

THE LOOKOUT



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THE LOOKOUT

A Journal of Literature and the Arts

by the students of
Texas A&M University-Central Texas

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Editor's Note

Together with the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas A&M University-Central Texas, I proudly offer the fourth volume of *The Lookout: A Journal of Literature and the Arts*, which features poetry, short fiction, art, and photography produced by current students and recent graduates of TAMUCT.

As usual, this year's issue of *The Lookout* demonstrates an array of styles and subjects from a variety of perspectives as diverse as the student body itself. Yet as unique as these authors and artists are, all of the works in this collection combine to form a common call to action: to bravely confront the mysteries of our lives and to search for personal and communal meaning in an increasingly ambiguous world. As you'll soon discover, there's no better place to begin this journey than through an interaction with the images and ideas contained within these pages.

Dig in and enjoy this new volume of creative works from the ever-inspiring students of Texas A&M University-Central Texas.

Ryan Bayless

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Assistant Lecturer, English and Fine Arts

Texas A&M University-Central Texas

THE LOOKOUT

Volume 4

JOY BEILER-REAVIS

The Need

dirty sheets
crumpled beercan ashtrays
laughter dank and dull
hanging like a frozen fog
settled over some forgotten valley

manged coats
of neglected dogs
feral cats at the window
screeching for nothing
but their wildness

drawn shades
strings mangled, strewn
hungry hustles beg
embers glowing orange and blue
in the belly of a rusted barrel

greedy squirrels
chase shadows and nuts
naked trees, too thin
scratching at the sky
for nothing
but the
sun

MILDRED TODD

The Hill

Mom's slender hands surround my chubby palms.
Squeezing and observing:

Your hands are so soft.

She points ahead to a low crawling hill:

Remember when I waited on this side?

Dad's determined fingers curl around the steering wheel.

Smiling he answers:

Oh boy! I waited for you on the other side all night!

Innocent eyes watch as they exchange knowing looks.

Who? For what? When?

Both laughing as they answer in unison:

Oh, something that happened before you were born.

Mom, you tell it.

Your dad drew me a map to meet him at this hill.

All night, I waited on this side of the hill.

At dawn, I discovered him on the other side.

Oh boy! I was teased about that for a long time.

Smiling they sigh.

Mom continues rubbing my hands:

I love your hands, they are so soft.

FELICIA JULIANO

Quiet Conversations

I have heard people say
they can see their own lifetime in ten seconds.
Yet, I've never heard anyone say
they could see someone else's recollections.

Sometimes the first few seconds are blurred,
distorted by false perceptions,
twisted by diseased memories,
and swallowed by easy deceptions.

Sometimes time can be hard to remember,
with each new second devoid of feeling—
an endless labyrinth of chaos
in the process of healing.

Sometimes the next few seconds are disorienting.
A stranger looks into the open casket wearing
unshed tears and empty wishes,
void of healthy emotions and bitter caring.

Sometimes the last few seconds are miserable.
Tear stained relatives touch a cold dry face,
accused glances masked with concern,
unable to interpret anger displaced.

Sometimes all it takes
is a moment's realization.
Graveyards are good places
for quiet conversations.



ANNIE MINGA

Frozen Dandelion Wishes

The Buggy

Normal trips to the beach don't usually include me cutting my foot on sharp metal objects tucked away in the sand. Not that I minded. I often cut my feet on shells only halfway buried in the sand, or shards of glass left over from a night of drunken revelries. I would always end up slicing the soles of my feet on the rocks in the shallows. I would have expected to cut my feet on almost anything except a buggy.

Only the wheel of the wire shopping cart was sticking out of the sand, visible between the ebb and flow of the waves. I had cut myself on the sharp piece of metal that jutted out from the wheel socket, bent beyond repair.

I didn't mind so much but my sister Gracie screamed that there was blood in the water and ran to get mama. She came running immediately, hollering and yelling to see if I was okay and to get out of the water that instant. I yelled back that I was fine and that the salt water would take care of it. She stopped at the edge of the tide, looking at me with apprehensive eyes. Her long black hair hung dead and limp around her face.

"There's a buggy in the water mama. I cut my foot on it. That's all." I said.

"The way Gracie was carryin' on, I thought a shark bit your foot clean off."

"No mama." I said.

Her friends across the beach began shouting, hollering unintelligible words and motioning her to come back. She yelled at them to quit hollering, adding a few choice

obscenities just for good measure.

She turned back to me. “Well, what’s a buggy doin’ in the water anyways?”

“Somebody left it there I guess.”

“Well, stay away from it, ya hear?”

“Yes mama.” I made a mental note to ask for God’s grace later for crossing my fingers behind my back.

Gracie refused to get back in the water now afraid that sharks would bite her too. Mama told her that there were no sharks in these waters—she had just been kidding—and to hurry up and get back in or she would get a paddling at home. Gracie bit her lip and stepped back into the water, stopping to look back over her shoulder at mama. She flashed Gracie a wavering smile and walked back up the beach to her friends.

I didn’t know if there were sharks in the water or not, but I didn’t care either way. I sank down to my knees and began scooping away the sand around the wheel. Eventually Gracie worked up the courage to wade back out to where I was digging. I had now exposed part of the metal webbing from the side of the buggy and a second wheel. Gracie bent down to help me. I was digging with a fervor, willing myself to get to the bottom of it and expose the whole thing. I began digging in a trance, not seeing anything in front of me, but stuck repeating the motions of digging by some will other than my own. Gracie’s voice woke me up.

“I think there’s something inside it.” She tilted her head to the side and cautiously poked a finger through the metal webbing.

