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QUESTION MARK EX- CLAMATION POINT

by Patrick Bowey

A thick cloud of orange dust filled the sky behind the trail of the motorcycle as the man rode through the desert. Pools of sweat formed underneath the man's leather jacket, the dust clinging to the outside of it. He gazed at the red mountains in the distance, and felt the wind at his face and the heat on his head. He wiped the dust away from his goggles and continued down the endless, narrow trail. His breathing formed hot clouds underneath the red bandana around his mouth. The thick heavy engine roared in the vast empty waste surrounding him, making him known.

As he rode further into the sands, his mind went back home, and how he had decided to abandon his family, again. Without the decency or maturity to even tell them where he was going.

"Shut up" he said under his bandana, stifling his voice to the point where I could just barely hear his typical snarky tone. "I know what I'm doing." (We'll see.) "What's that supposed to mean?"

The bike came to a stop at the edge of a pit in the middle of the red and dusty ground. It's wide gaping mouth gasping for air and water from the world above. The child took off his

goggles- "Don't call me that". I can call you anything I want, remember? "Just tell the story and stop messing around." Fine. The little girl took off- "Stop!" he shouted, his voice echoing down into the pit, not realizing that his energy and time was being wasted on a futile effort to control the things he cannot. "Whatever, I don't even care." Wonderful. Let's continue then.

The *man* took off his goggles-

"Don't do that either."

What is it now?

"That. Italics. I know you're doing them."

We're never going to finish the story if you keep interrupting me.

"You just resent the fact that no one will ever narrate your story. Always the narrator, never the protagonist."

Can we just get on with it?

"Please! We're two pages in and I haven't even gotten in the pit yet."

DAVID took of his goggles and peered down into the darkness below, the clouds of dust settling behind his bike. He felt his bandaged hand along the ground for a rock, feeling

the hot grains of sand pass through his fingers. He picked one up and tossed it into the pit. All he heard was the sound of the wind.

His breathing picked up. He unlatched the satchel on his back and it hit the ground with a loud metallic thud, the sound echoing down, far below. He opened the bag and reached inside. The metal tools burning his fingers. The rope, tools, and harness sat near the edge of the pit, the bag now filling with the hot wind.

He harnessed himself and began to repel into the dark pit, keeping his eyes toward the sky above. As he descended, the heat began to vanish along with the light. Hot sand was blown down into the hole from the wind and he watched as the grains passed and vanished below him into the darkness. He continued. The air became thicker and cooler. The curved walls were slick under his boots.

His feet slid to the sand covered floor of the pit. He pulled the bandana from his mouth and breathed in the air, feeling the cool of the shade on his skin. Before him, the earth sloped downward into darkness. He walked forward. The top of his head began to scrape along the rough chiseled rock containing him, as the ceiling grew closer to the ground.

As he ventured deeper into the caves, he began to feel as though he was not alone.

"You know you're really not helping here."

He could feel them crawl-

ing through the dark. Their white eyes peering into him. Their skin, black as the cave itself, erasing them from sight. Their hisses surrounded him as they closed in. The sound of their bodies gliding along the rough surface of the cave, getting louder.

"Then shut up!" he whispered.

Sorry— he whispered.

He waited. His breathing heavy. "You know what if there actually are monsters one of these days; I'm never going to know."

The beasts crawled forward.

"Did they?"

Oh yeah, they are monstrous, thick red drool dripping from their mouths.

"It's so weird that I haven't seen them yet."

Oh you will soon.

"Whatever"

He ventured further into the cave until he found himself in total darkness. "You know now would actually be a useful time for you to describe the things around me, you know because I can't see anything."

The darkness surrounded him, consumed him. "Ow!" he said after walking into the wall of the cave.

He raised his middle finger to the darkness.

He could hear someone talking

in the distance. He walked forward, guiding his hand against the rocky surface. His other hand stretched in front of him, waving it through the air. At the end of the tunnel, a small red curtain came into view. He moved faster. As he approached, he could hear several voices behind it.

David tore open the curtain and stared into the space beyond.

Several cloaked figures sat hunched around a large round table, empty apart from a small kettle and a porcelain teacup. Many small candles filled the room with light and dripped hot wax onto the cave floor. The walls were draped in red fabric, containing the light. The fabric extended upwards toward the high ceiling of the cave, lost in the shadows reaching towards it, and disappearing into the dark. The cloaked figures remained bowed and silent. Their robes, white and elegant in the soft glow of the candlelight.

One of the figures stood up, his face still out of the light, his tall frame reaching up towards the high ceiling. "Hello David." He said.

The other figures all fell from their chairs and kneeled upon the floor, their heads bowed toward David, who stood gripping the cave wall.

"What is this place?"

"All will be explained soon. Please, take a seat at the table."

He did as he was told. As he walked to his seat, he maneuvered his feet around the kneeling figures surrounding it.

"Pardon me." He said after stepping on one of their toes. Their feet were bare, the undersides black and filthy.

"They are waiting for you to grant them permission to sit again." The tall man said.

David raised his eyebrows. "Oh. They are? Well, then yeah they can sit."

The figures all did as they were told.

The tall figure reached for the kettle in the center of the table and poured steaming red liquid into a teacup. "Please, drink."

"Who are you?" David asked.

"Well, I suppose we should tell you."

The cloaked figure stood up. The light from the candles catching his face, highlighting the deep wrinkles, gaunt features, and casting harsh shadows upon it. Long, thin grey hair crawled out from the sides of the hood. His robe draped along the floor behind him, and as he moved, he seemed to walk on air. "I am formally referred to as the Grand Reverend of the 'Beings of Eternal Ancient Sophistication towards Sainthood', but you can call me Tim." "What about these guys?" David said, pointing to the cloaked figures around the table. "They choose to remain anonymous. Please, drink." "I'm not drinking anything until you tell me what this place is."

One of the cloaked figures

reached for a cup, filled with the liquid. "Are you sure?" he asked bringing the cup to his lips. "Still warm" he said as he slurped the red liquid. Thin beads rolled down the sides of his mouth.

"Way to make it really creepy Ned" Tim said.

The figure known as Ned did not speak again. Instead he returned to his previous thoughts. The many things in life that have left him behind, those he used to love, and how on some mornings the way the rising sun would paint the sky beautiful shades of pink and orange. As he reached for a fork from the table, Tim continued.

"Let me explain. You are currently sitting within the Holy Cave of Light. It is within this vast cave where we converge, and share our knowledge of the world. Only the select few are ever allowed within this holy sanctum of truth."

"Then why am I here?"

"Well, you are of course, a member already."

"No, no I'm not. I've never even seen you before." "You most certainly are. In fact, we believe you to be....."

"The Chosen one."

All of the cloaked figures responded at once. "*The Chosen one.*"

"The what?"

"The Chosen one."

"*The Chosen one*"

"Wait, how do you know?"

"Him"

David looked around the cave.

"Who?"

"The voice"

Wait, Me?

"Yes, you. It had been prophesized for centuries that the Chosen One- "*Chosen one*"

"-will carry with him the voice. A divine spirit. A messenger from on high announcing the savior's arrival. We have all longed to hear your music. For a long time, I believed that my ears would never receive the honor of having listened to its sweet tone."

Huh.

"Listen, I really don't have time for this."

Tim continued. "We understand the truth our ancestors knew. We believe that the power of the universe flows through one divine vessel. The divinity and power of our ruler, Henry."

"Henry?"

"Henry."

"*Henry*"

Harry?

"*HENRY*"

"Who is Henry?"

