

# East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

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Black Holes and Other Battle Tactics: The Voyages of the UPF Flounder  
By: Elizabeth House

### Second Placers:

Blue Instead  
By: Ogonna Ononye

Times Like These & You're Not Alone  
By: Ryann Lally

### Third Place:

Untitled  
By: Erin Purcell

### Honorable Mentions:

A Trip to Grandmother's House  
By: Carly Schweier

Spring Song  
By: Lilly Arthur

### Judge's Work:

Five Poems  
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## Black Holes and Other Battle Tactics: The Voyages of the UPF Flounder

By: Elizabeth House

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*The United Peacekeepers Fleet, or UPF, is a volunteer organization devoted to preserving the public good throughout the known (and unknown) galaxy. It is perhaps best known as the fleet of ships that finally chased off the Xan. The UPF is a volunteer organization that does a little of everything: disaster relief, black hole surveying, even first contact and outer colony rescue. One of its ships is called the Flounder. . .*

"Space—the great mysterious unknown. Men and women have gazed into your depths for ages past, knowing we can never truly understand you. Which is why we're out here trying. And failing. And wondering why in the world we ever agreed to come out here in the first place. And do you hear that?" Audrey Clark stopped dictating melodramatically to her computer and scanned the bridge of the UPF Flounder with worried green eyes.

She saw nothing out of the ordinary. The cramped bridge was still upholstered in battered fake tan leather, the auxiliary steering console was still cracked, and the exposed wiring still had masking tape marking all radioactive wires. Yet something was making a persistent beeping noise. Audrey, who had had an extremely low opinion of the Flounder's capabilities and a very strong fear of hidden bombs, backed off the bridge and dashed for the intercom in the hallway.

"Quent!" she gasped. She heard a loud banging and the gruff voice of the Wearwolf calmly inquired what she wanted.

"Quent, there is something beeping on the bridge."

Quent sighed. "Can't the ship's computer identify it? I'm trying to keep dark matter from leaking into the plumbing."

"The computer could identify it" Audrey admitted. "If it were turned on. But Bob tried to give the computer more of a personality, and it had an reinforced armor plating sheared off. One of the smaller black triangle ships plummeted out of orbit, but through sheer dumb luck the lead ship took a direct hit."

"And," said Quent," wild homygyphs from Bellatrix VII couldn't get you to go back in there."

"Exactly"

"It's get Tikka and Bob's a rone plumbng" Quent sighed.

Five minutes later, by Galactic Standard Time, Quent and Audrey had torn apart most of the bridge. And the beeping, the source of which had not been found, was starting to get annoying.

"Well," said Audrey, her short curly hair sticking out in all directions, "at least we know what happened to your laser screwdriver. Although what it's doing tucked in the emergency manual is beyond me."

Quent twirled his S104.45 screwdriver, now with a cracked emitter, between his fingers. "Maybe we have a Jonah onboard."

Audrey kicked the targeting scanner, which promptly broke. "Do Jonahs beep?" She got no answer, because Quent was staring thoughtfully into the middle distance. Suddenly he fixed huge brown eyes on Audrey.

"Before the beeping started, did you hear a really corny country song?"

"I think so—Audrey started. She was cut off by Quent dashing to the center chair and pulling its seat cushion off.

"It's Captain Wendell's cell phone!" Quent exclaimed. Indeed, the phone's holographic display was flashing Important: Incoming Message in red. It was also flashing Warning: low power cell. Please change immediately, but Captain Wendell's phone had been saying that since he'd dropped it into the acid seas of New Idaho. "Audrey," Quent asked, "Could you get everyone to gather in the dining room?"

Audrey nodded and walked to the door. Then she stopped, staring at the adjacent dining room door. "Quent," she asked, "does leaking dark matter make hydrosteel glow a faint purple?"

"Yeah," said Quent. "Why?"

"Let's meet on the bridge," Audrey said. "After we've checked on Bob and Tikka."

The bridge was really designed to hold three, or at most four, life forms. Besides Audrey and Quent, three other people resided on the Flounder, bringing the total bridge occupancy up to five and the grumpiness level up to nine hundred.

"Um," said Quent. "Thank you all for being so understanding. I don't know how dark matter managed to irradiate the dining room."

"Oh yes you do," said Serlina, her long blue-blond hair floating in a nonexistent breeze. "Bob and I should never have tried to fix the hall faucet. Now what is the reason for this meeting?"

Quent waved the cell phone at her. "Captain Wendell's phone is ringing."

Audrey raised her hand and Quent frowned at her. "Why don't we take the message?"

"You know we have to take a roll call before we do," Quent replied. "Otherwise someone might sneak in and hear sensitive information. Now, who's first?"