Still not fully aware, it took me a minute to understand she meant inside the buggy.

“Gracie, don’t poke it.” I reached out a hand to draw hers away, but drew back. My hands started to throb. I could

tell that there was definitely something inside it, but all I could discern at the moment was a large black shape. I told Gracie not to worry about it, and just keep digging. It was probably just leftover belongings someone had left in the buggy.

"I think mama looks like a ghost sometimes when she smiles."

"What?" I stopped digging to stare at her. "Don't say things like that."

"It's true though." She insisted. "Like when she smiled at me just a moment ago. She looked so empty."

"Whatever, Gracie. Just keep digging."

Soon we had part of the handle exposed. There was enough room for me to wrap both of my hands around the bar comfortably.

"I'm going to yank it, okay? Stand back."

"Let me help you." She reached forward with one hand.

"No, I can do it, stand back."

"Fine." She backed up to the edge of the water, arms crossed.

I braced my feet into the sand and tugged. The waves swelled up over the buggy and washed gently over my ankles. I felt like I could be a god right there in that moment, but then the wave receded and the buggy was still half buried in the sand. I sank down on my knees in defeat. What was the point?

Gracie pointed at the buggy. "Look, its moving!" Strange chugging sounds were coming from the buggy and bubbles rose from the depths of its belly. The dark shape inside shifted and washed into our view. It took me a second to recognize what I was looking at. A pale waxy face pushed

against the metal framed with billows of moldy hair. Her eyes were missing, and chunks of flesh were gouged out in several places but there was a hint of a smile as if her predicament was something to laugh at. The cheeks were sunken and her lips still had traces of lipstick on them. She looked as if she had merely gone for a swim and fell asleep floating on her back. I had never hated something and loved it at the same time until that moment. I didn't have much time to take it all in before Gracie screamed.

I was immediately aware of mama standing at the edge of the water. I didn't recall seeing her run over. Her eyes bulged at the sight of the face bobbing beneath its prison of metal webbing. I stood there seething at the injustice.

"I told you to leave that buggy alone! Get out of the water! We're goin' home, ya hear? Get out!"

We got out of the water. Gracie was crying and I barely had time to take one more look back at the woman's face before mama grabbed both of our hands and practically dragged us home. We had to run to keep up.

Mama told us that morbidity was a sin, but we couldn't help it. We speculated that night amongst ourselves as to who the woman might have been and how she ended up in the water.

Now that Gracie had gotten over her shock, she was just as curious as I. She guessed that the woman could have been crazy and had broken out of the institution when she was murdered by the orderlies who were sent to bring her back because she was too dangerous.

As for me, it seemed perfectly reasonable that she could have been a Queen.

I went up to the roof of our building the next morning. I had a pretty good view of the beach below. I had never seen that little beach so full of life. People were everywhere, taking photos, putting things in bags, interviewing witnesses. I asked mama if they were going to talk to Gracie and me about the woman, but she said no and told us we had to stay in the house until further notice. I told her that wasn't fair. We were the ones that found her. She told me that if she ever heard me mention that buggy again I was going to get a paddling I'd never forget.

Most of the people were concentrated around the left side of the beach. They had managed to pull the buggy all the way out of the water and were removing the body from it. There were other things in the buggy too, I could see them putting the items in bags, but I was too far away to tell what they were. It left a bitter taste in my mouth. I wanted to shake my fist at them and shout "I was there first!" But I remembered mama's warning and stayed quiet.

I stayed on the roof long after everyone left the beach. I watched the waves come and go, same as they'd always done. The beach seemed emptier now. Empty but peaceful. There was only one thing that still bothered me and I kept waiting to see if anyone would come back and fix it. But no one came back. After I had spent all that time trying to dig it out, they just left the buggy on the beach. It was already halfway sunk beneath the waves.



HEATHER CHANDLER

Cat in Venice

JASON MONKS

Arlington Heights

Toughskins and cheap tennies, a shirt no one should've ever worn.
Running through the jungle gym, drifting in the brush.
Sun shining on screaming chaos, I'm deaf to it all.
Spinning, turning, racing through the tire tunnel.
It happened so fast, the look on his face.
Tumbling to the ground, he didn't know what hit him.
The perfect smash, the perfect smear.
Twenty stampeding legs halt, ten heads swivel in surprise.
Their eyes turn to stare at me.
I stare back. The moment is trapped.

*A black cloud covers the sun.
I prepare for danger.*

The biggest one, the leader, starts right in,
"Hooray for the little kid!"
They all sing out, "Hooray for the little kid!"
They snatch me up and lift me on their shoulders.
"Hooray for the little kid!"; "Hooray for the little kid!"

*The cloud disappears.
Others flee at the approach of my parading army.
The only sounds – echoes of my beating heart,
chants of celebration.
I look all around to see treetops and human ants.
A plane turns to escape disaster.
Time is frozen.*

It's 1977.
I'm six-years-old.
*I'm a hundred feet tall.
I'm King of Arlington Heights.*

STACEY TORRES

One, Two, Three

The first three seconds are the most crucial.
Wavering tones bellow through the loud speakers.
One, two, three — we hit the ground.

Silence falls over everyone.
Rocket Attack, Rocket Attack — wavering tones continue.
One, two, three — we hit the ground.

The sound is far too familiar in a place like this.
Where does it hit this time? How many casualties?
One, two, three — we hit the ground.

Questions linger amongst the crew.
But only time will tell.
One, two, three — we hit the ground.

