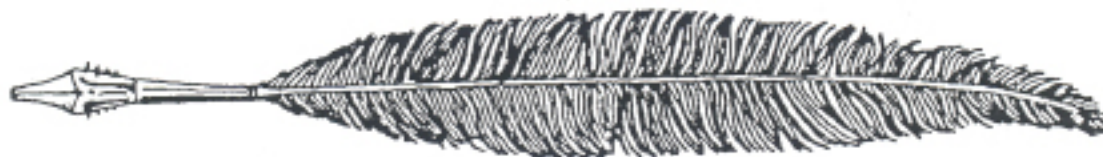


Susquehanna University

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THE APPRENTICE  
WRITER



Volume 31

\$3

# Introduction

Welcome to the thirty-first 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.

Susquehanna's creative writing major now enrolls 175 undergraduate students who are taught by six widely-published writers. Our program in Editing and Publishing gives our majors an opportunity

to showcase what they have learned by working on one or more of the four magazines the Susquehanna Writers Institute publishes each year. 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](http://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, Selinsgrove, PA 17870-1164. Please include your name and address on each page. The deadline is March 1, 2014.

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Special thanks to  
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# Heels

Nicole Acheampong  
SHARON, MD

I am leaning on a Benz, and I am going nowhere. Any other day, I would have stopped and said, “That is a good car.” It’s a car that gives you muscle on the road. Makes you go fast.

The man to the left closes in, and I swear I feel the vibrations of his feet through the cement. The three of them stand in a row, their lips peeled back like bed sheets. I could count the teeth in their mouths, if I wanted. I could flick the spittle on their chins, they’re so close.

Mama used to say my feet were fast and my mouth was fast, but my thoughts, my thoughts were too slow. “Think about now, Jaclyn,” she said when I was young, pressing her palms into my scalp as though to make her words stay.

“Keep up.”

One man leans forward, knees locked, so he’s straight like a bedpost. He stares hard at the parking lot floor for a second, then at my knees.

“Money,” I think he says, but now he’s looking at the car behind me, glaring at the headlights. I wonder why there are three of them, why one man wasn’t enough.

“We want money.” The middle man is speaking now, his voice clunky like boots, but loud and sure. I close my eyes and see miles and miles of sweet, green cash.

I want to say, “Don’t have any,” but the words are pulp sticking to the drinking glass. I’m coughing. I’m sprawled like a lab rat, flinching, small.

The three men’s necks are tight screws hammered into cinder-block shoulders. They are cartoons in the parking lot, each of them scowling like Wile E. Coyote,

like something mean and hungry.

People are never where they should be. People are in the hallways when your feet skid against the linoleum and your whole body trips. People are in the boardroom at the luncheon when you miss your mouth and in a moment are bathed in the goop of your juice. They are in the stairwell when you lift your hands in protest, a stiff smile still on your lips, and insist, “No really, I just want to be alone right now.”

People are not in this parking lot and now I want them here, I really do. I want people in the spaces between the cars, people running over from the office party two blocks away. I want people by the bus stop bench, peering over at me with a crease between their brows, people still prying, still trying to hear me, their concern alone saving me from these three men and the words I don’t have.

These heels will not let me run. I need to say right now that I am a runner. I am a runner and I can go miles, relishing the groan in my shins as I scale hills, laughing even as my breath grows sore and hoarse. I like to balance on the balls of my feet – it’s good for arch development my friends say, and I nod like its simple – and feel in my shoes the dirt, grass, gravel, whatever is pushing up and padding my soles in brittle patches.

I don’t like high heels much. I tried to reason with my mother once: “Heels are too grown, Mama, they are slow.” She gave me a frown and a voice heavy with Colombian women wearing espadrilles, slingbacks, and pumps. “Jaclyn, you are not grown, huh? Jaclyn, you are not woman?”

Sometimes things come out harsher with accents.

“We can play nice for ya’.” The man’s voice is a drawl. A silly, deliberate drawl. “I’ll count to three. We can make this so, so easy you’ll forget it by tomorrow.”

I want to be sassy. I want to make sharp quips, ask him, “Can you handle that? Counting to three, I mean. Maybe I

should help ya’?” but I know the words will not come soon enough, my words will not even bruise him.

The man on the left squints like a yawning cat. He scratches his stomach with one thumb, pulling the cheap fabric of his t-shirt taut. He sways back into the heels of his feet, knees still locked, then swings forward, pushing his face out in a rhythmic motion. It’s like watching a rocking chair, like how Mama used to rock me, back when I was little. We could sit for hours. The two men beside him cast fat shadows and wring their oily hands. This narrow strip of parking lot is crowded by their big shoulders. Why so many men? One for the words, dull, scary words, one for the glare and the last...for what? To swing his shoulders, lick his lips, and laugh his way home?

When I’m old, I’m going to buy myself a used Honda Accord, and paint it black, and scream up and down the same streets, thinking myself funny and smart and always, always fast.

I think about running and I think about tripping, about the time in a race when my feet stumbled, leaving me scraped, feeling stupid, and Mama pulled me from the track. She rubbed at the red, flicked back my hair. She told me the only way to completely avoid tripping was to never walk. I thought that sounded funny then, and I liked it, and I thought – I was so young and quick and silly then – I thought that I would never stop, thought that tripping was okay.

My mama, she used to move so fast that you couldn’t see where her heels touched the floor, you didn’t even know when they landed.

The men’s hot breath is on my skin. The one in the middle is grinning at the others, and he is saying, “We picked the right one.” He is saying, “This one is going nowhere.”

# Slapping Sacagawea

Kristie Petillo  
WEST ORANGE, NJ

My older brother hated slapping Sacagawea and Little Pompey.

That's what he called it: slapping.

His years of religiously carrying the big gold coin had strengthened his thumb, enabling it to send the dollar somersaulting magnificently. It was a great flipping coin, equally weighted and easy to catch, not that I ever got to send it flying, let alone touch it.

Our grandmother had given Raphael the 2001 gold dollar the day Mom had signed him up for afterschool help on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mom was fed up with having to pick out Raff's clothes and choose his ice cream flavors for him. Until age eleven my brother was incapable of making a decision, no matter how trivial.

He was able to limit the possibilities; he'd narrow the menu down to mac and cheese or chicken potpie and would then sit in silence, making the waiter wait until someone ordered him something. Raphael couldn't ever take the plunge into a choice.

"This is for you," Grandma said to Raff as our mother vented to our aunts about having found her eldest sitting on his bed, staring at a wall because he couldn't resolve whether to play with his trains or go on the computer. I was there in the living room when she presented the coin; Raphael's face lit up as if he had found pirate treasure.

"Trim the fat, then flip the coin," our grandma ordered. "Go through some elimination rounds if you have to; I don't care. Just flip the coin, as many times as you need, and move on with your day."

I suppose that's when my brother's life really started; he could now go to arcade birthday parties without worrying about the myriad of game choices, and could

decide against signing up for t-ball, opting for soccer instead. In some way, he really did fall in love with the Sacagawea dollar coin, expressed through a multitude of tan skinned, brunette girlfriends. He worshipped it for curing him, although I'm sure Mrs. Jessen, the school counselor, deserves some of the credit.

I watch Raphael close his eyes and opens his hand.

"You slapped her, Raffle," our little brother, Gabriel, reports as he looks over Raff's shoulder. The coin has landed on tails; Sacagawea and her son are face down in Raff's palm. My brother adored flipping his coin, but hated to get tails. He hated hurting her.

Raphael makes his a-deal's-a-deal face and puts more money into the slot machine. Gabe pulls the lever, and the machine rolls its mocking eyes at us. It plays its loser's anthem as it glares at us with a bell, a cherry, and an orange.

Raff curses, Gabe scolds, Raff swats the back of Gabe's head, Gabe whines, and I go check the pay telephones for forgotten change again.

It might sound odd, but I blame the eagle for our being here. If the Shoshone squaw had batted her big brown eyes when my brother had opened his palm, then maybe he wouldn't have put his brothers on a Greyhound bus and taken us away from our little, isolated corner of the Nevada sand to the outskirts of Vegas. Raising three boys alone must be trying for any woman, but the two packs a day recently landed our mother in the hospital. With no money coming in, besides for my meager stock-boy's wage and Raff's cashier's salary, Raphael decided to do something. Besides for the saltines and the canned corn, we had run out of food by the third week away from Mom. Raphael dubbed himself the man of the house and convinced me to spend the dwindling grocery money on bus tickets.

"How much money did we come with, Emanle?" Gabe asks as he watches Raff count our last singles.

"Three hundred dollars and forty-nine cents," I answer.

"That's a lot of money, isn't it, Emanle?" Gabe questions further. There is a two year gap between me and Raff, and a ten year gap between Gabe and me. He asks the question because he genuinely wants to know the answer, but it's just salt in Raff's wound, so he goes to whack the six-year-old again. Gabe leaps behind me, demanding for "Raffle" to stop it.

Gabe too is signed up for afterschool help, but it's merely speech therapy. I don't think he needs it; he says almost all his words fine except for three he says every day: Raphael, Emanuel, and Gabriel. Apparently, being able to pronounce your own name is a requirement for passing kindergarten, but, honestly, the only reason mom didn't fight his teacher a little harder was because insurance covers ST but not aftercare.

## Vestigial

Sarah Anderson  
EAGLEVILLE, PA

We parted at a time  
When you could have been anything,  
When you still breathed deep  
Amniotic breaths,  
When you had the possibility  
Of a tail,

You might have developed wings,  
I will never know.

I shed you like a skin  
And left you in winter  
As I moved towards spring,

I pulled air into my human lungs,  
In a binding mammalian body I walked  
Onwards and thought about you,  
Curled and amphibious and  
Left behind,

Forgive me.



Gabriel also can't pronounce Sacagawea, but that doesn't seem to have come up in class.

The coin's gymnastics aren't up to their normal, few-second-long grandeur. They are quick, cut short by my brother's impatient hand; sometimes he merely cups the coin in his hands and jingles it like dice. I'm starting to think that the two options are no longer to bet or not to bet but have changed to how much.

I'd be lying if I shook my fist and damn-ingly said that I hadn't wanted to come here in the first place. Raff knew that Gabe would be more than safe at home with me; I've watched him everyday since he could walk. I wanted to go to Vegas. Since Raff had no intentions of going to the main strip and only wanted to find a little Indian run place with a few one-dollar, one-armed bandits, I decided to bring Gabe along. I had envisioned Raff sitting down at helm of the machine, Gabe eating cherries from a Shirley Temple, and myself by Raff's side, cheering. Raphael wanted to blame me when our first stop's puny bouncer informed us that we were too young to enter, but apparently slots are like liquid courage: you have to be twenty-one, not eighteen.

Raff and I decided to lick our wounds at home, spending even more money on the taxi ride back to the bus station. The next bus that stopped anywhere near our apartment arrived in over two hours, and Gabe was already complaining, so we decided to take refuge in the gas station across the street.

After buying Gabe a cupcake that was probably older than him and settling my stomach with a ginger ale, Raff paced up and down the store's hedges of chips and trees of magazines. He was the one who noticed the beat up slot machine next to the filthy quarter machines holding candy. We didn't see it until he had spent twenty and won ten.

Ironically, Raff ended up finding what he was looking for. The gas station was Indian run, just not the type of Indian Raff had expected. The turbaned clerk averted his eyes from us, happy to be receiving money and not caring from where it came from.

The aforementioned bus left forty-five

minutes ago.

"Raffle!" Gabe cries. I lunge for my older brother's hands. However, it's too late; the gluttonous machine swallows our last bills.

"That was our way home!"

"We already didn't have enough!" My older brother glares at me as his hand finds the slot machine's trigger and pulls it. At first, I think his locked stare is out of anger, but really he just doesn't have the heart to watch the machine loll so carelessly.

The loser's music plays.

I thought Raphael would attack the machine, rip it from the wall and stomp our money out of it, but he just meets the gaze of the BAR, the orange, and the red seven, defeated.

Gabriel starts to cry; I don't think he knows exactly what happened, but he knows it isn't what was supposed to. All three of us wallow in the silence of the four o'clock news humming on the gas station's TV and the murmur of a man buying lotto tickets at the counter.

With a sigh, I decide to go beg for a little phone money. I start to pry Gabe from my side when I see the gold flutter once again, a beautiful three-second arch. There is nothing left to decide, but Sacagawea's face radiates comfort from my brother's hand.

Raphael swallows hard and puts his gold dollar into the machine's silver slit.

"Pull it, Gabe."

Gabe complies, and the slot machine starts to flip. Raphael closes his eyes and holds a kiss to the back of Gabe's head.

Fifty dollars in quarters tinkles out.

This time we both swallow hard, and Gabriel starts to cry again; I don't think he knows exactly what happened, but he knows it isn't what was supposed to.

"She really was worth her weight in gold," I muse.

"Go call someone." Raff gives me a handful of coins, turns me towards the pay-

phones and turns himself back to the slot machine. He blinks at the treasure, unsure of what to do. Gabe hops back on his lap and puts the coins in the machine himself. Raphael pulls the lever and becomes hypnotized, watching the slot's eyes somersault.

## Enter Kitchen

Emily Isaacs  
Pittsburgh, PA

You do not have to be a cook to enter this place. Glide your finger over stained recipes, as she would, mulling over the list of ingredients. See her forehead smudged with flour as she absentmindedly pushes wisps of hair from her face. Open the oven door and be welcomed by the sea of warmth, and the spill of apple pie.

Treasures she dresses on the refrigerator door— love notes with hearts and flowers and backward letters; the phone number of the third grade teacher who retired three years ago; the letter from her doctor, telling her the cancer is gone. On the windows, pictures made with a finger on glass steamed by draining pasta. Hear the clang of pots and pans as she calls you to dinner. Sit at the checkered table and bow your head at the place where she dabbed your mouth with a bib, set a flaming cake before you, showed you how to keep your adding columns straight, and opened the letter of hope.

# What Remains

Mindy Gorin  
ALLENDALE, NJ

Their dad bought a '67 Impala from a junk yard  
in '83  
and loved it like a third son before he left the  
key on the coffee table  
and abandoned all three of them for a better life  
in Hell.

Thirty years later, the car cannonades down a  
highway.  
The right headlight's out, and the left one

flickers, but no one else is on the road to see.  
It's so late at night that the clock  
has lost its coherence, and the moon's light  
flickers

in and out from behind dark clouds,  
illuminating the bruises on the car's dark hood,

the scratches on the windows.  
Bits of leather curl around the tears in the up-  
holstery  
where two long-gone children once carved their  
names

into the backbone of the passenger's seat, and  
in the back a leather

jacket lies crumpled in a ball.  
The toy soldier crammed in the ashtray  
stands watch as the living soldier behind the-  
wheel  
punches a button; the heat turns on with a shot  
of air,  
and the Legos shoved in the vents

begin to rattle with the plink only Legos in vents  
can make. The sound does not drown out the  
*clink*

of his kid brother's dead dog tags colliding  
where they hang  
from the rearview mirror, and the heat blasting  
from the Lego-  
infested vents does nothing to soften the bones  
of the lone survivor.



Brendan P. James BOONTON, NJ

# Brasilia

Luisa Banchoff  
ARLINGTON, VA

Nobody in this street but the salt.

Three more feet of snow in Manitoba but here just the empty rasp of sodium, licking absently at the wind, filling cracks that lace the lanes like stretch marks or border control. Salt signaling through the

fog, settling in the caruncula of morning as it blinks, aftertaste of seaside on skin from where it once curved the bends of bodies. Salt grains on a father's receding hairline sweating themselves into

a daughter's wedding pearls. Salty mouths swathed in jerky walking out from the corner 7-Eleven, spitting more salt into the curbside.

Where was this salt three weeks ago when she

trudged out under burgeoning flurries and shoved the roll of stolen quarters into the payphone there— see how the one she dropped begins to crystallize—

and punched in a foreign line that ends in Brasília because he is there, covering the leathery women in blankets and rebuilding the shanty schools, salting the earth, stitching up spines, handing out heartbeats?

When he picks up, she wants to run her tongue over the receiver but licks her lips instead, recracking their knitwork, and he can feel the brackish on her breath like the county council calling for more salt

to beat the snow to the streets. "An abortion," she says. My mind is made up, hums the wind, but you had a right,

clicks the phone cord stretching an equator between

them. Brasília is silent. The southern hemisphere holding its breath. Soon they hear a click. Quarters running out. Bridges being christened. Salt running her eyes through.

Afterwards, she spreads herself out on the street. Face down, the snow on her teeth could almost be mistaken for scripture. The flakes on her coat, the salt falling off

heavenly loaves as they are broken.



Nivy Zhu Lititz, PA

# Tangerine

Tessa Brandsema  
LANCASTER, PA

You're in a car with a boy, and he's neither beautiful nor broken. But it's not mind over matter so he gives you a smile like frost in July, his words tripping as they dress, your own staggering as if drunk and your heart is like a butterfly with a ripped-off wing, beautiful and clumsy and naïve. He laughs, sharp and poisonous, but he's a lighthouse in this tempest so you don't let him slip through your fingers; instead he gets tangled and knotted and your fingers turn blue, shaky and uncertain.

He drives on and you let him, you let the city signs flash by like neon strobes and you listen as he spins spiderwebs in the air, dewy and dark. He drops you off at a post-apocalyptic gas station, the tangerine fluorescents flickering as if in need of a defibrillator. You stand on the gum-blackened pavement just long enough to think about what lies beneath, the abyss of fuel under your feet, and it makes you think of something you read in a newspaper; deciphering the print as it danced, skirting around the edges of your vision. It was an article about a man who had died by gasoline fire, and it hadn't struck you as unusual.

The world is thick and rounded, not unlike your grandmother's old glasses, and you remember cracked yellow pages and cinnamon spice as you walk back to the highway, back to the road that leads to somewhere—because they all do, really, and even if you don't want to go anywhere, you'll end up in one place or another—and the traffic passes by like fireflies, quick and fleeting and strangely distant. You do hear them, though, leaning out of windows, calling to you, and you laugh and you wave and you stumble, because the tarmac is veined like a clumsy, shattered heart and you're wearing high heels. You're not sure why, exactly, but you are, and you like it—it makes you feel like you could conquer the world, though you know you must look something like a baby giraffe, tall and leggy and spotted with scars. It's intoxicating, being high on the nighttime, and you keep going, keep falling and scraping and rising, until you can

move no more.

You come to a room that's white and blinding, your skin feeling raw. There's a steady blip filling the room, but it flutters and dies when you rip the thin tubes from your arms. You manage to get down the hall and all but trip down the steps, slipping out a side door. The buildings rise like gravestones as you stand on the curb and hail a taxi in your pale nightgown, feeling like the wind currents carving through the city could lift you high and never put you back down.

The boy finds you again in the city of angels. It's night—it's always night when he finds you, when he knocks on the door of the apartment with the stolen key or the truck you sparked to life—and it strikes you that maybe he is an angel. He stands in the doorway and beckons, his silhouette a smattering of black against the tricolored sky and he glows, radiant and tattered.

It's the same car again, an old olive Impala with a crusted license plate and rusty door handles. He gets in the driver's side and leans over to open the passenger door, stretching, and it's in that moment you realize that he's a balancing act, a flight risk and a wild card with a homing device trained on you, and you need to walk him

like a tight rope, trembling on tiptoe. The leather seats nip at your thighs and you nearly knock the empty vodka bottle at your feet, and once again his laugh is harsh and venomous, his blunt fingertips tapping out a mismatched rhythm on the glove box, the box with the heart of a Glock and the skin of a thousand dollars.

You aren't scared—you don't know how to be, the ability to feel anything other than numb, numb, numb left you long ago. The boy parks at the edge of the road along the guardrail, and you can see where the ground has committed suicide, stopping so abruptly and raggedly that it makes you want to hop the rail and kiss the cragged cliff. Before you can, though, he talks, he speaks of imperfection and religion and the hope of tomorrow, all the while running his fingers over the slits in your arms as if counting them, cherishing them. You know this isn't love—you know he might not even be real—but for now you're happy to sit here and listen to his voice, honey-smooth and dark like violet wine, content.

You're in a car with a boy, and he's neither beautiful nor broken—but you are.



Allison Yuschik South Plainfield, NJ



# Atheist's Prayer (Reprise)

Camille Petersen  
MORRISTOWN, NJ

-for Moira

Did you know that God tried to  
Commit suicide

Yesterday. 2:15 P.M. The wind over  
The Hudson had the cadence of a falling  
leaf  
The sun was asphyxiated, disappearing a  
few  
Seconds at a time to catch its starved  
breath  
God plunged head first  
God knew, didn't wonder, such impacts  
Merit death

And then again this morning. 4:28 A.M.  
No overdose of air this time, just bullets  
Thinking about a North Korean girl  
Dance, dance beautiful brainwashed  
soldier  
The cameras are watching  
The world is watching

The God you don't believe in is watching  
Spin circles until the lies have found their  
rhythm  
You will die, dancer, if you don't love this  
sickness

Last words to the astronomers  
It is, in fact, impossible to view me with a  
Telescope  
Relinquish your lenses

To the mathematicians  
There is no formula for the color blue  
Or anything else worth seeing  
Burn the laws you live by

To the rest  
Nothing in particular  
I'm out of words  
You've turned them all hollow

It was a quiet plummet, a quick shot  
No one reported any disturbances

But I swear in the corner of my eye  
I saw frost wrap its spine around a flower  
I saw an atheist start to pray  
I saw a miracle get off crack and save a  
Future saint

Now. 3:50 P.M. Somebody doesn't know  
why  
Somebody like a dancer freed from the  
dance  
Like a lyric emancipated from the song  
Starts to believe something

(Dear God, Dear God  
Amen. Amen. Amen.)

## Fermin

Alicia Lai  
STATE COLLEGE, PA

Let in the bulls, take up fear—and now the streets of Pamplona  
welcomes the sledge and cut and haul and spilling.

You need to know how quickly the space closes between the runners and bulls.  
I am the customer; butcher, give me two pounds. In the flesh, hesitate. Ring

up a price. On the corner, a woman sells sweet sangria. Then  
she was wide-eyed with her limbs spilled over the contested ground

in a pool of red lace her bones unknit. Somewhere, the bull sees the shudder and charges.  
Somewhere, the handsome men shoulder her coffin and then the sky blushes angry

like a matador. We watch the bulls wrestle small buildings to the ground. They rein  
in a harvest moon, curl its spine, rub away the craters. Time to sweep the streets, Pamplona.

But you cannot go; you need to keep piety from pity, trace the veins of trade routes  
up Spain's collarbone, follow the bull through antiquity, its bones swollen in complaint.

You need to learn of the sangria, how small children with small hands offered  
tall glasses and then the bulls were wild, their bodies shimmering with hunger.

# Losing Touch

Elizabeth Vogel

CALIFON, NJ

I always knew that desire was a bad thing. To want is to lose and there is a place for people who would have been greedy.

## Day 1

My toes go first. Then the very bottom of my left foot starts to tingle. It's the falling of electric snow. Except it's rising, really, and only where my left foot touches lightly.

The feeling intensifies like someone turned up the voltage, but fades like when you turn off those new high efficiency light bulbs.

Now I can't feel my left foot. The nothing rises to my ankle.

Someone told me cancer used to spread. Years ago, before they fixed that. I'm not sure if you could feel it when it did. Doctors used to cut off infected areas. I'm not sure if you could still feel them after they're gone.

## Day 3

My right foot's gone, too. It happened while I slept last night.

I used to be a wiggler... my toes danced because they got rid of fullbody "movement in rhythm" years ago.

Before she went to the place for greedy people, Marge Eve told me that you always dream, even if you don't remember after.

## Day 10

I sit down. Today, I read a book. I try not to think about the characters or the narrator. I try to save my left shoulder. But I feel it growing warm. Something has curled up there to lizard in the sun, like gran's cat Dusty used to before all feline species went away.

But the characters suck me in and tell me secrets, and before I have time to consider the ways in which I am able to move my shoulder, it's useless.

## Day 11

Today I sleep.  
No good will come of it.

## Day 17

I suspect that some were offered a class in caring— one where they teach you how to not.

My mother clearly aced it because she walks without limps and sometimes reminds me of the ballet dancers people used to see on weekend nights in places that existed wholeheartedly.

I can't hide what I lost today.

## Day 19

Mother might have noticed something. I've been good in the schoolroom, but my knees have started to tighten and I've never experienced ache before.

I was surprised to learn there is a true-proper- word for it.

## Day 23

Today my mother tries to figure out a way to reverse it.

I don't understand why her toes do not tingle, why her lips don't freeze over, why her fingers do not disappear.

She rose her voice and I lost part of my torso.

## Day 24

I'm packing. It's difficult because I've never seen a real ballet.

## Day 25

Every bit of this building is in motion. I know it's intended to distract from the paralyzed inhabitants.

The walls wriggle at me and I lose my eyebrows.

## Day 27

When things happen to other people, it's easy to know hwy.

I thought fruits had gone long ago, but they have a few here: like grapefruit and the other misfitting ones.

I'm finding it difficult to eat today. I still do.

Some don't.

## Day 28

I've been enrolled in a class. Some of the people must be in charge because they stand taller and more like syrup that I think I've seen photos of instead of puzzles, which they've only done away with recently.

## Day 33

Today in class, they taught us what happens if you can't stop it.

I lost my left elbow.

I felt like I wanted to hide, but that's hard to do when you're roommate's stuck staring at you.

## Day 40

I know it seems like this all happens quite quickly, but there is something that tells me this has been building for quite a while.

My roommate could talk when I first moved in.

She didn't like to say much. We discussed the weather. And a species she called the platypus. She's older than me. But even she said they haven't been around for a while.

She lost her tongue today, though.  
For now, her name is Suria.

## Day 44

When the people in charge discovered that Suria had lost her tongue, they adjusted her injection and forced a tube down her throat.

But she hadn't lost that yet, so she still managed to squirm with the small bits she had left— like dirt in a cracked sidewalk. Like dirt in cracks if dirt could move subtly. If dirt could express how much pain it's in without words, without real ability to move.

Subtle was the wrong word to use.

## Day 49

I'm telling you this now because I know that when I'm at that stage no one will write about me.

## Day 53

I had to stop writing last night. I lost my right elbow.

There was a lie banging around my skull about people I've never met. They never got rid of lying because sometimes they need it. But people like me are expressly forbidden to create.

## Day 60

I think Suria lost her stomach.

There was a flutter of men and women professionals, all in stark colors, and beeps and I think I dreamed in some screams.

They have fixed her for now.

I don't think it's possible to exist long without a stomach.

I'm learning how to write without elbows.

## Day 61

Suria is gray.

## Day 65

I didn't think she could still make noise, but I heard it when she lost her lungs.

## Day 67

I didn't know that I had lost my tear ducts until I was wheeled to her funeral and I felt with my last finger on my left hand and there was no wetness.

## Day 71

I'm sorry, but I think I'll have to destroy this. Before I can't.

Before I lose entirely.

## Day 72

They have gotten rid of all uncontrolled fire.

They wont give us scissors.  
I no longer have enough fingers to tear.

## Day 75

I've developed a cycle. Twitches of joints or nerves. A series of reminders of what I still have.

But I can feel the freezing, and I can't make it stop.

### Day 80

I don't want them to do away with me as well.

My left eye wont blink.  
I think some people weren't meant for a claustrophobic death.

### Day 100

## God Was Sixteen

Joelle Schumacher

SHELTON, CT

THERE WAS A BOY: and he was young but not stupid, and innocent but not naive.

One day this boy came to a new high school from a town a thousand miles away, and sat in a desk exactly like the ones from his old school, and saw the faces of his old classmates on each one of his new peers. People everywhere were the same, he decided, and he moved from class to class with this sad little truth inside of him.

And he survived sophomore year, and he spent his summer in his backyard, and at the pond down the lane, knee deep in nostalgia for his old home and his old life, which he never even knew he would miss.

The boy came back to school quietly the next fall and was stunned when suddenly there was breath in the musty lungs of the school: sweet oxygen that took the form of a girl, tall and blonde, and oh so lovely. She sat in the front of his math class and stumbled through geometry without so much as a word to anyone; until they came back from Christmas break and all of a sudden the seating arrangement had changed and She was next to him; and She was witty and sleepy and too smart to be bothered with high school, and so She spent her days scribbling notes and poetry instead of paying any attention, and he let Her copy his homework and She gave him gum and chocolates whenever She brought them for Herself. He noticed She spent Her days torn between being two different people and always waited with quiet anticipation to see who would walk through the door. She might come in happy, not radiant quite like sunlight or any of those cliché metaphors, but with a quiet shine to Her: a warm and hazy yellow aura

around Her that made him think of lazy spring days, and picking dandelions, and holding someone's hand who you didn't love but you liked well enough, when liking was all you could really hope for. Other days She came in brooding and miserable and spent Her time at her desk with Her chin in Her hands with a sad, wistful look in Her grey eyes, and he had to wonder why She seemed most beautiful when She was so sad.

Junior year dragged by with nothing notable except his first kiss, given to him in a closet at a party he wasn't sure why he had been invited to; and his first heartbreak, when he met a girl at a weekend church retreat with shadows in her hair and eyes deep like the swimming hole he had left behind in Ohio; and it wasn't until he held her hand that he noticed her pale wrists had deep scars, four in a row: as rigid as telephone wires strung straight across pale morning sky.

One night in July, after his parents had gone to sleep, his only friend called him up and told him he was waiting outside his house. He slipped out the back door and into the pickup truck, and was struck by how remarkably easy it was to trick your parents when they don't realize you're capable of such horrific and ungodly deeds.

He could hear the music a full street before they got to the party and he wondered how nobody had called the cops yet; but then they took a sharp turn, and rolled onto the dirt road and he saw the lone house to which a hundred or so kids had migrated, like birds that flew south for winter. He felt giddy with the idea that he was breaking the rules for the first time in his life, and he sauntered into the white house with the idea that his life was going to change forever from this night, and even if it didn't that would be okay too; because it was enough to be alive.

He and his friend wandered through the rooms and his eyes widened at the girls draped like cats on the couches, and boys laps, and kitchen counters. The girl from his math class was dancing on a table with a friend, and they were both laughing and grinning and Her hips moved like the ocean, and he realized he must have imagined all those sad days She spent in third period.

Someone pulled on his arm and broke this trance, and so he followed them outside and down the concrete steps into the backyard. Almost everyone was in the house, but there were small congregations of boys in circles and a few couples scattered in the grass, whose existence was only known through the sounds of interlocking lips and sequential heavy breathing.

He followed his friend to a group of three boys, who all nodded at their

arrival with solemn precision and turned their attention to the boy making fire. He was tall; and had dark hair and a jagged smile, wolf's teeth hidden behind dark cherry lips. He took the lighter and lit something long and thick and brown, and took a hit.

The boy sat and crossed his legs like his friend had done and waited for whatever it was they were smoking to be passed to him. When it came he followed suit and sucked in, hard, until his lungs burned, and then he closed his mouth and choked on the smoke and started coughing so hard his eyes watered. Everyone in the circle laughed and his friend clapped him on the back. The boy who had lit it said, "Easy, Powhatan," and smirked as the group laughed even harder.

The boy wiped his eyes and tried to breathe and passed the blunt, setting the circle back in motion. He hit it three more excruciating times before he realized his kneecaps were tingling, and so he said, "My kneecaps are tingling," and everyone laughed some more and he laughed too and he watched it float, like smoke, up into the stars.

"Do you believe in God?"

The boy was taken aback by this question. They were still sitting in this group, the five of them, hugging their knees to fight off the chill. They had talked about how their high felt, they had talked about school, and they had talked about how hungry they were; now, it seemed, they were going to talk about God.

"I do," piped up one brave soul, and all eyes turned to him. He was tall and wiry, and had red hair and matching eyes. The boy knew him because he was the star of the basketball team and had won their game against their rivals in the last thirty seconds. "I think there's heaven and there's hell," the redheaded boy continued, absentmindedly pulling out fistfuls of grass from the ground he was sitting on. "I don't think God hates you for all the stuff the church says. Like what if you fuck a hot chick before you're married to her?"

They all laughed and the boy with the wolf's teeth said he didn't believe in God because there was too much wrong with the world, and the boy thought this was very much true but waited for his turn. And the boy with hands that fluttered like nervous birds told them that God was real but he wasn't the God they knew, because if they knew what God was really like he wouldn't be all that mighty and powerful after all. The circle shifted to focus on his friend, who shrugged a little and laughed it off like he was nervous but then launched into a rant about science and Darwin and how someone would had to have created God until he ran out of breath and sat back, clearly satisfied with his contribution.

The spotlight was on the boy now, and he knit his eyebrows and bit the inside of his cheek and willed the earth to swallow him up whole so that he wouldn't have to talk. "I think..." he started, and he racked his mind for something, anything to say but couldn't come up with anything. "I think..." And he turned around for a brief moment to search for inspiration and saw Her standing on the back porch, laughing quietly with a college boy, who was no doubt telling Her how good She looked in that red dress, and how hot She looked dancing up on that table.

He wondered if She knew She didn't have to wear that dress to make boys look at Her, and that Her hair and face and eyes were enough to make anyone stop dead in their tracks.

He wondered if She knew that just because She thought She was all mangled up and bruised on the inside, just because too many boys had told Her she was emotionally damaged, just because She felt like the one suitcase left on a baggage claim an hour after the flight had landed, emotionally damaged on a fucking merry-go-round, it didn't mean nobody wanted to peel Her skin back, plunge in and risk it all: to go so deep into Her, they risked drowning.

He turned back to the group and said, "I think God is dead." They all looked at him curiously, respect and caution in their eyes.

He looked back to the porch as if maybe She had heard this answer, but She was gone, leaving only a mist of perfume and a small puddle from the drink She had spilled.

God was probably off giving a lap dance, he thought grimly.

He wondered if She knew She didn't have to wear that dress to make boys look at Her, but then he saw the college boy come back outside without Her, with a new girl on his arm, and he wondered if She was ever really there or if he had imagined Her entirely.

The night crashed, stars showered the earth, and the party came to a halt.

