

# CAESURA

Fountains 37th Edition

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2026 • *A PCC Student Publication*



# CAESURA

*Fountains 37th Edition* • 2026



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## **Caesura: *Fountains* 2026**

*37th Edition*

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**Mission:** *Fountains* is a literary publication dedicated to glorifying God and showcasing fiction, nonfiction, and poetry pieces edited by PCC students. The publication—from selecting and editing entries to illustrating and designing the layout—is completed by students. The goals of *Fountains* are to bring honor to God and to entertain, enlighten, and encourage readers.

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## Introduction

A caesura is a strong grammatical pause that occurs within a line of poetry. This break forces the reader to think back on the previous line before approaching the next. Our lives are filled with pauses of the same nature—your reflection in a puddle after the rain, a sickness that forces you to slow down, a photograph that brings up old memories. During these moments, we reflect, reconsider, or perhaps reminisce.

This 37th edition of *Fountains* showcases some of the pauses we find in life. Throughout this collection of stories and poems, you'll encounter situations that challenge you to stop, breathe, and press on. We hope this book prompts you to pause and ponder the intricate rhythm and meter of your life.

### Senior Editors



Summer Griffin



Brooke Hammond



Abby Henry



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# Allegory

A story or poem with characters, images, or actions that represent a universal truth through symbolism.



0:01/0:04



# True Love Is Terrifying

by Parker Pritchett

---



*Dragons, kingdoms, and royalty—will a young prince be able to find true love before it's too late?*

“Father,” said the prince, bowing before the king’s throne, “I have come as you asked. What is the matter?”

The white-haired man looked down with weary eyes at his son. Echoes of the dragon’s onslaught rang in both their minds. The guardsmen at the entryway bowed their heads. The kingdom had gone from prosperity to ruin in a single day.

“Surely, Father, you haven’t lost hope. Have you? Our army may be cut in half, but we aren’t afraid. I know there’s a way. There has to be!”

The prince watched his father stand and descend the gilded steps. He placed his hands on the prince's shoulders. "Your hopeful spirit encourages me, Son. I know your mother would be proud of the man you've become."

The young man smiled as he looked into his father's eyes.

"But I must command you to leave the battlefield now. I have a different mission for you," the king said. His face was grave. "One which you must accept." Then he raised an eyebrow. "It's time for you to marry."

The prince took a step back. "Father! What on this good earth do you mean by that? Now is no time for love. It is time for war!"



*Echoes of the dragon's onslaught  
rang in both their minds.*



The king sighed and began pacing the floor. "Yes, I know—which is why I am sending you to seek a bride."

"I don't understand, Father. How does this have anything to do with—"

"Son, listen to me. Isn't the lore of our kingdom clear? The only way to defeat a dragon is through the true love of a prince and a princess."

"Yes, but Father—"

"And, prophecy or no prophecy, a marriage with our neighboring kingdom could strengthen our economy and stabilize our nation—even if only for a little longer."

“Father, I don’t know . . .”

“I know, Son. Just think it over tonight. Will you do that for me?”

The prince took a deep breath. “Of course, Father. I will.”

That night, the prince tossed and turned. Shortly before the sun rose, he wandered into the stables, leaned against his horse’s stall, and sighed. “Well, boy, it looks like we’ll be making a journey today.” The prince could see his horse was not interested. “I’m getting married.”

Now wide awake, the horse whipped his head toward the prince.



*That night, the prince tossed  
and turned.*



“We’ve no time to lose.” The prince tossed his saddle onto the horse’s back. “I just hope my father is right about this.”

The two rode off into the vast, enchanted forest which separated the two kingdoms.

\* \* \*

The dragon, surmising the king’s intention, watched from atop his terrible tower. He knew his own weakness, yet he laughed a wicked laugh—because he was evil.

“So, the prince goeth forth to find true love,” said he. (He spoke in old English also—because he was evil.) “The boy will never find a thing like that among the seven princesses.

Yea, they are much too haughty. None will love him.” He stroked his scaly chin. “Nevertheless, I must needs take precaution.”

Spreading his giant wings, the fiery serpent soared to the queen’s castle. His landing was an earthquake that shook the courtyard and knocked the royal family off their imperial seats. *I shall smell their hearts*, the dragon thought as he felt the tickle of arrows bouncing off him. He came to the eldest daughter, picked her up, and held her close to his nose. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply. A wry grin slithered across his face as he dropped the girl. *Pride! My favorite*. He came to the second princess, breathing in again. *Ahhhhh. Arrogance!* Then the third—sniff. *Vanity*. The fourth, the fifth, the sixth—sniff, sniff, sniff. *Conceit. Disdain. Haughtiness*. The dragon purred with satisfaction. *They are married to themselves. Perhaps I need kidnap none!*

Finally, he came to the youngest. *There is something different about this one*, the dragon thought, *almost as if she does not share their blood*. He started to sniff, but instead he shrieked and dropped the girl. In the seventh, he smelled something that made his blood curdle—a gracious spirit. Her kind heart contained so much graceful meekness that, even if she were a peasant girl, she would be mistaken for royalty. Fuming and fearing the prince would certainly fall for her, the dragon snatched the girl in his talons and carried her off to his dark tower.

Many days later, the prince arrived at the queen’s castle. After explaining his errand to the queen, she took him to see her daughters. But once the royal brood realized what was going on, each princess burst out laughing.

One princess said, “This boy is desperate!”

Another added, “I will marry no man that I must one day call king.”

The prince balked. “Have you no other daughters?” he asked the queen. “I thought there were seven princesses.”

“No,” said the queen with pompous disgust, or perhaps jealousy. “My stepdaughter is dead—but even if she were here, I can promise that you would not want to marry her. She was the most pitiful girl in either of our kingdoms.”

Dismayed, the prince departed the castle and mounted his horse. “No, boy,” the prince said, “there will be no princess riding back with us tonight—nor ever, I suppose.”

The horse slumped his head and lowered his ears.

*What am I to tell my father?* the prince thought as he rode home through the dark woods. *If all women are this way, I shall never marry. I was such a fool.* Suddenly, the prince stopped. Before him was a familiar fork in the road. He panicked. *I’ve been going in circles!*

The magic of the forest now had him trapped. He had no more chance of finding his way out than he did of marrying one of the condescending princesses. Aimlessly, he wandered.

After much time had passed, the dragon concluded the prince must have died. Wanting to get the gracious girl out of his tower, he took her far away and forced her to live in a cottage where his wicked forest creatures could watch her. Dressed in common rags and marred by the smoky dungeon, the girl no longer looked like a princess—and she wept at the sight of herself!

\* \* \*

After a restless night's sleep in the forest, the prince awoke early one morning. He was startled by a young woman looking down at him. Instinctively, his hand darted for his sword.

She jumped at his sudden waking. "Forgive me. I did not mean to startle you."

"Please don't be sorry. I should apologize to you." The prince took his hand off his blade's hilt. "I didn't know anyone lived in this forest."

"I live in a cottage nearby." She noticed his tattered clothes. "Are you lost?"

The prince sighed. "Yes. As it happens, I've gotten quite lost in these woods and cannot find the way out. Could you point the way?"

"I wish I could, truly," she said as the prince climbed onto his horse's saddle. "Wait. Do you have somewhere to stay? There is another small cottage a few minutes' walk from here." She pointed toward a narrow pathway in the trees. "No one lives there or anywhere else in these woods since the dragon came. You can stay there tonight if you need a place to sleep."

The prince thought of all the cold nights spent outdoors in the thick, dangerous forest.

"Perhaps," he replied. He pulled on the reins and rode into the woods.

That night, he stayed at the cottage, and in the morning, he woke to the smell of a fresh breakfast waiting for him. *This girl doesn't know I am a prince, yet she delights to help me, the prince thought. I asked nothing of her. What kind of woman is this?*

Day after day, the prince returned to the cottage where he had slept and found a meal prepared for him. The prince and the girl soon began to take walks, and their walks became longer and longer each time. (The horse smiled at this.)

One day as they were walking, the prince said, “Most of the women I’ve met were driven by vanity and social standing. The younger ones especially had an air of conceit about them that was painful to abide.”

“Not all women are as you say!” said the princess, vexed. “You are wrong even to think that most women are so rude and prideful. You sound as if you were raised in a palace.”



*This girl doesn't know  
I am a prince.*



“I was brought up in wealthy circles. Perhaps that is why I think this way. But the reason I said all of that was to say that you’re different. You have been gracious, treating me in ways I never earned from you—and I a stranger too!”

“I just wished to help you.”

“Now, your turn. Please, tell me about yourself,” the prince said.

“I also grew up in wealthy circles. All I knew of my father was from a letter he wrote to me as he lay dying. He told me he loved me, and that I would always be his beautiful flower.” The princess looked away into the trees. “But what good is it really? I still have never known him, and he never knew me. Oh, and I am hardly beautiful! He would be disappointed.”

“You’re wrong,” the prince declared. Your father would be proud of you.” He hesitated. “And you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met, most of all for your kindness. Your kindness reminds me of my mother.”

The two were developing a habit of rendering each other speechless.

\* \* \*

Atop his tower, the dragon began to hear whispers from the dark creatures of the wood.

“The prince yet liveth?!” thundered the dragon.

“Indeed, your Vile Erroneousness,” said the head bat, leader of the dark scouts.

“How in all creation can this be? What else hast thou discovered?”

“They’re in love, O Great Malefactor.”

“In WHAT?”

“I m-m-meant to say, my s-s-savage lord, that th-th-they’re infatuated.”

“That’s better,” said the dragon. “Tell me how these things came to pass.”

“Well, you see O Egregious One, the princess showed the lost prince an unusual amount of kindness.” The dragon cringed. “She let him sleep in the other cottage and do numerous graceful things—things that showed she truly cared and was looking for nothing in return.”

“And how respondeth the prince?” the dragon asked nervously.

The bat hesitated. A lump formed in his throat.

“Well?” prompted the dragon.

“Then the prince spoke to her and said she’s the most beautiful girl in the world,” the bat explained, sniffing, “because of how beautiful her kind heart is and how she reminds him of his mother. O my thrice-dreadful Master!” The bat broke down into sobs. “It’s just so beautiful—”

“ANATHEMA!” shouted the dragon, “Have you any positive tidings to bring before me? Speak, if thou cravest thy salary!”

The bat wiped his eyes with a tissue. “They still don’t know each other’s royalty.”

*Oh, thought the dragon, then I still have time. As long as the prince does not know she is a princess, he will avoid making his heart known. The dragon grinned. I shall finish this with fire.*

\* \* \*

The prince awoke to the crackling sound and intense heat of flame as the cottage burned. He quickly stood to his feet.

“Where am I?” he mumbled. Then it started coming back to him: the walk with the princess, the dragon’s attack, the chaos and fire. “I must have hit my head on this tree.” He surveyed his surroundings. Bats and other dark servants of the dragon watched him from all around. The trees were violently ablaze. He touched his head and felt dried blood from a wound. Then he heard the dragon’s voice.

“Fool.” The beast stood atop the smoldering rubble of the cottage. He was smiling wryly and holding the princess in his claws.

“Truly, it was most tempting to kill you as you slept, but I, being the evil dragon that I am, crave the look of fear. I cannot kill one in restful sleep. They must *scream*.” He squeezed the princess, and she yelped in pain.

The prince drew his sword and stood in the battle stance he knew so well.

“Make no mistake.” He inched his head closer to the prince and showed all his teeth. “She will *die*. Your kingdom will be *lost*. And I will *burn* you alive!”

The prince took a step toward the dragon. Fiery heat from the creature’s breath met him.

“I know I cannot slay you. I know what the prophecy says. And I failed.” He focused on the princess. “But still, I love her. And I will die fighting for her today. Though she is not a princess, she is better than a princess to me—because she is gracious and kind.”

The dragon froze.

Sliding through the beast’s claws, the princess ran to the prince and threw her arms around him. “And though you are not a prince, you are better than a prince to me—because you see me as I am and love me. I love you!”

The serpent struggled to his feet, but upon witnessing their embrace, he could no longer recover. The quiet terror that had been gnawing inside him seized his heart. He immediately began to shrivel up, shouting insults at the prince.

“THOU RANK, EARTH-VEXING DEATH-TOKEN! THOU JARRING, FOOL-BORN HEDGE-PIG! THOU CRAVEN, ONION-EYED CANKER-BLOSSOM! THOU ROGUE! THOU KNAVE! THOU . . .”



"Then the  
prince spoke to  
her and said  
she's the most  
beautiful girl in  
the world."

He writhed and withered, and soon melted on the floor.  
Dead.

The prince and the princess stared at the puddle. Their eyes peered trancelike deep into the rippling pool.

The prince's eyes wandered to the princess's reflection. Hers had already wandered to his. When their eyes met in the watery mirror, the princess turned a deep shade of scarlet. She immediately started wiping the ash off her face and brushing her dirty clothes. The prince flushed and began doing the same. Neither had intended to confess their love that day.

“Um, well,” the prince said, looking over the forest, “would you like to see my father's castle?”

“Yes, I—I would like that,” she said.



*Neither had intended to confess  
their love that day.*



The trembling prince felt something on the back of his neck. His horse was nudging him closer to the princess.

He smiled. “We should probably get going.”

As the prince and princess rode toward the castle, they saw the king watching from a distance. He gave a great celebration that night, and the prince and the princess were married and lived happily ever after. No dragon ever dared endanger them again—for to all dragons, true love is terrifying.

# The Fair Lady of the Fairgrounds

by Abby Henry

---



*Friendships ebb and flow, sometimes bustling with life and other times still and quiet. This extended metaphor represents the ever-changing friendships in our lives.*

The fairgrounds are a ballroom:  
Noisy, filled with life and laughter.  
The sky above is the vaulted ceiling:  
Glittering, the stars twinkle like shimmering chandeliers.  
The happy guests  
are drawn in by the luminance:

The merry-go-round.  
She is spinning, beckoning, beaming.

I go round-and-round.

The fairgrounds are closed:  
Silent, weary from a day of bustle.  
The sky above is a darkened lantern:  
Extinguished, put to rest.  
The guests leave  
Tired, clutching their tickets for tomorrow's ride:

The merry-go-round.  
She is sighing, dreaming, slumbering.

I am sighing, dreaming, slumbering.

The fairgrounds are empty:  
Deserted, silent wind through trodden grass.  
The sky above is an ancient mirror:  
Clouded, no shining glimmer to be found.  
The guests are gone,  
Bored of their first friend:

The merry-go-round.  
She is waiting, wondering, waning.

I am the merry-go-round.

But the fairgrounds are loved:  
Remembered in stories and framed photos.  
The sky above is a diamond:  
Enchanting, sparkling, and striking.  
The guests are grown  
butterflies far beyond their crystalline cocoon:

The merry-go-round.  
She is fulfilled, contented, beloved,

and awaits her next set of riders.

# Renewal

by Mary Seiber

---



*As roses wither and hair grays, sometimes all  
a neighbor needs is milk and cookies.*

Mrs. Johnson sat on her front porch, gently rocking back and forth as she studied the flowers bobbing in their old blue pot. When the neighborhood children visited on Monday, they would wonder where it had gone.

Her husband had bought her the flowerpot and some rose seeds on their first date. “The blooms represent eternal love,” he had said, having been convinced that they belonged together from the moment their eyes first met. Some of the roses had adorned her wedding bouquet, and the rose bush had flourished.

But time stood still the day her husband was killed in a car accident.

The rose bush had long since wilted, yet still it remained in the same flowerpot. The faded flowers and Mrs. Johnson's silver hair alone hinted at the decades that had passed since her husband's death.

Each day was the same. That is, until one afternoon when ten-year-old Avery Brewster's basketball crashed onto Mrs. Johnson's front porch.

"I'm so sorry! I'll go get something to clean it up!" Avery exclaimed, turning to race back home, but Mrs. Johnson stopped him. It was too late. The flowerpot was shattered, and the flowers had been reduced to dusty debris.

"Never mind. I'll get it," she muttered. Within minutes, the pieces lay in a bag on the porch, waiting to be thrown away.

The next day, Mrs. Johnson sat inside her house idly twirling her spoon in her tea, when a knock at the door made her spoon clatter to the floor. *Who could that possibly be?* she wondered, opening the door.

There before her stood the person responsible for destroying her most cherished memory.

*Who could that possibly be?*

"I wanted to apologize again for breaking your flowerpot," Avery said, offering her a plate of cookies.

Mrs. Johnson hesitated for a moment before accepting them, then shut the door without a word. Avery continued to check

on her every day during the following weeks, and she finally invited him inside for milk and cookies one afternoon. They became friends, and after-school milk and cookies with Avery became part of Mrs. Johnson's routine.



*A green shoot poked through  
the soil and blossomed.*



About a month later, she opened her front door to find a box. Inside, lay the flowerpot and some daisy seeds. Avery had carefully pieced the pot back together. The next day, they worked side by side to plant the daisy seeds in the pot.

As they worked, Mrs. Johnson noticed a new family moving into the house next door. A young girl, holding a cat, jumped out of the moving van. Although the girl waved and smiled in their direction, Mrs. Johnson ignored her and went inside.

But slowly, a green shoot poked through the soil and blossomed.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Johnson pulled a sheet of cookies from the oven and set them out to cool. She smiled as the now-familiar knock sounded, announcing Avery's arrival.

"Come in!" she called. "Door's open!"

