



GoThIC  
bLACKbird

LOOKING AT THE world of  
wRITING AND dESIGN ThRUgh  
GoThIC LENSES

Created by Paige Rohfus  
and Moses Eckstein

ISSUE I  
mAY 2012

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# AbouT bLACKbird

Gothic Blackbird is a monthly magazine, the brainchild of Paige R. Rothfus, who wanted to create a magazine that showcased the genre of art and writing with a gothic feel. Originating from DMACC (Des Moines Area Community College) in Ankeny, Gothic Blackbird is produced and partially funded by the Creative Writing Guild.

The creators of the magazine are Moses Eckstein and Paige R. Rothfus and the magazine features not only student writers and artists from DMACC but also from around the community, other states and even one from prison so Blackbird is both local and national, and naturally its contents are quite eclectic.

Gothic Blackbird's primary aim is to gather and share the work of budding writers, artists and designers from around the community with others while at the same time creating an opportunity for them to have their work published.

Gothic Blackbird intends to continue improving, expanding and changing and is excited about the future ahead.

CovEr ArT by  
**Paige R. Rothfus**

AuThorS fEATurEd IN ThIS ISSuE:

**Kat Taylor**

**Moses Eckstein**

**Charlie Cheek**

**Kasey Jones**

**Paige Rothfus**

**Ethan Polson**

**Benjamin Spick**

**To Check out their profiles and personal portfolios, go to  
[www.creativewritingguild.com/gothicblackbird](http://www.creativewritingguild.com/gothicblackbird)**

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Quiet Earth-tears from below  
Drawn up from nigh the roots  
Oh fishes' lore, O sweet liqueur  
That quenches thirsty shoots

Of heaths and men your pilgrims come  
To ask your secrets full  
All-knowing of the Earth-old wonders  
You ask of them a toll

And here I stand before ye now  
To beg a drink so cool  
Pray let me sip from chill your cup  
To cure a wiseman's fool.

2012

Benjamin T. Spick

**'To The Well' Linocut and poem by Benjamin Spick.**

# UNTITLED PoEm

by Kasey Jones

**My demons broke my shackles and set me free,**

**I released them and they released me,**

**From the ashes came new life,**

**My blinders removed and now I have sight,**

**I walk with no fear of death,**

**Holding forever my final breath,**

**My soul now free of pain,**

**Finally healed by mercy's rain**

## **Depression is a War Poem by Moses Eckstein**

**Between men and monsters  
Men with white banners raised on a hill  
Under a sky like a tower of glass  
One hundred riding white horses  
All armored in mail gold and glistening  
Faces weathered from battles countless  
Hair billowing silver out of helmets  
Beneath them a valley covered by trees**

**From the forest the monsters now creep  
Out of shadows under the eaves  
Where creatures stirred before the dawn  
Now fleeing from snapping branches  
Roots twisted into nooses as a black  
tide reeking of tar and ash oozes  
out from under the canopy**

**Behind the black flood they charge one  
hundred their bodies ragged and beaten  
Covered in sores and rotten flesh  
Faces like the faces of hounds and boars  
Teeth like nails driven into flesh  
Arms like the arms of starved men  
Hands fitted with the talons of vultures  
But eyes like the eyes of children**

Moses Eckstein believes that beauty exists in darkness and he strives to reveal it in everything he writes and creates. His fiction passionately chronicles family dramas in worlds of fantasy as well as our own familiar yet complex world. His poetry records a personal reflection of painful and confusing human problems. On the other hand, his artwork is an eclectic collection of game/story design concepts and random creations.



Undead Army by Moses Eckstein

**Wind from the cold north brings clouds  
Tumbling like black blossoms across the sky  
A man with eyes of gray buried in wrinkles  
Blows a ram's horn and they plunge  
Each man into the valley into the black  
Tide of the forest that swallows them up**

**The monsters surround the men  
Slashing at them cutting deep wounds  
Wounds to match the scars they carry  
Wounds that will fester until at last they  
Will drain the strength of a man  
Who bears them and leave him crippled  
Alone  
His armor bloodied and covered in the black  
Tide that reaches out beyond the men  
Beyond the forest and the valley  
Beyond the hill where the men once rode  
Devouring the world in its cold passion**

# Take a Walk

by Moses Eckstein

Take a walk down the winding road  
to the glen where the wind bends  
the spines of the gray-green switchgrass,  
You will see a world under moonlight  
stitched with silver spiders' thread  
far from concrete and traffic signs,  
Take a walk and you will see trees  
standing in shadows by the river,  
Beyond the shopping malls  
cattails dance under the stars,  
When the buzz of automobiles  
fades to a sigh you will hear  
whispers of the wind between  
oak trees in the forest,  
You will feel its cool breath  
on your hands and cheeks,  
Take a walk and look skyward  
as your naked ancestors did,  
You will see twinkling diamonds  
adrift in an ocean of tar,  
You will taste the frost in the air,  
Take a walk to the soaring oak tree  
smell the scent of wet leaves  
rattling against the branches,  
You will rub your palm against it  
feel the crusty bark on your flesh

