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## The Page Turner

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# The Page Turner

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# You Asked Me Once If I Had Ever Thought of You as More Than a Friend

Caitlin Wilson

Your eyes are the holy Ganges,  
dyed with the colors of *sarees*  
and embroidered with sunlight,  
your breath a carp with scalloped scales  
choking on a mouth full of air.  
You look at me with mudflat eyes,  
where I am lost without the moon;  
in the dark I hear you haul up  
a breath like netted fish.  
Your querying voice shimmers  
like a prize: a hemp-bound float  
that sank at sea, which you toss  
to me. I catch it with tremulous  
fingertips and light a candle that burns  
like the Ganges at the festival of lights.





# Green Grass

Kirsten Clawson

I stand in the dry, dying grass, with feet bare, the wind churning all around as it rips faded, yellowing leaves off limp branches and leaves my hair in tangles. The sky—a dark grey—lends promise to the incoming rain and a dewy fog wraps around me as you approach and engulf my pale, chilled hand in your own. You tug, a forceful yank, and I turn around, my eyes down. The black patent leather of your shoes suffocates me, and I decide I will not let this be easy for you. Biting my thumbnail, I look up and see a stranger: cool, composed, as if this were nothing. I close my eyes as you grasp my waist with your left hand, and an invisible beat begins to lead us around the yard.

The grass slices at my feet and leaves tiny pinpricks of pain. We near the playhouse, all bright yellows and blues and reds; braced against the wind, it doesn't move an inch. My shoulders slump in defeat as I wonder what I will tell Jane. Our little girl is only two, and won't understand why her father has left her for another: the whore who left light pink lipstick stains on the collars of your dress shirts—the ones I take to the dry cleaners every other Wednesday.

My eyes still closed, you come to a halt. I clench my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut as your hand comes up to caress my face. I almost mistake it for the storm swirling around us. As you turn and walk away without a word I open my teary eyes. Your footfalls are casual even though your back is tense. Your hands are deep in the front pockets of your black dress pants. I stare,

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impassive at your retreat, at the irony of us in this moment. We started all those years ago with a dance, didn't we?

The front door shuts, a whisper in the breeze, and I hear our old Mercedes start. I turn around, facing the playhouse. The blue plastic swings sway as the decaying grass caresses my feet.

# Macaroni and Cheese

Jaime DeTour

Sarah sighed, “But I don’t like Mexican food. You know that.”

“Just because you have strange issues with cilantro, doesn’t mean that I can’t eat it,” Elizabeth responded. She grabbed her purse and began digging around for her car keys.

“Who are you to talk about strange food issues? You barely eat anything.” Sarah picked up Elizabeth’s keys from the counter and tossed them to her. Elizabeth just barely caught them. “And you can’t keep track of your car keys.”

“First of all, I didn’t lose my keys; I just couldn’t remember where I put them. Secondly, I like all sorts of foods. I like tacos, and ice cream, and cake, and macaroni and cheese, and all sorts of other things.” Elizabeth twirled the ends of her auburn hair between her fingers.

“You don’t like anything with flavor, at least not strong flavors. I mean, you won’t even eat steak! How can you live in Nebraska and not eat steak?” Sarah slammed the car door shut and pushed the button on the garage door opener. Elizabeth stuck her keys in the ignition and started the car.

“I eat cheeseburgers. Besides, steak is always so dry and it’s just this giant hunk of meat. I don’t understand why anyone would want to eat it.” Elizabeth pulled out of the garage and zipped down the street, barely pausing at the stop sign.

“It’s only dry if it’s over-cooked, which, of course, is

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the only way you would eat it because you refuse to eat any meat short of well-done. The meat's practically burnt at that stage. How can you eat it?" Sarah fiddled with the radio, flipping through stations. She finally settled on a hard rock station, but turned the volume down so it wasn't too loud.

"I put ketchup on it, so it's not too dry. Besides, I can't eat the meat if it's remotely pink. It makes me think of blood and then I just...I want to vomit. I feel like I'm eating a live animal. It may as well still be mooing if there's pink in it." Elizabeth tapped her fingers on the steering wheel along with the music.

"Wait a minute." Sarah looked out the window and then turned her head to look back at Elizabeth. "Where are we going? We never decided on a place to eat." Elizabeth glanced back at Sarah and just shrugged, continuing to hum along to the music. "Tell me where we are going. I swear, if you choose the restaurant again without letting me have a say, I...I will never speak to you again."

Elizabeth smirked. "Of course you'll speak to me. You live with me. Besides, how are you going to get me to drive you places if you don't talk to me? I don't know if you've forgotten, but you don't have a car."

"Stop being a smart ass and tell me where we're going to eat." Sarah turned awkwardly in the passenger seat to glare at Elizabeth.

"It's a surprise," Elizabeth sang cheerfully. Elizabeth finally glanced back at Sarah and saw the intense glare that was directed at her. "Oh, come on. Calm yourself, would you? I'm just driving to the post office to drop off a letter quick. The restaurant-picking is still up for discussion." Elizabeth flashed Sarah her prize-winning smile, or at least what Elizabeth referred to as her prize-winning smile.

Sarah huffed and leaned back in her seat. "Fine, but I still

don't want Mexican. I don't care how many 'puppy-dog eyes' you give me. You will not convince me." Sarah crossed her arms.

"Oh, but how can you say 'no' to this face?" Elizabeth placed her hand flat under her chin and looked back at Sarah.

Sarah rolled her eyes. "You know, just because you say that all the time, doesn't make it any more true." Sarah glanced back out the window and saw that they had passed the post office. "Elizabeth..."

Elizabeth had a devious grin on her face as she turned into a parking lot. She placed the car into park and looked at Sarah. "Sorry," she shrugged. "I lied. I decided we were going to eat at Carlos O'Kelly's. Maybe you can get the macaroni and cheese off of the kids' menu."

