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THE REFLECTOR 2009

*Shippensburg University's Undergraduate
Student Literary Journal*

The Reflector is the annual undergraduate literary journal financed by the Student Association of Shippensburg University. The Reflector accepts fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and artwork year-round, and works are considered for publication based on a blind submission policy. Submissions are accepted electronically at reflectorsubmissions@gmail.com.

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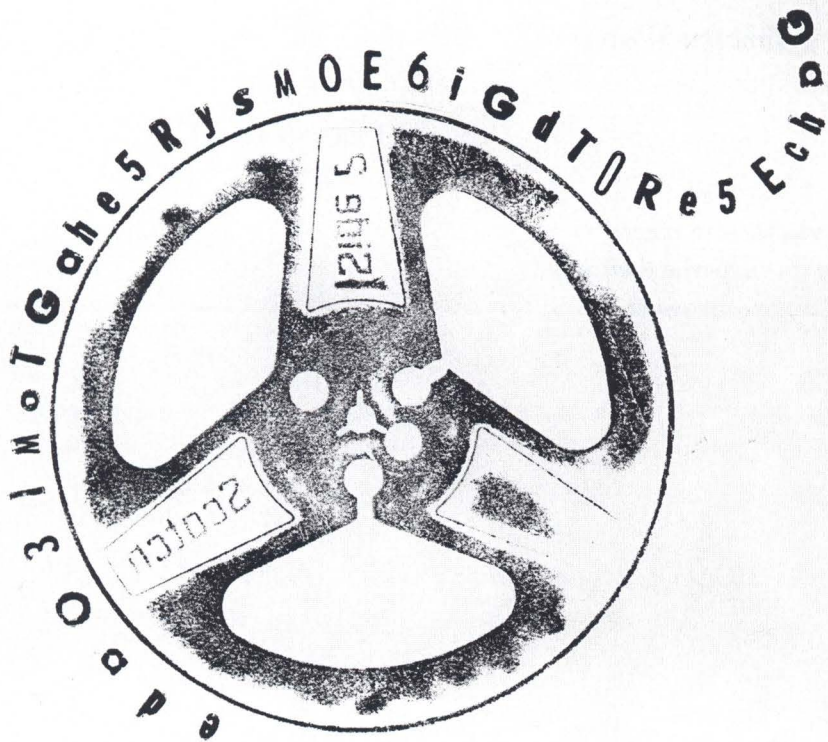
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Liar

Tabatha Weaver

If the world were turned
upside down maybe then you
could make sour sweet



Voice Found Object and Letterpress

Kathryn Boeree

Who Am I

Krista Graham

I am a critic. I am an observer.

I create nothing. I seek to fix everything.

My work relies on the works of others.

My beauty comes from those I surround myself with.

I am a reflector. A mirror.

A lone piece of glass.

My body is a reflection.

Scally Caps and Semantics

Brendan Rottmund

“I’m telling you the word is ‘jaunty,’” said Conall, waving his pint glass in the air and slopping beer down the sides before setting it down with a clunk on the heavy, darkly-stained bar top. James, the bar owner who was currently tending, looked up from whatever it was he was doing and eyed us to make sure we weren’t causing any trouble. I met his gaze and gave my head a slight sideways tilt coupled with a shrug to let him know I was on his side. My two friends were on their own.

“Con, you’re crazy. Not only does that word sound wrong, but it’s ridiculous to think that, just because you wear your cap at a funny angle, people won’t mess with you because you’ll look tougher.” Seth gave Conall an exasperated look and waited for the inevitable rebuttal.

Here we were, home on break from our respective colleges, filled to the brim with knowledge, sitting at our favorite hole-in-the-wall bar, The Rookery, and arguing over the proper word for tough hat wearing. Perhaps this wouldn’t be such a frivolous argument if we were miners here one hundred years ago. I momentarily removed my cap to scratch my head. After all a man wasn’t a man without a hat in those days and certainly coal miners needed to look tough. My friends had been bickering for about half an hour now, neither giving any ground. They were still only warming up, not quite drunk yet but getting close to the danger zone. Some ancient Greek once said that the only thing the Celts loved more than a fight was words. It might yet come to blows. Fights never seemed out of the ordinary in a bar with such a seedy I.R.A. atmosphere, not that the bartender would ever let

it get past macho posturing. I smiled to myself and studied the ring of portraits hanging around a framed copy of the Irish language version of the proclamation of the Irish Republic. My eyes settled on the picture of James Connolly. As a fine upstanding Irish-American, James Connolly was a source of internal dissonance. Sure, he was a great patriot, 1916 and all that, but he was also a hardline Marxist who would have seen Ireland red if he hadn't been martyred. Thank God for small favors.

Conall turned his head to the wall-sized window on the left side of the bar. Craning his neck to see around the puffed up crow painted in the center of the window, he scanned the darkening streets and sighed, "When's Deirdre supposed to be getting here?" With skill, he posed the question casually as if it had just crossed his mind that Deirdre McDowell was supposed to meet us.

Deirdre had often been an extra member of our small circle since high school. Conall's comment was so casual and unobtrusive, he really must have deluded himself into thinking that Seth and I had no idea he was still nursing the crush he'd had for a long time. It was rather insulting. Conall quickly recovered from his thoughts and extinguished that particular candle. Shifting in his seat, he refocused on the issue of the day, reigniting the short fuse attached to whatever part of his brain that usually failed at controlling his temper. With a very serious air, and ready for another round, he sat straighter on his barstool and looked at Seth.

"Seriously, guys, I read it in a book about being a bouncer. There's a whole section on body language and looking menacing to defuse problems before they happen, and one of the suggestions was to wear a hat down over your eyes. People are naturally averse to someone if they can't see their eyes. It makes them less likely to mess with you. And," he added with particular emphasis, "the awesome old-timey word for it is 'jaunty,' as in 'I wore my hat at a jaunty angle.'"

"'Jaunty' is not the right word you, shoneen¹." Seth's feathers were just about ruffled.

"Then what is the word then, eh?" Conall shot back adding, "amadaun²."

1. Shoneen (Seónín) – Someone who is pretentious

2. Amadaun (Amadán) – Fool or idiot

“I don’t know, but it isn’t ‘jaunty’, and you’re so full of it anyway I’m not sure I believe all that stuff you supposedly read, either!” Seth sat back on his stool looking sour and muttering under his breath.

Conall ignored Seth. He looked over him to me and asked what I thought. I had been silent for the duration of their arguing and was caught a bit off guard. Racking my brain, I looked around the bar to decide how I was going to play it. Light got lost somewhere between the smoke, dark furniture and fake wood covering the walls. It was always easy to imagine the Molly Maguires meeting to discuss their next blow to the coal bosses and victory for the working man at a place like this.

“I think,” I said, stalling for time and watching the tricolor hanging behind the bar attempt to liberate itself from the wall with the help of an unseen draft. Laughter from the Knights of Columbus and the Hibernians, who had besieged the sitting areas on the floor behind us, floated overhead with cigarette smoke around the low-hanging lamps. There must have been a church softball game today. “I think that you two are arguing like a couple of gligeen³.” The bartender, who had been refilling Seth’s drink at the time, stifled a laugh and went on his way. Unlike most of us who could only throw a few words or toasts around in Irish when the occasion called for it, James was fluent. An Irish speaker outside of Boston or New York is a rare find in this country, so he was recruited to teach at the Hibernian Hall whenever it was that he first wound up here. “Sure’n I have the Irish, too,” I said in my worst mock lilt. “And I don’t think anything,” I added with a half smirk. “I don’t know the word Seth wants, but I do know that ‘jaunty’ is indeed a way to wear your hat.” They both groaned loudly and sagged against the backs of their stools.

“You, sir, are full of shit!” Seth proclaimed, glancing left to Conall who nodded in solidarity. “We can see it on your face plain as day.”

“You don’t need to be a psychic to see the I-know-exactly-what-you-guys-are-talking-about-but-I’m-not-gonna-say-anything-because-I’m-a-dick aura you’re

3. Gligeen (Gligín) – Idiot or hairbrain

giving off right now.”

“Well now, that was a bit caustic, boyo,” I said matter-of-factly to Conall. “All right, fine. You guys win. There is indeed a better, tougher sounding word than ‘jaunty,’ but I can’t, for the life of me, remember what it is.” Looking at Conall, Seth shook his head slowly as if to indicate I had let them down. Conall sneered at the bar and picked up his drink. A loud squeal from the direction of the door caused him to splutter into his glass. I nearly fell off my stool. Seth, without any noticeable change in demeanor, looked over his shoulder and raised his beer in salute.

“Hey, Deirdre,” he said as though nothing had happened. “What’s up?”

“How are you guys?” She examined all of us, smiling excitedly. Conall, who had turned a very becoming shade of pink, gave her a brief nod and pretended to read the advertisement on his coaster.

I chuckled, looking from Conall to Deirdre, and greeted her, “We were all fine until you scared the crap out of us.” She laughed and apologized.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I just wanted to see you guys and introduce you to my friend who is visiting with me from school.” She stepped aside and grabbed her companion dragging him into the conversation. “This is my good friend Lou.” He waved sheepishly at us. Seth and I both nodded and smiled.

“Okay, boys, I’ll leave you to it.” She grabbed her friend by the hand and began to walk off, “I just wanted to introduce you to Lou.” Conall pretended to cough and turned from pink to enraged purple. “Lou and I are going to grab a table in the back. I’ll talk to you guys later.” Leaving it at that, she and Lou walked off to a table in a far corner of the bar dodging drunken men in softball caps. Seth and I exchanged worried glances and looked to Conall.

“Did you see her Claddagh ring?”

A muffled, “Oh boy,” came from Seth who had folded his head into his arms on the bar.

“Yes, Conall, I did. Right hand, heart pointed in,” I said, holding up my own hand and pointing at it. This was going to go downhill fast. Conall was focused intently on the table where Deirdre and her new boyfriend were sitting. I half

expected it to burst into flames.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Seth sighed, “She’s our friend too.” Conall cocked his hat down over his eyes jauntily. “I’m just going to go talk to them, I swear.” He puffed out his chest like a bird attempting to scare off a competitor during mating season and marched across the room.

Five minutes and a macho show of bravado later, Deirdre was gone. So was Lou. Conall was on the floor face up with a black eye and Seth and I peering down at him.

“Huh,” I said awkwardly, “You know I just remembered the word you were looking for: ‘rakish.’”

Seth bent down over Conall and patted him on the cheek. “Now that at least sounds tougher than ‘jaunty.’ Maybe if you had put on your hat like that instead, this wouldn’t have happened, avick⁴.”

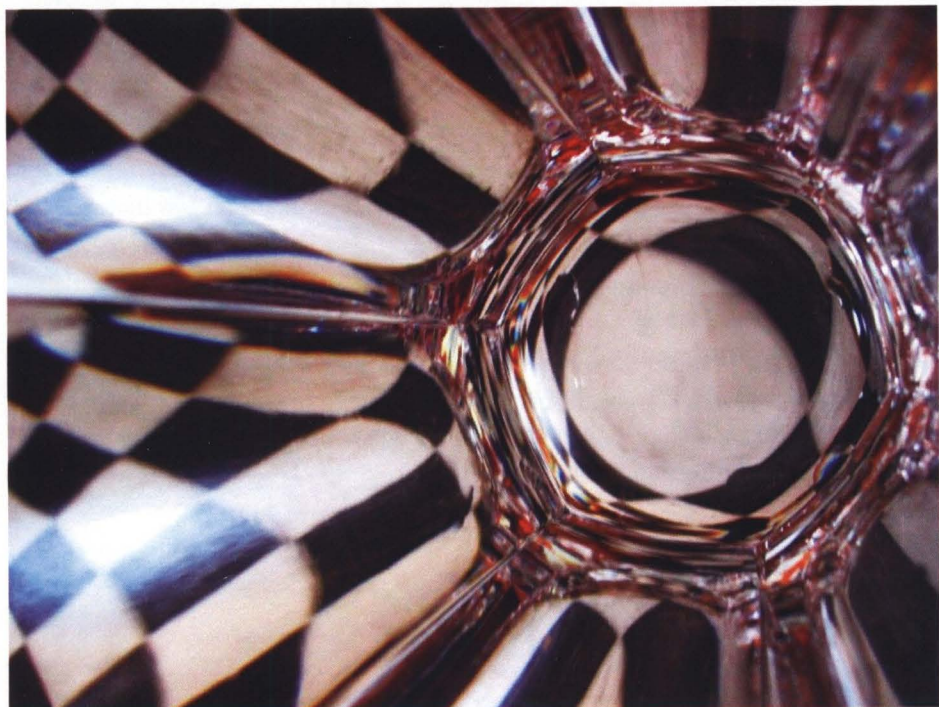
4. Avick (A mhic) – Usually a term of endearment meaning son or, my son. Used here patronizingly as if Seth were calling Conall sonny boy, boyo or something to that effect.

You Called Me Caddy*

Crystal Stumbaugh

she knew and I know what the body
can't forget my mouth almost bloody
from biting the lower lip the bones in the backs
of my hands too visible the curves in my hips
now hard pointed question marks
my body starved
for sleep and touch

*From a poetry collection inspired by the character, Caddy Compson, from William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*.



Drowning Less Photograph

Kaitlin Smallwood

Things I'd Say If You Picked Up

Krista Graham

Vivien Leigh was in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.
I bet she played the materialistic biotch.
I actually do remember the 90s, but
I never quite made it to Nirvana.
Marilyn Monroe is sexy if only for the fact that she married Arthur Miller
And hung out with Viv and Laurence Olivier...
And she looked amazing in those platform shoes
And that black fishnet unitard!
I think I want a black fishnet unitard...
Do you like mint tea in a short glass or
Lemonade in a tall one?
Why is there so much to learn?
I want to read a dictionary straight through...
I want to read a library and smear love on the shelves.
I tanned today in my panties with a girl.
Why is it that the things we're both interested in always collide?
Viv and Marliyn,
90s tunes and novels,
My generic love of poetry and your specific role model Byron.

Why are we two separate magnets revolving in an eternal circle
Our minds meeting but never touching?

Dance with the Devil in Heaven

Shea Hicks

Bee remembers the first time she met Alec, but it doesn't matter now. He left her. But somehow he's found his way back. Her silky legs engulfed his hips. This feels better than I remembered— pump. Bee supposed that he left because of Jovic, his brother, and not because of her. Alec told her that he was with all the wrong women and he wanted to change things around a bit and it started with, "If you ever want to get out, call me. Like, really get out, call." Oh, please, like someone like me could be with someone like you.

That was eight solid months ago. Bee's thoughts didn't drift to Alec often, but when they did she felt an overwhelming sense of shame, yet at the same time, she felt something like a rubber band always pulling her back to him. Bee didn't understand her actions in life anymore than a stranger would have. Alec didn't drive Bee to commit murder because, for the most part, they got along, and they were just right together. pump. But Bee did anyway, anywho. She hated her life until she was old enough to know that it wasn't going to change. Then she decided that the only thing to do was to take it out on other people. It all didn't just start like that though. She thought about all the people who had hurt her. The snowball effect was started by her mother. Why did she do that to me? Bee thought about how she would love, absofuckinglutely LOVE, to really stick it to the man, or have any man stick it to her. Bee was uncontrollable around men. Her mother was uncontrollable around women. Bee would like to tell all her "friends" that she wouldn't be their friend in another life. If she could travel west every day, she would, and Bee would be happy, happy despite her past. Were these all real

feelings? How can someone hate another human— pump— being with so much passion and fury as Bee did Alec? Bee had no idea the effect she has on the people around her. No wonder I can't keep a man around. Pump—pump— ahh. Not this time. This time we will remain together, the same. If it all happens like I have planned. She was insanely insane, if one can imagine such a thing.

Bing bang wang— ahhh— uh.

Bee wished she had more time to be wondrous, ponderous, serious, fake. The speckle in time that she was given— it's just not enough time to get everything done. I'll need to make a list. Bee thought of this as she glanced here and there while trying her best to avoid Alec's stare. where. glare. bear. They were bare and Bee was feeling too vulnerable. pump. She could hear his breath, even from so far away— but he's so close, he has come to play. Bee didn't understand why she was doing this. How far away is he from my face? Too close. Bee was never good at guesstimating. His breathing sounds like a train— why am I doing this? Pump. So she put it off because she was a terrible liar. What if she got caught. pump. What then?

The two ex-lovers had reconnected and now, not knowing what to say, they just didn't say anything. What are you supposed to say? He looks like shit, she thought to herself. I can't tell him that though. She hated the way his goddamned shirts always looked like they were crumpled into a ball and then put onto his body. But, this time, it was crumpled on the floor, beside the bed waiting to be folded and taken care of, cleaned and appreciated. I want to be treasured, more than this superficial fluke could ever do for me. He's not the one. But Alec had been there for Bee since the beginning. Since before things got complicated with Jovic and Bee lost all hope. Bee constantly left something at Alec's house: panties, a note, hair-tie, anything she could do without. She wished she could see his face when he discovered these items.