"Henry is everything. Through

him, all life flows. You, me, the voice. He is the one. He is the creator. He is Henry. Henry is the one true ruler of the universe. Without Henry, we would cease to be.”

“What?”

“Let me explain. Our journey began with the creation of the universe itself. But our knowledge comes from a single man. One of the most brilliant minds humanity has ever been blessed with. The man who discovered the truth about Henry. That man’s name was Dr. Harry Hanus. ”

(Hahahahahahaha!)

What was that?”

Nothing.

“At first, they called him crazy. The fools. But there were those who saw the light. Who understood. Together they formed a brotherhood, whose deep bonds of loyalty and faith carry on to this day.”

“Well this is all *very* fascinating. But, tell me, what does this Henry look like?”

“He is beauty itself. Green and majestic, he holds within his shell the infinite knowledge and wisdom of the entire universe.”

“Wait, you mean a turtle?”

“If that word helps you, then yes.”

How big we talkin’ here?

“No one knows of the true size

of Henry. Not even us. We do know that his power is infinite. He takes on many shapes and sizes.”

“So where do I come in?”

“You are the link between Man and Henry. For centuries we have waited for the day when we would be able to contact our god. Waiting for the link between our two worlds to arrive to bring together the world of the living and the world of the divine. We believe you are that link.”

Another figure spoke up. “Yes, we believe that he may be.... the chosen one.”

“The Chosen One”

“Oh, God.”

“So what do you say, Chosen One?”

“Chosen one.”

David rubbed his eyes, taking in this strange new information. “Okay, first off. Did the ‘prophesy’ or whatever describe ‘the cho... you know’ like me?”

“Many people over the centuries have interpreted the appearance and personality of the chosen o-”

“Chosen one”

“-In many different ways. However to be honest, we expected the voice to be a bit more.... Eloquent.”

Well, I do declare, sir, that your presumptuous defamation of my character is in fact short sighted when compared to

my mental lexicon.

Prick.

“And, also since when am I *the savior?* I thought I was just supposed to talk to him or something.”

“Let me explain. Your arrival has been anticipated since the very beginning. When all there was in the emptiness was Henry. He then decided to fill the emptiness with everything we now know: people, animals, the planets, sand, oceans, hair, fish, music, babies, baby animals, insects, baby insects, robots, baby...”

“He gets it Tim!” called out one of the cloaked figures.

“Oh. Well anyway, Henry created everything and now we wait for the chosen one...”

“The Chosen One”

“to join our two worlds together and bring peace and balance to the world.”

“See, that’s where you’ve lost me, the peace and balance thing. I mean things seem pretty alright as they are.”

“Perhaps, for now. But soon, humanity will face great dangers.”

(I wonder if he’s going to tell us exactly what those dangers are while speaking in vague terms and looking off into the caves.)

“We can see the future stretching out before us.” Tim said as he turned away from David and stared out into the caves. “We will soon face the

darkness, for it looms upon the horizon. Many will be silenced, and perish. The fall of man will be swift and sudden. Those who remain will have to make a choice. The path of darkness or the path of light. Man will be cleansed in the Baptismal waters and he will struggle to rise again, but, our savior Henry will appear to them, and his divine image will bring peace to all the land. You will be the herald of that peace, the human vessel of light for the world. With your gifts you will lead the people, teach them the ways of Henry, and save the world.”

“But what if I don’t want to be a vessel for this Hamilton?”

“HENRY!”

“Are you going to force me save the world?”

“Are you actually suggesting that you would not want to help bring about peace, vanquish all evil in the land and change the course of humanity for the rest of time?”

“Maybe. I might not feel like it.”

Yeah, what’s in this for us?

“Well, seeing as you lack any empathy for the human race, your legacy. You have both already been written about for centuries.”

...Really?

“Of course. You are the divine voice. Your story has been told for generations.”

Interesting.

David looked up. “You can’t be serious.”

Well, maybe we can hear them out. This might not be so bad.

“These guys are lunatics!”

Look their not all that bad, maybe they’re on to something. Look you’ve always wondered why you had a Narrator in the first place, maybe this is it.

“You should listen to him David. The divine voice is never wrong.”

I knew it.

“Come forward, and fulfil your destiny. It is time for the ceremony to begin.”

“The Ceremony?”

The Ceremony?

“Yes. The Ceremony of Light. The one that has been spoken of for centuries. Where we ensure your mind will survive to spread the word of our lord after the fall of man.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Let me explain. Once humanity has destroyed itself, we will need you, the chosen one-”

“Chosen one”

“Yes, yes. We will need you to survive. And the only way to do that is by preserving your mind for future generations.”

“And how exactly do you plan

on doing that?”

“We will just remove your brain and-”

“And then you eat it? Right?”

Tim froze. The other cloaked figures looked around at each other.

“What?” Tim asked. “What kind of barbarians do you think we are?”

“I knew you were up to something. This whole thing, this whole thing about me being the chosen one”

“Chosen one”

“-It’s all just some twisted fantasy you freaks play before you kill people and eat their bodies.”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea as to what you are talking about.”

“You’re drinking blood!”

“What are you talking about? That would be inhumane! We would never think of doing such a thing”

“Well then what’s that red stuff you’ve been drinking?”

“It’s just tomato soup.”

“...Oh.”

“Every week we have tomato soup for lunch. We call it tomato Tuesday.”

“Oh”

“Well, now that we’ve got that worked out, let us begin.”

The cloaked figures rose from the table and stood, silent and still. Tim climbed upon the table, spilling the cups of tomato soup and knocking over the kettle and teacups. As they shattered upon the cave floor, Tim began to contort and move his body in strange ways. The others did the same. They began to moan and cry the more they moved. They swayed and rocked their bodies around the room, their moans getting louder, echoing through the chamber.

David was confused.

“Δύο Πέντε δεκαεννέα
είκοσι μία δεκαοκτώ πέντε είκοσι
τέσσερα δεκαπέντε δεκαοκτώ εννέα
δεκατέσσερα έντεκα είκοσι πέντε
δεκαπέντε είκοσι μία δεκαοκτώ
δεκαπέντε είκοσι δύο από δώδεκα
είκοσι εννέα δεκατέσσερα πέντε!” they
chanted in unison.

...I- I don’t know how to translate that!

Several minutes passed. And then several minutes more. After several minutes more had passed they stopped their gyration and moaning.

Tim turned and faced the cloaked figures. His thin arms rose from his loose robes towards the ceiling. His voice shook the walls. “Come, council, and join me as we unite our chosen one-”

“Chosen one!”

“-to Henry and ensure the survival of his holy word! Please retrieve the vessel.” said Timmy.

He looked up.

“My name is not Timmy, O great divine voice! My name is Timothy.” Timmy said.

“I said don’t call me that! Timmy is what I was called when I was a child. They all knew it tortured me. I can still remember the taunts. The pain. The way they spat the horrible word back at me, like I was nothing, watching me, helpless, defenseless. All I wanted in that moment was to let them know what it felt like. To be the one in control. How they would be sorry for calling me that name. I have always hated that name, more than just about anything.” Timmy said.

“Stop that this instant! Timmy said, trying to hold back tears.

“No I’m not.” He lied.

“Stop it!” Timmy shouted.

“If you do not stop you will be very sorry!” Timmy said.

Timmy also spat this empty threat without having the basic intellectual capabilities to realize that David had sprinted away from them twenty seconds ago.

He looked up. And saw that his vessel had gone, the red curtain still flapping.

The rhythmic, muffled sound of David’s heart reverberated throughout the system of caves, beating out of his chest as he sprinted away.

“You must fulfil your density!” Timmy shouted.