All of a sudden there were cop lights, burning ecstatic blue and red the color of Her dress, and cop sirens, and the chaos of two hundred high school students bursting from the house, streaking off in every direction away from the swarm of incoming police cars.

The boy hurried back into the house to find his friend who had gone inside to grab them all pizza, and he wondered what was so Goddamn important about getting the food that his friend hadn't hightailed it out of there yet. He found him lounging in a chair in the kitchen, laughing hysterically at a brunette who had had the misfortune of falling flat on her face in the ensuing panic the police had brought. He yanked him out and shoved him out the back door and threw the empty pizza box at his head for good measure. He was just turning around to grab the truck keys when he looked up and saw Her.

She was at the top of the stairs. She was staring right at him, and he almost looked behind him to see if She was maybe looking at someone else. She was star-

ing right at him, and She was holding Her heels, ridiculous six inch heels, in one hand by the ankle strap so that they dangled dangerously, like someone losing their grip as they clung to the edge of a building with only their bare hands. She was staring right at him, and Her dress was rumpled, and he saw a black lacy bra strap standing like a soldier in place even though the flimsy straps of the dress, red like sex, red like Lolita lips, red like Christmas morning, had fallen off her shoulder.

She was staring right at him, and he was staring right at Her, and with a jolt She saw him, looked him straight in the eyes, and suddenly he knew that God was not dead, God was standing right in front of him in all Her rumpled, immoral glory. She was tan from days spent on the boat and Her hair was loose with waves and sex. Her skin was damp with sweat and passion, and Her lipstick was smudged below the right corner of Her mouth, and he had the sudden urge to fix it with trembling hands and to freeze Her like that so that he would never forget what She looked like. She recognized him, he knew She recognized him, even though She was eleven shots and two lines into Her night, because that, She had told him in the middle of one particularly dull math lesson, was the recipe for a blackout, and what was the point of a weekend you remembered? He knew She recognized him, and just like that he knew She loved him when he sat beside her in math, and he knew She loved him when he handed Her back Her test and smiled at Her shyly as though his A's did not trump Her C's, and he knew She loved him for not eye fucking Her like every other guy in the place had when She was up on the table (even though She looked so, so

## Villanelle for South Africa

Zoe Kurtz  
GREENWOOD VILLAGE, CO

"The image of the widow reaching out to her husband's murderer struck me as an extraordinary expression – and *act* – of empathy, to shed tears not only for her loss but also, it seemed, for the loss of de Knock's moral humanity..."  
Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

Dear widowed bride  
your marriage lost by a shot  
On a sad day when humanity hides

Killed by men who spread through the countryside  
your husbands from the plague caught  
by your country, leaving many widowed brides.

A people split in a deep divide  
the other man brought  
on sad days. Humanity hides.

People's races color the violent tides  
of a country whose battles children fought  
even on the day belonging to my dear widowed bride.

Forgiveness couldn't slide  
out from the memories of the lot –  
mothers shushing tears from times when  
humanity hides.  
Don't let his death fuel your bite  
how strange, the power of one fatal gunshot  
that widowed my bride.

Blame is for those who wish to chide  
Retributive versus restorative is the new  
thought  
What is your justice, widowed bride?

You live in the heart of the tried  
The loss of forgiveness is truly the sad day  
when humanity hides.

Progress lies in the reach of your hand  
Glistened with the tears of the will and will  
not.  
Here's your chance, widowed bride,  
Show your humanity will never hide.



good). And he thought, She loves me, and I love her, and I'll help her study and I'll learn all her favorite movies and I'll tell her it's not her fault that her dad left when she was six and hasn't talked to her since, and she'll stop wearing eye makeup when she goes out, and I'll take her to a concert for her birthday and kiss her on the cheek when her favorite song is playing, and I will tell her every goddamn day if I have to that she's beautiful in the same way that six year old girls are beautiful because they pick dandelions from the spring grass and call them flowers.

She opened Her mouth, as if to say something, and he noticed Her eyes were wet and Her mascara had run. In the time since they had locked eyes She had begun to cry, silently but with great effort to not collapse to the floor in a heap of despair. She was sobbing and Her chest, that perfect chest, was heaving, and he swore he could see Her heart pounding a hundred beats a minute like the taptaptap-taptap of fingers on tables, fueled by black coffee and deep anticipation.

He was about to call out to Her, to tell her he loved Her, when the door behind him slammed open with a foot that kicked it down and he turned away, for a fleeting moment, to see who it was and he realized it was the police.

There was a stupendous crash and his head jerked back and She was crumpled on the floor in front of him, fourteen steps lower than She had been just a second before.

"Casey?" he whispered as a burly cop knocked into him.

She didn't move. Somewhere, in another room, a girl was crying.

He looked at her, lying on the floor, and vaguely realized She would hate for anyone to see Her like this, passed out in Her blood red dress and missing all the fun.

He nudged Her gently with his foot, just to make her stir. He heard static voices over the police radio as they crowded around him: "No signs of the owner... some two hundred kids...Girl appears to be in critical condition..."

He looked around for the girl in critical condition.

The radio squawked again. "Coke lines in the bathroom..."

His eyes widened.

"Casey!" he shouted, and dropped to his knees, the party spinning all around him as the pigs swarmed the house. He put one hand on Her chest, that perfect fucking chest, and the world stopped when he realized Her heart wasn't beating any-

more.

The party made the papers, because they had broken into an old farm when the man who lived there wasn't home and there was thousands of dollars of damage and a girl had died.

The autopsy said it was an overdose.

His mother read it the next morning and commented how it was a terrible, terrible shame, and that the girl had been beautiful. She sipped her tea and looked up at Him and said, "Jonah, did you know her?" and all He could think of was bright red silk.

He wanted to tell her about the mood swings and the deep melancholy that Monday mornings always brought, and how she sometimes laughed to herself when she was reading a book under her desk, and how she had liked to joke to Him about the stupid names the kids in their textbooks had. He wanted to tell His mother that He had been there, that He had seen her body as the life spilled from her mouth, that He had dropped to His knees and felt her still beautiful face and put His head to her still warm chest and traced His fingers on her still wet lips, but He didn't know how to tell His mother any of this without telling her that He had killed her, that He had looked away, that for the first time in her life, no one was looking, and so He just said, "No."

And so she finished her tea and went outside like the world was still out there.

He wondered how the newspaper had managed to write an entire article in the space of only a few hours; how they had managed to compile a thousand words on a party between it being raided at two in the morning and the time the paper arrived on his doorstep at eight. He wondered if the obituary would come the next day or the day after that. He decided He wouldn't read the newspaper anymore.

He sat at the kitchen table and watched His coffee grow cold and wondered where she was now.

Senior year started and He went to his calculus class first period. He sat in the back of the room and watched His classmates tell each other a fun fact about themselves. When it was his turn, He stood up and said, "My name's Jonah, and I hate the stupid names they give to kids in math textbooks," and everyone laughed, even his teacher.

They had a moment of silence for her that day, smack in the middle of first period, like they had maybe forgotten about her on the morning announcements and they couldn't bear to waste time in their precious fucking schedules between the periods. As He walked in the halls after

the bell for second had rung, He wondered how He could breathe without her there.

He saw the boy with the wolf's teeth at lunch, who nodded at Him and grinned dangerously, then pulled a joint out of his pocket and put a finger to his lips.

They snuck out the side doors of one of the forgotten hallways and sat down at an equally forgotten picnic table to smoke it.

They were both silent.

"I heard you were there when she died," the wolf boy said, stepping on the roach with a combat boot to kill the evidence.

The boy was silent. He didn't trust himself to talk about it, especially not to someone who would understand.

"She was something else, man," the wolf boy continued. "I was a little bit in love with her, if you want to know the truth."

"Weren't we all?" His response surprised even himself, and the wolf boy looked at him in curious wonder and nodded solemnly, nodded like he knew his wolfish, stoner pain did not, could not, rival the innocent pain which his companion felt every morning. He cleared his throat. "Do you think she's all right now?"

The wolf boy sighed again and then grinned wistfully. "Dancing on a table somewhere, I hope," and then he stood and began to walk back up to the school. He stopped at the door and turned around, and all of the sudden Jonah could see in his dark eyes that he was hurting too, hurting every morning and every afternoon and every night and in those intervals between seconds, whatever they were called. His pain was just as monumental, He realized, just as real, and He was selfish to think He was the only boy who had ever loved her. "What was it you said?" the boy called back to Him, shouting. "God is dead, right?"

The boy looked at him and closed His eyes. He tried to taste the smoke from that night, tried to feel it like a cold waiting in His chest. When He thought He could feel that pungent, acid scent on His tongue, and in His nose, and all the way down His throat to His lungs, He pictured her as He last saw her: at the top of those steps, and He frowned. God was sixteen, He thought, and wore a bright red dress.

# Airplanes

Sophie Kaufman  
MILTON, MA

I've been scared of them since September 11, 2001.  
In 1974, Muhammad Ali beat George Foreman in Zaire.  
Dismissed from pre-school before recess, I ran in panic  
through screaming parents and DC sunlight into my father's unbreakable arms.  
In a swing, he regained his title of The Greatest,  
a slur of words gone unnoticed in the heat of the moment.

Most crashes occur just after take-off, and I grab my father's trembling hand.  
Muhammad Ali had to settle for a draw with Ken Norton in the fifteenth round.  
Instead of stopping, his fingers continue to shake,  
sending vibrations up as the plane gains height.  
It's a different path every time. It doesn't matter.  
Even The Greatest can't ignore  
the signs forever.

I remember when I was told that my father had Parkinson's disease.  
Muhammad Ali retired in 1981, his career ending in a loss.  
Sitting in the straight-backed position as the plane shuddered, I thought  
only of the park where my father's arms waited for me at the bottom of the slide.  
For the most recognized person in the world, this was the final round,  
tremors shaking up his arm, his words slurred in the terminal fight.

# North Avenue

Zoe Jeka  
SEVERNA PARK, MD

we all seem  
to have a history of breaking  
apart and rafting together,  
a mound of soap  
suds in my sink knotting  
above the grated drain, chewing each  
other into something  
smaller.

dusky people brewed  
into the curbs,  
their stained coats beside our salmon  
hands  
looks wrong: "i thought  
this was my city"—  
we all confide in ourselves, and catch  
the whisper before it goes down.

they are boldface but also treading  
along the sides of highways,  
stepping into our car horns with  
kindergarten letters on cardboard  
so that eventually we might call it a conflict  
of interest, a dogfight, froth collecting  
in the gums, so that eventually we might  
find each other  
decorously spaced,  
making black holes of the cavity between  
us—in the meat  
aisle, the bus station, the rims of neighbor-  
hoods—  
so that eventually we might call  
it an explosion, so that eventually

we might call it a tidied candle  
and leave it.

## What We Would Give Up

Katherine Martini  
HO-HO-KUS, NJ

### Part 1 What We Would Give Up -Marie Howe

Next time you ask me a question I will respond, "placenta." Something that makes so little sense that maybe you'll be half as confused as I was. Next time you tell me you love me (as a friend, of course) I will let out a high-pitched chuckle and call you a whore. Next time you reach for my hand I will yank it away without bothering to disguise my disdain, because that is what you deserve.

You're stupid. You're stupid and beautiful and everything everyone told me I needed. You are probably the most beautiful human I've ever seen; I keep going back and forth between thinking you're out of my league and that I deserve better. It hurts. So next time you ask me what's up I will not say "nothing." I will tell you that you are up and I am down and I have no idea what that even means. I don't want to lose our little field trip to Times Square. I don't want to lose the Hershey's Chocolate Store and Mumford and Sons and your arm around me. I don't want to lose this image of you on my

brothers' bed playing the Jonas Brothers and telling me about your life and me telling you about the hospital and you saying everything will be ok.

What would you lose? What would you even give up? A short girl in a skeleton t-shirt and leggings with an almost-afro encircling her confused head? A friend? An acquaintance? Your friends little sister? I don't know what I am to you anymore. Why did you call me beautiful? Special?

Am I a crazy? Probably. Am I all here all the time? Probably not. Am I ragged and run-down and a myriad of other distressing adjectives? Hell yeah. So I guess that's all you'll be missing: me missing you. It's time to give you up. Say goodbye to the pretty boy with the metro card. Say goodbye to the quirky girl with the curls. Goodbye.

### Part 2 I'm having coffee at Starbucks with my new boyfriend

when you text me. Ironic enough, isn't it? Although you're disinterested in me you have a seemingly enthusiastic curiosity about my love life. Care to explain? I didn't think so. As I sip my pumpkin latte he asks about my brother. It makes me think of NYU which makes me think of you which makes my stomach drop as I clench my hand around my iPhone. To check or not to check?

My furry high heels are giving me blisters. I wish I was wearing my gray Keds and I wish I was here with you. I wish

I was anywhere with you. But that's beside the point. We're not exactly chummy anymore. You want to know what's up and I want to unironically say up yours, stab you with my pencil and watch your medium velocity spatter hit the wall.

When my new boyfriend speaks I hear white noise. When you spoke it made me flushed. I turned into a pink Care Bear and the air filled with sweet pea flowers and polo cologne. When you touched me an electric ripple reverberated up and down my spine.

He wants to go get wings and drumsticks and watch the game. I'd rather drown myself in the low tide. You would have made me watch football too; the only difference is I would have done it. I did do it, my leg pressed up against yours, shouting, pretending to care.

He calls me his sweetheart, his little bunny. You never called me anything other than Katy. I liked that. I just liked you.

# The Warrant

Emmie Atwood

MILTON, MA

At ten, my uncle shot his sister's dog. On a shelf in the cellar, the rifle sat almost dead behind jars of syrup and canned rhubarb, the trigger stale, shellac untouched. He rummaged for it then took the dog out to the garden fence where every June he and my mom would sit counting the house lights that dotted the hill. Its name was Sadie. She was a mutt and had a dark coat, dirty like my uncle's fingernails, her tongue with purple spots on it. I know because on our piano there was a photograph of her, ears back, sitting by that same fence with her tongue lolling out, sweating summer.

We never had a dog but I wanted one so bad that in first grade, I wrote the word dog over and over again on a piece of lined paper, partly to practice my handwriting, partly to show off my spelling skills, but most because I wanted to leave the paper, folded under my mom's pillow, for her to find and know. I kept expecting for my birthday or Christmas that I would unwrap a puppy, find one waiting for me, first wanting a beagle then a golden retriever then a mutt like Sadie to be hiding under the tree. Dogs were inhuman. That fascinated me, having a cross-species relationship, communicating with an animal we diverged from far back in our evolution. All animals chilled me in that goose bump, fluttery way—let me get closer to them and try to understand.

When I was seven, I decided to study squirrels. I wanted to research any kind of animal, like those scientists on Animal Planet, and squirrels were the most abundant in the suburb where we lived. On the porch, my mom helped set up my easel, the one Santa had given me three months ago. I used crayons to sketch out the mammal's outline and colored it gray with watercolor. Later my mom stuck the drawing on the fridge. Sometimes I wrote in a field journal about what I had named each squirrel—Donald and Fuzzy, Spencer and Liz—and how they behaved, when their whiskers twitched. Sometimes I made up families of squirrels, brothers and daughters and grandfathers, and their stories too, like how Donald was the bad guy and Liz and Spencer were married.

My mom told me her brother loved animals too. When he was my age he brought home creatures from the woods and sometimes accidentally set them loose in the house, snakes and lizards and mice. One night when the whole family sat at dinner, she said they heard the piano playing. My grandmother thought the crazy neighbor from down the street had trespassed inside.

My mother thought it was a ghost. But it was only the mice my uncle had captured, scurrying up and down the keys.

One night on the phone, I heard my mom say though her bedroom wall how I reminded her of him, with my field notebooks and sketches, my bookshelves filled with animal books that I never read, just looked at the pictures. I stayed outside her bedroom listening to the conversation. Listening to my mom talking on the phone, I could always guess who she was talking to by the way her pitch changed and what she said—whether it was a man or a woman, a family member or a friend. With a man, she spoke kinder. With women her guard went down and her voice undressed, the same as when she talked to me. Of course with my uncle it was all different, her voice caring and concerned, words coiled tight like a slinky. She said let me a lot too.

"Let me think about it."

"Let me have a moment to..."

"Let me talk for a second?"

"Greg, let me."

When I turned nine, my uncle asked my mom if I could spend the weekend with him. He had come to Westchester maybe twice before when I was younger but I had never been to New Hampshire. My uncle lived on a mountain peak far from cars and stores and other houses. One Friday in March I went. During the car ride up, my mom told me she was unsure what exactly my uncle Greg's goal was here. Probably, she thought, it was to get closer to me, but with Greg you never know. My mom parked the car at the end of the dirt road and walked me up to the cabin. It had a porch that wound round the one story house. My mom kicked the red door open, and steered me inside by the shoulder.

"Greg?"

Atop the heater were five bright orange winter hats and a pair of wet socks. Books were piled neatly on top of shelves and the refrigerator had one magnet, a tangram square split into six pieces. One piece was missing. I walked toward it but my mom's hand held me back.

"Unbelievable. I told him we'd be here at two. Stay here, David."

I told her I just wanted to play with the magnet pieces so she let me go, turning instead to the cabinets to rifle through cereal boxes and jam. I asked her what she was looking for. She said "him" and laughed.

On the counter, a piece of paper

was pinned underneath the salt and pepper shakers. My mom picked it up and rolled her eyes.

"He's finally done it."

"Why? What is it?"

"A warrant."

"What's that?"

"It's about hunting." She crinkled her nose and sighed again.

"What's wrong?"

"Well your uncle and I have different opinions about that."

My uncle came through the door with boot laces tied between his fingers and a root hanging from his mouth. He was chewing on it. Before saying hello, he detangled the tree root from his teeth and handed it to me.

"Here," he said, "it tastes like root beer."

"Don't put that in your mouth, David."

"Margie, it's not poisonous."

"It is if it's been in your mouth. Don't eat it, David."

I touched my tongue to the bark. It did not taste like anything. My mom took the root from me. The cold had plastered my uncle's long grizzled hair to his cheeks.

"Greg, where were you?"

"Have you been waiting?"

"I said we would be no later than two."

"I thought no earlier."

I turned back to the tangram puzzle on the fridge. He asked me if I liked that and I nodded. My mom squeezed my shoulder and started to talk to my uncle about bedtime, no peanuts and being safe. When she left, she gave me a tight hug and told me to call if I wanted to come home sooner than Sunday. She hugged my uncle too and left.

In the kitchen, I stayed adjusting the magnet pieces on the fridge, my back tingling with my uncle's stare but I ignored it, hoping he would talk first because I didn't know what to say. After a few minutes, he started fumbling around the kitchen, opening cabinets just like my mom had done.

"Look what I've got!" he said,

scooting up to sit on top of the counter. I turned toward him. He was peeling open a box of cinnamon sugar pop tarts, then tearing off the silver wrapper of one inside.

“You like these? Wanna split one?”

“Sure!” I smiled and walked toward him. I didn’t like pop tarts much. They tasted like frosted cardboard. My uncle tapped on the counter next to him so I hoisted myself up and we sat together like that, eating our pop tarts, some crumbs nesting themselves in his beard, much of my pop tart accidentally falling to the floor. He didn’t seem to mind.

“So I thought you could sleep either on the floor in my room or on the couch out here?”

I nodded and shrugged. “Both are fine.”

“Well why don’t we just bring your bag into my room and we can decide later. I want to take you out into the woods today.”

After sliding down off the counter, he flopped my small duffle onto his shoulder and gestured me around the corner. We walked first through the living room, the couch leaning against the far wall that faced the window, a coffee table a few feet in front of it, which he told me he could move forward to make room if I wanted. Outside the window hung a birdfeeder. In my socks, I padded after him into his room. First looking at his dresser then at the balled up t-shirt flung in the corner, I noticed almost immediately the exact same photograph of Sadie we had at home sitting on his bedside table. Staring at it, I shivered. I never thought my uncle would have that photo too, a strange reminder to glare at him before he turned off the light each night. I went to it, picking it up. My uncle put the bag down on the floor then came up behind me.

“Your mom has that too?”

I nodded.

“Yep,” he said, then paused. “She needed it.”

We both looked at the photo. That was strange to think Mom needed it; she barely even looked at the photo, mostly my just pulling it out sometimes to pretend Sadie had been mine too. I wanted to ask my uncle why he had done it but restrained, as if prodding for the answer would awaken some scary side of him that had long been put to rest. I knew then I wanted to sleep on the couch instead. My uncle’s hand was soon on my shoulder,

steering me out the door like my mom does, saying, “Let’s get this party started, huh? To the great wilderness we go!”

That Friday afternoon, he took me out into the woods, both of us layered in fleeces and orange hats. After hiking up long muddy paths, we found a black rat dead in a tree root, its tail barbed like wax. He told me that black rat was pregnant. With his knife, he sliced the rat from its uterus to its neck, peeling back the skin so the dead pups inside could kiss the air, dead in their dead mother’s stomach, their mouths stuck sucking the milk.

“Why did you cut it?” I asked.

“Because you needed to see.”

I wondered if the pups inside had felt death when they had not even been completely alive. My uncle tossed the rat on the ground and beckoned me up the path.

We followed a blue plastic tube that snaked around spruce trunks and stream beds, and paused at a spring of water sprouting up from some ice.

“This is the freshest water in the world,” he said.

I nodded.

“Why don’t you lean down there and take a sip?”

He held me around the waist and I pressed my mittens into the dirt, my knees dampened by the bank, twitching my tongue out until it tasted water.

“Yup,” I stood up, brushing dirt off on my corduroys, “very fresh.”

When we got to the end of the blue tube, there were other tubes there too, red and pink and gray, all connected to a big white jug half full of sap. My uncle unscrewed the cap and peered inside. He kept nodding, looking around and then nodding. He said it was time to take this “bad boy” down to the shack. He just had to get his pick-up.

“Should I come?”

“Nah, stay here.”

“Alone?”

“You’ll be fine.”

As I waited in the woods, I counted the green fronds surrounding me, careful not to move even a sneaker. Soon my uncle came back with the pick-up and finding me there in the same position, he beckoned me over and said,

“Now, David. You’re not scared of the woods are you?”

“No.”

“The woods should be scared of you. Right, David?”

I nodded and helped him haul the white jug into the back of the pick-up and we started down the mountain until we reached the sugaring shack. It was a quarter mile from his cabin with steam misting the windows and heat turning the wood panels to log. It sagged in the middle of spruce trees and pines still lined with frost. A tractor rusted at its side and when we passed it, my uncle said it needed fuel. Inside the sugar house I sat on a chair near the door as he combed a metal tool through the sap gurgling from the vat to remove yellow foam and forest pieces. He asked me to hand him one of the jars stored under the bench. Filling it up, he handed it back and I sipped, hot syrup sliding down my throat.

He took a jar too and together we drank.

When he finished, he slapped my thigh with his rough glove and said, “I want to teach you my forest. Back to front.”

My eyes stung from the steam. The shack was getting very warm.

“How big is it?”

“Ah. Who knows? It goes from wherever our property begins to wherever it ends.”

“And where’s that?”

“Dunno.” He took another sip from the jar.

He told me he liked hiking in sugaring season, when the ground was still cold but melting and the air drying, when his boots still got wet after walking. For the rest of the afternoon, my uncle showed me how maple branches are arranged in their opposite pairs, one then the next, and how their buds are rounded and red. By the evening, we could identify a maple from a ways away.

Late that night, as I lay on the couch before shutting my eyes, maple trees and dark dogs filling my thoughts, I watched my uncle come out of his room. I don’t think he remembered I was there or knew I was awake. He pulled on his boots and left the house. My body froze over completely like ice glassing over that freshwater spring, and all I wanted was my mom to come and pick me up. I thought about Sadie and that scary side of Uncle Greg awakening again. Maybe I should call



so she could come sooner than Sunday. But very quickly my uncle returned, before these thoughts had the chance to solidify, coming back through the creaking door, a long object perched on his shoulder which he removed to place on a high shelf above our coats and mittens.

When he walked back through the living room, I asked him, "Uncle Greg? What were you doing?"

He jumped, startled. "Damn it, David, I didn't realize you were awake." "Sorry."

He came to sit on the end of the couch and told me at night he sometimes walked just a few steps into the forest, just to survey the woods.

On Saturday morning, I woke to my uncle's side profile. He was sitting on the armrest of the couch, watching the feeder. Birds flocked it, pecking for grains, their feathers of many different colors, swooping down two at a time, then two flying away to flee the crowds. He motioned for me to sit up from my sleeping bag, scoot myself over and watch with him. Together we drank maple syrup stirred with boiled water, sipping it as tea. A chickadee scooped up some seeds with its beak.

"So you know what I've decided to do, David?" my uncle asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his thighs. He put his mug on the coffee table.

"Keep the bears away?"

He chuckled a little, remembering last night. "Nope."

"Get new fuel for the tractor?"

"No. I'm gonna put this hunting permit to some use."

"Whose hunting permit?"

"Mine."

My uncle mimed shooting at the birds with his hands as if he were carrying a rifle.

My mom told me men sometimes hunted their own food or hunted only certain populations like white tailed deer. They did not kill does or fawns and were careful in their shooting, wanting only to help regulate. Or they killed because if they were to eat meat they thought they should find their own. Ethics, they called it. Uncle Greg was trying to walk their same path, she said. She said she could never hunt herself—she did not have the heart. She also told me I should never hunt either.

"It will follow you, David," she said.

I shook my head. Something was building heavy inside me like dead rats. Standing up from the couch, I tripped over my sleeping bag, spilling a little syrup on the rug. I fumbled my way out the front door. My uncle did not follow nor try to stop me.

On the porch steps, I paused, wondering where I could go. I wished I could skip time like stones to Sunday, or maybe I could just run home. The woods were clouded deep in morning, wind whipping cold against my skin. I sat down. A squirrel scuttled by the shed door, nibbling at a seed nuzzled between its two claws. The trees breathed early day, rocking with each breeze, towering tall above me and the ground and the soil, and this squirrel twitching by the shed.

Soon my uncle came out with a blanket and a mug of syrup. The squirrel darted off.

"David," he said, sitting down next to me and handing me the mug.

"Real men hunt, David. I want you to come with me. When you're ready."

My uncle stood up, leaving me with the blanket and the mug. Eventually, when the blanket no longer warded off the cold, I went back inside.

My uncle and I spent the next morning hours walking the woods, trying to find the limits, following streams that drained down through the mountain. He took me to a small pond where we captured salamanders and frogs. In the nook of an ash tree, we found a whole skull with scraps of skin and tissue still clinging to the bones. My uncle told me it was probably a fisher cat killed by another fisher cat. He showed me bear scratches on trees and fox tracks, the imprints leftover from lynx tails dragging through the snow.

When my uncle prepared lunch that afternoon, I told him I was going to change my socks, escaping into his room to rifle through my suitcase. Instead I went to the Sadie photograph, drawn to it inexplicably, much more now than I ever had been at home.

Suddenly I felt his breath behind me and I shivered, feeling so unsafe for a moment that my spine felt evaporated.

"You really like that photograph, don't you?" When he said it, my spine came back and I remembered again it was just my uncle Greg standing behind me. His voice came out sad and normal. I felt my mother in his long syllables, in the sigh

laced into each word. Uncle Greg sat down on his bed and looked at me dead-on.

"Your mom told you about her? What happened?"

I nodded a little. His chest inflated, and he let his breath out softly.

"That dog was very sick. Your mom wanted it to die off slow and painful, enjoy every last minute, she said. But that's bullshit, David. No way she could still be enjoying anything. Life that comes right at the end doesn't work like that."

I nodded again, but I was done hearing it, so I put the photograph back down, nodding again. My head hurt from nodding so much. But my uncle nodded back to me.

We stared at each other in silence until he said, "Why don't we eat some lunch? How about some pop tarts?" He smiled, laughed, then told me he was kidding. "You don't even like pop tarts, do you?"

"Not really," I said.

"I figured as much. Yesterday you dropped almost half of yours on my kitchen floor."

"Yeah, sorry. I didn't mean—"

"That's okay," he laughed. "I hate them, too. C'mon."

After lunch, when we were washing dishes in the sink, he told me, as he handed me a plate to dry, that there was a porcupine eating all his sugar maples in the woods. He told me porcupines strip the bark off the bottom of the trunks like Indians scalping their enemies.

"Have you ever seen Dances with Wolves?"

I told him no. He said this one porcupine was killing all his trees. He needed to get it before his woods died off and his sugar shack dried out. He told me he had read many articles about porcupines being "detrimental" to the ecosystems, and hurting the sugar seasons, both "bad things."

He said he had a buddy a few towns over with the same problem. He said porcupines have gotta be controlled a little. My mind flicked back to my mother, hovering on her for a moment.

"Could you just bring it somewhere else?"

"So it can kill other trees?"

I shrugged.

"No, it has to be killed," he said

bluntly, as if our little conversation about the dog had suddenly cleared it all up, as if I could handle it now. “It’s the right thing to do.” He handed me another plate. “Do you want to come?”

I put the dish on top of the other dishes and thought of my mom. I shook my head. My uncle shook his head too.

“No. I think you should come.”

So we went out together, his rifle tucked in the crook of his arm. He pulled on an orange neck warmer and gloves, instructing me to do the same. I bundled myself tight in my uncle’s old fleece. In silence we trudged through the wood, a woodpecker drumming in the distance. The air snapped like boots against ice, the ground brittle with mud caking my toes. He stopped at a tree, bald at its bottom, and pointed at it.

“We’re close.”

We found the porcupine, a specter perched up in a maple tree, dark and curled into a ball. The tree’s branches were arranged in that special opposite way but knowing that now discomfited me, tying me to the tree and everything in it. Yesterday felt so distant it stung.

My uncle hushed me even though I wasn’t speaking. I followed him to the ground, where he kneeled, pointing the rifle tip up toward the animal. I thought of the black rat in the tree root. I thought of the fisher cat skull. I wondered if the porcupine knew his death was so near, knew that every breath he exhaled shied two breaths too short. I wondered whether death meant anything if you couldn’t feel it come. I wanted him to just pull the trigger and end it. The woodpecker still pecked to its beat, ticking. I was cold, the cotton lining my uncle’s fleece thin and gruff. The ground numbed my knees.

He shot it, and it fell. The bang quieted the forest, the woodpecker disappeared. We did not move. A chill eased into us like phlegm sliding my mom’s throat when after walking home from her friend’s house that afternoon, she found her brother and her dog in the backyard, grief dipping into her stomach, toes first, falling to the concrete bottom of nothingness. Greg? What are you doing?

My uncle said, “Well, there it goes.”

The words crumbled from under his beard then hung half-dead in the air, draped in the absence of breath. My Uncle Greg rolled his shoulders then swung the gun a little at his side, kicking up leaves with his toe to make sound, to fill in the cracks the gun shot left.

Here we were trespassing upon this world to which we both belonged, I as stagnant as that rifle in his hand, that long object there, lengthening the longer I stared at it. With his head cocked right like a bent nail, he looked down at me, his mouth slightly parted. And there he was leaving me, running back to the fence and the yard and the dog.

“Why don’t you take this from me, David? See how it feels,” my uncle said, his voice only just disguised, a hollowness aching underneath.

As I looked at the porcupine now piled in a heap by the tree roots, I nodded and took the gun. As I walked to the porcupine for him, this time my uncle watching me, I saw Sadie for the first time, flopped there on her side like a dead frog. I had imagined it before but now it made sense, all the pieces snapping together and my vision clearing, how he walked from her, saw her panting in his scope—just pull the trigger, just do it—how he thought shooting that dog would take the same impulse that pushes you to run your licked finger through a candle flame—just do it—how she did not die right away when he got her in the neck, how she yelped, her back bucking like a bull, three sharp jerks, then settled into the grass, how it burned. I nudged the porcupine with my foot and it rolled onto its back, the bullet wound dark red drilled into its stomach. With my gloves that were not my gloves, I picked up the creature from under its neck, careful to avoid its needles, and tossed it in a pile of wet leaves.

I started walking from the woods and my uncle followed me back to the house. The rifle pressed into my shoulder and I stumbled under it, thinking how heavy it felt with a death just haunting it, wondering if it was heavier for my uncle that time death awaited it, the dog limping at his knees, tongue lolling, how heavy it must have felt to tell that dog sit here, stay then turn to back away, the dog following—no, Sadie! Stay—taking steps now, long strides almost to the tree line but still close enough to see the metal pendant on her collar.

On our way back, my uncle caught up to me and soon we were walking side by side.

“Do you see why it had to go?” he asked. I did not know whether he was talking about the porcupine or the dog, but he was waiting for my answer. I did not nod nor look up, but kept walking.

Our steps were softer going from the woods then coming, the whole forest cushioned in my uncle’s breath, each huff coming slow from his lips, just escaping. He removed his neck warmer and stuffed

it into his pocket, the orange barely hidden, peaking out.

A squirrel scampered up a tree and I watched it go, the tail disappearing behind a limb. I remembered watching squirrels in my backyard, puzzling over the scientific names in library books and writing fake notes with my pencil in the margins, pretending to be a scientist. It was a game then. I looked up at him, his unshaven chin no longer rustic but unkempt, his empty hands twitching, unsettled, needing something to hold. I thought about giving him the rifle, letting his fingers wrap around the casing, but knew too that the rifle would not settle them, his fingers grasping only at what stays too far away. Maybe the deaths had caught up to him now, chasing him through the woods which he regulated but no longer regulated, raking him with guilt like metal through sap.

“She needed it, David,” he said.

I tell this story now to leave it. When I bring my daughter and dog with me into the woods, we pause at ash trees and look at branches and run our fingers over claw markings scraped into the bark. Those markings never go away, no matter how much snow coats the forest or how many rains wash dirt down paths. I’m still unsure why my uncle did what he did. I tell my daughter that to hunt you must

## Middle School Parking Lot

Samantha Pappas  
UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NJ

She thinks he’s the scum her mom warns her about, looking down her nose. The boy cowers below her gaze, small and gawky and stained purple. Do it! The crowd yells, shoving each other back to get a better view. Teach him a lesson! The girl tightens her fist, clenching his heart in her cold grip. A whimper escapes his lips, then a gasp, then a plea. She leans down to help him; to trip him, to kick him when he’s down. She thinks his eyes are beautiful like this, red and veiny and swollen.

have what it takes. I don't think my uncle did. Maybe he could not bare the absence of whatever it was. Maybe he refused to believe he did not have it. But I know now it weighed on him.