CHAD PETTIT

The Price of Going Home

Mike squinted into the fiery sunlight eclipsing the purple sky behind a silhouette of pine that crested the distant mountains. He took a quick and whistling breath through his nose and exhaled it slowly with a throaty groan as he walked up to the driver side door of his black pick-up. Without looking at it, he opened the door, barely noticing the squeaking hinge, and then he carelessly tossed his lunch pail across the bench seat where it landed on the passenger side and wedged halfway between the seat and the door. He grunted a frustrated but barely audible sound that accompanied the sudden slump of his shoulders when he let his hand slip away from the door.

“Whatever,” he said, taking a few lazy steps over to the bed of the old, dented up Ford where he folded his arms over the top and leaned his chest into it.

He tried to ignore the muddy tire in the truck bed, but that wasn’t easy. The mud was caked in swirls on the tire, and it was positioned almost exactly in the center of the bed, surrounded by discarded coke cans, bottles, and other random debris that made it look like a whirlpool in a polluted sea that fed on trash and filth. He shook his head, not knowing or really caring when he’d have time to get the thing patched up, suddenly getting frustrated that he had to go another night on the thin spare bolted onto the driver’s front side. He closed his eyes and just breathed for a few moments, trying his best not to clench his teeth any harder than he already was.

“Don’t get worked up about it. You know what happens when you do.”

Mike opened his eyes and looked to his left to see his wife walking toward him from the tailgate side of the pick-up. She was carrying a silver thermos in her right hand and pulling a stray lock of silvery blond hair behind her pale ear. Her easy stride over the loose gravel of their driveway always impressed him, but he rolled his eyes at her despite himself.

“Shoulda fixed the stupid thing ‘s’mornin’” he said as he turned his head back to the truck bed. This time, he looked over it and stared down into the neighbors front yard. “Ain’t they never gon’ mow that lawn?” He nodded toward the neighbor’s as his wife came up beside him and set the thermos on the lip of the bed.

“Tom done run off again. Shiela’s workin’ doubles all week.” Mike saw his wife propping her elbow on the truck and resting her cheek in her palm out of the corner of his eye. “And if you’d messed with that tire this mornin’ you’d be ‘bout a pound heavier on attitude than ya already are.”

“Guess y’ought t’run down ner and tell her I’ll tend to it tomorra.” He stood up straight and let his hands slide away from the truck. “Attitude or not, I ain’t got no business ridin’ round on a spare like at.” He pointed at it. “Things gonna bust, you watch. Then I’ll be the fool everybody in town’ll be laughin’ at.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not Nat?” Mike put his hands on his hips and spread his feet, which made a crunching sound on the rocks.

“Cause then ya might wreck and get hurt, and then what’re me and the kids s’posed to do?” Natalie lifted off the truck as she spoke and her face turned red.

Mike snorted. “Shoot, the insurance money’d might be more than I’m gettin’ now. Workman’s comp ain’t worth a dime, but it’ll get us by.”

“Ain’t what I meant and you know it Mike Newman.”

Mike walked over and reached out for her hips. “First and

last name huh? Am I in trouble Mrs. Newman?"

She laughed and slapped his hands away as she stepped back. "Oh I hate it when you call me that, and yes you are in trouble. 'Bout give me a heart attack talkin' like 'at."

"Like what?" He held his arms out and feigned innocence.

"Like ya might get hurt." She folded her arms and put her back against the truck. "Or worse."

Mike sighed and let his arms go to his sides slowly. "Ah Nat, I ain't mean nothin' by it." He turned his head and looked back to the mountains where the sun was like a sliver of disappearing fire. "Just stressed is all."

"Thinkin' 'bout it again?"

He paused before he replied. "Don't ever stop." He swallowed and turned back to face her, but his head drooped before he looked at her, and he stared at the gravel at his feet.

"Daddy, are you leavin?"

Mike turned around and saw his seven year old daughter, with her curly red hair bouncing off, across, and around her freckled face, running over the gravel towards him. Her five year old brother was charging as hard as he could behind her, tiny arms and short legs pumping with his face to the ground and buzzed head aimed at Mike like a bullet. He knelt down and opened his arms up wide just in time for both of them to crash into his chest and nearly knock him to the ground.

"Yeah baby girl, daddy's gotta go t'work so's he can pay fayer birthday party."

She looked up, staring at him with emerald green eyes from beneath his sewn-on name tag and smiled. "Are you gonna be there?"

He scrunched his face up, squinted his eyes, and made a "hmm" sound. "Tell ya what. I'll see what I can do." He gave her a quick wink and a smile.

His son stepped away and folded his arms across his

chest. "Yuck man." He spit on the ground to his left with a big jerk of his entire body. Mike shook his head. "Them girls with their dang dolls and all that screamin' fer a whole day?"

"Danny boy, you watch 'at mouth for I clap 'er shut for yuns."

"Yessir." Danny huffed.

"Sides," Nat said as she walked past Mike toward Danny. "Cheyenne don't hardly play with dolls, and you know it." She bent down and poked playfully at his sides. He flinched and tried to block her hands with his elbows, but his mom managed to tickle him a couple of times before he escaped by running around the other side of the truck.

Natalie turned enough so that Mike could see her scowling. "Don't you kick a buncha rocks up on yer Daddy's truck with all that runnin' little boy."

"Ah one or two more ain't gon' hurt this old thing. Shoot, she's got enough now we prob'ly wouldn't notice." Mike snorted, letting Cheyenne go so she could chase her brother.

Natalie walked towards him once both kids were out in the yard tagging each other. "Just cause a body's got some dents don't mean you gotta put more in it Babe."

Mike shrugged. "Well this ol' body'll just keep truckin' along."

She stopped a foot away, folded her arms, and looked up at him with a stoic expression. "That's what I'm worried about."

"You sayin' I'm old?"

