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Matthew Obbink*
Since 1934, Sketch has published the creative works of Iowa State University students, making it one of the longest-running campus literary magazines in the country.

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SKETCH
206 Ross Hall
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For 80 years, Sketch magazine has been bringing artists and readers together in Ames and across the Iowa State campus. Whether students are writing, drawing, designing or snapping photographs, their work has always been able to find a published home here in Sketch. But why do artists want to create, want to publish?

Because creation is power. Those who write and publish, give themselves a voice. They capture their experiences, their dreams, anything that comes out of their imagination, and all those possibilities can be shared with anyone. The great American poet, Adrienne Rich wrote, “For writing is renaming.” Artists can recreate and reclaim the world as their own with each brush stroke, every time their pens touch the paper or the shutter clicks on their camera. And through their creation, artists connect.

In this issue, there are stories of loss and of second chances, of interesting characters and of unexpected acts. There are images of power and of adventure. There are poems about the everyday, made to be extraordinary. Most importantly, there are artists’ creations ready to be connected to readers and viewers. So go forward from here, open to a connection with creation.

Brenda Blackhawk
Undergraduate Editor
Zachary Eldridge // A senior majoring in English with a minor in Technical Communications. He hopes to work in publishing in order to help talented authors take their books from first drafts to store shelves.

Daniel Gill // White hair clung to his moist forehead. My eyes traveled down his bulbous figure, and onto its endless crevices with bright peaks lit by the moonlight. I lapped and slurped clear tequila seeping from his aged navel as he whispered, 'feel the Bern.'

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The Great Joe Maucker

By: Andy Fish

In a night sky, cloudless yet filled with a fine haze, the god, Jupiter, shines with an unparalleled ferocity a few degrees shy of the zenith; his image consumes the eye, so there may as well be no lesser stars. The haze of the sky slinks down and creeps through narrow alleyways to make the air thick and sticky.

Rats perform grand jeté from dumpster to dumpster like a filthy dance troupe. Their padded feet make no sound as they stick the landing and pirouette. They dance to the music of distant festivities, people cheering their congratulations to the evening’s champion while cameras flash. Those grimy ballerinas danced, feasted on trash, procreated, and lived their whole tiny, dirty little lives far from anything worth celebrating. It is here, where the vermin danced, that Joe Maucker was found.

He sat in the cold dark in need of medical attention. He looked closely at his battered hands; he looked at all the yellows, pinks, purples, reds, greens, and blues that composed the true color of his palm. He examined the idea of himself not being one color, black, but rather being composed of a great number of colors. And he wondered in the same way if he could be more than a boxer because after tonight, he would have to be.

For weeks the papers called the fight a David and Goliath story. A battle between the agile young Terrance Lee-Toni and the Great Joe Maucker.

“They’re sayin’ I’m Goliath, Chucky! Goliath was the loser, dammit!” he had roared at his manager and coach.

“So prove’em wrong, Maucka!” Chucky quipped. The stout and balding New York native had managed and coached the boxer since his beginning. He had seen Joe Maucker through his days of glory with glee, but in the twilight of the boxer’s career Chucky stood by him begrudgingly.

“Prove’em wrong!” he said again, but in a way he was really saying “Prove me wrong!”

Joe Maucker stepped into the ring, on the night of the fight, as a hive of buzzing confidence, ready to prove that he would not succumb to the same fate as Goliath of Gath. But the stadium’s lights shone bright and hot like the sun over the Valley of Elah, and the crowd roared like Israelites and Philistines gathered to watch the fight. For their Gods, their countries, and their champions, they cheered.

All through the first round, Joe lay into his opponent, Terrance Lee-Toni, but no matter how many hits he landed or how heavy they were, the sprite little rising-star from Harlem would not be phased. The bell rang, ending Round One, and the contenders went to their corners.

Joe’s shoulders rose and fell with each breath like monolithic waves of the not-so-Pacific Ocean. He nursed at a water bottle, but spit most of it out. It tasted of blood and sweat.

Chucky hissed encouragement and criticism in his ear just loud enough to be heard over the crowd.

“Kill him, Joel!” the bell said, and Joe Maucker rose to fight like a bear emerging from its cave, slow and lumbering, but also fierce.

Terrance Lee-Toni shot from his corner like a bullet from a hunting rifle. With a right hook to the temple, the bullet hit its mark and staggered the bear. In the seconds that the bear had to recover it was berated by the bullet’s signature combo: right jab, right jab, right jab, left hook, right upper cut, left upper cut.

Joe Maucker fell. His body shaped to the mold of the floor, and with his ear to the floor, he could hear the vibrations of the spectators interrupted by the bounding of Terrance Lee-Toni.

“One! Two! Three!” the referee counted into a microphone, “Four! Five!”

Joe Maucker got on his feet, shook himself off, and raised his gloves. “Fight!”

Joe threw a heavy right cross, but Terrance bobbed to the inside, where he hit Joe with a one-two combo. Joe reeled back, but returned with a mighty left hook. Terrance Lee-Toni dipped below the punch, and hit Joe with a rip to the gut before popping to deliver a left cross between Joe Maucker’s eyes.

The punch landed like stone that would forever be lodged in his skull. Joe “Goliath” Maucker of Queens fell to his knees and then on his face.

“One!” the referee yelled, “Two! Three!”

“C’mon Maucker! You sonofabitch! Get up, damn you! Get up!” Chucky cried from outside the ring.
“Four! Five! Six!”

“To-Ni! To-Ni! To-Ni!” the crowd chanted.

“Get up, right now!”

“Seven!”

“GET UP!”

“Eight!”

“To-Ni! To-Ni!”

“Nine!”

“Damn you, Joe Maucker! Damn you! Get! Up!”

“Ten!”

Ding ding ding ding ding!

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Boys and Girls! The champion! Terrance Leeee-Toni!!!!” the master of ceremonies exclaimed, running over to Terrance, and raising his hand into the air.

What rang the loudest in Joe Maucker’s ears was not Lee-Toni’s victory speech over the speakers, or the crowd cheering, or Chucky screaming profanities. What rang the loudest in Joe Maucker’s ears, as he lay there on the floor breathing heavy, was the voices of Shame and Defeat taunting him.

Some employee’s of the arena came out, and helped the Once-Great Joe Maucker to his feet and to the locker room. He wallowed there alone, reliving the fight in his mind, until Chucky barged in red-faced.

‘Tm done! Hear me! Done! That was the last fight I’m watching you lose! You are finished! But I’m not lettin’ you take me down with you! D’you hear? I jus’got an offa! You know that! I jus’got an offa from Mike Allegro, Lee-Toni’s managa, to be Lee-Toni’s defensive and conditioning coach with the promise to move up when Allegro retires. How about that, eh? I am takin’ it! See ya never, Maucka!” And like that, he left the boxer’s life forever.

So, bleeding and blind, Joe stumbled out the side door into the alley. Out of breath, he took a seat. He looked at all the colors of his hands. He looked at the bruises and cuts of his past. He looked up at the haze and darkness of his future. He saw, then, almost directly overhead, a something shining that he could not identify, and he gazed at it in wonder until it no longer held any meaning.
“I love this collection!” Joe Maucker announced on the set of an infomercial, thirty years after his fight with Terrance Lee-Toni.

“It has all the classic action movies of the 70’s and 80’s! You will not find a more complete set anywhere else!”

“That’s right, Joe!” the young infomercial personality said, “and if you call the number on your screen it can be yours for only three easy payments of nineteen ninety-nine! And! If you call in the next five minutes we will give you free shipping and handling! That’s right! Call right now and you will get shipping and handling, absolutely free! Say Joe? Aren’t there some of your movies in this collection?”

“You’re absolutely right, Todd. There is Whitesnake, Perfect Smoke, The Driver, and many more!”

For three years after the fight, Joe lived a life of isolation, with only the wretched company of depression, but in the third year he took a call to guest star on a hit television cop drama. The role was a success, and it propelled him into a career of playing tough guys, action heroes, and, on occasion, brutish villains.

His popularity as an actor waxed and waned conveniently with his interest in being an actor, and having amassed a fortune between boxing and acting he was set. But for fun, he decided to do an infomercial for an overpriced DVD compilation boxset.

“Joe Maucker!” a voice boomed in the studio after the filming.

Joe saw man in a slick suit walking toward him.

“It is a real honor to have you here, sir!” the man said with a smile, shaking Joe’s hand.

“I’m sorry, but do I know you?” Joe asked.

“Not really. We met once, but I wouldn’t expect you to recognize me. I was ten, and bawling my eyes out.”

“Wait a minute,” Joe said slowly, looking into the man’s stormy eyes, “you’re the kid, from after the fight?”

“The name is Michael Atkinson.”

“This is crazy. What are you doing here?” Joe said, bewildered.

“I own the studio, Mr. Maucker.” Atkinson said.

“Well, I’ll be.”

“I saw that you were filming here today. I just wanted to pop in and say that I was just as big of a fan of you on the screen as in the ring. My son and I watch your movies together from time to time. He really enjoys them as well.”

“You have got a boy of your own? Make me feel older, why don’t you? Say, how’s your old man?”

“He passed a year ago, Mr. Maucker.”

“Oh...I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright. He was good man, and it was hard to lose him. But, Mr. Maucker, you are not the only one who can get back up.” Atkinson smiled, softly.

