

*The
Sigma Tau Delta
Rectangle*

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Sigma Tau Delta is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

2014–15 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall

Ryan Horner
“Pepper Run State Park”

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Jessica Wojtysiak
“Reading Science, Reading Philosophy”: Applying the Anthropic Principle to
Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Taylor Mullaney
“Shell”

E. Nelson James Award

Liz Puris
“What I Mean to Say But Haven’t”

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

Ryan Horner
“Pepper Run State Park”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award

Alyson Elam
“The Blue House”

Judge for Writing Awards

A life-long Midwesterner, RON RINDO received his Ph.D. in American Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1989. Following three years at Birmingham Southern College, he returned to Wisconsin to teach American Literature and Creative Writing at UW-Oshkosh, where he’s been a professor of English since 1992. He has published three short story collections, *Suburban Metaphysics and Other Stories* (1990), *Secrets Men Keep* (1995) and *Love in an Expanding Universe* (2005), two of which were named outstanding books of the year by the Wisconsin Library Association. His work has received two artist’s fellowships from the Wisconsin Arts Board and has appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *The Best American Essays*, 2010. He and his wife, Jenna, live with their children on five acres in Pickett, Wisconsin, where they tend Shetland sheep, a dozen laying hens, and a thriving apple orchard.

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Poetry

Shell

What I Mean to Say But Haven't

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Our Parents' Houses

Moon Unbloomed

To Make Me A Bird

La Place De La Concorde

A Boston Marriage

Rustbelt I

Shell

| Taylor Mullaney

Shell /ʃɛl/ (n.) 1. The hard outside covering of an animal, a fruit, etc: as in the smooth, bleached seashell in an outstretched palm / or the peanut shells scattered in the sand around the teal folding chair. 2. A light narrow, racing boat. / The scalloped waves knocking against his red canoe / down on Lollipop Beach where we would use Cheez-its to catch fish / and take turns getting tangled up with the line. 3. A case of metal in which powder and shot is made up, esp. for use as a hand grenade. / Like the fireworks he would set off on the Fourth of July / in the front yard of the cottage / arranged on the leftover pieces of brick / burning the grass / as we all squealed to the unpredictable gold sparks of the Starfire Geyser. / Like the grenade in our winter holiday / an unpredictable explosion / a hushed hell. (v.) 1. To extrude, expel. / Cracked and pried away / The empty chair on Christmas Eve. / And this time we are all bombarded with enemy shells / powerless. 2. To encase / hold / keep. / At this moment he would ask me if I'm being chased by all the boys. / Right now he would pull out his joke book / and tell that one again about the pirate / or show us the comic clippings of Family Circus. / I can see him reading the *Hartford Courant* on our leather couch / watching the UConn men beat Michigan State / and in the morning he will whistle and make us scrambled eggs. / He is there and here / always / like the sound of the ocean / when you press your ear to a round-lipped shell.

Taylor Mullaney is a recent graduate of Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY, where she earned a B.A. in English Writing with a minor in Business. She is currently working as a proofreader and copywriter at Synapse Group, Inc. in Stamford, CT, and has promised herself that she will continue writing.

What I Meant to Say But Haven't After Jhumpa Lahiri's "Survivorman"

| Liz Purvis

Here's a truth: the first time your husband kissed me up against my car
after dinner at that Mexican dive, I kept my eyes open and watched
an old man hold the door for his wife, stooped behind her walker.

Here's a lie: I believed him when he said it wasn't
as if you were really married, as he had been separated
from you for a year, by couch and queen-sized bed.

Here are some facts: though I may have bought him the green
toothbrush
beside the sink so he'd stop using mine, most days I see it
I forget why it's there. But I smile when it brings back the memory
of the first time he cooked with garlic; we spent five minutes taking
turns
trying to scrub the taste out of our tongues. When you and I
had a parent-teacher meeting to discuss your little boy running
around the playground to pull all the girls' pigtails, I wanted to tell
you
the man who is still—technically—your husband wasn't
at work, but picking up ingredients to make dinner at my
apartment.
And whenever I see the toilet seat up, I imagine a stranger has
broken in.

Liz Purvis considers herself to be a native of the South at large, if it'll have her, and is working on her M.F.A. in Poetry at North Carolina State University. She recently graduated with a B.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing from Elon University, Elon, NC. Her work has

been published in Damsely Press, Colonnades, Decades Review, Outrageous Fortune!, and others, and is forthcoming in Deep South Magazine.

Venus in Heaven

| Babette Cieskowski

Sin sprung whole
daddy's little
Wife-girl.

She guards the gates
and remembers, fell into
heaven with birth

rights, half
morning star
half motherless

child. Now she's
birthing bitches, watches
grandchildren chew her

Daddy hole. Sin sits and
wonders what
mothers do.

Wonders why virgins
glow like Gods, how they
earned their right for praise.

Babette Cieskowski graduated magna cum laude from Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, in 2014. She earned her B.A. in English and plans to spend time in Paris before pursuing an M.F.A. in Poetry.

Doors

| Shonté Daniels

You don't remember all of it, just
brief moments. Alcohol in paper bags

in the kitchen, heavy and immovable
in your tiny hands. A knife

in your mother's hands, and waving.
Tell me when you see him. You

remember arguments, the time you heard
a knock at the door, and your mother,

from the kitchen, yelling, *Don't
let him inside.* Then you saw him,

your father, through the window,
waiting. His face, split by window blinds.

His eyes, tired from work, watched you
through the window, watched as you walked

to the door, and touched it.

This is where your memory
chooses to end. Imagine

being too young and powerful. Knowing
the strength of a door knob when held

by boney fingers and a rough palm. The strength
of a wrist, if twisted, to open a door,

to disobey your mother's threats, to let
your father in, and whatever comes with him.

Shonté Daniels is a recent graduate of Albion College, MI, where she majored in Spanish and English with a creative writing emphasis. She currently is an intern for the online publication and journal Kill Screen, and has a passion for writing about the art of both poetry and video games. Her next endeavor includes unfastening her English language training wheels and attempting to write a poem all in Spanish.

Child

| Alex Muller

For Katie

You were born begotten
of your mother and her poetry—
in every line your limbs
spread like water,
massaged through summer heat,

the showerhead drumming:
passions and forgiveness.

You were mixed in utero
with crayon tones,
lined along the walls
of your mother—
wombed and wanted,
but spent too soon

like a dollar,
you are drifting
downward lost in the water-color streets
of New Orleans.

Child, there your mother
is searching.

Pentecost ii

Sometimes the moon was the shoe
 strung down from a telephone wire—
 from our neighbor's upper room
 we could see the fire of
 bugs in purple grass,
 wandering the ending hours of summer
 when all turns orange in the dark.

Sometimes tongues are readily obeying
 in man's morning mouth naming:
 whatever thing they see:
 sweet gum, spurs, and velcro—

 the dove and dog, messengers of
 olive boughs and burdocks balls.

or gasoline—the way sometimes
 oil pools in parking lots
 make the rainbow of God's promise.
 How, again, our father said,
I know, but I'm making progress.

 The burning of youth, the revelation
 is: the way the grass stains sneakers,

the way I find the words to write
 when no place is yet distinct by name,
 the way in memory I say you say:
I promise. And, I promise.

Alexander Muller graduated from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC, in May 2014, where he was the editor-in-chief of their annual literary magazine and the President of the Iota Mu Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. He currently lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and is pursuing a Master's degree at Wake Forest University. Alex's poetry has appeared in Sanctuary, Kakalak, and When We're Together, an anthologized collection by Old Mountain Press. In 2014, he was the winner of the Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award for his essay published in The Sigma Tau Delta Critical Review.

Thorn Street

| Shannon Sankey

Behind the sleeping trains
on the riverbanks on the first

warm night in April, we drive down
another town's main street.

Shopkeepers lock their doors
and through the dark glass

Ethiopian coffee cans, hanging
scarves, sweet pink tomatoes,

and gold baubles cool off in
blue-filtered sunspots like deep

wet treasures catching light
on the soft tongue of the sea.

We push past like one rogue wave
down the road where long white

porches stay warm like hanging
oranges, where cotton curtains

glow soft on clean bay windows,
where a boy on a skateboard

doesn't know yet that we won't
turn into a driveway—and waits.

Shannon Sankey is an English Writing major and research assistant at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. She is a freelance copywriter and editor-in-chief of the campus literary magazine, Pendulum. She will pursue an M.F.A. in Poetry in 2015.

Exhausted

| Madison Pollock

I am your mother, your brother, your
 ancestor. I have sold cantaloupes
by the highway in a pickup, operated telephone
 switchboards in France, sharpened
rocks into obsidian points. In the war, I
 kicked amputated hands like one
kicks a can, and in the twenties I placed
 feathers on my head and dragged
on cigarettes. When the sun drops
 and the moon floats, I pray to
the father, to spirit birds, to the Nile god.
 I lie on the earth. I lie on a cot. I
lie on a mattress, for I was, am, and will be
 exhausted.

Madison Pollock is a recent graduate of Missouri Southern State University, where she received a B.A. in English with a concentration in creative writing. She currently attends Missouri State University to pursue an M.A. in English.

Root

| Caroline Berblinger

Warm winds broke over
my mother's body, round
and arced as the waning harvest
moon. I began in a sea of dust
and stagnant September heat,
endless and thick.

My hair grew in tufts
those first months. Thin
and gold like foxtail barley
across my scalp. Years later,
my mother would tell me I grew
from the backyard. *Just sprouted up—
right there—among the grasses.*
My mother joking, pulling bottlebrush
from my pockets.

Our chicks lived in the kitchen
during the spring of my first grade
year. Their wing fuzz became
feathers and I watched
as they learned to fly
from their cardboard box
on the floor.

Today I am twenty-one,
a number too big
for hands and toes,
and the farmhouse is
someone else's. I return
to dirt roads, the few square miles

of this town. Made here—
in the dust—I was a tiny
root. And yet I was
undone. A tiny root
still, I am burning

beneath this orange dusk.

tronie: a style of painting popularized during the Dutch Golden Age that depicted single subjects with idealized faces, often clothed in exotic or Oriental trappings. Tronies were not meant to be portraits, instead the subjects of such paintings were intended to be unidentifiable—existing largely in the painter's imagination.

Caroline Berblinger is a senior at Baker University in Baldwin City, KS, where she studies English and Sociology. She is the current editor of the university's literature and arts magazine, Watershed, and an intern with Communities in Schools of Mid-America, where she works with at-risk elementary students in Lawrence, KS. This past semester she has been facilitating a poetry workshop among incarcerated women in Topeka, KS. After graduation, Berblinger intends to pursue her love of poetry and education through a career in teaching.

Southern Gothicism: Go Down to Jordan

| Koltin Thompson

It's like a baptism way down deep into a burning fire
 Getting sprinkled by Methodism out of a chalice of blood
 Swallowing back black bile and spitting up phlegm
 And trying to remember to smile because everybody's watching,
 girly,
 Everybody's watching
 Seeing the strong boys out on the farm
 Got to avert your eyes and be ladylike and can't listen to them
 whistling
 Got to be a good girl and wait for the good boys
 So you bite your tongue and keep on singing out the hymns
 Your tongue hitting the roof of your mouth and the back of your
 teeth
 And thinking about how it'd feel if it wasn't your tongue at all
 But someone else's
 And next thing you know you're hot and bothered and in the Lord's
 House no less
 And you got to keep your head on straight
 Raise up your hands and be prepared to take a snake if God drops
 one
 Keep your eyes forward and your mind on things that ain't of this
 world
 But you find yourself committing cosmic treason every time you
 close your eyes
 Because there is a fire out there and you know it'll burn but it'll
 burn so good and so nice
 And you're willing to undergo full immersion into a lake of fire if
 that's what it takes
 And, frankly, that's what it takes

My, my, my—your skirt's so tight and your shirt's too white
Hair's more conservative than your face sans makeup
Because only whores paint themselves—only whores
Cute boy up front steals glances at you and you know he wants to
steal other things as well
And maybe you're OK with that and maybe you ain't OK with it
But you ain't OK with not knowing which way you feel
That's for sure
That's for darn sure
And he gives you a wink and you give him a smile and the whole
rest of the sermon
You are thinking about the cute boy and the tight skirt and the
Kingdom of Heaven
And Glory to God
And holy cow, these pantyhose are killing
And Praise Jesus, Praise His Sweet Name
And I wonder what that boy looks like without his shirt on
Amen Amen Amen Amen
You all bow for prayer and he glances over and gives you a gesture
Don't matter what kind
And you blush and make it back at him
And you know that he's going to baptize you soon and very soon
Singing Amazing Grace out by the crick one night and washing each
other white as snow
And being drenched in crimson
And screaming let there be light until there is light
Who knows what happens next
But do you care in that moment, or are you just romancing the idea
of romance?
Oh daddy'll kill you if he finds out
Kill that boy, too
But you don't give a rip about what Daddy thinks and ain't for two
years now
Not since he broke that bottle and threatened your Ma
Not since he gave her a black eye and then made you recite the 23rd
Psalm

Not since the other things
 So daddy may scream but you'll be screaming too
 Screaming like a spirit running free and thwarting major plans
 Riding down roads toward Paradise in a broken-down wagon full of
 sweet forbidden fruit
 And shouting, "Come one, come all! Come one, come all! Fresh
 fruit! Fresh!"
 And him alongside you (the boy, that is) shouting it too
 And later you'll stop for a picnic and he'll teach you next week's
 memory verse
 And you'll burn it—brand it—into your heart with iron and with fire
 Like the firebrand you are
 And you'll cry out to the Lord in the moonlight like a werewolf
 transfiguring himself
 Scratching out your eyeballs and breaking your skin
 And laughing and moaning and stomping your feet like a charismatic
 And you'll sing like a freight-train and *caaaaaw* like an eagle and dream
 about old films
 And rodeos
 The young man will kiss your exposed brain and your bare skin and
 give you gooseflesh nightly
 On some nights he'll play you the violin
 On some night you shall be the violin
 Other nights he will prefer the cello, but you are OK with that from
 time to time
 So long as he's playing something out of the Blue Book
 For a little while it's going to be difficult
 And for a little while, it is not going to be fun and you're going to
 want to run home to Ma
 And to Daddy and say how sorry you are
 But you'll not do it
 Because you seen the face of an angel and you seen the fire in that
 angel's eyes
 And you hungered and thirsted for righteousness
 And Jesus says that all who do so
 Will be filled.

Southern Gothicism: Three Days

Yesterday is me and Maryanne sitting out back behind the barn
 kissing French,
 And me reading Faulkner and her laughing at how I say my words,
 And I'm laughing at her and we laugh and talk and kiss till the stars
 take over the sky,
 And we dance and we spin around until we're dizzy and fall down
 On the blanket we laid out on the straw,
 And we hold hands and hold our breath and we say,
 "It's always gonna be like this, ain't it?"

Yesterday is plucking plump muscadines off the vine
 And my father saying, "This year, boy, this year we are going to have
 some sweet, sweet wine."
 I call him Daddyrabbit and he calls me Big Man,
 And we work side-by-side with our shirttails out
 While that unforgiving Southern Sun glares down like the sonofagun
 he is.
 Beads of sweat roll down the backside of my neck
 And I shiver from the heebyjeebies and swat at some mosquitoes like
 they're Satan's soldiers
 (which they are!).

Yesterday is Mama making us lemonade with cherries that she picked
 and jarred last year,
 And us drinking it down so fast we half-choke,
 Laughing and making plans to have a picnic supper by the lake
 One Sunday after one of the pastor's hellfire sermons that's
 All full of shouting and hacking and that white spit that gathers at the
 corners of his mouth.
 We'll have salty ham and tatersalad and some rolls our neighbor lady
 taught Mama to make,
 And me and Daddyrabbit will share a cold Coca-Cola and sit a spell

and just fish.

—

Today is a packed-out meeting house with fingers pointing and heat that's getting hotter,

Opinions growing stronger by the minute, and a couple of hung-head boys with guilty faces.

We still hunt witches in these parts—calling out “Jesus” and acting like God,

And throwing stones, and throwing bricks, and throwing fits,

And throwing around words like “hell” and “damnation” and “filth.”

Thermostat's broken, so we're hotter than the Hell we're sending people to;

A Mexican lady says we're all *como agua para café*, but we tell her to just speak American.

Today is a dead little girl covered in blood out by a river with her throat cut and her heart broken.

Her eyes cry, “Help!” and her lips say, “Help!” and her parents say, “We thought she was in her bedroom the whole time.”

The town cries out for a lynching like the old days and so-and-so at the store

Says he'll bet his right arm that it was a blue-gummed nigger did the killing,

And “Is we men or ain't we?!” and the whole store is shouting out,

And—today—we're in Salem again.

—

Tomorrow is my funeral.

I'll wear the blue suit Mama likes—the one I wore for Easter that Mama says I look right dapper in.

I will ride that pine box six long feet and it will drop me off in Gloryhallelujahland,

And I won't feel pain—no, sir, not at all—and it all begins tomorrow.

I'll slide on my pair of dress shoes—spit shined like the Negroes used to do them—and

I will dance a jig to Eternity: two shimmies forward and a little leap backwards.

Koltin Thompson is a 2014 graduate of Tennessee Wesleyan College, where he received his B.A. in English and served as the Sigma Tau Delta Chapter President. He is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and a Graduate Certificate in African American Literature at the University of Memphis. He eventually plans to earn a Ph.D. and become a professor.

Our Parents' Houses

| Caitlin Foley

Your father wears a floppy sun-hat,
pulls weeds away from flowerbeds,
pulls ticks from the collie's mane.

Here, on the wrong side of the river,
my mother swallows a Xanax
with Sunday eggs and French toast.

Across the river, you spread seed,
raise your hand against the sun,
fill feeders for red-headed woodpeckers—

and here, beneath skin
malignancy sits like an iris bulb,
hard and gray, tended to and worried over.

Across the river is apple stuffed pork
and the sour smell of new mulch,
and here, closed windows and stale breath.

It's not right to look at sickness
and turn away, but I want to.
Who will forgive my selfishness?

Caitlin Foley is a junior at Lesley College in Cambridge, MA, where she majors in Creative Writing with a concentration in fiction, and minors in Business Management and History. She is spending the 2015 spring semester studying at the National University of Ireland, Galway. After graduation, she hopes to pursue a career in publishing. If all else fails, she will run away and start her own goat farm.

Moon Unbloomed

| Nellie Stansbury

The wounded moon hangs in the sky
like a broken light bulb. Her cord severed.
Orbed luminescence unbloomed. Her
crusted edges shiver with a mad soul
and even the stars blink away, ashamed.

She cries muddy black tears that stain her
dress. Wounded wonder. The night
blanket, a ripped and tattered midnight sky,
holds her rounded corners. Her wails are
drowned in her own dimly lit caves.

Her love, all morning light and strained
jawbone, left her again last night. His
sweat dried and pressed into her lunar mind.
Flickers of sadly gleaming light. Extremely
loud nothingness.

The glittering illumination of his breath
on her murky surface turned him away.
The sun, another hanging globe,
leaves her each night so she can bustle blooming.
Light the night sky when he cannot.

Nellie Stansbury is a junior at Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, where she majors in History and English Literature with an emphasis in creative writing. She plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan.

To Make Me A Bird

| Carly DaSilva

“*Hope’ is the thing with feathers*” – Emily Dickinson

I.

I am a bird
 is what I say

while I remove the bones

while I remove the bones

I am a witch
 doctor

 sawing bones
in two

while I remove the bones

I rummage for
 the silver spoon

I saw the bones in two

I scoop the
 insides out

 I use the silver
spoon

I saw the bones in two

I am a
 hollow home

 for wind
 to travel through

I mend the bones with glue

in part
 with saw dust

 bone dust
 in part

I am a bird
 in part

I am
 a bird

in bones
 a bird

in bones

II.

careful

 to peel the

careful

 skin away from

careful

tissue tendon

lay it out

flat for kneading

knuckling 'til thin

then sow

sow away

soft white wistful

tufts

downy coat to hold the warm

feather shield to stop the cold

III.

you could fly

once

you didn't have the thumbs

you have now you couldn't

weigh yourself down with

bangles chains and heavy rings

you didn't need as many

bending things just body

feet and wings a voice

with which to sing keep

this but shape your frame

again the way it shaped itself
back then a baby boat
a fuzzy fluttered heart

I am a bird
in part

I am a bird

IV.

getting

dressed

this is sewing

neat so the stitches

aren't wont to show

this is how to sew

a dress for

getting

dressed

snug against

the face the base the

beak smooth underneath

the belly blushing

pink rosy

getting

dressed

a bird a heart is

putting on her feathered

breast and blinking

cosmic marble eyes so

wide so

dark

V.

I am a bird

is what I say

I remember

what it is
to lift

off my tender

pie-crust feet

to trust in

what I breathe

to hold me up

La Place de la Concorde

| Ceciley Pund

1,300 heads litter the ground of the Place de la Révolution, mingle with dropped Coke cans and plastic souvenirs. A red double-decker crunches over the bone yard—out pour the tourists. “Ten minutes for pictures,” a monotone voice commands from above. The families, honeymooners, retirees crawl over each other for something to add to their scrapbooks stuffed full with memories from the garden of severed necks. Camera lenses pointed at the Obelisk, they do not mind the children who tug their arms, complaining that they tripped on Danton. Heads spring up between cracks in cobblestones, hair growing like weeds that won’t be separated from the flaking skulls. Corday’s last tooth was kicked out, Louis’ wig is skewed, and Marie’s skull caved in beneath the trampling sneakers. The driver calls for the group to return to the bus. He stays behind to give Corday her tooth, and whisper an apology in the name of the revolution.

