporters, and pillars awed him. This interior was an architectural
masterpiece. All had been done just so, and with amazing precision. It was like a gigantic cathedral, minus the pews. He walked toward the altar with his head in the clouds. When he reached the altar he locked his gaze onto it.

It was a large statue of a figure forcing himself up. The statue was constructed of gray marble and was mounted on a slate pedestal with small brass bowls holding flame. He could not discern the gender of the figure, but it had a large, muscular build. It looked beaten and destroyed with a grimace of pain in its face, yet it was standing in defiance against unseen foes.

"Ah, it seems you've made it, boy," said an old voice from the shadows. A robed form came from the shadows with a hood cast over its face and its arms crossed. The boy looked toward it with curiosity. The form removed the hood from his head to reveal an old, wise face. A long white beard flowed from his chin, and his eyebrows were bushy and bristled. His eyes were a deep blue. The man looked many years of age, yet in his eyes it showed much more. As the boy looked into his eyes, he looked into more than an old man's wisdom; he looked into centuries.

"Who are you?" asked the boy. The old man walked closer to him in a sort of sidestep toward the altar. He stared at the statue and looked to the skylight above it.

"Why, child...," he removed his gaze from the altar. "Who do you believe me to be?"

"Well, the Keeper of Arda is a very powerful warrior-sage, I'm told." The man's eyes widened with pride. "You are his servant?" presumed the boy. The old man's brow furrowed, and he looked around dryly. The old man shook it off and held a hand out, and with the boy's eyes following, followed it to his chest as he indicated himself. The old man stood there, proud and slightly pompous.

"You?" the boy repeated in disbelief, as the old man nodded and leaned on the altar heavily. "The Keeper is a very powerful warrior!"

The old man nodded with enthusiasm.

"But you're old!"

"Now, quiet you be! Old may I be, but that gives you no right to disrespect me. I am the Keeper of Arda and I am a very powerful warrior-sage."
"But how can you be a warrior at such an age?"

"Naught does age have to do with being a warrior, boy. In my prime I was literally a very powerful warrior, but today that song has a different tune. I am still a warrior, boy. What do you want with me? Times are grim, child, hurry," he urged, as the boy fumbled through his pouch to retrieve the message. The boy grabbed the message and transferred it to the old man's hand. The man looked over the message with cold and stern eyes.

The boy stood there adamant. The hopes and dreams of the Civilization of Arda relied on this? A haggard old man calling himself a warrior? He was not at all amused. This was pointless. He knew little of the Civilization, but this made him lose a large portion of faith he had in them.

"What does it say?" asked the boy. The Keeper's eyes were clouded with anger and frustration. His face reddened.

"The Great One clouded my mind, preventing me from knowing of his army. He used his powers on me during the battle when I was under great strain to cloud my mind. The Dark Army has fixed its location on us, and is headed our way to destroy us completely." His face grew calm. He silently folded up the document and placed it in his pocket.

"What do you mean, 'his powers'? How could he 'cloud' your mind?"

"You know naught of the Power of Arda, do you boy?" he asked. The boy shook his head in response. The old man motioned for him to sit, so he did. The Keeper stood in front of the altar and drew in a deep breath. The boy had a feeling this was going to be a while, so he adjusted his sitting position into a more comfortable manner.

"Long ago, an ancient civilization formed, and they called themselves 'The Civilization of Arda.' For years they had based their lives upon maintaining the balance between Good and Evil. They swore to never allow one to become more powerful than the other. They used their gift of a strange and unusual power they called 'The Power of Arda.' The power allowed them to surpass their weaknesses, and gain power in their strengths, to unbelievable proportions.

"You may not know it, but your weaknesses hold power in themselves.
By drawing from this weakness and using it to supplement their strengths, they could achieve anything. Their agility would be multiplied, the strength would double, and their health would reach impossible levels. Their defense against attacks would be unbreakable. But with all this power, there were side effects.

"The power, if not harnessed, could reach levels of such power that the user would be destroyed in using it. The users had a wall they called the Spirit, deep within themselves. If the power, which came from within, passed beyond this wall, they would be destroyed. So the Civilization developed a plan to keep this from happening: the Keeper of Arda.