“He was a good man.” Joe nodded, “Listen, Atkinson, I have to go. I’ll have my people get in touch with your people and see about getting you and your boy some signed DVD’s and memorabilia from the old days.”

“He’d love that. Thank you, Mr. Maucker.” They shook hands, and parted ways.

Joe Maucker walked measured steps out of the studio. His hat was tilted down slightly. His coat was warm over his shoulder until he tossed it into the passenger seat of his Lamborghini. He pulled out of the studio’s parking lot and drove home.

That night, as he laid in his king bed, dressed in his silk pajamas, he dreamt of a dark alley where rats performed The Rite of Spring. A lone saxophone played what it could of the music, and the only lighting was that of Jupiter, high in the sky. He watched the rats dance until he saw, by the light of the distant planet, that their stage was his beaten and bloodied body. He got up.

**Andy Fish** is a Senior at Iowa State majoring in History Education.
As we begin this story—and what a brilliant choice you’ve made in choosing to read it, I might add—I feel it only right to give you the utmost assuredness that you are in good, well-tested hands. I come from a long line of story narrators, my father and his father before him practicing the trade since time immemorial. In the ancient era, my ancestors were among the first to convey stories in the past tense, winning nearly unanimous acclaim for their efforts. Their only critics were some of the older listeners, who complained that this was not necessary and was intended to be personally hurtful, which it was.

My humble hope is that this story will be as successful for me as Shakespeare was for him. With a name like “Lux”, we’re already off to a strong start. For any reader that does not speak Google Translate, “Lux” is Latin for “Light”, the name serving as a metaphor for the love interest in the story becoming a light amidst the main character’s dark and troubled romantic past. I contend this strikes the perfect balance between unoriginality and pretentiousness that so many young adults can passionately identify with and throw their money at these days. Within the first few chapters you’ll find the love interest’s name of Anna Lumiere as a ridiculously obvious hint towards the aforementioned metaphor, but the author will spend a handful of chapters in the middle of the novel desperately trying to make you believe it was a red-herring as the two lovebirds find themselves broken up thanks to an unrealistically dramatic and annoyingly avoidable conflict between them. Then, right before the climax, Anna returns to John, the protagonist’s life—which we all knew she would but hoped she wouldn’t—confirming that the story really is as pointless and conventional as it first seemed. The author will have you believe it was more about the journey than the destination, but this is not The Hobbit, and this journey will leave you feeling less like you went on a literary adventure and more like you went on a road trip across Nebraska; numb, exhausted, and generally more morose than when you began.

Back to the protagonist, John, though. Don’t expect any real growth or development from him over the course of the novel, dear reader. I say this only so the seeds of disappointment are not sewn and harvested as you read. It is painfully obvious that John is a foil, and a thin one, for the author himself. Just look at the name “John” compared to the author’s name, “Shawn”. They both have the same, well, frankly I don’t know the word for it, but they both have that thing with the “on” sound. Furthermore, John, who is also a novelist by trade, is presented as a highly charming, sophisticated, and attractive bachelor all throughout the story. The only question I’m left with is whether the author believes he is projecting his own persona on the character or if this is some sort
of sick fetish to write fantasy relationships for himself. Between the two, I find myself hoping for the latter, for then the author would at least be showing some traces of imagination within this 352 page abyss of dull dialogue and tired tropes. In any case, please turn the page to Chapter 1 so we can begin.

**Shawn Robinson** is a Sophomore in English Education. He started writing when he was nine. Ever since, he has been carrying some notebook or another with numbered pages and bad handwriting everywhere he goes. He hopes to someday sell one of those notebooks to you in a Barnes and Noble.
The Bleeding Man

BY: Rachel Reyes

Staring at the frozen December snowscape outside my bedroom window, I trace spirals on the frosted glass with my fingernail. Shadows bleed slowly across the walls like spilled ink as I sit cross-legged on my bed, talking to David on the phone.

“What day is it?” David says to me, his voice small and far away. On his side of the line, I hear a creaking mattress, and I picture him barefoot on his bed in flannel pajamas. “Wednesday?”

I reach for my sketchbook on my nightstand and open it to a new page, glancing at the clock. “Thursday. No, wait, it’s Friday now - two a.m.” I pick up my pencil and idly sketch a few snowflakes. I yawn. “We’ve been on the phone for two hours. We should really go to sleep.”

“Well, yeah. It’s pretty late.”

But besides that, I was sensing a certain tension throughout our conversation that had become all too familiar in the past few months. It was a strange disconnect between us - lately, the silences in our conversations had been growing longer, more impatient. Our frequent late-night phone calls now felt like stale habit. It sounds bad, but I want to hang up just so that I don’t have to deal with this awkward rift between us.

But I try to brush those thoughts away. There’s nothing wrong with us, I tell myself. “It’s late,” I repeat. “I don’t want to disturb my parents.”

“It’s two a.m. - I guarantee your parents are dead asleep right now,” says David. “They’re not going to hear you, if you’re quiet enough.” A pause. Then, his voice goes flat. “They probably don’t even care.”

There’s something dark and shriveled about that sudden low whisper. I drop my sketchbook on my bed. There’s no way I’m hanging up now. “Something’s...going on.” I tread carefully, like I’m trying to walk through a forest of dead leaves without making a sound. David’s hiding something from me - he has been doing so a lot lately - I can feel it. “Is...everything okay?”

“Nothing’s going on. I’m fine,” he snaps. A sigh. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Are you sure?” I plead, my voice rising an octave. “You don’t sound like it.”

“I told you. Everything’s going to be fine.”

My mind leaps back to last July. David was acting just like this... Suddenly, I know exactly what he means.

Panic rises like a tide in my throat. “David, you don’t mean...”

“- Of course I do. I think about it all the damn time. I wouldn’t do it if there was any other option.” His voice is strangled, gripped by a dark current. I picture him, swallowed by the darker shadows of his bedroom. Alone. Running his fingers over the scars on his arms.

“Please don’t talk like this,” I beg. “Listen to me. It’s the middle of the night. You’re...”

“- I’m done, okay? I feel nothing. It’s hopeless.”

I suck in shaking breaths, but the air is poisoned with David’s words and they seize me, freeze my limbs, my head, my jaw in their places, and my tongue is pulling at a response with all its might, but the words are heavy like anvils, stuck in the bottom of my throat.

“God, David, you’re scaring me,” I sputter. “You don’t have to do this, okay? I’m here for you. You’re my best friend - I’m here for you, I swear - you just can’t - “

David sighs, a lonely wind-chime sound. “You’re my best friend, Sami... but you don’t understand.”

“No!”

“Good-bye, Sami.”

He hangs up before I can say anything else, and the sudden dial tone rings in my ear. For a moment, I sit absolutely frozen on my bed, but then I realize what I have to do.

“David, hold on. I’m coming over,” I mutter. I will not let my best friend kill himself. I won’t. I’ll go to his house and talk to him or something - so what if things have been awkward between us lately? I care about him too much to ignore him like this.
David may deny it now, but he needs me to talk him out of this. I know him just as well as he knows himself. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. I’ll convince him that he doesn’t have to make this choice – I have to.

I jump out of bed and stuff my feet into my slippers – no time for socks. I grab my keys on my way out, slamming doors and stomping on the hardwood as I leave. I don’t care one bit about the noise – my parents can sleep tomorrow.

It’s snowing out. I sprint through the fresh powder to the garage and climb into my car, a 1978 Chevy Impala with a spotty paint job and unpredictable engine. Thankfully, I rev it up without any trouble, and I pull out of the driveway. But then I realize I forgot to put on a coat. Goddammit. Oh well. Shivering, I crank the heat to full blast and wrap myself in a sweatshirt lying in the passenger seat. David’s sweatshirt. I’m still freezing, but that doesn’t matter right now. Nothing matters except saving David’s life.

As I skid through the icy maze of suburban streets, I press harder and harder on the gas pedal. Urgency is chasing me. Streetlights flash by like glowing yellow comets, but I’m sailing faster. I lean forward on the steering wheel and grit my teeth. I’ll make it - I’ll be fine - I’ll be fine.

Eyes on the road. Eyes on the road. Left on Sycamore, right on Main. One more mile, then turn left on Virginia. Soon I’m driving out of downtown and crossing through farmland. The road becomes gravel, and the lights of the distant slumbering city soon fade away.

The cloud-covered night sky presses on me, the only car on the road for miles. Faster, I think. Faster. Every second that passes could be David’s last. Gulping back a sob, I accelerate.

A figure darts in front of me.

WHAM!

I hurtle forward on the steering wheel. The car spins on the icy gravel, skidding one, two, three times before stopping. The air bag bursts in my face. Sudden stars explode in my mind and whirl out of control, diamonds spinning in the blackness. For a moment, I am blinded.

Then at once, everything is still.


Yet I sense a strange atmosphere – something’s not right, I can feel it. It’s sort of like I’m surrounded by a dreamlike haze, and every sound carries a slight echo. I wonder if I’m actually dreaming, or if something wacky happened when I hit my head. That would explain why I’m unhurt. But the car, my body, and my surroundings feel real to me. So where am I, actually? I don’t know what’s going on. So I stay put in the drivers’ seat, wondering what to do next.

And then, out of the silence, I hear a rattling moan.

My heart throttles in my chest. I peer out the window. What was that?

Another moan, louder this time.

I whip my head towards the noise, but I don’t get out of the car. Who – or what – could it be? Do I get out? Do I stay inside? But what if it’s a person? Oh, God - did I hit an actual person with my car? What if I killed them?