# Hammer, Anvil, Stirrup

Eric Holt

We've been talking half an hour  
and you've mentioned your hair six times—  
like, what should you do with it?  
Gel it up, Ryan Gosling style?  
Channel your inner military man and shave the sides?  
Grow it down to your nips and donate that shit to Locks of  
Love?  
It's a conundrum that you still haven't solved  
since I last spoke with you four months ago  
and four months before that—  
above the rims of your Ray Bans, that wispy blonde nightmare;  
this year's most pressing issue, according to Time magazine.

I tell you that I'm moving to Twerkmenistan next month,  
just to see if you're listening.  
It's not actually true—  
I'm a homebody, forever a Nebraskan,  
and not much one for living in nonexistent countries.  
I hope that you'll fall for it—  
wrap me tightly in your arms and soak my shoulder in tears,  
all the while saying, "You're the chocolate to my peanut butter,  
and I'll miss you like hell."  
Instead you say,  
"Huh, that's interesting.  
Would I look good with cornrows?"  
No, white boy, you wouldn't.

But I stop this thought before it reaches my tongue—  
I wouldn't want to interrupt you  
while you're talking at me.

You slick back your mane—  
that life-long construction zone —  
and model it in front of the mirror,  
a mutual moment of “check that hottie out!”  
between you and your duplicate.  
You turn to me for a second opinion.  
Sure, whatever, this greaser look works great on you—  
let's close the case on this hair business for the next five minutes.  
But the quest for fashion is one without end,  
and so you wash out the fucking hair gel  
and mumble something about a fishtail braid.

I lean against the sink,  
close my eyes and breathe,  
dreaming up an explanation  
for why your mouth never stops moving.  
I picture a physical absence;  
two plains of flesh  
where pink cartilage crescents should be:  
the sides of your head smooth and uninterrupted  
by those nuisances we call ears.

# A Moment of Tranquility

Angela Berry

What about peace?

What about the boy in the ransacked, war-choked country

Praying for the day the relentless firing will cease?

What about the soldier who marches into battle

Fighting for a cause that's no longer black and white?

Where is the peace they long for?

Perhaps it's the momentary silence in a classroom of rowdy students.

It might be found between two children at recess

Who have discovered the sandbox is big enough for both.

Maybe it's a signature between two warring nations.

What defines peace?

Something that puts its beholder's mind to rest:

A moment of tranquility that gives us a moment to muse.

Teachers tell their frustrated students to count to ten and begin again,

To take a moment to realize the world really isn't turning so fast.

What is the peace you long for?



# Strings of Tension

Emily Burns

It was there on the shelf, in the room where darkness congregated in the corners, where the doll sat, a tangle of limbs and string. The little marionette had been a present to a little girl once, back in the days when its dress was pristine and its painted face was flawless. Those thin, white cords, the ones that used to make the puppet dance and bow, were now dingy and knotted. The dress was torn in places: some were mended, some unnoticeable, others obvious. The white paint was peeling from its wooden face. The surface was textured with shallow scratches; smudges too. The doll's hinged jaw hung open, leaving the curves of red paint separated. The result was a perpetually stupefied expression. The strands of pale hair, which at one time had been coiled into an intricate chignon, were now frayed like an old rope, styled as well as the hair of a zombie. Its eyes, a faded blue, stared.

There was the sound of a key sliding in a lock, followed by the grind of the tumblers. A door opened. Mila entered in a huff, throwing down her backpack, which made the floor issue a soft complaint like a stifled groan. This morning she had woken up with determination, rising in the company of the sun. While the day was still being born, she stared at her textbook, studying diagrams of the skeletal system and memorizing details about osteons, marrow, and Volkmann's canals. She sat upon that hideous pea-green chair, swiveling ever so slightly, back and forth. Legs crossed, textbook in lap, eyes closed, and under her breath, she murmured facts like a mantra, over and over and over again, until

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every nuance was ingrained in her mind.

Once the outside world had become fully lit, she rose from her post and took a moment to realign the stacks of texts and notebooks, each pile at a perfect right angle. She dressed quickly, selecting a pair of dark designer jeans, a simple white t-shirt, and a cropped blazer from her closet. She added a little makeup, just enough to cover her flaws and accentuate the blue of her eyes. She went to work straightening her hair, smoothing it so that the soft auburn color shined. Her backpack, once again, was filled with binders and paper and books, and she lifted it onto her shoulders, releasing a sigh of exertion. Behind her, she cast a last glance to make sure everything was still in its proper place and took a moment to straighten the lines of her clothes, like a designer before presenting her masterpiece. The handle turned under her fingers and the door swung open. With one confident stride, Mila stepped forward into the day before her.

\* \* \*

When she had been young, just on the brink of kindergarten, Mila's grandmother took her into a little antique shop, one built out of old brick and dark wood. The ebony shelves had towered over her, intimidating her into an awed silence. Even now she could remember the books with the peeling spines, the jewelry tarnished by time, the yellow and brass lights that descended from the ceiling, and that smell of metal and ink, rust and mold. Her little mind had thought of the place being like a witch's lair in a fairy tale. Among the trinkets and treasures, Mila found the doll with the dress of soft carmine and rose. Immediately she was taken by the puppet's beautiful face, the bright blue eyes like hers and the costume just like the prima ballerinas she had seen on the stages in all those movies. "Grandma! Grandma,

look!” Her companion, no more than a step away, turned to see what her granddaughter thought needed such immediate attention. The child’s small voice drifted over the dust and shadows of the store again. “Grandma! What is it?”

Mila’s grandma straightened to her full five feet, her fingertips just barely able to reach the doll on its shelf. Once she pulled the marionette off its perch, she knelt down to her granddaughter and said, “This is a marionette. Do you know what that is?” Mila stared up at her grandma with wide eyes and cocked her head to the side with an inquiring expression. “A marionette is a puppet. Now, isn’t that interesting? They used to use them to put on plays, a form of entertainment before all these TVs. You see, the puppeteer would hold on to this here,” she said, gesturing to the wooden X from which the strings were tied. “And then they could make the puppet walk or dance or do anything that they wanted to.”

“Really? I could make her dance? Or could I make her wave? Or curtsy?” Mila’s little soprano voice asked, her head still tilted inquisitively, but now her eyes were looking beyond the turrets of dark shelves and bulwarks of stacked books, imagining all she could do with this beautiful doll.

