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UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Welcome to the thirtieth issue of *The Apprentice Writer*, which annually features the best writing and illustrations from nearly 4,000 entries we receive each year from secondary schools throughout the United States. Every September we send copies printed as a public service by *The Daily Item* in Sunbury, PA to nearly 3,500 schools.

Our established program in Editing and Publishing gives our creative writing majors an opportunity to showcase what they have learned by working on one or more of the four magazines the Susquehanna University Writers Institute publishes each year.

Susquehanna's creative writing major now enrolls 180 undergraduate students who are taught primarily by six widely-published writers. If you are interested in learning more about the creative writing major and programs related to writing sponsored by the Writers Institute, see the back page for a summary or go to susqu.edu/writers for details.

Send material to be considered for next year's Apprentice Writer to Gary Fincke, Writers Institute Director, 610 University Avenue, Susquehanna University, Selingsgrove, PA 17870-1164. Please include your name and address on each page. The deadline is March 1, 2013.

EDITOR: GARY FINCKE

ASSOCIATE EDITORS:
TIM PIONTEK
EMMA MCCLELLAND
DEBORAH GRAVINA

PRODUCTION EDITOR:
ALISON ENZINNA

Special thanks to Codie Nevil-Sauers

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A Sea of Tweed

Claire Sapan
NEW YORK, NY

He buttoned his tweed jacket - the same one he had worn for the past four years on this day. He put on his crisp khaki pants still warm from the iron. He straightened his back, trying to look as tall and strong as possible but his twig-like arms and legs disappeared in the sport coat, making him look like a child playing dress up. His brother Garth, whose muscles were clearly visible through his clothing, stood for a moment in the mirror, then returned to his standard position on the couch in front of the TV. "Josh Wood", a deep voice bellowed, "your hair."

His father, an advertising copywriter, had mastered the art of speaking in as few words as possible, just enough to convey his point. As instructed, he took the comb out of the jar and poked at the straying hairs. His father's hand, as large as the paw of a bear but nevertheless gentle, swept the comb away and disappeared into another room. He returned a few seconds later with hair cream between the combs of the teeth. As he glided it through his son's hair, the fly away strands fell obediently into place, forming a neat side part. From upstairs his mother yelled in a deep, raspy voice that rang through the house, "Garth, I swear to God, I am going to throw that idiot box out the window".

On that note, the three males left the house for the train heading to New Jersey. At Penn Station, the pungent smell of cologne was overwhelming - people dressed in a sea of tweed were massing on the train platform. On board, his father was talking to a man in a tone he had never heard him use before - it was the same low deep tone, but the usual softness had been replaced with a type of de-

termination. While he listened to the conversation between the adults, he scratched at the red leather seat of the train. As he looked at the scratches he made, he saw that the red plastic was really just a coating for the blue worn leather underneath.

He noticed, as he got off the train, each person seemed to be subtly adjusting themselves. One would fix his tie, another tuck in his shirt; a woman corrected her lipstick in her pocket mirror. At the time he did not notice that few people were smiling. He did not think about why he and his brother made this trip with his father each and every year to the Princeton vs. Dartmouth game, filled with alumnae, when his father had not attended Princeton or any college. It did not cross his mind why his father, who grew up Jewish and poor in Brooklyn, would dress in nearly perfect WASP uniform.

Suddenly they came upon a huge grassy field with the P engraved in the center. Like his hair, the grass was perfectly in place, with not one blade sticking out. The color was a perfect green, harsh and artificial looking grass that one sees only in the movies. His father walked in front as he and his brother took their regular seats. The rumbling of the fans got louder and they cheered and chanted with the other 40,000 people.

I often ask my dad if my hair looks bad, or if a scrape on my nose is visible. He responds the same way each time: "People are too worried about themselves to notice the flaws in others. Don't worry about it." I believe this is true. As I walk down the street, I never notice someone's bad hair day or someone's scrape on their nose. Rather, I notice the expression on their face: if they are happy, all of their imperfections seem to fade away.

It is odd that my handsome and successful grandfather would carry on this ritual, not pretending that he had gone to Princeton, just not making clear that he hadn't. It seems to have taught my father a lesson. Whatever you do, you should not worry about the opinion of others, because it can change you into a different person, and perhaps not a better one. In trying to be someone he wasn't, my grandfather became like every other man on the train car. As my father scratched at the fake plastic covering the old original leather on the train, he realized that in an effort to make the seats look newer and

better, the seats looked fake and uniform - just like the people.

My grandfather believed that if you looked good on the outside, you felt good inside. My father has flipped that view: if you feel good inside, it doesn't matter how you look on the outside. He sings off key, and dances along with moves from the 80's. I see him leave the house almost every night to walk the dog. He wears pajama pants, old Merrill's and that day's non-wrinkle button down shirt, his hair flying this way and that. He is smiling. His smile makes the combination of the flannel P.J.'s and leather shoes almost fashionable.

Whispering from underwater, I tell you of my drowning

Peter LaBerge
STAMFORD, CT

I want to be this sandbar—
unremembered—

Back home,
I left the gas stove
heated, and the sink
sipping love from
the faucet.

I left only ugly cups
in the kitchen for you—
the ones stained with
saltwater and stars
from catching minnows
at midnight.

Our bed is drowning
in sand and nightclothes,
but the curtains remain drawn—
you think I'm still in there, of course.

Waiting to be claimed,
I feel the ocean floor
drop into place—

It seems I may have
finally done some good.

Gently, Into the Night

Irene Hsu
SAN JOSE, CA

On cool summer nights, Janie and Stella would make hand shadows on Janie's front porch, where the lamp hung crooked from the gable and cast a yellow flicker on the wooden steps. Stella would twist her hands into a bird, and at her beckoning, Janie would fold her fingers into a dog. Together, they'd weave a story, but by the time it was over, the bird flew alone while Janie watched, hands in her lap, entranced.

Fall was when Stella found pink worms squirming along the sidewalk cracks. She and Janie would squat on Mrs. Williams' unruly lawn, sticks in hand, prodding at the fleshy worms. The wind brushed their bare, scraped knees, and Mrs. Williams stumbled over their bare, scraped feet. She'd invite them in for slices of pie, and Janie would scramble after Stella, the stinging of her legs forgotten.

On mornings when the rooftops were draped in snow, they would make angel after angel on Janie's driveway. When their clothes and hair were damp and cold, they would clamber up the stairs with hot chocolate, to sit by Janie's window, which overlooked the town. There was the park, a white landscape now, and on the other side, there was the old cemetery, beautiful and eerie with its marble stones jutting from the ground. There was the house of that boy who always threw clumps of leaves at Stella, and the lake at the edge of town that Janie and Stella had flocked to a few days ago.

The snow on the sidewalk melted away, and Janie would perch by her window with a book in her lap, then spring downstairs when she saw Stella skipping into the open with her rollerblades in tow. They skated to the empty lot by the elementary school, where the grass grew long and the flowers grew wild, and they battled their way through the furious army of bees to reach a shady spot under the large

oak tree. There, they wove daisy chains, which browned and withered in their hands as they skated home, hand in hand, over the bumps and cracks in the sidewalks. But once, after Janie had lurched forward and fallen face-first, Stella held onto Janie's hand ever more tightly. In Janie's room, Stella gingerly smoothed bandages over Janie's skinned knees, and told her that everything would be okay—and Janie believed her, because Stella had told her so. The scabs melted away into scars, as spring melted into summer all over again.

As soon as the sun warmed their fingertips once more, they would pedal furiously down the next block, where Mr. Pilkinson had dollar ice cream Tuesday for kids. Janie would ask for vanilla, and Stella get chocolate, dripping with sprinkles and hot fudge. Outside the store, they sat on the wooden bench to share their dribbling ice cream, which disappeared as quickly as the leaves' green became speckled with red, yellow, and orange.

With the first snowflake came Stella's first love, the boy who had once thrown clumps of leaves at Stella but now tossed her compliments and sweet nothings. Stella would fall in love with his hair and his eyes and the way he said her name, and Janie listened to her over the phone while the snow grew thick on the driveway. Even when a storm cut off the line, Stella arrived shivering in Janie's room, where she told Janie everything else and more as Janie nodded along and nodded off. She told Janie about how he kissed her under the gazebo where that Mary Furgenstein had broken her leg. Janie smiled and frowned in all the right places, like later, when Stella told her that she saw him kiss that Mary Furgenstein at the end of Fuller Street. All the while, Janie wondered which boy in her class she would be in love with, and she was still wondering when middle school had let out, and the sun had come out.

One afternoon, Stella called Janie to invite her to that Mary Furgenstein's pool party, but she left a few minutes later with a towel and bathing suit in hand as Janie watched her go. The next day, Stella asked her to come along to the barbecue, but Janie hesitated. The next week, Janie agreed to go to Stephanie Martin's birthday party with Stella, only to find another reason not to go; and as Janie waved goodbye, the weeks pushed by her, summer was over, and autumn had begun. By winter, when Janie spotted Stella spinning and gliding at the lake with some boys, some girls, Janie found herself slipping on the ice, her head spinning. Stella would glide in to help, then glide away when Janie was back on her feet and back home. In

her room, Janie gingerly smoothed bandages over her scraped knee, the stinging still clear and unforgotten.

The grass in the lot grew wild and green, and Janie would bring along a book and some friends to read under the shade of the large oak tree. She found herself staring off at the old elementary school as she batted away a few lingering bees and wove a daisy chain, her book untouched. She would excuse herself to head home, alone, along the path of cracked and unlevelled sidewalks, book and daisy chain in hand.

By the next year, Janie would spin aimless cursive on her history notebook in front of the window and periodically see Stella waving goodbye to someone who drove away too fast for Janie's taste. One time, catching her eye, Stella waved her down, and they spent their night in Janie's kitchen, sharing cups of

Grown Up

Hayley Kolding
NEW YORK, NY

We were walking down the middle of the road—you, I; our arms white like frog bellies—walking in defiance of the implicit yellow line. You, at ten, complained about the weight of your breasts straining in your plain cotton training bra. I rolled my eyes at you (so gleefully weary) but I waited 'til your back was turned because I remember years of waiting to bloom.

Yards later you halted, stared down at the split-skin tar. Lying there limp was a slack-furred chipmunk, eyes frozen like glass beads or tears. Time shuddered; I shuddered;

then you, composed, were kneeling, raising his ear up to your lips. Ten years old, with scraped knees, a training bra—you crooned to the dead chipmunk, cradled him in your palms. I stood motionless as you whispered, "I think that this one likes me".

hot chocolate. Janie floated through Stella's endless tides of words, and it was just like old times again. So, when Stella mentioned that she would be working near home next year, wouldn't be going to college, Janie decided in her mind that she would go to the college closest to home; she told Stella all this and more as Stella smiled, nodding along and nodding off. They ended the night as the clock struck twelve and promised to talk again soon somewhere, some time.

When summer came to a close, Janie dragged crates and boxes containing some clothes, but mostly books, up flights of stairs in her dormitory. She imagined that somewhere, Stella was throwing together eggs and toast, or perhaps not making breakfast at all—perhaps she was sliding onto the duct-taped seat of her car. Perhaps, Janie liked to think, Stella was forming her own perhapses and somewhere and maybes about Janie. Or perhaps not, Janie would conclude and disappear into the lecture hall for class.

In a coffee shop twenty minutes from campus, Janie found Stella smiling, greeting, and taking orders daily, and Janie would lug her books to the cafe every day—but later, only on Thursdays when Stella told Janie about reducing her hours. But once—on a Friday—Janie passed by the cafe where Stella was smiling, greeting, and taking orders. On seeing Janie, Stella smiled—a little forced, Janie thought—but then Stella explained that she had taken on an extra shift, that she had started today, and that maybe Janie should order a cheesecake next time she dropped by on five hour-stretches?

On Stella's days off, Janie would trudge to the library, only to find her heart stolen by Shakespeare, and then Spenser, and then Marlowe, and then Peter, the man with brown hair and blue eyes at the reading room in the library, who finally had approached her on some Wednesday. They lounged in the study rooms, books in hand, and shared scones in the courtyard. And the next day, Janie told Stella all about Peter, and how she loved the way he ran his hand through his hair, the way his blue eyes lit up when he talked about Faulkner, the way he said her name when he introduced her to his friends; Stella nodded enthusiastically, yes, Peter sounded like a Prince Charming, and yes, it would be okay if Janie had lunch with him on Fridays from now on.

Her third year in college, Janie found Stella gone from the coffee shop; her boss said she had gone travelling, wasn't working here anymore. Janie called Stella's mother in worry but

was told that Stella had only gone on a road trip, and that she may or may not be back. She told all this and more to Peter, now her Peter, who would hold her in his arms. He would smile and frown in all the right places, as she clung to his warmth and the scent of his mint shampoo.

Back at home for the holidays, Janie walked across the street to wish Stella's mom a merry Christmas and was told that Stella had been home for weeks, didn't she see her around? She wasn't here now, though; too bad. But it was Tuesday, so Janie walked to Mr. Pilkinson's ice cream store, where she spotted Stella outside with that Mary Furgenstein, with lipstick just as thick and red as it had been years before. When Mary caught a taxi and was gone, Janie raced to Stella as her heart had been racing. Outside on the bench, Janie would tell Stella all about how Peter took her ice skating and kissed her under the gazebo; all the while, she saw that Stella tried to smile at all the right times, and she frowned when Stella did not, but when the birds came and went again, Stella cried and said yes, she would be Janie's maid of honor.

Stella arrived just in time for Janie to walk down the aisle, her hair swaying rhythmically and the flowers in her bouquet fluttering. Janie said, I do, and she looked into Peter's teary blue eyes and kissed him. When it came time to cut the cake, Janie offered the second piece to Stella. And as Stella whirled about for every dance, Janie whirled about alongside her like a moon to its planet, to make sure there was always someone for Stella. At sunset, Janie climbed into the carriage. She tossed her bouquet and followed its arc to Stella, who leaped up to snatch it, loose petals of peonies tumbling down over her. Janie blew kisses at everyone as they vanished into the horizon, but mostly, she blew them at Stella, who she knew would catch each and every one, even with that Italian bartender's arm thrown over her shoulder.

Even after the honeymoon, Peter whisked her away, to Paris, to London, to Berlin, and she would bring along Sartre, Austen, and Hesse to entertain her in the French, English, German bookstores; even then, she would wonder about how many postcards and how many letters were piling up in her mailbox, but mostly whether any were from Stella. When he brought her along to the Ponte Vecchio, she watched the gondolas glide through the water. He found her in a nearby cafe, absorbed in Purgatorio, and when she looked up and saw him, she told him that she was ready to go home, that she was a little worried about Stella. He

The Cyclist

Elizabeth Bennett
MILTON, MA

Maybe you've forgotten how you used to look blazing down the back roads at Wachipauk Pond. Did you know that when I called you from behind all you could hear the swift ride of metal over earth and a quivering heart?

Remember how you used to hold our dog! --held her to your chest and then set her loose to chase the tires. You ripped down the trail while she raced open-mouthed at the spokes.

Lifting the hips for a flat-backed ride, you lived for the turn of tires over old-growth, the ache in a rush of air pulled to the lungs.

Rounding that tree, too close, I think, you stuck your arm out straight out, letting it drag against the wind; and the dog, the dog snapping at the spokes...

Now, at home, I fill the bathtub, let the water run over my feet. I hear you come home, linger in the car.

I slip between cold bed sheets and listen, listen now, for the hollow hush of bicycle bones.

wove his fingers into Janie's and told her that everything would be okay—and Janie would believe, because Peter had told her so. He took her home, a new home, with a white picket fence bordering the garden of wildflowers. He swept her up the stairs, where they spent evenings sharing books. When his work called him away during the day, Janie felt the empty space in her days fill up slowly by her daughter, who learned to speak, learned to walk, and learned to abuse her mother's doting as only a daughter would. One day, as Janie called to

her daughter to hurry, to put on her ballet flats so they could buy a new knapsack for kindergarten, Janie heard her own name being called from outside her house.

Janie turned to see Stella standing outside the doorway. All at once, years of wondering and worrying were forgotten. They sat together in the living room, sorting the letters and pictures that Stella had forgotten to send to Janie. This, Stella said, was after I climbed the Eiffel Tower; here, here is a picture of Buckingham Palace, and where the Berlin Wall used to stand; I wrote this letter right before I met up with that Italian bartender at the Michelangelo Square. Janie would smile, and nod along, travelling the world through Stella's words. When it grew dark, Stella pitched a tent in Janie's living room, and they played shadow puppets with Janie's little daughter, who squealed as Stella's bird flew into Janie's dog. And as the squirming girl fell into rhythmic, blissful breathing, Stella promised to send Janie more postcards, and to make a trip to the old town with Janie in five years.

Morning came, Stella went, and the months grew into years as the letters from Stella once again grew sparser. Her daughter grew out of ballet flats, and grew fond of kitten heels. She even caked on lipstick, which was the only time Janie had ever been angry with her. Once in a while, Janie would pin up a new postcard from Stella, who made it her desire to travel the world from sea to sea. Janie would add bits and pieces to her packing list for the upcoming trip to her old town, and Peter drove her from store to store to find the perfect hot chocolate mix, or the perfect rollerblades. But most days, Janie found comfort in the fireplace and her books, and the comfort of Peter and his homemade scones, especially when their daughter was away at the theaters, or the mall, or the ice skating rink.

Then one autumn evening, Janie rushed to the ringing phone, and when she finally hung up after thanking Stella's mom for calling, the tears rushed to her eyes. Peter scooped her up and tucked her into bed, as miles away, paramedics would scoop Stella from the metal wreckage on some mountain road and tuck her into the back of an ambulance. The next morning, Janie combed through her garden for the last of this year's daisies, and collected what she could find into a jar to place by Stella's hospital bed. The daisies browned and withered, and were promptly replaced with fresh ones, their stems still woven with grass blades. Then one evening, Janie heard the flat tone from the monitor, and the thudding of her own heart.

She watched the doctors cover Stella in white and wheel her body away. And when the room was empty, and there was no one else to see or go to, Janie pulled herself into her car where she cried, for herself, for Stella, and for the emptiness that bloated her entirely. Around her, the colors were draining, and the parking lot was emptying, but she curled up and wished that the sky would be blue again, and that the parking lot would be full with people carrying their flowers and taking their loved ones home.

Janie refused to attend the funeral, but a few weeks later, she, Peter, and her daughter followed the migrating birds south to the old town, where old Mrs. Williams, now gone, once invited her in for a slice of pie, and where Stella once met Janie outside Mr. Pilkinson's ice cream shop on Tuesdays. They drove by Janie's old house, where the lamp had once hung crooked, but had now been fixed by the new family. This is where Stella and I made shadows with our hands, Janie said, but her daughter had forgotten the pitched tent, had forgotten Stella and the birds and the dogs. Don't you remember? Janie pleaded with her, grasping her shoulders—but her daughter shook her hands off and bolted to the car. As Janie crumpled to her knees, she heard Peter at the car, ordering their daughter to apologize, and then Peter explaining to the new family that they weren't trespassing, that this was Janie's old home and they were just visiting.

At nightfall, they pulled away from Janie's old driveway, where Janie and Stella had once made snow angels many winters ago. They eased past the bench in front of Mr. Pilkinson's old shop, the elementary school, the cemetery, eerie but no longer beautiful, with Stella's stone jutting out somewhere among the others.

Before heading for the highway, Peter stopped the car at a nearby gas station, now next to the old lot, where the grass grew long and the weeds grew wild, only now, they twisted around a "For Lease" sign and a chain link fence. A few wildflowers thrust their buds through the tangle, and she watched the withering petals tremble as the wind caught hold of their stalks. In the car, she could hear the music bleeding from her daughter's headphones and the humming of the engine. And later, as the town dwindled into a cluster of lights behind her, she traced the constellations in the sky with her finger, and outside, the moon traced the skyline with silver.

Gathering My Bones

Zoe Jeka
SEVERNA PARK, MD

I glimpsed the underside of a cobblestone near the Coliseum once. It pointed like a knife and found its way underneath my skin. When I search my arms and legs, there are only memories wedged in my bones.

Between my ribs, I find the quiet nights when we broke the law. In the city, there were only moments of still before the traffic lights across the street shone green, and then the rubber of tires was screaming closer. If headlights crept over the edges of our shirts, we knew to squeeze our bones through the fence and run faster than our legs could take us into the black. The guards leave with the daylight and the tourists; only shadows patrol the ruins after the ticket office is locked. Once we ran far into the dark, night welcomed our skin, and we were invisible to the city's eyes. The ruins were ours to explore, unknown to most. We walked through empty palaces and arches, up barely crumbling stairs. If you touched the walls, your fingertips scraped away dark secrets tangled in age. At the top, we were Roman emperors looking out at churches and piazzas, reveling in the possibility of a city all our own. The sounds of car tires and sirens were only an echo at such heights, becoming faint without alleys to capture their resonance. We dove into the silence, and could almost hear ancient church bells ringing, although they do not speak at night.

Autumn wrapped my body in ruins and palaces. Clocks seem to tick faster in the city, and the subway that slips through dark tunnels beneath the ground carried me through months of thrill until I reached the platform marked winter. I flew home to my family then, and learned of a darkness growing inside my mother's left breast. They acquainted me softly, while tucked away in the corner of a restaurant. Ten strangers still saw my tears. I watched her for weeks, fearing her cells would separate and wander away. My hands could not catch so many molecules.

I was not ready to fly away again, but time pulls you at the edges until your skin travels in the planned direction. Time does not know of body parts left behind, in many places. My veins are wrapped about rows of airport chairs and moments of parting, my hipbones tied in bows around memories of ruins and palaces. They are always there upon my return, presents as good as a child's. Time wraps them neatly when I go. I will never be whole, but I am not broken.

When I returned to Rome, my gifts were waiting. I could reclaim my hipbones, but my veins remained far to the West. We were emperors again, and lived off the ruins, drawing secrets from the stone into our fingertips and dissecting the whispers of a thousand ancient voices. By seven on a Friday night, we held freedom by the waist and danced until Monday. There was a thrill in the number of hours we owned and wielded to our perfection like gold at the end of the week. The city breathed our bodies through alleys and piazzas, crammed them into rooms electric with music and heat. We swayed at nine o'clock, tangoed with ten, discovered eleven in the beats of rock concerts and silhouettes of crowds. We knew the night was growing tired when the serenade of city sounds turned sharp, with only a few voices and car motors echoing between the stone buildings. Then it was time

to sleep and dream the night over.

On nights when we longed for human warmth, my two closest friends and I would gather our mattresses in the center of our room and whisper into the walls like little girls trying to resist sleep. If our laughter slipped through the windows or doorframe, a teacher's footsteps would click down the hallway and become silent just outside our door. We were master illusionists, quiet and dreaming until the footsteps faded, satisfied. Then we pressed our quilts over our mouths to contain our laughter, louder than before. After some time, our voices faded into steady, sleeping breaths.

Quiet nights reminded me of my blood across the ocean. I found city ledges where silence reached out to my mother and father and brother; placed their faces beneath my eyelids. I missed them perfectly when the air was cold enough to wring the shadows burrowed in my bones and leave my body raw. I almost reached close enough to sew each strand of hair back into my mother's scalp.

Sometimes, I did not remember they were far away. When I ached to press into my mother's shirts or wrap in my father's arms, my two closest friends would dive into my bones and empty me of shadows. At nighttime, we wheeled two bikes out of school and rode in silence – two on one

bike, one on the other. The shadows became weak after some time and begin to slip out of my pores. On the way back, I could spot them, collapsed into holes in the cobblestones, lying limp and asleep.

In the springtime, I left the city, and now, a year of my history is wrapped about ruins and faces. My mother's hair is soft and short and alive, and I can run my fingers through it each day without time pulling my skin across the ocean. But pieces of my body have torn off and traveled to dance in ancient palaces and Roman streets. My legs perform pirouettes to the melody of memories; my ribs catch the echoes of three voices whispering late at night. I will these pieces to return, but I remain torn between two oceans.

Over time, I have learned to summon each piece of my body, if only for fleeting instants. On quiet nights, I reach out to the two best friends I left behind, who carry my bones back and sew them onto my body. Silence unwinds their arms and faces from my spine; places them beneath my eyelids. For moments, I see them, as if distances and borders and time zones could be lifted, tucked away into dark corners. I wrap my arms about my knees and rock gently to the rhythm of our laughter; let it sing me to sleep. Then I am raw and I can miss them perfectly.



Marielaina Nissenbaum FORDS, NJ

London Calling or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Clash

Nora Bryson
LONGHORNE, PA

It was six o'clock on a Friday night, and we were hurtling down I-95 on our way from the 'burbs to Philadelphia. I was in charge of the radio because Dad was driving, Mom didn't care, and my brother Thomas couldn't reach the controls. I'd been searching for that one, elusive song that everyone would like, or at least wouldn't disown me for choosing, but the presets yielded nothing, so I hit the scan button.

The first stop was boring: some Nickelback song I'd heard a million times. Next up was Jay-Z, which my brother approved of, but which was ultimately ruled unacceptable. Dad doesn't like "that rap music." The evangelist yelling about acceptin' Jesus as yer Lord an' Savior was politely ignored until he went away; I tried for "Come on Eileen," but because Mom hates that song more than anything in the world, I was overridden.

I was about to give up when I heard strains of Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" and stabbed frantically at the scan button to capture the station. Mom laughed as my brother and I yodeled our way—slightly off-pitch—through the song.

"Where did you learn the words to that?" she asked when the song was over—and that took a little while because it was the extended dance mix. "That came out way before you were born."

I rolled my eyes and reminded her gently of the New Wave compilation album we had listened to growing up, on which "Tainted Love" was the second to last track.

"Come on, Mom. It was a big part of my life."

That incident really got me thinking—not only about the memories I associated with the CD, but also about the impact of music on my childhood.

The soundtrack of my life has always been a little unorthodox, hardly surprising when one has a punk rock DJ for a mother and a father who had only discovered in college that music

came in flavors other than classical, and who was making up for lost time. Some children's music was involved, to be sure (a little bit of Trout Fishing in America and a lot of Disney) but mostly the soundtrack had a little bit of everything: Southern rock, 80s pop, grunge, bluegrass, punk, Canadian folk, and even some Mozart thrown in for fun.

As kids, my brother and I listened to the "Tainted Love" and "Come on Eileen" CD so often that we destroyed the case and wore the liner notes to shreds. The album was a road trip staple, so I knew the words to every song. "She Blinded Me With Science" was a particular favorite; in my innocence I believed that the lyrics suggested some sort of chemical accident. The computer-generated strains of "Relax" and "Venus," so unlike the standard rock we knew, fascinated us.

Even though he discovered rock in college, the work of Bach and other composers never really lost its influence on my father. Every so often he would dig out some Mussorgsky, and on most Halloweens he could be counted on to shake the foundation of the house with Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, tossing in a bit of the fanfare from Also Sprach Zarathustra for effect. My first real introduction to the classical genre, however, came in the form of another compilation CD that he bought for Thomas and me, Baby Dance. If I'm going to be truthful, I really only remember a few of the tracks by name (most notably Sabre Dance by Aram Khachaturian, which remains one of my favorite pieces to this day), but I loved the CD, and was perfectly content to spin around to "Tea" from The Nutcracker for hours, or at least until I got dizzy and fell over.