Ceciley Pund is a second year junior studying English literature and writing, with a minor in History, at the University of Northwestern, St. Paul, MN. She is an editor for the University’s literary magazine Inkstone, and she plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. Much of her work is influenced by her time living in Italy.

A Boston Marriage

| Aurora Myers

She ran back to the rubble
in a space suit cape, the silver cloak
whirling up dust as she
clenched its edges with her fists,
inhaling the smoky neon thumping
of panic when she saw his hand,
his fingers scrawling the colors that had
spilled from his insides across concrete.

It took two years, two thousand miles of traveling
to Sweden or Barcelona across Bowker Overpass,
eight pairs of shoes that prepared this woman
for the moment to wrap her
tinfoil blanket around this man's limp body,
run those last 30 yards this time with
him in her arms
to cross the finish line.

Looking down at him, ears ringing,
she remembered the photo of an Afghan bride
several years back in the paper
who lay face down in dirt,
lips frosted with icing
from the wedding cake
she only took one bite of, the sticky
sweetness of uneaten medjools by her
upturned palm:

this kind of celebratory sweetness or denial—
she could taste it as the medic secured
his grip around the man,

wheeled someone's grandpa or groom into the ambulance.

Aurora Myers is a senior at the University of Portland, studying environmental ethics and policy. Besides teaching yoga, she loves to explore new places on foot, try different foods, play the ukulele, and catch up on some Calvin and Hobbes reading.

Rustbelt I

| Chase Eversole

I come from a town where
babies are born covered in dirt,
crying out for a bath before
the water from lime-crusting faucets
anoints them.

I keep words like you keep dregs
of motor oil in brass cans on wooden shelves
the difference being mine
can still turn an engine
over and over.

Your crimson words are hollow
but your stones are not.
What makes the difference
is that which carries more weight;
I hold the pail.

Chase Eversole will graduate from Indiana University East in the spring of 2015 with a B.A. in English. He served as the 2013-2014 President of his Sigma Tau Delta Chapter and is currently an officer. In addition, he served as the editor-in-chief of Tributaries, IU East's literary and arts journal. His work appears or is forthcoming in Burningword Literary Journal, Thickjam, LSPMAG, and other places. He plans to seek an M.F.A. upon graduation.

Creative Non-Fiction

The Blue House

Owing Pretty

A Slow Dissolution

The Eyes of Eckleburg Are Watching You

Lessons from the Garden

Thundering

Emotional Insulation

Gloria Mundi

I Never Smoked

The Blue House

| Alyson Elam

My mother and stepdad took my sister and me to a junk car auction when I was eight. Kimberly and I ran around the huge warehouse, climbing dusty shelves full of old transmissions and carburetors and black widow spiders, playing hide and seek. An old man in a camouflage T-shirt and orange suspenders rattled off prices of wrecked cars at a mile-a-minute, and Kimberly and I mimicked him, spouting out gibberish as fast as we could. We couldn't understand him. We couldn't understand our stepdad Mike either, with his thick southern accent, slow like molasses. But we understood why Momma was with him every time our eyes were caught by the thick gold chain on his wrist or the diamonds sparkling in the rings he wore on every other finger.

Our mother found us by the doughnuts and coffee. We didn't touch them until she said it was okay. For me, I've always been ashamed of taking free food. She would watch us lick the glaze off our fingers while chewing on the inside of her cheek, her dark, wavy hair bouncing from the momentum caused by her ever-jiggling foot. She called us "y'all"—a word I'd never heard before. I decided I was going to use it all the time. I wanted to be just like her. Once we got done eating, she pulled us out into the salvage yard.

We wandered past the crowd of men—men like my stepdad, rich men, white men—grouped around the auctioneer. They all eyed my mother, with her dark hair and dark skin and her strong, muscular legs coming out of her high-waist shorts. My mother used to make five-foot-two look runway thin.

"What do they all want with these old wrecked cars anyway?" Kimberly asked. The auctioneer was babbling off dollar amounts as fast as our stepdad talked slow. I thought everybody from the south must talk like they did—either super-fast or unbearably sluggish.

"Not all of the cars are wrecked," Momma said.

Kimberly looked around. "They all look wrecked to me," she

said.

I rolled my eyes. “No, stupid,” I said. “Not all of each car is wrecked.”

Momma threw me a dirty look. “Don’t call your sister stupid. Now, y’all split up and go through these cars.”

“What are we looking for?” Kim asked.

Momma opened the first car: an old Mercury that had been wrecked in the front, its airbag deflated in the driver’s seat. “Money,” she said. “Jewelry, coins, CDs, cassettes, anything, really.” She disappeared, leaning over into the floorboards.

Kim and I shrugged. We headed to the next two cars. The Georgia sun was waking up the gnats, and I could feel the humidity sticking to my skin.

I opened the door of an old Impala and peeked inside. There was a pile of coins in the cup holders, sticky with grime but still worth something according to Momma. A tassel hanging from the rearview mirror touched the back of my neck as I bent to pick them up, and I leapt out of the car squealing, thinking it was a spider.

Momma saw me doing the spider dance and began peering into the next car. “Don’t be a baby, it was only the tassel,” she said. “Don’t forget to check the glove box.”

My face flushed from adrenaline and humiliation. I wanted Momma’s approval more than anything while Kim and I were in Georgia for our short visit; in a couple of weeks we would return to our dad’s house in Arizona. So I went back into the car, searching for some hidden treasure that would make her eyes sparkle like the diamonds in Mike’s rings.

—

It took us four hours to go through each car; the auction ended soon after. Momma’s purse was heavy with coins, and Kim and I each had a collection of beaded rosaries, graduation tassels, and cassette tapes. Momma looked at our bundles and picked up a tassel from my pile.

“Eighty-nine,” she said, looking at the silver numbers that dangled from the top of the green and gold cords. “Same year I

graduated. Except my high school colors were maroon and white.” She handed the tassel back to me, and I took it from her hands like it was a relic.

Kimberly eyed me jealously, and we got into a scuffle over who was the rightful owner of the '89 tassel. Her nails dug into my fist, closed tightly over my new treasure. Mike stopped our fighting with his presence.

“You get the ones you wanted?” Momma asked him.

He shrugged and gave a reply incomprehensible to me. She dug into her purse for a cigarette. I wasn't sure if she was even listening.

—

Momma dumped all of the coins into a pile in the living room. Her eyes were bright, and she was smiling.

“Now, we're going to separate these into pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters,” she said.

We set to work. Momma played one of our new cassettes in Mike's living room stereo. She sang along to Blondie's Greatest Hits, dancing around the living room with a cigarette while Kim and I danced with our shoulders. Momma sat back down to help us sort the coins. I saw her hands shaking as she spread them around, separating silver from copper.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, trying to remember a time during the visit I'd even seen her eat.

“No, baby, just listen to the song,” she said. Her eyes were as flat as the edges of the nickels and as round as quarters. We were almost done sorting.

Momma darted to the bedroom she shared with Mike and came back with stacks of different colored papers held together by rubber bands. She untied them and placed them by the piles of coins: burgundy for pennies, navy for nickels, olive for dimes, and burnt orange for quarters.

“Okay, listen carefully,” she said. “There are 50 pennies in every roll, same as dimes. Forty nickels to a roll, and forty quarters. Put them in stacks before you stick them in the papers, that way you don't miscount and end up short-changing yourself.” She lit another

cigarette and began stacking the quarters in fours.

Kim and I each set to work on a different pile. I put pennies in stacks of ten and grouped the stacks together by fives. Momma had to help us put them into the paper tubes, but once we got the hang of it the pyramid of rolled coins grew higher and higher. I wondered how much money we'd have by the time we were done.

When there weren't enough coins left to roll into anymore tubes, we counted the money. I had never thought of change adding up to large amounts, but we had collected more than \$150 from those beat-up, wrecked cars. Momma said we would split it three ways.

"Let's just take it to the bank," she said. "Y'all don't want to carry all that around in your pocket books."

Kim and I laughed at her strange name for a purse, but we put our sneakers on, thinking about what we'd buy with our share of the money. We ran outside to her dark green Camaro, and I called shotgun. Momma's hands were trembling as she grabbed the steering wheel.

"We'll go to the mall in Dothan," she said.

Mine and Kim's eyes grew big at the mention of a city we'd never been to. We giggled and looked out of the windows at the passing cotton fields and farm lands as Momma sped towards the bank in town. The Camaro's old vinyl seats stuck to our legs and smelled like dog.

A lady in the bank gave Kim and me suckers while another counted out bills to Momma.

"Your daughters are beautiful," she said to her.

"Thank you," Momma answered, her eyes on the green stacking up on the counter.

Kim and I skipped out to the Camaro with our suckers in our mouths; Kim called shotgun this time. We settled into our seats expecting a long ride to Dothan to spend our hard-earned money, but Momma seemed to have forgotten about her promise.

"I'm going to go see a friend real quick," she said.

Kim and I sat quiet. I pulled the sucker off its stick and swirled the tiny orb of candy around in my mouth. Kimberly

crunched on hers and kept chewing on the stick for leftover sugar.

Momma drove away from town in the opposite direction of Mike's house. We arrived at a dilapidated blue house, the paint chipping and windows broken. Huge oak trees shaded everything. Cars sat with their brake pads resting on cinder blocks in the front yard, the grass around them tall enough for me and Kim to disappear into.

Momma rolled the windows down and turned off the car. "I'll be right back," she said and went inside the house.

Kim and I talked about what we were going to buy with our money.

"I want to get a Lisa Frank notebook," I said.

"I want to get my ears pierced," Kim said.

We wondered how much Momma would give us and how much we could buy with it. The air started getting cooler. Mosquitos whined their way into the car. Kim and I swatted them off of each other. Momma came out; her hands were steady.

"Let's go home," she said. I noticed her voice was different. It echoed like she was trying to hold on to a bubble in her mouth while speaking.

Kim pouted. "But you said..."

"Quiet!" Momma shouted. So we were.

—

My favorite nights at Mike's became the nights Momma cooked. Mike, Kim, and I would sit at the table eating pancakes for dinner or dove stew while Momma sat in front of her plate chewing the inside of her cheeks. My least favorite nights were the ones when Mike gave Momma money to buy something quick in town.

Whenever Momma had money, she would go to that same blue house and leave me and Kim in the car. She was never gone for long, but she wasn't herself either. I wasn't sure what she was supposed to be like after years of not seeing her.

Some days Momma would go into the kitchen by herself while Kim and I watched the Disney channel in our pajamas. I'd hear the metallic rustle of aluminum foil followed by the flick and burn of a lighter. Momma would come out a few moments later and

hold both of us in her lap, her hands shaking the entire time; the air tasted like a nine-volt battery.

“I used to hold y’all like this when y’all were babies,” she would say. She would hold us and shake, hold us and shake, until we wiggled our way free or she returned to the kitchen.

—

It was raining the day we drove to the Atlanta airport. The trip took all morning. Momma held our hands and cried the entire way. Kim cried, too, but I just kept letting Momma hold my hand and weep while listening to the pulse of the windshield wipers, waiting for her shakes to reverberate some response in my body. They didn’t.

Kim and I played card games on the plane. I tried to make sense of the time difference awaiting us in Phoenix and kept losing games of speed. We ate our peanuts and drank our sodas and looked out of the small window at the world below us. I thought Momma would have been proud of us for not fighting.

Dad was waiting for us to get off the plane. He asked if we had fun, and Kimberly prattled on about days spent on the trampoline and nights spent watching scary movies.

The Arizona heat pressed upon us as we made it outside to Dad’s truck even though it was nearing nightfall.

“So where is it hotter, Phoenix or Georgia?” Dad asked.

“Georgia,” I said. There was something about all the moisture in the air. In Phoenix, I didn’t feel like I was suffocating.

Alyson Elam is a young mother to a preschool-aged daughter, whom she reads to daily, and a new wife to a journalist, whom she haggles with over the Oxford comma. She recently obtained B.A. degrees in English and in Spanish from Georgia Southern University, where she was Vice President of the Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. She plans on teaching English and Spanish at the secondary school level and intends to spend her summer vacations traveling and writing.

Owing Pretty

| Margaret Yapp

“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.”

-Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa”

—

“You know, you could be really pretty if you just grew your hair out.”

Mary-Rose whispers at me in seventh grade study hall. She leans over her desk and cups one hand around her curly lips like she is telling a secret.

“You really could!” she continues. “Don’t you think, Jeanie?”

Jeanie nods in agreement, and offers me a closed-lip smile. Both of them have painfully straight, light-brown hair grown past their shoulders and side bangs that they keep coyly pushed in front of their eyes. They are the epitome of junior high cool.

My hair is dirty blonde, cut in a stacked bob and curly on the tips. I am something else.

“I know,” I lie, I don’t know. I have no idea what they’re talking about.

“My mom makes me cut it,” I continue. This is true. Up until now, in seventh grade study hall with Mary-Rose and Jeanie, I always thought I could be really pretty if I just cut my hair short.

“Oh, Mags—you look great with a bob!” my mom had always told me.

But Mary-Rose and Jeanie wear black eyeliner to school every day and have boobs and own tight jeans, so I listen to them.

I grow out my hair and later dye it blonder. I secretly buy black eyeliner at Walgreens that I keep in my underwear drawer at home, smuggle to school every morning and apply to the bottom rim of each eye in the bathroom mirror before first period.

Here I am—I want to be pretty.

—

How To Pluck Your Eyebrows:

1. Go to a secluded area where you will not be bothered.
2. Turn on the harsh lighting that picks up every dip, stain, and wrinkle of your skin; do not look at these things.
3. Pick up tight silver tweezers in your dominant hand, press them together with thumb and pointer—this is practice for the big show.
4. Bring the tips together around the unwanted stubby black hairs underneath your eyebrow arches.
5. Pull.
6. Repeat.
7. Repeat again, and again.
8. Do not be embarrassed if you find a few wispy threads in between your brows—you are human.

—

In sixth grade we quietly read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* behind the full bookshelves in our school's little library. All of the girls in the upper unit read the 1970 Judy Blume novel, a rite of passage that we have heard about from older sisters and friends, even our mothers and aunts. During reading time and free time, we quietly turn the thin pages, awkwardly giggling and pointing at the printed questions that we long to ask our mothers.

Are you there God? It's me, Margaret. I just told my mother I want a bra. Please help me grow God. You know where.

We must, we must, we must increase our bust.

—

“Oh, Mags—you look great with a bob!”

“Doesn’t it feel good to feel pretty?” my mom asks me. We are getting dressed together before our family goes out to dinner, putting on mascara and trading floral skirts. It is my birthday, I am eighteen years old.

Everyone tells us we look alike. I have developed her lanky upper half, her thick thighs, and her hands. These hands have been passed down to us from the mothers before her.

Everyone tells us we act alike. We have the same voice and cross our legs at the same spot. Unmistakable mother and daughter, they say when we walk by, our steps the same length.

“Doesn’t it feel good to feel pretty?” I have developed her worry. These hands we have, they are often shaking.

—

My mother hid for five months when she found out her womb was full of me.

She was 21 and I was
some tiny cells in her stomach.

When I was born, she said, I looked
like a rotisserie chicken ~

I didn’t have any hair
until I was three years old.

“Baby bird,” she said. “Baby bird.”

—

Now I am 21 and my mother’s
fingers are worn and stiff.

All of the women that lead
up to me have these hands:

long, thin fingers, round nails with

weird white spots, bony wrists.

Before she died, my great grandmother
cradled mine, said “Mine used to look like that.”

“Baby bird,” she said.
Mine are always shaking.

—

I pluck the first ones. Thick, coarse black hairs interrupting what was before a smooth, pink shell. I am twelve and consciously decide that I am not ready for this part of growing up—pubic hair is for my mom and aunt and grandma, for the old women I see changing at the pool.

Soft blooms of brown, black, or gray, like clouds or tops of trees. What do you do with it? Do you have to get it cut like the hair on your head?

It is not for me, so I pluck them, leaving behind a trail of red soreness.

—

“You know, you could be really pretty if you just wore a little makeup,” Claire tells me.

We are in fourth grade, on the swing set, soaring in unison; and Claire’s sparkly blue eyeshadow and bubblegum lip gloss reflect the sun. She is exotic, she already wears a bra. I pump my legs a few more times and I watch her sparkle. At the highest point of my arc, I release my grip and land on all fours. Run away, run away.

—

In sixth grade at a Catholic elementary school, my aunt read *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* for the first time. She kept the book on her lap, and snuck glances when she thought the nun wasn’t looking. At Catholic school, books about developing bodies and boys were not allowed. These types of things are unnatural.

A nun saw my aunt reading and grabbed the book violently from her hands, stuffed it in the bottom drawer of her teacher’s desk, where it joined the other Naughty Things: lip gloss, nail polish, neon

barrettes.

When the Sister left the room, my aunt leapt out of her chair, and sprinted to the teacher's desk. She flung open the desk drawer, grabbed her book—wrongfully stolen—and ran back to her seat! The likes of it had never been seen before.

Oh, I was a superstar that day! I was a rebel!

—

My grandmother, in the depths of her dementia, doesn't remember that she already put on blush an hour ago. She swirls it on again—the color of pink roses, my favorite, too—in the bathroom, over the sink. Behind her, in the cool alabaster bowl, she leaves a layer of rosy dust.

My grandma has 15-plus bottles of nail polish on her bathroom counter. They are all the exact same color: pearly, light, baby pink. Most are almost empty, crusted shut.

This woman was gorgeous in her youth. From old photos of her I begin to understand how she has always gotten around her slow mind—by using her brilliant black eyes and carved cheekbones, those thick eyebrows that I inherited. Her entire life, she has used her “pretty” to navigate a world that her brain couldn't quite make it through.

Now, she relies on her pretty habits to grasp some semblance of normal: she may not be able to remember when to take her medicine, but she always knows when she is scheduled for a perm.

Here we are—we want to be pretty.

—

Margaret Yapp is a senior at Luther College in Decorah, IA, where she majors in English and Religion. She is the President of her Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. Margaret graduates in May 2015, and hopes to pursue a law degree.

A Slow Dissolution

| Libby Chernouski

Smack! Smack! My paddle hits the water a little too flat as my twelve-year-old muscles strain to drag it through the lake water. I count the strokes before switching to my left side, pulling the water into small green twisters that are lost in our wake as we race across the inlet. Papa is in the rear, countering my weaker efforts with his own strength, propelling us forward faster and faster towards the shore and victory. My sweaty, life-jacketed body rushes into the summer air, bare feet planted on the bottom of the canoe. Papa and I are both breathing hard with the effort as we approach the last ten yards, passing other canoes paddled by other parent/child teams. The end is in sight! I count my strokes. I lean into them harder, I breathe faster, and I forget to switch sides.

We flip, tumbled out of the canoe by the force of our combined perseverance. A dozen feet from the shoreline, we find ourselves abruptly relieved of our forward motion, gasping in the cool green water. One canoe sails past us to win first. Another is only moments behind. Papa is floating on his back, lying exhaustedly in the lake, his face red from effort. I splash hectically in the water, righting our canoe in a last ditch effort to win one of those blue ribbons. Kicking frantically, I grip the side of the canoe tightly and pull-push it the remaining distance. The nose of the canoe scrapes the sandy beach, and we take third place.

—

How was the world formed? This question has spawned many a fantastic tale of gods and beasts, magic and might, all aimed at explaining the phenomenon that is planet earth. Was it through the voice of an almighty creator? A result of an epic battle between the deities? An explosion in the cosmos?

Most scientists hold that, in the beginning of the continents as we know them today, planet earth boasted one large ocean, in which a conglomeration of continents, name Pangea, rested 225

million years ago (Cole 63). It takes millions of years and violent force for this land mass to break into its many parts. The details of this tale of creation differ and are ultimately unknown, but every time the story of earth's formation is told, it is told with fire.

Fire spouts beneath the waters, volcanic activity splits the floor of the oceans, dividing the land on the surface. Magma rolls beneath the earth's crust, upsetting the continental plates, shoving them vehemently against one another, forming the bulging scars of mountain ranges on the surface. Flaming lava shoots into the sky. The earth is on fire as Pangea's slow dissolution continues.

The firebuilders. That's what we were. Papa and I always built the campfires on any family excursion, regardless of how many extended relations attended. He taught me how to stack the logs, how to coax the kindling, and how to fan it all to a blaze. We would man the fire all night long—he adding extra wood, carefully placing each log with his gloved hand, and I mostly poking at the embers with sticks.

When I was younger, we used to take a family vacation every summer. Inevitably, these retreats were always near a body of water: a cottage in Door County, a campsite in Devil's Lake, a cabin on Lake Minocqua. We did it all. We pontooned, we hunted for sea shells, we canoed, kayaked, and waterskied. We enjoyed this natural resource to its fullest.