A lone gust of wind howls through the silence, rolling over snow-covered fields.

A voice in the darkness. “Help... me...”

I do not want to get out. No way. I hear the moans, the rattling wind. I see the shadows, the shaking trees on the side of the road, dancing like skeletons. But against my better judgment, I climb out of the car. As I slam the door shut, I peer around the frozen landscape – I don’t see anything, at first.

Then I step over to the other side of the car, spun out in the middle of the road. The right side is dented, and the front bumper is missing, yet the headlights shine into the oblivion, facing the direction I came from, the only light for miles. I take a few more steps, each one slower and slower, as if bogged by molasses. Dread creeps up my chest.

Suddenly I see him. Not five feet from the car is a man sprawled face-up on the snow-covered shoulder of the road, wearing a gray hoodie and sweatpants. Thrown across his stomach lays a jagged piece of metal – my bumper? Then I see the blood, spilling from his chest and onto the ground. The snow beneath him is turning red...

Bile rises in my throat, but I press my hand to my mouth and force myself to step closer. Wind pounds the man’s weathered face. His eyes are closed. He’s not moving. Is he alive? Slowly, fighting the urge to vomit, I bend down towards him. A soft icy breath escapes from his parted mouth.

He’s alive. But for how long? I begin to feel dizzy. “Oh my God,” I moan, “Oh
God, oh God, oh God.” I’m a broken windup toy, stuck on one mechanical phrase.

Then I think of David.

What the hell should I do? My throat begins to constrict as I whip my head in a frenzy towards the bleeding man. Then the road to David’s house. Then back again. David’s in danger of ending his life and the man beside me is going to bleed to death, or freeze, or both. What now? Where do I go?

Do I stay with the bleeding man? I can’t just drive off and abandon him, not in the freezing December night. Not on the side of the road. Not when the falling snow buries his helpless body and the snow underneath him is turning red. Not when I was the one who hit him with my car. Not when he’s dying right in front of me.

But David needs me. I can’t leave him. Not after his terrifying words on the phone. Not when he teetering on the cliff of hopelessness. Not when we’ve been best friends for seven years. Not when I’ve always been there for him and known how to help him.

Time is dwindling for both of them. I need to make a decision, fast. But my mind is shrieking at me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing that I need to choose who I will save. The most terrible decision of my entire life. I can’t save both. This much I know.

But if I don’t move, I won’t save either of them.

Don’t just stand there, I shout to myself. You need to do something!

Shivering, I touch my numb cheeks with numb fingers. Daggers of wind roll through the night, piercing through the thin cotton of David’s sweatshirt and whipping my tangled hair in all directions. But I know that the bleeding man feels much worse. I crouch down next to him and take a closer look at his face: close-cropped black hair, patchy gray stubble. Sagging, wrinkled face, a crisscross of frown lines. He’s about the same age as my father.

He looks familiar. But I just can’t figure out where I’ve seen him before, if I’ve even seen him at all.

With a hesitant hand I reach out and touch his neck. A pulse is there, barely beating. But who knows how long he will hold on?

He stirs. I jump back.

“Who’s this?” he mumbles through pale lips.


He lifts his head, sees his wound, and his eyes fly open. “Fucking hell, Sami,” he coughs, spraying blood on his chest. “Where am I? What the hell happened?”

“You...were in an accident,” I manage. I look away with guilt. “Car accident.”

His sharp blue eyes, as cold as the icy landscape, dart around our surroundings. He takes in the snowy cornfields in the distance, the icy gravel road, my car spun out in the middle of it, the spiraling tire tracks in the frost. He tries to sit up, but I stick out my arm and hold down his shoulder. “Don’t move!” I command.

Oh, God, what else can I do? My thoughts are spinning, shrieking as I whip my gaze around the landscape, searching for something, anything, that could possibly help this man. Then, I stuff my hands in the pockets of David’s sweatshirt and my fingers curl around my phone. Of course - why the hell didn’t I think of that?

I’m calling for help,” I tell the man. He closes his eyes and groans.

I push myself up off the ground and stand on shaking legs. I blow on my fingers to try to warm them up, then swipe them across the foggy phone screen. How could I forget to call an ambulance? That should have been the first thing I did. Call an ambulance. Okay. I can do this.

Wait a minute. If I call for help, the paramedics can help this bleeding man, and then I can still drive to David’s house and save him. My car’s not too damaged, just a few dents on the bumper. This will work. If I can somehow stuff the air bag back into the steering wheel, I can...

The bleeding man groans again. Focus. Focus. I begin to pace back and forth beside him, my veins rocketing with adrenaline. I take a deep breath and press nine-one-one on the keypad.

Suddenly, the man rolls over on his back and throws his arm in front of my ankle. It knocks me off-balance. The phone slips from my hand. It tumbles into the frosty air, rotating, rotating, rotating, before landing in a puddle of freezing slush.

“No!”

With a loud cry, I collapse to the ground. I don’t care that the snow, cold and wet, soaks through my clothes and drenches my skin. Tears freeze on my cheeks as I gaze off to where the gravel road meets the horizon. Off in that distance is David’s house, miles away. Next to me is the bleeding man, whose skin is fading to pale gray. “No, no, no!” I sob, over and over again.
No phone. A spun-out car, whose headlights shine facing the way I came. Just me and the bleeding man. Silent snow falling. No one, absolutely no one, can save us. I am completely helpless. I am completely alone.

“Oh, please,” wheezes a voice behind me, gravelly and rough. “What the hell do you have to bitch about?”

I jump. Then slowly, I pivot to face the bleeding man. “Excuse me?”

He twists his mouth into what looks like a sneer. Or a grimace of pain - I can't tell. With a gaze more chilling than the wind, his frigid blue eyes pierce my own. “You heard me,” he tries to shrug. “But go on, tell me what problems you have right now that are so much worse than mine!”

His words are harsh and grating. I take a step back, and my slippered feet sink into a patch of snow. “Oh, well, I - I don't know,” I stutter. “Maybe it's just a little traumatizing that I hit an actual person with my car. Maybe I'm a little upset that you could, I don't know, die! And there's no way to call for help and - and - “ I break off, and soon my throat is choked with sobs.

The man, to my shock, begins to laugh. “Look,” he says, as if I've called him by name. “Poor Sami, with a few dents in her car. I feel so terrible for you - you're cold. You're alone. And worst of all, your phone is dead.”

“Look,” I glance away, “Can you stop - “

“- You can't even look at me now - can't stand the sight of blood, I see. How inconvenient for you. News flash: you may be watching me suffer but I'm the one who's actually bleeding to death. I'm so sorry that my problems are such a burden to you. God.”

I watch the snow fall in the yellow beam of the car's headlights, ghostly silent. I don't turn around. He's right, though - compared to him, I have no real problems. “I'm sorry,” I mumble. “I'm just a little freaked out.”

The man snorts. “A little?”

I shake my head. “Fine. More than that. But I'm better now, I swear.” And it's true. The initial shock is over. My heartbeat slows its tempo. I take a deep breath. My surroundings are settling to stillness - the car, the trees, the road. The bleeding man. I force myself to crouch down next to him. “I'm sorry for hitting you with my car,” I offer. Pathetic, I know.

“Don't be,” he replies. “I always knew I was fucked, somehow.” His chest wound is frothing, and hissing snakishly with each breath he takes. I smell alcohol on his breath, and notice a flask-shaped bulge in his pocket.

I slide my gaze over to his torso - did my car bumper slice his heart, pierce his lung? How is he still alive? How is he not screaming in pain? I know I would be. I touch my own hand to my chest, in the same spot where the man is wounded.

“How are you so calm right now?” I ask. His words are so casual, yet so morbid. I don't like it. There's something about him, too, something that's not right. “Who even are you? Whitehill's a small town. I know everyone here. I don't know you, not even your name.”

He shakes his head. “Not important.”

“What the hell does that mean, not important? And what am I even supposed to think of you? You look like you're homeless. And you're drunk!” I shout, slamming my palm on the icy ground. “And what are you even doing, wandering out on the road at two a.m.?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Suddenly it all floods back- David's voice on the phone, his fatal words. The entire reason I was driving in the first place. Pulling the hood of David's sweatshirt over my head, I try to think of how much time has passed since then. “David,” I moan. “Oh, my God, David.”

“What's that?” says the man, as if I've called him by name.

“My best friend...he called me,” I explain, crossing my arms over my chest. “He's going to kill himself.” Tears prick my eyes. The bleeding man says nothing, but just watches me with an unreadable expression. “Or maybe...he already has.”

That realization hits me with full force. In that moment, I just can't believe that David could do something so awful as ending his own life. But then again, I feel like I'm missing something crucial, like there are some parts of him that I don't know at all anymore - there's a mismatch between us now, however much I try to deny it. I'm at a loss. How had David become such a bitter cynic? Whatever happened to shy, sweet, fourth-grade David, the boy I first became friends with?

///

I remember fourth grade. I remember drawing pictures all the time - and, yes, a lot of kids like art, but while the other kids in my class scribbled on the walls and doodled hearts in their margins of their worksheets, I was the only one in Mrs. Nelson's class who used a real sketchbook and drew with special Prismacolor pencils, the ones that cost me three weeks' allowance. I loved to draw,
but none of my classmates did – they liked to play tag in the parking lot and make mud pies. And then there was me, the girl who stayed inside at recess by choice.

