

*The
Sigma Tau Delta
Rectangle*

**Journal of Creative Writing
Sigma Tau Delta
International English Honor Society
Volume 88, 2013**

Editor of Publications:
Karlyn Crowley

Associate Editors:
Rachel Gintner
Colin Herzog
Grace Schmitt

Production Editor:
Grace Schmitt

St. Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin

Honor Members of Sigma Tau Delta

Chris Abani	Katja Esson	Marion Montgomery
Kim Addonizio	Mari Evans	Kyoko Mori
Edward Albee	Philip José Farmer	Scott Morris
Julia Alvarez	Robert Flynn	Azar Nafisi
Rudolfo A. Anaya	Shelby Foote	Howard Nemerov
Saul Bellow	H.E. Francis	Naomi Shihab Nye
John Berendt	Alexandra Fuller	Sharon Olds
Robert Bly	Neil Gaiman	Walter J. Ong, S.J.
Vance Bourjaily	Charles Ghigna	Suzan-Lori Parks
Cleanth Brooks	Nikki Giovanni	Laurence Perrine
Gwendolyn Brooks	Donald Hall	Michael Perry
Lorene Cary	Robert Hass	David Rakoff
Judith Ortiz Cofer	Frank Herbert	Henry Regnery
Henri Cole	Peter Hessler	Richard Rodriguez
Billy Collins	Andrew Hudgins	Kay Ryan
Pat Conroy	William Bradford Huie	Mark Salzman
Bernard Cooper	E. Nelson James	Sir Stephen Spender
Judith Crist	X.J. Kennedy	William Stafford
Jim Daniels	Jamaica Kincaid	Lucien Stryk
James Dickey	Ted Kooser	Amy Tan
Mark Doty	Li-Young Lee	Sarah Vowell
Ellen Douglas	Valerie Martin	Eudora Welty
Richard Eberhart	David McCullough	Jessamyn West
Dave Eggers	Erin McGraw	Jacqueline Woodson

Delta Award Recipients

Richard Cloyed	Elizabeth Holtze	Elva Bell McLin	Kevin Stemmler
Beth DeMeo	Elaine Hughes	Isabel Sparks	
Bob Halli	E. Nelson James	Sue Yost	

Copyright © 2013 by Sigma Tau Delta

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Sigma Tau Delta, Inc., the International English Honor Society, William C. Johnson, Executive Director, Department of English, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115-2863, U.S.A.

The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle is published annually in April with the continuing generous assistance of Northern Illinois University (DeKalb, IL) and St. Norbert College (De Pere, WI). Publication is limited to members of Sigma Tau Delta. Members are entitled to a one-year subscription upon payment of the initial fee. The subsequent annual subscription rate is ten dollars (U.S.).

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

2012–2013 Writing Awards
for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and
The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle

Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall
Maegan Lee
“Hospice at Home”

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award
Alexis Catanzarite
“The Failed Subversion of the Patriarchy in
Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*”

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award
Robert Shapiro
“What the Living Do”

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award
Maegan Lee
“Hospice at Home”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award
Margaret Russell
“Four”

Judge for Writing Awards

HESTER KAPLAN is the author of “The Edge of Marriage” (1999), which won the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction, and *Kinship Theory* (2001), a novel. Her stories and non-fiction have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories* series (1998, 1999), *Ploughshares*, *Agni Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Story*, and *Glimmer Train*. Recent awards include the Salamander Fiction Prize, the McGinness-Ritchie Award for Non-Fiction, and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is on the faculty of Lesley University’s M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing. She lives in Providence, RI and is working on a collection of stories and a novel. Her latest novel, *The Tell*, was published by HarperCollins (2013).

Contents

The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle, Volume 88, 2013

Poetry

<i>What the Living Do</i> Robert Shapiro <i>Eleanor B. North Poetry Award</i>	10
<i>Exegesis #19</i> Joseph Gamble	11
<i>Exegesis #7</i> Joseph Gamble	12
<i>Past it all</i> Yosef Rosen	13
<i>Sleeping in San Antonio</i> Kodi Saylor	14
<i>Standard Issue Distractions Dressed in Red</i> Kodi Saylor	16
<i>Cleaning</i> John Dabrowski	18
<i>National Geographic</i> John Dabrowski	20
<i>How to Eat an Orange</i> Samantha Zimbler	22
<i>Womb of the Atlantic</i> Samantha Zimbler	23

<i>Guild of Surgeons: Amsterdam</i> Jennifer Arnspong	25
<i>Adam Choked</i> Tom Minogue	27
<i>At the Entomology Symposium</i> Debbie Wiles	29
<i>Prague</i> Debbie Wiles	30
<i>Sugar Ant</i> Debbie Wiles	31
<i>We are Naked and We are Alone</i> Christopher Sonzogni	33
<i>Grandmothers</i> Julie Landry	34
<i>Honor: Erbil Iraq</i> Victoria Pyron	35
<i>Forgetting Lilacs</i> Lyndon Seitz	36
<i>While Changing a Tire</i> Joshua Jones	37

Creative Non-Fiction

<i>Four</i> Margaret Russell <i>Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award</i>	39
<i>May Dip</i> Margaret O'Brien	45

Clarion Reflections 52
Theresa Oliverio

The Doctor Served HuHot 55
Jamee Larson

Glass Along the Shore 62
Caitlin Chciuk

Palmer Myths: The Isabella House 66
Heather Etelamaki

One for the Food, One for the Girl 69
Marc Cibella

*When a Fortune Teller Asks You a Question,
Don't Think about Your Underwear* 75
Julia Blanchard

Things You Should Know about Me Before . . . 83
Emily Whyms

My Grandpa 86
Bethany Knight

Short Fiction

Hospice at Home 95
Maegan Lee
Herbert L. Hughes Short Story Award
Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall

Programming for Language 103
Dana Eckstein

Straightened Out 117
Katelyn Harrell

<i>Wednesday Night at the Blue Branch</i> Victoria Niedzielski	123
<i>Red King Waking</i> Megan Kirby	131
<i>The Artist's Portrait</i> Matthew Staton	140
<i>Perception</i> Lauren Nielsen	146
<i>Velma the Iconoclast</i> Matthew Schwager	153
<i>The Mass</i> Andy Gallagher	159
<i>The Closet</i> Allison Hamil	163

Poetry

What the Living Do

Exegesis #19

Exegesis #7

Past it all

Sleeping in San Antonio

Standard Issue Distractions Dressed in Red

Cleaning

National Geographic

How to Eat an Orange

Womb of the Atlantic

Guild of Surgeons: Amsterdam

Adam Choked

At the Entomology Symposium

Prague

Sugar Ant

We are Naked and We are Alone

Grandmothers

Honor: Erbil Iraq

Forgetting Lilacs

While Changing a Tire

What the Living Do

| Robert Shapiro

After Marie Howe

We walked through the cemetery that night
and decided it was romantic, feeling the grooves
on the granite headstones and walking softly over
the graves planted in the ground. The sky looked beaten—
battered like it had been in a car crash or a brawl.
Stars and satellites pushed through the clouds, emerging
slowly in ripples and waves as your lips parted
to whisper the names, to feel them roll off your tongue—
Richard Gunn, Lula Cox, Ruth Carver Funk.

You dropped petals on a few plots here and there
because a name was pretty or someone died too young
or it looked like nobody had visited in years.
I imagined those below us admiring a sky like this,
one decorated like a cadaver with soft blues and purples,
looking like it should be alive, like it should be breathing.
And pressing into each other until warmth rattled between us,
we watched the darkness stretch overhead, felt the still ground
push our bodies up against the collapsing night.

Robert Shapiro is a senior at Elon University in North Carolina, where he listens to music far too loud and catches baseball games whenever possible. He majors in English with concentrations in literature and creative writing, and has previously been published in Pembroke Magazine. He hopes to be a lifelong student of poetry.

Exegesis #19

| Joseph Gamble

I wondered what you meant
when you said you saw something
red and glowing in the night.
I wondered if it was alive
and what you would do
if you couldn't tell me your name.
These aren't questions
but explanations
of how to live like fire.

Exegesis #7

| Joseph Gamble

Instructions: Look straight ahead. Do not turn back. Each player receives \$2000. Each player receives a token. Do not turn back. Each player receives one (1) blank card and two (2) dice. These are for the inscription of the will and the decision of fate, respectively. Do not turn back.

Roll the dice. Inevitably, you roll two twos. This signifies the dichotomy: body/soul, earth/sky. Two eyes times two eyes equals forever: a staring contest of wits; emotional stamina. Move forward. This is a room—white-washed walls and the smell of cinnamon, faint at first then stronger: an olfactory crescendo. And in your ear the whisper: each player receives \$2000; louder, then louder still until it is yelling: *no matter how much each player receives, each player will remain nameless.*

This is an explanation: roll the dice. Did you turn back?

Joseph Gamble is a junior at the University of Alabama, where he studies English. His poems have appeared in elimae, Specter, Housefire, and the 2012 Slash Pine Press Writers Anthology. He hopes to pursue an M.F.A. in Poetry and then a Ph.D. in Critical Theory and Poetics.

Past it all

| Yosef Rosen

Cracks riddle the asphalt
like tiny ravines bisecting,
trisecting, fissuring

the street into a thousand
tiny nations, each with its
very own dead

brown withered leaf for a flag.
Waving dandelions crowd
the lawn in holy white

prayer-seeds that climb each
warm-wet westerly puff. Now
they surge! unfurling

themselves across the cracks
in the old street, grimy windows,
half-dead split-limbed

hickory tree, the vine-straddled
streetlamp that hasn't worked
in weeks—they sail up, up,

past it all.

Yosef Rosen is a senior at Truman State University, where he is majoring in Psychology and English, with a concentration in composition. He is currently the Social Chair of Truman's Sigma Tau Delta chapter and serves as an undergraduate reading assistant to the literary journal The Chariton Review. Upon graduating in May 2013, he plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing with an emphasis in poetry.

Pero no habla español,
so she sees a different man every night
pretending to be in love.

Standard Issue Distractions Dressed in Red

| Kodi Saylor

The sun bounces willy-nilly
and bruises heavy
grape shadows of desert leftover
from last night in fingerprint size pieces.

Blowing still wet nail polish on her right hand,
legs twisted around the belly
of a trail trained pony, Charlotte runs
through the latest episode of her favorite police procedural.

Barely an hour down the trail, Daniel
counts with a painter's soul
and an engineer's skill
slides of red rock
on top of yellow
on top of brown
seduced by the turning of noon
against fins and arches and spires
and an assortment of strangled desert flowers, orange
and adorned with thorny lizards.

“How late are you?—I mean when was—?”
Mouth dry, he asks her near the narrowing
of the trail curved sharp against the jagged brush
afraid of the fat under her jeans.

“Somewhere around the time I turned 21.”

She says, rearranging the folds of her blouse-tunic
around her hips
so that the floral patterned carnations
lay straight.

Kodi Saylor is a M.F.A. candidate in the Creative Writing–Poetry department of New York University after receiving the Lillian Vernon Fellowship. She recently graduated from Sam Houston State University with a B.A. in English Highest Honors.

Cleaning

| John Dabrowski

My father is stripping in the backyard,
in front of the tomato plants
and that rusted swing set.

I can hear them talk,
the neighborhood watch,
when his uniform falls
on the grass.

My father is naked in the backyard,
and his skin has dark, worn eyes.
The towers fell.
He has seen too much.

There are a thousand stories
in the dirt of my father's flesh.

He grabs the Clorox bottle,
the liquid tumbles fast, down
his chest, across his stomach,
faster.

The green water hose tangles
at his dusty feet, when he sees me
watching from the window, my face
against the screen.

His mouth moves—syllables
collect inside the still blue sky.
They hang against his shoulders,
breathing heavy.

My father is in the backyard,
naked, crying. I want to
kiss him against his cheek
but he might fall into the center
of the earth, swirling in its core.

National Geographic

| John Dabrowski

You can see his fingers
grip the tumbler
from last night
as it lies on the
hardwood.

The blinds stop
pushing the light
away from hitting
the sterling silver
of his black leather
belt

In his shitdroppers,
that belly swells,
laughing in sleep,
snoring the smoke
of that final drag,

with his hand underneath
the waistband, digging
to scratch his balls,

and his mouth open
like a devil's palm, warm
and burning and waiting

for the slip of your tongue
to say

Dad, it's morning.

John Dabrowski is a recent graduate from Drew University, where he received his B.A. in English Literature and Language. He is a marketing assistant at Sony Music/RED Distribution in New York City and writes poems on his lunch hour.

How to Eat an Orange

| Samantha Zimbler

Dig your fingers into the bright coat, let the sweet guts bathe your fingertips.

This is living.

Drive your nails into the supple sunskin and tear the spherical layer away;

feel the way it gives itself to you, the way it offers itself to your thirsty hands.

This is breathing.

And plunder! Let the viscous juices pour down your wrists; toss the stringy veins to the sides.

Slice, rip, finger away the nearly identical pieces of tender fruitflesh.

Chew. Swallow.

This, this is loving.

Womb of the Atlantic

| Samantha Zimbler

He rows her out to the Atlantic.
He makes love to her—
salt and semen and holy water
stain the thick oars,
their tongues alive with spices.

She gives birth on his dusty floor,
her womb all seawater and
smoldering waves,
dark wet curls plastered
on her aching shoulders.

A babe walks out into the sunlight
and honeydew air,
branded with charcoal,
thirsting for fire.

His mother's gaping palms wipe the
caked dirt and sweat from his brow
with a paisley headscarf. She feeds him;
Fried fish, pale rice, saltwater—
the holy trinity.

He is born in the rainy season
but the sunlight scorches his fingertips.
He will soon be forgotten,
swept away by a high tide.

Samantha Zimbler is a senior at the College of New Jersey, where she is studying English and Creative Writing, and has an interdisciplinary concentration in European literary studies. She is the president of INK, her campus' organization for creative writing, and the issue editor of her campus literary magazine, The Lion's Eye. Zimbler has interned at Princeton University Press, PEN American Center, and Macmillan Higher Education, and hopes to pursue a career in publishing.

Guild of Surgeons: Amsterdam

| Jennifer Arnspong

as I—
 the once student under your charge—
 lift an errant curl of your wig
 puffing powder off your lab coat, the white
 dust trembles on the black lapel, I
 unbutton,
 furtively glance—
 closed eyes? yes
 continue peeling back
 the ironed shirt,
 the undershirt,
 find the still-warm sternum, pause

I must enact, as you trained,
 a proper firmness on the razor as it licks
 apart your warm flesh, the way it gaps
 into little mouths as it glides
 gently
 God's plague drips on the floor.
 I catch the miracle in a paper towel,
 begin the crossing mark to realize
 the ribcage bastion

with the steel I summon the reward,
 hover the hammer head below your clavicle
 upon the door I
 knock
 quickly,
 precisely,
 breaking only the necessary, the
 bits like teeth I tumble into the arms
 of sterile stainless platter
 a feast for the cemetery worms, later

and we meet
shimmering in the anointing of your veil,
the torn aorta the blood upon the seal
my love, hidden in the clefts of marrow
a wedding of rescue, I
snip, cleave you from your father
even as you let slip your last red tear
and receive you unto myself
Yes.
I understand his passion, now
I understand.

Jennifer Arnspong attends Saint Olaf College in Northfield, MN, where she majors in Studio Art and English. Her poetry forces readers to question the transcendent through forceful encounter with the material realm. She plans to apply for the Art Apprenticeship at Saint Olaf after May graduation and considers pursuing an M.F.A. in Poetry.

Adam Choked

| Tom Minogue

A chunk of apple
caught in his trachea,
no sufficient spit to ease
it down at noon, shears in one
hand to prune humid hydrangeas
bowing their heads to heat.
Beads of sweat tickled his ribs,
Eve had gone inside to brew
sweet tea and make a phone call
about their security deposit.

The landlord was evicting them for
a rent unpaid since they could recall.
They were too human to be good
tenants—sometimes Adam took a piss
in the bushes, staring
at the English Ivy vines wishing
they'd keep off his house.
Instead he'd grab his shovel
to chop the heads off garden snakes.

His fist slams his solar plexus,
apple and spit set speed records
among sprouted saplings.
Eve sees her panting
husband on the ground,
wipes the sweat from his forehead
whispering that the landlord
doesn't
take cash.

Tom Minogue is a senior at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, focusing his studies on British literature, political philosophy, and poetry past and present. With a May 2013 graduation impending, he plans to spend as much time in literary meditation as possible.

At the Entomology Symposium

| Debbie Wiles

The scientist at the podium wants
to be a butterfly, in her orange blazer with
black piping around the lapels,
but she speaks of damselflies:
“Enallagma eribium, a Marsh Bluet damselfly in Manchac Swamp.”

If I were a damselfly,
I would live in Louisiana, too,
flitting and buzzing among the creole
and jazz. I would be as blue as a Marsh Bluet.

I would hold my wings along my body
while perched atop a cattail in the thick southern heat.

In the cool dark of the auditorium,
I slide my arms down my body imagining
the floor is dangerous aqua regia—
I perch upon my seat and lift my feet above such peril.

The scientist who wants to be a butterfly
says that damselflies undergo an aquatic nymph stage.
I too would have gills.
I would feed on aquatic organisms.
I click my teeth lightly in the auditorium, evolving.

I would have wings like spun glass.
I would stretch them gracefully over my back.

I cross my legs in the space between my chair and the one in front
and place my hands one atop the other on my knee.

Butterflies would cry with envy.

Prague

| Debbie Wiles

I was twelve.
I wanted to be
in Prague,
walking one of eighteen
austere bridges
that span the Vltava,

staring deep
into its cold, blue, liquid
strength—water of the mother
land. I wanted to feel
significant, but delicate

notions of art
I might craft in a lonely
Bohemian studio
led me to see
mermaids whirling
in that water, frightening,
horrific, like Rilke's Angels.

Sugar Ant

| Debbie Wiles

I watched
a sugar ant
crawl across the artificial skin of

a Bartlett pear
nestled among
guitar and glass in a still life

by Picasso,
painted in anger
after Olga, but before Marie-Therese. I watched

the tiny
antennae
twitch on currents of air that carried dust

swirling
through sunlight
like the golden Malaga afternoon when Pablo was born.

How lonely;
this sole ant
should have another to sweeten his task.

If only he
were a picnic ant
rather than a museum and lemon-oiled wood ant,

then he would
have many brethren
close-by, feasting on chicken-salad sandwiches

while balloons
ascend from
children's fists into the brilliant sky.

Debbie Wiles, a non-traditional student, graduated from Frostburg State University with a double-major in Mathematics and Creative Writing. She was active in her Sigma Tau Delta chapter as an event promoter and graphic designer. Debbie's goals include continued publishing of poetry and Christian non-fiction as well as a graduate degree in Mathematics.

We are Naked and We are Alone

| Christopher Sonzogni

If those cold, winter-turning-spring days have me convinced of anything, it's that I want to be cold with you, that I want to wrap myself in fleece and wrap you in me when nights are still cool enough on Outer Banks beaches

until all that's still shivering are our toes and the ghost crabs tunneling under our feet. This is why I find myself on airplanes, flying east from New Mexico with you. You are asleep next to the window, your breath trying, failing

to fog up the window as the pilot clambers up upward, your nose pressed against the plexiglass, the perfect ridges of the Appalachians falling and rising below, mirroring the edges of my bag of tiny pretzels.

We are naked and we are alone up here, all strapped-in, and I am struck by the nonchalance of the flight attendant as she walks a cart up the aisle. These are the moments that I will return to: your hair

stuck to the pebbled plastic walls; my travel-sized cup balanced precariously on a fold-out tray; your hand clutching my thigh when we hit a patch of turbulence.

Christopher Sonzogni is a senior literature and creative writing double-concentration English major at Elon University in North Carolina. He will graduate in May 2013 and hopes to spend a year abroad before pursuing further graduate studies.

Grandmothers

| Julie Landry

The tip of one's nose
battleships through
bloodied soup. I
thank her for the
recycled sweater
in June.

The other's flip-flops dragged
on terrazzo and
slapped on countertops.
That's where she kept
the butter.

Slopping, her
condescension
escaped and held
down pillows over me.
I fight—I pretend
to be asleep.

On my throat,
heels as pink as
her lipstick pin the
exact moment we
stopped
being a family.

Julie Landry focuses on creative writing as she seeks her M.A. in English from the University of Louisiana at Monroe. She grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, majored in English and Spanish for her Bachelor of Arts, and has been published by photographer Dan Snow in his book Aftermath.

Honor: Erbil Iraq

| Victoria Pyron

Stumbling down wooden steps,
she barges into the basement. Her
twelve-year-old heart thrashes

in her chest. Her darting eyes stop
on the jug of kerosene. It peeks
from underneath her sister's old clothes—
her fists clench as she sees the burqas

that twice failed to protect. As she
lingers, a box of matches peers
over the top shelf and draws

her shameful gaze. She
can almost feel his hot,
panting breath defiling
her neck again. Resenting

those stiff, thick drapes
that couldn't help her escape
that frail existence: her womanhood,

her fate, she veils
her body in streams of kerosene.
The match, now in her hand,
strikes a single flame.

Victoria Pyron has studied Arabic, Urdu, and French, and has traveled throughout the Middle East. She is a junior at North Central University, Minneapolis, MN, where she majors in English, minors in Islamic Studies, and is the current President of NCU's Sigma Tau Delta chapter.

Forgetting Lilacs

| Lyndon Seitz

I'm not sure what I can remember
now. The enamoring lilac scent,
the dirt floor petals, it doesn't shade
the world pink anymore. A small crumb
of my world is taken in callused
Caucasian palms and thrown to ducklings.
Previous crumbs include silver stones
rippling when thrown by my grandfather,
the vibration of a train, thumbing
a rented tassel. Once I played hide
and seek by myself and no one looked
in the magenta flower fields. No
one was even out picking lilacs.
Neither stones nor water rippled then.

Lyndon Seitz is a junior at Westfield State University studying English with a concentration in writing. He has served as the poetry editor of Mind Murals, and serves on the editorial board for Westfield's literary journal.

While Changing a Tire

| Joshua Jones

The jagged edge supported all the legs
The maimed arachnid, stumbling about,
Had left, while dangling above the dregs
Of stale beer and the asphalt's smut; the stout's
Dismembered shards imagined a small host
Of eerie wounded twin spiders that twirled,
A synchronistic dance in air, almost
Poetic, were they all enameled pearl.
But they were not enameled pearl at all,
Nor jet nor red nor even jet and red.
The myriad of mimic monsters, small,
And even smaller than their first, half dead,
Just spasms in a mirrored glass, were grey—
Not even dark or light a shade of grey.

Joshua Jones is a senior at Houston Baptist University where he majors in English and minors in both Latin and Philosophy. He is a past President of his university's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. He intends to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and possibly continue on to a Ph.D. program in English.

Creative Non-Fiction

Four

May Dip

Clarion Reflections

The Doctor Served HuHot

Glass Along the Shore

Palmer Myths: The Isabella House

One for the Food, One for the Girl

When a Fortune Teller Asks You a Question, Don't Think about Your Underwear

Things You Should Know About Me Before . . .

My Grandpa

Four

| Margaret Russell

In a moment of crisis, sadness, or failure, I cling to space. Attaching myself to an irrelevant area like a pair of child's water wings, the only thing keeping me afloat. In reality, my own flailing limbs are sufficient. Rendering the neon plastic useless.

When I was told a car had hit my dog, I sat in the laundry room cradling the towel armoire my mom had stained purple. I traced the thatched eggplant pattern with my flaking nail while my tears darkened the treated wood. Locked out of the house, realizing my mom was back in the hospital, I cowered in the keyless doghouse. Bits of moldy straw embedded themselves in my palms. The heat of my tears smudged my glasses, blocking my brother's oblivious face from view.

The second of August was no different. I stood in the bathroom examining myself gingerly; my fingertips sporadically tapped my freckles. Marks not changed since that summer's first burn now felt foreign. My remaining hand gently touched the fat surrounding my stomach. I pinched it, proof that I could still find comfort in its folds. My body was still mine: brown splotch on my inner thigh; left knee more ticklish than my right; middle toes awkwardly immobile. I knew that body. It was clearly mine. Yet, I wanted to husk away this skin, free myself.

The turnip-colored walls scratched my bare back as I slid against it. My cheek rested on the cool ceramic of the toilet, sticking slightly. All I had to do was stand up and walk to my truck. Naked. Naked was not an option. I felt cold. I shrugged off the feeling. Cold is what got me here; why I was caressing a puke-stained toilet. Cold and an empty bottle of tequila.

As I stood up, a white hot flash of anger stampeded across my body. Why was I not strong enough? I was cold and pathetically drunk. I was not desperate for some juvenile caveman to knock me

over the head and drag me back to his hut. Yet here I was, naked and defeated.

My breathing hitched. When did it become standard procedure to whip through every tip ever printed in Cosmo on “How to Please Your Man” while being raped? Since when was the fact that you had not shaved in a week your biggest concern while being raped? Who decided “Sex is a bad idea” really means “Please rape me now”? Rape. I felt my anger deflate. I glanced longingly at the toilet as I walked back to the bedroom.