“You can do whatever you want. She is under your control,” her grandma said. In response, the corner of Mila’s mouth tilted upward, smiling as innocently as any child.

\* \* \*

On those first days of classes, Mila would walk around campus, her confidence still on a high from the ACT scores, valedictorian status, and “most likely to succeed” award from the year before. Every time she walked to class, the steps she took were steps in the right direction, like steps toward her future. She loved

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the sound of footsteps, how the noise bounced off the buildings, how it resonated among the melodies of voices and wind and birds. Her eyes would roam over the students sprawled over the greens and the squirrels that would run up the sides of trees. From the north, a breeze dragged the smell of fallen leaves and cold and smoke. Autumn would slay the summer soon. But that first day, it was all about potential and excitement. The second day was when she met Addison.

The required introductory English class commenced in the early morning when the world was still soft with dew and muted sun. The professor that stood before her class was a pixie, her face all angles, her frame petite, and her eyes augmented by thick glasses. She was a walking cartoon. As the hands of the clock reached nine o'clock, the pixie launched into her introduction, passing out a detailed syllabus and sharing the highlights of her career as a teacher. She directed her students to introduce themselves one at a time, giving out fun facts and nicknames. Around the circle they slowly moved until at last Mila began to speak, "My name is Mila. I'm in the pre-med program. I'm fr—"

The heavy wooden door emitted a loud protesting groan as a girl pushed it open, walking in to find many a pair of eyes on her. "Sorry," she said, pushing her brunette hair away from her face. "I couldn't find the room. I am so sorry to interrupt." The girl's eyes were dark and lined in black, brightening her cream complexion by comparison. The girl had lips painted red and used them to give the room a repentant smile. The professor eased her guilt and urged her to share her name and noteworthy facts.

"Well, my name is Addison," she said with a rich voice. "I'm an anthropology major. I grew up in Omaha, and I love John Steinbeck." Addison gave a small nervous laugh, which affected her classmates like a magician's trick or a snake charmer's

hypnotic sway. Her comment led them down a thread of conversation about the students' favorite authors, and Mila's half-finished sentence still hung off the tip of her tongue. All she could think was, "Steinbeck, seriously?"

\* \* \*

After Mila had emptied the books and folders from her backpack, she pulled the blinds' cord, letting shafts of streetlight fall across her bedroom floor. In and out she breathed, filling her lungs with fresh air, and opened the window just enough to hear the whirl of tires spinning on asphalt and the wail of distant sirens. With a sigh, the window allowed itself to be pulled back down, severing Mila's tie to the night. One last deep breath.

The day had been all classes and homework, stress and obligations. The clock was haunting her. There was still so much to do. The clock, no doubt, was laughing at her lengthy to do list, knowing there was no way she could complete it. And even though her room was silent, she could still hear the echo of it: the relentless tick, tick, tick. In her mind, the ticking was tangible. It was a pulse beneath her feet and an anxious trill in her fingertips. She looked down at her to do list. The clock reverberated even louder. Tick. Tick. Tick. She ran her hands through her knotted hair. She turned on the coffee maker. Brought up Word. Located the outline for her English paper.

\* \* \*

After her morning class, Mila emerged from the English building to find that the morning sun had been chased away by a wall of gray humidity. She felt an oily sheen breaking out on her forehead in the noon heat and the clamminess caused her hair to

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rebel. She felt the frizz rising, releasing an irritated sigh. Making her way down the concrete ribbon, she became lost among the torrent of foot traffic, battling to make a left turn towards the biology building.

By the time she escaped the unyielding throngs of students, waited for the incompetent elevator, and climbed nine flights of stairs, the lecture hall was already full. She managed to find an empty chair in the dark back corner. The speaker was short and balding, and slurred his words while attempting to cover things quickly. Mila did her best to transcribe the important pieces of information, but her mind refused to comprehend it. She scarcely understood how her hand could write fast enough to keep up with the professor's rapid speech. For an hour her hand continued to produce a mess of sentences and terms, none of which diminished the questions that burned like coals in the back of her mind. Questions were like a foreign language in her mouth. She had to stutter and stumble and slur to find a way to ask them. She never asked questions. She had never had to ask questions, and the sea of students between the instructor and her didn't make it easier. During the last week she had already had to humiliate herself by going to the tutoring center, not only once but four times. That was on top of spending hours fixating on the textbook pages, readying herself for that first exam. Never had she had to work so hard. The unknown score was taunting her. Was it okay? How bad? Could she still raise it to an A? Later that night she would know.

\* \* \*

After that first day with Addison, weeks had come and gone, and her English class had progressed through rhetoric and poetry units. Addison still basked in the spotlight that her charm

conjured, sitting in the front row, hand always raised in the air, looking flawless and sounding eloquent. It irritated Mila to no end. This day, she thought, was going to be different. While the debate of Shakespeare's intention for writing "The Rape of Lucrece" hung over the class, there was a trill of excitement as Mila's mind finally put together an intelligent comment fast enough for her to join the conversation. "Well, it creates an interesting situation. It's ironic that—"

"Sorry. Not to interrupt, but I think you mean it is a paradox," Addison chimed in, again, unsheathing her bashful smile. Her minor correction was enough to derail Mila's train of thought, and she went back to sitting in the class, trying to anticipate a break in the conversation to add a thought or mention her opinion. Once when a pause silenced the noise of the conversation, Mila took a breath, preparing to add her—"I just don't think that you can justify dismissing the historical context. Meaning comes through both the reader's interpretation and the writer's intent," Addison insisted, as Mila's lips continued to hang open; the words that had been ready to be heard had vanished. Another day and another debate. There had been no time to get an idea in. No time for anything more than a stutter.

\* \* \*

That morning Mila had arisen confidently, sure that this would be the day she would regain her metaphorical footing. Instead she stumbled through English, contributing nothing more than carbon dioxide and murmurs of agreement. Again, biology seemed to be presented in a code, an unbreakable code without a key, leaving her hand cramped from writing and a tangle of terms spread across the pages of meaningless notes. She passed the rest of the day in a self-imposed silence, focusing on studying for

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an Art History exam and finishing Calculus homework. After a hurried dinner, she went in search of a seat in the library. By this time the heat had broken, and the sun hid behind the horizon. Thunder crashed across the sky, rattling the clouds and the stars. Dry lightning flashed and divided the sky with its flares of light.

