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The Last Tardy  
By: Rebecca Costello

Prayer  
By: Rebecca Costello

### Honorable Mentions

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By: Linus Stoltz

Hanoi Hilton  
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The Smith's Ruin Christmas  
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### Runner Ups

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By: Erin Purcell

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Five Poems  
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### The Last Tardy

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By: Rebecca Costello

This morning, on the sidewalk,  
She steps on the ants, a smear of dirt.

Her entire figure holds the slump  
Of whatever bends her face toward the ground...

Cloudy, with a 60% chance of precipitation,  
What happened? One ant, two, three, are

Alone with the leaves -  
Avoided. Another and another;

"Each colony of ants has its own distinct smell.  
In this way, intruders can be recognized immediately."

Stepping on the cracks breaks your mother's back.  
Remember the others who fell,

Unbalanced, then gone within moments -  
The spider, pinned to a foam board;

The butterfly, prismatic, thin,  
Glued to a laboratory notebook.

Who would look at the sky,  
The unreachable and unfamiliar,

When instead, by walking along, the bizarre  
Of the unseen might stay away at least until dusk.

Down the street, she looks at each crack as they pass.  
My dear, why did you go out today?

The day is half over, a smudge on the year.  
The clouds and the leaves trade stares in the sun.

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### Prayer

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By: Rebecca Costello

The sun below, boundary  
Positioning, Supposedly  
Playing its song for you.  
Blundering through prayer,  
The sun bellows.

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## Bird Call

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By: Erin Purcell

There is a symphony transpiring thirty feet above my head. Chirps and tweets bounce back and forth through the damp morning air. The sounds of the birds tangle playfully with one another; the music slides off the dewy leaves, tickles the stern tree bark, caresses my all too welcoming eardrums. The sparrow calls a greeting to the lark, as the lark croons a lullaby to the blue jay. Baby birds announce that they've awoken, and their mothers rush to comfort them. The finch warbles a melodic morning greeting to his feathered neighbors. The woodpecker rap-tap-taps out a rousing beat, trumpeting the arrival of the sun, the daily beginning, the fresh start.

This is what I like most about birds: their perpetual enthusiasm for each new day. No matter how many innumerable times the sun may sink or the moon may rise, the birds will always greet the sunrise with joyous song. There is no routine for birds; each moment is its own dew-wrapped present of unexplored potential, a delightful gift to be heralded with song.

My breath forms tiny diamonds that hang in the air in front of my nose and then vanish. Pine needles, spilled like pick-up sticks on a muddy carpet, crunch and crackle under my boots. The pungent aroma of sap floods my nose with every inhale of breath. In. Out. In. Out. I nestle my chin further into my thick wool scarf, attempting to guard my face from the wind's burning tongue. The forest is wrapped in its own thick scarf of stillness this morning. I try not to disturb the syrupy silence as I walk through the maze of pine branches, navigating my way to a place I need no bread crumbs or ball of string to find.

I settle down on a familiar log; the moss has been worn clear on my usual seat. I place the dog-eared guidebook beside me. I push my glasses up my nose and rest the binoculars on my lap. Some days I like to look at the birds, to stare up at them through wide eyes and curved lenses. Other days I don't try to see the birds. In fact, I think I like them the best when I can't see them. I admire them the most. Birds are able to tuck themselves amongst the branches, to camouflage themselves within their sylvan surroundings. The brown feathers of the warbler melt into the tree trunk with ease; the blue jay is obscured against the morning sky. In a world where the sun can be such a harsh and glaring spotlight, sometimes it is nice to hide. I grab hold of my right knee and gracefully position it behind my left.

This is a morning for listening. I shift my weight back on the log, am about to close my eyes when- wait. What's that? Something red has caught my eye in a distant treetop. I peer out at the speck of vibrant color. What is it doing here, that misstitch in this wild quilt of browns and greens and greys? The red approaches, flitting from one shaggy green branch to another. Suddenly, I comprehend. A cardinal.