My father was the one who always planned these getaways. Papa had his list of supplies, first saved onto a floppy disk before I was even in kindergarten. Every vacation, he would print out a fresh copy, going over the list meticulously to ensure that yes, we did remember sunscreen and packed bug spray. He must have liked the planning and organizing, the rituals of preparation; it was how he conducted his whole life. Always prepared, always thorough. There was always a plan.

Somehow, humanity survives the upheaval in the time of the great divide. Over the next thousand years, we build and destroy their empires, invent and instruct, becoming a formidable species.

We spread across the face of the earth, but keep a steady population until about 1400 AD. Since then, we've been growing exponentially. In 1763, a man named James Watt begins the Industrial Revolution with the invention of a powerful steam engine.

—

The Industrial Revolution is a time of significant change for Western Civilization, as steam engines and coal furnaces billow furiously to meet the demands of a now steadily rising population. The puffing steam engines power machines that remove the water from the mining shafts that hold the coal, and the miners dig deeper, hollowing out the mineral-rich earth. With the invention of steam power, the mining and transporting of fossil fuels is suddenly more efficient and profitable—just what is needed to satisfy a growing population's demands (Dukes 11).

But what James Watt and others at the time don't know is the unimaginable impact their progress will have on planet earth. All they are able to see, if they are paying attention, are the symptoms: the thick, toxic clouds of smog that settle over industrialized cities, steeping their inhabitants in asphyxiating blankets of pollution.

—

My brother and I first learned of our father's diagnosis when I was sixteen and he was eleven. We knew things hadn't been going well because Papa had visited several different hospitals over the last year to find some relief from his severe back pain. It was only when he was referred to Froedtert Hospital that he found out what was really causing the back pain.

“Multiple Myeloma.”

The words didn't mean much to me. What I learned later was that this cancer affects the bone marrow, mutating the plasma cells that normally make antibodies. As the number of these cancerous cells increase, so does the level of abnormal proteins in the blood. Papa's naturally occurring proteins, spilled into the blood stream by the increase in cancer cells, became dangerous, compromising the entire immune system and the structural integrity of the skeleton.

Papa explained it to the both of us, saying that they had

caught it early, that there would be chemo, and everything would probably be just fine. He must have mentioned the possibility of death, but even now I don't remember that word being spoken. It was just such an impossibility: Papa was strong, gentle, caring, and quiet, and the human body is an amazingly resilient organism.

I had faith in Papa's full recovery.

Since the Industrial Revolution, we have burned more fossil fuels, such as coal, and released more and more CO₂ into the atmosphere. From the estimated 280 parts per million in the 1780s (and for six thousand years prior), the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide has risen to 360 ppm in roughly two hundred years (Hodgson 128). Today, coal is still used all over the world to transport goods and people and to produce electricity. On average, a coal power station emits 11 million tons of carbon dioxide annually (Hodgson 18).

CO₂ is one of the main components of what has been dubbed the greenhouse effect, whereby energy from the earth is trapped beneath the swirling gasses in our atmosphere. This is a naturally occurring phenomenon and is necessary to produce life on earth—otherwise our planet would be a chilly -18C (Hodgson 106). But the rapid increase of CO₂ in the atmosphere caused by human expansion is exacerbating this thermodynamic process, leading to an unhealthy warming of the planet.

Famously titled global warming, this change in overall temperature brought on by the increase in CO₂ and other natural and anthropogenic gasses has already begun to alter our habitat. Earth's permafrost has begun to melt in places like Alaska and Siberia, and the continued melting of earth's frozen liquids is causing the ocean's to rise. Atmospheric pollution from CO₂ and other minerals has changed earth in its entirety, altering the planet's ecosystem as a whole, compromising its very ability to sustain life.

Papa made it through therapy, through the transplant, and to recovery, and in July 2008, things were exactly how I had prayed for them to be: back to normal. He was in ninety-seven-percent

remission. He did it. The months of vomiting, weakness, and hair loss were over. But, even without the somber threat of death, things were different. After undergoing chemotherapy and his first stem-cell transplant, Papa had to be very careful about his outdoor activities. Too much sunlight, the doctors said, would be dangerous. But he was always careful.

Papa decided to take his doctor's suggestion to replace some of his stem cells with a matching donors', which would help his body reproduce new, cancer-free cells. It would be a preventative measure, an extra step to ensure his health and his continued time with us, his family. So, it was smart to decide to have this extra procedure. The insurance companies, however, didn't agree.

I remember Papa composing letters to the insurance company. I have never read those letters. Did he explain that his family needed him? Did he say that it would be more cost-effective to do the procedure now then to wait for the cancer to return and do chemo again? I trusted, as I had done before, that his quiet strength would work things out.

One of his doctors told Papa about a post-treatment trial drug that could be provided to him free of charge, if he agreed to be part of a study. It was a newer drug whose effects on the recovery process were still being investigated. Papa agreed to be part of that experiment. It was how he was able to convince the insurance company to fund the procedure: take the experimental drug for twelve months, free of charge, greatly reducing the cost of the procedure.

The cell infusion went off without a hitch. Papa was released from the hospital relatively quickly after his treatment. But, as with the earlier treatment, this one also came with risks. This time, however, the risks were increased, since the stem-cells transplanted were not from his own body. Papa began wearing a breathing mask and a large, tan sunhat whenever he wanted to go outdoors. He wore long sleeves and pants despite the warm May weather. Any other year, he would be down on his knees in the backyard, planting yellow-centered, periwinkle pansies alongside my mother. But this spring, he avoided the new springtime that blossomed around us.

—

Supporting life as we know it requires a very specific ecosystem. Global warming has already begun to compromise this structure in a number of ways, and it may only be a matter of time until life on earth is unsustainable. Far from recovering from the excess CO₂ in its atmosphere, planet earth is continuing its exhibit symptoms of a destruction brought on by cancerous humankind. It is unknown how quickly these climate changes will continue to occur, whether they will be the result of a relatively steady process or happen suddenly, in a catastrophic cooling brought on by the halting of the Gulf Stream through changes in ocean temperature (Hodgson 114). Scientists can construct models, make calculations, measure current atmospheric and oceanic changes, but they cannot predict the future with certainty. The theories about the world's future, like its beginning, are little more than myths inspired by what we think we know about our planet, how we are capable of understanding this seemingly resilient organism.

But can we really wait to find out the end of the story before taking action? The World Health Organization estimates that climate change is already causing about 150,000 deaths annually, and this number will only rise (Hodgson 115). Even as so-called first world countries are making the environmentally conscious switch from coal to gas, newly industrialized nations are beginning to use more and more of this fossil fuel, spitting out CO₂ in the process (Hodgson 115).

Temperature and population levels continue to rise. Forests are levelled, oceans and lakes polluted, and biodiversity lost. There is no guarantee that the next generation will be able to enjoy the earth as we are able to. There is no guarantee that humanity will endure, that we will always be able to take vacations by the lake. Taking action with the information we have about the planet and its future—incomplete though it is—may be our only option to begin averting, negating, or merely slowing the world's demise.

day after Father's Day, Papa went back to Froedtert. Something was wrong. He was nauseas, and he made frequent trips to the bathroom. They took him off of a pill that had been intended to speed his recovery.

Now, Papa's body was once again fighting against itself, frantically defending Papa from the foreign stem cells. The disease, called Graft vs. Host (GVHD), progressed quickly. The pill had opened his body's eyes, and now Papa's white blood cells saw their foreign enemies. At the same time, the transferred cells became aware that they were surrounded by foreign tissue. The fresh, stronger stem cells began attacking Papa's good cells. His immune system, weakened purposefully by the chemo to aid in smooth grafting, was not able to protect him against himself, and the cells that could have saved him began slowly killing him.

—

It's summer 2013. The setting sun streaks through the trees, and I get strong whiffs of animals as I walk briskly on the blacktop path. The walkway meanders through the Racine Zoo, lined with white paper bags that glow softly with candlelight. There's a band playing on stage, and people are milling around their Relay for Life team sites. My stomach clenches slightly every time I see someone who knows me, who knew him.

The names on the memorial lanterns float past as I walk, some decorated with small hearts or a child's drawing. As I round the northern corner, I see it. Someone has made one. It's a simple design: his name in green letters and a small cross. Bending my knees, I examine the lantern more closely, resting on the toes of my athletic shoes. I sit there in silence.

If I listen for it, I can hear Lake Michigan lapping against the shore, the peaceful waves advancing, then retreating back into the dark waters. He's gone, and the earth continues.

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The Eyes of Eckleburg Are Watching You

| Rachel Ginder

“A book jacket or cover is a selling device, close to advertising in its form and purpose, but also specific to a product that plays a teasing game of hide and seek with commerce. The reason for the ambiguity is that books have never been purely consumer goods.”

—Alan Powers, *Front Cover: Great Book Jackets and Cover Design*

When Charlie called the library asking for a copy of “that grey book,” we all suspected the title he wanted, but didn’t want to believe it. One of the librarians had the brilliant idea of pulling a copy of *Grey’s Anatomy* and giving him that, hoping he wouldn’t know the difference. Most public libraries get their share of senior citizens who dutifully request the latest *New York Time’s* bestseller with little notion of plot or author. For my part, I was just concerned that Charlie, who was approaching ninety, wouldn’t survive the waiting list.

At the height of its popularity, *Fifty Shades of Grey* had over 80 people waiting to read it, mostly middle-aged mothers and young women quick to claim they had no idea what the erotic romance novel was actually about. All the more reason to grab Charlie a DVD of *Grey’s Anatomy* and cross our fingers. But there was no fooling the man. Even though he appeared frail enough to topple over in a sudden gust of wind, Charlie was very assertive. He insisted he wanted “the book with the handcuffs on the cover.”

Why do we keep judging books by their covers, even when we know nothing about the content inside? We’ve been warned against this practice for centuries. The original saying can be traced back to author George Elliot and her 1860 book *The Mill on the Floss*. Oddly enough, Elliot penned these words several decades before the cover’s chief use was anything other than protecting the

pages inside. She seemed to have a premonition about what was to come, as ornamental designs slowly expanded from the spines of expensive volumes and twisted their way to the covers on front. Still, it wasn't until the turn of the century, and the glitz and glamour of the 1920's, that we began to see cover illustrations as we know them today.

It is F. Scott Fitzgerald, not George Elliot, who is really to blame for our obsession with book covers. The iconic dust jacket for the first edition of *The Great Gatsby* made it one of the most memorable books of all time. Two bright yellow eyes stare out from a dark blue background, and readers are immediately hooked. Fitzgerald himself was instantly taken with the illustration done by artist Francis Cugat. The cover was presented to Fitzgerald before he finished his novel, and it is generally believed that the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg were inspired by the design. In fact, Fitzgerald was behind in his manuscript when he wrote a desperate letter to his editor Max Payne about the cover. "For Christ's sake don't give anyone that jacket you're saving for me," Fitzgerald pleaded, "I've written it into the book."

I found myself thinking about Fitzgerald a lot as I worked at the library that summer. I felt like the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg were watching me as I waded knee deep through piles of books. Between shelving children's paperbacks and assisting little old ladies with their Kindles, my boss had asked me to "weed" the nonfiction. This is librarian lingo for getting rid of any volume five years or older to sell at the annual book sale. The idea was that if it wasn't getting checked-out, it needed to clear up space for the books that were. Libraries are far from a lucrative business. With limited money and space, we were desperate to draw people in with flashy bestsellers and claim what quarters we could for the outdated volumes of research.

I was supposed to be unbiased while pulling titles for their book sale fate, but you can only perch so long on top of a metal book cart before your legs start to ache, and I naturally felt more sympathy for certain sections of the Dewey Decimal system than for others. The history of *The New York Times* was worth shoving back

on the shelf even if it hadn't been touched in six years. However, the self-help books on how to find the man of your dreams had to go. I figured knowledge like that was worth about a quarter.

Then there were the sections that I pulled purely based on the covers. I didn't realize I was doing it until somewhere deep in the mid-240's, and I want to say I was racked with guilt. But I wasn't. Instead, I approached my piles of books with practicality. I had to do what was best for the library. If the neon shapes on a cover from 1988 were fading fast, no one would check it out. It didn't matter if the information was as outdated as an old computer manual or as relevant as recipes for pumpkin pie.

Yet, the really timeless books showed no age beyond their cracked binding. If a cover for a history book is a black-and-white photograph from WWII, it could've been published yesterday or in 1949. Rarely were these books collecting any dust. In fact, the simplest covers often belong to the library's oldest books, poetry from John Milton or theories from Sigmund Freud, books that we'd never sell no matter what the last check-out date was.

J.D. Salinger took one of the strongest stances for simplicity in cover design. However, his outlook was most likely fueled by a dislike for misleading illustrations, not an attempt to prove his books' timelessness. In 1953, Ace Books published his book *For Esme—with Love and Squalor*. In what was apparently an attempt to market the book as a racy romance novel, the cover depicted a seductive blonde with squinting eyes and bright red lips. However, Salinger's Esme is a pre-adolescent child who forms an innocent friendship with a lonely soldier. Naturally, Salinger was livid about the misrepresentation of his work, and from then on demanded complete control over his book jackets. Even in death, Salinger's strict publishing clause still precedes him, and it's rare to find a copy of his work with anything more than the title and author's name.

Salinger was known for his eccentricity, but maybe he was right in demanding complete control over his book covers. Classics authors have seen countless makeovers through various editions, causing readers to speculate if the original storyteller would approve of the way their work is currently being interpreted. Sylvia Plath,

for instance, didn't have Salinger's foresight to protect the covers of her books. She was probably occupied with other problems in her life, and it would appear that the designers behind *The Bell Jar's* 50th anniversary edition were completely ignorant to what Plath's struggles actually were. The book, released in early 2013 by British publishing company Faber and Faber, is a bright candy apple red with lime green typography. The woman featured on the front is heavily made-up with lips and nails to match the background, and she's been paused in the middle of applying even more powder to her snowy white chin. Her pin-up girl image is reflected in the compact mirror she holds in her hand.

The original cover, released in 1963 just months before Plath's suicide, suggests quite a different version of the story. The girl on this cover sits hunched with her hand on her cheek, a dark and blurry figure obscured behind an actual glass jar. The original publishers didn't know Plath was going to commit suicide. They didn't have over fifty years of feminism and women's equality movements behind them. They didn't even have Plath's real name. The book was first published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. However, they did appear to have read the story beyond the first few chapters. They understood the book was about Ester Greenwood's psychological downward spiral, not an endless foray into the life of a 1950's socialite.

However, half a century later, the story has turned into something different, a product to be marketed to a whole new generation of women. Faber and Faber decided the best way to do this was to color it like a jolly rancher and imply that it's about women's fashion. Never mind that the original story is a cult classic now studied in high school and college classrooms.

While I can't agree with Faber and Faber's design decision, it must be acknowledged that today's book covers are usually created to sell the stories inside, often to a specific audience. In a world entering information overload, how else can we make one story stand out from the next? The books that aren't presented in this way are overlooked, forgotten, stuck on library shelves to collect dust and eventually be sold for a quarter.

To the detriment of Salinger and the glee of Faber and Faber, we find that the cover of a book makes a statement, especially if it's being read in public. No one better understands the book as a status symbol than fashion designer Kate Spade, who recently released a line of purses made to look exactly like classic novels. The idea is to appear as if you're carrying a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Age of Innocence* into a party, but the "book" snaps open with ample room to store all life's little necessities. Apparently nothing says stylish like combining a famous New York designer with a classic nineteenth-century author, and the concept was high-class enough to garner a \$328 price tag. These books are the ultimate fashion accessory because of their loudly redesigned and sparkling covers.

While these purses might seem like a direct insult to Plath or Salinger, I happen to think that if the Fitzgeralds were alive today, Zelda would be happily carrying a clutch version of *The Great Gatsby* all over New York. Scott and Zelda realized that they were as widely known for their fashionable image as for the work they produced, and that the image and the writing would have to go hand-in-hand.

It seems only fitting that with the 2013 movie version of *The Great Gatsby*, flappers are back in vogue, and sales for Fitzgerald's most famous book are sky high, prompting the release of a movie tie-in version with Leonardo DiCaprio and Carey Mulligan on the cover. The *New York Times* commented on the new edition of the iconic novel by pointing out that movie inspired covers usually fail to outsell the originals. Gatsby publisher Scribner also acknowledged this by printing a mere 350,000 copies of the movie cover version, knowing full well that the book easily sells 500,000 a year even without the movie publicity. However, publishers continue to use the actors' faces in an attempt to inspire new readers who never heard of the book before the film, even if more serious readers know to avoid the slick marketing ploy. In fact, Kevin Cassem of Manhattan bookstore *McNally Jackson*, refused to stock the movie version. The *Times* reported him as saying the new cover is "God-awful." He even added, "I think it would bring shame to anyone who was trying to read that book on the subway."

Touché, Mr. Cassem. Unfortunately, nobody bothered to poll subway riders at the time of *Gatsby's* movie release. I did, however, strike up a conversation with a friend of mine who admitted a similar embarrassment when reading the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. She chose to download the eBook version so no one would see the cover of what she was reading, expressing horror at the women she saw carrying *Fifty Shades* into doctors' offices and bus stops like a sign that proudly reads, "Look at me, I'm scandalous."

But what would become of Charlie and "that grey book?" He called dutifully every few weeks to see where he was on the waiting list, and he was pleased when his turn finally came to check it out. He then returned the book three weeks later without embarrassment, and without further comment. His name promptly went down on the list for the next two in the series.

I am reminded of George Eliot's famous words every day that I work at the library. I think of them every time a patron comes up to me asking for a book. It's not uncommon for a reader to forget the title and even the author. Often, I'm forced to find a novel based solely on a description of the cover and my own intuition. That's one of the reasons we post not just a list, but pictures of all the latest bestsellers right behind the circulation desk.

I know that when a housewife wants a book with a bride on the cover, she is probably looking for the latest Nora Roberts. I know that when a middle-aged man asks for a book with a soldier on the cover, he is probably looking for the new Tom Clancy. I know because I too have judged books by their covers. I do it when I work, when I pull outdated volumes for the book sale, and when I check a book out for myself and take it home to enjoy. I, and thousands of others, do exactly what publishing companies have been conditioning us to do since the days of *Gatsby*, and possibly even before. I fall prey to a cover that speaks to me directly because it was created to entice someone of my age, my gender, and my social status. Is this really such a terrible thing to do? To take a story and tell the world exactly what kind of audience would enjoy it with an image that's presented right on front?

The trouble is, we first have to first interpret what image

is the correct image. Will the cover be the right one to convey the story underneath? I look at Charlie as he carries out his copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and I wonder who could ever decide such a thing.

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Lessons from the Garden

| Jennifer Bilton

The weed asks the flower, “What makes you different from me?”

The flower tells the weed, “They tell me I am beautiful, I have a reason to be.”

The garden tells its children they are valuable because they came from this earth. “You have much to give, even if they can’t see your worth.”

The gardener shuns the weed, exhumes its body, and picks the flower.

—

I remember the summer I fell in love with flowers. Not the packaged roses crumpled in vases at the grocery store. Not even the potted plants at the nursery. Flowers that grew out of the ground and over my head. Standing in the garden nestled in the wall of Cashiers Valley and staring up at the trees scraping the sky, I felt so small.

My grandparents brought me down to the garden for the first time near the end of my seventeenth summer. We put on long pants to protect us from the bugs and sturdy shoes to scale down the mountain. Around the side of the garage, past the row of hydrangea bushes, down the steep hill coated with leaves and lined with trees, and beyond the tan rocky clearing beneath the porch towering overhead on sturdy wooden beams like stilts, lay the rectangular plot that would come to define my mountain summers.

My grandmother taught me how after the blooming season, you must dig the dahlia bulbs from the ground and store them in the cool, dark basement for the winter. She recited the name of each flower proudly making its way into the world, like a walking gardener’s encyclopedia. My grandfather stood outside the picket fence bordering the garden, examining the tomatoes. Together, as if nurturing were in their DNA, they made things grow. They grew a

family around them, planted a garden, and built lives around both.

The promise of flowers draws me back each summer, a hope that still resonates within me, calling me home.

—

Flowers speak a language that weeds don't understand. But maybe they just haven't been taught.

Petals become letters that grow into deeper meaning.

If you open a dictionary and run your finger down the L's, you will see Primrose, Ambrosia, and Anemone; Carnations, Lilacs, and Roses. They speak different dialects of love but tune to the same pitch.

If a lover gives you a rainflower he is drowning you with sincerity. He will never forget you. He will atone for his sins. He will love you back. You can give thanks with a rose the color of raspberries. He will reciprocate with a Hydrangea for the gratitude of being understood.

Orchids reach for the clouds but want not their tears. They are refined, a cultivated beauty. Geraniums stand vibrant on porches over valleys, the scarlet clusters accented with stars and stripes speak to gentility and determination. Dahlias flourish in valley gardens, their heavy rainbow heads reaching towards the trees with dignity.

Rosemary for remembrance, olives for peace. While Ivy tells of good news, mint harbors suspicion.

But the sunny heads of marigolds bring pain and grief, where Love Lies Bleeding overflows with hopelessness. Morning Glory unfurls for the sun, but retreats as the trumpets curl, its beauty lost in vain.