She remembered that she didn't shut her garage door. The fucking cat is going to get out. She winced at the thought of her cat escaping. Where would it even go? I hope it doesn't get run over. Actually, it wouldn't get run over unless someone was really fucking lost. Bee lived at the end of a road that was practically abandoned

these days. Filler Avenue used to be teeming with energy and excitement when she first moved into her small studio apartment above the saddest looking laundromat. But things have gone downhill, to say the least. Whatever.

Bee didn't even have a cat, either. Imagining things that were impossible in Bee's life made her think that things were different, that she wasn't too crazy, that she had a grasp on things. She was the one willing the craziness to happen, so she thought it was okay. The happiness she thought she'd found in life was harder to hold onto than she had predicted. It was fleeting like every person who had ever entered her life. I should leave.

Bee felt a drip of salty sweat splash onto her brow, roll along the crease of her lid and sting her eye. She flinched and reluctantly looked up at Alec. His face is crinkling, scrunched nose...about to blow. I'd like to know what he's thinking right about— — now. Who cares what he thinks. He probably doesn't even have a brain.

Pump.

Pump. p u m p. Oh, that's better, now. Alec redeems himself once again!

Pump. Pppp. Ppp.

If Bee knew how, she'd give Jailbird1 and Jailbird2 lobotomies. Jailbird1: relative of Bee's. She's a self-proclaimed loser, or maybe that is just what everyone thinks of her. PUMP Fuck! Half bad-ass, half sexy-mama, half tattooed sleeze bag, half everything Bee didn't want to be. Needless to say, Bee's isn't any of those because technically four halves makes two people. I hate what she's done to the family name. pump. By sixteen, Jailbird1 had the pleasure of sleeping with 97 men and 11 women (she pinned a list to her 'fridge for all to see, even grandma) and worked for a man who called himself Mr. Nice. It's a wonder anyone chooses to lead this life, really, but if she wanted to change then she could and would and should. She was currently 32 years old and living the highlife in a woman's shelter downtown with her nine illegit half-brained offspring. Wild life runs in my blood.

Bee could tell there was something different about Alec's room. Was it the smell? Or the hushed traffic outside? Maybe I'm just paranoid. She was irritated at the aged dark blue peeking out from under the new taupe on the walls. He must

have done it himself and without painter's tape. Bee smiled at her thought. Alec looked at her and, in between whimpers, smirked back. Irritation and anticipation were settling in. pump. Everything around Bee was so distracting. Ugly. pumping away. Does the man own a vacuum? Those crumbs have to be from years ago. Her body was rocking, and the fitted sheet was coming loose at the corners. Lo and behold, a plastic-covered mattress. Ick! For the love of God!

Alec had always been a good lover despite his affinity for wrapping his rough hands around Bee's delicate neck during the deed. I love it when he does this reverse autoerotic asphyxiation...does he want me dead? Bee laughed in her head...surely not. Bee felt ugly most of the days. Sad about where she was in life. Sad that her mother wasn't there to see her. I wouldn't want my mother to see me like this. What would she say?

Jailbird2: By seventeen, she managed to park her lumpy arse in a cell for attempted homicide. Also, a relative of Bee and accomplice to Jailbird1's antics. Most assume the reason behind beating up a 62 year old woman is legit; however, there just simply is not enough time to explain the situation.

I need to make a list of things to do before tomorrow.

pump. pump. pmp. puummip. 1. laundry. 2. call the bank. I only have a little bit more time.

Alec jerked his leg up to arrange himself into a new position. "No! I like it like this," Bee blurted out. 3. don't forget to pee afterwards. Bee wanted to make him happy, but you can't make someone happy who doesn't want to be happy. elated. pump.

Bee tried to get into his head when they first met, but it was a failed attempt. He was impossible to decipher. He was consumed with everything that has nothing to do with her. He has no life to my knowledge. Bee thought about the times she thought she knew him; all these memories came rushing back to her, just before. pump— ughhh 4. throw away carrots.

Alec had a hard time committing to anything. That was the whole problem with the relationship that they shared. This can't be what people mean when they say they're in love. Alec has never told her how he felt. Bee assumed the best but

expected the worst. She was surprised that he agreed to meet up with her tonight because, a week ago, he said he would “never subject myself to your guilty heart.” Bee had no idea what that sentence even meant. pump. I’m so itchy. My ass cheek needs to be scratched. Crack. Bee tried to ignore the annoying sensation. Alec had this new thing where he shaved his torso. The man didn’t have more than six hairs around his nipples and a couple scraggly goat hairs on his chest, but he had a happy trail that was more like a happy forest. I wonder if he shaves now because he got crabs. It didn’t really matter, but it’d obviously been a couple days since his date with the razor.

Alec kissed her ear. I really wish he wouldn’t do that, gross. He’s getting too close. pummp. Is Alec’s landlord home? 5. check movie times. I’m pretty sure he is, and I’m pretty sure he can hear us loud and clear.

The existence of Alec’s only brother, Jovic, and Bee’s lack of judgment ended whatever kind of relationship that Alec and Bee had a few months ago. That reminds me. 6. clean vibrator. Jovic had real bad technique. Bad bed rompin’ stompin’, hair-flying technique. As much as Bee didn’t like that Alec fixed his grey eyes on her during sex, she hated that Jovic wouldn’t pay her any attention. He was in it for himself, never wanting to travel west together. His was always a solo trip. pump. Jesus Christ, it’s been 10 minutes— I need more time.

Does he love me? Will he ever? Did he ever? He’s so much sexier than Jovic. 400%. He gives fourhundredpercent, sixhundredpercent of the time.

I think he lost weight. Bee and Alec were from New Jersey, born and raised, lazy, a lifetime of pollution and lights from New York City projecting, ever so slightly, into their home state. To the north was cold, the south warmer, to the west— well, they didn’t make it out west much. That’s why it was something special.

Bee’s breaths were shortened as she arrived. She called it going out west because, when you get there, you feel like the journey was worth the wait. Pump pump pump pump. A release like no other, Alec had always known just the right way to please Bee. A little flick, lick, stick, flick, lick, lick, stick. Mmm.

Aforementioned vibrator is the best thing that ever happened to Bee. And her

mom's shower head. I'm beginning to think that this might have been a mistake.

Bee's mother died abruptly due to a freak accident. Alec and Bee met at her funeral. Ironically enough, Alec and Jovic's mother had dated Bee's mom in high school. Alec and Jovic were both adopted, so was Bee. Two mommys, two mommys. Looking back now, they were able to feel each other's pain growing up. Was it pain or jealousy? I think I am drawn to people that sympathize with me. Jovic provided the understanding that Bee needed.

Why are all homos always so fuckin' happy? Despite Bee's pessimistic outlook on life, she had it good, and she knew it.

Jovic had come out of the closet almost immediately after the two of them fucked. Do I turn everyone gay?

pump

pump

pu\$#p

PPPPPPump

When Jovic accidentally let it slip out around Alec, it was hard for Bee to cover her shame and infidelity. I don't think it counted—he was gay! Unadmittedly gay, but still gayer than seersucker, striped pants. The damage was done. She had betrayed the only man that she thought she had feelings for. I wish we would stop and that he would just hold me. So strong, he was always at the gym, so safe with her hand in his. But that damn belly was growing. Maybe he doesn't work out anymore.

Alec belonged to an all men's gym. Would he turn out like Jovic? Pump. Then he licked. He stopped and licked her. Ew. Where is he aiming because he definitely just licked my eyebrow! Her ears were ringing from the show they saw earlier that night. Bee took her mind back to the first time she did it. How good it felt. Bee woke up the next morning not knowing that this particular day would turn out to be the best and most awful day she had experienced. Pump. PUMP. She had blown Jovic. Then blown his head off. She had to. Now it was Alec's turn to join his brother in whatever afterlife there was.

His ass is twitching. He's getting close.

Pump

Pump

Pump

Pump

Puuuuuuupp

PUMP

PPP

UUU

M

PP

That day, Bee killed a man. A man Bee knew. Bee flew. She caught her wings. Ran with speed and lingered in time until the very end of it all. She held out as long as she could. Alec, not knowing what was coming. All she wanted was a mate. Someone to take. A man to hold. Be held. Alec was the one. But, she couldn't have him. With Jovic ruined now; there was no turning back.

His face is getting red, flushed. PUMP PUMP PUMP PMP PUMMMP!!
Uggghhh..ahh...

I wanted Jovic, I wanted his force. He never really agreed. Here we go.

Bee reached under her pillow. It was locked and loaded. Only used once before, on Jovic.

Shit, I think he saw it! PUMP PUMP.

Bee and Alec's simultaneous orgasms were competing for intensity when Bee pulled the gun out plainly and directed the shot at her lover's ear just as she screamed in a fury. Alec's brain flashed images of all the women he had ever been with and why he so intensely loved having sex with Bee. His thoughts slowed to focus on the revolver pointing straight at his head. In the ecstasy that was his orgasm he could do nothing to stop what was about to happen.

ANBG!!

NBGA!

BANG!

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Bee had two tries left. BANG.

One tries left. After the failed attempts, once to the eye— to take a look into the smoking gun— end it all. I'm doing this because you made me. BANG. Once more, just to make sure he'd never be back.

Done. If I got to hell, it was worth it.

Bee stretched her arm toward her jeans pocket. Lint, paper, a penny... where was the extra bullet? She had one more to make sure. To make sure Bee would never have to really pay for this child's play. Where the fuck is it?

Bee slipped herself out from under the bleeding Alec who lay stiff and heavy on top of her. He was still in her. Still twitching. Still glistening with sweat and a coat of gunpowder that had collected on his subtle beard. The only company I need is not of this world. Seven shells are all it takes to end three people's lives—and I lost the last one. Bee clicked on the light, walked down her hallway, stepped down the stairs, and exited her apartment into the late, dark night. These three people, who never should have met, never should have messed with fate—it was necessary for Bee to take over judgment—because, obviously, God didn't know what he was doing.

Out of the apartment she felt the breeze of the evening wrap itself around her bare body. Her nipples hardened to the chill of the night, and her smooth legs were now covered with goose bumps. The bus was due to stop in less than a minute.

I'll take it where I need to go. The lights from the bus creep over the hill to the left. Bee takes more steps toward the curb. She waits. The bumble of the bus is coming closer. Bee exhales, inhales—I'm sorry— steps one more step in front of the number 9 bus. Now. Done.

7. dance with the devil.



Process Digital Art

Laura Vargo

Simply Mesmerized

Daniel Tucker

Licked by her lips
Smacked by her hips

Pinched by her hair
Rubbed by her stare

Froze by her toes
Kissed by her nose

Pushed by her thighs
Hugged by her eyes

She got me mesmerized

Trained by her frame
Tamed by her name

Kicked by her breast
Slaved by her sex

Bathed by her zeal
Owned by her feel

Struck by her tongue
Drowned by her rum

She got me mesmerized

Burned by her curves
Thrown by her words

Drawn by her peak
Packed by her cheek

Traced by her nails
Calmed by her trail

Jailed by her lines
Rhymed by her mind

She got me mesmerized

Paradise for Free

Krista Graham

I want to run through the fields
And take old cow paths that lead to nowhere,
To put nettles in my hair and dance
Under the sun.
And even if I do all this without an audience;
Just to feel the air and the ground
And the tall trees
To see the sloping road and rising hills,
To do and feel and express lying on my back
In a hay field or riding a horse
Or walking through the picture that cannot
Be framed is the only way to make
A trap into a paradise,
To trap paradise.
Or to simply
be free.



Nonrenewable Steel, Car Tires, Electrical Ties, 13' x 7' and 7' x 4.5'

Scott Osiol

No Vacancy

Meghan Grady

We conquered every city,
hand in hand with destruction.
Before manners were an option.
Before relationships got lost in technology.
Before my surname changed.
Before we forgot who we were.

I-95 will never be the same.
Your hands at nine and three,
mine extended out the window,
catching wind through the cracks of my fingers.
I've never felt so content.
Our eyes met in the rear view mirror.
Two genuine, awkward smiles.

We debated modern topics.
I never understood your theories,
I only felt the passion in your words.
You would get so caught up in conversation,
that you'd forget we were en route .
Five more inches past that arctic cliff,
we would have been alongside angels.

Now it makes for a decent story.

We never gave our real identities.
The beauty of not knowing intrigued us.
As did an opportunity to disappear
from the reality we still refuse.
You had me convinced we could live like that forever.
I never got the chance to prove you wrong.

I've never been one for gossip,
but I hear you're still untamed.
I knew you'd never let go of youth.
Should have known you'd be a success.
The air we shared was contaminated,
and time has filled the cracks of our union.
State borders came between our hearts.
Mine still beats, but at a measured pace.

No one sings Elvis like you do,
like you did.

Moon River

Paige Bonitz

The moon casts her solitary spotlight onto the scene, overriding the sun. The remaining flowers of winter close their petals and bow down. Empty trees dance as the wind sings the moon a mourning song through their dried branches. It's a familiar tune that draws a tear from the stone statue of Richard Mills, which lies down the street in the center of town. I sit, numb to the breeze, and watch the Celestial Highness in awe and wonder if she is laughing at the turmoil below her. The bitter scent of oncoming snow is in the air as the clouds above grow thick and begin to coat the sky in purples and grays.

Goosebumps spread over my skin, causing the thin hair on my neck and arms to stand upright, saluting the wind that tumbles my hair onto my face and into my eyes. I sink back on the pillar that holds up the roof on the left side of porch. The stiff cotton of my father's worn college rugby sweater chafes my back in an area I cannot reach.

I rub my back against the worn wood. The itch is slow to disappear. Settling into my spot, head resting back, I dig my feet into the landing and the first step of the porch. Cold air gathers deep in the clothing, tightening my muscles and electrifying the nerves that are running in splinters. The night is dark and fog, slow in its viscosity, is rolling over the hills. The fog makes it a struggle to see past the stone path my father created that leads to the shed and gravel drive way.

On the wind's breath, I hear the gravel voice of my father, with a determined note, pronounce the master plan of his second porch to a six year old. It was one of the days when he was home from the office with just me. The wind was cool

and light with the slight taste of early spring sweetness, and we were having a tea party.

“The contractor put it on the worst foundation. Everyone knows the good foundation starts up there. Give this two more years and come rain season you’ll see, Miriam. This thing will sink right into the ground, just like the stock market. You’ll see, Miriam. I’m going to fix up this porch, and we’ll make it better than the one we’re on now. What we need is a better foundation, bedrock, concrete, stronger materials to face these east-coast storms. Move it forward a bit perhaps, then come rain season it’ll stay just right...much better for our tea parties if I do say so myself.”

The whole house was built on bad foundation, but we used the right materials and made it sturdy. As we drank tea, he yammered to me about the foundation, and I filled his cup with invisible earl gray from a plastic made-in-china tea pot that, if it had been real, could never have held enough tea for even one person. All the while he talked, I listened with glued-on rapture, as I had seen my mother do, nodding and saying, “You’re so right daddy,” including a few mhm’s and, “Do you want more cookies for your tea?”

He was a giant to me then, sitting straight and proud in a black suit, matching tie and shined shoes. For all of his grand appearance, he had kind blue eyes beneath a smooth forehead. His eyes smoldered when he laughed, like embers in a fire. My father had a crooked smile that on most would look cruel. On him it was dashing and clever. When he laughed, which he did quite often, it sounded like a parade of fireworks. His chin was chiseled in ancient Roman perfection, though one could see the remnants of where it had taken a beating once or twice.

He was correct about the porch. After choosing better materials and having stronger foundation laid down, and after broadening it out a few feet forward, his homemade porch still stands, not sinking a millimeter since it was erected, unlike the house which has started sloping backward each year.

The porch creaks and groans as I shift my weight against the weathered wood of the staircase. Pine and old paint mill around me, mingling and melding with the

smell of peppermint that still lingers in this old rugby sweatshirt. This porch was my sanctuary. It's where I came to play as a child. It would lose its painted wood flooring and be transformed to the inside of a cave. The stone path would become its forgotten pathway. Its steep steps changed to the bank of a tranquil river or an abrupt and dangerous cliff. Sometimes, they would become the stone steps of a castle and the boy across the street, Eli Wood, would always be the prince who came to rescue me from whatever evil witches and monsters had kidnapped me. The swing my father built accompanying the porch became our flying carpet when we wished to travel the skies while the hammock that sits across it evaporated into the curve of the moon. From there, Eli and I would peer out in silence at the display of dancing stars and planets as we rested our weary forms after long adventures into imagined places.

As those days passed, the porch became my solitary spot where I came to read on the swinging bench or in the hammock. It's where I had my first kiss with Thomas Pritchett under a mirror image of tonight's full moon, where I smoked my first cigarette with Emmeline on the night she left us to get her abortion, and where I had my first taste of rum and coke after graduation with a few girls, all of whom have left this small town by now.