You will walk back to your room,  
look at the eggshell-white walls  
the peeling paint on the edges  
of the doors and cupboards,  
You will smell the dust in the air  
as it blows up from the vents,  
You will have only a moment

before the phone will ring



# Cocoon

By Paige R. Rothfus

(When I'm sad) I want to sew myself inside a cocoon,  
Away from people,  
Stitch by stitch,  
Carefully shutting myself in,  
The cocoon will be made of fur on the inside,  
So I stay warm,  
And hemp on the outside: a ripstop.  
Inside I will make myself a little hole  
So I can peek out sometimes  
To watch the world,  
Make sure it's still there  
But mostly I'll just sleep,  
Safe and quiet.

Paige Rothfus is a fiction writer, poet and also enjoys typography, old english language, etymology, and dabbling in different art mediums. Her poetry reflects her perception of life, and the stories she enjoys writing are often based on little known ancient legends or scraps of incomplete history. Overall, her work has a distinctly gothic flavor. Her favorite mediums for art are colored pencils on black paper and pearlescent acrylics.

# **Insanity**

**by Paige R. Rothfus**

**I:**

**An empty planner**

**Flowered shirts stained and stretched out**

**I am never going to grow up**

**Tearless sobbing, heart-wrenching**

**Cackling laughs**

**All at the wrong times**

**Never making any sense.**

**II:**

**It all makes sense to me**

**It's the rest of the world I live in**

**that doesn't seem to understand why**

**I tear my hair**

**and grind my teeth**

**and pile my clothes in the bathroom sink.**

**I didn't ask for this life,**

**So don't laugh at me**

**Because I'm always laughing at you**

**Because you're so insane.**



**'Gillian by Ethan Polson. Ethan has enjoyed doing art ever since he could pick up markers and create an 'abstract' piece of art as all young children do so well. He likes pencils/charcoal as a medium and is also getting into digital art using photoshop for pieces.**



'Howl's Moving Castle' by Ethan Polson



**'Line Tree' by Kat Taylor. Kat graduated with advanced art classes from Clark Community High School in 2011. Having started art at a very early age and being naturally inquisitive, Kat has dabbled in many different art styles and mediums.**



'Red Dragon' by Moses Eckstein





'Prison Art' Untitled by Charlie Cheek. Charlie is currently in prison. He enjoys fixing vehicles drawing, and tattoo art. When he is in jail he is limited as to the colors he can use for his art and he is also limited to pens for his medium.



## Graffiti Etiquette

### The Do's and Don'ts of Urban Art

Paige R. Rothfus

Before you start: Understand that graffiti is an art form and takes time to become skilled. If you are just starting out practice doodling a lot in your blackbook (a special sketchbook for graffiti and tagging design ideas) and get really familiar with the work of other artists, such as Banksy. You can find a lot of his work by searching Google Images. Join a graffiti club or forum and communicate with people who have been doing it for a long time to ask advice and opinions.

Check out books on graffiti to get design and color ideas. Practice in your blackbook at least 15-20 minutes a day if you want to become good at graffiti. Paint on a small scale (orange crates and paper) to get good at combining colors and letters before you try to paint large scale on a wall. Start with mastering simple block letters before moving on to develop your own personal style. Also, before you go out and tag on the street and in public, practice your first pieces in obscure private places like culverts and abandoned houses.

Keeping photographs is a good way to catalog your work. Come up with your own graffiti tag, (this is your special signature). It can be the letters of your name or a nick name, but tie the letters together so they cannot be read easily. While you want your friends and other taggers to recognize your tag, you do not want the authorities to be able to read it. Practice writing your tag in your blackbook to get good at writing it quickly.

#### Proper Tools:

**Brushes:** Masonry brush paints are tedious to use and not good for quick night work. While you have slightly more control when you use brush paints make sure you are in an area that is out of the general public eye because you will be there for a while. One advantage of using brushes is that they are more environmentally friendly than spray cans.

**Spray Paint:** This is the typical tagger's paint of choice, because it is cheap, quick, and you can do a lot with different nozzles and stencils and such. Some good brands are Belton, Monatanas and Rustoleum—

however, Rustoleum takes a while to dry and tends to drip. It will be dark when you are out tagging so it is a good idea to make sure that you can tell what color



Graffiti and photo by Paige R. Rothfus

your can is in the dark so you don't have to use your flashlight very much. One idea is to paint a wide stripe of the color on the top half of your cans.