Weeds speak lessons of resilience, of hardiness. But the gardener does not speak their language.

—

Together we foraged the garden for the prettiest blooms, admiring their vibrant colors and reveling in their perfect symmetry, careful not to cut the buds. My grandmother and I carried our collection of dahlias, daisies, hydrangeas, and ferns back up the hill in a tin watering can. As we stood at the kitchen sink arranging

our floral plunder, she taught me about balance and shape. *Peel the leaves from the stem to keep the water fresher. Balance the bright blooms with tall swoops of green fern. Keep in mind the scale of the vase. Three is a golden number.* With beginners luck, I wielded my power as my grandmother worked on a large arrangement and I, on many smaller ones. She praised me for my eye, but it seemed to come naturally, the arranging itself as well as the love that blossomed the moment I completed my first vase. I felt almost like an artist of the earth, stealing some of Mother Nature's power of arranging the world, and assembling it the way I wanted, a way that allowed me to keep it for myself.

—

Any and every gardening magazine will educate inquiring gardeners on the most sought after advice. How to kill weeds, in increasing order of severity:

Plan your approach. The garden is a battlefield and weeds are the invaders. Be vigilant.

Cut off their supplies. Do not aid the enemy with extra water and fertilizer rations, even at the flower's risk.

Pulling weeds is most effective when they are young. Pulling them from surface level will not win the war.

Attempt to eradicate their taproots before their grasp grows too far from your reach. Use a shovel like a gun if you must.

Use chemical warfare as a last resort. Be green, if possible. Herbicides can kill germinating lawn seeds, pose risk to animals and humans, and damage the environment. Prepare for sacrifices. And good luck to you.

—

If you want to kill flowers, use scissors and put them in a vase.

—

But now, on some level, I dread the arranging. Dread the sound of my grandmother's refined southern drawl: "I'll let you do it. You're always so *good* at arranging them. I can't wait to see what you come up with."

It's not the miniature bugs that get brought in the house,

hiding behind the folds of the dahlia's petals. It's not the wet clumps of leaves and stalks and stems that collect in the sink. It's the worry of arranging them just so. The demands of balance, cutting tall blooms down to size, desperately willing shorter ones to reach the water. But also, the disappointment of always trying to recapture that first moment, summers ago, and like the stems, coming up short. My grandmother and I, like artists at the sink, collaborating over our designs. She would lean in, occasionally holding up a bloom so I could insert another one into my collection, admiring my work. "You're *good* at this, Jennifer."

And like an apprentice, thrilled by praise from the master, I understand what I imagine to be the slight remorse of taking the master's place. Of graduating. Of doing it alone.

—

Humans make weeds. They decide what a weed is and what is not, defining nature to their fancy. A weed in one garden is a flower in another. A weed to a gardener is a prize to a child.

Humans have made weeds uglier. We have tainted nature's green growth, however undesirable, with unpleasant undertones. Pearlwort and Liverwort yield to Ragwort and Ribwort Plantain's unsightly names. Fat Hen, Hairy Tare, and Hairy Bitter Cress are made more unwelcome in this world despite their blooms.

Humans turn to language to determine a weed's worth and to justify its unworthiness.

—

I struggle with definitions. I worry over what I am to be and how I am to get there.

Am I a garden? Do I wall out the world with wooden fences, protecting what's inside? The garden can't survive the winter. How can I love a 10x5 foot world for its natural beauty when human hands put it there? *Can I exist on my own?*

Do I have enough power to be a gardener, to shape the world I want to my liking? They must get their hands dirty. They must plant seeds that might not grow.

Am I a writer? I often find inspiration in sadness. I can write a weed beautiful, but do I believe my new definition?

—
The dictionary says that to find a weed, you must simply look for a plant growing where it is not wanted. In the garden. In the roof gutter.

A weed would say you must simply look where nothing else can grow. In the desert. In the cracks of the sidewalk.

—
Weeds can be beautiful, if you look the right way.

They need not be so unwelcome. They are the stuff of ancient remedies in faraway places. They are the stuff of child's play. Searching for luck among the clover. The dandelion crowns on children's heads, their wispy wishes sent on the wind.

Give up the chemicals; let the weeds protect your garden. They can attract beneficial insects to your garden, and also deter or distract the pests. They can blanket the soil, harboring the rainfall and sharing it with the flowers. Their deep roots can uncover elements deep within the soil, bring them to the surface. They can break through hardened soil, helping other plants reach their potential, letting them grow their roots deeper, like good neighbors.

Let them teach you a lesson, in growing, in nurturing, in tenacity.

Look closer, look deeper. Do not be at war with the earth—let the weeds save you the trouble.

—
The world opened up for me, down in that garden. The earth let me in and told me the secrets of the breeze that made the stalks dance. I took those cherished moments—the gleaming sun, the cool air, the immense height of the sky above—and folded them in my heart like petals pressed between pages.

I am no gardener. I can only hope the green thumbs of my grandparents have nestled in my DNA as well. Hope that maybe one day I can replace all that I've taken. Hope that I can build a garden and a family to revolve around it on my own, someday. I know their green thumbs have molded my heart like clay. I can be any number of things: a weed, an encyclopedia, a watering can.

—

When the plants speak to you, open up your heart to listen.

Flowers remind you to acknowledge and treasure the beauty around you. Beauty you do not have to ask for. They teach you to admire the strength of small blooms, with their heavy heads and skinny necks, reaching toward the sun. They help you say the words buried in your heart, fluent in the language of human emotion.

Weeds teach you to be indiscriminate, teach you the value of meager things. They grow without praise, grow in spite of threats. And in their hardiness, they speak languages of tenacity. Their tone is insistent—they are always reaching for something.

Flowers and weeds may speak of different experiences, but their message is the same:

Bloom where you are planted, and whatever you do, grow into something brilliant.

—

I've done some digging of my own.

I brought a camera that day, on August 14, 2010, when my grandparents brought me down to the garden for the first time.

The first photo: My grandfather standing behind the thicket of cosmos outside the borders of the garden. His face is obscured by the bush taller than his head, but he holds up a perfect red tomato above the clearing. *Papa, smile!* And he does, even though I can't see his face, I know he is smiling for me.

The fourth picture: My grandmother in front of the stake of deep red dahlias with sunny centers, long, thick stems leaning towards her. Scissors raised. Shot before the moment of impact.

My grandfather emerges from her right shoulder, bent over. Again, a branch covers his face. I almost didn't see him.

I take a picture of the cosmos even after my grandmother says she hates them. "They grow too high, too fast. I'm going to clear them down next year." They are weeds, despite their thin orange petals that burst open to greet the universe.

My grandfather beaming, holding his basket of tomatoes. The flash glints off of his glasses, the yellow cosmos dot the background. Looking back at this picture, my heart beams as well.

Later, my grandfather holds the camera. A shot of my

grandmother looking down, holding up two bright red blooms with orange streaks, one in each hand. I can hear her saying *Look at these. Aren't these gorgeous?* as I look on with a small smile. We put them in the watering can.

The last photo from the garden: my grandmother and I standing side by side, holding our containers full of flowers, scissors still in hand. Daisies grace the bottom left corner and a heavy pink and white striped dahlia leans its way into the frame. I lean in towards my grandmother; dark red flowers fill the space between us.

—

I went down to the garden in November, but I couldn't go all the way. Standing on the hill, I looked down at the clearing, the leveled ground, the fence keeping nothing in. I came to the wrong place to find comfort, I think to myself.

From this angle I see that the garden hangs over the hill. I can see the wooden beams that hold it up from underneath. I see the branch poking up from the clearing, missing the home that belongs on top. The emptiness startles me. The colors that I expect to wait for me at the bottom of the hill are replaced with the brown dirt, the brown leaves on the ground, the brown bark of the naked trees.

I am reminded that nothing is unsupported. The plot of earth that harbors so much life is held up by dead logs, the dahlia stalks are held up by stakes, the garden is held up by the hands that tend to it and the hands that weed it.

I try to let the emptiness bed my worries. I look to the ground for answers. The next time I return, in May or June, I will stand in this spot a different person. The ground will meet me, beneath my feet as it always does. The garden will meet me in my search for answers with its flowers, with its weeds, saying, *this is all I can offer you*. I will stand in this spot, looking at new version of old flowers, harboring new fears to old questions, but I will be different. If I buried my worries on this hill, I wonder what would grow. The ground will meet me in its constancy, and I will be left to decide whether my footprints are flowers or weeds.

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Thundering

| Jessica Compton

“You should totally come check out the Topanonna tonight,” Morgan encouraged in a lilting South African accent. It was hard to tell whether her bleached hair and bronze skin were artificial or truly sun kissed, but as she finished off her Angkor beer, her mildly plump body candidly testified to the accommodation of a few extra drinks.

“Yeh, it’s the chillest place in town,” Hayley, her Kiwi companion, agreed. Tints of red glimmered in her otherwise brunette hair, which was carelessly pulled into a loose bun on the top of her head. “Ev’rybody is so, so friendly. Loads of backpackers are coming in and out all the time, so you’re always meeting people. I’m so glad I found it.”

My three week stint in Cambodia included twelve other companions, a tour bus, and a thorough itinerary, so this spontaneous invitation offered at a cheap restaurant along Phnom Penh’s riverfront was an unexpected start to my travels. It was only my second day here, and I was already beginning to resent the organized structure of the trip. I fiddled with the coconut leaf bowl in front of me, unable to eat another chalky bite of my first Cambodian cuisine specialty, Amok Trei, a fish coconut curry soup served with the typical perfectly round scoop of steamed rice. Despite street kids hassling me to buy scarves and postcards for the past fifteen minutes, I remained under the two second periodic breeze of the restaurant’s oscillating fan, unwilling to face the sticky humidity outside. This heat was my punishment for coming to Cambodia in May, the dry season for rice patties and tourists alike. When Morgan and Hayley entered the restaurant, the kids abandoned me, hoping to find more eager customers in the new arrivals. As they continued to try to sell their paraphernalia, Morgan patiently answered their stream of questions.

“Buy some bracelets from me?”

“No thank you, we don’t need any.”

“You can take back to your mom or sisters!” another persistent girl pushed. With creased eyebrows and a jutting lower lip, a whiny pout replaced the angelic face I saw mere moments ago.

“We’re not tourists. We teach school here.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

I couldn’t help but eavesdrop. Curiosity, followed closely by envy, got the better of me. They were my age, and they had begun their lives. While I plodded along pursuing my undergrad degree, teaching English abroad someday only a blurry future possibility, Morgan and Hayley were doing it. They were independent, living in a foreign place with real jobs. *I must talk to these girls.*

“Well, that sounds pretty cool,” I replied. “Where is this place? What is it exactly? I don’t really know what I’m up to tonight, but maybe...”

My good girl reputation has followed me into adulthood. Growing up, I was the over achieving perfectionist. I never drank, never had a boyfriend, and rarely missed class or church. If there is such a thing as “safe risks,” those are the only ones I took—hiking a dozen miles, beating the record on high ropes courses, dancing like a fool, and engaging strangers in conversations. But I liked it that way. Though I was innocent, I was also the responsible, mature one, the person everyone came to with their issues.

“The Topanonna is the hostel we’re both staying at. It’s also got a great bar and lounge, and it is *the* place to hang out,” Hayley explained.

“Say, why wait ‘til tonight? What are you up to right now?” Morgan posed. “We can all grab a tuk tuk and ride over there together.”

Considering Morgan’s invitation, the whimsical adventurer in me agreed without hesitation, while the safe rule-follower cautioned her. *Can I trust them? What would happen if I said yes? What would I be missing if I declined?* Morgan slouched in the chair, her double-D cleavage threatening to fall out of her low rib-neck tank top. I shifted my glance to Hayley. Surrounded by a dash of

light freckles, her crystal blue eyes were simultaneously piercing as diamonds and milky as unstirred coffee cream. Neither Morgan nor Hayley were wearing shoes, and they didn't seem concerned to be standing barefoot on the un-swept restaurant tiles. The two looked like they had been best friends for years. They seemed enough like me, wearing the same type of flowy five dollar elephant print pants I bought the day before. I wanted to get to know them, so I suppressed my reservations.

“No plans,” I shrugged. “Let's go!”

We piled into a tuk tuk, Cambodia's open-air carriage cab pulled by motor bike, and headed for the Topanonna. On the way, I learned that Morgan and Hayley had only met two nights before at a party. Hayley opened the Happy Pizza box and pulled out a cheesy slice, offering some to me. Realizing this really could be ganja-fortified, I declined.

“We got jipped, Mo. This is not the real stuff,” Hayley bemoaned.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Oh believe me, another guy at the Topanonna got some real Happy Pizza last week. You could *taste* it. And definitely feel it.” I laughed along.

We pulled up to a headache-inducing yellow cinderblock building. It displayed a black outline of the cityscape, and an artsy, sliding iron-gate resting open against the wall. Under the black and red striped hood I read the bold, lowercase letters: top banana. In a moment of embarrassing epiphany, I realized this was the Topanonna Hayley had raved over. *Top Banana*. Ah, that makes a little more sense. We climbed up a very vertical staircase, switch backed, and scaled perilously steeper stairs verging on ladder status to the open air lounge.

I definitely would not have ended up at a place like the Top Banana on my own. The hostel had all the necessary amenities—Wi-Fi, a western toilet, a well-stocked bar—but it was the environment and the people that gave the Top Banana its trendy, hipster feel. The speakers jammed a playlist of electric guitar music and hard rock, and behind rows of alcohol bottles, the chalkboard wall decoratively

listed the bar menu specials. After we splayed across the low level couches, I checked out a group of lean, scruffy-faced guys smoking against the porch rail. One glassy-eyed woman with matted hair staggered over to the group and fell onto each of them consecutively until the last man gripped her waist and conceded an occasional kiss or rear grab. Eventually she stumbled over to her beanbag in the corner, collapsing into it with her legs spread wide, silently begging for a man to give her some attention.

Incredulous. That's all I felt as Hayley and Morgan relayed their stories of winding up in Phnom Penh. Halfway through her college education and teacher licensure at her home in Christ Church, New Zealand, Hayley got antsy. She decided to sell her only valuable possession, an acoustic guitar she used at night gigs, and made her way to Cambodia. Three weeks before I met her, Hayley arrived in Phnom Penh on her own without any plans or preparations. "After only forty-eight hours, I was miserable and lonely. The hostel I was staying in was a total dump, and I wasn't meeting anyone. Now that I'm at the Top Banana, lit'rally ev'rything is different."

She confessed that she only had a hundred dollars to her name and needs to make her forty dollar paycheck last through the month. "It'll all work out," she shrugged, without any discernible concern. *This cannot be real. What are you going to do without money?*

Three months ago, Morgan renounced her privileged life in South Africa and moved to Cambodia with her girlfriend. A few weeks later, she was single, kicked out of the flat they were renting together, and nearly broke. When she did stumble upon the Top Banana, it felt right. The day before we met, rather than heading to the airport and returning home as her round trip ticket instructed, she decided to stay in Phnom Penh. *You intentionally missed your plane home? Seriously?* She doesn't have any regrets, though. Everybody, she emphasizes for the fifth time, is just so friendly and happy. "I love it here, and I wasn't ready to leave. So I didn't."

Because I didn't understand these two, I wanted to hear their take on issues I had already noticed plaguing Cambodia. I began with the street children that bothered us earlier at the

restaurant.

“Are those kids really trying to earn money for school?”

“Maybe a select few,” Hayley began. “But nah, most of them have sold that stuff along the riverfront every day since they were four years old.”

“What about the classroom? Is it hard for you to teach not knowing any Khmer?”

“Eh, I have a small chalkboard the size of a window. There are only three pencils and not much paper. None of the kids are really learning, and all of the grades are fake, anyway, so none of it matters,” Morgan revealed. “The government won’t let you fail them either. They all pass with good marks.”

“What?! Doesn’t that bother you?” I asked, failing to suppress my shock. “Don’t you think that’s inhibiting their education in the long run?”

“Maybe so, but that’s just the way it is here. Absolutely nothing needs to change.”

“What about all of the prostitutes and child trafficking? The sex industry is a pretty big issue here,” I pressed. Surely they disagreed with those practices. “Even *I* see women standing out on street corners, and I’m oblivious to a lot of things. We shouldn’t try to combat that?”

“Definitely not. We’ve befriended a lot of prostitutes, and all the ones we’ve met like it. They don’t want to do anything else.”

My initial incredulity swelled as they shared their thoughts.

“I’m not saying we need to come in and change everything about this culture. It’s wonderful, and in the little time I’ve spent here, the Cambodians are some of the happiest people I have ever encountered,” I acknowledged. “But you’re telling me that if your prostitute friend was offered a skilled job with the same pay, she would continue to be a prostitute?”

“Yeah, she would keep selling herself,” Hayley said.

“That’s what we love about this place, though. The traffic is crazy, the people are poor, the government is nuts-o, but it all kind of works.”

An hour later, I was lying on a beanbag next to Morgan,

tipsy from a poorly mixed two thirds Bacardi mojito. The bright red walls displayed a funky purple and orange rendition of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and past guests' sharpied forget-me-nots. In the corner, an electric piano and mike were set up for live musicians. Above me, the ceiling was tiled with a green "I heart Ireland" t-shirt, a local Cambodian radio station flag, and more graffiti. While most people signed off with a short "Live it up" or "Phnom Penh is the shit," Frank's rap took up a whole ceiling tile. It contained the typical messages—I wanna live life, smoke lots of weed, and have world peace. Right.

"Why is there a life jacket on the ceiling? And how did people write up there?" I asked, my mind more blurry than usual.

"Somebody told me the Top Banana used to be on a boat. It sank out in the Mekong River and those are the old walls," Morgan said. "The life jacket commemorates the old days."

This hippy roof top lounge and the people here did not make me uncomfortable, but it was so not me. I wondered what my friends at home would think, how anyone who knows who I am would react to seeing me with this Bohemian crowd. Maybe it was the vastly different lifestyle, but I was strangely intrigued by everything Hayley and Morgan did. I knew I did not want to live like them, and I was convinced they could not always be as satisfied as they sounded, but I still found their *carpe diem* attitude appealing.

These two were bonafide Bohos, and they lived far outside my established safe-risk zone. Though it seemed to be working for them, I couldn't drop the feeling that eventually this practice of "throwing caution to the wind" would catch up with them. They drank the city's tap water. *Until you're reeling with dysentery.* They laughed at the idea of malaria pills. *Until that one mosquito bite.* They regularly rode on motor bikes with strangers. *Until you're the real life Taken victim.* They seemed to echo Timon's "hakuna matata" philosophy, but even characters in the Lion King can't simplify life to that degree. After spending a few hours with Morgan and Hayley, I realized that scraping by day to day is dreamily romanticized. Sure, the Top Banana is a cool place, but how can you live here long term—party after party, Happy Pizza after Happy Pizza, washed down

with yet another drink? How can you be so complacent, believing Cambodia is perfect?

Two days after my experience at the Top Banana with Morgan and Hayley, May 15 arrived, and Cambodia's wet season supposedly began. The heat was no less miserable than May 14, and the dry rice patties across the country received no relief. *We are tourists shuffling around behind our guide. We are hippies living the Dream, but our throats are parched.* The following day, the first sprinkle refreshed Cambodian plains, wetting its appetite and promising good nourishment. It ended ten minutes later as abruptly and surprisingly as it began. A week later, I jolted awake, alarmed by the powerful clamor trembling from the outer reaches of the night skies. It was a roar of thunder as I had never heard before, booming and boundless. *I am a traveler, it quaked. I will bring the rains.*

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Emotional Insulation

| Mary Imgrund

It is unlikely that A&E will make a show about it, but emotional hoarding is described as an inability to let go of certain feelings resulting in a stagnation of personal growth. Everyone collects certain friends, ideologies, even grudges, but when it is time to abandon those that are no longer relevant, many find it hard to say goodbye. This sense of security we find within our own minds can cushion the blows of reality, but eventually, it knocks down even the thickest of walls.

The last night I spent house-sitting, dreaming of a fire that consumed me along with the house, I worried whether I was dreaming or not and if my family would blame me for the phantom fire. With only a skeletal cat to keep me company, I stared at the insidious shadows bouncing off the high ceilings. The room seemed infinite. The only thing protecting me from the outside world was a blanket I found, curled up on the longest sofa available to me. I turned the fake fireplace off after the waking world took hold of me and I shivered in the dark until morning.

Housesitting didn't seem like it'd be particularly hard, especially when the owner in question was like the Willy Wonka of *stuff*. My mother's cousin—does that make her my second cousin?—was a flight attendant all her life. Proudly, she gave me a lengthy tour of her condo pointing out every sojourn-acquired *thing* that held some meaning to her. It took quite a bit of time. “This was one of the first items exported when we set up trade with the Chinese,” she would say of the old side table in her living room. All the pieces were lush and ornate. It was the only clean room; a temple to nostalgia. She had inherited the entire set from her mother and glowed fondly when swept up in the memories. Even the broken chair in the corner, she pointed out, will be reupholstered to match its sister, time having soiled her cushion.