The door, indeed, *was* open, and Avery walked in, followed by the girl from next door. "This is Laura Miller," he said, motioning to the girl with a smile. "She's new at school and

doesn't have any friends. I thought she'd enjoy some milk and cookies, too."

Mrs. Johnson hesitated, the silence becoming uncomfortable. "Fine," she relented. "She can stay, I guess. Just make sure to wipe your feet. And get another glass from the cupboard, Avery."

*The door, indeed, was open.*

By the end of their visit, Mrs. Johnson realized that Laura wasn't so bad after all. The number of members in the Milk and Cookies Club had grown from two to three, and the daisies in the flowerpot began to multiply.

Soon, Avery and Laura began inviting other children from the neighborhood. It took time, but Mrs. Johnson began to eagerly anticipate any new friend that the pair would drag along to her house. Many of the children came regularly, but Avery and Laura rarely missed a day with her, and a steady stream of daisies flourished in the flowerpot. Even after Avery and Laura left for college together, the neighborhood children and teens continued to visit Mrs. Johnson after school, and every year, the children would help her plant daisies in the blue flowerpot.

Now Mrs. Johnson sat on her front porch, gently rocking back and forth as she studied the flowers bobbing in their old blue flowerpot. Just like the daisies, her friendships had certainly flourished in the years since Avery's basketball bounded across her front porch. That old basketball. It hadn't only shattered the flowerpot; it had neatly demolished the

walls Mrs. Johnson had built to shut out the world, bursting open the doors to friendship.

It didn't matter if anyone asked about the pot, she decided. She carried it inside and set it on the counter next to a wedding invitation.

Carefully, Mrs. Johnson replanted the daisies in a new pot. She then washed the old pot, gently wrapped it in paper, and placed it into a wedding gift box. She smiled as she addressed the package to Avery and Laura Brewster and added some rose and daisy seeds.

# The Unknown Colors of the Ocean

by Evelyn Jordan

---



What colors lie in fathoms below,  
In the sky-tinted currents that surge the sea?  
Only the creatures inside the waves know.  
Those intricate hues that possibly glow,  
I wish a starfish could reveal to me:  
What colors lie in the fathoms below?

Could there be crimson tides that flow  
In the deep? Please divulge this mystery!  
Only the creatures inside the waves know.

Emeralds, rubies, and sapphires I'll owe  
To anyone willing to answer my plea  
Of what colors lie in fathoms below?

What is the price to pass the undertow?  
My soul, my breath—could bravery free  
The things only creatures inside the waves know?

Into the cold, swirling ocean I'll go  
To learn the truth and finally see  
The colors that lie in fathoms below,  
That only the creatures inside the waves know.

# Chalk, Books, and Life Lessons

by Emily Dean

---



*Not every lesson is read from a textbook.*

I've loved stories for as long as I can remember. My mom would read aloud to me every night—anything from picture books to children's adaptations of the great classics. When I was five, she read *Tom Sawyer*. That may have been a mistake on her part.

During my kindergarten year, my parents attended a language school in Texas for a few months. Outside church kids and my cousins, I had never interacted with children before.

I don't remember exactly what I had done to get into trouble. I just know it pertained to some sidewalk chalk all over the

front porch of our rental house. Naturally, it was my job to clean up my mess.

“Hey, you want to play?” one of the boys from next door called.

“Can’t.” I shrugged.

“Can we borrow your ball?” his older brother asked.

“No.” I knew better than to let a couple of boys play with my ball unsupervised. “I can come play with my ball once I’m done washing the porch.”

The brothers glanced at the bucket, the wet rags, and the foamy water swirling across the porch. They looked at each other. Then, without another word, they picked up the rags and started scrubbing.

As I watched them work, an image flickered in my memory—a fence stretching tall and wide and a smirking Tom Sawyer convincing his friends to do his chores for him.



My dad returned home to find that his daughter had managed to con the neighbor boys into doing her responsibility. He found it funny. My mother did not.

That's when I discovered the power of literature. Stories weren't just entertainment—they were blueprints for understanding the world. Reading is a pathway into the experiences of others that teach us in ways we may not even realize. The lessons we absorb from books have a way of seeping into our own lives.

As a child, I experienced aspects of life through the gateway of reading. I didn't just read about characters; I stepped into their shoes, felt their emotions, and saw life through their eyes. As someone who bounced from place to place, my books became my anchor. No matter where I was, I could open a book and find familiarity—voices that felt like old friends, places that felt like home, and lessons—like the one I learned from Tom Sawyer—that sometimes led me into trouble.

*Books are more than just a childhood escape; they are lifelong companions.*

Now, books are more than just a childhood escape; they are lifelong companions. They continue to challenge, comfort, and shape the way I see the world. Every so often, I'll catch myself reflecting on a book's lesson, just as I did all those years ago with a bucket of soapy water and a freshly cleaned porch.

2

# Enjambment

A poetic technique that pushes a thought into the following line, drawing the reader along with it.



0:02/0:04



# The Love of Flowers

by Luis Rodriguez

---



*The author, inspired by his dad's love of gardening, reflects on what lessons God's children could learn from flowers.*

God's garden holds flowers that aren't the same.  
Dahlias, daisies, and daffodils stand, fair.  
Beside young dandelions with wide, fuzzy manes  
And elderly 'lions with white, wispy hair.

Innocent baby's breath all dressed in white  
Grow next to dark and mature black-eyed Susans,  
With soft lavender curves among  
The sharp sunburst chrysanthemums.

Proud, lovely roses sit sternly and straight,  
While impudent pansies play at their feet.  
The tulips smile with bright-colored lips,  
As the solemn iris wilts in the heat.

The salvia towers above other flowers.  
The peonies sit, short and pretty.  
The brilliant blue asters are scattered like stars  
Among closely knit bouquets of lilies.

Such difference in color, style, and shape  
Does not cause the flowers division.  
They live and they love alongside their peers,  
In this wonderful, welcoming garden.

# Dark Jaws

by Josie Rutgos

---



*A raging storm threatens to tear the Belón-Álvarez family apart. Will they be able to survive?*

A strange noise interrupted the silence—a rumbling growl, like an angry animal. María raised herself into a sitting position. *Where is that coming from?*

She craned her neck to see behind her. The courtyard of the Orchid Resort Hotel wrapped around her poolside seat. Behind the hotel was Thailand's vast expanse of jungle. She squinted as far as she could see, but nothing seemed to explain the sound.

She settled back, shaking her head. Her lawn chair provided a view of the Thai coastline less than a mile away.

Despite the oppressive heat of the morning, a chill crept down her spine. She watched her husband Enrique and their three sons—Lucas, Tomás, and Simón—splash in the pool. They were absorbed in a game of catch with the beach ball they thought they wouldn't use. Just a few days ago, Lucas tried to convince her not to pack it for their trip.

"Mom," Lucas whined, "We don't need that. Dad is going to take us to explore the jungle."

"Yes, you will," María insisted, stuffing the ball into his bag. "Who knows when we'll take another family vacation. The sky won't be overcast like it is in Spain—you'll want to spend time at the pool."

María had been right. Every day had been sunny, and the trip was just what they needed. Being a physician made it hard for her to relax, and Enrique was often caught up with his business. But today, on the morning of December 26, 2004, the Belón-Álvarez family had not a care in the world. María was surrounded by the people she loved most, and she was totally content. Their trip had been perfect, like a movie.

María sank into her chair and tried to relax, but the growling noise only grew. *Do Enrique and the boys not hear it too?* She squeezed her eyes shut. Surely she was overreacting.

But the rumbling was impossible to ignore. Something was wrong.

Her eyes flew open. The splashing had stopped, and Enrique and her sons looked frozen in time. Birds stopped chirping, and the air felt thick. The family of five stared at the ocean. The hotel courtyard, where they were all gathered by the pool, opened up on the Khao Lak beach sprawling several hundred feet ahead.

Then she saw it. A black wave, larger than any structure she'd ever seen, was crashing toward them. Hurtling forward with tremendous speed, this dark entity swallowed up the beach in a matter of seconds. It grew as it lurched on, like a dark mouth—a watery mouth ready to swallow her and her family whole.



*Blood beat against the back  
of her eyes.*



María leapt out of her chair and began to back up. She stumbled, dizzy at the magnitude of this destructive mass of water. Her hair tore about in the wind, and she clawed at it with trembling hands. The dock to the beach groaned and splintered as dark jaws swallowed it whole. Trees were ripped from the coastline and sucked into its frothy currents like a straw.

The Boxing Day Tsunami closed the gap between itself and the resort, looming maliciously above María's husband and sons. She watched in silent horror as Enrique snatched Tomás and Simón in each arm and ran toward the hotel. Lucas sprang after them. And stopped.

“Lucas!” Her cry was lost in the roar of water. The last thing she saw was her ten-year-old son diving into the pool—overwhelmingly small against a seething backdrop.

Then blackness struck and began to digest her.

A roaring, like millions of grinding gears, overwhelmed her senses. She spiraled and the current flung her against

splintered remains of vehicles, trees, and the hotel itself. A spear of wood stabbed her chest, and pain shot through her body. She gasped for breath, but there was no air to be had. Water filled her lungs.

Despite her eyes being pressed shut, she saw tunnels of light flash open in front of her. A sudden thought made her sick.

*That light at the end of the tunnels—if I go toward it, I'll die.*

She struck against what felt like an underwater wall, and the building pressure plastered her body against it. The wall had to break, or she would be crushed. Blood beat against the back of her eyes.

A whooshing of water, a great thrashing of hands and feet, and her head finally broke the surface. Watery filth caught in her lungs. One thought overwhelmed her mind. Her family had been obliterated in an instant, and she was alone.

“Enrique! Lucas! Boys!” María wailed. Her unanswered words burned in the air. Then she heard Lucas’ voice across the current.

“Mama! Mama!”

Lucas clung to a tree several feet ahead. Thrashing against rough water, she swam to him and clasped him to her chest. “It’s okay, honey, I’m here.” María said as she latched on to new hope. She had to survive for Lucas.



*She had to survive for Lucas.*



The morning crawled into late afternoon when the water finally subsided. María relinquished her grip on the branch but not her grip on Lucas. She strained her eyes for any familiar landmark amidst what now looked like a wet junkyard. Not even the hotel, as conspicuous as it had been just hours before, was discernable in the wreckage of Khao Lak. The tsunami had splintered even the strongest structures.

Lucas's small hands supported María as they stumbled waist-deep through the water. The adrenaline rush had kept María from feeling the extent of her injuries. As she and Lucas dragged themselves through the swampy remains of Khao Lak, she took note of the deep gash in her chest. A sharp plank had also punctured the area behind her knee, and she pressed grimy fingers to the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Mom, we need to bandage your cuts," Lucas pleaded. He tried to pry his eyes from her bloody injuries.

Cold sweat broke out on María's temples. "It's going to be okay." She shivered. "We'll find something to wrap them with."

Without hesitation, Lucas ripped scraps from his t-shirt to bind her injuries. As much as she hated for her son to see her this way, she knew having him with her was saving her life. María's muscles ached for sleep. But, she knew if she were to lie down, she might never get up again. She needed to keep moving while there was still daylight.

"Come, Lucas," she murmured, "We need to keep going. We need to find food and dry land."

He gazed at her with wide eyes, and a sudden pang of guilt coursed through her body. Was all of this somehow her fault? She had planned this vacation to Thailand, but they should have never come. Gritting her teeth, she pushed the thought from her mind. There were more pressing issues at hand.

Mother and son trudged through floodwater filth, which slapped against their thighs with each step. Fading light indicated that it was late afternoon. Aside from that, María had no way of knowing the time or direction they traveled in. The stench of death flooded their nostrils. Their surroundings felt like the remnants of an uninhabitable planet. The putrid water had caused Lucas's cuts to swell, and blood soaked through María's makeshift bandages.

A strange noise stopped the pair in their tracks. In the distance, they could hear a small voice sobbing in another language. As she stopped to listen, María understood just one word.

“Papa! Papa!”

María turned to Lucas. No matter how long it took her, she determined to find that child. She imagined Tomás and Simón. If that had been one of her sons, she hoped another woman would do the same for them. For the sake of this child's mother, she had to help him.

“Lucas, stay close to me.” She gestured in the direction of the cries. “I'm going over there.”

His lip trembled. “Mama, you're hurt. Can you make it?”

“I have to try,” she said, with all the emphasis she could muster. “What if it was you? Or Tomás? Or Simón? I have to try.”

The pair sloshed toward the noise, calling out as they went. They found the scrawny Swedish boy, who couldn't be more than five years old. He sobbed from where he perched on a pile of debris, rubbing balled fists into his eyes. Though he was panicking, his injuries were minor.

“What's your name?” María tapped his chest lightly with a finger. Gesturing to herself, she said, “I'm María.”

After some coaxing, Lucas and María learned that the boy's name was Daniel. They also concluded that the tsunami had taken his father. Once he warmed up to María, Daniel clung to her with white knuckles.

The setting sun cast an eerie glow on the carnage around them. The polluted water they waded in had begun to infect their wounds, which grew discolored and swollen. María knew that if they didn't get medical attention soon, their infections would spread and poison their whole bodies. For now, however, it was getting dark. The three scrambled atop waterlogged wood planks and settled in for the night.

\* \* \*

The next morning, they were greeted by loud voices. Men shouted in Thai, and after a few rough words, began to drag María away. Desperate cries to the boys caught in her bloated throat. She tried to thrash her arms but found she could not. Were these men going to separate her from Lucas and Daniel?

“Don't take me away from my babies,” she mumbled, “I have to stay with them.” The men did not listen to her pleas, nor could they understand. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed another man pulling the boys in the direction she was going. As they moved on, the water level lowered, revealing her pruned legs.

In the distance, sludge miraculously gave way to dry ground. A pickup truck spluttered nearby, the bed of the truck coated in straw.

These men had been searching for survivors.

Lucas and Daniel were hoisted into the truck next to her as it jolted forward. They had finally been rescued.

As María lay in the straw, a feverish delirium set in.

\* \* \*

The hospital in Takua Pa was not equipped to hold so many survivors. Body heat rose from the closely packed cots. Nurses scuffed across the floor from patient to patient. Lucas, María, and Daniel watched as their Thai companions had shouted to the nurses over the hubbub. Eventually the three received their own cots.

Their arrival at the hospital had occurred a few days earlier, and María had taken in the scene between snatches of feverish dreams. Her condition had not improved since their arrival, and infection still wracked her body. Her head throbbed, and the same questions resurfaced over and over in her mind. Why did she survive, when so many others didn't? Why did she deserve to live more than her husband and youngest sons? Their faces flashed before her feverish eyes in disfigured fragments. She felt as though she could hear their voices, and she let out a sob. There was nothing she wouldn't give to have them with her once again.

"Mama, keep fighting. Please? Please? So we can be together." Lucas stood trembling by her bedside.

Daniel's face twisted into a pucker, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

María gazed at them through glassy eyes. “I will. I promise.”

She knew she had to put her pain behind her for her boys’ sake. But although time would heal her grief, it could never wash it away.

The Thai rescuers continued to haul injured survivors through the main door. Amidst the injured, three bruised male figures huddled in the doorway, awaiting care. Their faces, though slashed with cuts, struck María as familiar.

*How cruel of my mind to play tricks on me*, she thought. These people looked just like her husband and her sons. Turning to see what she was looking at, Lucas froze. With a shriek he ran and threw his arms around them.

*It can’t be. Enrique?* She stared stunned.

As Enrique’s eyes met hers, he let out a startled cry. Scooping up Tomás and Simón in an instant, he flew to her bedside. Happiness María could have never thought possible flooded every inch of her body. She felt rejuvenated, as though her injuries were gone.

Miracles were possible.

The family embraced for a long time. No one wanted to be first to let go.

*Miracles were possible.*

“Wait a minute—Daniel?” María looked around. “Where’s Daniel?”

Lucas pointed, and a few feet away, she saw Daniel. He was crying, cradled in the arms of a large Swedish man.

Daniel looked over at María, and a smile crept over his face. Pointing to the man, he simply said, “Papa!”

\* \* \*

The Belón-Alvarez family embraced for a long time, and every chance they got in the years that followed. Every year on December 26, they make a somber pilgrimage to the Spanish coast. María’s wounds healed, but her scars still remind her of the day she almost lost everything. Huddled on the beach, the family sits together in meaningful silence. The silence and memories pay tribute to the 230,000 who were lost. Now, more than ever, they are thankful for their greatest gifts—each other.

# The Broken Vase

by Esther Barragan



A mess of flowers fallen on the floor  
 Where beauty blossomed just a bit before:  
 Now petals scattered, stems bent out of shape,  
 Cold water running, looking for escape.  
 And all around, the shattered shards of glass  
 Give warning to the curious souls who pass:  
 “I cut and scrape the people who come near,  
 And all who dare approach should live in fear.”  
 But when I wandered close I saw my face  
 In the reflection of the useless vase.  
 I was reminded of that desperate day  
 When I fell down—my life in disarray.  
 How Someone reached in loving grace for me,  
 And past a shattered vessel He did see.  
 The same Who took each piece and showed He cared  
 Enough to see the crystal pile spared,  
 My broken heart His healing hands did mend,  
 And with His love He’s made me whole again.

# Okay with Average

by Brooke Hammond

---



*How dare I be satisfied with anything but perfection.*

My hands were cold and numb. Waves of nausea washed over me while my head pulsed with a headache. I squinted at the smeared numbers in the top-left corner of my phone screen—4:18 a.m. I rubbed my temples before taking a sip of my lukewarm coffee; its stale bitter taste coated my mouth. Staying up all night working on college projects and papers would always make me feel ill.

