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PROMETHIA

2010 THROUGH 2011
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A Note from the Editors

A person is not the same before and after writing a poem, short story, or even essay. A transformation occurs, both on the page and in your head. Ideas and images and emotions and conversations become art, at once concrete and nebulous. What you hold in your hands is tangible, but what the writer experienced in the process is not. Writing is both holy and messy. Whether you write or not, respect that. Respect the written word.

Rachel Whitlock

For me writing is a bit like Dr. Frankenstein and his creature. We take thoughts, ideas, stories, and experiences from ourselves and others and we knit them together to create something new, something that had not existed before putting pen to paper or fingertips to the keyboard. It’s an incarnational art form limited by the very thing we use to create it: language.

Alycia West
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Fences

Keith Gogan

At my apartment complex in Tulsa's “Little Mexico”
The manager has decided to finally replace its perimeter fence
Around these little brick hives of lives.
The fence had been leaning like a wooden wave with
Slats missing here and there where
The niños, seeking the path of least delay
To get to the school on the other side of the fence
Squeeze through in their
Weekday semi-finity of khaki and navy their
Backpacks snagging on the fence's rusty nails
That help the fence do its backwards job
Trying to keep the kids in
And I imagine that some of their kin
Have faced a fence or two somewhere where
The Rio Grande flows beneath a heatlamp sun or
Where Baja bumps up against San Diego County

And I think that these fences are odd things
Attracting people

Like an air-conditioned shop in Bangkok

But not letting them in or out
I'd like to see a world without them
But I'm not ready for that yet because
Some fences live within us

I can see myself saying
As Ronald Reagan once did,
"Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"
Except
I call the wall
A fence
And I replace Gorbachev's name
With my own
Somewhere Over the Rainbow

_Amber Earls_

I have Mocha skin
I have dear sweet espresso-flavored chocolate-covered Mocha skin
Cool like coffee
Smooth like lacquer
Roll-around-in-the-mud-and-clay-cooled-all-the-way-down Mocha skin
And my daughter does not.

She has Caramel-Copper skin
Like Sylvia Earls (my mother) circa 1976
At the height of the East Coast revolution
If one were to
Slap some plaid and platforms on her, those two would be identical
because she is her
Grandmother's girl.
Caramel-Copper skin
It engulfs her as if she chose to go to
A Niagara Falls showering bubbling sugar and water
Like ribbon it encases her and drapes over her like silk.

And I have Mocha skin.

My son has tea-at-three-skin
Like
When you go to a place like the Dragon Moon
And order Earl Grey tea in the afternoon
And look into the cup of tan
And put the cream into your hand
Pouring slowly
You watch the cream and Earl Grey marry
Until it becoming
The smoothest shade of beige.
My son is tea-at-three beautiful
Canvas handsome.

And I have Mocha skin.

My husband is a princely palate
The ivory to my ebony
(I'm the cookie to his cream)
In his light pigmentation
And the tiny accents spackled around his cheeks and eyes
I see the answering contrast to my life
MY opposite
My
Complete
Blended
Incredibly striking
Multi-cultured
Opposite.
With blood from different cultures and lands running through his veins

And here I am
With Mocha skin.

The more I think about it

If Joseph's coat of many colors can have 25 hues
I'm sure the world can stand for varied shades of love.
Actually, It's a Community Center

Alycia West

Our body is a temple,
and yours is a mosque
loitering a little too closely
to the steel-and-concrete coffin
of heroes and men.
Five blocks and nine years removed
from a Tuesday morning
that no one really understood,
the day when terrified faces reflected back
on the subway, in the streets,
in every town, on every TV.

Nine years, two wars,
gashes still exposed,
memorials grounded, lives creeping on,
holy bonfires still blaze,
burning your Good Book to ash.
In Tennessee you were
doused and torched,
a perfect sacrifice
to a frightened public,
perfect pandering
to the poisonous lies
of television prophets.

Had a mega-church
been born in your place,
there wouldn't have been debates
or protests
or violence.
But you're a mosque,
and it's an election year,
so we're not ready to forgive yet.
The Illusion of Things

Samuel Hunt

An illusion currently tickles society. It performs on the lives of people in every economic status, and it knows no racial or age boundaries—it is the habit of thing-seeking. Now, people do not actually seek things. Rather, there exists a valid emotional need, a sense of fulfillment for which the soul yearns, that people seek. However, when attaining stuff becomes the means by which people seek that satisfaction, the illusion has begun its work, and if it distracts them long enough, they will be left bewilderingly empty. This illusion keeps its audience anticipating something—something that will never appear as they expect. In some cases, people’s lust for something is so intense that they act irrationally—like the crowd that trampled a person at a mall’s opening on Black Friday. The things people crave mask the true object of their search; joy eludes them.