Compared to the times when we had parties and family gatherings, the porch looks larger than it used to. I remember a time when almost forty or more people would be smashed together laughing and drunk. Everyone would be spilling over the railing and fighting on the edges of steps to lean closer to conversations. The railing seems taller now, no longer sheltering but barricading. I notice more chips in the paint, some from play, some from constant comings and goings, but most from the neglect and forgetfulness of not repainting after cruel winters. The porch light that hangs above the screened-in door shines dim above me, flickering in its brightness as it is defibrillated by the shock of the nights wind. The porch door hangs open a sliver, having failed to latch when I made my silent exit. Sounds of turmoil and loss growl from the house, and I hurl myself forward and turn to retreat from its noise.

My mother's howls echo deep inside, squirming through the crack of the door and the squares of the screen. As a child I never heard her cry. Being twenty-three now, I wonder if she has she been so clever in hiding it from us that we had been unable to hear the stifled whimpers above our bickering and play. I can hear each staggered gasp for air before a renewed howl is let loose.

Looking back to the moon, I watch clouds, heavy with snow, march across her face. The clouds dim her crater smile and mist her cookie cut out eyes that shine over me. I raise the bottle of whisky I have brought out with me in a toast, and a moving fire washes my tongue and slithers through my teeth before plunging down my throat, taking with it the beginnings of a sob. I watch as rolling waves of the sky dominate the moon and carry her away. I had come out here to ask the heavens for an answer on how to sooth our sorrows. I came to scream at whoever is behind those clouds why now? Why at this time did he have to go? As the last cloud covers the sky's Celestial Highness, and my mouth still burns from the whisky, I realize there is no answer that she, or he, or anyone could give.

Inside I hear my niece, Olivia, run past the door to retake her seat at the kitchen table and pretend she has not been at the door of her mother's room listening to my sister, Suzon, and her fiancé's latest fight.

The shout of a curse is muffled by Olivia's footsteps and the sound of Suzon's door slamming limps behind them. Suzon's footsteps stomp to the kitchen where she proceeds to yell at Olivia to clean up her things and get ready for bed. I hear the beginnings of Olivia's new favorite question chirp through the door. "But where's Aunt Emmeline?" the demanding question breaks through the porch door as Olivia stomps her way across the tired floorboards toward her room. Whether she asks because she wishes to say goodnight or because she knows the mention of our eldest sister vexes her mother, I am unsure. I take another drink.

"Out! Now! It's too late for games missy! Bed, now. Now!" The last "now" is followed with a clap, and I cringe. Iron invades my mouth, and I realize I have been biting my lip. My tongue washes over the cracks and dents of my lower lip, coating the wounds in a whisky sealer. The last bottle of Father's home-made whisky slips

from my grasp and settles between my feet. I rake my hands across my face, and the inside of my palms feel liked dried sandpaper in the cool night. Closing my eyes, I rub and gouge at the corners of my eyes before I pull my hands back, tangling my fingers in my hair and clamp my palms over my ears. As I do so, I catch the faint smell of crayon wax and scented markers still on my hands from playing with Olivia and the mixture of cheap cologne and cigars that lingered about the curator of the crematorium earlier today.

The world becomes muffled, filtered through broken chapped skin, muscle and bone. Father and Mother never fought in front of us three girls, though we all remember them having heated, but silent, debates over steak and peas and various other entrées. I believe that Mother and Father wished never to let us know there were problems. Times were hard, and they needed to maintain the appearance of a united front. Though I remember when Mother left for weeks at a time to go visit Grammy in California under the pretense that Grammy needed help with something or other, and those months when Father slept on the couch when I was eight.

I had nightmares for quite some time, and I would go out to climb up with Father on the couch, and he would tell me stories, or we would talk about school or anything else. Sometimes we never talked; we would watch cartoons late at night and chuckle every time Bugs Bunny outwitted his enemies. My mind wanders back to nights like these. He and I would sit on the porch or in the hammock. He would be wearing this same sweatshirt I am now, looking tired and not as big, and I would be next to him with his arms around me protecting me from the night time chill.

Another one of my nightmares had woken me, and he was up going over bills and various other papers.

“Looks like it’s time for a break,” he had said with his lips splitting to a lop-sided grin before gathering me in his arms and carrying me out to the porch. No words were said between us; there was only the moon above. The cool spring night lingered with the scent of cherry blossoms, overgrown tulips and clover.

Mr. Kunkle, the town's resident night owl, had lost his wife only a few months before and had started playing her favorite song, Henri Mancini's 'Moon River' on a ritual basis in the wee hours of the morning. As it drifted down the street, filling each lawn, park and side alley, I heard my father hum the tune and sing along. His embrace strengthened as I crumpled into his shoulder, burrowing my face into the warm cotton of his rugby sweatshirt, letting it sooth and tickle my face before I fell asleep to the smell of pine and peppermint.

A cold wind bristles past, pressing the worn rugby sweater tighter to me; the thick cotton grows warm as it comes into contact with my skin, now heated inside out from the whisky. Relinquishing my hands and letting them fall to the porch, I listen, absent minded, to Suzon and Jacob's fight that gnarls on the borders of the porch.

"I can't handle this right now, Jacob, not after today."

"You can't handle this?" The retort is coarse and abrupt. "You mean you can't handle me. Goddamnit, Suzon, at some point you're going have to. Why am I even here? It's not like you need me, am I just your babysitter for Olivia?"

"No! It's—it's not like that. It's just...it's an inconvenient time."

"Yeah, when's a right time, Suzon? When would it be right for you to tell people we're getting married? In a month? A year?"

"It's complicated, Jacob," Suzon's words are relinquished in a sigh. "He just died! It would be," there seemed to be a struggle with her words before I heard the one she didn't want to, "inappropriate." A silence settled between the two. "I just can't, not right now. It would—be awkward, confusing, and they need time. When I lost Calvin, the doctors said mourning was important."

"They need time." A pregnant silence fills the void once more, and I have to cover my mouth with my hand so as not to break that silence. "Well I thought it was our time, but I guess that's over. Don't expect me at the funeral tomorrow."

The sound of disappointed footsteps echo past the door, followed by another's in short succession and both end with the sound of a bedroom door thumping against a heavy wooden panel.

I remove my hand that is covering my mouth and release the breath I was unaware of holding, ending it in soft groan. As I settle into the growing silence, I drown in the sounds of nature, the scratch of the trees and the pleasant cooing of owls. Far off, the faint cry of violins, a trailing lilt of strumming mandolins and the hum of a faithful chorus, meanders down the street. I close my eyes and melt into sounds. The corners of my lips twitch as I swallow a laugh, and the town washes itself in its nighttime ritual. The bitter scent of dying mist overpowers my senses, and the sound of a lone car on the road rattles my ears. Wet kisses decorate my face and, in an instant, I open my eyes. I can no longer see farther than the fourth step of the stone walkway. Heavy fog creeps and claws its way closer. Only the flickering porch light keeps it at bay.

The moon has been washed away by the grey expanse of sky, which has opened up and is raining down flecks of snow. Each flake dances and twirls until it comes to rest on the three-day frozen ground. Inside, the house has grown quiet. The growling and whimpering unrest of the day has halted for the night. I crash sideways onto the porch's left pillar, allowing myself to be held up by something. With the silence inside and the melody of whispering voices floating on the fog, a weak stream of tears trickles down my face. Stinging salt mingles on my lips with the slight taste of iron from the bite marks, a minor wound that will heal by tomorrow. I lose myself in the music and the night, the familiar click of the screen door pops and breaks my ease. In haste, my shivering hands rush to clear the tracks of my tears.

Whoever it is, she doesn't move from beyond the doorway, though I know she hasn't left because the short shallow breathing mills around me. I assume she is in awe of the curtain of snow that is filtering about layering before us. With the evidence gone, I reach back with one hand, and it is filled, after a short pause of insecurity, by a smaller hand. Our fingers fumble between each other's before locking into a comfortable grip. A sob is caught in my throat, and the tears flow without hesitation. My left hand fumbles for the forgotten whisky bottle between my feet. Raising it to my lips, I swallow another sob down my throat. I glide Olivia

forward and bind her to my body. Together we nestle on the porch steps, watching the snow in silence. My right arm, through instinct, pulls her tight, and I do my best to keep her warm while, around us, the world is covered the down comforter of winter. There are no words between us, and in a few seconds I find myself, like my father, singing along to Mr. Kunkle's sorrow as Olivia turns into my shoulder and prepares for sleep.

Sound Off

Susan Sullivan

The roar of traffic from the highway
is not the ocean waves
You are not swept away
The train pounding down the track
is not a downpour
You are dry
The acceleration of a pulse
is a hitch in your breath
and you are a head-on collision



Never the Same Digital Art

Laura Vargo

Little Lazy Life

Tabatha Weaver

Is there anything better than the wafting
fragrance of freshly murdered grass?

So simple—
it could be elegant.

It hits you with the alluring subtlety
of a bare collar bone.

Each reacts in its own way,
who's to say which memory is better?

The one of a baseball game
the last inning—
a lucky fly ball—
celebrations of ice cream floats.

Or the one of a summer day
sipping sun-brewed iced tea—
relaxing after chores—
an empty mind and sky.

Or the current one
birds crowing, fountains crying, idle chatter—
spotty shade from a leafy brush with a long trunk—
math and science and literature books scattered on my bench
unimportant.

Just another picture for the college brochure.

Diablo

Garrett Stambaugh

It started out like any ordinary day. Chuck got up, brushed his teeth, combed what long strands of hair he had left over the pasty bald spot on his head, put on his favorite blue button-down shirt and pleated slacks, put his genuine leather wallet in his back pocket and his gold Rolex on his wrist, grabbed the suit jacket that matched his pants and headed out the door of his Albany apartment without so much as a goodbye to his wife or pat on the head of his dog. He didn't even buy cookies from the innocent little Girl Scout who was at his front door when he rushed out.

Chuck was a car salesman, and a good one at that. Chuck lacked only the one thing everyone would think he should have— a nice car. He still drove an old Pinto—the kind without the extra metal plate on the gas tank to keep it from exploding. He thought it only reduced the gas mileage by adding needless weight; besides, how often do people back into phone poles, or garbage cans, or get rear-ended on the way to work? But as I was saying, Chuck lacked a nice car in the same way a cobbler's children lack shoes: His sales record was perfect. He had once managed to sell a brand new SUV with power-everything to the head of the Environmental Awareness Association. A coworker had bet him a month's salary that it couldn't be done, and Chuck wasted no time cashing in on his win, even after his coworker mentioned that he would not be able to buy his wife an anniversary gift without the money.

Despite its humble beginnings, this day would not end like most ordinary days for Chuck. When he arrived at the car dealership, someone had taken his reserved

parking space. He decided to park-in whoever it was, just to teach him a lesson. Unfortunately for Chuck, the years of poor vehicle maintenance had caught up with his sorry excuse for transportation. As he got out, he slammed the door of his car shut and the shock caused the gas tank to explode, killing him instantly.

It took Chuck a few moments to piece together what had just happened to him before he brushed his disheveled comb-over back into place atop his head. He looked around and took in the sights. He was standing atop a cliff, looking down at a valley filled with rivers of molten lava, which all fed into one massive lake of fire at the center. Pillars of flame burst randomly out of the scattered stones strewn across the blackened ground. The smell of brimstone filled his nostrils. The only thought that entered his head at the unnatural spectacle was, "I don't remember driving to Jersey."

"Welcome to Hell," a voice boomed from all around the late car salesman. "I've been expecting you for quite some time." Black smoke swirled through the air and came together in front of Chuck. Out of the gas appeared a towering man with a flowing black cape, sharp red horns protruding from his forehead, and a bright red pitchfork with the words "Old Jabby" engraved into the handle. "I am The Devil, lord and master of this place where you will be spending all of eternity!"

"Something ironic about me getting killed by my car, isn't there?" Chuck asked, seeming unmoved by the dramatic entrance.

"Honestly, I thought your love of pork rinds and Budweiser would have brought you here years ago, but yes, I had a good chuckle at your expense," The Devil said. "So, what sort of torture should we begin with?"

For The Devil, this day had begun much like any other day in Hell. He had gotten out of bed, filed the edges of his horns to make them as pointy as possible, polished his pitchfork, had an omelet seasoned with just a pinch of sulfur and unimaginable anguish, took a quick dip in the molten springs at the back of his mansion, and then began his workday of devising with clever, ironic, and often rhyming ways of tormenting souls for eternity. What The Devil was not expecting, was that the unusualness of the day on Earth followed Chuck down into the bowels of the underworld—a fact The Devil realized when, instead of getting a plea for

mercy or a clever suggestion for a bearable punishment, Chuck responded by asking what kind of car The Devil drove.

"You do realize you're in Hell, right?" The Devil asked.

"Don't you think I should get to know the guy who's going to be torturing me forever?" Chuck said with a shrug.

"I can be any place at any time I want. I mean, I just appeared here in a puff of smoke. Why would I need a car?" The Devil asked, clearly impatient. "Now if you don't have any suggestions, I've tortured plenty of other salesmen over the years, and I have more than enough ideas already. Since I've got a twelve o' clock with Judas I'll just..."

"No, I'm just wondering," Chuck interrupted, "because a car says a lot about someone, you know."

"I'm really not interested," said The Devil, struggling to interrupt.

"Just look around," Chuck continued. "How many people do you see driving cars down here? Nobody, right? Don't you think having a car of your own would really impress?"

"I was under the impression that being The Devil, lord of underworld, got the impressiveness across."

"Oh sure, that appearing in a ball of smoke thing might be impressive the first time you see it, but I bet it gets old pretty fast. Besides, I'll bet all the other demons around here can do that too."

"Well, some of them, but..."

"I mean, you've probably got a huge house, filled with all kinds of shiny golden idols. You have that sweet poker. The black cape looks pretty nice. But what does any of that say? 'Oh I'm The Devil, look at my pointy stick and horns.' What you really need is some transportation that strikes fear into the hearts of everyone you pass, that makes all the demons wish they could be as great as you, that makes you feel great about yourself!"

"And just what car did you have in mind?" The Devil asked, crossing his arms and resting Old Jabby over his shoulder.

"Half of the enjoyment is in the search, and we're not getting anywhere just

standing around here, now are we?"

The Devil frowned and clicked the bottom of his pitchfork against the ground and a black cloud of smoke engulfed the two. As the smoke cleared, a used car dealership appeared; it was familiar to Chuck—the competing dealership only a few miles down the road from where he used to work. The Devil looked through the window of a car to see the interior and said, "You have one hour."

As is the case with most car dealerships, except the one where Chuck's car had exploded earlier in the day, things were moving along as ordinarily as possible. Everyone had shown up for work, tried to make a sale or two, done some meaningless paperwork, and consumed entirely too much coffee. Despite the urge to break the monotony, not one person thought to investigate the two strange people who had appeared in the lot.

"I like this one," The Devil said, tapping the side of a bright yellow Hummer with his pitchfork. "It's the color of sulfur, would look nice in Hell."

"Well it is beastly and loud. It's got plenty of intimidation power, sure, but is that all you want? I don't remember seeing a gas station down in Hell and I'd hate to think about the price of importing," Chuck said.

Chuck smirked and walked over to an old pickup, and The Devil filled the air with a terrifying laugh.

"Hey now, don't write this thing off just yet," Chuck said. "It might not seem impressive at first, but if you're looking for functionality, just look at the nice bed on it. You could lug around a half ton of whimpering souls with that thing, and, honestly, what could be more frightening than a truck full of suffering. Besides, a rusty old truck like that screams 'Hillbilly' and I'm sure they have Deliverance in Hell."

"Only on VHS," was The Devil's response.

"So what do you think, hm?"

"Tempting as that may be, what about this one?" The Devil asked, approaching a seemingly out of place vehicle.

I say the car was out of place because it was nice—very nice. It was nearly new. Its sleek aerodynamic design, tinted windows, and candy-apple red paint job all

pointed to one thing: speed. There was no price tag on the car, which was probably because no one would ever ask about it if they knew what it would cost them, even used.

“That,” Chuck began, “is the Diablo GT. If you’re looking to impress, this would be the one. I’d bet it goes zero to sixty faster than you can do that fancy smoke trick. It may not be the most frightening thing on the road, but how can you resist a car named after you?”

“I want this one,” The Devil said.

“Hold on now, you haven’t even sat in it yet. You’ve got to test drive the thing before you make up your mind. Why don’t you go ahead and pop yourself in there and start it up.”

A puff of smoke appeared and The Devil was inside the car. He tapped on the ignition and it started. The Devil rolled down the window.

“Listen to this baby purr,” Chuck said. “Go ahead, press on the pedal a few times. Let it rev. Yeah, I thought you’d like it. Now why don’t you take it for a quick spin. If you like it, I’ll get you a sweet deal—all of us dealers have an in, you know. Tell you what,” Chuck went on, blocking The Devil’s chance to respond, “you go ahead and take it for a spin and I’ll go see if I can talk them down for you. Go on, you said I only get an hour.”