**Nozzles:** These are different caps for your spray cans to change the width of your paint stream. When out tagging have about 4-5 different nozzles. They mostly come in two sizes: fat and skinny.

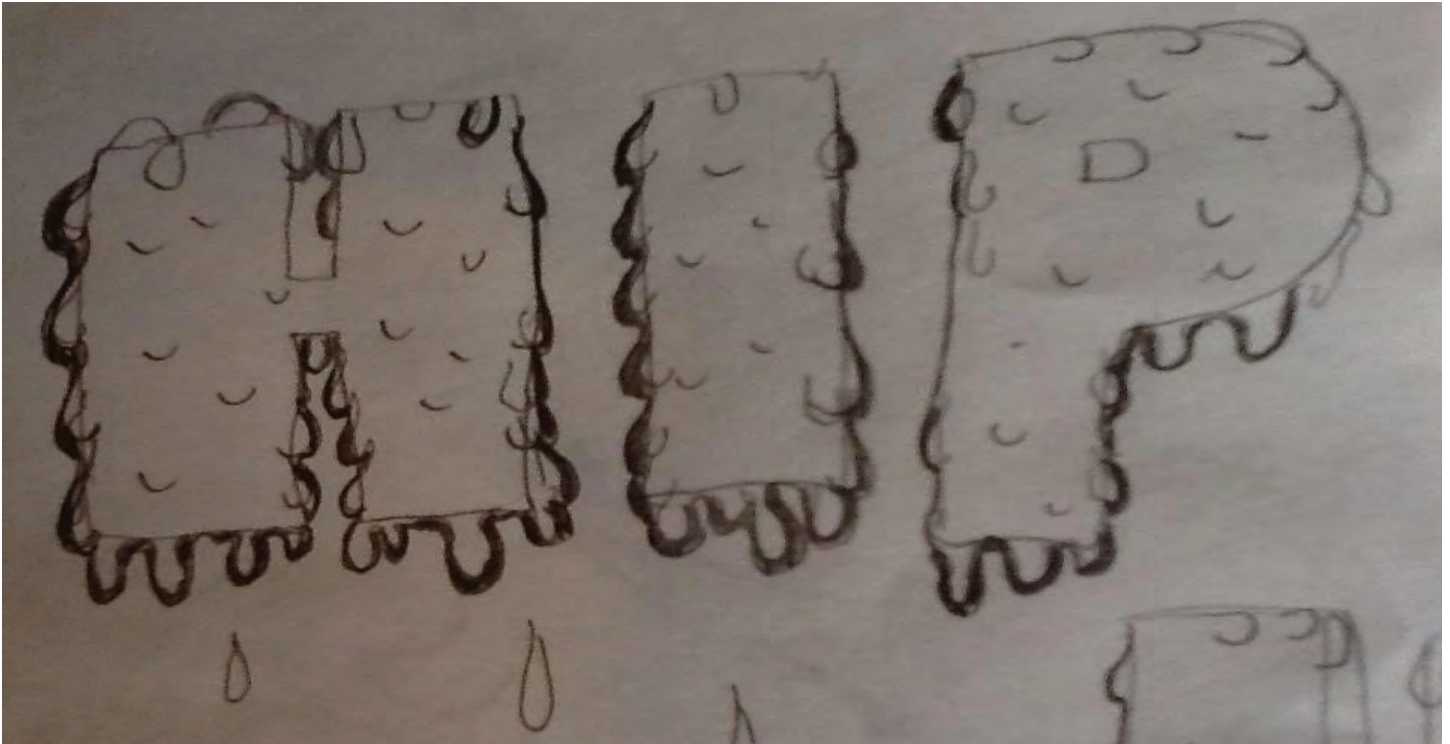
**Stencils:** It is easy to make your own from photocopies. Use cardstock or acetate for the stencil and carry them in a plastic folder. Just make sure you let the stencils dry before putting them back in the folder.

**Emulsion:** This is a primer, particularly used on porous surfaces like cement and concrete to avoid letting the more expensive colored paint get soaked up.

**Wet Chalk Pen:** This is a tool used mainly for blackboards and marking shop windows. You can get them at motorist's shops. Once they are dry they don't come off unless scrubbed, but they are only good for dry surfaces like the inside of bus stops and subway stations.

**Graffiti Markers:** The best kind to get are Krink, On the run, or MTN, and you can get them at [www.mtncolors.com](http://www.mtncolors.com). An alternative to the special graffiti markers are large colored and black Sharpie markers.