The search for joy is not new: with each new era, there resides on the sidewalks bum peddlers and street magicians, vying to catch the eye for a moment and persuade the exchange of an ill-manufactured, flashy trick for the searcher’s time and pocketbook. Joy is found in the flashiness, in the novelty, in the pride of a bargain, and a moment later, the temporal emotional satisfaction—“joy”—has subsided. It is like a hit song that is played and replayed until the sweet sound falls into a sour stomach that turns over empty once more. Joy is lasting. The pleasure of a thing is not.

To be sure, life yields an important place for things, whether as necessities or pleasures. Most people would do poorly without a vehicle taking them from place to place; a writer may greatly benefit from a personal computer; owning a big HD TV flat screen can be appealing and entertaining. What, though, is the use of things beyond the initial moment of need? It seems that discontent always finds its way back to the soul eventually, albeit slyly at times. Is the experience of life really to be nothing more than consuming and dissatisfaction? Why are we grabbing at sand sinking through a sieve? Life can be satisfying without coveting thy neighbor’s donkey.

A man had a vision once as he stood outside. In a real and spiritual way he saw the lives of no one in particular play across the air like on a silver screen: those people lived to work, to buy a house, to buy a car, to buy a better car, to retire next to a lake, to buy a boat and some suntan oil, and die, the sum total of each life equaling zero. The man heard, “What have you ever done for anyone else?”

That question reverberates in society’s ear today, but sadly, the flashy illusion has caught society’s eyes—which will it heed? In the world of branding consumerism, people get so distracted by the street magicians that they miss the main attraction. They buy the books and watch the movies and eat the food that feeds their disillusion; they chase the mirage of fast fortune and leap to fill their hands with sand that slips through their fingers. Joy eludes them. It is the illusion of things.
MTR (for K.G.)

Rachel Whitlock

Sometimes I think small gods
live in the center of the earth
and the rolling Appalachians are so because they
are too large to hide their bulging scalps from us.

Like grandparents with children,
they indulge our small wanderlust on their persons
betwixt growths that mock 9 to 5 and HDTV.

Do not ask me to content in their decapitation.

Divine blood,
helpless and without direction,
now floods people who live in peace,
and I swear you can hear sorry
in the breaking of these demi-gods’ bones.
Hat of Ages
Joseph Hull

Sun-burned, rain-stained,
sweat-soaked, shade glazed,
tribal band, worn leather;
for this hat how many days have been better?
Daffodils

Katy Miller

Marble squares sink in a muddy field
as wispy grass pokes fingers between each one.
Sprawling space that used to be a kitchen
disintegrates beside a twisted pipe.
Pink bathroom tiles lie crumbled
where a shower once stood
before the walls bled out their colors.

Perhaps this was home to a woman
who sang to a gleaming piano,
hung a family portrait in the staircase
and polished the wands of a crystal chandelier.
Twirling 'round the garden gate
in a peach cotton dress,
she might have felt the sunlight
soak into her soul.

Now the filthy foundation teems with insects,
and water covers the cellar steps.
Nails protrude from cracking panels,
while splintering tiles scatter
across the floor boards
like the broken pieces of a picture frame.

But bright sky still shines on the decay.
And among the weeds, two yellow daffodils
lean, gasping, against the gate.
Prayer

Joshua Lacy

People only pray
When they need help.
Like when they're in
Trouble, they get down
On their knees and
They sweat
And they believe
In God like he's
The creaks and
Groans of a settling house.
But He's much higher
Than the rooftop.