During one such recess, I sat alone with my sketchbook and pencils spread across my desk. With all the other kids outside, the classroom had fallen into that strange state of hushed suspension, like the way dust particles float in a sunbeam. Quiet. Soothing.

I chose a dark blue colored pencil out of my tin and began to shade my latest drawing – a girl, on the back of a tiger, prancing through outer space. For a few minutes I heard nothing but the crisp strokes of my pencil across the page.

But then, I heard a faint shuffling behind me, and I realized I wasn’t alone. Slowly, I turned around, and then I saw him: a boy hunched in his desk two rows behind me, wearing too-short jeans and a dingy blue hoodie. A mop of stringy brown hair fell over his face as he bent over a piece of paper – was he drawing a picture?

I was elated – he liked to draw, just like me! – but also angry: who did this boy think he was? Didn’t he know that this empty classroom was my space during recess? I had stayed inside alone every recess since the beginning of the school year. It was October now.

I shut my sketchbook, climbed out of my chair, and marched up to the boy. “Who are you?” I demanded. When he didn’t answer, I touched him on the shoulder, and he finally reacted.

“Oh! W-what are you doing?” His gaze snapped up, and his eyes startled me – giant blue eyes, like two miniature planets, each containing their own world.

“Who are you?” I repeated. “Are you new?” He nodded. “What’s your name?” I asked. Hugging my sketchbook to my chest, I said, “My name is Samantha Rose Tarring. But everyone calls me Sami.”

“David,” he replied, almost in a whisper.

A silence settled on us. What a quiet kid, I thought. I’ve never met anyone this quiet. Even I’m not like this – at least I talk to people when they ask me questions. Maybe there’s something wrong with him. What is he had laryngitis? Or...what if his voice box got stolen? No, wait – what if this David was actually a robot, sent by an evil dictator to spy on my class? My mind whirled with possibilities and I let myself get swept away in my imagination.

But then David spoke. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing to my sketchbook.

“This? Don’t you know? It’s a sketchbook. I’m going to be an artist when I grow up.” I leafed through the colorful drawings. “It has all my pictures I drew myself. You should get one.”

David said, with a touch of sadness, “I wish I had a sketchbook. Then I wouldn’t lose so many of my drawings.”

I glanced down at the scrap of paper in front of him – he had drawn a boy, standing alone in front of a house. I could tell that he was good at drawing, but this picture was so... realistic, so normal-looking. I looked at my own sketch – the girl, the tiger, outer space. Unlike David, I never drew normal things, because why would I draw something that’s already there in real life? For me, no idea was too crazy. But David was different, it seemed like.

I looked at David, his big blue eyes that were too large for his face, who only had a small scrap of wide-ruled paper and a stubby pencil to draw with. A funny feeling crept through my chest and, without thinking, I shoved my sketchbook into his hands. “You can have mine,” I said. I didn’t care that I was going to lose the drawings already in there.

“What? W-wow...I...” stuttered David, picking it up with an open mouth. He was shocked, I could tell. “You mean it?”

I nodded. My chest was suddenly filled with warmth, the kind of feeling you get when you drink hot chocolate and it slides down your throat. “You can have it,” I said.

A huge smile spread across David’s face. “Wow...thank you. I...”

He didn’t finish his sentence. He didn’t need to – I could see it in his eyes, so big, so bright, so blue, so eager. He smiled again, and I grinned back as the rest of the class filed in from recess.

And that’s how it all started. Every day David and I sat next to each other at recess and drew pictures together, sometimes showing them to each other, sometimes keeping them private. For me, David was the friend I never knew I needed – someone who had something in common with me, someone who didn’t think it was weird to stay inside. No one else understood our friendship – instead of being loud on the playground, we preferred to stay inside, drawing. I let David use my Prismacolors and he always took good care of them, too.

During those recesses, it was mostly quiet. Neither of us minded. But as the year went on, I found out more and more about David. His favorite color was red, and his birthday was on March seventh, exactly a month after mine. He was new here, it turns out; he had moved from Stillwater to Whitehill. His new house
was actually a block from mine. He lived there with his mom and his dad except his dad wasn’t around a lot and David didn’t tell me why.

I liked that David and I had the same way of hunching over the desk when we were concentrating hard, so deep in our work that nothing from the outside would distract us. I liked that he stuck out his tongue when he drew – it looked funny and I tried to do it once too, but it just felt weird to me, so I stopped.

But sometimes David shivered a lot during class because he didn’t have warm clothes on. I made him wear my coat so that he wouldn’t be cold. He forgot he was actually a block from mine. He lived there with his mom and his dad except they took care of him. He never seemed to mind.

The kids in our class liked to throw paper airplanes and spitballs at his head and I sometimes gave him half of my sandwich. The other kids in our class liked to let down miniature whirlwinds on the icy gravel road, swirling among the trees, rattling their bare branches.

Tree branches, bare in the springtime. My mind jumps back to this past April, junior year, when temperatures soared to a record eighty-five degrees, snow melted into rivers that flooded the parking lot, and people shed their stale winter coats and scarves to soak up the warmth.

David and I decided to eat outside in the courtyard for lunch at school (well, I did, really, and made David come with me – it was so nice out, I convinced him, it was a waste to sit indoors in the dingy cafeteria). We sat at a picnic table in the shade, but I was already sweating through my t-shirt and my hair stuck to the back of my neck.

“I haven’t finished my drawing for class today – do you think Mr. Norton will notice?” I fretted, unwrapping my sandwich. AP Drawing was my favorite class, but it was a lot of work sometimes.

“Depends if he’s hungover or not,” David grinned. “Which you know he will be.” In the sweltering air, he seemed unaffected by the heat in a long-sleeved gray hoodie and jeans.

I smirked. “True. Although,” I considered, “I still might go to the studio after lunch and work on it. I’m thinking about submitting it to my portfolio for MCAD.” I really was proud of this latest drawing, a surrealist self-portrait done in pencil, in which the left side my face looked real but the right half dissolved into a forest scene – the lines of my face became tree branches, my hair turned to leaves. Even years later, I still preferred to create dreamy and whimsical art – Salvador Dali was my inspiration. David, however, had always been more of a realist.

“Wow, you want to go to MCAD? Please, tell me more.” David rolled his
blue eyes, but his tone was light. He unwrapped a granola bar and took a bite. His hands were covered in pen.

"Shut up - you know it's my dream school." I had been obsessed with going to Minneapolis College of Art and Design since freshman year. "You should go there too."

"I hadn't really thought about it."

I swallowed the bite I was chewing and sat up straight. "Seriously! You could do it. You would so get in. Remember, you won the county art contest last year? With that drawing of Moose Lake? We could go school together. It'll be great."

Honestly, I had never even considered my future without David in it. We had been inseparable since fourth grade, and I always assumed that we would do everything together, even after we graduated, because that's what we had always done. We'd go to school together and rent a quirky little apartment in downtown Minneapolis and have our art displayed side-by-side at fancy galleries.

"I'll think about it," David said, although I knew he wouldn't. I didn't worry, though - I'd convince him to apply eventually.

"It'll be great." I repeated. "Except I still have to convince my parents to let me even go to art school. They want me to get a degree in something "useful," whatever that means. I love them and all, but sometimes they're the worst. Like they don't care for my own happiness. They must hate me or something."

David's mild expression suddenly turned sour. "God, exaggerate much? Maybe you should go to drama school instead."

I crinkled my eyebrows together. His tone had shifted from joking-sarcastic to mean-sarcastic. His head was down now, and his shoulders were slumped. Had I said something wrong? "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Clearly, he was not. What was he not telling me? He always told me everything, or at least I thought he did. I pushed away the possibility that he was hiding something from me and instead tried to probe a bit more. "No, you're not," I said.

David sighed and folded his hands in front of him, pulling down the sleeves of sweatshirt over his knuckles. A sheen of sweat had formed on his forehead but he didn't try to wipe it away. "Fine," he snapped. "If you want to know, my father's back."

I sucked in a breath. I knew David had never been on the best terms with his father, from the way he always refused to talk about him, but I had never known why, and had stopped asking after a while. It was hard, though - David was my best friend, and best friends always told each other everything, and I simply wanted to help. "He was in rehab or something, right?" That much I knew.

"Not anymore."

"So he's home now?"

David glared at me with icy blue eyes. "No, in outer space. Where else would he be?"

I held up my hands, stung by David's viciousness. I felt my cheeks turning red. He had never acted like this before. "I was just asking, okay?"

He shook his head, blinking rapidly. "Sorry," he muttered. I didn't expect him to say anything else, but then, all in a rush, he continued: "It'll be the same old bullshit with him, that's all. I'll come home from school today, and he'll yell at me for something, I know he will. If he thinks that I even look at him wrong, he'll--" David swallowed and put his hands over his mouth.

"He'll what?" I asked.

David shook his head again. "Never mind," he snapped. He stood up from the table and swung his backpack over his shoulder, pushing up his sleeves. "I'm going to the studio. Don't follow me."

"But - " I began, but he was already gone.

Now I was alone in the courtyard. I rested my head on my hands. I thought about David putting up the sleeves of his sweatshirt, exposing his arms to the unseasonably warm April sun as he stormed away from me. A flash of pale skin. A crisscross of red scars. A patchwork of purple bruises.

"My father's back."

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Back in the present, another frigid gust of wind howls in my ears as I stand on the side of the road. Tears sting my eyes and I gasp. His father. I can't believe that David hid this from me. After all these years.