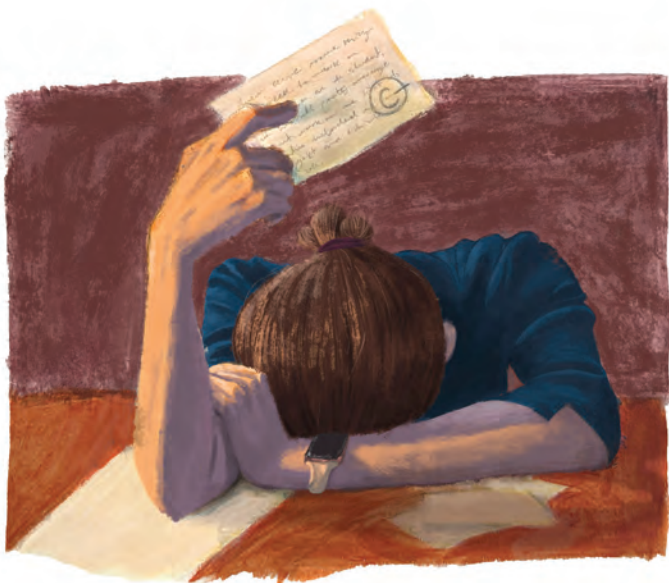
*Why are you staying up so late or just skipping sleep completely, you may ask. Don't you care about your health?* The answer to these questions lies within my birth order. As the eldest daughter who also inherited much of her father's

Type A personality, I often hyperfocused on my goals and lofty accomplishments.

Despite my parents' best effort to ensure that I understood they would be proud of me no matter the results, I rejected this idea. How dare anyone expect anything less than perfection from their firstborn!

The ironic part about this crippling, perfectionist mindset is that I am a *B* to *C* student.

I'd be lying if I said this doesn't bother me. I would love to see *A*'s come out of my long nights of studying and writing. I've listened to peers talk about assignments they knocked out in just an hour—that same assignment I spent days on. Beautiful *A*'s appear on their Eagle's Nest homepage, but low *B*'s slip into mine.



However, college has slowly but surely recrafted the way I view accomplishments and outcome from hard work. Sometimes your best is not “the best,” and oddly enough, that’s okay. The important thing is to avoid swinging the pendulum too far by giving up completely. Pushing yourself as a *C* student means you have the opportunity to grow and to overcome your own limitations. While I would still love to be an *A* student, I now recognize that it is okay to be average. My victories may not come through glowing *A*’s on a grade report. They may look like a *B* taking the place of a stubborn *C*, or perhaps resting a bit longer before tackling another big project. It’s vital for all students to remember that success is not measured by the letter on the report card, but by the hard work done for the glory of the Savior.

# Magnolias and Hyacinths

by Luis Rodriguez



Commencement Contest Winner



*I wrote this Shakespearean Sonnet after noticing  
springtime similarities and differences between  
Pensacola, Florida, and Grant Park, Illinois.*

My favorite thing about Florida's spring,  
Is the magnificent magnolia trees  
With white blossoms, where warblers rest their wings,  
And wait out the winds blowing in from sea.  
There aren't magnolias in Illinois,  
But the hyacinths, in pink and blue blooms,  
Poke through the mud and mire and bring joy  
To spots speckled in snow, as life resumes.

Rain and hail afflict the Earth endlessly,  
But every spring Earth shows her strength and grows  
New life, despite knowing eventually  
All will be covered in powdery snow.  
    For beauty and struggle can coexist  
    If I can be patient, if I persist.

# Defeating Discontent

by Christina Wooten

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*When God's plan and my plan didn't align,  
where could I find contentment?*

It began with war.

I charged across no man's land, mouth open, eyes wide, heart racing.

My partner shouted, "Stay close to me! There's strength in—" He was hewn down before he could finish the thought.

I paused to catch my breath. Bodies littered the battlefield all around me. One of the enemy troops ran toward my comrade John, who was facing the fort.

“John!” I screamed. He didn’t seem to hear. Clutching my weapons tighter, I sprinted in his direction and reached him just as the adversary drew his sword. “Gotcha.” I sliced the foe’s leg, then an arm, for good measure.

“Hey!” The boy rubbed the small welt on his calf. “No fair,” he whined.

John spun to see what had happened, high-fived me, and motioned to the grass. “It’s perfectly fair. You’re dead. Now, lie down.”

Our last opponent dropped reluctantly to the ground. The enemy children had been defeated, and my team stood victorious. As we celebrated, I thought back to earlier that week, when I had first learned about the battle.

*The enemy children had been defeated, and my team stood victorious.*

It was the summer of 2024. I had been counseling teenagers at The Wilds Christian Camp for three weeks, and I loved it. Because teens were close to my age, I found it easy to relate to their struggles. Our hikes through the North Carolina woods provided many opportunities for me to pull the girls aside and discuss their walks with God. As I settled into the routine, I started to think that this could be my best summer ever.

Then I was reassigned. All counselors were required to spend at least two weeks working with eight-to-twelve-year-old kids in junior camp. I had hoped the camp directors would just forget about me until it was too late, but when I checked my mailbox, the new assignment sheet shattered my dreams. Just as I had begun to feel comfortable counseling teens, I'd have to start all over with a completely different group of kids.

Dealing with children had never been my strength. My sarcasm often intimidated them, and I had little patience for disobedience. However, because there was nothing I could do about my situation, I begrudgingly determined to make the best of it.

That first week of junior camp went exactly how I'd expected it to go. The girls in my cabin were loud and stubborn and couldn't grasp the concept that it was a bad idea to walk in the middle of the road. I tried to model Christlike behavior, but the campers tested my patience to the breaking point. One of the girls did not brush her teeth for the entire week while another only showered twice.

I was too tired to care.

More and more, I began to look forward to Saturday morning when they would all board their respective buses and return to their families. But on Wednesday, as I herded children like lab rats through a maze of chairs, another counselor stopped me just before the evening assembly.

"Christina, are you headed up to the battle on Friday?" John asked.

"Battle?" A movement in the corner caught my eye. "Lily, sit down and stop drawing on Sarah's hand with that Sharpie." I looked back to my friend and wiped a sheen of sweat from my forehead. "What battle, John?"

“Every week, the junior boys paint swords and shields in the craft shop to use on Friday.” John blew a steady stream of air into a Styrofoam cup as he waited for his scalding tea to cool. “At the end of the week, any cabins that want to participate go up to the ball field. We divide the kids and counselors into teams, then run at each other and fight.” He took a sip. “The rule is if you get hit by a weapon, you have to fall down and play dead. You should come!”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I’m not sure my girls would be eager to fight a bunch of boys.”

“Well, I think you’d have fun, but it’s up to you.” John shrugged and walked away to unwedge a boy’s head from between two chairs.

I thought about what he had said. The battle did sound like fun. It would be nice to take the week’s stress out on middle-school boys. “Hey, girls!” I summoned my troop of tiny monsters. “Come on over here.”

Lily flipped her tangled, brown hair, smiled sweetly, and tried to bite another girl’s arm.

“That’s enough!” I broke them apart before Lily could take a chunk out of Sarah’s wrist. “I called you over to ask if you want to go up to the ball field Friday afternoon and have a battle with the boys.”

“Raaaahhhh!” Lily cheered. She was a very feisty child.

Little Sarah ran her tongue over her braces and squinted through thick-rimmed glasses. “That sounds like fun . . .” She seemed hesitant. “But we don’t have any swords.”

“I don’t think we need swords,” I reassured them. “Maybe a large stick could work. We aren’t trying to hurt the other

team. To get them out, all we need to do is tap them with our weapons.”

The children nodded and returned to whatever havoc they had been wreaking. I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing myself to consider the possibility that this battle could actually be fun.

Friday afternoon brought intense heat as the sun beat down on us in the open field. Our team faced a row of ferocious boys, who were gnashing their teeth and chanting strange war cries. To me, they looked about as fierce as Chihuahuas, but to my poor little girls, they were wolves.

“Don’t worry,” a boy in our group said to Sarah, “us men’ll protect you.”

Alex, the counselor we’d elected to be our leader, began explaining the rules of the fight. “No headshots, no stabbing, and no hard hits,” he shouted.

The boys cheered. I clutched two large sticks I’d found in the woods and walked over to my cluster of frightened girls. Ours was the only female cabin there.

Alex walked to the middle of the battlefield and began the countdown. “Five.” We were evenly matched with the same number of cabins facing off against each other. “Four.” Of course, one of those cabins consisted of six terrified girls—“Three”—and their equally terrified counselor. “Two.” Maybe this was a bad idea. “One.” Too late.

“Go!”

We sprinted across the field, wielding our makeshift weapons. A few boys lagged behind to form a protective shield around my girls.

The counselor I ran out with stayed near me. We stood back-to-back, swinging in large circles. Though the children were quick, they also had shorter arms than we did. To take them down, I just had to reach out with my stick and sweep their legs. My confidence grew as the battle progressed. I was defeating far more boys than I had expected to, and their overdramatic deaths provided peak entertainment.

After all the boys on the opposing side lay strewn across the battlefield, John hollered, "Victory!"

My girls stood alongside the boys, pumping their fists in the air. The fear had disappeared from their faces. I grinned. So far, I was enjoying this more than anything else I'd done at camp.

Alex lifted a hand to quiet the children. "This round," he announced, "will be counselors versus campers."

My fellow adults and I lined up on one side, staring at the sea of children across the field. They outnumbered us six to one. Those were grim odds.

As Alex began counting down, John leaned over to me. "Don't worry," he whispered. "When the fight starts, we're going to make a run for the fort."

He motioned away from the ball field. In the woods, just a few minutes' hike away, stood Fort Fun. Counselors often took children up to play at the fort during afternoon free time, but now, it promised to be our safe haven.

Alex yelled, "Go!"

The counselors took two steps forward before turning around and darting for the fort. I ran after John at full speed. We leaped over tree roots and tripped through brambles that ripped our clothes. Children screamed behind me,

thundering ever closer. I glanced back over my shoulder to see how far away they were.

*The children outnumbered us six to one. Those were grim odds.*

The next thing I knew, I was sprawled on the ground with my head spinning and pain shooting up my leg. My foot was wedged between two tree roots and twisted at an odd angle. I tried to stand, but waves of agony forced me to abandon my efforts. I managed to drag myself to the side of the path and lie on my back in the dirt.

One of the counselors stopped running. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I choked in a hoarse whisper. I was definitely not fine. “Go ahead. I’ll make it back.”

“Are you sure?” The counselor’s eyes gleamed. He wanted to fight.

“I’m sure.”

Without another word, he continued his hurried hike to the fort.

Then the merciless children descended upon me. “Kill her!” they screamed, slashing, stabbing, striking.

I groaned. “Et tu, Brute?” They were too young to understand that reference. “Stop it! I’m already dead.”

The little villains either didn't hear or didn't care, but eventually, the mass of children began to trickle away. My girls stopped when they saw me lying prostrate on the ground.

Sarah nudged me with her foot. "Christina, are you okay?"

"Yep." I winced. "I'm just gonna have to make a little visit to the nurse. You guys go. I'll find you later."

The girls hesitated, but with one final "go on," I convinced them to follow the stampede up to the fort.

When the last of the kids had disappeared through the trees, I hoisted myself up onto my good foot. For a moment, my vision tunneled, and the pain increased. Forcing myself to take measured breaths, I hopped, inch by excruciating inch, toward the nurses' station. Something was very wrong.

The nurse examined my foot in the tiny camp office. "The only thing you can do tonight is put ice on it and keep it elevated. But—" she probed at my swollen foot, and I winced— "it could be broken. We'll have to get it x-rayed tomorrow morning just to be safe."

The x-rays confirmed the nurse's prognosis. My foot was broken in two places, and my ankle was severely sprained. I wouldn't need surgery, but this news meant that my counseling days were done.

*A broken foot is so much worse than counseling kids, I thought. Why would God let this happen?*

Then it hit me. I'd been so upset about having to work with children, and now I was upset about this. Instead of choosing to serve God with a joyful spirit, I had done nothing but complain. Maybe my broken foot was God's way of sending me a wake-up call.

“Forgive me, Lord,” I prayed as I hobbled out of the nurses’ office. “You are still good to me no matter what, and I should have realized that sooner.”

*Why would God let this happen?*

Lily stopped me on my way back to the cabin. “Christina?”

“Yes, Lily?”

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes, I have to go home, and so do you.”

She stared at me so intently I wondered if she was plotting to kill me. When she lunged closer, I flinched. But then her arms wrapped around my waist. “Thank you, Christina,” she said, her voice muffled against my clothes. “I’ll miss you.”

I smiled, despite the strange sensation of sadness building in my heart. “I’ll miss you too.”

The next day, after the children had gone home, I loaded the last of my luggage into my car and thought back over the events of the week. I had led one of my girls to Christ. My cabin had grown in maturity and godliness. Lily even stopped biting.

I may have broken my foot, but I’d also helped children make the most important decision of their lives.

*And it was all worth it.*

# More Passion

by Abby Conrad

---



*Which is more important—passion or perfection?*

Haley froze. Her fingers stuck to the ivory keys like sap. The third movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” rushed from her mind faster than water through a spout. Her mouth went dry, and her lungs constricted—it was hard to breathe. She couldn’t remember the notes.

The stage lights glared down on the pianist, exposing her wide-eyed expression. Her fingers fumbled across the piano, reaching for any sort of melody, anything to finish the piece and leave the stage as quickly as possible. She couldn’t bear to be on that blinding platform any longer. After what seemed like hours of silence, she found the ending notes and played them with trembling hands. She had practiced for hours the night before, making sure she hit every note at just the right time, with the right intonation, and the right rhythm. The piece had been close to perfection. But when it mattered,



she'd cracked under pressure. What would her mom have thought of this disastrous performance?

Haley squeezed her eyelids shut and squinted through them at the judges in the audience. She knew she'd regret looking, but she had to know. Without a single glance up, the judges scribbled on some papers. Haley could see the criticism in their sharp pen strokes. It was humiliating.

*Hold it together. Just bow and walk off the stage. Move your legs, Haley Valdez.*

With what little dignity she had left, Haley stood from the bench and walked to the edge of the stage to bow. She hoped the other contestants in the front row seats couldn't see how violently she shook. She straightened her shoulders, feigning confidence as she left the stage of her crushed dreams.

The final contestants performed, and the judges conversed quietly before the presenter announced the first and second runners-up. Haley, gripping her black velvet dress so hard her knuckles turned white, sat in her seat in the front row with all the other contestants. One by one, the winners went onstage and bowed. On Haley's right sat Justin Moore, who had won the last three competitions. He wore a smug, twisted grin the entire ceremony, not a single ounce of fear in his eyes. The results were clear.

The presenter took to the stage with a sealed envelope containing the name of the first-place winner written inside.

"The winner of the 28th National Valeria Piano Competition, along with a \$1,000 cash prize and a full scholarship to Juilliard, is . . ." The presenter opened the envelope. "Justin Moore! Congratulations!"

Justin rose, straightened his silk tie, and walked to the stage.

After the ceremony, a crowd of people swarmed Justin with compliments and flowers. Haley, hoping to avoid any interview questions, sneaked out with her dad. He held her close as they walked out, but he didn't say a word, and she was thankful for it.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Haley sat at her own piano in her living room; she held the sheet music that she had practiced for months. The paper was crumpled and slightly torn, the wood on the piano chipped, and the keys discolored from use. She looked up. A photo of her mother, the infamous pianist Lilah Valdez, sat atop the piano.

"Sorry, Mom," she whispered. "I'm just not as good as you were. I don't think I ever will be." Her mother just kept staring back with smiling, brown eyes. Haley tore the sheet music and let it fall disgracefully to the floor. Maybe it was time to give up the instrument altogether. If she couldn't play an intermediate song like "Moonlight Sonata," then how could she hope to reach a professional piano level?

*"Sorry, Mom," she whispered.  
"I'm just not as good  
as you were."*

Seeing the photo of her mother caused Haley to recall the first piano lesson her mother, Lilah, had given her. She had been humming happily along as she showed Haley the

chords, but Haley cried because she couldn't get the notes quite right.

"It's okay, Hals," her mother had assured her. "No one gets it right away, and even when they get it, they still make mistakes. I can't tell you how many mistakes I've made in my career."

Haley couldn't believe that her mother made mistakes. She'd never seen her mother mess up once in a performance. Haley remembered her mother's last performance at Carnegie Hall. The final notes of "Moonlight Sonata" rang throughout the auditorium, the crowd in utter silence. Then came the loudest round of applause Lilah had ever received. Haley had watched in awe from the wing as her mother bowed before the audience. It had been this performance that had sparked Haley's interest in piano.

\* \* \*

The morning after the failed performance, Haley awoke to golden sunlight peeking through her ivory curtains, welcoming a new, but not very bright day. At least, it didn't seem bright to her. She pulled back her covers and noticed a slip of paper lying on her desk. It read:

*Hey baby, I'm headed off to work. Might be gone awhile. There's breakfast on the stove. If you need anything, just call me. Also, I want you to know that you're the best pianist by far in my heart, Hals.*

*Love, Dad*

Haley smiled half-heartedly at her dad's attempt to cheer her up. He had spent many a minute the night before trying to shift her thoughts from the competition, all in failure. She

set the note down on her desk and walked downstairs to the fridge to grab some orange juice.