And you wouldn't know it
You can't see the plan;
It's laid out like a quilt
But the pieces haven't
Been put together yet,
Nor do they seem to fit.
I know you want to see
The picture the Way it's supposed
To be. But your Grandmother
won't let you play with the Singer.
No matter how much you want to help

So there you are
Down on your shins your feet
Falling asleep, Mending what
You only hope
To be able to understand
Someday.
At least there's
Carpet, because God
Knows wood
Floors are so fashionable
But they are so hard on the knees
Empty Rings Around the Sun

*Alycia West*

This is for my brothers and sisters
whose pulpy souls were scraped out
with a rusty sword
and replaced with an agenda,

For the beautiful ones,
who use razor blades and rope
to escape the fear and self-hatred,

For the children who inherit
the whole earth but cannot love
in their own backyards,

For the ones blown all over the world,
creating a patchwork family
with scraps of people yanked from their homes
after a bout of terrified truth
dripped from trembling lips,

For my friends whose dorm rooms
are closets are fallout shelters
protecting them from the toxic breaths
of preachers and politicians
who taste the fruit and condemn it
with the same mouth,

For the one who hides
because outside are protestors
and children of the light
burning fag on his front lawn,

For the children of darkness
who proclaim love in unison colors
that flood the whole world with hope,

For the boy whose name is on a list,
who the UN won’t protect,
fleeing his country because
men of god call murder righteous,

For the white silk girl
who will never wed
her Always Yours
For the ones who love with stitched lips

For the frightened,
the ones who spend every morning
on their knees praying away
what they do on their knees every night,

For the believers,
of silver eternity
and golden rings
and love love love,
You are not alone.

You are not alone.

Hidden beneath habits and wedding rings,
behind pulpits and puppets,
there is a flood of love
wrapping hearts in celestial promises.
You are not alone.

Day will arrive.
The labor pains of broken night
will give birth to yellow dawn.
And there will be light.
And we will be light.
And not alone.
Grandpa

*Casey Crow*

He sits on the bulky burlap sack
Whistling as the aroma of coffee beans
Drifts from beneath him.
The bus bounces and bumps
Across Texas and Louisiana,
Departing this lonely station
Of familiarity,
Of bare feet and grass-stained knees,
Late-night harvests,
And Sunday dinners.
Fuzzy grey memories
Of failing stock-markets,
Snaking lines of frail bodies,
Like the ragged tail of a stray dog,
Begging outside of soup kitchens,
And his high-school sweetheart, Darlene.
The bus squeaks to a stop,
And he stands on wobbling legs
Like a new born colt,
Trading life as it was for a six-digit number,
a small steel tag, and gun shots
He'll hear sitting in his leather rocking chair
50 years from now, as Ray Knight
Cracks another home run for the Mets.
My Mother, When I Asked If I Could Go Far Away

Yoana Sampayo

She sat cross-legged on the kitchen counter
Like a red war painted chieftain
Wearing an eagle feathered headdress and brown suede moccasins,
Calmly smoking a pipe,
Spelling out the words above my head,
“You will never go.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you are mine
And I keep my things close.”

“Look at my house neatly arranged.
Look at my tables and chairs, my couches, my rugs, and my paintings,
My dishes and silverware, my children that follow you.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“Life’s not fair, but you are safe with me.
I’ve killed the wolves and serpents.
I’ve warred against the fierce tribes.
I’ve wounded my enemies for you.”

“But my enemies are not the same.”

“You will never go,” she said,
As she sat cross-legged on the kitchen counter.
A smell will transport you in a moment to a particular place, a certain event, to specific people, to one season of the year, and even to the exact hour of a day. We smell burning leaves in the autumn and are again 11 years old, helping our parents rake the lawn, placing dead maple and oak leaves in a rusted barrel, our fathers warning, stand back I don't want those sparks landing on that brand new coat your mother just bought you. The passing scent of a man's cologne puts you face to face with that boy who broke your mother's antique dish, broke curfew with you, broke your heart when you were seventeen. Just the memory of an aroma makes the throat close and the eyes fill. For me, it is the smell of my mother making applesauce in the hot Missouri summers of my childhood.

Like most Southern women, my mother had a few recipes that she had perfected and which were her signature, as indelible and distinct as her handwriting—not that Henrietta Collins Wood ever called herself Southern. She mockingly referred to her people as "Laplanders"—"you know, where the flat land laps over into the hills." And she was not the drawling, "good-dress-and-a-set-of-heirloom-pearls-to-do-her-housework" stereotype of Southern womanhood. I remember my mother from those days as a towering, raw-boned, Scots-Irish gal from Christian County, the heart and soul of the Missouri Ozarks, with squinting blue eyes, coarse auburn hair running to gray, freckled milk-white skin, and cheekbones so prominent and sharp that they could slice open tin cans. And a tongue to match. Her high, nasal voice—which no effort can correct in my own—was distilled from a hundred farm-ancestors who plowed and milled and herded. From one of them, she learned to make her own applesauce.

