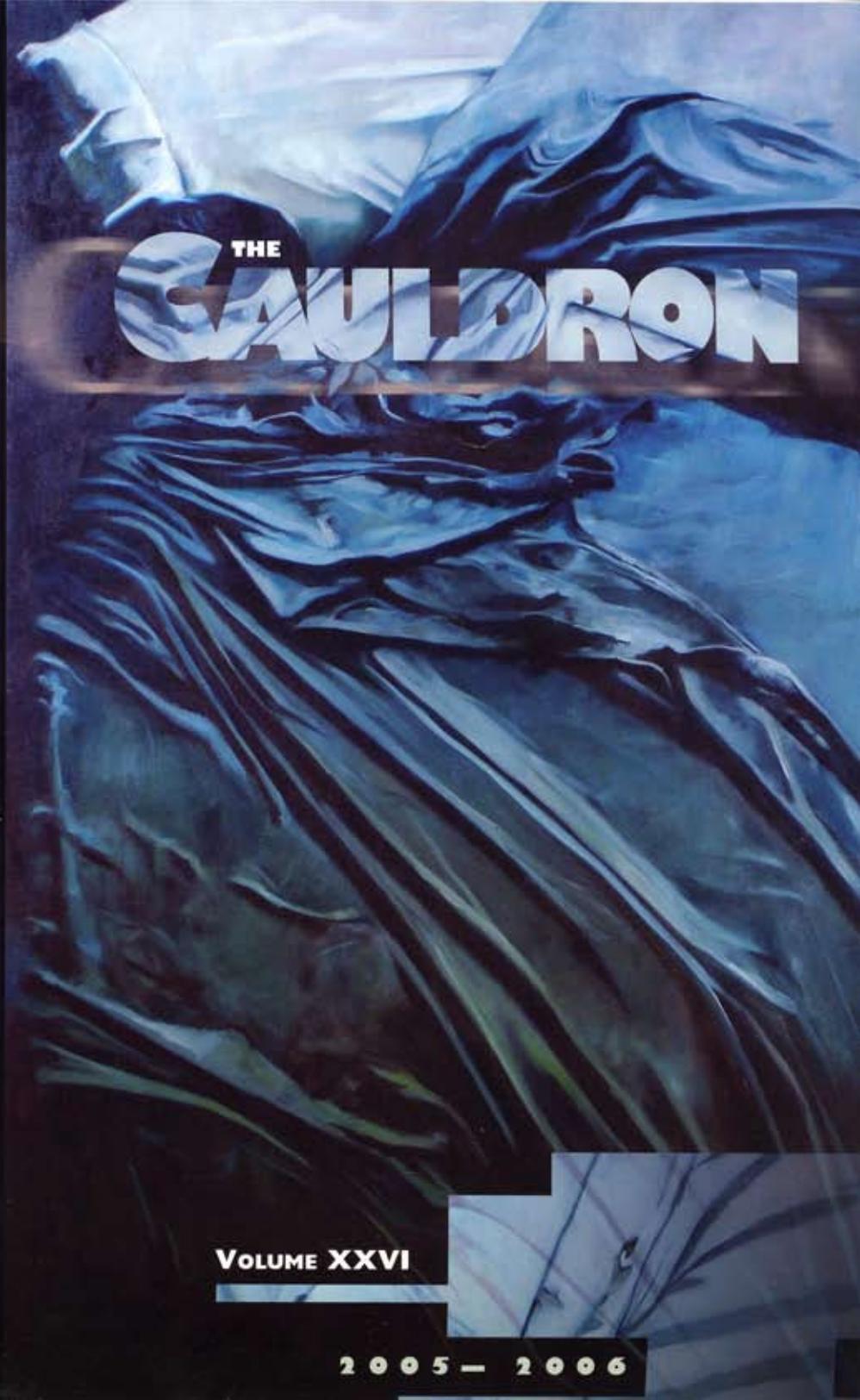




VOL XXVI THE CAULDRON

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE



THE CAULDRON

VOLUME XXVI

2005 - 2006



THE
CAULDRON

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This year's Cauldron is dedicated to Betsy Hoort, 1984-2005.

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The Cauldron staff sincerely thanks:

- Faculty advisor, Diane Seuss, whose overwhelming commitment, passion, and time makes the magazine possible year after year.

- The English Department of Kalamazoo College. We feel their belief in the value of student work, production, and publication throughout the process of building the magazine.