Bob hopped to his feet with a sound resembling a cymbal crash. He was a five foot six inch stainless steel robot of a roughly human shape, with glowing green eyes, no nose, and a cheerfulness almost as expansive as his ability to cause trouble. He threw his arms wide (smacking Audrey in the face as he did so, and effectively ending her mental tirade on the inefficiency of waiting for an intruder to voluntarily reveal themselves) and declared "Bob. In charge of ship maintenance!" Then he crash-bang clanged back into his seat.

Audrey followed him. She was human, blond, green-eyed, and curly-haired. With much less enthusiasm she declared, "Audrey Clark. Photographer attached to this ship for the sole purpose of recording black holes." Then she sat back down and immediately got into a tussle with Bob who had moved a soda into her seat in her absence.

Serlina floated to her feet next. She was a head shorter than Bob and an ethereal specter from planet 57, meaning that she had a slight blue tinge to her lively green hair and the ability to breath in space. She was also used to much higher gravity, hence the drifting. Quent Serlina D. She announced regally, "in charge of steering." Then she tried to sit down, but as Bob had spilled vanilla taffy soda all over the only available seat, she decided to remain standing.

Tikka, who claimed as her homeland the lush mushroom forests of I21A, floated calmly above the sticky tussle. She was new-leaf-green and the size of a spherical watermelon, with four arms, five eyes on pliable stalks, and a long, diamond tipped tail. "Tikka Takakakakakakaka (Her last name was a bit difficult to stop saying). Audrey's assistant"

Quent, a big jet-black Wearawolf with a few tan streaks and a very distinguished muzzle, announced his name and that he was Captain Wendell's assistant, but even an extremely sharp eared spying bot-being who wanted to find sensitive information would have had trouble hearing him over the din of Bob yelling, Audrey threatening to pour soda over him and see how he liked it, Serlina threatening to vent them all into space, and Tikka singing a traditional mushroom hunting song.

"Um, Guys?" said Quent.

"You just need to have more cheerfulness Audrey!"

"I'm counting to nine. One, two..."

"I hope you rust to death like the tin man!"

Trrrrr, Trrrrr, Tat tat tat tat...."

"Hey!" yelled Quent.

"Well," said a voice from the phone. "That certainly sounds like the Flounder. But where's Wilbur Wendell and his crazy harmonica playing?"

Everyone jumped, Audrey, Serlina, and Tikka, staring at the woman in the holographic display, all gasped "Madam Director?" in a very guilty manner. Bob held up a crushed soda can and declared to nobody in particular that,

"The Splash shorted out my cyber-trousers!"

The woman in the phone, who was indeed the Grand Director of the United Peacekeeping Fleet, and whose actual name was Sally, shook her head in a dignified manner. "Splash is terribly hard on technology. I lost a self-propelled vacuum cleaner to the cherry fudge flavur kaka. But I didn't call to compare large appliance horror stories. Something has come up and we need Wendell's help."

Behind Sally a window exploded. Then a runaway rocket bike trailing green smoke zoomed across the tiny holographic view screen. "Has a war broken out on Earth?" Quent gasped.

Sally looked alarmed. "No! Whatever gave you that idea?"

"The window..." Quent suggested.

"Oh," said Sally. "Oh no, that's just my secretary. He's doing spring cleaning." Behind her, a marble bust of Thomas Jefferson exploded.

"Well, that's a relief," sighed Quent. "But I'm afraid I have some very bad news Madam Director. Captain Wendell was sucked out the window yesterday and we can't find him."

"Again?" Exclaimed Sally. "What does this make then, the fourth time?"

"The fifth," said Serlina.

"Not counting the incident at Theta II" added Audrey.

"Wilbur will turn up somewhere," Sally said reassuringly. "But in the meantime, you're going to have save the Days without him. Have you ever heard of the Days?"

"No" said Quent, Tikka, Serlina, and Bob.

"Yes" said Audrey. "They're a dozen colonies on the fifteenth moon of Andromeda tri. They're the number one producer of dark matter."

"Right," said Sally. "And they're under attack. We can't tell who is attacking them, and we lost contact. You're the only UPF ship anywhere near the Days. Think you can help?"

Quent sighed. "Well..."

Sally turned her head to listen to someone yelling in the background, and then turned back to the tiny view screen. "I have to go. My secretary needs me. The barbitus has gone berserk and is chasing him around the parking garage." She flicked a switch on her desk and her image disappeared.

"Well," said Quent. "Let's set course for the Days."

