

VOLUME 87



# TOUCHSTONE

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VITERBO UNIVERSITY ART  
AND LITERARY MAGAZINE



Touchstone is published each academic year by Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

The mission of Touchstone Magazine is to contribute to and praise the creative thinking of the Viterbo Community. Touchstone provides a creative outlet for publications of visual art and literature. It is also a learning opportunity for students to create a professionally published journal that expresses the culture and education of Viterbo University.

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The Viterbo University community prepares students for faithful service and ethical leadership.



**VITERBO**UNIVERSITY

# TOUCHSTONE

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*When We Decided to Chase the Morning Star* | Acrylic on Paper

# Table of Contents

## **Anichini, Alyssa**

*Dreamscape... 37*

## **Antonelli, Gabriella**

*Life Is Not a Dress Rehearsal... 6*

## **Becker, Anna**

*Do you Have Anxiety: A Pamphlet... 18*

## **Cortez, Gretchen**

*Custer #3... 8*

*Where I'm From... 29*

*Untitled... 39*

## **Fleckenstein, Mahlivanh**

*Noodles... 12*

## **Henschel, Clare**

*Hallelujah... 9*

## **Jimenez-Becerra, Luis**

*Him|miH... 11*

*If Only You Picked Up the Phone... 34*

## **Kleman, Marissa**

*Still Life... 23*

## **Koza, Lindsay**

*Reflection on a Dried Flower... 40*

## **La Mere, Cameron**

*III... 24*

*IV... 27*

## **Laschenski, Ashley**

*School's Prey... 7*

## **Locy, Garret**

*The Watch... 20*

**Olson, Camille**

*Oranges... 14*

*Rabbit... 33*

**Olson, Maggie**

*When We Decided to Chase the Morning Star... 28*

**Peters, Kira**

*Candy Machine... 36*

**Sanders, Cheyenne**

*Your Choice... 17*

*Fantasy... 26*

**Santucci, Holly**

*Let Me Breathe... 15*

*What Love Should Be... 32*

**Stringer, Abby**

*Transparencies... 13*

*Under Construction... 31*

*Large Still-Life in Oil... 48*

**Teynor, Lainey**

*The Beach... 10*

**Anonymous**

*Cowboy Killers: A Taste of War... 43*



**Gabriella Antonelli**

*Life Is Not a Dress Rehearsal* | Charcoal

## School's Prey

I wake up to the perky sunlight

It speaks to me and wishes me well

But even its warm embrace cannot send the gloom away

My brain knocks on my forehead with the touch of a tsunami's lullaby

Boom

Boom

Boom

Its pleas hit me in angry waves from Poseidon's trident

And as it drowns, my brain wishes for the unruly storm to calm

But I deny its request for oxygen

I say no brain, not today

For we are school's prey

Like a child ripped from its mother's grasp, my brain kicks and screams

But nothing changes.

Its wisdom grows like the searching roots of a tree

A rotting library with love and knowledge to share

It knocks every day, seeking breath and warmth

But I bury its request in the ground

We wake the next morning to do it all again

And when we greet the morning sun

I say no brain, not today

For we are school's prey.

**Ashley Laschenski**



**Gretchen Cortez**  
*Custer #3* | Oil on Canvas

## **Hallelujah**

There we were,

    All by your side.

Your shallow breaths,

    Your mellowed eyes.

No strength left,

    Waiting for your guide.

Your skin paled and breathing seized.

Our fingers on your wrist,

    There's no beat found.

You slipped away in front of our eyes.

We sang to you as you left.

A song of rejoicing as your battle's now over;

    A song of sorrow for you won't be here tomorrow.

We say the word as you reach your peace.

    Hallelujah!

    You take your seat.