I have never seen a cardinal in these woods before. The bird preens royally, dipping its small pointed beak snappily into its feathers. The cardinal swivels his head around; his dark eyes look to see who has noticed him, who is enchanted by this majestic new guest. He puffs out his cherry chest, extending his regal stature to its fullest extent.

He shimmies his feathers proudly; the light glancing off them causes them to glow like a sunrise at sea. The cardinal skips to the end of his branch, aligning himself at center stage.

And then he begins to sing. Not the self-absorbed hum of the finch, but a song that is meant for others, for listeners. Tweets stride confidently from the cardinal's beak; chirps parade out unabashedly. The sound latches onto the breeze and tumbles through it gaily. These are joyous sounds, like a child's laughter or jingle bells on Christmas morning.

The cardinal has won his audience. Other birds have quieted their chirping, have swiveled their delicate necks to glimpse this startling newcomer. The diamonds in the air come sporadically now, as my breathing falls into stride with the playful melody of the cardinal's song. This tiny four inch creature has captivated the attention of the entire forest. The whole community is held on a string, waiting to see what he will do next. He stands on his soap box, his podium, his throne. Unembarrassed. Unashamed. Unafraid.

I turn my eyes downward at my own hands resting sheepishly in my lap. My heart is tapping out a beat with a pace to match the woodpecker's.

I do not want to hide anymore. I do not want to tuck myself away, fold into the mundanities of life like a boulder shrouded in pine branches. I do not want to be like the regular birds, no matter how pretty their songs may be. I will not be complacent to live my life hiding from view up on some distant branch. Instead, I will be a cardinal. I will flash my color boldly to the frigid air. I will hide no longer, but captivate instead. I will let my thoughts be known, my ideas communicated, my emotions expressed. I will stride to the edge of my branch, I will turn my face outward. I will sing.

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### The Age Of Man

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By: Teddy Murphy

The coarse concoction of decaying leaves and cold gravel were all that supported the polished clogs of the shivering child. She let the sleeves of her gray fur coat hang limply over the tiny clenched hands that struggled to fight off the creeping chill of September frost, and shrugged her shoulders to cover her exposed neck. Her head tilted down, releasing renegade strands of sandy, windblown hair, which refused to conform to her mother's well-crafted ponytail, falling limply past her forehead and tickling her pale cheeks. The black stockings she wore were partially covered with propriety by a plaid skirt adorned with railroad tracks of blue, black, and white.

The figures that she hid from were not unfamiliar to her. She had been in their cold company for twenty dreary seasons, each one changing to reveal evermore the pale, rubbery features of her paternal overseers. As seasons turned, these features of the figures focused sharper and clearer, and her incontrovertible fear of the unknown grew stronger and stronger. She had happily spent the first five years of her life playing around their feet, feeling the warmth of her father's coarse khaki pants and gentle kiss of her mother's flowing dress. The ripe leather of his shoes was polished and shining, but the daughter struggled to find her face in their reflection, as she had seen so many times in the musical cartoons that had been marketed for her entertainment. The inviting cotton of her mother's slippers dazzled the daughter's eyes with their bright colors from afar, but as she crawled close, she discovered the polka dots of purple and blue were nothing but a canvas for brown, matted threads and stains of dirt and grime, hardened with age beyond recognition, and somehow still retained an alien adhesiveness when touched by curious hands.

It was in this year that the daughter discovered how to look up.

There comes a time at that ripe age of five when one must endure the privilege of a western education. The mind is curious, young, and bendable, having been deceived into believing in a world of vibrant colors and happy endings, animated faces that sang perfectly written songs to them from a closely watched television screen. The figures happily sent away their naïve seed to the wood paneled schoolhouse, where she would receive the knowledge and education needed to become a contributing member of society in the dawn of the critical 21st century.

On her first day, she discovered many things: letters and numbers, words and pictures, names and faces, friends and enemies, students and teachers. But when an unfamiliar skirt standing in the front of the class called her name, she was so shocked that she couldn't help but twist her baby blue eyes up to the first adult face she had seen in her entire life. It looked down at her, smiling a toothy smile, well practiced and well rehearsed.