She used apples I have never heard of elsewhere: Early Transparent, an apple as green as a Granny Smith but with a rougher skin and a rust-red bloom near the stem. The USDA had imported them from Russia to the American South in the 19th century, and they were tart and tangy, with a finely textured white flesh, exactly like every woman in my mother's family. She bought them by the bushel from Young's Orchard just outside Springfield, in wood-lathe baskets that we would use that autumn to gather up leaves. In the blaze of summer, in our tiny kitchen, cooled only by a rotary fan, she washed them and sliced them into quarters, the sweat a river pouring off her face and down her arms as her hair went Indian-straight and fell into her eyes. On occasion, the paring knife she honed sharp enough to shave a grown man slipped in her sweaty fingers and for a moment, her eyes watered and reddened as she held a finger or a thumb under the cold tap, a few seconds of rusty water draining into the sink.

I watched her layer those apples into long metal baking pans and run a little water into them, all the while she was explaining to my 9-year-old self what she was doing and why, sliding them into what she called, like the country woman she was, a "slow oven" where they would cook down for nearly an hour. Stewing apples filled my mouth and our entire house until she yanked the pan out and set it on a rack. I have kept the dusty brown crock she set on the counter with the Foley Food Mill positioned on top, its metal tabs fingers holding on for dear life. Honey, she'd tell me, there is nothing else on earth that makes applesauce like a Foley Food Mill and it will last you as long as you are married and probably then some.

Grabbing up a couple of dish towels, she shook the hot apples with their loose skins into the mill with its perforated base sloping upwards to where the crank attached in the middle. My mother took a strangle-hold on the red wooden mill handle and ground the crank counter-clockwise for all she was worth. A harsh, keening sound, like the chords of a bluegrass fiddle or the wail of bagpipes, and the metal blade scraped apples against the pierced floor of the mill, leaving the green limp skins flattened and empty. Periodically, she'd wrench that crank in the opposite direction to clear the blade, its voice a screech of pain and protest.

A hot, thick, green sauce gushed and dripped off that mill, a soft green like the water of the rivers I swam in during the Ozark summers, so thick that it was like raspberry jam before it sets up. The only thing
my mother added was sugar. I never once saw her measure it out. She'd tip the sack and pour it in, stirring and occasionally tasting with a fresh teaspoon until she was satisfied. And that was it. That was the applesauce she made, with a smell that was the hot holy incense of my childhood, a prayer to the God of a redeemed creation, intoxicating me to the point that I begged for a bowl and then another no matter how close the air was in the stifling kitchen, a supplicant at the altar. In the years to come, I would decline every offer of store-bought applesauce, that yellowish, watery, insipid pap, because I had known the authentic, the archetypal version.

The memory of the aroma of that hot applesauce haunts me like a ghost glimpsed out of the corner of the eye. I can almost smell it, almost taste it, but not quite. It comes to me on hot summer days when some phrase or image or spark in my brain returns me to those years, and I am once again a small girl in striped shorts and a white sleeveless shirt, skipping down the alley, dust in my flip-flops, exhilarated by the smell of hot soil, by the view of cobalt-glass sky, racing into the house of my mother, blessed by cold applesauce straight from the icebox to hold me over 'til supper.

Pour it in the chalice and offer it as the Eucharistic drink, for it is one of the cups of my salvation, a cup that tells me I am no rootless wanderer in this world, prophesies that out of my harsh labor, out of my bitter sweat and wailing sorrow, will indeed emerge what sustains and sweetens my life. My bruised, heart-broken self, cuffed around by forces I dimly perceive, feeds and is made whole again.
Biting the Apple

*Chelsea Dillon*

stepping out of the van was stepping
into pure perfection,
pure chaos
with stunning shades, my eyes
gaze upon the candy for them:
bedazzled bling on billboards
constant cabs without caution
superb citizens with steady swag
these potent people take pleasure
in the hustle, the bustle, the life.
no longer in the quiet of the country,
I take delight in the
zipzingbeepclapswishboomwhipslap
a whole new world never made sense
until I came to this foreign land
I am a kindergartener roaming in the high school
consumed by the millions of sensory distractions,
timid to the unknown, brave to the possibilities
still sights surround me, and I surrender to their splendor
the brilliant storm of bulbs never cease to amaze my inner being
one day to return, one day I will
to attempt an understanding
of this wonder of the world
and to take one more bite of this luscious apple
Ode to the Kidney

Rachel Whitlock

Twinned, they make 300-a-bottle champagne
from grapes gone moldy on the vine.