*Knock, knock.*

Who was that? She slowly opened the door.

“Mrs. Larson?” Haley’s neighbor and old music teacher stood before her, draped in a lavish red dress with pearls and lace. She wore a wide-brimmed hat that jutted out in all directions, almost completely hiding her already small face. Haley had forgotten how eccentric Mrs. Larson was.

“Why hello, Haley dear. How have you been?”

“I—I’ve been better.” Haley attempted to laugh off the depressing comment she’d just made. “But what brings you here?”

“Well, I actually have a proposition for you, dear. I’ve come across a problem, and I was taking my morning walk ’round the neighborhood when I thought of you. I just know you’d be the perfect fit!”

“*What outrageous timing, Haley thought. Just when I was about to close the piano for good.*”

“For what exactly?”

“You know I still teach choir at Calvert Greene Elementary, right? Well, our pianist, Mrs. Jingle, had an accident the other day. She’s quite the elderly woman, you see, and she slipped on her stairs at home. She broke her wrist and is unable to

accompany our children's choir. We have a recital coming up, and we need someone who can play for us. I hear you're quite the pianist now."

*What outrageous timing,* Haley thought. *Just when I was about to close the piano for good.*

"So, what do you say, dear? Would you mind doing this small favor for your favorite music teacher?"

"Ahem . . . well . . . it's just that I—"

"Before you say no, just take some time to think about it. It would only be for the next month. We meet every Monday and Wednesday at three o'clock. The recital is on April 20. I promise to compensate you, of course. Think of it as a part-time job."

Mrs. Larson beamed at Haley with such an aggressive, excited smile that Haley had a hard time saying no.

"I'll try to make it," Haley finally replied.

"I hope to see you Monday then!" Mrs. Larson continued her walk, leaving Haley to comprehend what had just happened. She was a soloist. Accompanying wasn't really her thing. Yet somehow, here she was—an accompanist.

\* \* \*

On Monday, despite her resignation, Haley found herself in the entryway of her old school, still questioning why she had agreed to this ridiculous proposition. She stepped into her old music room. The same cheap, plastic chairs sat in wonky rows by the chalkboard. The broken window by Mrs. Larson's desk swung lazily on its hinges, creaking at every slight gust of wind. Mrs. Larson looked up from behind a mountain of sheet music arrangements.

“Hello, Haley! Glad you could make it. Right this way.” Mrs. Larson guided Haley toward the old, familiar piano in the corner. “Here are the pieces we will be performing. Fairly simple. Someone of your level could easily sight-read them.”

Haley scanned the pieces: “Oh, In the Woods,” “I Am the Music Man,” and “Amazing Grace.” She sat down at the rustic, faded piano and played through each piece as chattering students began filing into the classroom. Haley watched as the children took their respective seats. They seemed so . . . happy, like the world hadn’t unleashed its heartache on them just yet.

Haley noticed one of the girls swinging her legs back and forth on her chair while fidgeting with her golden curls. Every now and then, she stole a peek at Haley, probably wondering who she was. Haley returned her glances with a smile. Surprised, the girl looked away. Haley laughed softly and turned her focus to the music.

The bell toned.

Mrs. Larson tapped her baton on a music stand at the front of the classroom. “Quiet down, everyone. This is Miss Haley. She’s filling in for Mrs. Jingle until after the recital. Give her a warm welcome.”

“Hi, Miss Haley,” the kids said in unison.

“You don’t look like a pianist,” one of the children blurted. “Can you really play?”

“Charlie Moore! Watch your tongue,” Mrs. Larson reprimanded. “That’s not nice, and you know better than to speak before I call on you. Haley has won many piano competitions. These songs are a piece of cake for someone

like her.” Haley’s heartbeat quickened at the mention of competition.

Not deterred, Charlie raised his hand. Mrs. Larson conceded. “Yes, Charlie?”

“I have a question.” Haley turned her head to look at the unrelenting child. “My cousin plays piano, and he just won a big competition last week. Can you play like him?” Charlie turned his nose up, crossing his arms.

Haley’s breath hitched. *Justin Moore, the winner of the Valeria Competition. Of course, this boy is related to the piano prodigy Justin Moore.*

Haley composed herself. This kid wasn’t going to humiliate her. “I—”

“She’s plenty good. I heard her playing before class started,” the girl beside Charlie asserted. It was the same girl that had kept looking at Haley earlier.

“Really? Then how come she is here instead of out winning competitions like my cousin?”

“Because she—”

“That’s enough, Charlie and Kalia. I assure you I wouldn’t have asked Haley to come if I didn’t think she could do it. Now, we need to begin,” Mrs. Larson interjected. “Haley, play a C major scale. We are going to start with some warm-ups. Hum the scale using the sound ‘ma.’ Remember to hold out that last note.”

After a couple more scales, they jumped right into their first song, “Oh, In the Woods.” Mrs. Larson sang the first part of the song, and the children echoed her. Each time, the melody grew faster and faster. The kids started jumbling the words

together, loving every second. At the end, the kids burst into hysterical fits of laughter and exasperated breaths—even smug little Charlie. Kalia laughed alongside him, both children forgetting the fight they'd just had at the beginning of the class.

Then the children sang “I Am the Music Man.” Mrs. Larson threw in some hand motions, which the students messily imitated. Finally, they finished with “Amazing Grace.” The melody was slower, more serene. Yet the children sang it in cheerful innocence. Haley could see so much more love in their eyes for music than she had seen in her own the past few years. When had she fallen out of love with music? When had it become only about perfection and fame? Her mother would have been ashamed.

The rehearsal finished, and parents came one by one to pick up their children. When Charlie's mother arrived, he made a quick face at Kalia and walked out. She rolled her eyes at him and huffed as she waited in her chair.

Haley was still sitting at the piano looking over the sheet music when she noticed Kalia coming toward her.

“Don't listen to Charlie. He doesn't know what he's talking about.”

“That's right. What does he know?” Haley and Kalia shared a laugh. “Thanks for standing up for me, Kalia. You're very sweet.”

“I just said the truth.” Kalia hid a blush under her blonde curls. “Could you play another song?”

“Don't you need to go home?”

“My mom's not here yet. Just one song. Pretty pleaseeee.” Kalia shook Haley's arm.

“I guess I can play one, but just one.”

Kalia bounced on her heels, her curls bobbing ever so slightly. She scooted next to Haley on the piano bench.

Haley scoured her mind for the right piece to show Kalia. She knew several competition pieces, but which one would be best? Then it came to her.

Haley stretched her fingers across the keys and began to play a short rendition of the very piece she had botched at last week’s competition. She struck the keyboard aggressively as she began the fast-paced song. In the middle of the piece, Haley began to mix up the notes again. She hit a wrong chord and flinched. She inspected Kalia’s expression, expecting to find judgment in the little girl’s eyes, but Kalia sat there, holding her breath. Haley finished the final chords, panting from the exhausting piece. Beads of sweat formed on her brow.

Kalia gawked. She looked as if she had seen the most amazing thing. “How’d you do that?”

*To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable.*

“Just a little practice.” Haley laughed at the irony. “You should have seen my performance last week. If Beethoven had been present—and still hearing—and not dead—he’d have slapped me off the stage himself.”

Kalia giggled. “Well, good thing he’s dead, then.” She continued, “I’m learning piano right now, and it’s really hard, but I hope I can be as good as you one day.”

“Who? Me?” Haley gaped. “You’re better off looking up to Charlie’s cousin. He did win that competition after all.”

“I don’t care about his boring cousin. You’re way cooler than him anyways.”

\* \* \*

Later that day, Haley found herself at her old piano again. She ran Beethoven’s melody over and over again in her head, remembering when she had first heard her mother play it. It had been beautiful, sad, forlorn, and so many other things. But most of all, it had her mother’s soul—her emotions. Haley remembered a famous saying from Beethoven that her mother used to quote often:

“To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable.”

Haley lifted her hands to play the third movement of “Moonlight Sonata,” but this time with more passion.

# Why We Bleed

by Josie Rutgos

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*Why does God allow us to suffer? Sometimes,  
we wonder how long God will let us bleed.*

At night, I come back to my room and analyze the bouquet of emotions I gathered as I went about my day. It is not uncommon to find the rose of gratitude and thorns of fear curled up together in the same corner of my mind. Gratitude is my constant reminder that God works all things out for good. Yet my fears prompt me to ask, *What if He doesn't?*

I imagine that my feelings are a shadowy representation of what Job endured as he clawed at his blistered skin with shards of pottery. I cannot imagine how weary and forsaken he must have felt. While his mind, body, and soul ached for relief, one question must have burned in his mind—*how long will God let me bleed?*

With my face upturned to heaven, I often ask the same question. I am baffled that even through immeasurable grief, Job was able to say, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” Job didn’t know the end of his story, but I do. God used Job’s pain to draw him closer to the Healer. I see how light my suffering is in comparison and ask myself if I am also able to bless the Lord as I bare to Him my bleeding soul.

Another Man once cried tears of blood and begged God to ease His excruciating pain. Fully man and fully God, He longed to be free of the cross His Father asked Him to bear. Yet He was still able to say, “Not my will, but thine, be done.” God let Christ bleed, but His pierced hands stretched out to make a way for our redemption.

These musings of mine point me to a God who works all things together for our good. At times, I can’t see God’s plan. I don’t know how something good can come out of my suffering. But God used Job’s pain to bless others. He used Christ’s anguish on the cross to save the world from sin. God will use my trials to draw me ever closer to my Father.



*Sometimes, God lets us bleed.*



Sometimes, God lets us bleed so that we will repent of sin. He lets us bleed so that we will bless His name, even as we scratch our sores with broken clay. God lets us bleed so that we will know our Healer and become a tool that helps others know Him as well.

“ The LORD gave, and the LORD  
hath taken away; blessed be  
the name of the LORD. ”

–Job 1:21

3

# Point of View

The perspective from which a poem or narrative unfolds.



0:03/0:04



# Family Discord

by Luis Rodriguez

---



*Who knew playing piano could be so hard—and chaotic!*

“Put that away. It’s almost time for dinner,” scolded Mom, playfully.

“Wait, wait!” I said, not yet ready for my dad to finish playing his old Fender guitar. “Do one more, please.”

“Okay. I’ll do one more song,” Dad said, “but only if Mami says it’s okay.” He looked toward the small kitchen of our tiny trailer home, winking at my mother with a mischievous smile.

My brother, sister, and I rapidly crossed the few feet that separated the carpeted living room from the tile kitchen and gathered around Mom’s knees, begging her for one last song. She gave a little nod.

“Okay. One more, and then it’s time for dinner,” Dad said. We all sat down around him as his rough, calloused hands began to caress the guitar strings, drawing out a sweet tune. Still in his dirty work clothes, my dad strung together one more bright, fresh melody on that old guitar.

In my younger years, I was fascinated by the guitar. When Dad was not playing it, I would stare at its shiny brass strings and polished wooden body. I would slide my small hands across the strings, trying to evoke the same beautiful melodies my father summoned with such ease. I would spend long stretches of time trying to figure out how my dad was able to create such clear, sweet music with the instrument—and why all I could create were loud, abrasive scratches. I was obsessed with the music the guitar could make, but its secrets constantly eluded me.



*I was fascinated by the guitar.*

I think Dad always dreamed that I would take up the guitar some day. He wanted all of us siblings to play an instrument and would often talk about how he wanted us to play together someday, as sort of a family band. But he was always partial to the guitar. My older brother was the first one to start learning an instrument, and to my dad’s great delight, he chose the guitar.

“These fingers go here, and these go here,” Dad would say, guiding my brother’s fingers into the correct positions to play

a certain chord. I would sit and watch them, wondering when I would finally be able to learn the instrument I had spent so much time admiring. “Not yet,” Dad would say. “Your hands are too small right now. But don’t worry, Bud. I’ll teach you one day.”

As I grew older, however, my interest in the guitar began to wane. I had begun the long, arduous toil that was elementary school and had already begun to face the difficulties of being the younger brother. My teachers constantly compared me to my older brother, whose bubbly, talkative nature totally contrasted my more reserved, quiet personality. I began to dislike being compared to him and, to an extent, my dad, because so much of my brother’s personality mirrored Dad’s. I became irritated that everyone seemed to think I was so much like them, when in my mind, I knew I would never be like them.

Finally, the day came for me to decide which instrument I would play. I had known the question was coming for a few days, and at eight years old, I had resolved that I would take this opportunity to finally establish myself as a distinct person.

“Luis, we have a question to ask you,” Mom said during dinner one night.

“What is it?” I asked through a mouthful of food, earning a disdainful look from my mother.

“It’s time for you to start learning an instrument soon,” she said. “Have you thought about what you want to play?”

I breathed in and steeled myself. “Yeah, I have,” I said. “I want to take piano lessons.” I looked up and saw a slight

disappointment flash across my father's face before he quickly replaced it with a smile.

"That's great!" he said. "Let's get you piano lessons."

Thus, my adventure into the wonderful realm of scales, intervals, and chords began. I was content with the knowledge that I was the only one in my family interested in the piano. This meant there would be no one to compare me to. I had finally distanced myself from the image of my brother and father; however, the piano was substantially harder to learn than I had initially thought.

I struggled mightily. My fingers were shaky and uncoordinated. Even the simplest of tunes was an uphill battle for me. I made slow progress and became frustrated early on in my career as a pianist. But my dad supported me, for now he had a new dream: for me to be the church pianist. He pushed me to stay with the instrument, and for his sake, I persisted.

Years passed in this manner, and while I was making slow, clunky progress on the piano, my older brother quickly became adept at the guitar. He seemed to have a natural talent for the instrument, creating complex melodies and harmonies, while I could barely get through a scale without messing up.

My father became more focused than ever on our musical abilities. My brother began to play special music in church and for school recitals, and my dad could not have been prouder of him. He beamed at the sight of my brother on stage, skillfully strumming the brass strings of that same old

Fender. The tone was always sweet and clear, filling the space with joy. My brother was amazing.

I also began to play in church. Periodically, I would play a simple song for the church offering or invitation, but I was not as talented as my brother. Whenever I had to play for church, my hands would become slick with sweat, my throat would tighten, and my face would burn. Anxiety would squeeze my heart, making me panic and inevitably causing me to mess up. My dad regularly told me that although he appreciated my efforts, I needed to practice more.

Our house was almost always filled with the sound of guitar music. Often, I would walk into the living room to find my dad and brother, guitars in hand, working their way through various songs and melodies. I no longer associated the guitar with happy memories. Instead, it incited in me a wild frustration. I resented the instrument for constantly reminding me that I was not talented enough.

My frustration with the piano grew, and eventually it directed itself toward my father and my brother. I hated the guitar, and I hated the piano. Music became a foreign language for me. I could not decipher its complex arrangements of chords and tones. The notes and rests on a sheet of music looked like hieroglyphics to me, strange and old and unknowable. The rest of my family was fluent in this language, frequently conversing in whistled tunes or plucked harmonies, but I was unable to join the conversation.

I continued in this manner for quite a while, my frustration festering. Then I was asked to play for the church's annual Christmas recital as a junior in high school. I felt that this

was my big chance. Finally, I could show my dad that I too could make music. I practiced the simple arrangement of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” for hours. I memorized every note. I could play every chord with my eyes closed. My family joked that they were sick of hearing the same song over and over, but still I persisted, determined to finally succeed.

The night of the recital arrived, and my nerves once again threatened to sabotage me. My performance at rehearsal the night before had gone smoothly, but I could not help but worry about the chance that I would once again fail. We reached the point in the program where my name was called, and I slowly approached the piano. I mustered all of my strength, praying I could play the song smoothly. I breathed deeply. I placed my fingers in the starting position, took one last look around, and began to play.

I played horrendously.

I missed several chords right away and had to restart entirely. I began to breathe heavily, and I could feel sweat collecting on my forehead. The entire performance lasted only about three minutes, but it felt like an eternity to me. My strangled rendition of the Christmas carol eventually came to an unsatisfying end. A round of pity-filled applause rose from the audience, and I shuffled back to my seat in shame.

I felt crushed. I had once again made a fool of myself at the piano, and now my father would have more reason to be disappointed in me. My inability to grasp the complexities of music had once again been my downfall, and I was devastated.

After the recital, I made my way to the Ford Explorer my family drove and solemnly opened the door. To my great surprise, my father greeted me with a huge smile on his face. I had expected him to be upset at me for failing, and yet there was no hint of anger or sadness in the grin that he wore.

“Hey, Bud,” he said. “I’m proud of you. You did great tonight!”

“But—I messed up,” I stuttered.

“Oh, I know,” he said with a small chuckle. “You tried, though. And you practiced hard. I’m proud of you for that, and that’s what really matters.”



*He’s saying, ‘I love you  
and I care.’*



I sat in stunned silence as Dad turned the car on and put it into drive. I stared out the window at the light snowflakes whizzing past my window, and I realized that my dad had been proud of me all along. He didn’t care if I played piano or guitar. He didn’t care that I wasn’t as talented as my brother, and he didn’t care that I had messed up. Instead, he cared about me.

I gave up piano shortly after that disastrous Christmas recital. My family moved out of the tiny trailer I grew up in. Many things have changed since that Christmas recital, but that memory sticks with me. Music is still a strange language that I am unable to replicate, but now I understand what my dad is saying when he plays a tune or whistles a note. He's saying, "I love you, and I care." And although my response is not whistled or strummed or played or plucked, I hope it still resonates when I respond, "I love you too."