Some things shift something once solid in us, like waters tussling sediment beneath, soil ruffled by time and water and time again. I tell this story now for my uncle, my mom, my daughter, for me, because sometimes stories need to be raked away, to be flushed down streams through wide woods that rust white, trees with bot-toms bare.

## Autoscopy

Kat Kulke  
Wellesley, MA

Tonight is a painting by Van Gogh.  
Minnie and I slip quick past the back porch  
And creep put to the dock.  
Standing barefoot we watch the water  
Inhale, exhale into full dark.  
Down by the point three boys  
Pass the tail of a firefly, speak low  
Through the thick-tongued smoke.  
*I don't like pot, she says.*  
*Why not, I say,* and she tells me she  
doesn't like to feel stupid. I tell her I like  
to feel good.  
We sit on the edge and splash with our-  
toes.  
She puts a finger to her lips and pulls  
An Aquafina bottle from inside her sweat-  
shirt.  
*That better not be water, I say.*  
And it isn't.  
We each take a sip and dip our ankles.  
Soon we are wading waste deep.  
She talks about the boys she wants to  
kiss,  
And I tell her about my father.  
Underwater, my skin is fluid.  
And I can feel the organs  
Buzzing and bubbling inside me.  
We drink and I imagine I am melting  
Into the ocean's warm, wet breath.  
We ride ashore as dawn casts us in liquid  
silver.  
We hold ourselves and sink back into  
sand  
Were our stars are buried in morning.  
It feels strange and empty to have a body.

## Dendrochronology

Kyle Smith  
MADISON, NJ

Leaning under the kitchen table, my grandfather bent down, searching, left palm resting on his left knee. Silver hair slipped onto his forehead as his body angled downward. His leather belt groaned from overextension. His extruding stomach pulled his white button-down shirt taut.

"Shit."

I studied him with a confused awe, the wrinkles branching from the corners of his eyes, his dry, cracked, lips and frown lines. Did he look any different for his saying of that word? Surely, there was to be some consequence for his wrongdoing. Yet, nothing. He only continued in vain, grunting as he struggled to remove his lost screwdriver from underneath the table. Recognizing finally that his attempt would be futile, I hurriedly crawled to retrieve and return his tool.

I attempted to stand tall when I placed it gently back into his hand. At six I was still under the impression that my five-foot-tall grandfather was a large man. He looked at me as I handed him the screwdriver, his head tilted slightly, eyes squinted, lips pressed firmly against one another. I matched his stare - entertained by the fact that this was the first time I had heard his use of an expletive.

"Let's keep this one under our hats." He broke his gaze and raised his hand to his forehead - tilting his palm foreword then back - tipping an imaginary cap. I continued to stare.

"And if I ever hear you repeat that word." His eyebrows arched. I broke my eye contact and nodded vigorously, immediately recognizing the threat.

He smiled softly, then grunted, swinging his arm to slap me between the shoulder blades. My small frame shook forward, then back. I regained my balance and moved to stand directly to his right, a small burst of laughter escaping me. He looked down over his shoulder, now with a genuine grin, then back to the radio we had been fixing atop the white table.

Eight years later, the radio then buried somewhere in the attic, my grandmother was out of town visiting other family. My grandfather, alone in the house, called to invite me, my mother and sister out to dinner. We immediately agreed.

The four of us sat at a square table, near an unopened fireplace at a local Charlie Brown's. My grandfather slouched to my right, my mother to my left and my sister, across. He gnawed on steak, taking breaks in the motion of his jaw to wipe his chin, scrape juices from his fingers and discuss my thoughts on the future. My mother's jawline softened as she watched, her brow relaxed and her cheeks settled into content dimples.

We left the restaurant in a light drizzle. I drove everyone home in the car that was to be mine after turning seventeen. He sat in the passenger seat, fiddling with the stereo knobs. His movements were calculated and precise. Unlike most other men in their eighties, he has retained his steadiness.

The sky ripped open on the short walk from the back of our driveway to the front door, rain drenching the four us and wind taking down a number of small, rotting branches in passing. We stepped into the house, dropping our rain beaten jackets onto the back of the love seat in the living room. I pulled my shoes off and tossed them at the front door. My grandfather kept his on. Motioning for me to stay quiet, my sister slinked off to watch some TV and the remaining three of us gathered in the kitchen. My mother put a pot of tea on the stove and within ten minutes we were sitting in the living room, a mug attached to each of our hands.

"My father owned one of the first beach bungalows in Seaside." My grandfather put his tea on the coffee table before him and fell back into the sofa. "He had a friend who was an architect. My dad did some work for him, and the friend gave him a slot of land right by the dunes." The room's picture window vibrated as the rain outside grew heavier, a presage of the destructive hurricane that would cause the Atlantic to meet the bay only a few short months later.

He scratched his stubbled cheek and I nodded - an assurance for him to continue.

“There used to be one railway that ran the length of the island.” He sat up and coughed into the handkerchief that emerged from his back left pant pocket. “The conductor would stop at different spots and you just would hop off. I can remember climbing out and stepping into all the bushes and the sand with your suitcases and working your way over to the road where someone was able to swing by and pick you up.” He animated the train’s motion, speaking with his weathered fingers and knuckles.

He told us of his three aunts and mother - the three who married well, and the one who hadn’t, of the houses the four of them eventually purchased on the barrier island, of his childhood summers spent in the undeveloped dunes, of watching that train for hours, and how it inspired his career as an engineer. My mother interjected occasionally to ask questions of a narrative she had clearly never heard in entirety.

I gulped my tea and shoved my hands up against the mug’s porcelain warmth. He paused, scrunched his nose and pulled out the handkerchief again, snorting into it. He warned us that his memory wasn’t great. That his sister talked to their father more often. That she would know more about “all of this.” That she’s got boxes and boxes of pictures up in her attic. That we should take a look at them, the next time we’re over there.

“I never knew my father that well, actually.” He glanced over to the bookshelf bloated with old CDs and my desk dominated by schoolwork and textbooks. I looked to the lounge where my own father used nap on humid summer afternoons before his and my mother’s marriage deteriorated

quietly four winters before.

My grandfather’s left hand massaged the wrinkled cavities between the knuckles of his right. He seemed quite captivated by his shoelaces as his lips pressed together and his brow wrinkled - a familiar expression of contemplation.

I had never heard a single mention of his father previously - or any of what he had said that night - and in my attempt to respond, I opened my mouth to speak, and only a hollow syllable emerged. It was a kind of defeated release of air, my recognition that I may not even have the right to respond to his statement.

He was quiet for a few moments before beginning again, his voice fading to the background quickly. I shared a glance with my mother’s it’s-sad-isn’t-it expression and I smirked, nodded and looked down to the carpet. It was then that I realized everything I had ever learned before about my grandfather had extended from a source beyond him. Instead, I had slowly collected information from my mother, grandmother and even fading, sepia film photographs of my young grandparents, beginning their lives in a trailer park in southern New Jersey.

He left a couple of hours later, exchanging embraces with my mother, sister and a firm handshake with me. My mother’s father shrugged his jacket onto his shoulders and stepped into the front porch light, the pockets beneath his eyes darkening. The big old pine adjacent to our driveway moaned as I closed the storm door behind him and watched as he shuffled down the front walk and into

his parked car. And I wondered how many cars he had bought for himself over the course of his life. Which was the one he had driven on my grandparents’ first date? How many kids had he wanted? Does he ever get lonely when he’s driving? Does he miss his father?

The car’s tires sliced through the glow cast by the streetlights onto the thin layer of slick left after the heavy rain. I was barely able to make out his silver hair over the driver’s seat headrest. He rounded the corner out of sight, and the strips made by his tires were again filled by the continuing drizzle.

For most of my life there was a towering oak in my grandparents’ backyard. Its sheer magnitude and its innumerable ancientness was an object of constant fascination until it was ripped from the ground by a storm.

When its trunk, naked without its branches and leaves, was hauled away and only the stump remained I crept outside to study its rings, hoping to count the years. I discovered quickly my inability to number the centuries recorded within the grainy wood. The pattern of concentric circles extended with little separation in the tree’s years of drought, expanded by inches in clear years of prosperity and compressed once again into lines so minutely separated that they blurred into one. I glared at the thing intensely for a moment, angry and frightened. I was suddenly an outsider among what had previously constructed the quintessence of my childhood, an outsider looking in on hundreds of thousands of moments of physically recorded history.

## Other Than Landmarks

Zoe Jeka  
SEVERNA PARK, MD

it is apple season and so i am trying to remember my brother needing a ladder to pick the thin-skinned fruits, or was it my father’s shoulders.

the horses with weeds in their manes and in their hooves were important. barbed wire, craning necks, and apricots—sometimes i don’t know what to do with myself when it is 9:30, and i am reminded that i like caramel apples because they are good for slicing or looking at—but really because i learned not to bite into them whole from my mother. the orchards and my fireplace

are displaying these white shifts, telling me the farther i look into it, the more i will feel my hands knowing how to knot a rope, the more i will feel my hands forgetting how to act as beginners.

in between the planned hours, no simple statistics, there are certain cogs i want to remember— falling off the countertop in Oregon and all the places where the land and sea meet in the Mediterranean and how it felt to be three and bend the right way in a bed, setting aside belts of mattress for sleep and stories in the sheets.



# Herring Run

Jacquelyn Smith  
ROCKLAND, MA

He wrote a book report on herring once, in fourth grade. His teacher instructed the crowded class to use any tattered non-fiction book from the school library. He has always loved fish. He used to swim in his backyard pool from morning through night, pruning up, ducking under the rippled surface to avoid mosquitoes. His dad took their pool down a few years ago. He's barely swum since.

He walks a lot now. Weymouth is a walking town. Aged women carry grocery bags through Jackson Square, blocking impatient traffic. Unshaved men slump halfway across town to catch the bus to work. Punk kids, sent away by parents sick of their company, travel in packs, smoking cigarettes, drinking Monster, and kicking over passing trash cans. Everyone walks, tripping over cracks in the slowly deteriorating sidewalks of the slowly deteriorating town.

Weymouth doesn't have money to fix the sidewalks anymore. South Weymouth has some nice sidewalks left. Respectable neighborhoods cluster in South Weymouth with large colonial houses, neighbors chatting politely before viciously arguing behind carefully closed shades, daughters in yoga pants sexting other parents' sons in hats representing cities they've never been to. South Weymouth isn't very interesting. He doesn't go there much.

He spends most of his time in East Weymouth, by the herring run. When herring are in season, without fail he'll watch the current roll downstream in a mix of white foam and musty swirls. To the untrained eye, it's almost impossible to notice fish lurking like ghosts beneath the surface. But he's had plenty of practice. He catches every silhouette. He pictures their bodies clearly, as he rests his elbows on the bridge's railing. Long, lean, and toned, like solid muscle, with metallic silver scales that reflect only hints of sunlight, tails flick and bodies swerve forward in a constant battle against the surging stream. Every few moments, one gathers enough strength and

slices desperately through the surface landing with a splash on the next step, a few feet closer rest. Sometimes one misses, knocking back a group behind it like dominoes.

He remembers wanting more than anything to touch the fish, catch one in mid-flight with his bare hands. His dad would lift him over and hold him while he balanced on the outer side of the rail, teetering on the edge. A fish would lurch from the water and he'd shout and grasp his fingers toward it, like reaching for a star in the sky. When his dad took a smoke break and scooped him back onto the bridge, he'd heave himself back up onto the rail and kick his feet as though he too were a fish. He was small then, only a forehead taller than the railing. His dad doesn't like herring anymore.

Today, he takes a smoke break, carefully flicking the ashes far away from the water and crushing them into the bridge with his sneaker. He doesn't even like smoking. It gives his hands something to do.

A group of kids he recognizes from school slink over from the nearby skate park. They are farther downstream. They don't notice him. They curse and laugh at one another. One throws a can in the water. He ignores them.

He tries to follow one fish with his eyes. It's very difficult. The water is cloudy and churning already, let alone as the herring swerve and nudge in and all around each other. The only one he can follow is dead, bobbing at the top, floating downstream and out of sight.

He received the best grade in class on that book report back in elementary school. He doesn't remember much from the book, but he always tries. Watching them, he remembers there are several different species of herring, the ones below his feet being Atlantic. He remembers that they eat plankton and are eaten by just about everything. He remembers that they travel to breed. They usually live miles into the ocean, swimming in enormous schools for protection, but when the time is right, they swim back upstream to their birthplace and breed. Then they leave again. They swim right up the stream under his feet and then swim away.

Someone upstream cackles at another's failed skateboard trick. He ignores them.

He's leaning so far over the railing now that it hurts. He straightens, releasing his clutch of rail and letting blood flow to his fingers. Rushing water drowns his senses. Then, very carefully, he swings one leg over and then the other. He sits with toes perching along the edge. His arms hold the rail tightly, giving him balance. He watches the fish. He watches their murky shadows duck beneath the bridge and out of sight.

Without meaning to, barely noticing, in fact, he lets go of the rail, leans into the breeze, and falls the fifteen or so feet down into the herring run.

He lands on his feet with a forceful thump and a splash, scrunching to break his fall. The current sways him. He plants his hands at the bottom for balance. Adjusting his sea legs, he stands up. He shakes his wet hands and sweatshirt sleeves. He reacquaints himself with the present. He hears the boys down the stream laughing.

"What the fuck are you doing?" one of them calls. The others laugh harder. His pant legs are soaked up to the knees. He feels the slippery bodies of the herring wriggling against him. He doesn't answer the boys, but looks at the fish. His legs make small rapids around him. The fish pass as if he were another obstacle, a dead fish to float downstream. He doesn't know what he expected to happen. Perhaps some insight would hit him, some escape route or hidden passage would reveal itself under the bridge. But he wasn't moving. There were no signs or realizations. There were just fish, whose wet scales bumped and splashed him as they worked against the current.

The air is cooling as the sun sinks lower in the sky. His teeth chatter. He shoves his damp hands in his pockets, still ignoring the taunts from the boys at the end of the stream. He trudges forward several yards to a maintenance ladder and climbs up, heavy sneakers sloshing with cold water.

Shivering and smelling of fish slime, he walks. He picks up speed.

# Beetle

Lucas Cuatrecasas  
DENVER, NJ

When he sucks in his cheeks he looks like one of those fish that have both their eyes on one side of their body. (A flatfish.) Sometimes he also looks older, like his father. In the mirror, he can see himself as either one of these things and they both concern him immensely. He knows about flatfish because Kendra knows about them and also knows how to count to a hundred. The 'teens don't make sense to him and when he's alone he skips over them. Once he's finished he says he got them right out loud, but first makes sure that no one is around to hear him lying.

The New England Preschool Academy has a summer camp which he goes to from six thirty a.m. to six p.m. on weekdays. Kendra is a counselor and is always there when he arrives. She smells like mint and something else he doesn't recognize. It smells murky and thick and covered with a thin layer of dust, like the light coming through the window in the attic during the long, perfunctory stretch of the mid-afternoon.

It makes him think of Kendra herself, the way her eyes look, liquid and overcast, with small brown clouds floating inside of them. He thinks of the way his mother makes coffee: flooding it into the cup that's already filled with milk, spinning into itself, forming eddies from the inky brown moving through the white.

On the weekends, he spends a lot of time in the attic and likes to play tick tack toe with himself on the nine blurry squares the light from the grated window makes on the floor. He does this with chalk. Sometimes he has to erase the x's and o's before the game is over because he took too long to think of his next move and the light from the window has shifted. Every time he goes up to the attic to play the game, he likes to count the number of squares the light makes on the floor. He knows there will be nine but he likes to check, just in case.

His family moved to Connecticut from Rhode Island before he was born. They bought a house in a town called Windsor Locks. He's going to be in the little league this season. This is the first year he's eligible and while Anthony Fax is not involved in much of his upbringing, he was uncompromising about getting his son in little

league as soon as possible. He knows not to call his father Anthony Fax, but a couple days ago he read the name on the papers on Anthony's desk. Now he knows that "Fax" is the last part of his name too and can spell it for anyone who asks.

Whenever he asks Anthony how long his trips are going to be, Anthony tells him: "I'll be back before you know it." But when Anthony leaves he's gone for too long and comes back with a beard and Elyse has to tell him to shave it off.

Elyse Fax drops her son at the Daycare Academy every weekday morning and goes back to her house, which feels sour and empty, like someone had robbed the house and, out of spite, taken all the important things. Nothing tangible, of course. The missing things are made of shapes Elyse can't quite remember, but she knows they feel like warmth from the sun and the light moving across her arms, up her shoulders and smoothing itself down on her neck, like a curtain slowly being closed in on her. This curtain, however, does not obscure the audience, it insulates her with it, laughter and applause making tiny puddles across her skin.

Most days she wears a brooch on her blouse. It's a beetle, made of a

dull metal that never shines and looks like an oil stain from far away. It smells like sulfur and her own perfume.

Anthony had given the beetle to her four years ago after getting back from a short trip to Egypt, the same day she had told him she was pregnant. Their son was born about seven months later.

Before being moved to the delivery room, she had asked the doctor if it was happening too early.

"Sometimes the baby misses one month. It's usually fine. We like to say they're just eager to come into the world." The doctor had said.

Now when she wears the beetle it makes her think of an invisible tether line to Anthony, reaching him wherever he goes. This tether doesn't just reach across the surface of continents, finding him when he travels, but it moves through the earth itself, impervious to it's entrails; the rock and magma and ungodly heat don't affect it because of it's near-paranormal nature. The tether's existence itself is entirely occult. It resides in another dimension: one that Elyse herself can't claim to fully understand.

The day her son learns about



BIANCA RIVERA MIDDLE ISLAND, NY

beetles at camp, he tells her that some beetles can fly. She asks him what else he knows about beetles.

“Sometimes they eat their own baby eggs, just because.” he tells her.

He keeps asking her when Anthony will come home. He calls his father Anthony when he talks to Elyse because she doesn’t seem to mind.

Whenever Elyse answers the phone he asks if it’s Anthony and sometimes she shakes her head. Other times, she looks at him without moving and her eyes look dusty and half-transparent, like dark, cloudy honey and he thinks about Kendra.

By the end of the summer he stops asking who’s on the phone.

On the last day of camp he wakes up without Elyse making him. He doesn’t know where she is and stays in bed for a few minutes yelling her name. Then he goes downstairs. He can’t find her so he goes back to his room and pretends to sleep because if she thinks he’s not awake yet she’ll get upset and come out from wherever she is to find him. When this doesn’t work, he realizes Elyse is probably in the car waiting for him. He can’t open the front door by himself but knows he can always see the car from the attic. If he goes up there and yells from the window, he can let her know that she needs to come get him.

He hears laughter when he walks up the stairs to the attic. When he sees his mother, she is lying on the floor, grinning and lightly trembling with intermittent jerks of hysterics. They come and go like big waves faintly shaking the beach, or rather, like tiny electrical discharges, gliding into her, maybe even through her, being sent over from somewhere else...

She looks both tremendously happy and horribly afraid. Her son feels scared and tries to make her stop shaking. He yells at her and eventually cries but his mother continues to convulse, wearing a sickly pantomime grin and staring directly upwards, with conviction, as if trying to discern something beyond her field of vision.

The tick tack toe board is coming through the window, but she is lying on the floor where it usually lands. The nine squares are projected onto the fabric of her blouse, softly glowing like they always do. One of the squares falls directly on the beetle (The brooch is neatly pinned to the left collar of her blouse, pulsing lightly with the beat of her chest.) and disappears. The beetle absorbs the square completely. It’s lusterless metal traps the light inside

it’s shell and emits only a blurry gray aura—barely even there—that looks like floating soot.

He knows a square will be missing but counts them anyway, just to be sure.

## An Itch You Can’t Scratch

Mora McLaughlin  
OIL CITY, PA

Now you don’t wake up for her breakfast.  
Her egg eyes and bacon smile smiled back.  
And then she cried.

Your bus route is filled with strangers.  
You smell the baby with dirt on his face.  
And then you were late.

An ad popped up for a cruise to the Dominican.  
You think about that documentary you watched with your brother-in-law.  
And you’re broke anyways.

A beautiful woman passed you on the bridge.  
Sweat glistened on her shoulder blade while she stretched her neck.  
And you dropped your groceries.

The apartment above you is getting high.  
Your bedroom isn’t quite dark enough to slip away.  
And now you get what your father said.

## Dim Dreaming Life

Megan MacKinnon Runge  
CATONSVILLE, MD

*Inspired by poetry*

Because I cannot use my own words,  
I open the book and tip the sliding phrases down my throat, hoping the rhyme and rhythm will latch onto my veins.

Past my conch teeth and over my tongue something between water and ants flies and rests in velvet-lined splendor until I cough, and they fall down.

The velvet turns to cotton, and then silk, while linen lines my softly glowing lungs and the words land there, like crystalized air, and are spun by breath into flaxen gold.

Tunnels through the walls steer words into scarlet vines that hold together an ivory trellis: the vines pulse bright when shot through with written gold.

Gold dulls to silver as it cools, reaching the far freezing lands of my toes, my spine, my fingertips, my eyes, weighing them with metaphor and idiom and knowledge.

My heart is crowded with fifty-nine swans and crepe bows, with yellow woods, red wheelbarrows, grey mist, and a green bay; it is paved in floating bells and daffodils.

I can only hope my clumsy translation can do them justice; they were the stars and I am a mere lantern, fingers suspended over paper, singing softly: I must write.



# Fever

Emily Xiao  
CHICAGO, IL

Look there. Over here. Do you see me with my foreshortened thighs, my fingers unwrapping the cellophane off white Wonder bread, my eyes tearing with the stink of salt and the rush of air conditioning blinding my nostrils?

And do you hate me for my desperation?

Where are your hands? These are your grandfather's hands, your father's hands, with that feminine taper. But these are not their fingers—these are fingers with oil streaked in the nails, oils from the forehead beneath your bangs, from cobalt blue and cadmium yellow and Technicolor paints, from the handles of your bike. And these are not their palms, their smooth unwrinkled palms. Look down. These are not the fondly loved and remembered and described hands that loved you back and tousled your bangs in such a way as to not get the oil from your forehead on them. These are the angry hands that claw at your back, rubbing the zits there into angry hills and valleys, inbred Appalachian mountains, set ablaze into the curved horizon of your shoulders. Look at that. These are the idle nails of your right thumb and index finger that peel skin piece by piece from your chapped bottom lip.

Grandfather's hands wrapped around the greasy handle of a frying pan. I look up and I swear I can see the moon in his face, round and pale with a tint of yellow and gleaming with sweat. And a cirrus cloud of smoke drifts across the moon, veiling it for a few seconds. (It carries the tang of hot peppers, lots of them, and the inside of my nose begins to burn.) When the air clears, I see Grandpa holding out a spoon full of white grains toward me, his hand hovering precariously above the sizzling frying pan. I stare at this hypnotic vision of my grandfather, who barely seems to notice the oppressive flush of the smoke.

Sugar! Grandpa barks in halting syllables. He jabs the silver spoon toward me, and I immediately grab it and dump its contents into my mouth.

Whoa, I say. Oh, Grandpa, aw. I spit out the salt and attempt to wipe the surface of my tongue with my sleeve.

He grins at me with that raspy cigarette breath, his face narrowly avoiding the angry droplets of oil dancing off the pan, and shouts something in a language that I can't understand. I watch the frame-by-frame movement of those thin lunar

lips, the deliberate back-and-forth of the tongue. Don't take things at face value! the foreign syllables seem to say. But how great it must be to be able to take things at face value, his expression seems to say.

Look at yourself. Your hands are sprawled on your thighs, foreshortened from this line of sight, and you can feel how these thighs are agonizing against the seams of those cheap scratchy ten-dollar jeans because you think you're too good for the effort it takes to appreciate quality. Because if you are apathetic, how can you be desperate?

So you watch me wrench those hands into fists stuck into denim pockets, you watch me stand up until my thighs are no longer foreshortened. And in the way my jeans scratch, you can hear my grandfather's laugh.

It has a rasp to it, a sound weathered away by the taste of nicotine on the pink tongue of a young boy kneeling on the bank of the Yangtze River. Today that bank is a gravesite, hundreds of thousands of rotting fish piled in layers upon layers like grains of sand.

In the next scene, I am outside. I am watching these girls, these girls who love culture— all over the place you see blurry girls loving up Frida Kahlo, your standard neighborhood Communist schoolbag with Mao's loving-back face stamped onto the flap, bindis and saris and ethnically ambiguous jewelry because they are desperate for edges. The white Texas sun scorches the grease that has built up in my hair and I reach up and feel the slick, smooth, slide like a finger tracing patterns onto wintered glass.

No, babe, you're not a Southerner, not suited to this life where it never snows. But then why are you so desperate to make it yours? Why can't you stop thinking about the sulfuric marshes lining the Gulf of Mexico to your west? And the whoosh of salt water all up on the beach of Galveston Bay? How can you have love for a place with the kind of history that it has? I don't know how to express it to Grandpa, because his native tongue, the language of millennia, has been cut off with the fell swoop of a single generation. And his abortive attempts at English, his granddaughter's native tongue, so contorts his expression that she will never understand. It so contorts the set of his eyebrows, the timbre of his voice, that it transforms him into a frail stranger in a strange land, his mind as seemingly feeble as his body. And her contempt breaks his heart, or she only imagines that it does. She knows how ridiculous she's being. She knows that this is a land of freedom and opportunity, this is America the Beautiful and she loves how beautiful it is, and that all it takes to be American, no hyphens added, is to act American.

See the shadow of your grandfather coming into your dark bedroom at 11:53 in the middle of the night to turn off the heater by your bed, because to this day he is terrified of fire and will never stop hating the soldiers who bombed his childhood home on the Yangtze. Fire and water. Pretend to be asleep and hide your resentment beneath the flannels as he turns toward the door to leave before darting back silently to double-check. And when he finally leaves, roll over, you foolish, stupid, horrifyingly stupid granddaughter. In the other room, the clip-click of shiny silver scissors cutting quilt squares from newspapers. He keeps journals of these newspaper clippings. Sometimes I wonder what'll happen to all those journals when he's gone. They're a burden and I can't see myself carrying them with me wherever I go. I see them lying in a Dumpster somewhere, eventually transported to a junkyard filled with the rejects of other people's lives, and I always feel guilty for thinking this. I am not my grandfather's granddaughter in the sense that I have never learned, the way he does, how to make things matter.

Because his hands preserve, and my fingernails are spotted with blood from scratching too much. In the comfortable darkness beneath my bed, I breathe in dust, diamonds and dust, diamonds and dead invisible skin cells.

But I'm desperate, because my resentment will never overshadow my love for both the grandfather standing before me and the parts of him that will never be erased from my own flesh.

Look, all this time I have been focusing on myself. Where is my grandfather, his laughter? Why have I reduced him to adjectives and limbs and behaviors? Why should I resent him when his life has been one long series of forgiveness? And yet, even that is not enough, because no real person has that much forgiveness inside of him and my grandfather is real. My grandfather is someone I will never know. My mother tells me how big his childhood home on the Yangtze was. One day, it was big and beautiful, and the next, fighter jets whipped past overhead and turned it into a scarring inferno.

We have catfish soup for dinner. The world outside our windows is dark except for the dim streetlamps in our little cul-de-sac, and the glass yields only a reflection of our kitchen light on the array of food on the table. I am in the middle of transferring spoonful by silver spoonful of greasy fish soup to my bowl of white rice, when I hear the sound of my mother's chopsticks rattling past the edge of the table onto the floor.

She winces and swallows her bite of fish, then tries to get Grandpa's



attention. Ba, she says. Ba, as in father, or bah!—as in bah, this is awful? When my grandpa doesn't hear her above the silence of his own cigarette smoke, she makes another attempt.

Ba!

Honey, she says to me, don't you think this fish is too salty? I think Grandpa's getting to be too old to cook.

This is my mother, the girl from across the river who grew up in steel and concrete. I always had more of her in me than of my father, who, along with my grandfather, was a child of the white scorching sun.

## T-Ball Ballad

Rachael C. Aikens  
CHESTER, CT

let's hear another typed-out angry song  
by the kids who used to belt it out at  
girl scout sing alongs  
i'm the rebel, i'm the devil, i'm the  
wrong side of the tracks  
dress your eyes in black, babe, cuz  
there ain't no going back.

let's run off sell our souls to that little-known new band  
that's belting out the anger we pretend to understand.  
cuz who really gives a damn about a poem's punctuation?  
cumings won't be left last-picked by this here t-ball generation.

g'head and paint me with a face that you can fear and you can hate,  
and then put me in a suit and send me out there to debate.  
ain't gonna learn tchaikovsky like some one-fourth asian chick  
so you can ooh and aah with grand-mamma 'bout how i grow so quick.

so go fill in every bubble for the "none of the above"  
and find me some white hipster boy my daddy never loved.  
let's criticize and roll our eyes at rulers of the nation.  
cuz who really needs a pitcher in the t-ball generation?

oh no, don't give up on your nobel prize to go express your hate  
just write an angry poem with "immobilize, obliterate."  
go wonder how your screamo band will look on college applications  
rebels wear white collars in our t-ball generation.

Under my mother's watchful eyes, I make a big show of tasting my fish-stained rice. The spoon glints in the light, and I know what is coming. Glancing past my mother at the window, I can just barely make out the waning crescent of the moon.

But Mom, I choke out through a full mouth, it's so sweet . . .

—

And you pull yourself up. Or I pull you up.

And then I realize that none of it has softened the edge of my desperation.

—

So then I am walking outside and I pass by the swing-set on the corner, and I know that if this were a decade ago and I were five years old again, I would not be walking alone. Grandpa would be walking beside me, and he would follow me to the swing-set.

Let's go home, he would say after a while in his foreign syllables.

Just one more push, I would beg. So he would sigh and smile as I heard the creak of the chain holding the swing and felt the air carry me higher and higher away.

Because my grandfather's hands preserve. They sway back and forth with the rhythm of the swing-set, his thumb and forefinger strong with the billion flicks of a cigarette lighter, while mine are twisted out of shape from bending the wrong joints once too often.

## Tiger

Uma Ramesh  
COS COB, CT

*Note: In the Hindu faith, Durga, meaning "the invincible", is the ferocious goddess commonly depicted as riding a tiger.*

India flooded with monsoon rains last Tuesday, and the world reared back its soggy head with an all-consuming roar. I heard it in a temple. Meant to honor Durga: the raging, the invincible, the beautifully self-sufficient tiger. Embodying feminine force and power, she stared down at me from the temple walls until my mouth ran dry. My role model, my mother, my salvation. She was to give me everything I needed to do well in life, yet my parents would look at the sky and half-laugh, half-moan that our family was destined to live in debt. I never understood which was the joke.

"Psss," my mother whispered urgently, hastily jerking up the neckline of her salwar. Of course her neckline wasn't

## On Winslow Homer's "The Life Line"

Cassidy Hammond  
ROCHESTER, NY

The salt of the ocean  
coated leather like rock candy,  
and sea foam stuck to the cloth  
of our western garments,  
light like meringue and washed away again.

And we clung  
to our harnesses while the rope clung  
to the hulls of the ships, and fabric clung  
to our skin and our skin clung  
on through walls of water and I clung to you.

Soaked to the bone, a freeze-frame capture

wet like a photo in developer,  
growing darker with exposure.

And as the waves crushed our frames,  
splintering us like wooden shrapnel  
meant to float away  
and as your eyelashes tasted foreign salt water  
and I hid my own face under red cloth--  
an anonymous gesture, to spare you from  
whatever I could--  
I hoped you were dreaming of spun sugar.

the problem. Under the piercing gaze of the priests, the careful stares of my neighbors - none of them ever truly remaining silent - commands begin flowing in like a riptide. It was the first time honored ritual of the temple; a dance every girl knew so well that you could shoot them in the spleen and they would simply stand up and keep executing the perfect twirls, tucks, and rolls. Sometimes, one would even rehearse bending down on the ground in a position of supplication to make sure every vulgar strip of skin was covered. Even at a young age, I knew that the art of begging was an intricate thing, a raw delicacy one had to sample over and over to develop an acquired taste.

Smoky embers danced in the air, constricting my throat with their thick, pungent scent. My mother coughed again, pointedly. I straightened up with a jerk, gritting my teeth as I hastily yanked up the collar of my blouse. I imagined that I was a stranger from a far away land, awaiting a rendezvous with a charming stranger to show me around these parts. From a tourists' perspective, arriving in India would be like seeing a firecracker on the 4th of July; a pleasant, far-away assault on the senses. The kind of thing people might call a spectacle. Those people who lived in the blissful state of Not Knowing Any Better. I would go anywhere to case off this immediacy, a stick of dynamite thrown in front of my feet. My only two options were a), let the explosive go off in my face or b), deflect it to the house immediately to the right, feeling bile rise up in my throat while I watched the all-consuming fire. It's remarkable how many people don't understand that releasing hot air behind

closed doors doesn't make it any cooler on the inside. Wherever the flame went, the worst part was never the blaze – the heat was only temporary, but the charred skeleton one was left with had much greater durability. Someone tapped me on the shoulder, probably to let me know that the prayers were about to begin. If anyone understood my English, I would tell them to just wait. The only light worth a damn to me would be coming from a little man on the runway, telling me I was approved for liftoff.