But the daughter saw through her mask. She saw stains of yellow, painted on the teacher's charming white teeth from years of nicotine and THC. She saw down her grey throat, it's healthy ripe color burned away from boiling alcohol entering her chest and acidic vomit expelling through the same scalded tunnel, and giving off the shivering aroma of cheap vodka and the pungent scent of a toilet filled with oral expulsions of the same solution. She saw through her eyes, shining and bright corneas framed in dull black retinas. They sang a monotonous melody of years of youth and passion stripped away from her flesh with the fleeting heart of a lover, a dissonant harmony of pecuniary struggles and worldly wants, televisions and furniture she could not afford, in an apartment she would never see outside of the well lit, artificial photographs of domestic heavens in the latest Pottery Barn catalog cover. They pounded into the daughter's eyes a rhythm of distrust, a cadence of regret that assaulted the teacher's ears when she longed to find another pair of arms to hold her, a pair of eyes to calm her, a pair of lips to sing to her, and a touch that would send a warm tingle up her spine. This face was the song the adult sang to the child, meticulously composed in forty-nine bleak years, and as the child listened, she longed to look up and hear the song of her own parents.

When the teacher released her children, the adults mingled about the schoolhouse, waiting to pick up their effervescent offspring from their famous first day of school. They came out in waves, some more adept to collecting their crayons and markers than others who took the more care with their entrusted craft store valuables. Parents walked off, mother and father standing to either side of their child, as if protecting them from some unforeseeable but unavoidable danger.

However, two remained. Their daughter had not taken her place in between them to relive all the details of her first six hours of elementary school to them. Instead, the daughter had taken up hiding around the corner, eyes closed, hair covering her ears, and her head firmly crooked down.

She knew well the song of her parents. And she did not wish to hear it.

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### If Addiction Were A Child

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By: Justin Mendoza III

He would come  
bringing nothing.  
He would be  
by himself.  
He wouldn't  
converse with  
anyone.

He would wear  
tattered clothing.  
His hair would  
stand up, a wild nest of neglect.  
His dirt smudged face would hold  
bulging  
bloodshot  
eyes.

Oblivious to the things  
around him,  
he'd speak ever so softly  
to a someone that wasn't there.  
His home would be everywhere  
the street, trashcans, cardboard boxes,  
the sewers,  
suburban homes on tree-lined streets.

He would be a specter,  
a night owl hidden  
in the trees,  
a lion crouched  
down ready to pounce.  
He'd be  
Addiction.

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### Band Geek

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By: Linus Stoltz

I saw them standing  
with funny, furry, little hats  
and vibrant overcoats.  
I saw them march unified  
and precise like ants  
marching in a line.  
I saw band geeks.

I thought their title  
suited them, social  
outcasts destined  
to play piccolos and triangles.  
I thought those  
are the people who can't run,  
jump, shoot, throw, or even attempt  
curling. I knew for sure  
chess was considered a sport to them.

I thought all this and much more was true,  
until I played in a band,  
and heard my saxophone's  
booming volume,  
felt its soothing  
alm,  
and found a place to belong.

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### Hanoi Hilton

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By: Trevor Neel

After the door shuts and the footsteps die, it isn't so bad. Eventually the pain subsides, then it isn't so bad. Trying to move without bending my already broken ribs to get to my maggot infested cabbage soup and muddy water isn't so bad. Trying to sleep but the fear, pain, and screams keep me awake, even then it isn't so bad.

Even getting here isn't so bad. The sudden jerk of the pilot's seat after pulling the handle to eject isn't so bad. The sudden rush of flames and metal sending me out isn't so bad. When my main parachute failed, and I tried to stay calm as I pulled the reserve parachute chord. Floating slowly down above North Vietnamese territory with bad burns to my hand and legs, and the fear sets in, it isn't so bad. Landing in a lake, struggling to get to the top, overwhelmed by so many Vietnamese children and men hitting me wherever and with whatever they could, it isn't so bad. Eventually the army arrives and hit me with rifle butts and kicked me as they blindfolded me and drug me to a truck, it isn't so bad. The occasional stop to be paraded through a village or down a street and made a fool of on camera, the whole time being beat by other Vietnamese people and soldiers alike, it isn't so bad.