I clung sloth-like to the farthest edge of the bed and let out a small laugh. Not even Catholic, and I had guilted myself into returning to my best friend’s parent’s bedroom with a person who made me want to cry even more than the floral vomit masquerading as wallpaper around me. Suddenly a grotesquely soft finger traced my spine. I recoiled as if I had been burned by a cattle prod. My self-loathing laugh had woken him.

His syrupy breath forced its way into my ear, “Three times.” He moaned like a senior who had gorged himself with freshman lunch money. As his infant-like hands pulled me against him, I collapsed in on myself.

One. My head lolled against the window. Half against the windowpane, half folded into the couch, I shivered trying to stay awake. I had to wait for Danni to call, but it was so hard to hold my head up. I felt anger bubble up as I pouted over the idea of being alone on this couch. I cannot believe she left; she could not hold her glass to her lips anymore, so how she managed to unlock her car was beyond me. Now I was stranded with a bunch of ham-fisted frat boys and their bird-like girlfriends. At least I had Ron. I sighed. No, Ron had already left. My brain was not stringing thoughts together. Basic concepts were not forming in my tequila-pickled brain. I watched my phone light up, but I sunk further into the couch.

I knew I was crying, but I could not feel the tears on my face. I saw Willy wiping them off, but I could not sense his fingertips. I

knew I was blubbering, panicking about Danni. I watched my body shake brutally with cold. I saw him wrap his body around mine. Numb with cold, I clung to him, nodding to his whispers even though I understood them as well as I would a senile man's last request. I fell in love with his body heat, soothed by his affirmations that Danni was safe.

It took several times before I realized he was asking if I wanted to go upstairs to find more blankets. This was the smartest man I had ever met. I tried to voice my agreement but I could not form words. I smiled and that seemed sufficient. He chuckled at my attempts to stand and lifted me over his shoulder. I marveled at the childlike nature of his laugh. I wondered briefly if this was how the toys in Santa's sack felt. I caught a glimpse of Natalie's concerned face as I was heaved around the corner. It would not register until hours later that she was trying to warn me.

When my head collided with the banister on the way up the stairs, I finally felt something. The crack reverberated throughout my entire body. Starry-eyed, I caught a glimpse of his face. Annoyance flickered across it. I bristled slightly; he was the one treating me like a potato sack. I no longer felt like an adorable rucksack of playthings. Cradling my head, I pushed away from him, determined to support myself. I pushed too hard and crashed into a door. He was on me in an instant, forcing me against the pressed wood. When his hips pushed against mine, the first wave of panic washed over my body.

The playfulness was gone. Trapped against the door, he lifted me off my feet. Still woozy, I clung to him like a punch-drunk tree frog, eyes wide. He stumbled as he forced open the door. The fall to the bed felt like an eternity. The moment the mattress absorbed the shock of my body soft flannel enveloped me, flooding me with warmth. I scrambled to pull it around me, growing increasingly frustrated with my limbs' inability to function. I started slightly at the sound of the soft click of the lock.

The blankets now felt like thick cords of rope; coarse threads

slicing my wrists and legs as his small sugar-glider hands forced apart my thighs. "I bet you're warm now." His voice muffled by his shirt as he pulled it over his head, his legs pinning me to the bed. Unable to speak, I gave my head the smallest of shakes. "No?" he questioned, "Well I'm about to fix that." This time my own shirt muffled my rebuttal. "Come on, a girl like you has to be on the pill. It's going to be good." He emphasized "good" with a primitive groan against the nape of my neck. A girl like me? I did not know who he was talking to, but I do not know that girl.

Two. I tentatively moved my hands. I almost cried out in joy as my fingers grabbed subtle fistfuls of mussed fabric. The tequila had released its hold over my body, but I could still feel its traces. Sluggish blood and skin taut with dehydration. My brain pounded against the inside of my skull, begging to be used. But my body was too slow. I knew enough to be silent and find my clothes. I did not think beyond that other than to spend a moment confused by my lack of cotton mouth.

I found my glasses, deformed like a woebegone kite ensnared by a tree, beneath my back. I adjusted my now bespectacled face and hunted for my panties, moving as little as possible. I had pulled the black lace to my kneecaps when Willy stirred. I froze, praying relentlessly. My unanswered prayers joined my now ripped panties on the floor. "I don't know why you bothered to put those back on," he smirked after tossing the lace aside. I saw my face reflected in his dandelion eyes. How could he not see my fear and disgust shouting at him with every freckle, with every blemish? My fear subsided for a moment as he pulled me on top of him. His Mediterranean skin glowed in the moonlight creeping under the crepe paper drapes. His espresso eyelashes rested on his cheeks like forty-two tensed butterflies.

Suddenly I was mortified. He was beautiful and here I was with him, unkempt and foul. Tender blistering red patches covered my shoulders, breasts, and shins from last weekend's sun. Unable to shave because of the burn, I was vividly aware of my legs prickling

against the smoothness of his tensed thighs. The scum trapped in my elbows, the hollows of my knees, and nape of my neck from that morning's swim in the pond must smell, taste. It was then that I needed to be good enough for him. I had to please the Italian who had just hours ago smiled at me, amused by my slurred sarcasm.

Distracted by my desperation to fulfill his needs, I was taken aback by the swiftness of his movements. A frantic yelp escaped my lips for the first time as he pushed me on my back. Sudden pain erupted, instantly bringing tears to life. Before the cry finished its passage through my lips, his tot-sized hands trapped it, forcing my head back into the pillow. Now I had no doubt, he saw my suffering. This beautiful man with the hands of a porcelain doll was relishing every moment.

Three. A new kind of cold slunk over my body, the kind of cold that fills an abandoned house. Heavy damp air creeps in through the cracks, causing mildew to spread across the floors' forgotten furniture, leaving the structure to decompose from the inside out.

I sat up and pushed away the covers. Before my toes could touch the plush shag, reminiscent of a different era, his hand was around my wrist, "Where do you think you're going?" Every bone in my body knew he would not let me leave, not even to go to the bathroom. I tried anyway. Pulling me underneath him he demanded, "First, say my name." All the moisture from my throat evaporated. "Say it!" Each demand whistled through clenched teeth more iridescent than Tom Sawyer's whitewashed fence. With each push the crevice in my chest grew a little wider and his name a little louder, "Willy, Willy, Willy." More broken than I thought possible, I stumbled to the bathroom.

Much later I would be able to laugh at the irony that surrounded his name. For now, at this moment, standing illuminated in the doorway, watching how the weak light caught on the hair of my legs mirroring the dark hair on his olive chest, it terrified me. "Say my name one more time." His eyes dared me not to, questioning how strong I had grown in the bathroom. I had not changed; I still stood

before him wilted and ashamed, “Willy.” Four.

Margaret Russell is a recent graduate from Marian University, Fond du Lac, WI. She received a B.S. in both Middle Secondary Education and English. Margaret is currently pursuing a career in education and hopes to inspire young writers. She will continue her education specializing in American Literature.

May Dip

| Margaret O'Brien

It is my first year at St Andrews, my first year of college, and I am 3,600 miles away from where I was born—where I learned to walk and speak and grow. Eighteen years old and already transatlantic, I am free-falling, cut loose, tongue-tied and scattered from my homeland like some migratory bird. My watch face is blurred with rain: ten thirty. I am late for class, moving east on North Street, which runs parallel with the Old Course. Rich golfers in colored slickers whack their way across the windswept greens as I stumble my way toward St Salvator's Quadrangle. Dates of popes and great battles drift in and out of my mind, alongside the faces of strong-jawed German men, Hanseatic traders from the portraits in my Mediaeval History course books.

The stink of brine is heavy on the wet air, like the choke of diesel exhaust from the trundling lorries and busses flying past. My toes squish in my trainers, soaked through. I stumble a few times on loose sidewalk blocks; look down.

Memory is a funny thing, like history. Both leave traces. I stare at the pavement—someone has gouged “Ross has a big knob” into the slate. I stare and wonder if we've always been like this, about all of the places—home in Michigan, St Andrews, the whole entire world—and I wish there was someone I could ask about people. Ask why we are the way we are, why we do the things we do? My toe scuffs against the graffiti and I know that it isn't so different from the etchings in the barracks of ruined Pompeii: “*Suspirium puellarum Celadus thraex.*” *Celadus the Thracier makes the girls moan.*

I shake my head and continue on my way and think about home, about all of the ideas humanity has kept and where home started and why we always belong one place and not the other. I shiver under my damp coat and ache for the soapy balm of Michigan spring, for my house and the warm kitchen filled with sun and the chop-grind-sizzle-laugh sounds of my mother at the stove.

A hangover thuds in my head and waves of nausea erupt with

each heartbeat. I look up, take a deep breath. Over the tops of the houses and buildings, woolen clouds press on the steep pitched roofs. I battle on uphill against the rain and wind and, ever so slowly, the tower of St Salvator's appears before my face—the olive slabs of the stone bell coop, the length of the tower itself, the gaudy red-faced clock, and the armor-like roof of the chapel beneath.

By the time I reach the gateway into the quad I'm out of breath and I have to stop for a moment. My nose is angry and red with the cold wind and the colder rain. The cobbles beneath me are deep antique red, like the terra cotta fragments of Pompeii pottery. I swallow—still tasting last night's vodka—see the stone initials "PH" embedded in the ground. Patrick Hamilton's initials.

Whether it is the hangover or something else, I feel the ground go out from under me. The pit of my stomach gives way in a horrible, vertigo-plummet, and it is just another way the world is full of mystery, memory, history.

My very first day in St Andrews, Ania and I stood in this same spot and she taught me the tradition behind the initials.

"Okay. See the initials? Now. Look up at St Salvator's bell tower. Look hard," she said. It was sunny out, copper-October, and we were barely friends yet. I stared up but saw nothing.

"See it yet?"

"Nope," I said.

"You Americans are so fucking stupid." She slapped my shoulder. "Try again."

It took a while but eventually it came into focus.

"Is that a face?" I asked.

"Patrick Hamilton," Ania said. "He died here, something like five hundred fucking years ago. A crazy Catholic dude set him on fire. He was a Protestant martyr."

Later on, that first day in St Andrews, Ania and I walked past the tower again, on our way back to our dormitory. The sun was setting and we were giddy with the heady rush of two quid pints. I was ahead of her and as

I passed St Salvator's, Ania started bleating Polish curses and shouting my name.

"KURWA! No, no, Miggie, Miggie, stop! Stop!"

I stopped moving and Ania ran to me.

"God, fucking Americans! No respect! You can't step on the initials," she growled, jabbing her finger at my feet. I looked down. Two inches in front of me were the cobbled letters.

"Kurwa! If you step on that, you won't graduate. It's the curse!"

I raised my eyebrows.

"Yah, and the only way to get rid of it? Get naked and run into the sea by Castle Sands at dawn on May Day!"

"I don't believe in legends," I told her.

I stare up at the sooty portrait now, alone this time. Rain runs in rivulets down the collar of my coat. The crude image—round eyes, jutting cheekbones, eerie, thin-lipped grin—is familiar, another macabre piece to the much larger puzzle of this land. Even though I know that the May Dip is nonsense, I make sure not to step on the initials as I make my way through the arched gateway and into the quad. I cross the yellowed grass and head for the lecture hall in School Three, and, as I move, the weight of the air shifts as though remembering, spinning me out once again beneath the gravid brooding of lost centuries.

Toward the back of the quad, I see the frame of the modern library poking its head above the classics building. I smile. Weeks ago, Ania and I tried to talk our way into the rare books collection to see the six papal bulls acknowledging the university's official foundation. Sent over the channel in 1413 by the renegade anti-pope, Benedict XIII, the frail documents still smell of sea salt and incense. When the fat librarian refused us, Ania shouted "*Psiakrew!*" in her face and vowed never to go into the library again. When I asked Ania what *psiakrew* meant she grinned.

"It's a curse, a saying of my *Babcia*. It means, the blood of a bitch in heat!"

I am still smiling as I enter School Three.

I hang my jacket on a peg and find a seat. At the podium in the front of the hall, a pedantic Englishman lectures about Mediaeval Apocalyptic Traditions in a stuffy, public school accent. I yawn, feel the strain of too little sleep, too much booze. I stare out the window and imagine how the university must have looked in the early days of the fifteenth century. This backwater countryside of northern Scotland was a quiet place, even then. Unlike England and the tattered banks of France, this land was untouched by the savage devastation of the Hundred Years War. The only true trouble had ridden north on the backs of shaggy, cat-sized rats—in the tumbling stomachs of Asian fleas—toward the end of the 1340s.

The same outbreaks of Bubonic plague that terrorized the Continent in the fourteenth century terrorized the Isles too. The first cracking black buboes appeared, rupturing the bodies of Scottish locals only a generation before Benedict, sitting among the outcast remnants of his curia in France, wrote the founding bulls of the university. While St Andrews shuddered under the cruel sub-arctic seasons of the early 1400s—eaten away by decennial waves of the plague and spiritually sick with the moral collapse of the Great Western Schism—the anti-pope Benedict bathed in the southern French sun.

In Ania's art history textbook, there is a reprint of an Henri Segur portrait, a portrait of Pedro de Luna, otherwise known as Benedict XIII. In the picture, his face is smooth and pale, the color of oatmeal. He wears a linen coif on his head and the gentle breezes of Avignon and Perpignan rustle his crimson gown. Pedro, hand clutched about an unsealed scroll, holds up his hooked, Arigonese nose as if to catch the ripe southern winds rich with the soothing scents of oranges and spice. His head, cocked left on his scrawny neck, tips away from the artist as if unwilling to acknowledge across the narrow channel, where the stench of the dead is like a cloud from the bowels of hell.

Rain streams down the window. Sodden, empty, dismal, the

quad almost looks like a graveyard. I wonder if the ghosts of the plague victims still walk the streets of the town. I think about the night Ania's boyfriend Marcel got us drunk on real Absinthe from the Czech Republic. We went wild, hopping the gates into the ruins of St Andrews Cathedral, now a cemetery, tombstones spinning in the toxic buzz of wormwood coursing in our blood.

I close my eyes for a second, ignore the professor's reedy drone. I remember the smell of saltwater and fear, remember Ania white as milk and the way she whispered, "*Duchys!*" at the strange figures in the darkness, at the faces in the shadows of the tombstones. The memory makes my teeth ache. The cold, almost instinctual terror, Ania's eyes as wide as eggs, her trembling voice "Is this real?" We were sure of it then, and I open my eyes and look out now, wondering if the university buildings still remember the gutters clogged with festering corpses, the abandoned children with armpits and groins and necks splitting wide from the blistering, melon-sized buboes.

Through the rain, the tower of St Salvator's appears warped and flickering. The gathering darkness of a growing storm blooms in a bruise of thunderheads. Always, there is a shadow on this town, like the face of Hamilton on the bell tower. It is the shadow of history, and the secrets of St Andrews' past are as unintelligible as the obfuscated depths of the Firth of Tay. Looking back through the years—like turning the pages of brittle, velum tomes, like muttering the syllables of dead tongues aloud in the quiet carrels of the King James Library—is like looking through a glass, darkly.

I turn back to my notebook and see the date, February 28th. My stomach coils. Four hundred and seventy years ago—while pupils just like me sat in this very lecture hall—the Cardinal Beaton, Archbishop of St Andrews, burned the young heretic Patrick Hamilton at the stake. Did it rain, that afternoon so long ago, just as it does today? Did the fire, blazing and igniting the robes of Hamilton's scholastic rank, sputter and hiss under the agitation of a similar February storm?

The scene on the street would have been something: beneath the lashes of a leaden sky fat with rain and thunder and screeching gales, the misguided minions of the barbaric Beaton frenetically piling straw, tree branches, heretical books, anything, into a heaping pyre. Did they struggle to light the fire? The histories say that the first fire went out; did the second burn all the more slowly, painfully because of the weather, as though the earth itself was simply reminding Hamilton of his own mortality, Beaton of his own futility? These are things that no one has written down. Ania always tells me not to think that way, to forget it, that I'll never have all the answers anyways. But I know that even if they are questions with no answers, they are still questions I cannot forget.

I watch the thunderheads roll in closer, fully over the quad now. Everything has been splashed into pools of purple darkness, the white square of light from the window of my lecture hall like a glowing stamp upon the grass outside. The professor has finally finished his lecture and I have missed every single word.

I leave School Three, deciding to walk along The Scores and visit the castle before heading back to the dorm. There, before the ruins, I stand almost touching the initials of George Wishart—another reformer burnt by Beaton. The clumsy intertwined slabs embed “GW” in the pavement, but there is no legend surrounding Wishart. Before me, what remains of Beaton's castle is shrouded in the mists of the tempest. Beyond the far side of the grounds, the remains of a tower lean dangerously over the precipitous cliff. A hundred feet below, gnashing rollers throw themselves continually against the receding coastal rocks, their foaming faces breaking with roars and crashes. Out here, beneath the fury of a foreign sky, the jaded history of our strange and brutal kind is insistent, haunting, inevitable. I feel as far from home as I have ever been.

And when I return, safe among the familiar clamor of the dormitory, I sit in the common room with Ania watching the evening drop in like the carrion in Snowdonia. The black, glossy wings of darkness, fluttering, descend quickly on the heels of the

dissipating storm. As the clouds recede, booming claps of thunder rattle the windows in their frames.

Ania pours me another shot of Wódka Żołądkowa Gorzka. I take it back in a slug, savoring the sting on my tongue and the tingle of fire as the alcohol hits my blood stream. As though she can sense my thoughts, she eyes me warily and pours another shot.

“*Kurwa*, Miggie. Drink the fuck up, you look like somebody shot your dog. Seriously, you’re bringing me fucking down.”

I take the glass, admire the amber, orange shimmer of the liquor. It’s doing its job.

“Sometimes, I think studying history is like always being homesick,” I say.

“*Kurwa*, you’re already fucking drunk!” she says. Her mouth smiles but her eyes are sad.

I sigh, then hold my glass to Ania. The residue of the past is as thick on our world as the crisp morning frost on the domed, Scottish hills.

“*Na zdrowie*,” I say looking her right in the eyes. With a shudder, I throw back the shot of the Żołądkowa. The hum of potatoes and Polish booze fill my mouth—the taste is good. I decide, at this moment, that come dawn of the first of May, I will run naked and shivering into the frigid water after all.

Margaret O'Brien recently graduated from Alma College in Alma, Michigan, where she graduated summa cum laude with Honors in English, and a minor in Writing. Her poetry was recently published in Michigan State University's Red Cedar Review. Margaret served as an editor for Sigma Tau Delta's regional journal, Ex Medio, and plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Clarion Reflections

| Theresa Oliverio

Snap. Swoop. Rest.

Snap. Swoop. Rest.

I watched his arm and wrist twirl with ease to release the line and send it gliding over and into the flowing water. His motions were mechanical, but at the same time naturally rhythmic and graceful. Never had I seen my father more content, more relaxed, than while he was fly-fishing.

My sneakers scuffed roughly against the dirt slant as I lifted myself up and back from the ground to sit, leaning against the wide-based tree. The view was always better from atop this hill. I could survey the river valley below with ease, all the while enjoying the tranquility of a place free from electronics and schedules.

It was one of those fall days that children look forward to all year. The wind teetered perfectly between warm and cool. The leaves were dry and crisp, prime consistency for piling up and plunging into. Wildlife sensed the subtly shifting climate and emerged from their homes to take flight or scurry beneath the brush, creating a wave of movement mysterious to the world outside of themselves.

I scanned across the valley. The autumn yellows and browns melted down from the mirroring Pennsylvania hill and blended smoothly into the flowing water. The tumbling liquid surface swelled and re-birthing as it pressed firmly into my father's hip. How quickly its force gave in, broke, and wrapped around his waist. He stood as a pillar, breaking the flow of nature while creating it anew.

His brown eyes, mirroring images of my own, trailed the thin water whip from river to air and back again. The lassoed line shone as a slivered flash of light, twirling through the air before slicing sharply into the depths again.

Snap. Swoop. Rest.

Fly-fishing. It was one of those sports that, to me, seemed more fun to take part in than to watch (golf and NASCAR also making the top three).

I had watched this scene play out for years. If it wasn't my father who stood waist deep in the Clarion River, it was my Pappy, or my uncles, or one of my many older male cousins. I had known more about fly-fishing by the age of twelve than most people did in their lifetime, more than they would care to know.

But still, something kept me coming back.

I had always thought that in addition to spending time with my father, it was the sky that captured me, that made me love nature. My concentration often shifted from the river up to the citrusy sky. Hues of plum, peach, and tangerine swirled together amidst the frothy foam clouds to create a painting just for me, panoramic, the base framed by jagged autumn treetops.

But that couldn't have been all. No, there had to be more. The sight, while beautiful, wasn't entirely what captivated me. I shut my eyes and allowed the other senses to take over.

The bark supporting my back was rough. It stood strong, as my father did against the current. Rain, wind, snow, and hail had all tested and formed the sturdy armor. I fanned my arms back around the trunk, letting my fingers trail down the scaly bark until reaching the damp, shaded earth. My hands sketched an arcing trail across the ground, rolling rocks and bending grass blades as they moved; upon reaching my thighs, they hid beneath the warmth.

The air smelled of pine. Pine and something else. Something that cannot be named, only vaguely described. It was that "forestry" scent, that "earthy" scent, that "naturally free" scent. The scent that triggered tranquility and reminded those experiencing it that they still existed.

The air tasted different here than back home. Back in the city. Breathing it in gave me that smooth, cool sensation felt only after swirling and swallowing down a gulp of ice cold water after a long thirst.

I listened to the leaves rustle and tumble, moved by the motivational wind. The river seemed to control the noise as it hushed its surroundings and called attention only to itself.

Snap. Swoop. Rest.

I could hear the sound of my father snapping his wrist back, yanking firmly on the fishing rod. I opened my eyes to watch the line zip smoothly through his fingers. A slight jump rope whistle sounded as the thin cord cut through the air, then silence fell as it entered back into the water.

He had been working long hours back home, mainly midnight shifts. The laborious steel mill left him tired and sleeping by the time I caught the morning bus to school. In the afternoons though, once I returned home, I saw him fight the weight of his eyelids to stay awake, to stay alert, to stay involved and spend time with his girls. I loved him for that.

These weekend trips were the best though. We all soaked up this time away from it all. We absorbed our surroundings. We absorbed the days of simply being.

Perhaps that was it: Being.

My father had probably known this all along. That it didn't matter whether or not the fish were biting, but rather that we two were here. Separated, yet together. We could bond without saying a word. We could exist together in the moment. We didn't need to be anywhere other than where we already were. To experience nothing and everything all at once was what kept us coming back.

Theresa Oliverio is a 2012 graduate of Walsh University where she minored in Communication and Creative Writing and earned her B.A. in both AYA: Integrated Language Arts Education and English. Theresa served as President of Walsh University's Alpha Omicron Alpha Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. "Clarion Reflections" came about as the result of having amazing professors, supportive friends (the English Crew), and a loving family. This work was presented at the 2012 Sigma Tau Delta 'Reawaken' Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The Doctor Served HuHot

| Jamee Larson

I held down my nephew's arms while my brother, Jeremy, tried to keep his head still. Blake flailed his body as he struggled to free himself. To our right, a doctor methodically inserted a camera up the four-year-old's nose. *Jesus. Hurry up*, I thought, watching the doctor slowly maneuver the scope as he watched the progress on the monitor.

"Stop it," Blake wailed. "You're hurting me."

My sister-in-law turned towards the wall as she fought against the instinct to protect her son.

"It's almost over, Buddy," my brother whispered into Blake's ear. "Just a few more seconds."

"No. Stop it. You're hurting me." His screams made me nauseous. The fact that I was holding him down and therefore complicit in his pain made it worse.

The doctor had explained that he was going to check for abnormalities in Blake's sinus cavities. Since arriving at the Mayo Hospital three days prior, Blake had undergone dozens of procedures. This one was the worst. Under any circumstances, the test would have been a struggle, but the insensitivity of the doctor had made it horrific.

Blake likes to ask questions; he needs to understand how things work. Before Jeremy and Dawnelle had a chance to explain the procedure to him, however, the doctor began. With a quick, "here we go," he inserted the camera. Blake didn't see it coming.

The procedure only lasted a few minutes, but the screams lingered. The doctor packed up his equipment, gave Blake a quick smile, and said, "We're all done." It was as if the experience had no impact. I don't know how doctors can induce those types of screams from children and not be affected. Blake whimpered softly in my brother's arms—defeated, exhausted, terrified.

I leaned down next to Blake. "I know that was really awful," I whispered, "but do you know what would have been even worse?"

“What?” Blake asked through red, puffy eyes.

“There was one time that your dad and Grandpa both had a test that was worse than this one,” I began.

“Yeah?” Blake prompted, sitting up a little higher in the bed.