But then I think of how David never let anyone touch or hug him, how even if I accidentally brushed his arm he jumped back as if electrocuted. How
he rarely invited me to his house, except when his father was gone. How his eyes, saddled with bags, were always cast to the floor. How did I not make the connection? How could I have been so blind?

"Why didn’t he tell me?" I moan, covering my face with my hands. "I can’t even imagine... oh my God. His father? How... why did he... oh my God." My hands begin to shake and I sink to the ground, curling my legs up to my chest. "He never told me..."

"Oh, he wanted to. I’ve been there," says the bleeding man. "But it was impossible."

"Impossible how? He never told me... I could have done something. Or... he could have told a teacher, guidance counselor, called the police, anything!"

The bleeding man briefly closes his eyes and folds his blood-caked hands in front of him. "It should be that easy, shouldn’t it? What would happen, though, if he told someone? Think of the investigations. Child Protective Services. Think of David’s father. How fucking enraged he’d be when he found out."

"But... he deserves it."

The bleeding man’s eyes blaze with icy fury. "Of course he deserves it! You think I don’t know that? But it’s complicated. Maybe David’s father would be thrown in prison, but maybe he wouldn’t. Either way, the secret’s out. David’s private torment would become public gossip. Classmates would whisper and stare. He’d be the kid with the abusive dad and nothing else. He’d feel even more ashamed."

"But that’s nothing compared to — "

" - Think of David!" snarls the man. "Wouldn’t you be terrified that your father would come back and hurt you even worse? And then, wouldn’t you feel guilty about turning in your own father, because deep down, though you’d never admit this to anyone, however twisted it may be, you still love him?" He takes a deep, rattling breath. "It gets even more complicated, more than I can ever describe. You wouldn’t understand, anyway."

"But — "

" - No one understood. No one, no matter how much they tried, ever knew exactly how he felt, what he was going through. Look," he wheezed, his voice tumbling through the air, "He was probably appreciative that you tried to help, but even sadder that your help wasn’t enough. Not enough to keep him from his first suicide attempt."

"What?" I gasp. "How did you know about that?"

He pauses, eyebrows furrowing, and shrugs. "Whitehill’s a small town. Everyone’s obsessed about these kinds of things. Gossip is wildfire. It’s sickening, really. I remember it well, and I don’t even consider myself to be a part of this town. Never have."

Suddenly the man breaks off, doubling over and wrapping his hands around his knees. He closes his eyes, and he’s entered another world, it seems like, as if I and the elements around him have disappeared.

"Isn’t it horrible, when you try to make yourself disappear, how you become the center of attention?" he mutters to himself, grimacing. "How you’re just a speck of dust when you’re alive, but then people suddenly act like they care? They think they know what’s best for you. Why do they even bother? Just leave me alone!"

His raw shouts echo across the landscape. His pain, seeming to transcend the physical, is terrifying to witness. I back away. I close my eyes.

How could I forget that night?

///

July seventh. Evening. The door to David’s house was unlocked, so I stepped inside to the foyer and kicked off my shoes. I made my way towards the basement, my steps creaking across the floor. "David?"

It was strange – even though I had been friends with him for so long, I had rarely been to his house. I’d long ago accepted that David, for whatever reason, wanted to keep his home life separate from the rest of it, and knew it was no use asking. But tonight, he had randomly texted me, saying that his parents were gone and that I should come over. It had been a few weeks since I’ve actually seen him.

I entered the basement, surveyed the unfamiliar surroundings - the worn, stained couch, facing a flickering TV on the infomercial channel. A dusty piano in the corner, next to an antique liquor cabinet and a small black safe.

"Oh, Sami, you’re here." David emerged from the hallway, wearing his gray sweatshirt like always, and made his way to the liquor cabinet. He took out a bottle of vodka, opened it, and brought it to his mouth, grimacing the whole time. Then he offered the bottle to me.

I stared at him, incredulous. "Since when do you drink?"
I thought about elementary school, when David and I would sit side by side in our desks, a pile of Prismacolor pencils scattered between us. Pages and pages of drawings, stacked so high inside our desks that we couldn't close the tops. And now all those pages, all those years, cast into the wind, blowing away. “But why?”

David shrugged, his icy eyes burning the coldest glare. “I just don’t want to. You wouldn’t understand.”

“But you’ve been doing it so long!” I clutched my sketchbook to my chest. “You’re an amazing artist- you can’t just quit.”

“Who says I can’t? It’s my choice.”

I sat up on the couch and faced him. “You don’t know what you’re doing. What about college? What about MCAD? We talked about this. We had a plan- we were going to go there together, remember? We were going to get away from Whitehill, finally.” To my horror, tears began to sting my eyes.

“You had a plan. Not we.” David yanked off the cap of the bottle and took a long gulp. Scowling, he continued: “You always assume that I’m going to do all these things you come up with, but it’s not happening.”

“But-”

“Sami. Just stop.”

“No,” I snapped, standing up from the couch. I tore the vodka bottle out of his hands. “Something’s wrong. You’re different now. I don’t know when, but somehow you’ve turned into a dick and you won’t tell me why. And now you’ve given up art?” My voice shook and I closed my eyes. I couldn’t bear to look at my best friend. “Who are you?” I whispered.

David suddenly stood up to face me. Once a foot shorter, he was now a full head taller than me. “Get real. We’re not kids anymore. Did you really think we’d stay the same forever? Guess what: people grow up. And I’ve grown up, but clearly you’re still the same controlling bitch.”

I gasped. “David –”

“– Just stop.”

My stomach dropped and it felt like I was desperately trying to hold onto something that no longer existed- like I was hanging for dear life onto a rope that wasn’t tied to anything. I was falling.
I thought back to a paradox I had read, a long time ago: if a ship sails across the ocean, and all of its parts are replaced over its voyage, is it still the same ship when it lands on the opposite shore?

How much had David changed? How much of the old David remained?

David’s dark voice interrupted my thoughts. “You should leave,” he said.

I met his gaze, searching one last time for something to hold onto, and I recognized nothing.

I blinked back tears. “Fine.”

I turned to gather my backpack and leave, but David grabbed my arm. “One more thing,” he growled. He yanked the bottle of vodka out of my hands. “I’ll be needing this.”

Without looking at him, I climbed slowly up the basement steps. I tried to tell myself that I didn’t care, that David could do whatever the hell he wanted. So what if he was quitting art? So what if he was now an alcoholic? So what if he was no longer the same person I became friends with?

But I just couldn’t shake it. Something was wrong with him, no matter how much he tried to deny it. I reached the top of the stairs, saw the dark shadows moving across the foyer, and realized that I couldn’t leave him alone. Not tonight. I didn’t care that I was doing exactly what he was telling me not to do.

David was going to be pissed, but I didn’t care. He was my best friend, and I was going to stay with him even if he didn’t want me there. Because what kind of friend would I be if I left him when he needed me most (even if he didn’t know it)?

So I returned to the basement and laid down on the length of the couch - I’d just sleep here tonight. Covering myself with a blanket, I let my heavy eyes wander to the flickering television screen, and eventually I fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, I was jolted awake from a loud sound coming from the hallway. Wiping my eyes, I rolled off the couch, my body drowsy and stiff from the hard cushions, and shuffled over to investigate.

The bathroom light was on, but the door was closed.

And when I opened the door, I screamed.

David. On the floor.

Sleeping pills. An empty bottle.

I screamed again and dove to his side, wide awake now. All thoughts of our fight flew from my mind. “David, David! Oh my God! Wake up!” I slapped his face, shook his shoulders, but nothing worked. His head lolled to one side, and his tongue dangled limply out of his mouth. His hand clutched the bottle of vodka.

I sprung from the cold tile, blood rushing to my feet. I felt like I was going to vomit. I dove for my phone, which had fallen off the couch in the middle of the night. With shaking hands, I dialed nine-one-one.

“Help - my friend - he’s in the bathroom - he’s not waking up - “

The dispatcher said, “Where is your emergency?”

“Um - “ David’s address. What was his address? Think! “163 Sylvia Street. In Whitehill. But there were pills - he swallowed pills - please help, he won’t wake up!”

My hands shook as I sobbed, and suddenly I dropped my phone, where it clattered to the floor. All I remember after that was crying into my hands, hoping to drown in my tears, because my best friend was dead, or almost dead, and all I knew for certain was that he wanted to be dead, and that I couldn’t help him.

///

“You couldn’t help him,” says the bleeding man. “Sure, you called the paramedics. Sure, they rushed him to the hospital and pumped his stomach. Sure, his life was saved, but his dignity was lost. For once, he was in control of his life and you pulled him back into the hell he was living.”

“As if I’m just going to stand there when my best friend is unconscious on the floor,” I snap. The wind howls loudly, nearly drowning out my words. “But how long had he known he was going to kill himself? And why did he invite me over? Did he want me to find him?” I pause. “How could he do this to me?”

I remember, in the weeks afterward, feeling something I had never felt towards David before: anger. How could he be so twisted that he would let me find him on the floor like that? What kind of a person would do that? I filled pages and pages with my confusion, angry red and black slashes, jagged lines, drawings without focus, without beauty.

And the entire time, I hated myself for hating him. Because he was my best friend, and I could never ignore that. “Was I supposed to just let him die?” I say.