“Stop that! Everyone, after

“IN THE LIGHT” IN THE
LIGHT IN THE LIGHT! IN THE
LIGHT IN THE LIGHT IN THE
LIGHT THE LIGHT LIGHT

D In the light J
O In the light O
N In the light I
T In the light
N
! In the
light U
D In
the light S
A
In the light J
V In the light O
I In the light I
D In the light N
Y In the light U
E In the light S

L In the light J
L In the light O
E In the light I
the light N
D In
S In the light U
T In the light S
O In the light J
.....

Henry is the one
way. Join us.

“No”

Join us David,
it is better for you
here.

“No, no”

You must fulfil
your destiny David.

“What’s happened to you?”

JOIN US.

woah

“No!”

DAVID GAVE HIM-
SELF OVER TO THE DI-
VINITY AND POWER OF
HENRY, TAKING HIS
PLACE AND FUFILLING
HIS DUTY.

“No I didn’t!”

HE LIED.

DAVID UNDERSTOOD
THAT IT WAS USELESS TO
ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE AND
GAVE HIMSELF TO HENRY.

nO no! that’s not what hap-
pened! ----- Don’t listen to it Dave! Get
out of—AHH!

“Narrator!” HE CRIED
NOT COMPUTING THAT THE
VOICE HAS CHOSEN TO
FULFIL IT’S-

STOP THIS I- AHH!

Voice screams at the air

The world around him stands
still

Get us out of here.

What was that a Haiku? AHH!

*“You will pay for refusing your
destiny, David!”* **WE WARNED THE
FOOLISH VESSEL.**

“You monsters!” Dave
yelled, as **THE VOICE**
Fought back!

“What?!”

The...

LighTs...

FLICKerED....

The blinding lights went dark
as Timmy stood stunned at the immense
power of the one, divine voice.

“Oh, darn.” Timmy said.

David stood tall before the
cowards, trembling before him.

“So, what’s your next big plan?”

The morons said nothing. In-
stead they just stood there in their stupid
robes, their heavy breathing filling the
cold air with fog.

“I thought so. You see I can’t
even be seriously- Ow!” David cried
as Ned stabbed him in the neck with a
fork.

“NED!” Timmy shouted.
“That’s our dinner fork you madman!”

David collapsed onto the floor
as Ned stripped him of his clothes,
scattering them across the cave until he
reached the black armor, and pulled it
off of him.

“What are you doing?” Timmy
shouted

Ned did not speak, instead he
handed the black armor to Timmy.

Timmy held David’s armor, ca-
ressing the hard black metal. He looked
at David, defenseless and wounded, and
he began to feel the guilt and shame
well up within him. He began to ques-
tion his own perverted sense of morality
and the way he chooses to treat other
people for his own beliefs.

“No I didn’t”

He thought about his life up till
that point, his family, his friends. ‘Who
am I, deep down?’ he asked himself.

“No, that is not what I am
thinking at all.” He said as he strapped
David’s armor to himself.

“Give that back!” David

shouted as he writhed in pain.

"I'm sorry Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that."

You know you won't get away with this. We can take you.

"It's useless now. They have the armor." David said, not realizing that there was still one option left.

"Listen to David." Timmy said. "He has already accepted his fate. Let him fulfil his duty."

I'm not doing anything you freaks tell me. And we're both getting out of here with our brains inside our heads, not your stomachs.

"It's Tomato Tuesday you stupid voice!"

"How can we fight them?" David asked, forgetting that there is always, The Final Solution.

"No. No you said you would never do that. You can't! You are not allowed to interfere with the story." David said, not realizing that I had already made up my mind."

"Your power will soon be ours- Wait. Wait No. You can't do this"

How does that feel?

"No, no. I f-feel weak" said Timmy.

The other maniacs began to tremble, and cry. **"It's like my flesh is falling off of me!"** said one. **"I can feel it. Tiny worms. Digging**

into me. Slithering in my organs. Multiplying."

"It's like my brain is decaying within me!" said another. **"Oh Henry! Oh Henry have mercy upon me!"** said another. Their cries of pain echoed throughout the caves, the sweet sound filling the cold and barren air.

"You will not get away with this." Timmy said, coughing blood upon the cave floor. **"We will have our vengeance! You will fulfil your duty to Henry! Do you hear-"**

He stopped.

"Get them off of me! They're everywhere!"

He began to claw at his own flesh.

"Let's get out of here" David said.

No. I want to see this.

"We must stop talki-AHH!"

Their bodies began to shrivel up and their skin turned to black, blending into the shadows as they crawled forward. David's armor fell to the ground, the weight bringing down the shriveled body contained within it.

"They've had enough" David said, ignoring the fact that he seemed to have forgotten what these freaks had planned on doing to him.

"They don't deserve this!" he persisted.

Their eyes turned grey. Timmy crawled forward, his eyes empty, blood dripping from them, and looked up.

"If you let us perish, you will never be remembered. Your story will be lost in time like so many others." He said, just before their jaws fell apart and splattered on the ground.

They made terrible sounds. Their tongues hanging loose, dripping thick red drool. Their flesh began to bubble as they screamed in horror. Tiny maggots began to crawl out of the corners of their eyes. They kept coming.

"Make it stop!" they choked.

The flesh began to melt off their bones. A thick pool of steaming red goo coated the floor of the cave; the rancid smell of death filled the air.

Now let's go.

David stood there, in the dark. Silent and still.

He felt around the cave floor, his hand nearing one of the puddles. He moved his hand, not realizing that it was approaching one of the corpses. He moved it again, his bundle of clothes and gear only three feet in front of him. No. A bit more to the right. Little more. There.

David put his clothes back on. He began to walk away, not realizing that he had left the armor behind. "I know." David said. He began to re-think this decision. "No he didn't" He walked forward.

He heard the sound first. The

roar of fresh water, smelling of new life. The mist teasing his dry skin. His eyes widened as he saw the floor of the cavern disappear over the edge in the distance. He ran toward it. There was time to think.

David leapt forward and dove into the towering pillar of water. He fell, the mist against his skin and the rush of wind against his ear. He continued for what felt like miles until he slammed into the clear pool, resting at the bottom. The orange dust he carried on him was stripped away and it swirled around him in the **clear** water.

He swam through the cave. The air in his lungs running short. He swam further down, the pressure on his body crushing him, the frigid water chilling his core. Through his blurred vision he could see the flooded cave branch off into two separate paths on either side of him, each leading into darkness. He chose left; closer, less narrow. There was no more light. He continued to sink. The kicking of his legs, weightless in the water, became more frantic as the pressure tightened around his lungs, his heart still racing from the fall. In the distance there was light and he could see the clear water again. The ceiling of the cave ended as David swam up into the open surface.

He gasped and coughed as he floated, taking in full, heavy breaths and replenishing himself in the cool air. He swam towards the nearby cave shore and walked up the sloping ramp back to land. He looked up and noticed where the light was coming from. In corner of the high cave ceiling he noticed a small hole, with bright blue beyond it. He lay

down on the black rocky shore and took in the quiet, staring up into the world beyond. He could feel his eyes get heavier the more he stared at that tiny blue speck. For once he felt both alone and safe, a feeling that jolted him back to reality.

He had to force himself away from the oasis, the endless water, the cool shade. He could have just stayed there; no more worrying about the water or the heat, or his brain being removed. He would only need to look after himself. But he thought of home, and reminded himself why he risked it all in the first place.

I said, he thought of home.

David sat there, his eyes closed, his mind drifting back home. He saw his wife. Staring out of her window to the empty spaces outside, her bright blue eyes filled with tears, alone and waiting....