“What kind of test?” His voice was still quivering, but I could see a spark begin to reappear in his eyes.

“Instead of putting a camera up their nose,” I continued, pausing as long as possible for dramatic effect, “do you know where the camera went?”

“Where?” Blake asked.

“Up their butt.” Blake looked shocked at the very idea. “Having a camera up your nose was bad, but you’re lucky. It could have gone up your butt like your dad and Grandpa.”

Blake giggled and turned to my brother. “Really, Dad?”

“Yep,” Jeremy replied. My father nodded his head behind him.

“Oh man,” Blake chuckled, “that would be bad.” From then on, Blake measured procedures against their colonoscopies. As long as he stayed ahead, he was okay.

It had all started with a sore throat. A few days later, Blake woke up with swollen glands and a high fever. By the end of the week, he could barely move his neck. After several visits to his family physician, we were still without a diagnosis. When his blood work came back abnormal on the third visit, the doctor suggested Mayo.

The first two days were full of blood draws, tissue samples, IV insertions, CT scans, x-rays, and full body exams. Through it all, Blake had shown a quiet bravery I had never witnessed before. We met with an oncologist, an infectious disease specialist, a doctor from internal medicine, and a neurologist. They all wanted to “rule things out,” but nobody was able to rule anything in. The big report came twice a day when Blake’s primary physician would update us on the location of cancer on the list.

“The bad news is that we still don’t know for sure what is going on with Blake. The good news, though, is that it looks like cancer

has moved down to number two on the list of possibilities.” At the following update, it had moved to number three, where it lingered for the next couple of days.

It was difficult comprehending the possibility that my vibrant and active four-year-old nephew might have cancer. It just didn’t seem possible. Cancer happened to other people, those people on the telethons or in the newspaper. It didn’t happen to us, and it certainly didn’t happen to Blake. He was Spiderman. Just a few weeks prior, he had shown me how he could climb his dresser using nothing but the webs on his feet. Next, he was going to learn how to scale walls. How could he have cancer?

Blake arrived at the hospital with very little energy. My parents and I took turns watching his two younger sisters, but I tried to spend as much time at the hospital as possible. I was afraid to leave him. We passed the time watching movies and, by the second day, I could recite most of the lines in *The Giant Panda*. I learned the powers and villains of every superhero in the hospital’s movie collection. When we ran out of movies, we colored. Boy, did we color. I had to go to the local toy store for coloring books because we exhausted the supply we were given. It was difficult to allow myself to color outside the lines, but Blake often demanded that I keep up with him. I wanted everything to stay neatly inside the lines, but nothing about his illness was neat. It all felt as chaotic as our drawings often appeared.

Through it all, I refused to let Blake see my cry. I didn’t want my emotions to scare him. One morning, however, they were almost more than I could contain.

After following my usual routine of getting the girls ready before stopping for breakfast and coffee, I headed to the hospital. Blake was always lying in his bed, some mornings more excited to see me than others. On day three, he greeted me with an unusual amount of energy.

“He was able to eat most of his breakfast. He’s feeling good today,” Jeremy explained as I walked into the room. Blake sat

propped up with pillows so the large bed wouldn't devour him. His smile was more genuine than I had seen in many days.

"Hey, Bud. You look good today," I said as I leaned over to kiss his forehead. He still felt warm, but not as hot as before. I noticed a copy of *Free Willy* on the tray next to the bed. Jeremy and I had found it in the hospital library and brought it down, a piece of our youth that we wanted to share with Blake.

"Hey, did you like the movie?" I asked, holding the cover between us. "How about the part where Willy jumps over Jesse. Wasn't that cool?"

"I haven't watched it yet," Blake said, amused at my excitement.

"Oh, why not? I thought you were going to watch it last night."

"I couldn't watch it without my best friend," Blake responded.

"Oh, okay. Who is your best friend?" I asked, assuming he made a new friend on the wing last night. Blake looked at me for a second, seemingly surprised at the question.

"You are, silly. I have to watch it with you." I paused for a moment to recover my composure.

"You're my best friend too," I said, giving him another kiss. "Let's watch it right now." I had learned somewhere that either blinking my eyes rapidly or clenching my jaw as tightly as possible would prevent tears from forming. These skills had come in handy many times over the years, but never more so than that moment. As I put in the movie, I blinked as fast as possible while clenching my jaws. It barely worked.

I was almost a year clean and sober when Blake's illness hit. On May 26 of the previous year, a night of pills and drinking had resulted in a trip to the emergency room. I don't remember that part or the cardiac arrest that followed. I went from standing in a restaurant parking lot to waking up in intensive care fourteen hours later. It hadn't been the first time I had blacked out, nor the first time I had wound up in intensive care. It was the first time, however, that someone looked me in the eyes and told me how horribly my

behavior had hurt them. As I listened to my AA sponsor tell me she was done with me if I kept using, something clicked. I have been sober ever since.

I couldn't help but wonder why I had been given so many second chances, especially as I watched Blake's suffering. What if I had used up our family's allotment and somehow taken Blake's second chance? I had felt so grateful after living through my relapse, but now the injustice filled me with shame. I had squandered life's gifts for so long; it didn't seem fair that he was the one in the bed.

I had to walk past six rooms to get to Blake. Each contained a sick child, and I knew that, statistically, not all would make it home. Praying for Blake's recovery felt like I was praying for another child to perish. I was ashamed at my willingness to sacrifice someone else's loved one for the sake of my own.

A few times each day, I would walk to the large picture window at the end of the hall. Visitors paced on the sidewalk below, offering up prayers in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Cars zoomed on the interstate as life continued without us. It felt like we were in a different world.

On the way to the window, I would pass the nurse's station. Each day, one of the nurses would sit rocking a baby, probably about a year old. All day she would lie without making a sound. I don't know what was wrong with her; I was afraid to ask. I didn't want to hear Blake's list of possibilities projected onto someone who was obviously gravely ill. I did hear that her name was Savannah. On our fourth day in the hospital, Savannah was gone. The reality of Blake's illness became more terrifying.

Blake had been slowly getting better since his arrival, benefiting a great deal from the steady dose of IV fluids pumped into him through his hand. The nurses had allowed him to name his IV stint, and for someone reason Blake chose the name "George." We speculated that it could have been in honor of Curious George, but Blake kept the origin of the name a closely guarded secret. Several

times a day, the nurses would come in and tell Blake they had to “feed George.” After the first couple of “feedings,” Blake knew that there would be no pain involved, so the only fuss was trying to keep him still so the IV line wouldn’t get tangled.

Although he was feeling better, there still hadn’t been a diagnosis. On the fourth morning, however, all of that changed. Blake woke up with red eyes—bright red eyes. The eyes frightened us, but gave the doctors another symptom. It was like putting together a puzzle; the eyes were the piece they were waiting for. They decided that he had Kawasaki disease, which is an autoimmune disease that causes inflammation in the walls of small and medium-sized arteries throughout the body. It is also called mucocutaneous lymph node syndrome because it also affects lymph nodes, skin, and the mucous membranes inside the mouth, nose, and throat.

The cause of the disease is unknown, but fortunately, the treatment isn’t. Blake was given a twelve-hour gamma globulin infusion, through George of course. When the infusion began, none of us knew exactly what the results would be. There was talk about irreversible heart damage from the Kawasaki and warnings that the treatment may not work at all. I wasn’t sure what to expect when I left the hospital that night. I was afraid to allow myself to feel hopeful.

We returned the next morning to find Blake in the playroom putting together puzzles and playing with action figures. The treatment had worked. If you ask Blake about his cure, however, he gives the credit to two people.

“So what do you think cured you?” I asked him one day not too long ago.

“The doctors.” He smiled, “and HuHot. That cured me the most.”

“It was pretty lucky I found that HuHot.” I said. “I didn’t know there was one in Rochester until I went out to find coloring books.”

“I know,” he said, “it cured me. It did. You were pretty much like a doctor.” I let him give me partial credit.

When Blake learned he had Kawasaki disease, he had many questions. He sat quietly and listened to our explanations, processing what must have been an overwhelming amount of information. When we were finished, a clever smile appeared on his face as he remarked, “Maybe that’s why I like Chinese food so much.”

Jamee Larson is an M.F.A. candidate with an emphasis in creative nonfiction at Minnesota State University Moorhead, where she also teaches English Composition as a graduate teaching instructor. Upon graduation, she intends to continue teaching while pursuing her writing career. In addition to serving as President of the Mu Gamma Chapter, she spends her free time writing and editing children’s book reviews for the Great Plains Reading Review, a regional publication produced by MSUM.

Glass Along the Shore

| Caitlin Chciuk

The beach is filled with more stones than sand, and, if you look closely enough among the wet rocks of the ocean line, you'll find tiny pieces of broken glass weathered down by the rhythmic pounding of the waves. Every year when we ventured up to Montauk, "The End" of Long Island, my mother would reward us with 25 cents for each piece we found, no matter how small. The tradition began with my great-grandmother and stretched down the familial line through my grandmother and my mother, eventually reaching my siblings and me. Our eyes became skilled in combing the water's edge to find gleaming pieces of brown, blue, green, and sometimes even red pieces of sea glass. The pieces we found were pocketed carefully, and when we made it back to the top of the beach, we'd sift them into my mother's hands. She'd take them home and fill up jars to make decorations for around the house. The jars are often set near windows, and when the sunlight dances across the pieces, the whole room sparkles.

One of the best things about sea glass is how different each piece truly is—not just in size and shape, but in what the glass originally was before it became entrapped in the ocean's current. In our family, we have found entire bottoms and necks of bottles, still fairly round and often fully intact. Often times you can tell what the bottle held simply by examining the designs on them. Brand names and intricate pictures sometimes still stand out, even after months of being tossed around in the ocean. My mom has unearthed a marble, its once perfectly smooth surface eroded by the constant motion of the water, giving it a slightly murky appearance. She often tells stories of how when she was young, sea glass was mostly all brown, making it even harder to find because it was similar to the color of the sand along the ocean. Nowadays, with the appearances of new colors of glass, especially in liquor bottles, blues, greens, and even reds have started to become more and more common. Sometimes pieces of sea glass will even hold multiple colors, fading

from brown to clear or sometimes blue to green. Once, a bit of purple between the brown and grey stones caught my eye. I assumed it was a piece of discarded plastic, but even pieces of trash need to be carefully studied just in case they are actually hidden treasures. Sure enough, this purple gem was actually a piece of sea glass, smooth and marvelous. It stood out against my palm, gleaming under the glare of the sun, soaked from the salt water. I selfishly slipped this particular find into a separate pocket to keep for myself. My younger sister is a much more skilled glass hunter than I am, always finding the best and most beautiful pieces. But in that moment I couldn't have been happier, as I'd found a beautiful and rare piece for myself. That day, the hunt was well worth it for me.

Our family has gone sea glass hunting in places other than Montauk, too. One of the first times I can remember discovering sea glass is when I was about seven years old, in the Outer Banks, North Carolina. I thought that it was so boring, walking along the beach looking for the tiniest bits of color among the soft sand. I didn't see the point. But as I got older and began to notice all of the beautiful decorations my mom made from the glass, I learned to appreciate the tradition so much more. I fell in love with sea glass, just like my mom and the older women in my family had.

Last summer, we went to California and discovered the illustrious Glass Beach in Fort Bragg. In the early 1900s residents of Fort Bragg and Mendocino would dump all of their trash into the ocean, including countless numbers of bottles. The piles of garbage would be removed once they washed up on the beach. But when the broken bottles got weathered down and washed up on shore, people in the area concluded that the sea glass was too beautiful to get rid of. As a result, the entire beach is filled with glass—mostly weathered, but some sharp pieces remain. As we trekked along Glass Beach, searching lost its novelty. There was no more combing the shore line; it was all right there in front of us. Instead of looking for glass among the stones, we looked for captivating glass among the common glass. One of the more interesting pieces I found was

the entire top to a candle jar, still whole, murky and eroded just like the marble my mom discovered. We ended up mailing home thirty pounds of sea glass that summer. Don't get me wrong—it was an incredible experience. We found an abundance of beautiful treasures. But it was nothing like sea glass hunting in Montauk.

There is something so special and serene about scanning the blend of sand and rocks, looking for colorful pieces that stand out. There were days when I was so intent on finding these beautiful treasures that I would drop to my knees in the sand along the water and scoop up piles of rocks and sand, sifting and searching until I would pull out something that was different—vibrant, eroded pieces of glass among the bland rocks. Triumphant cries of “I got one!” would erupt down the beach. The only things that changed from year to year were the pitches of our voices, going from childish and excited to older and victorious, and the depth of the beach itself. The beach fell victim to the merciless erosion from the water as it pushed up further and further year after year.

Unfortunately, as Hurricane Irene moved up the east coast destroying nearly everything in her path, Montauk became a direct target. I woke up extremely early in my apartment nestled safely in the Allegheny Mountains far away from the storm, and turned on the news to watch the coast get ripped apart. The camera shot showed a beach literally crumbling, and my heart crumbled with it as I realized that they were showing Montauk. The reporter had to keep stepping back as the sand disappeared beneath where he stood. The already diminishing beaches and dunes were being swept away with the ocean's current, flooding the town with a few feet of water. My mom always said that she loved storms, because it churned up all of the good pieces of glass from underneath the ocean's floor. But this storm was different. This storm devastated Long Island, turning Montauk's beaches into almost unrecognizable wastelands submerged under a mix of water from the ocean and the sky.

I've heard the beaches are beginning to get restored. Upset residents and vacationers are working side by side to put their town

back together. People are attempting to build the dunes back up and save the small town from further ocean damage. The beaches have been practically annihilated, but the people who love Montauk have been doing their best to restore the community to what it was before Hurricane Irene blew through. My family is thinking of taking a trip up in the spring to continue the search for sea glass, but we aren't sure how much we will be able to find, or even if we'll be allowed on the beaches. It's a heartbreaking concept that our favorite vacation spot is no longer how it used to be. However, that will never staunch our desire to search for the precious colorful pieces of weathered glass. As long as Montauk's beaches are accessible, we will be there scouring the shore for our treasures.

Caitlin Chciuk is a recent graduate from Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. She received a B.A. in English with a concentration in writing. Her minor is in Women's Studies. She is working with a small town New Jersey newspaper, the West Essex Tribune, and plans to pursue an M.A. in Writing in the future.

Palmer Myths: The Isabella House

| Heather Etelamaki

It was the next-to-last house at the end of Isabella Street.

Through the back door. Red-orange save for the blue and white exercise bike in-between the basement stairs and the back closet. Complimentary colors stuck in that time between the sixties and the seventies. I would sometimes sit on the floor next to the bicycle and spin the pedals with my hands, trying to move them backward, but no luck. Only forward, around and around.

Grandmama and Grandpapa called my sister and me *papukaija*, Finnish for “parrot” or, more appropriately, “chatterbox.” I’m not much of a talker, but that is me now, and perhaps I was more of one back then. I would like to think my sister, Heidi, was more of a *papukaija* than me. She talked for hours when playing with her toys.

The hallway. There was a thin strip that had been cut out of the wall at chest level that allowed a peek into the kitchen. Trinkets lined this ledge. Among them, I remember the Kleenex box with the red yarn plastic canvas cover at the far end right before you turned the corner into the kitchen, as well as the keychain tape measure Grandpapa gave to me, eventually. As the years wear on, the other objects disappear.

The kitchen was the hub. Mom had once tried recording Grandmama and Grandpapa talking about their childhoods, sitting at the table against the wall, extra tapes on hand. There are many things I would ask them now, but they have been gone a long time. Two years apart. It seemed longer.

One could see what was happening in the living room, or who was coming down the half-spiral stairs that lead to two bedrooms. My grandparents’ bedroom was just off the hall, next to the pantry. One could not completely see who was walking down the hallway, only glimpse a torso through the open bit of the wall above the sink, until they turned the corner. Their footsteps echoed and the floor squeaked. It seemed louder in the kitchen. The torso is fleeting.

Dish rags Grandmama had knitted herself. Her hands had

tremors. She always wore at least two rings: one was her wedding ring, the other had four stones on it. One for each of her boys, the color of their birthstones. The pinkie on her right hand would stick out, but not from politeness. When she was a young girl, she dropped a bottle and cut herself. Her finger could never bend on its own after that. I asked her once or twice if I could try bending it, and she let me. It did but would stick back out again. I examined the four-stoned ring. Her grip was comforting.

This is unclear, years later, and I wonder if it is my imagination. We are in the kitchen in Palmer. Grandpapa has gone to nap. I ask Grandmama a question, perhaps why he naps every afternoon. I asked a lot of questions about many things. I am, after all, a *papukaija*.

Her story is that of a wound. Grandpapa had surgery, and his chest was cut open so he could be fixed. They sewed his chest back together with wire. I imagine a criss-cross pattern down the middle of his chest, like shoelaces.

Green with flecks of blue. The living room felt like what I imagined the fifties and sixties were: the childhood of my father and his brothers. A record player with sound system sat by the back door next to a coat closet. The TV and the CD player were two of the only high-tech gadgets in the room. Most of the furniture was a shade green or blue. An avocado-colored leather, with brass tacks lining the wing-back. The gleaming butterflies on the wall weren't pinned down. They hung as the framed photos of my father and his brothers did, further along the wall—they could fly away at any moment, but, as they were made of brass, they were too heavy to go far. Grandmama was pleased they stayed. I am sure of it.

Grandpapa made model boats. He might have given me a tiny canoe one visit. It might have even had a mini-sail or flag. I might have set it afloat in a drying puddle on the driveway. It has since been lost. The larger models with their tiny rigging, their papery

sails. The *Niña* sits on our sideboard in Kansas, and another sits in Uncle Roy's living room in Negaunee. I know there are more, but I don't know where they are. They must have traveled by all means except water.

Grandmama sat in the only white armchair in the room to knit. Grandpapa sat on the couch, watching a Tigers or Packers game if *The Price is Right* or *Wheel of Fortune* wasn't on. He would turn on his handheld electric razor—the kind that had the three circular blades—and work slowly around his face, without a mirror. Dad would join him to watch games. The Tigers were much more likely to be on the tube closer to home.

“Oh for *Pete's sake*,” Grandpapa would say in his distinctive Upper Peninsula accent if there was a bad play. He and Dad would complain about the weak pitching or the dumb moves the runners on base would make.

All I could think about when I would hug him tightly, though, was the wire his chest was held together with. I never felt it.

Heather Etelamaki is a recent graduate from Kansas State University, where she received a B.A. in English with an emphasis in creative writing and a B.F.A. in Drawing. Currently, she is applying to M.F.A. programs in Creative Writing, drinking a lot of Earl Grey tea, and working on a Young Adult novel. Her work has previously appeared in Kansas State University's literary journal, Touchstone.

One for the Food, One for the Girl

| Marc Cibella

To no surprise, the selection has not changed since I was last here in the trenches, scavenging for barely edible food that my parents should probably reconsider paying for, which was about fifteen to thirty minutes ago for “first dinner” with my friends. I head toward the Homestyle section of the cafeteria, which serves hit-or-miss meals with a special home-cooked touch of food poisoning, my eye on another plate of Thanksgiving dinner, the one thing that can fill my half-full stomach. Vince is working behind the granite countertop and readies a plate as I walk towards the bar.

“Back again?” he asks as he covers my turkey and mashed potatoes in gravy.

“Yeah, you know,” I reply.

“Yeah, I know,” he says with a smile. “How are things going with her?”

“Just fine.”

“Ahhhh, you’re going back again? Have you even made any progress?” sighs Arden as he lies on the loveseat in our house on campus. He has never had a girlfriend for longer than “a forced three months” as he puts it; they just don’t capture his attention. They bore him. One time, during high school, he didn’t even know he was in a relationship with a girl.

“Yes to both,” I reply as I slip on my black tennis shoes, the backs of which are becoming weak from taking them on and off so often. “I’m taking my time with this one.”

“And you wonder why you have to stay up so late to work on homework,” he says, holding his hands in the air.

“She’s worth it,” I say, walking toward the door.

I don’t want to eat here. It’s disgusting. The booth’s tabletop is smudged with streaks of ranch dressing, which have become part of the matte finish on the plastic surface. A lone kernel of cooked

corn resides at the far, rounded edge of the otherwise rectangular table, its broken yellow shell standing out amongst the flat mosaic of colors imprinted on the tabletop. At the other end, which fits against the cheap piece of arced wood squarely, an abandoned glass of chocolate milk, the leftover contents of which have inked the bottom rim of the glass, stands stoically as it peers out the booth's metal-edged window. The bottom window is open, and outside, the University of Mount Union is quiet. The opposite could be said about the inside of the dining hall, which is alive with screams echoing from the beastly athletes sitting at the tall tables toward ESPN broadcasting on the hanging televisions, the foreign chitter chatter and laughter stemming from a group of exchange students in the booth behind this one, and sorority planning by a group of enthusiastic blondes in the booth in front.

Sadly, this is the only booth open and, remembering her preferences, I toss my keys into the disaster zone, my lanyard just barely missing the corn and miraculously maneuvering by the ranch dressing onto the tabletop. I'd like to think of the landing like Captain Sully's onto the Hudson River: no casualties. I slip my arms out of my coat and leave it on the right side booth bench, whose cushions feel like two slabs of slate meeting at a 90-degree angle of discomfort, covered up by fabric sporting a tacky checkered pattern featuring four colors—brown, UMU Purple (obviously), H&R Block green, and off-brown. After ensuring my Purple Plus student ID card is heads up, rather than barcode tails, and visible, I turn my back on the booth and look for something to drink.

I always hope that someone will clean the table while I'm gone. No such luck. It's a false hope similar to believing that the next Bigfoot body that turns up will actually be him. After holding my breath while cautiously sliding past that piece of corn, I brush my coat aside and sit down. With a napkin or two, I tidy the place up, knocking the lonely piece of corn to the ground and wiping up as much of the ranch dressing as humanly possible.

There! A seat fit for a queen. Well, maybe not a queen. But for a very hungry and mentally exhausted young college woman, it'll do.

A vibration rumbles against my leg, the sound just barely reaching my ears from the dark denim cavern known as my pocket. Either my brother has texted me about silly stringing cars in the Wal-Mart parking lot or she's on her way. My hand wiggles my phone out of my pocket. My heart stops. It's the latter. Tap, tap—my fingertips spell out that I'm on the dessert side of the cafeteria. I watch the heart I've placed beside her name in my phone as the message sends. Red and full, it is not one of those cheap <3 hearts that can be broken by a slash or time. She's not offended that I've placed it there, but she's not exactly enthusiastic about it either. She's indifferent. She simply doesn't mind. Friends can use hearts, too.

Her message said she'd be here in five minutes, which, knowing her, gives me ten to fifteen minutes to eat most of my food as fast as possible. I know that as soon as she arrives and flashes me her smile, I'll lose my appetite and only take sips of my pink lemonade before eventually flipping my plates over in a fit of sarcastic disgust over the night's meal, sending her into a guaranteed fit of laughter.

With my back towards the entrance of the cafeteria, pressed up against the concrete cushion, I am unprepared when her slender figure approaches. A fork full of mashed potatoes and gravy sits in my mouth as she throws her enormous bag on the other cushion. She looks as beautiful as always, today sporting a subtle necklace dangling above a black shirt framing her fair skin. Her red and black hair out of its ponytail, I wonder which way I like it better: up or down. She leaves her keys on the tabletop, marking her spot, something I've picked up and begun to do after hundreds of lunches and "second dinners."

In an instant, I begin to panic. My stomach twists like a ball of yarn tangled by a playful kitten, preferably an orange one. She is gone for what feels like forever, stuck in the quagmire that is the six

o'clock sandwich line. Letting my nerves get the best of me, I take my frustration out on the cushion by slamming my back into it in an attempt to soften it up.

She rarely stays on campus during the weekends. When she does, she is usually swamped with enough work to make being an English major look like a trip to Candy Land. But the best things in life are worth waiting for, and finally the frustration recedes when I'm lucky enough to cuddle with her, our hands intertwined on her futon while watching reruns of *Criminal Minds* and *NCIS* on a cold and lonely Friday night in January.

I must look awkward in her soft blue eyes that glow like heavenly orbs when she returns. My legs are pulled up to my chest, my denim knees pushing into the side of the tabletop. My glasses have slid down my nose while reading on my phone about the new Arctic Monkeys track, "R U Mine?" and now rest at the end like those of a grandfather. I imagine I look like a tech-savvy old man suffering from Alzheimer's. Nevertheless, she smiles and slides into the booth. Her tray is full of food—soup, an egg salad sandwich, and a plate of Thanksgiving dinner; she is skinny as a rail, but not in her mind.

"No gravy?" I ask. "Too good for it?"

"No," she says laughing. "I saw how little you had eaten and figured it just *had* to be the gravy."

I smile. "Yeah, this dinner kinda sucks." My plate turns over easily, smashing my turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy against my green tray.

