“Real” by Juliette Snyder
3rd Place, Short Story 16-18
Her nose stung. It wasn’t a cold day, but up here on the rocks, her nose felt like it had been rubbed in menthol. She sniffed again, breathing him in. He smelled like sweet grass, sweat, and spray paint. Despite the knot he had tied in his hair to prevent it from tangling, the wind still teased loose dirty strands of it. It was like straw, long and yellow as the grass behind them. This was new to her; for a long time he saw to it so it never seemed to grow past his ears. At first she was surprised to see that his hair needed to be tied back on windy days, but she didn’t really know why it had shocked her.

"This isn’t real," he read aloud, gesturing with his head outwards over the stone bluff. Her face had been buried in his shirt, so she had to squint the sun from her eyes before following his gesture. It took her a few moments to register that he was reading the graffiti splayed across the rocks and she winced at the way his voice carried. The fresh spray paint message was clear as day, juxtaposed against the other older, faded bubble-letter messages. Early winter had stripped the color from the trees and the painted neon letters were a lot louder than the tepid browns and yellows that had replaced the oranges and reds of the earlier season. The couple sat on a low, taupe rock ledge that overlooked a forested slope not more than fourteen or fifteen feet below them. Some of the rocks seemed small enough to shift if she pushed them, while others looked immovable. Among the vandalism, which was comprised of half-done carvings and misshapen spray-painted verses, there was long, dead, yellow grass strewn about on the stone floor, blown in by the wind from the field behind them. Everything was dead. Naturally the once-lush grass would snap and be carried to the bluff, either to collect in piles in corners the wind couldn’t sweep out, or to fly over the slope and down into the trees below them. Her eyes landed on the red painted words, and she read them aloud as well.
“This isn’t real.” Her voice was too soft to echo across the rocks like his did.

“Ironic,” he sniffed. She watched his mouth and tried to envision the way his smile looked years ago, before his braces erased his crooked-front-tooth grin. What were the odds that Fate would grant her the chance to exist in the same sphere as him another time around; that God would allow her to feel his presence permeate warmth through her limbs almost as quickly as the wind could strip it from her? She felt as if she had ransacked her closet in search of an old, favorite sweater only to discover that despite the memories, it would never be anything more than what it always was: an old comfort to wear on cold days. All she wanted was to hike back through the tangles of yellow grass with him, without the fear that their cars would end up driving in separate directions once the sun fell below the trees. Worrying that the only thing that would grow back was the dead grass in the field they kept their backs to made her nose and eyes run worse than the cold air did. She wiped her face with her sweater, turning her focus towards the graffiti once more. Was it really ironic?

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The temperature dial clicked as she turned it up one notch, two, watching the black arrow shift to the red HEAT label. Outside it was definitely blue, but here, in the safety of her car, she let the illusion of control comfort her; she could dictate whether her skin prickled against the cold or relaxed in the heat; whether her hair stood on end or lay flat. Breathing in slowly, she let the hot air enliven her limbs as it flooded her nose and lungs like a hot shower after a snow day. Noticing that he smelled different in the heat of the car than he had on the rocks, she wondered if temperature had a scent.

The air was motionless; it smelled thick, stagnant, and burnt, like hot wax from a candle
just blown out. Her skin prickled as she sensed his eyes snake over her body, so she hugged her knees closer to her chest. Curled up in the driver's seat, the steering wheel dug into her shins, and she wanted to prevent the bruise she felt forming. His eyes dug into her as if he was probing into her skull and trying to pull somebody else out of it.

"Is this happening or not?" he probed further.

"Do you really want it?"

"It's up to you. I missed you."

The memory of his skin told her that it should've felt warm, therefore she was surprised to find it cold and torpid pressed up against hers. She tried to catch his eye as he tore away the square wrapper, hoping to reignite the old trust that had used to prevent her from worrying that he would rip the delicate contents. Eventually she must have turned the temperature dial back to blue; she could remember the air being too hot to breathe. She would try to forget the way the dead weight of what crept within her crushed her body.

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Shivering against the cold that seeped into the empty car, she sat on a nest of stained tissues. The key sat in the ignition but she couldn't bring herself to turn it -- the car had been off for almost an hour; to turn it back on without intention of going anywhere seemed like a violation against herself. Despite the iciness of the window, she pressed her forehead up against it. Her skin turned red from the hot burn of the dead cold.