**Climbing gear:** Be sure and wear clothes and boots suitable for climbing walls, also bring a hook and rope in case you plan on climbing up very high and need to haul gear up after you. The higher you can manage to tag, the more impressive but also the more dangerous.



#### Proper Attire:

**Gloves:** Get either cloth gloves that soak up paint well or plastic disposable. You can get latex from car part shops and non latex from hospitals. Be sure and dispose of everything messy like gloves and badly stained clothing in a bin before you depart the scene so that if you happen to get stopped on your way home you don't have any incriminating evidence. Also, don't bring your entire blackbook with you, instead, do a small sketch of your planned piece and fold it up in your pocket to be disposed of when you are finished.

**Garments:** Wear black or at least comfortable darker colored clothes, **DO NOT WEAR WHITE.** You will be throwing away your clothes when you are done so don't wear something you want to keep. You do not want to stand out; you want to blend in to the darkness. If you have one, wear a mask that covers your face in case of emergency.

**Proper Time:** The best time to go tagging is after dark (after 11 PM and before 4 AM)

**Proper Location:** You can tag practically anywhere, an alley, under a window, bus stops, ATMs, bins, walls, pavements, billboards, posh hotels, garage doors, roofs, even McDonald's. Of course different materials will react differently different backgrounds. On shiny and slick surfaces for instance, the paint is going to drip a lot more readily, but you will need less primer. On porous surfaces you are going to need a lot of primer but the paint sticks in place better. The cheekier you are when it comes to location, the better. Don't just do detailed pieces in out of the way places like bridges and allies where few people will notice them, but also try a quick tag in highly trafficked spots like a subway station or a motorway bridge. You won't have as much time to make it detailed, but a lot more people will notice. Also practicing this makes you braver.

#### Tips:

Don't do what is called "biting" other people's work. Whether you steal their style or their whole piece they do not take kindly to being copied. This means you have to do your research even when you think you have an original idea and make sure someone else hasn't already beat you to it.

"Unless you can do better don't paint over it" is an unspoken rule of taggers. Sometimes painting over is understandable if there is an infestation of graffiti in that area and you are running out of places. Just make sure you make your piece a lot more detailed than the one you are painting over, in order to do the previous artist justice. Bigger isn't always better. Don't always paint massive pieces that span across entire walls. Try detailed little pieces in a smaller area like a doorway and take the time to make it really look impressive. Have a plan for what you are going to paint before you go, either in your head or on a slip of paper so you aren't sitting around trying to think of ideas once you get there. As for ideas of what sort of things to paint, anti-war slogans, local campaigns and web addresses are all good things to paint. Graffiti is all about expressing yourself and your opinion, so take the time to come up with a message that means a lot to you. Only do one piece per night, because it's much safer that way. Bringing along a mate is more fun and also safer because you have a lookout. Take any photographs the next day when your piece has had time to dry and so you have the advantage of daylight. Just don't brag about it to passersby or you may end up in jail and wishing you hadn't been so proud. Just silently enjoy the good feeling of your art out there for everyone to see. Happy tagging!

# Dead Dog

## by Moses Eckstein

Scott pulled the covers back from his face. His mother was standing over his bed, her arms crossed against her chest.

“Mamma,” said Scott, “It's too early?”

“Get up,” said his mother. “Put your clothes on.”

Scott rolled over, cocooned in a white sheet with his head leaning off the bed at his mother's feet. She wore white flip-flops and a purple bathrobe. His clothes were scattered over the floor around the bed or hanging from the shelf in the closet. He grabbed a balled-up pair of blue jeans and pulled them under the sheet.

“When I tell you to do something,” said his mother, “you do it.”

The sheet ballooned as he pulled the blue jeans up to his waist. “What are you talking about?”

“That dead animal in the garden,” said his mother. The golden retriever had been sick for three weeks before finally lying down in the garden and dying. The same day Scott's father Sam took off in the pick-up truck.

Scott rolled the sheet off and climbed over the side of the bed.

“You don't go to school no more,” said his mother. “You don't do nothing.”

Scott sat up stretching, exposing his tan chest. “Yeah.” The blue jeans rode up on his waist. He cupped his hands over his mouth and yawned. His mother took a pack of cigarettes out of her bathrobe and tapped it on her palm. She took a cigarette out with her lips.

“Where'd I put my lighter?” she mumbled.

Scott yawned, making his eyes tear up. “Check the sofa.”