She laughs, as usual. "As hilarious as that is, you need to eat. You're so tiny." She holds up her fingers to accurately and scientifically measure the width of my midsection. I can't help but laugh. Little does she know, it's not that I can't eat; I do that pretty well, almost as well as large farm animals. I just can't eat around her. I get so worked up and nervous that my stomach pretty much closes for business. I've even lost weight because of it—ten or so pounds to

be exact-ish. In my head, it's like the acid workers in my stomach are on strike, refusing to want more food until they receive a substantial raise and some sort of written contract saying I can't eat peanut butter and pickle sandwiches anymore.

Her day was hell, a regular occurrence in the life of a biochemistry major. She's worried about what people think when she's one of the last ones to leave her organic chemistry lab, using her hands to emphasize the immense gravity of the situation while allowing her irresistible quiriness to shine as bright as her yellow and red fingernails. She need not worry—she has a bit of an affinity for biochemistry and its related subject matter, despite looking adorably awkward. Regardless, I am happy to listen whenever she needs someone.

Cheering her up isn't easy though. Again and again I tell her that being one of the final ones to leave means nothing at all. She's back to contemplating a change in major, an all too familiar conversation topic. Shaking her head, she won't believe my compliments, and I'm left with one final way to cheer her up—to add to the list in my notebook.

Since receiving a small notebook from my friend Joe, I've been making lists about various things, many involving her. One such list is comprised of reasons why she should change her major. Joe didn't have to make lists to get his girlfriend; he just whisked her off to Niagara Falls one weekend, no waiting required.

"I'll add it to the list," I say as I ink it onto the small page.

"I'm going to have to quit school and become a prostitute, aren't I?" she asks sarcastically.

"I think taking a lighter class load might be a better alternative."

My notebook is still laying on the table, underneath the small, dim light hanging above the booth.

"What other lists can we add to?" she asks, leaning forward and pressing one finger to her lips in thought. I want to reach across the table and grab her hand, a simple and familiar gesture, unlike eating

two dinners. I want to start a new list, name it “My Girl,” and file her under that. But maybe she has a list, too, and I’m filed under “Just Friends.”

Marc Cibella is a junior at the University of Mount Union in Alliance, OH, where he majors in English with a concentration in writing and minors in Literature and Psychology. He is the current President of his Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Marc is expected to graduate with a B.A. in May 2014.

When a Fortune Teller Asks You a Question, Don't Think about Your Underwear

| Julia Blanchard

The third toilet in the Twinsburg High School bathroom across from the theatre. Afterprom. Main character is crying. Probably only two or three tears, but still.

Now, I wasn't that stereotypical girl on TV who runs into the bathroom, tripping over her long dress, mascara running down her face, crying after she catches her boyfriend making out with her best friend. My prom date and I weren't even romantically attached. He just needed someone to go with since he dumped his girlfriend a few weeks before.

So if I hadn't been dumped or cheated on, what on earth was I doing in a bathroom stall during afterprom, pathetic tears sliding down my face?

I had peed my pants.

An hour earlier. The stars grimace at the fluorescent glow radiating from the windows of Twinsburg High School. Laughing students jump out of cars, their \$100 dresses and tuxes discarded, their perfectly styled hair just beginning to droop.

I walked through the crowded hall next to Kaely, whose thick red hair glittered with leftover blue sparkles from her prom dress. Our dates had left us for a game of *Rock Band*, so we strode on without them. We passed a caricature artist with a long line, a stand with raffle prizes, and a fortune teller with quiet music playing.

"Oh, look!" Kaely pulled me around.

"Fortune tellers creep me out," I said, amused and slightly uncomfortable.

"Me too. My mom went to a fortune teller once, and she told her exactly how and when my dad would die. And it actually happened."

I shuddered. "Yeah, let's not go to this one."

"Agreed."

Three minutes and fifty-two seconds later.

“Come on, let’s go,” Kaely said. “Just for fun—we won’t actually take it seriously.”

Forgive me, Jesus, I prayed.

Then, “Okay, let’s go.”

We stepped up together to the yellow-and-red circus tent and sat down on two metal chairs.

“Welcome,” said the fortune teller, whose cropped grey hair made him look more like my dad than someone who could read the future.

He began shuffling cards and spreading them out in front of us.

“Think of a question about your life. Anything. Don’t tell me what it is.”

I’m gonna pick something really stupid so he’ll never guess anything right. That’ll show him, I thought. My underwear. What color is my underwear?

In addition to being far different than the usual “What career should I choose?” or “Will I ever find true love?” my question was especially tricky because my underwear wasn’t even one solid color. It had little green frogs all over it with multicolored squares in the background. It was my lucky underwear, of course, so I had to wear it to my first prom. I also had lucky jeans, a lucky bra, lucky socks, a lucky pen, and a lucky charm. I also had second-place lucky things in case the first ones were misplaced or dirty.

But you know I don’t actually believe in them, I reassured Jesus.

“Think about your question,” the fortune teller said. “Focus on it.”

I held back a snicker. Gosh, I was so clever.

He began reading the cards in front of us, consulting a cheat sheet on his lap.

“You have a major decision to make,” he told Kaely. “Be sure to trust in a mentor, someone close to you. They may hold the answers.” Her eyes widened.

He turned to me, studied the cards, and glanced at his lap again.

“You will experience a great change,” he said. “What you are thinking of . . . it will be transformed.”

Yeah right, I smirked.

When we walked away, Kaely and I burst out laughing.

“Wasn’t that ridiculous?” she said.

“Totally,” I agreed.

“Although a few of the things he said made sense . . .”

Just like the generality of horoscopes are statistically bound to fit some aspect of your life every once in a while, I thought. *See, Jesus, aren’t You proud of me?*

Flashback. Doctor’s office. White walls and paintings of fish. Paper crinkles under the main character’s sixth grade butt.

“You need to find a small Nerf ball,” she said, “or something like that. And then you’ll put it between your legs up by your crotch, and then you’ll squeeze the ball using your leg muscles. Do that 20 times every morning and every night.”

I nodded.

“And when you’re going to the bathroom, try to stop yourself while you’re peeing. If you keep stopping and starting, it’ll help strengthen your muscles.”

At least my problem was a weakness in my muscles, I told myself, and not just something inherently wrong with me.

At home that night, I dug up an orange-and-blue Nerf football from a bucket in the garage and took it inside. I shut the door to the bathroom, cradled the ball in between my jeans, and began twitching my legs.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Twenty minutes P.P. (Post-Pee).

The toilet seat dug into my skin. I grabbed my numbing thighs and rearranged myself.

I didn’t have my watch or my phone, but I estimated that twenty

minutes had gone by. I had spent far longer than that on the toilet before, but I usually had *Harry Potter* or something with me. Here, the seconds were unending, gradually sliding over each other into a pool of minutes, my sanity slowly drowning underneath.

I could wash my shorts in the sink, I mused. And then dry them with the hand dryer. But I'd have to wash my underwear, too. There's no way I'm standing in the middle of this bathroom without any underwear.

They'll notice I'm gone soon, I consoled myself. They have to realize that I'm missing, and then one of the girls will find me.

T-minus thirty minutes. Only ominous foreshadowing could predict the events to come.

After we left the fortune teller, Kaely and I walked toward the chaos of laughter and screams emanating from the gym.

As the open doors loomed closer, we saw a series of bloated inflatables in all their primary-colored glory. Students were strewn around the room, talking and taking pictures of their friends' ridiculous antics to post on Facebook the next day.

Directly in front of us was a sumo-wrestling station where two seniors were currently locked in a strange embrace, separated by thick inches of rubber sumo fat.

"We have to do this," Kaely said, grinning.

I grinned back. "Definitely."

We stood in line and were soon joined by the boys, who were taking a short break from *Rock Band*.

We drew nearer to the front of the line, watching the current wrestlers with amusement. *I kind of have to go to the bathroom*, I thought. But we were so close to the front. I didn't want to make anyone wait. *I'll just go afterward.*

It was our turn. Giggling, Kaely and I wiggled our ways into oversized sumo suits. A worker at the station zipped up my back and situated a giant sumo head over my own, arranging it so I could dimly see through the eyes.

Someone blew a whistle, and Kaely and I stumbled toward each other. The extra room inside the suit made it difficult to control my movements, and the heat of the suit was heavy against me.

Impact. Kaely and I both toppled over. We laughed and rolled around until the workers helped us stand up.

Whistle. Laughing harder, we waddled toward each other again, our friends shouting for us in turn. Kaely flopped her arms in the direction of my extended waist, and I fell over again. Kaely began a grotesque victory dance, and I could barely breathe for laughing.

Oh no.

I felt a warmth begin to soak down my leg. *Shoot.*

My usual defense was to cross my legs and stop the flow, but my legs were trapped inside this monster suit.

The blood seeped from my face. My body was still convulsing in laughter, but nothing was funny anymore. This hadn't happened, not in public, in so long. I thought I was safe.

I let Kaely knock me over a few more times, not even trying anymore, just wanting it to be over. I bounced around in my rubber cage, sweaty and ashamed.

Eventually, the workers came to free us. They rolled me onto my back, took off my head, unzipped me, and told me to wiggle out.

Oh, no. They're going to see. Or smell. They're going to know.

I contorted my body into strange positions as I snaked out, desperate and praying to escape unnoticed. As soon as I was free, I turned toward the door and ran.

Eighth grade. Mama Santa's Restaurant, Little Italy. Main character prepares to reveal her secret to her friends for the first time. And then probably find a hole to climb into.

"So . . ." I began, inhaling, "can I borrow one of your jackets?"

"Why?" Courtney asked. "Are you cold?" She looked around the homey restaurant where our class was eating. The dancing candles and dim lighting didn't provide much heat, but it was May and the air was warm.

“Um, no . . .” I said. “Actually, I have something kind of embarrassing to tell you.”

“Is it about Casey?” JoAnn teased.

“Shut up!” I whispered, praying that as he ate his pizza at the table over, my eighth grade crush had not heard his name just invoked at our table.

“Stop,” Courtney told JoAnn, laughing. “I think she’s actually trying to be serious.”

Smiling, they turned their attention to me.

I gulped. “So . . . I have this medical problem. And . . . I have weak muscles. And I just peed my pants because I was laughing too hard.”

Cringing, I envisioned my friends getting up from the table in disgust and never speaking to me again. The entire school would ridicule me, I would lose all my friends, and Casey would never speak to me again.

“Is that it?” said JoAnn.

“Um . . . yeah. So I need to borrow a jacket to wrap around my waist.”

“Okay,” said Courtney, shrugging off her white sweater and handing it over to me.

“I love you,” I said passionately.

They grinned.

Return to the Toilet of Despair.

Forty minutes had gone by. Maybe an hour. I had no way to know.

Only two people had come into the bathroom the entire time. When the second girl entered, I contemplated asking her to find Kaely, but I wimped out.

Seriously? An hour has gone by, and not even my prom date has noticed that I’m gone?

I could hear a distant voice announce that midnight breakfast was being served. I groaned. I was really looking forward to that.

Why, Jesus? Why did I stop exercising with that stupid Nerf football? Why didn't I go to the bathroom earlier? Why did I have to think about my underwear when the fortune teller asked me?

Ten minutes later, the same microphoned voice began announcing raffle prizes. I heard a few names called out, some familiar, some not, and then:

“Julia Blanchard!”

A pause.

“Julia Blanchard?”

“Here,” I said weakly.

I put my head on my hands, my elbows on my sore thighs. I wondered if everyone would leave without me, if I would be stuck in this stall for the rest of my life. My body would disintegrate in the toilet, and no one would ever know what happened to me. Maybe I would become a ghost and haunt the bathroom, comforting anyone else subjected to the same miserable fate.

“Julia?”

Bliss. Sweet, joyous bliss.

“Kaely?”

“Julia! Are you okay?”

I groaned. “I hate my life.”

“What’s wrong?”

Sigh. “I peed my pants.”

She paused. “I have extra shorts in my car. Do you want me to go get them?”

“Please!”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

Thank You, Jesus, thank You, Jesus, thank You, Jesus . . .

A memory.

In a living room kneels a little girl. She is five.

She sets her Simba toy on a bench in front of her at eye level. She moves him forward, mouths the words he says to the invisible Scar.

She feels a growing intensity beneath her stomach, knows that if she hurries she will get a marshmallow for being a good girl and making it to the toilet on time. But Simba's not ready. He's still talking to Scar.

The little girl remains, lost in her fantasy world. And then her face flushes and she runs. But it's too late.

If the girl that emerged from the THS toilet stall with Kaely's shorts on met the little girl holding her Simba, what would she say?

I think she'd tell her that growing up isn't one epiphanic experience, that it's a series of embarrassing moments that you gradually learn to deal with.

She'd tell her that even though Casey never asked her out, she would always have friends and even eventually a boyfriend who would accept her and love her even after they found out her secret.

She'd tell her to keep loving Jesus.

She'd tell her that everything was going to be alright.

And I think she'd also tell her never to trust a fortune teller.

Julia Blanchard is a junior at John Carroll University, near Cleveland, OH, where she is majoring in English on the writing track and minoring in Catholic Studies. She is a consultant at the writing center as well as a resident assistant, and she is involved in service and campus ministry. She hopes to someday find an excuse to travel the world and write about people.

Things You Should Know about Me Before . . .

| Emily Whyms

Things You Should Know About Me Before . . .

- a) Buying me a drink
- b) Asking for my number
- c) Taking me on a date
- d) Telling me I'm beautiful

1. If you say the word *feast* to me in your best “deep, sexy voice,” I will laugh until tears run down my cheeks every time we make eye contact for at least the next three minutes.

2. I love holding frogs. Not toads, frogs. I think perhaps it stems from a childhood spent catching tadpoles in the retention pond behind my house. You hit the jackpot when you caught one that had two little back legs, but still had a tail. As the water became populated with amphibious creatures, my sisters and I slung nets and buckets over our shoulders, International Frog Worshippers making the annual pilgrimage to the pond.

3. Have you ever opened an advertisement for mattresses and, upon seeing a woman sleeping with a peaceful, serene look on her face, asked yourself “Who sleeps like that?”

I do.

4. They say you can tell a lot about a person from their dog. Whether I believe this or not is irrelevant, but you might, so here it goes: My dog is afraid of the dark, he is neurotic, and he has separation anxiety if left alone for only a few minutes. He can be infinitely clumsy, has questionable spatial awareness, and water spills out the sides of his jowls whenever he takes a drink. And before I forget, he also broke my mother's arm.

5. I make up words when I find the English language is lacking in some specific area or another. One of these words is “shrubbin.” **shrubbin** \shruh-b-in\ *vb* : to drive around and around a parking lot to find the closest parking spot. Example: I was late for my appointment because I had to shrubbin for almost five minutes.

6. I didn’t always hate fishing. In fact, I still might find it quite relaxing if I could dangle an empty hook in the water, never worrying about catching anything. I once caught a beautiful catfish in Lake L. I watched it swim, captive, around and around the five-gallon pail, until my dad took it up to the farmhouse and fed it to the cats. Sharp claws slashing hieroglyphs in glistening, silver-tissue-paper skin.

7. Yes, I have a penchant for sequins (not sequence, never ever sequence) and stilettos. There’s something about those flat, plastic discs, the way the light bounces off of them and dances like drunken fireflies. And yes, I’m tall, I know I’m tall. But I love a good pair of stripper heels anyway. Men under six feet need not apply.

8. They say the odds of finding a four-leaf clover are 10,000 to 1. They say the odds of being possessed by the devil are 7,000 to 1. Odds are I’m possessed rather than lucky.

9. When people ask me to describe myself, I want to say I’m like the waves. I’ve felt utter hopelessness, again and again, rejection, being thrown back. But like the waves, I won’t give up. I will keep hurling myself against those rocky outcrops until I have worn a place for myself.

10. I want you to give me your smile. Not that fake one you use to pick up girls, but your real one. The ice cream melting smile where your eyes light up like street lamps.

11. I wonder what it's like to be a cannibal,
 Who the tastiest humans are.
 It must be babies.
 Witness veal, lamb, and caviar.
 Do they ring a dinner bell?
 Or shout from the cliffs
 "Here comes a nice, tasty baby!"
 And if I were a cannibal's child,
 Would I come running
 Fork in one hand, barbecue sauce in the other?

(You can keep your smartass comments to yourself. I've already heard them all, including "Good question, Swift.")

12. Sometimes I wish I lived in a Dr. Seuss world. A world where songs were played on kite strings and no one thought anything of it. Where Nessie played card games with bald monkeys. Where the strongman struggled under the weight of the bar, a pretzel bar with a Cheerio on each end. Where old men didn't have voices like rusty bedsprings, but like wind chimes.

13. I know the agonizing pain of loss. I've stood in that vast field of wildflowers, eyes blinded by tears, pulling up delicate shards of grass and tossing them to the wind. The memories I can't escape grind like a mortar and pestle behind my eyes.

14. I'm hopelessly in love with water—its fluidity, its ever-present prospect of change. Raindrops tattooing Morse code on my bare skin. The ecstasy of catching a single drop on my outstretched tongue.

Emily Whymys graduated summa cum laude from Marian University. She received a B.A. in English with a writing concentration and minored in Cultural, Media, and Gender Studies. She is an administrative assistant at Michels Corporation where she prepares corporate resumes and collaborates with the legal team to write agreements.

My Grandpa

| Bethany Knight

“You know I think the sun rises and sets on that man.”

Mom has said this multiple times over the years. At least once, she slapped the kitchen counter to emphasize her point, even though none of us have ever argued with her. We know how fiercely she loves him.

Mom and her dad have always been close. One Sunday, her family took a trip to Manassas to see the battlefield. By the time they arrived, her younger brother had fallen asleep in the car. Her older brother and her mom were irritated with each other. So her dad said, “I’ll just take Carla.” And they went.

“He knew every inch of that battlefield,” Mom told me with a smile in her eyes. Maybe she was picturing the way that he pointed out a particular rolling hill and hearing him say, “Here’s where General So-and-So fell” or “Here’s where the Confederates advanced.”

In the Visitors’ Center, they stood before grainy, yellowed photographs. “There was a wall with a picture of five different generals,” Mom remembered. He rattled off their names. Then “he would cover them up,” flashcard style, and quiz her on them “until I had them memorized.” I like to think that only after she got all of the names right did they trek back to the car and their sleeping or annoyed family. A typical little girl would have rolled her eyes at having to drill historical facts, but Mom’s tone held no trace of resentment. I guess this knowledge was something else for the two of them to share. And such facts were important to her dad. By extension, then, they mattered to Mom.

There were probably many more trips to battlefields between that one and the next that Mom remembers most. Mom related that one day, two years after she’d gotten married, she and her dad visited Antietam. They climbed up the observation tower—a brown stone turret with a red roof. Well, Mom climbed; her dad was, in her

words, “sprinting.” Maybe he went right over to the strip of window and gazed out at the battlefield while she hung back, arms crossed, trying not to look out the window or down the spiraling stairs. Or maybe I’m projecting my own fear of heights onto Mom. Either way, when he was done surveying the battlefield, Mom said, “He went down in front of me so that I wouldn’t be scared.”

Sometimes he wanted to show Mom things that were smaller and perhaps less significant to American history but equally as important to his own (and thus her) history. Mom remembers that once, while visiting his old home in Pennsylvania, her dad led her on quite the hike. They clambered behind sheds, over fences, through fields, and past dozens and dozens of trees. Somehow her dad knew exactly where to find the “Autograph Tree,” a tree whose bark bore jagged initials and crudely etched hearts.

“Look,” her dad told her.

I imagine that Mom scanned the pointy letters, wondering what, exactly, she was looking for, before shooting her dad a confused look.

“Keep looking.”

And then she found it—JVS, her dad’s initials. He supplied her with some sort of pocket knife to cut her own initials into the tree, and she returned to the “Autograph Tree” about fifteen years later to find both sets of letters.

It was in those same woods that her dad would wear his old army uniform and carry his rifle over his shoulder. He would creep through the woods and look furtively around as if he were looking for enemy soldiers, reliving, for whatever reason, his experiences in World War II.

I never saw him sneak through trees, shooting glances at any leaf that moved, but I still didn’t know what to make of my grandpa when I was little. When he talks about me at that age, he chuckles at the memories. Every morning, he came over to take me to his house so that he and my grandma, Mimi, could watch me while my parents

were at work. I would hear someone outside my room, stand in my crib, and call out hopefully for mommy.

“Baby sugar!” his deep voice boomed as he peered around the corner, grinning.

And then I would cry, he relates, laughing hoarsely. I don’t know why he thinks it’s funny, except that I was little and cute and lacked real malice. He knew that I loved him even though I clearly preferred Mom’s company to his. At least I let him carry me to his house—across the street, down the hill, and through their backyard—without protest. I must have shown that I did love him. Whenever he got down on his hands and knees and gave me pony rides around the house, I must have giggled as I gripped the back of his shirt.

Each of the three sets of grandchildren has a different name for him. My older cousins went with the traditional Grandpa. My younger cousins call him Pop. And my brother, sister, and I call him Gampers. I started the tradition, probably because I couldn’t say Grandpa. Thankfully my sister, Becca, picked up on it.

It took my brother, Micah, a while, though. When he was two, he heard Mimi yelling for Gampers. “Joe! Joe!”

“Joe! Joe!” Micah crowed from his stroller. And Micah called him Joe for a long time afterward: “Mimi and Joe are coming!” “Joe! Come see my trains!”

Gampers’s real name is Joseph Victor Statnick. He was born on August 13, 1925. The day he turned eighteen, he enlisted in the United States Army. He has survived World War II, two heart attacks, and an awful injury from a weed-whacker that should have been recalled the instant it was put on the shelves. He still walks with a limp.

He has wispy white hair that does whatever it wants, milky blue eyes, and a jack-o-lantern grin. He likes to wear overalls and button-up shirts or khakis with t-shirts and suspenders. Ever since I can remember, he has been partially deaf in both ears.

He loves to watch old Westerns. When he comes to our house, he will sit right next to the television, with his ear nearly touching the screen. While Mimi talks to Mom, Gampers laughs as the cowboys gallop across the dusty plains and shoot each other.

He used to collect model John Deere tractors—the green ones with yellow writing on their enormous sides. Now he loves coming over whenever the life-size versions of those tractors are in the field behind our house, planting or spraying or harvesting. Last year the farmers planted corn in the field, and Gampers would stand at the glass door and stare out at the field, quietly marveling at how high the stalks had grown.

Even though he isn't supposed to have them because of the heart attacks, Gampers loves sweets. His favorite cookies are Archway molasses cookies—bittersweet, dark brown cookies shaped like fat flowers. Whenever we would buy them for him, he would tear open the red package and make sure each one of us—Becca, Micah, and me—got at least one of the cookies as well. We still give them to him for his birthday. And we still sneak him Reese's, mostly just to see him grin.

When we lived about fifteen minutes apart, Gampers used to come over by himself every once in a while just to relax and talk and eat the candy that we would hand him. One night, Mom told me, she opened the door to see Gampers standing on our porch “with glee, holding a box of frozen Snickers ice cream treats.”

He'd brought them to share, but when he handed Mom the box, she looked at him and said, “Well, there's only three left.”

He grinned. “I know.”

I laugh every time I hear that, and I probably found it funny at the time partly because I didn't like Snickers anyway. But another instance wasn't so amusing in the moment. A neighbor would hand out enormous candy bars to trick-or-treaters, and Becca and I had saved our gigantic Three Musketeers to eat after Thanksgiving dinner. But during one visit, Gampers noticed our candy bags sitting

unguarded on the bench in the hallway. He didn't go for the Reese's or the Snickers—his typical favorites. Instead, he ate the oversized Three Musketeers. Both of them.

I don't think we found out that he had eaten them until weeks later, possibly when the time had come for Becca and me to eat the long-awaited candy. But we couldn't find them anywhere, and Mom and Dad concluded that Gampers had eaten them. Becca and I were not happy. Now I just laugh and wonder how he could have eaten two huge Three Musketeers bars in the span of one visit. Maybe he snuck the other one home in his overalls pocket.

In October 2007, Mom's side of the family was headed up to Pennsylvania for my great-grandma's 95th birthday celebration. Dad had driven Mom to meet up with my aunt and uncle so that she could ride with them. When Dad got home, he didn't yell, "Hi!" after opening the front door. He was very quiet. Frighteningly quiet.

Eyes wide, I tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen. Dad saw me, took a deep breath, and sighed. "Gampers had a heart attack."

The next thing I remember is that I was up in my room, arms wrapped around my knees, sobbing and shaking. All I could think was, *Dear God, please, not my Gampers*. Over and over again. *Dear God, please, not my Gampers*.

I don't recall exactly how it happened, and the memory is too painful for me to simply ask Mom for details. Gampers didn't have the heart attack on the road. And he didn't have it back at their house in Virginia because he ended up at a hospital in Pennsylvania. I do know that instead of going to my great-grandma's 95th birthday party, Mom, her brothers, and their families went to the hospital to await news.

Gampers underwent surgery and recovered enough to return home. Things settled down again, but a few weeks later, Mimi called. Somehow we knew, even before Mom picked up the phone and we heard Mimi's panicked voice, what had happened. Mom left the house a minute later, face pinched and eyes glassy, to drive to yet

another hospital and await yet more news.