This cousin, Jane E, whose name one pronounces

emphatically, like the eponymous “Wall-E”, had always lived with her parents. The kitchen and family room were a single cavernous space down a short hallway, with high ceilings and large, southern-facing windows; it seemed incredibly modern and chic, except that everything about it defied the architect’s plan. The sofa and chairs near her outlandishly large television were all covered with pads, the shelves that surrounded it were strewn with frames, every flat surface was covered. Things, things, things, things for this, for that, a letter from him, a flower for her, food for the cat, professional portraits of said cat, nutcrackers because her daddy just loved nutcrackers.

Her father and her cat were both dying, but both held such presence that death consumed even the smallest glimmer of cheer to which she so desperately clung. She clung with all her might.

Hoarding is usually associated with small trailers overflowing with rotting pizzas and feral cats, but this high-end version is no less revealing. Most cases of hoarding are associated with past traumas; Jane E gave birth to a daughter but never got to be a mother. Having a child at 16 was frowned upon in the late 60s, and her parents forced her to give Faith up for adoption. Though I’ve never spoken to her about it, I believe this broke her. She spent the rest of her life jetting around the world, never forming any lasting meaningful relationships with her peers; she cursed her parents for taking away her daughter by taking away their chance to really be grandparents. She never married. She just went to China once a month and came back with handfuls of cheap scarves that would never be opened.

Uncle Jack, “daddy” to Jane E, was 97 years old and continued living with his only daughter, in her 60s. She was rarely home, to her this place was like a shadow box, and with every trip she took she added more to her collection. I never figured out whether she was caring for him out of love or trapping him out of spite. Thankfully, I would be keeping the house while they were both gone to attend a wedding. How she kept forcing him on long road trips and social outings was evidence of Jane E’s pure strength of will.

She was also willing the cat to stay alive. Clinging and willing. Poopsie not only had one of the cruelest names one could

give to an animal, but seemed to want to die. He never ate. He rarely drank. Looking at him, I saw almost every bone, and I hesitated to touch him fearing that he would disappear in a puff of smoke. She pumped his poor little mouth with pill twice a day, and that was to be my job for the next four. He never fought much, just looked at me with eyes full of apathy. “Don’t you fucking die on me,” I’d whisper to him, “you can after she comes back, just not while I’m here.” I think he understood.

A refrigerator fuller than any I had seen before, a double bottle of white wine, a bottle of some British liqueur, and a high definition television with HBO all awaited me. I was excited. This was going to be fun. I would play house with all the people I was keeping in my life at the time.

My first night there began around 10:00. I had invited a close friend and his boyfriend to come stay for a while. I came up with something fun for us to do, which wasn’t often. I still don’t understand why people don’t think sitting around, watching funny videos, and eating celery isn’t a good time.

The development didn’t exist on GPS, apparently. They were lost and had no means to navigate the foreign roads. Meanwhile, I had only a rudimentary idea of where in the world I was. Pretty typical. I pleaded for them to keep trying, and eventually they found their way to this unknown place. Before we did anything, I showed them the basement.

The basement is not plagued with death like the first floor, but with overabundance. Once one steps off the stairs, she meets a pile of boxes at least five feet tall, and another one, and there’s yet another, and still more to the left and right of her with only a path much too small for Jane E to navigate safely winding through the labyrinth of Christmas decorations, old heirlooms, and empty wine bottles. It was all fairly organized and stored well enough in rows upon rows of neat, uniform boxes. It smelled like an antiquated craft shop, that musty mix of cinnamon and cold dust. My friends were amazed by the boxes and the path, and I felt like I had made a memory for us to share.

The night went on, and we talked and drank. At one point,

we tried to make ourselves a snack, but had no idea how to work her mini-oven which took the place of a microwave.

“Can I put tin foil in this?” Ryan swayed, holding an unwrapped frozen sandwich.

“I have no idea, all I want is an egg and cheese sandwich. Just please don’t break anything,” I replied.

Ryan banged on the piano to our amusement. He is a skilled pianist, but is rough with the keys and pounds out deafening notes that hang heavy in the air. I’ve always found that the way a person handles a musical instrument reflects his current mental state. Ryan’s relationship with Caleb was, and has always been, strained by the distance between them. Ryan lived here; Caleb was attending Temple University in Philadelphia. Caleb was Ryan’s link to an idealized past that never happened. Ryan had an excuse to re-live the life he thought he deserved with every monthly visit, seeing old friends who he idealized. He never treated me with the same sense of awe that he did the Philly crowd. Maybe it’s because I didn’t have purple hair or a small clothing shop like his old art-school friends, but more likely is that he figured I’d always be there. Amusingly enough, he was also *my* second choice for the night.

The painting in the hallway was dislodged somehow, interrupting Ryan’s music, and we all fumbled trying to right it again, having no idea how much it was worth. The security system was state-of-the-art and the house talked to me, to my dismay. It was as if there was someone watching our every move, alerting me every time I opened a door or window. I felt like an intruder. I felt like this was perhaps a bad idea.

They fled and I retired to the guest room, which was full of pictures of Jane E as she was as a child. Her baptismal robe was hanging on the wall, framed. It wasn’t exactly the ideal place to sleep if the goal was to *not* have frightening dreams. The bed sheets were pure white and the mattress hurt my back as I curled up. She was afraid of losing her childhood while I was afraid of losing my childhood friend.

Austin, my first choice, kept me company on the second night. He was moving to Las Vegas soon, so I had only a month left

to talk to him. That's what I really enjoyed about his company, he usually listened. I didn't have many friends other than Ryan, and he was preoccupied with what was going on 100 miles away.

Armed with my laptop, I relished my captive audience. I had Austin watch *Funny Games*, a favorite movie of mine, which I interspersed with stories about high school and my freshman year at college. I was trying to force feed him doses of myself: listen to this song, read this article, watch this video, anything that would allow him to understand me more. I wouldn't miss him, but the idea of him. His bones, too, stuck out in fragile ways.

The basement didn't seem to affect him as I showed him all of my new discoveries: here are the portraits of the cat, here is the father's room, and here is the attic which is also full of towering pillars of brown boxes.

Austin played the piano and lazily the chords ebbed through the air. He insisted we go to bed, as I was queuing up a playlist of my favorite comedians on YouTube. Back into the guest room we went, I guessed.

I never really enjoyed sleeping with him, nor was I very attracted to him at that, but at least it gave me a chance to get well acquainted with the ornate ceiling fan. It was pretty enough. "Why continue having sex with someone if you didn't like it" one might ask. I was sick of being a 20-year-old virgin and I figured that I needed to put in some practice hours before I was in the position to underwhelm someone else in bed. I could have found any other stupid thing to do with my time, but I also liked feeling wanted. "Damn it, the Christians must have been right all along," I'd think to myself, never missing an opportunity for ironic reflection, "sex is just terrible and should be avoided."

I never really knew what our relationship was until he let me know, mid-blowjob, that we were just good friends having fun, except that we weren't really friends and it wasn't much fun. I held onto him for far too long to the point of it physically hurting me, but I did learn how to let someone go. Maybe less of a mistake I had thought.

Hello, my name is Mary and I was an emotional hoarder.

Hoarding, emotional or otherwise, is like insulation, keeping certain things in while keeping all others out. Walking through the house on my last night there, I saw all the *things* that Jane E used to keep reality away. Meanwhile, I was my best friend's second choice and I was having sex with someone who was later described to me as being "so far beneath my league that he wasn't even playing the same game." Neither Jane E nor I wanted to see how poisonous our relationships were. Jane E's dying father was left for days at a time in that house while she went to work, not humoring the notion of sending him to be taken care of by someone else. He belonged to her in that house. With the stuff. He was just another thing to fill the void.

Poopsie sat on my shoulder purring, as I sat in the darkness not even capable of watching *Game of Thrones*, which I still regret because I don't have HBO. I couldn't bring myself to go near the piano. I was a lot like Jane E. Afraid. Poopsie and I were willingly hypnotized by the false flames behind the glass, and I felt the living ghosts that remained with me in the room. Ghosts that existed only in the mind of a woman that never married, never moved away. Ghosts of the people I brought into her house whose presence may not have been preferable to solitude. She was looking for something in those boxes. Something that never really was, a thing that would comfort her, would make her whole. Ryan was trying to re-do his past. I was trying to mold myself into the kind of girl that no one would want to get rid of.

A few days after I was relieved of my house-sitting duties, Poopsie died. Weeks after that, Austin moved away. Months later, Uncle Jack passed away.

Jane E's levies, those emotional, those made of boxes, couldn't keep the ocean at bay. For years, she kept herself so removed from reality that she had no way of existing within it. Conversely, I learned how to be alone. I realized that my masochistic decisions were symptoms of the larger problems which were entirely my own. Jane E medicated herself in the same way that Poopsie's pills kept him alive—she couldn't handle being alone and sober. I was still hurt by my loneliness, still made destructive choices, yet that

ability to be alone became a constant comfort in the cold. Neither of us were happy for a time, but we got through the winter.

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Gloria Mundi

| Matthew Gesicki

*I loved what was most frail,
I touched what was without substance,
and within what was not,
I am.*

—Thomas Merton

Father.

The passage here was long and dark.

I linger at the margin of Your light, on Your threshold—

Open to me.

—

Each moment's perception holds a world.

Exhale. Let die that mere sense of self, arisen only in the briefest of conditions.

Inhale. Let arise the self once more.

Infinite.

—

According to the funerary text of the Vajrayana Buddhists, *The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between*—in the West, the Tibetan Book of the Dead—each life is a phase in the continuity of consciousness.

At the moment of death—and the days that follow, before the body is cremated—a rinpoche recites the disorienting poetry of the Tibetan Book of the Dead in the presence of the body, in an attempt to lead the consciousness of the deceased through the three *bardos*, or “thresholds,” the portals of the afterworld suspended between death and rebirth. The *bardos* reveal to the deceased a sequence of visions of cosmic Buddhas both magnificent and terrible. They challenge the deceased to attain liberation, and realize that everything in this world is no more than the projection of consciousness. That the origins of the universe turn within us.

The visions begin with a great body of radiance. A void of pure, clear light.

—

In the far hills of rural Kentucky is the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, a monastery of the Order of the Cistercians of Strict Observance, first founded in northern France in 1098—a brotherhood of Catholic monks whose lives rotate upon *ora et labora*, prayer and labor. Here, each day is centered on contemplation and structured by liturgy. Here, the monk and poet and theologian Thomas Merton wrote and prayed and wept.

Each day the monks abide by the Liturgy of the Hours, seven offices of prayer—Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline—which begin at three o'clock, far before dawn, and conclude soon after dusk. They pray and they sing. Their hymns draw from the Psalms, and constitute the majority of worship.

“Our singing together is the most evident manifestation of God in His world,” a young Merton believed, and the brothers live in the deepest evidence of God through liturgy. For one luminous day, I belonged to that liturgy, the axis of time and psalm upon which day and night spin.

When the laity joins the monks for prayer, they must remain in the ambulatory and balcony, separated by gates and panels of glass, clothed in a greater shadow as the monks rise in light. As if no one were here but they.

In accordance with their vows, speech is confined primarily to the prayer and song of the offices. Silence is law, and with that law, stillness—wordlessness—anticipation. A gesture through which they express themselves only in relation to God: silent, without name. God’s alone.

I withhold my voice.

Memory, *speak*.

VIGILS

“awake”

*May sounds, lights, and rays not arise as enemies,
And may I behold the magnificent realm of the mild and fierce*

Lords.

May I know all sounds as my own sounds.

May I know all light as my own light.

May I know all rays as my own rays.

May I realize the threshold's reality as mine.

–“Prayer for Deliverance from the Straits of the Between”

Hours before dawn.

The sky is dark, void-like.

Silence.

O Lord, open my lips.

Then, the susurrantion of psalms, a whisper that is almost plainsong. At Vigils, the monks speak the scriptures instead of singing them, as if, this early, the air around them is insubstantial and would break.

Aligned, they gather in pews that face each other, with the nave in between and the sanctuary beyond, dark and impenetrable. They kneel in their cowls, hooded in white—so still and mute in repose, like swans.

When the monks rise their hands unclasp. In psalmody their whole bodies open, arms lifting toward the high walls of the monastery, pure and bare and white as walls of bone that enclose the marrow within, which God would draw from them for sacrifice—

For the life of a man is small in the hand of God.

On the cusp of each psalm, they repeat the doxology—a short proclamation of faith to *the God that is, was, and is to come, now and forever*—to close the phase of prayer.

Hands stretch out for holy water. They strain for its purifying power, its living memory of baptism—death to the dark world and birth into and unto a bright God. Here, the world no longer exists, only the reality of God, everywhere and nowhere, clear and void.

In departure, they draw their hoods closer over their heads. The hood hides the face of the monk from the world and cloisters him in God.

In the sanctuary, before the small icon of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ, a single candle struggles. A barely living

flame clings to its wick.

The night trembles for the coming of dawn.

LAUDS

“praise”

Now the time has come for you to seek the way. Just as your breath stops, the objective clear light of the first between will dawn. Your outer breath stops and you experience reality stark and void like space, your immaculate naked awareness drawing clear and void without horizon or center. At that instant, you yourself must recognize it as yourself, you must stay with that experience.

-“Prayer of the Reality Between”

Dark verges into light—

And God intercedes.

Now, a tremulous cascade of music in the sanctuary, to herald the day.

In this hour where light is nearest, sensed yet not seen, birds begin to sing. In the dark quiet earth near the monastery, the pines abide like ancient, chthonic men.

Years ago, in his own days of rapture and doubt and solitude at the monastery, Merton spoke of the presence of waking day birds in the midst of his prayers with the other monks. These first birds mark what he called *le point vierge*, “the virgin point,” the most viable moment for the experience of God, a phase “of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes.”

In song and in flight, the birds speak to God as if on a precipice—an “awakening that is their dawn state, their state at the *point vierge*,” before they will fully manifest, “before they will be fully themselves.” The monks address God with the inchoate praise of predawn prayer, like the waking birds, in faith that the light that fails each night will be brought forth once more. In the dark before light, wings vibrate—quietly, shuddering as the hands of ladies at fans.

At Lauds, “the virgin point between darkness and light, between being and nonbeing,” that interstice without horizon or

center, this light, this silence, this trembling nascence, God is.

The birds of the virgin day sing, for they know that the Kingdom is long established on earth—for they know that “paradise is all around us...yet we do not understand. It is wide open.”

They beckon us, a knell for worship from the pines. *Holy*, the wood thrush calls, whole body alight with its voice.

Elsewhere, a stream flows into silence.

V E S P E R S

“evensong”

Now this mirage you see is the sign of earth dissolving into water. This smoke is the sign of water dissolving into fire. These fireflies are the sign of fire dissolving into wind. This candle flame is the sign of wind dissolving into consciousness. This moonlit sky is the sign of consciousness dissolving into luminance. This sunlit sky is the sign of luminance dissolving into radiance. This dark sky is the sign of radiance dissolving into imminence. This predawn twilight sky is the sign of imminence dissolving into clear light.

–“Prayer of the Reality Between”

When day splits to dusk—stark and sudden, bone through skin—the monks lament its loss in song. The psalms palpitate.

Upon kneeling, they rise in a pose pure and bare, embryonic. An offer for sacrifice—dropped heads now held high, once-clasped hands open in surrender. Long white-robed limbs outstretched in one stroke, they pause in the wingspan of birds, midflight over a bright remote elsewhere, white-into-white-into-white.

—

In Tibet, on the high plateaus of the Himalayas, Vajrayana Buddhists perform the ritual of a sky burial—a ceremony of exposure, of reverently offering a corpse to the wilderness and its birds of prey. As birds and the natural elements consume the flesh over time, what remains is bone.

Bone, in its purity and anonymity, is the body’s only absolute. In Buddhist thought, the skeleton is the closest approximation of a soul—the ultimate physical evidence of mortality,

what remains from surrender to annihilation. For when flesh falls and is silent, bone still speaks—child of dust and revenant of dust, without name under a void of sky.

And when all else, even this, falls away: *Nirvana*, the “blowing out,” like extinguishing a candle. Where the flame was, now a nebula of dark matter—once touched by light, now unseen.

C O M P L I N E “complete”

Now the pure clear light of reality dawns for you. Recognize it. This, your present conscious natural clear void awareness, this presence in clear voidness without any objectivity of substance, sign, or color—just this is reality, the Mother, Buddha All Goodness. And this, your conscious awareness natural voidness, not succumbing to a false annihilative voidness, just your own conscious awareness, unceasing, bright, distinct, and vibrant—just this awareness is the Father, Buddha All Goodness. Just this presence of the indivisibility of your awareness’s naturally insubstantial voidness and the vibrant bright presence of your conscious awareness—just this is the Buddha Body of Truth. Your awareness thus abides in this vast mass of light of clarity-void indivisible, you are free of birth or death—just this is the Buddha Changeless Light. It is enough just to recognize this. Recognizing this, your conscious awareness’s purity nature as the Buddha, yourself beholding your own awareness—that is to dwell in the inner realization of all Buddhas.

–“Prayer of the Reality Between”

Night, raw as blood loss.

Moon under a veil of cloud.

The monks unfold for God.

The monastery is that of Our Lady of Gethsemani, woman and virgin and mother of God, she of the heart penetrated with a sword at the foot of the Cross, she of soul untouched and body riven with grace. In the close of Compline, the monks remember their veneration when they sing the antiphon of the *Magnificat*, the Canticle of Mary, one of the only hymns still intact from early Christian liturgy. In its verses, the monks sing the words that Mary

herself said to her cousin Elizabeth at the Visitation, when she first proclaimed to the world that she bore the Christ within her. *Magnificat*: “My soul magnifies.” *For it is amassed with the vast light of grace, my words claimed and lit with the Word, my voice not only my own.*

For the monks, this structure in the liturgy deepens the commitment to the presence of the Virgin Mary—she, the most perfect human, God’s purest and clearest instrument, through which the soul is most magnified, the glory of the world most present. Like a pane struck transparent in the suddenness of light, hers was an existence in which God was manifest to the utmost—maiden veiled in blue and closed in light, narrow visage lowered and trembling as the angel beckons at her threshold, wings and feet writhing with fire as he draws near, and speaks.

At the edge of the sanctuary, they touch holy water to wrists and foreheads. They enter God’s bright abyss, not as self but as single sacred atom in the vastness.

As the prayers near their own completion, almost all light is extinguished. The dark of the sanctuary is pure as a dark deep sea of cosmos. Hands stretch out, unseen. Suddenly, solemnly, a void—but for the light of two candles before a Christ-laden Virgin.

Blind, the men chant in the dark. Song throbs in blood, spun through veins. They breathe, and their souls diffuse.

In silence, they cling to the candlelight. As if this changeless, latent light were the only light in the world.

—

In the dark sky over the monastery, an array of constellations. Like a thousand candles lit from a single fire, burning at an altar of celestial cloud.

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I Never Smoked

| Aven Rose

People used to tell me I was exactly the type of person who should smoke cigarettes. Literally, those exact words. Many times. The first time I remember, I was working a shitty retail job on Black Friday and about halfway through the day my coworker looked at me, spoke those words, and continued on an incredibly long rant about all the benefits I would get from smoking.

One night toward the end of my sophomore year of college, I was walking to a practice I didn't have time to go to, for a play I didn't want to be in. Yeah, I rocked the part, and yeah, I missed acting, but this wasn't the kind of play I wanted to be a part of. It was short, my co-star couldn't act, and no one knew about it, so who was going to come see it anyway? Besides, I had better things to do in the busiest week of the semester. A million assignments swam in my head and I couldn't stop thinking about how I could sneak bits of reading in while on stage.

I couldn't stop checking my back, watching the shadows on the ground. He was there. He was following me. And nothing I did was going to stop him.

I ran to my neighbors' door, banging and banging. My hands hurt, I felt sore and violated, I couldn't see through the steady stream of tears falling down my face. They opened the door, and even though we weren't friends anymore I fell into their arms and sobbed until my face hurt. I could feel the warmth of their bodies, the uncertainty about what to say. I couldn't voice the attack, the way I tried to fight him off, the fact that my fists did nothing. I couldn't tell them what happened, or where, or how I'd gotten back to their apartment.

Maybe because it was all in my head.

No one followed me. No one attacked me. I never went to my neighbors' door. I went to play practice, had a normal run, and walked home. Nothing went even remotely wrong. But walking

there, I had been certain it would. The scene had played out fully in my head. I could see the man, and every detail of his dark shirt and wide physique. I could see every second of the trauma that never happened in intense detail and feel every pain and fear I might have felt if it had actually taken place.

I'm not going to lie, I thought about it. My grandpa died from smoking, and because of that I'd always been against it. I never really considered why people might actually smoke. But there had to be a reason, right? Otherwise why would anyone do it? And relaxing had never been my thing.

That night was the worst of the attacks.

The first attack happened five years earlier—my sophomore year of high school—when in the middle of a relay race, my heart rate went up beyond the normal exercise rate, beat harder, and wouldn't slow down, even ten minutes after I stopped moving. I spent an hour lying on the stairs of the gym with a faculty advisor who called the school nurse and explained my symptoms through the phone. My heart pounded in my temples and the world spun. I could hear voices around me, talking to me, but couldn't understand what they said. The world wouldn't stand still and I clung onto the stairs for dear life. Everyone kept telling me I was okay. I couldn't understand why they didn't realize I was dying.