"The Keeper is a person who harnesses the power of all those in the Civilization to keep the Spirit strong enough to keep the power from passing through it. The Keeper would keep his position for one thousand years."

"One thousand years? How could one live so long?" asked the boy incredulously.

"With using this power to put their bodies in maximum efficiency and keep everything balanced, the people of Arda were capable of living for years. I myself am about to reach my thousandth year.

"Anyways, after one thousand years, the Keeper must perform a Passing. Someone must come forward and receive The Keeping. This person, in turn would live for a thousand years. Most of the people of Arda live an average of two hundred years. Only the Keeper lived for a thousand years.

"However, harnessing so many people's power and Spirit puts a horrible strain on the Keeper. That is how the Great One clouded my mind. While the battle raged on, I had most of my power in my defense against things that could cloud me. My army was growing desperate, so I tapped into my defensive power and added it onto my power, and then onto my army. We barely got away with a quarter of our original force, and I wonder what could have happened if I'd used the power I added from my defense.

"I would have probably not been clouded, but my army would all have died without even placing a dent in the Great One's Army. I feared this would happen. Now we are to be completely destroyed."

"Why does the Great One seek to destroy everyone from the
Civilization? I know some can simply be vicious and seek death and destruction, but he seems to take it very seriously...

"Seems! His very life depends on it!"

The boy stared with confusion.

"Long ago, after the First Keeper was established and he had harnessed the power for nine hundred years, half of the Civilization started a rebellion and turned from the Cause by lust for power and disrespect of the Keeper of Arda. They refused to follow him, and wished to use their gift of the Power not to balance but to ruin and create havoc and destruction.

"This half was then called The Dark Arda. They were not content with a world of balance, and split from the Civilization on a mad quest to rule all. The leader of the rebellion was since known as the Great One. This horrid turn of events forced the Civilization of Arda to change their priorities and values. They could not continue their mission of balance with the Dark Arda commanding such power and bent on causing chaos. So they began a crusade that was to simply stop the Dark Arda and destroy them right down to the very last one.

"The Great One was faced with something horrible also. He could not achieve his true power because of the split in the Civilization. When it split, the power split with it. Only by completely destroying every last one of the Civilization of Arda could their power build on its own and they could grow in strength.

"You see, our existence is like an anchor for their power. We keep them as they are and in this small lake of power. When we are destroyed, the anchor is broken and they can travel all the seas and oceans of power and energy they wish. Their power will be absolute."

"So, what now?" the boy insisted. The Keeper gazed into his eyes coldly.

"We are finished. Nothing I can do will prevent his army from crushing ours and butchering our people."

"Finished!" the boy said, with tears in his eyes. How could this be, he thought. A civilization built on raw power and might was finished? The boy had faced death and braved the wilds only to have an old man tell him there was no hope? He was infuriated.
"I can’t believe this! You mean to tell me there’s no hope?"

"I never said that. There is always hope. There is always a last resort. A last ditch effort to come out on top."

"You have one?"

"Yes, and it involves you," said the old man, as he beckoned two figures from the darkness. The figures came forth to reveal a man and a woman. The woman guided a small girl alongside her. The two must have been the parents of the child, as they regarded the girl with care and had a striking resemblance.

"And her. She is our last hope. Our last resort," he said, as the boy stared at him dubiously.

"Her? Keeper, she is a child... How can this help? We have an army in the thousands approaching our camp and we are doomed, and you say a girl will save us?"

"Yes. I am going to perform a Passing. I will pass on the Keeping to her. Her name is Aurora."

"But, Keeper, she is too young... Won’t her Spirit Wall be too small to contain your power?"

"Yes, but this one is special. Her heart is pure and innocent. And she is the last one of our people. She has never used her power before. An Ardaian who uses his power first cannot become the Keeper. The power used by an Ardaian for the first time is always of titanic proportions and uncontrolled. Once used, they lose the ability to become the Keeper, as they have spent a great deal of their Spirit in using the power and forcing their body to adapt to it. After becoming a Keeper, they still contain the raw pool of energy deep inside them, though."

"But, Keeper, even if you pass on your power to her, what good will it do? We are still about to be exterminated..."