Since the heart attacks, Mimi doesn't like for Gampers to go places without her. It's understandable. It also drives Gampers crazy. But on a Saturday in the past two Marches, Mimi was at a conference at our church and Gampers spent the day at our house.

The first year, we were out in the church parking lot when he told us, "I'd like to drive to get gas by myself." He sounded ridiculously excited but spoke softly even though Mimi was inside. We followed him to the gas station so that Mimi couldn't be too angry, but he drove his own truck.

Afterward we went into Weis so that he could buy packs of molasses cookies. "Two for three dollars," he muttered, clearly delighted. I walked behind the cart with at least six packages of cookies in the back and clapped a hand over the laugh working its way out of my mouth.

When we got back to the house, he talked about growing up in Pennsylvania. I remember that he mentioned something about fiddling with radios. "It must have been after I got home from the war," he mused. He recalled that he'd gotten annoyed with his little sister for being too loud while he worked.

I don't remember much about that story, but the mentions of radios and war intrigued me. When I was about eight, Gampers had recounted every detail of his time in World War II. Although I was completely enthralled by his story, I didn't remember anything that he said besides something about working with radios. Now, over a decade later, I wanted to write about his experiences.

We were walking through the church parking lot this past March when Mom told Gampers that I'd like to hear the story again. I watched his face, trying to make sure that he actually wanted to talk about his experiences. I didn't think he'd been scarred by anything he'd seen in the war. He'd voluntarily told the story before. As he listened carefully to Mom's relaying of my request, thumb on the top of his hearing aid, he nodded. "Yeah, ok."

So that afternoon, I sat across from him at the kitchen table and listened. I was immediately impressed by his recollection of exact dates: “On June 9, 1943, I graduated high school.” “On August 13, 1943, I turned eighteen.” “On November 20, 1943, I left.” I wondered if he used those dates as a sort of anchoring for his story—as if, once he recalled them, everything else would flow out.

His little comments throughout the story also left an impression on me. “On August 13, 1943, I turned eighteen,” he told me. “And what do you do?” He chuckled. “I went and signed up for the draft.” He didn’t say whether he’d aspired to join the military ever since the attack on Pearl Harbor. He didn’t say whether it was something he talked about all the time. He didn’t relay his parents’ reactions. He didn’t even say if he told them or if he just went and enlisted.

Gampers told me about his training in Florida (on a converted golf course, where he learned to throw hand grenades; I suddenly had the odd mental picture of exploding golf balls). He talked about zigzagging across the Pacific to avoid submarines. With a grin, he recalled sneaking aboard a Navy ship in New Guinea to pilfer food. “Those Navy guys were mad!” he laughed. In the Philippines, his ship was attacked by—but subsequently shot down—four kamikazes. He worked on a radio tower built from coconut wood to help guide lost planes back to where they belonged. And once the war was over, he took a train through Hiroshima.

“In one year, I was 10,000 miles from home. How about that?” he concluded with a final chuckle.

I’ve always been proud that Gampers is a World War II veteran, but his story gave me something greater than regard for my grandpa: a slightly clearer picture of an amazing man. He has seen the jungles of New Guinea and the bombed-out ruins of Hiroshima, yet he takes the greatest pleasure in the simplest things—getting gasoline by

himself, eating cookies with his grandkids, and walking battlefields with his daughter.

Bethany Knight is a senior at Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, where she majors in English with a concentration in creative writing and minors in Spanish. She tutors writing and works as the chief copy editor of Shepherd University's newspaper, the Picket. After graduating in May 2013, she plans to continue writing with hopes of future publication.

Short Fiction

Hospice at Home

Programming for Language

Straightened Out

Wednesday Night at the Blue Branch

Red King Waking

The Artist's Portrait

Perception

Velma the Iconoclast

The Mass

The Closet

Hospice at Home

| Maegan Lee

He opens the morphine syringe and struggles with the plastic wrapping. His wife is waiting, open-mouthed. She grunts, moans, wiggles in the bed, and he can't get the plastic undone. She blames him for this. With her eyes wide open, her jaw set like a man's, Stephen fumbles at her bedside with bitten fingernails that don't catch, digging, and she won't forgive. It's not his fault, he wants to argue. He's doing his best. The accidents, the vomit, the trips to the doctor which ended in "I'm sorry but there's nothing we can do"—he never wanted it to happen.

She has a death grip on his arm and he can't escape. He drops the box, tries desperately to pull away—then, as he's standing in the light of the kitchen, sweaty and gleaming, he digs for the scissors in the drawer, and runs back to her with the ends pointed up.

Already, he is losing.

Tammy, the nurse, leaves a little box on the counter, along with four brochures and a mail-in form for his opinions on the dying experience. The packets are thin and illustrated. They have prepaid envelopes. Tammy had said, "Our main goal is to keep her out of the hospital. We don't want her to go back there," and Stephen had nodded his head.

Dummy.

He didn't understand.

He missed the hospital, missed the blank hallways and the vending machines. Such clean direction, such lovely linearity—Stephen had had nightmares about the destruction of disorder, and organization became a heaven. He wanted his wife to go back into the hands of that big sterile building, where she laid in bed and looked like a wrapped-up package. There were buttons for her to push, people to come in and fix things. In the hospital, Stephen wasn't a cowardly cat. Sitting in the corner and eating cheese puffs, holding her hand—his job was beautifully simple. Stephen now feels

nauseous when he looks at the little box on the counter. Tammy opens it up and shows him how to use it, how to administer pain medicine, nausea medicine, muscle relaxers, what's what, and she writes down numbers to call, holding the tiny syringes in her hand like candy. He wonders, if he calls these numbers, if someone will come over and take care of him, too. He wonders if they could take him back to the hospital instead.

The other girl, not Tammy but the other one, she comes in every three days and gives Martha a bath. Stephen excuses himself from the room when this happens. He goes into the kitchen and makes a new pot of coffee although he's already made one and hasn't done the dishes. He looks at all of Tammy's papers on the counter. He looks at the yellow impression-copies of documents he's signed, sees how he hasn't pressed hard enough, and he goes back over all his signatures with a gooey old pen. The coffee pot bubbles, gurgles, already run dry, and Stephen is busy reworking his name.

Martha has also run dry. Stephen finishes, wipes out a dirty cup, and pours himself some, then goes into the other room, where he leans on the doorjamb and watches as the nurse brushes Martha's teeth. Death is lurking under the bed. Half naked and mostly shriveled, Martha lies there uncovered, and death's arms are reaching up the side of the mattress.

She is so blue, he thinks.

He holds the coffee cup close to his face, sucks in the moist steam.

I never imagined she would be blue.

After the other nurse leaves, Martha is clean and smells like baby-lotion, while Stephen is clammy and smells like a wet animal. They talk without making a sound.

She has been placed in their bedroom, of all places, and in the light of the bedside-lamp, she appears almost alive. Stephen says, "I'm sorry," and Martha says, "I hate you." Stephen says, "There's

still time left,” but Martha says, “No.”

Rain begins to tap on the windows and Stephen thinks that this is the sound of his brain swelling, popping his eardrums. A miserable fear overtakes him, sharpens him to a point. When he realizes that the sound is really rain, he gets up and goes to the bathroom, where he sits on the toilet lid and closes his eyes. He is sick, perhaps. He wakes up on the floor hours later as if he spent the whole night here, and his neck feels twisted, maybe broken. He gets up heavily, blunted now, and he washes his face.

There is Martha’s hairbrush by the sink, lying there from another era, and Stephen knows he’s seen it somewhere else, in another time. His body hurts all over. He feels as if he’s dreamt a dream but can’t remember what it was, and he’s grasping at threads, connecting images, squeezing the delicate bits of his mind, but unable to know what has happened. This hairbrush is an artifact, he is sure. It has come to him from the dreamworld—a tease.

He pushes the syringe under her gums, just like Tammy told him to, but the morphine always takes a lifetime to work and Martha must wait and stare at him. Out loud, Stephen says, “There you go, babe,” the words whispered and heavy. She doesn’t forgive him for sleeping with other women, but rather she lies there with all the wisdom of a great oak tree that has been here forever and seen all there is to see. She doesn’t blink. Stephen gets an idea in that moment. It is an incredible idea, something hot and exciting, and it makes his insides burn with an intensity he has not felt since high school. He jumps as he hears Tammy knocking at the door, and, in a flurry, he does not write the time on the morphine record like he ought to. He tucks the empty syringe in his pocket so Tammy will not see it in the garbage and he goes to her.

Tammy is standing in his house, in his territory. She is so pretty. The sight of her face fills him with a warm, gently settled exhaustion, and he lets out the breath he was holding. He smiles. He adjusts his pants.

Martha moans in the other room, but stops as Tammy enters. Stephen calls out answers to Tammy's questions from the other room, shouting to be heard, and as he does so, his voice echoes back to him, tainted and metallic, not quite his own. He moves deeper into the kitchen, inching back. Maybe he is afraid. It is the voice of his shadow, begging him to flee.

There is not much difference between hiding and running away, but to Stephen, hiding is what married men do, so he backs up as far as he can against the countertop and scrubs the coffeepot. Stephen is a good boy. He does the dishes and his erection pushes against the edge of the sink.

This hurts, terribly.

The cancer diagnosis was slow and inhumane. The doctor, a polished young man in tight trousers, was very kind to Martha, but for Stephen, who must wait in the waiting room, all the results were like river flood warnings that are suddenly broadcasted to those on a hill. Disaster was entirely improbable.

Everything that Stephen knew about Martha's cancer, he knew from her descriptions on the way home, and in his mind, he couldn't imagine it. It wasn't hurting yet, it wasn't complete yet, and perhaps it would turn out to be something else. It was abstract, almost, like thinking of a movie when all he'd ever seen were the previews. The tumor on her left ovary, making an egg sac like a spider, was the result of psychosomatic illusion. Hell has a special place for doctors who lie, Stephen had said.

On their way back, Stephen drives their truck home with his hands tight on the wheel, knuckles white and throbbing. Martha discusses the cancer with him like it is an old friend. There would be no treatment, she tells him finally. They drive up their gravel driveway in the bright sunshine, their house swamped in glare. She says she wouldn't be able to stand it, and neither would he. He stops the truck before they reach the house, and he swallows a large mouthful of air. His body is bloodless. A year and it would be over.

Tammy comes over every day now. Martha stopped talking, started babbling, and Tammy asks if Stephen would like another brochure. There are professional people to call if you need them, Tammy says. She is very pretty in the kitchen, and Stephen nods, sure he'd like another brochure, when really he just wants her to stay a while longer. He'd like for Tammy to sit with him in the armchair and hold him like a baby for a moment, but he is embarrassed by his emotions and he does not speak.

The grief builds up in his throat as he thumbs through the new papers. It seems he's building a tower of cards higher and higher into the sky. The idea of Martha's death strikes him hard, jarring him, and the tower topples just as he sees an illustration of a sailboat sailing away. He knows this is deliberate. He knows he will be alone with the TV on all day and no dinner to eat. Tammy puts her hand on his back, rubs it in small circles. He turns his head to the side. Negation.

"I know," Tammy says. "I know."

As if she knows what Martha has done to him.

Martha, poor Martha, she hasn't eaten anything in a week, and Stephen wonders if it's because she doesn't want anything, or if she wants him to watch her starve. There is an open cup of Jell-O on the nightstand with an old spoon next to it, and every now and then Stephen asks her if she wants a bite.

No, Martha says without speaking. No, I don't want that.

He asks, aloud, if she wants soup, if she wants a milkshake, if she wants some of those cookies Tammy brought over for him yesterday. They're really good cookies, he says. Really good.

She shakes her head at all of them, rolling it back and forth along the pillow.

Maybe some water, he says. Do you want something to drink?

No, she replies. *I wanted you not to fuck other women.*

Martha, he is sure, wants to die.

She groans when Stephen tries to leave the room and he thinks she's trying to tell him something. "What is it, babe?" he says. "What's up?"

She blinks at him, makes no noise until he turns around to go. She wants him to watch her, he knows, so he returns and sits down. He thinks about his new plan until she is asleep, and then he gets up, turns out the light, and takes off his shoes so he can shuffle away without a sound. Martha groans when he is gone, and he stands outside the door, listening. His heart pounds in his throat. He is almost ready to begin.

Martha soon sinks deep into the bed and does not moan anymore. Stephen has nine syringes he can give her. One by one, alone in their bedroom together, Stephen slowly administers each dose. He tucks it into her slackened mouth that hangs down like a wet flag on a windless day, releases the medicine against her gums. She closes her eyes after the first one and moves her legs back and forth in the bed.

Stephen stops, tries to soothe her.

"Hush, hush, babe," he says. "You're almost there."

Stephen bends down and kisses Martha's cheek before giving her another, and another, and another syringe of morphine. He is a good person. He can find empathy deep in his heart, and although he can no longer feel his heart there, thudding in his chest as he pops open a new syringe, he tells Martha, "it's ok, it's going to be ok," over and over again as though he believes it himself. She grabs his arm for the last time.

Stephen has to pry her fingers off, and even in death, she is stuck to him.

He has two syringes left over, and these he puts in his pocket. Martha, in her last moments, did not struggle or groan or cry. Stephen put his ear to her chest, just to be sure, but he heard nothing at all, only the throb of his blood in his ears. There was

no life, no gurgle, not even some gas inside her. The silence of an object. Stephen then realizes that this is not a matter of payback, but really a matter of decomposition, and this sharp epiphany, grounded in the clarity of looking out the window and seeing the lawn, the trees, the plants that thrive in the dirt, makes him sit down on the bed very suddenly. He cannot stand to think of himself. He cannot stand to look at Martha, dead and cooling under the covers. His eyes begin to burn, stuffy without tears, and he takes out a syringe, pops off the wrapping. Stephen tucks the syringe under his lip and pushes it down.

A wave of nausea hits him in the gut, and in an instant, he is doubled over. He starts to apologize to Martha to keep his mind off his stomach, but this does no good. He throws up anyway. He gets up to get away from it and his balance is intangible. As if falling through syrup, he collapses thickly against the bed and hangs there, stays there. Tammy is knocking at the door.

“Tammy,” he calls. “Oh Tammy.”

She is announcing herself, saying she is here. Something in Stephen’s chest is pushing on his windpipe, and when she comes in the room, Stephen rolls over to face her. He says, very wetly, very softly, “Oh Tammy, I have never known anyone as beautiful as you.”

Tammy drops her bag in the doorway. Numbly, Stephen understands that his heart is choking him, growing fatter and fatter, and as he starts to crawl to her, the world stretches out beneath him, too vast. He will be crushed before he can reach her. She stands aghast, hand at the throat, copied from the last scene of a crime novel, and Stephen throws himself at her feet, begging that she forgive him. This is the most severe truth he has ever known.

Tammy calls the numbers, wonders if she should call the police. Stephen is a worm on the floor. Heavy and acrid, death seeps out from the bedroom, creeping into the rest of the house. Tammy runs

back to her car and Stephen cries out. Winners never quit, they say. If he keeps crawling, he might reach her in time.

Maegan Lee is a junior at Purdue University, where she majors in English and minors in Psychology and Art History. She is the current editor-in-chief of Purdue's undergraduate literary magazine, The Bell Tower, and has plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Programming for Language

| Dana Eckstein

PROGRAMMING FOR LANGUAGE

CHARACTERS

CARL - college-aged web programmer, nervous type, troubled by women

GIRL - represents several girls in a bar as well as a telephone operator and Carl's mother

GUY - represents the competition

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(Carl stands before the audience and speaks to them.)

CARL

When I was little, I heard my mom ordering one of those TV infomercial funnel cake makers over the phone and she had to spell the last name. Our last name is Meynekhdrun. You can never get away without spelling it. She said M as in Mary, E as in Edward, Y as in yesterday. I was intrigued. Adults had this code for speaking. You could spell words with other words or names. But how did you know which words to use?

I asked my mom how to know which words to use. She said just make it up. So I tried it once. I spelled my name for somebody. C as in client/server error. A as in authentication. R as in Resource Definition Framework. And (singing badly) L is for the way you look at me.

But nobody looked at me except to make strange faces before walking away.

So it didn't work. At all. There was definitely a code that I didn't know about. When my mom said E as in Edward, she knew it already. That was an acceptable term for her to use.

Do you ever find that language—? It always comes back to bite you! There are keys and passcodes that people use and you don't get to learn them until after you need to know them. Until after you make yourself look like an idiot. For example:

Bell. Enter Girl.

CARL

Can I buy you a drink?

GIRL

Sure. I'll have an Alice Cocktail.

CARL (genuinely pondering)

Does that even count as a drink? It's all fruit and sugar . . .

GIRL

Yeah, I'll see you later.

Girl starts to leave. *Bell.* Girl freezes.

CARL

See I wasn't supposed to say that. That was not the way to get the girl. On the other hand

Bell. Enter Guy. Girl unfreezes.

GUY

Can I buy you a drink?

GIRL

Sure. I'll have an Alice Cocktail.

GUY

Oh that's a sugary drink. Is that how you stay so sweet?

GIRL

Aww.

Bell. Girl and Guy freeze.

CARL

How did he do that? So well anyway, I learned that was the wrong thing to say in that situation. So it's frustrating. But I can grow from it, you know. I can learn.

Like in web design. That's what I study at school. And there's only one real way to make a webpage.

You have to learn the languages. Start with html and work your way up from there, Perl, PHP, C++. It worked for me. So I can do that with people right? Or at least I think I can.

Bell. Girl unfreezes.

GIRL

So I was thinking about dying my hair and I can't decide between these two shades. I've got it narrowed down to honeysuckle blonde and sun-kissed blonde. I can't decide which blonde I want to be.

CARL

Isn't it kind of shallow anyway? You know, focusing on your exterior?

Girl starts to leave. *Bell.* Girl freezes.

CARL

What? It's a valid point! Maybe if she spent less time thinking about her hair she'd have more interesting things to say at the bar! You know? She could talk about the African orphans she's sponsoring or her new neuroscience research grant. It's a valid point. Okay, it's a point. Well, there are clearly other ways to handle the situation.

Bell. Guy and Girl unfreeze.

GIRL

I've been thinking about dying my hair.

GUY

You'd look beautiful with any color.

GIRL

Aww.

Bell. Guy and Girl freeze.

CARL

See? That was so easy! I spent twelve words getting her to leave and he spent six words getting her to fall in love with him. Not only is he achieving the results I want, but he is doing it with a 50% higher efficiency rate. How is he doing it? And he's not the only one. There are jerks out there who still do it better than me.

Bell. Guy and Girl unfreeze.

GIRL

I've been thinking about dying my hair.

GUY

Blondes are hot.

GIRL

Well then you're in luck.

Bell. Guy exits. Girl freezes.

CARL

He's clearly a jerk but she's still going to sleep with him! And it only took him three words! That's 75% higher efficiency!

I decided I just needed practice. I decided to order a book I saw on TV. It was called *The Art of Romance*. I was on the phone ordering it when the woman said:

Bell. Girl unfreezes.

GIRL (as if on the phone)

Okay, I'll need your first name.

CARL

Sure. My name is Carl.

GIRL

Okay Carl, and your last name?

CARL

Meynekhdrun.

GIRL

How do you spell that?

CARL

M.

GIRL
N? or M?

CARL
M.

GIRL
N?

CARL
No M as in . . . Oh god, what starts with M? Oh my god. I'm having a brain spasm. I can't think of a single thing!

GIRL
N as in Nancy.

CARL
No, not N and I said M. M. M. M. Oh—I got it! M as in mitosis.

GIRL
Sir? Your toes itch?

CARL
No, “mitosis,” you dumb saleswoman. It's a stage of cellular reproduction!

GIRL
Click.

Girl hangs up.

CARL
Didn't you ever take a biology class? This is why you answer phones for a living! Hello? Hello?

Bell. Girl freezes.

CARL

It's a good thing I know about cellular reproduction because at this rate that's apparently the only kind I'll ever know about. So I ordered the book online. It was an interesting book. I learned, for instance, in "Chapter 1: Listening," that it's not just about what I say. It's about hearing what she says. So I don't need a code after all! I just let her babble away and I occasionally chime in with remarks. This'll be great. It's her job to say stuff! Oh, what a relief. Let's try that hair scenario again.

GIRL

I can't decide which shade of blonde I want to be.

CARL

Sounds like you have a lot on your mind.

GIRL

Well I guess it's kind of silly, but it's good at taking my mind off the stress of important decisions, like what I want to do with my life.

CARL

What do you want to do with your life?

GIRL

I'm going to be an actress. I've always loved performing and the stage.

CARL

So actually, your hair color is part of your craft.

GIRL

Exactly! You understand! My parents don't at all.

CARL

They don't?

GIRL

My parents have a problem with everything. They don't approve of my schooling. They don't approve of my boyfriends. One time, they told me to hang out around the NYU Medical School Library and try to marry a Jewish doctor.

CARL

Well, I mean, to be fair, you are going to school for *acting*.

Girl starts to leave. *Bell*. Girl freezes.

CARL

So, what I realized is no matter how little I say, I still have the opportunity to say the wrong thing. And I always do. So on to "Chapter 2: Making Conversation." Instead of criticizing my potential dates, I should showcase myself. I can't offend them if we're talking about me! This says I should show them what's interesting about me. That shouldn't be too hard because I am very knowledgeable about web programming. I could talk about it for hours!

Let's try that hair scenario once more now that I'm armed with what my book tells me is "unstoppable romancibility."

Bell. Girl unfreezes.

GIRL

I can't decide which shade of blonde I want to be.

CARL

You know, picking a color is an understandable problem. In my line of work, I have to pick colors for webpages every day. And computers typically run in three color modes: 256 color, high color which is 64,000, and true color which is 16.7 million colors—doesn't that boggle your mind? 16.7 million colors? So if I were to be picking out a "blonde" that would be from the yellow family, in 256 color that would be pretty easy. You want a strong yellow, go for FFFF00. Or if you want something a little more orangey, FF9900, or I personally like FFFF99—it's kind of peachy. Very pretty. But once you get into a bigger color chart, I mean how do I know if I want FFEE00 or FFEE11 or FFDD00. Every time you adjust slightly on a red, green, or blue color bar you make a huge difference! And what if you design for a really nice true color scheme but then the viewer's monitor is only 256 color? What do you do then?

Girl starts to walk away. *Bell.* Girl freezes.

CARL

I'm starting to think that fate is weighted against me. I just poured out my soul to her! How does this book expect me to open up my passion and vulnerability like that only to be rejected? I can't do this! I say something—I'm rejected. I don't say something—I'm rejected. I say too much—I'm rejected. I need an escape from all this. Do you hear me?! An escape! That's E as in Edward; S as in soliloquy; C as in—

Carl bumps into Girl. *Bell.* Girl unfreezes.

CARL

Crap! Sorry.

GIRL

You mean C as in Charlie.

CARL
What?

GIRL
I take it you're talking about the military phonetic alphabet, right? A as in Alpha; B as in Bravo; C as in Charlie.

CARL
That's a real thing?

GIRL
Yes, my dad's an officer. They use it all the time.

CARL
So there is one code and one code only and you can never go wrong?

GIRL
Well it changes sometimes. For instance, in World War I it was R as in Rush. By World War II, it was Roger, and presently it's R as in Romeo.

CARL
He had much better luck than me talking with the ladies.

GIRL
What?

CARL
Never mind.

Bell. Girl freezes.

CARL

My mother tricked me! She told me to make it up! No wonder it didn't work! Well I have a thing or two to tell her!

Bell. Girl unfreezes.

CARL

Mom, you were wrong the whole time! It's not E as in Edward. It's E as in Echo.

GIRL

Okay?

CARL

And it's not M as in Mary—it's M as in Mike.

GIRL

Carl, are you feeling all right?

CARL

Don't you get it? You were steering me wrong the whole time!

GIRL

It's not a big deal, sweetie. As long as it's simple and it makes sense, they'll understand you.

CARL

That's it?

GIRL

It doesn't matter if it's A as in Alpha or Able or Albert. You get the picture?

CARL

Okay it just has to be simple and make some kind of sense. I think I get it.

Bell. Girl freezes.

CARL

Simple. That's it! It was never about codes after all. I need to keep it simple. It's almost as if I was trying to do too much with my language. Almost as if I was coding and I had too many tags and I wasn't nesting them properly. I say too much, I get confused and jumbled. I don't need codes at all!

Bell. Girl unfreezes.

GIRL

I can't decide which shade of blonde I want to be.

(Pause.)

What do you think?

CARL

Hair can be blonde.

GIRL

Yes, it can. You are a very astute observer, aren't you?

CARL

(Pause.)

Can I get you a drink?

GIRL

Sure. Thanks. I'll have an Appletini.

Carl hands her a glass.

GIRL

Thank you.

(Pause.)

So, tell me about yourself.

CARL

I'm Carl.

GIRL

What do you do, Carl?

CARL

Programming.