Just get up

“Alright, alright.”

After filling his canteen to the brim with the clear, cool water he walked back through the tunnels. He soon came upon the end of the trail, a large rocky wall leading back up to the surface, now nothing more than another small hole of blue light, but in that moment, it was all there was. He scaled the wall, his canteen knocking against it with every movement upwards. “Don’t look down” he thought, only focusing on the hole getting larger and larger the more he moved. His body ached and strained to find the right position in the dim light, not realizing that there was

a small space just above his right foot and that if he could move his right arm an inch up, he would have something to hold onto. He did just that. “Thanks.”

The blue light was blinding now. Inches away. He gasped in the dry air and felt the heat on his skin once again.

He pulled his body up over the edge and lay in the hot orange sand. He found himself crawling over red rocks, rising up towards the sky above. The goggles and bandana covered his face once more. He began to climb. The peak of the red mountain getting closer. As he reached the top, he saw the desert stretch out before him, his bike and the pit specks in the distance.

He breathed in the warm air and reveled in the new daylight surrounding him.

Man, can you believe those freaks?

He paused, as if something was wrong.

“You know, when you first came to me, I hated it. I hated the way you talked about me, like I wasn’t even worthy of your narration. And I didn’t want any. I didn’t want someone to be with me all the time. Always talking. I like being alone, and now that option is just gone. I also didn’t want some stranger out there would know everything about me and know all of my thoughts, all of my actions. I don’t have any privacy anymore. I can’t have a single thought without the entire world hearing it. But then, one day, you know what I did? I just gave up. I realized a long time ago that we’re just stuck

together, no matter what. And I’m just going to have to deal with that.”

I’m Sorry

“What?”

I’m very sorry. For everything.

“No, no. I’m sorry” he said. “I shouldn’t have said those things.” He said, despite the fact that there was no reason for him to apologize.

What happened back there was my fault. I should have gotten you out of there sooner.

“No you shouldn’t have. I need to do these things by myself.”

He paused. Listening to the wind carry the sand off into the distance.

“You know, it’s funny. For as long as we’ve been together, I don’t think I ever asked you what your name was. I guess I assumed that you didn’t have one.”

“That’s because I don’t”

“Why?”

“I guess we just don’t have them, no gender either.”

“Why don’t you just give yourself a name then?”

I had never thought of that before.

“What do you want to be called?”

....

Torbjorn

“Torbjorn?”

Torbjorn.

“Okay Torbjorn, you up for some more?”

Definitely

He smiled and the brave man began his trek down the steep mountain.

The engine revved. The roar of the bike broke the silence around him. The deep thunder could be heard into the distance and traveled to the peaks of the red mountains far away.

As he rode off, a trail of dust filled the air, still warm. The sky still blue, filled with clouds. As he sped off again into that dust, above the red mountains the bright clouds seemed to take the form of a turtle, hanging in the sky.

JOURNEY

by Sam Davis

Looking back on it, it all seemed so fast.
Every peak I conquer, has been a journey of fear and rewards
Every valley I fall in, has been comforting and sad.
Along the way I have met guides
at my best and at my worst.
My leaders, my enemies, my characters, my friends,
They taught me, they strengthened me, they transported me, and held
me.

There are the things I regret.
There are the things I wish to do again.
There are the things I am proud of.
There's a journey ahead complete with
Pain, and love, with sorrow, and laughter.
I will not sit in silence.
I will stand with significance.
The path is never meant to be clear,
The path has been beaten,
The path has been traveled.
It is time to start the journey.
So full steam ahead!
The journey is waiting!
I begin my new journey today!

SANDWICHED BETWEEN OREOS

by Ian Normile



I woke the same as any other day. As usual, my morning cravings commandeered my emotions, and, as if by rote rehearsal, I retrieved a glass of milk and 4 Oreo cookies from the kitchen. Little did I know that the purity and innocence of my clockwork routine would soon be harrowingly tainted. I casually enjoyed my Oreos, dunking them in milk, waiting for the bubbles to stop seeping from the cookie, and eating them. Love, which quickly arrests the gentle heart, seized me with the Oreos' alluring taste. Love, which pardons no man from loving, took me so strongly with delight in them that it still abandons me not. It was the last cookie; I was going to savor

it. I watched with excitement as the bubbles quelled. Just as I lifted the cookie to enjoy, it broke. I stared helplessly as it sank slowly to the bottom of the cup, out of reach. After a moment of disbelief I held myself and wept. What evil hath been wrought to befall such suffering upon me! Eventually the trauma subsided; I was numb to the pain. I held my face in my hands. Why must good men be afflicted undeservedly? Why should the Judge of this world judge not justly? I remembered how joyfully I had eaten the first three Oreos. There is no greater sorrow than to recall happiness in times of misery.

WHOLE

by Andrew Kafoury

Point nine repeating seeks to be whole,
To be a positive integer.
Point nine repeating has just one goal,
To be paired with point one aflutter.

Whole - Point nine never will on its own.
It is doomed to go on endlessly.
It will advance, but just with a clone,
By duplicating infinitely.

Point nine lives on, but just by itself,
Waiting for point one repeating to
Come by and summate together to shelf
The void, the bond is now tight as glue.

Point one may seem insignificant,
But it is the perfect supplement
For point nine such as that they form one.
Gladly together, they're goal is done.

RAY'S TRIP TO THE PHARMACY

by Isaac Williams

All day long Rays mind was not focused on school. He spent most of the day walking slowly with his headphones in and his hood on hiding his face. Lunch came around and normally he would be excited and eat and talk with everybody. Today, Ray didn't eat. He just sat alone in the corner of the lunchroom and put his head down. For the past week this has been going on. Ray had been a three sport player in the past but quit to take care of his mother. He tried getting a job, but Ray didn't have a ride to work all the time.

"Should I do it?" He asked himself.

Lunch ended and Ray went back to class. As the day went on Ray couldn't even focus. Sitting in his desk with his head down, not listening to the teacher or the other kids, all he thought about was what would happen later on today.

"Ray?...Ray?" his teacher asked.