The course was laid in with only minimal difficulty (Serlina managed to keep that console safe by telling Bob it was haunted) a dinner of cold cereal was eaten, it was past midnight (12:24, to be exact), and not a creature was stirring, not even a bat being, when Audrey rolled out of bed. Careful not to disturb Tikka, who shared a room with her, Audrey slipped out.

"Computer?" asked Audrey. "do you know who you are?"

"Ship computer 290857423," replied the computer in a soft sweet voice. "Although I do wish..."

"Wish what?" asked Audrey.

"Never mind," said the computer. "How may I help you?"

"Bring up the complete history of the Days," said Audrey.

"Formed in 2098 by five men from North America, the Days were extremely popular for their music, which was rock lyrics set to classical tunes. They are considered the founders of classical rock, distinguished from classic rock in that—"

"No computer," Audrey said. "I meant the colonies called the Days."

"Oh," said the computer "Those Days. Founded in 2220 on Andromeda tri by a small group of entrepreneurs determined to provide an independent supplier of dark matter. Highly successful, the Days entire economy revolves around Dark matter production. The surface of Andromeda tri is inhospitable and has only three native life-forms, the—"

"Thank you computer" said Audrey. "I don't need the life-forms. Bring up the complete history of..." she frowned. "Of the colony on New Brazil."

"Founded in" the computer started to say, but it was cut off by Tikka, who floated in the door and demanded to know what Audrey was doing.

"Just some midnight reading," said Audrey.

"It's one in the morning" Tikka replied. "And this is about the colonies, isn't it?"

"2198 by a group farmers who wanted to grow vanilla berries," said the computer.

Tikka gave Audrey a knowing look. Audrey sighed. "Tikka, you know how I feel. First Redsburg, then Little New York, and now this?"

"It can't be a coincidence, I know." Tikka twitched her tail uncomfortably. "But Audrey, what else could it be? Everyone knows colony living is dangerous. Even if someone didn't, the insurance prices would clue them in."

"New Brazil is a lush wilderness."

"Tikka, please just let me run this idea through the computer. If it doesn't work out I'll forget about it."

Tikka twitched her tail about in extreme agitation. "OK Audrey, but please promise me you won't embarrass yourself this time."

"Flora and Fauna include" the computer paused. "If you aren't going to listen to me, will you terminate you're request? I feel pointless."

Audrey opened her mouth to answer the computer, but she was interrupted by Quent's voice.

"Bob, there are no bat beings in the hallway, and there are no Aaaaaaahhhhh!!! A ghost!"

"Oh no!" screamed Bob as he began running in circles. "It's a ghost! Or a specter! Or a vampire! Or a wherewolf!"

"Aaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh" howled Quent.

"Tikes" said Tikka.

"Or the abominable snowman! Or King Kong! Or bloody Mary!" screamed Bob, now running in hexagons.

"The greater spotted fluff-bird, sixteen varieties of the mushroom Temella Torminosus, the large rockwood spgywort, and an unknown number of biting orchids," said the computer; it's sweet voice now sounding a bit ticked off.

"Who?" demanded Serlina, drifting regally into the room in a velvet nightgown that made her resemble a sorceress, "is going on?"

"Or Frankenstein! Or Richard Nixon! Or the Easter bunny!" wailed Bob.

"Easter bunny?" said Serlina, puzzled. "Where?" then she looked at Audrey, squinched her eyebrows together, and said, "Audrey, take off the bathrobe. You're scaring them."

Audrey did so, and Quent stopped howling and looked embarrassed.

Bob continued to run in triangles; now screaming "They've gone invisible! They're going to rob the democratic national headquarters! Or suck my lifeblood! Or sell me car insurance! Or revolutionize the postal system!"

Serlina stuck out her foot and tripped Bob as he came around a fifty-second time.

"Now," she said, "To repeat my question. What in the multiverse is going on?"

"You said 'What is going on' last time," complained Bob, who was sitting on the floor in a heap. "And the existence of a multiverse has yet to be proven."

Quent glared at Bob. "Mr. Iron-ally breath here dragged me out of bed to chase down the ghosts he thought were using the ships computer."

"New Brazil was destroyed by a series of freak gopher accidents in 2205 and it's property was bought by Jett-Black Inc., which now controls a dark matter processing plant on the site of the former colony," said the outer colony, now audibly irritable.

"New Brazil?" asked Quent. "Why are you looking up the history of an outer colony at one in the morning, Tikka?"

"Tikka wasn't looking up the history of New Brazil," said Audrey. "I was, Computer, stop," she said. The computer heaved a huge sigh of relief. Audrey heaved a huge sigh of frustration.

"Do any of you think that the attack on the Days is strange?" she asked.

"Well," said Quent, as Serlina and Bob shook their heads.

"Exactly?" Cried Audrey, with a frightening glint in her eye. "And do you know why?"