She closed up the pack of cigarettes and slipped them into her bathrobe. She walked out of the bedroom, stepping over piles of Scott's dirty clothes. Scott grabbed a Kiss band t-shirt from between his feet and pulled it down over his chest. In the living room his mother had taken both of the cushions off the leather sofa. One lay beside the forty inch flat screen TV, and the other lay in the middle of the floor. A clear path cut to the kitchen between mountains of old gifts sweaters, jackets, shoes, clothes hangers, plastic grocery bags, toys, and a stack of empty cardboard boxes.

“God damn it,” said his mother.

Scott grinned.

His mother straightened. “Don't you laugh at me.”

“I didn't laugh,” he said.

“You were thinking it,” she said. She knelt on the floor to look under the sofa.

Scott walked into the kitchen. There was a microwave, a portable refrigerator, a two-burner stove, and a couple of cabinets with no doors. He reached into the refrigerator and grabbed the gallon of skim milk.

“What are you doing?” asked his mother from the living room.

Scott shut the refrigerator door. “I'm hungry.”

“You can get something afterward,” said his mother.

Scott pounded the jug of milk down on the counter. “This is child abuse.”

She climbed onto the sofa, sitting on it without the cushions. “You wouldn't say that if your father were here.”

Scott went to the door. When he turned to shut the door behind him, his mother was standing there. “Shovel's in the shed.”

He shut the door on her. The trailer's blue paint was chipping around the roof and the windows, and the trailer skirt was missing three planks of wood near the rear support. Scott

looked out across the yard to the garden between his trailer and the neighbor's double-wide. A waist-high wire fence enclosed the vegetable garden in a rectangle.

He grabbed a loose plank from the deck and hurled it into a stand of bare walnut trees behind the trailer. The trailer door swung open, and his mother stepped onto the deck in her flip-flops. "Thought I heard something," she said. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and looked at the deck. "What'd you break now?"

"Nothing," he said.

"I'm calling your aunt Martha," she said.

"Good," he said, walking down the steps.

"Don't you walk away from me," said his mother. She put the cigarette in her mouth.

Scott walked to the garden.

His mother mumbled something with the cigarette still dangling in her mouth.

Scott turned around. "What makes you so great? All you ever do is smoke and watch TV."

The door of the trailer slammed shut.

There was a mound of yellow fur lying in the furrow between two rows of blue-green cabbage plants. Scott knelt down beside the Golden Retriever. He remembered his father taking the dog for a walk at Ledges Park one year back. They were gone for six hours, while he played poker with his mother on a picnic bench. His mother had told him Sam loved the dog more than either of them.

The head was lying between two cabbage plants with its tongue rolled out on the ground. The eyes were open, but there was white and yellow puss oozing out from around the orbits. Tiny white worms were crawling around inside the dog's mouth and around the black lips, giving it the smell of road kill. He grabbed one of the dog's hind legs and picked it up, with a couple of clumps of dirt hanging off its paw. An entire side of the animal was frozen to the ground. He sat down on the row beside the dog and started pulling weeds out of the ground.

When he looked up, the girl from the double-wide trailer ran across the yard to the garden. She grabbed the wire fence with both hands and leaned on it. "Shouldn't you be in school, Louie?" he asked. She wore a jean jacket over her pink tank top. He thought she was a pretty for being four years younger than he was, but she had trailer written all over her. She was hippy, her teeth weren't straight, and she had a noticeable overbite.

"Mom says I don't have to go every day," she said. "Besides I'm going to the mall to pick out a costume."

"Great," said Scott. "You should do that."

She smiled at him, exposing her crooked teeth. "Do you want to know what I'm going as?"

"No," said Scott. He pulled a handful of Creeping Charlie out of the ground, twisting the stems off the roots.

"Bet you can't guess," she said.

"Bet you don't care," he said. He tossed the handful of Creeping Charlie over the fence next to Louie.

"It rhymes with Stitch," said Louie.

Scott looked down.

"I'll tell you later," said Louie. She climbed over the fence, getting her flood pants caught on a wire hook in the process. She snapped the hook off her pant leg and walked toward him.

Scott looked at her feet. "Don't step on anything."

“I wasn’t going to,” said Louie. She stepped over a cabbage plant and sat down next to him. “Hey, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” asked Scott. He backed away from the dead animal.

“Gross,” said Louie. She wrinkled her nose and leaned closer. “It’s got stuff coming out its nose. Like snot.”

Scott winked at her. “Cool, isn’t it?” He grabbed the dog’s right forepaw and walked back with it, pulling the body behind it in the dirt. He let go and straightened.

“It’s not working,” said Louie.

“I know it’s not working,” said Scott. He stretched his arms over his blond hair and scratched the back of his head.

“Maybe if you got something to pull him,” said Louie.