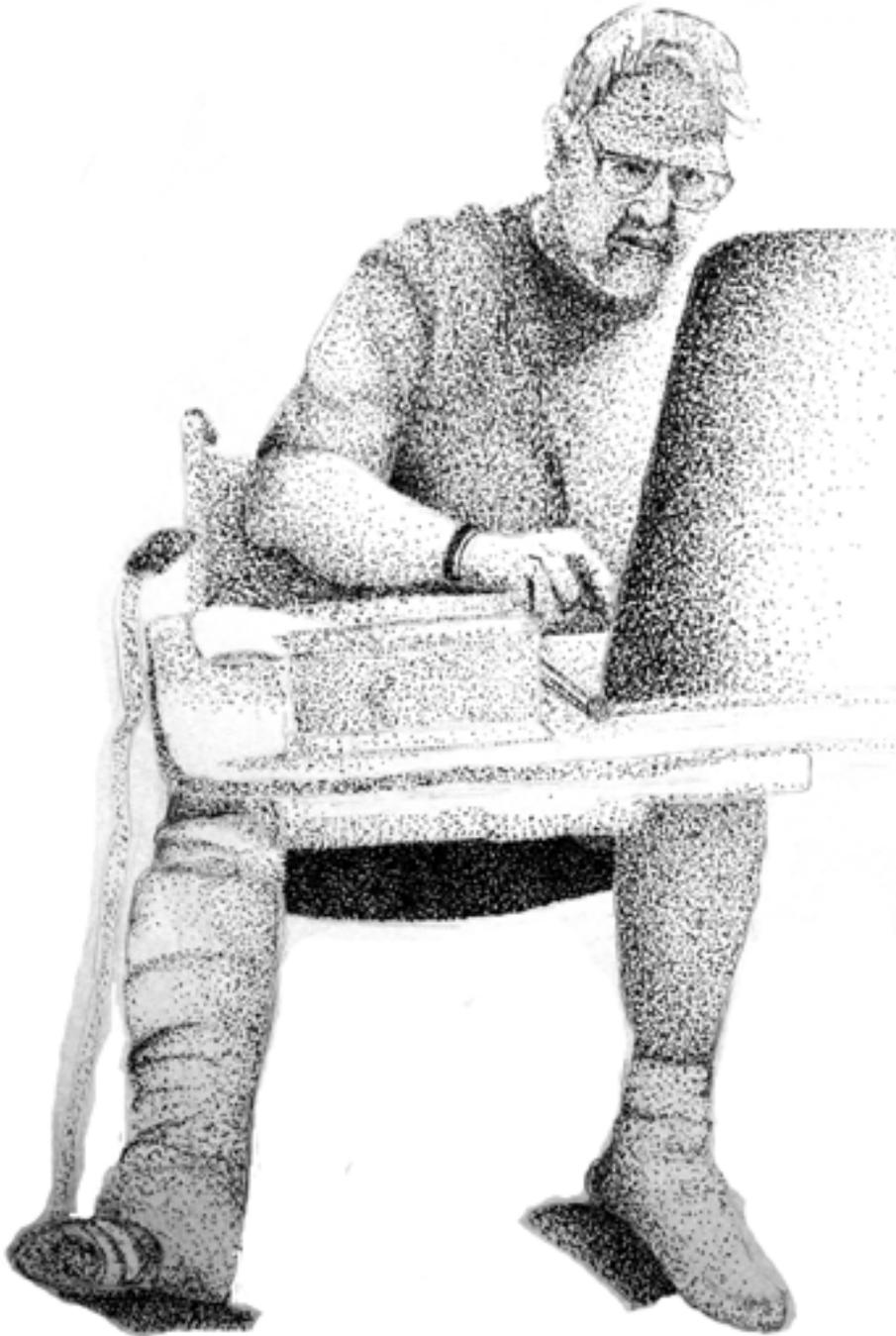
Ray looked up but didn't answer. He put his head back down. The teacher took his earphones out his

ears and told him to pay attention. Today was the day. Five minutes left, school was almost out and Ray was only thinking about one thing. Grabbing his backpack off the tile floor, he stood and walked out of his class quickly, not speaking to anyone.

"Ray get back here now!" his teacher said.

Ray kept walking and left. On his way out of school Ray decided not to take the bus home instead he ran home. He would get there quicker.

Arriving home, Ray went straight to his bedridden mother. She laid there on her back, looking tired and frail. Her room was dim, with streaks of light from the sun peering through the curtains of the window and from the television. On top of her nightstand lay empty old pill bottles, half empty or empty 8oz bottles of water, and peppermint candies. The covers up to her neck and tissues lay next to her. The carpet, dirty in her room, filled with stains. The white



artwork by Alex Trunko

walls looked grey in the darkness. The paint was peeling and even had holes in walls. They lived in a small shotgun house, just the two of them, at the end of the street. They had no family in the whole entire state. The house was red with a white screen door and the paint was faded and chipped in places. The grass was low, with patches of brown spots. The rusty brown wire fence around the front yard was only about 4 feet tall. They had no car, no insurance, and no money. Rays' mother's health had been regressing over three years. The last time she went to the doctor was a year ago. His mother was in dire need of her insulin. Ray knew that this was sold behind the counter of the local pharmacy across from the park, three blocks away. Ray asked his mother about her day and how was she feeling.

His mother responded with a smile, "It was fine, don't worry about me, I'll be ok." "How was yours?"

Lying to his mother to keep her from feeling worse, he said "It was great. One of the best days I ever had. I got A's on both my test."

"Good...good, I'm glad. Now go ahead and start your homework." She said in frail and tired voice.

Walking out his mother's room he kissed her forehead and went into the kitchen. Starving, he looked in the fridge. There was an old spoiled apple, a expired milk carton with only a drop left, one piece of ham, and a can of condensed milk. Ray decided not to eat any of that. Ray then went on his way to get his mother's medicine. Before leaving home he went to his room and reached towards the upper left of his closet, grabbing his black glock 9mm and his black LA Kings hoodie putting them in his backpack. He told his mom that he was going to practice. As he walked to the pharmacy, it got dark, the sky turning from a dark purple to a dark black as if you were outer space. Feelings of nervousness and anxiety kicked in. Ray stopped at a park bench to ponder and think this all through. Staring at the murky puddle of water below the bench he knew that he couldn't afford the medicine. He didn't know how he was going to steal this medicine. He didn't know what would happen if he got arrested. How long would he be in jail or who would watch over his mom? Ray thought about where he would run if the cops chased him and if he would have to shoot anybody. Hopping up from the park bench he said, "fuck it". Pulling his hoodie out, putting it on, and throwing the

hood over his head, then grabbing the gun out his backpack and placing it in the back of his pants, Ray walked from the gloomy park across the street and straight into the store. Making no stops, no signs of hesitation, he walked right up to the pharmacy counter, put his head down and hopped over it. The pharmacists yelled at him as he tried to retrieve medicine for his mother. As they appeared to grab him, Ray pulled his gun firing once into the ceiling.

"Get the fuck off me and don't move! If you do I'll shoot you in the fucking face!"

His heart was racing. Everything was happening so fast. The clerk in the front had heard the gun shot and the screaming and called 911. Ray quickly searched for his mother's medicine. Upon finding it, he put as much as he could in his back pack and wrapping it in a blanket in hope that the glass bottle it was in wouldn't break. While zipping his bag up he heard sirens. He quickly put the medicine in his bag and hopped back over the counter to leave. The police arrived at the pharmacy and ran in.

Ray uncovered his face and ran past the police yelling, "The shooters in there, he's in the back!" Ray walked out trying to act

as if what happened never did, but as he turned to look, the police were running towards him screaming, "You're under arrest!"