Jagged shadows, from the tree branches, cross the man’s face. His chest rises and falls, quicker and quicker. “When you see someone suffering,” he wheezes painfully, “Would you want him to suffer more?”

fiction
“It’s not like that.”

The bleeding man shakes his head. “You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand? I’m David’s best friend - even if I didn’t know anything about his life, which I don’t, I know so much more than you. You don’t know David. What are you trying to say to me? You don’t even know me!”

The man closes his eyes and turns his head away. “I do know you, more than you realize.”

“So now you’re speaking in riddles? Great.”

“You don’t understand.”

I stand up and tower over him, stomping my foot on the icy ground. “I’m so sick of you saying that - ‘You don’t understand. You don’t understand.’ So make me understand!”

The man pierces me with those blue eyes, bright and haunting and familiar. “Think of two a.m.”

“What?”

“At two a.m., everything is dark, no matter where you go. Every street, every corner. The last of the stragglers are heading home. Everyone’s asleep, dead asleep. They don’t pay attention to you. They don’t want to be disturbed. They don’t know about the nightmares that enter your mind in the dark and quiet night. At two a.m., all you can do is lay in bed and stare at the ceiling. No one can hear you speak. No one can hear you cry. The lights are off. No one can see your personal hell through the windows of your eyes.”

He pauses.

“For me, for David, every single minute felt like two a.m.”

Wind and snow pelt my face. “That doesn’t help,” I moan. My legs quake and I fall on my knees, scraping my hands on the rough ground. “Nothing helps. I don’t understand. I try and try and try, but why can’t I make things better?”

I choke on sudden tears and cover my eyes. My cheeks are numb, my hands are numb, and my mind is numb, my heart is numb. “I don’t know what David needs.”

The man says, “Look at him. Look at his life.”

I stare at the bleeding man. “I know, but...”

“What will happen if David lives tonight?” coughs the man. “He’ll be hurt by his father, by others as well. He’ll grow up. He’ll leave Whitehill with a flask in his pocket. Since hurt is all he knows, he’ll hurt the people in his life, just like those who have hurt him. He’ll wander. He’ll wander all his life. He’ll be alone, wandering on the road in the dead of night, in the dead of winter. Always alone. Always wandering.”

“I don’t want any of that,” I sob. “I just want David to be okay.”

“And he will be.” Blood trickles out of the bleeding man’s lips. “He has to do this. You’ve done all that you could.”

I reach out and touch the man’s forehead. His skin is waxy and blue now, and his breaths are rattling faster and faster. “All that I could.” I repeat softly.

He gasps, his weathered face twisted in pain. “Sami, it’s time to let him go.”

Then the bleeding man closes his eyes and lays his head down on the snow. Blood froths and congeals on his chest, rising and falling faster and faster. His open mouth lets out a single puff of air, and then he is still.

My mouth quivers, and I let my hand fall from his forehead. He’s dead.

He’s gone.

He’s dead, he’s gone, and I couldn’t save him.

I begin to weep. Silently, no wails, no groans, no cries, just the pure march of tears sliding down my cheeks, spilling into the snow. A moment of suspended stillness.

Then, my shoulders begin to tremble, and soon I’m sobbing, harder than I ever had in my life. I cry for the bleeding man, who was tortured for so long, who I tried to help but could do nothing to save.

I cry for David, who suffered so much and who I couldn’t save either. But now, I realize that I no longer wish for David to stay alive - now, I wish that his life had been better in the first place, so that he never would have had to contemplate death as an escape.

And still I cry for our outgrown friendship, which was once so strong. We had been best friends once in a simpler time, when all we needed was pencil and paper. But I don’t understand anything about him anymore, and I hadn’t understood him for a long time, no matter how much I tried. His mind is a mystery; we have nothing in common. I should have realized this earlier, when
all of our recent conversations always cycled back to the past, the same old rut of homework and lack of sleep. Always about the past, the stale past. We were no longer bound by the connection we once had. The past was over now.

I peer upward, at the dark clouds shifting silently through the velvet sky. They uncover the moon, which bathes the surrounding fields in whiteness. I squint and shield my eyes from the sudden glow.

Lights in my face, burning harsh and bright and blinding. I close my eyes, but I can feel their heat on my skin as they come closer, closer, closer...

I open my eyes.

Something’s different. I’m no longer standing on the side of the road, but I’m still sitting in my car, the exploded airbag pressed against my face. I squint at the glowing numbers on the dashboard: 2:46 a.m.

“Miss, are you all right?” Who is that?

I try to shove the airbag away from my body and open the car door, but I’m stuck. I groan and rub my hands on my forehead - I have a pounding headache and my nose feels tender, as if it’s been broken. “God, what happened?” I groan.

“Can you hear me?” A figure approaches the door, and I wipe off a circle of frost on the window with my sleeve. There stands a man, tall and bearded, wearing a fur-lined hat and parka. I recognize him as Whitehill’s snowplow driver. What is he doing here?

He taps on the glass. “Are you all right?”

I nod, then instantly feel nauseous. My head feels too heavy for my body. But I have to get out. I have to know what’s going on. I unlock the car and push open the door, and the snowplow driver holds out his arms as I stumble out and nearly collapse to the ground.

“Whoa, calm down. You’re shaking.” He lifts me up, sheds his parka and drapes it on my shoulders as I hug my arms to my chest, teeth chattering. “Let’s get you warmed up.” He puts a mittenened hand on my shoulder and guides me in the direction of the snowplow – wait, a snowplow?

The snowplow sits, motor running, on the side of the road, with the headlights glowing harsh and bright in my face. The lights. I whip my head across the landscape – same gravel road. Same snow-covered fields. Same skeleton trees. I glance behind me – same spiral tire tracks that lead to my car, spun out in the middle of the road.

The bleeding man. Where is he?

I break away from the man’s grasp and run to the other side of the road.

“Miss – wait – where are you going?”

But I ignore him. I frantically scan the shoulder of the road, but there’s no bleeding man, just the lone body of a deer, crumpled and bleeding from a gash on its side. A jagged piece of metal – the bumper of my car? – lies next to it.

“Where is he? Where is he?” I cry, covering my face with my hands. “He was right there!”

“Who are you talking about?” says the snowplow man. “Is anyone else here? Is he hurt?”

I point to the deer. “He was right there! Right there!”

The man shakes his head and begins to walk me to the snowplow. “There’s no man there. Just the deer. You must have hit it with your car. Come on – you need to get inside.”

But he was there, I know he was. He was there, in his stained gray sweatshirt and ice-blue eyes, lying in the snow, wounded in the chest. He was there, talking to me, talking to me about David. The things he knew, the things he talked about, were real. They had to be!

Wait. Does this mean that David... is he...

“David? Are you still there?” I shriek, fumbling in my pockets. I find my phone and pound the screen with my fingers, but it won’t turn on. “David? Is he okay?”

The man opens the passenger side door to the snowplow truck and lifts me inside. Suddenly, I am surrounded by warmth, so much that it burns my cheeks, and my hands begin to smart as they thaw. I wring them together as the man turns up the heat full-blast, reaching in the back seat for blankets.

As he tucks them around me, he says, “Are you warming up? Are you hurting anywhere?” I shake my head, mind whirling. He peers at my face, then continues gruffly. “Looks like you have frostbite, though, on your ears. Nose looks broken too.”

“I called the police, too,” he continues. “They should be on their way.”
I nod, not really listening. Instead I stare at the side of the road, at my car, smashed in the front, at the deer broken beside it, illuminated by the headlights of my car.

After a few minutes, flashing lights approach us, and a squad car pulls over on the edge of the icy gravel. A female officer steps out of it, her badge gleaming in the shadows as she steps up to the snowplow and knocks on the driver’s side window.

“We got your call,” says the officer, who is wrapped in a navy scarf and navy coat. She peers over at me. “Are you Samantha Tarring?” I nod.

She turns to the snowplow driver. “You did the right thing, keeping her warm.” With a quick glance at me, she says, “Although she will need to go to the hospital to get treated for minor injuries. I’ll take her from here.”

The officer shakes the snowplow driver’s hand and she helps me out of the snowplow truck and into the back of the police car. I’m still wrapped up in the snowplow driver’s parka and blankets, and as soon as I’m seated I begin to nod off.

The officer steers the car onto the road. Through my sleepy state, I hear the sound of the scanner, bits and pieces of static-laced conversation.

“...Ten-five-six...I repeat, we have a ten-five-six...”

“...One-sixty-three-Sylvia...”

I bolt upright. That’s David’s address.

“...male, late teens...”

“...bedroom...chest wound....”

“...handgun...”

My eyes widen. “David,” I whisper. The officer doesn’t hear me.

Even though I had known it was going to happen, the realization still crashes over me. He’s gone. He’s really gone. I expect to start sobbing. I expect my tears to corrode my skin, melt my body into nothingness. I expect the moon and stars to fall to the earth. I expect devastation, because my best friend is dead, gone forever, dead forever.

But none of that happens.

Instead, numbness spreads from my temples. Incredibly, a tightness in my chest, tension I hadn’t realize existed, unravels my heart. I take a deep breath - I’m lighter somehow, lighter with the strangest sense of relief.

I press my forehead against the warm glass of the car window and stare at the hills. The quiet fields roll past, like an ocean frozen in time. In the distant horizon, the edge of the earth touches the sky, and this is where the problems of the world are carried away, where the souls of the suffering are lifted by the stars, where burdens evaporate.