“I don’t need your help,” said Scott. He looked at the shed behind the trailer. He faced Louie and pointed at her forehead. She looked up at his finger. “Don’t follow me.” He walked over to the shed with a rusty padlock hanging from the door handle. He picked up the padlock and slammed it back on the corrugated steel door, making a dull thudding. When he turned around, Louie was standing there looking at him.

“Don’t you have something better to do?” asked Scott. He walked past her toward the deck.

She followed after him. “Thought you wanted my help?”

He climbed up the stairs and opened the trailer door, leaning inside. His mother was lying on the sofa, her yellow hair spilling down onto the floor. The television was on to the soaps.

His mother looked up. “You done?”

Scott shook his head. “Where’s the key for the shed?”

“Ain’t no key,” said his mother. “Your father took it when he ran off.” She took out a crumpled ten dollar bill from her purse. “Pick me up a lighter too,” she said. “And not one of those cheap Bics either.”

Scott walked out into the yard, where Louie was playing on her phone. She looked up. “Where’d you go?”

“Going to the hardware store,” he said. He walked toward the sidewalk.

“Wait up,” said Louie, as she put the phone in her pocket.

Scott looked both ways at the end of the street. To his left was a gravel street that led up to a dozen trailers like his own. To his right the paved street led down three blocks to the hardware store. A Ford Escalade with a dented driver’s side door drove by them. One of the guys inside threw a beer can out of the window.

“Where’s your truck?” asked Louie.

Scott kicked the beer can into a pothole in the middle of the street. “Wasn’t mine to begin with.”

Louie’s phone beeped. She dug into her pant’s pocket and took it out.

“That your boyfriend?” asked Scott.

Louie shook her head as she walked. “No, it’s just Jeff. He’s joining the Army.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Scott.

“You wouldn’t do that,” said Louie.

“Don’t know. Thought about it once or twice.” He had seen an army recruiter at the high school’s job fair. The recruiter had bought him a can of Pepsi and talked to him about his family. His father had been in the army for eight years, climbing to the rank of sergeant. He had been in

the same unit as the recruiter. "Ain't no way Mom would let me join," he said. "Least not until I'm eighteen."

The hardware store was up ahead with its American flag waving from a flagpole in the gravel parking lot. He faced Louie. "Race you to the store," he said, and started running. Louie caught up to him in front of the store, gasping through her red hair. There was a neon green sign up in the window for Camel cigarettes. Two for five dollars.

Scott walked to the back and grabbed the cheapest metal saw he could find. Louie followed him to the checkout counter. A man with more hair on his chin than on his head stood in front of several rows of cigarette boxes. On the counter a bunch of cheap lighters hung from hooks in a punchboard.

"You Sam Plooper's son?" asked the associate.

Scott lowered his head. "How'd you know?"

"You look like your old man," said the associate. "Jutting chin and green eyes and all. Where is that scoundrel?"

"Gone," said Scott. He put the metal saw on the counter.

The bald man's eyebrows furled. "A man has to be dog-mad." He looked at Louie. Her shoulders rolled together.

"This your girlfriend?" asked the associate.

Louie blushed and leaned toward Scott.

"She's just a friend," said Scott.

The associate checked the metal saw with the barcode reader. "That it?"

Scott grabbed a neon orange plastic lighter off the punchboard. He put it on the counter. "And two packs of Camel Lights." Louie looked up at Scott, her eyes widening.

The associate turned around and took two packs of Camel Lights out of a dispenser. He put the packs down on the counter.

"Need your I.D., son," said the associate.

"They're for my mom," said Scott.

The associate nodded. "It's against the law, son."

"They're not for me," said Scott. "I swear. My mom gave me the cash to pick up her cigarettes."

"Your mom Rachel?" asked the associate.

"Yeah," said Scott.

The associate shook his head slowly from side to side. "I'll ask her the next time she comes in." He checked out the cigarettes and the lighter and put them in a white plastic bag with the metal saw. "Give your mom my best wishes now."

"I can't believe you lied to him," Louie said as they walked outside.

"I can't believe it worked." Scott pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"You smoke?" asked Louie.

He drew in a deep draw and blew the smoke out of his nose. "Dad used to buy them for me."

They returned to the shed and Scott started sawing off the padlock. Sparks flew as the metal blade shrieked against the rusty iron. He took off the padlock and tossed it into the yard. Inside were two shelves with paint cans on them and an assortment of lawn tools, including two rakes, a shovel, and a hoe.

Louie walked to the back of the shed and turned around. "I want a cigarette."

"You won't like it," he said.

"I won't ask again," she said. "Just this once?"

He took the open pack of Camel Lights out of his back pocket and grabbed the lighter. She put the cigarette in her mouth, and he lit it for her. She drew in a deep breath, held it for second, and coughed. She took the cigarette out of her mouth and looked at it.