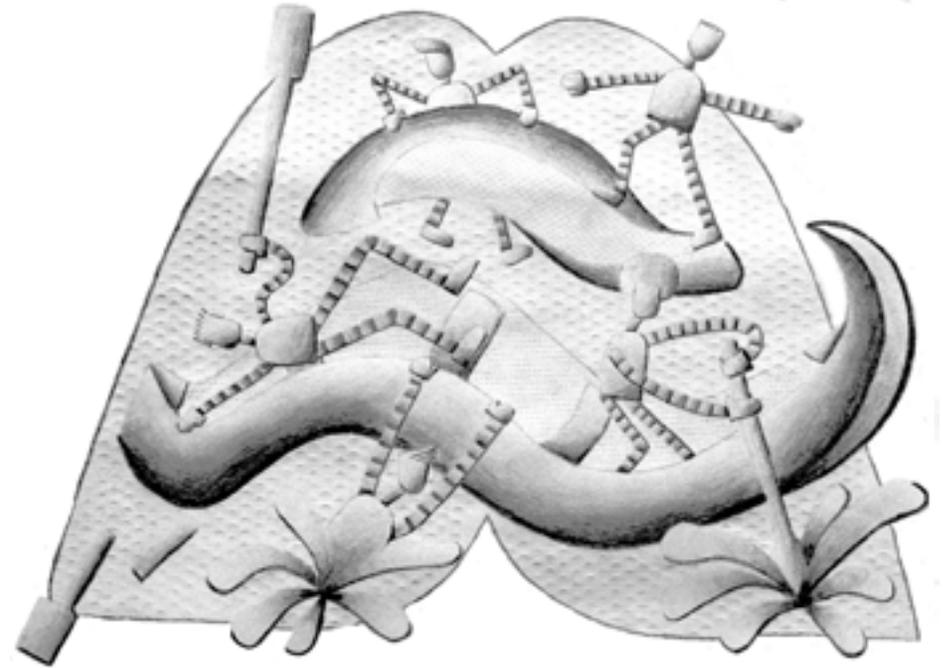
The chase was on; Ray hit the corner hard and ran through a coal-black alley. He looked back and saw that only one officer was chasing him. The officer shot but didn't hit Ray. Ray knocked a few trashcans behind him making the officer slip on some trash. Ray pulled out his gun and fired. He heard the officer scream but didn't know where he hit him. Ray reached the corner of 54th and Amber and ran to the right and through the park, thus losing the officer. Now walking home cautiously Ray noticed his leg had been shot and was bleeding bad. Arriving home Ray cleaned up his leg as best he could so his mother would not see or suspect anything. Ray limped into his mother's room to find her asleep. He placed the insulin on his mother's night stand, kissed her goodnight and limped back out. Ray walked back to his room; lay down with a bit of relief, knowing that his mother was going to be alright for a little while longer. What Ray didn't notice that there was an undercover cop car following him home. Soon 5 police cars pulled up to his house, lights blaring, sirens blaring, and

cops screaming. The neighbors soon came outside to see what all the commotion was. Lying in his bed, seeing those red, white, and blue lights flashing through his window, his heart was pounding. Ray couldn't imagine going to jail and being away from his mother. Ray got up and ran to his mother's room to explain. Ray tried turning on the light, but their light bill wasn't paid. The room was pitch black and the T.V. was off. There was only light coming from the hallway. Shaking his mother's arm, she didn't wake up. Ray screamed at his mother trying to wake her up. She didn't move nor respond. He opened her eyes and they stood open, still she did not move. He placed his hand on her heart and there was no movement. He placed his ear on his chest and he heard no heartbeat. Grabbing his mother's hand he began to cry, feeling how cold it was. His heart sank to his stomach. Ray told his mother he loved her one last time and kissed her forehead. He pulled the covers up to her chest and folded her arms before returning to his room. Ray became angry. It began to rain heavy outside. He grabbed his gun from off of the floor in his room. Thunder struck. Ray looked at for what felt like 10 minutes held it in his hand tightly walked to the front door opened it. The cops told him to drop his

weapon he did not they said it again and still Ray didn't drop it. Standing there dripping wet in all black the officers closed in on him and as they did so he raised the gun slowly to his head. As he did so he heard a voice. It was faint but he knew who it was.

"No, don't"

Ray lowered the gun from his head. His leg gave out and he fell to one knee firing the gun on accident. The cops responded and put six bullets in him. Two in the head and four in his body, his knee, his shoulder, his neck, and chest. Ray was dead. On his front porch he laid with his eyes and mouth open. The gun lay in his hand. There was blood on the porch around him.



artwork by Christian Weishaar

THE DANCE

by John Higgins

“Well, it’s that time of year, Tom: homecoming,” my friend said as we walked to English class.

“I know that, Jason,” I responded, “but who do we ask?”

“Why not ask some of our grade school friends? If they’ve already got dates, maybe they’ll fix us up with some of their new friends.”

“We’ll call them up after school,” I told him.

Shocked, Jason said to me, “CALL them? CALL them! Nobody uses a phone to call people anymore!”

“Well, then, I guess my name is Nobody,” I jibed at my stubby yet thin friend.

“Whatever, dude,” sighed Jason, giving me a look that sufficed to say, “You poor uninformed little soul. Maybe you’ll figure it out someday...”

That night, after finishing my homework, I pulled out my cell phone and called my friend Carla. We had been friends since sixth grade, when she first came to my grade school. I was the first one who bothered to go up to her and

introduce himself. We instantly became friends. Looking back now, I think she might have had a crush on me, but I was too busy crushing on a hopeless crush of my own, namely, Alice Hodges. I pondered this as my phone dialed Carla’s number and it started ringing. After a ring or two, she picked up. “Hi, Tom. What’s up?”

“Uh... hey, Carla,” I stammered, “I’m uh... calling you to ask if you want to, you know, go to homecoming with me?”

“Wow, Tom,” said Carla, “I’m surprised there are still guys out there who call girls to ask them out. I’d love to go with you, but I already have a date. Thanks for asking, though!”

“Okay,” I said, trying to cover up my disappointment before saying “Bye.”

“Talk to you later, Tom!” she said to me as she hung up. I called two more girls that night, but with no luck.

“So, how’d the old-fashioned telephone treat you last night?” jeered Jason as I sat down next to him in

history the next day.

“Not well,” I sighed, “I called up three girls last night, and all of them already had dates... didn’t we just find out about this thing last Friday?”

“Indeed we did, my friend,” said Jason, “but the weekend is an awfully long time when it comes to finding a date to homecoming.”

“How on Earth do you know all this stuff about homecoming, anyway?” I asked him.

“Neither of us has ever been to a dance before!”

“Ah, but I have three older brothers who have,” he said to me.

He thinks he’s an expert just because he’s heard a few stories from his brothers, I thought to myself, *He doesn’t really know anything. Then again, I don’t either...* “Well, I’ll see you after Spanish,” I said to him as I entered my class.

That night I called up three more girls I knew from grade school. Still, I was without luck. Needless to say, I was beginning to get very worried. Suddenly, my cell phone rang. It was Jason. “You’ll never guess what just happened to me, Tom,” he said.

“You got a date, didn’t you?” I

sighed.

“Heck yeah I did!” he shouted. “I texted Carolyn Anderson and she said yes! She was the first girl I asked, too!”

Whoopdy freaking doo, I thought, *I won’t bear the end of this for another week or so.* “Congrats, bro,” I said, “I’m still in need of a date. I’ll ask more girls tomorrow.”

“Okay, see you later,” said Jason as he hung up the phone.

As expected, the fact that Jason had gotten a date first was all Jason would talk about. I was fed up with it within eleven minutes.

“Can we *please* talk about something other than your homecoming date? Some of us don’t have one yet,”

“Ah, I’m not worried about it,” Jason replied, “Besides, next year I’ll be the one who can’t find a date and you’ll be rubbing it in my face that you got one first.”

“Who says I’m not going to find a date?” I shot back, “There’s still time yet,” I told myself more so than Jason, “There’s still time...”

That night I couldn’t think of anybody to call. Well, I could have called Alice, but I assumed she’d already gotten a date. She was

so pretty with her long, flowing blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and perfect face. She'd never paid much attention to me, and as far as I'd heard she had a boyfriend. I decided I wouldn't bother wasting our time. As I was wallowing in my hopelessness and procrastination, my phone rang. It was Alice, to my great surprise. Before I could even say hello, she said, "I can't believe you of all people don't have a homecoming date yet! Why didn't you call me?" she laughed.

"What about that boyfriend of yours? I assumed you were going with him," I answered.

"I broke up with him a while ago, Tom. He was such a jerk. He treated me like one of his trophies, showing me off, bragging, and all that stuff. I hated it," she explained.

"I just assumed that you two were going to be together for months at least," I replied, "I can't believe I never heard about it. Wait a second, how did you know I didn't have a date?"