Natalie nodded. "And dented. You need to call up to that hospital."

Mike let out a harsh sigh. "There you go with that mess again," he said, shaking his head.

She reached out and put her hand on his chest. "Calm down Babe. I ain't tryna fuss." She choked over her next words. "I just get so worried about you at night. I can't hardly sleep

cause I don't know if—”

“Stop.” Mike grabbed her hand with both of his gently. Hers was soft compared to his callused, cut-up fingers. “I’ll call.” She frowned and cocked her head to the side. “Nah, I mean it this time. I don’t know if it’ll do any good, but I’ll give ‘er a shot.”

“Promise?”

He nodded and stepped back, grabbing the driver’s door with his left hand. “Yeah I’m off tomorra night, so I’ll ring ‘em up in the mornin’ for I go to bed.”

She twisted her face up and stared at him through narrowed eyes. “You’re alright with that?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Ain’t nothin’ to make a big fuss about. Just don’t tell nobody, alright?”

She cocked her head to the other side quickly. “Now why would I go and tell anybody about something like that?”

He held up his hand and looked at the ground. “Nat, I’m just sayin. Don’t get all bunched up over it.” He took a deep breath and looked up. She was smiling. “Ah, good night! Alright, now I gotta get for I’m late.”

She held her ground, smiling.

He rolled his eyes and nodded. “Fine. You’re right. Better?” She raised an eyebrow and shrugged slowly, holding her shoulders up for effect. Mike snorted and shook his head. “Lord help.”

Natalie yelled for the kids to come over and tell their Daddy good night, so they stopped their spontaneous wrestling match and ran over to the truck. They each took a turn hugging his leg, and he dropped a gentle arm over their shoulders without taking his hand off the truck’s door.

“Love y’all. Mind, hear?”

“Yessir,” they said in unison.

“In the house,” Natalie said from behind them. They

groaned but obeyed, slowly moping away from the truck, up the wooden steps and into the single-wide trailer.

Mike watched them go with a smile, and then turned back to look at Natalie once the door had closed. She was in front of him, leaning with her shoulder against the side of the cab of the truck and holding his thermos out to him. He grabbed her by the waist with one hand, pulling her off the truck and toward himself while grabbing the thermos with the other hand. He felt her body lifting as she stood on her toes to kiss him. He pulled her in tight to himself as their lips met gently, roughly. Longingly. Mike wanted it to last a long time, felt her heartbeat speeding up as if to share his sentiment, but he forced himself to pull away slowly after a few passionate seconds.

“Course I could skip that phone call and finish that up in the mornin’ instead.” He raised both eyebrows up rapidly twice and gave her a devilish grin.

She touched his cheek softly with the palm of her hand. “Hmm, not a bad idea.” She slid her hand slowly down his cheek, making a scraping sound over the two day old stubble until her fingertips came to the edge of his jaw, and then she gently pushed him away with both hands on the front of his shoulders. “But, that would be breaking a promise, so it’ll have to be a rain check.”

“Rain check huh?”

She shrugged. “Promises are promises.”

He nodded. “Guess that’ll teach me.” She shrugged again and gave him a pursed lip smile.

“Love you,” he said as he grabbed the steering wheel and pulled himself into the truck.

“Love you too.”

He tossed the thermos next to him on the bench seat and pulled the door shut.

Mike grabbed the sides of his face with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand and closed his eyes. He let out an exhausted grunt and pulled the fingers across his eyelids, and then he used them to pinch the bridge of his nose. He took a long breath in through his nose, held it, and then exhaled with his mouth wide open. When he pulled his hand away from his face and opened his eyes he saw the blood that had been smeared across the palm and fingers, and it quickly registered that he had just covered his face in it. The hand began to shake. He squeezed it open and closed several times quickly, but it only seemed to make the trembling worse.

“You okay Newman?”

He looked up and saw Bill Johnson standing in front of him. The foreman had one hand on his hip, and he was leaning forward so far that his other arm was hanging loosely in front of him.

Mike blinked a half dozen times before giving his tall boss a rapid series of nods. “Um. Yeah.” He sniffed and blinked at the same time, squeezing his eyelids tightly for a moment. “Yeah, I’m alright.”

“No you’re not.” Johnson stood up straight and folded his arms. “You’re done Newman. I’m sending you to the doc.”

Mike stared at him blankly, absently pulling his bloody hand into his chest where he rested it against his name tag. “Nah, I’m alright sir.”

Johnson snorted. “Oh you’re alright? Newman you’re covered in blood, and I don’t even know who’s it is. Do you?”

Mike shook his head and wondered whose blood it really was. A team of paramedics pushed a stretcher with one of his crewmembers strapped onto it behind Johnson. The man, Colvina, groaned and squirmed under his straps. John-

son turned his head to the right, glancing over his shoulder at the injured man. Mike could see his shoulders slump when he turned back toward him.

“Where was your head at Mike?”

He tried to respond, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a weak “um.”

“Well?” Johnson stomped his foot.

“I don’t know. I got distracted by something in the road.”

“The road?” Johnson unfolded his arms and took a step forward. He looked to his left and right, and then whispered once he was closer to Mike.

“Mike what in the world are you talking about? The road?” He stood up and looked around again. “You’re inside a shop, don’t you know that? Huh? That kid just took a 4-inch piece of solid round steel in the face because you weren’t paying attention and hit cycle start on that lathe without an okay from the operator.”

Mike felt his mouth hanging open and his heart rate picking up. “No. No, that ain’t it.” He shook his head. “There was a man in the road. He was waving us down like he needed help.”