I think of tonight, racing over in my car to save my best friend. And as hard as I’ve tried, I’ve now accepted that his death, as awful and twisted and confusing as it sounds, was inevitable. It was nothing that I did, or didn’t do, except failing to see that David knew what he wanted all along, even if I did not. And I would never know.

I think of the strong bond David and I once had, the bond that had gradually crumbled and was now being swept away by the gusts of wind.

I think of the accident, the bleeding man, the frenzy, the panic, the terrible choice I thought I would have to make.

From the beginning, I had realized that I couldn’t save both David and the bleeding man. Now, I know that I couldn’t have saved either of them. I couldn’t have saved our friendship. There was never a choice for me. There was never a choice for David.

Rachel Reyes is a sophomore majoring in mathematics and English. In between writing proofs and writing fiction, she spends much of her time explaining to friends and family that it is in fact possible to enjoy both subjects. She also enjoys hiking on the North Shore of Lake Superior, performing stand-up comedy, and listening to the cast recording of the musical Hamilton.
Non-Fiction
The Curious Case of Neal Schiesske

By: Casey Baumberger

His callused fingers strum at the strings expertly, plucking out an original melody that fills the dreary apartment. His two friends sit next to him on the worn, suede couch; one picks a complimentary harmony and the other sings gentle lyrics. Together, their sound is sad and burdened, yet somehow it still carries the air of hope and aspiration.

I close my eyes and let my ears follow the lyrics.
*Can you feel the treasure here?*
*No blasphemy, nor fear.*
*Can you shred the hate in your heart?*
*Skip on back to the start.*

The words roll around in my head, touching my thoughts the way the waves caress the lonely early morning shoreline.

*’Cause the world won’t take me down*
*But the fallen will*
*They will always tear you down*

I open my eyes, resting them on Neal and his guitar. He is an expression in and of himself; his loud, no-bounds personality decorates every inch of his skin, his arms and chest a kaleidoscope of inked colors and shapes. Yet as he plays, he is calmed, contained, somber even. In this moment, he is a contradiction.

*Skip on back to the start.*

He paints the scene for me. A small, rundown house by the beach is home from the first day he can remember until the day he left for the Marine Corps, his proud father waving goodbye in the bus mirror. With only him, his siblings, and their father in the house, deep down, home always felt like it was missing something. He longed and ached for her presence, even though he had never known his mother. The word home still elicits that feeling when he talks about it, I see it in the lines around his eyes, too deep for someone of twenty-two years.

*Can you shred the hate in your heart?*

My eyes wander to the short, thick scar that sits under his right ear, just above where his square jaw line begins.


September 12, 2014. Neal’s divorce is finalized.

In the two years, three months, and twenty-two days between those fateful dates, he endured punishments of the worst kinds. His son was hidden from him. His wife was unfaithful. His money was stolen, as was his confidence and self-worth. An argument over the hours of his new job elicited a blow from the dull end of the knife that left the little pink scar.

The only other scar from this trial is hidden underneath a lopsided hourglass tattoo painted on his left bicep with the phrase “Time Marches On”. You can’t see the remnant from the sharp blade unless he tells you it’s there.

*No blasphemy, nor fear.*

Despite living across the country at a California military base, Neal Skyped his son every night. He spent his days serving our country. On his evenings and weekends, he met with his dealers and customers, buying product straight from Columbia and selling his special meth-cut cocaine to ensure that he’d have enough income to pay for his son’s schooling. In one of our earlier conversations, I asked him why he didn’t get another job to make ends meet. Drug dealing is dangerous and illegal, after all. Why not do something safer and healthier for yourself? He looked at me as if I had just asked him why the sky is blue.

“I work full time for the Marines. I don’t have a college degree. The only job I could maybe get would be minimum wage. A year of minimum-wage pay checks after taxes wouldn’t even be close to enough.”

I feel like a sheltered idiot for not thinking of that.

I barely see the fading spider web of track mark scars on his inner elbow as he bends his wrist around the neck of the guitar.

*’Cause the world won’t take me down*
*But the fallen will*
*They will always tear you down*

My gaze turns to the ugly, dried flowers that are framed on the wall. Once bright and full, the white has turned dirty and grey, and in the year since his father’s funeral, the red faded to dull pink, and the light has forsaken the yellow. I didn’t know Neal before his father’s death, but something tells me that his eyes used to be vibrant like those flowers.
Now, they are dark and wise, with a hint of pain hidden somewhere just out of reach. I would imagine losing your one and only parent does that to you. The one who made your meals, cried and hugged you when he found out you were cutting yourself, saw you off to the Marine Corps, and the man who's arms comforted you when your wife left you. In a way, it ages you.

He likes to use the term “old, worn-down, and broken” to describe himself. I tell him he is storied. And stories are beautiful.

"Can you feel the treasure here?"

He puts his guitar down and lights a cigarette. His friends stand up and retire to their rooms as the clock reads 11:58pm. He takes a drag, letting the smoke slowly escape his lips as he leans back, an invisible burden lifting from his tattoo-clad shoulders.

Neal is a mess of a person.

He is a Marine who misses the call of duty. He is a father without his beloved son by his side. I find him occasionally looking down to his side, slightly extending his reach as if he is reaching for a little hand. He is a musician struggling to make a name for himself, spending hours at the studio recording the same melody until his fingertips bleed. He is a drug addict and dealer, using them to escape his life as well as to fund it. He is a lover without someone to love, sleeping away the night alone.

Neal is probably the last person who should come to mind when someone asks me the question, "Who do you admire?" But he isn't. He is actually one of the very first, second only to my own mother.

Neal is a treasure of a person.

He is a Marine who is always willing to house his fellow brothers when they visit: seven of his Corps friends visited a few weeks ago and he let them all stay at his little apartment. He salutes the flag when The Anthem plays while others simply stand and stare. He is a good dad; he Skypes his son nightly, along with sending weekly letters and monthly packages. He is an artist, and a talented one at that. He provides for his family, no matter the cost to his well-being. He is the truest of friends.

He takes one last pull from his cigarette and puts it out in the ashtray. He is quiet for a minute, rubbing his callused and tanned hands together. His brow is furrowed like it often is, always thinking, always pensive. He looks up at me and asks, “Do you want to Skype Landyen with me? He says he wants to meet you”.

I feel a grin spread across my face. I nod and follow when he pulls my hand, leading me to his computer. He opens the laptop and brings up the app. As Skype is calling, I sit on my hands and wait eagerly, excited and honored to be part of the beautiful story that he is writing with his life.

Casey Baumberger is born and raised in Iowa, though her heart lies in Green Bay (Go Pack Go!). Her main goal in life is to never grow old at heart. When she isn't writing, she works as a horse trainer and can be found exploring new things, skydiving, running marathons, and belly dancing.
I've done my fair share of grocery shopping. To my mom, it was—and still is—this massive chore. The way she says “I have to go to the store today” sounds like a normal person saying, “I have to have a colonoscopy today.” To me, it isn’t as monstrous of an endeavor. Well, aside from the staggering time commitment. I often leave grocery stores with the same feeling as emerging from a very long and complex movie; the ones that make me want to lie on my floor and contemplate life. The ones that mess with my mind so much I'm not even sure my life is real anymore. It's like wondering if I dreamed Inception. Did someone incept Inception in my brain? I don't know anymore. What is life? Is it ours to define? How did I get on the floor?

Entering the grocery store, however, is fantastic. The halogen lights comfort me in a very chemical way; it welcomes me with promises of fresh produce, flowers, and a weird bank that nobody actually banks with. It wants to give the impression that I’m not there purely for 3 quarts of soy milk, five pounds of pasta, and dairy-free snacks including—but-not-limited—to the biggest package of Oreos they have. It’s true: “milk’s favorite cookie” is completely dairy-free.

Grocery shopping has become more challenging for me this year. Last January, I was suddenly floored by a virus that made it almost impossible for me to digest anything for about two months. Recovery involved many things I dislike, with it is that it never leaves me alone. I go to work and grocery shop. I go home and realize I need groceries. I go to the store only to have my phone ring. It’s my mom. That’s weird. I’m usually the one to call her. Of course she’s at the grocery store.

“So, I’m at the newly renovated Mills Civic Hy-Vee and I hate it,” she greets me.

“Oh, are they done with it?” I ask. Last time I was there they were in the thralls of construction. The in-store restaurant was a sad clump of four tables in the produce section. Not by the produce section, in it.  

“Yes and I can’t find a thing! They moved the Jell-O to God knows where.”

“Well, where are you now?”

“Aisle 6.”

I hang my head. Okay, I’m good at grocery shopping, but it’s not a fully-fledged superpower. I can’t telepathically know which aisle has what in a newly remodeled store that I haven’t seen yet. I have to stop walking and slouch in order to reel in the snark before responding.

“No, Mom, what foods are you by?”

“Chips.”

“Okay, so you’re a ways away.”

“You’ve never even been here since they remodeled! How do you know?”

Well then why did you call me? I grab my Oreos off the shelf and unceremoniously throw them in my basket. By the sound of it, one definitely cracked. “The Lincoln Center Hy-Vee finished remodeling a few weeks ago. I’m assuming they’re set up the same way.”

“Oh. Can you tell me where the Jell-O is? I need to make Green Death for a potluck and I can’t find the pistachio pudding to save my life.”

“Have you checked the baking aisle?” Green Death, or as the rest of the Midwestern world knows it, Pistachio Pudding Salad, is a staple in the Seely home. We make it year-round for celebrations, if we’re really strapped for side dishes, or if we’re really strapped for a potluck dish.