Water dripped down from the ceiling in slow, steady drips. A lone droplet fell on my face, rolling soothingly down my cheek. What it must be, to cascade, fly, and fall with such abandon. Then my parents gestured to me impatiently to sit down – the prayers had just begun. The priests stood in front of us, arms spread wide like magicians at the start of a show, as one among them brought out a large striped animal. Half of her face was concealed by the shadows. Her fur was a mess of vibrant orange like tamarind, white flecks like paint chipping on the walls, black like the eye of a storm. Wide eyes that made me want to kneel down and pet her, run long hands through her soft-looking fur, kiss and coddle her until she purred with contentment. But then she'd shift, growl, and narrow those eyes into slits. Just like that, the world had changed. I'd immediately notice the predatory glint wrapped inside her seemingly innocent stare, realize the danger of an innocent mistake. My mother gasped in awe and stared at the tiger like she used to stare at the moon every day, when she dreamed of living in a house where you could see the stars. Cosseted

in sanguine silk and trussed up in the missteps of adolescence, I simply could not understand how this feral creature was an appropriate replacement.

I looked at her, scared in that child's way – wanting to escape, my mouth still not grown enough to open itself for more than feeding. So I sewed my lips shut, withdrawing to the relative safety of my mind to wait out the surrender. I gazed at the predator in front of me and tried to see the resemblance. Between saggy, couldn't-run-a-quarter-mile thighs and the thick, lustrous fur of the tiger. Between my bumps-for-breasts, perennially losing the race with all the other endowments, and the tiger's sleek ivory-white fangs. I took a step back and shuddered, imagining those sharp teeth dripping with blood after a fresh kill. There is a special place in hell for those who think such thoughts in a holy place, I knew. Yet the chanting around me was in a language I didn't understand. A tongue of supplication, devotion, and virginal faith.

The chanting grew louder and louder, words ramming against my head like music blared at top volume. I suppose this was really supposed to be music to the trained ear. It doesn't matter if you don't understand, my mother always told me – just concentrate on the rhythm, the way the names and words meld together into something beautiful. I closed my eyes and focused, trying to make my mind fit right. I had as much success summoning up adulation in my heart as I did most nights trying to make myself go to sleep. Desperate to get enough rest to be "energized" the next day, I'd yell at myself to JUST DAMN FALL

## Again and Again

Tori Kargman  
LIVINGSTON, NJ

I want to know if I love the crunch of red or green or yellow apples; or crazy or flowing hair; or rain or shine.

I want my memory to blur enough to forget

what I ate for breakfast,  
how my first bites of chocolate tasted.

I want you to have to look me in the eye to tell me something,  
to grasp my arms and shake me.  
My head will bob  
bob  
bob.

Again and again, you will tell me words  
I have never heard before  
and show me colors I have  
never witnessed.

I won't remember the widening  
and shutting of our pupils,  
the dancing of our freckles  
when we laugh,

the cleft of your chin close to my nose.

I want you to tell me  
once, twice, any number of times  
until you scream at me.  
And then I forget that too.

ASLEEP ALREADY, threaten to poke my eyes out with a fork, try a million different positions on the bed. Try as I might, my body fell asleep when it wanted to, woke up when it had to, and stayed in one piece as best it could.

So I couldn't make sense of words I didn't understand; words that set parameters, could never be the woolen blanket and warm smile that I so longed to burrow under on cold nights. So I didn't understand why I had to kneel in front of a tiger, when the world had much more creative ways of sweeping my knees out from under me. So I didn't believe one visage could save me from classroom taunts, parental rants, and have one mind blowing first kiss neatly delivered, wrapped with a drawstring, onto my doorstep by twelve noon tomorrow.

I looked up and made eye contact with the tiger. So I didn't buy in. What was anyone going to do about it? I had looked into my parents' eyes and pulled the trigger so many times, spitting those eight tiny bullets out of my mouth. Just like when the body releases lactic acid in a desperate attempt to extract every last, bitter drop of energy, I knew very well the direction those shots would travel. People define insanity as trying the same thing over and over again, when it has consistently proven to be a failure. If they could all imagine, for an instant, the tiger's enclosure. Perhaps a zoo, perhaps a reserve. However endangered you think you might be, it never matters. Life reduces to the same set of constants. Bars. Water. Fifteen minute walks each day. Two hour parades. Formulaic meals shoved through the bars. It may rain, it may not. Life always boils down to the same set of possibilities. It's a question of 'Have I gone too far for Plan A?' 'Would it sound convincing if I walked everything back to plan B?' And finally, 'What the hell? May as well go out guns blazing.' I looked up at my parents, mouth open. My mother shushed me, squeezing my shoulder in wonder and pointing excitedly up at the tiger. "Look at her face," my mother urged, "And keep the image in your mind. She will always be there for you, to help you make the right choice in times of trouble.." I concentrated on the tiger's slack-jawed features. The far away look in her smile that made me doubt how

she, from Bangalore, India, could help me find peace in my home half way across the world. Yet I continued to look up studiously, taking in the information with my ears, examining the temple-goers around me with an expression somewhere left of enlightenment, right round the corner of 'oh-how-small-am-I-in-the-vastness-of-the-world'. I certainly did not want to play out desperate measures today.

From the point at which I look back to this, age is no longer an excuse. The broken pieces should have, by now, clicked instantaneously. My parents call me to prayers, and I feel the greatest heavenly fear in examining my mother's accepting closed eyes. Those accepting knees giving out to the floor in perfect synchronicity with every other worshipper in the temple, in this cursed world over. All so beautifully inaccessible that it hurts. Is this how they make themselves feel better, I wonder. Making up their own little club, making it all look so damn easy. Incense sparks drift into my eyes, pricking them sweetly and fertilizing them with the burden of fat, rolling tears. I lean back, and laughing, shake my head. They say my family was destined to live in debt, and no wonder! To imagine that this shall be my only inheritance.

Twirling a strand of hair on my finger, I remember back to the days when I would dream about being a martyr. I would run boldly into the fray, shooting with everything I had, only to be injured mortally at the feet of a tyrant. As the last drops of life drained out of me, my friends would stand around and sob about the life I'd lived. If only she didn't take that last risk. Don't you understand? I wanted to tell them. You just do this one thing and you're done. Everyone remembers you as a hero, whispering softly into your ear that you don't have to struggle anymore. It was so much less painful to be heroized in death than live life as a maggot. What was the point of it? It's a hard question to answer when you're six. With age came the enlightenment that life's worth lay in the honey – not the temples, the supplication, the careful avoidance of the tiger's calculating eyes. It was the carnal joy of victory, applauding after the kill is made, and rearing back to roar at the moon. Things I imagine the tiger would be far more familiar with.

## Aunt Mary

Rachel Allen  
CANTON, MA

On Hanover Street, she was buying tomatoes. The producers watched before asking. Local, Italian, dark-haired mother, gap between front teeth like her son, like her brother, voice strong enough to call a boy home, Wednesdays, to Prince spaghetti pasta.

Come nights we watch her commercial on television, her leaning out a top floor apartment, calling, *Anthony, Anthony!* between evening news and the VonTrapp children.

Dinner in the living room, Mama says, just this once. We place a pillow over the spot Nickie spilt soup. Dad eats in the kitchen, neck folding as he bends to reach his bowl, eyes trained on the paper, the war. Sometimes, he talks with her on the phone and they sift through shifts and tones in the letters John sends home, hearing him breathe in the space between words.

She calls again, voice lingering like the confetti on brick walls days after the Fisherman's Feast. I wonder what she dreams— in moments, after night's hand pinches out streetlights, if she thinks of John running through the streets of the North End, uniform barely creasing with his stride, coming home, if she remembers hearing words of English slip between his teeth, unfamiliar, if she doesn't sleep, and just stares at the picture of Roosevelt hanging like a relative in her room.

# The Great Provider of Bagels

Gabriella Costa  
WOOD-RIDGE, NJ

The butter dish whirls around in the microwave, circles overlapping circles under a pale yellow light. The little timer to the side of the window progresses down through numbers, through green colored seconds up to a shrill beep. My father stands before the machine, slightly and contemplatively rocking from ball to toe in waiting. A time-honored, sacred even, ritual is coming to a close, evidenced by the bulging brown paper bag he balances on his hip. His one arm cradles it close as the other, prompted by the alarm, opens the microwave door and pokes the stick within it with a pinkie tip. My father then nods at the block, commending it on its newfound consistency, and escorts it, plate and all, to the breakfast table.

In front of that very table I stand, the last drops of morning exhaustion being pushed out of my veins by a steady transmutation of gastronomic excitement. My father lifts the bag from his hip to above his head and places it down on the table with a masculine pronouncement of “tada.” He unfurls the very small twist of paper that is the empty space on top of the bag and, ever-chivalrous, steps back and allows me to be the first to poke my nose inside. A doughy, malted scent enters my nostrils, the product of the elaborate dance performed by my father and I on the best of weekday mornings. The smell is the culmination of hallowed rites—the silent tiptoes of my father out of the house at six a.m., the telltale purr of his 1988 Volvo rousing me, the hopeful rush to wash and dress, our wordless greeting when my father returns, the setting out of knives, the laying of hands upon butter, and finally the presentation of breakfast.

And so it is with a smile that I reach my hand into the bag before me, feeling the warmth beneath my palm as I grasp onto one of fifteen fresh, edible pieces of gold.

The world smiles back. The bagels are here.

To paraphrase the good Lord himself: one knows neither the day nor the hour in which the bagels cometh. But to one with strong faith, they will indeed cometh. They will arrive, a glorious baker’s dozen in a beautiful sheath of a bag, and bear glad tidings to the one who lies in wait for them. And so lie in wait I perpetually do, a silent supplicant at the mercy of the Father’s will, salivating for the happiness that only a stellar bagel can provide. After all, the hole in a bagel is for you to put your heart.

As per an unspoken agreement between two of us, once a week, on an ever-changing and never disclosed day, my father will go out and buy a batch of bagels. The bagels come from one of two places: the bagel place or the good bagel place. The bagel place is only three minutes or so away, a small store that produces middling-sized bagels. The whole creation is slightly flat with a pronounced hole, and it tends to walk on the less-favorable softer side of the crispiness spectrum. But they are cheaper and easier to attain. On the other hand, the good bagel place is more of a trek away: seven minutes drive on a quiet weekday morning. But it produces large, puffed up circles of dense, doughy heaven. The hole of each one is practically squeezed shut by the expanding sides of the bagel and the outside of these beauties crackle with each bite until the tooth hits the soft bread of the inside.

And so while some fathers taught their daughters how to pitch a softball or how to lace up their Skechers, what my father has taught me is the correct methodology for preparing a perfect bagel. “Zen and the Art of Battering” if you will. He was the one who placed his hand over mine when I was young, guiding it to cut a bagel evenly in half, and the one who preached to me the superiority of butter over its nemesis, cream cheese. It was his example which instilled in me the belief in the necessity of rendering it, the butter, soft enough as to have a knife pass through unhindered before use, and the essentiality of spreading butter out thick enough to be seen yet thin enough that the terrain of the bagel underneath can be discerned. And still followed is his master plan to deal

with breads less than fresh: toast them just to produce a golden sheen that will melt butter and so soften underneath it. Truly there are many things in this world that are unclear and disorganized, but my father’s rules on bagel preparation make clarity in all things appear attainable.

Thus my father, the Great Provider of Bagels, will forever be the original crusader for these rings of boiled dough and I can only ever claim to have merely inherited his fanaticism. Consider that this was the man who, to kick off family vacations, would set up a kitchenette in the front seat of the car and fashion such buttered entities at five a.m. for each of his half-asleep children in the backseat. And so clearly he does not just enjoy bagels; rather, he understands the very power of bagels. To watch him pick them out at the bakery is to watch a fussy buyer stalking about at a market, the old woman who squeezes the peaches and interrogates the farmers on the freshness of their wares. He will ask to feel the poppy seed bagels to gauge their crispiness and question the counter help regarding which bagels are warmest. In fact, during the whole process of ordering, he will be bent halfway over the counter, straining to see what is contained in the little metal baskets feet in front of him. Mentally he is doing the math, determining which varieties of bagels have the most chance of being eaten that day by the four mouths back home, how many he can fit in the freezer to defrost for future rushed breakfasts, and deciding if any new creative combinations are worth the trying.

While my father may not always lend his support to the newfangled varieties of bagels that kids these days cry out for, chocolate chip or strawberry to name a few, he has consistently advocated for bagels dyed a St. Patrick’s Day green or orange and black for Halloween. He could even get behind a blood red Valentine’s Day bagel. Ultimately bagels are a celebratory food in my household and my father is the master of ceremonies for any soiree they happen to attend: First Communion parties, grammar school honor roll breakfasts, and casual Sunday brunches. To this day he is absolutely tickled toasted by memories of parading the whole family through unplowed streets the day after a blizzard in quest for a dozen bagels,



his decisive victory march against three feet of snow. And he fondly recalls buying us, the three children, bagels on our birthdays from diners in the city or from vendors on the street. For to know happiness is to know a good meal and for our purposes, a good bagel.

It is this attitude that makes my father the rogue member of his family, the rebellious butter bearer. His lineage is one riddled with, composed practically entirely of, people who spread margarine upon bread items as if an emulsion of vegetable fats and water creates a legitimate food. The sort of population who prefer decaffeinated coffee tea bags to real percolated coffee and who purchase their birthday cakes from a supermarket. Food has never been a top priority for my father's immediate family with their silent and chilly meals: they appreciate a pea soup, eaten in earth-shattering silence, the way no sane people should. The few times I have broken bagel with them, they make me use that fake yellowed vegetable fat or spray-on "I Can't Believe It's Not But-

ter," laughing at my face of righteous and deserved disgust.

Sometimes I am convinced that my father married my mother because she taught him how to eat properly. He was introduced to her, a naive culinary novice with margarine on his mind, and it was she who put a stick of butter into his hand and ignited love in his heart. Which came first, the butter or the love I truly can not say. But empirically speaking, mankind will always be drawn to the one who offers it a warm, dense, carbohydrate spread with soft fat. My father often and fondly recounts the grand breakfasts he was exposed to at my maternal grandparents' house, ones that involved a rowdy passing around of bagels, juice, crumb buns, and pecan rings. So while my father is now the one who constructs photographic holiday tableaux by arranging the family around food about to be devoured and the one who buys two different kinds of butter each week, he had to learn it all from my mother. Therefore, it is clear that the way to a man's heart is easier to travel once

greased by butter.

Little footsteps can be heard above my father and me as we butter our bagels, the sounds of the rest of the household awakening. I put down my knife and smile at my father, knowing that soon everyone else will amble down the steps utterly unaware of the sacred orthodoxies performed just minutes earlier. I have heard that some parents pass down to their children antique jewelry while others give baseball cards or china. My father has promised me none of those things; instead he has bequeathed unto me a love for bagels. It's not something one can sell for money, but it's timeless and the too little-acknowledged secret to a happy life. After all, it has been said that the most singular difference between joy and bagels is that joy is a liquid and bagels a solid.

Plus, as I am reminded with the first bite of bagel I take this morning, it's awfully hard to frown with a whole mess of bread and butter within one's mouth.

## Porch Swing

Anna Kingsbury  
BALTIMORE, MD

Maybe we haven't got a porch swing,  
the ones painted white that fold in on themselves  
with a slight curl 'round the edges  
and are made of real wood that mutters,  
creaks and squeaks as we sit, holding hands,  
and just listen.

The kind you always said were made for  
summer breezes that smell like earth and honey,  
wheat fields and rocking-chair companions,  
pointing towards soft sunsets  
that disappear somewhere over beyond  
a front yard of baby, still-green corn stalks  
or sunflowers, all in rows,  
cut through by a single dirt path  
that goes on for hours.

Well, honey,  
maybe we haven't got a porch swing,  
or the front yard to fit one.  
Maybe there's no sunset  
'cause here the night sneaks up and surprises you  
when you glance up from those bills on the counter

and realize you've run out of time  
to go out for the milk like you said you'd do.  
Maybe our front yard is only  
three cement steps and a sidewalk—  
our only flowers the dandelions in the summer,  
and the roses we both bought for each other  
last Valentine's that are starting to wilt  
in their vase on the table.  
Maybe the breezes here  
smell like gasoline and garbage bins  
when the wind comes down the alley.  
Maybe the neighbors are just a little too close  
and a little too loud for sharing bedroom walls  
on those days when you're so tired of work and people  
you fall onto the sheets still dressed for a success that's a little  
slow in coming.

But honey,  
I've got two fold-out chairs,  
and enough saved up tips and street change  
for the bus trip to the shore  
where we can set up and settle down,  
if just for today.  
And if you'd like,  
I'll hold your hand as the sun sinks,  
shaking off reds and golds into the water,  
and we can pretend  
it's ours.



Joyce Moon Lititz, PA

## A Child of Berries

Zoe Edelman Brier

ALLENDALE, NJ

I believe the dinosaur before  
the chicken, and the girl  
before the chick. I believe music  
is a sound different from any  
you've heard before, and steamed  
broccoli can be sweeter than halloween  
candy. I believe handwriting  
will soon be obsolete,  
but the machines will not take  
over the world. I live in fear  
of true happiness, and I believe that we  
imitate  
the strive for perfection. I believe hexa-  
gons  
are the perfect shape in all ways.  
I believe keyholes go somewhere deeper  
inside the doors they unlock. I believe in  
heffalumps  
and woozles, Wonderland is a real place,  
and fluff is better than chocolate.  
I believe that the internet  
is the future and sleep is more  
important than work.  
I believe boys watch too much porn,  
and spend too little time trying to get a  
real  
girl. I believe Reduce Reuse Recycle  
will change the world, but organics  
is a ploy to make money.

I believe men will  
never understand women, but that goes  
both ways. I believe in the juxtaposition of  
love  
and hate, of the kidneys to the liver. I be-  
lieve in noise:  
synthesizers, drumming fingertips  
and vocal chords. I believe in heart  
beats and bass that you can feel on the  
back  
of your neck. I believe in blown  
ear drums, bitten tongues, shaken  
heads, and the good throbbing within  
them.  
I believe you can never have too  
much volume. I believe curls  
are better than straight, and that beaches  
know how to make you look your best. I  
believe a bad  
haircut can ruin you forever. I believe red  
lips  
make someone 5 times more  
attractive. I believe rain is misunderstood.  
I believe depression is  
an epidemic that no one knows  
how to cure. I believe that drugs don't  
work.  
I believe analog is better than what comes  
out  
of a digital camera. I believe in

midnight snacks at 5 am,  
staying up all night because you don't  
feel tired. I believe in television shows and  
movies.  
I believe in picking noses; I believe this  
should be socially  
acceptable. I believe everyone deserves a  
second  
chance; even if they really don't.  
I don't believe in god, or a life  
after death, though I wish I did.  
I believe in fruits and vegetables; apple  
picking in orchards that extend farther  
than you can see, pressing turned maple  
leaves  
in a book while sitting on a tall man's  
shoulders,  
pumpkin picking after a corn maze,  
and squished berries on childrens' faces  
I believe you are what you eat  
and if I could become a blueberry,  
wild grown and picked when plump,  
I couldn't help but to eat myself.

# Flight

Catherine Wong  
MORRISTOWN, NJ

*I pledged my life as a child to taking flight—savoring the moment just before wind catches on wings, the hesitant seconds of limbo when flight is synonymous with fall.*

Even before I could speak, I learned to take off my jacket and run with the fabric slapping the wind. There is a photograph in which I am rushing headlong along a narrow stretch of grass with my arms flung wide with wild abandon, and I am frozen in other pictures with an expression of rapture, letting the gusts billow forwards into opened towels, or umbrellas, or bare outstretched arms.

In books, though, they tell stories of men searching for flight with a bitterness reserved for cautionary tales. Mythology warns of the hubris that comes with daring to build wings from feathers and wax before embracing the biting warmth of the sun. I remember reading this and hoping desperately to rewrite the ending—amidst a pantheon of heroes, as a child I singled out Icarus, understood that signature yearning to sail forth and fall into the air on physical and metaphorical wings. It can be no coincidence that the primal beauty of flying snatched the breath away from onlookers even then, that a hundred and a thousand years before, birds were once revered as gods. Flight smacks of fearless abandon—the raw faith inherent to winging unfettered into the unknown.

Those moments are the rare ones, the raw exhilaration enough to justify the thousand other times when everything collapses. On most days, life falls from calibrated balance and the only thing left to do is to stand alone just before the leap, beating helplessly against the wind. I met a girl, on one of these days, within the confines of a middle school classroom. In a school falling fast in the wake of slashed budgets, this was the last desperate plan—to peer deep into a box of paradoxes, to bring students to teach where the teachers themselves had now gone.

The remaining teacher confided to me

before I entered that every moment would be a struggle, and when I walked in the girl shot me the glare of an untamed dog before burying her head in her arms. They asked us to read together. We dragged a desk out into the unswept hall, and I learned that she had an unsteady and beautiful voice. I quizzed her three times over on a list of words that she did not know, until she cried that they were seared into her memory, and even then there was a gentle lyricism to her pleas. She told me afterwards that she had taken a test on the chapter and won her first and only A, a conversation that made the breath catch in my throat, so that I marveled afterwards at having left some small handprint on the life of another. What I remembered afterwards about that day was fleeing the building and turning back to watch the girl and a couple of friends swing each other in looping circles in front of the school. They were silhouetted against a backdrop of buses, unburdened by flashcards and school books and foreign words. When they spun they locked hands and laughed just before letting go, so that they stumbled and soared a little before falling into the grass in unthinking joy.

In my own kindergarten classroom, the teacher once spent a day in a misguided attempt to teach us sign language. I muddled through with tangled fingers, and the only word I learned was the gesture for bird. I remembering interlocking my thumbs in the nighttime, hands backlit by a nearby window, and letting the light throw shadowy wings upon the walls; in the darkness I could watch the world fall away, and in the hazy shadow of sleep I dreamt of flight. I have learned to live amidst perpetual longing, seeking this always—the few precious seconds when the world pulses with wonder, the times when I feel my breath catch in my throat and even the sighing air ripples with magic.

# Echoes

Catherine Wong  
MORRISTOWN, NJ

*I have learned to believe in echoes – of sound, of the past.*

In my earliest memory, I am walking hand in hand with my sister into a tunnel built from graying brick arches, yelling “hello” and hearing the place fill with voices, the stones like cupped hands over many mouths that amplify and distort a hall filled with sound. When everyone has left I stand alone in the middle shrieking with glee, listening to the tunnel repeat back my joy, and what I remember later is the sense of unquestioning wonder, the possibility of mystery.

These are the things that I know:

Echoes are sound waves bounced helplessly from surface to surface, like light glancing off of a pane of glass. There is a rhythmic and structured simplicity to their movement, and every echo can be captured perfectly in the pristine coldness of a mathematical equation, numbers and symbols substituted for sound. This is what they tell me in science class when I am five – textbooks can explain echoes, can deconstruct this like other small wonders. There is no myth here, no magic.

A Greek myth says that echoes are a terrible punishment, a girl destined to repeat others with no voice of her own. She spoke either too many times or too few times – the retelling varies with the teller, the lines of the story only as malleable as their source. I remember reading this with a sense of skeptical pity, thinking it was lonely, and lovely, and ridiculous.

The Chinese words for echo mean, literally, “returning sound.” We have no myths to explain this – what echoes are, where they come from, how the past reverberates up into the present. When I ask my parents, I am told that we cannot tether ourselves to memories, that somehow in a culture that clings even now to the specter of a thousand-year history there is no legend about echoes, about waiting for sounds to return.

It haunts me, this lack of a myth,

as if a culture with legends about rabbits in moons and ladies who walk on bright streams of stars could somehow forget the folklore of echoes, the story erased with the sound. I can only imagine that storytellers realized the impossible weight of an echo, that they feared sounds with the power to boomerang back up through history, the return of voices from the past. History weighs heavily in our home, the traditions of a father who hangs Chinese characters on strips of red paper on the walls, of grandparents who immigrated years ago and tell stories too many times of placing golden oranges on altars and fleeing on grunting water buffalo through rice paddies and rain. We hold peculiar holidays—ours are a mesh of traditions, a basket-weave of faiths from past and present, so that on Thanksgiving someone stirs soy sauce into the gravy and on New Year’s we sing warbling songs in two different languages, the strains of carols and Chinese opera echoing together as one.

This is the hallmark of our family—the ending embrace of echoes, the hesitant final handling of stories that bounce from surface to surface, generation to generation, fading but not disappearing with time. My mother tells me that her youth was strangled in willful oblivion – the methodical erasure and rewriting of memories, the studied obliteration of the past – and that she grew with no sense of a history, her mother and father living always as if clinging to the tangible confines of the present. She tells me that her parents refused to speak of their families and youth, that she learned everything she knew of her mother and her mother’s mother from a distant and gossip-prone aunt, and yet come Christmas we tear recycled wrapping off of a gift from my grandparents to find a box with a small packet of stories, painstaking narratives composed to reveal the hidden memories of their youth. It is here that we find them, the water buffalo and rice paddies, the stories of children printed neatly on paper after a broken hiatus of fifty years.

These are the myths of a past I watch bounce like whispers around me when I embrace my grandparents in a red lacquered home, when I feed lettuce to dancing dragons on Chinatown streets, when I learn that my last name means “king” and that one thousand years ago the emperor and his sprawling family fled from rioting peasants across the country to the oblivion of a farming village, the village where my grandparents were born.

Returning stories, returning sound.

Echoes are like ripples on water, wonderful but fleeting. I learn this in the darkened tunnel where we stand hollering our names and our hellos, the murmur of a hundred voices dying down to a brooding silence, an amplified hush. They follow me out into the sunlight, only the memory of voices, with the heady exhilaration of dis-

covery. This is the rock of my faith, this is what I believe – not in the transient beauty of echoes but in the full-throated chorus that rings out from a single person in an empty tunnel, the power unleashed by a story, a voice.

## Las Meninas (The Painting)

Camille Petersen  
MORRISTOWN, NJ

Before I was here I was burying poems  
In the Arctic as a loose soul, as melting  
glass

I did not formally have a name or mean  
anything  
You could not find me  
In my best days I took up no space

The nights were all there was  
Darkness was a language I learned with  
My eyes, the tints of those dead sunrises  
And the subtle variations in *idioma* and  
*Lenguaje* when the moon chose to starve  
itself think itself to death

There was a hole in my head as if an  
Asteroid had dented it, its tail snaking  
around me  
Until I felt all my thoughts strangle them-  
selves  
With chains and then dance dance dance  
hoping  
Their movements would make new music  
Disintegrate the prisons

Who was I  
I was the girl in the mirror in the painting  
Who was not in the painting at all  
Everyone else belonged and I stood  
watching  
How out of place we all were

Hung up on a wall, image upon image  
We were perfectly painted lies  
We were the photograph and we were

Taking the photograph  
and we were trying  
To be something somehow

The artist did not mean to put me there  
But I wandered so long he could not tell  
me  
From a dream he fought years to forget  
I was the subconscious of philosophy  
I had no answers and wrote my story  
With fragments of questions

Who was I  
I was you sleepwalking awake  
Repeating over and over to yourself in  
The dimness of four a.m. to take it day by  
day

I was you reading about Virginia Woolf’s  
Suicide, drowned in an overcoat full of  
stones  
Frightened that you understood why and  
Could see yourself doing the same

I was you describing to a stranger some  
pain as crystal  
And some pain as wood because  
This had become your way of crying

I was you lying on the floor wondering if  
the  
Ceiling would open up like a music box  
and pull you out  
From self-destruction,  
the most endless wreckage

And now I am with you, I am you  
I am pacing these pasts and shivering  
Spinning, my hands full of ice  
I am looking at this picture carefully

I am trying to be something



# Blue Jeans

Uma Ramesh  
Cos COB, CT

Imagine first grade, oohing and aahing your first pair of “grown up” pants with your best friend. The two of you look at each other for a second, and big grins split chubby faces simultaneously as you both come up with the best plan ever. She lifts you up onto her shoulders so that you can lift your sister’s bedazzler down from the top of her bookshelf (and they thought you wouldn’t be able to get it from there!). Nodding knowingly, the two of you glue little tornados of glitter and beads onto your first ever blue jeans, writing “Littl Mis” on the right back pocket and then turning the pants inside out so that you can initial each of your names on the inside of each pant leg. You didn’t know why, but something tells you that writing it on the outside just wouldn’t be the same. When you hear your sisters’ stomping footsteps after she comes home from oboe practice, bellowing that someone took her bedazzler again, you and your friend link hands

and give each other gummy grins, shaking your heads over the chaos you’ve created because you know she just doesn’t get it.

Imagine a basement. Descending well worn steps, the railings worn with the touch of countless fingerprints. You wonder about everyone else who has made this descent – did they paw at their blue jeans with clammy hands, hooking their hands into pockets to look nonchalant? Did they anxiously tug down their necklines to show off grape sized bumps, or assess the territory to see where they would and wouldn’t be allowed? As always, the shy kids cluster together in the corner, polishing their glasses every few minutes. The golden girls bestow upon them the royal scoff and whisper, strutting around in skintight denims that show off diminutive little curves, just begging to be gawped at. Then the boys saunter in. Soldiers in an army of bronzed armor, well-gelled spikes. ‘Gangsta style’ blue jeans ripped by hand. Let the games begin. You crowd around the bottle, kneeling down as it spins out countless middle school fates – first kisses, fragile hopes, clumsy attempts at overly

bold, almost-romance. You look down at oceans of blue as your stomach grows dizzily seasick. Everything the same, all the same. Maybe you’ll have a bell-bottom, little rips and tears, or a bedazzled belt to keep things spicy. It never changes the story. That’s why you weren’t surprised when the bottle stopped spinning. It was never going to point in any other direction except yours. You knew well by now. When destiny gave you a chance to prove yourself, you stepped up to it. Your jeans crinkled as his hands consumed them greedily as flames, carefully painted red lipstick smashed against the paleness of his mouth. Unnoticed by all, a rip on your denims opens up like a sore, the threads tearing against your skin as he reaches in.

Imagine the morning of your first day of high school. You run your hands through wild, frizzy hair that doesn’t stay down no matter how much product you put in it, snapping at your dad when he says you look fine even though that’s what you most want to hear. Tugging frantically at your slim-fit hip hugging jeans, almost screaming in anguish because they refuse

## Distance

Catherine Malcynsky  
CHESTER, CT

I stirred at the sound of a crinkling plastic bag, loud and to my left. Peering through my lashes, I saw the pudgy Chinese man beside me fiddling with his bag of peanuts. As the haze of sleep between us faded, I let my eyes wander over him, while his thick fingers chased nuts around his tray.

I gave him a name: Hector. I gave him a hobby; he collected vintage baseball cards. I also gave him my house. He would live in it, and change the sitting room while my daughters fiddle with their grandmother’s dolls into a room for porcelain plates and fancy silverware. Hector would hang a black-and-white picture of Central Park over the mantle in the foyer. Where my husband smokes cigars and takes conference calls, Hector will play billiards. He would finally hang curtains

over the wide kitchen window, never feeling the need to stare out from glass each morning until he finished his two cups of coffee.

The cabin air smelled like leather and bubble gum and generic dog shampoo. I gazed around me at the varying shades of grey and blue, and watched the flight attendants’ slick, manicured buns as they bobbed up and down the aisle. As a tall, thin blonde passed, I named her Paige. I gave her a love of fettuccine Alfredo and deep purple nail polish. And I gave her my car – she would like it, the smooth leather interior and knock for speed. She would hang a peach-mango air freshener from the rearview mirror and put her Starbucks cups between the seats. She would take it for long drives down quiet roads, the way I once intended to.

The low, periodic chimes of the plane reminded me of the doorbell, and the way my golden retriever barks at it. I gave her to the lanky teenage boy across the aisle. I named Lennie. He would hear her howling despite the clunky white headphones over his ears; he would call

her into his kitchen, smiling when she bounded towards him. She would jump up and put her paws on the knees of his baggy jeans, and Lennie would laugh and take time out of a busy day to kneel down with her. Lennie is not a dog person yet, but she has a way with kids.

I slid my feet out of my shoes and rested them on the bag I had tucked beneath the seat, a smile tempting my lips as I recalled the barefoot freedom of childhood. The sunlight slanted through the inch of window unmasked by the plastic shade, highlighting the ballet of dust above my lap. I watched the flecks, floating and falling, and didn’t think about the tiny, busy world thousands of miles below me.

There was a woman one row ahead and across the aisle, sitting quietly in her seat, flipping through the airplane magazine that nobody ever seems to read. I named her Stella, and I gave her my husband. She was pretty, with high cheekbones and soft brown eyes. She had gentle-looking hands; smooth skin and dainty fingers. She would soften him a bit, and stitch him up well.

to say anything else except “I’m trying too hard”. The clock forces you to capitulate to mediocrity and step into the car, fastening your seatbelt and stuffing your hands inside the same electric blue skinny jeans so that no one sees how they can’t stop shaking. You lean back and stretch, the cool blue of the denim slowing your heart-beat for a while. But for how long?

Imagine throbbing dub-step beats, jean jackets cast aside as ‘things get hot’, rose colored glasses that make every girl look like a male fantasy. Goodbye, overbite! You lean against the wall, checking your phone to give off an aura of mysteriousness. Idiot - if you were so above this whole scene, then why would you be here. You bury your head in shapeless blue jeans, partly hoping to escape the whole scene, partly in hopes that someone will see you and ask if you’re okay. You look up, and someone taps you on the shoulders. “Hey, hey! I just decided to take off my jacket – it’s getting seriously hot in here! So watch it for me? Thanks!” Social interaction disappears with a gust of wind and a cheery wave, and you dig your clenched fists into baggy pants pockets, letting them disappear as you dig your nails into your fists, hard enough to bruise. All of a sudden you want to rip off your jeans, your skin, and make it all over into something new. Something golden. Something beautiful. Anything would be better than this; the pale blue of your jeans are the tears you want to let spill now, just like a waterfall. Your pants look trashy – your eyeliner makes your face look fat – and why didn’t you buy that new designer perfume from the mall? Look at you. You poor little reject, you! Someone should start a collection fund. You turn to the girls on the floor; perfectly applied mascara, blonde curls bouncing in a frenzy, polite little mini skirts that wave hello or goodbye with every gust of the AC. You could never decide which. Turn and run. Why don’t you. Like you could do any better. Little miss in her brand new jeans. Like you thought they could’ve made a difference. You want to beat your fists against the wall. You need to

run. Finding an escape route is a little like locating the door in the darkness of the club. You fumble around. Weighed down by the puke on your blue jeans. Wasted as hell. Reach your hands out for a friend, but all you come up with is shadows.