But the true soundtrack to my childhood rests in the strains of the third studio album of British punk rockers The Clash. London Calling was my first exposure to rock music, and rather than start me off slow with a little Bill Haley and the Comets, or maybe some Elvis, my parents dumped me right in the middle of one of the most stylistically diverse, issue-packed punk rock albums of all time before I could even speak. One of my parents' favorite albums, London Calling was a constant presence in the house and the car, blasting while my father cooked dinner or my mother drove me to dance class. It took some time before I could understand what was really going on in Joe Strummer's lyrics, but I knew the words to "Clampdown" and "Brand New Cadillac" before I knew my times tables, an accomplishment which I'm sure both pleased and frightened my parents.

Through my childhood and adolescence, it was not uncommon to hear The Who, The

Rolling Stones, and Led Zeppelin intermingling with pieces by Alison Krauss and Union Station, Stan Rogers, or Big Bad Voodoo Daddy. The Blues Brothers made a big impact, once I was old enough to withstand a few f-bombs, and I've still never seen The Commitments, but the soundtrack is on my mp3 player, and I can't go more than two days without hearing "Mustang Sally" or "Take Me to the River."

When I reflected on my musical past on that trip to Philadelphia, however, I realized that it wasn't just my soundtrack that was diverse and a bit eccentric; it was my education as well. My parents had simply applied the technique they had used to teach me "the important stuff" to the musical instruction they gave me. For them, education wasn't about making me listen to language tapes in the womb or watching Baby Einsteins the second I could sit up so that I could get into the most prestigious day care and be on the fast track to Harvard by the time I was on solid foods, just as my musical education didn't consist of regimented piano lessons and being forced to sight-read concertos. In a much more informal process, my parents offered up the wealth of their knowledge, both practical and academic, so that I would have the best educational foundation possible. I am grateful for their wisdom, because I am convinced that without it, I would not have the chops to write this essay.

Or, at the very least, I certainly wouldn't be listening to The Clash while I did.

A Sonnet for Iceland

Joanne Koong
IRVINE, CA

Because the Icelandic language was sexy in its entirety, the men we sought needed to understand enough to be idyllic and de-industrial, wrought

by books and chess and Nordic Germanic I love you and glacial icebergs too frigid to not say what you mean – organic oceanic oxygen for fish to breathe unmuted

unhomogenized mother earth without a twist of the tongue – all you need to say is in the language – impossible to doubt how you feel if darkness never betrays

the midnight sky seduced by northern lights above us like Icelandic fireflies.

Starfish Sonnet

Grace Henderson
ALLENDALE, NJ

When I first saw you, five legs like sides of a pentagram, I screamed: pitch treble-clef. Floating on the surface of the shade-cooled water, I nearly inhaled half the ocean,

the rough skin of your back making my own crawl with the tiny legs of a thousand jellyfish, hoping the water would protect me from

your tiny mouth, filled with the terror of tiny starfish teeth. Half terrified, half mystified- I saw you later on the wallpaper in my room and on the edge of my towel

as if plucked from the ocean of Anguilla and left to light my nightmares with stars.

Candy Necklace

Hayley Kolding
CANTON, CT

You told me it was for decoration not for eating but when the string snapped, I tried to catch all the beads on my tongue. I wasn't expecting the soft pinks and purples to be so hard -wasn't expecting them to rattle

like a hundred teeth loose in my mouth. Shaking, clattering like a maraca or a death rattle. I spat fast, but still I tasted blood and empty spaces (the taste of melted candy and gums giving up too soon).

I remember our mother best on days like this one. Days when it was too cold to snow, you and I moved past parked cars, mailboxes, windows edged in ice. We bent our fingers stiff stinging while winter paled the streets. Bags slung over shoulders, we felt concrete rattle with the trains below.

in drifts of light and shadow. With two hands cracked, she gripped our chins and kissed the corner of our mouths.

At the corner where Beacon crosses Spruce, she waited, wool collar tucked tight across the chin, face shining with Vaseline spread thick beneath her nose. Headlights, softened with smog, caught her face

Together we waited for the train to gust through the tunnel, grind to a stop. When the doors slid open we shuffled through the bodies, rearranged. An old man with eyelids like thick thumbprints was closest. I could feel his breath on my neck.

She cleared a window with the heel of her hand but I all I could see were the racing shades of shadow.

My father wants me to join the military. He wants me to go to West point and become a sniper. So every year at Christmas time, he takes the bow and arrow outside to the front yard attaches fishing line on the end and tells me to aim.

I try to tell him that I don't want to be a soldier. I want to be a poet or an artist or a mermaid.

He ties the Christmas lights to the end of the fishing line and tells me to aim.

He swears it's not for training. He swears it's just the easiest way to get the lights all the way up the tree.

Every year he brings out the thick black hunting bow and the arrow with quarters taped to the end. He puts it in my hands

and tells me to aim. I lift the bow high, pull the thin arrow back so the foam feathers on the end brush my cheekbones, and aim.

Release. Perfection nearly every time. It wraps around the branches and we pull the sparkling lights to the top, walking them around and around so they twist like candy canes.

My father reminds me that the West Point Application will be due soon.

He tells me I need to aim high, and shoot to kill. I toss the bow to the ground and grab hold of his hands.

I tell him his aim is off and spin him around to face my future bright and twinkling as it winds up the tree and into the sky.

Aim

Grace Henderson
ALLENDALE, NJ

The Woes of an Unconfident Writer

Leah Evert
ORWIGSBURG, PA

1. Talking to Myself

4 weeks before submission date

-Do you really want this?

=Yes. I want it more than anything.

-Anything?

=Alright, many things.

-That's what I thought.

=Sigh. I can do this.

-Don't be so sure.

=Shh.

-You know, though, in reality it seems as if you've actually given up on this whole "Apprentice Writer" thing.

=I won't deny that.

-Why not?

=I... Truthfully, I don't think I'm going to make it. I don't have any grand ideas. And I don't remember the exact date it needs to be submitted by. Once I know that, I can probably write better.

-Because you're a procrastinator.

=Yeah.

-So when were you planning on starting work on your demonstration speech due Tuesday? Monday?

=I tried to start. But the software I was using was stupid.

-And you couldn't do anything else?

=Ugh. I know.

-Good luck with that.

=Shut up. I hate myself enough already because of it.

2. Disclaimer

Maybe I'm just approaching this at the wrong angle.

Which angle is the right one? I have no clue.

Maybe I should start writing what I FEEL, instead of what I THINK I want to write.

WARNING: The following writings will most likely be full of emotion and include too much soul-searching.

3. Attempt 1

figure him out, but the fact is, when he shows up on your doorstep at two in the morning, you are as confused as everyone else.

He speaks as if he's ashamed, ashamed of the words that come out of his mouth, he speaks as if he's intoxicated, words tripping over themselves, stumbling, falling, but truthful, always honest. You want to tell him you live for kisses by the railroad tracks, dirt underneath your feet scratchy and littered with pebbles. You want to tell him you live for the moments when you push his hair out of his face, when you can see his eyes, when the film of distraught confusion leaves and they are clear, because they are beautiful, because he is beautiful. You want to tell him "I'm yours! In so many ways, in any way you want, I'm yours!" but you approach him as if he is a fawn, frightened, shaking, awkward yet so magnificent at the same time.

When you walk, you are a water strider, never putting all your weight down, skirting just on the top of something deeper. You speak as if there's a popping in your ears, keeping you from hearing, understanding exactly what you are saying. People treat you as if you are a wild cat, never pushing hard enough to get you to run

I stand. I wait. I'm unassertive. I finally get to the front of the line.

4. No, No, No.

This doesn't "feel" right. I think I've been thinking again.

Hey, but technically feelings come from the brain, right? So really, feeling IS thinking!

There I go, thinking again.

Shall we have another go?

5. The Grade

3 weeks before submission date

I got a 67% on my demonstration speech. My worst grade in a long time and it's in my favorite class, English. As if that wasn't troublesome enough. Then my mother finds out. Meh, a bit worse of a situation. But then.

But then, Mother decides to e-mail my English teacher.

And a world of wrath and torture are sure to ensue.

I don't know where my mother conceived of the idea, but she seems to believe that all this is the teacher's fault.

"A 67 seems more like a 'didn't even do it' grade."

"No... That would be a zero, Mom..."

For now, I'll just have to plead ignorance to

away in fear, but never giving enough to make you seek them out yourself. You dream like nothing else. You dream of kisses by railroad tracks, tips of fingers gripping yours through a chain link fence, and more than anything, you dream of fawns, of words that stumble and eyes that are opaque, dull with confusion, bright from emotion.

You never stop to wonder once if you are wasting your time, if you are chasing after a dream that will always be just that, a dream, you never think about what you have left if the fawn will never touch its nose to your outstretched hand. When you are together the paint from your canvasses mixes together, and makes a painting both of you can understand, a painting of holding hands with your arms crossed, looking into each other's eyes from opposite sides of a chain link fence, and kissing amidst the sound of a roaring train. "I'm yours," you say. "I know." He says. Hold hands, walk strong, and put all your weight down, delving beyond the topmost layer. Walk straight; walk as if you know where you are walking even if you have no idea at all. Speak clearly, speak surely, speak kind words, speak words that bite, as long as he is here, as long you are together, as long as he is near, then you are one.

my teacher.

6. Elements

2 weeks before submission date

I try to write serious things, but when I make my attempt I realize I can't take myself seriously enough. Then I give up. If not that, I decide that everything I write is boring. And give up.

To write something in full, I need three elements:

1) Encouragement from my peers. Without this, I might as well just quit writing altogether.

2) A certain drive behind my story. I need purpose or pressure.

3) A due date. Due date, due date, due date. If I don't have one, it'll never get done.

These conditions usually never occur all at once. That's why I haven't written a full story in years. (Or, at least, that's what I'd like to believe.)

7. That Explains It

The Clandestine Wheel Corps snuck into the wheel factory in the deep of the night and began to destroy everything they saw. Unfortunately for them, an alarm was raised and the local authorities arrived. The Corps resisted arrest and a gun battle immediately erupted.

In the end, the police gunned down a majority of the Corps and arrested the few who surrendered, with only a few casualties of their own.

Nobody must know of The Clandestine Wheel Corps.

The chief of police ordered that all dead bodies of the Corps be incinerated. Ironically, almost every incinerator on hand had broken

down earlier in the week.

That is, except for the one in the basement of my own Blue Mountain High School.

And, my friends, that is why it smelled strange in my English classroom today.

8. A Quick Interlude

Originally, that last story was a lot longer. But - surprise, surprise - I felt it was boring. So, I cut off the entire exposition. Oh, the woes of being an unconfident writer.

9. Morals

1 week before submission date

In case you were wondering, I'm not writing this with a moral in mind. Morals are overrated. I write to entertain, not to teach. If I want to teach something to someone, I'll state it directly and follow up with a long-winded rant. No, if someone actually reads my work, I'm not going to force them to think about the underlying message. I feel like that's asking too much of them.

I also hate searching for morals of literature in English class. I'm sure the author would prefer us to read the story he worked tedious hours upon and focus on its excellence than to pick it apart and attempt to assume what he was saying through it. Isn't it a little presumptuous of us to do that?

Wait. But wouldn't this make this have a moral, then? The moral, "morals are overrated?" So I've managed to totally contradict myself, then? Neato.

10. Talking to Myself Again

The night before submission date

-Well, well, well. You've lived up to your ex-

because he did. She learned to love peaches.

She learned to love them and their yellow orange glow, which would please

her in the morning over waffles. She would tell him, *Please, why don't you ever make me breakfast?* But now her nose never smells peaches in the morning anymore, there in her empty house, empty of his clothes, of his red running shoes, of his laugh, his keys. He left the peaches though, and she has been making cakes, one part

sugar, three parts flour, five parts peaches. She doesn't want to say, *Please come back.* She wants to cook with peaches and eat and eat. She doesn't want to know if it was wrong to have ended it because she feels a red excitement about never having to see him there

in her doorway again, there in her bedroom, there in her kitchen eating peaches cut up in square parts. Somewhere, she thinks, she had seen his disgusting red

peppercorns. Trying to get that last chunk done in the sliver of time you have left. Why would I expect anything else?

=Really, why would you?

-Perhaps I thought you were going to be responsible for once.

=I'm responsible.

-You just have terrible time management.

=What can I say? I work best under pressure.

-I'd hate to see the things you've done without pressure, then...

=Hey!

-Uh-huh?

=You know, you could try to be a little nicer sometimes.

-I'm not mean. I'm cynical.

=Oh, my mistake then.

-It's difficult for the reader to pick up on sarcasm through text, Leah.

11. La Fin

Alright, I need to finish strong...

Hey, how about I go with a choose your own adventure type of thing? Are you excited? Yes? Good!

[Insert whatever ending satisfies you.]

Yeah, that'll work. And just for an extra flare...

[Insert beautiful orchestral fanfare marking the end of the story. Something along the lines of 'bididididi BUM BUUUMM BAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-HH!']

Well, all great stories must end. My story must end, as well. Oh. I just insulted myself. Gonna need a skin graft for that burn. Aaaaand now my ending's weak... Shoot.

jelly. She pictures her mother saying, *Please find yourself a husband*, and then blowing her nose dramatically. She laughs and slices slivers of peaches

to top her cake. Her kitchen smells of peaches

and she places the half-moon slivers here and there on the raspberry icing, little boats on turbulent seas. She knows that it will be perfect and it will be the kind of cake that part of her will never want to eat, but she tells herself, *Please just get rid of these peaches and this jam that is eerily red.*

She stands there in her kitchen and turns to the red window frame. She knows that it would please her to throw the cakes over a bridge or off a rooftop. Her lips part as she smiles and hums, cutting peaches.

Railroad

Rebecca Gomezrueda
EAGLEVILLE, PA

The way he walks is like a baby taking his first steps on ice. He walks like he's cautious, as if he doesn't know exactly where to put his feet, as if he's afraid he will fall at any moment. The way you look at him is like you're starved, starved of things no person can give you, you look at him as if you are afraid that if he turns sideways he will disappear. The way you look at him is as if he is a million times more perfect than he is, like he is a pristine white canvas instead of a canvas that has been littered with splotches of paint, thrown on haphazardly until no white remains. If he were a painting he would not be a painting of any mortal object, instead his painting would be an abstract representation of feelings, something that almost no one can find the deeper meaning to. You are cocky, and you want to believe you can

Untitled

Erin Conroy
SELLERSVILLE, PA

It was one of those instants, those miniscule moments in your life when it's like someone freeze-frames your thought processes. When you can't think, but you don't need to.

Mr. Crooke's class was overflowing with shocks like that, and by overflowing I mean like the tidal wave in *Deep Impact*. Every day was more unique than a snowflake and just as laden with possibility. We went from classes that had us crying to classes that had us crying in hilarity. But, through all the eccentricities – all the philosophy fights and vocabulary victories, all the oddities and “omens”, all the lines and lessons – I came out knowing, if nothing else, one of the most important things I've ever learned: That I would be ok.

Freshman year had me poised for a face-plant of unprecedented proportions, the likes of which I had prayed I would never see.

I didn't have a single class with a single person I had ever known. For a girl with the interpersonal skills of wallpaper, this was akin to entering the lion's den armed with a toothpick, if that den also happened to house cobras and sharks and maybe a dragon or two.

I bumped through my first day in Converse and a pencil skirt (looking back on it, that was probably my greatest mistake), knocking into people and lockers and my own inhibitions. Finally, I got to period six-seven English Honors with Mr. Crooke. Naturally, my assigned seat was the very front seat of the very front row. I stared at it as if it were made of pins, flamethrowers, and various other instruments of torture that I would have rather endured than sit in that godforsaken seat. But, armed with my toothpick, I sat. I sat and I waited. I waited for a battle that never came.

Instead, I was met with a boy my exact height with fox-brown hair and constantly laughing eyes. He sat behind the Chair of Death, and he was the first person I actually liked in Pennridge High School. I harbored that crush for a year, and now I wish I were still in that chair and he were still laughing behind me.

After that came a barrage of names I didn't put any effort into remembering, but they wound up seared in my mind anyway. And I met Mr. Crooke.

Mr. Crooke was and still is enigmat-

ic to the point that something “normal” for him was cause for concern. On that first day though, it wasn't my teacher's myriad quirks that caught my attention, nor was it the quotes and literary posters plastered around the room. It was the enraptured look with which the girl who sat across from me regarded him. I spent my first day laughing in my head at her, thinking she was way too happy to be there. It took me until now to realize that she must have known somehow what I had to learn gradually: that Mr. Crooke would change our lives.

Slowly, too slowly, I synced with the rhythm of the class. I grew to count on it; I knew that if I had a day where it felt like I was incessantly paddling upstream, Mr. Crooke's class would be my little island in the current. It was something I anchored myself to. And I stopped laughing at that girl, Greer, and started listening to her. She had so much to say, and I shiver to think of how dark my high school trials would be if I had let my jealousy and insecurity drown me.

We read *Romeo & Juliet* in the beginning of the year. More accurately, we fought with highlighters and laughed ourselves to tears while Mr. Crooke tried to explain the modern equivalent of the line “a right fair mark is soonest hit”. He connected to us in a way that no other teacher came remotely close to - the other team teachers were blatantly

Anatomy of a Snowflake

-for Haley and Moira

Camille Petersen
MORRISTOWN, NJ

I know I don't know
When I was five I tried to dig a hole
Under a slide to get straight to China
Mostly I needed to test the theory
But I also wanted to believe in something
Buried underneath

As if having faith in the impossible

Could make the possible more real
I went three feet down and my hands cramped
I felt like machinery
Exhaling shallow breaths through stone
Part of what I'd uncovered

Which was nothing but what people find
When they read the journals of the dead
they've never known
The words make no sense and the places
disintegrate
But you don't know the person
You are the person
You've lived that life, it's about you

You don't know yourself except in these
Distant glances, out of context renderings
Seeing who you are is like watching the winter
sun rise

Snow bleeding lost noise from forgotten
stories

Across the driveway and the sky's colors
reminding you

All things pass and connect again

Snowflakes have an anatomy
This is something I know
They fall like insects onto windshields
Their wings clipped, their bodies dagger-like
on the glass
I can see each part of them
I can see where they've been and where they'll
go

This is something I know
These snowflakes scare me
Imagine what we would look like to ourselves
Visible, unburied, decoded journals
Insects and snowflakes
Imagine finding your soul on your windshield
one morning

This is something I know

The Things I'll Never Tell My Mother

Jessica Blau
MILTON, MA

Sticky fingers, kids call me, ask for a pack of skittles, a magazine, that nice tampax, pearly plastic, not that cardboard shit they're used to.

They stand outside Safeway, one thin sheet of ice ready to break apart at the sight of a patrol car, loss prevention staff, and they whisper about the girl who doesn't get caught, except today.

When his fingers closed around my wrist, stop miss, I wished it were you and your fingers, soft, like they used to be, before these small attempts at vengeance.

When he asked me what's your name, how old are you, where are your parents, I thought about the nights you sat at the foot of my bed,

talking to me long after I slipped into dreams.

When he called the police, hands gliding over phone keys, I could feel your fingers move against my back, tracing words into my skin, the low light of a television soothing me to sleep.

When that metal first bit into my wrists, I remembered the sharp taste of blood in my mouth, teeth to tongue, as I slipped lipstick and soda bottles and comfort under my shirt,

the heel of your dining room table in my back as the neighbor boy fucked me, the hard pavement of our driveway at night, gravel gripping to the bottom of my feet,

my reflection in your bathroom mirror as I took your nail polish and your perfume bottles, the bag in the back of my closet filled with your favorite scarf, your baby's sweater.

And when my hands were tied in the back of that police car, sirens screaming, skin screaming, everything screaming, tell me, did you even know where I was?

jealous. I felt more honesty and camaraderie in that room that I did at home. I still do.

One day, during the balcony scene (during which I also had a fake tree shaken in my face), Mr. Crooke asked us to write our names on a piece of paper. At this point we were used to his antics; we just kept laughing and did as we were told. Then he picked up the distinctive blue recycling bin, went to each of us, and asked us if we would “tear the word” – rip up our names – for true love, like Romeo promised to Juliet. He asked if we would give up everything, our identities, for some one else. Most people did, a few refused. Then he got to me, the very last person. He didn't wait for me to answer, which was good because I really couldn't decide.

He said plainly, “You won't do it.” It wasn't a challenge. He just said it as if he was telling me the sky was blue.

“No, I won't.” I answered just as simply, and he moved on.

It felt... bizarre. My English teacher

knew more about me than I did. That couldn't be good. Thousands of inclinations started stinging from the inside like I was a beehive in distress. But when all of the chaos cleared, I felt a serene kind of clarity. Hollow and whole at the same time. For the first time in my admittedly meager high school experience, maybe for the first time in my life, I felt like me. Like all of the memories and scars of dead pain evaporated to make way for something that needed all of me. And it finally had all of me.

That class wasn't simple. It dredged up some secrets of mine that I wanted to keep in the dark, and brought light to some things I had been blind to. But that class was the single most significant event in my life because it started my life. It showed me with breakneck speed that I could be me, that I would be me, now and forever.

And I will be ok.

Katrine

Zoe Jeka
SEVERNA, MD

She does not let many people hold her piano fingers. But I know her mother died, and she reached for comfort and laughter in glass bottles—careful not to break them.

I know she dove inside her wrists one day, and found air instead of blood, and she blamed this on her mother and screamed until she was a child again, so her mother could kiss her piano fingers.

I know she whispers goodnight to a Polaroid photograph hidden under her pillow, and clings to her mother's face as she begins to dream, to hear her voice without the sickness swallowing its melodies, without the wires choking her piano fingers.

I do not know the way she cries—raw and fierce in its silence, untamed so that it is hard to listen.

I do not know desire like she does—aching for the gentle nights when her mother was not buried and sharp at the edges, a photograph under her pillow.

I do not know her thoughts when it is dark and we're following our shadows home because they know the way better than we do.

I do not know tender like she does. So I hold her piano fingers, to feel a little more.

So They Say, We've Got Things In Common

Joshua Barber
BRINGHAMTON, NY

I am so many things when I draw air, and never enough to say what they are. Sometimes I am a great leader with bands of howling men at my back, other times I am caught in the arms of a silent beautiful woman on a seashore at the end of the world, still others I am laying on a white bed in a white room on hardwood floors. Great monsters advance towards my humble bones when the hour of last light comes along, and far underneath the pitter-patter water droplet footsteps in the dark, I imagine I am three or four or five again, young enough to pretend I don't know I am going to die. It's in the last hours before father comes tracing open lines on the small of my back that things are scariest, every second closer to sleeping again.

It's always been.

Catharsis is not too much of a trouble, I am not heavy too much anymore I don't think, my thighs have slimmed. Their circumference circles a lot less, and when I think in the couches I glide this way and that over the cushions, I am inside of a big circle and I think of how my left thigh is slimmer than the right. It's comfort sometimes that I perceive ambling through the downtown at night under the Hess station lights, or collapsing in a car seat, or talking on the phone, or sitting here now twice a week. So many things have sat next to me, among which I count family and etchings of cyclists and magnetic stacks and goo drip dropping for forty-five minutes.

The dreams are a lot crazier these days, and during the two hour naps I am far across the night with my mother and father, and now unrecognizable I dream of cities in the dark and canvas bags and books and Italy in late August in small grandmother villages. Sitting here, I can only dream of a better time and days with no obligation, but I've been robbed. Sitting next to me, she is simply shards. The grandfathers in the fire drills hug the hardest when their babies play baseball, but I quit that too

soon, and I quit the other things too soon, and didn't do well enough because they loved me too much and I couldn't reciprocate.

Reciprocity is tricky sometimes when I can't remember being dead. West End, I must be dead sometimes in my dreams, for on Chapin the coffee smells too strong in the room and I've let them down again.

"I couldn't hear anything, I was sobbing."

"What did he do to help?"

"No one was around me, no one at all, no one to help. Apparently no one in my life cares enough."

It's not been any different these days. Walking spirals, or sleeping in her bed again, I think of breathing tubes, and death on their spare room bed. I smell the pillows when you leave and lay on the carpet sucking in the empty throats. It's not meant to be a pity party, in fact I haven't ever meant to distract people from real problems inhabiting your bones and rib cage.

She pulled out a wad of tissues from the smooth-shelled black purse while he was speaking, and managed to whisper out her availability for the next meeting by the time we left. She sprinted out the door and he rubbed my back while I left him. Her purse was slung over her shoulder, she bought that with little money, I know, and she only ate a few times today, and I should feel bad about it, but when do I get to feel it myself? I protected you my whole life.

"It must be tough to hear that."

"I know sometimes it must not have felt that way, we never meant for it to feel that way."

The third time it happened, and the fourth it was a chore, and no more did she feel like she had sons. Peculiarly, sitting in warm baths on Sunday nights reading D.H. Lawrence I wish I was dead. I fell like a ghost legless onto the new loveseat and the suede was swept over my shoulders by him, he who grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the house. Next door, the neighbors must be dropping their forks, because the Miami Heat have won again and because they must hear them screaming outside.

I drooled and I sneezed and I cried. No more came of it except now thinking of the summer at the pool and you and your mother talking about your distance. Five months later, we are in love and locked on couches for hours speaking of distance and space. I can dream of the future, and things feel like something else.

Space is fascinating to them, but not anymore. He walks across the room and lifts up the clothes from the red chair.

"We need to talk."

"No."

"Alright."

And with a start he was gone. But today now, he seems resigned and sitting back to her

monstrous shadow.

We stepped into the car again and drove away; he didn't deserve it this time. I collapsed into the comforter upstairs and didn't wake up again. So now, while standing with the mask off above the canyon, I was being held in their arms, or in the chilly September parking lots in Burlington.

I was shaken awake, with his hand slapping me on the behind and tracing a circumference on my upper thigh.

"Can you just try a little harder? Come on, bud...just...show us a little bit, so we can cut a little for you."

"Get up!"

And so it was the next day.

It was an ordinary morning, except for the sun coming up differently this time, but next time it won't come up this way, but no, it's different this time, he thought. It's different this time, yes, that's it. Every time it's different it's not the same this time or that, which is which, which is why when his father shot him, it made sense.

Out across the airfield was more and more snow. The airfield was white and the pavement was cracked from years and years of salt cakes puncturing the pavement, which is black, the snow is white. Sitting on the pavement, he was crying again. Yesterday, he looked into their eyes, and saw something different.

Now feigning death, he sits carbon monoxide pluming like heaven out of the exhaust pipes. It's not too much finite, years, these days, they're not much more than eternities lasting seconds, so that tomorrow will feel like we've grown tenfold.

He could remember the practice addition tests, the ones he swept through quickly but stalled on the last one, or the matches in the state parks that didn't go well enough because they lacked a thumbs-up or fist pump.

So now sitting it doesn't mean much anymore, which is why he wanted to let it go. Riding over the back roads, the car got caught in the snowbanks, and he returned to watch travel shows.

She is sitting in shambles while I say it, which is expected anymore, not different or different than before.

I came home that night and heard her shrill jabs. When he came downstairs he sat in suede, and I looked at him, stood up, walked away. He yelled back. I came back to the yell, and he

looked at me, and yelled.

"Why don't you just kill me?"

He took out his gun, cocked, and pointed at me, saying, "I don't want to use this, I don't want to use this."

And with a flash I was gone.

For many, many more days out across the way, I felt alone and cathartic. Going home got to be too much, so I went elsewhere, in basements in love, or on ice with nearly full packages of cigarettes, and not in the minds and lives of the people who'd let me there.

In between drags, she stared uncomfortably, and gray smoke emptied and fell out of cigarettes dangling in fingers. There she stood.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so."

"Are you positive?"

"I don't know."

"Well Jesus, figure it out!"

"Okay, I'm pretty sure I'm positive."

"Are you sure?"

"Not really."

"Well...Jesus," (struggles to accentuate) "just stop being so indecisive!"