"Audrey's acting a little weird, isn't she?" whispered Bob to Serlina.

"Audrey, please," moaned Tikka. "This is why the Carpathia refused to take the black hole surveying job."

Suddenly Serlina gasped. "Audrey," she asked, "Are you from an outer colony?" Audrey nodded.

"Not New Brazil though," she said. "I'm from Amber Hills." Her announcement had a profound effect. Serlina's eyes widened, Quent's hair stood on end, and Bob rammed headfirst into the already broken targeting scanner trying to back away from her. Even the computer gasped. "I'm not contagious," Audrey laughed. "I don't glow in the dark. I can't make objects become possessed and attack. I don't drink blood, and I can't rip holes in the universe and shove people through them. I'm just a person who was irradiated with an unknown form of radiation when I was little."

"That's not very comforting," said Bob.

"What does this have to do with the Days?" asked Quent

"Audrey has this theory," said Tikka, "About the Earth government..."

"Actually," said Audrey, "I ditched that theory. This one really makes sense."

Five pairs of eyes and one sonic imaging scanner stared at her.

"Computer," said Audrey, "create a three-part Venn diagram. First circle, colony planets destroyed in the past 17 years. Second circle, colony planets suitable for dark matter production, third circle, locations of dark matter processing plants erected by Jett-Black Inc. in the past seventeen years."

"Processing data," the computer said. It began to play music.

"Mozart?" asked Quent.

"Michael Jackson?" asked Serlina.

"It's the Days," said Audrey. "Tribute to the Great M's. 6 weeks on the galactic hit singles list."

"The process complete," said the computer. "I apologize for the tiny type. It was the only way I could squeeze everything in there." Indeed, the circles on the Venn diagram were filled only where they all intersected.

"Well?" asked Audrey.

Quent squinted at the middle of the Venn diagram. "Jett-Black Inc. Audrey, this is not good."

"Why? The data is reproachable," said Audrey.

"Why does Jett-Black Inc. is a major corporation. Accusing them of complications in a colony world disaster would hurt the stock market."

"What does Jett-Black Inc. make?" asked Serlina

"Millions" said Audrey.

"Cyber clothes for the high-tech consumer" said Bob. (Bob was a very devoted fan of cyber-clothes.)

"Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep," said the computer. Everyone turned to look at it. "I was programmed to sound an alarm when we were half an hour from our destination." The computer explained, it's holographic display blushing red.

"If previous outer colony world disasters are any indication, anything from radiation so strong it makes jelly-ot stand still to murderous groundhogs," said Audrey. Everyone shuddered.

"We have half an hour," Quent said. "Lets see if we can get the ship ready for battle"

"Uh, Quent?" said Audrey.

"Yeah?"

"The Wearawolf home fleet has higher powered seismic cannons. The Earth navy has anti-matter cannons and 94.5 caliber negative-gravity rifles. The Zazzaland star corps has magnetic shielding that lets them ram enemy ships. And the Xan. The Xan (there was a collective wince and everyone made an x in the air) may we never see them again, used a device that sucked the souls right out of their victims."

"Yeah," said Quent. "So?"

"So every piece of that advanced military equipment is produced by Jett-Black Inc. And our water lasers don't work because Bob sat on the targeting imager and cracked it! We're going to fight a company that has extensive knowledge of the best weaponry in the galaxy, and the only thing on this ship that functions is the bullhorn!"

"Wait," said Serlina. "Jett-Black Inc. contracted with the Xan?"

"Yep. Made a bundle. Destroyed our seventh moon in a mining accident and we sued them after the war" said Tikka.

"I don't believe it. They ruined Tikka's moon and got away with money?" said Serlina.

"You better" Audrey said darkly. "My grandmother was in that war. She has a Xan soul stealer, and it has Jett-Black's little 'JlBb' symbol on the handle."

"Actually what with the overhead costs and everything, the mining operation wasn't successful. I meant that we made a bundle when we sued," said Tikka.

"Maybe" said Quent. "we could fix something before we arrived." Then he gave everyone so severe a glare that the bridge was instantly deserted, everyone having run off to check wiring, fix leaky connectors, run a self-diagnostic, and get dressed. In that order. Quent had a very terrifying glare.

By the time the Flounder plunged erratically into orbit around Andromeda Tri (Bob had fiddled with the flight plan and they entered orbit upside down), the targeting imager worked and so did the water-laser emitters. But there was a problem.

"No lasers?" asked Quent incredulously. He stood on the cramped bridge with Bob, who had a screwdriver, and Serlina, who had a granola bar and orange juice. "What happened?"

"When we went through that black hole last week it must have drained them," said Bob. "And we didn't notice because we never use them."