"I like it," she said. She put the cigarette back in her mouth and inhaled the smoke into her nose. She coughed and took the cigarette out of her mouth. "Smoke kind of stings." She blew smoke out of her mouth and coughed again.

"You get used to it," he said. Scott remembered the first time his father had bought a pack of cigarettes for him. They'd been out all day fishing at the lake near the quarry. He had caught a trout, a giant in his arms, but only seven inches from the tip of the nose to the tailfin. His father handed him a cigarette and said, 'You're a man now.'

Scott went to the dead dog, grabbing it by the front paws and pulling it up. Then he spun twice around with it and heaved it over the wire fence into the yard. The animal landed with a slump in a patch of orange grass. The trailer door swung open and his mother walked onto the deck in her flip-flops. "Where have you been?" she asked.

Scott walked up to the deck and took the lighter out of his pocket. "You didn't say what kind."

His mother sniffed. "You been smoking?"

Scott stepped back. "No."

"Give me the lighter," said his mother.

Scott handed her the lighter. She leaned toward him and sniffed. "Smells like cigarette smoke." She looked down at Louie. "Luanne, has Scott been smoking?"

Louie shook her head. His mother backed up and opened the trailer door. "I want to talk to you." She went inside, and Scott went in after her. The TV was in a cardboard box in the living room. There were empty cardboard boxes in the kitchen and in the hallway.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"We're moving," she said.

"Hold on, Mom," he said. "What are you talking about?"

"You can start packing," she said. "My sister's taking us in."

"What about my friends?" he asked. His mother started packing the cardboard box in the living room with photo albums. Scott went to her. "Mom, I don't understand."

She grabbed a photo album from the entertainment center and stuffed it into the box. "There's nothing to understand. I won't stay in an empty home."

"This is crazy," he said.

"Don't call me crazy," she said.

"I didn't," he said.

"You're more like him every day," she said.

Scott crossed his arms. "Mom?" he asked, "what'd you say to make Dad leave?"

She straightened with her back to him, frozen. "How dare you say that."

"It's an honest question, Mom," he said.

She stuffed a photo album into the cardboard box, knocking it open on the edge of the box. There were pictures of their family with his dad cut out of them.

Scott took the photo album and closed it. He'd seen his parents arguing in the driveway. His dad had slammed the pickup truck door. "You said something to him."

"Go outside," she said.

"Mom, I won't stop until you tell me."

She turned slowly to face him. "He wanted to leave."

"Why?" he asked.

"Scott, I don't know," she said, turning her back to him. "I don't know."

"What'd you say?"

"I said no."

"That's it?" he asked.

When she turned around again, there were tears in her eyes. "I don't know, Scotty. What do you think?"

He knelt beside her. "Mom, I'm sorry." He put his arms around her, embracing her as he never had before.

Scott walked down the steps to Louie and the dead dog. "You in trouble?" asked Louie.

Scott grabbed the paws of the dead dog and pulled it back into the walnut trees. Louie followed him back there. He grabbed the shovel out of the shed and started digging. The ground was solid and crusty at the top, but as he dug deeper the soil turned into fine black silt. He stabbed the shovel in the dirt and walked back to the shed. He picked up the plastic bag and took the second pack of cigarettes out of it and stuffed the bag in his pocket.

"Get back," said Scott. Louie backed up. He grabbed the dead animal and pulled it into the shallow pit. The dog slumped into the pit, its head twisting under its haunches. Scott took both packs of Camel Lights and tossed them into the pit. Then he started covering it with dirt from the pile.

"You're angry," said Louie.

"I'm not angry," he said.

"Why won't you talk to me?" she asked.

Scott stabbed the shovel in the ground. He stared down at the dog. Its front paws hung on the pit's edge. Scott remembered the day when his dad had brought the golden retriever home in the pickup truck. His dad had been out with friends all weekend, and his mother was talking to his aunt. His dad had gone fishing with him a week earlier, but they hadn't talked for more than a few minutes since then. Scott kicked the forepaws into the hole.

"You know what Dad said before he left?" He kicked dirt onto the dog. "Don't make my mistakes." He turned around and walked back to the trailer and knocked the front door open. His mother lay on the sofa speaking on the phone with his aunt, and he could tell by her voice she was changing her mind about moving. The cigarette lighter lay on the coffee table in front of her. He snatched it off the table and went outside again.

"Why'd you leave?" asked Louie, as he walked up to her.

Scott took out the cigarette lighter, sparked it, and tossed it on the golden retriever. A flame caught on its back and then expanded to become a golden ring. The ring incinerated hair and flesh, and slowly consumed the dog as Scott leaned on the shovel, unable to look away.