**Clare Henschel**



**Lainey Teynor**

*The Beach* | Oil on Paper

## **Him|miH**

He watches me

Judging every move I make All the clothes I wear

To every last wrinkle on my forehead I can always feel his eyes

I make sure every last hair is in place Even when I look my best

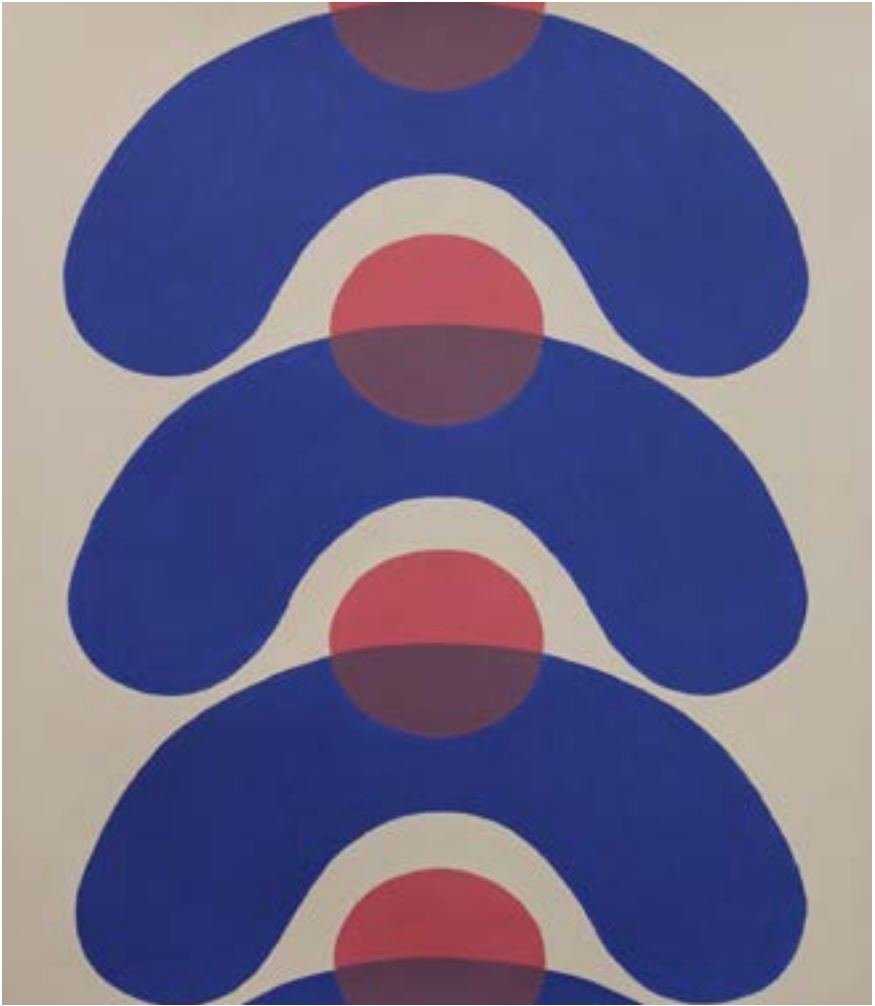
He will tear me down

Why can't he go a day without screaming Maybe it's time to stop  
looking in the mirror