He felt a jolt and gasped. He blinked and realized that Johnson had grabbed him roughly by the shoulders. “Get it together son.” Johnson’s face was close to his. “Get outa here before the boss gets here. He’s on the way from his house now. Get yourself to the hospital.”

Mike shook his head. “I’m not hurt Bill.” He stared directly into Johnson’s eyes and tried to slow his breathing, which had become rapid and made up of bursts.

Johnson stepped back and let go of his shoulders. He nodded somberly. “Yeah ya are Mike.”

Mike looked down at his feet and sniffed to fight back the moisture forming in his eyes. “I’m done here huh?” When he looked back up, Johnson was wearing a frown, and he’d shoved

his hands into the pockets of his dark blue dickies. Mike could tell he was trying not to get choked up when he replied.

“Yeah Mike. You’re done.”

He felt a sudden calm. His heart beat normally. He breathed at an even pace. He poked his lips out and nodded one of those nods that takes the whole head, neck and shoulders, the kind of nod that accompanies the acceptance of great defeat.

“Thanks for the chance Bill.” He thought about shaking hands, but when he looked at the blood on his, he changed his mind. “Nat said the same thing this mornin’. Been sayin’ it a while. Prob’ly shoulda listened.” He reached over to the work bench next to him and retrieved his thermos and lunchbox, then turned back to Johnson. “I’ll check on Covina later, make sure he’s alright.”

“You just get to the hospital’s all.” Johnson jerked his head toward the door to his right. “I’ll call up to the house and make sure your wife knows where you’re gonna be.”

He nodded, hesitated, and then headed for the door.

* * * * *

Mike didn’t want to go to the hospital. He looked out the windshield over his hand on top of the steering wheel. The smeared blood on his hand in the darkness of the cab made it look as black as the night sky, and he couldn’t keep his eyes off of it. He hadn’t even taken the time to clean his hands before getting in the truck. He knew blood was all over him, all over the seat, the doors, and the wheel. Driving faster and faster down the county road from his shop toward the hospital, there was only one turn that would lead to the road that would take him to the hospital. As he approached that road, a wide farm road to the right, he tightened his grip on the wheel.

He kept his eyes fixed on the broken yellow line in front of him, contrasted by his black knuckles. He tried his best to shut the rest of the world out of his peripheral vision, forced himself to ignore the road as he passed it. He planted the heel of his right foot firmly into the floorboard of the truck and pressed the ball of his foot down on the gas pedal. The pick-up roared and stood up, picking up speed as he clenched his teeth and tightened his grip on the wheel even more.

Home. That's all he wanted. The only place he wanted to go.

He felt the chill of the early morning creeping into the cab and reaching out for him with its long, icy tendrils. He reached down to the thermostat and turned the fan up without looking at it. The trees on the road ahead were getting shorter and more spread out, which somehow seemed to bring more of the cold as the space around him grew wider and the road became less developed. He began to feel bumps in the road, but he ignored them. The heat of the fan blowing into his face made his eyes heavy, and he began to blink with long pauses that shut the road out for seconds at a time.

"Get home boy." He breathed in through his nose for three or four seconds, held it even longer, and then let it out with a groan that dragged out and developed into a yell that went nowhere but the ceiling of the cab.

He gave his head a quick shake and then turned the radio on. He blinked and tried to focus on the road while he turned the tuning knob through the stations. He turned the knob slowly, one click at a time through country music, classical, and talk radio about everything from aliens to Congress. The clicks became slower, matching the pace of his drawn out blinks until he felt his hand slip off the radio knob as his body jerked. He blinked hard and opened his eyes as wide as he could. He put his hand on the bench seat next to him and pushed himself up because he had slumped to the right. He was over the yellow

line on the left side of the road, so he steered back to his own side. There was static on the radio.

“On your toes son,” he said to himself. “Just gotta get to the house.” He blinked again, and the darkness swallowed trees, the yellow line, and the broken road ahead.

He sat up fast, too fast. Jerked the wheel. He had barely gotten his eyes open in time to steer back into his lane. It couldn’t have lasted more than a second, but Mike had drifted into the oncoming lane. His heart pounded in his chest and he was breathing hard with trembling shudders. He swallowed hard, thankful that the road ahead was clear. He looked down at the picture of his family that he had wedged into the dashboard.

The road seemed less curving than it had a minute ago, but even foggier than just moments before. The pick-up rode smoothly over the road, even though it was scored with pot-holes and whole sections of asphalt were missing. He felt so at peace, so relaxed. Even when he saw a man standing in the road, his body was too comfortable to react. The man was holding something in his hand, something square and plastic. Mike thought the pick-up must have been moving in slow motion because he was getting closer to the man, but he hadn’t moved. His dirty, bearded face was wrapped in a white and black checkered cloth that draped over a gun-barrel grey sport coat. The sport coat covered a white, ankle length robe that touched the man’s chapped toes, scarcely covered in a dusty pair of broken sandals. The man was smiling. One hand was up to his own throat, thumb pointing toward him. The man’s smile widened as he dragged his thumb across his throat, then pointed to Mike with the same hand.

Mike woke up as his pick-up drove head first into a concrete guard rail. Bright, white-hot light filled the cab of the pick-up, and Mike threw his hands up in front of his face. An intense heat blew the windows inward, showering him with thick, bulletproof glass. He felt his head, suddenly in a helmet,

slam into the steering wheel, and fingers of pain reached out, grabbing his brain and squeezing hard. He screamed from the pain as the pickup went air born. His shoulders and lap felt like they were being burned, and he was jerked down tightly into the seat as the vehicle went upward. When the vehicle came down, the force knocked the wind out of him and he tried to gasp for air. There was nothing, except helpless terror and silent gulps for the air that had been sucked out with the explosion.