"Part of why I called you was to tell you how I knew you didn't have a date yet," she said, "Jason's making fun of you all over Twitter for not having a date. He's even gloating about how he was among

the first to get one... It's disgusting."

"I don't care to know what he's said about me, but I do care to know what Carolyn thinks of it," I said. "I just got off the phone with her," said Alice, "She said she was going to tell Jason to stop or else she'd go with someone else. I personally feel she should just dump him now and move on to a better date, but she said she wanted to give him another chance. She must really like him, I guess."

I started to get the sense that that wasn't the only reason she called me up, so I said to her, "There has to be more of a reason you called me up than just to tell me that Jason's being... well, Jason. What is it?"

With a nervous-sounding sigh, she told me, "I want you to take me to homecoming. I have ever since the announcement was made and I broke up with my boyfriend. A bunch of guys who found out I was available asked me, and I turned them all down. I was waiting for you to ask. Finally, I decided it was time to take matters into my own hands and ask you myself. So, do you want to take me or don't you?" I was speechless.

After a few stammers, I managed to get out, "You have no idea how

much I wanted you to say that. I'd be crazy not to say yes to an offer like that!"

She laughed and said, "You know, I've had this huge crush on you since sixth grade. I've tried to date other guys to get over it, but it hasn't ever worked. I still wind up either getting dumped, cheated on, or breaking up with the guy. I've always ended up thinking about you." After some more speechless stammering on my part, I responded, "I've had one on you for just as long. I guess I was too busy crushing on you to realize you were crushing on me."

We both laughed for a good minute before she asked, "So does this make us a couple?"

"If you're okay with that, then so am I," I replied. "Now, I think we both need to quit procrastinating and hit the books. Talk to you later, Alice."

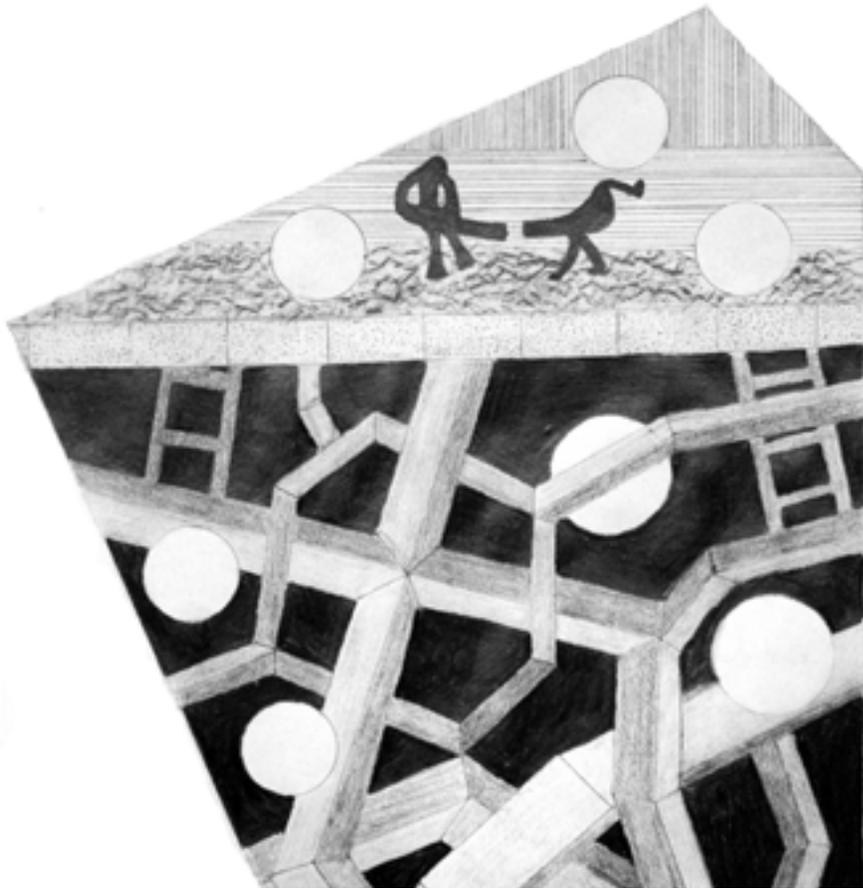
"Okay, bye, Tom!" she said as we hung up.

The next day, Jason refused to believe it when I told him. Even though I said nothing to him about the Twitter incident the night before, he acted as if nothing had happened. I judiciously kept my distance and hung around my other friends more and more

until I barely spoke to Jason anymore.

The weeks went by and, finally, the night of homecoming arrived. My tall and slightly overweight friend Bert, who I've known and been friends with for far longer than I have Jason, his skinny brunette date Mary, who I've known for almost as long as I have Bert, Alice, and I went to dinner together before the dance. It was probably some of the most fun I've ever had. We joked about teachers and laughed at funny and embarrassing stories from grade school. "I wonder how Jason's doing," said Bert. "As far as I know, he's found himself a new group of friends to hang around with," I responded, "but I neither know for sure nor do I care if that's true." We laughed, and sooner than we expected the time came to go to the dance.

We got out of the car at the door and my mom drove away as we walked to the gate. We each got our tickets checked out and approved, and then we headed in. As we expected, nobody was really dancing so much as they were awkwardly talking and trying to find anything to do that wasn't dancing. Nobody wanted to be the first one to go out and dance. Finally a senior guy decided to dance, and within a minute almost



artwork by Jacob Stange

everyone else in the gym joined him. Of course, the first song they played after people started dancing was a slow song. About half of the crowd slunk to the outside corners and wall of the gym, giving the couples room to dance. Neither Alice nor I had the courage to go out there. We didn't know the song.

After the slow song was over, we spotted Jason. He didn't seem very happy. In fact, he looked like he wanted to punch somebody. His eyes met mine, and suddenly I knew who he wanted to punch: me. Before I could get a word out, Alice said, "Have you ever been in a fight before?"

"Ask me in about five minutes and

the answer will be yes, I'm afraid," I managed to shakily laugh.

"I'll be here for you the whole time, Tom," said Alice as she grabbed my hand. By now, Jason had gotten to within earshot.

"You," he growled, "You did this to me, you little..." he rushed forward to try and tackle me, but I dodged left at the last second, sending him careening into the punch bowl.

"What did I do to you, Jason?" I asked, calmly. "YOU made her dump me!" he shouted. "We had just gotten to the dance and she ditched me for another of her guy friends. She said it was because of what I said about you on Twitter. I figured I'd beat you to a bloody pulp and steal your girl. See how YOU like it!"

"He won't be fighting you alone," said Bert as he stepped forward with Mary close behind. I knew I could count on Bert to back me up. He always has, and I suddenly regretted pushing him to the side for Jason. "What you said that night was uncalled for. You deserved exactly what you got." This sent Jason into a rage as he ran forward and punched Bert in the gut, hard. Seizing the opportunity, I tackled Jason from behind to focus his attention away from

a clearly startled Bert and toward me.

"Back off, Jason," I said as I got up, "It's not my fault Carolyn dumped you. It's yours. You know what the fallout would be if you beat me up and then took Alice *against her will* as your date? It'd be much worse than the humiliation you'll get for being dumped, I'm sure. Go home, Jason. Besides, there's always next year." This made Jason madder than ever, and by now most of the people had stopped to watch the action.