**Luis Jimenez-Becerra**



**Mahlivanh Fleckenstein**  
*Noodles* | Acrylic on Paper



**Abby Stringer**

*Transparencies* | Acrylic on Paper



**Camille Olson**

*Oranges* | Acrylic on Paper

## Let Me Breathe

I am so tired

Though, not that kind of tired

Not the sleep deprived kind of tired

What I mean

Is that I am tired

Of feeling like

The ocean's current

Is pulling me in

Gasping for air

Kicking my legs

To try and release myself

From the waters grip

There is a constant war

Being fought within my mind

A war that never ends

One that leaves scars for life

A single bullet is fired off

Ringling through my ears

Causing me to fall to the ground

Begging for my life

Like a storm cloud

Rolling in over the hills

And the rain floods

A once beautiful meadow

One night's rest

Is all I need

Please our gracious God

Just let me breathe

Even now, nobody

Knows the pain it took for me

To become this gentle

For you, my sweet boy

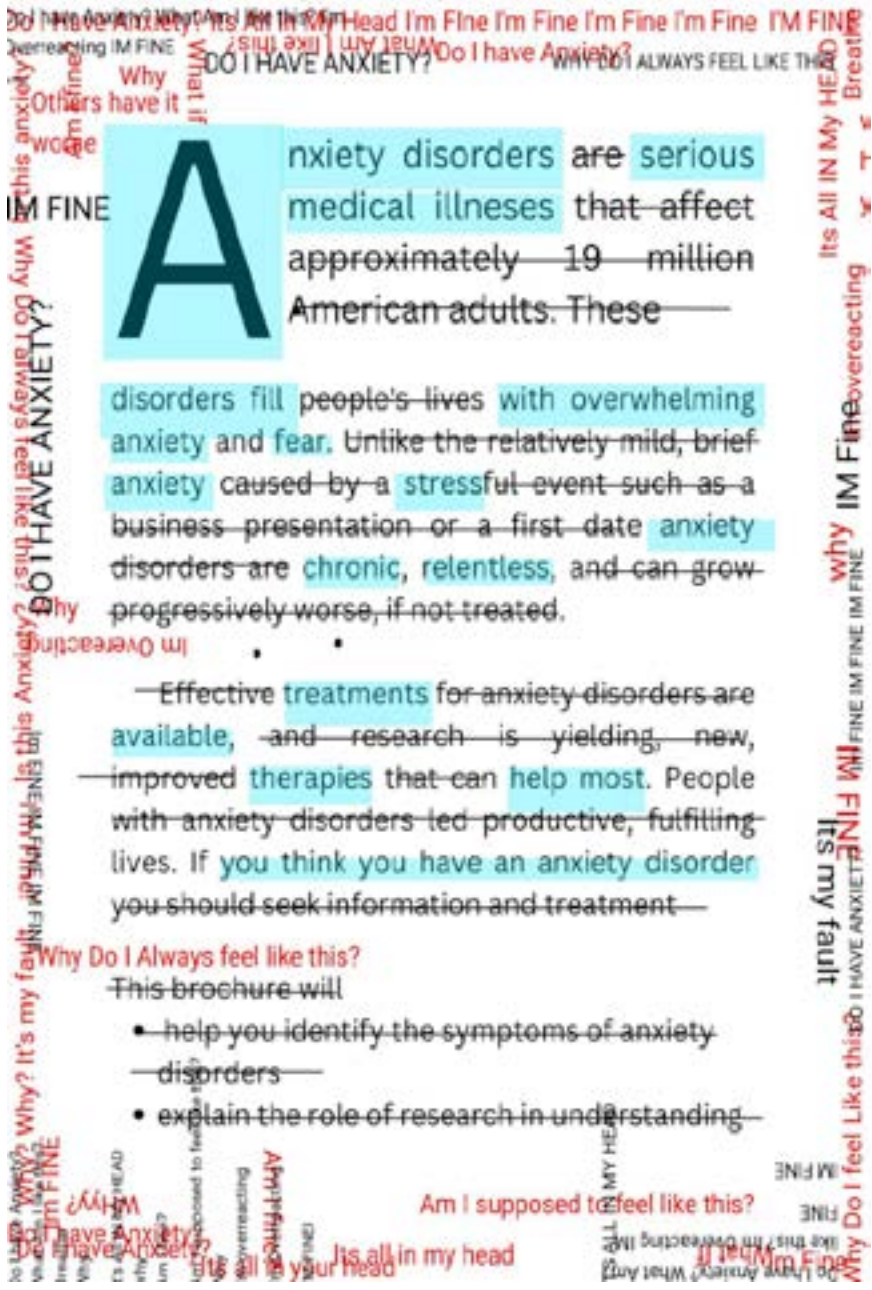
I'd shake hands with the devil

Cause' love is pain, right?

**Holly Santucci**



**Cheyenne Sanders**  
*Your Choice* | Oil on Canvas



**A**

nxiety disorders are serious medical illnesses that affect approximately 19 million American adults. These

disorders fill people's lives with overwhelming anxiety and fear. Unlike the relatively mild, brief anxiety caused by a stressful event such as a business presentation or a first date anxiety disorders are chronic, relentless, and can grow progressively worse, if not treated.

Effective treatments for anxiety disorders are available, and research is yielding new, improved therapies that can help most. People with anxiety disorders led productive, fulfilling lives. If you think you have an anxiety disorder you should seek information and treatment—

Why Do I Always feel like this?

This brochure will

- help you identify the symptoms of anxiety disorders—
- explain the role of research in understanding—

**Anna Becker | Do you have Anxiety: A Pamphlet**



**Lexi Oestreich**

*Androgyny* | Graphite

## The Watch

Ding! Ding!

The bells ring as I enter the run-down cafe. I hate stores that have those bells. What is the point? To indicate a customer? Should the employees not be able to see if a customer walks in without any auditory help? Stupid.

“Go ahead and seat yourself sir” the waitress says. I sit at the booth furthest away from the door to get away from those bells. The booth has cracks in the seat and is held together by duct tape. Pathetic. The seats are maroon purple and the table tops are aqua blue. Not the best combination. Maybe even one of the worst.

There is something about this cafe that feels rather familiar to me. I’m certain I have never been here before because I have never been to this city prior to last night. I’m just passing through, but thought it not to be a bad idea to spend last night hitting the local bars and clearing my mind.

Ding! Ding!

I turn to the sound of the bells and see a small woman walk in with a little boy. They have come to join me for breakfast. Or lunch? What time is it anyway? I go to check my watch on my left wrist, but to my surprise my watch is gone. Dammit. Come to think of it, I can’t remember if I ever even had it on or how I might have ever lost it. Maybe last night I..

Ding! Ding!