As she suspected, the study rooms were taken, and the open areas were filled with people working in groups, trying to finish projects and plan presentations. Their calmness irritated her, as did the hum of their unconcerned voices and relaxed postures. She wedged herself in a hard plastic seat between a kid blasting heavy rock music and a girl arguing with her boyfriend though a pink phone with a cracked screen. "It's alright," she thought to herself. "Just breathe. In and out. It will be fine." She convinced herself to ignore the other people and their raucousness. She took a breath in and out. She maintained her composure for another thirty minutes until it broke down her resolve. Her hand quaked in irritation. She slammed the textbook she was using shut. She forced her stuff into her backpack. Just before she was to leave the building she noticed a little seat, beneath the stairs. Isolated. Quiet. It was exactly what she needed.

She took a seat and allowed her muscles to relax for a moment against the soft chair. "Okay," she breathed and pulled her laptop out. It burred to signify that it was in the process of turning on before taking a long moment to finish coming to life. She brought up online student account, looking for her test score. "It's okay. It's only the first test. I couldn't have done that bad," she repeated until she had almost convinced herself. One last deep breath. She clicked the report, and shut her eyes in fear; slowly she opened them, trying to make sense of the page: C+. "Okay. Not horrible. It could be worse. Much worse. Much, much worse." She wouldn't let herself believe that, though. Her pulse thumped violently, her teeth caught her trembling lip, and



she buried her nails in her palm in order to ignore the tears teasing the corners of her eyes. Never in her life had Mila studied so much for a test, and all that work resulted in the lowest test score she could ever remember getting.

As she sat there, regaining control of her emotions, her thoughts were interrupted. “Hey, Mila. Are you okay? You look kind of upset,” Addison’s voice sounded.

“I’m fine,” Mila snapped, liking the way the soft “ffff” led into the sharp sound of the “n.” She turned her attention to Addison standing in the archway. She stood tall with her shoulders back, her eyebrows raised in concern. As always, she was dressed perfectly: a vision of prim and proper, which only added to Mila’s irritation. How did she do it?

Addison really did seem concerned. She stood there, unsure of what to do for a moment, before smiling and trying again. “I totally know what you mean. This week seems to have no end.” She paused waiting for Mila to say something. When she didn’t, Addison continued. “Is your paper giving you trouble? ‘Cause I don’t know about you,” she sighed, “but I had to reformat it at least four times before I could get it to make any sense.”

Paper. The paper that was due tomorrow. The paper that Mila had forgotten about in her panic over biology. “No. It’s fine. Finished. What about yours?” She asked Addison, in the hopes of distracting herself from the stress that had begun gnawing into her stomach.

Addison smiled encouragingly and said, “That’s great, and yeah, I’m done too. It was just hard getting it started right.”

“Yep, uh-uhuh. See you tomorrow.” She hurried out of the library and headed back to her dorm.

\* \* \*

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Tick, Tick, Tick. An hour had passed since she had first started working on her paper. An hour. An entire hour had passed, and all she had done was stare at the screen. Type a sentence. Ponder its success. Delete the sentence. Repeat. Breathe. In and out, and try to meditate on what she was trying to say. What was she trying to say?

The page was mocking her. Staring at her. Begging to be covered in words, but she just couldn't come up with anything that was worth the ink or the paper. She tried to remind herself to calm down, to ignore that ticking. There was still plenty of time. It only had to be five pages. She already had an outline. It was just writing. Five pages. The clock only read 12:30. Tick, Tick, Tick. The page continued staring at her. With a crack of her back and a few sips of bitter black coffee, she set to work. She promised not to delete anymore, not until she was revising. Upholding her word, she had three and a half pages done. Three and a half pages of typos and clichés.

In frustration, she stood. She stretched her arms above her head and made an attempt to release the tightness in her upper back. It didn't work. She returned to her seat at the desk, rubbing her strained eyes. She didn't know what to fix first. She didn't know what to add. She hardly even knew what she had written. The staring contest began again. White page versus blue eyes. She blinked, tried to straighten her clothes, and ended up spilling the last of her coffee on the hem of her t-shirt.

“Damn it.”

She stood up to get a napkin to soak up the deep brown stain that blossomed on her shirt. She sat back down, pulling her legs up. She could feel her shoulders being pulled upward by stress, as if she were the marionette with strings heaving her scapulae towards her ears. She glanced over at the doll on her bookshelf, wishing she could control everything with those

strings. She thought of all the times she had made that little puppet dance and bow down to her, made her wave and walk, put on plays, and jump through hoops with only the wooden handles and delicate strings. Now she couldn't even make herself write a paper. The air billowing from the vent was warm. It pulled at the edges of her mind, making her woozy. She reached over and picked up the doll, viewing its scratched face and chipped paint, trying to remember what had caused each of the scars.

\* \* \*

Mila picked her head up off the desktop, wondering for a moment why she was at her desk. "Right, paper," she thought. Her eyes still half-shut, protested the light in the room. They completely opened. "Light. Morning. No."

In her sleep, she had upended every pile that she had so carefully organized. As her senses began to emerge from their sleep-induced numbness, she smelled something sharp and bitter. Burnt coffee. She went to the appliance and turned it off. When she finally located the clock, it read 6:39. The pulse in her veins jumped. No longer calm and steady like a heartbeat ought to be. "Paper. Paper. Paper. Need to finish. Need to finish."

She looked at the screen of her laptop. There were three full pages and part of a fourth, followed by four more pages of non-sense strings of letters and numbers. "Crap. Crap." She stood. She tried to find order in the mess. Papers got shoved into piles. Coffee got wiped up. The laptop got plugged in.