# Our Childhood Joys

by Mary Seiber

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*Rondeau*

Our childhood joys are best compared  
To grand adventures that were shared.  
The paths, traversed as a band of four,  
Welcomed new friends into our corps:  
A charge for which they weren't prepared.

Our duct tape shields and sabers glared  
In summer sun, as war horns blared—  
Imagined schemes that are no more:  
Our childhood joys.

Go back into a time we dared  
To try new things—see how we fared!  
A time when thoughts and visions soared.  
We played our games and wrote our lore,  
Trifling matters for which we cared:  
Our childhood joys.



# Finish at the Top

by Summer Griffin



Commencement Contest Winner



*Sometimes difficulty is a sign to run harder.*

There has always been something grand and imposing about a mountain peak. Growing up in the hills of North Carolina and taking frequent visits to Tennessee and Virginia, I am no stranger to the rolling Appalachian Mountains clothed in towering pine trees and sheared with sharp stones. However, the gorgeous hues of a mountain range did not always fill me with a sense of wonder but with a sense of dread.

As a former cross-country runner, one of the biggest things I hated was running up hill. At every match, before the official race would begin, all the teams would walk the first lap of the course so that we knew the layout, where to avoid stepping, and which portions would require the most physical effort.

I gazed out of our school van's tinted window with lidded eyes. "Not this one again," I mumbled.

I dreaded the cross-country course of Shining Light Christian School with a passion. The entire course was one hill after another, and at some points, I'd even have to use my hands to overcome the sheer steepness of the path. Unfortunately, however, my least favorite course was also the closest to my school. This meant more trips to Shining Light than any other school, and the small lighthouse that stood in its parking lot quickly became a beacon of dread and impending exhaustion rather than hope.

"Come on," Mom urged from the front seat, "We need to get warmed up."

*There has always been something grand and imposing about a mountain peak.*

I forgot to mention my mother was the coach of the cross-country team. Her fiery determination to finish any task she set her mind to had trickled into coaching. And as her daughter, that burning light had been focused on my lackluster running talents.

The team lethargically climbed out of the van, sidestepping weeks-old water bottles and trash leftover from the last match. The gravel beneath my sneakers crunched as I stepped out, and the cloudless sky left the sun to shine down on us like ants under a microscope. The beginning of autumn was too early for the chill to set in, which left us baking in our jerseys as if it were still August.

Ten minutes into warm-ups and my jersey already started clinging to my back. My team and I sat in a circle doing stretches. Unlike the other teams around us that chattered and laughed nonstop, we were silent. Mom had instilled a need to conserve our oxygen and regulate our breathing long before the race began. The sharp, blond dry grass scraped against my exposed shins as I stretched. But just over my teammate's shoulder, I could see the hardest hill of the course and the last one before crossing the finish line. I tried not to let my shoulders sag at the thought of facing the miniature mountain again. That thing hated me, and the feeling was mutual.

After the customary walkthrough, our teams lined up along the starting line. *One breath in. Hold. One breath out,* I thought as my body eased into position.

The horn went off. The teams took off in a sprint. A girl in a red jersey drifted past me like a fox diving from its hole. On my other side, a tall boy in a navy top pumped his arms and legs as though they were machine parts instead of muscles, tendons, and ligaments. A frown creased my face at seeing so many runners glide past me. I swiped a strand of hair out of my eyes.

“Remember,” Mom’s words echoed in my mind, “Everyone tries to get in the lead first, but they’ll run out of gas quick doing that. Keep your pace and save that last bit for the end.”

*Thump, thump, thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump, thump.* My feet hit the hard-packed dirt in a steady, mechanical rhythm, and my frown turned into a thin line.

*Come on. You can do this! Just keep pushing forward!*

The first dip came into view, and I sidestepped down into it, trying to keep my balance among the clawing roots and loose

red dirt that reached for my filthy sneakers. My legs burned as I climbed out the other side. Another dip, another small hill—it wasn't anything terrible. At the flat, open stretch that ran along a set of abandoned train tracks, I could see my two teammates Annie and Avery keeping pace. Behind me, I heard our other teammate Carter and his labored breathing. But even exhaustion could never keep him quiet.

“Clown!” he yelled. Avery shot forward in a sprint with a high-pitched shriek. Everyone knew that she had an unhealthy fear of clowns, which I don't blame her for, and Carter took full advantage.

The three of us laughed before Annie tried to catch up with her friend. Carter started falling behind, and I was left alone again as we ran into the wooded section of the course.

Roots, branches, and loose rocks littered the track, threatening to twist ankles and tear ligaments with a single misstep. The girl in red from before half-ran, half-jogged in front of me, her breathing heavy. With a slight burst of speed, I eased around her.

*Almost there, I thought, almost there.*

A short, but steep incline loomed ahead of me. My feet scrambled for purchase on the dirt, and I reached for the short, thin trees growing out of its exposed side. My momentum gave just enough of a push for me to hoist myself over the edge.

The sun glared down at me, and sweat trickled down my cheeks and looped under my chin now that I was back in the open. My arms and legs ached and begged for rest. But the guy in the blue jersey was only a few steps ahead.

Then I saw the hill—or more accurately described as a mountain in disguise.

“Come on,” I huffed, my voice sounding as teary and frightened as I felt. “Come on.”

The guy slowed down until he was barely jogging, his shoulders drooping in visible dismay at the impending climb.

*You’ve done it before.*

A grunt pushed past my lips as I sped up, my mom’s voice reverberating in my mind.

“When the track gets hard, and you want to quit, *that’s* when you run faster,” she told me. And this time, I obeyed.

“*When the track gets hard, and you want to quit, that’s when you run faster.*”

Pulling on strength I didn’t have, I pushed past the teen and ran towards the hill. Everything in me screamed to walk, to slow down, to stop—to quit. But I could hear people cheering at the top of the hill, even though I couldn’t see them. I ran faster. Pumped my arms and pushed every last ounce of my being into my legs as I climbed the hill and crossed the finish line.

I didn’t finish first, but I didn’t finish last. No matter how much I wanted to, I didn’t quit.

In the Bible, it says that we have a great race before us. It also says that we have a great cloud of witnesses watching us run the race of life and faith. Many will give up when things get hard or when challenges loom like grand, sneering mountain faces. But what's most important is that we don't quit. When things get hard, that is when we draw on the strength of our God and push forward—never quitting, never stopping until we've reached the finish line at the top.

# Mató

by Alaina Suttles



Commencement Contest Winner



*Even the most hidden love is real.*

For Tye Acothley, calving season meant three hours of sleep in the last two days. The morning of the second day, he finally found a chance to sprawl just inside the ranch house entrance. Through the screen door, he viewed the Wyoming ranch—a mere patch of mountains and grasses at the feet of sheer peaks. Beneath these, Wyoming’s wilderness flung out into winter’s glare and sparkle of snow.

Tye’s daydream collapsed when a boot shoved his leg. Dad bent over him. His intimidation came partly from the stern Lakota features he had given his son. His brows, gray-flecked, snapped together over a broad forehead. Tye had heard the men whisper behind his father’s back about how stupid his old man was.

“Get up!” Dad wasn’t so much stupid as plain mean. Tye repeated the same question to himself he had repeated for years. *Mom cared about me. Why won’t he?*

Bathed in creamy light, the outside air was crisp. Tye dipped his chin into his jacket as they stepped out to scan the huddle of brown backs twenty feet away. Four calves frisked at the edge of the corral like spring butterflies. His head spun. After thirty-six hours of labor to bring new calves into the world, nothing mattered . . . His thoughts died from the sheer exhaustion of thinking. Blue, Tye’s Australian cattle dog, slid out from under a pickup truck to sniff around his master’s feet.

“How many calves were there when you last checked?” Dad snapped.

“I counted fifty before dark.” Now memory snaked back into Tye’s mind. Yes, it *had* been dark when he last counted; it was high noon now.

“Look at this.” Dad motioned for him to follow. Around the side of the corral, they found a night’s butchery. Thirty calves laid in various states of mutilation among a turmoil of bear prints.

“*Mató*,” Tye muttered.

“Yes, a bear.” Dad glared.

Tye was too tired to do anything but stare. How could he explain that it was natural for him to oversleep? He tried. “I—I’m sorry. I meant to . . . and . . .”

“Come on, boy, you’re nineteen. Act like it!”

Tye ran a hand through his black hair—a common habit to appease anger. He glared after Dad as Dad barged away to the barn, leaving him alone. Always alone. *He sees right through me.* He pushed at the thought, but it wouldn't budge. Worse than that, there were other thoughts—persistent, determined thoughts. *He doesn't care about me.* Mom had cared, and Lala—dear Grandad—had cared. But Dad had left on his fifth birthday without caring and stayed that way for fourteen years. *I will make him care. But how? I'll shoot that bear, and then he'll see I'm worth something.*

In a voice that did not sound like his own, he asked Blue, “How would you like to hunt, *shunka?*”

Blue's answer was a decided “yap.”

“I agree.”

That afternoon, when the world was going coppery under the sunset, Tye loaded his .30-60 rifle and saddled his horse, Pistol. Then, with Blue at his heels, took to the bear's trail. There was no time to wait as the changing sky overhead promised more snow tonight. He followed the trail along a ridgeline east of the ranch. He leaned to the side of the saddle to stare down into open canyon. The path being narrow, he took Blue up onto his saddle horn and trusted Pistol's knowledge of the way.

As he rode, Tye could not help thinking. He didn't care much that Dad saw him as less of a man than himself. But a small, insistent voice demanded that he cared more than he let on. He started caring a year ago when Mom and Grandpa died in a crash, and he and Blue came out to the ranch to restart

life. When Mom was still alive, his knowledge of Dad was condensed to a framed Polaroid picture on top of the living room piano. Now, there was a part of him wished it had stayed that way.

For half an hour, they followed the path in its slow descent to the valley floor where shadows of sunset already stalked like specters between the trees. Tye swung off Pistol's back to splay his hand over a print. The tips of his outstretched fingers barely mastered its edges. *He'll be big when I find him ... or he finds me.* The shifting shadows beneath the trees made his spine tingle. Some distance off, he spotted a juvenile herd of elk, their breath lacing together in a frosty array.

With Blue in the lead, they took to the higher ground where the trees scabbled over each other's crowns in their struggle up a cliff face. Cold set into the tips of his boots and gloves. If he let himself think, it seemed easier to go back. But he *could* not, he *would* not because he was an Acothley. No, it was because Dad would not forgive him or would not *see* him somehow if he went back without a dead bear.

Pistol stumbled. Tye lurched in the saddle. "Not much longer," he mumbled to the horse. "We'll go back soon." He glanced up when Blue began a sing-song whine that broke off into a growl. The dog's hackles shivered upright in the wind.

"Hush." Tye slid from the saddle behind a line of bare antelope bitterbrush. Hidden by their screening branches, he got down belly-low and propped his elbows on the snow drift.

Through his rifle's scope, nothing stood out in the white sheet that was the clearing below. "Where is it?" he breathed. Strums of energy rippled through Blue with nervous energy.

“*Shh!* You wanna ruin it, *shunka?*” Tye thumped him lightly on the ribs with a thumb. Blue was quiet although he continued to squirm. “Dad says you learn how to hunt by being patient—huh, that and a lot of other things, I guess.”

He chewed his bottom lip. Through the heart of the clearing cut the broad expanse of Broken Tooth River, frozen over. Across its smooth back, the sun painted a farewell orb of deepest pinks and violets. The cold made his hands clumsy, but when he reached for the gun’s scope, they shook from something more than that. It was not until he glanced around him a second time that he realized how deep into evening the world had slipped.

After hours of no sleep, Tye’s body ached for a rest. Though he fought it, sleep dragged him away. When he was groggily next aware of anything, Blue’s sudden sideways leap pinned him onto his gun, ramming his ribs badly against the bolt. Before he could scabble out of the way, two bodies swayed above him in a ferocious struggle for life, pierced by Blue’s yips and the bear’s grunting. Blue headed off the bear’s initial charge and kept out of reach of its jaws through side leaps over the snow. Snarling his anger, the bear clawed through the air in wide, useless sweeps that missed Blue.

Tye’s breath hitched in his throat as he rolled clear of the confusion. He chambered a round, aimed the barrel at the bear, and pulled the trigger. The next minute, Blue’s yelp echoed in the clearing as the bear caught him by the shoulder. Tye drew the bolt back again and choked. The bullet had wedged sideways in the action.

Before he could unjam the bolt, the bear whirled on him, snarling savagely with jaws open for his throat. Tye threw himself to the side—but not far enough. Powerful teeth like a vice clamped down over his calf. Dragged face-first over the snow, he felt the gun torn from his fingers by a bitterbrush's roots. Blinding pain overtook all his senses.

A memory flashed through his head. *Come on, boy, you're nineteen. Act like it!* But it wasn't even this that reached through the fog in his brain. He remembered *Lala's* hands, age-spotted and homy, cradling a white-flecked puppy—Blue. That was two days after Dad left all those years ago, after he said the dog would never live.

Something snapped in Tye, and he shouted, "Enough!" Twisting like a snake in a man's grasp, he began to pummel the bear's snout with the edge of a rock. Surprised, the bear "harrumphed" and released him to retreat a few steps. Tye made for his gun at a mad crawl. His hand found the gun's barrel just as the bear came back. This time, he dealt a cracking blow with the butt of the gun. The bear snorted and stumbled aside. Tye got to his elbow, ready for another charge, but it never came.

When he was certain the bear had gone, Tye crawled to Blue. He stripped off his belt with one hand and strapped it tight above the place on his leg where a dull throb set in. By now, he knew Pistol had bolted. Blue whined when Tye got his arms underneath the dog's limp body. He gasped. He'd just have to do his best. By painful degrees, he half dragged and half carried Blue, trying to keep his balance as the world shifted drunkenly around him.

He had ridden through this land enough to sense the direction he ought to go to reach the only road around for four miles. Soon, he felt something brush his cheek. The snow that had held off all day began its gradual descent now. Using the gun as a crutch, he pressed on. *I'm an Acothley.* With each step, he repeated it. After a few minutes, his boots scraped against hard asphalt. He fell forward onto his knees to feel the cool road underneath his palms.

From here, it was a straight shot to the ranch. He gathered Blue into his lap. The dog was limp and heavy. "Thank you, *shunka.*" It was a thank you that ran river-deep and wide.

Maybe his eyes played tricks on him or was that a car? A minute later, twin headlights spilled golden light around the road's bend. The same red work truck that parked every evening outside the ranch barn appeared. Tye recognized Dad as the driver. He laid Blue down to take up his gun. He would finish what he started.

"Tye! What are you doing, boy?" Dad slammed the truck door closed in anger. But was that really anger in his voice?

"Acting my age," Tye called. He thought he heard Dad utter an exclamation when he passed a flashlight over his son. Tye felt years of hurt rise in him. He began to limp away. "I'm gonna finish this!"

"Tye!"

Tye limped faster. But dizziness brought him to his knees. He was near tears of pain when hands slipped under his arms to raise and support him. Dad took the gun without a word, muttering about the faults of risky young men. Tye tried to push back.

"Let me go!"

“You wanna bleed to death out here?” They were shouting at each other in Lakota by now.

“Maybe I do!”

“Well, maybe I don’t want you to!” Dad’s face was unreadable in the dark, but Tye heard the strange sound he made in the back of his throat. He suddenly felt resistance seep from him.

Dad hurried to dump him into the passenger’s seat, but not before he could mumble, “Do you care . . . that much?” Dad did not answer.

Tye remembered little of the hazy drive to the hospital except two things: the tears that Dad fought to hide by chewing his lip and looking out the window and the picture of Tye’s high school graduation hanging from the rearview mirror. As unconsciousness drew him away, a single thought asserted itself, and he took it. *Mom cared. Lala cared. Dad cares.*

He woke to the crisp light of dawn through the hospital window. He thought he was alone until he moved, and Dad’s hand descended on the blanket from the bedside. Dad extended Blue’s collar. “Buried him outside the barn this morning.”

As a wave of bitterness swept over him, Tye took the collar. Yet, that bitterness of loss mingled with a sense of something that made Blue’s death bearable.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Did you . . . Do you?”

Dad nodded gruffly. “Yes, I care. Always have.”

After last night, Tye felt settled in what he was about to say. “I know I’d talked about going back east. I’m not anymore.”

A new light washed over Dad’s features, and he dipped his head to hide it. “Well—that’s—that’s . . . what made you change your mind?”

It seemed to Tye that they were speaking to each other for the first time. Fresh understanding warmed Dad’s gaze. The picture of his high school graduation and the anxious pitch in Dad’s voice the night before flashed across his mind. He smiled to himself.

“Anyone who knows he is wanted has a reason to stay.”

# Patrol on Graves Hill

by Charity Antonio

---



*Ominous signs, chilling weather, and lonely graves  
welcome Officer Hunt to Graves Hill.*

Built over an old cemetery, Graves Hill was the town's least popular neighborhood. Everyone believed it was haunted. Everyone, that is, except Officer Winston Hunt, who had always thought the rumors were ridiculous.

"Aren't you scared of ghosts?" a little girl had asked him a couple weeks ago. She had been sitting on the steps of the old church, probably waiting for her parents to come out when he came by on patrol.

He had nearly laughed, but the last thing he needed was a crying child. “There’s no such thing as ghosts,” he simply stated before trying to walk off and continue his rounds.

“But what if you get scared?” the girl persisted. “Do you pray for help?”