- Professors Bonnie Jo Campbell and Gail Griffin for reading every piece in the magazine and thoughtfully selecting this year's recipients of the Divine Crow Awards.

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- Terry Watson for designing the cover.

- Keegan O'Connor for typesetting and designing the magazine.

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- Deb Pattison, for generously giving her time to compile pieces, and her go-with-the-flow attitude throughout.

- Provost Gregory Mahler, for continuing to believe in creative writing and The Cauldron. His unfaltering support has allowed us to maintain the quality of the magazine despite the diminishment of our funding source, and to focus our attention on planning and producing the magazine rather than fundraising.

- Dianne and Rob Vibbert for their support and presence in honoring their daughter through The Stephanie Vibbert award.

- Ravenwood Coffee Shop for generously allowing us use of their lovely café for an open mic reading to raise awareness of and funding for this year's magazine.

- All of the many student writers and visual artists who gave us the opportunity to read their engaging and honest works.

This year's Cauldron is framed by two paintings—a bed at night and a bed during the day, the covers of each crinkled and folded as if vacated just moments before. The painter, senior Art major Leah Busch, chose the bed as the landscape of her work because, as she wrote: "An object as familiar as the bed transforms into the world of painting where ideas rule. As the setting for so many human emotions, the bed crosses borders, sexes, and cultures, a rhythm present in each of our lives."

The contents of *The Cauldron* are also a world where ideas, filtered through the myriad of human emotions, make rhythms that beat through all our lives, "writers" and "artists" or not. The written and artistic pieces throughout the magazine are, like the beds, unmade, slept in, vulnerable, and accessible. From Nick Benca's imagined conversations with Jesus Christ at recess in "Gospel from a Playground in Jerusalem, Tennessee" to Cherie Heiberg's proclamation, "I dig my fingers into geometry, searching for the shapeless," in "White," the works featured are not fitted sheets, contained and carefully folded away from us. They are open and tangible, questing and raw.

Like the daytime and nighttime beds, our lives are marked by dualities. The circadian rhythms of sun and moon, light and dark, section and divide our physical time. Emotional experience also seems to work in dualities, a tug-of-war between sadness and joy, suffering and celebration, growth and decay, cycles continuously unraveling.

We have divided the writing and art in *The Cauldron* into night and day, as well, but throughout it becomes clear that the dualities are linked, not either/or, but connected and reflecting the other. Dualities are in dialogue, as Keegan O'Connor writes in "Mount Ever-Rest Cemetery," "death is sometimes more like life/ than a mountain in permanent winter. Sometimes/ it is ordinary, sometimes it is not memorable." Life and death, the ultimate duality, are like separated twins, the phantom of the other still felt long after the one becomes two.

Night and day are split by a section entitled, "High Noon," which is comprised of three poems by senior English major Erin Agee. Together, these poems are the recipient of The Stephanie Vibbert Award, an annual award that honors a piece of writing in *The Cauldron* which best exemplifies the crucial relationship between creative writing and social and political justice. Agee's pieces are from her Senior Project, inspired by the Deep Ecology movement, which insists that nature has intrinsic value beyond the value it holds for human use, replacing an anthropocentric worldview in favor of an ecocentric one.

At high noon, the apex of the day, when the sun casts no shadow, Agee's poems offer both a pause and a bridge between night and day. The poems allow the fierce embrace and ongoing battle between dualities to calm. In "Gratitude," Agee describes: "The darkness, entering a desert of light, with no disclaimer." We invite you to enter this gathering of dualities without disclaimer or boundary, to join Kalamazoo College's student writers and artists in an unwinding conversation.

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* Denotes Divine Crow Award Winner



The Divine Crow Awards are given annually to three outstanding pieces in The Cauldron, regardless of genre, and are judged "blind." This year's Divine Crow judges were Professors Bonnie Jo Campbell and Gail Griffin from the Kalamazoo College English Department.

The Stephanie Vibbert Award is given annually to honor a piece of writing in The Cauldron which best exemplifies the crucial relationship between creative writing and social and political justice.



NIGHT

LOUISE LITTLE

Meridel Thomson

*"She was very sad at heart, and heaviest of
all her losses to her was that of her sons,
and in her pain she blamed God for it."*

—"The Aged Mother" by The Brothers Grimm

Freshman year they warned all the girls
on the first floor of the dorm to lock
their windows when it grew dark.
They'd shut down the Kalamazoo Asylum
for the Insane so all the wild men
and women with long hair and rolling eyes
were crawling into open rooms, curling
up in bathtubs like the brittle exoskeletons
discarded by cicadas in spring,
on their backs, dry legs and joints
frozen in the air, a whole body prayer.