GIRL

So what's that like?

CARL

Programming.

GIRL

Are you okay?

CARL

(Nod yes)

GIRL

It's okay if you're shy.

CARL

(Nod yes)

GIRL

Are you shy? Aw, that's cute. Don't be nervous.

CARL

(Nod yes)

GIRL

I used to get nervous in public too. Do you want to go someplace private where we can talk, just you and me?

CARL

(Nod yes)

GIRL

All right, let's go!

CARL

(Nod yes)

Girl yanks Carl's hand and leads him off stage. Carl smiles, waves to the audience, and salutes them as he goes.

(Blackout.)

Dana Eckstein is a senior at the University of Hartford, Connecticut, where she double majors in English with Creative Writing and Cinema. In addition to her burning love of English, she is also particularly fond of flowers, bubbles, and smiling. She is the current President for her Sigma Tau Delta chapter.

Straightened Out

| Katelyn Harrell

The chiropractor's waiting room was neither small nor big, but its walls were lined with wooden chairs that sat too closely to one another, which made the space feel crowded. It was an awkwardness I prepared myself for, usually by bringing a book, one with a nondescript cover, something that no one would be interested in. This particular morning, I'd grabbed a wedding dress catalog from my desk and pressed it to my chest as I entered, like a shield against boredom and unwelcome conversations.

As always, the door bell jingled, and the heads lifted. There was a moment of mutual assessment.

To my left were two chairs, occupied by a police officer and a convict wearing a full orange jumpsuit. To my immediate right was a line of four chairs, but only one of them was occupied by another, younger police officer, who nodded his head and said, "Mornin'."

"Good morning," I said.

A teenage girl sat by herself on the right wall. I made a quick beeline for the chair beside her. She moved her oversized handbag and glanced at the magazine in my hands with a small smile. Her athletic shorts bunched at her hips, and her tank top read "Lady Warriors Volleyball Team." That put her in high school, seven or eight years younger than myself.

I opened my magazine to a random page. The girl beside me returned to texting furiously on a small jewel-encrusted cell phone. For a few minutes, the only sound was the quiet but incessant clicking of buttons, her speeding fingers mere blurs in the corner of my eye.

My own phone lit up in the pocket of my purse, and I opened it to a message from my fiancé.

Got your message. Back bothering you?

Just an adjustment, I wrote back. Won't take long.

We'd recently started a game of limiting our messages to only six words. I'd gotten the idea from a magazine article about

communication and how it was one of the three most important parts of a marriage, along with sex and a shared sense of humor. Nothing groundbreaking. The article had said that having limited words makes you think more about what you're saying to your significant other. We thought the article was stupid, but we liked the challenge, and both of us found it amusing.

Waiting room time, huh? I'm jealous.

Unusual crowd today, I typed back. Might get interesting.

The convict and I were seated diagonally from one another. I couldn't get comfortable in my chair and tried to observe him inconspicuously through my curtain of brown hair. He was a short black man, probably no taller than myself, with a thin black mustache and closely trimmed hair. He was slumped down in his chair with his eyes closed. My phone lit up again.

Rabbi, a priest, and a minister . . . ?

Nope. Convict. Two cops. No joke.

Word of advice, Laura. LEAVE NOW.

I smiled and glanced around before texting back:

That's two words, Dan. Thanks, though.

The officer seated beside the convict wore a sheriff's badge and a bored expression. He looked to be in his late forties. When I had first sat down, he had glanced at me, then looked away when our eyes met. I was reminded of my father's coworkers, those big, bull-necked farmers, whose button-downs always appear to be choking them.

His counterpart seemed to be in his early or mid-thirties. A yellow-rimmed, black badge on his sleeve read "Deputy." He tapped his foot on the carpet to the rhythm of whatever he was humming. An issue of *Field & Stream* on the coffee table caught his eye, and he grabbed it, flipped through it for less than a minute, and set it down with a flap.

"Nothing to do," he said, his voice surprisingly loud in the quiet room. He walked to a small display in the corner where three white pillows were stacked on a rack. "Contour pillows," he muttered,

holding one with his hands and laying his head on it to fit its shape.

At least the cops are there, Dan wrote.

“That’s one of them NASA pillows, Jeff.” His nametag flashed when he turned. “G. Bryant” tested the others in turn, pinching them between his fingers.

Yes, I wrote back. Their presence is very reassuring.

Jeff gestured to Bryant to bring one over, took it with his large, red hands, and squeezed it, watching the foam slowly rise back up. “Might have to take me a nap with one of them.”

“Tell me about it,” his partner said, putting the pillow back on its shelf. The teenage girl laughed just audibly enough to be heard and continued texting. Attention won, Bryant returned to his seat and watched the girl beside me.

“You see how fast she texts, Jeff?” he asked, pointing. “Ain’t that something?”

I lifted my magazine a little to hide my own phone between the pages.

The girl smiled in acknowledgement, though her eyes remained on the small lit screen.

“How fast you text?” he asked, smiling, his elbows on his knees.

“I don’t know,” she said shyly. “Pretty fast, I guess.” Her Southern accent was strong.

“How fast you text while you’re driving?”

I looked in her general direction, waiting.

The girl laughed, shutting and opening her phone. “I don’t do that.”

Good answer.

“That’s a good girl,” Bryant said. “I’d hate to see you get in trouble.” He winked at her.

The convict leaned down and scratched his ankle. The chains at his feet jangled. The older officer made a muffled joke about him trying to escape.

“Nah, man. I’m getting out.” He touched his nose with the pad of his thumb. “I ain’t gonna screw that up.”

“What are you gonna do when you’re free, Tommy?” the younger officer asked.

“First thing I’m gon’ do,” Tommy said, looking at the ground, “is see my kids.”

“Shoot, Tommy . . . I didn’t know you had kids.” Bryant looked over at his partner as if to ask if he had known. Jeff shrugged.

“Yep. Son and a daughter. And I’m gonna see ‘em in one week, too.” The older officer considered this in silence.

“You get out in a week?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Wow. Good for you, Tommy.”

I realized I hadn’t turned a page since I’d arrived, so I did, for the gesture of it. Someone shifted, and I looked up, meeting the eyes of the older officer. He sniffed and looked away. Flustered, I looked at my phone.

Blehh, Dan had written. Lunch over. Time to work.

Nooo . . . all aloooooone . . . Fine. Love you.

Bryant’s two-way radio sounded. It was a woman’s voice, garbled speech. With an exaggerated sigh, he stepped outside.

Another message.

Love you, too. Keep me updated.

Will do. Get back to work.

Things were quiet for several minutes in Bryant’s absence. The teenage girl opened and closed her phone so that its blue light blinked on and off.

The door to the back opened, and Dr. Waldrop appeared.

“Samantha? You can come on back.” He smiled as the girl gathered her things. “Hey, Laura,” he said to me with a small wave. “How you doing?”

“I’m doing all right,” I said.

She entered the hallway.

“Be with you in a bit,” he said quietly before the door closed. I returned to my magazine.

The convict muttered something.

“... shouldn’t be looking at her that way,” he said. “Girl’s too young for you.”

He was still slumped down in his seat, his hands folded across his stomach, elbows on the armrests. But his eyes were open and staring at the sheriff. My face flushed.

When the sheriff said nothing, the convict continued, “You know better.” The other man remained silent. Tommy smiled and shook his head, as though the officer had denied it. “I saw the way you looked at her when she walked back there.” He jutted his thumb at the door.

I felt my face burning and tried to keep my head low but still high enough to observe. The officer’s face turned a shade redder too, but he continued to act as though he hadn’t heard a word.

“I know it’s hard, man. But it’s wrong. Just wrong.” I wondered if Tommy would keep going, half-hoping he wouldn’t, and waited for the officer to say something. He hid his embarrassment well, minus the blushing, and didn’t even look at me to see if I was listening. He readjusted his belt and seemed to be holding his breath.

Bryant reentered, glancing immediately at the seat beside me and finding it empty. He took his chair for half a second before the receptionist called, “Tommy Williams? You can come back now.”

I watched as the prisoner stood, the chains jangling at his feet, head still shaking slowly. He disappeared behind the white door, the two officers just behind him. The room was empty. I felt more at ease and openly fanned myself with my magazine, happy they were all gone.

“Laura?” The nurse stood in the doorway with a clipboard in the crook of her arm. “You can come on back now.”

I gathered my things and squeezed through the space between her and the door jam. The two officers lingered in the hallway outside of Tommy’s half-open door.

“Come right in here, and lay down on the table,” the nurse told me. “He’ll be right with you.”

The younger officer smiled at me, chewing on his gum. “What’s

the problem, girl?” he said. He rested his hand on his police baton, then gripped the end of it tightly. “You need me to straighten that out for you?”

I looked at him incredulously—the older officer sniffed and looked down the hall—then turned away. Once inside the room, I tossed my purse in a chair and leaned against the wall.

“Must be shy,” I heard Bryant say as I shut the door.

I took my phone from my pocket, hoping that a message from Dan would be waiting for me. There was nothing. I opened his last text and clicked Reply. My thumbs hovered over the buttons.

Six words.

Katelyn Harrell of Thomasville, Georgia, is a graduate of Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, where she received a B.A. in English. Having majored in Literature and Creative Writing, she now edits fiction as a freelance copyeditor for both Mercer University Press and Juggling Board Press in Charleston, South Carolina.

Wednesday Night at the Blue Branch

| Victoria Niedzielski

On any frigid winter night on a small street, the line of yellow streetlights is broken up by a neon blue sign: *The Blue Branch*. It's a place that you might have to open your eyes a little wider to see, but many people know about. You'll pass it by if you want to. But if you need to, you'll notice it. Above its doors, a sign reads *You're always welcome at the Blue Branch!* In addition to the warmth inside, there is always someone to greet you. This Wednesday night is no different than any other. Cold people enter, cold people sit, and cold people are warmed by their food. In this small restaurant, people come and go, taking the thoughts in their heads with them—leaving with more than the food in their stomachs.

Sweet

This Wednesday night, two college friends decide, on a whim, that they need something sweet. So the boy drives the girl to a small restaurant a few miles from campus. They are seated at a two-person table. The waitress hands them their menus, smiling. They tell her they only want dessert. She nods and tells them to take their time. The boy opens his menu to the desserts.

Milkshakes:

Our creamy milkshakes are blended with Blue Branch homemade ice cream. We top the generous helping with a thick layer of freshly whipped cream with a cherry on top. Available in chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. Flavors cannot be mixed. You'll lose yourself in this milkshake. You should get the chocolate milkshake. You love milkshakes. She loves milkshakes. Just like you two have the same favorite color. People like that should stick together. This milkshake is so big that you would have to share it. It would be a waste of money to get two separate ones that you'd never be able to finish. You could easily stick two straws down the middle

of the smooth shake and drink away. You'd lean in, meeting in the middle of the table. Your foreheads would almost touch. You'd laugh and smile, gazing into her big brown eyes as you drink the big brown shake. When you're done drinking, you'd let the straw fall from your lips, breaking away and being so close. You'll see her tongue glide over her lips, cleaning away the whipped cream and sweet brown layer of shake. You might forget your girlfriend's name. You'll definitely forget her boyfriend's name. The chocolate shake is the sweetest. Is she looking at this same menu too?

"So what are you going to get?" the boy asks his friend. She closes the menu and smiles at him.

"I was looking at the chocolate shake."

Served Together

A young girl, no more than twenty, walks into the Blue Branch on this Wednesday night hand in hand with a little boy with messy brown curls. She is his mother, and they are celebrating his fourth birthday. The waitress gives him a blue balloon after he tells her he's four. It's a big day for him. The pair never goes out to eat. He proudly follows the waitress to their seats as his mother ignores the stares and whispers she's grown used to.

"Mommy guess what," the young boy says, taking off his tattered coat.

"What?"

"I'm four!"

The mother smiles and nods as she picks up her menu.

"Mommy guess what," he says again.

"What?"

"I love you."

The mother reaches over and squeezes his hand.

"I love you too. Now pick out something to eat, birthday boy." she says, opening her menu, looking only at the appetizers.

Fried Mozzarella Sticks:

This appetizer is a wonderful way to start your meal. Lightly battered mozzarella cheese is fried to a crisp on the outside, revealing smooth melted cheese on the inside. Served together with our homemade marinara sauce for dipping. This small serving won't fill you up but you're used to feeling hungry. That means he'll get to eat anything he wants. He deserves it; he deserves everything. But you know people will stare and whisper, wanting you to hear them. And you'll want to throw one of these mozzarella sticks at the eyes that judge, drench their college diplomas in water, or stain their minds when they act like they've never misjudged love with marinara sauce. But you won't because you have something—someone—they don't: the greatest gift to ever happen to you. Even though it's hard, there's nothing you love more than hearing the words *I love you* exit his small baby-teeth mouth.

She looks over at her son as he holds the menu upside down. His hand is on his chin and he has a look of concentration on his face. She smiles. In her mind, she promises him that she'll always take him out for his birthday.

"Can I get macaroni and cheese?" he asks. She softly laughs through a smile.

"You can get whatever you want."

Favorite

On the same Wednesday night a man with thinning black hair enters the same restaurant. He walks in and starts to unbutton his faded black coat. He holds the door open for a young girl and a young boy holding a blue balloon, reminded of the child he never had. It is the first time he has been out to eat in a while, six months to be exact. He is breathing deeply as he tries to ignore the waitress' sad smile when he says he is a party of one. He is seated at a two-person table and given a menu. He is immediately drawn to the burgers.

Chicken Crisp Branch Burger:

This is the ultimate burger for any chicken lover. A huge piece of chicken breast, fried to perfection, perfectly tender on the inside. A combination that causes your taste buds to fall in love and crave more. We add fresh lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, onions, peppers, with a choice of dressing. This is one burger you won't forget. This was her favorite burger. The one she always ordered, the one she always looked forward to. Her insistence on splitting the bill always made you smile. She'd pull back her brown hair so nothing would get in it, leaving out only her thick black bangs. You'd be so surprised when she'd finish the entire burger. You'd laugh at the sight of her tiny self inhaling it, dressings spilling out onto the napkin she donned as a bib. She ordered it on your first date here and on your last date here. Well, last meal. You miss her. But she would want you to know that she had an amazing last meal here with you and the accident that followed wasn't your fault.

"Ready to order?" asks the waitress. The man looks up, through the tears in his eyes, and points to the burger.

Nuts

A mother and daughter enter the Blue Branch on that Wednesday night. Her stepfather has to work late and her sister is staying over at a friend's, so the pair has decided to go out to eat. While they're waiting, the mother pulls down the daughter's shirt that was exposing a flash of skin, and rubs off a small chocolate stain on the corner of her lips with her thumb and spit. The mother lets out a sigh that the daughter can only attribute to her lip ring that her mother accidentally touched. The waitress seats them, the pair following her in their designer heels and converse sneakers.

"What are you in the mood for?" the mother asks her daughter.

"I was thinking about getting a burger."

"Oh honey, maybe you should get a salad instead," she says without looking up.

And so the daughter opens up to the salads.

Apple Chicken Walnut Salad:

It'll be hard not to smile while eating this salad. Fresh cut apples are mixed with juicy grilled chicken breast and crisp lettuce. The candied walnuts make this salad stylishly fun. Comes with your choice of dressing. You'll lose yourself in the variety of colors and taste. If she wants you to get a salad, then get this salad. She doesn't know anything about you, she doesn't care. If she can't remember the name of your favorite band she won't remember your nut allergy. This can be the final test of her alleged love. When you're in the hospital near death she'll be drowning in remorse. The sad thing is, she'll probably still be worried about your prom date.

"Ready to order?" asks the waitress.

"I'll have the Apple Chicken Walnut Salad," says the daughter.

The mother smiles.

"Good choice, I'll have that too."

Choice Of

A young couple has entered the restaurant for their Wednesday night date. The Blue Branch is a favorite of theirs. They're loosely holding hands. The girl is gazing out the window as they wait to be seated, watching cars go by, thinking. The boy has to nudge her out of her daydream and she gives him a small smile, without teeth. The waitress seats them behind two friends sharing a chocolate milkshake. She orders a water, he orders a Pepsi.

"Do you want to go for a walk later?" the girl asks, looking up as she opens her menu to the wraps.

"It's too cold out," says the boy. She looks down at her menu.

Caesar Salad Wrap:

This tasty wrap is filled with crisp romaine lettuce, fresh diced tomatoes, onions, and parmesan cheese. Stuffed in your choice of a white, spinach, or wheat tortilla shell and doused in our special Caesar dressing. Served with a bowl of your choice of any of our

warm soups. This wrap will fill you up and keep you warm. Choice of tortilla and choice of soup; the choice is comforting, isn't it? It's up to you to choose what you want. Look at him. He's great. He has been great for over three years. He's nice and he loves you and he takes you out every Wednesday. But does he really understand you? He doesn't like to sit and look out windows with you and he doesn't like books. It's more than that, though. Just because there's nothing wrong doesn't mean that it's right. You have a right to find out what makes you happier, not just happy. Don't settle for the wheat when what you really want is the spinach. It's okay if you want this to be your last Wednesday date night.

She closes her menu.

"I have a question," she says, voice slightly cracking. He doesn't look up.

"Hey, look at me," she says. He looks up.

"Yeah?"

"Are you—" She clears her throat.

"Are you happy?"

Stains

Two young girls meet in the restaurant on this Wednesday night, having arrived in separate cars. They exchange polite smiles as they fix their brown and blonde hair, slightly tousled from the winter wind. When the waitress picks up two menus, the brunette tells her that they are waiting for a third, their mother. On the way to their table, they pass a mother and daughter eating the same salad, the daughter coughing harder and harder. They are seated, their menus are handed to them, and there is silence. While her sister is consumed with her cell phone, the brunette rolls her eyes and opens her menu to the pasta.

Spaghetti and Meatballs:

Generously sized beef and pork meatballs are freshly rolled to perfection and tossed in a sea of smooth tomato sauce, a secret Blue

Branch family recipe. Served in a choice of angel hair, penne, or elbow noodles. Topped with parmesan cheese to the amount of your liking. This sauce is really red. It would definitely stain the expensive white coat your sister is wearing. A couple of noodles accidentally flung off your fork should do it. Dropping her cell phone in this dish would also do some damage. Ask to see it really quick; it is the latest smart phone, after all. But then again, you'd be the only one laughing. Your mom would probably laugh too if you were the one who bought her a new purse for Christmas instead of writing her a poem. It's not your fault you don't have a job for extra money. You focused on grades in high school, not working, and that's how you got a full scholarship to college. Your sister working through high school doesn't make her any better than you. Aren't you curious as to how that blonde hair would look with a big saucy meatball in it?

"What are you smirking at?" the blonde asks. The brunette sets her menu down.

"Nothing," she says.

"Mom just texted me, she's on her way."

"I think I'm getting spaghetti and meatballs." The blonde looks at her, puzzled at this dialogue.

"Okay, good for you," she says, voice heavy with sarcasm.

Stuffed

As Wednesday night dinner is drawing to a close, a young woman enters. Her cheeks are red from the cold and her face is filled with defeat. She holds a picture of a small brown dog in one hand and a broken red collar in the other. After she is led to her seat next to a window, she stares blankly at her menu for a while before opening it. Her stomach growls, and she decides that though she should not be rewarded for her failure, she should still eat something. She opens the menu in search for a simple slice of pizza.

Cheese Pizza:

Available as a whole pizza or by the slice. This is a simple

combination of smooth red pizza sauce and three cheeses, with stuffed crusts upon request. Available with varying levels of hot sauce or bleu cheese. This pizza won't fix anything but it will certainly pick you up, giving you the energy to keep looking for your best friend. Ten years old and still as lively and curious as he was when you were both young. That's what led him to break out of his collar and run away, not your irresponsibility. He's smart; he'll find his way back. If you order this, don't throw out the crusts; they can be given to someone who's been outside all day on his four legs. Don't forget to keep your eyes on the windows.

She puts down the menu next to the picture. Glancing out the window, she sees a small brown dog walking by under the yellow streetlights, missing his red collar.

Wednesday nights don't last forever. As this Wednesday night turns into Thursday morning, the sun starts to rise before the snow clouds fill the sky. For a moment there is sun. A man is walking down the street, alone. He looks up at the sun and takes a deep breath. He is warm despite the breath he sees. As the street lights he walks under start to turn off, he notices a blue light turn on. The Blue Branch is open for breakfast.

Victoria Niedzielski is a junior at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY. She is studying English and Creative Writing and serves as Secretary for her school's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Whatever her future may bring, she hopes to always have blue ink on her hands.

Red King Waking

| Megan Kirby

The walls are different. They'd always been ugly sea foam green, but now they're just barely faded, like an old photograph muted by sunlight.

Liam had found other inconsistencies over the last week, changes he only discovered on waking—the book that migrated from the coffee table to the bathroom sink, the newly emptied ashtray now overflowing with spent butts. These had been easier to ignore.

His logical side told him the walls had simply faded during the three years he'd lived at the apartment. He took them for granted in the same way he dismissed every aspect of his daily life—the way things grow so familiar, like his toothbrush or the face of his mother, that when pressed for details he drew an utter blank. Now that he really noticed the walls for the first time in years, it seemed incredibly self-centered to expect them to stay the same shade as his memory.

But he could not shake the feeling that someone snuck in and painted while he slept.

Sylvie was on her way. From the kitchen window, he watched her approach, wearing all black except for the slash of a red scarf around her neck. She battled up the sidewalk as the November wind tugged at her oversized peacoat and the brown bag of groceries clutched to her chest.

She'd left a harsh message on his cell the day before—*you better buzz me up when I come tomorrow, fucker*,—her high-pitched voice anchored by the curse at the end. Sylvie counterbalanced the fact that her body and voice never progressed far beyond a twelve-year-old's by adopting an impressive range of obscenities, all oddly endearing when paired with her bowl cut and all-black wardrobe.

Her little-girl voice rasped over the intercom—"Wake up, asshole, it's cold as tits out here"—and he hit the buzzer with a knot in his stomach that could have been apprehension or anticipation or some hybrid of the two.

When she banged through the door, he moved to take the groceries, but she jerked away with a little snarl. “If you’re not in the shape to answer your fucking phone, you sure as hell can’t manage this.” She bustled uninvited to the kitchen and began unpacking on the counter—a half dozen eggs, a quart of milk, a baguette wrapped in translucent white paper. “You look like total shit. Why haven’t you been answering your phone? Everyone’s pissed at you. You’re such an asshole.”

He’d seen her three days ago, at the memorial service for his former roommate, whom he’d begun calling “the Dead Boy” in his head. As if distancing himself could blunt his grief, like a knife’s edge rusted from disuse. He’d felt oddly separate from their group of friends—all uncomfortable and somehow contrived with vintage dresses and secondhand suits replacing the usual uniform of flannel shirts and blue jeans. Their grief was too obvious, like the smell of yeast from a rising ball of dough—something penetrating and sickly that suffocated him the longer he stood in the church’s cramped foyer.

He hadn’t spoken to anyone since the day after the service, when the parents came to collect the remnants of their son from the apartment, the coffee mugs and torn sweaters and half-filled sketchpads newly meaningful in death.

If Sylvie hoped to upset him with her sharp tirade, its effect was the opposite. A thin smile stretched across his lips as she wrenched open the fridge to stare disdainfully at the brick of moldy cheddar and the half-bottle of Jim Beam that made up its entire contents. “Have you been surviving solely on coffee and self pity? Jesus.”

“And cigarettes,” he said. “Don’t forget the cigarettes.”

“Go shower your disgusting body,” she ordered as she turned her attention to the dirty dishes in the sink. He escaped to the bathroom, running the water so hot it left splotches across his shoulders and chest. When he reemerged, an egg sandwich waited on the kitchen table, yolk staining the thick bread an unearthly yellow. Sore red rimmed Sylvie’s eyes, but he knew not to

acknowledge that she'd been crying.

She'd straightened the kitchen—put the dishes away, wiped a rag over the counters—and he wanted to say thank you, but the words stuck in his throat so he just choked down a too-big bite of egg and bread.

In the silence, he considered if he should mention the shifts in the apartment—about how crazy he felt when his sock drawer and t-shirt drawer swapped places, or when the alphabet magnets on the fridge rearranged from VOWELS to WOLVES. About how he felt consistently off-balance, as if he were looking for some misplaced item but could not remember precisely what it was, only that it was lost and he needed it back.

But she was standing abruptly, buttoning her coat then moving behind him to wrap her arms around his chest. After a few seconds, he relaxed into her hold: the tightening of her thin arms, her warm breath against his neck. He thought inexplicably, almost sleepily, of the one time he'd kissed her in their freshmen year dormitory. There'd been nothing sexual or even romantic about it. They'd been watching some movie, he couldn't remember which, a cushion-length apart on her futon. During a quiet scene, he'd leaned over and kissed her—he couldn't explain why, then or now. She'd laughed. They'd resumed watching the movie, and never spoke of it again.