There they are again... just in time to announce to me that another family of three has entered the cafe to join me for whatever meal it is that we are having. Behind the family I notice that there is some commotion going on outside the door. It seems some police officers have pulled into the gravel parking lot of the cafe with their lights on. Probably a car accident.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water and a Cranberry juice.”

As I put in my order, I notice that the waitress continues to look at me for an extended few seconds. She has a strange look to her and seems to be nervous for some reason. Weird.

My stomach rumbles which reminds me that I should survey the menu. It is one of those little shitty cafe’s where the menu’s are only paper and don’t even contain enough options to go further than the front and back of a singular page. Classy.

I think I want the eggs... ehh maybe biscuits and gravy. I wonder if the om..

Ding! Ding!

I hear them, but this time I can't get myself to care enough to turn around. My palms are sweating. I am so hungry. I decide I'm going to get the meat-lovers omelet. I'm not always the biggest fan of meat. Especially at run-down places like this where their meat tends to be poor in quality, but I'm so hungry and hungover I need the contents of this omelet badly.

"Here are your drinks, and are you ready to put in an order for some food?"

"Meat-lovers" I say as I point at the omlet section.

As the waitress writes down my order, I notice that she is looking at me some more. She seems to be writing down much more than what I have ordered. I wonder if she is acting nervously because she finds me attractive. Most people do.

I slam my water in two or three gulps. It wasn't a big glass, but I am awfully thirsty from being hungover. I go to grab the cranberry juice and accidentally spill it all over my white t-shirt and jeans. Nice. I get up to go to the restroom to clean myself up and I accidentally slam my hip into the corner of the table. I knock my knife holder up and to my surprise, my knife is gone.

Ding! Ding!

I search the floor and the pockets of my ripped Levi's but there is no knife to be found. I know I got drunk last night, but not drunk enough to lose my watch and my knife. Dammit.

Beginning for the bathroom, I notice that some of the police officers have made their way inside of the cafe and are questioning the waitress. Interesting. No wonder she has been acting so strangely. I walk past them and make my way into the restroom. It is my first time looking at myself all day and I look awfully rough. I have a few bruises that I don't recognize and I am noticeably dirty. Not to mention the spilled cranberry juice on my t-shirt that makes it look like I have been stabbed. This makes me realize tha-

Ding! Ding!

With the sound of the bell I can hear a lot of motion going on outside of the bathroom. I quickly make my way out of the bathroom to see what all of the noise is about. I see that all but one of the cops who have pulled in here have now sped off out of the gravel parking lot leaving large dust trails behind them. I look around to try and figure out what is going on, but nobody seems to be paying attention to the situation.

“What’s going on anyway?” I ask the waitress.

With a very surprised and confused look on her face she seems to scan me and say,

“The police are in search of a man who was at the cafe but has fled now.”

Interesting. Of course I decided to go to the restroom and missed all of the exciting action. I return to my table, and to my lucky surprise, my food has arrived. I had forgotten how hungry I was, but I quickly regain that hunger as I eat.

As I take the last few bites of my omelet, I notice that the waitress has picked up the phone and is looking in my direction. I am a bit fed up with her hitting on me and her nervous behavior and I honestly have had enough of this cafe. Without knowing the cost, I quickly throw down a \$10.

Ding! Ding!

As I walk out of the door of the cafe into the gravel parking lot I am greeted by the cop who has been left out of the high speed chase action and left to watch this boring cafe. He gives me a simple head nod, which I return. As I walk by his car I notice that on the hood there is a towel with a few items on top of it. I notice a watch, a hat, and a few other small items that I didn’t look long enough to make out. Interesting. I wonder when it became a social norm to communicate through head nods instead of simply saying good morning or hello.

I pull my 1970 Chevy Impala out of the gravel lot of the cafe and only make it about a quarter mile down the road before I notice a group of cop cars with their lights on in my rear view mirror. They speed closer and closer and I grip the wheel tightly knowing that my luck has completely run out.

I watch as they pull back into the gravel lot of the cafe and I realize that once again I have missed all of the action. Unlucky timing. The man has probably returned to the cafe or was hiding out back or something. Either way, I decided to leave too early.

I turn up the radio as one of my favorite songs, “Stuck in the Middle with You,” by Stealers Wheel plays. I drive and I drive and I drive some more.

**Garret Locy**



**Marissa Kleman**  
*Still Life* | Oil on Paper

### III.

I am beginning to feel the mood shift as the sand of a desert ocean constantly changes.

Am I ready to do whatever it takes to feel,

Something new,

Something adaptable,

Something with less pain?

Because right now the walls are caving in, inescapable, this is a life sentence.

I will obtain anything you need: money, sex, be a servant only to you. Just let this all stop now.

Am I too late?