"So all we have to fight off a possible aggressor is..."

"Water cannons" said Serlina, nibbling on her granola. "Except we had to shunt the water flow out of all port systems to keep it from mixing with dark matter, so the pressure will be equivalent to that of a strong hose."

Quent put his head down on the targeting scanner. "Ogh, what's going to go wrong next?"

Audrey walked on the bridge, dropped into a seat, and began putting her shoes on. As she tied each lace in a double knot she flicked on the visual scanner and keyed it onto the planet below. The screen showed a barren brown surface. Audrey grimaced. "Here's your next problem. The Days are home to the worst kind of kudzu possible, so this entire area should be dark green."

Tikka floated on the bridge, looked at the screen, dropped her doughnuts, and, as glazed blueberry spheres bounced around the bridge, said "Tikes."

Serlina waived over to the scientific scanner, removed the barbed wire and her doughnuts, (she refused to let Bob destroy this console) and ran a quick survey. "It's OK. The colonists are still alive. They are farmed. But they're... underground."

"Shelers," said Audrey, staring at the post-apocalyptic vision on the screen. "All colony's are required to have ones that can withstand radiation, direct fire, and gophers." She turned to Quent. "The attackers will still be here. They're waiting for the colonists to decide it's safe and come back aboveground before attacking again."

"All right then," said Quent. "Battle stations everyone!"

Quent was being a bit optimistic. The Flounder was a science ship. It had been a warship many years ago, during the wars against the Xan, when water lasers were innovative new weapons and metallic leg warmers were the height of style. Still, Serlina, Bob, and Quent worked for battle stations and Audrey and Tikka headed out of the way, as photographers do when they're not being shot at.

Normally, But the Flounder was missing it's Captain and about to go into battle, so Audrey ended up sitting on the bear trap, squinting at the scientific scanners as Tikka and Bob poked around the propulsion system.

"OK. Serlina. Put us in a search pattern around the planet, and put us inside the atmosphere," said Quent "If we meet someone I want the water cannons to have some effect."

Serlina nodded and the Flounder dove into the atmosphere. Of course, the buffeting blockers had been destroyed in a smog storm on their last visit to New Idaho, so the Flounder immediately began bouncing about in the atmospheric currents.

"G-r-g-g-good S-serlina, h-hold her st-steady" Audrey gasped as the entire ship vibrated.

"I'm p-picking up a weird c-cyber s-signature" Audrey said. She squinted at the radar-imaging screen, which was showing impossible shapes, and the view screen, which had shut off.

"What?" yelled Quent.

"I'm p-picking." Audrey yelled again, but the rest of her sentence was cut off by a huge ZZZZZAAATTTT. The saucer shaped Flounder flipped end over end, and people, equipment, and blueberry doughnuts went flying.

"It's them," declared Audrey. She flicked a few switches and kicked the scanner. The view screen turned back on, now filled with jet-black pyramid shaped ships. The big one in the lead had its point, on which the "JlBb" symbol was clearly visible, aimed at the Flounder, and the point was glowing with blue-white lightning.

"Quent, controls this ship have armor?" Audrey gasped.

"The, does these ship re-roust." Quent growled. "I can't access it."

"Initiating armor deployment." Announced the computer. The reassuring click of gold reinforced hydrosteel followed its words.

"Thanks computer," gasped Audrey.

"Don't thank me yet," said the computer. "The armor won't hold up against those weapons for long." As if to prove its point, the shipping was then hit with another zap of lightning. Half the armor plating on the Flounder's bottom fell off. Luckily, the lightning kicked the buffeting blockers back into being, and the ship went to an uncontrolled spiral to a dead stop.

"Bob?" yelled Quent.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob.

"Why?" Quent roared. "Are the cannons now non-functioning?"

"That last lightning bolt drove a pipe into the water supply chamber" said Tikka. "The cannons can't pump water anymore."

"Well can't you load them manually?"

"Quent," Tikka interrupted, "water cannons are specifically designed to prevent tampering. You can't load water into them manually. It triggers the self-destruct."

Serlina took the control of the controlled spiral to evade another bolt of lightning. Audrey stared at the scanners. She told herself. Think. Unfortunately, all she could concentrate on was the malfunctioning asteroid warning system, which was telling her they were in a class 4HD asteroid belt, and the rather sticky bear trap she was sitting on. Think. Audrey told herself. Then, and stop talking to yourself. Do you want to be as nutty as Bob and his cyber trousers. The Flounder shuddered and yet another piece of plating fell off and plummeted to the planet below. Audrey froze with one hand on the asteroid warning system. Cyber-trousers! Her left hand, rattling her pocket on the bear trap, and dashed for the door.