But we buy the cheap toilet paper,
thinking of budgets
and time “wasted” behind a closed door or stall,
bare skin against usually-white plastic seat.

Perhaps they grow tired of our vacillating?
Super size me’s washed down with “purified spring water”
or multivitamins in jello shots.

Regardless, they process our bodily paperwork.

We use phrases cute—
“visit the little girls’ room”
and crass—
“gotta piss like a racehorse!”
for something more akin to a blue moon inside a double rainbow

For the kidney,
unless in the context of stones, disease, punches, or beans,
is the stage manager,
not the prima donna.
The Aviary

*Keren Apura*

There's a preposterous ostrich escaped
In my thoughts, ruffling and shaking
Her feathers as she blazes by
The blue-footed booby's nest
Of my well-formed, logic-born thesis.
The warbled harmony of the dove's cheers
Wars with the squawking hawk in my ear
But the oblivious ostrich runs on.
I've been chasing her all day but
Ideas are not meant to be caged.
Plethora of Papers

Amber Earls

Ha.
They eyeball me
Cheshire grin at me
That smoldering stack of martyred trees tattooed with inked commands
Demanding that I yield to their directions
(With precision, I might add)
So that I can show the world I comprehend instruction
And that I play well with others.

I listen to them dictate:
Use MLA format!
Keep it under three pages!
Do not pass go or collect $200.00 because nobody really cares about your feelings!
Don't question it; Just Do It!
(Look, kids! We're Nike Ads in disguise!)

Those Agatha Trunchbull assignments cower over me
With a riding crop in one hand
And a due date in the other

They don't break their gaze
As forgiving and stingy as time
They don't ask for your questions
They don't care for your objections

They just cock your eyebrows like Miranda Priestly asking
"Why is no one reaaaady?"
When it is 12:31 and you don't deliver

I feel them trying to break me
Challenge me
Force me to be a good steward

And so I deliver
Day after day
Page after page
Paper after paper

Here they are
Keeping me on the clock
Giving me an agenda
Declaring my mission
(Should I choose to accept it)
But then again
If I want to graduate
How could I not?
Swing Set

Casey Crow

To me, my town never seemed small
Although people said it was.
In the grooves of splintered wood
And lazy waves of a dark green slide
My county borders extended
Passed the smiling San Juan peaks,
Beyond those icy mountain streams.
In plastic yellow swings
I sailed to foreign isles,
From sun-baked monkey bars
I dangled above glowing lava,
Exploring ancient castles
To the sound of my parents’
Raised voices.
I flew away on magic carpets
And on wings of imagination I soared,
Until the scent of warm dirt
Mingled with the setting sun
Sweeping strokes of pink and orange
Across the lone horizon.
But when fires of imagination
Die into embers and embers into coal,
When screaming voices intertwine
And darkness settles on the house
Except for reds and blues
Dancing on my father’s face
As the player hits 4th down.
My sails float to a stand-still
And lava cools to
Dry-tipped grass.
I set down my hat and telescope,
Trade my crown and golden scepter
For a half-eaten bag of cheerios
And my sister’s purple tennis shoes.
“Friends, Romans, countrymen! Lend me your ears! We have come to bury Caesar, and when the hurlybury’s done, and the battle’s lost and won, then all’s well that ends well.”

The vast expanse of trees and leaves rustled with the strong breeze but was otherwise silent in reply.

Bobby stared up into the cathedral-like canopy of interlocking branches, twigs, and leaves. The warm shades of green swayed like a giant lung taking in the breeze. The vault of leaves seemed to stretch upwards forever, and never once did the piercing blue of the clear sky break through the endless ranks of green. He was in an entirely different world, perhaps.

Bobby closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. The smells of the forest filtered in through his nose. Rotting leaves, wildflowers, acorns, and rich earth. The smells of high summer.

“So much for Shakespeare,” he said to himself, laying down on his back to continue staring up into the trees. He soon found himself drifting away into an afternoon nap.