Are all the chances to help myself gone?

I don't care if it takes hell freezing over to stop this pain.

I will do it.

I will do anything.

Your hands could be my necklace.

Any kind of chain would be freedom compared to now.

Why did it have to happen to me?

Could I have done more for you?

Change.

I will change, just give me a price.

It will be our little bargain.

**Cameron La Mere**



**Cheyenne Sanders**  
*Fantasy* | Oil on Canvas

#### **IV.**

I pray for the feeling of euphoria,

A word that never can encompass such beauty.

To save me from constant dysmorphia

Your comfort makes me feel like doing something fruity.

Sometimes, people just need one warm, embracing hug.

How is it possible to have an effect that extreme?

You existed only to prove to the world that something can be this zealous.

You are better than any kind of drug,

That possibly could be coursing through my bloodstream.

You make those depressed, like me, so incredibly jealous.

**Cameron La Mere**



**Maggie Olson**

*When We Decided to Chase the Morning Star |*  
Acrylic on Paper

## Where I'm From

I am from oil paint,

from Gamblin and Winsor and Newton.

I am from the multi-bedroom, loud yet strongheaded home,

chaotic, safe, and the smell of apple cinnamon candles.

I am from a pathos,

vines of rich, green leaves that are strong and never stop growing.

They can survive in the light and the darkness.

I am from the Polar Express and dark hair and eyes,

from my only brother, Alexander, and Schultz.

I am from the stubbornness from my father,

and making sacrifices from my mother.

From if you eat a watermelon seed, it will grow in your stomach

and if you look at the green light, Razor Back will come and get you.

I am from the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I am from Pardeeville, and three different countries

Spain, Mexico, and Germany.

From homemade chicken noodle soup

and chocolate chip cookies from my grandma's recipe.

From the addiction, hundreds of empty Korbel bottles

and my hero, my dad, who overcame the plague of addiction.

Four years sober, I can't wait for more.

From the dedicated, hardworking woman, my mom

and the perfect example of a teacher.

On my moms closet shelves lie the stored away family photo bins,

and five baby bins of each of her five children.

I am from these moments.

Grown and resilient,

never looking back but searching for more.

**Gretchen Cortez**



**Abby Stringer**

*Under Construction* | Acrylic on Paper

# What Love Should Be

Love should not paint red roses black,

But should blossom from a small green bud to a beautiful red flower.

Love should not feel like a dream turned nightmare,

But should be the arms that pull you close when you wake up from a bad dream.

Love should not be the blade that pierces your skin,

But should be the bandage that heals the already torn piece.

Love should not be an anxious knot in your stomach as you fear you've said the wrong thing,

But should be the warmth of their words wrapping around your heart.

Love should not be anxiously checking your notifications to see their name,

But should be an "I love you." text already waiting for you.

Love should never drain you.

**Holly Santucci**



**Camille Olson**

*Rabbit* | Pen and Ink

## If Only You Picked Up the Phone

This world has felt like a lonely journey through the safari

You would always say your ringer was never off

If you check my wall, you'll see our first-date photo

How I miss the times when we would talk till dawn

I write this note to you on the floor of my dingey motel

Do not dwell on me, I want you to be happy

it's funny how even my last day is cloudy

Listening to my heartbeat writing this going at such a fast tempo

Even after your countless attempts, I still hate tiramisu

I should've told your parents how I loved it every time we would camp

I wonder if I'll remember the tangy sweetness of a kiwi

At my funeral, I want you to take the mic

If there is nothing after life, will my conscience just go dark

I hope for this to be untrue so I can watch you from above

Without you, I was left to just be alone in my head

Nobody bothered to talk to me, they think this was impromptu

These same people will post me with the meaningless caption "R.I.P"

Classmates will start to care all of a sudden to look like an activist

I have no control over what happens in the aftermath

Through my last moments, I remember when I saw this was love

I wonder how long it'll take them to realize I'm not asleep

I don't know what's ahead, but this reality is hellish

My life was ruined after they spread that damn video

I thought you would be there to guide me through the pain

If only you picked up the phone

**Luis Jimenez-Becerra**



**Kira Peters**

*Candy Machine* | Photograph

## Dreamscape

Of all of the grand mysteries one might expect to find at the crossroads of Hades and Ecclesia, where smoldering embers meet streets of gold, the last thing I expected to find was a third road. It was a sliver of a road made up of the earth's ashes. My body was drawn to this secret road, and I hovered towards it. It became louder and louder with screeches as I approached. When I fell near, I was swooped up by a flying pterodactyl that dropped me into its nest and tried feeding me as one of its own. After I rejected, I was backhanded by the wing and was suddenly running with a group of Neanderthals towards a mammoth they planned to feast on for supper. They motioned to me to kill the beast but when I couldn't execute, the mammoth got away and I was thrown into a fire. I woke up warm in what looked to be a bedroom of royalty. In fact, I soon found out I was in the quarters of Mary, Queen of Scots. Servants came in and with their thick Scottish accents hollering at me to get up. They compressed my ribs as they tightened my corset and made me slip into a ballgown with a white flared neck piece that looked like a coffee filter. Behold, Mary, Queen of Scots stood before me. Before I could even curtsy, she told her guards "Off with her head." As I waited for the end, my hands in chains and my head in a wooden block, I hear the blade release.