"Yes, but this is where I need you," said the Keeper. The boy was dumbfounded. "Me? I don’t..."

"Yes, you. You shall be her guardian in the years to come... There isn’t much time now!" shouted the Keeper. He began to strain, as he focused his power into his center. Time seemed to stand still as he gathered his might. A blue light blurred his outline. The interior of the Temple of Arda
was filled with the blue light. Sweat ran down his face and steam rose from below him. The boy was awestruck. From outside, the cracks in the temple shone through with the blue light.

In the dark recesses of the Great One’s Palace, the Great One sat atop his golden throne. He sat there, pondering his victory with pride, when all of a sudden something strange washed over him. It was a great focusing of power and might. He knew not what the focusing meant, but it reminded him of something similar one thousand years ago. He could not put his finger on it, and he sent out his Spirit Wall to discover its location.

The location came to him, and then it left him. He shouted in frustration and anger. His fist came crashing down on his armrest. Fury overtook him. Then out of nowhere its exact location was discerned: the Temple of Arda! His fury overwhelmed him.

"That fool! I’ve already won; doesn’t he know that? Why is he wasting his time? My army is going to cru--," he screamed violently, and then abruptly stopped. At that point the only thing running through his mind was the death of his foe, and the fact that he was not going to be given a tie like this. He sensed more than the Passing. Some extra energy was being gathered for another purpose altogether.

"Mialdokolo!" he commanded. Within moments the young boy had made it to his chambers.

"Yes, Great One?" replied the boy. The Great One’s voice was full of hate and anger.

"The Keeper of Arda is performing a Passing!" he said as the boy nodded with a grim smile. "But there is something else... A time warp! He is going to send the new Keeper into the future! Come close, Mialdokolo..." requested the Great One. The boy approached him with fear and suspicion. The great One jerked his hand from within the folds of his black robes and onto the boy’s head. A strange power surged through the boy’s body as the Great One spoke in a loud, shrill voice.

"You shall be my Guardian, my assassin in the days to come. You will live on to destroy the girl if I fail! Do you understand?" shouted the Great One, as the young one nodded fearfully. "Pray to the Dark Ones, and grow
in power! Now, be gone!" he shouted, as a gate of blackness opened behind the boy and he threw him into it. The Great One turned in the direction of the Temple of Arda and focused all his energy into himself. He even took energy from around him, and from his slaves in their chambers below him. He forced the energy into himself and with a painful grimace gave out one last cackling statement.

"Well, my army shall be destroyed by such a blast, as well as myself and this temple. So be it! I shall strike down the Keeper, his temple, his mountain, his people... all shall perish in the name of the Great One! Ah, ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, as the energy overwhelmed him and passed far beyond his Spirit Wall, and he focused it into a sharp beam. The ceiling and walls around him busted and collapsed. He felt the energy boiling within him as he forced every last thing he had to the surface. The walls began to fall apart for the last time before the palace would be destroyed.

He released his energy in a stretching beam that consumed his body and his surroundings as it burst through the wall, and left the Palace of the Great One as a pile of rubble and debris. His energy of death and destruction left a long black trail as it streaked to its target. The Great One was no more, but his energy lived on, his last ditch effort to destroy the last of the Arda. As the remnants of his body lay under the thousands of pounds, all he could do was relish his victory and laugh with all the vile darkness that he was. Time had run out, with him as the victor.

The Temple of Arda shook with terrible force. The brilliance that was its architecture was being destroyed by the second. The boy stood there attempting to steady himself. Stone and debris came from the ceiling as the Keeper stood calmly, collecting energy.

"Place her on the altar!" he shouted. The parents did so, as the blue light engulfed her. Aurora cried as she lay at the foot of the statue. The Keeper drew forth his hand and placed it onto the boy's chest. The blue light from him climbed off and onto the boy. The Keeper had to yell to keep his voice above the noise. "You shall be her Guardian, her Defender in the days to come. You hold unknown powers, boy. Go to the Mage Tower and receive the Test of the Magi. You will have the lifetime of four men, child. Live on!
Find the Heroes of Legend, and defend her! Go! I will be watching you!"