But everyone has a right to believe that miracles can take place, even you. You’re standing outside, in your backyard, but right now it feels like center stage. Thunder crashes and lightning splits the sky. Old women scream, and sandboxes are carried off in the flood. This is no time for child’s play. Ignoring the cries from the window, you start to dance on the wet grass. You’ve never been particularly graceful, but tonight, it feels like you can’t fall. Tipping your head back to imbibe the sensuously falling raindrops (they really do taste just like wine!), you take a moment to wring dry the waistline of your rain-spattered blue jeans, rolling it up so that it doesn’t get that heavy again. Suddenly you stop, unsure of what to do next. Your baby blue jeans curl up against you, and you lean against the stairway behind you, suddenly feeling exhausted. Singing in the rain, dancing in the eye of the storm – you suddenly realize you’ll fill yourself

with crumpled paper and faded denim just to believe there’s something there. So you climb the stairs with a lift in your step. Change into fuzzy black sweatpants when you get back inside. Toss the jeans out the window into the rain. Funnily enough, they land exactly in the sandbox. With tears shining in your eyes, you wave at the amalgamation of garbage, memories, and weight until it floats out of sight, then curl up on the chaise with a worn paperback and a bowl of Chunky Monkey ice cream. Stretching your hands above your head, you turn your head to the window and watch the churning water boil and bubble outside. Never again, you say, laughing lightly to yourself, unable to stop the tremor of fear that makes you get up and close the curtains. Never again.



CLAIRE ORESKOVICH SELINGROVE, PA

# The Girl With No Name

Abigail Raymaker  
MADISON, NJ

For the girl, the days trudge by. It isn't what happens in the day but that it does happen that bores her. She doesn't mind school, she does well enough, but sometimes the rhythm of it upsets her. Why is everything so predictable?

"I like you. People say I have no taste, but I like you." This is how the man always greets new acquaintances, as he chuckles to himself. "Brains aren't everything. In your case, they're nothing!" His rhythmic laughter echoes in the silence; the soft sound of rattling silverware accompanies him as his fist pounds the dining table. He talks about his accomplishments at the university, making sure to mention his recent raise. He talks through Janice Montgomery's throat-clearing and Richard Franklin's coughing fit, not stopping even as Stephanie Phillips leaves the table, her eyes rolling in an exaggerated gesture of annoyance. It isn't until Marcia Walsh's account of her dog's surgery brings her to hysterical tears that he finally sits in silence, though he is secretly annoyed by her brash display of emotion.

The girl has always been pretty, the kind of conventional pretty that turns heads. Sam Seiler once told her she was beautiful. But when she looks in the mirror, she isn't particularly pleased. She notices a few freckles, spread around her face like speckles on a bird's egg, light like watermarks. Her bangs fall just above her eyes so that everything she sees is framed by feathered hair. As she stares into her own eyes, she imagines how many girls must do this every day and she can't help feeling ordinary. Nothing sets her apart, but who wants to be set apart at 17? The man is different. He has made it a point to be distinguished, though his understanding of the word doesn't quite match most interpretations. His thinning hair, which is combed at a strange angle, makes him look sharp. Cindy Lunt once told him so. He has had the same

rounded glasses for 20 years and he cleans them twice a day. The bridge is bent out of shape so that the glasses hug his nose, but he takes pride in never fixing them. He always wears jeans, cuffed at the bottom, as if he might step in a puddle. He takes pride in his quirks, what he calls his "defining qualities".

The girl leafs through her photo album. It is half empty. The first photo is a picture of her on the day she was born, motionless and lost but for her mother's arms. The next is a picture of her kindergarten class. She picks out her classmates one by one: Colleen Guertin, Evan Wegner, Ryan Young, Jill Carey... It can be so hard to believe how much time has passed, how much life she had ahead of herself that day. The photos trace her childhood; a child becomes a young girl. Someday, maybe that girl will become a woman, her maturation preserved between crinkled sheets of clear plastic. But for now, those pages are empty. Will they ever be filled? Not many people know the man, but this is how he prefers it. People remember him, but he is careful not to let people know too much about him. He considers his private life a precious treasure, the keys to which should remain in his own possession. Besides the occasional dinner party, he rejects most of his social invitations. Most recently he received an invitation to Becky and Tim Rutledge's open house, but he prefers not to hold his tongue for an hour as he listens to them speak proudly of their new Victorian light fixtures. He has lived alone since his time at the university, as he finds most people intolerable for long periods of time. He doesn't seem to want companionship; in fact he enjoys the loneliness.

The girl likes her friends. Sometimes they just laugh together, the kind of laugh that steals all your air until you think you'll die. But sometimes she hates them. The way Nina Perdue's whispers taunt her with secrets she'll never hear, the way Victoria Kozart cares for her but doesn't care enough to know things about her, the way Monica Leland and Kristin Gartner act surprised if they find out she's upset with them, as if they weren't trying to upset her all along. Sometimes people just pretend not to see things coming. It's more convenient.

He walks around town in the evenings. The crisp autumn air clears his head. He always sees groups of young people roaming the streets together like herd animals, lost but for their fellow herdmates. He isn't particularly impressed by adolescents these days. He remembers being much more astute at that age. He was one of the best students in his high school class as he recalls, and the other students respected him for his intelligence. Molly Baron told him he was the smartest boy she'd ever met. Now, he sees the girls (and the boys) flock to each other for such superficial reasons: beauty, athleticism, wealth... He's so full of contempt he nearly bursts. He hates the disrespect these children have, the way they never to consider anyone's perspective but their own. They simply complain over petty things: the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the color of their hair, their friends, their own parents...

Today, the girl will not be illuminated by streaming sunlight as the morning wrenches her from deep sleep. She will not walk to the bathroom, eyes closed, nearly tripping over a pile of books she forgot to put away. She will not open the windows as grogginess fades like sunlight slipping away as a day comes to an end. She will not look through her drawers, feeling the different fabrics between her fingers as she finds something to wear, something to obscure her among the sea of blue jeans and sweaters. She will not run to the bus, waving to her friends as she slips into the leather seat, chilled from the biting cold of morning air.

There's someone the girl remembers, someone she thinks of in a moment of life or death. But moments don't exist for her; time has been lost ever since she gave up. She saw him gazing at the stars from the roof of the school building, that brick fortress of solitude standing so empty in the black of the night. He had looked so immensely resigned, so disconsolate that she felt almost cheery in comparison. She had called out to him. A sharp silence was his only response. Despair and frustration had driven her to this quiet sanctuary, the only place where even her darkest thoughts seemed free, unaffected by her efforts to keep them hidden, to keep them from spilling out of her eyes, to keep

those mirrors to the soul clouded. But the very same lure had drawn another victim. Whatever her struggles had been that night, his were much more severe. It was the man. He had saved her life. The man remembers her. It was the first time he had climbed the roof. That night he watched her from the roof, she watched him. She had looked lost, sad even. In his mind, he returns to that moment. What if he had shouted back in the night? What stories would they have shared? He tries to shake the thought; what consolation could this girl have brought him? Then again, he had climbed down from the ladder, only to return this morning. He tries to descend, thinking of how her problems must be so petty, but she saddens him. Hopelessness descends.

Today, the girl will make a decision. Last night, she dreamt of an old woman, sorrowed and worn, sitting on the roof alone. She knows it all has to end. The man has taught her more than any teacher. She is tired of blending in, tired of living every day like something is a little bit off. She thinks again of the man; his expressionless face lingers on her eyelids; her eyes close and he's there. From the safety of her mind, he stares at her through rounded glasses and his lips part but no sound is heard. A puff of his hot breath escapes into

the cold night air, a cloud of hesitation, but still he does not speak. Her eyes close, but he is gone. Her tears drag her in like riptide, washing away the footprints of that memory. She looks in the mirror, and it's as if she sees a face half her own and half a stranger's. Her individual features- eyes, lips, nose, hair- are like pieces of a puzzle that don't fit together. Is a flower with mismatched petals still beautiful? She opens the window, a gust of wind unsteadies her and for a second, she can't find solid ground under her feet.

She jumps.

The rusty stairs groan under her weight as she tiptoes down the fire escape. When she arrives at the school, people are clustered around the sidewalk. Whispers spread like wildfire, little gasps punctuating the silence. She slips between Joey Mansfield and Jake Ehlers, weaving her way through the crowd until she gets to the edge of the sidewalk. The first thing she sees is the glasses. Rounded, bent at the bridge, lying cracked on the pavement. His limbs are sprawled out like a flightless bird, his face hidden and his hair combed over the back of his head at a strange angle, as if he wasn't quite sure how to do it. His feet face outward, jeans cuffed to reveal bony ankles. She can't breathe. All

she can think of are the names. She sees Molly Watson and Frank O'Toole, Harry Gordon and Thomas Wu, Yvonne Douglas and Margaret Smith. Meghan Wilson cries with Jane Park as Will Levin pulls out his phone to call his mother. She stares at the man, unblinking. Suddenly her eyes close and she is there again, on the ground, and he on the roof. She asks the man his name. Someone taps the girl on the shoulder. Her head whirls around sharply, her eyes wide and vulnerable. It's a woman from the police department; Officer Lisa Howard.

The officer shakes her hand, still but for a quavering she can't suppress. The officer speaks gently, asks for the girl's name. The girl shakes her head. Her mouth feels dry. All she can think of is how she will never know his. Her lips part but no sound is heard.

## Elegy

Nicole Acheampong  
SHARON, MD

The albatross bird never sleeps  
and never lands  
I tried to sleep last night  
but you were heavy in my head  
I promise I really tried  
to push you off my chest  
the albatross  
has the longest wingspan  
and the longest lifespan too  
you were less than twenty  
every night I sweat  
like there is a well  
beneath my skin  
over water the bird  
will spend its whole life  
awake and airborne  
even when the sea  
bruises black-blue  
and the wind won't move  
when its wings are tired  
even when it's lonesome  
no one is there  
it cannot land.



JOYCE MOON LITITZ, PA



# God is in the Details

Madeleine Gallo  
RADFORD, VA

The clouds, thin metal-colored sheets, reminded Jane of a time when things were not so ugly. The cigarette between her fingers had nearly burnt the skin at her nails, but there was something slightly pleasurable about pain. “Forget it, Horace,” she said, placing her hand on the man’s shoulder. “Remember the last one we tried to build? What a . . .” The words came slowly, difficult for her to speak.

“Failure.”

Kenning scratched his head at the plans spread over the ground below him. “Stop dwelling on the past,” he answered, thrusting his lower lip out in a childish pout. “I’ve got to do this, Jane. James Levin’s got a working machine. Have you seen the thing? It runs smoother than half the junk in our house.”

“That’s because you built half the junk in our house,” she replied, her humor falling flat against his stooped body. Jane’s smile disintegrated and she exhaled. “Please don’t build this thing. I don’t want to relive the ordeal of last time. That was . . . depressing.”

“Why? Because it didn’t work?”

“Because it almost did,” she said without emotion. When she closed her eyes and strained her mind to remember the horrid incident, she felt a familiar throb start in the center of her chest. Such pain could only lead to full blown agony, so she forced the memories away into the black abyss from which they had come.

“I don’t see why that affected you so much. Olivia, well, she didn’t really count, you know? I know you saw her as a daughter but —”

She turned away from her husband and tuned out the low hum of his voice. “The sky used to be beautiful.”

Kenning ignored her comment, and Jane looked at him and sighed. The sky probably looked the same to him each day. While he was muttering to himself about work, Jane made an excuse to slip inside the house. She headed toward the bedroom but hesitated in the entrance when she saw the wooden door to the closet.

Jane took a deep breath and pushed her way inside, moving aside cobwebs and old clothes. She hadn’t opened the box in the far right corner in a long time, and it felt unfamiliar in her hands when she pulled it from its hiding place. The sides groaned in protest as she forced

them apart. Dust settled in a circle on the carpet, and Jane was able to peer into her once beloved treasure chest. In it were stored the precious memories of her childhood. Having no use for them anymore, she sifted through them until she felt what she was looking for brush her finger. She stared down at it and sighed, for it was nothing more than a metal plate, a thin icy rectangle in her hand.

Though it had gathered a thin layer of dust, Jane was still able to make out Olivia engraved on the surface. Her heart throbbed with nostalgia as she brought it to her chest, just as she had done a million years before when Olivia was still living.

Jane had learned she was unable to give birth at the tender age of fifteen. Her adolescence had been mistake after mistake, usually with a young man by the name of Rob Lagvy. Looking back, she wondered what it was she saw in Rob, for surely it was not his mind or looks. No, something much simpler had drawn her to him. Rob was the type to nurture a fallen bird to health or to help a stranger’s grandmother cross the street. He didn’t look for reasons to be kind; there was no hope of a better chance at heaven or good karma. Some primal instinct made him act the way he did, perhaps a certain wiring of his DNA.

Jane wouldn’t have minded being a young mother with Rob. Her heart and mind were always in the right place; her body was the one to never keep up.

Time after time she was left disappointed, and for five years she convinced herself that the doctors were wrong. The problem could not be with her but had to be with Rob. As long as he stayed, she would remain without children. So without a second thought, she let him slip into a future without her, a future where she learned he soon had a wife and three sons.

And that was when she met Horace Kenning at a genetics seminar some fellow science lovers convinced her to attend.

Kenning caught her eye the instant she entered the building because he was tall and old-fashioned, yet he spoke of the future. She watched him with admiration as he rose before the room, encouraging them to aspire for a life beyond what they knew. He also shared with them his own dreams. His world was a place where crime and war were obsolete, where disease could be deleted on a computer screen. Unlike Rob, Kenning had plans for how to make his goals reality, and with a crew of other hopefuls, he had succeeded.

Not only did Kenning learn to remove certain DNA mutations that caused common illnesses, he also discovered a way to replace mutated DNA and alter it slightly to give the person unique character. He could tweak and add genes until he had practically created the person himself. After this phenomenal leap in science, he continued to amaze the world by finding neurotransmitters in the brain that influ-

enced certain people to crave violence. Kenning eventually completed the first successful removal of these neurotransmitters and turned a well-known psychopath into a compassionate, loving man.

Soon Kenning’s contributions to science had ended nearly all disease and war. He had changed everyday life.

But for some reason now that her infertility could vanish in an instant, Jane lacked a reason to fix herself. If she were born without the ability to conceive, changing that would seem almost blasphemous. Was it unnatural for her to have children? Would she be going against the work of God?

Explaining this to Kenning was close to impossible, so after discovering a child with him was not likely to happen either, she asked him to build one.

Thus came Olivia.

The more time Jane spent with Olivia, the less she liked the world her new husband had built for her. With Kenning’s discoveries fixing her every wrong turn, she felt rather than living, she merely existed. With a heavy heart, she watched the breakdown of seven-year-old Olivia, who had served more as a surrogate hope than a child.

What would Rob Lagvy have thought?

“Horace will never understand,” she muttered, bringing her lips to the chilly metal. The dust remained on her mouth when she pulled away, leaving a print of her skin on the heart. “He didn’t love you like I did. He doesn’t love anything but science. He doesn’t love life.”

The decision to murder Olivia had not been her own, but Kenning’s, and looking back, she was unsure how she had forgiven him. Olivia was a machine . . . a robot. Love ran differently for them; it was programmed, not born. Kenning was rational and aware of such things. Olivia was no more to him than a toaster or a TV remote. When those things broke, he removed their batteries, as he had done with Olivia’s.

Holding the most vital piece of Olivia’s short existence reminded Jane of how strong their bond had been despite everything. Metal never separated their love. She loved Olivia as much as she had ever loved Kenning, possibly more. She understood Olivia better than she understood Kenning. Robot or not, Olivia was a child.

Jane’s child.

Her daughter.

She gently placed Olivia’s heart back into the box and wept. She wept because her child was dead, but mostly because her husband was the reason why.

“There you are,” Kenning said

when Jane returned to the family room, her eyes swollen from crying. He was so used to her tears that he barely noticed her appearance when she approached. “I was getting worried.”

Jane stepped forward and settled her muddled vision on his face. “I want to build the next one.”

There was nothing worse for Jane than a man watching and judging her work. She could feel Kenning’s eyes stab holes through her back as she worked out the diagram to reconstruct Olivia. There was no way the symbols would ever make sense in her head with those eyes staring at her.

“Horace,” she said through clenched teeth, hoping to send him off with sheer willpower.

“I know, I know. You can do it,” he admitted sheepishly behind her, “but I did make Olivia, remember? Don’t you think I could give you some pointers?”

“You also killed her,” Jane answered, just as condescendingly. She heard a nearly inaudible sigh escape his lips.

“Olivia broke.”

“Which is why I should do this one myself,” she countered. “So it won’t break.”

Horace groaned and stormed up the basement stairs. “Call me when something goes wrong.”

She would never need him though, for she knew how to build robots by heart. She had watched him night after night until she had memorized when to use what tool, where to place each wire. Oh, she would prove him wrong all right.

He had taken three years to complete Olivia, but Jane was sure she could have hers done in less than one. Time was not an issue; she had all the time in the world. Her whole life was focused on this one project.

She considered making an exact replica of Olivia, but it would be impossible to recreate that love. Olivia was gone forever — even Jane could understand that fact. But she would build someone she loved not more, but equally.

And though she refused to admit the truth to Kenning, Jane knew Olivia hadn’t been as advanced as she could have been. Her heart stung to think it was not love that Olivia had shared with her, but an obsession Kenning had put inside her brain.

Jane’s robot would be different. It would no longer require a mechanical necessity to want her; it would choose to want her. It would have a human mind and emotions to make up for the things Olivia lacked. And if it came out as planned, maybe it would bring some joy back into Jane’s desolate life.

“It’s not as bad as I expected, I’ll give you that,” Kenning said, stooping over the desk to observe the squirming prototype. “It moves smoother than P52-er, Olivia, did at this stage.” He gently nudged the writhing ball of liquid metal and it shot backwards with a hiss. Jane laughed.

“Pretty good for a week, huh?”

“Pretty good for a week,” he smiled in agreement. “When will you start on the body? That’s the difficult part.”

“Once I’m done with the brain.”

“You’re really devoted to this, aren’t you?” he asked. “I’m impressed.” His lips pulled together in a tight line, and he squinted at the shaking matter thoughtfully. “If it keeps up like this, it’ll be better than the Levin one.” He took a thin strip of duct tape from Jane’s desk and headed for the infant machine.

“What are you doing?” she asked, placing her hand roughly between his shoulder blades to halt him.

“Labeling it. Is P53 okay?”

“Absolutely not,” she answered, slipping between her husband and her creation. If he wanted to put a label on her work, he was going to have to fight her. She stood face to face with him and watched him sigh, his hands settling on his hips.

“Well, what do you suppose we call it then?”

“His name is Brian.”

Shock passed Kenning’s features before his face melted into a disappointed grimace. In his eyes was a look Jane had seen there many times before, an expression of utter confusion.

“Oh, Jane,” he sighed softly, dread creeping through his words. “Not this again. Not Olivia again.”

“It’s different this time. He’s —”

“A robot, Jane,” Kenning finished sternly. “Look, I’m not going through that ordeal with you again. You said it was an ordeal yourself, remember?” He glared at her, his eyes menacing and burning in his heavily lined face. “Didn’t you learn not to get attached last time?”

“That won’t happen again,” Jane retorted. She turned so she was facing Brian instead of the seething eyes of her husband. “I’m making this one. He won’t . . . He won’t break. He’ll be more advanced,” she whispered, the last part nearly silent in hopes Kenning wouldn’t hear. Unfortunately for her, he didn’t miss a word.

There was a heavy moment of silence where Jane focused on nothing but her shallow breathing and the sloppy movements of Brian below her. Fear crept into her blood the longer the stillness went

on and her heart hammered her chest.

“So it was my fault,” she finally heard him say in a restricted voice. “It’s because I built Olivia that she broke. Well, in case you’ve forgotten, she was a machine, Jane. Built to love you. Built to make you happy. I went out of my way to make her for you, to bring you back to life, Jane! Machines break! It wasn’t meant to last forever; I never meant that.” His voice was shrill and angry, so much so that she felt her eyes well with burning tears.

“I know that,” she whispered, regretting her earlier words.

“Olivia’s love for you was false. It was no different than a remote built to change the channel. If I had known then that building her to want you would lead to this, believe me, I never would have done it.” By the time he was done, the rage in his voice had deteriorated into the exasperated way of speaking she was used to hearing.

Something warm brushed her shoulder. “I know you miss the way life used to be, but it’s so much better now. There’s no war, no crime, and no disease.”

“I miss variety,” she muttered. “I miss color and difference. What is the worth of beauty if there is no ugly to counter it?”

“That’s ignorance talking.”

Neither of them spoke again until Jane heard the sound of Kenning heading up the basement stairs. Her hands stayed in fists at her sides, and she kept her eyes defiantly glued to Brian, who was still squirming helplessly beneath her.

Kenning paused at the top. “All robots break.”

She heard the bedroom door groan open and close. Rather than sleep next to Kenning, Jane curled into a ball on the concrete floor, the newborn brain of Brian enfolded in her hands.

Four months passed and Jane not only completed Brian’s brain, but his organs and bones as well. Never having seen Olivia at this stage, she had a difficult time looking at the mechanical skeleton without cringing. Though his movements shifted between smooth and primitive, his iridescent eyes seemed strangely human when they focused on her. This eerie feeling compelled her to work faster, to start on the body sooner rather than later.

She created the face of a child, just as Olivia once wore. Looks meant little to her really, but she tried to shape the features in a way she believed mirrored both her own and Kenning’s. The eyes became Kenning’s beautiful ocean-colored almonds. The skin was a soft olive shade that matched hers, and his hair was dyed to a pleasant blend between her own dark locks and Kenning’s blonde ones.

She laid the thin human face

down and frowned, not quite pleased at the way it appeared sprawled over the wooden surface of her desk. The thick lashes fell over the cerulean eyes in a peaceful manner, but she did not feel at ease. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Jane gently folded the skin and set it aside to begin on the body.

The labor was long and arduous, spent with the chilling noises of Brian's restless brain clicking beneath her, but in three hours, Jane Kenning had finished molding Brian's skin to his metal bones. Once that was complete, she had nothing left but the few small things that would make him truly human, such as speech, touch, and most important, emotion.

She knew wiring the emotion was a giant risk, especially for her, a woman who had never been a scientist but had longed for artistry all her life. Even Kenning had yet to pull off such a feat. If she knew what she was doing, and she was ninety percent sure she did, Jane was about to create not a robot, but a boy.

She could be famous, surrounded by admirers and dollars . . . but she wouldn't be. Brian would live the life of a child, not a machine. To the human eye he would appear as her son, and no one would ever know the difference other than those who knew already.

Such excitement was drowning her thoughts that she nearly missed the garbled croak as she inserted Brian's vocal chords into the open latch on his throat.

"Pretty," it said faintly. "Pretty."

Jane froze in her awkward position crouched on the floor. Her fingers trembled where they worked and she looked up at the face of Brian. He was sitting on the desk's edge, staring at her with bewilderment.

He smiled when their eyes met and reached forward in a surprisingly fluent movement, taking a lock of her dark hair into his artificial hand. "Pretty," he repeated, the teeth Jane had labored over clashing together when he spoke.

"Brian," she said slowly, gently unwinding her hair from his fingers.

"Jane," he answered without faltering. Even though she had designed him to recognize her, she was still astonished when he spoke her name so quickly. The blue eyes shifted from her to the doorway and Brian's smile quivered at the edges. "That man is coming back," he stated, his voice suddenly hard.

"You mean Horace?" Jane asked, drunk with happiness at the sight of Brian coming to life. She momentarily wondered whether the emotion chip she had drilled into his chest was effective.

"I do not like that man."

The words hadn't been what

she hoped for, but it was the first time in her thirty years of life she had ever heard a robot express an honest opinion. She laughed with joy and tugged him off the desk, bringing his cold body against hers.

"Brian, Brian, Brian," she chanted, kissing his hair and cheeks with tears in her eyes. "My Brian."

He placed his rigid arms around her and seemed to inhale her scent. She smiled against his chest, liking the way his flesh moved with his synthetic heartbeat.

"Come with me," she said softly, taking his fingers into her own. He stared at her with puzzled eyes like there was no world outside the basement door. "There is more," she reassured him, leading him up the stairs, "so much more, Brian."

When they emerged from the basement, Kenning's smile dissolved into a surprised and slightly nervous frown.

"This is Brian."

Realization dawned on Kenning.

"This is the robot," he gasped, "Jane, I don't understand! You told me you didn't want to relive Olivia. You said it didn't work last time, a mistake, right!? You said it would be different now . . . Now, just look at this thing! It's a boy, for God's sake! A living, breathing child!" His shoulders heaved with something close to rage. Brian did not pull closer to Jane as expected, but instead bravely stepped forward to Kenning. "Tell me something."

Kenning shook his head, muttering softly to himself. He set his jaw straight and glared down at Brian. "So you're Brian," he stated flatly.

"Tell me something," Brian repeated. Kenning looked to Jane for help, but when she said nothing, he sighed.

"What do you need me to tell you?"

"Tell me what the word 'robot' means to you," Brian answered without so much as a blink of his glass eyes.

Kenning stepped back and rolled his bloodshot eyes to the approving face of his wife. "I don't have time for this, Jane. I wanted to eat, maybe take a nap."

"And what is stopping you from doing just that?" she demanded.

"Your project's silly word games. Did you plan this? Is it like a test . . . a right and wrong answer?"

"I only programmed a life for Brian. How he wishes to live it is his decision," Jane explained defensively. "And if he wants you to explain something to him, whether it is the meaning of life or the definition of robot, that is exactly what you should do."

Kenning released a desperate sigh

and closed his eyes. "I am a sensible man," he murmured to himself before sinking his shoulders and grunting, "Robot: a mechanical human constructed for easier, more convenient life."

Brian, nodding as if he expected the answer, turned back to Jane and gripped her fingers in a gesture more man than boy.

Kenning looked on vehemently, a vein across his forehead protruding in annoyance.

"And do you have the time to answer a question of mine, my lovely wife?" he sneered, causing her to hesitate in her steps.

The tiny fingers in her own, however, brought her strength to say, "Yes?"

"Why did you have to make it look like me?"

"Brian, meet our robot. It doesn't have a name like you, but I am positive you'll make friends," Sheila Levin grinned, gently nudging forward the tiny shaking contraption on the floor. Its weak metallic legs struggled to grip the polished wood and it made a pathetic move backward, collapsing onto Sheila's feet. "You have to understand you're very advanced, sweetie. Most robots are like this one here," she smiled sympathetically.

Jane watched as Brian stared down at the Levin robot, his friendly smile faltering at the sides. Sheila caught her looking and winked. "Come on. Let's grab some lemonade. It's nice outside. Your Brian will make a great friend, don't worry."

Keeping her anxious eyes on her son, Jane hesitantly followed Sheila onto the porch. Sheila seemed oblivious to the idea of trouble, as she was already blabbering away with the latest gossip. Something about adultery, she said, maybe in the Smith house.

Jane struggled to listen over the sound of the old porch swing rattling beneath her. The sweet taste of the lemonade fell sour on her tongue, and she grimaced at the sensation.

"What was that?" Sheila said suddenly, interrupting herself. "Did you hear that, Jane?"

Jane didn't answer but jumped up and bolted for the screen door. The sound spilled from the open windows once more, and her blood went cold inside her skin. "Brian!"

He was standing above the broken pieces of Sheila's robot, a bundle of wire held tightly in his fist. His eyes were wide and frightened as he looked down at the mess.

"It's not your fault!" Jane rushed to tell him, dropping to her knees beside him. He dropped the wires, shifting his



maddened eyes to her face. "You didn't mean to break it, Brian."

He raised his hands to his face and moved his shaking fingers to his cheeks, almost like he expected tears to fall down them. Jane made a mental note to remember to program tears for him later, but his anguished look was enough to make her forget the thought. "Brian?" she whispered, ignoring the dim sound of Sheila's mild complaints behind her.

"That thing," Brian spoke softly, holding his face in his hands, "That thing is not the same as me!"

"Of course not," Jane assured him.

"It is not the same at all!" he screamed, kicking the mangled pieces away so they slid across the tiled floor. Sheila bent to catch them in her open hands. "We're nothing alike, are we, Jane?" he implored suddenly, his eyes manic when they found his creator's once again. "I am not a robot, am I? I'm not made of wires and metal like this, am I?"

Jane hadn't realized he was now gripping her shoulders until she felt the pain of his glass nails digging into her skin. "Good God, Jane!" Sheila said distastefully. "Don't let a machine control you like this. Turn it off or something."

"Tell me I'm a man!" Brian begged Jane, shaking her with incredible strength. "Tell me I am not a machine! Why do they say this about me? Why do they say I —"

"Brian?" Jane asked when his voice stopped. Brian ignored her and turned and ran back to the basement, back to where he was born.

"Ridiculous," commented Sheila. "You can't build a boy, Jane. No matter how lifelike you make him, he will never be anything but a machine. You cannot build a personality into him. He will only imitate what he sees, he'll never be —"

"It's time you leave," Jane growled, shoving Sheila in the direction of the door. She found Brian at the basement desk, the oil stained blueprints from his construction in his shaking hands. "Brian," she whispered to him, stepping softly from stair to stair, "Those mean nothing! You understand that, right?"

"Jane," he spoke softly, his voice a thread in the air.

"Call me mother, my son. Mom, mommy, mama, whichever suits, but not Jane," she answered. "Never Jane with you."

Brian flinched beneath her fingers and sighed, though the action seemed strange when no breath left his lips. Slowly his hands wound through her hair, hovering over the curve of her shadowed cheek. In the poor light, the minor flaws in his design gleamed, such as the slight hesitations in his movements or the scratch she didn't

remember making under his left eye.

"You are warm," his tiny voice spoke, the short boyish fingertips barely on her skin. "Unlike me."

Jane closed her eyes to imagine it was not a metal thing in front of her, but a boy made of flesh and bones. The hardness of his hand gave him away, and the low temperature of his synthetic skin.

"I will work on it," she promised him, leaning to kiss him. "You are no different than the people I know, Brian."

"And do you love me?" he said with his glowing eyes on hers. "Do you love me how you love Kenning?"

She smiled against him. "I love you completely. You are my son!"

Fire dancing in his eyes, Brian spun around and tossed the blueprints aside. "I don't want to be your son!" he screamed, bringing his foot to the desk chair and sending it spiraling into the wall. He waved the blueprints in her face. "I want to be a man! Make me older, Jane! Fix this hair," he begged, grabbing fistfuls of his brown hair and ripping at it. "Make me look nothing like you!"

"All right, Brian. You can choose your own features this time," she said in an attempt to calm him. "I'll put you to sleep while I work," she whispered, reaching for the small control panel on the back of his neck, just beneath his hairline. He jumped backwards defensively, holding up his hands.

"No," he said. "I want to see everything. Never touch those buttons. Never turn me off."

Jane heard her husband calling her from upstairs, saying something about dinner and sundown. She hurried to smooth out the last wrinkles, and when she pulled away, she found herself staring openmouthed at her work.

She heard Kenning's heavy footsteps on the wooden stairs, and she could detect the moment he spotted them because his steps faltered. "What is this?" he whispered in a voice unlike his own. "What have you done?"

Jane said nothing, looking to the hulking silhouette of her husband on the staircase and then to the exact replica of him before her. The two Kennings looked at one another for a long moment before the man on the stairs repeated, "What is this?" His voice was shrill now, his eyes demented as he looked between Jane and Brian.

"I-I let him decide how he wanted to look. He didn't want to be a boy, Horace. He wanted —"

"So you made him into me? You've given him my face, my body!" Kenning shouted. "That's it, Jane! I'm turning him off." Kenning made a wild dash for

Brian, but Brian was faster and grabbed his arm, wrenching it backward. Kenning yelped in surprise and struggled against the robotic arm.

"Brian!" Jane begged. "Brian, please stop!"

"Don't call me that name," Brian warned coolly, tightening his grip on Kenning's arm until the man whimpered in pain. "My name is Horace," he said, stressing his syllables just as Kenning did, speaking with the exact inflections. "Horace Kenning, your husband, Jane."

"Turn him off, Jane!" Kenning shouted, lashing out with his other arm. Brian spun them around, flipping their positions, and then he moved their bodies in such a way that Jane lost sight of her husband and found herself staring at clones, unable to identify either of them.

"Brian?" she whispered, tasting the nicotine of her most recent smoke dry in her throat. Both of them blinked wild aqua eyes at her, both completely human.

Realizing she would never be able to tell them apart, Jane edged backward until she was against the cans of gasoline Kenning used for his sky-bike. "Jane!" one of the men shouted and Jane kicked one of the cans over, watching the ugly liquid roll over the cement floor.

She fumbled for her cigarette lighter in her breast pocket, clumsily latching onto it at last.

"Jane!" they shouted in unison.

"I never taught Brian the escape route from the basement," she said, moving backward up the stairs. She felt her heart pounding her bones and sweat starting on her skin. She knew as she ascended the staircase that they would hold each other from escaping, that neither of them would be greeting her in the backyard.

All she had left was hope, and that one word echoed in her head as she dropped the flaming lighter and rushed up the stairs, slamming the door behind her. She realized how strange she felt knowing that two men were burning beneath her and she could not hear the fire. She ran through a silent ghost house, tripping over a piece of Sheila's broken robot.

The yard was no lighter than the basement, and as Jane ran around the house, she could not help but look at the sky.

Blue, she realized. The sky was blue again.

She careened around the maple tree and to the back of the house to the deck. The little wooden door aside the pillars holding the deck was still unopened; no one stood beneath it waiting for her. She stood there for many minutes, her chest heaving.



Olivia came to her mind, and for the first time ever, Jane felt nothing. Olivia hadn't meant anything to her, she discovered. Having Olivia had just been a distraction from the thing that had emptied her life of meaning. Olivia hadn't even been her idea.