The nurse told me through the phone that it was a panic attack, and that it'd pass in a few minutes. They called my parents, and pretty soon I had five people leaning over me while I panicked on the floor. I couldn't breathe, couldn't focus, couldn't believe what they said.

After that first experience, I stayed constantly scared another attack would come out of nowhere and I'd be slammed with the inability to function again. And if it happened when no one was around, I didn't know what I'd do. But for a few months, I didn't have even a hint of an attack. I got fairly regular flurries of worry, and small moments of misplaced fear, but nothing ever came close to the way that first one felt. Until a year later.

I guess I also never thought I needed anything to calm me down. I've been high anxiety my entire life. It never crossed my mind that I wasn't

supposed to be. I liked pressure situations because they felt like home. I lived there. I thrived there.

A year after the panic on the stairs I went into the hospital with the worst pain I'd ever experienced plaguing my stomach. It felt like a constant knife, jammed into my intestines and twisted every time I tried to breathe or move. Ten days in a row I went to the ER, only to get sent home every day with a not-so-comforting "Nothing's wrong."

Day after day, various doctors speculated and ran tests: Appendicitis? "Tests came back negative." Ulcer? "No way, she's too young." Kidney stones? Food allergy? UTI? Ulcer? "Let's do an ultrasound." Menstrual cramps? "Don't you think I'd have noticed that?" Every day they sent me home, and every day we came no closer to discovering what was wrong with me.

One day toward the end of the week a nurse brought me three giant cups of raspberry Snapple pumped full of dye and told me to finish all three as quickly as I could. By the time I got halfway through the first cup I knew I'd never be able to drink Snapple again. The dye dried out the juice, making my throat feel like the worst kind of sandpaper. I felt sick after the second. It took all the willpower I had to finish the third. In and out of the hospital, dressed in paper gowns, writhing in the worst pain I'd ever experienced—and the most disgusting part of it, the part I remember most vividly seven years later came in the form of the juice I'd had and loved a million times.

I haven't had more than a single sip of Snapple since.

If there weren't so many toxins in cigarette smoke, and if I didn't have such sensitive lungs, I probably would have tried it. I liked the idea of having a reason to leave a room for a few minutes when I wanted to. Still do. To have a reason to step outside and breathe the fresh air when I felt overwhelmed or panicky. To have no one ask why I left, or give me weird looks for standing in the cold at night when the only thing that can calm me down is fresh air.

I must have seen upwards of twenty doctors in five days, and none of them had any idea what was happening to me. I think one of them vaguely mentioned a possibility of stress causing it,

but mostly they put me through test after test—ultrasound, CAT scan, endoscopy, etc.—with no result. I know now that the pains were phase two of a panic disorder that would change its effects at least five times over the next five years. Each pain was a new attack, something I realized without the help of a doctor a year later, when the mere sight of my ex would send a new pain into my stomach.

It isn't his fault; he just happened to be the current issue on my mind. It's no one's fault. I had the happiest childhood in the world. My parents are still together, I'm super close to both of them and to my siblings, and I had and have great friends. Nothing about my suburban life was in any way bad.

I just always put a lot of pressure on myself to do everything right. I have a hot temper. I get worked up easily. I'm competitive. I'm an over-achieving perfectionist.

Think about it. Smoking. The perfect excuse to escape an awkward or overwhelming situation. You don't like the person you're stuck talking to? Take a smoke break. You're stuck doing tedious tasks for hours at a time? Take a smoke break. You can't handle the heat/light/smell in a room? Take a smoke break.

Despite the different forms the attacks took over the years, I could always tell what they were by one constant factor: the wildly beating heart. No matter what the form, whether it's full-on (like the first one), stomach pains, shaky hyperventilation, shakes and spinning that leave me with migraine-like headaches, or terrifying hallucinations, the heart rate is always prominent, quick, and pounding, making my chest feel like lead my lungs aren't quite strong enough to move.

You make friends when you smoke. You don't feel out of place when you desperately need to leave a room. You have an instant stick of calm in your pocket at all times.

The night I walked to play practice, five years after the initial attack, was the worst of it—the night I knew I had to get help. I called my mom in tears, terrified that I'd gone crazy. I had heard stories of panic attacks causing hallucinations, but had always assumed they came from hype from the media and writers who just wanted to increase the drama of their stories. That, or people

making excuses to avoid feeling crazy when they hallucinated. Fear couldn't possibly cause such a full out-of-body experience, or such vivid visions of horror. But that night I found out the true extent of the tricks my mind could play on me in a moment of panic.

I called my doctor the next day. Three months of therapy and a prescription for in-case-of-emergency meds later, I was on track to a better life. The attacks never went away, but, for now, I have a handle on them. When I first figured it out, I couldn't even begin to speak about the attacks without having another one. Reliving and reliving the experience made it worse. I was (and am) lucky to have incredible people in my life who walked me through every step of the healing process until I could handle it on my own. Now, two years after the diagnosis, I sit here typing an essay about the pain and the fear, and I find myself overwhelmed with a feeling of calm.

I'm not scared anymore.

I never smoked. But sometimes I wish I could.

And I'm getting better.

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Short Fiction

Pepper Run State Park

Paint by Number Sacred Heart of Jesus

Digging for the Hell Man

Big Things

Little Degenerates

The Armor of Femininity

If You Had Been There

Tome for Tea

The Golden Thread

Pepper Run State Park

| Ryan Horner

The boyfriend knelt on the lower level of rocks and he was smoothing the handkerchief underneath his palms so that inside they could wrap up their bowls and spoons when he felt the girlfriend cross through the air far above him, arms wheeling as she leapt for distance and her blonde hair fanning out behind her as she fell. The boyfriend was quick at math and fair at angles, and his eyes tracked the hard lines above and below him in a moment: the broad Muskingum River was drifting along 18 yards below his ledge, and that was the ledge that all the university kids jumped from because it was a harmless but still knuckle-whitening fall to the water, and the ledge that she had leapt from was 15 yards higher still, and those were important facts but the piece of information that he really needed was the distance between the edge of her ledge and the edge of his, which was the distance she would have to travel in the air, and the girlfriend was falling as he calculated, and he thought that that was typical, so incredibly typical to just jump when they'd spent the last hour specifically saying how idiotic it would be to jump from that one, and she had supposedly climbed up on the upper ledge to see what the view was like, and then he saw her right side hit the ledge just in front of his feet. The boyfriend watched her elbow crack the stone and then her shin and the bony bit of her hip at the same time, like *tat* on a snare drum, which whipped her head and her hair down sharply as if they'd been yanked by a string, and then the girlfriend was over his ledge in under a second and out of his sight and into the silence on the other side, and his brain thought "slinky on the stairs" before he could stop it, the boyfriend fast-stepping up to the edge in three quick strides like he was going to jump again, and his shorts still clung wet to him and tight around his middle from the last time. But he could see down and the surface of the river was white and frothing and disturbed, hiding the girlfriend somewhere in the chaos underneath the water where he

would have trouble finding her, which was the single biggest reason for his delay, for his undecided stillness, because he considered both jumping after her and also climbing down the back of the rocks and around to the bank of the Muskingum. Up the river a Mommy and Daddy and two bare-bone girls floated on one inner tube each with hands holding hands holding feet in a chain from the ponytail of the youngest to the white underside of the Daddy's heels, which the Mommy kept tickling just when he'd get relaxed, pricking some life into him so that he'd be good company for the girls on his day off. For a full two seconds the boyfriend flip-flopped, in his head first jumping off the rocks after her which would mean that he might shoot down into the water and strike her invisible body, but then also picturing the time it would take him to run around the back and down to the river bank which was obviously the less dangerous option, and yet also time-costly, which in the end he decided to do, to tramp down the path in untied hiking boots even after those two seconds spent deliberating, and then at the water's edge he deliberated again, boots off or on, do I slip them off or wade in, think, but in the meantime the black water had stilled and settled like the wrinkles and hills and valleys of old age turning flat again under the plastic surgeon's scalpel. Then the surface broke and water dribbled down from the crown of the girlfriend's head as she raised it from the Muskingum, and the boyfriend's forearms dull-ached from where he had been clenching them accidentally, and the girlfriend whipped her hair back and her mouth pulled open like her teeth were fleeing from each other, grinning at him, and despite all of the things he could have been paying attention to the boyfriend couldn't help but think of commercials where models stood under showerheads baring wide-mouthed smiles or emerged from estate pools flipping conditioned hair like the girlfriend was doing now, like she was flipping her hair, and then the boyfriend's eyes truly opened and cleared—her hair, which was now murky brown instead of the normal blonde that she had entered the water with, which he had gathered in his hands on some nights and kissed and buried himself inside, which was dyed brown from the blood flooding from the base of her skull and spreading onto her hair and

the slopes of her shoulders and the water around her, and then the boyfriend knew that her gaping mouth was not a smile but a scream, the pseudo-silence of Pepper Run State Park swelling and bursting into a television-static roar, like the whole world was shaking until the edges and lines blurred. And color rose in splotches on the boyfriend's arms and cheeks, a lurking scarlet frustration that would prove telltale to those who would know him later in life, a sensation that would lurk and loiter in his mind-shadows for years before manifesting itself in odd habits during the last stages of his adulthood, like skimming all but the last three paragraphs of every newspaper article and lugging groceries four or five or six bags to an arm and even switching from beer to bourbon or scotch in search of a more rapid buzz, all in devout service to Time on the dual altars of Waste Not and Maximum Efficiency. The Daddy nearly upset his tube shifting to get a clearer view of the couple over by the bank of the river, where they were hugging and splashing and shrill-shrieking like they had found a treasure, as if they had found the black waters of the Fountain of Youth leaking up into the water and they were going to bottle the stuff and sell it for millions from a little wood shack on the shore. Sagging trees loomed out from the shore over the water, the branches like tired students in class stretching their arms, trees who had leaned like that for years and who would continue to lean through the coming cycles of river-flooding and river-draining and who would continue to lean even as the shouting boyfriend and the screaming girlfriend became bumbling husband and stooping wife and then became something much more and less than a marriage, and those trees would see untold quarts and gallons of river water pass beneath their limbs as the Muskingum ran into the Ohio and into the Mississippi and on into the Gulf and the wide waters of the world, the world where thousands jump but millions deliberate and they always have, and they always will.

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Paint by Number Sacred Heart of Jesus

| Stacy Hammon

Mama worked two places that summer. The owners Al and Rita at the Sportsman Bar and Café never minded when Mama brought me along. Dad could pick me up when his work shift was over. Miss Marlene at the Magic Mirror beauty parlor liked having me there too. I made the old ladies happy while they cooked their roller sets under the chrome bullet-capped hair dryers parked along the south wall. Except for Mrs. Shipley; she always fell asleep with a Redbook magazine drooping from her lap. They pinched my cheeks, cheered when I twirled my dress high, and bought me candy and RC Cola after my impromptu tap dance performances. However, the orange shag carpet that ran the length of the floor between both sides of linoleum-tiled hair-styling stations made even my shuffle-off-to-buffalos lackluster.

With Mama busy serving the “Chicken Fried Steak, Biscuits, Gravy, and Lemon Pie Special” one afternoon, she didn’t notice right away the laughs, claps, hoots, and hollers coming from the back tables on the bar side of the café. Tap dancing reverberates marvelously on Formica topped tables. Mama didn’t like it when I showed her the dollar bills the men had given me. They liked to see me dance, too. No different from the old ladies at the beauty parlor buying me candy—I thought. Mama didn’t think so.

Then Miss Marlene didn’t understand why little girls turned pesky sometimes. And with all that licorice, Baby Ruth’s, several swallowed sticks of Juicy Fruit, and Cola swirling around in my belly, it was bound to happen I would puke all over Mrs. Shipley’s new, white, patent leather pumps. Imagine her waking up to that! I heard Miss Marlene tell Mama, in the back room, she’d had to snip out chunks of carpet with ground-in, gray gum globs three times already. Mama said a ratty shag carpet wasn’t very practical for a hair salon, anyway.

“I don’t care what kind of bind you’re in, Claire. She’s a

nuisance around here.”

Mama said, “But the ladies adore her. She’s only here for an hour.”

“That would be nice if it were true.”

“It’s been difficult lately not knowing which shift Dan’s work is going to keep him on. There’s nothing we can do. You know I don’t have anyone who can watch her. Marlene, please just be patient a little longer.”

“I have been patient. He has never been on time to pick her up. I think we both really know why. Claire, you need to fix this.”

Mama didn’t say anything.

I was kind of relieved I wasn’t wanted. I was always terrified Miss Marlene’s huge rear end would spill out through busted seams of her too-tight skirts one day. My eyes were right there, level with the monstrosity, should it happen.

That is how I ended up with Abuelito the summer I turned five.

Abuelito is an artist. Nana doesn’t think so. She says his paintings get in the way. I don’t see why. When they are dry, he leans them against the walls in little stacks around all the corners of the house. He switches which ones show on top every once in a while.

Today he flips open the lids of the little plastic pots and says there is not enough paint in them. He makes the colors stretch by adding the white paint he used on the kitchen walls last fall. He never follows the numbers anyway. Abuelito makes Jesus’ bleeding heart pulse with tints of grapefruit, lilac, and bubble gum pink. He paints silver starburst rays blazing from this pastel center. He says the silver washes out of Nana’s eyeliner brush better. He got caught when he used the gold paint before.

He says, “Cissy, let’s make lunch.”

Peanut butter and grape jelly on a tortilla for me. Leftover tongue on his. He doesn’t take any frijoles, this time, that Nana always leaves simmering on the back left stovetop flame. I notice Jesus’ eyes are the same flamed-blue. I ask if he painted them to look like mine.

We sip orange Fanta from the same bottle. Abuelito lets me work at the cap with the bottle opener. Mama never lets me. I spill. He says one day he will teach me to open the cap with the blade of a pocket knife.

Paint dries slowly. We kick back together in the Barcalounger. White tea towels cover the worn patches on the arm rests. The pungency of tobacco and cigars wafts nearby from where they are placed on the brick planter that divides the kitchen and living room. I'm a little scared. What if I slide off the chair arm and land on the spittoon? He holds me tighter after I peek over the side. We watch *Tic-Tac-Dough*, *The Price is Right*, and by *The Newlywed Game* I am bored. Abuelito says the one husband shouldn't have married the blonde girl.

He says, "See how she hits him over the head with her cardboard sign? None of her answers match. She doesn't know him. She doesn't love him."

Abuelito is asleep before the soap operas come on. This one has a lady who is sick and dying, lost in the woods. I think adults must never really outgrow fairy tales. I drift off too as the Ty-D-bol man floats around in a sea of sky blue toilet water.

Pito wakes me. The TV is off. Aunt Dolores must have come over and left the chilies from her garden. Pito barks at wasps buzzing at the screen door. I hush him. Abuelito's snores continue without a change of tempo after I wiggle off his lap. I know the dog decides to stop barking on his own as he follows me down the hall to the bathroom. Both walls are furnished by a gallery of unframed Sears and Olan Mills portraits tacked up with straight pins. Some of the faces I know. Other aunts, uncles, and cousins don't live here. Their hair is black. Their skin and eyes are brown. They all smile down at me lopsided from their haphazard placement. I don't look like any of them.

The bathroom smells like Old Spice. I open the medicine cabinet mirror to look at the after shave bottle while I wash my hands. I like the big blue ship. I wonder how Abuelito pours it out of there. I don't dare take it down from the shelf. I'm not supposed to mess with anything in there.

Back in the hallway Pito checks behind him every few steps as he leads me to the back door. The leash hangs from a dust-caked nail concealed slightly behind the refrigerator. I give it a few good flips to yank it down.

Latching the leash to his collar I promise Pito I won't lose him this time. I don't like to take him on my adventures, but I'm afraid to go by myself. We walk to the curb and gutter. I sit down to unbuckle my sandal and slip my bare right foot through the loop of the handle. I figure if he is attached to my leg, I can search the gravel without worrying he will pull the leash out of my hand.

My cousin told me he found emeralds in the gutter last time. He wouldn't show me. I find only the tiny pink, gray, black, and brown rocks of ordinary gravel. Some have bits of sparkle in them though. Maybe it's gold. There is a lug nut too. Even I know a missing lug nut can't be good. Faded petals from Mrs. Tremaine's rose bushes and the round bottom of a broken beer bottle mingle there too. But no emeralds.

Pito is ready to move on. We follow the rose petal trail two houses down. My sandal, unbuckled, slaps out of rhythm with my step. I'm not supposed to pick them...the roses. They make you bleed. Also Abuelito says we have to ask somebody if we want something that belongs to them. We can't take what they have because they love it too. Smelling the flowers is okay though.

Pito and I knock on Mrs. Tremaine's door. The vacuum is running. I tie Pito to the railing. Abuelito showed me how to loop the hook end through the handle to make it tighter than the bow I tried tying before. The vacuum hum dwindles. I ring the doorbell this time. She can't possibly love the skirt full of faded, crunchy-edged gutter petals gathered in my lifted up hem. She smiles through the screen and tells me to wait. Cabinet doors click open and bump closed from the kitchen. She returns with a small brown paper bag. She helps me empty my collection inside.

With the leash around my wrist, I hurry off. If I'm going to get back before *Hollywood Squares* comes on, I better hustle. I don't understand why grownups think movie stars like Betty White and Charles Nelson Reilly are funny. Her smile makes her look pretty,

and he does look funny, but I don't get their jokes.

I almost trip. I stop to refasten my sandal. There is a shady spot under the yellow house's maple tree. I don't know who lives there. There never even seem to be any cars in the driveway. But I don't think they will mind me using their tree to cool down. The helicopter seeds aren't ready yet. They are still green. It's hard to lay my leg sideways to get the strap in right. Pito tugs. When I pull my knee up to my chin to reach down and around my leg to get a better angle, Pito tugs so hard the leash slips from my wrist and away he goes.

He is fast. I can't ever catch him. I take both sandals off. It is not too hot yet to have bare feet—not too hot for the sidewalk and road to burn. I don't care if Nana and Mama will complain about how black the bottoms of my feet are. I start looking. I get down on my knees careful. I don't want to scrape them peering under cars parked on both sides of the street—under cars parked in every driveway. I search bushes and hedges. Even the stinky ones with the small, clouded, dark, blue berries I'm not supposed to eat because they're poison. My cousin claims he eats them and nothing happens. I won't take him up on his dare though.

All the time I holler a drawn out, "Peeeeeeeetoooooe!"

I make kissing sounds and pat my knees.

"Peeeeeee-tooooooeeee! Heeeeeer, Pito!"

He never comes. He doesn't like me. I tried to tie orange hair ribbons to his ears one time. I don't like orange. I figured it wouldn't matter to Pito if it was true dogs can't see color like my cousin said, anyway. But maybe he does care and hates orange too. I give up looking after three more houses down the street.

I have lost my rose petals. I walk back to the maple tree. The shaded grass feels tickly-cold through the back of my dress. I like being under trees. I like to feel the play of leaf shadow and sunlight dancing through my closed eyelids.

Abuelito's house slippers scuff toward me. I'm afraid the birds that have landed in the tree will poop on me, so I sit up. He stops by my side. I am afraid to look at him. He is wearing black socks.

He says, “The dog came back to the house, Peque.”

He sits.

“The painting is dry. If we put it in the front window, they say it will bring blessings.”

We sit more.

“I bet you’re thirsty.”

He picks up my sandals and helps me up with his other hand that is flecked with pink, lilac, and silver. I hold it for the trek home. Before we go inside, I let go and say, “A blessing—is it like good luck?”

“It is better than luck,” he says, “A blessing always helps. It is always true.”

Pretending to sleep in Abuelito’s chair, Pito peeks at me with one bulgy, black eye. I decide I don’t like him either. Nana says I’m not even supposed to say his name anyway. She calls him “the dog.” She says I should too because his name means something naughty—something having to do with the parts of a boy’s body covered up by a swimsuit. When I asked Abuelito, he said it just means Pete with an O.

After I drink a glass of water, we lean Jesus in the window sill on the right hand side by the front door.

Abuelito inhales deep. He grins down to me and says, “Your mother, she told me not to teach you to play poker. She heard me talking to a friend on the phone this morning. There is a game Thursday. Let’s work on your poker face. You can help me beat Ernesto.”

Two weeks before summer was over, Abuelito was taken to the hospital in the middle of one night. He never came back home. I had to spend those last two weeks before Kindergarten started with Miss Marlene’s mother. Her house smelled like tuna fish. She had me help her wash out her wigs. Everything she owned was white. Kids aren’t allowed to have any fun in a white house. She fed me oatmeal, and tuna fish sandwiches, and milk. That was it.

The helicopters were just right when he died. I fought with my mother before the funeral. I insisted on wearing my favorite sundress and scuffed sandals. I did not want to wear a new, itchy

black dress with new stiff Mary Jane's, even though they all were velvet. I did not care if the sundress and sandals were a little too small for me, or that it was chilly outside. I didn't care if they were speckled with tints of grapefruit, lilac, and bubble gum pink paint. They were what I wore the day I knew I was loved.