The blue light surrounded him, and the last thing he saw was the parents of the girl being thrown aside by the rubble and the Keeper being overwhelmed by his energy as he passed it into Aurora. His eyes locked with the girl’s, and at that point he saw what the Keeper was talking about: raw and unbridled power were in those eyes. The boy felt weakened and shrunken by her presence. She had no idea of the massive power she held. For a moment he saw what they called "The Spirit Wall." It was a huge, shimmering white light that was engulfing her. It was around ten times her size, and even then he was standing within its boundaries. The blue light surrounded him, and he blacked out into a deep, forceful sleep.

Miles away from the Mountain of Arda, the boy appeared with a flash of blue light and a clap of thunder. He fell violently onto the ground. He stood up with strain and effort and gazed forward. All was blackness. He could see the outline of the Mountain of Arda and the blue light now emanating from the Temple of Arda. A huge, billowing black cloud rolled in from the east. It was not a natural cloud, for he could sense it was born of evil.

The cloud ceased its rolling and went into a hover above the mountain’s peak. Crimson lightning flickered about its insides and streaked out in random directions. The boy pondered the Keeper’s reasoning behind teleporting him here. In one moment, a flash of burning victims and explosions filled his mind’s eye. They cried out in pain and agony as they suffered from the final death throes. The image wiped itself from his mind. He jerked his head to the east where his eyes met with the unearthly terror.

A huge beam of black energy was streaking straight toward the mountain. It was magnificent in power, as the boy could actually feel the beam’s power from where he stood. The beam raced onward toward its target. The boy made a cold realization: the Civilization of Arda was doomed. The Keeper knew this. He wasn’t creating a defense! He was sending the girl away to a different time, and he was being teleported away because of it, because he was her guardian.

All the animals and creatures of the forest were going crazy. Every
creature capable of making a noise was making it. His eyes returned to the mountain as the beam crashed into it soundlessly. All went silent. The mountain began to glow with a gray light. There was a sudden flash of blue from within the temple that broke holes into the walls enough to let onlookers see inward. His eyes followed up the mountain and focused on the black storm cloud. A huge bolt of crimson shot from its center and touched the mountain. All went silent. Almost immediately the mountain exploded with a violent force. A colossal sphere of flame consumed the mountain and increased in size until it ate up the nearby land whole. The sphere broke at the poles and turned into a large circle of fire stretching outward.

The boy stood there in disbelief. The wall of fire stretched outward and outward until finally the light became so bright he had to shield his eyes. The wall stopped expanding and stayed there frozen. With a fantastic flash of light and energy, the wall flew outward as tremendous energy. The boy was thrown forty to fifty feet by the blast. He landed in a tree with bruises and scratches covering him. The blast came at speeds of thirty to forty miles per hour in every direction. It went on for five minutes, as the boy clung to the branch for all his worth.

Finally, it ceased. The force quit coming, and the boy fell out of the tree clumsily. He looked up at the crater that was once the magnificence of the Mountain of Arda as tears welled up in his eyes. He cursed himself for his slowness in getting the letter to the Keeper. So many lives were lost, all because of his weakness. He was a failure, and others were punished for him. He sank into a crying heap under the ravaged tree.

"Why are you cursing yourself, boy?" said the voice of the Keeper.
"Because I’ve failed you, I’ve failed everyone," he said, in between sobs.

"No, child, you don’t have to act in such a manner. It has all turned out as it should. The time for Good and Evil to lock horns on the battlefield is for another day. It is a long battle, but it will not be won today. Another day, another day, my child. You will have the lifespan of four men... Live on. Take the Test of the Magi and grow in power as a wizard. You have powers you have yet to awaken. Live on to find the Heroes of Legend..."

"Who are these heroes? How will I tell?" said the boy, wiping away
tears.

"Know you shall. You must be her Guardian in the years to come. Live on, live on..., live on!" were the last words of the Keeper of Arda as his spirit left the world. The boy stood up with a focused pain and anger flowing through him.