“Yes, but I couldn’t find it.”

“Well, go back. It’ll be by the frosting.”

She sighs in the form of static through the phone but starts on her way.

Meanwhile, I’m making my way to the West Ames Hy-Vee health market section. It embraces me with promises of dairy-free goodness. I pick up a box of Annie’s Naturals Friends Bunny Grahams. They are a mix of original, chocolate, and chocolate chip graham crackers shaped like little bunnies. They’re my
favorite because of the name and the ingredients. Plus, I like to say that I eat my Friends. It gives people pause, especially because I’m a Culinary Science major with a minor in Anthropology. My mom used to joke that I wanted to eat people when I grew up. Not people, Mom, just Friends.

“So I’m in the baking aisle, looking at the frosting,” she declares.

“The Jell-O should be above, below, or beside the frosting.”

Silence. She’s scanning the shelves. Then, another static sigh. “I don’t see it.”

“Is it by the squeeze tubes of frosting? The canned pie filling maybe?” I supplied.

I continue my quest for dairy-free snacks and fill my basket with sweet potato chips and soy-based yogurt alternative, both of which are very real things.

“Okay, I found the Jell-O but not pistachio pudding mix.” She sounds defeated.

“A grocery store is not a grocery store without pistachio pudding mix.” I whisper into my phone, hoping the not-unattractive bro (shoot me) looking at protein shakes down the aisle doesn’t hear my statement.

“Found it!”

“Good. Can I let you go? I’m at the store too. And I need to wrestle a few quarts of soy milk into this basket.”

“Sure. I need to get home and let the dog out.” Her cart squeaks around a corner through the speaker pressed to my ear.

“Are you sure you don’t need help finding the marshmallows?” Mini marshmallows are another essential part of Green Death, along with crushed pineapple and Cool Whip. Mom omits the traditional walnuts.

“All right, you ungrateful snippet.” She’s smiling now. Mission: accomplished.

I hold one of my hands up in a mock surrender even though she can’t see me. “Hey, if anyone’s ungrateful here, it’s not me, Mom.”

“Goodbye, dear.” The bustle of the other grocery store in my ear stops when she hangs up.

I shove my already broken Oreos aside to make room for three cartons of soy milk and find myself sighing just like my mom. She’s been my rock through my illness and recovery. I’ll be lucky if I inherit half of her compassion, and I already inherited the woman’s John Denver obsession so I’m well on my way.

When I manage to tear myself away from the health market freezers without a pint of peanut butter chocolate swirl ice cream alternative, the express checkout is refreshingly deserted. Thank God. I have to get out before I’m lost in the limbo of this Hy-Vee forever. The checkout girl is nice, proving that Hy-Vee employees smile at cash registers as well as in every aisle like their sing-song-y slogan promises.

The sun smacks my pupils into submission the second Hy-Vee’s automatic doors slide open. There it is, the all too familiar feeling of emerging from a mind-blowing movie only to realize that the world is exceptionally ordinary. I go home and attack my groceries with a sharpie so my sorority sisters don’t accidentally eat the relatively few things on this earth that I can digest.

In passing, I ask one of them what’s for dinner.

“Mac and cheese!” she says.

Without replying or closing the cabinet, or thinking really, I go back to my room and lay face first on the floor. My Annie’s Naturals Friends are still in my hand.

_I guess I’ll eat my Friends for dinner._

**Annie Seely** earned her B.S. in Culinary Science from Iowa State in December and is currently a graduate student in Food Science and Technology. Her love affair with food began with boxed cake mixes and escalated at an alarming rate when, at the age of 16, she baked ten pies for her church’s RAGBRAI stand. In her free time, she enjoys making lists, watching videos of Corgi puppies, and baking pies.
Poetry
**Voluntourism**

BY: **ANDREW FISH**

Once upon a time, white men came,
And they destroyed the world.
Now, they have come back
To fix it.

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**Beautiful Bacon**

BY: **LAUREN LEE**

[For Paige]
9.30.15

Beautiful bacon, so red, white & rare
Beautiful bacon, so fresh & bare
Protein in flesh & flavor in fat
A love affair, yes, just like that!

A love affair of the stomach & mind
Mouth-watering & delicious, doesn’t matter what kind
From the pig to the package to the pan to the plate –
Raised for one purpose, O’ glorious fate

To grace the mouths of hungry desire
Cooked in a pan or slow roasted over fire
The heresy – in the size to which it doth degrade
But still – no doubt – this beauty won’t fade

Heaven only, where it shall not shrink
Must wait for that day, O’ on the brink
Swimming & sizzling in a sauna of grease
Calming the stomach to a deep inner peace

Clogging the bloodstreams with vehement rage
But life too short, like a book’s intro page
Beautiful bacon, such a beautiful addiction
Vegetarian never, what a mental fiction!
Why Biochemistry Should Not Happen on Fridays

By: Lauren Lee

Once upon a time there was a girl
She hated Biochemistry till she wanted to hurl
If it weren't for her friends, she'd be ready to die
All she wanted to do was to kill & to cry

The professor did his best to make her fail
She went insane, her mind derailed
She would not give up, she would not quit
Despite her insides throwing a tempest fit

The professor - so large, round & plump
Continued on with his worthless intellectual dump
On & on & on he droned
Till everyone in the class so loudly moaned

Till the cows came home & exploded there
Unmilked & unhappy - yes, life unfair
Dr. Seuss’ worst nightmare, a reality now
If life were so simple as being a cow

His worst nightmare brought to life
Good grief, the horror, the strife!
Of microscopic alien creatures waging war untold
And O for someone to be so bold

To O for a minute contemplate homicide
Someone must end this tyrant, & that I do confide
And birth new thoughts of freedom reign
Let me pass this class & join the sane!

In happy living of unmarred joy
End this professor, yes! That’s the ploy!
I just want to live and be free again
To fly like a bird and sing like a wren
Never to engage in such stupidity later
Could make me a believer & not a science hater!
23 May 2014

Sitting here all alone
Writing poetry by the light of my phone
On the edge of a rooftop with shingles so old
Oh that I would be so bold
Through the window above my bed
And with every step stealthy tread
To not awaken the sleeping nor the dead
Either woken would be a dread

Light pollution fills the sky
The onset of morning still far from nigh
Waiting for a meteor shower
The onslaught of the stars in display of power

Two dogs roaming loose, loose in the street
To their delight, freedom their feat
Of the meteors, none can be seen
The light from the street, something so mean
To curb my excitement and my fun
To sit here any longer, my patience undone
My vantage point, no matter how high
Continually ruined by the polluted sky

To see something so beautiful, but to see it not
Induces emotion, but rather distraught
Sitting here, with no one by my side
Something rather lonely and somber, I do confide
For while the invited others slept
The nightwatch by myself I kept

Nothing to be seen this starry night
Nothing to be seen with this dumb light
To fall from a roof, so brave and dare
The city sleeps and none could care
That star gazers would cry is lost

Till toes went numb, but not with frost
Forty minutes to sit here long
Little heard, but the highway throng
To take a minute to gaze at the stars
To see worlds away, or even just Mars
To wish someone would hold my hand
To take me far away, far from this land
Just to have someone to sit with me here
For company at best, or even to hold me near
Would be something special, something I seem to fear

But off to bed, gone for sure
Leaving my post, my bed doth lure
Night be going like rowers rowing
Stars be there, but hardly showing
The mission failing, something lame
The stars were there, they actually came
But unseen they remained
Thus my heart it pained
The window once open, now close
Into bed I shall go, I suppose...

Lauren Lee is a graduating senior in Food Science and Journalism with a minor in Culinary Science. She enjoys crazy adventures, writing letters, playing the piano, drinking smoothies and sailing. She is excited to pursue her career goals and life aspirations, wherever those take her in the world.
Mass Creation
BY: MATTHEW WILSON
MATTHEW WILSON is originally from Chicago, IL and has always been making art. His favorite medias are drawing, painting and digital. Since he wasn’t taking classes at the time, he just gained experience through graffiti. Now that he has more training, he plans to use all opportunities to make art for everyone to enjoy. He completes his undergraduate studies this spring, and will finish his masters in Sustainable Environments in one more year.
German Escape
BY: KRISTEN AHLERS
A Glimpse of Venice

BY: Kristen Ahlers

Kristen Ahlers is a graduate of Iowa State University. She spent her final semester at Iowa State student teaching 8th grade reading/language arts. In December of 2015, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in linguistics. Kristen is endorsed to teach 5-12 English and reading. Her hobbies include running, reading, and traveling.

visual arts
Delanie Downey
is a recent Iowa State University graduate and wants to continue her education in the graduate program of English Literature. This will be the first stepping stone to obtaining the major goal of being a professor at a four year institution.
MATTHEW OBBINK is a 2nd year graduate student in Furniture Design and Metal-smithing. He is originally from Armstrong, Iowa, but he and his wife have lived in Ames for the last 16 years. He graduated from Iowa State University in 2006 with a BFA in Integrated Studio Arts, with an emphasis in furniture design and metal-smithing. In his time since graduating he has worked as a professional cabinetmaker at several different high end custom shops. In his current work he is exploring many new angles from one of a kind pieces of art, to limited production furniture.
Information is just bits of data. Knowledge is putting them together. Wisdom is transcending them.

- Ram Dass