6:51. Mila stood in the middle of the room. Staring down the screen. She stood before it. Deleted the mishmash of nonsense. Typed more sentences. Her heart hammered blood through her veins. Her pulse matched time with the Tick. Tick. Tick. She breathed. In. Out. In. Out. Tick. Tick. Tick. She tried

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to type faster. Tremors shook her hands. “Shsaw;ike’pseare wasd trujngf tol illjustreate tfjhe agemcy pof woomeen,” her paper read. “NO!” she yelled. “Sheaksopeatre waes trujng to sdhowe tghe afgency of wo,mern.” Tick. Tick. Tick. She tried to breath. In. Out. In Out. Calm down. Calm down. Tick. Tick. Tick. “Sjha-poekspearr wasd rtrtyingg tooo...”

A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. Her side ached. Something gnawed at her stomach. Those imaginary strings still pulled on her shoulders. She backed away. She sat down. Her legs splayed out in unnatural ways. Her hair was a mess of red frizz and tangles. Her make-up had been rubbed off during the night. Only smears of black remained, just under her tired blue eyes. Her shirt was stained, her clothes were crooked, and her mouth hung open as she caught her breath. She looked down. On the floor beside her was the marionette. She swooped it up and stared at it.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Mila snapped. She stood, grabbed a pair of scissors from the desk, and hacked away at the strings until the marionette was just a doll. She tossed it aside, and turned back to her computer, gave a final glare to the paper, and shut the lid. She turned off the light, and joined the darkness in the corner, with a pillow and blanket, drifting off to sleep.

# Burnt Chocolate

Erin Thomas

Jennifer rolled over in bed to find it was her cell phone that had disturbed her from her sleep. She recognized the number of Saint Theresa's Hospital and knew that any phone call at 3 a.m. was bad news.

"Is this Jennifer Higgins?"

"This is she. Is my father okay?"

"Miss Higgins, this is your father's nurse. I am afraid he isn't doing well."

Jennifer couldn't breathe. She wasn't ready for this.

"Miss Higgins? Are you still there?"

"What happened?"

"His organs are failing. His doctors are afraid he doesn't have much longer. It'd be best if you came down as soon as possible."

She felt her heart drop to her stomach.

The timer on the stove woke her from the memory; she was surprised to find herself crying, unconscious of the action. Jennifer pulled herself together and restacked the mountain of paperwork she had yet to fill out, leaving it for later.

Jennifer wasn't shocked to find that the cake wasn't done. She had the habit of setting the timer for less time than was required to be sure she didn't burn anything. Jennifer put the cake back into the oven; after a few more minutes it should be done. She was pulled away by the sound of her doorbell before she could reset the timer. Various people had been dropping by

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throughout the day offering condolences and food; her freezer was already full to capacity with casseroles she would never eat. They all pretty much had the same things to say: “We are sorry for your loss,” “Your family is in my prayers,” or “Your father was a great man.”

Jennifer answered the door to find something much worse than another casserole. Standing there was the woman who had abandoned her and her father ten years ago. The color drained from Jennifer’s face, and she felt her heart begin to race.

“What are you doing here?” Jennifer couldn’t believe her mother was standing there, outside her house, today of all days. Her mother had left her father when Jennifer was only fifteen.

It was as if she was looking into a mirror; they had similar chocolate brown hair, slender petite bodies, and hazel eyes. “Jennifer, I heard about your father. I thought you might need someone to talk to.”

“If I needed someone to talk to, you’d be the last one I would reach out to. What makes you think I would want your help right now?”

This was all too much for her to handle. It had to be a sick joke.

“You have no reason to hear me out; I wouldn’t be offended if you shut the door in my face right now.” Jennifer contemplated shutting the door before her mother could get another word out, but to be honest, she wasn’t sure how to handle her father’s death. Even at twenty-five the situation felt far too adult-like to be under her control. Her mother took the fact that the door was still open as a sign to continue. “Just because I left your father doesn’t mean that I didn’t still care for him. We all knew this day would come sooner or later, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“You have no right. Have you even talked to him in the

last ten years?” She tried to keep her voice at a reasonable level, but her emotions were bubbling to the surface and she was about to erupt.

“We’ve stayed in contact. I didn’t want you to think it was just a trick to get you to answer my phone calls. I wanted that to be your choice.” Her mother paused and looked towards her feet as she adjusted her necklace. “You know, he used to brag about you. He was so proud of you. When you got into Le Cordon Bleu he called me right away in tears. Is something burning?”

Her mother had stopped talking. The scent of burning chocolate drifted to where she was standing. Jennifer took off for the kitchen, leaving her mother on the doorstep. When she reached the kitchen the smoke was already slithering through the cracks in the oven; the smoke alarm would go off at any moment.

The last time Jennifer had burned a cake was in high school. She had been trying to make her boyfriend of the time something sweet for Valentine’s Day while writing an essay. Multitasking had never been her strong point. This was all well before pastry school; burning a cake was so embarrassing once you had a degree in pastry. This was all her mother’s fault. Jennifer stood in her kitchen looking at the burnt cake when her mother walked in.

“I didn’t say you could come in.” Her mother was the last person she wanted to deal with right now.

“Is that your father’s recipe?”

“I’ve never used another. Why mess with something that’s already perfect?”

“I remember the first time your father made that cake for me. It was for our first anniversary; I never got a chance to try it that night though.” Jennifer could see the pain in her mother’s face as she recalled the story.

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“Why not?”

“He burnt it.”

When her mom said this they both turned into a mess of laughter and tears.

It took a while for the two of them to regain their composure. It was silent for a few minutes afterward. Her mother was the one to finally break it.

“I was so young. Life seemed to be closing in around me; I know it’s no excuse, I just couldn’t handle it. After you were born I had to drop out of college, leave my job, and stay at home with you. It just felt like I was the only one giving anything up.”

“Did you come here to remind me of how much of a mistake I was? I am not going to sit here and listen to that.”

“No, I came here to make it clear that you weren’t a mistake. Look at everything you have accomplished. Aside from academically and professionally, do you even realize how happy you made your father? I was never meant to be a parent, but your father was.”

Jennifer didn’t understand where this was coming from. She couldn’t work out a way to respond either.

“Jen, I didn’t come back to be your mother. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think either of us wants that. I just want to help in whatever way you will let me.”