Eventually the truck stopped. Dragged off the truck, persuaded by the end of a rifle to move inside, it isn't so bad. Pushed and shoved with fists, feet, rifles, my body bouncing off the cold, cement floor like a basketball on an old gym floor, it isn't so bad.

"Name, GI?" a little man I knelt before repeated over and over.

"What you do here, GI?" the little man said after I gave him my name and serial number. Then a rifle butt to my ribs when I repeated my name, my rank, and my serial number.

"You are spy, GI?" the little man would say. Then almost like clockwork I could expect a sharp jab to my ribs or the back of my neck.

"You commit crimes against Vietnam, GI, sign paper and we take care of you." The little man said in the same mono-tone broken English. Another rifle butt to the ribs when I didn't sign the paper the little man pushed towards me. My lungs not wanting to take air in, the blood that came out of my mouth every time I coughed, the scream that became a gasp at the sheer pain of my chest pushing out. No, my friends, that isn't so bad.

Eventually I make it back to my cell. Lay down slowly in a corner away from the urine on the floor. Trying not to lean against the walls because of the French glass that protrude, but also trying not to put pressure on my body due to the agonizing pain, no that isn't so bad. A gong strike, Metal clanking, locks banging, the big iron door swings open. Another soldier comes in and rushes me to my feet. Not able to sit up on my own, let alone walk down the hallway with him. Drug to my feet, and a fist right into my stomach, I have nothing to do but try and scream in agony. That isn't so bad. Another hit to the stomach for screaming. That isn't so bad. Forced to walk down the hallway, when I fell, I was aided back up by a swift kick to my back or if I was lucky sometimes just drug up by my collar then pushed against the wall. No, that still isn't that bad. When I'm knocked to my knees by the back hand of the Vietcong guard in front of that familiar wooden table, and that familiar little man, it isn't so bad.

"GI, you will die, sign paper and you are free to go", then the paper and pen are pushed towards me again. I shake my head no and then brace for it, but still not able to brace myself for the pain. A hard jab to the back of my ribs. I feel them break again, but try to hold back a scream that is inevitable. It isn't so bad. The little man at the table waves his hand at one of the guards. I'm knocked to the ground and then picked straight up to my feet. The guard takes me and slams me against a wall and binds my hands. Pain tears through my body like a hot knife through butter. It isn't so bad. The guard hoists me up onto the meat hook protruding from the ceiling by the rope that binds my hands. My arms bend backward behind my head. My ribs stretch and I try and bite my tongue but it doesn't matter, I still can't hold back the yells from the pain. I try pulling my arms up so there isn't so much pressure on my body, but it's no use, my shoulder blades popped out of place during the hoist up to the hook. The bruises and cuts all over my body, the broken bones. Pain, pain that is so unbearable that at times I'd rather die than go on feeling it. Honestly, I felt as if I would die. My lungs gasping to get a full breath in but unable to with my ribs threatening to poke through my lungs. The guard laughs as I whimper, and I hang like a shirt on a clothesline drying in the summer breeze. It isn't so bad.

"GI, you sign paper, we take you down and give you bandages. You get better, you go home. You just sign GI" the guard repeats. That's when it becomes bad. That moment, when through your mind flashes the thought "Just sign." Blood, tears, maggots, rope burns, beating after beating, seclusion, the hate that seem to fill every crack and crevice in the place. None of it as bad as that moment, that split second when the soul hops outside of the body looks down on the guards, look at my own body just drooping there. My soul walks out the very door that keeps me locked in, takes a stroll over the hills and through the grassy hills that so many young men have died trying to claim. My soul eventually returns to America. It walks the streets of gold, right past the college protesters, right back home to suburbia. Without knocking, my soul walks through the front door and looks back on all the memories that brought me in and out of that very door so many times. A rifle butt to the back of neck brings my soul stampeding back to reality. The force of the hit sends my body like a tetherball spinning in circles. The guards stops me, but there is nothing he could do for the pain even if he wanted. He laughs again then says something to his friends, they join in the laughing. All of them, laughing at the defeated Yank criminal.