# My Friend

Paige R. Rothfus

A tight-lipped smiler, he was the first one to talk to me. A man missing two thirds of himself, trying to thread together shreds of an old life: Can't quite pick up the shards of himself, and can't quit smoking. Someday he will, just not today. His life is a very sad story: Too much to drink; a stupid mistake: The kind everyone makes, but few have to answer for. Cuffed and caught, he saw his freedom sifting away on the wind. Once he had sat, in that small stiff room: No friends, no phone, only one girl who came to see him a few times, the last hope, the lady of his heart. He caught the hope that sprang from her voice, that certain warmth in her touch that sang to his soul, and he held in his own heart an aspiration that one day he would be free and walk hand in hand out in the open with her again. And only photos of their own small bundle she brought with her, to show the father his son. But one day when visiting time came he lifted his head, looked for her and no fresh face was there. He called but nobody came. He was alone in the dark. No hopes, no goals. His life was decaying before him, all the hours in a day. His only friend, his love, his mate had left him. The ticking clock loses its meaning in lives such as these. But one day came when he was a prisoner no longer. The gates opened and walking out for the first time, betrayed and broken, he lifted his head to look at the dark sky where clouds are going by. He hardly remembered how the outside world worked and wasn't sure where to start. Now that he was free, there was no joy in the freedom. No warm house welcomed him homeward. The regret of eight elongated months was contained inside him, hanging on, half-poisoning his waking hours like a spreading cellar mold. He remembers with a bitter smile his time in that place. He hates card games. Used to play those in jail, doesn't like them anymore. Charlie, a nervous laugh and a smirk that looks painful, memories too near to forget. A raveled windbreaker that doesn't block the wind and smoky shirts. His eyes are dimly lit and hold no hope, his thin face is gauntly shadowed and his limbs scrawny; he is a torn scrap of paper compared to the book of the man he used to be. A lot to say to me about his days gone by, but most of it's sad and when it's too much, I catch a tear falling from his eye. You would have never known it from his voice that he was weeping. He admits he's sensitive like that. "Crying heals the soul," he says unashamedly. Just out of a hard place, it's hard to stop running from himself, his own biggest foe. Running out of choices, he lives on the edge, inching closer, his options one by one closing tight shut like doors 'til there's none left and he's forced to take a leap into the void, just having to hope he lands on firm earth again. A guy who once knew how to have fun, honest, but things change when you're in jail for so long with no contact. Cut off from the world, he learned to draw and drew for hours. No color, only black pens in jail. And played cards and slept and ate and pleased himself. A hell that he couldn't get out of. And now he's finally out. There's no reason to be here at all, he's totally alone. Hugs are something beautiful he remembers from a long time ago, but not something he expects anymore. Working to barely get by, with no one to cook for, no one to sleep by at night, and no one to say good morning or I love you to. That's a huge thing to forget.

Honestly he is hungry and the electricity doesn't come on 'til Monday. That's a long time to wait it out in the cold with nothing but pepperoni to eat, considering the dream that used to be his. It's so easy to think about things that you can't have. Sometimes his story is inspiring but other times it just makes me want to close my crying eyes and shut it away in a cupboard somewhere, lock it away where I can't hear it, but you can't do that with real people; their pain is too honest, their life too real. Makes me wonder what it must be like to have no friends. There's no such thing as a guarantee. People's promises expire, and life-long comrades change without warning. There's just no telling who will still be around in twenty years. I can't help him; nobody can. Charlie's choice is his own. He has lost a whole world, a whole life, and he needs to figure out that there's no going back, but that he must move forward instead. I can tell you a draft of his story, but he is the one holding the pen. Sometimes he can't see it, but I see that there's still a half-clinging hope for him, a small safe place teetering on the very edge of the cliff, if he will stop laughing at it and grab it before it falls forever. He keeps reaching for the old life, keeps thinking he can get it back if he tries. Tells me about old times until he gets dark and sees suicidal thoughts floating like his cigarette smoke in the air. I tell him he needs to move on and make something of himself. He tells me at last that he knows now that he must build a new life, but he isn't sure what parts of himself to keep or how to start. I can't give him answers. I am just there for him and by being there I like to think I help him in some small way. I am his only friend now, and I am a voice to talk to, a name to write to when he needs it. It's hard, but he knows inside what he must do. There are forbidden places where he can go again, if he waits it out. Happy is a word that I will again one day use to describe Charlie if he feeds his determination and stays rooted on traveling the right way.

But it's a long way, and for now he walks this hard road alone. Here and there you will see him, coatless and sometimes with holes in his shirt, ripped from the fencepost. Searching for the way to get an old life back, or looking to find a new.