She'd kissed the Dead Boy three weeks ago, at a party in this very kitchen. They'd been dancing, laughing. Liam had watched from the other side of the room, feeling as flat as his red plastic cup of beer. He wondered if they'd kissed before then, or after. No one ever spoke of it. Sylvie was always kissing people and forgetting, or pretending to forget.

She hummed into his ear, a little sob she couldn't stifle, and he understood it as a goodbye. He closed his eyes until he heard the door click behind her.

Things changed, he understood. Things got misplaced, forgotten, willfully abandoned. Yes, he could move a book from one place to

another and forget after. He could confuse the precise color of his apartment walls.

That disturbed him most: the thought that things weren't really changing; he just remembered them incorrectly. He pressed his hand over his eyes until a grid of phantom light spanned the insides of his lids. It had only been six days, and already the Dead Boy's face had blurred in his memory. The general shape and structure was there, but he could not remember the complexities of the expressions he'd taken for granted on a daily basis. The harder he focused, the further away everything seemed.

They'd come with boxes and black plastic bags, with old newspaper and rolls of packing tape and Sharpies to catalogue and pack away all of the Dead Boy's things. Liam hadn't lingered after his hello; what could he say to these parents, suddenly hunched and older, somehow smaller, in their grief? The mother had touched his cheek. She had said things like *it just doesn't make any sense* and *he was so young* and *there was no warning* with the scratched repetition of a skipping record.

He'd pilfered the Dead Boy's room the day before, fulfilling his final duty as friend and roommate: web history cleared, porn disposed of swiftly and mercilessly. He only kept the two carefully rolled joints from the bottom of the sock drawer, stifling a whisper of guilt with the utilitarian conclusion that they shouldn't be wasted.

But when the family showed up, he had retreated to his own bedroom, telling himself it was to give them space and time but knowing that really he couldn't handle one more moment of their sad stares, the wrinkles that had deepened around their mouths and eyes. There were unspoken questions that sparked from person to person like static shock.

Why had this happened to the Dead Boy? Why hadn't it happened to someone else on that bus, why hadn't someone else's brain shorted out like a computer in a thunderstorm, why hadn't

someone else fallen down dead with absolutely no warning? Who decided the Dead Boy would leave, and that Liam would stay?

Now, numb with four days of solitude, he entered the empty bedroom with the feel of ducking into a tomb. The parents had left him the old record player, the milk crate of records, a stack of dog-eared art books. They'd left the larger furniture—the drawing table and the bed—with a promise of sending a mover by the end of the month.

He wondered, vaguely, if the Dead Boy had been rearranging the apartment. As if in some alternate universe, he had died and the Dead Boy had remained, and now the two realities were tuning in and out like two songs fighting over the same airwave.

When he sat on the edge of the bare mattress, he spotted a white corner peeking from under the headboard. He pulled it out—a sketch of a young girl sleeping on the train, her face sweet—and ran his finger over the careless initial at the bottom.

He closed his eyes for only a moment, but it stretched longer and longer.

He woke to an unfamiliar stretch of ceiling, and jerked upright in sudden panic before he realized he'd passed out on the Dead Boy's bed. This felt somehow indecent, like wearing his clothes or intimately texting his ex-girlfriends. Even after Liam recognized where he was, he couldn't slow his heart. Because in the hazy minutes between sleep and waking, the dark ideas circling his mind sharpened to undeniable reality.

He was the Dead Boy. He didn't exist any more, he'd become some sort of shadow, just an idea of who he used to be. He'd be trapped in this apartment forever, surrounded by objects that constantly fluctuated and changed places.

As he hunched on the edge of the bed, it felt completely plausible that his roommate was in the other room, properly grieving, and Liam was stuck in this purgatory of an apartment, haunting himself.

Liam's self-imposed insomnia left him as stretched as the cups of coffee he diluted with whiskey and hot water. There were only a few teaspoons of grounds left in the bag. He replaced meals with cigarettes, leaning out of the kitchen window to smoke in the winter air.

But he fell asleep without meaning to, without even realizing it was happening, so that he'd wake up in the unlikeliest places—slumped across the kitchen table or curled in the bathtub—with his heart beating ambitiously, as if it could squeeze an extra beat between the standard two. He began thinking of sleep as a black line drawn across a square of paper—a straight start and finish, no detours in between. He wondered where his dreams had gone—if he forgot them upon waking, or if he simply didn't have them anymore. Sometimes, with a wince of panic, he suspected he was dreaming when he was awake.

The hot and cold switched on all the taps. His bedroom curtains changed the direction of their stripes. The bathroom and the kitchen traded places, so that he spent thirty minutes standing between the two, looking back and forth as if some explanation was written on the blank wall between them.

Tonight, he sat sipping weak coffee on the edge of the couch, clicking the TV volume up higher and higher in attempt to stay conscious. He'd never liked this late-night talk show host, a paunchy man who used his slicked-back hair and electric-colored suits to upstage his famous guests—but the young red haired actress reminded him acutely, almost painfully, of a girl he'd pined after in high school.

It was all in the smile—a quick, unsure flash of teeth. The high school girl had not been famously pretty, with her frizzy brown hair and a smattering of too-dark freckles, but Liam had grown infatuated in the way only seventeen-year-old boys have the energy.

They'd drunk too much pilfered whiskey at a house party senior year, and he'd fingered her in the master bedroom as the family cat watched boredly from the bureau. And after that, he felt repulsed

whenever he saw her. She cornered him one afternoon, practically pushed him up against a locker and demanded an explanation, but he hadn't been able to give one to her or to himself.

The harder he considered these memories, the hazier they become. Maybe it had been junior year. Maybe he'd been drinking tequila that night, instead of whiskey. Maybe he'd never even led her up to the bedroom—maybe it was another girl, or maybe some other boy had done this and he'd heard about it secondhand. He felt distant from these memories, as if they never fully belonged to him.

On TV, the actress's laugh had a tinge of Stockholm Syndrome.

The talk show host turned to stare intently at the camera, straight out of the TV screen as if the glass had turned to a window. "Do you hear that?" he demanded.

All of the sudden he did hear something—a low rumble, the noise of the train a block away, or the radiator kicking on, or maybe of some beast crouched behind the couch just out of his sight.

"It's only the Red King snoring," the host continued. "Fit to snore his head off . . ."

The rumbling noise grew closer, vibrating through the bald patches on the carpet. Liam stared down the talk show host, trying to summon some feeling of disbelief, but none came. As of late, everything had been misbehaving—why shouldn't he hold a conversation with a houseplant, or his own reflection, or this man on the TV?

"He's dreaming now," said the host. "And what do you think he's dreaming about?"

"It doesn't matter," Liam muttered. "I don't care."

"Why, about you!" the host exclaimed, and the camera swooped over the catcalling audience. "And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?"

"In this shithole," Liam gestured around him, at the ugly orange couch and the overflowing ashtray on the coffee table. "Right where I am now."

"Not you!" the host cried victoriously. "You'd be nowhere! Why,

you're only a sort of thing in his dream! And if the King were to wake, you'd go out—bang!—just like a candle!”

Liam stood up so quickly he upset his coffee cup, and the lukewarm liquid sopped under his bare feet. Because this was what he'd been fearing from his peripherals, refusing to look straight on: not the Red King dreaming him up, but the Dead Boy, keeping him trapped here alone as the apartment disintegrated into nonsense. “You're just in my head!” he insisted with sudden vehemence. “I don't have to listen to you!” The audience's cheers erupted from the tinny TV speakers.

“You won't make yourself a bit realer by getting angry,” the host said. “There's nothing to get angry about.”

“If I wasn't real,” Liam demanded, “then how would I get angry?”

“I hope you don't suppose that's real anger?” the host sneered.

Liam jerked forward in a panicked rage, unsure of what he planned—to put his fist through the TV, or to push it off the stand—but something clicked into place, or maybe out of place, and the talk show went on as though uninterrupted. The host turned back to the nervous actress and said “Now, tell us about this charming clip we're about to see . . .” The moment was suddenly so normal it bordered on dull—Liam's bare feet curling on the carpet, his hands tightening on his bathrobe tie.

All his projected anger rebounded back on himself—what was wrong with him? Was he hallucinating? Had he been drugged? Or was the talk show host somehow right—did his reality belong to someone else, entirely outside of his own control? And if it did belong to him, did that make any difference?

He reached forward to wrench the TV cord from the wall. The romantic comedy preview turned into a pop and a shrinking square of white light before the screen went dead. Liam just stood there, shoulders hunched, holding the cord in his hand and staring at the reflection on the dark TV screen. The Dead Boy hovered over him, transparent, as if they were both drawn onto overlapping

sheets of tracing paper—two different subjects occupying the same space. Then Liam blinked, and only his own reflection stared back—unshaved and pale, too thin in his filthy bathrobe, staring plaintively at himself.

As he staggered to the couch, a thousand things dreamt him up. He was dreamt up by a moth: paper-brown and lace-thin. He was dreamt up by a tree: green and narrow and always stretching, yearning for something just out of his reach. He was dreamt up by the pigeon on the telephone wire, and by the old lady in the yellow hat shuffling to the bus stop. By the first spiraling flakes of late November snow. By the toaster, by the bookshelf, by the sun that splashed cold light like a bucket of water through the sitting room window.

He is dreamt up by the Dead Boy, exactly as he is, hunched on the couch with his head in his hands and his eyes stinging, and when he closes them tight he isn't sure whether he's trying to fall asleep or trying to wake up.

Megan Kirby studies English Writing at Elmhurst College, and she is finishing out her last semester in Oxford, England. "Red King Waking" is part of a short story collection focusing on themes found throughout Lewis Carroll's writing. In her spare time, she likes drinking coffee, thrift shopping, and dropping Harry Potter references in casual conversation.

The Artist's Portrait

| Matthew Staton

He fell in love with her digitized nose first: the long, smooth inverted arch of a slope that gave her regal beauty an element of dysfunction. Her eyes were large, the lashes blackened and curled, her cheeks touched with brush and powder, lips stained red. She was all in order—her eyebrows meticulously drawn on—but her nose was off, possibly even out of proportion. The look on her face suggested irritation at being photographed, but in her eyes there was also an element of fear (or even of self-loathing!) that had to be centered on the nose. Her head was turned to the side and lifted slightly at the chin to grant her a seductive authority. He thought her eyes were crossed (if he could just see the other one!) from staring at her nose.

Her perfect imperfectly-formed artist's nose!

Todd Barker, high school senior, sat at his pitted, paint-scoured table in his art class and fumbled with the cramped touchpad mouse on his school-issued laptop to try and better frame the image he had found onscreen. The class was supposed to be doing research for an upcoming project for which they would find an artist whose work they liked, write a short biography of the artist, and then produce a piece using that artist's style and medium. Todd loved his artist, but he hated her work. He was conflicted.

Jenna "Emmalou" Princeton-Paler did all her work on canvases she first stained completely black using not a proper brush or paint roller but a tiny scrap of porous sponge (like you might find in a bathroom!) gripped in the jaws of an old clothespin, held in paint-stained fingers as she scratched and rubbed at the canvas, laboriously, for days on end. When the canvas was finally blacked out to her satisfaction, Jenna "Emmalou" Princeton-Paler took a scrap of metal she found at a dump and, after sharpening the edge to knife-like precision, dipped it, delicately, into her paint. She coated the sharpened edge in bright pinks, reds, or purples. Then, with quick flicks of her wrist, she would dash onto the canvas—stopping herself just short of tearing the material—thin, scratchy,

stick-like figures with outrageous scribble heads and freakishly long limbs. She never did backgrounds: it was always just the black canvas followed by the crude razor etchings.

Todd wasn't surprised at all when he found out that Jenna "Emmalou" Princeton-Paler killed herself at the age of 36. On one hand, she had effectively immortalized herself as a young, pale, long-nosed South Carolina woman who made men swoon. On the other, she left behind some weird art. Her weirdest piece was, of course, her last. For some reason, right in the middle of scratching out a long-fingered purple woman squatting as if she were playing an invisible piano, Jenna "Emmalou" Princeton-Paler stepped back from the canvas and sliced her own wrist open. Amongst the natural arterial spatter on the canvas, forensics found a few tentative blood-red etchings made with the razor. As she bled out, the artist seemed to have resolved whatever dilemma had caused her to pause in her work originally. Yet, it was impossible to tell exactly what her final movements before the canvas had produced. The subject remained just an incomplete woman futilely playing an invisible piano, overlaid with blood that dried in rivulets all down the front of the painting.

Clicking his way around the school's content filter with practiced ease, Todd found images of the final painting. He clicked to zoom in several times, rubbing his fingers sore on the touchpad—waiting for the lagging internet connection to finish unfurling the image before him—as he positioned the picture onscreen. To the left and right of the purple pianist (who would remain legless for all of eternity) Todd saw Jenna "Emmalou" Princeton-Paler's last efforts scratched out in her life-blood. There were three vertical lines in a scabrous red-brown color to the pianist's left. To her right was a single vertical stroke of the razor, swerving off to the right at its bottom end where the artist must have finally swooned and fallen.

After studying the painting for a moment, Todd shrugged and went back to the photograph of the artist herself. He thought he might print a copy off on the sly to take home with him. The

picture of Jenna “Emmalou” Princeton-Paler was posted on a website dedicated to her memory. Plenty of other students in the class were goofing off and looking up sports statistics or checking their Facebook newsfeeds, so Todd decided he could put finding an artist for his project off until the next class meeting as well. Only a couple very serious students with futures as art majors (and later as true starving artists!) had finished up. Todd browsed the site, looking for a full-body shot of Jenna “Emmalou” Princeton-Paler. He found one of her in a conservative black dress that clung to her body and flared out at the waist to stop just above the knees; but from that angle (she was facing the camera) it was impossible to see her nose. The nose was essential to the equilibrium of her beauty, Todd thought, clicking quickly away.

Without the nose, she was just another beautiful woman who—if she were alive and his age—would be beyond his reach. With the nose, she became a figure not of fantasy but of hope: a beautiful and flawed woman that might settle for a boy like himself (if she were not 36 and also dead).

“Ah, yes, poor Emmalou!” said a voice over Todd’s shoulder. He jerked in surprise and was glad that he hadn’t been looking up something indecent. His teacher stood just behind him, gazing down at the screen with a sad smile on her face. “She was something else, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“She was both a perfectionist and a minimalist: Strict and tightly-controlled, even though her pieces looked like scribbles. She would spend whole days painting a canvas black . . .”

“I read that.”

“She was once commissioned to paint a portrait of a couple with strong New Age leanings. Naturally Emmalou protested: she told them that she was the wrong sort of artist for the job. But they told her ‘no,’ they really wanted her to do it. Artists working with photo realism were plentiful to the point of being nothing more than glorified, slower-working cameras. They said they wanted something

unique.”

She directed Todd to a link on the site that led to an image of the portrait. When the painting finally loaded, he saw that it was just like the others. The couple had been rendered as stick figures with exaggerated limbs and long, grasping fingers. One (blue and probably the husband) had a long arm across the shoulders of the other (pink and probably the wife). The background was black.

“Did they pay her for it?” asked Todd, mildly curious in spite of his conditioned apathy in the face of all things school-related.

His teacher shook her head.

“No. In the end, they found that what they really wanted was a nice, old fashioned portrait of them to be done by a local man who spent his time doing pencil studies of wild turkeys and squirrels. Emmalou kept the painting though and titled it ‘Despair.’ She was a lonely sort of woman who never found the audience she craved.”

The teacher walked away and Todd was left alone with “Despair.” He hit the back button a few times and watched the other paintings flash before his eyes, the stick men and women (it was impossible to tell them apart) dancing a mad jig like the poorly-illustrated stills in a reel of animation. The backgrounds were all black and empty. Todd kept clicking until he arrived back at the incomplete final painting. He zoomed out and scrolled down to the bottom of the block of text below the image. He had read all about the suicide and mysterious final strokes of the razor already, but he had skimmed past the last couple of lines, set apart from the main body of the caption.

Although Princeton-Paler never officially titled her last piece (which has come to be called the “Death Painting” amongst art lovers), some critics and interested parties continue to argue that it be given the name found in the artist’s notes. The only title found there without a matching piece was “The Artist.” This final painting has been publically displayed only once—for a limited time—because of the fact that it is still noticeably stained with Princeton-Paler’s blood.

Todd looked at the clock and realized that he had less than ten

minutes left to print off a picture of Jenna “Emmalou” Princeton-Paler. He started to scroll away from the “Death Painting” (or “The Artist”) when an idea suddenly came to him. Again, against his deeply-ingrained adolescent disregard for excitement, he found himself gripped with an urgency that seemed to put his pulse in time with the silent ticks of the advancing clock hands, counting down his time.

“The Artist,” he said, staring hard at the image of the purple pianist before the invisible piano, with only the crude red stripes in the background to keep him (or her) company.

And that was when the significance of the vertical lines came to him.

They were an audience.

In her final moments, Jenna “Emmalou” Princeton-Paler had added other figures to her painting (in the background of all places!), watching the pianist perform.

With five minutes left on the clock, Todd closed out of the window he had kept open with the photograph of the woman centered just-so and ready to print. Instead, he copied and pasted “The Artist,” then raced for the print button just as his teacher held up her hand and called out for them to shut down the computers. All around Todd, other students high-fived each other and talked about lunch and work effectively put off until later. Todd ignored them and closed the laptop. He took it to the mobile computer cart, plugged it back into its appropriate slot (carefully adjusting the tangled power cord), and then he walked to the printer. He picked up “The Artist” and held it in his hands.

Lightheaded, he swayed a little on his feet. All it took was a few simple strokes to brighten the image and illuminate where before there had been only darkness. Jenna “Emmalou” Princeton-Paler had gone, nose and all, into the light: first, inspiration struck; and then she tumbled to crack her head against the floor of her studio. They found her with what looked like a smile on her face.

Matthew Staton is a senior English major at Bridgewater College in Virginia. He is currently working toward a certification in Secondary Education, with the intention of teaching English at the high school level. Matthew is also a founding member of the college's writing group: Lunatics, Lovers, and Poets.

Perception

| Lauren Nielsen

The day Charlie Mathis left her was the day Alisa decided to get rid of her tail. On a sunny Saturday morning in mid-May, Alisa hauled herself out of bed after waking to the sound of a garbage truck trundling down the street. She was still wearing her yellow dress, crumpled now, and her eyes were sore, burning. It took her a moment to remember why. She went to the kitchen, ignoring the broken glass on the floor, and poured herself a cup of coffee, black, before she went to find the morning paper. Picking it up, Alisa shuffled back inside. She let her tail wrap itself around the brass doorknob and nudge the door closed until the latch clicked. Its slender length floated along behind her, poised in the air so as not to drag on the ground. “There’s never any good news,” she thought, sinking down into her armchair and riffling through the paper that only ever contained headlines about death, crime, or politics. Her tail flicked back and forth along the edge of the newspaper, and she brushed it away. Alisa flipped to the back page. “What a surprise, more rain.” The entire population of New England was practically waterlogged after dredging through the torrential rains that had settled in on the coast for a two-week-long stay. Alisa really couldn’t care less anymore.

Finishing her coffee, Alisa went back to her bedroom and pulled her hair back into a messy bun, then slipped into a skirt and white t-shirt. She wished that she could wear sweats, but it was impossible to go out of the house in them without her tail making the back of them awkwardly lumpy. Alisa plopped down on her bed and began patting down the frizzy ginger-colored hairs on her long, slender tail. She had learned the hard way that the short, wispy strands of hair on her tail did not respond well to hair spray and so, unless she wanted her tail to look (and feel) like a greasy orange rope, she shied away from any use of products on it. Today, however, the hairs wouldn’t stay patted down. “Fine, I give up.” Looking at her tail now, Alisa could not help thinking about the previous evening. It

had been going through her head all night long, with Charlie's face floating through her dreams, distorted and ugly.

Charlie had come in from out of town for the weekend. Friday afternoon, Alisa had gone out to the farmer's market to pick up something to make for dessert after their dinner reservations. She walked through the rows of stands, finally stopping at one and picking up a large carton of strawberries. She decided she would make a sauce to go on top of an angel-food cake and stopped at the bakery on the way home. After getting back to her apartment, Alisa got to work, dusting, vacuuming, organizing, and fretting over every little detail of her apartment. She wanted everything to look perfect. Then she began to cut up the strawberries for a sauce, slicing longwise through each of the fleshy, heart-shaped fruits. As Alisa worked, she let her tail out of its skirted confines. She amused herself by seeing if her tail could tune the kitchen radio to just the right station, using the hairless friction pad on its tip to spin the dial. Usually she missed by a degree or two and wound up listening to some talk show. She finished the strawberry sauce, put it into the refrigerator, and got ready for the evening. Alisa put on her yellow sundress and made sure her tail had wrapped itself around her upper left thigh, tucked away safely and out of sight.

Charlie had never seen her tail. They had met in a coffee shop the previous fall, sharing a table because the place was so crowded. He had made a comment about the cover on the copy of *The New Yorker* she was reading, and they began talking. Although Alisa and Charlie had been dating for nearly six months, they rarely saw one another due to Charlie's work, which kept him traveling for weeks and sometimes months out of the year. Alisa had not decided when to tell Charlie about her tail. She didn't need to bring it up, not yet anyways.

When Charlie arrived on the night that he left her, he'd brought her a bouquet of pink roses. Charlie took her out to Chez Pascal and let her order the duck, which was her favorite, but also the most expensive thing on the menu. Then they walked home, hand in

hand. Alisa opened the bakery box of angel-food cake and took the strawberry sauce out of the fridge. She scooped the sauce onto each piece of cake, careful not to spill. Alisa hummed absentmindedly and swayed to the unknown tune stuck in her head. Her tail unraveled itself to sway along with her. She should have been paying more attention; she should have heard him coming into the room. Alisa closed her eyes, trying not to remember what happened next, but the sounds and images came anyway.

Charlie dropped the vase of flowers. Alisa whipped around, realizing what he had seen. Shards of glass, rose petals, thorn covered stems covered the floor and distanced them. She tried to explain to him, tell him that it was a defect, that it was nothing. Her memory blurred, but she could still see the look on his face. She could still hear the words: unnatural, disgusting, freak. Then the door slammed.

Alisa's tail was still lying in her hand and she dropped it. Charlie left because of it and she didn't want it anymore. Other memories rushed back to her: her mother telling her how beautiful she was but making her keep her tail hidden, the kids at school always making fun of her when she couldn't go to swim parties or field trips to the beach, the dreaded appointments with specialists from all over the country wanting to examine the "tail child," her cousins taunting her about the long skirts and baggy jeans she was always wearing. And now, the man who supposedly loved her had left—all because of her stupid, stupid tail. Alisa was done with all of it. She did not want to be that freak anymore. She did not want to keep something that always made her feel defective and abnormal. She did not want to be held back by her tail any longer. She wanted it gone.

Alisa called several of the specialists she had most recently met with. She finally chose Dr. Jeffrey Tackett, a specialist in amputation who worked at the hospital in Providence, and scheduled a surgery with him for Monday afternoon. He was very eager to perform this "extraordinary, one-of-a-kind surgery." Since Charlie left, Alisa tried to forget her tail even existed. She tried to keep it wrapped around

her leg whenever possible to keep it out of sight. Her determination to get rid of her tail had been the only thing holding her back from completely breaking down, but now that her appointment was scheduled and she no longer had Charlie to call and talk to, she felt miserable. For the rest of the day and all day Sunday, Alisa remained on the couch curled up in blankets, only getting up to go to the bathroom or to find some more junk food residing in the back of the freezer. She flipped through the TV channels and landed on the “Chick-Flick Weekend Extravaganza.” Alisa slept through most of them, but caught glimpses here and there of *She’s All That* and *Can’t Buy Me Love*. The geeks all changed how they looked, changed who they were, and then people liked them—then people wanted to be with them. “See,” she thought, “all of them changed and turned out for the better.”

When Monday morning came around, she shoved her tail into the leg of her baggy sweatpants (quite unnecessarily, since it could do so itself) and left the house. She was ready to be done with her tail. At the hospital, the nurses checked her in, put a white plastic bracelet on her wrist, and directed her to the waiting room. The only magazine that did not feature babies or “Tricks to Get Slim” on the cover was a trashy celebrity tabloid. She flipped through it, glancing over the scandalous articles on how so-and-so shaved off all of her hair or how what’s-his-name branded himself with a tattoo across his chest. “Everyone needs change,” she thought and continued to flip through the magazine. “Alisa Seneck?” a nurse with a clipboard called from the doorway across the room. Alisa tossed aside the magazine, got up, and followed her. Before the operation, Dr. Tackett came in.

“Hello Ms. Seneck, I’m Dr. Tackett. Now, before we get started, there’s just some paperwork about what you’d like to have done with the amputated limb—”

“I don’t care. You can do whatever you like with it, I don’t want it. Where do I sign?”

“Of course, I understand,” he said, smiling at her. “Then let’s get

started.”