* * * * *

Mike forced his eyes to stay open, willing himself to consciousness. He knew the pickup was on fire. He had to get out, but the door wouldn't open. There were agonizing screams behind him, screams joined with the roaring of flames and the smell of burning flesh. He wasn't in the driver's seat; he was on the right side of an armored HMMVW with a military radio between him and the driver of the vehicle, a young man in body armor and a helmet. He looked to his left and saw the driver of the armored truck, unmoving. His head was slumped against the door of the vehicle. The man's body was limp, his body armor now his casket.

Mike heard a voice crackling through the static on the radio. It was screaming, shouting at him, but it wasn't a song. It was Bill Johnson yelling at him to stop. But that was in his head now. The radio had been destroyed. He could smell the flesh of his gunner still smoldering in the turret hatch, and he managed to turn his head enough to see the man's torso draped over the gun, legs dangling, blackened. He turned back around and looked out the window. The man was back, standing in front of the vehicle with a smile. Mike lifted his hands to his face. His Nomex gloves were covered in blood. The screams from behind were growing faint. He shut his eyes and clenched his hands into fists. He felt his body shaking, heard his sobs above the

roaring of the flames.

The door of the vehicle opened. Mike turned and saw a man in camouflage and body armor reaching for him. When the hands of the man touched his chest, Mike felt his body go limp, and everything faded to black.

* * * * *

“Mike?” The voice called to him. It was distant but familiar. It came again, closer and clearer.

“Mike, wake up.”

Slowly, Mike opened his eyes. He blinked several times, clearing away the haze of the hypnosis. He sniffed through his nose and took a deep breath, almost at the same time. Instantly he was wide awake and staring into the face of Doctor Adega. Mike knew him too well; short, middle-aged, pearly white teeth. The man was the picture of health. Mike couldn’t help but resent his pristine appearance.

“Welcome back Mike,” Dr. Adega said, smiling. He stood up, taking his hands away from Mike’s shoulders where they had been. Mike guessed he had been shaking him to try and rouse him for a while. There were worry lines creasing Dr. Adega’s forehead, but he still wore the same smile, genuine and reassuring.

“Thanks,” Mike managed to say. He put his hands on the armrests of the leather chair he was sitting in and pushed himself to a more comfortable position.

“That was quite a session Mike,” Dr. Adega said, standing over him in his white smock. He reached up and fixed his glasses with his index and forefinger. “How do you feel it went?”

Mike looked away, to the right and to the ground, staring at the floor.

“Mike do you know where you are?”

Mike nodded.

"Good, and do you mind telling me where that is?"

"Walter Reed," Mike said without looking up.

"That's right," Dr. Adega said. "Very good." He cleared his throat and sat down in a chair that was a step behind him and to the right. "Mike you said quite a lot in this session about going home."

"So."

"Do you want to go home Mike?"

"There is no home."

"Why is that?"

"Because I fell asleep. I ruined everything and now I can't go home."

"But do you want to go home Mike?"

"This is home now."

"This is America, so yes, compared to Iraq, it is home." Dr. Adega folded his hands in his lap. "But Mike, don't you want to go back to your wife and children?"

"They don't want me now," Mike said, emotionless. He stared at the tile floor, stared through it.

"What happened that day Mike?"

Mike sat quietly for several moments, not responding. Dr. Adega was still, respectful of the gravity of the memory. Mike looked up and took a long, shoulder raising breath. He let it out with a groan.

"We was two weeks out, 'bout to go home," he began mechanically. There was no emotion in his voice. "It was one of our last patrols. It was nearly morning, so we was just on our way back to camp. It was cold that morning, so we had the heat cranked up pretty good. We used to run it wide open so my gunner could get a little bit of heat on his legs. It gets pretty cold in them turrets Doc, you know?"

"I can imagine," Dr. Adega said, nodding.

"Yeah, well it does," Mike continued, unshaken. "I couldn't hear the radio over the heater. Some kinda malfunction with our headsets, so I had to turn the volume up a lot. I couldn't understand hardly nothin. I should have just turned the stupid heater down, but we'd done that patrol so many times that I didn't pay much attention. Background noise, catch my drift Doc?"

"Absolutely Mike. Please continue."

"Well what we didn't know was there was also an exhaust leak, but it was leaking into the cab of the vehicle. It took a while to notice on account of the gunner's hatch being open, but carbon monoxide was leaking in on us. 'Bout had us all knocked out. The patrol had stopped behind us, and my commander, Captain Johnson, was screamin' into the radio for me to stop. I fell asleep at the same time as my driver. I was so messed up, I couldn't even hear my gunner yelling at us. We never saw the debris in the road. My gunner managed to wake me up, but it was too late. There was this old man in the road. My driver woke up right when my gunner was yelling "Haji" but it was too late. We'd done driven right into a trap."

"And what was the old man doing in the road?"

Mike shrugged. "Ain't no tellin' man. Decoy. Someone on his way home. Who knows."

"And that all happened just two weeks away from you going home?" Dr. Adega's brow was furrowed up and his smile was gone.

"Like I've said for the past six months," Mike said. "Why do I have to keep telling this story?" His voice shook. "Don't you people realize it's killin' me?"

"We're just trying to get you home Mike," Dr. Adega said in a calm voice.

"Like I said, this is home," Mike replied flatly. "Walter

Reed, but I gotta admit, I'm 'bout tired of this burn center."

"You're not in the burn center Mike." Dr. Adega leaned forward.

Mike leaned back. "What?" He felt his knuckles pop as he gripped the armrests of the chair. "Well just where am I then?"