Not a moment after his eyes had closed, Bobby felt a rough, pointed stick at his throat. He opened his eyes and sat up quickly.

“The readiness is all,” said another boy. It was Dustin.

Dustin dropped the stick on the ground and smiled.

“So you’re in Ms. McClaren’s homeroom too?” Bobby asked, his face brightening.

“You bet your mom’s bra I am,” said Dustin, giving his friend a hand off the ground. “I just got my class schedule in the mail and came to tell you. How dumb is it that we’re going to go to school at a place called Franch L. Liechstein Middle School?”

“More like Frankenstein Middle School,” Bobby joked, giving Dustin a slight shove.

Dustin shoved back, and the two boys jostled for a bit.

“Race you to the creek,” said Dustin, suddenly taking off through the woods. “I bet you there’s frogs to catch today. They can’t stand this heat.”

Bobby ran after his friend who was tearing through the thick underbrush on his way to Wildfire Creek. The boys called it Battle Creek from one of their favorite video games.

When Bobby had pushed aside the last thorny branch, he saw Dustin had already kicked off his sandals, removed his shirt, and begun wading into the deeper part of the creek.

“Beat ya,” Dustin said, searching both banks for the big brown eyes of local amphibians.

“Not next time,” Bobby said, taking off his own shirt and leaping into the creek.

“I always beat you, Bobby,” Dustin said. “That’s because I’m going through puberty, and you’re still in diapers.”

“Oh!” said Bobby, splashing as he quickly waded upstream toward Dustin. “You are going to have it today!”

Bobby really wasn’t sure what “it” was, but he knew from his older brother that “it” usually involved a beating and was never good.

He let his hands down into the water and splashed the frigid water at Dustin’s back. The retaliating tsunami on Bobby’s bare chest sent shockwaves of icy cold running all through his body. The two boys splashed each other until both of their jaws were chattering.

“Dude,” said Dustin, “I can’t believe Ms. McClaren is making us memorize so much Shakespeare. I mean the guy’s been dead for like four hundred years!”

“Yeah,” said Bobby. “It’s pretty dumb, but I don’t know, I’ve kind of enjoyed some of the plays so far.”

“Er tu, Bruté?” Dustin shouted, turning around to face Bobby.

“What, man?” Bobby shrugged. “I just said they weren’t half-bad. Some of them at least, even though I guess they’re all kind of babyish.”
“That’s better,” said Dustin, leading the two further upstream toward banks with more reeds and shade.

“We’ll have you out of toddlerhood before you know it!”

Bobby’s forehead wrinkled. “Enough with that crap, Dustin. I’m not a baby.” He splashed Dustin again. This time, Dustin didn’t turn around.

As they trudged up the center of the creek, Bobby’s feet slowly began to feel numb with the icy water, and before long, he couldn’t feel the smooth pebbles of the creek bed beneath his toes. Soon, they could hear the dull roar of Wildfire Cascade. It was their favorite place to hunt for frogs. As they passed the last bend before the cascade, Bobby heard a muffled giggle off to his right.

“Did you hear that, Dustin?” he asked, stopping and looking into the reeds.

“Hear what?” Dustin asked, spinning around.

The giggle came again, but this time louder. Bobby dashed off toward the reeds and pushed them aside in clumps looking for the source of the girlish laughter.

“Who’s there?” asked Dustin, joining the search.

“Nay, answer me; stand, and unfold yourself!” came the squealish response.

Bobby laughed internally at the lines of Shakespeare he had read just earlier that afternoon. He had an idea who his mysterious giggler might be, and a second later, he found out he was right.

“Samantha!” Bobby said. “What are you doing here?”

“Bobby!” said the girl. She pushed the blond hair away from her blue eyes as she continued to suppress another giggle. “I didn’t recognize you!”

“I knew it!” said Dustin, jumping to Bobby’s side. “Girls are never up to something good!”

“Ha!” said Samantha, giggling. “Says the biggest trouble maker in the seventh-grade class!”

“At least I’m proud of my accomplishments,” said Dustin, flexing his rather small muscles.

Samantha giggled again. “Looks like there’s a lot to be proud of!”

“So are you in Ms. McClaren’s class too?” Bobby asked.

“I burn, I pine, I perish!” said Samantha putting a hand to her head and mock fainting.

Bobby laughed.