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Digging for the Hell Man

| Derek Dietz

Mom told me to get my head the heck outta them books and go play outside for a few gosh-darned minutes. Except she didn't say gosh-darned. She said the other "GD" one. The one I'm not supposed to say. That's how I knew she was serious.

It was real hot that day. Wanna know how hot it was? When I looked out to the road I could see wavy pools of water lying in the middle of it, but my brother, Jacob, told me it wasn't water. He said it was a trick played on us by the heat when it gets really hot. He's probably right, cause each time I see water laying on the road I run out to it, but it's always dried up by the time I get there.

Anyways, it was real hot, and when I went outside, I was gonna go climb the big tree that reaches almost all the way up to the clouds, but I saw Jacob standing in Mom's flowerbed, except I don't know why she calls it a flowerbed 'cause there's been no flowers in it since I can remember. I ran over to see my brother, and he was standing next to a big hole. He was holding Dad's big shovel, and he was digging the hole, and I asked him why.

Jacob dumped a big shovelful of dirt onto a pile that looked like the mixture in the bowl when Mom sometimes made us brownies and she'd let me lick the spatula. Jacob looked at me, all sweaty from the sun, and told me he was digging for the Hell Man. I got real scared and asked him why again.

Jacob lifted another shovelful of brownie batter out of the hole and told me he was mad. He said he was mad at Mom for always blaming the Hell Man for our problems, blaming the Hell Man for why Dad always went to the bar and got drunk, blaming the Hell Man why some nights we had to pretend we ate the biggest feast for dinner, like that one in the story about the princess and the knight and the fat king, but really we only had stale crackers that stuck to the roof of your mouth. Jacob said he was gonna yell and scream at the Hell Man. He said he was gonna beat the "S-H-I-

Blank” outta him too, but he said the real word. Last time Jacob said that word, Dad gave him a good spanking and said “S-H-I-Blank” wasn’t said in his household, even though we heard it leak through our bedroom walls some nights when he yelled at Mom.

Jacob kept digging. I asked him if he was scared of the Hell Man. Jacob told me yeah, but he didn’t care. He was being real brave, but he said that he wanted some help from me though, ‘cause we both seen pictures of the Hell Man, with his goat horns and his bright red skin. Jacob wanted me to back him up in case the Hell Man wouldn’t listen to him. I told him I was scared, but he told me don’t be a baby, and then he asked me when was I gonna stop reading all those books and actually do something, like Mom always tells me.

Well, I was sick of having Mom and my older brother get mad at me about my books, even though they’re my favorite thing in the whole world, so I got down on my knees in the dirt in the flowerbed and started scooping up the dirt with my hands. Dad only had the one shovel, after all. Even though it was so hot there was pretend water on the road, the dirt was cool and wet. I grabbed a fistful and rubbed my hands on my face, and I got cooled off real quick. Jacob told me I looked like those Indians we seen one night on the TV when they were hunting and riding horses. Then he grabbed a handful of dirt and did the same thing to his own face. I said doesn’t that feel good, and he told me that if we were gonna face the Hell Man, we had to look like warriors.

And so we were warriors, and as we kept digging down, the dirt started turning orange and got a lot harder. I could barely scoop any up with my hands, and each time I tried I only got little pieces, and I left marks in the dirt like our old cat used to leave in the legs of the kitchen table. This new dirt felt like the time last year in school when Teacher let us play with Play-Doh for class, and we made shapes, and I made a snake, but Susan, who sat next to me, got scared of my snake and told on me for not making the shapes.

While we’re digging through the Play-Doh, we heard Mom and Dad talking real loud inside the house. Dad said a lot of bad words I’m not allowed to say, like the b-word, and worse ones too. I

looked up at Jacob to see if he could hear them, but his eyes just got like Teacher's did at school when she pulled me aside for making a snake with Play-Doh and told me she was cross, even though I don't even know what cross means. Jacob kept digging. I think he heard them yelling even if he didn't say so.

We heard Daddy slam the screen door, and then we heard his truck rumbling, growling mad like he was. He was leaving again. Mom came out to see us, and she had her arms folded up tight around herself, like she always does after Daddy leaves. She saw the hole and we looked up at her with our warrior faces, and she asked what in God's name were we doing. Jacob told her we were digging for the Hell Man. Mom said we weren't ever gonna find him, because he lives too deep underground.

Jacob called Mom a liar, and he told her he was gonna fix our problems, and that's when Mom walked over to Jacob and grabbed the shovel out of his hands, even though we got taught in school to take our turn with toys. She looked him right in the eye like she always does when we done something wrong and said that some people are just supposed to have hard lives. She said it don't matter what you say to the Hell Man, 'cause he does what he wants. Some people, she said, is made to suffer. Tears started leaking out of her face, but they weren't imaginary like the water on the road. They were real. Then she threw the shovel on the ground and said fill in that F-ing hole and get cleaned up, and then she went back inside.

I looked up at Jacob. His mouth was a funny shape, trying to frown, but he was fighting it. It looked like he wanted to cry like Mom was, but he was a warrior, like me. And the warriors in the stories I read never cried.

Derek Dietz is a Secondary English Education major at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, where he is a senior. He is currently serving as the Vice President of Clarion University's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. He is also one of the co-editors of Tobeco, Clarion's literary and arts journal.

Big Things

| Emma Moser

Edna Stiller shooed the last cow into the barn as thunder groaned in the distance. Sliding the door shut, she shot a cautious look at the knots of dark clouds overhead. In their shadow, bluebonnets dulled to the color of slate. Stubbles of grass became a gray patchwork with brown-ash dirt. The splinters on the little white house seemed more pronounced as the growing wind slapped against it.

Edna kicked manure from her boots and stared down the tapering stretch of road. To her surprise, she saw a figure approaching—straight, slender, rounded on top with a bonnet. Edna squinted through her cataracts, until the figure materialized into a young woman with blond curls.

“Alice!” Edna wiped her hands hastily on her smock.

Alice set her suitcase on the ground and stood erect. “Hello, Mamma.”

Edna beamed, throwing her thick arms around her daughter’s slim neck. She winced when she found stiffness in Alice’s shoulders, but was relieved when she felt the girl’s hand resting lightly on her back.

“What are you doing here, child?” Edna released Alice from the embrace. “Your father planned to pick you up at the station tomorrow, like you wrote—” she bit her lip suddenly, “—us.”

“Came home early,” Alice’s delicate face was blank—tired?—as she scanned the yard. “Where is Daddy?”

“General store,” said Edna. “And he’s likely to stay there awhile, with this storm coming.”

“Thunderstorm, Mamma?”

“Or a duster, never know,” Edna tucked runaway ends of her powder-gray hair behind her ear. “Best get ourselves inside.”

The sky blackened as Alice walked up three wooden steps into the house. Edna studied her from the back, warming with pride

at how perfect her daughter looked. Slick purple dress, curls neat under her hat, body straight and slender—nothing like the little girl in a seed-sack dress and gnarly curls, chasing cows. She was a successful woman now.

As they passed the rusty-framed mirror in the front hall, Edna caught a glimpse of her own reflection. She was short, but thick like a man; her face was tough and sun-worn. Nothing like her soft, lovely daughter. As Alice placed her suitcase on the kitchen floor, Edna noted how her hands looked like silk—nothing like her own. Edna's hands had worked hard to make sure of that. Alice used to kiss those callused hands at night and hold them to her cheek, Mr. Stiller would hum as he fed the stove, and Edna would whisper, "We'll save up some money and send you to college, so my baby can do big things with her life."

Alice sat at the rickety table, handbuilt by Mr. Stiller, and removed her hat. Edna, boots and smock stashed away, clanked a kettle on the stove.

"Tell me all about Rochester!" Edna scoured the cabinets for clean cups. "What's it like?"

"Cold." Alice kept a steady frown as she stared around the room. "And noisy."

Edna laughed, though the dryness in Alice's voice had startled her. "That's better than hell-hot and grave-silent, anyway. How are your classes? The other girls you live with?"

"Fine."

The house groaned under the first rush of rain. Pulling two teacups from a shelf, Edna peeked over her shoulder at Alice's frown. The girl's azure eyes rested on the table (Edna thought of its unevenness), then on the floral-trimmed walls (the smell of dirt that stayed in the house).

"Is your room in Rochester nice?" Edna asked.

"Yes, it's very nice."

Edna felt a shrinking in her chest and quietly wiped the cups with a rag. She poured steaming water from the kettle, while thunder growled and rattled the screen door.

"Your father near fell over from excitement when he got

your note.” She was smiling, but the small stream wobbled as Edna tried to steady her hands. She could picture the letter in her mind, penned in Alice’s neat handwriting. “You hadn’t written in so long, honey...” *Coming on the 10 a.m. train on Saturday, have Daddy ready for me.* “...We were beginning to worry...” No *Love you Mamma* at the end.

From the table, Alice began to say something.

There was a clatter at the window. A blast of wind had torn a shutter open, smashing it against the house.

“Damn shutter!” Edna turned to get tools from the closet, but found Alice ripping a drawer open. Clutching a cluster of wire, Alice strode toward the window and shoved it upward. Edna jolted to the side. Rain flurried against Alice’s face as she reached out into the storm, yanked the shutters, and tied them shut with the wire. Edna gaped as Alice’s hands worked—silk white, but gripping firmly. Still so strong, Edna marveled, after a year of carrying only books and purses.

Finished, Alice slammed the window shut and brushed the water from her forehead.

“Best take care of the others before it gets worse,” she nodded curtly.

Edna, still gaping, stammered in agreement.

Alice marched to the front hall window. Outside, rain hammered against the roof, while wailing winds threatened to break through. As mother lifted the sash and daughter spindled wire, Edna studied the girl’s face. Flickers of lightning illuminated a wildness—bitterness?—in her eyes. Her lips twitched, biting something back—a smirk? Edna winced, unsure what to make of it.

“Alice...”

A roar of thunder crashed over the house. Edna screamed, her hands covered her face.

“Alice!” she cried. “Why, *why* did you stop writing me?”

Alice stood erect by the window, fists still clenched over wire.

“Because,” the dryness in her voice cracked. “I was sick of writing about someplace I hate.”

Edna’s hands dropped. She stared into her daughter’s face.

Alice's frown twitched, looking like sadness. "Alice..."

"I hate Rochester," Alice bit her lip. "I hate the noise and the neatness and the stuck-up women."

"Alice," Edna shook her head. "We thought you were happier. We—I—wanted you to be happier." She rubbed her rough, aching knuckles. "I worked hard and saved hard so you could go to school and have a better life than me."

"What life, Mamma?" Alice punched the windowsill. "Books and then some office where no one cares a fig about me? I want *real* life, Mamma," she shook her head, her hair falling out of place.

"Alice..." Edna inched closer.

"I never wanted...big things," said Alice. "No fancy degree, no career—just, life. Just, good work, love, and a home. Like..." Her eyes lowered.

Edna stood silent for a moment. Then, tentatively, she touched Alice's cheek with her fingers. "Like what, honey?"

Edna's little girl raised her head. Her tangled curls clung to a damp face.

"Like you, Mamma," Alice said.

Edna threw her thick arms around her daughter, eyes clouded with tears and cataracts.

When the storm gasped its last breath, the two women stepped onto the porch, silk hand holding callused hand. Twigs that littered the yard lay still and dormant. Rain-drenched grass sparkled green between the shines of fresh mud. Sagging bluebonnets burst in color under a bluer sky, while a hesitant sun bathed their little house.

Emma Moser is a senior at Westfield State University in Westfield, MA, where she majors in English Writing and minors in Music. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in multiple venues, including Sweatpants & Coffee and Assumption College's literary journal, Thoreau's Rooster. After graduation, she hopes to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Little Degenerates

| Marisa Maccaro

How much of our former selves are we?

What portion of our past do we retain? And what do we lose?

I'm not a pig-tailed little girl who forgoes recess to say the rosary anymore. Nor do I feel that any part of me is. But why does the memory of Sister Ruth telling me I'd go to Hell if I pray with my hands folded prevail over the memory of learning long division? All we are is an accumulation of our years, our memories, our experiences. Part of me will be seven years old forever and part of me will be eighteen and all the years in between.

"Eye shadow makes people look like *total* freaks of nature!" My declaration rang through the crowded kitchen and dissipated in a sea of giggles. I like to think I was wise beyond my years. Rachel Spetz grinned devilishly at the phrase I picked up from rides to girl scouts with her. It was early 2003 and Dominique Zaugg was hosting the best makeover themed slumber party I'd ever been to to celebrate her eighth birthday, which happened to be just three days before mine. She would always be three days smarter and three days prettier than me but I wouldn't start noticing that until almost a decade later. She'd invited ten friends from Reverend George A. Brown, our Catholic grammar school, and they were all running around the Zaugg's kitchen, shrieking and messily applying pink lipstick. I long for the days when makeup was a game, not a requirement.

To emphasize my point I grabbed the nearest glitter eye shadow in a shocking shade of cobalt blue and smeared it clumsily over my eyelids.

"What about me?" Mrs. Zaugg asked innocently. "I wear eye shadow, do I look like a 'freak of nature?'" To this I had

no response and looked unabashedly up at her. In retrospect, Dominique's mom probably thought I was a brat and did not approve of such rude language being used in her kitchen, coming from a seven year old no less. Nevertheless, I suspect what Karen Zaugg doesn't approve of would fill several books, and besides, if she only knew what sort of debauchery would be committed in her kitchen ten years later, she would never have let Dominique leave the house ever again, except maybe for church.

I love parties in the dead obscurity of winter when you can smoke a cigarette outside and fake inhalation with the cloud formed by warm breath hitting the cold glass sky. Teenagers warming their lungs with ash and warming their bodies with each other. Dominique's parents had gone away somewhere warm for a few days to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. No one invited to the authority-empty, pristine house could fathom a commitment to anything for that long, for our mock marriages lasted mere months before they simmered and exploded. But at parties like this, intimate in size, grand in expectations, passion thrived among us, mere high school students killing the time before adulthood with sin. We were so cool.

We had booze: Everclear, Southern Comfort, Jungle Juice, Jell-O shots, and beer for the guys. All pilfered from parents' unguarded liquor cabinets and purchased at that sketchy gas station in Dover. Drugs shoved deep in pockets. Weed, namely, gram after gram consumed way too early in the night. Sometimes edibles. MDMA for the more adventurous. Blow for the addicts. And cigarettes, pack after pack of Marlboros, Newports, Camels, and American Spirits piled high on the coffee table next to the sacred bong and gas mask to "take the edge off."

Whirling around the room, our heads, and each other, we danced exaggeratedly to Miley Cyrus and Macklemore. Evan played the music, Beth and James loudly made out on the couch, Caty smoked a bong casually next to them, Ian pretended he wasn't on coke, Steve hit on everyone, Nick shotgunned a Keystone, Roshaan dealt, the Twins bought, and Dominique and I packed a bowl on the kitchen floor. No one cared. Some

might have called it “recklessness” or “immaturity” but we called it expressing ourselves. Grace Walter-Cardinal’s falsetto moans coming from somewhere upstairs filled the house and it was only ten o’clock.

We were lying in the basement snug under the covers of our sleeping bags, bellies full of pizza and popcorn, done up like little Barbie dolls while we watched a Tinker Bell movie. Mrs. Zaugg came in to kiss us all ‘Goodnight’ like our own mothers and my heart thawed beneath my floral PJs.

“Let’s go put makeup on my Dad!” Dominique exclaimed, eliciting a chorus of giggles and yeahs! It was an absurd proposition. The sweetness and silliness within my best friend on her eighth birthday from which such an outrageous idea originated are characteristics that would become buried under years of Catholic school oppression, and to this day she denies ever having had such a ridiculous notion at all. I only ever really see that childish side anymore halfway between a few Peach Bellini Smirnoff Ices and a “special” brownie split between us.

I rolled my eyes and called her “idiotic,” already so sardonic and critical at barely eight years old. Everyone was shocked at my irreverence towards the birthday girl, but that was the first time Dom and I shared the spark of daring on which our friendship was built.

“Whatever. Let’s go.” Masking the hurt in her eyes with defiance, she gestured to the rest of the girls, still shaking with laughter and excitement as they left the basement.

And there I sat, alone in front of the television in a half-finished basement, scrawling in my pocket diary in orange crayon “I think Dominique and I have to break up.” I didn’t understand the gravity of the phrase at the time, or the fact that it pertained to romantic relationships, not friendships, but my naiveté wouldn’t last long.

“I’m giving up.” Dominique fell back onto her bed dramatically and shut her pretty eyes.

“What? Cigarettes?” I asked, poisoning one between my teeth as I lit.

“Fuck no, throw me the lighter. *High school* guys.” She said the word “high school” like it was an STD. “His stupid drunk mouth tasted like beer and spaghetti and his tongue was as sophisticated.” She was jaded and slurring lightly but her wit was sharp as ever.

“Did he finger you?” I asked carefully on the night stand and tried to focus on her face. How was her makeup still flawless? I watched the smoke whisper into patterns in the air, enveloping us and getting caught in our hair.

She sighed disdainfully but I could hear the smile playing on her lips. “Unfortunately.”

We looked at each other and slipped into a fit of giggles. Such was the elegance of our late night, post-party conversations, long ago having perfected the secret language of girl talk, the rhythm of listening, the rhyme of laughter.

Dominique always says that boys are temporary but best friends are soul mates. Her nightstand held Urban Decay lipstick, a purple tube of orgasmic lubricant, French homework, and two silver picture frames: one with a picture of her little sister holding their dog Barker when he was a puppy and the other from her eighth birthday party.

Ten years ago...ten years between that moment and this one...

My mind wouldn't quiet as I took in the image of us: Dominique in a Scooby Doo nightgown smiling demurely from the floor and me with bright blue eyelids and crimped hair, waving a peace sign in the air, already a miniature hippie.

“I can't stand the passage of time,” I whispered wondering if Dominique saw what I did but she was already half asleep and barely managed an affirmative “Mhm.” I pulled the blanket up and shut the light.

We slept side by side like spoons in her pretty pink room and dreamt of the freedom college would offer. Neither of us anticipated the boredom or the loneliness of being without each other for the first time.

Marisa Maccaro, currently a sophomore at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY, has successfully been able to conceal everything of significance she has experienced during her short lifetime within her only published piece of writing. She looks forward to making up for this sad truth in her blindingly bright future.

The Armor of Femininity

| Rachel Sonvico

When I was little, I could wear my pretty-as-a-peach dress, with my knobby little knees showing, without a second thought. Fourteen years of age came around and I began getting looks of damnation as my thighs glistened in the sun. “You can’t wear that,” my father would say, shaking his head and clicking his tongue, “you’re a lady now.” A lady who didn’t even know her body held more weight than her words. I can’t say I feel any different from the little girl who ran around with her bare feet and naked arms, but the world looks at me like I’m a prize to be had. I remember the first time I got hollered at, like I was putting on a show and I didn’t even know it. “You look fine, little lady!” the men in the big, yellow truck yelled, and tighter and tighter my hands clenched at my dress. I look fine? Well, I am fine, thank you. I feel perfectly in good health, if that’s what you mean. I haven’t had a cold in what seems like an age, and I definitely can’t remember the last time I had a fever. So, thank you for commenting on my health, sir.

But, that’s not what they mean when they say you’re fine. They mean that you’ve got curves in all the right places, and your lips are as red as cherries, and they’re ready to go picking. Well, I’ll tell you what, no man’s going to take a hold of me without my permission. I still feel as young as I did when I climbed trees and had runs down my tights, and I won’t change my dress for some prideful man. You can’t wear that, ha! Since when was there a universal rule that told me what I could and could not wear? I never learned about this rule in school, and I learned all the rules in school. Don’t talk back to your elders, don’t forget to brush your teeth, and don’t ever say the Lord’s name in vain. Nothing about the color of my shoes, or the length of my dress, was slammed into me at the little school house. You know what I did learn? The Ten Commandments that Moses held on those stones, is what I learned. Remember not coveting your neighbor’s wife? Then, why do they

covet me and then I get yelled at for being the wife? All these rules were forced upon me by the pinched-nosed ladies and the greasy-handed men, who either shook their heads at me or licked their lips. Never once did they think about who God was yelling at in the Ten Commandments. Nope, it was always the wife's fault.

My brother was never told what he couldn't wear. No sir, the only time he got yelled at was for not washing his hands enough. Instead, my parent's warned him of the women that dressed like me, with their orange marmalade skirts and deep cut shirts. He would nod his head patiently, as if he took the lesson to heart, and then yell at girls on the streets telling them they were "pretty as a picture." Sometimes, when I think about all the things I was disciplined for, and the little he was, my face gets so red it could be mistaken for a fire. My hands begin to sweat, and I stomp my feet, my head spinning on its axis about ready to fly off into all different directions. Tears come to my eyes, and my cheeks can't help but let them fall to the ground, as I cover up my knees from the yellow trucks that keep on driving by. Why am I told to behave myself, when men aren't told to stop yelling? Didn't God tell his followers to deny these earthly pleasures? Why don't men get yelled at for disobeying Him? My parents act as if I'm on the streets looking for work. No, my dress dances right above my knees, but that doesn't stop the slurs from flying towards me.