The Diablo shot off across the lot and out onto the highway. Two men ran out from the dealership shouting about the car disappearing. One ran back inside to call for the police while the other walked over to Chuck.

“What the Hell? You know that guy?” the man asked.

“Me? No. Never seen the guy before. Hey, listen. I’ve had my eye on this Tempo in the corner of the lot.”

“The one without a muffler?” the man asked, dumbfounded. “I mean, uh, yes sir. A fine piece of work, too. Engine still runs just fine. Yep, it’s all fine. Fine.”

Chuck went inside with the man and quickly filled out some paperwork. He walked out to his new car and drove away. It didn’t take him very long to get home. He went to his bedroom without a hello to his wife or a scratch behind the ear for his dog and dropped his jacket on the bed. He unbuttoned his pants to loosen them

and went back out to sit on the sofa. His wife entered the room with tears in her eyes and dog in tow.

"Chuck, they said you were dead!" she shouted.

Now this would have been like any other ordinary reunion from beyond the grave you may have heard about from someone else, if not for The Devil appearing in a burst of fire at that moment. He twirled his pitchfork above his head and then pointed the tip at Chuck.

"That was a bit flashier than last time," Chuck said, "but it would have been better if you had driven through the wall in your new car."

"You've had your fun, now it's time to come back to Hell," The Devil said.

"But, how could you take me away now, from my own home, right in front of my family?"

"All right, let's ask your loved ones," The Devil said. "What do you two think? Should I give our good friend Chuck here a second chance?" he asked the stunned woman and dog.

"Chuck came all the way back from Hell just to come home to us?" the Chuck's wife asked.

"Of course he did," The Devil replied. "All he did the whole time he was down in Hell was talk about how much he missed you and how much he wanted to go home."

"Really?" Chuck's wife said as she wiped a tear from her eye.

"No," Satan said, drawing out the "o" as long as possible. "Actually, he sold me a car."

"So you did buy it then," Chuck said, rising to his feet. "Still a perfect record."

"Take him," his wife said dully. The dog barked in agreement.

"But stop and think for just a moment before you take me back to Hell," Chuck pleaded. "If I can sell you a car, I can convince anyone of anything! Look at all the idiots making ludicrous payments to the dealership on cars they don't need! That I sold them!"

"And this train of thought is leading to why you don't deserve to be in Hell when?"

“I’m just saying, maybe I’d be a lot more useful to you up here. It’s not like you don’t have plenty of other people to keep you entertained already, right?”

The Devil paused. “You are good. Well, you and everyone else who’s tried that one on me. I’ll tell you what, since you’re such a great guy, I’ll only torment you for an eon or two, then I’ll smack some horns on your head so you can be an official demon, and you can come back as a six-year-old girl and sell Girl Scout cookies as one of my minions.”

“The Girl Scouts are your minions?” Chuck’s wife asked, looking up from the box of Thin Mints she had purchased after Chuck left for work.

“Most are just little girls” The Devil only half-answered, “but I am the one who convinced them to sell Thin Mints for eight dollars a package. Anyway, Chuck, how about a ride in my new car?”

And so Chuck rode back to Hell with The Devil behind the wheel. His eternal torment was quite ordinary, overall. Hell would never be the same though. The Devil made his prisoners build a special highway just so he could ride around in his new car. It actually livened the place up a great deal. But that’s not really the point I’m trying to make here. The real point is, if a day starts out seeming completely ordinary, you should probably buy those tasty Girl Scout cookies from me when I show up at your front door. Either that or try not to slam your car door any time soon.



Mantis Photograph

Courtneye Crans

Nature and Agriculture in Purgatory, Kansas

Marie Hathaway

There are no naturally occurring lakes in Kansas.
A fiction, true or not, I tell myself as I look down now
from the heavens
from Google Earth
at Emporia.

I am in our garden.
My father blocks it out in old railroad ties.
Tills and measures and reclaims.
Regiments it into designated sections
for broccoli,
peppers,
yarrow.
My mother holds my hand
and leads me down the narrow paths
teaching me the names.

The sunflowers in the back of the garden
grow in a rowed jungle
taller than anything I can imagine.
I explore them alone,
walking under and between them.

Each broad leaf is a canopy.
But their shade is hot.
My eyelids droop.

Eager buyers coax us
out of our big gray house on West Street
earlier than we can head for the east,
we settle next door in a squat tan house that used to belong
to one of my parents' students.

A year or two before, I sit on his front porch,
and, with an old dead analog wall clock
balanced on his knees,
he tries to teach me how to tell time.

From his overgrown back yard,
where I press berries until they ooze and give up
the seed from their middles,
and my mother smears cigarette ash into the painted concrete patio,
my father stands on his tip-toes and peeks over the fence
and everyday watches his mathematical patch of land
spin and spew
and spray itself
into a dizzying wild of weeds.

The First Time

Crystal Stumbaugh

you shed your skin
I found it days
later under balled
up socks and dirty t-shirts

you were the same
(more or less) freckles
on your nose long-
fingered musician's hands

the next time
you shed your skin
a piece caught
on the bottom of your heel

when I peeled it off
you grabbed my wrist
curled your mouth into a snarl
and told me you'd
put me through the wall
if I tried that again

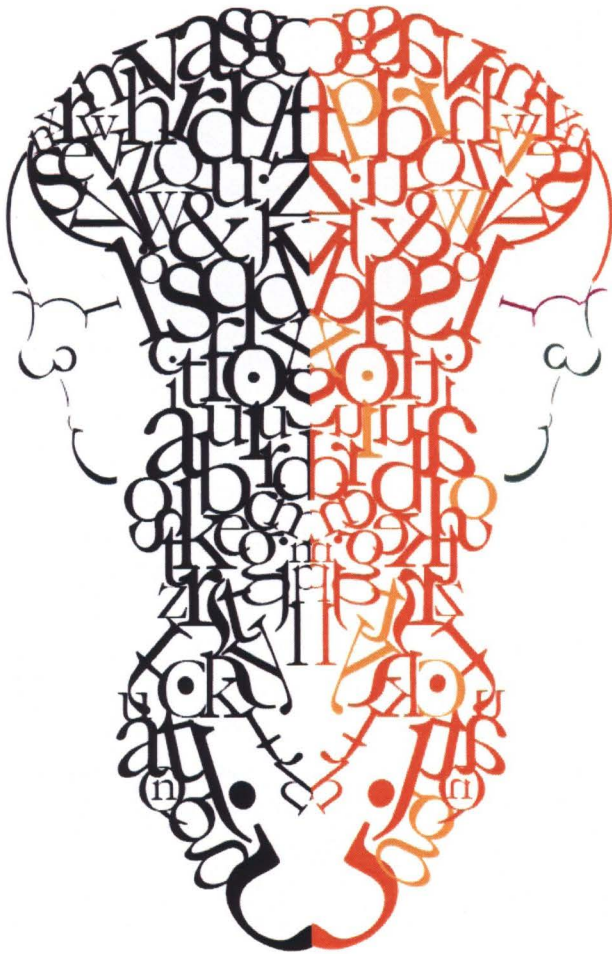
the last time
you shed your skin
you were on top of me
your green eyes clouded
freckled skin pale and loose
you rubbed your mouth
on mine to work the skin
on your lips free
the skin covering your nose cheeks ears
began to slip
away you moved against me to wrench
out of the old skin you grinded
your hips into mine and slithered
your knees and ankles
out of that skin

this new skin is not at all like the one I found under the socks and t-shirts

Desert

Susan Sullivan

You are wearing that t-shirt
I asked you to dress
Up Please
The waitress asks
would I like the super salad with that
 Super salad?
The soup or salad
And you laugh across the table
Sorry I'm talking too fast
 No it's just me
I say spinning my finger beside my temple



Self Digital Art

Kathryn Boeree

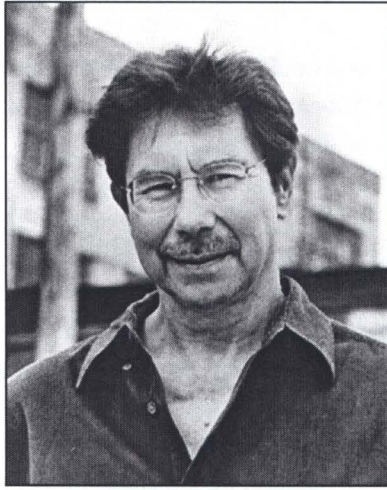
Simultaneity: A Conversation with Stuart Dybek

Whitney "Nighthawk" Fenton

It was September, 2008, and I was slated to interview a famous author for *The Reflector*. Unfortunately, despite being an English major and a junior, I didn't feel any of the fierce passions my classmates sometimes demonstrate for certain authors. One ends every email he sends with a Vonnegut quote. Another dreams of taking a train to Colorado just to sit on the lawn of the college Kerouac founded. And another I've been tempted to put on suicide watch when she begins to sound too much like Anne Sexton after an all night poetry binge. Even if I could choose a favorite, who would be likely to come and give a reading at Shippensburg University, which is usually how the initial contact for the interview is made?

The interview didn't have to be finished until May, so I put it in the back of my mind and focused on another tradition, one that has just recently started: attending the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' national conference. Once again, *The Reflector* was invited to speak on a panel for undergraduate student editors. This year, the conference was going to be in Chicago. We needed to make travel arrangements and plan our part of the panel.

During one of our many brainstorming sessions, I was looking through the conference's website. I decided to check whether I knew any of the authors presenting. I scanned the page and, third row down, third picture in, saw "Stuart Dybek." I must've yelled or clapped or just yammered, but I was soon explaining my excitement to the other editors. If I had to list my favorite authors of all time, Stuart Dybek would be on that list. I'd read his book, *The Coast of Chicago* my freshman year in an advanced creative writing class that I wasn't even supposed to be in. He'd published three works of fiction and two books of poetry. He



intertwined settings and emotions in a way I still don't think I'll ever master.

"We can interview him!" The idea was out of my mouth the second I thought it. I had no clue how these things were done outside of a university setting or even if it was possible for an undergraduate editor to arrange this kind of meeting, but I didn't care.

I told my idea to our advisor, Catherine Dent, and she agreed that it would be a great addition to the journal. She confessed later, however that she never thought it would actually happen.

Whitney Fenton: My first question is a must because *The Reflector* is an undergraduate journal. What is your best advice for young writers?

Stuart Dybek: Well, the first advice I can give is: read. Everybody will tell you that. The second is that you're about to begin practicing the most deceptive of all arts. With other arts you take for granted that, in order to practice, you have to learn the tools. With writing, the medium is the only one that doesn't come through the senses. If you're not in the room with the smelly leotards, you can

forget that you need to practice. All art is about the craft. Just because you can write a laundry list, doesn't mean you can craft a story. In all the other [arts] you expect it to be that way, so you apply yourself.

Months later, I had found myself sitting in the Hilton Chicago's International Ballroom: North, waiting for a panel entitled, "The City—Real and Imagined," to begin. The room was vastly oversized but filled quickly. People seemed to be there for the same reason I was: Stuart Dybek would be on this panel, discussing his way of writing about a city. It was more than fitting that he was sitting on this panel at this conference because Stuart Dybek was born on the Southwest Side of Chicago.

WF: You didn't start out as defining yourself as a "Chicago Writer." How did you define yourself or how would you define yourself now?

Dybek: The Chicago Tradition, which I loved, is militantly realist, and my personal break through story happened listening to music. I wrote a story I never intended to write. I wasn't writing in the realist tradition. But how would I define myself? Magical realism was not around then. I would've used it. I guess I would have said surrealist or fabulist, like Kafka or Borges.

WF: Also in today's panel, you spoke of standing on a multilayered street. How is this reflected in your writing and what does it add to your writing?

Dybek: There was a French philosopher, Bergson, who was very influential in the early 20th century. He influenced writers. Joyce and Faulkner are two. He said that, "We appear to live in chronological time." But really, people are

multilayered creatures. It's that simultaneity. A city is objective, you have to think of it figuratively. That's what I meant.

I had re-read *The Coast of Chicago* on the train ride to the city and had brought it with me to the panel. I planned on asking Dybek to sign it afterward. As for the actual interview, I was going to approach him after the reading he was scheduled to give on Saturday, the last day of the conference. But, as I sat there listening to the panel, jotting down quotes and advice, I started to doubt if I'd be able to even ask for his signature let alone a minute of his time. It wasn't as if I didn't have anything to be nervous about. As I said before, Stuart Dybek has written three collections of fiction: *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), *The Coast of Chicago* (1990) and *I Sailed with Magellan* (2003). And he's also published two books of poetry: *Brass Knuckles* (1979) and *Streets in Their Own Ink* (2004). On top of that, he's also won several awards including a MacArthur Fellowship, nicknamed the "Genius Award." All of these facts swam in my head as I sat listening to the panel.

On my lap was a notebook in which I'd written hypothetical interview questions and interesting things I was hearing from the panel. Our prose editor, Paige Bonitz, sat beside me on another of the sea foam and gold buffet chairs that filled the room. I passed her the notebook and she added new quotes and suggestions to it, along with several teasing remarks. I rolled my eyes at her newest entry. Over the past few months and especially the last day and half, *The Reflector* staff had begun to view my interest in Stuart Dybek as a great thing to poke fun at. I had brought it on myself three weeks earlier, when I suggested that we use Dybek's fragment titles on the backs of our tee-shirts for *The Reflector*. It led the staff to adopt the title of my favorite story in *The Coast of Chicago* as my nickname for the rest of the year.

WF: In your panel today, you spoke of Chicago being an image. When writing, do you feel you're giving that image a body, mind, attitude or even a soul? And by

giving it that form, how does that impact your writing?

Dybek: Well, because most writing classes are in the English department, a lot of what learning what is valuable is literature interpretation, and in those classes, energy goes into interpreting images, but in writing, all the energy goes into making image. Once or if you succeed in making images, all the other stuff of interpretation just happens. You have to have utter and complete trust in that.

When the panel had ended, I had lined up behind Paige to ask Dybek to sign my *Coast of Chicago* book. The wait to the front of the line took forever and yet moved too quickly; before I had in my head what I was going to say, I was standing at the front, asking him to sign my copy of his book. I have never been described as a shy person or a quiet person. I have something to say about almost everything and I'll say it to anyone who will make eye-contact. That day, I had to repeat my own name three times because my voice was so quiet, and I forgot the name of *The Reflector*--the literary journal I'd worked on since freshman year--for a good two seconds. I spoke to his signature on my book until I finally formed the right question.

"I know you're busy, but we were wondering if you'd be able to give us an interview sometime this week." I used the pronoun "we" for protection, to hint at some ambiguous group of people who would back up my story if he challenged it. I felt like a fraud. Like the greenest writer at the conference who had no right to be speaking to a published author.

WF: What is your approach to writing? For example, do you try to write every day?

Dybek: When I can, I've tried to as much as possible to earn a living that allows me to still write. I think that's true with everyone. You become your own patron.

WF: How much of your writing is creative nonfiction and how much is just fiction?

Dybek: I couldn't tell you the proportion. There are stories I've written that are almost verbatim. One piece, "Blueboy," in *I Sailed with Magellan*, I thought a long time of publishing it as memoir because it's so close to what actually happened.

My feet were already turned toward the door when he asked how long the interview would take and if I had time that afternoon. I turned back my lower half and explained that I was free until the keynote speech that evening and that it wouldn't take more than half an hour of his time.

He told me his room number there in the Hilton and to come by at five o'clock. I scribbled the number on the back of my hand, completely ignoring the notebook I'd brought with me. I think that if I could've skipped out of that ballroom humming Chopin's *Grande Valse Brillante* without looking like a complete idiot I would have.

WF: I read in an interview that you play the saxophone but moved away from music to writing. Why the move and why writing?

Dybek: I couldn't play. I didn't have the technical facility to play what I heard in my head. I became very frustrated. It seemed to me that a knack I wish I had with music, I had with writing. It's like the old adage, "You can't teach someone to run fast, only faster."

WF: Is music a conscious influence on your writing? And, if so, is there a specific genre you're more attracted to?

Dybek: I listen and think about music the way heterosexual people think of the opposite sex. They did a study of how often women think of sex and men and vice versa. That's how much I think about music. When I write, it's like the music is an inner soundtrack for a movie and then I write the movie. Music is a drug, for me.

Later that night, I asked a bellhop for the floor of the room number Dybek had given me. I rode up the elevator with my stomach in my throat. He's a professor. He works with students. I don't have to be perfect, just professional. I looped the makeshift pep-talk in my head while walking around the halls looking for the number on my hand. When I found it, the room had double doors and even though he had said to ring the bell, I knocked. I waited and after a few minutes he came to the door.

"I almost didn't hear you," he smiled and led me into the sitting room.

WF: How do you feel about looking back on your writing? Some authors enjoy it, and others say they can't stand it because all they see are mistakes.