He scoffed. “I don’t need help solving my own problems.”

Now, Officer Hunt rubbed his cold hands together in the icy October air as he passed in front of the church on today’s patrol. He never did enjoy graveyard shifts this time of year. He slipped his right hand into a glove and other hand in his pocket, wondering where he could have lost his other glove—not that it mattered. After all, he only needed one hand to hold the flashlight.

The light glinted off the icy roads, and the shadows it cast contorted and stretched out along the cold ground. The whole world felt dark and dead, and the only sound he heard was fallen leaves crunching under his boots. It was ominously fitting for Graves Hill.

“

*I don't need help solving my own problems.*

”

Trash cans rattled nearby, and Officer Hunt flashed his light toward an alley, where a black cat froze in the light, a mouse hanging from its mouth. He breathed a sigh of relief and

rubbed his hands together. Why should a black cat spook him? Maybe it was the cold. If only he had his other glove.

Behind the church on Bradbury Road, old headstones with illegible names and broken statues stood crumbling after years of neglect. A shiver went down his spine. He did not believe in ghosts but knowing that buried bodies and skeletons lay so close to the living chilled him to the bone.

Just as he turned to patrol the next street, Officer Hunt stopped in his tracks. He scanned the area, wondering where the other footsteps were coming from. Not far behind him, a lone figure in a black trench coat briskly walked down the sidewalk. It was probably just a local rushing to get home and out of the cold. Picking up the pace as he walked, Hunt realized that the shadowy figure behind him had also started walking faster. And when he stopped, it slowed but continued toward him.



*Maybe he did need a little help  
from time to time.*



Thirty yards away. Officer Hunt tried to call out to the man, but his voice stuck in his throat. Twenty yards. He reached for his baton, but his stiff hands fumbled with it. Ten yards. *God, if you can hear me, I could use a little help.*

“Evening, Officer. I think you dropped this.”

Hunt looked down to see the other person holding a single leather glove out to him. “Th– Thank you,” he whispered.

As the hooded figure trudged back into the night, Officer Hunt breathed a sigh of relief, taking a moment to regain his composure before continuing on his way. He was ready to be out of the cold. By the time he reached the station, the sun was rising over the horizon, its light spilling across the small town with a comforting glow. The old church spire stood tall over the rest of Graves Hill, and the sun's rays glinted off the sides of the cross at the spire's tip. He could almost hear the little girl's voice again. He laughed at his own hubris and sheepishly rubbed his warm hands against the back of his neck. Maybe he did need a little help from time to time.

# What If I Fall?

by Priscilla VanDenBerghe

---



*College is a roller coaster.*

What if I fall? I fear falling—both the feeling of falling and the unknown of what I am falling into. I'm afraid of the pain of slamming into the ground somewhere. It all terrifies me.

My fear of falling began when I went to a fair at only four years old. I had never been to a fair before, but my parents told us there would be rides and goodies and a petting zoo. As young children, my brother and I were fascinated with the thought of going to the fair. I may have been young, but I wanted to get the most out of my fair experience.

The fair was teeming with liveliness. Bright colors from the glowing rides and camera flashes filled the night sky. Families gathered, endeavoring to keep track of everyone they came with. Couples held on to each other's arms and shared twisted pretzels. Friends laughed as they ran from booth to

booth while announcers tried to bribe those who passed by to compete in the festivities. Everything was rambunctious and captivating at the same time.

As I sat in the double stroller my parents pushed my little brother and me in, I looked around at the world of color and chaos before me. I wanted to try everything.

“Hey, Priscilla. Do you want to ride that roller coaster over there?” My dad gestured to a small, red coaster in the shape of a dragon with its scaly head and beady, golden eyes sitting at the front of the cars. “I think you’re big enough to ride one now.”

I was quick to oblige. My mom, on the other hand, was hesitant to let me go.

“I don’t think you should go on the ride, Priscilla,” she warned. Maybe she thought that I was too little for the ride. Or maybe she was just projecting her fear of roller coasters on to me. I couldn’t remember my mom ever warning me about anything before this moment. My mom’s doubts made me question if I really wanted to go. I had never had to make such a big decision in all my four years of living, but while I didn’t know if I would like the small, colorful coaster, I wanted to see for myself.

“It will be okay, honey,” my dad interjected gently. “She’s a big girl, and I want to take her with me on the ride. If she wants to go, then I think we should let her.”

“Okay,” my mom agreed. “But if you’re scared or if you don’t like it, tell me, baby,” she insisted while pulling me out of the stroller.

“Yes, Mama.” I smiled, but my little heart was beating fast in my chest as I felt the rush of the ride flying past me high in

the sky. The noise made me tremble, but my dad had already picked me up and carried me to the line of people both eagerly and anxiously waiting to get on the ride.

“If you don’t want to get on, you don’t have to,” my mom called out to me one more time. I could hear her words, but I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to seem like a scaredy-cat.

Dad set me down right before they opened the gates for us to get on the coaster. “This isn’t even a big roller coaster,” my dad told me. “Just wait. Someday, we will visit Cedar Point and go on the big roller coasters I used to ride as a kid.”

He seemed happy to talk about the rides, but I was beginning to regret ever leaving the comfort of my stroller. My mind wasn’t processing anything but the thunderous whir of the ride every time it swung around the tracks.

I sat next to my dad, and the attendant pulled down the lap bar over us. Because I was much, much smaller than my dad, the lap bar did nothing to hold me against my seat. I was terrified. I whimpered and squeezed my eyes shut. My dad put his arm around me, but his small gesture did nothing to calm the storm of fear inside me. A jarring voice sounded over the intercom and began a countdown. My heart began to beat even faster.

*Does the ride go upside down? Am I going to slip out? What if I fly out of my seat? I don’t want to fall.* The very thought of falling out terrified me. I no longer wanted to ride the roller coaster.

But before I could ask to leave the train car, the ride sped off. The roller coaster lasted barely a minute, but everything was a blurry mess as I exited the coaster. When I got a hold of my senses long enough to see where my mom was waiting

with my little brother, I ran to her and then got back into the stroller. I was safe there. I wouldn't be able to fall out of something that low to the ground.



*The very thought of falling out terrified me.*



Since that moment, I have always been afraid of falling. Falling from a banister, a tree, the top of a playground, a plane—everything. It all terrified me. Soon I began to fear more than just falling to the ground. I was also afraid that I would fail in life and fall unworthy.

As I grew up, my fear of falling only worsened. I wanted to enjoy the thrills of what life would bring. I wanted to grow up and go to college, move out of my parents' house, secure a career, and even find love. But I was also scared of what awaited me when I finally grew up. What if I fell? I couldn't wait to enjoy the highs of life, but I knew that just as a roller coaster has its highs, it also has its lows.

Every roller coaster has one thing in common: the first drop. Some people love it. Some people hate it. They either crave the adrenaline rush supplied by the plummeting feeling in their stomachs, or they close their eyes while gripping their restraints with superhuman strength. For me, the first drop always left me traumatized. After I graduated high school, I faced one of my first drops—leaving home and everything I knew for college.

College felt like a roller coaster in its own way with its steep drops, valleys, and thrills. It looked entertaining if not intense, but I had prepared for this. I boarded the roller coaster, secured myself in the seat, and gently tugged at my restraints to assure myself there was no way I could fall out. To prepare for college, I had written down my schedule for classes and events in my planner to ensure that I would always be on time and never forget where I was supposed to be. But even with all my preparation, I still feared that college wouldn't go the way I wanted.

Almost too quickly, the ride clickety-clacked its way up the tracks. Up, up, up it went. So, so, so high it climbed into the sky. The cables whined and scraped as they pulled the weight of the cars higher. I dared a glance down at the ground, looking back to what life was before I left my home. I'd been secure, safe, and grounded. Now I was ascending into the unknown. The noises caused me to tremble. I feared something deep within the mechanical components would snap and the ride would break down. These noises were the voices in my head that caused me to doubt my decision to go to college. My doubt quickly led to fear. *What if I fall?* The thought spun around in my head over and over again like a Ferris wheel unhinged.

*What happens if I fall? What if I am not good enough? What if I do not have what it takes to get through college? What if I let people down? What if I survive college, and the rest of the ride is even scarier?* I felt myself shaking. The only thing I heard was the clanking of the cable belts whispering doubt in my ear. My heart beat fast in agonizing harmony with the clickety-clack of the negative voices.

And then I fell. It felt as if college was pulling me in so many directions at once. From competing in collegian sports and keeping good grades to doing my devotions and making time

for my family back home, I thought I was slowly losing a handle on everything. The pressure shoved me back in my seat. I tried to scream, but the rush of air stole my voice. Since I did not have enough trust in the ride to close my eyes, I watched in panic as the roller coaster dove toward the ground. But in a matter of seconds, the roller coaster swooped back up. I relaxed my grip, thankful that I hadn't fallen out of my seat. I began to realize that I could handle everything. College was worth the fall. After the initial drop, the roller coaster glided over the tracks, swerving around the gentle bends, climbing little hills, and taking shallow dips. There were a few more steep hills that had to be ridden, but that's what gave the ride the thrill.

“ *And then I fell.* ”

Several years after my first coaster experience, I got on a roller coaster again. This time, I was at a theme park. This roller coaster was taller than the one at the fair. It was longer and steeper, and the trains were different too. Each one looked like a car with massive monster truck-sized wheels that hung excessively over the edge of the track. I gulped as I watched my brothers race to the express line. Before my brain could process what I was doing, I was following them. Something inside pulled me toward the intensity of the roller coaster. The adrenaline rushed through my veins drowning out the terrifying *whoosh* of the coaster whizzing by.

I waited in line, careful not to think about my shaking hands or the tremor in my voice when I spoke. The smiling faces of those getting off the ride assured me the thrill of the ride was

worth the fear of getting on. When it was our turn to board, I stepped on with as much boldness as I could muster.

When I looked up from buckling my safety straps, I saw just how high the climb to the first drop was. My chest tightened. My eyes widened. I clutched the lap bar for dear life even though the coaster hadn't moved an inch. Looking for my mom's face in the crowd, I waited for her to tell me she didn't think I should ride.

But she didn't say anything.

I was older now. No one had pressured me to get on the ride. I had chosen it myself. I wanted to achieve this feat. I wanted to know I was braver than my fear of falling. I was still gripping the lap bar with white knuckles, but I was on the roller coaster, and I wasn't getting off.



*I clutched the lap bar  
for dear life.*



There wasn't a countdown this time. Instead, when the final lap bar was latched into place and the attendants stepped back, someone flipped a switch, and the coaster roared to life. It took off slowly at first, gaining momentum as it climbed to the height of the first drop.

I kept my eyes open. The view from the top of the roller coaster was beautiful. The track bent a turn at the top. I smiled seeing the sunlight glint off a lake in the distance. I was oddly aware my hands had loosened their grip. The ride hovered and paused slightly. The front of the car posed over



the steep drop, and I took a deep breath, waiting for the click that would send us flying down the tracks.

Then with excitement, I yelped as the car train was released and we torpedoed down the drop, up again around some bends, and back down until the end of the ride.

My knees were shaking when I got off the ride, but no one noticed. Everyone saw only my smiling face as I walked away with my head held high. I had overcome my fear. That didn't mean I would never be afraid of the first drop again, but now I knew I could overcome anything I set my mind to just as I had done with the roller coaster.

4

# Anaphora

The intentional repetition of a word or phrase to emphasize a theme.



0:04/0:04



# Cornfields in Summer

by Luis Rodriguez

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My childhood was spent among cornfields  
With gilded stalks in every direction—  
A sea of yellow, yearly harvested,  
A paradise of rural perfection.

The breeze would carry the scent of wet dirt,  
Of growing corn, and emerald green soybeans,  
And deliver it to our door, a sign  
That the cornfield was ready to be gleaned.

We kids would race barefoot, grass in our hair,  
Then slowly tiptoe on the gravel road.  
We would search for crickets and ladybugs  
And lie in the grass that was freshly mowed.

Cicadas would start up their summer song,  
Leaving behind delicate silver shells.  
We'd claim these cast-off carapaces and  
Chase each other, letting out gleeful yells.

We'd work and we'd play among thick cornfields,  
Whose crops grew tall every fall. And although  
My summers have stopped being so simple,  
Those memories have a radiant glow.

# Counting My Blessings

by Summer Griffin

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*There's only one person you can lean on when  
you're uncomfortable and ungrateful.*

God's blessings aren't a matter of someday but every day. And while I grew up hearing this truth in church, it didn't fully register until my senior year of high school.



*God's blessings aren't a matter  
of someday but every day.*



Life in general did not go well during my senior year. The renovations to our one-hundred-year-old house were taking months longer than expected, forcing us to temporarily move into what my family called the “old house,” but what I inwardly dubbed “prison.” The two-bedroom, one-bathroom house had everything a family of six could ask for—no Wi-Fi, a shower that turned my fingernails orange, questionable drinking water, and a single bar of cell service if you angled your phone just right by the kitchen window. Top all these amenities off with an hour-long drive to civilization, and things were looking fantastic.

“*This epiphany kickstarted a fresh perspective on my senior year.*”

Instead of voicing these thoughts, however, I started venting into a well-used notebook already filled with random short stories, lists, and sketches. Because my little brothers knew better than to go through this notebook, my opinions were safe. And every few nights, I would sit at a desk and scratch my frustrations down on paper.

During one such session, something nibbled at the back of my mind. Little reminders of blessings floated to the top of the well of stress that bubbled inside me. I had a roof over my head, food to eat, a good education, a loving family, and a God that I could call on anywhere at any time about anything.

Unshed tears warmed my eyes as scribbblings of anger and unfairness gradually turned into a written declaration that God would always take care of me—that He was taking care of me right then in the moment instead of making a faraway promise.

Cliché as it is, this epiphany kickstarted a fresh perspective on my senior year. I started looking for the good things about the “old house” instead of complaining about the bad. The lack of technology meant spending more time playing games with my family. The long drives to school created extra bonding time with my little brothers as we sang off-key to *The Greatest Showman* soundtrack, and the occasional quiet rides by myself gave me extra time to pray. Also, staying in a cramped house off the edge of Google Maps encouraged me to learn how to negotiate and share, skills that helped immensely when I met my college roommates for the first time.

While it was initially hard to see how God was taking care of me and my family at the “old house,” I slowly learned to be more and more thankful for the little blessings that I had once taken for granted. A good shower, a cool cup of water, decent cell service—I learned to recognize God’s hand in the details of my everyday life.

And now, almost four years later, memories of that night when God adjusted my perspective still remind me that He is always taking care of me anytime, anywhere.

# Within

by Autumn Scollon

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*The Lord said that the rocks would cry out for  
their Creator. I want my voice to cry louder.*

Dear Lord, ignite in me a song of fire.  
Shame—pebbles sing louder than I do.  
Let it shine like sapphire stars in the sky;  
The song within me—burning.

May this song more than conquer;  
Let it catch fire and burn all doubts!  
Crackle against the night, blazing flame.  
The song within me—burning.

May it provide the strength of ten thousand.  
Bygone are my days of youthful frailty;  
Strengthen my heart and don't quiet  
The song within me—burning.

A single note that I must play,  
My praise, the world cannot ignore.  
May it overflow and overtake—  
The song within me—burning.

# Time to Go

by Courtney Floyd

---



*There is always time to help others.*

“Have a nice day,” Holly sighed. It was the same farewell, in the same tone, behind the same desk as always. The question she asked hundreds of times a day was, “How can I help you?” every time a book was dropped in front of her, except this time when she looked up from her computer, no one stood on the other side of her desk. The book sat in front of her, seemingly out of nowhere and from no one.

“I’m Alice, and I want this book!” a voice said.

Holly lifted herself halfway out of her chair. Bright red curls covered Holly’s view of jungle-green eyes and a sea of freckles.

“Can I have this book?” Alice asked.

“Do you have a library card?” Holly left her chair entirely as she stood to see Alice better.

“No, but I want this book!”

Holly glanced instinctively at her watch—stuck on 3:45 as it had been since a year or so after her father gave it to her. Her gaze switched to the big clock on the wall: 5:53. The library closed in a few minutes. Holly could just send the girl home and take the last few minutes to tidy around her desk and close up so she could be home by 6:30, like she always was.

“Please let me have this book!” Alice hopped up, her curls bouncing as she pushed the book closer to Holly. “I need to check this book out.”

“You can’t check out a book without a library card,” Holly replied.

“But I need this book! It’s Emma’s favorite.” Oblivious to Holly’s blank stare, Alice babbled on. “Emma’s my sister. I told her I would bring her this book, so now I have to!”

“The library is about to close,” Holly motioned, as she glanced at the clock again. Alice continued her rant as if Holly hadn’t even spoken.

“Emma didn’t have any books yesterday, and she was so sad. The doctors were too busy to play with her when I was at school. That’s why she was bored and sad. I promised her I’d read her any book she wanted, and she wanted this one!”

Holly’s mouth had been half-open, ready to send Alice home without getting her a library card—which always took kids forever. Holly’s mouth closed almost by itself, and for the first time, she took in her little visitor. She not only saw the red hair, green eyes, and freckles, but also the knots in the hair,

the red rim under the eyes, and the near-maroon flush of skin behind the freckles.

“Come with me,” Holly instructed. She led Alice to her side of the desk and pulled out a library-card form. “After you fill this out, you can take this book to Emma.”

Holly helped Alice through each question and checked Alice’s school ID before handing her a card and her book.