“Come on, Bobby, let’s go,” said Dustin, grabbing Bobby by the shoulder and turning back toward the creek. “I’ve had enough of this freak show.”

“Hey!” said Samantha. “Who you calling freak show, mudface!”

Dustin tromped up the creek toward the cascade, and Bobby struggled to keep up. He could hear Samantha right behind.

“Dustin,” Bobby said. “What’s your—”

“There’s one rule in middle school, Bobby,” said Dustin, not stopping or turning around. “Girls are the enemy. Dorks are also the enemy. Girls that are dorks are social suicide.”

“Dustin, we’re all still friends from elementary school,” said Bobby, splashing behind Dustin into the wide pool at the bottom of the cascade. “Don’t you remember we were all in Ms. Green’s class together—”

Dustin pushed Bobby back and dashed toward the edge of the churning pool of water. As they waded toward the falls, hundreds of green-brown amphibian eyes slipped beneath the surface. Dustin bent over and with a quick jab into the water had a slimy creature struggling to escape his hands. He turned back around as Bobby and Samantha approached.

“Here, Samantha,” he said, holding out the muddy toad. “I have a gift just for you.”

“Oh, he’s so cute!” said Samantha, reaching out to take the squirming gift. “Thanks, Dustin!”

“Just kidding,” said Dustin, throwing the toad at her face and dashing off toward the cascade.

Samantha shrieked and waved her arms wildly in the air when the slimy toad hit her face. The creature fell back into the water and quickly swam away.
“Dustin, you jerk!” Samantha shouted above the roar of the cascade. “Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind!”

At first, Bobby didn’t know how to react. His breath quickened and his muscles tightened as he watched Dustin splash near the bottom of the cascade, but then he looked back toward Samantha as she washed the mud and slime off her face, and his head felt a little light.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Dustin’s just a big jerk. That man that hath a tongue, I say, is no man, if with his tongue he cannot win a woman.”

“I’ll go show him—” Bobby said, pounding a fist into his palm.

“Bobby, no,” Samantha said, grabbing his wrist. Bobby felt his heart jump a beat. “Just let it go.”

“Uh, I…” said Bobby, taking a quick step to regain his balance.

“He just feeds off of trying to put us down so that he can look cool,” said Samantha. “It’s something we’re all supposed to do as middle schoolers, I guess.”

Bobby looked away toward the waterfall when he realized he’d been staring down Samantha’s spaghetti-strap shirt. He squared his shoulders.

“I’ll go talk to him,” he said in the deepest voice he could muster.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Samantha called after him.

Bobby joined Dustin on one of the large rocks at the bottom of the thundering cascade. The water splashed everywhere, and in an instant, Bobby was covered in goosebumps from the icy droplets all over his skin. The two boys sat for a while without saying a word.

“So, you’ve decided to dump the loser?” Dustin said, looking into Bobby’s eyes.

“No, man, she can still be our friend,” Bobby said. “You act like just ’cause we’re in middle school we can’t still hang out with the same people.”

“That’s because we can’t,” said Dustin, standing up on the rock. “We’re not babies anymore, Bobby!”

“Stop calling me a baby!” Bobby said, also standing up.

“Stop talking to me, loser!” Dustin shouted. “If you’re really not a baby, then you can prove it by climbing up this cascade faster than me! Too bad you’ll never be able to do that, lover boy! All that talking to girls has slowed down your muscle development!”

“Hey! Wait up!” said Bobby, leaping after Dustin onto the smooth, wet rocks of the cascade.

“Hurry up, baby!” Dustin said, pulling himself up onto the next rock.

Bobby’s heart beat faster and louder than the water roaring and rushing all around him. His nerves tingled with adrenaline but grew numb with the icy spray. His muscles twitched and heaved as he climbed higher. What Dustin had scaled quickly seemed to take Bobby a lifetime.

Bobby looked down at the pool below and could see Samantha shouting frantically but he couldn’t hear a word. He looked back up at Dustin and realized he wasn’t nearly as far behind as he thought. When Bobby drew level with Dustin, he understood why he’d been able to catch up.

Wildfire Cascade began when the creek poured over a jutting edge of hard bedrock. In order to reach the top of the cascade, Bobby would have to grab onto the jagged edge and pull himself up by strength alone. The jump to grab the edge was a tall one though, and one swing in the wrong direction would put him in the direct path of the pounding creek and send him plummeting down to the hard rocks below.