Dybek: I was in martial arts, and in Tai Chi, it's all about the flow. I had a Tai Chi teacher who told me, "Be gentle with yourself." There's a time to be critical, that's when you're writing the piece or rewriting. So, I really don't look back. I give readings and find things then.

Saturday afternoon, Stuart Dybek gave a reading in the Grand Ballroom. A question and answer was scheduled for after the reading, so Dybek could only read a few pieces. He read them like he was having a conversation. It felt as if he was sitting down with everyone in the ballroom and simply telling them something that had happened to a friend of his. His tone was the same it had been Wednesday evening during the interview. Before he sat for the question and answer segment, he read one more piece from *The Coast of Chicago*: “Her kiss crosses the city along a bridge arched like the bluest note of a saxophone, an unfinished bridge extending out over a sea of sweet water.” It was the end of a fragment entitled, “Transport,” in my favorite story, “Nighthawks.”

Substitution Geography

Marie Hathaway

Omaha, Omaha,
Where you been?—*Tapes and Tapes*

I see those Mid West babies
with their noses to the water-logged ground
prone like curled up dead bees
groveling pressing
as the soak seeps up cooling
their lips
their scalps
their shoulder blades

1.
and I'm driving west last summer
with my brother
eighteen hours

we keep seeing aluminum pools in the fields
they chase the car
but we keep
heading west toward South Dakota
we push to a hundred and twenty miles per hour
when we can

in Missouri we talk about
how close we are to our old home
just over the border and a little bit more
but really we can't stop

2.

and I'm driving south this summer with both of my brothers
on a day that stays sunny but breaks out in sweats of rain
we talk about how one of us is thinking of moving to New Orleans
how he's crazy

we talk about how we should buy the old mill
that dad lived in
when he was still young
like we are still young

3.

and I picture us in Virginia
on our knees
on old hardwood floor
dust sticks in my mouth and tastes like cinnamon
it cakes up my nostrils
I imagine it makes a bit of mud in our lungs

our three backs are pressed
to the cool grind stone
loving and loving
the heavy emptiness there

4.

and I think about Iowa
the muddy sea beneath them
how they hold on to the weeds
let their bodies float
if that's what has to happen

how they kiss the flood

5.

and I think about how to cleave
means both to cut
and to cling to

6.

and we sing like a prayer



Along the Wayside Watercolor on Paper, 30" x 22"

Pamela Speaker

Electrical Impulses

Tabatha Weaver

I look at my phone
two seconds before you text
that's a connection



Lighthouse Clay Sculpture, 2'4"

Jeff Kuratnick

Happy Days

John Friscia

August 7, 2008

Mr. Throckmorton Creed
3131 South Arm Street
Carlisle, PA 17013

Dear Father,

I am happy to report the state of my affairs is vastly improved over the previous case of my writing to you. I write to you no longer out of need for money or a belated desire for paternal attention but to express the joy of my current condition and the hope that you will swell with pride in knowing your parenting has resulted in a highly capable young adult.

My days as a cashier at the local grocery store are no more. Your money spent toward my college education was not squandered! Granted, my English degree has thus far served primarily to cover the crack in the living room wall where I think those cockroaches keep coming from, but without my education I hardly think I would be in my current position. I am now assistant manager of dairy and frozen foods at the local grocery store, and as an assistant, the only place to go is up! I oversee a vast empire of cheeses, yogurt, waffles, frozen pizzas and other

assorted treats that are pivotal to a pleasurable existence in our luxury-driven society. I am certain the town is overwhelmed with gratitude for my service. My co-pilot and manager in this journey, a Mr. Wally Low, is a resoundingly powerful figure who will surely go far in the business world, but I shall not be surprised if one day he finds himself as *my* humble assistant!

Yes, Father, do not expect assistant management to be the end for me! There are new doors opening all the time, and, should the wage I receive now not be up to my liking, there are numerous other avenues I may pursue. Since alligators have made a recent resurgence in sewers, sewer workers have been losing limbs or faces in increasing numbers. Positions in sewer work now pay very well as a result. Maddog's Daytime Prison and Night Club is also hiring; they are in need of new prisoners for cage dancing. I may not be a prisoner, but I believe my dance repertoire and menacing demeanor would suffice. Then there is an establishment called the Crack Den. It may look like a condemned home in the most dangerous part of town, but I hear upstanding individuals make thousands of dollars there in a day! I should investigate it more closely.

But perhaps all this business of work is too dry for you? Perhaps you'd like to know of my romantic endeavors? I thought you might! I never did believe for a moment that the cleaning lady stimulated you half as much as my mother did when she was alive, that is, if the screaming were any indication. Yes, you seemed to hit the cleaning lady much harder, and not nearly as often with an open palm. You still reserved the good stuff for me though! A good schedule of beatings turns a feeble boy into a powerful man.

I'm sorry; I digressed entirely from what I was getting toward. They say the road to love is long and winding, but I believe I have traveled it and am writing to you from the cozy comfort of its conclusion. You see, three months ago, on a fateful day at Buymart, I met a girl named, Amelia. I was enraptured by the very sight of her! It took me a moment to determine her ethnicity; tattoos of snakes, death, and illegal sex acts cover her body almost completely. Thankfully, I finally established her to be Caucasian. I remember that you taught me a mixed marriage would not work; that dimwitted Maria woman was incapable of cooking

you anything but rice. Amelia had hair like the rainbow. It was very short, so I wondered if she were one of those women, but certain tattoos on her lower left thigh confirmed to me that her sexuality was of the proper persuasion. I knew everything I needed to know; I approached her directly and told her she was the most exquisite beauty I had ever encountered. Then I told her it would be a great honor if I could take her to dinner and a movie, but to my great dismay, she declined.

I thought my hope for love was lost eternally at that moment, but God had decided that lightning should strike twice! I happened to spot her again just as she was exiting; I would have missed her, but the alarms went off as she walked out. The security guards found she had a few hundred dollars worth of electronics in her oversized purse, and, though she explained perfectly rationally that it was all a mistake, the guards had her arrested! Naturally, I tailed them to the police station and insisted they let her go. When they refused, Amelia suggested I pay her bail, and as her knight in shining armor, I did! A better investment had never been made for the love of a lady. With that business behind us, I took her to dinner and a movie just as I had intended, but, as my wallet was suddenly hurting from circumstances I need not explain, McDonald's and a free showing of *Casablanca* had to suffice. I remembered not to order the Happy Meal this time.

To my jubilation, she requested to come home with me, as it seems she had the terrible misfortune of being evicted from her previous residence without just cause, and her belongings were in storage at the moment. Not wanting to ruin such a happy moment for myself, I did not ask where she had been sleeping previously and raced home to good old apartment 4C, desperately hoping the cockroaches had all resigned to the cozy underside of the couch by this time of the evening. She seemed to like my apartment well enough, and she especially enjoyed my mother's quilt. She said it reminded her of an old dog she had that had to be put to sleep when it was mistakenly thought to have mauled a child napping in the park.

She slept in my bed, her face close to my pillow. From my place in the bathroom tub, I could only imagine how nice it would have been if I were in the bed with

her. After that, things just fell into place, you know? I continued going to work, and when I got home a meal from a frozen box would be ready for me, or Amelia would be asleep on the couch or the floor with some sort of refreshing alcoholic beverage in her hand. She does sleep frequently during the day; I worry she may be narcoleptic. Nonetheless, my world became, and continues to be, paradise.

Minor mishaps are known to happen even in paradise, however, and mine is no different. One day, a young boy by the name of Troy simply showed up at my residence, and when he called Amelia, "Mommy," I could tell things had become more complicated. As it turned out, Amelia has six children at the wonderfully young age of 22. Though I did not inquire as to where the rest of them were, I was certain she had everything under control. The boy stayed with us a few days, and then he disappeared. Amelia said he had gone back to be with his father, and then she went on an unusual monologue about the innumerable benefits to be reaped from selling a child into slavery, if one were brave enough to do it.

In fact, her mood was so joyous that I almost worked up the courage to kiss her. I've made several great strides, from tapping her on the arm or the shoulder to several seconds of physical contact with her hand. Frankly, I'm worried that when I do accomplish my goal of kissing her that I will have no greater goal to achieve! What greater pleasure exists between man and woman? It is no wonder you requested the middle school exclude me from health class; I was much too sharp to need it!

Well, I suppose I have sufficiently expressed the current jubilation that I feel every moment of every day. Amelia is the love of my life, and things only get better between us each day. She searches for work constantly, although I'm certain it's only temporary and that she will immediately resign herself to homemaking when we are married. When her phone rings, she'll rise from her slumber and leave at any hour during the day or night if she thinks there is an opportunity for employment! I think she is attempting modeling, because she frequently comes home wearing more or less the same clothes that she had been wearing when she left. If only she had my luck with jobs! Having such a large number of people depend upon me for well-being is such a prestigious honor, and it would be most

amusing if Amelia could taste that for a brief time.

I hope everything is well with you, Father, and that the retired life is pleasant enough for you. I have heard young women are attracted to men with stable financial situations; perhaps you ought to try your luck at the Buymart! Thank you, as always, for your years of support and intelligent decisions regarding my upbringing. I hope you will get to meet Amelia soon!

Your son,

Throckmorton Creed, Jr.

Note on Door to Roommate

Heather Kresge

Having hot wild sex
Come back later on tonight
Won't take long—trust me



Minotaur Digital Art

Kaitlin Smallwood

Makes Me Wanna Dance

Tabatha Weaver

So overpowerin,
it's like hidin in a cocoon,
being found,
and then beaten by
cute little kids.
So gratin,
like bad sex
from a nice guy.
So in your face,
like a hotter chick
flirtin with your guy
and then watchin him smile.
So obvious,
like bubblin sarcasm
from your divorced uncle
whose car's just been repoed.
So turn it up,
let's dance.

Growing Up and Liking It

Kathleen Springman

For just a moment at half past one on a grey, wet Friday afternoon, a shriek filled the attic of the Young house. A shriek produced in the highest human vocal register. A shriek that slashed through the dank and dusty attic air. A shriek that would beat unmercifully on any eardrum it encountered. But the house was empty, save the lone figure kneeling on the attic floor who emitted the shriek. Cindy Young leaned back on her heels with her left hand still clutching a clump of her tee shirt over her thumping heart. She ran her other hand through her shoulder length dirty-blond hair. Before her was a cardboard box, open and stuffed with stacks of folded pink, frilly and bow-covered baby clothes. Nestled on top of one heap was a plump rat laying belly up, its mouth agape. Cindy leaned forward toward the corpse, and as she squinted her eyes for a closer look, the skin at the corners of her eyes compressed into fine lines. It had been smart enough to finagle its way into the box but not back out again. Poor bastard.

At five o'clock that morning, Cindy, still puffy eyed, descended into the kitchen and began her morning ritual. Her kitchen was cramped and claustrophobic, so maneuvering was not easy. A hulking, putrescent green refrigerator stole most of the small space. A double basin sink, along with a microwave, toaster and tiny T.V. blotted out the counter. A small heavily scarred table was squeezed into the bulk of the space not being used by the refrigerator, leaving only a narrow path to navigate. The room wasn't ideal, but it and the house it was part of were all Cindy could afford on her waitress's salary. Cindy switched on the tiny T.V. and pulled

down her #1 Mom mug from a cabinet as the coffee dripped lethargically into the pot below. An old wooden clock with metal hands ticked loudly from high on the wall behind the table. It read two thirty five because its indignant minute hand only moved forward every ninety seconds. Rather than buy a new clock, Cindy merely learned to convert the time.

Soon Cindy would have to coax her twelve-year-old daughter out of bed. At the beginning of the school year, Caitlyn insisted Cindy wake her by five-thirty, even though she didn't have to catch the bus until quarter to eight. She needed the extra time to straighten her long blond hair and apply the glittery make-up she had begged Cindy to buy for her. Cindy settled into one of the two chairs at the kitchen table that groaned under her weight, and she wrapped the mug of black coffee in her palms. Her eyes were fixed on the tiny window that hung above the sink. The black sky that she awoke to was slowly dissipating into a thick grey mass. On the counter, the small T.V. flashed a picture of a nerdy looking man wearing a bowtie and standing before a map of the tri-state region.

"It's going to be a doozy folks! This is a fast moving storm, but it's going to stick around long enough to cause some real damage. Expect heavy rain, maybe even some hail, lots of lightning and some strong winds later this morning. Don't venture out if you don't have to!" Cindy craned her neck in the direction of his voice. She watched as he indicated a green blob with a garish red center that crept along the map, blocking the state boundary lines.

Cindy had spent years talking a good game about clearing out the rubble in the Young's, attic but Caitlyn had always thwarted her. Thirteen years of accumulated junk splayed across the Young's attic floor. Artwork that had never made it onto walls, hand me down furniture kindly accepted and quickly stored out of sight, various household items and trinkets deemed useless but not hopeless enough to throw away.

"I think today we should tackle that attic," Cindy would begin. Caitlyn would contort her face in mock disgust and answer with a nasal whine, "Why? Can't we do it some other day? Let's do something else together instead." Cindy knew the



whole time that her suggestion was half-hearted. She knew the attic needed to be organized, but she never asked Caitlyn with the hope of it getting done. Instead, she asked with the assurance that Caitlyn would suggest they do something else together as a way to avoid the chore. Cindy smiled at the thought of how many days of mother-daughter bonding had started with this exchange.

So instead, Cindy and Caitlyn would go to the nail salon where Caitlyn would insist on having her nails painted the same vibrant pink as her mother. Or they would go to the hair salon where Caitlyn would insist on having her hair teased and styled like her mother's. The manicurist or the hairdresser would smile and say, "Aw, how adorable. You want to be just like mommy." Caitlyn would beam back at them and shyly nod her head in agreement. Turning to Cindy they would say, "Aw, it's so cute your daughter wants to be just like you. You're lucky you have a little mini-me!" Cindy would beam back at them and nod in agreement.

Then this past summer, the Young's neighbor, an elderly woman named Mrs. Nylund, passed away. For three weeks after, Mrs. Nylund's house sat vacant as the robust summer grass in her yard inched higher and higher, threatening to blot the house out entirely. And then one sticky July morning, a small U-Haul and a red pick-up truck pulled up out front of Mrs. Nylund's home, bearing Mrs. Nylund's son, his wife and their fourteen-year-old daughter, Brittany.

Almost as soon as Brittany and her family invaded the neighborhood, she and Caitlyn became inseparable. They met each other every morning at ten o'clock and didn't part until curfews forced them home. Cindy would watch out the window as a gaggle of long-haired unkempt young boys would gather around where the girls lounged on the lawn. Brittany's flat chest and narrow hips had begun to develop into curves and the boys had begun to notice. They swooped in like bees to nectar, transfixed by her burgeoning beauty. Caitlyn, whose figure remained straight, was equally enthralled as Brittany lorded over her swarm of boys. Caitlyn would watch as her mentor toyed with the emotions of her followers.

Every weekend the girls had alternated sleeping over at each other's houses. On the nights they stayed at the Young house, Cindy would lay out snacks for the girls in the kitchen, and each time they would spend just enough time in the

kitchen with Cindy to gorge themselves before they headed up to Caitlyn's room and locked themselves in for the night. Downstairs Cindy would listen as bits of their conversation and laughter floated down to her. Occasionally she'd trudge up the stairs and knock on the door, optimistically thinking she'd be let in on their gossip. Inside, the conversation and laughter would stop and, after a short delay, the door would be cracked open. Cindy would try to initiate conversation and involve herself by asking about the boys. The girls would only offer brisk remarks and impatient glances. Disappointed, Cindy had always returned downstairs and turned the volume up on the TV to drown out the conversation and laughter that had resumed.

That grey Friday morning, as her daughter slung her backpack over her shoulder, Cindy cast out her usual bait. "I think tomorrow we should tackle that attic. It's a disaster. I bet the two of us could get it done pretty quick." She waited for the familiar tug on the line. The invisible, yet unbreakable, line that led from mother and daughter. The familiar look of disgust soon crept onto her daughter's face.

"Ew, no. Anyway, tomorrow I was planning on going to the mall with Brittany. Why don't you just do it yourself? Why do I have to help? You're the one always complaining about it." In one deft move she whirled around and dashed out the front door. Cindy sat with her mouth agape, eyes unblinking and riveted on the door. Pressure began to bear down on her chest, squeezing the air out of her. She didn't even flinch when the screen door crashed back into place.

At sixteen, Cindy had begun dating a kid named Joey. Joey was twenty-two, a high-school drop out, a part-time cashier at a convenience store and a full-time pot smoker. One day, as Joey slid Cindy back her change for her daily slushie, he winked at her and whispered that she had a nice ass. Cindy, who spent her days wandering the halls at school with her head down, was flattered. She slid him back her phone number. What ensued was a brief but momentous relationship. After only one week of dating, Cindy succumbed to his persistent sexual advances. After only three months of dating, Cindy learned she was pregnant. Scared, she went to

her parents for guidance. Angry and appalled, they kicked her out of the house.