I open my eyes and I'm in Ford's Theatre, I'm watching a play when I hear a Boom. President Abraham Lincoln has been shot in the head. Chaos emerges and couples in fancy gowns and tuxes are running around mad. I encounter a girl who tells me her name is Anne and she brings me to a hiding spot. It's dark for a moment and when she lights her lantern, we are in an attic and instead of gun shots I hear bombs. She tells me the Nazi soldiers are trying to get us. Tears fall from my brown eyes and there I can see my reflection in the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. In the distance over loudspeakers, I hear I have a dream. I know that I am at the March on Washington listening to Dr. King speak. I gather next to fellow citizens and one by one we join hands in harmony and equality. I sway back and forth as I close my eyes, I open them to iconic Jimi Hendrix shredding his guitar and handfuls of drugs are being passed around. I pop one in, and the music starts to fade out and my brain gets fuzzy. My limbs have become fetus-like, and I can no longer speak or make thoughts. It was the day I was born.

**Alyssa Anichini**



**Gretchen Cortez**  
*Untitled* | Woodcut

## Reflection on a Dried Flower

In the deep mud and earth cellar,  
where worms and the roots of something greater  
crawl through the walls,  
There are  
shelves and shelves and shelves,  
whereupon those everlasting rows  
sit jars  
That holds everything sacred:  
tangible and conceptual  
memories;  
Indeed,  
they hold on so tightly  
like how the shelves cleave to the earth walls;  
and if they were to let go,  
you'll lose a part of yourself,  
never to be experienced  
again;  
In spite of the preciousness,  
the fragility,  
you'll sometimes go down there  
And you'll open one with a slight  
pop;  
And today, when you unscrew  
one of those unscrewable lids,  
you are hit first with the smell  
Of clean air,  
whose taste promises that the doldrums of Winter  
have ceased for another  
season;

You notice  
the gentle warmth of the early morning sun  
the lingering nip of Winter in the air  
the palette of blues and purples that  
waltz in the sky;  
You notice the green,  
of the leaves and the buds and the grass and the  
Flower;  
You're surprised because  
flowers don't push upward this early,  
less they too share your desire  
to breathe and to live  
once more;  
You decide to give the flower a little tug  
and it lets go of its dewy chains,  
and it is happy,  
Because it can now live forever  
without the fear  
of cold and of loneliness  
because  
You put the flower in a safe jar  
and you put that jar on a sturdy shelf  
and that shelf is one of many in your cellar  
and that cellar has worms and the roots of something greater  
in its warm walls of mud and earth.

**Lindsay Koza**



**Dan Stokes**

*Three Mugs* | Stoneware

## Cowboy Killers: A Taste of War

BOOM . . . The blast was almost deafening. It reminded me of a car backfiring in an empty tunnel, though the others with me that day might disagree. I could feel the left side of the Humvee lifting as I looked around. Time seemed to slow down as I saw the faces of my squad mates as the world literally flipped upside down. Moyers's face was easy to read; it was his first time running into an improvised explosive device (or IED for short). It was for most of us in Humvee. The only face that was stoic as ever as we flipped and rolled was Sargent Hoffman. I remember thinking the rest of us—even myself—were not ready for what we were about to get ourselves into as the world around me faded to black.

0430 – it was a Sunday morning, and not unlike most, I woke up late and rolled myself out of bed. All around I could hear the sound of the soldiers I shared a tent with waking up. I used to judge the sounds they made; all the groaning and cracking as they forced themselves awake. I used to think it was just old men making old men noises, but today I know the sound all too well. It was the sound of a body almost broken but still forcing itself to get up every day and push forward.

Following my normal Sunday routine, I grabbed the only things that keep me going during the week: a NOS energy drink and pack of Marlboro red cigarettes—“cowboy killers” we called them—and headed outside. I used to love the first drag of a cigarette. I used to swear they helped wake me up and heightened my senses.

“Corporal Parkhurst!”