"Audrey?" asked Quent. "What are you doing?"

"Finding some Splash!" Audrey yelled over her shoulder.

"Audrey?" asked Quent, but Audrey was already in Bob's room, tearing it apart in her search for Splash. She finally found some, under the bed, and juggled a 48 pack of lemon-marshmallow down to Tikka and Bob.

"Audrey! This is no time for a cold chilled glass of soda," scolded Bob.

"I know," said Audrey. "Load these into the cannons." Bob and Tikka stared blankly at her.

"Hurry!" moaned Audrey. "I'm hoping the Splash will short out the ships the same way it shorts out everything else."

"Ohhhhh," said Bob and Tikka. The Flounder's cannons had, at no one time, fired antimatter bombs, so they accepted the cans of Splash with only minimal pushing and shoving. And it was lucky they did, for no sooner had the thirteenth can been loaded (Bob was drinking the fourteenth) than the ship took a direct hit.

"Audrey, you'd better have a plan!" Quent yelled, "because we just lost the armor!"

"Fire on the lead ship!" Audrey yelled in reply.

"With what?"

"Just fire!"

Quent did, and the cans of Splash shot out of the cannons, spun end over end, and exploded against the hideous black monstrosities. And the Splash worked. Wherever it hit the shiny black surface points blaked lightning spiring out of protective casing, and entire plumb of diamond reinforced armor plating sheared off. One of the smaller black triangle ships plummeted out of orbit. But through sheer dumb luck the lead ship remained undamaged

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## Blue Instead

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By: Ogonna Ononye

Blue, like those faded jeans  
Torn to perfection, never stayed clean  
Those ripped back pockets  
And that hole in the knee  
Hold the memory of you and me  
Broken-down truck, lakeside view  
Velvet dirt and gentle dew  
Hugged my feet as I walked with you  
Hands entwined, hearts steadfast  
Knew this moment wouldn't last  
Shaking hands said it all  
First kiss went by way too fast  
I looked up expecting you  
Saw nothing but a sea of blue  
Your eyes, a mirror of the sky,  
Whispered that you stole His hue  
Not only for those faultless eyes  
But used for paint upon your shoes  
Scuffed and worn, I'll never forget  
Every adventure, along [with us] they went  
Matching my stride, every step  
In cold, in dry, in warm, in wet  
Not in a storm would I ever lose  
Those priceless, timeless shoes of blue  
Blue, like your shirt upon which I cried  
With ruffled stitches up the side  
A bed on which I rested my eyes,  
Into soft fabric fell tears to dry  
My comfort for the road ahead  
Are navy rocks on paths you've led  
Some think that love is pink or red  
My heart tells me it's blue instead

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## Untitled

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by Erin Purcell

I pulled my candy cane striped fingers, red save for the bone white knuckles, into the sleeves of my bulky green coat. The crusty snot streaks still lingered on the sleeves from my cold the week before. The sky formed a canopy of hard grey cement on that Midwestern February morning; I chose instead to look at the cement under my feet as we walked along. I watched as the same divots and cracks passed under my eyes like a reel of movie film. This four-block stretch of sidewalk between my house and the school was more familiar to me than myself, less changing and more resilient. I knew that I could walk the whole way with my eyes shut because I'd tried it.

Our Yale Avenue gang reached the mail box on the corner, a peculiar blue structure about my height that looked to me like a robot that had whizzed out the pages of a sci-fi comic book. I imagined it swallowing people's letters and teleporting them off to its blue robot friends with a rush of colored lights and high-pitched beeps when we were all asleep in our beds. Katie, our neighbor from three houses down, rushed ahead of our gaggle, her jacket unzipped and her hair blowing into her eyes.

"Hey guys! What if I put snow in the mailbox?" It wasn't so much a question as a request for a dare. My sisters and I, raised with authority in mind and realizing that we were already risking tardiness, weren't about to give it to her.

"Why would you want to do that?" Stacy asked. "You'd ruin all the letters."

"Yeah, the snow would melt in there and the words would get all blurry," Hillary added.

"But it'd be funny! Think of all the grown-ups with their love letters in here for Valentine's Day! All the love letters would be ruined!" Katie countered, the mischievous look in her eye already revealing how this would end. We tried to argue with her; what if the U.S. congressman from our town, who lived three suburban grid blocks back and a few to the left, had deposited in there some urgent letter to the president? Feeling savvy, we asked whether someone might be mailing a check. The possible risks fueled Katie even more. She scooped up a clump of grimy dirt-freckled snow with the mitten's her grandmother had knitted at Christmastime and shoved it into the mailbox.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Stacy half-heartedly as she turned toward the school. The other kids followed her, but I stayed behind on the corner. They didn't bother calling back to me; they knew I knew the way and what the tardy bell sounded like.