Cindy gathered up her few belongings and moved into the small studio apartment Joey rented over the dry-cleaner's downtown. Joey insisted that he wanted a child more than anything, and he vowed to become a full-time cashier and a part-time pot smoker. Cindy found work as a waitress at a greasy spoon diner called the Garden of Eatin' just down the street from the dry cleaner's.

One night the pressure on her bladder from the baby forced Cindy awake. She pushed herself off the bed, careful not to jostle Joey. As she stood, a deluge of liquid flowed down from between her legs; immediately excited by the liquid's meaning, she shook Joey awake. With a towel wedged between her legs, she left for the hospital.

In the early morning hours, Cindy tried to relax after the doctor had examined her and told her it was almost time. Joey, with no prologue or introduction, stood over Cindy's bed and announced, "Look, I don't love you. I don't know why I got myself mixed up in this shit. I don't want to be tied down with you or a baby." He turned and walked out. Cindy had no time to react. She began to scream as a contraction ripped through her womb. A nurse came in and announced it was time to push. Half an hour later, a tiny wrinkled baby was put into Cindy's arms. Outside, the sun had risen and now shone into the room with a brutal intensity.

Cindy wept as the little girl wrapped all her delicate fingers around one of Cindy's fingers. She should have cared that Joey left her a single mother, but all she could think of was the baby nestled in her arms. She saw it not as a product of her and Joey, but as a chunk of herself that had been set free from inside and made tangible. She was so enraptured by the little face that looked up expectantly at her, that all she could think about was how lucky she was to not have to share her with anyone. Cindy gazed into Caitlyn's face, and in the blue puddles of her eyes, all Cindy could see was her own reflection.

At five-thirty on that grey, wet Friday morning, Cindy mounted the stairs and stopped at the second door on the left. Gently, she turned the handle. Inside, the menacing grey sky was oozing through the blinds, casting a dingy light on

the cluttered room and the slumbering girl lying with one leg dangling from the edge of the bed. The room was a mess. Clothes were strewn all over the floor and furniture while posters of half-naked male models stared down from the violent purple walls. Cindy remembered how neat this room had been just a few years ago. The bed had always been made, covered by a pale pink comforter. Sweet pink and frilly clothes hung stiff in the closet. Dolls with painted on smiles sat expectantly on top of the toy chest, waiting to be noticed by their owner.

Now the contents of the closet spewed out onto what would be the carpet if it weren't covered in dirty laundry. The only relic of the old room that remained was a bouquet of dry, faded white roses tied with a ribbon and dangling from the curtain rod. Cindy thought about how beautifully tragic it looked hanging there, as if it had been frozen mid-trajectory.

Caitlyn had caught the bouquet at Cindy's best friend's wedding seven years ago. She had been the flower girl and joined the single females who had formed a giggling group a few feet behind the bride. All of the women claimed it was stupid to think that catching a bouquet would mean they were next to be a bride, but they joined the group anyway—just in case. A fling of the bride's arm, a short scuffle and Caitlyn emerged triumphant from the throng, the bouquet hoisted above her head. She ran to Cindy's side, her face beaming.

"Look Mommy! I got it! I got it."

Cindy congratulated her and felt an unbiased pride as she watched the despondent group of women scatter, each of them thinking, "Maybe next time." How precious Caitlyn had looked that day in her little tulle dress and her hair dangling in blonde ringlets. Cindy pushed the picture of the smiling little girl out of her mind and shook awake the adolescent who replaced her.

At one o'clock, Cindy pulled down the ladder leading to the attic. The house had begun to tremor as the thunder grumbled outside. Any other Friday, she would have headed off to the diner for the lunch shift, but she had today off. Instead, she spent the hours since Caitlyn left for school parked in front of the T.V. She gave

the appearance of being engrossed in the paternity struggles of Maury's guests, but no shout of "You are not the father!" registered in her mind. Instead her daughter's impudent remark, "Why don't you do it yourself?" played in her mind on a constant loop. Cindy decided to occupy her mind by doing just what Caitlyn suggested. She ascended into the attic, determined to make it the cleanest it had ever been. She needed to create some tangible proof that she wasn't useless.

The rain began to batter the roof. Cindy started sifting her way through the junk. She had cleared a small path through the rubble when she spotted a wicker basinet in the back corner of the attic. Surrounding it were several cardboard boxes but Cindy didn't need to read the labels of "Caitlyn—Baby Clothes" to know what was inside. Already full of self-pity and willing to torture herself, Cindy kneeled in front of the closest box and pried back the lid. Just a single glance into the box, and Cindy let out her shriek. A rat. A fat, ugly dead rat laying on top of Caitlyn's baby clothes. Cindy grabbed her tee shirt over her heart in some unconscious attempt to slow its quickened beat.

Cindy sat for a little while, still staring at the inside of the box as the tightness in her chest subsided, and her heartbeat returned to its normal rhythm. The last thing she'd needed today was the shock of a dead rat. She wished someone had been there to comfort her. She wished someone else was there to help her get rid of the rat. All morning Cindy had slammed her molars together to fight the spasms that threatened to push tears out of her eyes. She stared a little longer, and the spasms subsided. A thought crept into her head and a smirk spread over Cindy's lips.

At three o'clock, Cindy sat at the kitchen table, her eyes fixed again on the small window over the kitchen sink. The torrential rain had obscured the glass all afternoon, but Cindy could just make out that Caitlyn was running down the street toward the house with her hood pulled over her head. Cindy readied herself in her seat.

Caitlyn came crashing through the front door and headed for the kitchen for her ritual after-school snack.

“So, how was your day?” Cindy watched as Caitlyn selected a yogurt from the refrigerator and a spoon from the drawer.

“It was okay.”

“What did you learn today?”

“Stuff.” Caitlyn stood scooping yogurt into her mouth. Normally Caitlyn’s curt answers unsettled Cindy. Today she didn’t care. Today she was ready.

“Oh, well that sounds exciting. Stuff. Good to know my tax dollars are teaching you stuff.” Caitlyn had finished and tossed her spoon in the sink and the yogurt container in the trash.

“I’m going upstairs.” Caitlyn was halfway up the stairs when she finished her sentence. Cindy heard the click of Caitlyn’s door opening and then—a shriek once again filled the Young house. A shriek produced in the highest human vocal register. A shriek that slashed through the late afternoon air. A shriek that beat unmercifully on Cindy’s eardrums.

“Ah! Mom! Mom! Mom! Come here! Mom I need you!” Caitlyn’s distressed yells reached Cindy’s expectant ears. Cindy followed the cries up the stairs and into Caitlyn’s room. Caitlyn stood on her bed, pointing down to a pair of her new skintight jeans that were sprawled on the floor. On top of them, lying just as he had in the box in the attic, was the rat that Cindy had discovered that afternoon. Caitlyn leapt down when her mother came in.

“Oh my God, it’s so gross! Mommy, get it out of here!” Caitlyn rushed to her Cindy’s side, burying her face in her mother’s chest.

“Aw, it’s okay, baby. It’s just a rat. He’s dead, he can’t hurt you.” Cindy embraced her daughter. Just one more tug on the line.

Taking an old shoebox from the mess of Caitlyn’s closet, Cindy bent down to scoop up the dead rat. As she used the lid to coax the stiff rat into the box, Cindy noticed that in Caitlyn’s panic, the bouquet of roses had been set free from the ribbon that held it in mid-flight. It hadn’t been destroyed in its tumble to the ground. It lay intact and still beautiful, on its side looking just as it did when it hung. Cindy sent Caitlyn downstairs with the makeshift coffin. She picked up the bouquet, careful not to disturb the brittle leaves and petals. One end of the

ribbon was still attached to the curtain rod and the other end dangled free. Cindy retied a bow around the end of the bouquet, taking the time to pull the loops into symmetry, and once again she suspended the bouquet in flight.

Abstinence Only

Jessica Swan

a pocket full of poesy
the catcher in the rye
Mary in the meadow
kissed the boys and cried

one night a coy demeanor
and innocence the jest
and I the jester's puppet
lay me down to rest

while Jack and Jill ingest the pill
with a pail of holy water
Jack falls down amid a frown
Jill will follow and falter

the rabbit hole is large you know
for more than one you see
the bloody hole will engulf you
and swallow all of me

and Mary Mary brightly wary
how does your garden grow?
with cherry stems too many men
will come all too well to know

so Jack be nimble
Jack be quick
there's forbidden fruit to pick

Jack be gentle
Jack be nice
listen to The Man's advice

but the foundation is cracked
and the martyrs have gone
the golden rule is dead and done
and while Mother Nature's on the run
Cain's children are out for fun



Plecto Aliquem Capite Digital Art, 15" x 12"

Tom Burke

Roads

Whitney Fenton

He roams the roads. He owns the roads. He knows the codes to roam the roads.

Ya dig?

The code of the road. The knowing. The growing. The showing. Show me.

Show me the roads. Learn me the codes. Show me. Know me. Grow me.

Ya dig?

He roams the roads to know the codes. He owns the roads. He wrote the codes.

Winter Close

Susan Sullivan

A warm imprint
sunk into my skin
tender and easy as dough
where your hand touched my back

From that moment
there were months
where I let its softness
creep over my chest

A ghost of fingers
that bent and moved me

The impression faded
pink to gray and peeled away
wheezing and choking it fell
to my feet last August

I slung what was left of you
over a wire hanger
pressed tight between winter coats
and the wall

On cold days
I wear it like a glove

The Definition of Poetry

Daniel Tucker

(Poetry: noun, verb, adjective)

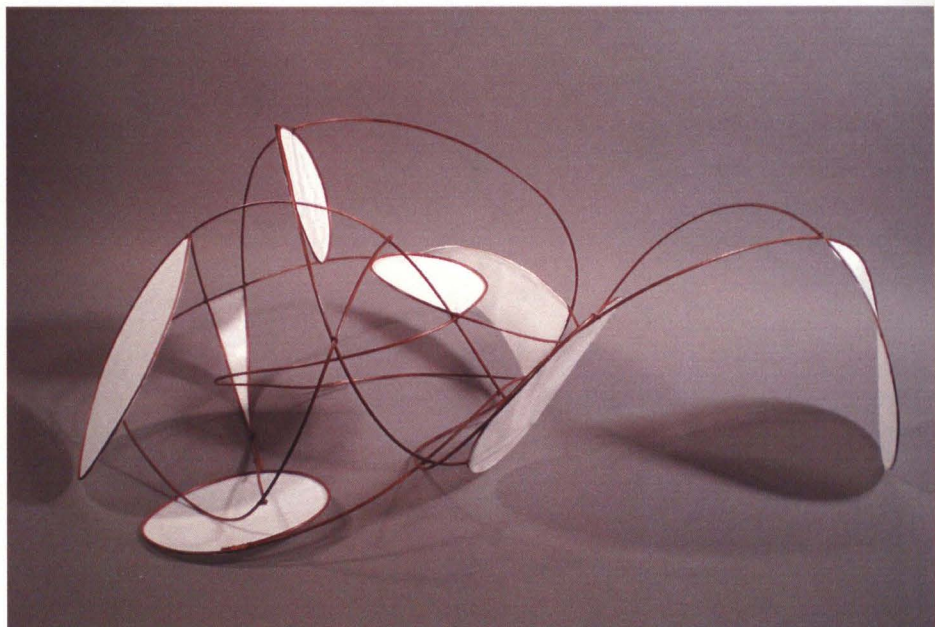
1. A potion
2. Seen serene
3. Evokes emotion
4. To praise a queen

5. Expresses love
6. Displays a thought
7. A fitted glove
8. A lesson taught

9. A baby's cry
10. Family's strife
11. Hurtful lie
12. Struggled life

13. Brown voice
14. Broken home
15. Life choice
16. Left alone

17. Pressured teen
18. Drug relapse
19. Tickled vein
20. Pulse collapse



Ambiguity Reed and Rice Paper, 40" x 30" x 25"

Nicole Jacobs

Black Eyed

Joanna Plasencia

The tiny red room was quiet except for the sound of Emma Bern's needles.
Click click cli—

“Stop it.”

It was eight in the morning, London time, when the sun's glow rested on Emma's handiwork. Her shaking, withered hands strained against the pull of the black and white yarn.

Click click click cli—

The blanket fell on Emma's lap as her hands flew to her glasses. She shoved the thin frames into the grooves of her nose to scrutinize the blanket. Something had settled in between the yarn just to the left of the black and to the right of the white. Her heart felt its tug.

Bump ba-bump ba-bum—

Emma shut her eyes and imagined that she was a sponge, the sun's pale yellow was absorbed deep into her core. Ignoring the blanket, she began to flick her needles.

Click click clic—

Emma pictured herself as a strong adventurous young woman. Maybe a sea captain, no a pirate! She mused. Oh, how lovely her long hair would flow in the cool sea swept breeze. Emma pictured herself embraced by a man. Tall, black hair, green eyes and he's got to be fit! Oh, and a spicy Latin temper. Billowy shirt? Shirtless. Why leave anything to the imagination at her age? Banana hammock? Speedo? No a—

Click click click c—li—ck

God I hate you, she glaried at the needles. In her excitement, she had clumsily banged her metallic needles hard and fast against each other, forgetting to count her place. “One, two...twenty...sixty-three.” She had dropped a stitch.

“Shit.”

How the hell am I supposed to live vicariously through the stereotypical fantasies of women? Can't this stupid death blanket work itself out? Carefully, she retraced her stitch, attempting to find the outcast. The black and white yarn wasn't very helpful. With a sigh Emma carried on, deciding that a triangle blanket would simply have to be that hot new accessory for decorating death beds should she continue dropping stitches. The needles filled her red bedroom with what many would consider a gentle ting-ing melody. Emma was not “many.”

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

How the hell can I possibly knit anything? Is this why everyone thinks the elderly knit? Because we can't hear well? Just how morbid is this goddamn deathbed blanket tradition anyways? Screw you, Grandma Eunice. Damned be the consequence. I'm breaking the mold. “As the last surviving Bern of the 25th generation, this ends with me,” she told the blanket, from her vanilla rocking chair.

“Timber! Watch out below lumberjack Jack is here to warn you— of the time.”

Emma stared at the image on her wall clock of a small lumberjack destroying the environment with an insanely happy grin. This allowed her disjointed mind to reassemble itself from its musings. Regaining a sense of time, she realized her daughters were about to arrive.

“And it all goes to hell! Shit!” she yelled, figuring these to be most appropriate words a woman of her wise years could use to sum up her feelings. Emma quickly shoved her blanket underneath her mattress. Stepping back to inspect her furtive work, she sighed. Perfect, it wouldn't do to have them find it yet. Wait, where's the note? All business, Emma's eyes began scanning the room, not a thing out of place, clean and precise. She instantly regretted cleaning her room.

“Damn it!” Emma complained as she clumsily grappled with her dresser. “How

the hell am I supposed to find anything? Everything's so fucking neat!"

Ba-bump Ba bump ba-buummm...p

Emma reached for her dresser to steady herself. She had to stay calm. With a sigh, Emma started her search.

Five minutes into the demolition of her room, she froze, her right hand still clutching a lime green polyester projectile. Of course she realized that things would be different today. But why did her mind have to feel so cloudy? I guess it really is time to send myself to the old glue factory. Sheepishly, Emma reached in her bra. There she felt her heart rate calm as her fingers felt the crinkle of the delicate stationary she had splurged on for the special occasion.

She had known that she did not possess enough eloquence in her tongue to handle the delicacy of the matter. She had stood in front of the boutique's stationary aisle, hoping to find the right combination of color and pictures to soften the news. She remembered how she had received that, blushing as she recalled the insults she had thrown at Dr. Gaines. Finally, she had settled on the image of a white and pink floral arraignment set against black.

As she calculated the time she had lost searching, she realized that she had no time left to re-clean. Emma flopped into her chair. She hated leaving her room like this but not for its untidiness. She knew her daughters would clean. She could see it now, her daughters' long delicate fingers, clutching her beloved items. "Those damn dirty apes."

As much as she loved her daughters, the thought of their hands returning her favorite lilac sweater to its final resting place inside the closet depressed her. Emma rose to pick it up. She walked toward the closet, her hands cradling the soft cashmere fabric. Each step she took was a step in the vivid green fields of her memories. Upon reaching her closet, she thrust her hands into the soft continuous tangles of pinks, greens, and blues of cotton, polyester, or wool. Greedily, one last time, she allowed her fingers to soak in every sweet and juicy memory.

In the shadowy corner of her closet there hung an onyx satin gown with white accents. Carelessly, Emma had allowed her index finger to graze the satin. In an instant, she felt the burning of her fingers spread to her heart. She struggled with

the onyx gown, her peachy skin slowly sinking into the dress. I'm lost, I've lost, if only my daughters could have seen me before.

Ba-Bump ba—bump ...bump ...

"Mom?" The voice came from the kitchen down the hall.

Emma knew the voice of her daughter; it had always reminded her of Ni— Not now. No. She forced herself away from the gown's grasp, shutting the door on the memories.