Jennifer headed to the sink where she took her time scrubbing out the dirty dishes she had let pile up in the sink. She took the burnt cakes out from their pans and tossed them into the trash. Her mother had stood in silence through all of this; waiting to see if Jennifer would respond.

“You can stay if you want, I wouldn’t mind some company. But don’t touch anything. Dad was the only one that was allowed to help me in the kitchen.”

Her mother sat at the counter while Jennifer collected the



ingredients to start the cake over:

*3 eggs*

*1 cup of milk*

*1/2 cup of vegetable oil*

*2 teaspoons of vanilla*

Jennifer mixed the wet ingredients together, separate from the dry ingredients like her father had taught her. Cautious not to over-whip the eggs, she turned off her mint green mixer, the one her father bought her when she graduated to replace the one she had practically destroyed from overuse, and thought back to the first baking experience she could remember. She had made her first cake when she was six years old, working alongside her father in their small apartment kitchen. She managed to screw it all up within the first ten minutes. Jennifer remembered the flour flying through the air when she accidentally turned the mixer on high.

“Jennifer, stop!”

She looked at her father with her face covered in a combination of flour and panic.

“I’m sorry, Daddy. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know that would happen. I’m so sorry.”

The words flooded from her mouth as tears built up in her eyes. She turned to leave the kitchen when she felt a handful of flour cover the back of her head. She turned back around to see her dad laughing hysterically. They fought back and forth, flinging the various ingredients within reach until they were both exhausted.

*2 cups of flour*

*2 cups of sugar*

*1 cup of cocoa*

*1 1/2 teaspoons of baking powder*

*Pinch of salt*

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As she sifted the dry ingredients together, conscious of her mother staring at her from across the counter, she remembered the night her mother had left: the storm her mother had caused and the distinct feeling that it was all her fault. Her mother had been very insistent that she “wasn’t ready” and “they had married too young.” Jennifer had watched her mother pack her bags from outside her parent’s doorway. She knew her mother had seen her, but she wasn’t sure what to do so she didn’t move. Her mom traveled from one side of her room to the other, grabbing everything necessary and throwing it into a suitcase. She moved to pack the bathroom and shut the door, probably ashamed to have her 15-year-old daughter watch her.

Jennifer snuck into the room to her mother’s vanity mirror to look through her jewelry. Jennifer thought back to all the days she had spent playing dress up and getting yelled at for using her mom’s jewelry. There was one necklace in particular that she had always loved. It was a gold star with “the brightest star in my life” engraved on the back. Her father had given it to her mother on their first anniversary, and even though it was cheesy, Jennifer loved it. She slipped it on for one last time to try to engrave the way it felt around her neck into her memory. But when she heard the bathroom door opening up, she rushed from the room without slipping it off. The necklace sat in her drawer in the upstairs bathroom. She had always kept it safe, but she never wore it.

The cocoa puffed up and the scent filled the room. She worked silently; the situation was uncomfortable to say the least. It wasn’t that her mom had disappeared from her life completely. But Jennifer was never very receptive when she did come around.

*Preheat oven to 350°.*

*Alternate dry and wet ingredients until batter is smooth.*

*Pour batter into two separate pans.*

Jennifer shuffled around her small kitchen, preparing the

pans first with butter and flour. Then she lined them with parchment paper to prevent the cakes from sticking; both were tricks she learned from her father. She poured the batter into the pans making them as even as possible.

*Set timer for 25 minutes.*

“Do you think you could look through the plans for the funeral? I’m not sure if I am handling everything correctly.” Jennifer didn’t know if this was the right decision. It felt wrong to let her help, but if she had really stayed in contact with her father, she might have some useful input.

“I’m not sure how much I can help; I’ve never planned a funeral either. I’d be happy to try though.”

They sat down to sort through all the paperwork. At first she was afraid she would be too overwhelmed to plan a funeral, with no one from her family around to help sort out the details. But once again, her father had been there for her; thankfully, he had thought ahead. Everything was picked out and paid for. He had kept the arrangements simple; he wasn’t a frivolous man, so it was only right he would be put to rest in a non-frivolous manner. He had chosen a plain, pine casket, instructed Fr. Stevens should lead the ceremony, and requested no flowers.

Her mother cracked a smile. “Your father always hated flowers. He believed they should be left in the ground and not cut and bunched in bouquets. It was his one request for our wedding.”

“Some people never change.”

“Everything looks in order. Your father would have been proud with how you are handling everything.”

Except she wasn’t doing all that great of a job. All that her father had left her to do was to schedule a day for the ceremony with the church. But she couldn’t bring herself to call. As they sorted through the paperwork, her mother happened upon a

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copy of her father's medical records.

"Will you—can you talk about the other night? I understand if you don't want—if this is too hard. It could help to talk about it."

Jennifer thought back to two nights before. Room 284, she had grown to hate the numbers. The man lying in the hospital bed looked nothing like her father. His face had been similar enough, slimmer though, dehydrated from the chemotherapy. The lack of hair was the biggest difference in his appearance. His hair had always been a mess. There was only one time she had seen it slicked back and styled, and it was in his high school yearbook. He had gone through a greaser phase and was lucky enough to have it immortalized as his senior yearbook photo. The usual joy her father brought to a room was missing.

She sat down next to his bed and reached out to grab his hand, which woke him up.

"Jen, what are you doing here?"

"Your doctors called. They said you weren't doing too well. I just wanted—" Jennifer was cut off by her own tears. Her father mustered up all of his strength and pulled her into his chest.

"Don't cry sweetie. It's going to be okay. You are going to be okay." She could tell it hurt for him to talk; each word took more from him than the last. She lay there on his chest as the beeps on the machine grew further and further apart. She wouldn't be okay. Not without her dad.

"Please don't—Dad don't leave me all alone."

"I love you Jen." He took a deep difficult breath. "If I could I would never leave you." Another. "But this isn't in our control." Another. "It never was."