The wooden door groaned and fell open at last. A man stepped forward, his clothes stained with soot and his face patterned with ruby scratches. When he saw Jane, he pulled her into a mammoth hug and laughed against her hair. She breathed him in, smelling fire. "Thank you, honey. I told you he was no good," he said, kissing her.

She laughed with him. "I was worried for a moment."

"He knew," he said suddenly, pulling apart so they could look into each other's eyes. "He knew my skin would not burn. He knew you meant for him to die."

Jane shrugged, reaching up to touch the scratch beneath his eye. "No one will ever know the difference."

"I love you, Jane," he said, moving her hand so she could feel his heartbeat. She saw smoke rising from beneath the deck, and she realized the house would not survive. Let the bad times burn, she thought.

She caught two brilliant eyes watching her and she smiled, realizing he was expecting an answer. "Of course I love you. I told you I would always love you, Brian."

"Call me Horace, Jane."

## Love Poem for the Garden State

Flannery James  
BOONTON, NJ

You've got the Sunday morning blues, but that doesn't mean you can just waltz through my back door, flop on the living room sofa, drag smog-painted fingernails through your tangled highway hair. *God, I've got a headache.* Ocean County is bunched up around your ribcage, and I can see a sliver of Toms River low across your waist. Trenton is caught in the dip of your spine. You're trying to pretend you didn't spend the night browsing the shelves at some anonymous big box store, reading the tabloids in the carpet aisle, a tessellated bathmat stamping its pattern into your elbow. Eyes gloss over page after tired page, exclamation points and limp paper smiles tickling the night away until the blue shirt stoops over you: *Señora, you need to buy it or move on.* Your coffee-stained breath is giving you away. It's been rough going ever since you dropped your nickname—*why would anyone call their child Garden*—and started chain smoking

oil refineries and tractor-trailers. Girl, get your shit together. Your strappy sandals are spilling the Jersey Shore all over my floor, and no amount of spray-tan can hide Newark tattooed across your chest. You're losing yourself in the Short Hills Mall to forget that you ever knew what it's like to fall asleep in Camden, drunken sirens singing you into unconsciousness, the percussion of gunfire no more foreign than the ricochet of your pulse. When you get up to leave, I glimpse the low tide of Cape May pulling out from your seaweed-drowned ankles. New Jersey, let me get lost in your asphalt curls, stitch me into the fabric of your back road wanderings with double lines of yellow thread, sweep me off my feet in the wild arms of the Rockaway River. I'll wait for you under dim gas station lights, flickering an uncertain Morse code into the night: *run away with me, and I'll storm through you with the hurricane strength of my love. I'll level the high-rises and dance barefoot over suburbia, lead the Pine Barrens to march over soccer fields and empty acres of parking lots. Come with me, and we'll hike the Appalachian Trail to heal your layers of interstate scars.* I'll show you the stars without light pollution, and you will weave the wilderness of you into me. But we both know you won't show.

## Before the Zoology Lab Test

Alicia Lai  
STATE COLLEGE, PA

*after Sappho*

In class, you are your own small kingdom—the bass frightened into fishtailing away, a hermit crab knowing only to be equal to the gods

before becoming bulbous, incongruent in his shell. He needles up through the sand; sifts, vise-like; laughs his way through packing

for home—tide, sandbar, divine intervention without the complication of attempted rebirth. I sort his harbors by color. I file oceans by how

much speaking is left in me after your shell jangles to dust in my pocket. I know you by the mess you leave on the lab table after oxidation, reduction.

I watch from across the room as he foams at the connects of his brittle, segmented form. You are bent, a curtain over this performance, and

tuck his cavernous organs away under the scalpel—who doesn't love a disaster you yourself create? But this way you do not know to

slip sweetly into another chambered shell.

# Beginnings

Emily Xiao  
CHICAGO, IL

When dusk rolls around, most of the families at the neighborhood pool begin to leave. Past the wire fence the tennis courts lie empty, mottled by shadows of neon tennis balls sprawled in the sun, and beyond them, the pine trees attract clans of oversized mosquitoes.

Around here in Clear Lake, it's not unusual to get a whiff of that strange, acrid, biting sweet blend of sunscreen and insect repellent. The sun and the earth work in tandem, heat pounding down in waves off your pink shoulders while the fire ants slip unnoticed through the laces of your shoes and warm your feet up with their razor bites. Sure, sunburns and bug bites are no big deal—some Cortisone and in a few days you're good as new—but most people would rather avoid the trouble. Why go through all that pain when you just as easily don't have to?

My father and I are never ready to go home, though. He tells the rest of the family to go ahead in the car, it's okay, we'll walk, and swats lazily at a mosquito on his knee. Glancing over at me in the pool, at my fingers clinging to the rough rounded cement at the edge, he swats at me to go ahead too.

I plunge in, my wet feet inverting above the surface and feeling the cool July breeze before breaking into the water again. Down below, the pool lights nestled within the tiled perimeter have been turned on and they render the water a ghostly shipwreck sea-blue, fine powdery silt suspended in the glow. I scream at the beauty of it all but the sound only comes up a cornucopia of bubbles that turns to marbles in my ears, the boom falling apart as it beats the drum, shoots the pistol, whooshes up against the seashell swirl of cochlea. A few feet away there are two pairs of intertwined legs illuminated white, and I lift my head above the surface to see a guy looking up at the humid pink sunset and telling his girl, baby, it's gorgeous.

So, holding my breath, I duck my head back under and let the water buoy me up, and through the rippled layers of color I can make out the outline of the lifeguard in his tall chair craning his neck, wondering whether I'm drowning, thinking, hey kid, are you okay there or what? God, don't

make me come down . . .

When you live in this area by the Gulf of Mexico you learn early on from your history teachers that whatever happens to you, you will never ever have it as bad as poor Cabeza de Vaca did when he got wrecked up on the shore of the Island of Doom, Malhado, beloved hopeless Galveston with its grimy sands and murky waters. Tropical storms work wonders around there, but hurricanes are legendary, like the one in 1900 that drowned the city—there are stories in which a guy stood on the torn-off rooftop of his house and watched his entire family drift past in the flood. But without that hurricane Houston would never have had the chance to rise up. Houston . . . the haughty stronghold that was only trying to help after the last hurricane when the mayor of Galveston finally said, no way, we don't need your help, because its pride was the last thing it still had.

It was on Galveston Island that Cabeza de Vaca got stranded almost five hundred years ago. But this is only the middle of his story—the poor guy had already experienced misfortune before, and would experience untold loads of misfortune after. He and his men had gotten lost in the yawning swamps of Florida, eating their horses as they built their five rafts in search of Mexico. They drifted without food and water along the coast, until one of our tender hurricanes separated the rafts and swallowed some of them forever in the salty depths. So forty men ended up at Galveston, only to be enslaved by some neighboring Indian tribes. In the end, only four men, including Cabeza de Vaca, survived out of the original six hundred.

But this Cabeza de Vaca guy wouldn't let all of that get him down. He wandered from tribe to tribe, eventually gaining a follower as a faith healer, a child of the sun. And so he made it back to Mexico City, back to Europe. He made it. Historians love his journals for their accounts of the native peoples, and for his compassion and respect. So I don't want to hear anymore complaining from y'all, my seventh grade history teacher told us. You will give me the same compassion and respect and do the homework.

It is Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca whom I think of this afternoon as I look out at the rain falling down on our cul-de-sac, the same rain that's been falling all day long. The streets suffocate beneath a few inches of the stuff, and there is a car out there that swims slowly past the house, its driver

mouthed please because he just wants to get home to his wife and a beautiful rotisserie chicken for dinner without losing control. Behind me in the depths of the house, a din of shouting accompanies the thunder, my grandfather's pots and pans clattering, my mother yelling at my father about something he keeps forgetting. His parents jumping in, the mother language stabbing through the noise in the way that only it can.

This storm knows not to venture into angrier territory, finally relenting a couple of hours before dinnertime, and thank God I don't need Cabeza de Vaca's help anymore because this means the pool might still open.

When we get there the pool is only half as crowded as usual, and the water has the strange heavy tint of rain, sizzling against the electricity in the air. The rest of my family, my parents, grandparents, sister, goes to look for empty chairs. I scramble down into the deep end of the pool, but once I have braved my eyes to the water I see the limp body of a frog floating in front of my face. And I can't get out of there fast enough.

But morbid curiosity overtakes me and I am back in, scanning the concrete below. It's nowhere as deep as the diving pool, where the depths are clouded in the murky remnants of lost items and every kid knows he could sure as hell die down there and disappear forever. Here, I can make out the black specks at the bottom and begin counting the wreckage brought in by the storm, two, six, nine. Where did all these wretched dead frogs come from—where will they go? Their thin limbs are slimy and twisted out of position and the water carries them like broken marionettes. I stare at them drifting past in this aquatic gravesite, my eyes following the current to the rectangular slats of the pool filters, where their bodies knock awkwardly. The water in this neighborhood makes its way down the pipes, rainwater through the storm drains, and eventually finds itself in the Gulf, washing up against the boundaries of the disappearing sulfuric marshes. Rotting corpses of amphibians among the smell of rotting eggs.

When I lose count I make my way over to the shallow end, keeping my body close to the surface, and look up to where my family reclines in plastic pool chairs. The pool is quieter for a lack of people, and I can tell they are loving it up, all the stillness of it. Tomorrow the entire neighbor-

hood will return again and they will love the noise of that as well. And tonight the sunset is cloaked by an angry musk of gray, but tomorrow they will remake it into something more beautiful than anything we've ever seen.

The lights turn on beneath me and no way I'm going to look because this time they could illuminate something ugly and devastating. But the thing is, I do force myself to look. I plunge in and look. The beauty of the water is ruined, marred by the dispersed bodies among the scintillating sediment, and I know it will never quite be as pure as it used to be.

And to my surprise, I'm not devastated, because I find that I'm beginning to love the stillness too.

## Crossings

Catherine Wong  
MORRISTOWN, NJ

They say that in this village  
bridges last lifetimes,  
not one, but many,  
a thousand men dead and born  
before the river spans uncrossed.

To start they shoot  
a feather-licked arrow  
caught and bound with  
a noose of string  
and with every bridge  
the archer walks first, on tiptoe  
so if he falls in crossing,  
his arrow tears from the earth  
and falls as one.

How do you know  
a dying bridge? How  
to tell when the knotted ropes  
will groan beneath you  
like tearing muscle  
and dive as twisting dragons  
into the waiting water?

They say, you don't.  
They say, if it sways beneath you  
and falls as you cross  
then surely this is good,  
surely this is meant to be.

## On Writing Good

Alexa Derman  
Westfield, NJ

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

*I want you to tell me your definition of good writing.*

Your first character's name is Minnie. She needs an introduction. Let her describe herself. That shows what she's like, Right?

Think: something about bubblegum. She's sweet, right? That's symbolism. Think: when was the last time you heard bubblegum? What was it strung with? You bet it's never been strung with...vodka. Ah-ha! You're kind of brilliant, aren't you?

Wow.  
That's tough.  
Do movies count?  
What about plays?  
Rinse, repeat.  
The writing I like has a strong lyricism to it.

"I'm made of bubblegum vodka, Sarah! Bubblegum vodka and bug juice and the end of the world. What are you made of?" Well, musicality and cadence are absolutely crucial.

"Hopscotch and the underbellies of toads. Dinosaur dust. First haircuts."

Still, a piece must flow, and the thoughts must be clear and concise; it has to make sense.

Shit.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

If there are characters, we relish in the voyeurism of watching them struggle. They have different sides to them. They're not symbols, politically or sexually. "He dreamt he was reading an oversized book, heavy as a child in his lap."

They're all people.

"He knew it was important for his thesis, and that he had pulled a few strings to get it, because his hands felt tight and raw with a nervous excitement, and anxiety."

I find myself most drawn to the works that show the struggle of man — say, an imperfect protagonist who finds himself through the course of the novel. The character may be flawed —

I see myself in his characters:

(The arrogance,  
The sense of entitlement,  
The vanity,  
The sick infatuation with tragedy)  
They're all flawed.

"Lolita, light of my life!"

I personally like when the characters have *some* kind of flaw.

"You know that song 'If a body catch a body comin' through the rye?' I'd like—"

'It's 'If a body meet a body coming through the rye. It's a poem. By Robert Burns.'"

But he is compelling. And, despite the character's limits—

"IF WE CAN DO IT UNDER FOUR SECONDS, WE CAN DO IT UNDER THREE,' he said. 'IT JUST TAKES MORE FAITH.' 'It takes more practice,' I told him irritably. 'FAITH TAKES PRACTICE,' said Owen Meany."

I am most taken by a character who finds his voice, holds onto his spirit, and ultimately provides the reader with the feeling that he will not only survive,

"The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."

but prevail.

As you know, I am listening to *Les Misérables* on tape and while Victor Hugo can digress and explain the whole Napoleonic Wars, he gets away with it and brings you back to Jean Valjean.

"No man is an island, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine."

But Homer Wells and Owen Meany, they were what Faulkner was talking about. They have "an inexhaustible voice," a soul, a spirit capable of compassion

"Give me your Tired, your Poor,"  
sacrifice

"We can have everything.'

'No, we can't.'

'We can go everywhere.'

'No, we can't. It's isn't ours anymore.'" and endurance.

"Stock your mind.  
You might be poor,  
Your shoes might be broken,  
But your mind is a palace."

(But too many details can get annoying.)

I like writing that is unexpected, writing that utilizes words I wouldn't have used myself, since

"feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;"  
(Certainly good writing is not afraid of risking abstraction.)

Look, a good book just "grabs" you. I envision a Justice Potter reference—

*I'll know it when I see it.*

It's not heavy-handed.

And good writing makes you lose track of time, but never the story.

It makes you see the characters and believe the writer.

It has a So What, a meaning, a purpose for being written: a lesson to teach, confuse, confirm, suggest – an experience for a reader.

It makes them have a new opinion or view on a subject.

(The idea, I think, is to get your idea across as clearly as possible—  
“What fools these mortals be!”  
In as few words as possible.)

*Exit, pursued by bear.*

Still, good writing is not what you “expect” or “should say.”

It's not overly, unnecessarily complicated. It's not the story that's already been told.

Good writing CONNECTS.

Good writing is heart.

Good writing is F. Scott Fitzgerald.

“She had once been a Catholic, but discovering that priests were infinitely more attentive when she was in process of losing or regaining faith in Mother Church, she maintained an enchantingly wavering attitude.”

His characters represent his generation or past ones, there are philosophical arguments and questions raised. But it's still literature. He's not coming in and naming his character John McSchism to imply that the guy's conflicted (I'm looking at you, Dostoevsky), and you can actually see the explanations play out without some hundred page monologue (I'm looking at you, Ayn Rand).

So with F. Scott Fitzsexy? You get it. I think ‘this is fascinating,’ not ‘I am learning!’ I'm drawn along by gems, scattered through every page.

Him and Zelda, they were beautiful, they were glamorous, they were tragic. But he was able to capture the spark that made the 20s roar.

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”  
I think that's it. Maybe.

Look, I'm less concerned these days with whether writing is “good,” or “great,” or whatnot.

I like a tale with a great beginning, one that captures you.

“All this happened, more or less.”

Just, good writing is good shit, if you know what I mean.

(“So it goes.”)

See, in King's books, nearly every moment is described in meticulous detail.

Wilder's *Our Town*, by contrast, has a set comprised of a few chairs and a table – the rest is left to the imagination. Both writers, however, can be argued as having written “well.” And therein lies the ambiguity.

Good writing is very subjective.

Good writing is something that no one can prove is truly good, because in the end, the truth of how much you gave yourself up for your work, how much you managed to reach out to your readers, and how much you learned in the process, lies only within yourself.  
(But that's just my two cents.)

Good writing is humorous,

“Nanny fact: in my interviews, references are never checked.

I am white. I speak French. I have been to Lincoln Center in the last two months. I am hired.”

“One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had changed into a monstrous, verminous bug!”

“Civilize my syphilized yarbles!”  
yet also well thought out and dramatic at times.

“I feel so funny. I think I'm going crazy. Maybe I'm already crazy.”

“He had a headache.

He woke up.”

(Look at the count, if you can. 213 words, And not a comma splice in sight.)

(A novel won't win any awards or critical acclaim if there are grammatical errors or poor sentence fluency.)

Maybe you should call it a night.

(And 213 words is plenty  
And who cares if you never make it to four twenty six?)

But:

- Good writing changes the reader.

- It makes you feel something besides boredom.

- It's when a piece of literature leaves an impact, positive or negative.

(Break your hands, ball your fists, flex.)  
“Isabella had been squeezing his hand again...”

(It is a truth universally acknowledged that a woman in possession of a good mind must be in want of a good book.

1. *Aesop's Fables* – reading to a younger brother and learning that life is full of puzzles.

2. *Red Badge of Courage* – pulling down Nana's bookshelf decoration and reading about the universal struggle of trying to define one's self.

3. *Grapes of Wrath* – understanding that

one can overcome adversity to succeed.

4. *Sweet Savage Love* – a teenager's spring awakening.

5. *Anna Karenina* – moving beyond titillation and into the depths of intimate relationships  
(“Happy families are all alike; Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”)

6. *East of Eden* – defining the intricacies of family relations... disappointment, denial, forgiveness.

7. *Fountainhead* – reflecting on man's place in society, economics, perseverance

8. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* – accepting that things happen for reason.)

Good writing makes me want to write.  
“Life Everlasting – based on a misprint!”  
Good writing translates well, crosses borders, and travels time.  
Good writing doesn't need a sequel. Unless the sequel is written well.

Good writing is what you fight to create, understanding that all people have equal worth. You and your “message” are no better than anyone else, but the way that you make your message matter is by transcending the desire to selfishly put your story on a pedestal.

Good writing is what you create with stubbornness, with compromise, with fearlessness.

My father always loved John Steinbeck. Can anyone write a better sentence than Hemingway, brief but powerful? Your Dad always liked Faulkner.

Good writing is better than a belly laugh and tastier than pizza. But not ice cream – ice cream still rules.

No muddling allowed.

(To be simple, I believe that good writing involves a complex enough plot that stimulates my thoughts to move beyond the pages of text. The complexity, however, must be reachable and not shrouded in such depth to make it nearly unattainable.)

As for plot structure, if it doesn't drag, and useless dialogue is omitted, then the piece is written “well.”

It has a sufficiently good vocabulary and sentence structure so that there is rhythm that ebbs and flows, with terse language and multisyllabic magic.  
Like Poe.

“Once upon a midnight dreary while I pondered weak and weary—”

I was thinking Dickinson  
“Because I could not stop for Death  
He kindly stopped for me;  
Dickens?”

Dickinson.

The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.”



(Heck, Dickens too.)

I think good writing can come from anyone and from anywhere.

Good writing isn't about how many big words you use,

"My love is like a red, red rose."

Good writing doesn't have to be a specific length, or genre,

It doesn't need numerous, complicated characters,

It just has to influence the reader.

What they say about art is that good art becomes a part of you. So good writing becomes a part of who you are, becomes personal, so that when someone tries to tear it down you become very defensive. But the author must not be thinking, in that moment of creation, about whether the writing is good or not good,

*On Catch-22:*

"I haven't really the foggiest idea about what the man is trying to say... Apparently the author intends it to be funny—possibly even satire—but it is really not funny on any intellectual level..."

Of what is trendy or marketable,

*On Animal Farm:*

"It is impossible to sell animal stories in the USA."

Or of what is accepted as good

*On Lord of the Flies:*

"an absurd and uninteresting fantasy which was rubbish and dull."

*On Sylvia Plath:*

"There certainly isn't enough genuine talent for us to take notice."

*On Lolita:*

"... overwhelmingly nauseating, even to an enlightened Freudian ... It often becomes a wild neurotic daydream ..."

"I recommend that it be buried under a stone for a thousand years."

Or as "literature", which is often only limiting.

All in all, good writing is up to the writer. You must believe in what you write and feel the characters you are writing about. You have to put in your mind and your heart and combine it with your hands.

(Don't know if that helps, but that's my definition.)

I think an artistic piece is done "well" if it accurately depicts what the artist has dreamed up in his or her brain.

You just have to create something that matters to someone, even if it's the simplest poem.

And, well, I don't know how helpful this is, but to me 'good,' like any word, is based upon subjective experience. And to try to describe any experience in words is futile in of itself, but as writers, that's our job, isn't it? So to me 'good writing' would have to be any clever or beautiful or otherwise effective combination of letters that manages to break that barrier, between phonetic labels and human experience

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..."

If only for one heart.

(Break.)

"The arts are not a way of making a living.

They are a very human way of making life

more bearable."

Good writing needs the commanding and consistent use of language. (One of the things I am always drawn to—I love looking at the pretty bricks that make up the building, too.)

Good writing is musicality.

"What can be more resounding, more resplendent, more suggestive of choral and sculptured beauty, than the word *coramen*? In reality, however..."

(Ball.)

"Out beyond our ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

"Keep the feet moving."

Good writing has always helped us define who we are, why we're here, and where we need to go. I like a well-written book that, while it may be fiction—

"Atticus, he was real nice..."

"Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them."

teaches you something about the human condition, or advances your understanding of how people live, love, and die.

Okay, so I think good writing is anything that makes the reader think. I don't mean, like, 'Oh, I wonder what that word means!' I mean when you put the piece of writing down and it stays with you, and you can't stop mulling over the words.

"Salinger, I'm sorry, but 'Don't ever tell anybody anything' is a string of words I would like to wrap up in canvas and sink to the bottom of the Hudson."

Good writing lingers with a reader long after the last sentence has been read, itching at the subconscious, imbedding itself into the psyche. Every now and then, it crawls back into the light, reminding you that it was there, like a friend you think of fondly.

"Pursue the things you love doing, and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you."

(Flex.)

"There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open... No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."



MORGAN CATHERMAN SELINGROVE, PA

One a.m. Word count: 2098.

"I'm so tired, Jon" she said. "I feel as though I've lived a thousand origami lives. I feel as though I'm stuck under a thick layer of coke-bottle glass."

He kissed her hair. "I know," he said, and it was enough. A louse ran across her scalp, then stopped abruptly. It was tired, too. He picked it out of her hair. She looked up at him. Her lips were pursed, a red apple of suggestion. Instead, he touched her lids and closed her raw eyes, leaving her with purple crescents. She took the invitation. She slept for thirteen hours that day. She was perfectly still.

*\*\*All of the quotations are cited in the original work. Citations have not been reproduced here due to insufficient space.\*\**

## The Sort-of Girl

Danielle Rifkin

RIVER VALE, NJ

Dear Diary,

I don't know if I should say this, or how to. I feel like maybe I'm overreacting. But ever since Sarah started dating Adam she's been getting worse and worse. I miss the old Sarah, the one in the old photo albums from birthday parties forever ago. Where is the girl who skipped blowing the candles out and dug straight into the cake without even taking them out, just letting them burn until someone else did it? That little girl didn't have to worry about being rail thin to please Adam, or be afraid of not managing to please him. That girl wasn't afraid of anything.

Now, she should be. Afraid, that is. She should be afraid of how clearly she can see her ribs, how sharply they stab at waxy, bruised skin that is way too pale. For all their prominence, they certainly aren't doing their job of protecting her heart. It doesn't matter now. I don't know if there's anything left of her heart to protect. But then again, what do I know? Not the new Sarah, that's for sure. Just the old one.

The old Sarah who was perfectly fine looking.

The old Sarah who never thought that, who never expected anyone to like her or call her beautiful. I think now she's afraid no one else ever will.

Sometimes I feel like she's not so

different. At least, I tell myself that.

But... the old Sarah didn't have cuts on her wrist. The old Sarah didn't have bruises that were from a boy she claims to love.

Sometimes, I can see why she loves him. The way he smiles at her, the way he seems to take her on an adventure with something as simple as dinner and a movie, the way he brushes her hair out of her face, and the way he shows up out of the blue with flowers. Well, not out of the blue anymore. Now there's a new bouquet every time a new bruise blooms. For Sarah. That's what the little card always reads, apology flowers for Sarah that she accepts time and time again.

He leaves them in her locker before she gets to school. She'll come in, looking like a kicked puppy because of him, and she'll open her locker. And there they are. And he walks up behind her, and hugs her from behind, and whispers in her ear. Its so quiet, I don't think anyone but me has ever heard him do it.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I don't know what happened. You know I didn't mean it. Please forgive me. I love you so much." And just like that. Just fucking like that, she melts into his arms and he kisses her on the cheek. "You look beautiful. I'll see you at lunch, okay?" And he runs off to homeroom.

He apologized.

It's not like it was unprovoked.

I love him.

He loves me.

Sarah has gotten much better at lying.

I could see her falling for him, hard. Instead of being there to catch her, he let her crash-land and kept kicking her as she lay growing more and more broken. He asked her out in school. He was confident. Borderline arrogant. Cute. Funny. Smart. Captain of the Soccer team. The works.

"Hey, Sarah. You know Toby's having a party this weekend, right?" Of course she did. Everyone knew about Toby's party except Toby's parents.

"Yeah."

"Great, I'll pick you up at eight." He said, and he winked.

She laughed. "Aren't you supposed to ask first?"

"C'mon, how could you say no to this?" Right there, he struck a ridiculous pose in the hallway, just to make her laugh. And that was it. You know, "I'll see you Saturday" seems like a really harmless phrase. It seemed like one to me at the time. But "I'll see you Saturday" can have the power to ruin your life if you say it to the right guy.

A guy like Adam. A guy who knows what he wants, and goes out and gets it. He wanted Sarah, and now she's all his. Only his. The thing about Adam, he doesn't give in easily, doesn't let go.

It got worse at the party, when he came up with two beers. Fine. Sarah can hold her alcohol. Its not the beer that's the issue. At least it wasn't in the beginning

"Have I told you you look beautiful yet?"

She was thrilled. Through the roof. In way over her head. "Oh, thanks."

"A bunch of the guys have a bong upstairs. Come on."

"I don't really..."

"Have you never tried pot before?"

She turned bright red. "Ummm..."

"It's okay. The first time is cool."

"I really don't..." Right there she should have seen that flicker in his face. How did she not fucking see the flicker?

"C'mon. You don't wanna ruin the fun, do you?"

And that was it. How's that for willpower?

They went out for a real date the next weekend, and she came home flying, staying on the phone for hours to gush about how perfect he was, how he pulled out her chair for her, how his hair fell in his eyes, how he kissed her goodnight, and how it started out soft, how the heat built and built into an all-consuming inferno, how the embers did not fade for hours. I honestly don't think the burns ever will. Things escalated from there. Slowly, very slowly. First he would make a small comment about how skinny another girl was, while pointedly eyeing her food. He started to insist they spend time together every day, got upset when she tried to leave to

study, but constantly harped on her about her sinking grades. She became that girl, the girl in the back with the bloodshot eyes and a thousand failing grades crumpled on the bottom of her bag, crushing her. The girl she used to judge for not having a future.

It was an ugly downward spiral long before it really began.

She was talking to her lab partner. She tripped; he grabbed her around the waist. From where Adam was standing, I'll admit it looked bad. Sarah with the lab partner holding her up. It looked like she was doing something wrong, so he convinced her she was. He started out calm, draping her arm, getting bonier now, over his own shoulder with a cheerful, "I'll take it from here." She came in with her first bruise the next day. She remembers getting into his car and that's it. She started blacking out more and more after that. It wasn't like she passed out, but looking back, certain moments would be horrifically, painfully lucid, but between these moments, there would be nothing. A gigantic abyss of anything and everything, a thousand words said and a thousand more in waiting, until she had new spots of inky purple across her skin. All she would remember was a bright, crimson smile. His smile, like a careful knife carving in her brain: blood red, and heinously, surreally, beautifully, painful.

Things got worse: low, lower, underground, Hell. Finally she hit rock bottom, where she was always in pain. Where it wasn't just what he inflicted on her, but what she did to herself. It's terrifying how close to the edge she is. How the scars on her wrist stick out like jagged fault lines, the seismograms of pain, hurt, fear, worthlessness, how you could tell her hand quivered with each stroke by the way the line wavered. In the beginning, at least. She's much more practiced now. At punishing perceived weakness, at causing pain she thinks she deserves. She can't hide it forever. She's not bending anymore. She's breaking. And she's about to fall apart. It's his fault. At least, I want it to be. I don't want to believe that everyone missed something so inherently wrong, that there is something inherently wrong at all. I want it to be him that caused it. I want getting rid of him to be the way to fix it. But what if when he's gone it doesn't go away. I don't want her to be crazy. I don't want to have missed something like that, missed the glaring signs. I can't believe that no one knew her enough to notice them if they were there. I want it to be him. I want it to be the fact that he doesn't take no for an answer, ever. I want it to be his fault

somehow that she can't seem to give him the ultimate no, just two letters that cannot seem to find their way out of a throat clogged with unshed tears and unspoken wishes.

She can't keep doing this. She can't keep pretending. Makeup can't hide everything. Makeup can't hide anything. Her extra eyeliner doesn't hide the fact that her eyes are puffy from tears. Concealer can't fully cover a bruise. And baggy clothes just make her look more shrunken and emaciated. I can't seem to get through to the part of her that still loves him.

That part of Sarah that still loves Adam, that small, stupid part of her can't forget his smile and the way he made her feel beautiful in the beginning. I can't remember the last time she actually said she felt beautiful. I guess it was when she wore that princess costume; she must've been about five. I wonder if that dress would hide the bruises. She used to think she was invincible when she wore that dress, that nothing would ever hurt her. Nothing happened to princesses except happily ever after, not in the world she used to live in. She outgrew the dress. Her tiara, and her happily ever after, are long gone. If she makes it out on the other end of this mess, all she'll have left are the scars.

She's given him everything for nothing in return, because when he smiles, it takes her breath away.

Sarah gave it all for a pretty smile. But when he isn't giving her that smile, he is terrifying, terrifying beyond imagination. It isn't the face of a monster, a gorgon, a dragon, a beast. It is a face she loves, a face she trusts, until it twists, barely recognizable but for the lips that form the smile she loves and the scowl that haunts her nightmares. Defying him will leave her more bruised, but taking it quietly is like handing him the blue-black ink and inviting him to leave trails of it all over her arms, her legs, her stomach, until eventually it all fades to an ugly yellow.

Eventually, it all fades.

She's scared of him. She's more scared of losing him, but still, he terrifies her. He pulled her apart to the point where she feels like he's the last thread keeping her together. She can't seem to break out of the vicious cycle she's living, to finally, just once, say no and walk away. The girl I remember had no problem with that.

Her parents asked her to clean her room, eat her vegetables, do her home-

work, and that girl would put one hand on her hip, defiantly shout it, that word that was so hard for her to say now, and flounce off until she got her way. That little girl is long gone, and now-Sarah was never that little girl, something too irreparable, too essential changed. They are different people. She was shaken down to her core by a natural disaster, and she won't let the rescue teams in to pull out the survivors. She won't admit there's anything wrong, and no one else wants to either. If there's nothing wrong, there's no blame to place, right?

The wreckage is awful.

She's lost under the rubble, I can't find her. The girl I used to know, I mean. I couldn't keep looking, there was no point. So I broke the mirror. Smashed it to pieces. It doesn't change anything.

The mirror doesn't lie, she's gone. All that's left is shattered glass.

Love,  
Sarah (Sort of)

## How to Kiss a Girl with a Life-threatening Allergy

FLANNERY JAMES  
BOONTON, NJ

One day you bring a peanut butter sandwich to your American history class, and she rushes out of the room with her sleeve held over her nose. Later, after you've thrown out the sandwich and the plastic wrap in a garbage can all the way on the other side of the school, and washed your hands and even rinsed out your mouth, she apologizes to you, eyes downcast and cheeks furiously red. You stammer out an apology of your own, but she is back in her seat at the corner of the room before you finish your sentence.

The teacher gives you a look and the other kids sitting around you give you sarcastic slaps on the back, even though you're pretty sure that they hadn't known about the allergy either. You try to focus on the Great Depression, ignoring the rum-



bling in your stomach and the clock, reminding you that there are two hours and seven minutes until your lunch period. In the middle of reading a paragraph (twenty-five percent unemployment in 1933) you suddenly wonder what would've happened if she hadn't noticed the sandwich in time, and once the thought crosses your mind, you can't get rid of it.

You sit with her at lunch the next day. It's the least you can do, you think. Her friends eye you suspiciously and the lunch lady pokes at your tray to check for Allergy Foods or even Sensitivities before you are allowed to sit at the Peanut Free Table. These are the words that are added to your vocabulary over the next half hour, along with Epinephrine and Anaphylaxis and If You Breathe On Her, She Could Die. You lean in close to hear her voice, low but still unmistakably a girl's, over the noise of the cafeteria.

You wonder why you have never noticed that her eyes are green. You start seeing her everywhere, without really meaning to. You catch glimpses of her in the hallways, bent over a book in the library, getting scolded by a teacher for climbing the dogwood on the front lawn. The day you stay home with the flu, you wonder if she noticed you were gone. You spend an hour looking up how to use an Epi-Pen.

Her friends stop raising their eyebrows at you when you join them in the cafeteria. You go out for track again, even though you swore up and down last year that you'd never suffer through another hurdle practice as long as you lived. You watch her out of the corner of your eye as she runs intervals with the distance team, dark hair flashing gold in the sunlight. On the way to your first meet, sitting next to her on the narrow school bus seat, your knees almost-but-not-quite touching, you open the lunch your mom packed you to find a peanut butter sandwich. You crumble up the bag and throw it away.

The dance is on Friday, you blurt out after the track meet. You're the last ones waiting under the overhang by the parking lot.

She grins at you. Yes? she asks.

And I—well, I thought that—do you want to—

She finally rescues you from your humiliatingly inarticulate speech by nodding, once, and hugging you so quickly

you barely have time to lift your arms in response, before darting off into the rain. You step out into the downpour while watching her car pull away, drenched to the bone but still feeling her arms around you.

The dance is a blur. You shuffle your feet, hold her hand, rest your chin on top of her head for the slow ones. When it's time for her to leave, you put your arm around her waist and suggest that you take the long way to the parking lot. Outside, the pavement glows under the streetlights. It's barely drizzling, but you offer her your jacket anyway. And then you kiss her. In the books, you'll think later, they only ever tell you, He kissed her. They kissed. What they don't tell you is Hands, on shoulders, at the back of the neck, entwined. What they tell you is Lips; what they don't tell you is Nose, Cheek, Forehead. What they tell you but you've never understood before is Tongue.