"Are you home?"

"Where else would she be?" Emma heard Susan, her youngest daughter, question. Just in time. Inspecting her hands, Emma was surprised to find no trace of the onyx. Had she imagined it? Instead her hands were shaking at twice their usual speed. She dove for the rocking chair, flinging the tangerine comforter over her lap for cover. For a brief moment, she felt comforted by its lively disposition. She imagined herself swimming amongst the yellow and red, immersing herself in the crisp cool tang of it. She was ready.

"I'm, I'm here!"

"Where?" Lauren replied.

"In Nin—m—my room!" Emma corrected, cursing her thoughts.

"Kay, we're coming!" Susan's shouts sounded closer.

With every nearing thud, Emma's heart rate increased. It would be mere moments before two familiar brunette heads would pop out from the doorway. She wondered if all actors felt this way before their performances.

"Ta da!" Susan exclaimed, appearing in the bedroom's doorway. Her arms were dramatically outstretched for applause despite the immense fusion of plastic bangles enveloping her thin wrists.

"Don't just stand there stupid," Lauren said, her Jimmy Choos colliding with Suze's Chucks. "You almost made me drop her present."

"You've always had such appreciation for my flair for the dramatic," Susan countered, stepping aside.

"Yes, certainly when you've had to live with it for so long it kind of rubs off on you, like B.O.," Lauren remarked, staring directly at Susan.

Knowing her daughters' penchant for banter, Emma interjected, "Why hello, Mother, how great it is to see you after so long! How have you been as of late? Really! You did what? In your condition! Wow, you are so amazing, Mother. I am so glad we travelled so far just to visit!"

"Sorry," grinning, Susan hugged her mother.

Meanwhile, Lauren had moved to kneel in front of Emma, offering up to her a red box. "For you, oh great mommy dearest, please excuse Suze's ignorance."

Emma could never quite pin down the emotional moments in her life. It seemed that no matter how hard she desired the ability to stop time, the only control she ever had over it was in allowing it to fly past. Thus, understanding the limitations of the human body, she resigned herself to imprinting memories. Since Lauren's birth thirty-one years ago, she had tried never to allow the moments escape completely. Increasing in direct correlation with Lauren and Susan's age, were stuffed animals, hand knit socks, dazzling arrays of freshly painted walls, anything and everything capable of some level of "absorbency." Emma would content herself with these consolation prizes.

As Emma watched her daughters, she imprinted the small wrinkles forming at the ends of Lauren's eyes and the gentle pressure of Susan's arms surrounding her inside her comforter. Certain that she would never forget it for as long as she lived. An easy feat.

In an instant, the bond was lost as Susan detached herself to wrestle with Lauren's grip on the box and proudly deliver it to her mother. "We picked it out together; it's your favorite colors." She winked. Emma's curiosity could no longer be ignored. She tore away at the red wrapping paper.

Emma was struck with a feeling of *déjà vu* as cool familiar curves of crystal met her fingers. Pain had begun to eat at her hands, but she forced them to stay. The hands that lifted the crystal vase were steady but cold. It was as if the vase had sucked the warmth from the air around her.

Ba bump ba bump ba bump ba beeeeeep

Had they felt it? Emma dared a peek at her daughters. No, Lauren was bent toward her mother, awaiting the praise and happiness that only such a gift could

warrant. Already the pink hue had visited Susan's cheek. Ever the wary college student, she expected questions of expenses. They knew her well. As the sun's rays caught the crystal it surrounded the three women in rainbows dancing on her walls. Emma had loved this vase, before— before the crystal became a storm of infinitesimal glittering pieces dancing on her sister's undisturbed hands. She remembered its crash. It had all been so quiet.

"We're not done just yet," said Lauren, unaware of Emma's stillness.

"There's a present part deux. It's kinda at its best when fresh though," Susan explained.

"But that will have to wait until after tea," Lauren grinned reveling in the torture. "I'll start the water."

"And I'll make sure she doesn't screw up, Susan added, following Lauren out of the bedroom, leaving Emma alone to glare at the vase in peace.

Emma enjoyed the hours of reminiscing with her daughters over tea. Away from the vase, in her kitchen she had immersed herself in the past. The scent of orange and cinnamon from her tea was soothing. It was only at the end, when both girls were at the doorway, that she allowed herself to cry. The girls, aware of her condition at last, were anxious to leave her to rest. She assured them that she would remember them the next time they came. As she shoed them away, she gave them the letter to open at home.

The girls' second gift filled the vase in Emma's room. She sat glaring at the Black Eyed Susans. She imagined the black center growing. Cruel black arms extending to the golden rod petals, climbing up to their withering points, with each grasp marring the flower's beautiful hue. There it clung, collapsing, demolishing, every last petal bled black. They were dead, in spite of Emma. If it wasn't for my daughters, she thought glaring, I would smash every last piece of you.

She remembered it, the petals plummeting to the ground, crystal hail cutting them midair. She reveled in it now as she had then. Nina's pale smile framed by petals and shards.

Beep beep beep beeeee

Emma shoved away the thought. She focused on how Lauren's singing had filled

the apartment earlier. She pictured Susan on the kitchen counter, hips swaying, legs bopping to the beat. She grabbed the tea bags and sashayed to the stove to place them in Lauren's open palm.

And then there was Nina, yelling at her to close the blinds from the kitchen table. Nina, pale and thin was squinting hard against the sun, her hand raised to her forehead in defense. Emma, only taller by an inch, looked down at her younger sister. "I need to see in here, like normal people, why don't you just go to that crypt you call a room and eat there?" Nina rose from her chair to carry her cereal down the hallway, stopping to fix Emma with her cold jet black eyes. Emma was drowning in them.

Emma's red walls were losing their color, growing darker. She stared at her vanilla shelf, watching as the color bled out, leaving only black.

Emma awoke, cold. She looked out her window to see the sun setting. She trembled hard, realizing it was almost time. Tired, she made her way to the bed sinking deep into her mattress, the blue and indigo sheets drawn up around her. She was so cold.

Beep Beep Beep Beep

Why the fuck couldn't that fat ass nurse raise the thermostat a little? Would it fucking kill her to do some work? She had glared at the nurse behind the service desk. She had been pacing the empty halls of Grace Hospital's twelfth ward, wishing she had opted for a longer gown. As it was, she had been freezing in her golden charmeuse halter dress with plunging neckline. When she reached the end of the hall, she realized it was dark outside. She had never expected to end her night here, with nothing to dance to but heart rate monitors. She didn't want to stay any longer. The waiting was too much. She hated waiting. No, she wouldn't wait any longer.

Determined, she had walked up to the overweight nurse and asked her to relay a message to her parents. "Please tell them I'm sorry, and that the doctors wouldn't tell me how she is. Tell them that I'm fine and that I took a cab home." She looked back at the door of room 210. She considered turning around and sitting down. She could picture herself there, picking at the skin around her nails until they bled,

running her hands through her auburn hair, and holding her knees to keep her leg from bouncing. She would see the emergency doctor walking towards her slowly, shoulders stiff and hands together, his eyes darting. He would pan the room, the tilt of his head asking where her parents were. She would have to explain that they lived an hour away, and that she was responsible. Responsible. Emma turned away from the thought before she could picture her face falling at his news, focusing on the nurse. "Tell them that I love them and that I will wait for them to call me at home."

Emma had considered the cappuccino vending machine on her way out. But looking at the dollar bill clenched in her hand she understood that it had no value. Instead she concentrated on her hands, losing herself in the peachy color that flowed into them.

Emma's eyes were beginning to sting and water. She decided to blame it on her red walls. Looking around her room, the red walls were turning darker

Emma had thought Nina looked beautiful in her onyx gown. Uncharacteristically, Nina had allowed Emma to choose her accessories for the night. Emma had chosen a simple red and black teardrop necklace to offset the white embroidery right above Nina's heart. Lastly, she added a red begonia around Nina's wrist. But as Nina tugged at her flower, Emma couldn't help herself.

"God, Nina, don't start! If you don't like it, just take it off."

"I don't really think I'm in the position to start anything, Emma, just finish."

"What?"

"Never mind, I'll keep it, just please stay happy," Nina said, turning her gaze to Emma's eyes, "I mean it."

Ba bump ba bump bump...ba buummp

Emma wondered if her girls had read her letter yet. She knew they hadn't suspected her, thinking it was sugar. She reached underneath her mattress to draw out the black and white blanket. Whatever had been inside it before, she welcomed as she drew it up to cover her face.

The memory had the consistency of molasses. Emma remembered thinking that Nina's black hair had made such a contrast with the bright red. She was still on the

sidewalk. She remembered the arc of its flight, blood growing darker and darker, splattering against the asphalt, black. She wouldn't remember the figure that flew, amidst the shower of crimson that dropped hard and laid quiet.

She could never remember faces. She remembered a blue streak rushing from the black limo to perform CPR, and the screaming splotch of pink taffeta yelled at a boy to call an ambulance. She didn't feel the rough cement of the sidewalk skimming her arms and knees when she had failed to catch hold of Nina. She remembered two tuxedo clad boys holding her away, while the limo driver's hands clutched his bloodied nose chanting, "She just ran out... I didn't mean... couldn't...she ran." The noise of the ambulance was fading away, taking Nina. Only then did Emma notice her hands, balled and shaking. They were pure white with chunks of onyx satin slipping through her knuckles.

It had been years since Emma had sat by Nina's hospital bedside and only minute wrinkles around Nina's eyes gave any hint of the years. It was a rainy day, the kind that Nina had liked best. Emma stared outside from the window of room 210 at the people below. They were rushing around attempting to dodge the wet bullets that Mother Nature threw at them. She thought they had looked silly stumbling around, naive infants like her newly born daughter Lauren. With a sigh she turned around, pushing back her graying hair to stare at Nina.

"Were you unhappy?" Emma asked, hoping that someone else would break the silence inside room 210 for a change. "Why would you be?" she asked staring at Nina. Not surprisingly, Nina didn't respond. Years ago, it seemed that something had made her determinedly fix her jet black gaze straight ahead at the pale blue wall. Emma couldn't seem to keep her volume down. "Why did you fucking run? Did you really mean it? That you wanted me to be happy? I am the reason you're here. How the hell was that supposed to work?" she spat, picking up the sparkling crystal vase filled with mixed zinnia flowers. "I want you to see just how happy I am," she said, throwing it inches above Nina's face. Something in Emma always appreciated beauty, even in extreme situations and she couldn't ignore the light and carefree yellow petals floating down to frame her sister's face.

Turning away from her sister's hospital bed, she had shut the blinds. Nina's body

was cast in shadows, as she would have liked. Returning to her sister, Emma's lips quickly grazed Nina's forehead. She couldn't stand to linger. Yet her hand clasped Nina's, praying to feel the press of pale fingers. She wouldn't come and soon she never could. Emma straightened and walked out, determined to never turn around again. She had stopped by the nurses' station to terminate her deceased parents' long-term healthcare plan. Emma left the hospital's comatose ward hoping to be gone before the steady beeping of Nina's heart, which guided her steps, faltered.

The black came slowly. Emma's eyesight darkened. No more pretending Nina. With that, her neck loosened and her shoulders drooped as her blanket offered her its gift. How nice it must have been for Nina.

beep beep beep beeeeeeeeeeee—



Cartoon Digital Art

Vanessa Rosas

The View from Above

Krista Graham

Cement stairs
lead to an Eden.
I sit above and watch
not wanting to disturb
its virginal square
of stone benches
and high brick walls
with its green friends
and tiny visitors.
An umbrella stands sentry
to the empty table.

A purple flower perches on an olive branch.
I wish I had the strength to lightly touch it.

Bottomed Out

Bill Schneiderhan

When I see my reflection
Orange and distorted
At the bottom
Of an empty pill bottle
Like the face of the man
In the Pink Moon,
That's the blues,
Hollow and empty.



Rust Photograph

Phillip Engle

This Is Why We Wear Those Fruity Necklaces

Spencer Thompson

Ask him if he's gay. Ask him if he's gay. Just ask him.

Jake's face was fixed in the exact neutral expression of inoffensive interest in Allan's conversation. He felt a churning, miserable sensation inside him, but everything visible seemed cool and calm. Below the table, his lanky leg shook violently, tapping out a frantic beat. He sat in his chair like a student in the principal's office.

He probably isn't gay. It'll be awkward. You just met him. Can't the man go one day at his new job without being accosted by a needy homo? Let him eat in peace.

But what if he is gay? He might be gay. He's probably gay. He's so nice, after all.

You think every nice guy is gay.

But he's too nice, he has to be gay. Straight guys aren't this nice to other men. People will think they're gay.

"Oh, of course," Allan sang, "I have no idea where any of the good lunch spots are around here."

"You just need a tour guide," Jake suggested. "It doesn't take long to get to know the city. Pretty soon you'll be attending radical poetry readings at coffee shops you can only get to from alleys."

"Will I?" asked Allan with curious intent, placing a finger against his bald temple.

You've got good gaydar, right? You've been gay for how long? All your life? You

should know this by now. Concentrate. Think. You can do this. Check the wrists. Limp?

You're being so homophobic right now; you should be ashamed. If anyone checked you for limp wrists, you'd slap them. Not every gay guy projects their gayness. You don't. Probably.

Jake picked at his arugula. The leaves had wilted since they'd been prepared that morning. When he couldn't bear to look at Allan's warm face, Jake would direct his attention down to the reheated slice of pizza Allan ignored. Lunch wouldn't last forever; he'd have to eat it sooner or later.

Maybe if you just wait long enough it will come out naturally. Maybe he'll mention his boyfriend.

Well that wouldn't help much, would it?

"Where did you get that salad?"

"Made it myself," Jake replied as if defending himself. "I'm a great cook. Really. I love to cook."

"Do you mind if I try a bite?"

"Not at all, sure!"

Maybe he's in the closet. He probably wouldn't tell you he's gay either way. He'd say "Oh, no, um..." then he'd blush, and he'd tell you he gets mistaken for it all the time. Then he'd tell you about his girlfriend, then he'd show you his wedding ring, then his children would run up to him, and all the while you wouldn't be convinced he was straight and you'd still think he was gay. Or just in denial. Or something.

You're being pessimistic. Not every gay guy is in the closet. Not every gay guy has a wife and kids. A lot of gay guys are single and in their late twenties. You are. There must be others.

The clock hummed. The second hand glided along, didn't jerk, didn't stop at each second like so many clocks do with their ubiquitous tick-tick-tick. Time flowed smoothly, inexorably. The clock was decorated with "The Birds of Colorado", each hour meant to be greeted with the lively chirrup of its representative bird. Twelve birds, twelve songs, and Jake having only heard the one o'clock swallow. Different

birds chirped at two, or noon, for the people who took lunch at noon or two. And who did the six o'clock bird sing for? When everyone's gone home at night, or before anyone has arrived in the morning? It perched by its number at bottom just as dignified, just as proud as all the others, its brightly rendered plumage seeming to say "I'm six, and you?" Maybe that was its message, in whatever bird language it spoke, when six would come and no one was there. "Hi! Hello! Hi! I'm six, goddamnit. I'm six and if anyone can hear me, you're six too. Hi! Hello! Hi!"

When would even be a good time to say it. Now? Should I wait until lunch is over? It doesn't matter, he'll think it's strange regardless. There's nowhere in the conversation to put it. "Oh, you love the park? Are you gay?" "You've read Bukowski? Would you happen to be gay, too?" It will just sound like you're insulting him for whatever he said last.

"Did you see the game last night?" Jake asked.

"What game?" Allan asked, almost as if declaring he had better things to do than watch the Islanders triumph on a slap shot from the blue line with 1:34 left in overtime to take the points lead in the division. Jake had leapt from his chair and shouted, looking around the empty apartment for anyone, his dog maybe, to celebrate with. But forgetting how late the game had gone, he got only an angry bang on the wall.

"Oh, nothing important," Jake sighed.

Just act like you think he's gay and see if he corrects you.

But then he'll wonder how you knew, and you'll make him self-conscious. Don't make him self-conscious. What if he's in the closet and you make him paranoid that he's projecting? You'll ruin him for life. He'll never want to date you.

Allan looked at his watch and shuffled around in his pocket for some loose change. He had an inquisitive look on his face, as if the contents of his pocket held an obscure truth about the universe. He surveyed the mess of coins in his hand.

"Do you have a quarter, Jake?"

"Oh, no," Jake admitted, patting his empty pockets. He checked the floor and found a dime. "Here's a dime."

"Can't do it, I need a quarter." Allan stirred some sugar into his tea. "You keep

it." He flashed a debonair smile.

Say something mean about Hillary Clinton. Say something nice about Jesse Helms.

Well both of those are a little bit drastic, huh?

The hands on the wall clock whirred like a freight train onto 1:00, pulling into its station with a deafening hiss of steam that sounded much like the sweet, musical trill of a swallow. Right on time. One o'clock had a habit of always coming about thirty minutes after 12:30. You could set your watch by it. Allan stood up to leave, throwing his uneaten pizza in the garbage.