"How can I be sure about anything?"

By now, everyone else was occupied with something else. The gaze she had was piercing; I had to figure out whether I was sure or not, sure or not about what, ah, sure or not about what, I was sure enough about what what was, but not sure if I was sure or unsure of what what I was wondering what I meant before, and this she could tell, because she got up to leave.

"Wait! I'm sure now."

"Sure of what?"

"The what you asked before."

"Oh! Well, what?"

"What?"

"What what?"

"I was just looking."

"Oh, OK."

I stepped out of the car and kicked the bumper as the smoke popped the hood off.

"It's busted."

"No shit."

"Just hang on. Just have hope. You'll be okay, I know it."

She stared emptily at him into his brown eyes.

"Just remember we'll be there for you. We'll

come to see you when it's all over. Just remember that."

Her eyes filled with non-existent tears, since she'd forgotten what the others were like.

You'll be OK, you'll be OK, she kept turning over in her mind.

Behind the other curtain a woman was weeping and screaming heard, but unheard, lost in an abyss.

Help! Help! is what everyone thought she was saying, though no one was sure.

"What?"

I knew this time. I think.

"Ugh, I forgot again."

And so I ashamedly looked at each dimple in the linoleum and felt the helpless come-up in the heart. You'll be OK. Screams of help! I looked again longingly at the linoleum for what I had known before. The linoleum transferred to hard gray concrete.

This time, I knew. I looked into her face and said sorry, I didn't mean it, I was only kidding, what was I supposed to know about a pistol? There is nothing in a desert when you look far enough. Where was I yesterday?

You'll be OK.

But she's not, screaming and crying out groans of longing for the sunrise to come again to be remembered by someone or something.

And so, I sat in my cell staring at the cold gray hard concrete ceiling taking endless puffs and drags off a cigarette until the grays merged together and I wondered what I was doing when I kicked the bumper.

"So they say, we're alike in many ways."

The old man stretched out his legs on the park bench talking about Rembrandt and other Dutch masters.

"I'm never in love with the season I'm in."

In my dreams, everything gets put back to the way it was. Sitting next to me any longer is a different color sound when I think of the summer, or the summer before, and I always figure things out a little later than when they happen. Walking together on the balconies at night, riding bicycles secretly in the summer, and sitting on blankets in the park. It was a different time, this is for sure. I always figure

things out a little later than they are due, for instance the distance from Boston to Maine, the likeness of our feelings, the ways to etch a memory in a spine, and the way to abhor the thoughts of the ones who do no thinking.

When I sit next to the water, I never dream of how I'd never be able to handle it now. When I was eight and thrashed this way and that by the big waves on Styrofoam boards, I never thought at some point the undertow would be a Savior in the dark.

It's the majority of the time that I want to scream, and the other times I wish I was laying down in the grass again, smelling smoke and riding a car far, far away the days after the ones that came before. Sometimes sitting, we think of ourselves in a manner that means nothing more than before.

I've never been to the other continents, and have never seen snow from another globe, and have never loved in another country, or another night, or another home.

When I sit by the water, I think of being seven again, or twelve, or six, and the best, four when the worst that happened was losing an action figure in the waves. Now smoking hash in a semi-sewer drain, I seek to be out of my body, and standing in the forest, all I could see was someone far across the way, stuck in there with the rest.

Movies about nothing make us love each other more, I've come to think. And the things change from year to year, and what goes on is the body, sinful, fattened, fattening, scarred, and things get to be so much different. The more shit you do to yourself, the less you get to know what things were before you did them.

"We've got things in common, they say."

And that's when it came to light: sitting in shambles, she went back to three hundred seventy-three days before and said she didn't like what I was becoming, and crying in the flooded basement I peed in my pants and tripped up the stairs, and fell at her feet in my head. I kicked myself in the foot, and ice skating on Saturdays, I was the king of the rink. What I would give to go back, and end it before it started to come out.

"We've got things in common, they say."

He took a pistol and put it in his mouth. When he let it go, I picked it up and laid there crying in the pool of blood when the police came, and I told them I did it, and they looked at me.

"Son, people don't murder the ones they love."

And with that they put a bullet in my brain.

he's come to thinking around the bend anymore

Joshua Baber
BINGHAMTON, NY

*what happened to you over the past year?—to
my grandmother*

*the first thing the dead blind man saw was (a
piece of wood) a kingfisher and a limousine, so
he cut it*

*and drove away, screaming, "i must mark my-
self!" so channeling strauss, he*

*thought to himself, i very much do live a life of
big and grand strings in a dark city street.*

he's come to thinking around the bend anymore

*today--this is him looking at your books of paint-
ings*

*and reading your record sleeves. come unhinge
the doors beneath the sink, for the garbage is wet
and it's gotten to*

stink.

*little object, the butterfly beneath the sky ceiling,
where in my dreams sometimes he has tiny hands
and shoulder mucus that sticks in the hinges of
his ugly little spine.
the bones of my lower leg have gotten to jutting
recently...*

*i've gotten to watching the waves more than
usual, for the time of year.*

*it may well be a creak in the floorboard coming
down*

far

beneath the ceiling upside down. this is no juxta-

*position, it's only thinking side by side if it was
turned on it(s) side (-ide).*

*if you drop space for more of it, you get to feeling
confined, which is what he does*

*at night in the winter time. what is outside the
window in the morning? mother, don't make me
go to the other side! shut the window linens and
tuck in the morning light, it has to sleep too*

and don't make me walk outside today.

*fish smell incomplete when you look at them for
too long a time.*

*bread and fishes, i like to wash dirty dishes...the
stains wipe off nicely, a cleaving gone through the
tide, like the hands of some*

MYSTERIOUS

*watchman (tick-tick, go to sleep) through my
vena cava, which is where i get to thinking the
worst things.*

some-

where

*between the fire and the knick-knacks is a boy
who cries*

wolf, and "my destiny is sealed; my fate complete!"

don't kill me wolf!"

*and he was a tragic lover, more than the next, so
it was and running naked through the apart-
ment filled with people, bloody procedure done in
the bathroom, sick and miserable, and scream-
ing, watching how slow time was moving*

in his dreams.

6 february 2012

Make her see how much she really does miss
The innocence in the autumn leaves,
But hard times have left harsher weather.

None in this town believe they could weather
The storm brewing, that bleak and nearing
choice.

Politics kicked up in the air like leaves,
And at the top, a man no one dared to cross.
Though, if he were to die, no one would miss
The tyrant and cheers would ring from houses.

Never having slept safe in their houses,
The people oftentimes wonder whether
This life is one that they could ever miss;
Their inability to make this choice
Serves only to make them more scared and
cross,

And they give up, lying face down in the leaves.

Yet who can say they'd be able to leave?

Just go? Leave behind memories and houses?
Some say that bridge is one they'll surely cross
When it is reached, one and the same whether
They make the first step themselves, or the
choice

Is made for them. Either way, what's to miss?

Young strangers would come up and say, "Hey
Miss,
Do you remember playing in the leaves?
Back when you thought you'd have a say, a
choice?"

Asking on sweeter memories as they pass hous-
es,

Even making talk about the weather
Until they reached the street and had to cross.

They all bear that cross, and it never leaves
A sore spot to miss. Inside torn houses,
They wonder whether they made the right
choice.

The Losing Game

Sarah Mathews
PLUM, PA

In sullen days where sullen people cross
The streets, too busy to care what they miss,
She stands on bridges wondering whether
Or not to jump, then loses nerve and leaves.
Amidst busy streets and crowded houses
She thinks that perhaps she's made the wrong
choice.

Although, really, there was no other choice.
Running her hand along the tarnished cross
On her neck, the starved children and ruins of
houses

She knew her mother
Wouldn't approve of him—
His smile had no manners
And his eyes told tales
That had never been to church.

But he had a way of
Crooking his lips
Like false prayers,
Tearing down her god
And daring her
To find it beautiful.
And when her name
Fell off his mouth,
Like pearls
Rolling across her tongue,

His bare teeth promised
To swallow the
Space between their skins.

A heretic,
She named him—
Someone to burn her mouth
With blasphemy and
Promise her a fall
From grace,
Leaving nothing
But the taste of him
Raw in her throat
And the fingermarks
Untying her hips.

Heretic

Angela Sim
WALLINGFORD, CT

fusses in his car seat as his mother scrambles
to make sure the little boy has enough to eat.
Middle aged men sleep in their chairs, while
others sit huddled close, chatting and telling
stories. A cluster of men who were hanging
out outside under a tree enter the room and
with them comes a cool breeze and the scent of
marijuana. No one seems to mind.

Jared Benatar
ROSLYN, NY

I enter the dingy basement of the
church, wary of what awaits me inside. Fran-
ces greets me immediately. She has jet black
hair and a slightly rotund build. Frances is in
charge of the soup kitchen, scurrying about
and managing the flood of men, women, and
children who come in and out. "So glad you
could help today, Jared. Let me see where I
can put you," she says as she ushers me about.
Within seconds I am in the front of the room,
running the breakfast area.

The morning starts slowly, but little
by little, people gravitate toward me. I pour
milk for some, scoop sugar coated cereal for
others, and slice overripe bananas for most.
Each person says a warm thank you, some
looking at me directly, others with heads
bowed down.

Time passes, and as breakfast turns
to lunch, more and more people fill the room.
I watch with a curious eye. A gray-haired old
woman helps herself to what is left of a bowl
of fruit, making sure she quietly stuffs several
shiny red apples into her purse for later. A
toothless elderly man sits hunched over and
stares off, smiling occasionally at the volunteers
who pass him by. A frazzled looking mother
strolls in with her two children, one a baby and
the other a young boy of about eight. The baby

brant; I have never seen so much color in one
bowl. The sausage and peppers smell hearty
and delicious. Frances puts as much care and
attention into every detail of this meal for the
needy as she would were it for royalty.

Eventually, I am at the sink wash-
ing dishes and I rush through because I want
to finish in time to make it to my basketball
lesson at the gym. Smiling, Frances turns to
me and says, "I appreciate your help Jared, and
please, I hope you'll come back here soon." I
say goodbye to her and she hugs me as if we are
now friends for life.

It's a long drive home, so I find my-
self mulling over the day. An uneasy feeling
begins to creep in, along with a pang of guilt.
Here I am, dashing off to pay someone to im-
prove my basketball skills, while the dozens
of people to whom I just doled out food can
barely afford a meal. It dawns on me that one
day, with a stroke of bad luck, I too could find
myself on the other side of that table, accept-
ing food from generous strangers. This nags at
me. I struggle to justify why too often I spend
money on frivolous and unnecessary things. I
tell myself that I'm still only a young adult, and
if my parents are willing to indulge me, then
I might as well enjoy the opportunity while
I can. But within seconds, my conscience re-
jects this. I remember the people at the soup
kitchen; I see them one by one, smiling, eating
and chatting, and then I make a decision. At
home, with a bold black marker, I write "soup
kitchen" across every Saturday on my calendar
for the next three months.

What started out as just community
service work will now be an endeavor of my
heart. As I slip off my Air Jordans, I think of
Frances and smile.

Note to Deteriorating Self

Charlene Francois
LIVINGSTON, NJ

When it is quiet, become suspicious. Carefully drop the laundry basket. Don't forget to tell Lauri to put her clothes in her hamper, rather than leave them in a heap on her chair. Listen past the normal creaking of the steps for the sounds. Try to remember where everybody went. Pray to God that he's not here. Then, realize that if God existed, he would have listened to your begging long ago. There are sounds simply produced by your paranoia. Don't panic. Fight the paralysis from your fear and steady that trembling bottom lip. Reprimand yourself for wearing a skirt and tank top today. Consider changing into long sleeves and pants, but then tell yourself that you have no time. Pull out a suitcase from the corner in the attic. Climb in and seek refuge. Yank the cover back up. Huddle inside yourself, and bring your knees close to your heart. Your eyes are watering. Blame it on the dust. Wipe the sweat of your palms on the side of the spacious suitcase. Shudder when you begin to think about what could happen. Count each wracking breath. Try to breathe more steadily. Feel dirty. Then, beg to feel clean.

Remember the first time it happened. Remember this being the first time that you lied to your mother. He molded a shelter of lies for both of you to hide the secret in and for some reason, you cannot escape from it. Go back to the exact moment when it happened. Let your heart cry.

You are naked and hear somebody breathing outside the door. Open the shower door. Feel the chill of the room mingle with the steamy air from the shower. Stop when you hear the knock. Breathe in relief when you hear him say his name. Ask him to wait

one second as you get your towel on. Open the door anxiously. Contain your excitement and don't hug him too hard. He is grinning. Grin back. Take him downstairs to get a glass of water. You still wear nothing but a pink towel and flushed cheeks. He'll be around more often; this is what he tells you. Get out the pitcher of iced tea. Tell him how much you've missed him. Ask him how his trip was. Insist that you come with him next time. Pour him a glass of iced tea as you chat with him. Feel his eyes on your back as cubes of ices plopp into the pitcher. Ringlets will form where the cubes interrupted to the peace of the still water. Your towel will still be on. Set a coaster down in front of him, then his glass of iced tea. Sit with him at the table. Cross your legs. Adjust your towel. You should go get dressed, but you do not want to leave his side. Inform him that your parents are at the lake today. Don't get uncomfortable when his eyes linger for too long on your chest. You awkwardly stammer into a new conversation.

Go get dressed. Take him to your hammock outside. Let him swing back and forth. Lie on the ground beside him. Think about how all of your friends are at prom right now. Don't regret not going, especially since you did not have a date. Tell him. Don't think about why you are telling him, just do it. Smile when he tells you that there should be no reason why you do not have a date. You are an attractive and funny young lady. Move your knee when his hand skims over it. Justify why he would be touching you there. Still, you have officially become uncomfortable. Make a decision whether or not you should look into his eyes. Do you want to see where he is looking? His eyes will be locked with yours. Force yourself to smile. He will squeeze your knee again. Panic. Let your heart beat with a more accelerated rhythm, and feel the hairs on the back of your neck rise. You hear the crunching of gravel in the driveway. Mom is home. He panics and demands you not to let anyone know that he was here. Take that confused look off of your face. Nod in compliance. Watch as he runs away through your backyard, through your neighbor's yard and around the corner to the bus stop. You didn't know he wasn't allowed to be here. Feel sick. Feel the touch of his hand on your knee. Lean over behind the oak tree and wretch. Rid your body of his touch. Realize that something very sick has just happened. You don't go straight inside your home. You sit amid the sweet grass and

acorns. You breathe.

Lie to your mother when she asks you why there are two glasses of iced tea on the table. Shrug when she asks you why your towel is draped over the chair. She is suspicious. Run to your room after a contrived conversation with her about your day. Get ready for another shower. Turn the water on to the hottest temperature. Feel it scorch. It burns you to the core. Know that it can't hurt as much as what he did to you. It feels like the beginning of something...be afraid. Your father asked him to stay over for a week. His apartment was being renovated, and he had nowhere else to stay. Call him to the kitchen table for dinner. At dinner, look at your mother as she feigns kindness. Act normal. Walk him downstairs to the guest room. The basement will feel dank. Comment on the musty smell and apologize on its behalf. Show him the brown sheets and wooden desks in the guest room. Lead the way back upstairs to the kitchen. Try to run around him to get through the doorway leading back upstairs. He will block you. Retrieve a nervous laugh from the bottom of your body. Is he serious? He really will not let you leave. Tell him your mom wants you back upstairs. Don't scream when he covers your mouth with his callused hands. Your neck will hurt when your hand bangs against the headboard on the way down. Grab his hands, fight to push this bastard off. He will become more aggressive. Fight back. Find this inner strength to remove his weight from your body. Button your shirt

Anticipation

Julia Xia
STATEN ISLAND, NY

Balmy morning, the first warm touch of spring; Wind cradles the breath of ocean mist and I soar in winter's cold farewell embrace. My feet are drums, they tap a cozy beat as they race against the stinging breeze towards summer's retreating sun. Then day rolls up its sleeves, gathering clouds around its shoulders. The darkness scatters heavy rain beads.



as you run out of the room. Don't stop to hear the rest of his threats. But you won't run fast enough to miss the beginning of his sentence. He'll be waiting for you.

When it happens, your father can hear the banging of the headboard and the cries of a young girl with no fight left in her. He had your father's dignity and secrets in his control. And, he was willing to use them against your father. So, your father does not do anything to help you. He would rather keep this man as his friend, than as his enemy.

Stay later at school. Smell the ammonia of the janitor's cleaning supplies. Watch her limp down the hallway. She looks at you suspiciously. Stick your nose into your Trigonometry textbook and don't make a sound. If you're thrown out before the latest possible second, it will be over. You'll have to go home and he may still be awake. When the lights begin to turn off in the school, walk a few blocks

down to the elementary school. Swing on the creaky swings. Try to recapture your childhood, and the innocence that existed with it. Remember when you would swing and look up into the sky, trying to grab clouds of blue and heaven.

If you go home, he will be there. But he is here too. You feel him all around you. The sweat from his hands stinging your face as it dripped. Don't tell anyone. It is dark now. Brush off the dirt from the swings. Walk home in the dark. Look left. Look right. Scurry across the streets. Walk quicker as the streetlights turn off. Hear him behind you. Feel his breath on your neck as you turn the corner onto your street. Run up the sidewalk until you reach your porch. Realize that there is no refuge from him inside. Climb through your bedroom window so he cannot hear you. Realize that eventually he know that you have arrived. Be quiet. Lift one leg over the sill and push your way into the room. Don't turn on the lights. Curl up into a ball in your bed. He'll be here soon.

Come back to reality. In the attic, you are a thirty year old curled up into a ball of fear. You still hear someone coming up the steps. He is calling your name. Don't answer. Don't open your eyes. Maybe if you're quiet enough, he'll leave. The sound is coming closer and you can tell that he is now in your room. He tugs on the zipper of the suitcase and coaxes you to come out. You look at the face, and it looks like the face of the man who killed your innocence. But, this man is telling you that he is your husband and that those times are over. He is always the one to open the suitcase and rescue you. You're not young anymore, but you are still acting like a baby. Believe that you are protected. Hug your husband. Sit with him on the bed and let him comfort you. Don't be embarrassed as your kids stare at you from the other side of the room. Glance back at your husband. Then, turn your head so he cannot see the tears that seep from your eyes when he squeezes your knee.

First Shot

Jonathan Esty
CHESHIRE, CT

I cradle smoke-blasted wood,
child's hands too small
for the black iron grip.

They tell me:
Breathe in deep. Hold.
Elbows locked, shoulders steady.

Center the sight and target.
Keep the ring around the dot, the line under-
neath.
Imagine it's a lollipop.

Grit from a spilled sandbag peppers my arm.
I squint through sweat and gungrease.
Exhale.
Squeeze.

I sunder paper to shreds,
rip back the bar and ratchet,
spitting out a crumpled golden casing
like the shiny foil
of a candy wrapper.

out-their-iPhones-and-text-their-best-friend-
that-they-Just. Saw. You.

I felt a sharp pinch on my right. up.

My eyes darted toward my pocket.
Nothing. Then I saw the ground rushing at me,
as if its hinges were at my feet and I, a door,
slammed shut upon it.

Sometimes, when you get knocked
down, the only thing to do is to get up. Do you
feel helpless? Don't. Can't get up? Then crawl.
They say it's the journey that counts. But that's
not true. How you get up isn't as important as
actually getting up.

When I came to, a figure in a leather
jacket and jeans appeared.

A hand. I took it and got up. The
hand belonged to a woman. I glanced at her.
What just happened? Before I could ask her,
elbows began jabbing me, pushing me back,
as I was once again reminded of where I was. I
opened my mouth to speak, but the din of the
traffic drowned me out. I mouthed the words
Staaaar. Buuucks. and pointed past her.

She nodded and disappeared into the
horizon of the crowd.

Counter-clockwise seven times.
Clockwise seven times. A gentle sip followed
by an abrupt slurp. That was how she stirred,
and drank, her Skinny Vanilla Latte. She re-
peated this motion several times before realiz-
ing that she had drunk it all. It didn't faze her;
she repeated the motion as if there were more.

If you're feeling like nobody cares
about you, don't hurt yourself. Chances are
there's at least one person in this world who
thinks you're special. You may think that you're
not, but you are. Really. People know how spe-
cial you are. They're just afraid to say it.

We were the only two there.

Dunno. I just remember a billboard
lady with a green dress. Blue backdrop.
Ah. That one.
Yeah.
You like Gucci ads?

They're alright.
Just alright?
Their models wear too much make-
up.

She stopped stirring her coffee and
stared down at her cup, like a child whose fa-
vorite toy just broke.

How much?
She reminds me of a clown, except
probably with less makeup on.

Is there that much?
I mean, she's not bad.
Not bad?
Yeah.
Why?
I like her outfit.
What if she didn't wear that outfit?
I like her jewelry.
Are those the only reasons?
No. I just like her. You don't need rea-
sons for that.

She left. But before she did, she said,
Here, call me, and handed her business card to
me.

I returned to where I fell. By now, it
was deserted. I looked at the card she handed
me: Kate Kerrigan, Vanguard Models. I turned
it over. In the streetlight, a familiar picture
emerged. Green dress. Blue backdrop. Lots of
makeup. I held the finger-smudged card up,
next to the always bright, always shiny bill-
board; the women were unmistakably, undeni-
ably the same. Identical twins even.

Do you think that shiny is best? Do
you wonder how it feels to stand out? Well, ac-
tually, it doesn't make you feel that special. In-
stead, after a while, you realize nothing has re-
ally changed. It's like that feeling you get when
it's a quarter past midnight on New Year's Day-
something feels different, but actually, every-
thing's the same. But no worries. You're still
shiny. You're shiny on the inside.

Rainy Season

Nicole Achempong
SHARON, MA

Dockray Funeral Home is flooding.
Passing cars slow, rubber slicing puddles.
The wooden walls soften like your skin
after showers. Wet earth swallows
a sunken foundation,
the weight of too many processions.

Do you remember Bath, Maine?
The potholed streets, the graying diners
slicked with grease, the cracked vinyl
booth where we piled our plates high

with crisps of bacon smoked black.

We spent that summer soaked in rain,
spent three weeks scraping roadside mud
out from under our fingernails. I'm not sure
what this means, but I forget the sound
the rain made as it leaked through
the motel window pane. I want to see
your face, strained to the sky. I want you
drowned in a season's downpour.

Remember Sundays,
when rainwater pooled in the gutters,
when our father's truck tarped in blue plastic
camped beside the curb.

We crouched on the back door mat,
yanked wool socks up
over our knees and laced sneakers
soft and shapeless.

The screen clacked against the doorframe as we
plunged
into rain. He shimmed the canvas sheet from
the roof,
leashed the edges to the truck bed.
Wedged underneath, we rolled together
like cigarettes slid smooth in their pack.

You pressed your palms beneath your chin,

but I liked the click my molars made
every time we hit a rut.

At the grocery, he would cut the engine,
step to the street. Waiting, we peered
beneath the tarp at stones embedded in the
road.

Sometimes there would be water chestnuts,
salt water taffy that we peeled
from cellophane squares,
but remember, remember
each time, he started the engine.

When smoke settled on the air
he had lipped the first cigarette,
the pack of Marlboros tossed
like a deck of cards on the dashboard.

To think she sees nothing
beyond you. In bed my grandmother

stirs, her body a budding of light
on a birdless tree.

She has told me about the waking
of things. How the end of a life

lies closer to its beginning, how
one day when her father's shoes left

the doorstep, she had dreamt
an ugly birth. She thinks

she had been young then.

But holding her, I wonder

if she dreams of it still,
if, as she listens with hair flattened to sheets,

her eyes reflect the look of dawn
that smears into sleep.

The Billboard

Leo Yu
CUPERTINO, CA

Beige tiles lined the path. A ray of
dim moonlight led the way. I walked and
walked, past the Starbucks on the corner of
43rd and 8th, past Grand Central Station,
until I was in Times Square. Some people say
Times Square is a bright, shiny place. It's not.
It's a vacuum, it sucks your energy away, and
everyone's the same there. Just your garden-va-
riety fanny-pack-schlepping, Coolpix-clicking,
I-heart-NY tourist.

A newspaper drifted through the air
like urban tumbleweed, landing on my chest.
I peeled it off. The front page was an advertise-
ment for some seminar: The Individual and
Others.

Whenever you feel like everyone else
is better than you, just remember: You're dif-
ferent. There's only one of you. No two people
are the same. Did you know? They found that
even identical twins are not actually identical.
Maybe in a parallel universe identical twins
are actually identical. Nobody knows for sure
though, as such a place may or may not exist.

As I passed a billboard, I stopped to
look up at it. There she stood. Arrogant. Tiger
eyes. Glossy black hair. Makeup. Lots of make-
up. Probably too much. It was an advertisement
for Gucci, but the model wasn't even wearing
that much Gucci. If anything, Gucci was more
of an advertisement for the no-doubt up-and-
coming model. It was yet another example of
The Fame. The walking-up-to-the-hostess-of-
a-three-star-Michelin-rated-restaurant-with-
out-a-reservation-and-waiting-for-her-to-rec-
ognize-you-before-she-mentions-the-"special"-
booth-that-has-coincidentally-"just"-opened-
up-while-those-waiting-patiently-in-line-el-
bow-the-person-beside-them-and-point-fin-
gers-and-flash-looks-of-adoration-and-take-

Wake

Haeyeon Tina Cho
MILTON, MA

The God Particle

Victoria White
STONINGTON, CT

So there's this thing called the Higgs Boson, which unless you're really into physics, you've probably never heard of. Just trust me when I say it's a pretty big deal if you are. I'm no physicist, but the best I understand it, it's like this: you've got atoms, right? Made of protons and electrons and neutrons. And you break those down into more particles, fundamental particles with names like 'quark'. On a side note, I know what they're doing is important, but really. How they ever thought a quark could be taken seriously is beyond me.

But the point is, these fundamental particles, they're what make up the whole of everything. We get that. That's fact already, the physics gospel. The Higgs Boson, this thing the media's calling the 'God particle', is different. It's this tiny theoretical particle created by something called a Higgs Field, and the Higgs Field is what gives everything mass—and stop me, here, if I'm going too fast. I'll say that again: Higgs fields give mass to particles moving through them. They make everything tangible, *real*, there. That's called the Higgs Effect.

I know, I know, these names. It's that all these theories come from the same person, Peter Higgs: great guy, but he spent more effort on science, less on terminology. Atheist, too—not that I'm judging, but it meant he hated the name 'God particle'.

Thing is, though, that's sort of what it is. The Higgs Field gives everything substance: it's the foundation for physics. Take a second for that to sink in. They've gambled a field of science on a particle they haven't proven exists. Of course, it probably does, but people don't want likelihood, they want proof. Certainty. Physicists worldwide are salivating for it. People, those greedy, irresistible creatures, don't just want what and hows

but *whys*, the things that I could never give.

The boy hasn't moved for a while. He's hiding, crouched inside the red tube in the playground, breathing the stale, plastic air through his mouth. Outside, his brother charges around the playground in a pickup soccer game, their mother watching from a bench. She eyes other peoples' running, shrieking kids with a listless kind of hatred. She doesn't hate them, really, so much as the way everything's still going on like normal.

She hasn't noticed her younger son's disappearance. It's been several minutes since he crawled into the tube, curled up tight like the clot that formed inside his father's heart a couple weeks ago. He needed to get away from everyone else before he could mourn.

I'm surprised when he speaks to me, since he never has before. Kids sometimes do and sometimes don't, but he's one who doesn't, who stopped believing as soon as he heard that the air above him stretches far past rambling clouds—composed of water vapor, intangible and proven so—into a stratosphere populated by lonely birds, outwards and upwards until it thins to nitrogen and oxygen, argon and carbon dioxide, trace amounts of other gases, falling away into yawning space and further still, the stars, flares of white-gold hydrogen.