You kiss her like any guy would kiss any girl, like every couple in all of history has kissed, but it's different, of course, because it's her. You're thinking about everything that makes her different as you watch her drive away that night; her eyes her smile her laugh her lips. The thing you don't think about is her allergy.

That night and the next morning pass with no communication. Not for lack of trying on your part, though; you stare at the blank screen of your phone, wondering when regular texts from her became a reality rather than a possibility. How did you miss that turning point? You try to do homework, distract yourself, but your thoughts flutter against the inside of your skull, clamoring to be released, to fly back to her. It's evening when the call finally comes, but it's not from her. With a sinking feeling, you recognize her friend's name on the caller ID, and you know that it's over, that it's so over her friend had to call for her. Oh damn oh damn oh damn, you repeat silently, but you pick up the phone, hoping desperately that there's another explanation.

And there is, but the instant you can comprehend what you're being told, you wish, you wish a thousand times, that it had been the first reason you'd thought of. You can survive a break up, a broken heart. She-but you don't let yourself think that way, as you leap down the stairs, taking them four at a time; you don't let yourself think at all as you pour out a jumble of words to your parents, telling them to just go, just drive, you'll explain on the way.

These are the terms you hear that night: Shock. Delayed Reactions. Antihistamines. Itchy Lips, Swollen Tongue, Hives, Airway (Closed), Oxygen. CPR. And over and over again: Allergic Reaction. Peanuts. Cause Unknown.

The hospital waiting room is packed, but you pace anyway, unable to stop yourself. The other people in the room, patients waiting to be admitted, your parents alternating between concerned glances at you and concerned glances at the nurses; you push past all of them. You force yourself to focus, to try to recall: did you eat peanut butter yesterday?

No matter how hard you try, you can't remember.

Finally, at last, the nurse calls your name. There is a moment of blank, pure terror as her expressionless eyes meet yours; then she breaks into a tired smile and tells you that it's alright, she's going to be ok, you can see her now but only for a minute, and absolutely no talking on her part. You're already through the doorway, down the corridor, hesitating outside the curtain surrounding her bed before her mom ducks out and waves you in with a Don't be silly and an Of course she wants to see you.

She doesn't look beautiful. The movies and books lie. People in hospital beds are pale and faded, with frizzy hair and bags under their eyes, wires and tubes and masks strapped on. But she is still lovely. You sit nervously on the edge of the bed, squeeze her hand. Behind you, her mom is talking in a low voice.

It must've been during the day, she said; she took Benadryl when she got home last night, delayed the reaction, thank God her wheezing woke up her sister in the middle of the night, don't know what would've... Her voice trails off.

You brush her hair out of her face. Her eyes are so, so green. You can see your unspoken question reflected in them; you know that she knows what you are scared to ask. She covers your hand with both of hers and smiles, as best she can through an oxygen mask, and gives the tiniest of shrugs. Later, you'll both realize there's no way to know for sure. You don't know if you can ever forgive yourself. But she falls asleep holding your hand.



## To My Cousin, Three Months Old

KAT KULKE  
WELLESLEY, MA

The belly of your wrist is soft as the petal of a lily. I listen with my palm to the rhythm of your breathing, let it stitch us together as it smooths into sleep. In my arms, you look just like a doll: cotton-bodied, too little, it seems, to be human. I think of the way that you greet me four-legged on the kitchen floor, cheeks sticky with laughter, the way that you speak not in words but in colors. And when you cry each note is elastic--more alive, I think, than I know how to be. too often now, I feel the thickness of my own skin, like fabric: the second between thought and speech like the half moment after the fall before the bruise becomes tender, or blood beads on the lips of the wound.

## Arrival in the Yellow Bucket

MAGDA ANDREWS-HOKE  
PHILADELPHIA, PA

The boy peeked under every tiny flower and leaf. The flower petals fell and crinkled as he trampled on them in his grey sneakers. Each leaf the boy picked up had hidden treasures beneath it. Sometimes there was a pretty stone or a beetle or, if he was lucky, a worm. His fingers were dirt brown down to his knuckles; they had been roving through the ground in search of luscious jewels of the earth. There was a yellow bucket in the middle of the lawn. It had been used to build many sandcastles with windows and ramparts. But now it was upended and filled with dirt. Dark, rock filled sod was squished into every corner of the bucket and, writhing on top of the earth, were dozens of worms. Their thin, slimy bodies intertwined and produced a confusing mass, twisting and

squirming.

The grass was still wet from the rain. The sun had only just risen an hour ago and the rain had ended later. Now the ground was littered with worms, hiding under leaves and behind bushes. They all awaited their arrival in the yellow bucket.

The boy dug through the wet earth with his dirty fingers. Worms turned up here and there, and he ran with them back to their new home, treading a path into the moist grass. His red t-shirt became dirt smudged and mud caked on his shorts. The wet grass stuck to his knees and tickled his arms.

There was a light breeze swimming through the garden. It followed the rain, chasing away the clouds and ruffling the boy's hair. Leaves rustled together in the highest reaches of the trees. A maple tree towered above the boy's head, but he did not look up at it once, for there were too many things on the ground. The maple's roots made deep, hidden pockets and the boy rooted through them and came out with worms draped over his fingers. The grass folded under his feet and the worms flew and landed with a plop in the yellow bucket. The clouds were almost gone now and the blue sky was taking over. The sun twinkled through a cloud and suddenly emerged, heating the back of the boy's neck as he dug in the dirt.

Sometimes he would roll the worms through his fingers, or tie them into slimy knots. He would always untie them; he did not want them to die. They left dirt on his palms as they writhed helplessly, but then he would transfer them to the bucket, where there was dirt to live in and friends to play with.

The sun was almost at its highest point in the sky, and the boy thought it would be lunchtime soon. But he still had many worms to catch, and that was more important than lunch. So only when he could find no more worms did he pick up the bucket. He had checked behind the bushes against the fence and among the roots of the maple and even along the driveway, but there were no more worms. So the yellow bucket swung from his grubby hand as he skipped back to the house.

The house was a sunshiny yellow, with many windows, each one a snapshot of the world within. There was the kitchen, where there was a teapot on the stove. There was the living room, where the boy's mother sat reading a book. The sun

bounced off the embossed writing on the cover of the book. Upstairs there was the boy's bedroom, with his shelf lined with shells and rock and bottles of dirt. There was the bathroom window, which had pale blue curtains drawn across it. Each window was a little picture that the boy held in his mind.

There were three little stairs up from the lawn to the back door. They were wet from the rain and the boy made sure not to slip on them. He turned the door-knob to go inside, but then he saw it. The little toad was hopping diligently along the ground right beside the house. His splayed toes hit the ground and bounded up again to carry the toad onward. Little brown and grey bumps covered his back. The boy bounced after him, and after imitating his jump several times, scooped the toad up in his hand. It squirmed a little bit, but then sat very still. The boy could feel the feet in his palm. They were small and slightly wet, but not repellent. In fact they were rather gentle and dainty.

Soon the toad was cocooned in the deep soft pocket of the boy's shorts. The boy could feel the wriggling against his leg.

There was a sandwich on the kitchen counter. He knew that his mother's hands had spread the peanut butter and it made the sandwich taste good. Now he could hear her shifting in the living room, the pages of her book rustling and the fabric of her pants softly rubbing together as she crossed her legs. He let the toad hop on the counter leaving dirty footprints. He did not let the toad jump into the sink or on to the floor. When he got too close to the edge, the boy would scoop him up again and return him to the darkness of the pocket.

The boy's sneakers pattered up the carpeted stairs to his room. The boy's bedroom had two large windows that looked out on to the lawn, once littered with worms. His bed was made, but only through his mother's nagging. A tank with two hermit crabs sat by the window. The shelled creatures hid under the sand that was in their tank. The boy fished them out and, their legs flailing helplessly, deposited them into a cardboard shoebox that had once held the tiny grey sneakers. The boy wondered if toads liked sand. He knew that worms liked dirt. Systematically, the boy moved all of the sand into the shoebox and dumped the yellow bucket into the tank. The worms hit the bottom with a dull thud and the dirt landed on top of them. The

boy evened out the dirt until it beautifully covered the bottoms of the tank. Worms began to wriggle through the earth. The boy put the shoebox beside the tank and sat on his bed.

The toad hopped on the bed. The boy watched him hop for a long time, moving him back to the middle of the bed when he progressed towards the edge. There was something calming about the rhythmic little toad. Bounce, bounce, bounce. He never stopped for very long.

The phone rang downstairs. He could hear his mother's shoes clicking on the hardwood floor of the hallway. The ringing stopped. The boy could not hear what his mother said, just the clicking of her shoes returning to the living room.

The ringing of the phone was as rhythmic as the toad, but the toad was better. The toad did not make loud noises, just soft depressions in the boy's comforter.

When the boy heard his mother's shoes again as she went to replace the phone, he ran downstairs with the yellow bucket in one hand and the toad in the other.

"Look mom! It's a toad!" he called to her.

Her cheeks were wet, but she took the toad in her hands and smiled down at it. Her hands were gentle around the delicate creature. He did not hop when he was in her palm.

She handed the toad back to the boy and softly told him to go play. He nodded and grabbed the toad with his short fingers. Outside the grass was dry and the sun shone. The boy had made many sand castles with the yellow bucket, but never a dirt castle. With the toad in his pocket, he packed the bucket full of dirt and turned it upside down on to the ground. A crumbling tower of dirt emerged. A second, third, and fourth emerged: the four corners of a fortress. They all had ramparts which disintegrated as soon as the bucket was removed. With his hands, the boy then built four walls to connect the towers. They were solid walls, reasonably high, and very thick. The boy ripped grass from the lawn. He pulled it with extreme force and the roots tore out of the weak earth. The boy layered the floor of the fortress with the soft grass. It created a beautiful, luscious green rug. The boy filled in all the holes in the rug until it was uninterrupted and smooth. Then he placed the toad in

the center of the grassy mat. The toad hopped energetically from the boy's hand and landed softly.

It was afternoon now and the sun had begun its descent. There were few clouds and the visible ones were white, fluffy, and non-threatening. The toad hopped in his castle for hours. The boy never tired of him. The boy could add strange, earthy furniture to the castle, or make the walls higher, or make the toad jump over his hand. The bumpy toad was a good friend and also never tired of the games they played. The trees overhead shaded the castle and the boy set rocks in the sun and when they were warm, he placed them on the grass rug for the toad to lounge on.

The sun was setting behind the pointed roof of the house. The house now cast a very long shadow to the boy's feet. He walked along the edge of the shadow like a tightrope walker and as it shifted, the boy moved with it. Soon the shadow disappeared, blending in with the shadows cast by the trees. Soon the boy's father would be home.

He had first taught the boy how to catch a toad. The boy's father had big, strong hands, but they so delicately wrapped around the fragile toad. In his hands the toad had not struggled and he let it go into the back garden. That was several years ago now, but the boy had the image in his mind: the gentle hands encasing the toad. And so the boy knew how special toads were, and that his was the most special, for it understood him and lived happily in the castle home built for him.

The boy looked up. He saw the snapshot of his bedroom through the window; the tank of worms was visible and they writhed. The living room was calm and dark, the lights turned low and his mother's book resting on its face on the coffee table. In the kitchen his mother stood. He could not hear her, but he could see her mouth move. It moved quickly and fiercely. She was talking on the phone and her hand flew around in big gestures, broad strokes of motion. The boy imagined her ordering people around, perhaps a secret army that only she knew about and was in control of.

The toad was also the leader of his own world: the back garden. But all of his soldiers had been removed. They were not dead, they were simply being held captive. The boy ran into the house with the yellow bucket. He flashed up the stairs

hearing only a snippet of his mother's words, "If you don't come home-", and then he was gone. Her voice was loud. He could hear it reverberate upstairs behind him, but then he was in his room and pulling the worms from the tank. They sat in the bottom of the bucket, slimy as ever. He ran back downstairs. His mother was not talking, just listening to someone over the phone. There was a voice coming through the phone, also loud, but unintelligible. The back door stuck a little on its hinges, but the boy managed to open it and skipped down the steps and across the yard.

The worms would make good soldiers. They could follow orders and be lined up in rows and, if needed, defend the castle. He selected five of the longest worms and set them in the castle with the toad king. They were the smartest worms. They would be the toad's advisors and generals in case of a war. The boy's small fingers wound around each fat worm. He lined them up. There were ten on each side of the castle. They were all different lengths and made crooked lines, but all together, they made a good battalion.

The sun was now touching the horizon and the stars were popping out. The moon hung ghostly overhead. Soon all light would be gone and the ground would be indistinguishable from the sky. But the rows of worms continued to grow and the toad sat mightily in his fortress.

"Come wash up! It's almost dinner!" the boy's mother called from the back stoop. The boy pocketed the toad and ran from the castle.

He washed his hands free of the dirt and the worms and the toad's slime. The dark muck ran down the sink drain in swirls until the drain swallowed it completely. The boy stuck his clean hand in his pocket and held the toad so his hands would not feel too clean. When the boy seated himself at the dinner table, his mother was not there. He let the toad hop around on the tabletop. He hopped across the plates and over the silverware. The boy could hear his mother in the kitchen, on the phone again.

"It's dinner! He's inside at the table and you're not here yet!" the boy's mother cried.

The toad hopped around on the boy's plate making circles of faint, dirty footprints.

"I don't care if you're angry! Get the hell over it and get home!"

The boy didn't like when his mother yelled.

"I'll drive over and pick you up myself if you don't get your ass home!"

The toad hopped more circles until the boy scooped him up and left the dining room. His feet touched the carpeted stairs softly and without a sound, he was in his room again. The boy lay on the bed with his feet hanging off the side and watched the toad hop on the blankets.

"What's your name, toad?" the boy asked. "Do you have one?"

The toad stopped as if to think.

The boy could not think of any questions that a toad could answer.

When the wheels screeched in the driveway, the boy knew his father was home from work. He would be proud that the boy had caught a toad all by himself. The boy held the toad gently and ran downstairs. He stood by the door, waiting for the key to click in the lock. His father entered, his glasses hanging from his shirt collar and his cuffs rolled up to his elbows.

"Look dad!"

He held up the bumpy toad.

His dad didn't smile, but the boy knew that he loved toads. The boy's father took the toad in hand and stroked his back.

"Very nice. Nice toad," he said and handed the creature back to the boy.

The boy's mother approached from the hallway. The boy ran with the toad back upstairs and let it hop on the floor in his room. His dad was tired and tomorrow he would appreciate the toad more and help the boy build a bigger castle.

"Tomorrow you will have a kingdom, toad," the boy said. The toad looked happy at this prospect.

There was a bang from downstairs and there were feet on the stairs. The boy's father was coming upstairs. He went into the bathroom and the water started running. The boy wondered if the toad would like a drink.

The boy fell asleep. It was early in the evening but the room was very dark. When he woke up again, he could hear his parents downstairs. They were yell-

ing, but he snuck into the bathroom and splashed the toad with water. The toad leapt around, flinging the water off his back. The boy was very hungry. Dinner never had happened. When the boy went to the top of the steps he could see his father whispering angrily to his mother. They were standing in the hallway, and the boy knew that if they were in a fight, the toad would make them happy. The toad made him happy; it would make them happy too.

"Dad! What should I name the toad?" the boy called as he ran down the stairs.

He tugged on his father's pant leg. His father's hand pushed the boy back and he stumbled. He hit his head on the wall and dropped the toad. The toad hopped away into the living room.

"What the hell?" the boy's mother yelled.

She stooped and helped the boy up. There was a little bit of blood on the back of his head, but more importantly the toad was gone. He ran into the living room and lay on the floor, surveying under the chairs and bookshelves.

His head hurt. He searched un-

## Residency

Rachel Allen  
CANTON, MA

It's just so hot. Most nights she sits, cross-legged, on the floor by the fan and eats, looking out the window to where the letters meet the fig tree. Her walls are made of words, cutout love from friends, articles, medical lexis, lyrics that make her think of the first time she saw New York. The city flooded her and she surged.

Now, some nights, she and the boy go to the Juliette for a crème brulee and take it to the park, feeling the basketball court grit into arms as they lie, watch suns dip into the glass of skyscrapers. She thinks of her mattress raised with textbooks, of painting late at night—doors, walls, ceilings, of the photograph of her curved along the subway wall, hand meeting the boy's, the fresh night settling upon them like yellow fog that steams in the train's brake lights.

She wishes the boy were from here, that he grew up in Brooklyn, and remembered something like buying Neapolitans from the Italian bakery at Christmastime. He's just talking about St. Louis now, and she's barely listening, thinking of tomorrow when she'll buy crooked flowers at Penn Station to place in a ribboned jam jar on the center of a table in some third floor apartment where windows barely brush fig leaves.

der everything but there was no toad. He curled up in a ball in the middle of the rug and wanted to cry. He fell asleep again.

When the boy woke up, he was still on the floor. There was morning light pouring into the house. In the kitchen, the boy's mother sat slumped in a chair, asleep. There were some broken cups on the floor and the boy backed out of the kitchen. He didn't want to step on them. Outside, the castle was intact. Most of the worms had left, but a few had held ranks. The toad was not in his castle.

The boy picked up one of the worms that had not fled. It was a very big worm and the boy wound it through his fingers.

"I will name you Toad," the boy said.

## Young Woman, Smiling, At Maplewood Lanes

Harry Wood  
ANDOVER, MA

The ball swayed drunkenly  
And collapsed into the gutter.  
You kissed me  
And whispered how well I'd done.  
And I smiled.

We made love in your parents' trailer,  
Taken with the novelty  
Of a motel on wheels.  
The trailer shook, and  
Everything rearranged.

You drove home alone  
Through a gold-tinged haze of tears  
And sepia memories.  
I stared at the in-flight movie,  
Choked back a flat, black Pepsi.  
I dreamt of your smile  
So bright under the black lights  
That everything else was shadow.

## Offline

LUISA BANCHOFF  
ARLINGTON, VA

Offline he stands on the moving earth of a metro car, his backbone zippered to the pole, his heels cutting wedges into life-stained carpet. His feet ache to walk a thin line of purpose between sweaty seats and over the gap he used to think he'd slip into if he didn't watch his step. His hand wants to hold the paintbrush dipped in streams of consciousness and run across the silicon city, leaving only a wall-painted line the color of marrow.

Offline she walks a beam of light away from filler-worded conversation and towards the crayon-colored corners of estranged buildings that dot the lines of her palms. At night she thinks of standing on top of the train car and ripping out the light of the left eye and holding it up to the gasping wind and watching the fabric of each caught memory vanish in the sprinting landscape seen through one eye.

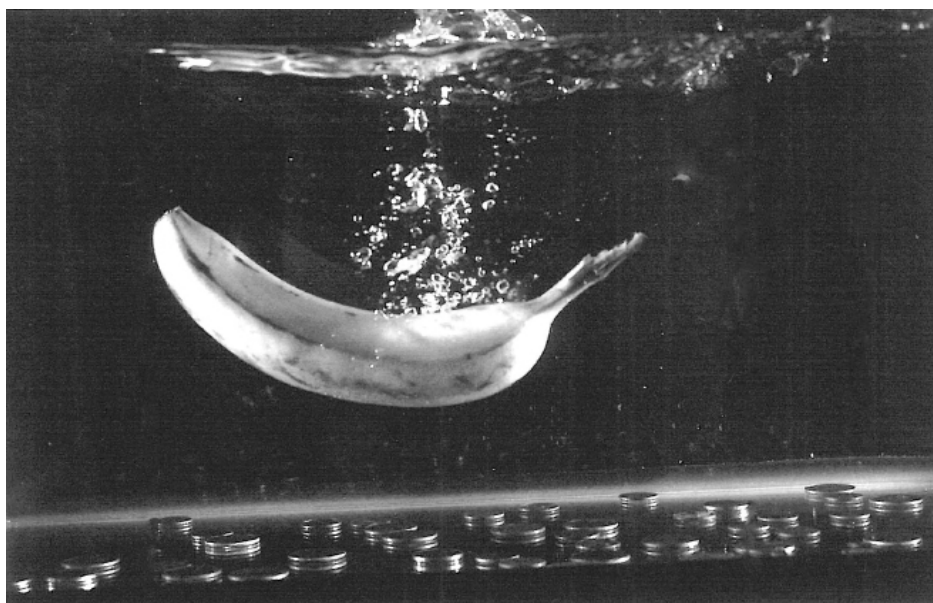
Offline they find themselves together on the corner of seventh and Constitution beneath raindrops meant for Noah so he spreads a map of the city above their heads and she traces a path through the destinations smeared together and they tell each other where *I am, I was, I will be* beneath the dripping canopy of unwavering raindrops, never looking to see the lights turn.

Offline you lie face-down in your mother's tulip garden, tasting the earth's

sweet lifeblood of static spring, a quiet question forming on your taste buds like a lozenge held between your teeth. Your mind is by the graying garden gate, untying the gingham ribbons you bound to the arching wooden lines to mark the more painful days of being. Each day you look for someone to hold aside the branches as you bury them like closet-hung secrets beneath the soil still fresh on your tongue.

Offline I sit in an armchair at the bottom of the stairs by the basement door, looking up at the framed light that sieves through the fraying ends of the day and warms my stomach like a pot set to simmer. High in a warped oak a woodpecker is tapping on a champagne glass so I lean back and let my spine click between the ribs of the washed-out plastic chair and cut the laundry line that airs each thought of tomorrow and in that fleeting moment between sein and sehen I sigh and breathe and am today.

Offline we linger like two jaded Carmelites who do not turn back for the fear of a pillar of salt but still have heard of the fire burning behind us, always warming us onwards between the crisscrosses and diagonals and parallels of the veins we can see through the skin of our wrists. Tomorrow we will walk on gravestones as if they were tightropes and read from nutrition labels as if they were bibles and sip saturated air with wine-watered lips and laugh at the lines we drew.



CORY PERRY SAYRE, PA



# 11:11

HAYLEY KOLDING  
CANTON, CT

The kitchen was dark and quiet when Adam went to refill his glass of water. He savored the smooth tile floor under his bare feet. His soles were leathered and rough, too callused to be bothered by hot tar or sharp stones on a summer's day, but buried in the calluses was a constant heat that throbbed regardless of the ground beneath. In this cool after the storm, the heat had finally subsided, and Adam felt soothed at last.

He padded along in the dark, making his way to the sink as if by floating. Carrie's kitchen was tranquil at night. At home, Adam made a point not to go downstairs after sunset. He wasn't scared, exactly; he just itched at the thought of familiar chairs, doors, and tables taking on extra angles in the darkness. Unfamiliar sides. It was as if the furniture unfolded after nightfall like the knuckles of a fist—first there was a solid rock, and then there were too many fingers groping in the dark. At Carrie's, Adam enjoyed the more stable nighttime geometry. The house was as warm as a home to him, but it wasn't so much his that it had any power to turn on him.

Adam wondered if the tiled landscape became twisted when it was Carrie who walked in the dark. He supposed it must, because it was her house and so should also make her nightmare. But he hoped not, because he loved her. She was there, in the kitchen, hardly visible without the lamplight. Adam could just make out her silhouette in front of the stove. The August lightning storm had teased her hair out of its ponytail. Little strands floated heavenward and Adam could just picture the electricity running through them like water in the shower. The lightning had knocked everything else out—lamps, computers, the telephone pole at the entrance to Carrie's road—but here was Carrie, lit up by it. Besides Carrie, only one other light remained lit. On the opposite wall of the kitchen, the stove clock glowed on. Adam could see it around Carrie's head, which

stayed perfectly still under the halo of green.

"Carrie?" Adam whispered.

She stayed still for a moment before turning her head to face him. It was a slow, hesitant motion; there was a toothbrush in her mouth and Adam shivered as he watched her lower it slowly to her hip. She lifted her eyebrows, the corners of her closed lips. Quietly, she walked to the sink and spat, then bent over the faucet to rinse the toothpaste from her tongue. She straightened.

"Adam," she answered. "Hi."

It occurred to him that Carrie had not once set foot in the bathroom while he was getting ready for bed, not even to brush. He wondered where she had gotten the toothpaste, whether she kept a tube in the kitchen cabinet, or perhaps something travel-sized in her purse. The notion sent a flicker of admiration through him, admiration for the type of girl (the type of woman) who would be so prepared. Extra toothpaste; an extra sleeping bag for Adam in light of the storm. But it seemed so lonely to be brushing her teeth like a refugee in the abandoned kitchen. He was glad he had walked in on her.

"What were you doing?" he asked her, as if he had not just seen the toothbrush in her mouth. As if he had not just shivered from the way her back curved as she bent to drink from the faucet.

Carrie looked at him intently. "It was 11:11," she responded.

This explained nothing of the toothbrush, nothing of Carrie's avoidance of her own bathroom sink, but Adam ignored the omission and smiled at his friend. "So you were wishing?"

"No," Carrie corrected him, "praying. I always start with a wish, and keep going, but soon it gets to a moment when I realize that most wishes I could wish have already come true. And it scares me, really. It's a good thing, but it scares me. So I pray to say thank you over and over, and to ask just that it won't be taken away."

Behind her, the clock glowed on.

Adam watched it in silence.

"So what did you say thank you for?" he finally asked.

Carrie reached for a chair and sat before him, leaning her elbows on the kitchen table. "Isn't that supposed to stay a secret?" She was trying to tease him. She kept that smile he loved—that impish, I-know-you-want-me smile—but her voice broke on the "supposed" so it didn't really sound like she was kidding.

"That only goes for wishes," Adam told her. "The prayers, I think you should spill."

He smiled like he was kidding. His voice faltered on "should".

Carrie lifted her knees to her chest, wrapping them in her arms and resting her head. She looked up sideways at Adam, who was watching her toes curl and uncurl around the edge of the seat.

"All the normal stuff, I guess. My family, my friends. Being healthy. Opportunities. And the storm. I said thank you for the storm."

She paused. "I like the electricity of it. The rainfall. The way it trapped us here."

Adam answered too quickly. "I like it too, Carrie. I mean, I've always thought it would be kind of fun to, you know, get stuck with you."

In his head it sounded like the greatest of compliments. He wondered if maybe he should kiss her here in the dark kitchen, with the light of the stove clock seeping in through their open mouths.

Carrie wiped absentmindedly at the corner of her lip. There was a little dot of toothpaste left over, hard to see unless you stared at it, but enough to remind Adam of his original question.

"Carrie, why'd you come down here to brush your teeth?"

Her round, open face tightened surprisingly. Adam noticed shadows he'd never seen before: wells under her eyes,

dark little inverse-dimples when she drew her lips together before answering.

"You were using the sink upstairs," she responded in an offhand voice. "I didn't want to intrude."

"It wouldn't have been intruding," Adam answered earnestly. He would brush his teeth beside her every day if he had the option; he would floss with her; he would gulp mouthwash like shots from a souvenir glass and gargle TV jingles in unison with her. Anything.

"I knew you'd say that," Carrie admitted. "But I don't think I could have handled it. It would be like, I don't know, like we were playing at marriage or something. But we're not...like that."

She stared at the clock. "I couldn't just play that way."

Adam looked at her. "Oh."

He struggled to think of an answer. His mind was too busy with memories of their early friendship, when Carrie had asked him to play house with her—You can be the daddy—and he'd pulled her over to the Legos instead. What a dumb kid he'd been.

"I guess we ought to go to bed now," he finally volunteered.

As they trundled back through the kitchen, through the dining room, the living room, Adam noticed that the home had rearranged itself after all. He stubbed his toe on the daybed by the coffee table and swore.

"What'd you do that for?" Carrie asked. "You should know your way around here by now."

Adam glowered at her. "Sometimes things just start to look different all of a sudden."

She laughed at him, an electric little laugh. "I don't think I can trust you to take care of yourself down here all alone. Lie down and I'll go grab a blanket so I can keep you company."

She disappeared up the stairs. Left alone in the living room, Adam wondered what he should do with his sleeping bag. Should he slide it over so Carrie and her blanket could fit next to him on the couch? Or should he lie on the floor and let her have the softer spot? He was unable to decide before he heard the sound of Carrie's feet tumbling back down the stairs. In a panic, he climbed into the sleeping bag and scooted as far as he could into the

couch, leaving the front half of the cushions unoccupied and the bag's zipper open.

Carrie marched in with a blanket wrapped around her freckly shoulders. Adam saw her eyes land quickly on the dangling zipper pull but, except for a quick biting of her lower lip, Carrie didn't show any signs of noticing his timid invitation. Instead, she shoved aside the coffee table and spread the blanket on the floor. She tugged a pillow from under Adam's leg and, grinning, threw herself down on the blanket.

"It'll be like a sleepover," she whispered as she curled up there, so close that she couldn't be close enough to Adam.

"Don't kids play spin the bottle at sleepovers?" Adam tried.

"Go to sleep," she shot back. "It's hard enough for me to sleep when you're just lying there next to me. Don't go joking about kisses."

Adam rolled over and pulled the sleeping bag up to his chin. Unable to drift off, he listened all night to the sounds of Carrie's furniture shifting in the dark.

## Faith

STEPHANIE GAVELL  
MILTON, MA

I first wore white when the priest  
christened me with holy water.  
The moaning hymn  
of the drip, and mother's palms  
on the back of my neck, melting wax  
mixing with the candle wick's ash.

I learned I came from ash  
the day the priest  
traced a cross on my forehead with his  
wax-  
burned thumb and the black dripped  
onto my nose like water.  
He drew it as we sang hymns,  
using remnants of last year's inciner-  
ated palms.

I took communion in the center of my  
left palm  
and saw mother's face, drained and  
ashen

behind me in procession. She muttered the  
lyrics to the hymn  
that she knew by heart. She mouthed the  
priest's words and crossed herself with holy  
water,  
her faith still waxing.

The candle I brought to the hospital  
dripped wax  
onto her bed. I warmed her left palm  
with mine and fetched glasses of water,  
swept the cigarette ash  
off the creases in her robe. I asked the  
priest  
to say a prayer at Mass. She asked him to  
sing a hymn.

I chose the hymn  
for the wake. Flowers with wax  
stems lined the casket. The priest  
said a blessing in the graveyard. I  
palmed  
a metal crucifix, stained to ash-  
black, rusted from water.

I washed my hands with holy water.  
I prayed the porcelain rosary that she  
hymned,  
whispered the Hail Mary fifty-three  
times. Amen turned to ashes  
in my mouth. Candle wax  
branded my hands and the priest  
held up his palms.

Each year the priest strokes a cross on  
my forehead with ash.  
When I get home I rinse it off with tap  
water.

# Speaking of Alien

KELLY LEE  
LAGUNA HILLS, CA

Her name was Marcy, and she was not like her sister. She was twelve. She was named for the street her family lived on, 128 Marcy Circle, a quaint suburban place somewhere in California. The neighborhood had been built in the 1970s, and the children who had lived there had straightened and stretched and stooped, now occupied mainly with taking their dogs for walks early in the crisp mornings.

She had laughter that skidded across the floor like small glass marbles that didn't bounce, or heavy beads scattered from a long necklace. The patio was her favorite place in the world, where the sunlight spread its golden fingers across the light-paneled wood, filling in the numerous scratches, but she loved equally well touching the oily front doorknob and wiping her fingers on her dust-colored jeans for hours afterwards. The house was small, a two-bedroom single story that was clean and warm. On days that family came over, the air was thick with the scent of cooking pork, marinated with pepper paste and salt, or sweet hotcakes slathered with maple and stuffed with brown sugar.

Her sister June was as close to perfect as a human being could get, and anything she did was performed with such an efficiency it seemed close to art. First place in the regional piano competition, third in archery (a dent in the bottom right corner of the bronze trophy base where Marcy's mother had thrown it), and national chess champion. The only thing about which Marcy could feel a small stab of vindication when it came to her sister was the rounded, slurred accent with which June spoke. Of course Marcy was afflicted too – but at least this was an imperfection they shared.

When Marcy's mother, who never bothered to learn much English at all, spoke on the phone, she babbled away in rapid flowing Korean. When June's name came up her mother's voice was approving, and when Marcy's did it was disapproving. "Aish," she would say, "Sok sangheh." Frustrating. Marcy thought it was only because June had reached all of these pedestals that she herself hadn't, attained all of these impossible goals that Marcy was too small or young or stupid for. It never crossed her mind that perhaps her mother had a favorite, a child that she pro-

jected her hopes onto, because of course grownups could never be as one-sided as that. It was not her father but her mother who was considered head of the house; she got the final say in all they did and her personality bordered on dictatorial. Each day her mother's eyes grew tighter and her face hardened with contempt; she pressed her own regrets and wishes upon Marcy, so that they crushed in from all sides and threatened to suffocate her. Each day there would be some new blemish that had materialized overnight, another roach Marcy's mother needed to stamp out.

It seemed as though she could never be pleased. The rice was improperly washed or not washed enough; Marcy wasn't smart enough or tall enough or pretty enough, even when she bought makeup and put it on for her mother, saying that she had a banquet dinner for her badminton team that evening. Her mother looked up from her dishwashing and her eyebrows lifted, her lips attempting to curl into a smile that never would be, and her emotions were never difficult to decipher, the distaste in her expression filtered through the cracks, and Marcy walked – but not too quickly – to the bathroom and scrubbed away at her face, her tears mixing with the soap and water and mascara.

Her father loved her. His eyes were always crinkled at the sides, and he smiled almost all of the time. His hair was sprinkled with silver and thinning and Marcy often worried about it. She bought him shampoos, plastered with labels that clamored for attention, promising hair strength and rejuvenation, with her saved weekly allowance. She never packed her own lunch; her father always made rolls in the wooden, slatted gim mali or cut kimchi into little strips, which he tucked into pink plastic lunch containers. It seemed there were always two sides to Marcy, one for around her father and one for around anyone who wasn't her father; her demeanor that was conscientious and eager to please, or withdrawn and reserved, her eyes that were bright and happy, or suspicious and quick to squint, her smile that was shyly amicable, or cracked and tense.