Bobby’s eyes widened as he stood alongside Dustin on the narrow ledge beneath the hanging edge of bedrock.

“Scared?” asked Dustin. “I’m not.”

“Yeah?” asked Bobby. “Then ladies first.”

Dustin sneered then wildly leapt at the rocky overhang. Bobby watched as Dustin scraped madly at the empty air, his grip falling just short of the needed length. Still flailing, Dustin landed back on the ledge, and
Bobby caught him before he slipped down onto the rocks below.

“You’re welcome,” said Bobby, heaving Dustin up into a position where he could safely rest.

“I don’t need your help,” said Dustin, pushing Bobby aside.

“Can we get out of here now?” asked Bobby. “You win. We both got as close to the top as we can.”

Dustin shook his head, still breathing hard.

“Come on, man, let’s just be friends again,” Bobby said, crossing his arms and standing back up. “I’m sick of this endless competition.”

“What, drawn, and talk of peace!” shouted Dustin. “I hate the word, as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee! Have at thee, coward!”

Dustin lunged at Bobby’s legs, and acting out of pure instinct, Bobby leapt high to avoid Dustin’s circling arms.

The moments ticked away like the long, slow second hand of a detention clock.

From somewhere far below, Bobby could hear Samantha screaming louder than the waterfall.

“Bobby!” the muffled shriek shouted in his ear, pushing its way past the thundering of the water just inches away.

Finding himself in nothing but air, Bobby reached out for anything that would tie him back to earth. His hand grasped a rough—almost cutting—edge of rock, and his muscles and tendons tightened securely until he was sure he couldn’t have let go if he wanted to.

His other arm and both legs continued to dangle freely in space until the jerk of gravity drew them all down. When time began to roll on once more, Bobby realized he was hanging onto the bedrock edge that Dustin had failed to reach minutes before. The sudden insight of his position pumped more adrenaline into Bobby’s veins, and for fear of either letting go or swinging under the force of the cascade, Bobby swung his other arm to the edge and pulled himself upward.

Just as over half his body scraped over the sharp edge of rock inches from the rushing water, Bobby felt a violent tug at his ankle. His head snapped around and saw Dustin leaping again toward his dangling foot.

“The ripest fruit first falls!” shouted Dustin.

Bobby pulled himself up as quickly as he could, but Dustin’s hand caught firmly on his ankle, nails clenching into Bobby’s skin. The extra weight was more than Bobby’s arms could handle, and with a violent rip and pop, his arms gave way, hands cutting on the rocky edge as he slipped into the open air.

Somewhere in flight, Dustin had let go of Bobby’s ankle, and a second later, Bobby landed forcefully on the ledge below, but Dustin was only hanging by its edge at Bobby’s feet. Dazed, it took Bobby several moments before he could regain awareness.

“Bobby, help!” Dustin cried, his fingers searching for a better grip and finding none.

Bobby twitched and sprung toward the edge. “Give me your hand!” he shouted over the roar of the water.

Dustin lurched, his right hand jabbing into Bobby’s as his left slowly slipped off the end of the ledge. Bobby grasped Dustin’s hand with both of his, and the two boys looked each other straight in the eye.

After the day’s exertions, Bobby couldn’t lift Dustin up, and as the moments rushed by like the thousand drops of water rushing over their heads—quickly, slowly, running all together, working backwards, eroding, pushing, flying freely like never before—Bobby felt his arms slowly give way.

Dustin looked back up at Bobby. His eyes were no longer those of the middle-school Dustin, but of the frog-catchiing, pie-stealing, barefoot-running, slingshot-sharphooting, bird-hunting, rock-smashing, lakeswimming Dustin that Bobby had known for years before.

“The rest is silence,” Dustin said.

Not a second later, Bobby’s grip failed, and Dustin slipped into the stream of the cascade. The roar of the gushing water was loud enough that Bobby never heard Dustin’s skull crack against the boulder far below, but
he watched every moment of his best friend's death. And as the blood slowly filled the pool below, Bobby could once again hear Samantha's screams.

Bobby felt like he couldn't breathe. He fell back against the rock wall behind him and began to sob, wiping the streams of tears from his eyes. His side soon hurt from the very effort of breathing. His mind, directionless, wandered.

_We were, fair queen, two lads that thought there was no more behind but such a day tomorrow as today, and to be_ boy eternal._

Nicholas Harren
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