“Thank you!” Alice said, beaming. “By the way, your watch is wrong,” she added. “It’s 6:10. I’m teaching Emma how to read watches. Your watch is just like Emma’s—it breaks all the time too. Let me fix it!” Alice’s little hands grabbed Holly’s wrist before the motion could be stopped. She pulled and twisted at the little knob at the side of the watch, before finally giving the watch a firm smack on the face. “There!” she said triumphantly.



Holly glanced down. She blinked twice. Her watch read 6:10, and the little dials that had been still for years were now ticking their way toward 6:11.

“How did—” Holly started to mumble to herself, but she was distracted by the sound of little feet. She looked up to see Alice making her way to the door with a book for Emma clutched in her tiny hands.

“Bye!” Alice yelled. “I’ll be back tomorrow to get more books!”

Holly smiled. “Have a nice day!”

# In Defense of Me

by Abby Henry

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*During a fierce thunderstorm, Della faces her greatest fear.*

I pulled the door of the cab shut behind me, cringing at the spray of rainwater from the impact. After wrestling with my soaking, half-open umbrella until it was shut, I tugged the hood of my raincoat off my head. My purse, umbrella, and briefcase hit the black leather seat next to me with a *splat*. Pulling the seatbelt across my slick raincoat, I fumbled for the connecting point on the seat.

Horrid water. Horrid rain and horrid weather and *horrid* thunder.

Horrid fear.

*You're fine. You'll be home soon, and you can hide under the stairs until it's over.*

Suddenly, I noticed we weren't moving. My eyes snapped upward to the rear-view mirror, colliding with the chocolate-brown gaze of the cab driver. His eyebrows—not quite as rich—crept upward, and I realized that I hadn't said where I wanted to go.

He beat me to it. "Where can I take you, ma'am?" His voice was warm, with a slight Southern accent that probably charmed all the girls. I shooed away the errant thought and replied. "469 Poplar Place, please. In Weston." Those eyebrows went up again, but he nodded and shifted the car into drive. I settled back against the seat, knowing I'd be in this sticky, damp raincoat for at least forty minutes.

Between the cities of Weston, where I lived, and Steinford, where I worked, sat nearly forty miles of empty, Kansas grassland. One lone highway stretched between them like the bridge between two islands. Two islands that I, like the fresh-out-of-college chump that I was, was forced to commute between five days a week. With no car. I sighed and let my eyes fall closed.

"Long day?" I jumped a bit at the cab driver's unexpected voice. An embarrassed blush crept into my cheeks as I twisted in my seat to look at him. Or rather, the back of his head and his eyes in the rearview mirror. But close enough.

"Huh?" I said, because I was super dignified.

His eyes crinkled, and I could imagine the smile on his face. "Did you have a long day? You keep sighing." His eyes flickered to the clock, where 2:26 p.m. glowed back at him. "Not that the day is over, yet."

“Oh no, my day’s been fine, I just . . .” How exactly did one explain that she freaked out over the storm and got sent home early? “I don’t like the rain.”

He nodded, his eyes glancing up from the road to look at me again. “I don’t mind it. Helps things grow.”

I only huffed. What little I could see of the driver’s face in the mirror looked taken aback. I looked away, not wanting to explain. Sure, all kids were scared of thunderstorms at some point, but they eventually outgrew their fear. I never had. Not after a category-four tornado tore through my hometown, nearly destroying my childhood home.

“ *Vivid white lighting crisscrossed the sky.* ”

Apparently, the cab driver was feeling chatty because he cleared his throat and pressed onward through the awkwardness now filling the car. Or rather, he would have spoken, had the biggest clap of thunder I’d ever heard not interrupted him. The car shook and vivid white lightning crisscrossed the sky. Then, if that weren’t enough, the emergency alert went off on my phone. You know the one: the deafening, demanding, death-is-imminent sound that accompanied AMBER Alerts and other things.

Other things like weather alerts.

With panic building in my chest, I snatched up my discarded bag. I ignored the driver’s concerned questions and dug through my purse to find my phone. My hand closed around

it, and I yanked it out. I fumbled with the On button for a moment before pressing it, and the screen lit up.

*WEATHER ALERT: A SEVERE THUNDERSTORM WARNING IS IN EFFECT FOR YOUR AREA UNTIL 4:00 P.M. (CST). TAKE SHELTER IMMEDIATELY.*

“Is that a weather alert?” The driver’s voice pulled me from my panic.

His words were enough to make my fear rear its ugly head once more, and another clap of thunder only doubled the effect. I fought back tears and pulled my feet up onto the seat.

“Where’s Noah and his ark when you need him?” The driver laughed. I was slightly annoyed—did this man have no awareness?

I didn’t answer. The wind was howling, and the lightning seemed to be striking more than ever. A branch blew past the car from some bush or tree, grazing the window. I flinched. I could practically hear the sound of branches crashing through the window, right into my childhood home.

“Miss?” I buried my face in my knees and didn’t respond. “Are you all right?” I was in the fetal position in the back of a cab—did he *think* I was all right!? “Okay, I’m going to pull over, cause I’m worried.” I felt the car slow down. A moment later the smooth road turned to rough ground.

I lifted my head from my knees in time to see the driver put the car in park. He twisted in his seat, and I got my first full look at his face. It was a pretty nice face, and he had some kind of Flynn Rider thing going on with his hair, but I was too panicked to appreciate the look. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Because I didn't trust myself to speak without bursting into tears, I gestured wildly around me. I pointed at everything: the cab, the rain, the umbrella, even him. His eyes followed the movement, lingering on the rain, then flickered back to me. I tensed, bracing for a lecture about how silly it was to be scared of thunderstorms.

A moment passed, but he didn't speak. Instead, those chocolate eyes, apparently belonging to a very patient guy, softened. "I'm going to turn the car off, okay?" His voice was calm, assuring me everything would be fine.



*I didn't trust myself to speak  
without bursting into tears.*



I fought back the lump in my throat and nodded.

He watched me for a moment, then turned around. Then he twisted the key, and the engine shut off. "What's your name?" he asked after a moment.

I paused but quickly decided that if he were some crazy killer he would have taken me out already.

"Della," I said, "short for—" My words cut off. I wasn't the biggest fan of my given name. But, the driver was smiling, and I was pretty sure he was trying to distract me. "Short for Delphine."

His smile widened a bit. "I'm Ben."

"Short for Benjamin?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "Benaiah."

Now it was my eyebrows that went up. “Like David’s mighty man?”

His eyes, which had wandered to the pouring rain outside, snapped back to mine. “You know the names of David’s mighty men?” His voice was awed, and his mouth hung open in a wide smile.

I nodded. “Lots of Sunday school.” Feeling bold, I continued. “Do you go to church anywhere?”

He was practically beaming now, launching into an explanation of the church he went to.

I smiled back and began to speak, but my words got drowned out by another crash of thunder. I cringed. I *hated* this. Sitting here, my fears completely exposed. Horrid thunder, horrid rain.

Horrid fear.

I could feel Ben’s eyes on me, but I didn’t meet his gaze. A moment passed, and he spoke. “It’s comforting to know that God controls the rain, at least.” His words were kind, but I heard the intention behind them.

I sighed and shook my head while looking back at him. “I know He does, but—” I paused, embarrassed. “That doesn’t make it any less scary. Or destructive.” My voice was small, like a child’s, and it only darkened my blush.

Ben tilted his head, his eyes flickering to the right as he thought. A beat passed, and he reached across the cab to the glove compartment. He opened it and pulled out a worn, leather-bound Bible. I watched as he flipped through the pages. He found the passage he was looking for and handed the Bible to me.

“Here,” he said. “Read verses seven through fifteen.” I paused, then took the Bible from his hands. It was open to Psalm 18. I quickly read the passage—a beautifully scary description of God swooping down from heaven amidst a massive storm.

My eyes lingered on verse fifteen. *Then the channels of waters were seen, and the foundations of the world were discovered at thy rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of thy nostrils.* I shivered.

“See? God seems so angry in this. And that’s scarier than the rain.” I tried to pass the Bible back to Ben, but he didn’t take it. There was a funny little smile on his face, and despite my self-determined astuteness for reading people, I had no idea what it meant.

“Now read verse six.” His voice somehow matched the smile, all light and teasing like he knew something I didn’t. I flattened my lips but read the verse anyway.

*In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears.*

Something shifted in my heart, but I didn’t know what.

Ben’s voice was soft. “So, verses seven through fifteen, that angry and scary description of God . . .” he trailed off, and I looked at him. “That was God running to David’s defense?”

That something shifted in my heart again, and I blinked away tears building in my eyes. Ben saw them, but he continued anyway. “Storms like these . . . they don’t always mean judgment and anger. To me, storms like these are a reminder.”

My eyes were blurry, and my voice was a whisper. “Of what?”

“A reminder that when we call out to Him, *this* is the power with which He runs to our defense. God doesn’t sit up in

heaven waiting for His children to fail so He can strike us down. Instead, He runs to us in our failings. He helps and forgives and *loves* us.”

My tears spilled onto my cheeks. Ben politely turned away, and I looked at the storm with fresh, damp eyes. Instead of seeing God as angry and righteous, hurling lightning and sending storms onto some sinner, I saw Him running to my side—armored with His own strength and might, darkness and clouds as His chariot. I saw Him hearing the cry of one of His children and rushing down, ready to aid with all His power.

Ready to defend *me*.

And suddenly, that horrid fear in the pit of my stomach, ever-present in a storm like this, began to fade.

\* \* \*

“Here we are,” Ben said nearly an hour later as he pulled up in front of my apartment building. Even though the storm hadn’t completely passed, it didn’t bother me as much as it had before. My fears fell into the background as I meditated on the verses Ben had shared with me. Like the sweet, patient guy he was, Ben had driven slowly and carefully, his eyes flickering to mine in the rearview mirror every time a stray crack of thunder filled the sky. I’d still jumped, but fear hadn’t raced into my heart like before.

“Thank you,” I said, gathering my things. “How much do I owe you?”

Ben’s eyes dropped to look at the display, but he only grinned. “It’s on the house.”

“We only met today.”

He shrugged. “We’re trauma buddies.” I shook my head and rolled my eyes, but I knew I was smiling, too. Seconds ticked by as we engaged in a silent battle of wills.



*Fear hadn't raced into my heart like before.*



Ben shook his head. “I’m not budging on this.”

I huffed, still smiling, and pushed open the door of the cab. “Fine. But thank you!” I stepped out of the cab, took about two steps, then turned back around. I ducked down and rapped on the passenger window. It rolled down, and Ben leaned across the cab. I spoke before he could. “Thank you, Ben. For everything. God knew I needed to be in your cab today.” I paused, then stepped away. Once again, I barely made it two steps before the sound of the cab door opening made me stop.

“Wait!” Ben said, coming halfway around the cab. He stopped near the hood, some six feet away from me. His eyes were riveted on my face, and he looked . . . nervous. “I, uh—” He cleared his throat. “I changed my mind. The ride isn’t free.”

I raised my eyebrows at him and crossed my arms in mock chastisement. “Well, how much is it?”

One foot absently kicked at the wet pavement, and he spoke. “I’ll tell you what. If you get coffee with me sometime soon, we’ll call it even.” He was smiling.

Butterflies took flight in my stomach, and I matched his smile. “Deal.”

# A Changing Heart

by Joshua Small

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*Kayla resents her life in Tanzania until someone challenges her perspective.*

Kayla sat on the front porch of her parents' home in Tanzania, which felt like a million miles away from anywhere interesting. The wind blew dust and debris through the small village where she lived. Her ears rang with the clamor of children playing in the streets and the chatter of villagers going about their daily business. She wiped away the sweat from above her eyes and leaned her face against the post that supported the porch roof. Kayla couldn't escape the blazing sun that made the summers so harsh. To her, this place felt like a prison.

Kayla and her family had moved to Tanzania three years ago to serve as full-time missionaries. Initially, she had tried to keep a positive outlook on the situation. She wanted to make the most out of traveling across the world. Her mom and dad had told her such exciting and vibrant stories of what to expect as missionaries in Africa. However, life hadn't turned out the way she wished it would. The exciting life promised by her family had quickly turned into boring routine.

Kayla walked over to the church and began her daily chores of tending to the church garden and cleaning the auditorium. In a few hours, she would get changed and head to the first church service of the day to hear her father preach. She had begun to grow numb to her parents' teachings and bored with the monotony of everyday life. Kayla resented her parents for moving her away from the bustling city of Seattle. She had always dreamed of attending school parties, going to prom with a cute boy, and, in two years, moving into the dorms of a prestigious university. What she really wanted was to be anywhere in the world but a remote village in Tanzania doing missionary work.



*I just want to be normal.*

Kayla's mom and dad thought their ministry was fulfilling, and they were content with their way of life. But not Kayla. *I just want to be normal*, she thought. *Is that too much to ask?*

"Kayla!" a familiar voice shouted.

"Yeah, Mom?" Kayla replied.

“I’m headed to the clinic now. Will you be able to meet me there in thirty minutes? Oh, and don’t forget to bring the extra bandages and gauze.”

“Sure, I won’t forget,” Kayla snapped. *How could I forget? Nothing around here ever changes.*

Kayla finished up her work at the church and then walked to the clinic with the extra bandages. A young boy stood outside the building. She recognized him. He came with his family to hear her father preach every Sunday. He was a short, frail child who looked about ten or eleven. His clothes had so many holes in them that they were nothing but dirty rags. The little boy wore a crisp baseball cap, which he had clearly gotten from the donation bin at church.

Kayla shivered, then wondered if the feeling was from being uncomfortable or from something else. Guilt, maybe?

“Hello,” the boy whispered timidly.

“Hey,” Kayla responded. “Are you from this village?”

The boy nodded. He looked as if he wished to say something but seemed too shy to get the words out.

“What’s your name?” Kayla asked in a warmer tone of voice.

“Omari is me,” the boy replied in broken English as his grin widened. “You help. My mama say that you help.”

Kayla stepped closer to the boy. “Yes, we help wherever we can.”

“You gave my family food,” Omari said. “I sell baskets to help my family.”

Kayla smiled at the boy. “I’m sure you do a great job helping your family.” Kayla rarely spent time with the villagers.

She chose to work behind the scenes and let her parents interact with the village children. Kayla had never had good experiences working with the kids. It was as if they could sense the insincerity in her voice when she spoke with them. After all, she didn't even want to be here.

Omari spoke up again. "Thank you for help." He grinned. "When you help, we feel good."

All Kayla could do was smile back as the little boy in tattered clothes ran away to catch up with the rest of his family.

Over the next few days, Kayla thought about Omari and his words. She thought of his tattered, dark rags compared to her nice and colorful clothes. She thought about how, at such a young age, he was helping provide for his family. As the week passed, Kayla found herself assisting at the clinic more often than she ever had before. She wanted to become more involved, especially with the village children. She wasn't sure why, but she knew it had something to do with the guilt she had felt during her conversation with Omari.

The following week, as Kayla was helping her father carry medical supplies to the clinic, she saw Omari sitting under a large tree with other children from his village. The children were using the leaves from the palm trees around them to make baskets. Omari looked up from his weaving and spotted Kayla in the distance.

"Hello!" shouted Omari, his face bright with a smile. He waved her over and patted the spot next to him. "Sit," he offered.

Kayla hesitated before she sat down next to the other children. All their eyes were on her. Although she felt slightly embarrassed, she wouldn't turn Omari's offer down to sit next to him.

“You make baskets?” Kayla questioned as she watched their tiny fingers seamlessly weave the leaves together.

“Yes, I help,” he said with a smile. “Just like you.”

Kayla noticed the feeling of shame building up again. This young boy was willing to selflessly work to provide for his family. Omari wasn’t bothered by the labor. He just did what was needed to help his loved ones survive.

Kayla grabbed a small stack of the leaves by the children’s feet. “Can I stay?”

“You want to watch?” Omari asked.

Kayla responded with a slow nod, and Omari’s eyes lit up. “Yes, you watch. We teach you.” Omari paused for a moment, trying to find the words to express how he was feeling. “You help us all time. Thank you,” he finally said.

Tears welled up in Kayla’s eyes as she reflected on her attitude. She had been selfish. She had wanted to find purpose anywhere but this remote Tanzanian village. Now, she knew that she could do more to help others here than anywhere else.

“Omari, I haven’t been wanting to help like I should have,” Kayla said as tears trickled down her face. “I’m a selfish girl, and I’ve only ever thought about what I wanted to do. My parents are the ones you should be thanking, not me.”

Omari looked at her with a puzzled gaze before he opened his mouth to speak. “But when you help, people are happy. I am happy and glad you come here. It sad you do not see that God give us you. God use you to help us.”

Kayla was surprised by Omari's words. She never would have expected something so wise to come from someone so young. He had clearly learned these truths from her dad's preaching. It was a message that Kayla had needed to hear, but because of her coldness toward her parents recently, she had blocked it out. Omari was right. Helping should be a selfless act. Kayla had been absorbed with the things she thought she needed in her life—traveling the world and going to parties and living in a big city. She had failed to see the purpose that God had put right in front of her.

“Thank you, Omari. That's a good way of thinking about things.” Kayla chuckled as she wiped away a stray tear.

Omari smiled and continued to weave the basket in his hands. He took the end pieces from the horizontal-facing blades and weaved them over and under across the vertical-facing blades. After completing his intricate pattern, he overlapped the end pieces, and he was done. He raised the finished basket up to Kayla. “You help?” he said.