She doesn't talk in public, her school teachers said of Marcy. They watched her during class, the small girl in the back with black hair pulled tightly back into a chignon, tied with a red band, who bent over her arithmetics. So different from her sister, June, whom they had taught when she was in Marcy's grade and had her name engraved on a gold-plated plaque on the wall behind the Great Il-

lustrated Classics in the school library, one of the highest honors a fourth grader could achieve, for being Student of the Year. You don't get award for not talk, her mother said often, her tone sharp with tight expectations.

It wasn't that Marcy was particularly frightened of speaking in public. It was that when words came out of her mouth, they were foreign and stale on her tongue, and would leap out of the oven half-baked, boldly and deliberately. She hated the way her voice sounded. Her Ls were feathered at the edges and curled over, blurring the distinction between themselves and Rs. The vowels, every one of them, were personal demons, much too shapely to be natural. Marcy often heard fellow students talk during class, gabbling about the assignment or involved in a discussion on a reading assignment, and she envied them for having such fluid, effortless, eloquent speech. Someplace deep inside her wished that she could rip out her own and replace it with one of theirs. She lived in constant terror of being called upon. During class, she pretended to be absorbed in her writing, so enormously focused on inscribing the lecture word for word that she was too busy to be asked a question – it would disturb her concentration. Or surely, if she studied the markings decades of students had worn into the graying wooden desks, or retied her grubby shoelace, or refilled the lead in her pencil – really, there were any infinite number of things to occupy her – surely she could avoid the heat and humiliation associated with being different. Or perhaps that was too mild a word. Would "outcast" fit better?

On one such occasion Marcy had been copying down the timeline on the board, taking too long, making sure every line was stick straight, dotting the Is, crossing the Ts. When the question came the unexpectedness of it felt like a physical slap, because she certainly hadn't been targeted by the teacher before, and she felt the sting as she glanced up from her work, almost instantly regretting it. Her classmates all looked down and away, because they knew her – she was the quiet Asian girl who sat in the back and didn't say anything, they knew because many of them, most of them, had often exchanged a quick smile or a quiet hello in the hallways and hadn't been rebuked, exactly, but might as well have been, with the brusque manner with which she accepted the formalities, as though she were declining the soup they had tried to offer her once they had had their fill. Now her eyes shined as she stared down at her paper and remained willfully

and powerfully silent, the silence feeding itself – shallow enough for a child to wade in, deep enough for an elephant to swim in – and the teacher eventually asked, not out of concern but out of pity, if she didn't feel well and would she like to go to the nurse. She mumbled a hasty response and hurriedly rose from her seat. She was not stupid, her peers had decided long ago, just odd. Out of place. Alien, if you will. She was neither American-Korean nor Korean-American, an awkward adolescent half-breed.

She doesn't talk in public, her teachers said of Marcy; but she's a wonderful artist. Often during class, they strolled down the aisles of desks, unconvinced by the bowed heads and furiously scribbling hands that their students were working; and they saw her fingers moving gently, an extension of her arm, and peered over her shoulder, looked away and then back again. Even her art instructor pulled her aside, saying, Don't tell anyone I said this, of course, but you have the most talent I've seen of any student in the thirteen years I've been teaching. His eyes were questioning and she could see past them, into his effort to be comfortable and soft, as if urging her to open herself up to him.

Marcy's returning smile was wet and perfunctory; she felt a warm glow as she was praised, but she had no intention of telling her art instructor of anything, of the dreams she'd had, of her dancing in the dark, trying to keep from crying out so she could listen for the swish of the belt through the black. Of how her mother swung the belt with calm, detached efficiency, machine-like, without passion. Of how that very belt was curled in a drawer in June's room at the moment. These dreams she would wake up from with shivers, and immediately, eyes screwed tight and her limbs weighted down with drowsiness, she'd drift to her desk and take out her pencil and begin drawing.

On days when family visited, Marcy chatted with aunts and uncles and gamboled about with cousins but avoided her grandparents, her grandfather with his polo shirt, often in some pale pastel color, stretched over his belly, her grandmother wearing high-waisted pants that were never jeans and a brightly colored apron, often with a stain on the front. She avoided them the way heartthrobs avoided their unrequited loves. When they tumbled out of their dusty blue Honda that smelled of pickled vegetables and moths, laden with all sorts of food that Marcy thought would

only stink up the house, her grandfather did not rush forward as her grandmother did, with excitement at seeing their granddaughter and how big she was now and how healthy she looked, but waited until his wife was finished mobbing the children and smiled at them in greeting. After she had escaped her grandmother's affections Marcy often ducked under her arm and headed towards the patio, or drifted towards her aunt, who spoke fluent English, so that her grandfather no longer waited for her to exchange formalities with and instead drifted towards the family room and began sipping coffee and talking with her father about business. Marcy noticed these things but did not feel particularly apologetic about them. Even her actions around her grandmother were token and halfhearted; she felt as though a layer of plastic, or a shell or a bubble perhaps, wrapped around her as she was in her grandparents' company and peeled away of its own accord when they piled into their van to leave. When Marcy's mother urged her to give her grandparents a hug at the end of the day, Marcy often felt a stab of irritation and wondered why this was an obligation.

When she had to be picked up by her grandparents after she arrived in San Diego, after a long day of riding the train, she leaned away when her grandmother tried to embrace her and shook her head; to her grandfather she bestowed only a glance of recognition. And so as they walked away from the platform, they struck others as an odd group; the girl out in the front, steaming ahead with her suitcase clattering behind her, the elders in the back, the man's face tight with compressed anger and the woman fumbling with her shoe straps, not looking up. Later when she saw her grandmother for the last time in St. Timothy's Hospital Center, she would lean in to the bed and her grandmother would turn away. In Korean she would say, "I won't hug you. I won't touch you, I promise." And Marcy would stand there until she died and feel no regret but instead a desperate yearning, for the space between them not to be a space of dark matter but a strong force, the kind that knows better than to let you drift apart.

In late autumn, on an otherwise unremarkable Saturday morning, before she learned to be ashamed of her mother, Marcy was sitting on the patio floor outside, her colored pencils scattered around her. She felt fully in control of what is spreading out on the paper before her eyes, and she intended to keep it that way. If one were to twitch her hand aside and

glance at the drawing, they would see the outlines of a woman and a girl, about half her size, sitting on chairs that looked as though they should be in motion. June was inside, practicing the piano; occasionally a dissonant note sounded and Marcy knew June would mutter to herself and go over the measure again, repeating the troublesome phrase until it was flawless. Until the point where muscle memory took control and emotions withdrew into the corners where Marcy's mother believed they belonged. Marcy traced the tips of her fingers over the paper, and it seemed as though the end of the pencil she held with her other hand was behind every one of June's mistakes, every weary sound inside the house. The floorboards began to rattle, signaling approaching company; the vibrations made the smooth lines gliding on the paper run ragged as her hand shook along with them. Her mother approached and sank into one of the chairs on the patio. Instantly the air seemed to constrict around Marcy; how her mother managed to invade such a comfortable space Marcy did not know.

Her mother held a newspaper and a cup of herbal tea. The morning was cool, not cold; the steam from the cup misted in the air anyway, defiant, and Marcy briefly considered drawing it. She meticulously selected the gray pencil and sketched elegant swirls rising from the figures on the paper. The drawing made little sense, but she didn't care. Her mother read over something in the news, made a little hmmp sound, and turned a page. She looked over the top of the paper at the girl curled on the floor.

"You should draw inside," she said. "Floor dirty outside."

Marcy continued drawing. The girl's shirt became blue, outlined with pink, a shirt that was at that very moment hanging in the second closet from the right upstairs.

"Don't lie on stomach. Stomach grows cold, is bad for you."

The woman bound by thick black lines seemed to lean back in her chair and sigh. Marcy drew a window to her right, through which a slant of yellow peeked. She didn't move. She thought that, if maybe she acted the same as she did in class and busy herself, her mother would forget about her and move on to someone else. This was what Marcy wanted. Her mother put down the paper and the cup of tea. "Did you hear?"



“Yes, Ma.”

“Then why no response?”

Marcy sensed a note of danger in her mother’s voice. It was coiled, but not compressed, not under such pressure yet. She could afford to press a little harder. She shrugged.

A pause. “What do you draw? Bring me paper.”

Marcy looked up. Her mother’s hand was held out, the fingers a little curled, but naturally slack. Her eyes were flat black and unyielding. Marcy felt the blood thicken behind her eyes. “It’s not ready yet. I’m not finished.”

“Doesn’t need to be finished.” Her mother shook her head vigorously. She forced a smile though the hardness, a crack

burrowing its way through cement, as if she were doing Marcy a favor, as if Marcy would like nothing better in the world than for her mother to see what she was drawing. “You say you like drawing, so why not show me?”

Marcy looked down at the paper. “It’s really not any good,” she said. “Bring me here. Now.”

Before she could think about it, or justify it, Marcy was drawing again. Her hand seemed to move of its own accord and one side of the page was instantly shadowed with gray. Her brows slid together in the middle of her forehead and the edge of the pencil pressed down into the floor. To say she scribbled would be inaccurate – there was almost an artistic quality with which she ruined her work. Marcy drew loops and dashes and dots with a kind of fury, and when she was done

half of the page was lost forever under that layer of gray. Only half the drawing remained – of a little girl, in a blue and pink shirt, sitting in a chair on a patio, smiling at the gray, one hand stretching toward it. Then Marcy slowly stood and carried the paper over to where her mother sat, the cup of tea forgotten on the coffee table.

“Here, Ma,” she said, and her voice did not tremble. She heard June swearing upstairs; she had been practicing the motif for nearly half an hour and it seemed she had yet to get it right. It saddened Marcy, how this little thing had been a triumph for her. She fought to keep her face composed and her voice quite cool as she turned and walked inside, and as she said to her mother, “You can throw it away when you’re done.”

## Apricots Ripening

NICOLE ACHEAMPONG  
SHARON, MD

Mona ate seven in one night.  
*T. saginata* lives in cattle and can grow up to forty feet long.  
The fruit’s sweet meat stained her teeth, her lips, the skin beneath her fingernails. She says the worm is skinny and white and looks like boiled scallions, thinly sliced.

She tried to swallow the pits too. There aren’t many symptoms, but sometimes you’ll get headaches, sometimes spasms.  
Can you imagine it, she says, sleeping inside you?  
Mona held them tightly in her fists, ripping the skin and pressing her fingers to their hard seed centers. The tapeworm will wrap around your intestines and squeeze.  
She let the juice dry on her palms so that they glowed yellow-orange in the dark.

It looks like paper but feels like wet flesh.  
Seven apricots, soft and fat.  
They have mouths that suck at your insides, sip the juice.  
Her belly was round and full with them.

## L’Empire de la Mort: Empire of the Dead

HAYLEY KOLDING  
CANTON, CT

### • Rayons de Soleil: Sunbeams

Aboveground  
we enjoy the clattering of sunlight.

Wet cobblestones sparkle like saucers  
smashed by newlyweds at a reception; bikers whiz by,

hair tangled with light. No helmets here.  
Beams spin in drunken spokes, clanging like wedding bells

while French voices blend with the ringing of brightness.  
Street sounds bounce: photons. Just more invisible light.

The curator of the crypts leans out her doorway,  
squinting into the brightness. Entrez.

### • L’Escalier: The Staircase

Without the light we are forced to listen

to our broken steps, cracked breathing.

The hollow spaces that rang with sunbeams  
give weird echoes in the darkness.

Strange, isn't it, how our voices on the staircase  
wind like shivers down a spine? The steps are

terribly vertebrate, each one stacked above the next  
on this heady downward spiral. They are chipped

—one misstep and pebbles clatter over the edges  
of blocks in disarray—and too brittle for my comfort.

My feet in too-big shoes tremble  
at the sudden thought of an earthquake.

One tremor could shatter this helical backbone,  
it and its nucleotide stairs.

I would be broken, buried, silenced—  
me, the quiet fragments of my brittle DNA.

Maybe the others think of this as we descend  
into darkness. Maybe they think we're here

because it has already happened.

• **Le Tunnel Sous la Terre:**  
**The Tunnel Under the Earth**

Bottom step is briefly lit by the flashlight  
of a brown-haired tour-guide speaking out the side of her  
mouth.

She gives us a short history lesson, then  
"Please, no flash photography." Again we step into darkness.

The floors here are downward-sloping and gravelly,  
crunching wetly underfoot like a forgotten streambed.

(If this is the Lethe I mourn  
for whoever tries to steer his own canoe.)

The water slipping on the walls is silent, insidious—  
I have never before imagined a rainstorm

without the sound of droplets on the roof.  
Now all I hear is our feet, crunching

the bony gravel beneath our boots.  
We force ourselves to ignore the stone walls,

too close to our heads as they tug on our hair  
with fingers of the drowning, the dead.

• **Empire de la Mort:**  
**Empire of the Dead**

The tunnel winds down to an archway,  
gates open in eerie welcome. The sign above:

Arrête, c'est ici l'empire de la mort.

Our guide, with her dark cloak  
of hair, beckons us to enter.  
Nous entrons.

There is something achingly mineral  
about the silent-stacked bones of the ossuary.

Devoid of soft flesh (devoid of the embrace of muscle,  
devoid of the tearful empathy of semi-permeable cell membranes)

they have become stone. Tiles in a mosaic  
—not even. They are atoms, uniform and

indistinguishable  
in the anonymity of crystalline structure.

Becoming history for a moment, I ache:  
What has become of the pieces of the people whom we loved?

• **Chanson aux Morts:**  
**Song to the Dead**

We have all heard of deafening silence.  
Think now how it pulses in a room where all is still.

My heart shifts as I watch the haunting lack of motion.  
Empty eye sockets, hollow tibias,

marrow all run dry.  
I scan the skulls for a sign, for any break in the pattern.

I stare until tears blur my vision,  
moving it to life. Then:

woman, tooth missing, jaw solid and proud.  
Man, white bone browned like a sun-leathered forehead.

And a child's skull, unlaced—cranial suture un-sutured,  
edges gaping like a pre-zip zipper, or an untied shoe.

Wishing to smooth this ragged bone,  
I hear myself humming a reedy song to the dead.

It is thin like a band-aid, but loving,  
and I find it beautiful, this stilted half-harmony:

me chanting life to fill the holes in the bone-walls;  
pauses after each verse as I wait for their silent refrains.

# Capital Kid

ALEX FLOYD

ATLANTA, GA

His hair was like the stock market. Take your shampoo (your starting capital), invest in your hair, scrubbing and massaging it in, then take your suds (dividends) and reinvest, scrubbing all the froth and foam back into your scalp. Invest, earn, reinvest. 1, 2, 3. Perfect.

Sometimes just to complete the analogy, when he got out of the shower, he'd do his hair like Gordon Gecko, slicking it back, giving it that 80's money money money look. He wouldn't keep it like that of course. It was ridiculous as hell. But for a moment, he was not Walt Aberman, sophomore at Clear Creek, he was Gordon Gecko, corporate raider, stock trader, the guy everyone pretended to hate.

Out of shower, into clothes, his hair normal again. His phone buzzed. A few messages, but he overlooked them. Mostly inconsequential (opportunity cost of looking at messages + possible loss of hope by seeing their meaningless = nope). Instead he instinctively clicked on the stock app, which opened with an additional buzz. It was Saturday, the market was closed, no new news to report. But it didn't matter. He just wanted to see them. See that they were all there, his little babies. The stocks chirping back to him their closing value from their little nest of public trading. Just as along as his phone didn't spit back his request, like a baby regurgitating the worm its mother worked so hard to bring to it. "Just kiddin' Walt! World's collapsed around you and you and your family are broke! Take that rational self-interest and stick it where the sun don't shine!" The phone did not spit back. Thank God (no thanks to Nietzsche). The market was still there, the prices still intact. He breathed a sigh of relief.

He once had a nightmare like that, where the walls came crumbling down. He was standing in front of the New York Stock Exchange, watching all the prices plummet in a collective frenzy until they hit zero, the dashes and lines swirling together until the little yellow lights all lit up around a hole into which he could see nothing but blackness and he knew, "That's what it is now. It's blackness. It's a black hole of nothing." Bye, bye little birdies. Nope. It was a dream. Not real. And dreaming was really worthless (stress/mental anguish of dreams + possible ideas gained from them = nada).

He adjusted his hair some. Good looking, done, but not too done. His hair wasn't great. He just wanted it to be normal. Which it was. Mostly. Besides, by the looks of his uncles, he wouldn't have much left soon anyway.

For a brief moment, he reached out to the side table next to his bed for his glasses. Then No! He remembered. No glasses anymore. Contacts. Glasses were weak. And he was weak. But he didn't need to show it even more by not taking

advantage of the tools available to him (e.i. contacts). Simple choice (signs of weakness + available technological and cosmetic advancement = no brainer). He grabbed for the box of contacts sitting on his dresser. Daily disposables, new brand. The best, supposedly. He hoped they were. He knew they were a bit expensive, and it would really be irrational if his parents had paid all that good money for shitty lenses.

He got them out, put them on plop plop, then he was off. Eyes ready, clothes ready, hair ready. Fired up, ready to go. He put the box of contacts back down on his copy of *The Fountainhead* (– Remember, finish reading, you promised) and looked in the mirror again. Once more, hair okay, normal enough. Everything else was fine. Everything was normal. So that was good. Perfect, really. Normal's perfect. Galloping down the stairs, the nothing arrived and set up shop in his brain. His mind was as empty as a corporate headquarters in the Bahamas. Just a stripped bare room, with maybe a single telephone routing calls to wherever the real business was done. That usually bothered him. Emptiness bothered him. So he decided to play Remember which you played by running through the trading advice in your head you'd heard on CNBC yesterday. Begin and whammo. The mind lit up like a diamond catching a desert sunset. Tech stocks up higher than expected, construction and housing down, healthcare way up (Obamacare connection? – Remember, research later).

And soon, the stairs had folded, conquered, behind him.

The kitchen was empty. That's right, it was Saturday. Saturday morning. He glanced at the clock. Late Saturday morning. They would most likely be gone by now. Mom, dad, Andrew. Out of the house. The cold house, he just realized. Damn, why was it always so cold when he needed it to be, well, not so cold? Irrationality at its finest. Murphy's Law, perhaps? Then, a pause.

The sight isolated itself from the petty distractions around it that made up his home. They faded until that single image was all that remained, encased in a pool of blurred suburban furnishings. The door was open. Not the back one, the front one. Okay. That was okay. They had been doing construction lately, and there were housekeepers, one of them maybe? No. They were gone. It was a Saturday. No one came on Saturdays. No one was supposed to be here. Still, it could be okay. There were other excuses. Parents, brother, friends, neighbors. Someone could have come over? Yes, someone could have. Someone could have been careless and stupid and have come over and left the front door open. An idiot. It was their fault. Didn't they know how dangerous that was? The door was open, crime was up (because unemployment was up and urban overcrowding + economic downturn = higher crime rate) someone else could come in and rob the place or kill someone or do something really messed up because some idiot–

He stopped. Again.

The tunnel vision crowded back

out his view and brought with it its milky suburban swirl to all but the Thing. He was standing there in the middle of the living room. The Thing. The man. Dirty. That was the first thing Walt could think of. He was dirty. And in such a clean living room! That's why he thought of it, he realized. He was an anomaly. An oasis of filth in a spotless desert of modern living. Walt wanted to shout, "Okay, whatever you want to do, fine, but can we at least do it in the kitchen? There's a hardwood floor down there that won't get nearly as messed up." But that didn't change the fact that there was a stranger (a dirty stranger) standing in the middle of his living room. His bright clean living room, with him. A dark splotch on a white canvas. Alone. They were both alone.

It's okay, it's okay. Law of demand (fallen demand + high unemployment = homeless man in living room). It was all right. It made sense. It was perfectly normal. Sort of.

"Uh," Walt said. More. He needed to say more. And he planned on it. But, after all, best kept plans, best kept plans . . . Nothing came out.

The man nodded. "Hi," the man said.

Silence.

The man nodded again.

Still silence.

God, he needed to say something. Somethingsomethingsomethingsaysomething shot around in his head like a bullet ricocheting off the walls. He managed a strange croak of a moan that sounded like a voice crack crossed with a dying emphysema cough.

The man gave an especially contemplative nod at that.

Spelling bee. That was the last time. Standing up there, choking. CHOKING! It was the spelling bee. Choking and speechless. An idiot. He got that word, clamped up, couldn't spell it. Couldn't talk. Oh God, it was the spelling bee the fucking spelling bee.

The man smiled. His teeth. They were a mess too. Walt might have been paralyzed by fear and had a slight case of lockjaw but he still wanted to run over and clamp the man's mouth shut so that his teeth wouldn't somehow seep out and ruin the carpet. It was an expensive rug and mom would be so pissed and really why not because there was a homeless man in her living room just oozing dirt and WHY WAS THE DOOR OPEN?!

"Cold outside," the man said. He took a step forward. A small step, but that was enough. "Small steps toward socialism." – Khrushchev. That's right. Small something at least. Proletarii vsekh stran, soyedinyaytes'!

"Cold in here too."

Well, at least they both agreed on that. The statement almost gave the man a sense of humanity. Normalcy. Not really

normal, of course. Normal people had to act normal, which Walt knew took a great deal of work and self-discipline. Calling this man normal was doing the word a great disservice, eroding its value, corroding its very essence in the zeitgeist. Inflationary, really. Monetary policy 101.

And that's when he saw the sparkle, glittering in the man's left hand like a cheap hood ornament. His first thought was Ha! See? A normal person wouldn't have sparkling hands! Until he began to realize that even the very abnormal did not possess such a feature, and it was in fact a knife.

What was the word?

The man was still smiling. Good God close your goddamn mouth!!!

"Warmer though," the man said, the words whistling out between his teeth.

"Huh?" Walt managed.

It was that one word. It got you, it got you.

"Warmer in here," the man said.

Word. Just one word. Walt gave him back a slow nod, and could feel a dry swallow gurgling down his throat. Had he seen? The man had seen. He could feel it. He could feel those bugged out eyes just borrowing into the dried out crust of his throat like ground drills. This moment brought to you by the letter T for terrorized. It scared him. Scared him like the stock market dream. But it was still different. This fear went down deep, deep inside, burrowing along with those eyes. Down until it hit the core and made his reflexes spark. He was bare. "And next, for Clear Creek . . ."

He was weak. He knew that. Contacts? Nope. They didn't help it. They didn't hide it. He was still weak. Now the man had seen and he knew it. He'd seen that dry little swallow. And he knew that he was Walt Aberman. He knew that Walt had skipped one grade in math, but had to be held back one in English. That he could read the Dow Jones Average as well as some kids in his class read Fun With Dick and Jane. That he was a weak, brittle boned loser who wore glasses and would probably be bald and couldn't remember just ONE WORD ONE WORD!!

"Know something?" the man told him. Walt in fact knew quite a lot. He knew that the market had peaked at 14,164.53 on Tuesday October 9, 2007. He knew that the current unemployment rate stood at 7.9% as reported by the BLS. He also knew that soon he could end up just like those dream zeroes on the big board, his eyes two big black holes of nothing. Worthless.

"In weather like this, a man needs some coffee. You know that?"

Okay. Then a man needed Starbucks.

But Walt did not say this. Walt tried to say yes. Or no. Or something. He instead presented a remarkable failure at all three. He managed a pathetic (PATHET-

IC!) shrug.

"We gotta have some coffee," the man said, any previous use of subtly now being blown away by an apparently intense desire to feed his body with ground beans and sugar.

Okay, Walt thought. Okay, coffee...

His mind was meek. For they shall inherit the earth. He'd been told. Lies. Everyone knew that. Lies. Coffee. Coffee, coffee, 1, 2, 3.

The word is . . .

Did they have coffee? Columbia had coffee. And India and Brazil and Guatemala and Mexico . . .

As used in the sentence . . .

Vietnam, Ethiopia, Peru . . .

Defined as . . .

Coffee coffee everywhere, coffee coffee in your hair.

. . . and also as . . .

Coffee was a cognate. But not in English. Almost every other language but English. Cog, as in a machine, nate as in there's no word to use for nate.

. . . conversion to stocks or bonds . . . And yes. Coffee. They had coffee. . . . total assets . . .

His voice became a calm dance of sound, a slow serenade to the chaos that swirled around him. Coffee . . . coffee . . .

"Gotta have coffee," the man said nodding, as if he could read into Walt's inner serenade voice. . . . please spell . . .

Walt walked over, his steps like soft little pitter-patters on a foam mattress, almost a waltz (ha ha waltzing Walt!). Graceful. Like coffee beans slowly trickling into a grinder. His hand extended elegantly out to the man, and he took the ragged stranger by the arm, leading him to the world of coffee and beyond.

Yes.

His eyes made a gentle glance down at the side table, an almost rolling gaze that was wondrous and flowing in its own right. Malthus and the Rest: A Complete Volume of Classical Economics (Remember – read it, you said you would by now, but who cares because you're waltzing). It was so large and heavy. Not like him. He was light now. Light and graceful and so wonderfully normal, just getting some coffee because you had to have coffee in weather like this. Ha HA! He laughed, and the man laughed with him, the two of them holding hands together as they walked to the kitchen. Walt could talk.

"Capitalization," he said.

Blackness.

Crying shattered into his hearing, awakening him on the cold, sterile bed of a

hospital.

There was so much goddamn crying in the hospital. Mom, dad, Andrew, all the rest.

"Baby baby baby baby baby!" His mother, falling apart like a collapsing tower of Janga. Her dramatics bordered on opera standards (tragic event + kin = freak out/Greek theater).

"A book!" was his father's word of the day. "Killed him with a goddamn book!"

At which point the weeping paused for a moment.

"Language!"

Then on again once more.

"He was a veteran, too!" she finally gasped between sobs. "And you still survived! Think what he could have done! Think what he could've done to my baby!"

"Brave thing, brave thing."

"Yes, very brave."

"Took some guts. Those people are trained to kill."

"My mouth tastes like wood."

"I bet it does, son." Made no discernable sense, didn't matter.

Walt gurgled between smacks of his lips. "Wood," he said again for good measure.

Everyone gave a proud nod. Indeed, wood it was. The hero commands it. The crying starting again.

"Gotta deal with the waterworks, bud. You hang tight for a minute."

The hospital had fluorescent lights. They blinked. He hated them. Little blinking lights. They reminded him of the stock market dream. Little blinking zeroes. Worthless. They were worthless too. (Remember, research – possible green energy involved?)

The marching band returned.

"Gonna get new locks."

locks!" "Of course we're going to get new

do."

"Yep, that's what we're gonna

do." "As soon as possible!"

"Absolutely."

"Don't worry, champ."

"Hmm."

The room was a delightful swirling of prosaic nonsense. Was it the drugs? Perhaps. Perhaps it was just the crass banality of such an average room. An American hospital. (It was the drugs).

"Swirl."

"Yes, honey, it will be swell!"



They fed him jello. Such a stereotype it almost made him cry (along with the drugs). The food was without question hospital food. It was so perfectly bland one could almost taste it. But good news? Economic law of hospital food: the longer the stay is inversely proportional to quality of food. So bad food? Good news.

They had asked if he wanted something to drink. Like coffee. He'd laughed so hard they'd had to sedate him. "Showers . . ."

"Sorry honey, you can't do that right now."

"No Gecko?"

A pause followed this. He gave a drooling laugh and clutched his IV line. The nurse smiled and moved on to the next patient.

"Keep the sheets clean."

The Visitation Cycle, as presented by Walter Aberman. They came in, they cried, they left. The cycle repeated itself, day by day. Rinse, wash, repeat. Invest, earn, reinvest. 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.

library!" "We outta keep this guy outta the

"Yeah, I mean that's one way to get out of community service."

Pause.

"Huh?"

"You know. Reading to kids and shit."

"Dumbass."

"Shut up! It makes sense!"

"Seriously, though, that was brave, man. Really brave."

His feet hurt in the hospital. Drugs didn't help that for some reason. Day by day he sat and they hurt and he grew restless and could see himself getting used to the surroundings. Acclimating. Adapting. Terrifying. Not here. Not in this place. This place that was somewhere so far from normal the word seemed foreign.

"Soon you can be released. You're in the paper. News, too. You know that?"

Gurgle-laugh.

"Okay, honey, yes that's right. You just sleep now."

The nights were a lovely shade of faded dark. It was beautiful to see the darkness of the sky punctured by the lights of the city in the outside window. The little lights shown through. Do you miss me, birdies? Did you?

"Need to go in a wheelchair first. Insurance policy. I mean, you'd think in a place like here, you're covered, but, you know."

"Like this."

"Huh?"

"Like this, not like here."

"Oh. Okay."

He needed to walk again. Walk and move. Movement was important. Healthy. Natural. Normal. Because that's what he was. He was going to be normal. And it was perfect. 1, 2, 3.



ASIA WGO LIVINGSTON, NJ

# The Transubstantiation of Peonies

ELIZABETH VOGEL  
CALIFON, NJ

To get into the attic, there's a proper staircase. It's hidden by a door that looks like all the others that lead to the bedrooms. At the bottom of this staircase there is a pile of three thick books. The one lying in between is particularly ragged. It holds things like family secrets and what she never knew how to say.

\*

I dropped a penny down a well once, intending to make a wish. Metal makes me uncomfortable. The way it never molds to me. It might just be an excuse for never donning rings, but I try not to think of things like that. I couldn't tell you if it came true, but I know it was a rare penny— it's worth something now apparently.

Metal makes me uncomfortable in the same way names do. Speaking names aloud has always seemed a bit too familiar. I can always feel a sense of hesitation when people go to say mine— deciding whether to shorten it to Mae or stick with the more intimidating Maeve.

\*

She used to be a wanderer. There are woods behind her brick-faced house and she used to delight in winding spirals through the underbrush. She swore up and down there were mazes painted through berry bushes and birch trees. Clear blue days and steadily rained upon afternoons were punctuated in this way.

\*

I used to confuse peonies and poetry. I couldn't tell which I was striving for. My father bought me a bouquet of peonies and crushed baby's breath. I promised myself for years that it was syllables gathered and tied with a cotton candy bow. I wanted to write about different kinds of love I had never experienced. It's not so much a matter of over-romanticization. I wanted to never love— or at least never love under someone else's mandating. It was about the way the syllables played on a tongue that made no noise. Really, I'm jealous of people who have mastered silence.

\*

She's such an internal person. And that has got to be at least part of the problem. She doesn't like talking because people don't understand why it takes so long for her to form sentences. And if she speaks too quickly her words echo in her head for weeks. She can't stop questioning them.

Her name means intoxication, but sometimes she thinks that's not quite

right. She feels neither springy enough for Mae nor exotic enough for Maeve.

\*

I was never a singer or dancer, maybe there's hardly anything special about me at all. I have to wonder if my self-awareness worked too hard and inverted itself. Although I wouldn't say I've ever had a specific fondness for extraordinary. Distinguished, maybe. I've never wanted a forever. There's only ever been a 'here, right now, please' kind of a thing. That comes like certain rains— substantial and far apart.

\*

She likes meanings and meandering— manipulations. There is a feeling that she can't quite articulate. A sense of urgency that makes her feel like her heart's running, like she's had too much caffeine. Somewhat like a voyeur, like something she isn't. It creeps in the way tea climbs up the thin string connecting leaves to label.

\*

It's all about obsession. Some people call it an addictive personality. The things Mae wants and doesn't. It keeps her afloat and drags her down in the same way. There's never a perfect balance and she can feel it in the way she rests her legs. She chases herself in circles.



SHIJA ZHANG LITIZ, PA

# I Became Aware of Veins

Alexandra Mendelsohn

GLEN ROCK, NJ

I became aware of veins in the dingy bathroom of an elegant restaurant. Dingy because of soft towels, hanging paintings, gentle almond aroma. Elegant because of lies.

Stand at the sink and wash away the things I didn't say. Stand and wash and nothing.

I was fascinated by my breathless blood, fading into tan skin. My fingers traced the web of veins which mapped me out, summarized me in a tattoo of wires.

Fractured mirrors were unacceptable.

Outside in the elegance they expected me to look and be looked upon. Upon brunette hair and mascara lashes. Mouth I shaved off and painted on with lipstick.

Stand at the sink and scrub my reflection off my hands. Stand and wash and nothing.

I had never understood marzipan. It was the sweetest vestige of my life, but I couldn't fathom how it was made. I was afraid to wonder.

The soap smelled like almonds.

Towels confused me. Water did not reflect light, and my hands were soaked with things the mirror could not see. I dried them and they looked the same.

Stand at the sink and think: almonds or cyanide? Stand and wash and nothing.

I couldn't figure out why blood was so important. It was stagnant in stationary bodies. Only moved when forced to. Only moved when discarded.

My invisible wrists reappeared.

Smile, mother said. Smile and don't count your heartbeat. Don't count your heartbeat or it will count you. Veins were easily confused with arteries and I lost track of both.

Stand at the sink and count my heartbeat. Stand and wash and nothing.

What she didn't understand was that smiling, I was nothing but my ivory teeth. Incisors and pink lips without veins. She didn't understand that counting was the way I made it matter.

They would never see me but I could see myself.

My name in silver on my wrist. It glittered over throbbing veins, a birthday present and misplaced. My name meant letters. I was more than letters.

Stand at the sink and glitter while they can't see me. Stand and wash and nothing.

My perfume smelled like the lavenders stranded on the counter. As I grow older my blood vessels will rip through the tops of my hands like roots in soil.

No arteries. Only blue sky beneath my skin.

Age was a choice. That was the beautiful thing. Age was an elegant privilege in the dingy bathroom of an elegant restaurant. My veins were mine.

I don't have to wash.

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If you would like to know more about any of the programs for high school students or receive information about the Writing Major at Susquehanna, see our web site at [www.susqu.edu/writers](http://www.susqu.edu/writers) or contact Dr. Gary Fincke, Director, by e-mail at [gfincke@susqu.edu](mailto:gfincke@susqu.edu) or by telephone at 570-372-4164.

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