It was the last thing Jennifer's father was able to say before his heart finally gave out. Jennifer had always heard when

people died they looked peaceful, as if they were sleeping. This was true to a certain extent, but blatantly put, her father looked exhausted. He had fought for much longer than the doctors predicted, and it had taken a toll on his body. On one hand, he looked peaceful, like he was finally able to rest. On the other hand, he just looked dead, and it was too much for Jennifer to handle. She sat for a few moments after he had passed, but as soon as the doctors came in to turn off all the equipment, she left.

Once again she was unaware of the fact she had been crying, but to some extent she felt better after repeating what had happened. She looked up at her mother for the first time. She hadn't heard her crying until then. They sat for a moment until they were interrupted by the timer on the stove going off for the second time that night. This time the kitchen was filled with the smell of deep, rich chocolate. Jennifer knew she had nailed it.

Without waiting for the cake to cool, Jennifer brought the pan to her kitchen table and handed her mother a fork. They sat together at her kitchen table, taking their time eating.

“Your father called me last week.”

Jennifer looked up from her plate, confused.

“He had a feeling that his time was almost up.” She paused for a moment, struggling to repeat what he said. “He wanted to be sure that you wouldn't be alone.”

“He asked you to come see me.”

“He just wanted me to keep reaching out to you; I had a feeling that showing up was the only way for you to take me seriously. He loved you so much.”

They finished eating in silence. Jennifer took the time to contemplate everything that had happened in the last couple days. She walked her mother to the door, but before saying goodbye, she excused herself to run upstairs for a moment. Returning, she

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held out the necklace to her mom.

“I haven’t seen that thing for years, how did you get ahold of it?”

“I took it the night you left; I figured you would want it back.” Her mom held the necklace in her hands for a brief moment. To Jennifer’s surprise, she slipped the necklace over her head.

“Keep it. You were the real star in his life.”

“Are you sure? I know how much this meant to you.” She nodded, leaned in to kiss Jennifer on the forehead, but hesitated and decided against it, turning to leave instead.

*4 cups of powdered sugar*

*1 cup of butter*

*½ cup of Crisco*

*2 tablespoons of vanilla*

The whole night left Jennifer utterly confused. Somehow it had managed to bring a small bit of closure. Jennifer knew that her relationship with her mom would never be perfect, but after tonight she decided it wouldn’t be the worst idea to answer her phone calls. And with what her mother told her about the night of her and her father’s first anniversary, burning the cake felt more like a sign than a failure. It wasn’t a sign in a spiritual way, but more like a kick in the ass to keep living. Jennifer walked to her kitchen and picked up the phone and dialed the church’s number.

“Hello, Fr. Stevens? Yes, this is Jennifer Higgins. I need to schedule a time for my father’s funeral and was wondering if you could help.”

The funeral would be held Saturday. Fr. Stevens promised to take care of the announcement and would make calls to some of her father’s friends to help plan the luncheon. He promised to keep everything simple as her father requested, but he also left

her with one warning.

“I’m afraid I can’t promise a small ceremony. You, more than anyone, know how loved and admired your father was. I have a feeling there will be a rather large attendance.”

“Thank you, Father. Oh, and please let the ladies know that I’ll take care of dessert.” With that Jennifer finished the conversation and hung up the phone.

# So She Told Herself

Daley ElDorado

Caroline lay in bed and tried not to fall asleep. An hour nap meant at least two hours lying awake when she really wanted to be sleeping. She thought about romantic things, like having a picnic under a tree or reading a book and drinking wine or cuddling and watching an intellectual movie. She could do these things if she wanted to, but more often than not, she found herself lying in bed, simply fantasizing about them. It seemed easier—easier to stay in bed all day and think about things that could enrich her life rather than actually doing them. She thought about the list of books she wanted to read—it was a really extensive list, ranging through all the classics. She would definitely be more cultured because of those books. She thought of the stories she wanted to write—they were great stories, sure to be published once they found their way onto paper. Caroline adjusted her pillow and took out her laptop. After some digging, she opened a folder called “Haircut Ideas.” She double clicked on the fourth icon and one of her favorite adult films opened. With headphones snug in her ears, she put her hand down her pants and her sheets over her head.

\* \* \*

“You really shouldn’t be wasting your childbearing years, Caroline.” Aunt Ellie popped another donut hole into her mouth and delicately wiped her fingers on the napkin in her lap.

Caroline perched on the chair with her feet tucked up un-



derneath her. She sipped her coffee and looked at her aunt over the brunch table. To her left, her mother worked diligently on the newspaper's Sudoku, not noticing that the edge of the page was gradually becoming translucent from the bacon grease on her plate. Her mother didn't signal that she noticed the conversation either, but Caroline knew she probably wouldn't have cared in the first place. Aunt Ellie was smart and college-educated; Caroline's mother said she knew all the things that the modern woman should know.

“Are you still dating that young man—Scott was his name, right?”

“Yeah,” Caroline said to the bits of scrambled eggs still left on her plate.

Aunt Ellie continued, buttoning and unbuttoning her cardigan. “So you are getting pretty serious—you must be. It has been six months, right? I remember when Mark and I met. We were engaged just four months later! Now, I'm not saying follow my example, but Mark and I just knew we were meant for each other after a month of dating. But we figured we should wait to follow social conventions, you know.” Aunt Ellie adjusted the hair-sprayed, stiff as straw, blonde mess on top of her head. Her lips turned up into a smug grin. “And as soon as we got married, we started planning for kids. It really is so much fun being a woman, Caroline. I can't wait for your wedding and for my little grandnieces and grandnephews.” She beamed into her cup of cream with a little coffee.

Caroline stared at the newspaper. “Assault Victim Accused of Lying, Alleged Perpetrator Releases Statement.” Scott was on his way to becoming an art teacher; he would be finishing up student teaching any day now. Caroline had an internship at a local attorney's office this summer. She didn't want graduation to come with a ring. She and Scott hadn't even slept together, let

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alone talked about marriage.

Caroline excused herself from the table, leaving her mother to start on the crossword and her aunt painstakingly texting letter by letter on her new phone. It was the little things, she told herself.