A new feeling began to take root in Kayla's heart. She looked at the little children surrounding her and felt thankful that God was using her in such a special task. He had shown her the influence she had on others when she helped.

A Bible verse she had long forgotten entered her mind. “For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.” It was a verse her father quoted to himself often, and now it made sense why he said it so frequently.

*If Christ was willing to be a servant, I should be willing too,*  
Kayla thought.

She looked at Omari and smiled. “Yes,” Kayla said, “I want to help.”



# Small Victories

by Calin Pettit

 Commencement Contest Winner



*Five days doesn't seem like a long time. To Sergeant Michael Strank, however, five days is a lifetime between death and survival.*

Five days.

One hundred twenty hours. Seven thousand two hundred minutes. Four hundred thirty-two thousand seconds.

Five days.

Iwo Jima, most notable for its extinct volcano, was cold. The U.S. Marines shivered underneath thick jackets, their bodies numb as the ship drew closer to its target. Their main objective: gain control of Iwo Jima. The war depended on their success. The island takeover would take weeks—maybe even months—to accomplish. Mount Suribachi stood in their way of doing so swiftly.

Their first objective: take the mountain. They had five days to do it.

## **Day 1**

At 9 a.m. on Monday, February 19, 1945, silence shrouded the shore of Iwo Jima. LVT(A)-4 vehicles, carrying hordes of Marines, flooded the shallow ocean bank. Sergeant Michael Strank knelt low with his battalion. His hands trembled as he ran them down his face, nerves and exhaustion warring within his body. The heavy sage green coat did nothing to protect his aching body against the biting wind. His finger, painfully stiff, rested against the trigger of his M1 Garand rifle.

Michael watched one of the men kneeling across from him mouth words silently, eyes pinched tightly. The man was probably saying a prayer. Maybe he should pray while there was still time.

But time and war didn't stop for last-minute prayers.

"We're going in, boys," Major General Keller Rockey ordered, his voice just loud enough for Michael to hear over the crashing waves. "At the ready."

With rigid hands, Michael adjusted his rifle. He straightened his back and steadied himself against the sides of the vehicle. When he stood, his knees cracked from the change in position. The amphibious vehicle lurched as it came to a halt, and the mechanical whirring of the ramp filled the air. Michael jumped from the ramp, and the stinging salt water slapped his face. His sea-soaked pants added to his chill. Silence washed over the beach along with the lapping waves.

Michael's feet left mangled footprints in the volcanic ash and sand. The thump of his heartbeat filled his ears.

*Thump-thump. Boom! Thump-thump. Boom!*

When had a cannon joined his heartbeat? Michael was in the sand before he knew it, desperately trying to avoid the small rockets of the enemy 120mm mortar. Sand and ash dug into his skin as he crawled flat on his belly. His face twisted each time his elbows dug into the beach. He had to stay low to get away from the gunfire. With every breath, sand scratched his nostrils, but that was the least of his worries.

Michael continued to crawl, hoping to get to the higher bank. Above the rockets and gunshots, he heard yelling.

“Move! Move!” his commander roared.

“

*With every breath, sand  
scratched his nostrils.*

”

Michael used his rifle to push himself off the ground. He didn't know who had died or who had lived. All he knew was that he and the rest *had* to take the beach. He darted left and right, dodging the rockets and added gunfire. If he could make it through today, he could make it through the week. Surviving would be a small victory.

A grueling ten hours passed before Michael had the chance to stop. Even though the air was frigid, sweat trickled down his brow. From what he knew, the Marine line had reached from the base of Suribachi, northeast to the shore, south to the edge of Airfield 1, and ended near East Boat Basin.

Michael shakily exhaled as he sat on the cold dirt. His feet throbbed, and his hands ached more than they had that

morning. Taking the moment to just breathe, he couldn't help but chance a small smile. He had made it through D-Day on Iwo Jima.

Small victories.

## **Day 2**

When dawn broke through on February 20, Michael's eyes burned from the flashes of grenades and flamethrowers used through the night. The cries of "corpsman" from the deceptive Japanese were forever engrained in his memory.

He had whispered "those aren't our men" over and over.

"They could be. We still need to help," Marines had whispered back, carelessly ignoring Michael. He had to watch the jungle's darkness envelop them; when the sun rose, they had failed to return. His division had since regrouped and were advancing to Mount Suribachi. They couldn't stop until absolutely necessary.

Nine hours later, Major Kelly commanded them to halt. Michael knew they weren't anywhere near the goal. The Marines had only gained two hundred yards. A full day of war and barely anything to count for it.

Still haunted from the night before, Michael's eyes were wide, and his body twinged from shot nerves. Any moment could be a surprise attack. When he was allowed to finally eat, his food fell off his fork from the uncontrollable tremble of his hands. Once finished, he stood and joined his men. He stayed silent; words of encouragement fled from his mind and lips.

For once, Michael wasn't looking forward to the sunset. Back home in Pennsylvania, he enjoyed the beautiful hues of orange, red, and pink. But not here. Not in the middle of a war.

When the sun fully disappeared below the tree line, Michael shivered as he slowly crawled into his sleeping bag. The disappointment from earlier slowly melted away when he recounted the day. They were closer than they had been the day before. He was still alive.

Small victories.

### **Day 3**

On the morning of February 21, a faint buzz overhead drew Michael from his sleep. The noise grew louder as a group of small planes grew larger. Michael wondered if this was U.S. air support coming to help. He was answered by the sound of bullets shredding the surrounding trees.

“Take cover!” he shouted over the noise, before dropping to the ground. His hands grasped for his sleeping bag and coat before he shoved them deep into his pack. His eyes darted to the sky then back to the ground. His fingers shook so hard that he failed multiple times to secure the pack’s straps. Once he was successful in snapping the two pieces together, he lunged for his M1 before standing up.

“There must be thirty of them!” someone yelled.

“Or more!”

Michael looked around before he ran. The ground beneath his feet shook as U.S. tanks rolled their way through the trees, flattening anything in their path. Marines carrying 37mm guns and half-track mounting 75mm cannons followed. Their defensive actions halted the Japanese attack, leading them to finally arrive at the foot of the mountain.

Michael could still hear the buzzing aircraft throughout the afternoon. “I wonder what they’re doing,” he murmured as he set down his pack. Another day of non-stop fighting was over.

His division, along with the 28th Marines, had secured their position for the day. Mount Suribachi was on the verge of falling into their hands. Michael was watching the enemy planes when they suddenly banked and headed for the ocean. His stomach lurched when he realized what they were doing.

“They’re headed for the carriers,” he whispered, horror laced in his words. He helplessly watched from a clearing in the jungle as the kamikaze planes began to divebomb the aircraft carriers. In the next hours, his eyes stayed glued to the bay as the ocean battle kept on.

*Boom!*

Michael lurched at the deafening noise, dropping his sleeping bag. His eyes quickly found the source through the dark sky. From the water, a pillar of smoke rose from the haul of the *Bismarck Sea*, one of their escort carriers. As the moments ticked by, he watched the boat sink deeper and deeper into the waves until it disappeared altogether at 9 p.m.

His heart ached at the thought of the men lost in the sinking. The feeling almost consumed him, and his small moment of star gazing didn’t help. Yet, even through the air and sea attacks, he had survived another day.

Three down, two to go.

Small victories.

## Day 4

Michael woke up before the sun on February 22. He sluggishly sat up, back cracking when he stood. He knew that there must be deep bags under his bloodshot eyes. His knees protested as he squatted to pack his backpack. The sage green jacket he wore was caked in mud, the color barely peaking behind the sludge.

He knew today was do or die. Their goal was to surround the base of Mount Suribachi. Unlike the other three days, victory was so close that Michael could almost taste it.

*Today was do or die.*

“Time to move!” General Kelly’s voice rose above the murmurings. Michael felt the tension in the air as they began to march toward their goal. His right hand clenched his pack’s strap while his left held his M1. When the Japanese arrived a few hours later, he was ready. His rifle cracked painfully against his shoulder, but he couldn’t stop. After a few rounds, Michael was quick to pull the pin of a grenade and throw it far. His back slammed against a tree, and he shoved his fingers into his ears.

*Boom!*

He hoped it was a direct hit before circling the tree to continue on. From the grenades to the cannons, he swore he’d go deaf by the end of the day.

“Move left!”

“Continue on!”

“Don’t stop!”

With every command, Michael’s heart raced more and more. He ran and dodged enemy fire, hoping to make it to a stopping point. All around, tanks and hordes of men started to create large and almost never-ending lines around the mountain base. A Marine near Michael yanked his arm, causing him to skid to a stop. The soldier seemed to be yelling something, but Michael’s ears were still ringing.

“What?” he yelled, brows pinching in concentration.

“The mountain is surrounded!” Michael’s shoulders jerked under the hands of the excited Marine.

“The mountain is surrounded?” he asked in disbelief. If they had succeeded in surrounding the mountain, they had the upper hand for taking the entire mount tomorrow.

“We surrounded the mountain!”

Michael’s eyes filled with tears as he took everything in. He saw men’s arms lifting into the air. Other Marines were on their knees, tears streaming down their faces. They had done it. The mountain was finally surrounded. Today was a success. Today opened the door for tomorrow.

Small victories indeed.

## **Day 5**

At 10:20 a.m. on February 23, 1945, one American flag flittered in the strong wind at the peak of Mount Suribachi. The stars and stripes symbolized the success in taking one side of the mountain. The other side continued to be fought over by the Japanese who were unwilling to give up. Michael

could see the flag waving proudly from the base of the mountain.

He had *finally* made it to day five.

He knew the battle for the island wasn't finished, but the biggest part was over. The flag was flying, and he was done with combat for the day. So, why was someone jogging down the mountain?

"Lieutenant Tuttle wanted a larger flag, sir. He wants it big enough so that the Marines on the other side will be able to see," Michael overheard the soldier tell his captain.

After the two exchanged words, Captain Severance turned to him.

"Sergeant Strank, I want you and three men to take the flag up."

"Sir, yes, Sir!" Michael saluted before turning around to face three Marines. "Corporal Block, Private Hayes, and Private Sousley, you'll come with me."

An echo of "Sir, yes, Sir," from the three men sounded.

When the scratchy fabric of the flag touched Michael's fingertips, the weight of the moment pushed down on his chest. He rolled his shoulders and took the first steps of the 550-foot hike up the mountain. His knees wanted to give out, yet the flag tightly gripped in his right hand kept him going.

Michael panted with every step and breath. When he and his men reached the peak, his knees finally buckled, forcing him down to the rocks and dirt. The sharp, volcanic rocks dug into his knees like the sand had dug into his cheek on day one. He squinted as he looked up at the smaller flag being lowered. His gaze then fell to the one he gripped in his hand.

“Can you find me a pipe?” Michael asked, finger shaking as he pointed to rogue pieces of metal that cluttered the mountain face. Private Hayes jogged over to where a 20-foot-long pipe stuck out of the ground. Michael watched as Private Hayes loosened it and jogged back over. Michael’s fingers rubbed at the pipe’s rust when it was handed to him. With trembling hands, Michael skillfully tied two corners of the flag to the top of the pipe.

Michael grunted as he stood, careful to keep the flag from brushing the ground.

“Stand around me. Let’s get this flag up,” Michael ordered as he dug the end of the pipe into the ground.

The three Marines quickly gathered around him, all arms reaching out to get a hold of the pipe.

“One. Two. Three. Push!”

Michael gritted his teeth as he pushed up. The pipe barely moved.

“Again! One. Two. Three. Push!”

Once again, the pipe didn’t budge. Michael felt the severity of the moment crashing down on him. The Marines on the other side were counting on him. His captain was counting on him. His *country* was counting on him.

His head whipped around before his eyes landed on two Marines passing by. “You two! Come help get this flag up!”

The two—Corporals Keller and Schultz—dashed over, feet kicking stray rocks in different directions. One knelt by the ground, holding the pipe steady at the base, while the other reached over Michael’s head. Michael gritted his teeth once more.

“One more time. One. Two. Three. Push!”

With the extra strength and hands, the pipe finally gave way and started to rise upward.

“Keep going!” Michael ordered.



*Moments of peace had  
time for prayer.*



When the flag was almost upright, Michael heard the click of a camera. Seconds later, the pipe stood by itself; the flag free to move with the wind. Around him, Michael heard the cheers from his men. Other Marines around them shouted *oorahs*.

Michael's hands dangled by his hips as he watched the stars and stripes flicker. This image of the flag waving freely was all that he stood for. He took a step back and kneeled. This time, he didn't mind the rocks that dug into his bruised knees. He clasped his hands together and closed his eyes. He didn't know if he had time to pray, but he'd do it anyway.

Moments of peace had time for prayer.

Small victories at last.

# Heart of the Ocean

by Christina Wooten

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The surface ripples, shimmers, beckons.  
Green and blue hues fuse together.  
Laughing waves lap at sand as  
The ocean entices you to enter.

Sunlight warms the upper layer  
But cannot breach the ocean's crown.  
If rays attempt to pierce the depths,  
They are smothered and dragged down.

Just as breath is seized from man  
When on his deathbed he reclines,  
The water steals from you your air  
And manipulates your mind.

As black as night, the purple sea  
Ensures your fate is sealed.  
It pulls you downward into darkness,  
'Til despair is all you feel.

No warmth exists so far below.  
The pit allows no light of day.  
Refusing rescue to drowning men,  
Keeping all hope for life at bay.

The human heart, a whirling sea,  
Is on the surface calm, serene.  
Yet darkness dominates its depths;  
Illumination but a dream.

Such is the state of sinking souls  
Who do not know the Savior's love.  
Christ's light cannot exist within  
A heart which Satan is ruler of.

Men condemned by their Creator—  
In true joy cannot take part.  
Look to the ocean as a warning.  
Make Christ the Master of your heart.

# Gum Wrappers

by Esther Barragan

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*In the busyness of life, I forgot where I came from.*

*“Señora, me compra un chicle?”*

I heard a child’s voice close to my elbow as I waited for my horchata at the food stand on the corner of the street. I didn’t have to turn around to know exactly what he looked like: ragged hair, dirty hands, and hopeful brown eyes. My mother came to mind, and I recalled her stories of how she grew up in that same little village.

*“Señora?”* A tug at my sleeve jolted me from my thoughts.

Giving in, I sighed and turned. I had to head to the airport in an hour, and I was already thinking through ways to get rid of him. My day was full of things to do, and this was not one of them.

The boy was small, only six or seven, with thin arms resting at his side. He was holding a cardboard box stocked with gum in colorful wrappers.

An even tinier girl trembled behind him, clutching his torn shirt. I smiled at her, and she ducked behind her brother. Before she hid, I caught a glimpse of her lopsided pigtails, her shining eyes, and her shy smile.



*A tug at my sleeve jolted me  
from my thoughts.*



Three pesos would buy me a piece of gum. A small, round drop harder than a piece of clay. I searched my tote bag, feeling around the bottom for any loose coins that might have slipped out.

Nothing.

I shook my head. “Sorry, honey,” I said, turning around, hoping my drink was almost ready.

“*Tengo hambre, Mateo,*” the girl whispered to her brother.

I felt my own stomach rumble. From the corner of my eye, I could see that the boy hadn’t moved.

“*Por favor,*” he pleaded. “*Solo un chicle.*”

Just one gum.

“*Señora,* your drink is ready,” the owner of the food stand called.

The little girl stepped closer to me. She was cupping both hands in front of her, holding them out to me.

I glanced toward the stand where the man waited with my drink. A woman on the opposite side of the street watched the children, her face wrinkled, worn from what only could be hours in the sun. Their mother? She did not look young enough to be these children's mother. She looked like she could be *my* mother.

*She could be my mother.*

“*Señora!*” My horchata was waiting.

Soon, I'd fly back to the States in a plane packed with people ready to leave this place, just like I was. These children and their gum would only be an afterthought. Then my mother came to mind again—how she was one of these children selling gum so many years ago. She would want me to bless others the way I've been blessed.



*She could be my mother.*



I ignored the stand owner and took out my wallet, the one I kept in the fanny pack close to my chest.

Giving the boy a twenty-dollar bill, I chose a red-wrapped piece of gum. His eyes widened when he saw the American money.

Both children turned and ran toward the woman standing a few yards away. “*Mamá!*” the boy exclaimed, waving the money before her. A big smile filled his face.

As I left the street corner, I turned and waved to the children one final time. The girl's pigtails shook as she flailed one hand enthusiastically, the other hand clutching a large cup of horchata to her chest. She'd needed it more than I did.

*"One year ago, today."* I look again at the notification on my phone: a photo of my mother picking me up from the airport. I snap back to the present.

I'm home now, but there's a crumpled gum wrapper in my pocket, and my mind's back in that little Mexican village. I can't look in the mirror without seeing the small, battered little girl with the toothy grin. But for the grace of God, I would've been that girl. I pull the gum wrapper from my pocket and drop it into the Mason jar on my desk where it joins the collection of paper balls just like it.

I never throw them away anymore.

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## Q CAESURA

**Life is full of abrupt changes** that force us to slow down and evaluate our surroundings. In poetry, this kind of stop is called a caesura, a grammatical pause within a line of poetry that allows the reader to slow down and ponder the previous line before moving to the next. From the nostalgic memories of childhood to the sudden difficulties of adulthood, the poetic cadence of each of our lives is interrupted by our own caesuras. **These breaks encourage us to stop, breathe, and think back before we press forward in our lives.**

*“The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life.”*

—Proverbs 14:27



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