For him, things fall neatly into rows and columns on the periodic table. He knew as soon as he learned what was past the sky that there wasn't room for heaven, and isn't going to be fooled into believing anything.

In a way, I respect him for that. Some people in his place would lose



KENDALL FAWCETT SCOTCH PLAINS, NJ

Practice

Jana Ruthberg
LIVINGSTON, NJ

Let me ride my hot pink Barbie bike by myself, without the elbow pads and knee pads and the safety of your car creeping behind me just in case I might fall.

Let me fall. Let my skinned knees bleed red ribbons on the pavement and let me come limping home alone. But if you're there, still watching don't let me in the car. Drive away.

And when it starts to rain, watch the water soak through the slats of my sticker-plastered helmet, drip into my hair, my t-shirt, and stick to my shivering body.

Let it wash my cuts and wipe away my tears, and let me find my own way back and inside, and upstairs to the bathroom closet, where the Power Ranger band-aids wait.

Let me relish the pain from the sore scrapes on my knees as I climb onto the toilet to reach the box. Watch me slip and try again.

Let me put on my own band-aid, tenderly patch up my own wounds. Let me start early. We'll call it practice for later.

faith—wouldn't want to believe these things happen for a reason. He's too rational to even buy into it.

I hate you, he says, uncomfortably, clumsily. He doesn't know how to yell at anyone yet. He wipes his nose and tries again. *He believed in you, you know? So you better exist for him. He better be happy now.*

He's talking at me, I realize, not with me. He needs someone to be angry with. He doesn't believe. I want to tell him I'm not trying to hurt him, that I know how this feels—not that I empathize, not that I understand, but that I know.

On the other side of the world, in a dusty, empty street, a soldier is shot. A car in Germany hits black ice and skids off the road. A twelve-year-old in Minnesota listens to her father throwing dishes across the kitchen, aiming at her mother's head. In the tube, the boy keeps trying not to cry.

If you talk to one, you have to talk to them all.

I stay quiet.

Fuck you, he says inexpertly, not for the last time.

I'm not going to say that this kid's passionate. I don't like that word—most of the time I don't like any of the words that are supposed to show how much someone cares about something. You know the ones I'm talking about. Interview buzzwords: interest, passion, etcetera. The one that comes closest is *calling*, but even that doesn't cover it. When you really love something then it's not what you do, what you're drawn to, it's what you are.

So let's put it this way: everyone's something, right? A dancer, a businessman, a teacher. The boy's a scientist. Take the time, just a second, to picture it—his first few steps into his middle school science lab. Of course he doesn't talk to me. Heresy. It doesn't mean I'm not watching. With him, I take in the battered posters, the stained glass flasks, the spidery molecular models crouched on the windowsills, and for a moment, just like him, I want to know.

At first it's enough to learn about the molecules that make up everything, but soon he wants to hear about protons, neutrons and electrons; he wants to understand how he's the same, deep down, as trees and skies and stars. The whole world, he thinks, atoms dancing around each other. Crazy.

Over dinner one night, he mentions that a human body is always replacing cells, dying and recreating every part of the self, so in a way, we're all dying all the time, and death's just the point where you stop doing that. I think he thinks it'll help. His mom puts down her fork, biting her lip. "Fuck it," says his brother thickly, after a moment, and leaves the table.

The boy thinks, forlornly, wishing he could tell someone else, that people float through life, all living and aging and dying the same, and never remember they're just space filled with the hum of life. 'Person' doesn't mean too much to him any more when they're all the same, aren't they? People? Atoms?

Lying in bed that night, he twists his fingers together and expects to be able to push straight through, parting molecules that are only empty air. He feels in

touch with the universe and immensely alone.

Freshman year, he moves into a new school, a bigger lab, and learns that nothing can ever be proven. "Even gravity is only a theory," says his chemistry teacher, dropping a marker to clatter on the floor. "In any part of science, we can gather evidence to support our reasoning, but we can't prove it's true."

The boy raises his hand. "So how do we know about atomic structure?"

"Scientists hypothesize and test their theories," says the teacher. "That's the only way we can try to figure it out." "How?" the boy presses, and the teacher sighs and gives him the chapter in the textbook that covers it. Tonight's reading, he says, certain most kids won't do it, but the boy wants to know: wants to break down people into pieces, wants to find out what comes next and then, in a small, dark corner of his mind, wants even more to know that it stops somewhere, that there's a point where things are pure and made of nothing but themselves.

"I think I want to study particle physics," he says one night. His mother is cleaning up from dinner in the kitchen, packing the leftovers into Tupperware. He and his brother sit in front of the TV. The brother, unpicking the laces of his soccer cleats, looks up and frowns.

"The fuck is that?"

The boy thinks hard for a moment. "Remember protons and neutrons? The stuff from chem?" He always talks like this at home, picking words short enough not to piss his brother off. "It's sort of the study of that. And what they're made of."

The brother chews this over.

“Who cares about that?”

“I think it’s kind of cool.”

“Fucking weirdo,” the brother says, kicking his cleats onto the rug.

The letter comes in the mail on a Tuesday. Turns out MIT thinks particle physics are kind of cool too.

“Shit,” says the brother
“Thanks,” says the boy.

Twenty-six and mostly done with his Ph.D., he meets the girl at a friend’s house party. He’s never really gotten into partying, but when he ducks into the kitchen looking for quiet he finds her, sitting on the counter and smoking a joint. “Hiya,” she says, and smoke fans from her lips, a smell like skunk and citrus. She has wispy blond hair and large, reddish eyes. Her thin legs are spread even though she’s wearing a skirt, and he doesn’t know where to look.

She drums her heels against the cabinet and grins. “Want some?”

He takes the joint and breathes in, trying not to choke. He’s smoked a couple times before, but can’t ever shake the feeling that his mom can see him. When he coughs anyway, the girl’s laugh is raucous.

“Good, huh?”

He blinks tears from his eyes. “It has a certain *je ne sais quoi*.”

She jolts upright, and demands to know if he speaks French. He doesn’t, but she doesn’t let him answer: instead she starts telling him how she speaks French, majors in French lit, how she’s gotten into all this crazy Enlightenment shit from the 18th century. She tries to translate it for him but stops—*it sounds better in French*—and starts to quote instead, her voice too high and chattery to get the rich, husky vowels right. The boy inhales her smoke secondhand and smiles.

Sometimes when they sleep together she talks in French, whispers against the corner of his mouth, a language that’ll always sound to him like sex. He’s got no idea why a girl like this likes him so much, and she doesn’t tell him that she learned all her French in high school, that the furthest she’s ever been from Boston is Illinois. Instead she talks to him

about poetry and loves it when he lets her unpack it in front of him, parse it to its roots, plucking symbols from the text like rabbits from hats. She talks for him and he listens for her, and it works.

Their conversations are one-way streets walked hand-in-hand, the girl always tugging ahead. She doesn’t know a thing about science or particle physics, of course, but when he tells her it’s the stuff that makes the universe work, she disagrees anyway. Self-described as spiritual, she’s Episcopalian by birth but converted to Hinduism last year. They’ve got it all figured out, she says, the way we’re all a little wrong about everything. That’s how it works, the soul tethered to the body like a balloon, within and beyond our existence, the Self above all, and all of us swimming in a circle between death and life. She makes religion sexy to the boy, and he’s embarrassed to tell her he doesn’t believe in anything.

Two years later, the girl is at work at the diner when he checks his email, and she’s the first person he calls. His fingers shake as he dials, and then the words all fall over each other when she finally picks up. He’s trying to tell her everything all at once, that it’s a yes and he got the fellowship, that they picked him—*him*, out of everyone—can she believe it?

It takes her a moment to catch up

because she sometimes smokes up before work—come on, she’d say, like anyone cares on the night shift—and her head’s still a little fuzzy, but when she gets the details she nearly drops the plates she’s carrying. “Oh my God!” she yelps. “Oh my God, I told you you would!”

And he’s going again, more about this lab and she remembers, right? She racks her memory. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. You told me about this. CERN. The one with the underground... piping.”

“Um. The Large Hadron Collider,” says the boy. “Yeah.”

That’s not how he wants to reply. He wants to say that 100 meters under the city of Geneva, below the world’s largest particle physics lab, a 27-kilometer circle of tunnel—not piping—loops under the Jura Mountains and back towards the city. CERN—the European Organization for Nuclear Research—uses those tunnels to accelerate particles to massive speeds and collide them in ways that are changing physics as we know it. He wants to remind her about the Higgs Boson and how he knows, he’s always known, that they’re just particles, but if it matters to him this much then she could at least listen the first time.

But instead he says, yeah, right, and then he tells her the really great part. “Geneva, huh?” She glances back and forth across the kitchen. Surrounded by the clatter of plates and the sizzle of fat

on the grill, she finds it hard to imagine anywhere farther away. “You’re going to Switzerland.”

“We’re going to Switzerland.” She can hear him smiling. “I don’t speak French, remember?”

“Babe.” She laughs a little. “I can’t move to Switzerland. I’ve got a job.” Sure, it’s a loud, shitty job, but they don’t care if you smoke and, you know, it’s hers. And she can’t actually leave. Switzerland? Yeah, good one.

But he’s thinking already of his family’s faces when they hear the news, of the Higgs Boson and an answer to the last big why. “Come on,” he says, “don’t you want to go somewhere new? Just get away, the two of us?”

She looks around the diner, phone tucked in the crook of her shoulder, and thinks of a city with lakes and clean streets, of tasting culture on the air, a smell she imagines like Chanel No. 5. She thinks of leaving the silverware for someone else to clean, of sitting under a tree in a park and reading Victor Hugo. She nods against the phone.

The city from above gulps the Rhône, a greedy mouth in profile, swallowing Lake Geneva into a fraying river. As they circle down towards the airport, he’s glued to the plane window. He’s never flown before. The girl says she has, and she flew to Chicago once when she was little, so it’s not technically lying.

She peeks over his shoulder anyway. The plane cuts through gauzy clouds and they see Geneva spread flat, scattering at the edges into puzzle-piece fields. “It’s so green,” says the girl, shocked by a city that’s not brick and glass. She sits back in the chair, drumming her fingers on the armrests. She doesn’t like flying as much as she thought she would.

A passing stewardess looks over and smiles at them. Her teeth are very European, and the girl is fascinated. “Votre première visite?” asks the woman. “C’est une ville magnifique, n’est-ce pas?”

“Oh!” The girl gapes. She’s never spoken French to anyone but Americans. “Oh, it’s—I meant, oui, c’est...”

“English?” The stewardess nods as if to say, *of course, don’t worry*. “My mistake. I just said, it’s such a beautiful city.” She smiles again, and the girl wants

abruptly to hit something.

“I know,” she replies haltingly. “I’m just a little out of practice.”

She chews on her lip as they lurch towards the ground. “It’s amazing,” says the boy, next to her, and she ‘uh-huhs’ vaguely. It’s never occurred to her that being able to discuss poetry in French isn’t the same as being able to take care of herself here.

Two months in, the boy’s always at the lab, and the girl can order herself coffee in French from the corner café near their apartment, but somehow sitting there and drinking it on her own feels just like it would in Boston. She wants him to be home more often, to sit opposite her at the café table and act out a scene from a romantic foreign film. She feels like she put down the script somewhere and can’t remember where she left it.

But he’s happier here, I think. It’s not that he’s not happy other places, and the girl still makes him smile like she always has; whenever she says, “*Je t’aime*,” and he replies I love you too in the only French he’s ever learned, he still thinks she’s the best person he knows, but she’s not the compass on his map any more. He’s setting sail, this kid, for new coasts, drawing further from the her shores, getting his sea legs. I don’t think he’s yet looked back.

It’s not like it’s easy, he tells his family on the phone, running a hand through his hair. It’s a graduate position, so it’s not like it’s that exciting, just lab work, just going through data. I mean, they’re not even doing hands on research—no, Mom, they don’t split atoms, it’s a little more complicated than that—but no, not for a few months. It’s really just crunching numbers, but it’s still... well. You know. He’s doing all right.

The girl looks over as she walks into the room, sees him grinning like an idiot as he says it, and smiles vaguely.

He’s at the lab one day with a couple other grad students, comparing his numbers with the graphics they’ve come up with, when his phone starts to ring. He pats his pockets, remembers it’s on his desk and grabs for it before the ringing stops. “Hello?” he says, and mouths to the others, *girlfriend*. “Honey? What’s up?”

“Hi,” she says. She’s sitting on the

Untitled

Ella Bishop-Heil
GLADE SPRING, VA

Where I’m from, rivers are the size of snakes,
and the only thing bigger than our hair is our sky.

I’m from leaps of faith,
from levels won by the frantic pressing
of x! x! x!
And happiness is little elf-man in a green tunic.

I’m from late-night music venues, finding sanctity in the heavy haze of distortion,
reverberating off walls into each mo-hawk’d body.
A push and pull of raw energy.

I’m from tubes of paint squeezed dry,
and graphite images.
A continual battle between my mind’s subconscious garden
and weeds of self-doubt.

I’m from a family of divorce, ripped apart by hatred and patched together by the mallet of a judge.
A new house each weekend, sheltering a little girl
dreaming of unison.
Maybe. One day.

I am from a doped-down, tatted-up hell-hole of teenage life
Rising curls of smoke intertwining with Zeppelin
Fornicating with irrationality
A harmonic trance launched into unexplored cosmic dimensions.

I am from the face of earth’s beauty and the soul of Heaven’s Divinity.

I’m from the heart of a child, who will never tire
and the soul of an artist
which will
Never
Be
Extinguished.

The Backseat Is My Home When It’s Dark

Adriana Van Manen

PRINCETON, NJ

As we drive through the outskirts of New York City, Papa speaks quiet Dutch words to a friend in the passenger seat. Their golden syllables glint in the night, long lost antiques.

I curl.

Arc my back.

Regard the view, then

Tug my head towards my chest.

Trying to grow into a nautilus shell.

The dashboard clocks are lit up achtung orange, like two sets of owl eyes.

Papa turns around and winks, as though I still have armored shins. As though the ghostly, plastic bags that try to fly, as we emerge from the Holland Tunnel, are peacocks suspended above the violet fields of the Veluwe.

couch in the apartment, looking across the room at the bookcase. She went out and bought all these books in French before they left, ones she'd always wanted to read, and they stare her down from the shelves. She thumbed through a couple, started one, left it dog-eared at page twenty. She can't read without the quiet distracting her.

"Hey," he says. "Is something wrong? I'm at work."

She clutches the receiver in two hands, hesitates. "What are you working on?"

He laughs. "Right now? You wouldn't be interested."

"No!" He's surprised by the force in her voice. "I mean," she says again, "I don't know. Try me."

"All right," he says. He glances up at his friends; one's frowning like, *really?* He holds up two fingers: *two minutes*. "Um. Okay. So they used the LHC... sorry, the Large Hadron Collider. The proton machine. They used it about three months ago, and my job is going through all the data it produced. I'm working with a couple other students to compare the data CERN recorded with the graphics they've made."

"Graphics?"

"Yeah, graphics. Pictures, yeah? Of the collisions."

"You can't see those."

He resists the urge to say, *yeah, no shit*, and sighs through his teeth. He doesn't have to tell people here this; they'd already know. "No, but the machines record the data, energy produced, that kind of thing. We can calculate the trajectory for all the—"

"Trajectories? What does that mean?"

"They're the... never mind." He takes a slow breath in, out, listening to the hiss of static along the line. He's doing it again. That stupid, stupid way of speaking, picking the words as if from a lineup, the smallest, the simplest. It's the way he talked to his brother, the way he talked in high school, the way he'd finally started to forget. He's doing science, he realizes, that the girl's not going to understand, no matter how hard she tries, and he's sick of playing dumb. Not here, he thinks. Not now.

"I'll tell you later," he tells her firmly. "I have to get back to work."

He hangs up the phone and puts it back on his desk. The dial tone whines in the girl's ear.

He really does mean it, but the thing is, he's never back from work, not really. He comes home late, later and later, and she wants to be angry but he's not trying to upset her: it's just that he's finally found people who care about the same things as him. Even when he is home he's thinking about work, counting seconds till he'll be back there. She hates feeling like she needs his attention and wonders if she's always been this way, if she's only noticing it because the boy's got more important things to think about now. "God, I love it here," he's always saying. "Isn't it amazing?"

She wonders how he'd know, since he's never anywhere but the lab. Sometimes she says, "It's great," but sometimes she doesn't reply. He doesn't seem to notice a difference.

She talks to me sometimes, quietly—me as she's always pictured me deep down. Slowly she's finding out the difference between glamorous and necessary faith, and as in love as she is with the loops and curls of Hinduism, she was raised Christian and it's that she falls back on. She pictures God not as a six-armed warrior, but as an old man in white, sometimes looking like Morgan Freeman.

She asks the boy if he's ever believed in God. "No," says the boy, which is almost true. "I don't get the whole 'believing without proof' thing. It doesn't make sense."

That's the point though, isn't it? You've just got to trust in the end. She tries to tell him that and he laughs. *I'll stick with the things I can prove, thanks.*

So she never mentions the conversations she has sometimes with me, late at night after he's fallen asleep next to her. She says that she's lonely here, that she wishes the boy understood or even just noticed, that she thought she'd love this but she just wants to be home and is that normal? God?

I don't talk back. I look at the boy and the girl asleep next to each other and wish sometimes I didn't have to watch.

On a Sunday a few months later they're sitting on an old bench in Parc La Grange. Geneva is famous for its parks,

and this one is the girl's favorite: she loves walking through the aisles of the rose garden, its bushes lined up like show dogs. The air's heavy with the smell from petals curled like pursed lips, flowers blowing kisses.

On good days the girl, in a pink sundress, bends down to kiss them back. Every time, she can't help thinking how there isn't a single rose garden in Boston. It makes her feel old, the way she needs to defend her city, the way she can't love them all equally. She wants to be able to walk through Geneva and have home be where the heart is—better yet, for her heart to be here.

Instead she rests her head on his shoulder, talking to fill the air with a language she understands. He lets her fade gently into the background. It's not like he's trying ignore her, but nowadays talking about the day-to-day seems like a waste of syllables. He's got nothing but physics on his brain, and even as he tries to listen, as he looks down at the girl, she isn't his girlfriend: she's a beautiful compilation of molecules, her hair ticking his cheek and her hand on his leg. Just like the bench and the roses and the grass under their feet—they all break down into protons, neutrons, electrons, bosons, quarks—

"Hey!" The girl jabs him in the side, a little too hard, and he starts. "Are you listening?"

He rubs his side, irritated and kind of surprised. She never notices what other people are doing when she's talking, but then again, he's never not listening. "Of course I am," he snaps. "The park's nice today. You're feeling really spiritual. All good things."

"That's not what I said!" She pushes her arm from around her shoulders. "I said I miss Boston."

"What?"

"See? You weren't listening!"

"I heard you. I just don't know what you mean."

"I mean, I'm tired of living here." Nervously, she licks her lips. "I want to go home."

He tries to laugh. "This is home. We are home."

"No we're not!" She stares, stunned and a little sick. "Babe, this is only for a few months. You said that, *you said so.*"

"Okay. I did, I probably did." He

scrambles for a compromise. "It's fine if you miss Boston. I've got some vacation—I can take a week off. We can visit."

"I don't want to *visit.*" Her voice splinters in her throat. "I want to go home," she says. "I don't like being this far away. I don't want to stay here anymore."

So what can he do when his girlfriend's sitting between him and his answers, crying because she misses home? He stares at her like he can't believe it, like *why is this happening to me?* His head shakes back and forth, faster and faster.

"We have to. Please, the latest data says ninety-nine percent accuracy—"

"That's not good enough?"

"It's not an answer! It's a probability! It means we're nearly there!"

"Listen to yourself! It's never going to be enough of an answer for you!" She pushes him back. "Here's a fucking question for you to answer: are you going to come home with me, or is your stupid experiment more important?"

"If you really cared, you wouldn't make me choose!" He stands up from the bench, grabbing his hand away. The girl blinks owlishly, and her mascara smudges with tears. He tries to pretend like it doesn't bother him. "I've spend my whole life working for this, and I'm not leaving for anyone, do you get it? Not even you!"

"I'll leave." She trembles. "I'll go. You don't think I'll do it."

"Okay," he says. "Okay." He takes a deep breath. "Do it. Go back to Boston."

"I don't... it's not you. I don't want to leave you."

He looks at her and thinks, leaving CERN? This job? This research? That is him. He wonders if she's ever known that.

"We'll find you a flight," he says. "Take some time back home. If you want to come back after that..."

He has to say it. He and I already know she won't.

He drives her to the airport on a sunny day and waves goodbye as she passes through security. It is the last time he will see her.

The drive home is extraordinarily quiet. When he gets back to the apartment he spreads his papers across the kitchen table, his data and charts lovingly organized, his ninety-nine percent accuracy

on display. He picks up a pen to write. For a moment he rolls it between his fingers, staring at it like he can't really see it, and then without warning he starts scribbling, madly, across the sheets of paper, knocking them to the floor, sending them flying. His throat is knotted tight.

Ninety-nine percent accuracy, he thinks, and remembers his high school physics teacher saying, "Everything is only a theory." What's going to be enough? 99.9 percent certainty, 99.999? How long till he'll have enough to stop, to leave the rest to faith? Suddenly he hates it all: these particles that he can only imagine, that he might study all his life but will never see. If everyone dies, he thinks, when their body's too tired to keep rebuilding itself; if he'll die someday, suddenly, like his father and millions before him; if he can't

Gumamela sa Maliit na Paradiso (*Hibiscus on a little paradise*)

Eric Fernandez
BALTIMORE, MD

On the corner of a shanty,
a wilted bush rests in a rundown, old pot.
Every time the rooster calls, fragments of light
enter through the window and onto the plant
giving it enough energy to splay
its leaves reveling
sprouts of red flowers.

prove that these immortal atoms, these particles, stay constant throughout—then what does?

He thinks of the girl trying to say, *but you can't ever prove God exists; you just need to have faith.* He closes his eyes. He might not have faith, but he needs something to blame, and I'm as good a why as any.

"Fuck you," he says out loud, "*fuck you*, why'd you have to make it so fucking complicated?" He doesn't know if he's talking about the particles in an atom or believing in things or loving a girl who

only loves the idea of him.

"I hate you. I hate this. I'm never going to know." His voice thickens. "What's the point if I'm never going to know?" he demands. "What the fuck do I do if I'm wrong?"

I don't know. I don't know anything about Higgs Bosons, don't know if he's right or not. I don't know what you do when you try your hardest and it's not enough. I want to tell him that it's okay: that you don't always marry the girl you meet at a house party, that there are billions of other people and several who could make him just as happy as she did, that nobody gets it right the first time. It's not that worse things happen—every time, with this, it's the end of the world—but things will be all right too. He needs to know that. I think, I could talk to him right now. I could tell him what's going to happen. I could help.

But I have one rule: I don't talk to them. It's not faith if he knows; it's obligation. He'll find things to believe in, reasons why, and whether they're atomic particles or higher powers isn't for me to decide.

A few minutes later, the boy stops crying. He's alone in the apartment, and it's very quiet. He wipes his eyes and feels childish. After a moment, he picks up his notes off the floor. He thinks, he already believes in enough things he can't prove. Someday he'll publish a paper on the Higgs Boson, even though he can't prove it's there. The girl won't read it. Neither will most people. His mother will buy a copy of the journal it's in, but won't ever get past the abstract. I probably couldn't either.

But now, I watch him working and think, every time I love them, just as much—these people looking for reasons why it all happens, why it's all here; the only real constant there is. Sciences and religions, the explanations they choose, can change, but the people searching for answers are always the same. I think, I love the things they come up to show why life goes wrong; I love the way they cling to their truths; and I love watching him write that paper, explaining how he believes it all works. You can't prove things have a reason, he knows, but they have a place, a purpose, in people who fall in love and believe in things they can't see.

Untitled

Gabriella Costa
WOOD-RIDGE, NJ

“The cat had left them. His sickness was gone, they had healed it. The family was sitting in their living room the night the cat slipped out. He never looked back.”

The panic attacks had begun several months after M. and I had broken up. Our relationship had died a few years in and I was the one it fell to to put an end to it. Truthfully, I had decided I was tired some time before I cut him off. The realization was painful although not all that surprising to me, and I guess you as well. Love only hurts when it is unreciprocated and I really pulled the rug out from under M.’s feet. That is to say, the two of us didn’t leave very amiably and had never met to divide up all the possessions we had shared during our years together.

The physical separation of breaking up is always the worst part. Divvying up your things is the final rip it takes to split two lives away from each other at the seams, and I was glad that I didn’t have to go through that with M. I found myself awfully invested in the collection he had left behind. They had become constants in my life and were easily incorporated into the other objects found scattered around my apartment, each kept for the story they told to me and the way they made me feel.

M. had tried to convince me to organize my apartment multiple times. Really the mess of my place was the main reason he never officially moved in with me like you did. M. was a meticulously clean person. He barely let me enter his apartment, barring the tornado he knew would wrinkle the neatness he had ironed out. This insult was a blessing in disguise towards the end and left me with a whole new wardrobe and an extensive compilation of books and records. All you left behind for me was a handful of broken pens and ink stains on my couch.

Before the attacks started, all my collecting

never really bothered me. It fit in with how I had been brought up, a family with a clear predilection for memories and a sacred respect for the objects they inhabited. Yet when I woke up in the middle of the night feeling as if I couldn’t breathe, I knew something had to change. I was having nightly dreams that the mess of my apartment was going to rise up and overtake me, leaving the investigators to find my body lifeless and suffocated under a mass of junk. The walls of my apartment started to close in on me and I would hear screams coming from inside.

“The woman cried, hearing of her cat’s sickness. She knew there was no way to explain to the animal why he felt as awful as he did, why he was losing weight and hair. She had no choice but to pay the fees for the medicine.”

The day that I went through all of my things was quiet, but the stillness was more peaceful than somber. It was only slightly chilly outside, enough that I wore just a sweater to keep the window cracked open, catching the autumn breezes. I flipped over all the pictures frames that were scattered around my apartment. My mother would do the same; she didn’t want the faces inside to see her throwing out any of their possessions. There was a surprising amount of pictures of M. and me; I can’t remember us taking that many. I slipped these out from under their glass to be regulated to one of the lower drawers of my dresser.

I had filled two garbage bags full of scraps from my apartment before I found your sketches under one of the drawers in my desk. I had pulled it out to see what I could skim from the layers of papers contained within. Smashed up against the wooden back were the drawings, acting almost as wallpaper for the desk’s innards. I could see the black and red that slashed across the pages, bleeding through to the back. The outlines of shapes began to take form as I unfolded the papers and smoothed out the creases they had garnered from their time inside the desk. There were four in total, all variations of the same face.

You had drawn them in this apartment while we were in college. More specifically I was in college and you were trying to figure things out. Always toying with the idea of going to art school, you were that reformed bad boy whose sad eyes intrigued me. I gave you a key to my place and I would often come home from school and find you sitting on my

couch, just staring at the wall ahead of you. It was unadorned and I never knew what you were looking at or for. I tried to buy you a set of pastels and expensive colored pencils to inspire you while I was gone, but you refused and continued to use the bent and inky pens that were your medium of choice.

“The family found the cat camped outside their door. He was a little kitten at the time, deceptively docile. They immediately took him in, mistaking him for a tame-able thing. But the cat was born in the wild and wanted to be self-sufficient.”