Getting out of a cab at her apartment, Alisa stumbled a bit as she made her way to the door of the building. “Must be the anesthesia,” she thought. She struggled all the way down the hall to her apartment door, trying to keep herself balanced. Alisa finally made it to her couch and collapsed. She thought about what the doctor had said—that the procedure had gone well and she shouldn’t have any lasting pain after a few days rest. She rolled over on her side and gently fingered her tail bone. There was only a large, scratchy bandage where the base of her tail used to be. “Good,” she thought, “now I can wear normal sweatpants for the first time in my life.” Alisa was unusually cold so she pulled her knitted afghan off the back of the couch, wrapped herself up in it, and fell asleep.

When she woke up, it was just before 11 p.m. She figured that the anesthesia had to have worn off by then. “And the painkillers too,” she mumbled, pressing her hand against the throbbing tailbone. She got up to go to the bathroom, took two steps, and fell. She tried once more to stand. It was disorienting. Her stomach turned over on itself. One more step and Alisa was flat on the floor again, humiliated and making a hopeless effort to blink back tears. “First Charlie, and now this . . . I just can’t win.” She pulled her blankets down onto the floor, feeling sick and missing Charlie more than ever.

The eleven o’clock news was just starting. The sports report came up first. Some students from Harvard had dyed themselves alternating colors, crimson and black, and were arrested for indecent exposure and lewdness. The next report detailed a fight between the Boston Red Sox’s mascot—Wally the Green Monster—and the Milwaukee Brewers’ Racing Sausages. Alisa shook her head. She turned up the volume as the local news began—a female reporter was standing outside of the hospital.

“We have an interesting story for you this evening,” she began. “Dr. Jeffrey Tackett, the specialist in amputation at Rhode Island

Hospital, was able to perform a very unique procedure just this afternoon. We were able to interview him earlier this evening about his work on a woman with a *tail*.” The woman laughed. “Here’s what he had to say . . .”

Alisa scrambled over to the television on her hands and knees, smacking the power button off. The TV screen crackled with static, as if it shared her anger. She was shaking, infuriated and revolted at the same time. The story was about *her* and her tail. She felt invaded. Alisa shuffled to the window, unable to fully retain balance, and yanked the curtain closed. There was no privacy in the world. She felt naked and, although she was completely alone in her apartment, Alisa could not help but feel like there were eyes everywhere, penetrating the walls around her.

Alisa curled up in a ball, hugging herself so tight that it hurt—so tight that maybe it would cover up the horrible feeling of shame that was crawling through her veins and seeping into every inch of her body. She could not escape it. She was “normal” now, and with no idea of how to be normal, Alisa wished desperately that she could go back to being that freak again. She had never felt less beautiful or less like herself in her entire life.

The next morning, Alisa awoke on her living room floor right where she had curled up the night before. The pattern of the carpet was imprinted on her forearm. Alisa pulled herself up by the TV stand and stumbled down the hallway into her bedroom, using the wall for support. As she sat down on the bed, she reached around to scratch an itch on her tail, but it was not there. She had heard something mentioned about phantom pains before, feeling a sensation in a limb that is no longer attached to the body, but before that day, Alisa had never imagined she would ever have to deal with anything like that in her lifetime. She got up again and began rummaging through her closet, then pulled out the long, wooden object. Alisa also had never imagined that, at twenty-seven years old, she would need a cane to help her walk from one room of her apartment to another.

Thunder rippled through the building—the rain was back again. She made her way into the kitchen, putting half of her weight on the cane to help steady herself and taking one step at a time. Alisa poured herself a cup of day-old coffee that she then heated up in the microwave. As she sipped at it, she pushed herself up and back onto the countertop, tuned the radio two degrees below her normal station, and listened to the morning talk show.

Lauren Nielsen is a senior at Luther College in Decorah, IA, where she majors in English with a writing emphasis and minors in French. She is currently the Vice President of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter and the Editor of Luther College's Pioneer Yearbook.

Velma the Iconoclast

| Matthew Schwager

There was a Luddite in the kitchen when I came in through the front door. She already had her grocery-store wine in her hand, and although her wide bonnet was crumpled on the counter, her floral-print dress hung long around her legs.

“Matt!” she said, sweeping her arms wide. “How the fuck are you?”

After hugs, a little alcohol, she led me back to the bathroom. She told me Blake was out getting more snacks before the party.

“Some soda, some chips. I don’t know. We have to bring something,” she said. She clunked her makeup kit next to the sink. Her normal living clothes were underfoot. I moved to pick them up—she said *nyah nyah nyah* and started pulling out a bra, a tank top. She shoved them at me.

“Sit down,” she ordered, a brush in her hand. She grabbed my hair in great swaths—this was back when I had long hair—ripping the brush backwards through it, ruffling it out. I took up a Sharpie and start doodling pinup girls, cursive, other coquettish junk on my arms.

The front door closed. Blake.

He appeared in the doorway.

Now, back then, he was Velma. The girl-in-body-but-woman-in-spirit, a vision from my youth when I’d watch her be that steady voice rising over the VHS din of Scooby and Shaggy running from nuclear zombies or whatever. And here she was, although she looked oddly enough like Blake in a Salvation Army orange sweater and puffy hair. She smiled, leaned against the bathroom door frame. “Let’s

go,” he said.

The Luddite had just finished my hair and was putting some final touches on my Sharpie tattoo sleeves. “Hold on,” I said. I adjusted my bra, put my Daisy Dukes on. My Halloween corps had to show me how to pucker so lipstick could be applied evenly like oil paint. The coldness of the bathroom pricked my leg hair, but that’s the cost of being Amy Winehouse for a night.

“Aww, you’re cute,” the Luddite said, sipping wine. Her bonnet had miraculously appeared on her head.

“Sexy,” Velma belched, smelling of hops. “Let’s go.”

We went to some house. In between the blaring speakers and the kitchen packed with minors and frat guys, I asked the Luddite why she wasn’t drinking.

“Well, I’m a Luddite tonight. They don’t go for that, right?”

I shrugged. I didn’t say anything. I don’t like to say much. I didn’t know what a Luddite was. I still don’t, really.

“Whatever,” the Luddite concluded, popping some beer nuts into her mouth. “I decided not to drink because watching people self-destruct is way more fun.”

Twenty minutes later, we were looking for Velma, who had last been seen slipping and falling on the beer-slicked linoleum.

Ten minutes after that, we found Velma’s girlfriend, all dressed up as a fabric-shop Athena, stomping about the dance floor, the

kitchen.

Five more minutes and we were outside, scanning the backyard, jacuzzi included, for Velma. The Luddite ceaselessly texted people for clues. She was having a progressively harder and harder time stifling her laughter.

Ten minutes and we were holding a quietly panicked congress outside the downstairs broom closet. Velma had in some alcohol-clouded stupor beguiled herself and taken a girl back to a bedroom before Athena parted the clouds and descended in a terrible roar.

“Look, man, I didn’t mean to,” he whined through the closet door. “I just. Shit, does she see you guys?”

Athena was down the hall by the Chex Mix, trying to sound nice. We pretended that we were just in line for the hallway bathroom. “I brought some vodka,” we heard her saying. “Where did my vodka go? I would like some vodka.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Velma said. I could imagine the puff of his hair mashed against the closet door. She fell silent. Steadfast, brainy Velma, taken out of the VHS and locked away in a closet. Not even looking like Velma anymore, but a little more slurring and with eyes closed probably and maybe getting tired by now. The closet fell silent. The Luddite tugged at my tank top and we gave the closet some space.

We took another quick tour of the house. Grabbed some soda for her, a beer for me. High-fived some guys, laughing in the spirit of the night. I think at one point I glanced out a window and saw Athena out on the front lawn underneath a charcoal tree, pushing herself on a tire swing. She was pumping her full piston-legs out into the cold air, bending them back, pumping them again, the yellow

stripe running down the side of her leggings flexing and releasing, flexing and releasing, the stitching undoing itself just the tiniest bit, the air rushing in under the loop made by the yellow and the leggings with every flex and release, every cycle, every repetition, her swooshing lazily through the black, her cape fluttering wide under the tree.

I looked down from the window and got another beer.

We texted Velma, told her it was time to go. I remembered on the way to the closet that the Luddites weren't particularly opposed to alcohol, that was the Amish, right?

The Luddite shrugged. She put her empty Coke can into the open hand of some guy jangling to the music as we went past.

We had to pry the closet door open. Velma wanted to dance. He had a bottle of vodka in the closet with her. We grabbed it and when Athena, the Guardian of the Front Yard, had her winged helmet turned the other way we used our increasingly unorthodox understanding of balance to stumble through the hallway, through the forest of dancers, out the back door.

I saw her, Athena, the day afterwards. She was on a bench outside the library, wrapped tight in a peacoat. Her milky skin cracked a little bit through the pressures of fatigue and hangover and not wearing Halloween makeup. She smiled and the cracks under her eyes deepened.

“Hi,” I said. “What happened last night?”

Those little cracks became ravines. “I don't know. Blake went off

with some girl when he was drunk.”

“Ouch.”

“I was a little drunk, too,” she admitted. “Well, I was smashed. I mean, it’s a party, you can’t not be. Smashed. But hey I mean I didn’t go after some guy.”

“No, I guess not.”

“I did lose my vodka, though. I brought a whole bottle and I think Blake actually took it. I know he loves that shit. But he’s not usually that stupid. I think when he’s drunk it’s like he’s somebody else.”

She tilted her head up a little more and I realized that I was still just standing in front of her, hands awkwardly clasped together. I should have sat down next to her or something. Hugged her?

“Next party, I guess,” I said. “Yeah. Second time’s the charm. Yeah.”

“I guess.”

I left, then. I don’t think even she, she with her goddess powers and magic dollar-store sword, noticed how uncomfortable I was. I don’t like to say much when I don’t know what’s going on, but I couldn’t help but feel a pang of something when I turned my back on those milky Greek remnants, that rubble fallen out of a somebody.

Did that just happen? We erupted out the back door. Outside there was a lukewarm bonfire and the jacuzzi and a radio groaning out jazz through the blue glow of its front panel. I shivered.

“Did that just happen? Wow,” said the Luddite, her dress swooshing around her calves after our mad dash through the dance floor. She breathed and laughed, not even trying to stifle it anymore. “We just did that.” Her phone rang and she reached to silence it, fumbled around in the folds of her dress until she found whatever pocket she stowed the thing away in and squeezed it until it stopped. My hair had fallen out of its giant beehive at that point. Maybe if we hadn’t run so hard and so fast out into the cold, out into the charcoal trees.

Velma, if I could even call him Velma, swayed slightly, first to the left, then a little to the right. He wiped his hairy hands across her stained sweater.

The radio switched gears from its saccharine jazz to some sort of gypsy guitar and the people out in the yard started to turn back to themselves and their beer and the warmth fizzling out of the bonfire into the sky. Underneath the guitar that flooded over the backyard, we set out, past the plastic pumpkins and the spider web fuzz. We were so unprepared that night, the Luddite and Amy Winehouse and, finally, Velma the Iconoclast, the three of us all in a line through the gate, through the driveway, through the wide, dark street.

Matthew Schwager attends Montana State University, where he studies English Literature and Music Technology. He will someday register his name as a URL where you can view his creative portfolio; in fact, you should probably Google it now. Until then, you may e-mail him at matthew.schwager@gmail.com and he will respond gladly.

The Mass

| Andy Gallagher

They were a mass of people, not quite visible from space but definitely from a plane. They stood upright. The mass was filled with items. One-eyed dolls, nails, tatters, syringes, lemon peels, woody splinters, semen, papers of revelation, playing cards, greeting cards, at least thirty-seven bongos, multi-colored paper clips, empty pens, tires filled with perpetual rivers, but above all there were eyes. Eyes could see things, of course, but really only zoomed in, as though each person was looking through a magnifying glass with his or her face pressed right up to the thing he or she was trying to view, and so it was a sensory mess where what you were touching was probably what you were seeing, and this made people forget about the removed perspective that eyes granted to the beholder. To remedy this condition the mass was on a strict schedule which allowed it to look up at the sky at once (since how could a person tilt up one's gaze to view the sky at liberty, where one would likely hit one's chin on the neck or eye or shoulder blade of the person in front, and do the same with the back of the head to the person behind), and when the mass conducted this procedure, there was a great groan that sent a vibration through the throats, the chest, the abdomens, the thighs, and tickled the feet on the earth. According to the almost forgotten lore, at the time of the Most Massive, this great vibrating groan shook the crust so violently that it parted in a zigzag fashion, and a barreling fleshfall began to rush down each side of the expanse into the black abyss, legs upturned, fingers clawing, uniform groan shifted to reeling, divergent screams. Adults told this tale, lips brushing ear in the hush of night, but the mass made no effort to quiet the upturned groan. Adults, and especially elders, held the history of the mass. Shoulder to shoulder with each other, and shoulder to hip with the nearest children, they imparted wisdom.

The primary activity of the mass was to be. It was charged with living. Its collective identity as a mass was all it endeavored to know.

Everyone set off to forget everything but this one point. To bury thought was to make thought truly beautiful.

The mass was men, women, children. The mass was size and scope unknown. The mass maintained a core temperature. It was dressed in endless cloth and never changed.

A man fell asleep on his feet in the middle of the day. He jerked out of dream, falling slightly forward and hitting his teeth on the elbow of a very tall woman, who pulled her arm away in shock and pushed the woman in front of her at the small of her back, and an endless falling occurred for the rest of the day. It was not hand but hands and they were pressing on other things and this pressing gave birth to ubiquitous pressing.

This was when the focus was lost. Every man for himself, every woman herself, and the mass suffered. When the mass finally worked to its feet again, forgetting was prioritized. Become one again. Relinquish memory. Erase catastrophe.

Only the person who started the dismantling would remember the horror and feel the guilt. But one stomach made a fist, and others followed. This was the trouble: the looming burn in the stomach of the mass. As the mass grew, more dismantling occurred, and more perpetrators felt the personal guilt. Black auras surrounded these unfortunates, and the mass felt the permeating flush.

Out of fear, there was no talk of this curious phenomenon. The mass must forget everything but itself. The mass is. But eventually every person in the mass knew he or she was faking it. It was low-grade floss that shreds and leaves teeth dirtier. Frightening awareness hindered it all. Insanity was suspected of oneself. Everything became internal, rehearsed alone. The commonality of the mass gave way to secret cranial monologue. The daily upturned groan felt less fulfilling. The smell of hair became distinct.

The anxiety caused fidgeting. Shifting from foot to foot, standing on tiptoe, trying to shake out the bads; all of this contributed to imbalance. Ulcers developed from the stress. Soon the groans

became moans and they sounded at random as stomach pains smarted amidst the mass. This made the disconnect even more apparent. Each person had a different moan, and in true turmoil, this moan would produce any pitch it wanted. People longed for the comfort of the daily upturned groan, the homogeneous *Ahh* that vibrated them so wholly, so evenly. Still no one talked about it. Verbal acknowledgement was the greatest fear of all.

Eventually the ulcers corroded straight through. People tried to plug the holes with fingers, stacks of useless pennies, balls of cloth. Still, infection spread. Moans and stinging and mouths agape. People started dying. If enough of the living surrounded the dead, the corpse would be kept upright until others died, which was inevitable. Proximity to other death created proximity to one's own death. When more than one person died in a compact section of the mass, the falling would start again. But now, the living fell and slogged through the decay, and the pressing would not always press back. As more died, space grew. The mass compacted itself, retaining a façade of the closeness it once had. However, this could not be maintained. The mass was standing on its dead. Heels were lodged in toothless mouths, toes sunk into atrophied muscles and dead bones splintered under the force, cutting the feet of the living.

Healthy members of the mass created special calls to alert other healthy members of their presence. There was a great migration through the mass so the healthy could unite. This, of course, caused more falling, and eventually the sick joined the dead. The mass was now much smaller, but was healthy and sought to return to its peaceful existence. But the guilt of abandoning part of itself infused the mass with a newfound anxiety.

The time came when all unity was lost. Ulcers. Far worse, far larger. It all happened again. The healthy mass could not retain its health. The death was crustier now, bloodier, and when the first falling came it never stopped. Newly dead fell upon oldly dead fell upon long dead, which was soil.

When the mass finally perished, it was when it could no longer

rightfully call itself a mass in any sense. No—just a single, individual, brown-haired little girl, trouncing aimlessly through the stinking vastness in a stained white dress, stepping over miles of entangled, rotting limbs, plugging her nose, clutching a one-eyed plastic doll between her elbow and her side.

While matter can neither be created nor destroyed, we typically follow alternate guidelines, dictated by hope, which is created and destroyed by the second.

Andy Gallagher is a senior at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), where he is an English and Secondary Education double major with a minor in Creative Writing. As the co-founder and vice president of the student organization TCNJ ENGAGE, he regularly volunteers as a mentor for homeless and at-risk youth in central New Jersey. After graduation, he plans to teach and write.

The Closet

| Allison Hamil

Besides the monster, my closet contains exactly two pairs of shoes, an empty garment bag, and one blue earring. Of the four shoes, I have one pair of green sneakers and a pair of red and white stilettos. The stilettos are my favorite. I never wear them.

The clothes I wear every day consist of a pair of jeans I stole from an abandoned shopping bag in the city and a yellow t-shirt that says “Jack’s Hawaiian Grill” on it—I used to want to work there.

Don’t get me wrong, I haven’t always been this way—depressed, anti-materialistic. I don’t want anything anymore. In fact, I very much want nothing. No, I take that back. I want my red and white stilettos, but tomorrow they’re going to burn.

Philip used to own Jack’s Hawaiian Grill. Then one day he died. It was tragic; it was in the newspaper. His son, Dave, took over. Now it’s a bicycle shop that the local kids like to break into at night. It might have burned down. I can’t quite remember.

My jeans have a small hole in them near the knee. Sometimes I stare at it wondering if all holes begin that small.

Yesterday I took the garment bag out of my closet. It was a big step for me. Today it went back in. I know the monster is staring at me even though I’ve never seen its eyes.

I don’t know what to do with that one blue earring. It glistens next to the monster. Maybe it’s the monster’s eye plucked from its socket. Maybe it’s a magical teardrop that doesn’t evaporate.

Last night, while I was still wearing my green sneakers, I heard a knock at the door. It was two police officers. I was shocked the police could actually find my house. Usually they can’t. I haven’t bathed in exactly one week. I’m starting to accumulate a strong odor. Maybe that was how the police found my house.

“Can we ask you a few questions, Miss?” the police asked. I don’t know which officer. They are like one entity.

“I suppose.”

“Do you know Dave Foster?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know that he is missing?”

“No.”

“We heard a rumor that he was here a week ago, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then you could possibly have been the last person to see him.”

That blue earring is really starting to annoy me. I can't throw it out. I'm afraid someone is looking for it. I just wish they would hurry up and find it. I would put it in a lost and found, but I'm not ready to go near the monster.

My feet were hurting while I was talking to the police. My green sneakers really aren't that comfortable, especially after a long walk. I wanted to change into my stilettos, but the police wouldn't have appreciated them.

I sleep with my closet doors open so that I can kill the monster once it emerges. I have been trying to make the monster leave my house, but it's hard to fit it in the garment bag.

Why would you leave one earring and not come looking for it? If I had one wish, it would be to have another blue earring. Then I could wear them for Halloween.

“Do you know where he went after he left?”

“No.”

“Can you think of any place he might have gone?”

“No.”

“Did you have a sexual relationship with him?”

“I don't understand the question.”

I have been filling my garment bag for the past few hours. It is currently full of air. Soon, it will be full of one blue earring and my red and white stilettos. Once I take it to the dumpster, the monster will leave my closet. The smell of burning satin always attracts the worst monsters.

My scars have scars and my bruises have bruises. I hurt all the time, but I don't remember why. My garment bag came from a prom dress store, but the prom dress isn't in it.

“Were you two in a relationship?”

“No.”

“Dave’s ex-girlfriend says you were.”

“We weren’t.”

“Didn’t he take you to prom last week?”

“Yes, but he didn’t take me back.”

“Did you two have sex?”

“. . . yes.”

“Why did you hesitate?”

“I had to think about it.”

I think I might be able to repair the hole in my jeans, but I won’t. My other holes are too big to repair. I feel like Swiss cheese. I wonder if the monster has holes. Maybe I could give it some of mine.

I wish I didn’t have to put my red and white stilettos in my garment bag as well. I don’t have a choice. If I don’t put them away, the police might steal them. I’d rather they were ash.

I want that blue earring out of my sight. It’s going in the bag no matter how tight a fit it might be.

My stilettos used to be all white.

“One last thing; do you recognize this blue earring?”

“No. Did Dave steal it?”

“We don’t think so. We found it in the woods next to a pool of blood—Dave’s blood. Would you know anything about that?”

“No.”

“You see, we think Dave might have been murdered, but we couldn’t find the body.”

“Well, that should make the newspaper.”

“Yes, it will. Are you sure you know nothing about where Dave might have gone after prom?”

“I guess he must have gone to the woods.”

“Yes, of course. Here is our card if you think of anything useful. We’ll be in touch.”

I carry the extraordinarily heavy garment bag containing one

blue earring and my red and white stilettos down to the dumpster. I toss in some gasoline. I don't cry. I light the match. I watch the monster burn before climbing in after it.

Allison Hamil is a recent graduate from The University of Alabama, where she received a B.A. in English and Music. She plans to attend law school next year while continuing to write in her spare time.

Jurors

Kevin Brown received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Mississippi. He also has a M.A. in English from East Tennessee State University, a M.A. in Library Science from the University of Alabama, and a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Murray State University. He is a Professor at Lee University. He has published essays in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, *InsideHigherEd.com*, *The Teaching Professor*, and *Eclectica*. He has one book of poetry—*Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009), two poetry chapbooks, *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Holy Days: Poems* (Winner of the Split Oak Press Poetry Prize 2011)—and a book of scholarship: *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State University Press, 2012).

Katie Fallon is the author of the nonfiction book *Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird* (Ruka Press, 2011), which was recently named as a finalist for the Southern Environmental Law Center’s Reed Award for Outstanding Writing on the Southern Environment. Her essays have appeared or are forthcoming in a variety of literary journals and magazines, including *The Bark*, *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Ecotone*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Now & Then*, *Isotope*, *Fourth River*, *the minnesota review*, *The Tusculum Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay “Hill of the Sacred Eagles” was a finalist in Terrain’s 2011 essay contest, and she has been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize. She has taught creative writing at Virginia Tech and West Virginia University.

Cherri Randall’s novel *The Memory of Orchids* was published in 2011. Her essay “Daughter Rhymes with Laughter” is forthcoming in the anthology *Impact* (Telling Our Stories Press). She has published poetry, short stories, and essays in many leading journals such as *Story South* and *Blue Earth Review*. Her creative nonfiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is currently editing a textbook on ethics and writing called *No Truer Words*. She teaches creative

writing at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown.

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 *Best New Poets 2007*. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English 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, and 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 frontier, and popular culture. Currently, she is examining the role of the American flag in films and visual media, with an emphasis on the manipulation of patriotism.

Felicia Jean Steele is an assistant professor of English at The College of New Jersey, where she teaches historical linguistics and old British literature. Her research interests span the history of the English language, Early Modern literature, and literary theory. She is a co-sponsor of the Alpha Epsilon Alpha chapter at The College of New Jersey.

Matthew Vollmer is the author of *Future Missionaries of America*, a collection of short stories, and of *inscriptions for headstones*, a collection of 30 autobiographical essays, each crafted as an epitaph and each unfolding in a single sentence. He is also the co-editor of *Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters, "Found" Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts*. He teaches at Virginia Tech, where he directs the undergraduate creative writing program.



SIGMA TAU DELTA

INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

www.english.org

Subscriptions Information

The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle is published annually. Subscriptions include a newsletter and both journals, *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Review*. Please email the national Sigma Tau Delta Office for enquiries: sigmatd@niu.edu

Submission Information

The Sigma Tau Delta Journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of currently-enrolled undergraduate and graduate members of active chapters of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society.

These journals are refereed, with jurors from across the country selecting those members to be published. The journals have had illustrious head judges, including Jane Brox, Henri Cole, Jim Daniels, Maggie Dietz, W.D. Earhardt, CJ Hribal, Kyoko Mori, Katherine Russel Rich, Lisa Russ Spaar, and Mako Yoshikawa, to name a few.

The best writing is chosen in each category from around 1,000 submissions. Not only do these publications go to over 10,000 members worldwide, of an over 20,000 member organization, but they also honor the best piece of writing in each category with a monetary award. There is also an annual reading at the national conference from *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* by any of the published writers who can attend.

All currently-enrolled undergraduate and graduate members of active Sigma Tau Delta chapters are invited to submit their original work. Chapter sponsors, faculty members, alumni (including members of the Alumni Epsilon chapter), and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle (founded in 1931) is an annual journal of creative writing that publishes poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Submission by a single author for each issue of the journal is limited to one piece of prose or one group of up to three poems. Prose manuscripts should not exceed 2,500 words.

For complete submissions information, guidelines, and link to submissions: www.english.org/sigmatd/publications