"I will seek redemption for my weaknesses and you will be mine, Mialdokolo! This is not over!" he said sternly. The boy gazed onward into the sky that was now covered in a sickly gray. This was not over, he thought. This was not over.
Life is What You Make of It

by Jennifer Lynn Gumas

It was early morning at the Woodland Apartment complex. Like every other morning, the sun rose over the hill, crept lazily across town, and finally cast its warmth on the furrowed, grumpy gray brick structures. The lumpy apartments tried their best to shrug off the warmth of the sun, emanating a haughty coldness from their peeling black shutters, barred windows, and bolted doors.

Margaret took her time on the slippery sidewalk as she made her way down to her mailbox. The landlord was supposed to hire somebody to shovel the snow off of the sidewalks, but he never did.

"Somebody is going to fall and break her hip," Margaret muttered. Her cane cast a crooked shadow on the muddied February snow. The cars from the highway had corrupted the innocent, sparkling snow on the lawn with carelessly spattered slush.

"How ugly," she scowled.

Meanwhile, Betsy was hobbling toward her mailbox from an adjacent apartment. Betsy paused on the sidewalk for a minute to take a deep breath of the fresh, crystalline air. She smiled warmly, noting the bird footprints scattered in the snow. She always told her grandchildren that they were fairy footprints when they came to visit her. Looking up, she saw her neighbor Margaret fumbling with her mailbox. "Why, hello, Margaret! What a pleasure to see you this time in the morning!"

Margaret mumbled a reply under her breath as she tried to jam the tiny key into its corresponding tiny keyhole with her wrinkled, clumsy fingers. "Yes, yes, Betsy. Nice to see you, too," she forced impatiently. Margaret’s mind wandered to what she would fix for breakfast, whether or not her grandchildren had written her thank-you notes for their Christmas gifts, and
whether or not her languid landlord would ever fix her broken window, as she thumbed through her mail with trembling hands. She jumped as Betsy came up alongside of her and started talking again. Margaret tuned out her jovial ramblings. She envied the way that Betsy easily inserted her key into her mailbox, removed her mail, and effortlessly shut the door. Of all the nerve! Betsy was six years older than she was! "Well, it was nice seeing you again, Betsy," Margaret interrupted Betsy in mid-sentence. "Hope to see you again soon!"

"Yes, yes! Like I was saying, you can stop by for breakfast anytime, my dear!" Betsy continued, still smiling warmly. "Good day!"

Betsy ambled up the precarious sidewalk, up the rotting staircase, and back into her modest apartment. Her cat Peppermint greeted her with a friendly purr and a rub against her leg as she entered the room. Her apartment was nothing to brag about, but she had tried to ward off the cold atmosphere by hanging objects of warmth and comfort around the rooms. A picture of her three grandchildren, whom she loved dearly, hung over her living room sofa. Betsy paused to look out through the bars of her window. The snow-covered lawn, though polluted with brown, still enthralled her. She looked like a child captivated by a sparkling blanket of snow on Christmas morning.

Betsy sat down at her simple kitchen table and began to sort through her mail. After sorting through a few bills and a letter from her darling grandson, Betsy came across a strange envelope. She squinted and held the letter up to her crimson nose to read the return address. It was from the landlord. Holding the letter close to her face, Betsy read the contents of the letter:

_Dear Mrs. Betsy Bennette,_

_We regret to inform you that Woodland Apartments will be closing due to circumstances out of our control. All tenants must vacate their apartments by April 3, 2001. Any belongings left after this deadline will be considered the property of Woodland Apartments Management. We apologize for any inconvenience this has caused you, and we thank you for your patronage._

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Betsy’s hand shook with growing astonishment as she lowered the letter to the kitchen table, gently, as if it would break if she let it fall. "Imagine that!" she murmured. The same warm smile spread across her face. She was moving! What an adventure! "I must call the children at once to tell them the good news! This is fantastic!"

At precisely the same moment that Betsy was opening her letter from the landlord, Margaret was opening the same letter in the adjacent building. She read it a second, then a third time, just to make sure that she had perceived the message correctly. Her brow furrowed, and her mouth opened in horror. Margaret let out a sob of desperation. She felt very weak. Her white, pale countenance seemed to take on a shade of sooty gray, much like the ruined February snow on the lawn below, as she lowered her head into her arms and began to cry.
The Great Stain Remover

by Christine Witkowski

"Mom...," a whining voice sails through the grocery store aisles. I look down to see my runny-nosed five year old sister staring up at me, dark circles outlining her light blue eyes, pale skin to match her icy fingers.