But I won't change my dress for a prideful man. I won't apologize for my hips and the red lips God gave me. *I* am a woman, and nobody is going to take that away from *me*. My dress will touch the wind with feminine grace, my feet will walk the ground with maternal beauty, and my eyes will be sharp as a kitchen knife. Next time you yell at me in your yellow truck, you will feel the wrath of a thousand generations, a thousand women scorned, and a thousand women burned. My skin will radiate the energy of a thousand suns, and throw your little truck off the road. You can't wear that. Ha! Why, yes I can. The armor of my femininity will knock the façade of your masculinity to the ground. I will wear the battle scars of motherhood, the cloak of domesticity, and the headdress of endless possibilities. You will not define me, you will not shake me, and you

will not holler at me. Oh, and you can be sure I will wear my pretty-as-a peach dress, with my knees basking in the sunlight.

Rachel Sonvico is currently in the undergraduate program at Regent University in VA Beach, Virginia. She will be graduating with her B.A. in English and a minor in European History in May of 2015. She plans on pursuing a career as an English Professor.

If You Had Been There

| Justin Davis

If you had been there a second ago, you would've seen it. You would have seen a mugging. You would've seen a man come up and put a gun in his victim's face and you could've done something, but it's probably a good thing you didn't. If you had, you'd have called the cops. Who wouldn't?

But if you had called them, that mugger would have ran away. He wouldn't have killed his victim. You would have felt good that the man was still alive; you'd have shaken his hand, and bought him a cup of coffee. You'd have talked with him, and heard his life story, and he'd have told you how grateful he was you were there and that he's still alive and you'd have been a hero, and you would go home to your family.

But you would have read in the papers the next day:
MUGGER ESCAPES POLICE. WOMAN RAPED. MADMAN
STILL ON THE LOOSE.

That would have been worse, so it's a good thing you weren't there. Otherwise, you would have felt bad that the mugger was still on the loose, and you would have felt obliged to do something. You would have started manhunts and went looking for the rapist. After all, it would have been your fault he got away.

You would have been obsessed with this mugger, if you had been there just one second earlier. You would have bought a police scanner, and you would have been listening to it non-stop. You would have bought a gun, and you would have dedicated the spare room in your house to your vigilante hobbies. Undoubtedly, you would have had a map of the city, and you would have put pins in the map; pins marking the Mugger's last whereabouts, known associates, etc.

You would have been going in and out of bars, loaded gun in your coat pocket, photograph in hand, asking people "Do you know him?" It's a good thing you weren't there a second ago, and

there's nothing you can do about it. It's a good thing that man died and you never saw the mugging.

Eventually, you would have found the mugger. Eventually, you would have tracked him down through the slums and garbage and found him holed up in a shitty apartment with a prostitute and you would have laughed at him. You would have gone into his rat hole and stuck your gun in his face and asked: Why would you rape that woman?

And he would tell you: I didn't. You wouldn't have believed him, and you would have shot him in the knees and called him a liar. You would have shot him in the eye and then you would have put the gun up to the hooker's temple and shot her, too. You would have wiped the gun clean of your fingerprints, put it in the hooker's hands, and you would have shot another round to get powder on her hand, framing her.

You would have gone home, relieved that the scumbag who raped a woman got what he deserved. You would have felt satisfied and whole again, and you would have felt justice had been served. However, when you would have gotten home, you would have had to deal with your spouse. Your spouse would be yelling at you, asking you where you've been, why you're never home and why you don't see the kids anymore.

You would have apologized, and you would have promised to be a better partner, and you would have promised to take the kids to soccer on Saturday and church on Sunday. You would have promised to be present more, and you would have promised to love more. That is, if you had been there, just one second ago, all of this would have happened.

For a while, you would have been a fantastic spouse. You would have cooked and done the dishes, you would have tucked the kids into bed, you would have made love with your spouse more passionately than ever. You would have torn apart that room dedicated to vigilantism and burned the maps and pins and thrown out your police scanner. You would have been happy and healthy and productive.

For a while.

After a while, someone would knock on your door and your spouse would answer and the police would be looking for you. Your spouse would cry and shriek at what you had done, at the monster you had become, and would want to know “Why?” This is just one reason it’s a good thing you weren’t there just one second earlier.

You would be on the run, driving fast and hard, trying to outthink law enforcement. You would regret being caught, but you could not regret killing that man, that thing, that raped the woman. You would regret not having first checked the bullet casings in the revolver for fingerprints, and you would regret that your family found out.

You would have hidden in a rat hole and listened to police scanners and checked the papers daily. You would have had to disguise yourself, usually as the opposite sex as they would be least likely to suspect you as the other. You went in drag whenever you went anywhere, which wasn’t too often because you were holed up, scared, like a rat.

Eventually, you would have been arrested. You would have been surrounded by the SWAT team, and there would have been a helicopter, and you would have had to give up.

You would have been arrested and tried by the court of law and found guilty and sentenced to prison. You would have had plenty of time to sit and think about what you had done. But you would have never regretted it. That is, if you had been there just one second earlier, just one.

You would have been beaten in jail, both by the guards and the inmates. You wouldn’t have thought it, but cops hate vigilantes as much as criminals hate them. You would have been told, day in and day out, that taking justice into your own hands was a stupid move, and you would have your genitals smashed with batons and you would piss blood. The guards would laugh at you and spit at you, and turn their back to you in the showers.

You would have, as irony has it, been raped in prison, and nobody would care. Your spouse would never visit you, and you would have never, ever, ever been allowed to see your children. You would have been miserable and sad, but you would still have

been able to hold your head high, saying to yourself “I did the right thing.”

Then, you would have gotten a new cellmate. This cellmate would be the man you had saved, were you there just a second earlier. You would ask him “What on earth did you do to get put in here?” And he would say:

I raped a woman.

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Tome for Tea

| Rachel Burns

He saw her again and his heart stopped. Then, as if to make up for lost time, beat all the faster.

Yellow Christmas lights hung around the store window, framing remnants of snow outside still lying on the sidewalk and road. The sign, printed on the glass in a thick, black medieval script, read “Tome for Tea—Books and Beverages.” There, haloed in the space of the first “o,” was the face of the young woman who so violently affected the boy inside. He turned back to the books he had been shelving, taking an agonizing amount of time on each worn volume.

He winced at the sounding of the store bell, but continued on with his task.

“Hello?” came a voice from near the front desk. It was the same half-laughing voice he remembered. “Is anyone here?”

Cornell thumbed his glasses back to their proper place on his nose and maneuvered his way past empty armchairs and bookshelves scattered pell-mell about the shop. Mondays were sinfully slow.

She was reading the titles of books, her head tilted to the side, the turquoise nail of her thumb between her teeth.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

She turned and her face instantly tightened like a rubber band. “Oh...hey, Cornell.”

“Hey, Cassie,” he said. Neither met the other’s eye.

“Someone told me about this place and how good the hot

chocolate was and how they had really old books but, I guess I forgot that that was you..." She trailed off, her eyes roving all over the tiny shop.

The silence expanded between the two of them.

"So, what's good?" she asked, nodding towards the chalkboard menu above his head.

"All of it."

"What's your favorite drink, then?"

"I drink my coffee black."

She laughed, a loud, almost forced, sound. Her tongue touched the roof of her mouth in that odd way she had, her parted lips and teeth revealing an intimate exposure of inner pink. "You would. But I, I'm not so easy to please. You remember."

He glowered.

"What do you want, Cassie?"

The tightness in her features faded slightly, as she joked, "Today? Hmm, I have to figure out what kind of day it is. You know how I am, is it a chocolate day? A caramel day? A tea day? A complicated smoothie kind of day? I don't know."

"You came in because of the hot chocolate."

"No I didn't; you misunderstood me. I heard it was good, but if that's what everyone gets then I don't want it. Do most people get the hot chocolate?"

Cornell shrugged, watching her over the counter as she bent closer to inspect the teacakes and éclairs all displayed on crisp white trays, hands on her knees, her face perched above a thickly knitted scarf, the color of cream icing itself. "I don't really keep track of those kinds of things." Cassie didn't acknowledge this last statement, occupied as she seemed with the desserts.

He allowed a few more seconds to roll past before he asked again, “Know what you want, yet?”

“Maybe when I’ve found a book. Certain books call for certain flavors, you know.”

Cornell sighed. He thumbed his glasses up the bridge of his nose once more, his long face inexpressive.

“Listen, I have to finish shelving some donations we just got. Call when you’ve decided.” He stepped out from behind the register and merged back into the dusty dimness of the shop, escaping to its dying radio tuned to the Classical music station and the old-book vanilla smell that emanated from the floor-to-ceiling cases lining the walls.

His heart rate had slowed but the world remained off kilter.

“I didn’t know you worked here,” Cassie said as she followed, inspecting the many volumes around her, dancing her hand across the old velvet couch. He reached into the cardboard donation box, pulling out a bright red anthology of love poems. She tugged it from his grip and flipped through it, running her finger along the lines, her plum painted mouth echoing the words on the page silently.

A subtle sigh slipped from her lips as she closed the covers.

He moved as if to take it back from her but faltered instead and went on with his task. “You’re still such a romantic.”

“Romantics make the world’s heart beat faster, realists make sure it’s still spinning ‘round.” Smiling over the pages, she glanced at him then shoved the book on top of some others and wandered a few shelves over.

As she passed in front of him he caught a hint of her perfume. It was not the one he remembered—it was darker, more mature. He hated that she had changed what he forever linked to her. But he hated that he noticed even more.

“You never used to have a hard time finding something to read,” he said as he pulled out the book she’d just put down.

Cassie was quiet. Cornell looked up and found her staring at him, pale-faced and motionless.

“Everything makes me think of what happened between us. Everything.”

“You seem fine.”

“Do I? I guess distance has dulled your ability to read me. I can still read you, though, no matter how much you avoid me.”

Delicate strains of Debussy floated, gray and clear, through the shop. The phone in his back pocket gave an irritable buzz but he ignored it.

“That reminds me! I sent you a text this morning,” she said, using both hands to part the curtain of her hair away from her face; it emerged intent and almost accusatorial.

“I was busy,” he answered.

Her heavy locks slipped back to their places.

“You’ve been busy for a while, then. I’ve been sending you one about twice a week, just to see if you were alive. I thought about driving to your house and making sure your body wasn’t rotting away inside.”

He shrugged and corrected his glasses again.

“It’s not like I’m asking for the world,” she remarked.

“Do you even know what you’re asking for, what you really want?”

Cassie wrapped her arms around herself, her jaw working as if chewing back the angry words inside her, struggling to maintain farcical peace between the two of them, but she burst out, “I know

what I want. I've always known. And, I thought that I could find it here. But I..."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, her thumb edging along her lip towards her teeth, slightly smearing the lipstick.

"I have to go," she said finally, her voice heavy with a simple, brown layer of defeat.

And she was gone, out the door, and out of the picture frame window with its hopeful, twinkling Christmas lights. Gone. As black and permanent as the words *The End* on a page.

Cornell flung his glasses off, the dull plastic clattering as it hit a nearby coffee table. The sound was obtrusive in the stillness left in her wake; the radio only garbled out some static from dead air. For a moment, he just leaned against the shelves, blinking hard and fast.

"I miss you," he finally whispered, still clutching the red-bound book of poetry in his hands.

Rachel Burns is an English major at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. She is fascinated by love (in all its many forms), spirituality, and different ways of interpreting sensory information. This publication is her first outside of Winthrop.

The Golden Thread

| Mary Jean Miller

The man creeping through the dark is quiet, coming upon a side window to the small hovel that one could conceivably call a cabin. Though the man knows it is not just any cabin. It is *the* cabin. The cabin that the children are warned to stay away from. The cabin so far out in the woods that visitors will never stumble across it. The cabin spoken of only in secret whispers in inns and taverns. Whispers that turn from the cabin to the monster that lives there. Old and bent, some will tell. Others say he stands straight as a rod, not looking a day over five and thirty. In every story though, every telling, there is a glint to his eyes. One of malice, of ill intent for those foolish enough to seek him out, or worse, cross him.

Despite the warnings, the man is desperate. His family and his children are starving and will not last the winter if he does not do something. Which is why he carefully peeks in the window of the cabin, looking for the man whose name no one knows. The supposed immortal that is currently sleeping soundly on his simple bed, his spinning wheel in the center of the room. The man creeps in through the back door, thanking his gods when it does not creak. One thread, he tells himself. One thread is all he needs. And it is one thread that he takes from the spindle. One thread he steals from the cabin before flitting away in the woods. One thread he will sell to get money to buy food for his children. And one thread that will cause him to be run down by a carriage as he crosses the road, his sight obscured by the groceries that end up strewn about, stained with his blood.

—

The traveling trader, the tinker, could jump for joy. Who would have thought that he would actually make such a find in so small and insignificant a village? And for such a price, too! Though it was not hard to swindle the man who sold him the golden thread. He had that look, that tinge of desperation that the tinker was all too

familiar with. The look that means the customer has fallen on hard times, and the tinker is about to walk away on top. In this case, he is walking away *very* on top. Or rather, riding away with his cart and horse. He will go to the larger city to sell such a treasure as this thread. There will be more buyers, more tailors squabbling and fighting for a thread of pure gold.

It is with a happy cluck of the tongue that he flicks his reins and sets his cart trundling down the road to the city, the bustling city with its streets full of carts and carriages, the air laced with the noise of people moving about their everyday lives, vendors hawking their wares, and buyers bartering and arguing. The city in which the tinker stops his cart at different tailor's shops and eventually settles on a deal that leaves him well off and the tailor satisfied.

There is a different noise on the streets that night. There is the drunken song of people from the taverns and music of plays in the square, of course, but there is a darker undertone, a crackling noise amidst the revelry before a shout of alarm goes up. Water is called for as people try to fight the flames, but they are burning too hot, too fast, consuming the wagon entirely in a matter of moments. Then there are the screams of agony and the sounds of horror as those on the street realize the tinker was asleep inside. Before anything can be done the screams cut off abruptly, the only noise left the crackling of flames consuming wood.

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The tailor smiles after making the deal with the tinker, holding the thread up to the light and admiring its shine. He is quick to turn to his needle and the shirt he has been working on. With the thread sewn into the garment he will be able to sell it for double, even triple, what he would normally sell it for. To a nobleman, perhaps, or a passing dignitary instead of one of the middle class. His fingers are quick and nimble, slipping the gold into the shirt's embroidery easily. It will sit in the shop window for only a few days before someone comes in to buy it, a nobleman on his way to his country estate. They discuss the gold around the collar of the shirt, the nobleman curious as to how the tailor managed to get thread of gold and the tailor giving him a wink with sealed lips. His little secret, of course. It would

mean bad business should other tailors suddenly start making shirts with gold thread in them as well.

The nobleman lifts an eyebrow. "How much for it, then?" He smirks. "My firstborn?"

The tailor chuckles good-naturedly as the nobleman brings out his coin purse to pay for his new garment, one that will surely make others jealous. It is one-of-a-kind, after all. The nobleman leaves with his parcel wrapped in paper and tied with twine, the tailor bidding him a good day with a smile before slipping into his shop to count his coins again. It is with those coins that he buys himself a nicer meal this night, taking it in the back of a dim tavern. A spot tucked away enough that no one notices the tailor's eyes widen, or the strangled noise he makes as he chokes on a chicken bone. A tavern crowded enough that no one hears the chair topple over as the tailor stumbles to his feet, and it is late enough that he is brushed off as just another drunk. That is, until he collapses, a blue tinge to his face. The barmaid is the one to check that he is alright, and it is the barmaid's shrill scream that pierces the room.

—

The nobleman, pleased with his purchase, arrives at his country estate in a jovial mood. He wears the shirt the next time he has a dinner gathering, as a matter of fact. A few nobles in the area are in attendance, along with their wives. The shirt of course, receives numerous compliments and the nobleman is asked repeatedly where he managed to find such an item. The nobleman only smiles and shakes his head. A tailor in the city displayed it in the shop window, but he has never seen anything like it elsewhere. The shirt is one of a kind, it would seem, and he was lucky enough to snatch it up.

It is while the nobleman is toasting to a restful stay at his estate that another man, a poor servant, stays back in the shadows, plotting and scheming. The nobleman has not been shy in boasting how much he paid for the shirt, and the servant's eyes gleam with greed. Thus it is later in the night, when the nobleman has retired for the evening, when the servant creeps into his room. A dagger flashes in his hand, and his plan may all have been for naught if the nobleman had awoken when a floorboard creaked under the servant's

step. Instead, his sleep heavy from drink, the nobleman merely rolls onto his back, giving the servant the perfect opportunity to plunge the knife deep into his heart, steal the shirt, and escape into the night.

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The servant, with his new possession carefully hidden away, flees the countryside for the sea. It is a journey of several days, but he finds an inn to stay at and work on the docks. He is mindful not to flaunt his new possession as he searches for a buyer on the shadier dockside market. That is what brought the downfall of his previous master. He would be a fool to make the same mistake.

It is a busier day when a ship comes in, one from the Orient bearing silks and spices. The docks bustle with activity as the dockworkers, the servant included, rush to get the ship tied off and unloaded. It is when they are bringing crates up from the belly of the ship that a rat scurries between the servant's legs, brushing against him briefly. The servant hops around, cursing briefly before shaking his head and continuing with his work.

It takes only two days for the servant's body to be discovered, dead in his room of a disease that no doctor or apothecary can identify. His body deformed with black buboes, little do they know that he is the first of many, of millions. They bury his body in a small cemetery, dressing him in the nicest clothes he has in his possession. The gold in the shirt catches the sunlight as they close the lid of the pine box and lower him into the earth.

—

It is the darkest part of the night when a man slips into a cemetery, intent on a relatively fresh grave. He stops, holding his hand out over the dirt. It takes a few mumbled words and a flick of the fingers before the earth stirs the tiniest amount, a single, gold thread slipping up and into the man's waiting palm. He chuckles, an echoing laugh that is both quiet and piercing, as he tucks the thread into his pocket and turns for the trees. As he slips into the shadows of the forest he is humming. Some old rhyme about a game and a name that nobody knew...

Mary Jean Miller is a junior at Drury University in Springfield, MO. She is currently working toward a B.A. in English and Writing with a focus on fiction. She plans on pursuing a Ph.D. in English with a focus on editing and publishing.

Jurors

Kevin Brown received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Mississippi with a dissertation that dealt with Mark Twain's influence on Kurt Vonnegut. He also has an M.A. in English from East Tennessee State University, an M.A. in Library Science from the University of Alabama, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Murray State University. He is a professor at Lee University with two books of poetry—*A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press, 2014) and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009)—and two poetry chapbooks—*Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Holy Days: Poems* (Winner of the Split Oak Press Poetry Prize, 2011). He has published a memoir—*Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding Faith Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012)—and a book of scholarship titled *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State University, 2012).

Ty Hawkins is an assistant professor of English and coordinator of the Freshman Composition Program at Walsh University in North Canton, Ohio. He is also a faculty sponsor of the Alpha Omicron Alpha Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. His publications include *Reading Vietnam Amid the War on Terror* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as a number of journal articles. He teaches courses on American literature, general-education literature, and writing. He holds a Ph.D. from Saint Louis University.

Anne Mallory is an assistant professor of English at East Carolina University, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature with an emphasis on British Romanticism. Her essay "Burke, Boredom, and the Theater of Counterrevolution" (*PMLA*, 2003) was awarded the William Riley Parker Prize for that year. Her reviews have appeared in *Gothic Studies*, *Women: A Cultural Review*, and *Partial Answers*. Two essays are forthcoming in *Approaches to Teaching Jane Austen's Mansfield Park*, Eds. Marcia Folsom and John Wiltshire (MLA Press) and the *Hardy Society Journal*.

P. Andrew Miller is coordinator of creative writing at Northern Kentucky University. He has published poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction here and there. His prose chapbook, *Bodies in Water*, was published by Porkbelly Press in 2014. His short story collection, *In Love, In Water and Other Stories* was published by Post Mortem Press, also in 2014. He received the Professor of the Year Award from his local chapter of Sigma Tau Delta.

Donika Ross received her M.F.A. in Poetry from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas, Austin. She is a Cave Canem fellow and a 2004 June fellow of the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Indiana Review*, and *West Branch*. She is currently a lecturer in Women's and Gender Studies at Vanderbilt University.

Scott Sanders is the author of two novels, *Gray Baby* and *The Hanging Woods*, both published by Houghton Mifflin. His awards and honors include a writer-in-residency fellowship from the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, a fiction award from *The Atlantic Monthly*, and a fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. He lives in Virginia, where he writes and teaches fiction writing at Virginia Tech.

Shannin Schroeder is an associate professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches composition, literature, and creative writing, as well as directs the Writing Center. Her publications include *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, and her research interests include magical realism, the contemporary novel, the American flag, and popular culture. She just received a research grant with which she can lay the foundation to write a young adult novel exploring the total abandonment of Victor Frankenstein's younger brother, Ernest.

Kevin Stemmler's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Writing: The Translation of Memory*, *Paper Street*, *Heart: Human Equity Through Art*, *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, and *Pittsburgh Quarterly*. He was a recipient of the 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Grant. He is professor of English at Clarion University.



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