I heard my name but couldn't see who it was, guessing it was someone of higher rank coming over to harass me. I put my NOS down and my cigarette on top of it so it wouldn't go out and stood at attention.

“Parkhurst, Moyer, Watts. . . .” I heard my name again this time with a few more from my unit added. I knew with the lineup of names we were going to be heading out soon and more than likely to meet up with some “eleven bang bangs: (infantry). I looked around to see if I could see the others, and to my left about 50 feet away, Private First Class (PFC) Lance Moyer exited his tent. Lance was a good foot taller than me with a slender build. Like the rest of us, he had his hair cut short. I nodded to him as he made his way to me taking his spot in my makeshift formation.

"Where's Watts?" I asked, looking past him to see if Watts had left his tent yet.

"I don't know. Not his keeper," Moyer answered, shrugging.

Moyer had always been the carefree type and could care less if we got yelled at for not forming up, so I went right to Watts. It took a few moments. Private (PVT) Greg Watts was from Tennessee and had a very thick southern accent and I could hear his voice coming from the mess tent asking for more biscuits. Unlike Moyer, Watts was shorter than me and had what we called little man syndrome. He always had to pick a fight with the biggest guy over the smallest thing. It really made it hard being his Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO). I entered the tent and saw Watts; he had short red hair and thick glasses. We could call them "BCGs" or "birth control glasses" since no one wearing them would ever be getting laid. I grabbed the neckline of his shirt and started to pull him out of the tent.

"Watts, they called us for formation like ten minutes ago let's go." He struggled for a moment before he recognized my voice and let himself be pulled outside and over to where Moyer was still standing. As we fell back in line, Staff Sergeant Robison had made his way to use.

"All right boys, new orders. Leaving today so go get your gear and meet me by the motor pool and we can go from there" SSGT Robison said. We all acknowledged with a salute and rushed to our tents to get ready. It took about a half hour, and we all met up. Waiting at the motor pool was a man we did not know he was tall and built much like a pro wrestler. He introduced himself as SGT Matt Hoffman and stated we would be joining his unit as they moved between locations to help support a group of combat engineers. The three of us replied with names and ranks before being quickly shoved into a nearby Humvee. I called shotgun and that caused SGT Hoffman to laugh.

He explained that he wasn't the driver so the Humvee would be seated five deep. As I opened the rear driver's side, I saw another person. She was smaller than the rest of us with light blond hair pulled into a tight ponytail. She gave me a warm smile and introduced herself as PFC Katelyn Persons. I smiled and said hello as I climbed in.

The next few days went by pretty fast. We met up with the 317th engineering unit and were told that we would be driving between the cities of Al Fajr and All Hayy and stopping at a few outposts to help repair damages. We were, in fact, going into a hot zone.

The days went by, and I met a handful of people whose names or what they looked like I couldn't tell you to this day. Most of them were in a passing glance; a quick "drink more water." Or "have you tried some ibuprofen?" There was one dehydration that happened, and I ended up walking Moyer and Watts through the process of placing an IV filled with water. It was a pretty relaxed detail, for the most part.

That Friday started like another. I woke up and lit myself a cigarette and I prepared my gear.

"Those things will kill you."

I heard the now filmier sound of SGT Hoffman's voice. During the week at least twice a day, he would tell me that same line. He never pressed it beside that one line, to which I always

replied: "the sooner the better" with a slight chuckle. He joined me at the Humvee and started to thank me for all the extra help I had been giving to his troops and asked if I needed anything. I told him, "no" and kept going with my job. Within a few hours, the rest of the unit was ready to go. I climbed into my normal spot at the rear driver's side behind Persons and next to Watts and Moyer as SGT Hoffman took the front passenger side. As the Humvee roared to life, my whole body vibrated. I sighed as we took off, lighting my sixth cigarette of the day by 0800.

We had a few stops. The first was for lunch after driving for about five hours when we got to pull over and eat. Moyer, Watts, and I ate quickly so we could play our favorite game, rocksambo, a game made up mostly of us throwing rocks at each other. Sgt Hoffman called a stop to the game when I was hit in the right eye causing a good size cut. He ordered us back on the road saying we had about  $\frac{3}{4}$  hours until our next stop. I checked to make sure the Humvee had been gassed up during the break before hopping back into my seat behind Persons. She had been napping so I kicked her seat, jolting her awake.

"Huh...What?" she mumbled.

"Time to roll out. Here." I tossed her an MRE knowing she decided to sleep the whole break but could always eat on the road. She thanked me as she fired the Humvee up. The rest soon joined us, and we were on the road. The conversation focused on me again. My squad mates had been asking about my girlfriend at the time.