Dr. Adega was silent for a moment, but then replied slowly. "You are in the psychiatric ward Mike."

Mike felt the blood draining from his face. His jaw dropped and he couldn't breathe.

"And you're not at Walter Reed anymore Sergeant. You are at Darnall Army Community Hospital, at Fort Hood, Texas."

Mike barely whispered his next statement. "But that's where I'm stationed."

"You've been home for over five months Mike."

Mike was still at first, and then began to shake his head.

"No," he said. "No."

Dr. Adega held his hands out with his palms in front of him. "Mike, please."

"No. You're crazy. I ain't stayin' here no more. I gotta get outa here."

"And where are you going to go Mike?"

"Work. I gotta talk to Johnson. See if I can get my job back."

"Mike, there is no job."

"He'll give me another chance."

"There is no shop to go back to Mike."

Mike stood up and shouted. "Well then where was I last night?"

Dr. Adega was calm. "You were here, in a hospital bed."

Mike shook his head. "Crazy. I ain't even the one's hurt."

Where's Covina? I gotta make sure he's alright."

Dr. Adega slowly stood up. "Mike, please listen to me. "Specialist Covina is not a man you worked with in a machine shop. He was your gunner in Iraq, and he died in a fire the night your convoy was attacked."

Mike froze. His jaw dropped. He slowly, almost unnoticeably, shook his head as his vision glazed over. He felt hands on his chest and back, felt them guiding him back. The back of his legs touched something, a chair, and he was being guided into it by those hands. The world grew dark around him, and the voice of Dr. Adega became distant. He barely noticed the cold leather of the seat swallowing his body. His hands came up in front of his face. They weren't bloody; they were clean but trembling.

He blinked. Looked at his hands again. Blood suddenly smeared them.

Another blink. Gloves, covered in blood, appeared on his hands. Darkness surrounded him, and all he could see was the blood on his gloves. He heard flames burning, roaring around him, and he clenched his fists. He shut his eyes, squeezed them tightly. The static of the radio blended with the sound of the fire.

The door of the armored truck was yanked open. The man in camouflage and body armor was reaching for him again. The man's name tag said Adega. His arms reached around Mike, grabbing him by the shoulders, pulling him out of the fire.

"Come on Mike," the man said. "We're gonna get you home."

PAT SONTI

A Sniper's Veil

Shots bloomed, slyly undiscovered;
Stealth practiced, patience tamed.
Silent presence, grass grows.

Faces blurred, rifles dulled;
Snow and greyed, brown and abraded.
Shiny copper, intent flows.

Kings fall, faces bloodied;
Parades scrapped, target felled.
Death awaited, sleep swallows.

Jungle welcomes, desert embraces;
Cities muddled, adversary befuddled.
Ghosts arose, corpse shows.

Shrouded mystery, fire unbeknownst;
Identity cloaked, face veiled.
Enigma remains, time slows.



CYNTHIA SOLL

Wilt

RICHARD BARRETT

The Magistrate and Town Halls

A time of worry, a time of unknowns.
The people feel divided, though they live united.
United they live, divided they stand.
Corporeal thoughts of self-absorption.

The groups, the citizens, the workers, the teachers, the students,
Everyone ruled by the magistrates in Town Hall.
The magistrate sits high above in his wooden-milled chair.
He rules unjustly in lieu of what is needed.

The majority needs to eat, the majority needs access.
Yet the minority has ruled so long, they have oppressed the majority.
The majority says, "No More!"
The magistrate agrees that enough is enough.

The time has come, where the people oppressed speak their minds.
An age of protest and absolution, where the discriminated are delegated.
Where the era is the same as it once was, a voice is always heard.
But sometimes...the voices grow louder.

CYNTHIA SOLL

The Taking of Emmett Till

Pride sneaks through the night,
 dressed in the clothes of Everyman.
Audacity enters quiet homes
 to corner prey in crowded beds.
Entitlement brushes aside companions,
 with their desperate, throaty pleas.
Vanity snatches sweet youth
 from life's protective grasp.

Anger carries cold metal
 with which to beat and bruise.
Ego covers callous tyrants
 with righteousness of rust.
Hatred seeks capitulation
 when stiff spines do not bow.
Wrath delivers darkness
 with the permanence of death.

Regret creates suffering
 with whispered might-have-beens
Pain demands answers
 to fill the gaping void.
Heartbreak sows revolution,
 with passions stirred by grief.



FELICIA JULIANO

Untouched

ERICA STALLINGS

Rose

She sees the red rose everywhere
on every street she walks down.

She reaches, she tries to grab it—
It appears devoted to the ground.

She can only enjoy the fragrance
and attest to the delicacy from afar.

The yearning!
The deprived!

Concealing her angered eyes,
she sees the red rose everywhere.

SHAUN K. ORTEGO

Soul of the Star-strider

Your way of life, it is going to die.
Never the matter, how hard you try.
Gone are the old days, no more apple pie.

*: You cannot stop the future nor undo the past.
I would say nothing you do will ever last...
but now that would be a lie.*

Pressure remains, no time for a sigh.
Never any relief, now we live in the sky.
Rewards may be great, but the price is high.

*: One can be immortal and even live forever.
Just be careful yet daring in whatever you endeavor...
and remember kings never die.*

Don't look back child, don't you cry.
You'll be a man soon, the time is nigh.
Best you learn a trade, a skill to ply.

*: Work harder than the next, learn everything well.
You have to be resilient, for you shall walk through hell...
men must yearn to be tested, lest they be bested.*

Enough with the questions, don't ask why.
You earn enough, buy a ship to fly.
Live among the stars, tell the Earth goodbye.