Jason reared back for a punch as I thought, *Okay, Arkham City, don't fail me now.* I countered his punch and began deploying Batmanesque tactics and moves to fight my opponent. It worked much better than I thought it would. "Don't make me keep doing this to you, Jason. Go home so we can all forget about this." With a roar he rushed back at me and after a minute or so more sparring I landed the knockout blow. As he lay there on the floor, Alice ran over to me and hugged me. Jason eventually came back around and hobbled away as everyone in the gym cheered. None of his new friends were there to back him up. Nobody looked like they were going to help him limp through the doors until I walked up to him and supported him.

“Why are you doing this?” he whimpered, “After all I’ve done to you, everything I’ve said, still you help me. Why?” “I’m helping you because nobody else is,” I responded. “It’s just what I do.” “Thanks, I guess,” said Jason as he hobbled out to the parking lot to wait for his ride.

After a few more fast songs, the DJ put on what he said was the last slow dance of the night. Alice and I had yet to dance. The song was “Dancing Away with My Heart” by Lady Antebellum. We looked each other in the eyes, grabbed each other’s hands, and danced to the flow of the music. It was the start of many more great times to come.

ODE TO A MUNI BOND

by Mr. Andy Lange

To you on this day of days
I show my love in many ways

I’m grateful that you’re in my life
Your constant nature prevents me strife

Your gifts are full and rich and true
My favorite kind with no taxes due

Not only I, your cause improves
Libraries, domes, and schools you choose

Semi-annual is your gift to me
In particular without AMT

All my days of you I’m fond
I love you always muni bond

THE WATER

by *Suneh Bhakta*

The Water

“Okay boy, it’s time to jump into the water now”, he said while extending his arm and pointed finger toward the bay.

I nod. I follow his arm and see the abyss of water. My feet go forward, mixing in with the plastered wood of the boat. They shrivel and tense up with each step. It is cold. My hands shook. My arms vibrate like a phone with the winds blowing away from the sun. My body stimulates, goose bumps show and my teeth chatter. I look down. The plastered wood of the deck blurs. It is the water that’s quality. The small crashes of the blue mystics interact with each other; no two are the same. They hide what lies below in the deep and dark, I can only assume. The water picks up. The boat rises up and crashes down. It surprised my lungs. I gasp out my chest for no one’s help. I grasp for the metal rod of the roof’s support, let alone mine. The boat gently lifts up again, my shriveled hands almost slip off the bar.

Huuh. My lungs rose and let out a scream. I trip on myself a few steps backwards. No one seemed to notice. I am more closer to the water I ever was. I see the grains of sand and the remainders of rock mix together in the concoction of the dense water. I could’ve fallen. I wrap both my hands around the other metal rod, allowing my lungs to catch up to me. My hands shake. I slap my chest, only welcomed by bare skin. *Ugh.* They would only pack two life jackets. They would have an elderly couple call first dibs.

“Hey Suneh, you gonna jump?”

I follow the source of the noise. I look shimmy around the metal rod to see who it is. I see his face. It is Shaan. Half of his body disappears to the abyss below. He rocks subtly up and down, dancing with the waves.

“You going to jump yet?” I paused trying to think. I exhale to give off the first thing off my mind.

“Yeah...Just...Just give me a



Angelo Marcallini

minute.”

He looks at me with squinted eyes and swims away to the others. Geez, he could at least give me time. Well...that’s what I get for having a cousin who lives on a freaking island. I look down at the water again, half hung over. The waves still dance. Quiet waves mix in with each other, leaving a small window of blue glass. It is clear. I look through it. I see a dark rock formation, complex with cracks and glistening plants that reflect the sunlight.

My brain wanders off. If I do jump, will I sink to the bottom? Will I be lost in the aquatic space floor? Would my lungs will give way, and will I drown? In the end, I will lose all life slowly and surely with the water’s power. I will die. My body retreats and proceeds alongside the deck of the boat. I am just going to sit and wait till everyone’s done. It’s just water. It can wait. I shuffle along, compensating the boats rocking, so I don’t lose balance. I see the leather cushioned seat.

“This seems comfortable enough.”

I shuffle. I can’t wait to finally sit down. Wind blows aside my body. My nose stimulates. It is

cold. My nose turns to a subzero popsicle. The body ahead of me turns. His red Hawaiian shirt drags my eyes to his face. I see the whites of his eyes look upon me.

“Jump BOY, jump!”

He stomps his feet, showing his whites with a smile. He’s going to push me off. My feet shake and retreat. My chest hardens and my breath stiffens.

“No, no, no, that won’t be necessary.”

“Son, one day you will have to JUMP. Better you make it today.”

My legs become scared and rush to the nearest corner of the deck. He approaches with raised hands, and the less I have room to shimmy. I almost slip off. I turn around to see the waking water, still clashing and dancing. The man had raised his hands to release the anchor down.

“Aw, what the hell.”

I take a deep breath and lung myself in the air. I jump.

My legs kick so hard, I think I shook the boat. Things slow down. I take flight through the air. Wind brushes against

my hair and around the ridges of my toes. My arms flail above my head. I look down to the blue abyss below. I see the continuing forming cracks and waves; they hid the space below. I close my eyes. Things go dark. I can only feel. I feel the air whizzing up past my toes and through my face. It is cold. I feel my feet enter the surface of the water. It is warm. The water slowly consumes me, one percentage of my body at a time. My head because warm. I’m no longer cold. Things are still dark. I feel my body missile down the water. I feel all the rocks and sand brush against me to what seems like an eternity. I wonder how far down I’ve become. I feel the rush of bubbles and water catch up to me. I think that I’ve slowed down.

I open my eyes. They open to a blur of blue and dark spots. I realize my body had come to a dying halt. My body floats in the vacuum of ocean. I look above to see the mirrored version of what I saw on the boat, waves clashing and waving at their own pace in time. I see the sun above also; as I would on land but this time it feels like I’m in another world, something that’s hidden. I hadn’t sunk in too much. Bubbles sizzle on my arms

like a hot skillet. Like a flag, my limbs freely go where the water takes. I feel the molecules tightly wrap my body like a blanket. Almost like Christmas morning with mom and dad, aunts and uncles...everyone. So tightly compact, yet...so free. I can’t see much. I left my glasses back at the hotel. It’s just a blur of blue and darker pigmentations of rock and many sights to see. But my body becomes warmer, maybe a bit too warm. The watery blanket becomes too tight. My lungs call out. My nose exhales the last of what it has, exerting bubbles out into space. I need to leave this place.

I jerk my arms and legs as much as I can. The blanket is now ruined. I try to reach for the sun, but it’s no use. I stay at the same place, flying down into the abyss. The water restricts my arms in its own sense of physics. My chest becomes worried. I thrash everything I have to get the slightest altitude, but I still continuously sink. I contort my body to lie down on the invisible surface. I just look at the sun become dimmer and dimmer. It is cold. Things go dark. My mouth urges to open up, but I can’t let that happen; the temptation kills me. My body aches and I become

tired with all the thrashing. My lungs angrily want their air. It's no use. I'm gone.

The blanket becomes existent once again. It wraps around my body. A force of water arches my back forward and lifts me. Bubbles of tiny hands form around my limbs and ribs and push me up. Like a helicopter lift, my mass is slowly lifted with ease. The bubbled hands massage my body, bringing it back to life. The crevasses and dancing of the water surface becomes visible again. I see the sun and I feel its new heat. The bubbles and forces let go of me. They pop and tickle my back goodbye. It's time. It's my end of the bargain.

I lift my hands one last time in this space. I remember the amateur lessons I learned years ago. Don't thrash, but dance. I calmly thread my arms across the water and paddle my legs. I gain a few inches. Like a soccer player, I head-butt whatever water I have left. I can feel the wind brush past my scalp on the other side. I contract my body once again. With one last heave.

Huuuuughh.