Louise Little, the mother of Malcolm X
stayed at the Kalamazoo Asylum
for the Insane while her son pilgrimaged
to Mecca and his eventual assassination was set
in motion. One night, she came to my window.
On the other side of the glass, the yellow moon
grinned down, and her hair curled up
like water snakes in response, wriggling,
reaching serpents in blue light. Her eyes
were white buttons and her skin glowed
green-black, a luminous carapace.

I pressed my palm against
the cool window and spread my fingers
so that a milky star hung between
us. I wanted to ask if she loved him
angry and fierce or preferred
to picture him wearing white,
holding white hands.

As we pulled into the Glein Funeral Home parking lot, I assured myself that things could only get better from the car ride that had consisted of my little sister singing along off key to the new Bon Jovi album, my father spitting out of the window every five minutes because his sinus drainage was acting up, and, worst of all, being crammed in the back seat with my brother and his despicable girlfriend, Amy. They had bumped into me repeatedly as they tickled, groped, and kissed each other under the jacket I let them borrow. I had tried to drown it all out, but my senses were overwhelmed. I had tried closing my eyes and focusing on the fact that these were the people I loved...people who loved me unconditionally, but I just felt nauseated as we sped along the down the highway. I opened my eyes and absorbed the landscape through a window speckled with bird shit.

It was my cousin's funeral, and it would have been his twenty-third birthday if he hadn't died four days before. He spent his doomsday on a rented houseboat drinking alcohol and smoking pot with his dad. At two o' clock in the morning, when he was driving home, he drifted off the road, hit a ditch, and flipped his pick-up five times. He was thrown twenty yards from the vehicle, and died on impact.

We had about an hour to kill before the one-thirty service, so my dad wanted to go in and see if my grandparents were there yet. As we walked in, we were greeted by a portly man who directed us to the correct room, but before we entered, my family immortalized themselves at the Glein Funeral Home by signing the guest book while I studied a service card.

The room was nice. The walls were decorated with soothing landscape paintings, and, aside from the crimson and gold carpeting, everything was plain. There were rows of folding chairs with a wide aisle down the center. In front of the chairs was a shiny black casket flanked by tables covered by a mini jungle of wreaths, cards, ferns, and flowers.

I had been told that it was going to be a closed-casket ceremony, but it was open and there was something inside. I came to the conclusion that it was just a display and they were going to wheel in the real coffin before the ceremony. The body inside looked like something that even the lowest budget horror flick would turn away because it was too shitty. "That is the worst looking dummy I have ever seen in my life," I told everyone.

Amy giggled, but my dad just glared. I could see a tsunami of rage building in him as his face turned scarlet in a matter of seconds. He muttered some inaudible swear and looked as if he was going to hit me, but we were interrupted.

"Hi, Bob."

I turned around and saw my aunt Jane and my grandparents walking through the doorway. Jane was the deceased's mother, and we hadn't seen her in eight years because she'd moved to North Carolina after she

divorced Frank. Although Jane was my blood-relative, Frank was my Godfather. They must not have known him very well when they selected him as my back-up guardian. He was a Vietnam veteran, and they didn't really understand how deeply the war had affected him.

My aunt smiled weakly and embraced my father. They started talking, so I slipped away from everyone to get a better look at the dummy.

The mannequin had bristly brown hair that was parted to the right, and its face had an unnatural waxy luster. As I hovered over the coffin, I noticed that something was a little off. I leaned in to get a better look, and I came to the slow, awful realization that it was no dummy. It was my cousin, Chris Parnell.

The corpse in front of me was a far cry from the handsome skinny kid that I remembered. The left side of his face was pretty fucked up. Part of his upper lip was missing, which exposed a jagged set of cracked teeth in his mouth. Layers of makeup failed to cover up a bruise. They just mixed together and gave birth to an odd blotch that stretched across his cheek, the color of meat a butcher just discards. There were thin lines of stitches where parts of his scalp and hair were sewn back on by a mortician. The left side of his forehead was completely flat from where it had slammed into the ground at fifty miles per hour. It should have been a closed casket ceremony.

I looked back down the aisle and saw my grandpa staggering toward me.

"Ever been to a funeral?" he asked in the gravely voice of a former smoker.