"I'll sign!" I shouted.

"What you say, GI?" The little man said popping out of his seat like a prairie dog as the laughing halts.

"I-I'll sign, just get me down!" I gasped trying to get the breath to finish.

"Good GI, you smart," the little man said as the other guards cut me down and help me down to the floor then back on my knees, like I was a slave kneeling before my master. That is when it becomes bad. I am a modern day Benedict Arnold, betraying a nation that entrusted me with what I was doing. A little wooden desk, black ink, a North Vietnamese paper.

"Can I ever wear an American uniform again?" That's when it gets bad.

"Will I ever be able to look my family in the eyes again?" That's when it gets bad.

"Will I even still have a family?" That's when it's the worse. I cracked, I gave in, if I ever was to call myself a man again. If I could ever work up the courage to call myself American again, it won't matter. Others have come before and gave up everything including their lives, and I gave in over a few broken bones. That is beyond bad, it's worse than death itself.

That is why today I sit here in my house in this old recliner. My wife took my only daughter and left a week ago because I haven't said a word since I came back. Can't she see that I'm too ashamed? No, she couldn't possibly see, both her and my little girl know that I'm a coward, I can see it in their eyes. They hate me. They will never think of me the same way, I can't even think of myself the same. I sit here with an empty bottle and this old Colt, the one my grandfather carried with him at Gettysburg, resting against the back of my mouth, a bullet in the chamber. Maybe it won't be so bad.



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### The Smiths Ruin Christmas

By: Hannah Cravens

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The Smiths look average in every sense of the word; they live in the suburbs, they have a nice, American car with a "My child is on the honor roll at Washington High School" sticker on the bumper, and every Thanksgiving they have a nice meal with turkey and pumpkin pie. They are a perfect family: a dad (Jonathan), a mom (Sarah), two precious children (Katie and Johnny), and a golden retriever (Sammy). Unfortunately this nice family has some extended family members who are not so normal or perfect. There are lots of cousins and uncles and aunts and grandparents who do not live in the suburbs, drive Toyotas and Hondas, and have eaten Chinese on Thanksgiving. This not-so-nice part of the family is coming to the Smith's house for Christmas, and Mrs. Smith is very worried that the neighbors are going to see all of these people she has tried so hard to keep hidden.

Right now on December 25rd, Mrs. Smith is sitting in her rocking chair that Mr. Smith gave her for Mother's Day about five years ago. She's rocking and rocking and rocking while she thinks of all the problems invading in a mere two days. There is Mr. Smith's sister and her mob of a family—six kids and no father! Now the mother has to work two jobs to support her brood. Mrs. Smith is very glad that she is not nearly so irresponsible as to have children she can not support or have a husband she can not keep happy. Then there is her side of the family, a sister and a brother. Now the sister is not so bad on her own; it's just her sister's daughter. What a little tramp—barely seventeen and pregnant. The Smith's little Katie would never think of getting herself into such a mess and embarrassing the family. Mrs. Smith adjusts herself in her seat as she thinks of the worst of them all: her brother. The little miscreant has had a drug problem since college and just got out of a rehab center. The family is just lucky that no one has ever found out—think of the shame! That is enough with the disturbing thoughts, decides Mrs. Smith. She slowly pulls herself out of her chair and makes her way to bed, turning on the night-table lamps in the children's rooms to guide them when they get home, as both are at very important study groups. She lies down on her side of the bed and folds back her husband's side of the comforter because he is downstairs on the computer taking care of the finances.

It is too bad the Smith children are not really at study groups. Straight-A Katie is with her boyfriend in the back of his pickup, and varsity football Johnny is lighting up a joint in the park with some of his friends. Financier Mr. Smith is doing a dirty deed of his own. Instead of balancing the online checkbook like he said, he is IMing his pretty new secretary. Around two or three in the morning the children creep in and find their way to their rooms, and Mr. Smith follows them upstairs soon afterwards. They all want to be well-rested for when the not-so-perfect family members come.