M. and I were together for six years. Our relationship was a working one at its core. M. had met me after I had had some writing already published and he respected my work. You and I never cohabited as well as M. and I did. He knew how to stay out of my way when I was writing and didn’t ask to enter into my thoughts and conversation. It was understood that I didn’t want to talk or go out and barely wanted to eat. He wouldn’t wait up for me before going to bed, but instead would leave out a simple cup of coffee, black, for me to take.

I kept our worlds pretty separate and I knew that he didn’t like it, just as you didn’t. The dark mental place I entered to write was something I wanted all to myself which he quickly learned. Still I think he may have loved me more for it; I became an unattainable object to him. He never realized I was perfectly content to stay that way, that I had let him in as far as he was ever going to go.

You, on the other hand, craved my constant attention. Self-deprecating and whining you would try to get me to talk during the large silences that overtook the room while I wrote. At first the ploy would often work and I would stop to collect the crumpled artwork you threw my way. I knew I was feeding your vanity, but I wanted to keep your presence in my apartment. I believed art would beget art. I hadn’t decided just yet that I was content being alone either. It was only after I had completed my first collection that your antics began to truly grate upon my nerves and I thought of changing the locks on my door.

“It was strange for the boy to see the hair still coating the pillow where the cat loved to sleep. That his final relic and the boy didn’t know whether or not he should clean it off or keep it as a memory.”

As I stared at the pages, I knew I couldn’t

get rid of them. I wish I had picked up some of M.’s cleaning habits before we separated. He had learned from his mother who loved nothing more than to vacuum her days away. She would have dropped dead if she knew the kind of place I maintained. Not that it mattered much, she never really liked me. As far as she was concerned, I was slowly sucking her son away from her. She wasn’t a particularly warm person, but she wanted nothing less than to have her children grow up and leave her. Her attic was a testament to this, holding boxes of the cards M. and his brother had given her for Christmas and Easter as well as all their little baby outfits, kindergarten drawings, honor roll certificates, Halloween costumes, and their lost teeth.

After she passed away, I went with M. to help him go through her things. Unlike M.’s family, mine is no stranger to death. I think that in your years of knowing me I attended enough funerals that counting needed both hands. When M. found his mother’s boxes in the attic, he decided immediately to throw their contents out. It pained me to see all the prized possessions of one person being deemed useless by another as if in dying her judgment was invalidated. But I take after my grandfather. When his wife died, he held onto everything she owned. He began to drown himself in memories of her and would have continued to do so had my mother not been sent in to pull him out. Together they worked to find a middle ground between getting rid of everything and hoarding it all close.

Many of my grandmother’s things were passed onto the grandchildren, my sister and I as well as a younger cousin. That necklace I used to wear was hers, the blue one with the diamonds. It was missing a couple of stones from the middle pendant, making it look like the costume jewelry everyone maintained it was. But I believed in its validity and wore it until I inherited another object of hers, a simple silver locket. It was you who would tease me about putting your face inside it, but I have always left it empty.

“The children ate cereal every night, but they didn’t mind. The cat needed to be cared for and that is where the money went.”

It was after my first collection was published that we really began to fall apart, you and I. You never forgave me for that story I wrote about you, the one that everyone else loved. I couldn’t understand why, you feeling used. You cried when you read it, saying that

the paragraphs I devoted to you there said more to you than anything I had ever spoken. Your fictional self pays more attention to me than your real one does, you told me. We had our last real fight then, and I realized how far I had let you go in loving me. You kept whispering that I was too busy with myself to let our relationship grow. I asked you to leave soon after.

The portraits are the last thing I ever watched you draw. After our fight you sat down on my couch and started sketching. I just stared at you, not sure what to make of the situation in front of me. When I raised my eyebrows in judgment you told me good, now stay like that. When you were done you got up and handed me four papers, my face from different angles. To remember me by, you said. I know you find your love not in people but in what they leave behind. These will be more useful to you than I am now: I am done being your inspiration. The papers still have those small circular wrinkles that I can only assume now are your tears.

“The cat grew up with the family and his life became a product of their love. They had created him and would go on to save him. It was assumed then that he loved them back.”

I never wrote about M. the way I wrote about you. He did inspire much of what I did, and I based many of my characters off of his actions. Studying him opened up to me the sight of a whole new spectrum of emotions. He was a product of as well as an exercise in rejection and quiet love. I wasn’t worried about him discovering he was my secret muse, an object I toted around for my craft’s sake. As far as I know, he never picked up anything I wrote.

The only one of M.’s family who read my work, or at least admitted to it, was his younger brother. He was a lovely boy who had a habit of creating scandal wherever he went. When I was first introduced to him, he was dating a quite talented dancer. It was more upsetting to M.’s mother that he was African American than that he was a man. The two of us forged a strong friendship that way, both hated by her. M. and I were invited to a few of his performances and I made us go to every one we were free for. The spark in his eyes that I had always loved during our conversations consumed his whole body on stage; he gracefully made the music his own, his muscles telling a story and his face barring emotions that supported it. I asked him

later what inspired him when he danced and he smiled, touching my face with his strong hands: maybe you, maybe everyone.

“They didn’t notice the cat was missing until the next morning and began right away to make posters for his safe return. The children were distraught and kept asking their mother if they would ever find him.”

I felt another attack coming on with your pictures in my hand so I quickly put them down. My throat felt like it was closing up and my locket felt tight so I took it off and held that in my curled fingers instead. The doctors told me that my symptoms were akin to someone having an allergic reaction. Do you have a cat living with you? No, only the one in my stories.

You were living with me when I penned that story, the one that thrust me into the spotlight. My first collection centered around it, the narrative of a family who gives up everything to save a cat only to have it run away. It was the favorite of M.’s brother. He liked to sit down with me and talk about the work. The cat’s selfish, the brother maintained. He feeds himself while everyone else starves. He is using the family’s love and letting them suffer. Well what would you do in his situation? I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s not that. I think we all use each other and leave when there is nothing left for us. No, I think we are supposed to help each other equally grow. Ego rules us all and we only want to feed ourselves. Love isn’t a commodity. I have to disagree with you there.

“Feeling better, the cat wondered what his next move was. Staying at the house had begun to tire him and he didn’t like being pinched, prodded, and pulled by all the children. He decided that his time there was done.”

That was the second and last time you let me see you cry—when you gave me the pictures. For all your emotional angst, you left the crying up to me. I wonder if you remember the many times you found me balled up on the floor my eyes closed and cheeks streaked with salty liquid. I did it enough for the both of us, reveling in the attention and catharsis of the tears and have never been able to deal with people breaking down in front of me. M. seemed to know this and I only saw him cry once. He had come to me with a picture of the two of us, small enough to fit in my locket. I pushed it away, telling him I couldn’t do it.

He nodded and folded up our smiling faces, stopping to throw them into the wastebasket as he walked out of the room. When I peered out from around the door frame, I saw him sitting on the floor, his eyes wet.

M. looked slapped. You let people love you and you allow them to feel like one day they will be loved back. They give you parts of themselves for you to fashion into something you can use. No, you just take whatever you want. Then you cut them loose when you can no longer find use for them, when they are spent. You want only their memories, not their presence. Tell me the truth, did you ever love me as much as you love yourself?

Following Pauline A Quartet based on Louise Erdrich's "Tracks"

Peter LaBerge
STAMFORD, CT

I. Recollection

My legs rely on memory. Except it is firm and level when my legs are dirtied by dirt from the path,

wwhich doesn't feel fresh below my feet—blistered, knotted, bruised a darker black with guilt.

I recall a room I knew well. Coins clink and playing cards, fraying at their waxy edges, lap and candlelight. A man across the table rattles like a firefly suffocating in a jar.

There is a woman, eyes sewn open, so she never blink without vulnerability. I feel her eyes drinking me.

She snaps me, my being like a sinking lifeboat across a Chippewa lake.

My legs rely on memory, but sometimes

"The family wasn't sure whether the cat had run away, choosing to leave them, or if he had accidentally stepped out and became lost. They hoped it was the latter. They told themselves it was."

Recently I went to see the dancer again even though he and M.'s brother are no longer together. His performance was just as breathtaking as the first time I had witnessed it. Yet something had changed, and I wasn't sure if it was he or I who was different. It could have been both. When I talked to him after the

I'd prefer to forget.

II. Tremors

That was the winter when body grew a new geometry—collarbones surfaces like flying fish. Or it was like standing by the ocean, watching the tide of your skin pull out a secede.

We saw the world as it was: hollow, and cylindrical. Like an empty stomach. We ate prayer verses straight from the book.

Our skin was tough, swallowed by shivers. A bitter dough, unbaked and falling.

That was the winter I dreamed of empty churches, steeples shooting skyward like bullets.

III. Submerged

Like a paper crane hovering at the edge of sight, I am the girl: ephemeral, familiar.

The sun is brimming with lemons. It's sweet against our faces, gnashed with a violent sort of love: tongues, knotted, intertwined like a braid.

He plays my teeth with his tongue like Lakota drums.

The old man that grips

show, he seemed sad with the fact that M. and I were no longer together as well as with the reason why. I love you, he told me as I left, giving me a slight smile. But I could see pity clouding his icy eyes.

"It's a kitten! the children exclaimed. Let's keep him forever. Oh, what shall we name him?"

I put your sketches into my drawer, the same one holding the pictures of M. and I. I had always assumed that the cat didn't feel regret. But my certainty is slipping away.

my face caws, excited like a raven on a hot stove.

I want to tell him that love doesn't trick.

My dreams sweat into his bed sheets. He gathers them and drowns them in lakewater.

IV. Numb

His screams ripen the apple trees.

Tonight, the moon is swathed in white Easter decoration.

I have clipped its wings, and I see it suppressed, wild against my outstretched hand.

Stinks of saltwater begin to wet the old man's shoulder blades.

His face is a flesh turned west wound into my rosary beads.

Eyes have never been this blue-veined and brackish.

My dreams swim freely from his bed sheets.

Some springs, apples bloom too soon.

His scream ripen the apple trees.

The fruit is quick to judge that the frost has finished.

Look Out, Jack

Alaina Demopoulos
STRATHAM, NH

Simmons women always decide to go in the middle of July. My oldest sister Elizabeth wrapped Daddy's Ford around a tree one scorching night in 1986 and was buried the next week in 104-degree heat plus humidity; that could have been a fluke. But then Isabelle decided to succumb to her cancer on the hottest day of the year. I say no coincidence. It makes sense to me. We're smart, us Simmons women. If we have to go through the inconvenience of dying, the least you can do is sweat through a suit for a few hours at a funeral.

I'm the last one left, and that's why they say I smiled through the entire thing. That would be wrong. When Elizabeth died my grin was one of a 10 year-old believing herself to be the proverbial pillar of strength. It seemed smart to me. If Elizabeth could be at one moment alive and college-bound and bringing Kevin O'Brian to senior prom and the next smashed and battered on a paved suburban road, one needed to be truly strong. I couldn't waste her funeral crying at my misfortune; I couldn't show anyone I was like her. Only when I went home, safe and alone in my Daddy's thinking chair with the family asleep upstairs could I properly mourn.

But when it happened to Isabelle, only out of sheer exhaustion did I remain stoic. I hadn't seen her since Christmas, but I flew to New Hampshire and rented the church. I made the tuna sandwiches and ordered the flower arraignments. I kept my motor running until my sisterly duties were completely finished, but glazed over any semblance of humanity prematurely out of unanticipated fatigue. This sparked the old women of the town to whisper I was happy at my sister's passing. Maybe I was. I don't remember. I went back to my hotel room and slept twelve hours.

I used to rule this town, back when I yearned to get off the hill. Before I descended and became an outsider, the household name of "whatever happened to that girl?" When I thought again of ever climbing back up the

hill, even for the shortest visit, it's summit suddenly shot up to Everest proportions. Some people are just better suited for low ground, I justified for myself. Some people don't need to sit at the top of the world with their noses up, knowing that they are the highest beings in the state of New Hampshire. True courageous people belong in the cities, below sea level and constantly facing the threat of engulfment by tidal wave.

"So now you're the only one left," I heard repeatedly, from the old women who whispered about me, like they expected a full confession of the Kennedy-esque conspiracy theory I just pulled off. No, I wasn't here to steal my sisters' assets; most of it was my mother's gaudy costume jewelry anyway. Yes, I would sell the house and no, I wasn't sorry. I would be, though, if I didn't get off the mountain soon.

I packed my belongings and headed towards the station. I had more than an hour until my train of urban salvation arrived, but I couldn't stay at the old house with white doily curtains and filled with my sister's affinity for faux-porcelain angel statues. Across from the tracks was Breece's Lunch Stop. I decided to mull there. On the Civil War Memorial Bench outside sat an old man and his equally old dog. He tipped his hat to me. I smiled politely back. The dog stared me in the face. I thought dogs were supposed to avert eye contact with humans as a sign of submission. Sparky didn't. I tried to soften and reached over to pet him. He darted away from me and moved closer to the man. Smart dog.

I smiled again, cordially, and then entered the luncheonette. A bell hanging from the doorknob jingled faintly. People scattered around at different tables. Old timers in flannel rolled up their sleeves at the prospect of a big-boy omelet while tourists in for ski season smiled as their perfect children took their first bite of whipped cream and strawberry filled French toast. I took a seat at the counter.

Breece was at the stove, frying eggs. I remembered him from the nights I'd spent in the restaurant in high school, thinking it the pinnacle of coolness to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes with Nancy Sheffield. Back in those days, Breece seemed eternally fifty, wearing real black-and-red flannel shirts and carrying an extra fifteen pounds with grandpa-like appeal. Now he still wore the same shirt, but his eyes hinted that more than his noticeable recent weight gain sagged him down. I stared at myself in a Heineken mirror hanging on the wall. I wasn't the same

seventeen year-old, either. Even going down the hill couldn't save me from the same fate as Breece.

If he recognized me, Breece didn't let on. He stared at a TV propped up above the counter, replaying the Kennedy assassination. A second before the shot fired, Breece whispered quietly to himself, "Look behind you Jack." For a moment his face lit up, anticipating that he himself saved JFK and therefore the world. But as the screen cut to his motorcade rolling back down a Dallas street, Breece lowered his head solemnly.

If I didn't get down the hill fast, I'd be shot too. I still had more than forty-five minutes to wait. Everything hit me at the same time. My tongue badly burnt from some terrible coffee an old churchwoman had made me after the funeral service, suddenly felt far too large for my mouth. The loud tourist child slammed his fists down on his sister's hand and made her yelp.

"Look out, Jack."

New customers walked in. The bell jangled louder and louder with each one. A disgustingly devoted high school couple stared into each other's eyes far too intensely for their ages. The smell of eggs—poached, scrambled, sunnyside, however you want the Breece will make 'em—stank itself deep into the depths of my sinuses.

"Turn around, Jack."

I wanted John F. Kennedy to turn around, if he only turned around Breece would shut up and the tourists would go back to Canada. Eggs would smell beautiful and there'd be no war, no poverty, just prosperity and well-endowed secretaries and wives who turned the other cheek to them. But the Dallas scene kept rewinding, and always ended the same way. Somehow, without a doubt, JFK would end up shot in the back of the head. I realized then that even if I boarded the train to the city, the hill would never go away. It would always be there and distant family members would keep on dying. More and more funerals would pile up in front of me, no matter how far away I moved.

And as I made my discovery everyone in Breece's turned to stare. The tourist family and the real men looked up from their previously important breakfasts. Breece and his cooking eggs judged me. People on the street, people on the hill, everyone in New Hampshire stopped to watch my next move. JFK turned his head, only slightly, like my life could rival anything he ever accomplished. The dog outside, too, kept looking at me with those unafraid eyes. Only the old man didn't. I think he had fallen asleep.

Admission

Ashley Zhou
BASKING RIDGE, NJ

Gracey, Gracey, Gracey – so admirable and kind and respected. Revered. You thought it was your place to bring that first form in, a form we could see you were anxious to fill out before us, before even your sister because you didn't think she was smart enough to go there.

You were wrong on both accounts. I knew. It was my position to saunter in with the file of applications, in my manila envelope. You should have been peering over my shoulder as I sifted through my essays and finally threw the stack down on the table for you to pore over like it held the location of the Holy Grail. Perhaps it was a treasure of sorts, lying there so magnificently white against the faded grains of the cafeteria table; after all, hadn't our mothers told us that "education was the best legacy they could give us?" Hadn't they promised to cut our inheritance money by at least one quarter in order to pay for school expenses? Your sister was the rightful one to stand on the valedictorian's podium. Not that you did. No, you were too busy battling off Karen to notice me, slipping by quietly behind your back and mounting the platform to look upon everyone and have them honor me. To see the light that bounced off the stage lights and reflected in their eyes, eyes so full of wonder and amazement. Your sister knew the feeling. She knew the tingle of power that ran up her fingers when everyone applauded, heard sighs the teachers emitted as she finished her speech, felt the graduating class clapping and clapping, the vibrations tunneling to the soles of her feet. She was that infallible first place, the grand shadow you always lived in. She was a golden statue. You never stood a chance.

Did you know Cornell uses the font Myriad Condensed Web for their heading? They do. And you would have known, too, had you not brought in your application first. Moravian. Pathetic.

Yet we scoured those pages, touching them until the corners curled up from the sweat of our fingers. Lily asked me, "What do you think of Wellesley?" Odd – she always did

like boys a little too much to be able to concentrate on the important things. "An all-girl school," Karen said, "would get boring after a while."

"How many lesbians do you suppose are there?" Grace grinned wickedly.

What a faux pas. "Grace," I admonished, "we're still in school."

"Like the teachers would care." Her smile didn't waver. "They adore us."

And the question of distance surfaced. Malleable Lily wanted to be far away from home to achieve independence, as did Karen, who wanted to see the world. Her postcards cluttered our mailboxes in the summer – Bermuda, Japan, Zimbabwe – I threw them all out. And pretended not to see the obvious hurt on her face when I told her. Far away and warm climates were nice but I preferred not to stray too far – all the Ivy Leagues were on the east coast anyway – in order to stay rooted to my family. A family with important connections and relatives at corporations that offered prestigious internships.

Thinking about the future already. That's what we said in third and fourth grade when we didn't even know of each other's existence. And that's what we said in seventh grade when the rungs of the ladder were placed, super-glued, and filed down so that anyone could lose their grip so easily. We smiled at our new friends and thought of how we were going to demolish their quarter's averages. X, y and z; if x equals my friends and y is the number of hours I waste their time chatting about frivolous things, find z. Figure out the days I have to count before they discover that they actually have to study.

"Growing up too fast, too fast," our mothers said.

And also told us to grow up faster.

It wasn't just our game – it was theirs too. They were all immigrants, all people who had grown up with Survival of the Fittest as their Qur'an and moved to find a more suitable nest to raise their chicks. Never thought they'd have so much competition for territory; in their homeland, everyone lived off the maggots that grew underneath their fingernails. They came in different ways and liked to tell of the hardships they had to endure in order to cross into a safer country, then here, to America. The broiling heat as they traveled along the equator, up filthy Mexico – where those Mayans had lived – and evading the eyes of the border patrol. When we were younger, all of us – all four families – packed our bags and went on a road trip to the mountains. A fire

in the middle of tents, our mothers' screeching voices telling us to appreciate, to worship them. In four days I gained the complete trust of every single adult. "See Audrey, she's such a good child – she takes good of her parents, so young, so much talent, so much opportunity." They told me everything. Their ancestors were the Incas, dominators of the Americas at one point and that it was always their dream: to have someone in the family return that honor to their country. Centuries and centuries of it, they explained, breeding to attain only the purest Peruvian blood and they still had the primitive greed to gain power and status over others. We weren't the only gifted ones; they had been special in their homes as well. A first place for arithmetic in the neighborhood here, articles printed in the newspaper there. Gold trophies everywhere, dug up by the father-miners in the community to make just for them. Then they met each other and had to be the best mother as well. But motherhood turned on them when summer flew into fall, and they pecked each other's eyes out. And then they pecked at their weary nestlings, pecked at them too.

They weren't songbirds and nightingales, they were vultures who finally got to Lily's drying carcass. Lily liked to think she was strong. I saw the way she walked with her unimpressive chest puffed and her hips swaying, her furtive glances to check if anyone was looking. She liked to use big words that weren't in our SAT vocabulary books and waste afternoons reading about castles in the air, sphinxes, happily-ever-afters. Grace read about the 1917 Russian Revolution. Karen read the science textbook. And then Lily – Lily watching interviews of her favorite bands instead of writing her essays. I don't remember how she got to be in our circle. Her body slumped after every test returned; the teacher always threw a glance at her paper, wondering why her grades were dropping if she hung out with us.

Lily was my best friend.

Friends forever since the beginning of seventh grade, from the start of the first year we knew each other. She trusted me quickly; a new school, new faces, relieved to meet a friendly body to welcome her. We talked about everything: boys, school, grades, boys. Grades. Always trying to figure out where we stood compared to the rest of the nation's children, taking IQ tests that were meant for adults. Our scores were atrocious but she was the only one who knew. Boys were a conflicting topic – she loved them, I really didn't care. She dated a peevish boy earlier in the year; Karen called them the perfect contrast. Perpetually laid back and

the most worrisome child we had ever seen. Lily did the boy more good than he did her, she calmed him down a bit. Just enough to see Lily was a waste of time and leave her. I saw him holding hands with a British foreign exchange student the next week. "Hey Lils," I IMed her, "u dated a fruit."

"Rly? He did always stare at that kid with the glasses a lot."

Wrong person, I thought. "Ya." And then signed off, and studied for a few hours. Lily's mother called me a machine, in praise, of course. Asked me if I ever slept. Wondered why I never acquired rings under my eyes like everyone else did. And she wanted to know if Lily was all right. Lily was fine – better than she'd ever be again.

But she got a C- on her math test and although she wouldn't tell me it at first, her mother called me and asked why on earth this would happen. I asked Lily. "I had a loud, aggravating song stuck in my head the entire test," she said. Her mother sent her to my house to study together before the next test. Study-therapy, not retail-therapy. Lily bounced in and instead of working, spun me a story about a delightful little spider. The spider had built a web under a myriad of criss-crossing webs that belonged to other spiders. After every catch the others made, the carcass of the insect – the filth – would drop onto the little spider's web. The waste piled and piled up so that the web was overwhelmed with weight and collapsed. "Oh," she added, "the webs were atop a fast-moving river. And there were jagged rocks."

I asked, "What happened next?"

She said, "It died."

She was clawing upwards at the time, trying to shake the unmovable rungs of the ladder. She wanted to perfect everything: her papers, her handwriting, her smile. Her face. Too fat, too round, she complained to me. "When I make enough money, I'll get a face transplant." I nodded. "Is that your number-one goal?" Lily said it was. Lily said she would be best at everything, would peel off a blue ribbon and stick it on her chest. She burned through the ranks: fourth to third, second but never first. That position had already been filled. I asked about her grades after we received our midterms back; I had already calculated my average in my head. She stared at me and wrinkled her nose. "Better luck next time," I said.

"Since when is there a next time?"

And she kept slipping to the edge, never enough to fall off a rung entirely, but enough to scare her into spending another all-nighter with a six-pack of coke and handfuls

of cereal. Karen had to remind her about a science test on molecular bonding. She fell asleep during the test and wouldn't wake up. Then the principal noticed how thin she was getting to be – so thin, fading into air. The science teacher didn't let her retake the test. Her mother called me again but I unplugged the phone after a while. No more help for you, Lily. In her cock fight, she had a blind left eye and a freshly injured leg. Her parents circled high overhead. The fight would not be fair. Still, she gambled her last eye and attacked furiously. Her grades soared. Her parents were thrilled. But I didn't say this game was even. She came into school with bags under her eyes and crescent moons dug into her face, like fingernails. I flaunted my perfect grades in front of her, asking why hers were fluctuating so dramatically. I sat on the opposite side of the classroom on testing days. I stopped smiling in front of her and she stopped smiling. A fight is never easy with an impossible opponent. That opponent was me. Lily took the chance. Then she had nothing.

Ring around the rosy...I remem-

ber when we held hands and spun in tight circles. When we promised we would always be friends. We spun and scratched each other's wrists raw to twirl faster. A pocket full of posy... or a pocket full of good deeds we could pull out when negotiating with a stubborn teacher. It's not our fault they were incompetent. It's not our fault they favored us over the pool of average students. Ashes, ashes... unlike us, our lives; we never dimmed, never faded. We plodded along and kept on trudging until someone got trapped in the mud. And then we left them. Ashes, ashes of each other's cremated bodies that fell like snow and we caught with our tongues. We all fall down!

Fall down Lily.

We three attended her funeral with elegance. We wore matching black dresses – dresses we had bought together in the ninth grade. Lily wore the other in her casket of ash. Her parents had decided on oak, strong and sturdy, but I cried out that no, no, she should have only the best. Only the finest for our Lily. Only the wood that had a name that



KENDALL FAWCETT SCOTCH PLAINS, NJ

described how she and her work charred to crisp, into delicate ashes fluttering in the wind. Her parents wouldn't have her cremated so I convinced them to give their daughter something better than she really deserved. What kind of child would demand so much attention even after death? The parents listened to me, naturally, and had the casket lined with the most expensive silk from India. Grace brought her a book – Raise the Red Lantern – to take to heaven. Karen placed a fountain pen beside her body. "For our writer," she said. I touched two fingers to my lips, then to Lily's forehead. I didn't bring an item. When Karen and Grace went to console the deceased's parents, I looked at her face again. Her cold, white, dead face, spruced up as if she were attending a party. You'd never think she was the type to hang herself, except for the bruises the undertakers couldn't hide under all that makeup. Lily never wore makeup; she was too lackadaisical even to disguise her blemishes. Better to just rid of them entirely. The mourners cried because when they looked at her, they saw memories. When I looked, her remains were pockmarked with mistakes.

The school buzzed with the news of her death. Psychiatrists began to flit around like they owned the hallways. Suddenly everyone had a symptom of impending suicide. Our principal was so afraid of a lawsuit he forgot to pay attention to his students. "She seemed like such a nice girl," everyone said. Such a nice girl, even when she was buried six feet under and couldn't smile or walk or talk or breathe. I wanted to scream at them. Well, what did you expect?

She wasn't the last to go. I made sure of that. Gracey was too confident. But she was stronger. After watching Lily get lowered into the earth, though, she left us too. We saw her in the halls still, by her locker, in the cafeteria at the table where she had thrown down the first form. Karen and I brushed past her everyday. Karen even called "hi!" to her, but she didn't call "hi" back. Her sister didn't come home from college one weekend. Their mother called and told me she had an exam approaching but they were embarrassed. My mother asked why I never went over to Grace's anymore. I didn't answer her. That silence I had borrowed from Grace herself, now that all she did was shuffle along in the corridors, trailing a finger along the wall. She always had to be touching something. Once she streaked through wet paint and when she finally noticed, could only stare blankly at her blue fingertips as if unable to decide what to do with them. A shrink gently

led her to the nearest bathroom, then observed warily as Grace fiddled with the faucets. Her mother said, "Grace, what's wrong with you?" Grace stood there silently. Her mother slapped her arm and she didn't flinch. Then shook her shoulder. Then bent Grace's arm in the most awkward position and curled her fingers into a tight fist. Grace just stood there for hours, never moving. Her mom called me after three, not knowing what to do. "I don't want her to be Lily," she cried. "What's happening to you girls?"

Don't think you're invincible, Karen. Do as I do: learn from other peoples' mistakes. If you've been paying attention to Lily and Grace as intently as you focus in class, there's a lot to learn. I hope you're ready, because you're next.