\* \* \*

Caroline walked along the beach, collecting sea glass as she went. It was a good hurt, walking on the beach. It meant her summer calluses were reforming, and she soon could go barefoot on the hot concrete sidewalks without flinching. The air smelled like nothing, and clouds were coming to cover up the sun. Caroline looked down at her flat chest and her chubby thighs. Scott told her to lose weight. He wasn't comfortable dating someone who didn't exercise—it reminded him of his mom's struggles to be healthier. Caroline's mom alternately offered her a membership to the gym and money for new jeans since none of Caroline's old ones fit her anymore. "The freshman fifteen is a real threat, hon," her mom said. "You struggled enough making friends in high school—we don't want that to happen now, do we? You could be finding your college sweetheart!"

Caroline sat in the surf. The water wasn't warm enough to swim; the cold stung and made her leg hair prickle painfully. But that's what people do when they're sad, right? They do things that make them hurt. She wanted to try it out. It was too much work to talk to the counselor. She was too nice and patronizing. Caroline couldn't bring it up with her friends because she already complained enough about Scott, and they needed someone to be there for them every once in a while. Her parents were out of the question. They would just offer solutions that Caroline had already thought of and tell her they were on her team, no matter

what happened.

A piece of sea glass rolled over as the waves came in. This one was blue. It was still sharp, too. Caroline took it and scraped it on her thigh. It hurt. But no blood—it just scraped up a layer of skin and welted, leaving a red line. She sighed. It was all too much work being sad: so much energy and time and brainpower and confusion. And it wasn't even that she was sad all the time. Just enough that it made her wonder if something was wrong. The doctor told her she was depressed, but she didn't feel depressed. She still smiled a lot and appreciated sunny days and sang in the car and did good deeds. She enjoyed things that made her happy and held on to them when the skies were blue. It was the little things, she told herself. But sometimes the skies were black, and her memory wasn't working right. She'd be so tired and couldn't do much of anything but doze and watch television and masturbate and eat candy. Being in a "funk," people called it. But what if being in a funk was when Caroline most felt herself? And what if being herself scared her?

\* \* \*

Caroline's relatives thought she was a lesbian. She never stayed in a relationship longer than a year, and her "punk-rock" haircut wasn't "her." Caroline rolled her eyes at this. At the next family reunion, she made sure her hair and skirts were shorter and her heels taller. She brought her best girl friend.

\* \* \*

Caroline put up Christmas lights in April. As a college student, organized religion was supposed to start bothering her. Christmas was food, Easter was food, Halloween was food,

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Thanksgiving was food, the Fourth of July was food. So why should Christmas lights only look beautiful for a couple months out of the year while her body was deemed not beautiful for all twelve months of the year?

\* \* \*

Cigarette smoke was so beautiful. Caroline loved blowing smoke rings. It was the little things, she told herself.

Her apartment was on the fourth floor of a building with no elevator, and she was out of wine. It was the little things, she told herself.

Caroline lay on the floor of her apartment. She hadn't showered yet. Scott was coming to pick her up in fifteen minutes. She sucked in a bunch of air and pushed out her stomach. She wondered if that was what it would look like if she were pregnant. She hoped she would never know.

# Contributor Bios

**Angela Berry** is the marketing director for *The Page Turner*. She is a senior Advertising & Public Relations and Communication Studies double major, with a minor in English. In the future, Angela would love to work at a publishing house or for a non-profit organization. Before that, Angela is off to Europe to volunteer, learn the stories of locals, and explore cultures and countries.

**Emily Burns** is the graphic designer for *The Page Turner*. She is a junior English and Art History major with a minor in Studio Art. Next fall she plans to spend her time researching Victorian fairy tales, interning for Prairie Schooner, and continuing to watch more Netflix than she would care to admit. Her career plans are far from certain but are usually about being a writer or editor. All she knows for sure is that Panera, yoga, and Joss Whedon references make her happy.

**Kirsten Clawson** is a co-editor and copyeditor of *The Page Turner*. She is a junior English major with a concentration in Editing and Publishing and minors in Biological Sciences and Classics. Some day she hopes to become an editor for a publishing company, but in the meantime, she is active in her sorority, MEDLIFE, and College Republicans. She can often be found in the Walt Whitman Archive working on academic research, at Starbucks with friends, or reading a good book.

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**Jaime DeTour** is co-editor and copyeditor of *The Page Turner*. As an English Major in her junior year of undergraduate study, she spends much of her time reading, writing, and participating in nerdy English conversations. After graduation, she hopes to spend some time teaching English abroad and eventually hopes to attend graduate school for Rhetoric and Composition to become an English Professor. In the meantime, you can often find Jaime in her room daydreaming about the future and procrastinating by feeding her Netflix addiction.

**Daley ElDorado** is the managing editor for *The Page Turner*. She is a junior English major with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Spanish. She hopes to work for a publishing company one day, big or small, to help professional storytellers share their work with the world. In the meantime, you can find her sleeping in the Andrews Hall basement or satisfying her sweet tooth with bunches of candy or chocolate.

**Eric Holt** is the editor-in-chief of *The Page Turner*. He is a junior English and Film Studies major. He plans to study Scandinavian culture in Sweden this fall and touch up on his Swedish language skills while he's at it. Until then, he will spend his time writing late-night poetry, watching too many horror films, and making bad puns in the company of friends.

**Nathan Sindelar** is a jack of all trades for *The Page Turner*. He's a senior English and Journalism major, as well as the editor of the Daily Nebraskan Arts & Life section. When he's not in the windowless basement of the Nebraska Union organizing a newspaper, you'll likely find him at a nearby coffee shop or the Hi-Way Diner, writing and listening to old live shows from Rod Stewart.

**Erin Thomas** is the finance director for *The Page Turner*. She is a junior English major with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Business. She hopes to one day own her own business, and like many other creative writers, she hopes to be a published writer. When she isn't in Andrews Hall making copies for professors and graduate students, she helps coach a 12U Sox Baseball team with her brothers and dad.

**Caitlin Wilson** is a co-editor and copyeditor for *The Page Turner*. She is a senior English major graduating this May with minors in Biology and Math. After graduation, she is heading out East to make her fortune. Until then, she lives in a small house with five roommates, two cats, a hedgehog, a snake, and a tank of fish.