It is Christmas morning and Mrs. Smith is rocking and rocking and rocking in her chair. Her eyes flit nervously from one member of her extended family to another. All of them are gathered in the Smiths' large living room, unwrapping presents and exchanging small talk. Everyone seems to be behaving so far, but she knows that it is only a matter of time before someone does something very, very uncouth. Suddenly a siren breaks the calm. Everyone races to the window to see what house is so unlucky as to have a cop come for Christmas. Shocked looks are exchanged when the patrol car comes to a halt outside of the Smiths' house. Immediately Mrs. Smith turns to her brother and says, "I knew your problem would ruin Christmas. Are you really so irresponsible to bring drugs into my house?"

As he looks down in shame and mutters a tearful response (something about being clean for six months), policeman after policeman bursts through the door, pushing Johnny Smith against the wall and reading him his Miranda rights. Mrs. Smith screams in horror that they are, of course, mistaken and really should stop and think about what they are doing. In a matter of minutes, though, it is very clear that the policemen are not mistaken. From Johnny's room emerges box after box of cocaine, marijuana, and a wide assortment of pills. Unfortunately for the Smiths, Johnny's room is not the only room that needs to be searched. In Katie's room the cops find birth control pills and condoms and from Mr. Smith's study, they take the computer.

By nature cops are not really quiet people, and all of the comments they make throughout the house travel quite easily back to the ears of the Smiths and their guests, who are still sitting quietly in the living room. Mrs. Smith rocks quicker and quicker as they hear:

"This is probably the biggest bust this unit has ever made. I'll bet we make the news!"

"What a little skank. Is that a pregnancy test? Whaddosit say? Positive? Guess little miss cheerleader's going to miss prom."

"I wish my secretary sent me pictures of her in lingerie. I'd be a happy, happy man."

All of the family members stare at their laps, not sure of what to say or what to do. It is quite amazing, though, how everyone in the room is thinking the same thing (except the Smiths, of course). They are all thinking how glad they are that they are not as screwed up as this family and how glad they are that they are not nearly as irresponsible as this brood of hoodlums.

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### Five Poems

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By: Matt McBride

For B. Precious are your teeth the frame of your plastic hair your perfectly round eyes drawn by a sharpie marker. You are a bobble-head genius the abstract of personhood a less endearing Pinocchio without blemish and yet somehow horrible in your savagely generic beauty. You collapse like an old barn under the weight of your innocence. You are angelic in your boredom. Please, write for me another epistle of gibberish; sing to me a psalm from your plagiarized bible.

Snow Forgets the Landscape Flakes of glass soften, sink through our dreams, frozen letters of rain. Cars swell into sleeping ghosts of young elephants. The air is empty with sediment— I am immune to memory.

Night What is held under the auspices of night? The velvet streetlight? An old man's viscous coughing? What do you have to say for yourself, pigeon bones in your pockets and a mouth full of paper? It feels as if someone's pulled back the curtains of meat and shown you, standing organless and naked on this poorly cobbled street. The moon never knew you. Why are you screaming? You'll wear your bones out. Remember the dream of the red-winged angel. Remember she held you and sang; the one about being lonely, the one about the black king of moths returning triumphant from hell.

Overcast and clouds speak with the voices of dolls. Soot-colored pigeons billow back into smoke as they leave their wire. My gut is a rag I wring each morning. On the sill rests a mason jar humming with flies. The soul leaks a little from the edges of my shadow.

Cymbal Crash of the Moment When You Realize a Dream Is a Dream The people across the street are actually from a projector. Two cars collide with such slowness the accident can't be real. Looking up, you see that the sky really isn't the sky but rather an enormous flock of blue cranes flying backwards. When you reach to the woman standing next to you, she slides off your touch as her poorly-propped body falls over. The colorful graffiti is illegible. Shadows are spills of milk. You grab a handful of shards from a broken bottle, and when you wake up, it's this poem.