Do you want to know a secret, Grace? I suppose I could tell you, since you're incapable of speaking. Did your psychiatrist say that was permanent?

I killed Lily.

I made you catatonic.

My, my, isn't this game fun? If you hadn't lost your mind, you could run off and warn Karen that the big, scary Audrey-monster was coming to get her. Scamper to Karen like she was your mommy and tell her that I was scaring you again, to make me stop. Have you ever known anyone who could tell me what to do? It's really too bad our parents aren't playing too. Then their wings would be caught in my crosshairs as well.

You know, I'm quite disappointed that you aren't in the game anymore, Grace. You were so lovely sometimes – you had your brilliant moments here and there, scattered about. Karen isn't so clever, not in the way you were. All she does is exhume information from that retentive mind of hers and plug it into the situation. No creativity at all. Her ideas are borrowed, yours were original.

It's such a shame none of those Ivy Leagues want a girl who can barely drag herself to perform the most primal functions. I don't remember, can you even still move? Last time I hung up the phone on your mom, she was complaining of how you were stiff as a corpse on your bed. Remember when we used to fight over which college we would attend? Do you know what happens now? A Harvard and a Yale are out there, pulling every string they can to get me. To have me chose them instead of the other, to have Audrey go to them and carry with her prestige. They're fighting for me.

Let me tell you a story about a little spider. This undeveloped insect had enough idiocy to

build its web over a shallow creek. One day, a foot was wading through the creek and it collapsed the entire web, spider and all, into the water.

Can you guess what happens next?

Lungs

Nicole Achempong
SHARON, MA

The priest is smoking a Parliament Light in the church parking lot, sunken cheeks sinking deeper as he drags in the smoke, one hand squeezing on the cigarette's lean body, the other steadying a crucifix that swings against his chest. I am thinking of my mother's hands pointing at the Sunday paper's headline: No religion is the fastest growing religion in America. I am thinking of tobacco-scented pews, and how the threadbare prayer cushions still hold the indents of God-fearing knees, hold them even when no one is there, hold them when the air is heavy and the church has no lungs.

Sparse

Stephanie Gouo
SAN DIEGO, CA

Last summer, I knelt by the riverbank
To carve sparse verse

Across the pale arteries
Of leaves. As I watched them flow downstream

I wondered
If I used the right adjectives. Unlike me, you

Do not find the floundered fluff of pound bread
Fragrant. A leaf

Or two has made its way to
The meandering creek just beyond

Your front porch. Perhaps, though,
You've already read them

And have been quietly humoring me
Ever since.

Love All

Hayley Kolding
CANTON, CT

We were walking on a spring day. Snow was still melting in dirty piles, like laundry heaped up by the side of the road, and a mineral taste soaked the air. I breathed and was giddy. It was one of those days when I was looking—really looking—at everything around me: cracks in the sidewalk, ants whirring quietly in the dirt, holey leaves praying to the air. Everything. The wonder of it made it hard to walk in a straight line.

I had tried to explain it, this giddiness that sung me straight off the sidewalk. He'd asked about it; he wanted to know what music I heard as I swayed and smiled. I looked down at my shoes, not waterproof, in a puddle, and told him that I wanted to soak in all this life flowing around me. I told him that I loved it all: sunlight, ants, children. The woody earnestness of trees.

That when I loved it so much, life overwhelmed me.

He told me that I was allergic. He said it fondly, I think, as if he thought me pleasantly quirky for trying to breathe life in when I knew it might make me sneeze. So I smiled and kept walking. On and off the sidewalk, mostly in agreement. But all the same, I was sad to hear my love spoken like a symptom.

As a child of tree bark and pollen in the wind, I don't think that love should be treated with Benadryl. And yet so many fear the word that I find as honest as breath. Hesitant partners balk at it; relationships end when "I love you" is met with only a nervous "thanks". The term for pure affection has been counted as the worst of the four-letter words. But for all the advice columns warning me not to use "the l-word" until I mean it, I can't think of any reason to wait.

Love—it's the only way to describe what fills me when grass cushions my footfalls, when peep frogs chirp at night. It's the only word I have for when strangers sneeze in the supermarket and I say, "Bless you," because I've been reminded that they, too, breathe and live and sneeze. Love—just the simple, joyous acknowledgment that existence is shared.

Sometimes that acknowledgement

is difficult to make. On icy nights in January, it's so hard to love the cold. When goosebumps rise on your skin like spider bites from every icy nip of the air, how can you feel affection for the chill? Speak it: I love the cold. Let it flood your mouth, pure and sharp like ice water. The love, the cold—they belong there; they are part of you. Speak the word, and you will allow yourself to mean it.

That's the power of love. Of course all words are meant to persuade an audience—journalists stack them into truths as bitter and undeniable as black morning coffee; advertisers sing them like siren songs to mesmerized couch potatoes. But love's power works on more than just the audience; when spoken, it has the power to affect us, the rhetors ourselves. That single drawn out syllable—love—provides a time frame to reflect: on the pulse in the fingertips that trace letters on our backs, on the swaying of grass like the hairs on our heads. It lends a second for contemplation of the rocks, cold as our feet are, sharing waters of their streambed, and of our lungs, above water, filling with air that thousands of others have breathed. With that one word, we can come to realize that life is no allergen; it is our oxygen. To love it is only natural.



JENNIFER WU LIVINGSTON, NJ

A Pet Store

Christina Menniti
MYSTIC, CT

The rabbit stared. The boy stared back. Too tall and too old to be staring. He blinked first. Pretended he hadn't. The rabbit's nose and ears quivered. It squished its fluffy flank against the glass. Shoved its eye close to the boy's face.

I'm watching, dumbass.

Then it hopped away.

He straightened. He brushed his fingers over the rim of the cage. He glanced at the tanks gleaming in the sickly fluorescent light. The rabbit's back was deliberately turned.

A tiny brunette gaped at him across the cage from her mother's arms.

Hey, don't touch the glass. The man was spilling over the boundaries of his pants and uniform shirt. Sweating. Flesh rippling gently. Staring.

The brunettes face was plastered to the cage. Still staring at him. The boy looked at her. Looked at the man. The man looked back. What the hell does it look like, like I'm gonna break it? But the boy didn't say it.

Sir. The man raised his eyebrows.

Okay.

The man watched him walk the long way around the fish room and jiggled as he made change. The boy stopped at the puppies. Tangles of them that piled at the front of their cages to yap at him. He almost smiled.

The man oozed out from the behind the counter. Bounced across the floor. The boy wrapped his hands in sleeves and took slow steps towards the kittens.

Is there something I can do for you sir?

The man's eyes were narrowed, disappearing into his face like raisins into dough. Sweating, oozing dough.

No thanks.

Just tell me if there is.

The pet shop's previous owner died at thirty-nine of a coronary when the boy was still a child. The old lady dressed him in a tie and jacket and took him to the wake. Stood behind him while he looked in the casket. The face was pale and gummy. He reached to touch it but the old lady caught his arm.

He looks like silly putty.

Don't you say things like that.

He does.

You were enough trouble to that man alive. Don't go botherin' him now he's dead.

He plucked the strawberries off the fruit plates while the old lady made small talk. Looked at his new loafers while she offered condolences.

What's a coronary?

A heart attack. I think.

What attacked his heart?

Good Lord child. I look like I know? Little boys like you broke it clean in two.

Really?

Course not.

Well hello there darling.

The corn snake nodded gently at him, strawberry blond and glossy.

Hello yourself.

He tugged at the threads on the cuffs of his sweatshirt. The man couldn't see him. He was in the fish room. The lid of the cage slipped off easily. He hesitated. Leaned it gingerly on the stand. The corn snake watched with languorous golden eyes. Slight undulations of her body as she glided down the branch.

Her tongue flickered out between her teeth and disappeared.

He looked over his shoulder.

The man was walking to the counter. The boy cursed quietly. Stepped back from the cage. Stared fixedly at the mice. Mice sleeping in piles. Curled into balls. Mice running over one another like insects exposed to light. The snake at the blurry edge of his vision, nodding with laughter. He heard the gentle slap of the man surging bulk toward him. He didn't look up from the mice.

Any of you squeal, Ill feed you all to the snakes.

The mice weren't listening.

The light clatter of the lid as the man re-fitted it on the cage. No other sound. The boy stayed still.

The man was staring at him. Just staring. The back of the boy's neck felt itchy. He didn't scratch it. Stayed still like a possum

in headlights.

The man scrubbed his chin. Tilted his head. Squinted. Maybe he was thinking. But probably not.

Then the man was heaving himself back to the counter. Excess flesh swaying as he went. Hauled him onto the stool. His back to the boy.

The boy swung back around to the snake.

Her tongue flicking out of her mouth, her body swaying slightly as she looked at him.

He looked at the man. Looked at the snake. Now or never.

Moved fast this time. Took the lid off, dropped a hand into the cage.

The previous owner showed the boy how to make a snake coil around his arm when he was a child. He went to the pet store with the woman. She wanted a dog. A retriever she could hook onto a red leash and walk around their neighborhood, wearing matching red sandals and a white dress and sunglasses. She sat in the pens with the puppies and they jumped at her and licked her face and she laughed like a girl. She was beautiful. The owner let the boy hold the animals. Listened when the boy talked. Tousled his hair once or twice. He never mentioned the snakes that turned up missing.

The boy let his finger gently brush the corn snake's chin. She slid over his palm, her body smooth and dry and sleek. Twisting delicately around his wrist. Her tongue brushed the skin inside his forearm. He shivered. She slipped under his sweatshirt. Stopped wound delicately below his elbow.

The man hadn't moved. The boy pulled down on his sleeve. Ambled off past the mice again. The man waved to a customer. Turned and looked at the boy. Looked at the mice. Walked to the cage and stared in, his girth completely obscuring them.

Time to go.

Ten yards between him and the doors. The parking lot shining beyond them like a beacon of hope.

He measured his strides. Two linoleum squares per steps. Away from the puppies. Two seconds per square.

Past the door of the fish room.

He wasn't hurrying.

Six yards.

A tug on his sleeve. The little brunette.

Mr., 'scuse me, Mr., can I see the snake?

Wide eyes and apple cheeks and curling wisps of hair. His skin went cold.

What?

The snake. She pulled at his sleeve again. The corn snake shifted her coils slightly.

I don't know what you're talking about.

The girl's mother had seen them.

Sweetie, don't trouble the boy.

The man turned around. The boys blood pounding in his face.

Mommy he has a snake in his sleeve.

The man heard her.

Leave him alone. I'm sorry about this.

The man looked at the corn snakes cage. Squinting. His face changing color in splotches.

No problem, Ma'am.

He took two steps back. Five yards to the door. The man speeding towards him, a tidal wave of digested doughnuts. The boy felt nauseous.

The mother was tugging the brunette away. She looked over her shoulder, a crinkle in the strawberry ice cream skin between her big blue eyes. For a second the boy was sorry.

Excuse me. Sir.

He turned for the door. His heart beating in his intestines.

Sir.

The man seized his shoulder. Touched him. The boy squirmed away with a frantic twist.

What the hell do you want?

The man seized his sleeve, flicked it back. The corn snake coiled around the boy's bare arm. The man's eyes lit like Christmas lights.

Would you care to explain this sir?

Not really.

He felt lightheaded. Aware of the blood in all of his veins. He didn't wipe his hands on his jeans.

I believe that snake belongs in that cage. Right over there.

He could smell the man's breath. Milk. He took a step back. The man took a step forward. His small smile made sallow balloons of his cheeks.

I could contact the authorities about this.

You cock-sucking bastard. You're enjoying this. But the boy stayed quiet.

I'd be within my rights.

The man's voice was gentle. Nobody could see his face. The brunette's mother was watching. Her forehead ridged just like the brunettes. Identical expressions. The boy's throat was too hot.

Should I do that sir?

I guess not.

The boy's voice was raw and too quiet. The man too aware of his customers. The boy could see them watching. Like they would watch a mugging and never look over their shoulders.

What did you say?

I said I guess not.

The man pointed at the cage. The boy stared at him. Kept his expression deadpan.

The corn snake sir.

The boy nudged her coils and softly as he could. She moved like a person getting out of bed. Sluggishly testing all her muscles. Sliding slowly along the length of his arm. The boy held her out draped between his fingers.

The man stopped smiling.

The boy raised the snake slightly to the man. The man took the smallest step back.

You're afraid of her. You own a pet store and you're afraid of her. You self-righteous son of a bitch.

Put it back.

The man was smiling again. He pointed to the cage. The boy crossed the room quickly. The customers watching. His footsteps squeaking slightly on the linoleum. The lid ground metallically as he lifted it. Dropped the corn snake back in the tank.

You'd better leave sir.

He did.

The old lady took him to the pet store after the woman left. Then the previous owner died and the store closed. It was only a few months later. He missed it. He missed the woman too. He cried some and started collecting wild snakes instead of pet store ones. He stopped when they starting dying and then he missed them too. The old lady made him bacon and gave him the paper with his plate. The man's bloated face under the sign of the pet store with the caption new owner. And the boy decided he hated him.

He waited in the back of the parking lot. Took off his sweatshirt. He was too hot and sweating. His face felt hot. He wasn't supposed to get caught.

The little brunette left not long after he did. She didn't see him. Her voice pitched up in a question. Her mother's lower answer. He didn't here the words. The back of his throat and eyes stung.

Color

Emmie Atwood
MILTON, MA

I remember trudging
Through the field bruised from last night's
frost
Branches sagging in the dark blue air
A strand of hair caught in my dry, cut mouth
Toward the swing set of metal rusted bars
Where my red
scarf waits

so I see you broken
on the bed of empty, silver springs
face cratered with gray
knotted in your eyes
that plastic tube climbing its way from your
wrist to your neck

And my mind trudges back
Searching

People went in and went out. Parents and children.

The air got cooler as the sun set. He started to shiver but he didn't put the sweatshirt back on. The flow of people slowed. And then stopped.

Sometime after dark the man came out. The boy watched him lock the door. He thought about standing up. Walking up the man where he stood by his car and spitting in his face. Hitting him. But he didn't do it and the man heaved himself up into his pickup. It dropped slightly under his weight and the boy laughed out loud.

The man didn't look in his direction as he drove away.

The boy sat on the curb. Looked in the store. Dark. Shut up. Empty.

The old lady said the boy was trouble. She was hard on him but he didn't mind. She read him stories and took him to beach and bought him a guitar and he loved her. But he didn't listen to her.

The boy wrapped his sweatshirt around his hand. Breathed in. Breathed out.

Punched the door as hard as he could. The glass fell in a sheet. He stepped over the threshold and stopped.

Nothing happened.

He pulled the sweatshirt off his fist. A few pieces of glass fell out. Clanked as they hit the linoleum. Pale blue light and weird shadows. The fish room, cavernous and black. He stood thinking for a moment. Then stepped behind the counter.

There were drawers and cupboards on the inside. The drawers were locked. The cupboards weren't. They had extra change in them. Register paper. Wooden shelves.

He thought about the police.

Rustles and muted squeaks from wakeful animals. Livelier now than in the daylight.

Relax. I'm not here for you guys.

He walked quickly this time. Snake cages in rows on shelves. Moonlight reflecting bluely off their surfaces. No need to be quiet this time. He pulled the lids off. They clattered when he dropped them.

Well hello ladies.

He looked for the wink of the light of their scales. Found them in the dark of their cages one by one.

He let them rest on his palms as he carried them across to the counter. Some twisted up his arms to whisper in his ears. He ignored them. A boa draped herself around his shoulders. Wrapped around his throat. They hissed in different pitches as he dropped them in the cabinets. Eighteen in all. Flowing over one another and over shelves and the cardboard boxes. He smiled at them.

He started to leave but went back. Took the water dished from a few cages and placed

them in the cupboard.

Have fun.

Oh we will.

He wanted to stay. He wanted to sit on the floor and he wanted to hold the mice and he wanted to talk to the kittens and puppies with the woman in a white dress and red sandals and sunglasses.

He left and sat on the curb at the back of the lot. Drew his legs to his chest and wrapped his arms around them and rested his head on his knees. He began to shiver again and pulled on the sweatshirt. He slept and woke at dawn damp with dew.

The lot was still empty. He uncurled himself slowly, stretching his feet out on the pavement. The clouds were pink rimmed with gold and the sky was the palest blue and he smiled to himself while he watched the sun rise.

The man's pickup pulled in sometime after the sun came up. The boy's stomach twisted slightly.

The man dragged himself out of the truck. Braced himself with both hands on the doorframes. Each step down was hard labor. The boy watched. Watched him take the first steps toward the store. Watched him stop.

His back was to the boy. The boy couldn't see his face. But he heard the shout. Cussing.

He watched the man waddle as quickly as he could to the door. Each roll of fat surging and bouncing against the others. Quieter now, but still swearing. Bulbous head rotating side to side. Fingering the broken glass in door with gross distended fingers.

The boy stood. Hesitating. Wanting to

see. Not wanting to be seen.

The man stumbled drunkenly through his store. Into fish room. Out again. Through the Employees only door. Didn't come back.

The boy slipped behind the man's truck. Watched him through the windows and kept waiting.

The man came out again and the boy could hear his voice. Too high. Watery.

The man picked up the telephone. The cops. The boy almost turned to go but the man bent down talking into the phone.

The whine of his voice unpunctuated by pauses.

His head disappeared behind the counter. The cupboards. The boy bit his lip.

The man screamed. High pitched and short. And he didn't get up.

And didn't get up.

The boy waited. And the man still didn't get up.

The boy thought about going to look but decided not to. The old lady would be waiting up for him. Worrying about him. She would probably hug him and yell in his ear. He left quickly with his hands in his pockets. Didn't look back.

In the paper the next day. The old lady shoved it under his cereal bowl.

Break in at the recently reopened pet store. Nothing stolen. A prank. Owner in the hospital. A coronary, condition uncertain.

I guess that place just aint meant to be.

I guess not.

OF CRABS AND ANESTHETIC

Nanditha Lakshmanan
LIVINGSTON, NJ

While at a supermarket, you usually don't expect the products on the shelves to come alive and snap at you. But within five seconds of reaching the crowded fish market, I realized that this was, in fact, the norm for aisle twelve of Closter's Korean Mega Market. I can't recall whether or not my jaw dropped at the sight of all the living fish. But that might have been because I couldn't feel my jaw when I reached the store. I was eight years old, and had just left the dentist's office. Dr. Song had pulled out two of my baby teeth and administered anesthetic, and I remember hating him with a passion for making my mouth go numb. When I tried to speak, what left my lips was a phonetic nightmare. Because I sounded like I had a dire speech impediment, I refused to speak to anyone for two hours after Dr. Song's medicine-filled needle left my mouth.

But I wasn't upset because I couldn't speak to anyone. I was more upset over the fact that since I couldn't move my jaw, I couldn't crunch on the tiny, sweet-smelling, golden cookies that a petite Asian woman was offering at the entrance to the grocery section of the mall. It didn't help matters when my little brother eagerly showed off his ability to scarf down sweets so that my stomach moaned out of longing. Before I could encourage my brother to chew on a well-seasoned, deep-fried knuckle sandwich, my mother wisely decided to move us away from the woman serving up ramen, cookies, and ample reasons for a little girl's blood pressure to rise.

So we made our way through aisles of Korean curiosities and eventually ended up at the source of all vegetarians' nightmares. But having never seen a fish market before, I wasn't aware of the evils that lurked behind the three oblong, eel-filled glass aquariums that held up the heavy granite countertop and the salesman's cash register. Being young and innocent

to the nature of fish markets, it was impossible for me to predict what I would witness when one of the fish sitting in the plastic tubs on the display table was selected to be taken home to some hungry person's kitchen.

For the moment, I was still naive. I was too preoccupied with the crabs that were sitting in the plastic bucket at the back of the market to be concerned about my future. Each crab was as large as my hand, with beady black eyes, orange shells, and sharp-looking pincers that were carrot-colored on top and beige on the bottom. Having lived in a household that was, for the most part, foreign to the ways of seafood, and having never seen a living crab before, I devoted an immeasurable amount of time to staring at the crabs. A majority of them were forelimb; some were swaying their crustacean forelimbs in the air like fans at a Bon Jovi concert; others used their arms for more aggressive activities like arm wrestling and boxing.

My brother later came over to observe the crabs with me. Soon after, a lady approached the tub with a paper bag in hand. Like us, she also had a little smile playing on her lips. At first, I thought that she had come to watch the crustaceans with us. But then, she pulled a pair of cold, metal tongs out of her bag and extended her arm so that the tongs ended up in the crabs' bucket. I saw that the crabs, all of whose attention had been solely fixed on each other just seconds before, were now all angrily snapping at the metal instrument. After a brief struggle, the woman finally grabbed one crab, dropped it into the paper bag, and left. All of the crabs ceased their snapping, but only a few resumed their prior activities. Wondering why the crabs weren't moving anymore, I slowly leaned my face towards the bucket, hoping that my eyeball wouldn't get plucked out by an orange mandible. Once I was convinced that the crabs wouldn't attempt to puncture my cornea, I took a closer look at the shiny black holes that were their eyes. It confused me when I saw what looked like beads of moisture dripping from their eyes, because, as far as I knew, crabs didn't cry. I heard my mother call me, and turned to leave the crabs. But before I left, I saw the most miniscule crab in the bucket give me one sorrow-filled look before shifting his gaze.

As my brother dragged me towards our parents at the counter, I pondered over what kind of a life the crab had led before the hungry stranger plucked him out of his home and dropped him into a dark sack. Maybe he was a father who had raised several children.

Or, maybe he was one of several children himself. Maybe he had been a rabbi in a past life! Eventually, I realized that his back-story didn't matter because soon, he would be cooked to perfection, and his body would end up in someone's digestive tract.

I was grateful for the fact that seafood was rarely brought into my house, because after thinking about how the crab's last moments alive would be spent inside a pressure cooker, I started to feel a tad nauseous. My mother waved me over and told me that we would leave after she ordered a couple of fish to take home. I nodded slowly and watched as the man at the cash register wrapped up two fish for my mother. I tried to look away from their damp faces, but it was impossible to ignore the gazes of the dead creatures that pierced through their plastic wrappings and into me. In a desperate attempt to avoid the fish, I directed my eyes elsewhere, and they set their sights on a young man who was standing before a kitchen countertop with various cooking utensils spread out in front of him. His gig seemed innocent enough. I figured that watching the cook would be a safe way to distract myself from the plastic-wrapped fish that were currently being weighed.

The cook took out a cutting board, and I eagerly waited to see how he would expertly cut the mounds of carrots and beans that lay next to him (I grew up with my mother telling me how to properly cut a vegetable without slicing my fingers). But rather than satisfy my need to see something unrelated to fish, he pulled out yet another scaly aquatic creature. I stood frozen as he set the body onto the cutting board. He got out a large blade and hurriedly cleaned it off and dried it. His customers would not be forced to wait a second longer than necessary. I anxiously tugged on my brother's sleeve, trying to get someone, anyone to see what I was seeing. But when my brother faced me, he didn't understand what it was that I needed him to look at, for the only noises coming out of my mouth were incomprehensible, nervous squeaks. The fish remained on the cutting board, his mouth agape, mentally saying his goodbyes to his loved ones on Earth. The cook raised his arm over his head.

I watched in silence as the knife came down.

on the veracity of smog-enhanced sunsets (for erithy)

Stephanie Gouo
SAN DIEGO, CA

blinded, you told me

you'd fix it. No seams,
no sewing machine:

just simple
thread. Bare

and ivory, I realized
your hands were still

reaching. You must see, too,
that for the needle

to prick hard, prick fast,
you must be unyielding, as you were

when you told me
the translucent expanse

of frail, candied sky
above

was the product of a hundred workers
dumping indistinguishable ink

off the coast of china.

So prick.

I hold my arm still,
Wait for you to find my pulse.

The Dead of Winter

Emmie Atwood
MILTON, MA

On Friday I found a raccoon in the gutter. Its fur was wet from puddles of street gunk, its snout caked red.

I fetched my father from the garage. He was on his back greasing bike tires, spinning them around and running his black fingertips over the metal spokes. Removing his gloves and hanging them on a hook nailed to the back door, he told me he would get his shovel. We turned at the end of our driveway, our shadows long and cold on the sidewalk as cars blew dust onto our backs and branches above us shed snow.

“Did you finish the bikes?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said, brushing his hands on his jeans, “not yours yet.”

I nodded. He kicked the shovel, snow flaking off the metal tips. The red house on the corner of Ruggles and Central sat sad and drooping among its pines, the roof piled high with ice and fog hanging in the corners of its windows. It teetered near the point of collapse, sinking deeper and deeper into the snow.

“When do you think you’ll do it?”

“Eh, probably Tuesday. Maybe Wednesday.”

The raccoon was up ahead on the pavement, cradled in the shadows of the street lamp. Its eyes blinked slowly as we hunched over its stained fur, its tongue lapping up a trickle of water which framed the manhole on either side. My father knelt down next to the body, butting its ribs with his toe.

“It wants to die, Cal,” he said, rising to stand next to me. I stared at it.

“Why don’t we bring it home?”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know. Give it water or something.”

“I don’t think so, Cal.”

“Well, we can’t kill it.”

“It’s what it wants.”

“We can’t kill it.”

“It’s not going to get any better.”

“If we bring it home, it might.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

Half of its stomach was missing, its brain folded into the concrete. It seemed half of its life had already been taken. Maybe the other half still stuck here on earth was lonely now.

“Anyway, it’s what it wants,” he said. I held onto his elbow as my father dropped the metal blade of the shovel into the raccoon’s side. It didn’t twitch but rather settled dead in the gutter, slipping away.

On Saturday, I found my father in the garage polishing his Craftsman 22 driver.

“You’re home,” he said, his fingers twirling the rubber handle around and around in his hand. Sawdust stuck to my eyes like lost lashes, clouding around my father’s ankles each time he kicked up dirt with the toe of his Timberlands. I blinked.

“Why is it so smoky in here?”

“Eh, I had a cigarette.”

“Dad.”

He shrugged. I walked toward him and leaned over his shoulder, watching him rub a red cloth over the screwdriver in minute circles. He paused, lifting it up to the fogged bulb dangling on a wire from the ceiling, then lowered his goggles.

“You look good.”

“What are you doing?”

“I found a van in the woods,” he said, putting his goggles back on. His voice tasted like spoiled gasoline. “Damn it, I don’t think this is the right one.”

“Which do you need?”

“A Craftsman 17.”

“Oh.”

He stood hunched with the driver clutched in his glove then shrugged, “You want to see it?” I nodded.

I trudged behind him, my jeans tightening around my thighs with each step as they got wetter and wetter with frost. The snow was punctured by squirrel tracks. Cold puffed into my ears, powdered my face, stained my teeth, and I could hear my father’s breath tremble with it, like the ticking of a dream. We found it, half buried in ice, with a bare-barked ash tree growing out from the top of its roof. Its windows were cracked and rust varnished the paint.

“I can fix it up.”

“Nah, Dad. This thing’s finished,” I said, stumbling toward him through the rime. All I saw were two walls of metal rotting into the forest floor.

“I’ve got a buddy down at the station who said—”

“Dad, it’s not worth it.”

He removed his mittens and traced the metal body with his bare hand, jerking away when his skin caught on some rust.

Gruffly, he breathed, “I wanted you to have it.”

“Dad. The bus is fine.”

“Too damn expensive.”

As he bit the piece of rust out from under his thumbnail, I could see the living van trapped under the folds of his mind, a Volkswagen type 2 from the ‘60s, handsome in its blue and red paint. It belonged there with him not here on these roads.

“You could come home more if you had a car.”

“Maybe. Come on Dad, let’s go.”