"I just can't bring myself to eat it. Had too much reheated pizza in college," he quipped and smiled at Jake. "Is the boss the type to get angry if I'm a little late back to my desk?"

You're being silly. Stop it. Alright? Just stop it. You're being paranoid, you're being ridiculous. You're blowing things out of proportion. He seems nice. He makes great conversation. He's cute, he's smart, and most of all, he's mature. He's not going to overreact just because you ask him if he's gay. Okay, so do it already. Just do it. Right now. Ask him.

"Hey Jake," Allan paused at the door, leaning against the frame. "I hope you don't mind a personal question, but, do you have a girlfriend?"

"I—" Jake stopped, twisting his fingers to make them pop. His eyes floated back down to his half-eaten salad. "It's complicated."

"I know how it is, man," Allan intoned with a peculiar voice, then turned to leave the break room.

The Agony of the Twin Bed

Stephanie Beyer

I sleep so soundly when you don't spend the night.
When you sleep in your bed I can let my guard down.
Let limbs drape and sheets tangle.
When you spend the night I stare at the ceiling,
restlessly aware of my every uneasy
twitch.
Your arm's asleep and I'm wide awake.
Awkward and condensed, we spoon to fit.
Not to be close but comfortable.
I sleep so soundly when you stay at home,
but I prefer to toss and turn.

The Older the Crab the Tougher the Claw

Crystal Stumbaugh

blue grey river water at dusk a heron
collides with a telephone wire

oyster shells on the bank lonely
for the comfort of a mason jar

bare feet silt
rough against calloused heels

minnows dodge toes
tiny fish flashing silver

a girl with her head on another girl's
shoulder reading a fortune cookie fortune

the older the crab the tougher his claw
a thought to bury in oyster shells

to float in the current of minnows
or paper a telephone wire

a girl with her hand on another girl's
thigh reading sighs



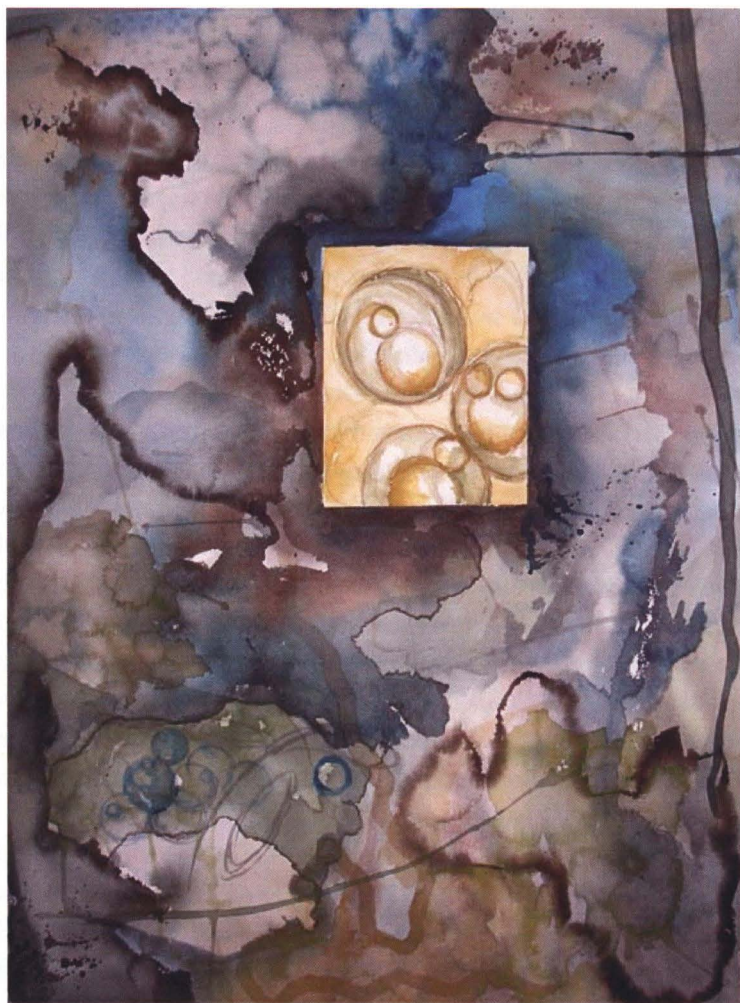
Tide Photograph

Courtneye Crans

Midnight on the Isle of Que

Marie Hathaway

Your mother said your father was a dog
and how she loved him
How
in the dark
when he was sour like beer and the rocks in the river
when the floor boards groaned like a boat
and we slipped out and away
from the heat of your small square house
through the dim wet line of light
that traced the bitter walnut trees
that made seams across the water
that seemed to hold the night air tight
while letting it slip and sag
like a fair fish plastic bag



Reckless Watercolor on Paper, 30" x 22"

Pamela Speaker

Saving Angela

Whitney Fenton

The beat of an old hymn made its way into Angela's foot. She stood in front of the open freezer trying to decide what to eat for breakfast. Eventually, she'd have Cheerios with banana slices, but she couldn't help looking for what else, if anything, there was to eat. She dug once more into the freezer to be sure there were no blueberry waffles hidden behind her frozen vegetables. Of course there weren't. Angela hadn't eaten blueberry waffles since she was sixteen, almost eight years ago now. She and her father would share a plate of them piled high with syrup and butter while they read the Sunday comics together. That was before he left Angela and her mother.

The cool air of the freezer on Angela's front kept her standing with the door open. That kind of cold never came to southern Ohio. It tried though. In a few months, when January came along, the raw air would almost be as cold as the air in Angela's freezer but not quite. "That saved a wretch like me." Angela sang under her breath, inhaling the chill while goose bumps formed on her arms as the heat crept from her skin.

The mountains had smelled like that; cold, frozen air that had burnt her nose when she breathed it in. Angela had smelled it the moment she stepped off the plane in Colorado. The entire airport had been filled with it. The air was warm because after all, the airport did have heat, but Angela could smell the cold in it. She'd known Colorado would be different from Ohio, but a difference in something as fundamental as air was a thing she hadn't expected. There was no dust or warmth,

just road-salt dirt and dry, artificial heat.

All around her, families were reuniting. From across the crowded terminal, Angela watched a young girl, about six, run to a man who'd been on Angela's flight. He'd sat two rows ahead and to the right of Angela. When he wasn't talking loudly to the man next to him he was flirting with one of the stewardesses. Now, he opened his arms wide, letting the chubby girl fling herself into them. He tried depositing her on his hip but lacked that evolutionary shelf women had developed for their children. When the girl slid down his side, he took her hand instead and kissed a smiling brunette woman hello.

Sitting at her kitchen table, Angela read through the Sunday comics while she scooped Cheerios into her mouth. Milk dribbled from her spoon onto Sir Valiant, making the blue colors of his coat run into his Nordic blonde hair. She never read that one, but she carefully soaked up the milk with the corner of her napkin anyway. Flipping her brown curls over her shoulder she moved onto "Doodlesbury." It was nothing clever this week, just a continuation of the list of soldiers who had died in Iraq; another plain political statement. Disappointed, Angela finished off the rest of her green tea and stacked the mug on her overflowing sink with a sense of accomplishment. It was a kind of triumph for her every time the basin was filled with dishes, a passive aggressive, too-little-too-late method of acting out. Her mother had never let a dish sit in the sink for more than the time it took to cook a meal.

Angela walked down the short hallway to her room and exchanged her pajama bottoms for a pair of jeans. She grabbed her wallet from its place on the dresser and a battered newsboy hat from the bedpost on her way back to the kitchen. Her apartment was tiny and cluttered, but she liked that. Her mother's house was too open and sterile. During the two years after Angela's father left, when she lived with just her mother, the house felt more like an empty hospital than a home. Angela preferred the smallness of her downtown apartment; it made her feel warm.

She searched the refrigerator door for the grocery list she knew she'd started

last week. She had errands to run before she met Jane for their usual Sunday lunch. Finding the list and adding waffles to the very bottom, she headed out the door. Halfway down the hallway she turned back, realizing that she should grab a jacket. The deadbolt stuck, so she pushed her shoulder into the wide door until it finally gave way. Snatching her coat and green and white scarf off the hook on the wall, she went back out the door in one fluid motion.

In the airport, the heavy coats the woman and child had worn reminded Angela that she had forgotten to pack her winter jacket. She had looked out the wall of windows and saw a light snow blowing past in a wind that seemed out for vengeance. The turbulence she'd felt on the plane told her that the wind wouldn't be too forgiving for a tourist without the right attire, so her winter weather apparel for the imminent cab ride was determined by the scant selection in the airport gift shop. As a result, Angela headed into the snow wearing a sweatshirt bearing a print of the Rockies and the last scarf in the shop; it was green and white with tassels at each end.

Angela wrapped the scarf tighter while she waited holding her carry-on tote in the tiny roofed section designated for transportation pickups outside of the airport. A cab stopped, and Angela slid in. She noticed the woman and young girl from the terminal getting into a black car just ahead of her. Slouched in her seat so she wouldn't be caught staring, Angela watched the man from her flight take time for a cigarette while the chauffeur put luggage into the trunk. The man was now wearing a long brown trench coat and black scarf over the casual suit that Angela had seen on the plane. He looked around as he lit his cigarette and only took a few drags before flicking it into the snow.

Angela remembered the penance her mother had threatened if she was ever caught smoking: twenty Hail Mary's bare-kneed on the gravel path in the back lawn and fasting for two days. Her father had pretended not to hear the threat. The man looked around again, shoving his hands down into his pockets. He seemed to look into Angela's cab before moving to follow the woman and girl into the car. Angela sank deeper in her seat and prayed silently for the traffic to break so her

cab would get moving.

When Angela and Jane got to the diner, it was clear that the lunch rush was just ending because most of the tables were dirty. A few people sat at the counter that ran along the far wall by the kitchen, and another regular customer sat at a table toward the back reading.

Angela and Jane made their way around the scuffed wooden chairs and tables that filled the center of the diner and took their usual booth. Angela stacked all of the dirty dishes up at the end of the table while Jane watched her and began shedding outer layers of clothing. "I don't know why you do that," she said. "That's what they pay the staff for." Angela pulled off her cap and sat it on the seat beside her.

A waitress brought over drinks, and Jane automatically mixed sugar into the coffee that was meant for her. They ordered the same things every week.

"I'm glad you let your hair grow out. It looks better long."

Angela tousled out her curls with her fingers. "My mom always made me keep it short, so I just never knew what it would look like long. I'm getting used to it though."

"Well, I think it's gorgeous, and I can't believe your mom made you cut it off."

"She thought curls brought vanity. It was just how she was." Angela bobbed a tea bag up and down in her mug of hot water. "She cared in her own way."

"Yeah, but still, from what you've told me that way wasn't exactly the best. Did your dad know what she was like when he left?"

Angela squeezed the hot water out of her tea bag quickly, so she wouldn't burn her fingers, and sat it carefully on the saucer to avoid making any sort of mess on the table; some habits were hard to break. She took a sip and felt the tea burn her tongue.

"Where to?" asked the cabbie. They were pulling out of the terminal, and Angela hadn't told him where to go yet.

"Do you know a place called Jack's Fine Dining Diner? I think it's somewhere

downtown.” Her father had told her to go there if she were ever in Denver. It was his favorite place to eat when he was away on business trips.

“Yeah sure. Little hole-in-the-wall kind of place.” The cabbie maneuvered the car into main traffic and headed downtown.

Angela had sat in the diner for about three hours, picking at a cheeseburger and fries. The diner was just like the cabby had described it, a hole in the wall. The place was so narrow that Angela could have touched the people sitting at the counter if she’d really wanted to. It was cramped and cluttered, but that added to the warmth that probably came from the kitchen and seeped into every customer.

The waiter didn’t seem to question Angela’s extended presence; he just kept refilling her glass of water and making friendly conversation. She’d shed the Rockies sweatshirt and sat comfortably wearing just the long sleeve thermal she’d stolen from her dad’s closet. The sleeves were too long, so she had to keep pushing them up. Each time a customer walked into the diner, Angela felt the sharp draft and the sting of the air in her nose. It was good. It kept her alert while she waited. She watched each newcomer choose a seat at the counter or in a booth along the wall, each one red nosed and hungry. Mainly they ordered coffee or tea, something warm. Feeling the cold vicariously through the other customers, Angela finally asked the smiling waiter for a cup of coffee. Her mother wasn’t here to forbid her from drinking caffeine, so where was the harm?

Angela was adding cream and sugar to her first cup of coffee as the diner door opened again, ushering in the icy air and yet another newcomer. She recognized the man from the airport, alone this time. He was smiling to the whole place while he shed his coat and hung it on a rack by the door. In the middle of hanging his scarf, he stopped smiling and his eyes locked. “Angela?” His voice cracked, and his smiling face transformed into a confused scowl. In a few quick steps, he had moved to the booth where Angela was seated. He’d forgotten to take off his hat. “Jesus Christ! Angela Elizabeth Maria Thomas, what in God’s name, are you doing here?”

Angela winced at the invocation of her full confirmation name. Her father never used “Maria” unless he was beyond angry. He stood next to her table in disbelief.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I followed you from home. After you said you were leaving yesterday, I went through your suitcase and saw your return ticket for today and bought one too. I sat behind you on the plane. I just want to come with you. Please don't send me back to Mom, please. Let me live with you."

He fell into the seat across from Angela and threw his hat onto the seat next to him. Rubbing his temples with both hands he stared through the table top like he was trying to disappear into it. Angela held her breath.

"You know you can't live with me," he said finally. "All of your friends are in Ohio. Your mother is in Ohio. Your life is in Ohio."

"So is yours." Angela avoided her father's stare and took a sip of her coffee. It had been cooling for a few minutes but still burnt her tongue when she swallowed.

"I'm sorry, Angela, but it isn't anymore. I tried to make it work, but I just can't anymore. You're old enough now. You'll be in college in a few years and you'll be fine. My life is here now. I'll see you in the summers. Your mother said she'd let you come and stay with me."

"You know she never will. She doesn't trust anyone outside the church, you know that. The penance she'd make me do when I got home would be enough to make me not come to visit you."

"The penance she'll make you do for this little stunt, I imagine, won't be a walk in the park either," he stopped himself. "I know your mother is hard to understand, but she loves you. She's just trying to raise you the best she can."

"Why can't you? Why do you have to leave?" Angela had never spoken to her father like this before, but this was her one chance for escape. If it didn't work her mother would have her under lock and key until Angela left for college. It was only two years, but Angela knew it would feel like an eternity in Purgatory. More importantly, her father knew that too. He'd seen it first hand.

"Angela, I can't." He looked defeated. "I've tried for sixteen years. I can't do it anymore. You'll be fine. I just can't do it."

He stood up and moved next to Angela motioning for her to get up. Wordlessly, she obeyed and gathered up her sweatshirt. When her father turned to the counter to pay Angela's small bill, she reached into the seat where he had been sitting and

snatched up his black newsboy hat.

They went straight back to the airport, and Angela was put on a plane to her mother. Her father had called ahead, so her mother was waiting when Angela got off the plane. She felt the last of the cold Colorado air leave her lungs when her mother hugged her at the terminal. Her father hadn't come along, he'd simply put her on the plane and left. He hadn't even told her he loved her before walking away. Now, her mother entangled her arm with Angela's and squeezed her hand, nearly breaking Angela's fingers. Angela heard her mother begin reciting the Lord's Prayer. Out of habit and habit alone, Angela joined her mother. "Forgive us our trespasses..."

Did your father know? Jane's question stayed in Angela's ears. She knew that Jane was waiting for an answer, but Angela didn't know what to say. That was almost eight years ago. It was done and over. Angela was out. Did it matter if her father had known? She'd gotten herself out.

Angela heard the bell above the diner's door ring and looked up to see a young man walk in. He was tall and handsome, probably a student at the university. His faded tee shirt read, "He is our deliverer," with some scripture citation underneath. Angela half sighed, half laughed, and picked up her newsboy hat. She ran her hand along the brim, feeling each stitch when her finger passed over it. Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

"I think my father may have suspected how my mother was, but I'm not sure if he really knew. Even if he did know, things would have been the same. My dad just wasn't the saving type."

Counting on Change

Susan Sullivan

There was a time
in the years following
my grandfather's death
when he would pitch pennies
from Heaven onto parking lots
for my grandmother to find.





the reflector

stephanie beyer

kathryn boeree

paige bonitz

tom burke

courtneye crans

phillip engle

whitney fenton

john friscia

meghan grady

krista graham

marie hathaway

shea hicks

nicole jacobs

heather kresge

jeff kuratnick

scott osiol

joanna plasencia

vanessa rosas

brendan rottmund

bill schneiderhan

kaitlin smallwood

pamela speaker

kathleen springman

garrett stambaugh

crystal stumbaugh

susan sullivan

jessica swan

spencer thompson

daniel tucker

laura vargo

tabatha weaver