"Can we go home? I wanna go home, puleez?"

My mother sniffles and quickly wipes her sore nose on a red fleece sleeve, sighs and takes Kayla's hand, saying nothing in response.

I ignore them both, shuffling through different types of Dimetapp's and multi-colored bottles of orange and purple cold syrups. Which one will work the best, which one will cost the least...?

I swipe back loose strands of hair from my forehead and shift my weight, holding different boxes in each hand, as if weight determined which to buy. I haven't yet mastered the understanding of cold medicines. At six thirty this morning, Kayla's shuffling steps came towards my room. I watched her struggling attempts to open the door for a good ten minutes, each time the knob turned half way under her tiny grasp, then fell back. Finally, I pulled my limp legs from under the warmth of covers and let her in. A tear-streamed face and flushed cheeks told me the words "I don't feel good" were coming before she even opened her mouth.

"M-o-m..."

Screw it. I throw them both into the silver metal grocery cart and push down the aisles, yank Kayla's small arm with me.

I feel strangely annoyed by the brightly-lit store and synthesized rendition of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" as I weave my way through parents and employees, looking for the short line that doesn't exist.

We make our way through large holiday greetings displays, and announcements blurting in through the music to say, "'Tis the season to be
jolly! Pick up a bargain-priced bottle of Cheer! Guaranteed to take out any stain." I smile impatiently at the women behind the counter. Her old tobacco stained hands slowly glide groceries past the flashing light of the electronic scanner.

I bite my bottom lip, let my face stare blankly at the clerk’s slow moving hands; the wails from Kayla evaporate into the ambient noise. I have never been this tired. But that history project is due tomorrow, and I haven’t even started it. Of course, that is just because I am a procrastinator. "Maybe if you didn’t wait until the last minute, you wouldn’t be so stressed out..." I already hear my mother’s exasperated voice scolding me tonight when I am still up past midnight doing homework. Maybe if I didn’t have to clean up after both of you all the time, take out the trash by myself, feed the dogs, scrub the dishes, help Kayla with her homework, make her dinner, shovel the driveway, vacuum every room so that the dust mites don’t bother her allergies. Maybe if you didn’t work so much, if Dad was still alive, if I was smart, maybe then I would be able to get everything done, and I wouldn’t be struggling with school, or staying up until two a.m. to get all of my homework done, then falling asleep in class. Maybe if you didn’t make everything my fault.

I clench my fist around the now crumpled twenty, trying to control a seething anger. Why is she taking so long?

"Twenty-two fifty’s the total," she mutters under a voice worn with age.

My mother pushes me out of the way, snaps open her purse and hastily throws change on the counter. When I protest that I have a twenty to pay for it, she shakes her head.

The clerk turns around to grab small bifocals and places them on her nose.

"Five..., six..." She drags each coin slowly and painstakingly across the countertop while muttering its value. With each sliding scrape, I feel even more like kicking the counter.

"I don’t have the time for this, just hurry up!" My mother grabs the change from the clerk’s frail hand, slapping each coin down loudly and deliberately.
"Fifty, and three," she says sharply to the coins.

I pick up my bag of groceries in one arm and Kayla in the other. I want to scream and wish I had an extra set of hands to cover my ears from the cheery music.

My mother walks up closely behind me as we leave through the automatic doors, past the wall of advertisements and "lost" signs. She reaches out to take Kayla.

"I’ve got her," I say, annoyed.

But she holds her arms out, her long face staring at me. For the first time, I notice how exhausted she looks, her hair tossed up, silver strands weaving into black. Her jeans are worn at the knees, white tennis shoes still stained green from last spring’s lawn. You’re not supposed to wear white shoes past Labor Day.

"Lindsay," she says with exasperation. I act as though I don’t know the name, turn my head over the brown paper bag, behind Kayla’s curly hair to check for cars, cross the street.

"Lindsay," this time it’s softer. "I’m sorry."

"It’s okay."

And with that resolution, we pull out of the parking lot, away from the Christmas carols, the cold syrups, and the clerk. Away from bargain-priced Cheer that can’t take any real stains out.