I reached for his elbow as we turned to walk back to the house, listening to the van’s last sigh join, sighing, with the air.

On Sunday, I took him for a walk. The street sign up ahead was covered with snow, its letters paling in the light blue din. His hat hung low over his eyes. I beckoned him closer as a car’s lights condensed in the mist up ahead.

“Everything looks blue today,” he said.

“Winter turns everything a bit bluer,” I said.

When we crossed onto Ruggles, the sun was a sliver of leftover light striping the asphalt. At the new house on the corner of Central, he stopped, grabbing the wool lining of my sleeve.

“Look,” he said, and pointed to a clover in the snow, sprouting out from a nest of tangled oak roots just between the curb and the sidewalk. “Look, Cal.”

“Huh,” I said and knelt down next to it. The world was dusted white, this plant powdered clean. “Would you look at that.”

Knees hinged and sighing, he followed me down to the ground, holding my elbow to keep balance and wobbling a little on his soles. Removing his mitten first, he then placed bare skin on bare stem.

“Should I pick it?”

“No,” I said.

I stood up. My father stood too. His silhouette was set deep against the night, rolling gray into the rural roads. Night hushed the snow, blurring my father’s outline until I could no longer see him next to me. We kept walking a bit farther through melting forests, frozen by age, until the road became silent, misted by frost, and winding lonely

The Wastelands of Womanhood

Lisa Delao
WOODBIDGE, VA

“In fifth grade I tried to give myself my period,” Bria giggled as she shared this strange story with the class. We weren’t in a circle telling personal stories, so why the hell was she? Some looked confused and others simply laughed along with her, all of them girls.

Her way of thinking was something I could not comprehend.

Jesse asked, “How did you try to give yourself your period?” His face contorted. She couldn’t stop giggling! Her squawking, toothy laugh that would be broken in intervals as she tried to catch her breath.

The spotlight intensified; she had made herself an ant beneath a magnifying glass on a sunny day. Not only did I want to inspect her, dissect her brain, and tear open her thoughts, but I wanted to see her suffer as I went through my examination by depriving her of anesthesia.

All I wanted to know was why?

“I stuck a tampon up... there.” Each word was followed by a squeal of laughter. Her cheeks were two shades of red, or maybe I just wanted to see humiliating foolishness pinch her face and make her regret sharing this colorful story with us.

“Why?” I asked; alarm rung in my eyes. I didn’t notice I had said anything until everyone turned their heads to face me. She shrugged her shoulders, hopped up on her desk, and looked around – first to her girl friends, then to everyone else – searching for understanding, or at least an answer no one would laugh at. I guess she forgot this was middle school, a place full of vultures; once kids smell an embarrassing moment, they swoop down to laugh and point until your face is hot, stained with tears, and you’re curled up in the fetal position crying out for your mommy.

“All my friends already had their period. I

wanted to start being a woman too.” She bit her bottom lip and let out another chain of squeals, as if she had to swallow the embarrassment.

I wanted to grab her by her sun-tanned shoulders exposed by her spaghetti strap tank top, and scream in her face hidden by a layer of make-up, “You’re only in seventh grade!”

Most girls would love to delay the day blood started trickling from a place that wasn’t a flesh wound -- unless they have a twisted view of God and decide it is His way of subordinating women below men by making them bleed every 28 days. Yet here Bria was telling everyone she did the opposite. Just to fit in. I wondered if she regretted wishing for it. Being the idiot that she was, she probably didn’t know a girl can’t give herself her period. She deserved what was coming, tenfold - the kind of cramps Midol couldn’t cure, swelling like an elephant, and a flow so heavy Maxi pads couldn’t absorb it all.

All the things that at the age of eleven I didn’t know existed.

My family and I went to Ocean City for spring break. I told Dad it was a bad idea. The beach never opened before the beginning of summer, but the man thought that once he got there the whole town would have to bow to his requests. Mother Nature and the entire town had other plans. The day we arrived it rained like bullets, imprisoning us in our hotel room.

After the weather cleared up a bit, the third day, we went shopping in local stores and played mini-golf where I kicked my brother and sister’s butts. The basis of the game was simple: shoot the ball in the hole. David thought that meant in the bush and Yanira swung her club whichever direction she felt like. She’d hit the ball alright, and launch it straight into the huge man-made lake.

Dad only rented the hotel for four days and Mom was anxious to leave. We made all of our last minute purchases of Ocean City t-shirts and souvenirs we’d forget about or break. We packed up our suitcases and dozed off to the comforting sounds composed by the rain hitting the boardwalk. It really made me want to go to the bathroom, but I resisted the urge because I was in such a comfortable position. If a cozy spot on a bed is found, especially a hotel bed, it is a duty to stay put and guard it with one’s life. I grum-

bled out of bed, slipped on some flip-flops – Mom always said never to walk around bare foot in hotel rooms or else I’d get a foot fungus – and wobbled over to the bathroom with my knees stuck together. Classic “I have to pee” walk.

I slid down my pajama pants and underwear. All I had to do was pee. My eyes scanned the bland bathroom and all of its whiteness.

I finally drew my attention away from the fascinating bathroom and noticed that I hadn’t heard a trickle fall into the toilet bowl. What’s wrong? Don’t I have to pee? I looked down and saw it. It looked brown. Brown would’ve been better than the other color that stared me in the face. It looked like dried blood, not bright and gory. It reminded me of a scab in its beginning stages. A scab on my underwear.

It was about two in the morning, which meant my panic would have to be in silent whispers. “What the,” I couldn’t form a sentence, my jaw severed from my face so that any attempt at speaking would emerge in grunts and mumbles. I was ready to fall over the toilet seat unconscious. Am I sick? What

How I Learned Depression

Kaitlyn Henderson
HO-HO-KUS, NJ

It begins with the smell. She reeks of melancholy and tire— like a hospital bed, or the morgue. Like pills and bleached sheets and canned milk. She wanders around the house. Her face lined, pink and quivering, but soft like clouds. Tears so common they no longer have meaning. They’re just trails cut into her cheeks. Anxiety plagues her lungs; infests in her shaking hands. Like Cancer. She is always afraid of Cancer. She no longer sleeps. She sleeps forever. 5AM she leaves before I wake. The sky, darker than Mars Black acrylic, swallows her up as I catch her leaving. I want to hear her heartbeat, listen to the rhythm of blood pumping through her veins. You are still alive. You are, Mom, you are.

kind of disease is this? Oh my God, am I going to die? This bleeding was definitely caused by some sort of terminal disease. I was only eleven! I never even got to see an R-Rated movie! What about high school and college? I wasn't even in middle school yet and I was facing death!

I didn't know what to do. If I told Mom, she'd tell everyone else; the whole vacation would be ruined. Instead of enjoying the car ride home with stops to produce markets, we'd all rush to the closest hospital, where we would have to stay until the doctors figured out what was wrong. They'd tell my parents the horrible news, and we would need time to cry and make funeral arrangements. Spring break would be ruined if I told Mom.

Who said I had to tell her, though?

After calming down to a level where I could breathe without sounding like an asthmatic child, I devised a scheme. I slipped off my pajama pants and the gross evidence of my illness, tossed the underwear into the trash can, until I realized that Mom's eyes would somehow wander there... I plucked my Garfield panties out, making sure not to touch any part that had been contaminated; wrapping it up in toilet paper, I made sure to conceal every bit of cloth. I dropped the blood-stained evidence into the trash can, this time well hidden. No one would ever know.

A few hours after my discovery, Mom and Dad woke us up. My eyelids slowly lifted to the sight of everyone else getting dressed and packing up loose items. The news I found out last night dramatically affected my sleep. I had dreams of my funeral service.

"You okay?" Mom touched my forehead and retrieved her hand soaked with the sweat.

My eyes widened in horror, and I jumped out of bed. "Fine! Just tired," I smiled, immediately taking my eyes off her and scanning the area around my bed. I picked up a pair of capris and a t-shirt. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her with her arms crossed. She gave me the Mom look of omniscience. She knew.

"Lisa." Her voice was gentle; she placed her hand on my head, petting the stray hairs back in place with the rest of the unruly clump. "I know this vacation wasn't what you wanted it to be. We all told your dad, but he's as hardheaded as a coconut. You can't break him." She thought I was sad about the vacation! My relief must have triggered the blood flow to my wound because

I felt a sudden rush of warm liquid soak the toilet paper that I used to clog it. My bladder felt emptied, drained, and my head was dizzy. I knew the sickness was moving fast. I felt metal weights in my belly and pelvic area pulling and tearing the muscles, reducing them to loose threads.

I quickly sat down struggling to stand and even more to keep a straight face. My lips maintained a solemn line, and wrinkles did not crease my face in pain. "Yeah," I agreed with Mom, "he never listens to anyone. But this vacation wasn't so bad. Even though it rained we still had some fun. I just wanna go home, though."

She nodded in agreement and smiled. "We'll be home soon." My stomach churned, rolling the weights around as I prayed to myself and whatever God was listening, I hope we get home before I die. I don't want to be roadkill!

David and Yanira passed the soccer ball back and forth in the Holiday Inn parking lot. Every time David had the ball he popped it up with his foot and flaunted his disciplined control by cradling the sphere on the back of his neck and shoulder, leaving us in awe, and then nestled it back on top of his shoelaces in perfect stillness. Yanira tried to imitate him, but she failed and the ball hit her in the back of the head. It rolled down the parking lot until it lodged itself beneath the bumper of a Honda Civic.

David held his stomach as he laughed, "You're supposed to hold the ball on your neck, not let it hit you on the head!" Yanira rubbed her skull, and her body shook in unison with her chuckles.

"Lisa, can you go get it, please," she managed to ask between giggles. I shifted from a walk to a jog, but the moment my weight landed on my front leg, fluids flowed down my internal drains. My hands dropped to my stomach, tightened around it, and quickly released.

I turned around and said, "I don't wanna, it's too far." They couldn't know I was sick. Yanira grunted at me and jogged off. I wanted to run and retrieve the ball so that we could all play together, but I knew I couldn't take part. I had to conserve my energy. Sitting down on the curb, I watched the ball roll back and forth, jealous that their blood was still in their veins.

"Let's go, kids," Mom said. She placed her small duffel bag on top of the other suitcases ensuring that the puzzle pieces wouldn't loosen from their positions and cause an ava-

lanche of clothes and junk food. She managed to squeeze everything in, only a few shirts and bags of potato chips spilling over, and closed the trunk door with a muffled thud. David and Yanira jumped in and made beds in preparation for the trip home. I sat behind my parents, I had to stay awake, stay alert.

Mom and Dad were busy rolling fruit around in bins, trying to find the ripest of the bunch. David and Yanira cuddled into their pillows, smacking their lips searching for the taste of the salty beach air, warm funnel cakes, and tooth-rotting cotton candy. Meanwhile, I struggled to bide myself time. My eyes scanned the fields of corn husks that lined the road on both sides. Bathroom, bathroom. I needed to get to a bathroom.

I straightened my body so that I was no longer hunched over holding my intestines so they wouldn't spill out. Approaching an adult while in pain was going to be as strenuous as walking upright had proven to be.

It took every ounce of strength to mouth words instead of grumbles and grunts. "Excuse me," I smiled, "Do you have a restroom?" The happy facade was beginning to break; the man needed to answer.

He finally spoke, "Sure thing, doll. It's right around the corner." With his detailed directions I could have saved myself the pain and walked around until I stumbled upon the woman in a triangular dress, the universal restroom sign.

The stench of hot feces attacked my senses as I swung the door open, fanning the flames of past visits. Holding my breath, I walked into a stall. The healing process was finished faster this time. As if performing surgery, my fingers moved with precision as I plucked the wad out and tossed it away, ensuring that I didn't get any on my skin. I knew nothing of what I was experiencing, so I took extreme precautions in trying to contain it. My legs shook as I hovered over the filthy toilet seat, the roll of toilet paper spun around my hand like a cottony cocoon. I shoved the bundle where the soiled one used to be, nestled between the apex of my inner thighs. Good as new.

My self-made bandage wasn't stopping the blood, merely absorbing it, but at least it was concealed. Two hours had passed since the last stop when I had to fix myself again.

"I have to pee," I whined.

Dad wove in between blinding headlights to the exit and pulled into Wendy's. The women's restroom was out of order, but I

wasn't going to let that be my downfall. We were so close to home; all I needed was one new bandage to get me the rest of the way. Once we unloaded the van, I would unload my heart of this devastating news I found agonizing to conceal.

"Daddy, can you watch the door?" I pouted as I bounced in place with my knees tucked in. I had to keep up my charade.

"Yeah, Lisita, just hurry up," he said, only half paying attention. I slipped through the door and shut it behind me; there was no lock, so if Dad drifted off, I would have no other protection plan. I took my chances and began my superficial surgery once again. As soon as I pulled down my capris and panties, the door creaked open.

I only got a glimpse of his face; it was chubby and he wore gold wire-rimmed glasses. Upon hearing his shriek, a mumbled sorry came from his baritone voice before the door shut. His apology meant nothing to me. I was exposed. I pretended he saw the bandage stained crimson; that meant I was no longer the only one who knew I was going to die. Sharing this with another human was comforting, even if he was a stranger. I walked out of the restroom, thankful I didn't have to see his face.

Dad slurped his Diet Coke, dug into a bag, and pulled out fries. "You want some?" he asked, smiling.

My grimace told him that this could not be fixed with food. "You didn't watch the door! A man walked in on me," I snapped, ignoring his offer. I didn't see a smirk on his face, but his buoyant voice made me think he was suppressing laughter.

"Did he see anything?"

"I don't think so..." my voice trailed off, and I sunk my head into my chest. "But still, you shouldn't have left me alone!" Dad put his arm around my shoulder and gave me the Wendy's bag. Inside there were two medium fries and a bacon cheeseburger.

"I'm sorry, Lisita." He smiled and rubbed my head. "I got that for you," he said, pointing to the bag with his lips. He got in the van, and I pulled myself back into my spot. The thought of eating made my stomach churn. My illness now hindered me from enjoying one of my favorite activities. As I passed the bag back in to David and Yanira, they jumped on it like vultures.

"Someone walked in on Lisa in the bathroom," Dad announced. Laughter engulfed the van. Embarrassment pinched my face, but luckily the night hid my red hot expres-

sion. We were back on the highway heading home. After a moment I joined in on the laughter. I didn't know if I would be able to enjoy harmless jokes with my family after tonight.

The headlights of the van cut through the darkness that consumed our neighborhood. Everyone was tired, so we dragged our suitcases inside and left mountains of clothes in the laundry room. Mom, Yanira, and I made an assembly line in front of the fridge to store the food before it would spoil. Afterward, I tugged Mom by the elbow.

"Mommy, can we talk? In your room." My voice was shaky, almost inaudible. My bandages could no longer hide this bloody truth. Worry plagued her face with wrinkles, the signs of a loving mother. She closed the door behind her and turned to me.

"What's wrong, baby?" She took my hands; her soft thumbs rubbed my knuckles as if she was hypnotizing me to melt beneath her touch. And I did.

"Mommy," I paused, taking a deep breath, "I'm dying." I pulled down my pants; the sight would explain those two words no one ever joked about. There, speckled on my poor bandage, was scarlet. It wasn't dark or soaked, but there was a trace of my looming death.

She laughed and pulled me by my shoulders to hug me; if it wasn't for her catching me, I would've tripped over my ankle-high pants. For a moment I mistook her laughs for blubbling. Her eyes welled up, but then she smiled. They weren't tears of sadness. They were tears of joy. "Lisita, you aren't dying, you got your period."

"Period? As in what comes at the end of a sentence?"

No, it's a disease that leaks a crimson flow every 28 days.

She reached into her purse, handed me a large bandage, and said, "Here you go, that should help." She rubbed my confused face, "Oh, my little girl is becoming a woman." She embraced me again.

I never received a pamphlet on menstruation full of colorful diagrams identifying female and male body parts. Perhaps Mom and Dad discussed who would be the unlucky parent to have the awkward conversation of the birds and the bees with me but never got around to it. Mom only told me to expect blood from there every month and to be prepared.

After that, I was still uncomfortable telling my mom my stomach hurt from cramps,

but it was worse when I would tell my dad! He'd stagger over his words, unsure of how to comfort me, his child suffering from a womanly problem. Mom would stare at me whenever she'd see me get a pad with distance eyes. The first time we went shopping for female products, it was overwhelming to choose between pads or tampons, then brands. She helped by picking regular pads, tampons being out of the question, as if the absorbent tube had the ability to impregnate me.

She was already worrying about me having a child, so she'd do her best to shield the truth, as if she could keep me from bleeding every month. All I thought about then was whether a red spot would appear on my jeans, intruding on my kickball game during recess.

I guess becoming a woman means to slowly lose your life after all.

Weeding

Peter LaBerge
STAMFORD, CT

Bare-foot, pulling weeds from his ex wife's garden. They writhed like visions trapped in wine glasses. Some resembled shrubs she couldn't resurrect, only choke from the surface.

Sticks and branches eroded to nakedness. The snap of the wood against her skin. A frisbee and soggy blue newspaper sleeves hid under the bushes.

Her fingers swimming in the lilies and lavender met a steppingstone with two handprints: one larger than the other, with two names etched into a carved heart.

She put it with the rest of the weeds.

Then got on her hands and knees and pulled thyme by accident. Holding it up, she saw green shoots lifted from the white roots.

Once I was Rapunzel (A cento)

Margo Gurenburg
LIVINGSTON, NJ

Mom is making chicken potpie; someone must have died.

Emily Masters
ALLENDALE, NJ

As sleep falls in the innocent air
Regret plays its reedy flute in the dark.
A legend begins to move;
Then you can trade places with the wind.

Once I was Rapunzel.
Fire raced under my skin.
I could whisper the word burn and he'd turn
to ash.

Years ago, when I was rotten with virtue I be-

Mom stands before the sink, defrosting frozen peas and carrots in the brown bowl we hardly ever use. She is humming softly, tapping her foot along with the radio. On the stove a pot of soup puckers and bubbles. It is cream-based, soft and gauzy. There are four neat pie crusts lined up on the counter.

"Would you take the chicken out of the freezer?" she asks me.

On the counter rests a scrap of paper with a name and address written on it. I look at the pie crusts. Two for us, two for them.

Out of habit, I pull the makings of a salad out of the refrigerator and begin tearing bits of iceberg lettuce apart into a bowl. I dump in the shredded carrots, chop up the cucumber. Then I arrange the tomatoes around the edges and cover the bowl with cling wrap.

I stand back and look at the bowl, turning it slightly in the light. I am not sure who the family is this time, though most of the time I don't. The calls come in every couple

lieved loveliness was just a face, a flower.
I'd like to tear these petals with my teeth.
We are so filthy with our love,
It will be strange knowing at last it couldn't go
on forever.

The heart lies to itself because it must.
It was hard to distinguish from pain,
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds.
You need to say your prayers-
Redemption hangs upon the nails.

of months from the woman who runs things, asking that the town mothers weave a string of dinners into a family's life. The pots of chili, loaves of bread, and the Tupperware containers of mystery meat fill their counters and refrigerators, but cannot fill the empty spaces of air left behind by loss. But we are told these meals help, and so we make pot pie.

When the pies have been pieced together and closed, they look like swollen wounds, with pinched edges and round, pale skin. My mother and I craft flowers with the extra dough and place them atop each crust, cutting five thin slices around each blossom for aeration.

We will eat chicken pot pie tonight as well, because it is convenient. I set the table as my brothers and father slid into their seats. My mother hands me my plate, a long slice of pie. The crusts open in a loose embrace of the filling. Peas and carrots and stretches of sum



Shelby Wilcox COLUMBIA, MD

Pursuing an Erased Past

Sage Warner
SCITUATE, MA

Soap first foams a frothy white, and then the hot water clears it away to reveal the olive skin of Tara's hands. Her right palm digs into her left in a repetitive, circular, motion. The left waits for all five fingers to press hard, but only three do the work. The dips where the other two fingers should sit are empty. Dirt and coffee syrup swirls down the drain of the white sink below. Tara barely turns the cold water faucet. She stares as water melts like hot glass from her nails down to the base of her wrists. Tara watches the reflection of her hands in the mirror. She dries her hands on a single sheet of paper towel, and hides both up her topaz sleeves.

"Tara! Tara? Are you still in there?" Knocking silences Tara's memory, and she's left staring at a mirror splattered with hot water and specks of soap.

"Yeah, sorry, I'll be out in a minute."

Back behind the counter, Tara mixes egg-nog and cinnamon into the froth of the hot milk sitting in a red cup. "Medium Easter's Eggnog with two shots of Hazelnut!" her voice vibrates hoarsely against the metal machines around her. A hand with bulky fingers picks up its order. Tara notices a tattoo on the hand's left pinky. The ink runs in alternating shades of pink, and with the pattern of dashes, forms the universal ribbon for Breast Cancer.

"It's in memory of my mom," the hand's voice says. "She was diagnosed, and then a week later she was gone. But uh, maybe things are better that way."

Tara ran through the rest of the day's orders in a blur. Each time she finished an order, she felt like she was repeatedly hitting the snooze button on her alarm and never actually waking up for the day. The only thing she could dream about were the words from the tattooed pinky. She thought about them as she rinsed

and washed and wiped the coffee-stained machines; she thought about them as she tidied the display of instant coffee packages; she even thought about them as she patched up a hole someone had punctured in the top of one. Tara could not stop thinking about them, but it wasn't because of the cancer, it wasn't because of the tattoo itself, no, it was rather the realization that so many things in life are far better off happening by surprise.

The walk home is frigid. Tara left her winter coat hanging on her closet door, and had only managed to pick up her blue fleece on her scrambled exit out the door this morning. The wind seems to blow right through her chest, and her whole heart feels like it's about to hit its freezing point. Her paces rush themselves along the pavement, racing the wind and the dropping of temperature and light. Night creeps around edges of brick. She passes the Gearson's house, and surveys the worn out yard, counting the broken flower pots and fallen shingles. Then she starts to look around at the other houses, and begins to see things she never quite could in her rushed morning hours or nighttime returns. Each house seems to have aged so much since her elementary years. Tara remembers the long walks her and her mother would take right after supper in those warm summer nights, the blankets of heat warming the back of their necks like heat wraps. Her mother would point up at the houses, and tell stories about how they came to sit and stand so tall. Tara always looked up at those attic windows that seemed like sky scrapers against twilight sky. Everything was so fresh and grand back then. Now, strolling on these sidewalks, Tara feels obliged to check up on each house she passes, just to make sure those once sturdy walls are still standing upright.

Finally, the familiar midnight-blue shingles catch Tara's eyes, and her feet guide her up the dirtied steps of her house. Inside, a candle glows on the cherry wood mantelpiece. Next to the flame sits picture frames filled with childhood memories. One frame is made up of silver plastic, with fat red lettering that reads "Mother&Daughter". The picture holds the night of Tara's 10th birthday. Pie custard and whipped morang covers her face; the residue left over from the pie-throwing event at the mini-carnival her mom had put together. Her mom had stood on the mini-stage she had created in their downstairs sitting area. Tara was on the floor with her princess tiara on her head and her face painted with flowers and stars. She looked up at her mom, who seemed so strong and elegant elevated by the stage's

height. Those days were some of the brightest parts of Tara's childhood. Tara grasps the frame in her hand, and holds it close to her chest, still warming to the sudden heat in the house. The picture she holds is nothing but a moment sitting in a frozen world. If she and her mother could revisit those moments together, rather than Tara having to explain every goddamn name and appointment and face and street number and how the street can also be called a road and how a lit candle holds a flame and how the girl standing before her is her daughter, not some stranger holding her hand. Her mother is losing it, and all Tara wants is for someone to hit play on these paused moments so her and her mother can go back in time and relive them before they're erased from her mother's mind completely.

She started up the cherry staircase, the picture frame clutched tight underneath her right arm. Tara remembered sprinting up these stairs when she was young; each one was so sturdy and strong beneath her mud-covered feet. The two at the top would make a creaking noise, and Tara would get excited every time she heard them. Now, they all creak. The two at the top are thinned so much they bend down each time weight presses against them. It used to be so sensational to hear those creaks at the top; a sound so foreign to everyone else and yet so familiar to Tara. Now, with all the steps creaking, the top two steps are two decaying disappointments rather than anticipated joys. If those steps could talk they would talk of scents and children's whispers and sledding with blankets down their slippery structure. Instead, they creak. The two at the top have seen so much all they can do now is sigh and age as the children's laughs turn into memories.

Tara gets to the top, and calls out, "Mom? Are you up here?" A thud comes from the small wooden door at the end of the hallway. A laced doily hangs limply from the middle of the door frame. "MOM? You okay?" Tara quickens her steps towards the door. She knocks lightly. The doily flaps above her head, nodding yes as if to give permission for Tara to enter. Tara turns the gold knob. It's cold, even though the vent overhead is breathing down hot air. The knob turns easily, but the door moves slowly. Something's on the other side, blocking its way. A chair? Her mother's bureau? How did she even get it up against the door?

"Viola, it's Tara, your daughter. I'm not here to hurt you. I've lived with you in this house all your life. Please, open up."

"GET OUT! IM CALLING FOR HELP!"

FIRE! FIIIIIRE!” Tara hears a window unlock and then the breeze seeps through the crack she managed to open the door to. “FIRE!” Her mother’s voice sounds farther away. Tara fidgets with the door frame, finally pushes it open, and sees the chair fall on its back. It hits the ground loudly, and Viola’s arms start to flail. Her hands don’t know where to go; she’s trying to avoid eye contact with Tara, while mumbling profanities in varying tones. Viola’s hair looks like someone’s been frying it. Her eyes are bloodshot and framed with dark circles. Her legs search the floor for somewhere else to go. They end up on top of Tara’s dad’s old leather recliner, the one he would sit on as he slipped on his socks and work shoes each morning. That chair hasn’t been touched for years. Viola’s feet sink into the cushion, and bring up dust that melds in with the sun’s afternoon rays. Tara sees the specks and wants to cough, knowing the dirt she’s now breathing in, but she doesn’t need to, so she can’t. Once on top of the chair, Viola starts to breathe a little deeper. She inhales through her nostrils, and out through her pursed lips.

“You don’t look that scary, now that I see you,” Viola’s lips start to spread into a grin, “Did they send you up here to get me ready for the day?” Viola climbs down from the chair like a child would from a tree house; steadily, eagerly, and determinably.

She walks over to her bureau. Pearls are laid out in a string along the mirrored surface. Viola sits on the embroidered stool, and props her legs up on the beam underneath the bureau. The mirror stares at her. It reflects the story on her face. No wrinkles are missed, no laugh lines are covered, no bags are concealed; the specks of green in her blue irises show proudly, the thinning of her eyelashes fade in with the redness that surrounds her brows. There’s a memory to the wrinkle above her left brow – in the sixth grade Viola began a fascination with eyebrow raising, but could never accomplish the action. So, for each day after that she would practice, and then, as she finally understood the joy of doing so, she did it everywhere she could. She raised her brow when the teacher called on her in math; she raised her brow when no one knew who had eaten the last of the bread in the breadbox; she raised her brow when Tom Young asked her to be his Valentine; she raised her brow when her mother was rushed to the hospital; she raised her brow when the funeral director tripped up the steps to her front porch; she raised her brow at her mother’s grave until it hurt. The other lines on her face trace laughter down to the roots of her skin and lungs, all the way

down to her teen years. Heavy laughter for the times at the summer carnival: where the lights and the sounds and the boys were like an addiction. She would go back every year, and if she was lucky, one of the boys would take her up on the Ferris Wheel, and make her giggle at stories he would narrate with nervousness. The bags beneath her eyes erase the nights of joy and hilarity. They started forming when Viola got her first real job. Just out of college, she decided to earn her money by working her way up at an architectural company just outside of Philadelphia. Her boss would leave early and arrive late. Each time he came in the door and went out the door he’d leave her a stack of papers with a post-it on the top. The messages were detailed and precise at first; she were to follow a strict set of instructions marked by numbers. Each number had an a, b, and c. She found these easy to follow and in consequence left work precisely at 9:05 each night. However, then the notes began to turn into just numbers, and then the numbers into dashes, and the dashes into scribbles, and soon enough each one became a puzzle that she had to solve before she could even begin each task. Viola stopped work at roughly midnight or one in the morning each night after that, and the bags began to develop under her skin. Viola looks into the mirror now, and sees only the surface of these marks; her brain forgets how to dive into them. It’s as if one of the many bridges she designed many years ago is finally coming to life within her mind, and because of the sleepless hours, the designs never thoroughly became a bridge, but merely fragments of wood that want to connect and can’t.