*: Rome fell and eventually America did too.
Nothing remains shiny, nothing brand new...
life may be transient but learn from the past.*

Nothing remains, nothing left behind.
Saw the warning signs, yet we did not comply.
Our way of life, it caused the Earth to die.

*: Your fellow man is your brother, but count them few.
Conspiring minds are plenty but a handful remain true...
so honor your word to your very last.*

So when I die, don't you rant and rave.
It is what it is, and everything is what I gave.
Returning to nothing, the Sun shall be my grave.

*: A knife in the back is a dreadful situation,
so approach war with a bit of hesitation...
for when you do, the die is cast.*

Now I disappear, leaving you a lesson to grasp...

*: Legends were once real and life does not last, you must
act in the present if you are to live in the past.*

HEATHER CHANDLER

Texan Head Trip

Her poetry was conceived
'round well versed fancy visuals,
dripping with wilting magnolias,
leather, and whiskey
inclined to resonate wrangles
between an "I reckon ma'am,"
and Merle Haggard plucked on the guitar.
She paid no mind to Pancho's
bumbling foolishness or Lefty's
xenophobic gibberish
knowing full well it was
a lone star disposition,
merely a Texan head trip.



STACEY TORRES

Light at the End of the Tunnel

JASON SMITH

The Gift

I was born with a beautiful gift
To construct words from nerds and make dimensional shifts
And by dimensional shifts, I mean the words take lead
Form to flesh and bone, while syllables start to bleed
Like the trees have leaves, the words got to feed
I'm creating and radiating, all the nutrients that they need
I'm the Sun Rising
Now, see the connection
I was sending out messages way before texting
I was giving virgin birth to lyrics without sexing
I was becoming a star before the sun was even setting
Like a poetry lesson, I keep the class in session
You can put your hands in da air, but only for questions
I'll give the right answer like you're taking a test
Behold the Gift given, From the One, who is Blessed

JOY BEILER-REAVIS

I Was Here

nodding off,
pen in hand
marking page with
fascinating proof that
i am here - i am here.

squiggles, loops,
satisfying strokes -
ink flowing at
half pace to thought -
from nothing to something
in one stroke of
smoothed ball
spilling ink
from plastic tube.

something new.
something me.
i am here.

the ache of
my middle finger -
the first bend swollen
from thirty years
of hard writing.
calloused perfection -
red shining proof of
my effort, my force -
the smooth spot on my pinky, too
from rubbing across
a million pages
in search of answers.

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Submission Guidelines

The Lookout is published annually by the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas A&M University – Central Texas and features poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, photography, and visual art submitted by current students and recent alumni of TAMUCT. Any student currently enrolled in classes at TAMUCT (or recent graduates) may submit their previously unpublished creative writing, photography, and/or art work for possible publication in the spring.

To submit your work, save your complete and polished manuscripts in Microsoft Word and send as an attachment to Professor Ryan Bayless at **ryanbayless@tamuct.edu**.

Poetry: submit 1 to 3 poems

Prose: submit 1 short story or creative non-fiction essay

Photography and Art: submit 1 to 3 works

(Attach photos as high quality JPEG files; black-and-white images preferred, but color photography and art will be considered for the cover)

-Please use the body of your email as a cover letter that includes the titles of your submitted works, contact information (email, physical address, and phone number) as well as a brief bio that indicates your class (Junior, Senior, etc.), your major and minor (or degree), and a list of any previous publications in the arts.

-Also, please write "LOOKOUT SUBMISSION" in the subject line of the email.

Submissions accepted October 1st - March 1st each year

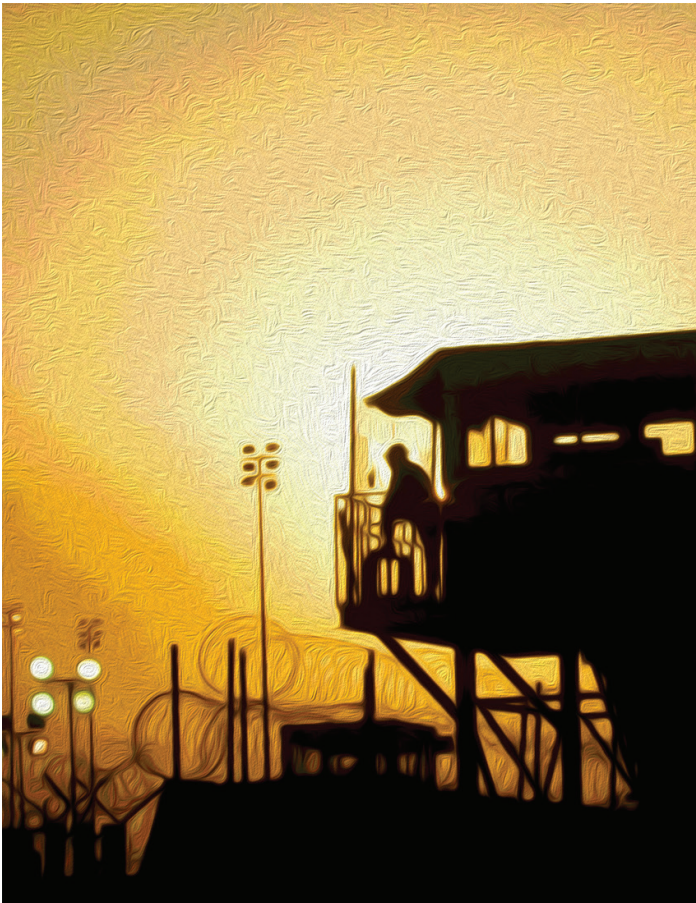


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THE LOOKOUT

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