"Yeah, this is my third."

"Yeah well, this is my third this year," he said. "Mind you I spent most of it in the hospital."

I nodded. He had a list of medical problems about a mile long, but his recent tag-team bout with pneumonia and meningitis had been life threatening. From December to March he was in the hospital, and he was hooked up to life support for nearly a month. He had been heavily medicated and had no memory of his illness. The only proof he really had was the couple month period of non-existence.

"Yep, as you get older and older, you come to these things more frequently, until that's all you seem to do. Let me tell you something, Mikey boy...the years go fast...goddamn they sure do, and if you aren't careful they can pass you by...yep...the years go fast."

I looked at my grandpa, a bitter, stubborn man who refused to die just to spite the grim reaper. I saw tears streaming down his wrinkled face. I wondered if he was crying for Chris, or for himself; just another old man clinging to a landfill life with lumps of regret and wasted time piling up along the horizon.

He sighed. His hand, shaking with arthritis, his skeleton frailer than

dried out wish bones, reached into the casket and clasped the hand of the dead body. "It's a goddamned shame."

He gripped my shoulder and looked at me through bleary red eyes. "You better outlive me because I don't want to bury another grandchild." We stood silently because I did not know how to respond.

"Here Mikey, hold his hand...there is nothing to be afraid of."

The only other time I had ever touched a dead body was when I was eight, and, on a dare, I poked my great grandmother's liver spot at her funeral. Carefully, I took the lifeless hand into my own and felt nothing.

The room had steadily filled with people, most I recognized as my relatives. Frank was forbidden to attend the service himself but there were some people that had to have been from his side of the family though. There were also a few young adults who were probably Chris' friends. The service was about to begin, so I made my way through clusters of people looking for my seat. When I got there, my brother was sitting in it with his eyes closed and my jacket was draped across his lap. Amy was sitting in the seat next to him with both hands under the jacket.

"You're in my seat."

They jumped.

"Find a new one," my brother snarled.

"No. My jacket was on the chair. It is my seat."

They eyed me with scorn, but never breached their poker faces.

My brother swallowed hard, then started "Get the fu—" but before he could finish, a voice came over the loudspeaker announcing to everyone that it was time to take a seat. The room quickly settled, and a preacher walked through the door holding a bible high over his head. An entourage of people followed him in and sprinkled incensed ashes on the carpet as they walked. Everyone in the room stood, except for my brother. He sat with his jacket covering his lap.

The preacher took his place behind a pulpit that had been placed next to the casket when I was not looking.

"Let us join hands as we sing hymn number twenty-three."

My lunch was suddenly lively in my stomach. Amy was standing next to me, and I knew where her hands had been. I stood paralyzed as her filthy hand reached, her balmy palm and fingers wrapped around my hand. She smiled smugly. I closed my eyes, but it didn't help. I just stood there, staring at the florescent lights in the room, and pretended that I didn't exist.

The preacher delivered a nice succinct eulogy. My favorite line was the good old staple, "Chris would have wanted you to move on with your lives." He was convincing because if I hadn't known better, I would have believed that he had actually known Chris.

We were among the last to leave the cemetery in that morbid

parade, with our little orange flag—that proclamation of death—attached to the roof. We were back in the Glein parking lot, and it was time to undertake in the last event of the day. I really didn't feel like attending the post-funeral party, so, as we were walking in, I held the door for everyone, but I didn't follow. I went around the building in search of a secluded place to sit down and found one between a brick wall and the back of the funeral parlor. I sat down next to an empty, broken bottle. It reminded me of something, but I couldn't remember what.

I pulled the Altoid Mint case out of my pocket and sifted through the mints until I found my last joint. All I wanted to do was smoke. Most of the pot smokers I knew would do it with their friends to have a good time, but I prefer to smoke alone. I sparked up, and a couple of loose seeds popped and cracked as I inhaled. I held that first hit in until little black dots danced in front of my eyes. The smoke exploded from my lungs and filled the air with a hazy gray cloud. I kept the joint between my lips so my hands wouldn't smell.

Before Frank and Jane got divorced, we spent a Christmas with them in their home outside of Columbus. Everyone in the Parnell household was forced to adhere to his strict "no light policy." To protest outrageous electrical prices, Frank insisted that no lights be turned on in his house. If you wanted to get around at night you kept a flashlight handy. I remember their Christmas tree: it was beautifully decorated with tinsel and ornaments. The lights were strung, but we weren't allowed to turn them on. Jane left him about a year later, after he put Chris in the hospital for the second time.