Tara stares into the blue of her mother’s eyes. She looks for the green specks like she used to search for bruises on a fruit she didn’t want to eat. She wants to see them so she doesn’t have to feel the blue swallowing up the green. They’re the color of the September seas, the color that would reflect on her and her mother’s face during the last stretches of summer. Her mother would always tell her about the sea grass and the green sea foam and how, if Tara looked close enough into her eyes, she could see the story come alive. And wow, Tara could. She could feel the waves every time she stared into the depths of her mother’s eyes. The specks of green were fragile reminders that more life existed in an ocean than just a wide-spread blanket of blue. Now, Tara spots three specks of that familiar green in her mother’s right eye. There’s something still in there.

“Viola, do you want your laundry done now or in the morning? Your basket’s looking full.” Tara nudged her chin towards the ivory

colored laundry basket nestled in the corner of the room. Gloves and scarves were mixed in with various linens and hats. This happened every week. Viola would mix up her hat box with her scarf box and her linen basket with her laundry basket, and eventually, they would all end up in the same basket, which Tara resolved to dub Viola’s laundry basket.

“I want my laundry done now, Tara. And while you’re doing mine, be sure to do Steven’s. And don’t forget to iron his dark gray suit, he cherishes that one.” Tara freezes. This happens even more than the mixing up of the baskets, and yet she always feels the air stand still when her mother talks about her father. She never knows how to go about it, talking about death, that is. How do you tell a woman who is a child that the person she has slept next to for thirty years is no longer going to fill that spot? How do you tell a woman who is an aging child that the father to her only daughter is lost, and cannot find his way back? How do you tell a woman who is herself, lost, the directions back to sanity? How do you tell a woman who is both so old and so young that there is no Steven, and even though there was a Steven, there will never be a Steven again? Tara’s exhausted, but she doesn’t have a choice to ignore her mother’s naive words.

“Viola. Your husband, he’s dead. He died in a fire eleven years ago. You are a single woman, living in Ashland, Virginia...and I am...I’m your daughter, Tara. I live with you here.”

Viola’s hands clench. The pressure of her rings whitens her blue veins. “I don’t have a daughter. I...want...I want to see my husband! Where are you keeping him! Why are you taking him from me! Give him back! I want to see my husband!” Viola picks up the string of pearls and hurls them at the mirror. Their hard surface leaves a scratch on the top corner. Viola picks up the necklace again, and pulls it harder and harder as she raises her voice louder, “I WANT MY HUSBAND! WHO ARE YOU TO TAKE HIM FROM ME?!” She’s shrieking now, and sobbing amongst thick and heavy inhales. Her face is red, and looks both cold and hot. Tara tries to grab her mother’s arm from breaking her favorite necklace. Viola starts to pound Tara; her fists matching the shapes of bruises covering Tara’s forearms. Tara slaps her mother’s hands away and then takes hold of each of her wrists. She matches the concave of her neck with the convex of her mother’s face. She cups Viola’s cheekbones in the palms of her hands, and looks into her eyes. Her eyes have lost any hope of green. All that’s left are story-less wrinkles and a lifeless ocean blue.

If We Die Tonight

Erin Niederberger

The world ends today. Everyone says so. It’s on the TV, the radio, the headlines of the paper Alexa Lewis skims while she eats breakfast. *My last breakfast*, she thinks with a shudder, scooping up the last drops of sugary milk from the bottom of her cereal bowl. Everything is her last, today.

Even in a world with no future, she’s still holding onto the past. She slipped out of the house easily- Dad’s deep in one of his drunken stupors again, big surprise- and now she sits on a rickety old swing in the park, remembering. The chain rattles and squeaks as she pushes herself back and forth, digging a trench in the graying mulch. She remembers when the mulch glowed new and golden, when children ran screaming and laughing around the jungle gym, and when a woman with long dark hair and eyes like the sky did the pushing for her. The image hovers for a moment in her mind, then drains away, like trying to hold water in her cupped hands.

“Mom,” she says, turning her face up to the sky. It’s clear today, with only a few wisps of feathery clouds interrupting the blue. It doesn’t mean anything, though - the end won’t come by storms. “It’s me, Lex. I don’t know if you can hear me. Maybe you’re watching. Or maybe you really did leave us behind without looking back, like Dad says when he’s angry with you.” Her voice trembles, but she steadies it. She will not cry today. “I want you to know that I miss you. And...and maybe I’ll see you soon.” She tries to smile, but the expression won’t come. No answer materializes, no whisper from up high or sudden angelic vision. Just the empty playground and the constant creak of the swing. But Lex isn’t expecting much. She never does.

Her father drank himself silly as usual, saying he wouldn’t even notice the end, just wake up and find his wife again. His words, heavy

with the sharp tang of alcohol, had come out fervent, if a little slurred. Lex doesn’t want to pin all her hopes on a heaven that might not exist. When she looks up at the sky, all she sees is clouds or stars, no golden palaces glittering far up in the air. This park is her connection, her one memory of her mother. If she closes her eyes hard enough, she can almost pretend.

But no children chase each other around the playground. No dark-haired woman pushes the swing for her daughter. The ridged plastic of the swing bites into her thighs as she sways back and forth, forcing the truth into her mind with blunt honesty. Everyone remains inside, spending their last hours with their family. Lex is the only one alone. All she has is her father, and she hardly wants to have her life end while dealing with a grouchy drunk.

She has one other person, she realizes. The person who’s been in the back of her mind all day - or if she admits it, quite a bit longer than that. Her best friend, who doesn’t even know she’s hopelessly in love with him. That was the way she wanted it. Still, now, now when the world is about to come crashing down, would it really be so bad to tell?

She has waited so long for a lot of reasons. Brian has a girlfriend already and doesn’t seem ready to give her up. She’s afraid of what his reaction would be, what it would do to the friendship they’ve kept going strong for over half their lifetimes. If she is willing to admit it, the secret has become a part of her, a dark weight she carries inside. What will be left of her if she lets it out?

A glance at her watch- just an hour left- helps her decide. “I’ll tell him,” she says out-loud, just in case her mother is listening, after all. “I’ll tell him now.”

The windows of Brian’s house are dark.

Something inside Lex twists, threatening to break, and only now does she realize how much she has been relying on this. How much she needs to see Brian and have him tell her that it will be all right, even if it won’t. He’s always been the glue holding her together, and without him she’ll start to come apart.

Taking a deep breath, she knocks. Three sharp taps, echoing down the empty street, startling a few birds into flight.

For long moments, no one answers. She imagines the family huddled inside, surprised by the interruption of their final goodbyes, wondering who would leave their own farewells to say hello. Eventually she hears footsteps and moves aside as Brian opens the door.

“Lex,” he says, a note of surprise in his voice. He doesn’t tell her to go away, which was what she was afraid of, but he doesn’t invite her in either. Instead he just stands in the opening, a little uncertain, as time ticks down for both of them.

Obviously, it’s up to her to say something. “If we die tonight,” she says, “I want you to know...”

And she stops. The words tumble together on her tongue like a bad pileup at rush hour.

She has been carrying them around so long inside of her that they’ve hardened, coal to diamond cooked in the heat of her hopes and fears.

“I love you,” she spits out because, really, what does she have to lose? But even as she says it, she wonders if after all this time it really means anything, even to her. Her love has become a child’s teddy bear, a toy carried around for comfort until it’s too worn for even the owner to recognize. Juvenile. Insignificant.

English Teacher: Amy McKitmis

He doesn’t say it back, or kiss her or anything like she’d daydreamed when this day was only a vague possibility. She’s glad of that. It would be too fake, and today, of all days, she wants him to be real.

Instead he opens his arms and she lets him hug her, resting her face on the shoulder that has put up with her small sorrows so long that she has probably left an imprint on the skin. “I’m scared,” she whispers around the knot in her throat.

“I am too,” he answers.

Her eyes prickle, but instead of tears, words come pouring out. “I don’t want to die. I’m only seventeen years old. I want to graduate high school. I want to marry and have kids and grow old. But I won’t. None of us will.”

“Maybe not,” Brian says. “But look.” He points down to the street and smiles. “See that?”

“See what?” she asks, sniffing. “It’s just normal.”

“Exactly,” he agrees. “Look.”

So she does. At first her brain protests, confused and weary from an emotional overload. Then she understands- why is it that Brian always sees so clearly? – and really looks.

The sun sets, throwing fingers of fire through the darkening sky. The edge of leaves are gilded, turning the road into someplace magical. A few birds soar by, dipping their wings and vanishing into the distance. Timed lights flick on in people’s windows. It’s beautiful, and it happens every night.

“They say the world is going to end,” he says, putting a hand on her shoulder, “and maybe it is. But I look out here, and I can’t believe that. The world’s still here, and it doesn’t look like it has any intention of going anywhere.”

“So what does that mean? That you’re right and the whole world is wrong?”

He shrugs and grins. “I don’t know. It’s still a good excuse to have Mom make cookies and hang out with my best friend.”

Best friend. The words make her feel so much better. He didn’t say girlfriend, but at this moment she realizes it’s enough.

“You should come in,” he adds. “Mom and Dad won’t mind. They know... how it is.” “Thanks,” she whispers, and follows him inside.

“Lex,” Brian’s mother exclaims. “Nice to see you.” Whatever Brian says, she looks panicked, eyes darting back and forth like a trapped animal, as if she doesn’t want a stranger encroaching on her family time. Lex can’t blame her. No matter how much time she has spent at Brian’s house, she’s not really part of their family.

“Hello, Mrs. Robinson,” she says, eyes downcast. “Sorry for bothering you.”

“It’s no trouble,” the woman answers. Brian sits down on the sofa and pats the cushion next to him. Before Lex can reach him, his mother sits on one side, his father on the other. She’s squeezed in right on the very end. Another not so subtle reminder that she doesn’t belong.

Brian frowns and extends his arm across his mother’s lap. Lex catches his hand, weaving her fingers through his. The countdown playing on the TV is running down, red digits flicking past almost too fast to read.

Ten seconds.

She’d never believed that your life flashes before your eyes right before you die, but it’s true. Maybe it’s a way for humanity to relive the good times, to show that life is worth living, even when it leads to such an awful thing as death. She sees her mother, alive and smiling, and her father back when he smelled of paper and aftershave rather than whiskey and stale cigarette smoke. She wishes they were real. Not in this life, but maybe in the next.

Nine.

She remembers the day they finally determined when the end would come, the product

of science and theology working together at last. She’d thrown herself on her bed and cried until her eyes were burning, screamed at the universe for not even being decent enough to last. “What

kind of luck do you have to have”, she’d demanded, “for the world to end before your eighteenth birthday?” She hadn’t even really lived. The world hadn’t answered. It didn’t care.

Eight.

Fifteen-year-old Alexa Lewis took a sip from her soda can and looked over at Brian

Robinson, the taste of cherries heavy on her tongue. I might love him, she thought. This is bad.

Seven.

Dad came home with the news when she was five years old, barely grown up enough to understand. “Your mother was in an accident,” he said. “She’s not coming home.”

Six.

Six year old Lex sat on the edge of the playground, tears streaming down her face. It was Mother’s Day. The whole class had made cards, even her. She’d been too embarrassed to admit that her mother was gone. Never coming home.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked up to see a boy from her class. Brian, she remembered. His face was open and friendly enough to convince her to tell the truth. “My mom’s dead,” she choked out. That was

how it all began: three words leading to eleven too-short years.

Five.

A tear travels down her cheek, even as she fights to keep all of them in. What would you do with five seconds to live? Her answer is absolutely nothing.

Four.

Maybe there’s heaven. Maybe there’s hell. Lex doesn’t know anymore. Maybe Brian’s right and the end really isn’t coming, and everyone’s going to look like idiots in a few short seconds. But maybe not. Maybe this is the end of everything.

Three.

“I’m scared,” she’d told him. She doesn’t know what this emotion is now. A mix of fear, apprehension, sadness, anger, and maybe a little bit of hope. Hope for what, she’s not sure. She’s afraid to look too deeply into her own feelings, afraid of what she’ll find. Lying to yourself when you’re about to die may be pointless, but it’s easier than facing the truth.

Two.

She squeezes Brian’s hand a little harder and brushes the tear from her cheek. Whatever hellish onslaught is about to claim her, it won’t see her crying.

One.

She takes a deep breath, even though it won’t help. The world stills. Through the window, she sees the last traces of sunlight slip below the horizon.

Zero.

The Dream

Brittany Barnstead
MILLSTONE TOWNSHIP, NJ

In the darkness behind my eyelids,

A ruffled owl flew over head,

Like dirty snow against the stars

And stared at me with eyes of piercing amber.

A little girl crouched under a jagged tree

In a forest the color of sorrow.

A mangled ragdoll sat at her feet

And leered at the sky.

Slowly, she peered through a curtain of dirty hair

And her white, sightless gaze stabbed my heart.

That was the first time I woke up crying.

The Tiny Lecture Waving Through the Tiny Galaxy

H. Vaughn Reese
SLATINGTON, PA

“I uphold the conviction that human beings are on Earth just to fart around.” – Vonnegut

Were you a phantasmagoric observer, completely pallid, transparent, you’d see the natural pattern of all energy or life. How looking in hindsight at our galaxy: it really is just several masses communicating with each other in circles, like atoms are several masses communicating with each other in circles. A really scary part about this whole thing, this whole ‘life’ thing, self-awareness, is that to the cosmos we will be a simple flash of light in a star. All of our history, thoughts, actions, in our tiny little lives, or even our tiny existence as a species, will be a brief flash of light to the rest of space. Then, upon being over, we will never have existed. This might be what hurts all of us so much, or where silence comes from, that nihilistic fact. Our brief flash of light as a star, when it reaches somewhere, will hopefully even garner some beings attention for two seconds; then hitherto our greatest purpose as a galaxy would have been to remind him he’s so small.

Go from this grand existence - something our minds can’t comprehend, all the reoccurring actions of everything, to something much smaller - to a classroom in the flat flat flat Midwest. A place where you can see for several miles all around, while the ever-pervading sky makes the ground beneath you seem like an island floating in this giant soup, or makes you feel like you’re in a snow globe. No hills, no valleys, a clean sheet of brownish-black farmland paper.

The students file in, immediately sitting

in assigned seats, they write down the current event on the board. It talks about how some nut-job broke down on television, attempting suicide, but he was stopped. Or maybe it was about a sleazy Senator who could play footsy with the brown-haired, red-fingernailed Secretary, while shaking a man’s hand to stab him in the back with the other one.

Assuming you are this ghost, you’d be able to appreciate all the empty space in a room. No one ever seems to notice that most of a room is empty space. Their fields of perception and vision get fixed on where life is. They forget all about the room. This is exactly how the universe and our solar system are. Most of everything is nothing. To try and scale things up: take a basketball arena, and we’ll say the Sun is a basketball sitting directly in the middle of the court, Mercury would be the size of a grain of sand at the foul line, Venus could be a cockroach (a tiny one) under the basket, Earth would be about two ping-pong balls past the bench or where the press sits right before the seats, Mars - a microbe in the middle of the stands, Jupiter would be a medium-sized bouncy ball at the top of the stands, Saturn’s a bent-up fork near the ticket booth, Uranus (a smaller bouncy ball) lands at the sidewalk by the doors, a marshmallow Neptune orbits in the parking lot, and Pluto’s an atom way the hell out at where you drive in. Like I said, most of it is absolutely nothing, no thing. A school, classroom even, could be compared precisely the same.

Knowing that most of everything is nothing, you can decipher that you are something! This may not seem like a very big deal at first, but when most of all the crap ends up as straight-out nothing, with all those possibilities (in every square millimeter life can end or take place), all that empty space, it’s actually pretty freaking crazy that you are alive, reading this right now! You are alive! You move! As a pallid, transparent, observer you could understand all of this.

When someone uses their life, be it through actions or words, they are like the sun burning hot. They give off rays of life you can choose to accept, mirroring it back, or shut it off. The teacher, as she speaks, gives off rays of light to this tiny Galaxy Classroom, where most of everything is still nothing, but there are a bunch of some things to-

gether in rows: “Class, hey, listen up, today we are going to talk about the system. The thing that artists are always raving about; and that same thing that politicians or lawyers really make no mention of because all they do is play by its rules. How many of you think that everything everywhere is planned by a group of people?” No one raised their hands. “Alright, kids, paranoid conclusions are something society looks down on. But the real thing you should pay attention to is how many people have them, and even more so, how actually sane it is for many people to voice casual belief in them. Every man’s got his conspiracy, be it Jews, the Bankers, Wall Street, Communists, Capitalists, the Government. You know what I’m saying, that whole ‘the governments using satellites to put thoughts in my head,’ thing.” With the class meddling in laughter: “Right?” Some of the little planets in the middle rows shifted in their seats to show interest. While Venus up in the front row stared harder, fixed her glasses, then her awkward-colored shirt. Mrs. Flew gains confidence: “I mean think about it kids, if twelve men could run Nazi Germany with one gifted orator, hiding the mass killings of an entire people (needless to say getting human beings to actually commit such heinous acts,) making them think they were winning the war, run one of the most successful propaganda campaigns, and keep all outside sources of information contradicting them hidden, what makes you think it couldn’t happen here?” This really turned some heads, like owls. Venus read too cryptically into it, and started getting mad. Here was this no-good social studies teacher questioning her doctrine of life, her daddy’s job. Her orbit began racing. The middle planets started picking up speed, thinking. Uranus and Neptune were already long-gone five minutes into class, doing their own thing in their own head. Whilst Pluto in the back, she sure looked disillusioned and amiss, but she just took her orbit a little slower, gaining a little more than everyone else.

“What makes so impossible, even disregarding razor-sharp technology, the idea of a few men running the world? Everyone playing a game they made! While they sit in a room just laughing, because it’s a big fat joke only they know the punch-line to! Even though the signs of true happiness point another way, these cattle still listen!” Again, the kids look uncomfortable, as most people get when they have to question

everything they've known. "What are you told? Go to college, work hard, get a job, work harder, die. Really, that's all there is to the Game. While people who choose not to follow get shunned. Why? Almost everyone who went nowhere played by their own rules, but so did everyone who went somewhere!"

Transparent observer, do you now see? You can watch the rays of life, of active thought, come off. To and fro they are received, filling the empty spaces of minds. Hither, thither, they deflect, are rejected. Look at poor Venus and Mars, they either fully accept, or reject. An open, subjective, existence has never occurred to them; because the game prefers numbers and objective thought. So now they suffer, unable to hold life, only deflecting it off then getting the heat twice as bad. (Venus and Mars are the planets too hot to live on, get it? Like the Dead smart kids who sit in the front with no personality, get it?)

"These are all things you should be asking. As teenagers you are the future! You're growing older this second, this one, this one. Albert Einstein, everyone know him?" They chuckled again, many sitting forward in their seats. "He said this once, and he was a pretty smart guy: 'The greatest obstacle to truth is the unquestioning trust and acceptance of authority.' You need to learn to ask questions." Ironically, Pluto raised her hand in the back. She never raised her hand. "Mrs. Flew, what's your conspiracy then?"

It got slightly quiet. Suddenly

the whole Galaxy went ass-forward. Mrs. Flew smiled, "that's a good question Sierra," smiling, "I used to think it was advertisers. 'The ones who control television,' I said! They ran by greed, ran us by greed, making everyone chasing after clothes or cars. We were all caught up in their fifteen-minute monologues, the Televisions creepy blue aura holding people like chains around their necks while getting fat, dying. They got rich off it. But, the only things you can believe are what you check for yourself. Go out and observe patterns, because they're everywhere. What I think paranoid people take in as a malicious system, is really just simple patterns they pick up on. They realize that anything could be possible, or that thoughts come from somewhere deeper than the mind, with Fear infecting that notion. Subsequently, they believe then their thoughts aren't their own. That someone's putting those thoughts there. But this just explains one type of insane. I think a lot of the pre-cautions taken in society are out of Fear. The cameras, the police, the politicians always standing the same way on stage, between all this I do not want to be a paranoid schizophrenic. Did you know that schizophrenia has much higher rates in urban areas? Just something to think about."

You could see just the right amount of rays hitting the Earth row. They began to breathe with thoughts of their own, not copies of the teacher, but of their own. "All cruel acts can be traced back to Fear or Greed. Which most Greed can be rooted to Fear. Fear is evil because it's one of our most basic

instincts. People Fear that they don't see the whole picture, then generalize a conspiracy. Rather than be taken by Fear, use your Fear to open you up to new ideas, to open you up to life. Fear acts as a catalyst of control for Satan in the Bible. Now I'm not religious, but it doesn't take a preacher to see that evil roots itself in people. When all you truly need is to enjoy every second you're given like an infant. For that is how we enjoy life at our most base level. If you approach all things with a balance, or willingness to seek for truth, you can see that the patterns aren't malicious, they're beautiful, like in Nature." She radiated warmth to all the tiny planets doing the dance she described around her. "And remember, 'questioning everything was never not an option' Noam Chomsky said that, he's a pretty smart guy too, who actually isn't dead!" The class laughed, the bell rang. Earth looked filled with inspiration and life and water, he walked quickly out. Venus, class president, got sun-burned with anger. Pluto slowly, confidently, made sure to be the last out of the room, so she could watch. Mrs. Flew sighed, then once more put up the current event. So it goes on, our tiny lives. You float away back where you came from, like a true observer does.

This tiny solar system, had just discussed a system.

"Either you repeat the same conventional doctrines everybody is saying, or else you say something true, and it will sound like it's from Neptune." - Chomsky

The Nuns in Trastevere

ANNE THOMPSON
BALTIMORE, MD

They steady each other – old weary feet on old smoothed cobblestones, fresh bread from the bakery, still steaming in their hands, wooden rosaries woven around their withered wrists. As the wind whips their habits behind them,

they pull their coats tighter, and retreat to La Catedral del Santa Maria en Trastevere. The old oaken doors pulled by ancient hands, the warm church welcomes them, enveloping them in comfort and God.

Your Heart a Perfect Globe (a cento)

Clara Berkeley
LIVINGSTON, NJ

This legend is uneasy, unreliable, wrong, and reckless. In a glare of shining brass, Dark signs crawl toward the edge of the page, Spiraling, arms-outstretched airplanes.

You have measured your life

In Chanel lipsticks under the radio, To squander as you please.

Terror is a mirror in which your eyes belong, Not accounts of dusk, Large as your heart a perfect globe.

Mermaids

Jessica Blau
MILTON, MA

You say we will pretend our drinks are sea water and we will drink to our records and that bitch who did the better butterfly. Your brother's car smells like rebellion, our hair like chlorine.

The car hits on your side. I see your neck break on the dashboard, a wave crashing on the sand and I think, I'm sorry you never got your first taste of something other than seaweed and fish eggs.

We are underwater as they lift me to a stretcher. I see your parents until I realize they're just strangers on the street, watching you, watching me,

like they've never seen something like us before. Salt burns my scissored skin.

Our breasts wash up against the lips of a scalpel, the silver metal shimmering through our blue blood. The surgeon says I'm lucky, I'll go back to being who I was before. I look to you in your hospital bed, see your heart monitor run dry. I know better. We have lost our tails.

Los Glaucos

Stephanie Kraynak
HATBORO, PA

Trod down and down again today, the beach is no picnic. Picasso paints a Soviet Spain: damp, dreary, muted.

The bread has slipped through his fingers. A moldy wave inquires of his bony feet

He edges away. He huddles.

From afar, a gull whines; no, it is his son whimpering from hunger.

He edges away, his soul ever smaller.



BRITTANY CHO BROOKLYN, NY

Susquehanna
UNIVERSITY
514 University Avenue
Selinsgrove, PA 17870-1001

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Susquehanna University's **Writers Institute** provides students with the opportunity to receive nationally-recognized undergraduate training in all forms of creative writing through its **Creative Writing Major**. Students work closely in fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, editing, and the technology of publishing with faculty who are widely-published authors. Small workshops and one-on-one instruction are central to the Creative Writing Major, which is enriched by the following programs:

The Visiting Writers Series: Seven writers visit campus each year (One of them for a week-long residency). Recent visitors have been Tobias Wolff, Andre Dubus III, Li-Young Lee, Billy Collins, Sharon Olds, Robert Boswell, Jayne Anne Phillips, Louise Gluck, Eavan Boland, Richard Bausch, Dagoberto Gilb, Ted Conover, Tom Perrotta, Carolyn Forché, Sue Miller, and Richard Rodriguez.

The Susquehanna Review, Essay, and RiverCraft: Three distinct magazines are edited and produced by students—a national magazine featuring work from undergraduate writers from across the country, a nonfiction magazine, and a magazine of fiction and poetry from Susquehanna student writers.

Endowed Writing Prizes and Scholarships: Ten writing scholarships of \$17,500 per year (\$70,000 total) are

available to incoming writing majors based on the quality of their writing portfolios. Prizes of as much as \$1000 are awarded to students chosen each year on the basis of work published in our student magazines and in senior portfolios.

The Student Reading and Chapbook Series: Ten student readings are presented each year. Every senior writing major edits and produces a chapbook that showcase his or her best work.

Internships: Susquehanna's Creative Writing Majors have had recent internships with national magazines, advertising agencies, professional writing organizations, nonprofit foundations, newspapers, public relations firms, film producers, radio stations, churches, businesses, and schools.

Graduate Programs: Within the past six years, Writing Majors have been accepted with fellowships or assistantships to such outstanding graduate writing programs as Iowa, Columbia, Hollins, Indiana, Washington, Houston, Arizona, Massachusetts, Johns Hopkins, Pittsburgh, Boston University, Ohio State, UNC-Greensboro, UNC-Wilmington, George Mason, Rutgers, Mississippi, and The New School.

In addition, the Writers Institute sponsors **Writing Ac-**

tion Day, which brings 150 high school seniors to campus for workshops in all genres of writing. Each summer, the Institute offers the one-week **Advanced Writers Workshops for High School Students**. Participants live on campus and concentrate on fiction, poetry, or creative nonfiction, working closely with published writers.

The Writing Faculty have published thirty-four books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, many of which have been used in classrooms throughout the United States. They have won major book prizes such as the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowships, Pushcart Prizes, and magazine prizes. They regularly publish their work in such periodicals as Harper's, Newsday, Virginia Quarterly Review, The Paris Review, American Scholar, The Georgia Review, and Poetry. Their work has been syndicated in newspapers throughout the United States and heard on National Public Radio.

If you would like to know more about the programs for high school students or receive information about the **Creative Writing Major at Susquehanna**, see our web site at www.susqu.edu/writers or contact Dr. Gary Fincke, Director, by e-mail at gfincke@susqu.edu or by telephone at 570-372-4164.