I didn't care about the president or other people's money. I did wonder, though, about the "love letters," now being slowly digested by grassy slush in the belly of the robot. My experience with Valentines extended only to the little bits of folded cardboard with candy taped on that we obligingly dropped in every classmate's decorated box come Valentine's Day. My knowledge of love stopped at the boy meets girl, boy slays dragon, boy gets girl of storybooks.

I thought about all the people I'd never met that might have their coins on the roulette table, who might have an envelope to a lover in that mailbox right now. I couldn't picture their faces or what their eyes did when they kissed or fought, made love or peered anxiously over a jeweler's counter at a display of rings. I didn't know whether the sender liked Bob Dylan and whether that mattered to the receiver. I didn't know why the writer always started the coffee pot too late and if that drove the reader crazy. Most of all I didn't know why the lovers weren't together right now, why they had to bother at all with inky words transported on fragile paper vessels. That the lovers had no more answers but many more questions than I did was not an idea that crossed my mind. I thought of the envelopes, stained now with water hopefully unlike tears, their letters turned fuzzy, soft, indecipherable.

I pulled my balled fists into the sleeves of my coat as a shrill and urgent bell lost itself in the grey concrete clouds.

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## A Trip to Grandmother's House

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By: Carly Schweier

Crunch...crunch...crunchcrunchcrunchcrunch...crunch...crunch. The little girl, keenly aware of her footsteps because of the booming silence of the forest, tentatively made her way down the snowy path. She ran from one tree to the next, pausing each time, trying to temporize the run to the next tree. Each time she stopped, she took a second to look at her surroundings.

The sky, a dull, gun-barrel gray, was cloudless, and growing darker with each passing minute. What little sun had been visible during the day was fading into obscurity. The path upon which the young girl was traveling was covered in a blanket of snow, sparkling like a thousand tiny diamonds in the last rays of daylight. The trees, tall and foreboding, were also draped in sheaths of white. However, with each bone-chilling, breath-taking rush of cold air, a good portion of the snow was blown off the evergreens and into the air, dancing in a wild and haphazard fashion, like tiny fairies cavorting in the wind. The trees lined the path on each side, like a gauntlet of soldiers, stern and unmoving in their duty to guard the inner forest. Just one look at the woods beyond the trees, murky and shadowy in its mystery, sent the girl running off to the next tree for shelter.

The trip to her grandmother's house was never easy, and it was made even more difficult by the snow and diminishing light. The girl did not even have the moon or the stars for comfort; instead, all she had was a wide ceiling of gray. Another gust of cool air came rushing by, carrying with it the scent of pine needles, wet wood, and the indefinable but completely undeniable smell of winter. The girl, numb of all feeling, heard a chattering noise. CLICKCLICKCLICKCLICK.... It took her awhile to realize that the noise was her teeth knocking together. She tightened the knot of her red cape, and made sure her hood was covering her ears, in the vain hope that she might become less frozen. She took off her mittens and vigorously rubbed her hands together, before putting them up to her lantern. At this point, she thought of the lantern as a close companion on her journey, one that offered her warmth and comfort at a time when she so desperately needed it. With a long and regretful sigh, the girl rose from her crouched position on the ground, and, with her extremely luminous and infallible lantern cutting through the gloomy dark, she once again made the fear-inducing trip to another tree. Even though she would have preferred to travel on the main path, away from hidden ditches, sticky trees, and animal droppings, she knew that in order to protect her life, she must stay within the tree line of the forest. As she closed in on the next tree, she felt her foot catch on a buried tree root. In the split second between being upright and being horizontal, the little girl had barely enough time to let out a small shriek, just loud enough to break through the barrier of silence in which the forest was enclosed, before she was face down in the cold, wet snow. Her face stung, partly from the sheer iciness of the snow, but also from the cluster of little rocks on which she had landed. Her nostrils were filled with snow, giving her an extremely unpleasant feeling, and she sneezed violently. As she sat up and rubbed her forehead, her face tingling from the new numbness provided by the snow, she heard ragged breathing, which broke the calm silence even more than she had, behind her. Knowing that her attempts at being covert were in vain, she turned slowly to meet her fate. Staring back at her, with eyes as yellow as a lemon, and equally sour, was the wolf she had worked so hard to avoid.

"Well, well, well. It certainly took you long enough to get here. I'm so sorry about that pesky little tree root, it always seems to give people so much...trouble" the wolf said.

Then, his face split into the most terrifying smile the little girl had ever seen, and, with a sardonic look in his eyes, the wolf leaned in close.