They each had something smart to say, the most common of which was a "Dear John" comment to get me going. I think they liked when I got riled up. At the current moment, Sgt Hoffman was having his go at me. I had just lit up a cigarette and he asked, "What would your girlfriend think if she knew you were smoking" or something along those lines. As I began to reply....  
BOOM!

I want to say the ringing in my ears is what woke me because I couldn't hear anything else. I must have blacked out for a few moments because the last thing I remember was the

Humvee flipping and looking to my squad mate before everything went black. I rubbed my head trying to clear the ringing, but it was presenting so I shook my head and looked around to see what else was going on. The Humvee was upside down and I was laying on the roof, cigarette still lit in my mouth. I thanked God I wasn't wearing a seat belt as I looked next to me and saw Moyer hanging unconscious by his seat belt. I left the cigarette in my mouth as I crawled over to Moyer and checked his seatbelt. I couldn't get it to unbuckle so I drew the knife from my belt and started to saw at it. As I was working to set Moyer free, I took another look around. I could see Watts outside sitting behind some rocks about fifty feet away rubbing his head. SGT Hoffman was pulling Persons from the driver seat. As we locked eyes for a few moments, his stoic face gave me a little hope and I started to saw faster. I could see Hoffman's mouth moving as he was trying to give orders, but that ringing was still there, and I could only assume what he was saying:

"Keep it up, you have to get him out of there."

I turned back to look at Moyer right when the belt was almost cut. I started to put my knife away when the part of the belt that remained gave way to Moyer's weight. His body slammed into mine as it fell. I screamed as this white-hot throbbing pain appeared out of nowhere in my left leg right above the kneecap, or at least I think I screamed; that damn ringing was still there. The cigarette finally fell from my mouth as I struggled to pull not only Moyer but my medic's kit out of the now on fire Humvee. I felt a sudden jerking motion as someone grabbed the back of my collar. I had lost track of just about everyone else, focusing only on my task at hand, and when I was pulled back, I turned and swung with all my might. My fist landed into the chest of Sgt Hoffman, whom I could swear was smiling, as he pulled me into cover behind a pile of rocks. He pointed to my leg and his mouth moved again, this time only muffled by the gunshots flying around but I still couldn't make out what he was saying. I looked down to where he was pointing. In my left leg was my own knife. The way Moyer's body had slammed into me must have forced the knife into my own leg.

A quick look around again, and I saw a handful of people laying down and started to tend to them, moving from rock to rock trying to find cover as the bullets rained down on our position. I made it through a handful of people before I turned back to check on my squad mates. Both other medics, Moyer and Watts, were up doing checks like I was, Persons was frantically waving as if in trouble, and there was no sign of SGT Hoffman. I decided to head towards Persons and see what was going on. I again bounced from cover to cover, stopping slightly at each one, looking not only for people who needed my help but for the people attacking us. I had been shot once before and it wasn't going to happen again. I finally made it to the rock with Persons and took cover. As I got closer, I saw that she was crying. Lying next to her was SGT Hoffman with a bullet wound in his head. I was stunned only for a second, but that's all it took. As I stood there looking at my new friend's body, I started to shake and a few tears of my own rolled down my face as well.

Even under fire, I reached for my cowboy killers—"smoke if you got em" we used to say—and right now I was so shaken up my natural reaction was to light a cigarette to calm myself. As I did, I stood to grab my lighter... BANG! I don't think I heard the gun that fired the bullet, but I felt it. It felt all too familiar to me, a sudden piercing pain as my leg started to feel more and more wet. I looked down and saw the hole in my upper thigh. I slumped back down with a cigarette still in my mouth as I blacked out for the second time that day.

I woke up a day later in a makeshift Army hospital tent. I was told the only person we had lost was SGT Hoffman. A few other soldiers were wounded but nothing life threatening. That incident is what made me decide to leave the Army. I had been shot twice, stabbed a few times, and now once by myself, and I was done looking at death. I still talk to Moyer and

Persons; they each also live different lives because of what happened. Moyer became a therapist and Persons is back home helping her family run their small-town auto shop. We don't talk as much as we used to, but they are and always will be my battle buddies. As for Watts, he started in the Army a few more years, but in 2018 he took his own life. To this day, I can't light up a Marlboro Red cigarette without thinking about that day. That's why I don't smoke anymore; something I use to love is now a trigger for me, but maybe it helped in the long run. I don't smoke anymore, beside once every year on April 21st, when I remember the faint, faint words of SGT Hoffman.

"You know kid those things are going to kill you."

And I still reply, "the sooner the better SGT; the sooner the better."



**Abby Stringer**

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