With his muzzle just inches from her face, and his breath smelling of rotted animal, the wolf whispered, "What's in the basket?"

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## Spring Song

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By: Lilly Arthur

I saw you, little bird,  
Amongst the branches.

You wanted me to hear,  
And I heard, I listened.

Your melody rang out over the hill,  
Filling the silence with your beauty.

The notes remained in the air,  
Carried by the cold winter wind.

Your song did not match the weather,  
Your song was bright and warm.  
You sang a song of Spring.

Your song gave me hope,  
That this winter might soon be over.

Thank you, little bird,  
For your out of season song.

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## Five Poems

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By: Lisa Ampleman

### North County

Down Washington Street, the church  
crests a distant hill, small spire against sky,  
one of few in this part of the county  
that have not closed.

Others auction off school desks, move altars and statues  
to new parishes. Here, corn fields  
surround the outlet mall, and the highway exit  
has both an industrial park and a family farm's  
small fruit stand. I nearly forget how

to get home because the streets all look different,  
new traffic patterns.  
Land west of the airport is razed for a new runway,

new tunnel that can withstand nuclear force.  
There, people used to watch jet after jet  
roar into the sky—now, planes taxi  
where teens sat in their cars and necked.

All this work, though the largest airline has cut  
its flights and closed down one concourse.  
Ground molded by backhoes and tractors—they'll  
pour some concrete and call it a day.  
Each flat house  
they go home to dolled up for Christmas,  
blinking and gesturing. Each dark living room  
lit blue by television. Traffic signal flashing yellow and directing no one.

### Glass and Steel

At Easter Vigil, we each hold a white taper  
with its paper skirt to catch the wax. In darkness,

the light spreads slowly—one candle leans into another  
as if whispering a secret. Wax tears drip down then clot,

and I think of the church burnt  
and rebuilt, how the lightning strike shut off power

to the alarms. When the pastor checked  
the dark church that night, he saw

nothing. Lightning sang in the wires  
and rafters for hours, until the church

blazed on the hilltop, until the white steeple  
fell, engulfed. The church is not a building,

but the people, my parents said. It rose again,  
steel beams to frame the new sanctuary, tarp over

what would be stained glass. We walked through the half-  
finished place and had to imagine what it would become,

this crowded room where a man holds his breath  
as the priest leans him into the water.

### Rose

She drinks root beer until  
the pain is such she says  
no more liquids and eases  
into sedated sleep.

Pink sisters praying behind  
their grate for her. Office  
shut and dark, books piled  
to the ceiling. Someone else's

now. She walks into the dark  
forest, able to call out  
to any approaching shade  
in its own language—

pobrecita. Ciao, ragazzi.  
She'll ask each name, expect  
a dirty (but not filthy)  
joke. Let there be an irreverent

wink of greeting, a guide  
to rooms with the best light,  
as she leaves behind this salt  
the rest of us are made of.

### Low Water on the Whitewater River

We saw what seemed a white-and-blue tent on the hill,  
but closer, the colors resolved themselves  
into metal angles: a 1960's two-toned Thunderbird,  
roof flattened by flood,  
wheel-wells buried in mud, tires long gone. Grasses grew  
out of the hood. But the rusted chassis,  
shocks and all, lay separate  
just above the waterline, a toy dissected by curious hands.

We rowed past in reverent silence. I thought of the possum  
turned inside out on the highway's shoulder.  
Morbid, you said,  
and splashed me. But my mind had  
latched on to horror:  
a man decapitated on a bus, the sounds  
the other passengers heard.  
A soldier's head deflating like a balloon  
after the bullets were done.  
Bodies dragged to scraps. The ways we are taken out of them.

Under a high bridge, hundreds of beehives  
huddled in the green oxidized recesses.  
Convinced I heard them humming  
even one hundred feet below,  
I threw our soda cans in the water,  
and when we landed, wrapped my arms around you,  
buried my face in your back. The canoe rocked  
back and forth in the wake from a speedboat.

### Missive

I dreamed I felt far from you. With thick, clear tape  
I closed a box, sealed in the long note, the knick-knacks,

my heart which was an avocado, its greens  
fading to yellow in the middle. I wrote

your address in large block letters, a handwriting  
not quite my own, and once the box

left my hands, I wanted a bottle-message  
in reply, something still damp with salt water,

something a long time in arriving.  
The box lay open in the corner

of my room, drawing in the dust-motes  
that danced down in the light

from the window. It was a dry season,  
my throat raw from the dust,

lips cracked. A harmonica wheezed  
somewhere, and I never said anything,

never sent anything, never wanted reply.  
On waking, I cannot at first remember

what has happened, but lines  
from the note come back to me.