When we stayed at their house that Christmas, I was probably about five or six, and Chris was about eleven or twelve. Chris had always been my favorite cousin because he was one of the only people who preferred me to my brother; my brother and I were both staying in his room, but in the middle of the night Chris only woke me up and asked if I wanted to read comic books with him. I couldn't really read, so I held the flashlight while he read them to me. He asked me who my favorite wrestler was, so I told him the only one I knew: Hulk Hogan. Chris told me he hated Hulk Hogan because Hogan took steroids. I didn't know what steroids were. Chris told me that steroids were a type of drugs. Chris told me he would never take drugs.

My extended family was habitually secretive when it came to personal failure, so up until two days prior to the funeral, I didn't know that Chris had been in and out of jail since he was eighteen, sometimes for drug possession, sometimes for assaulting either his mother or his girlfriend. I wondered what happened to that innocent kid from my memories. What happened?

I told myself he was lucky the way he died. Quick—like his life. In the long run it might have turned out worse if he'd gone on living; when

you live in the flames, maybe a short, brilliant blaze is better than a slow burn because you never have to deal with the ashes.

I tossed the roach over the brick wall. I looked at the cloud I'd been searching the sky for earlier. Damn, I was faded. Every object had a little trajectory following it when I moved. Comet tails everywhere. My thirst and hunger were starting to get the best of me, so I popped a couple of mints and headed back into the building.

When I got to the buffet I decided on blueberry pie and a tall glass of lemonade. I saw an empty folding chair in the corner and thought it would be a nice place to sit. As I was eating my pie, I noticed my grandma had made her way over to me, so I put my plate down and stood up. The warmth of her embrace was momentarily comforting.

"Are you alright? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine, grandma."

"I know you already have something to eat, but do you want me to get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine," I said, trying to imagine who my grandmother actually was. She spent her whole life catering to the needs of others and was never satisfied until everyone had been served but her. She was so selfless I wondered how much of her self was left. Even her name, Mary, robbed her of identity. I scan the lines cut into by age, but they are like a roadmap of a place I will never know.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, grandma."

I sat and watched the people conversing, standing rooted like trees. They spoke, told jokes, laughed. Fake. Unhappy. I wondered if their laughs were always like this—strained and spiked with a tinge of sadness. Maybe it was because it was a funeral. I couldn't seem to shake the feeling that everyone was a ghost.

Eventually the party started winding down, and gravity began feeling a little less oppressive. A figure appeared in the threshold. It was a pale, stocky man wearing a green flannel shirt, a bright orange hunting vest, and a pair of faded jeans with an oil smudge on the thigh. He hadn't shaved in a few days and looked like someone coming down from a week-long bender. He just stood there, his eyes were fixed on the edge of the universe. His gaze shifted. He turned his head, and, for an instant, he looked directly at me.

I had seen this man only a handful of times, the last time being about a decade before, but I still recognized him as Frank Parnell: Vietnam Veteran, uncle, Godfather, and complete mystery to me. The room was like the eye of a storm as my aunt Jane walked toward the doorway and stopped two feet in front of him. She looked at him with fiery eyes. He looked through her. She raised an open hand like she was going to slap him, but she wavered. Her mouth twitched then cracked open. A low, guttural moan escaped from her depths as a piece

of her made its way through her parted lips. Like a puppet when you let go of the strings, she collapsed into his arms. She beat her fist hard against his chest. "He's gone!" she cried out and everything in the room shook with an agonizing frequency. "Gone! My baby! My poor baby!" Tears flowed from her clenched eyes, and snot ran down her lips and coated her chin. Frank just held her and stared off into the distance. I stared too...I stared directly into Love's most hideous face. I didn't even flinch.

Sibyl (sī'b'əl) *n.*

1. One of a number of women regarded as oracles or prophets by the ancient Greeks and Romans.
2. A woman prophet.
3. A type of torture in which the fingers are wrapped with a cord which it tightened to induce pain. (often *sibille*.)

thin fibers twisted tightly
into a compact cord,
somehow the *sibille* seems
deceptively safe:
a gentle wrapping of the cord
around the thumb,
in front of the forefinger,
behind the next,
a continued weaving
and looping back
through each finger
encircled by a ring
of cording.

the *sibille* snakes
through my fingers, I feel
a rising in my throat,
the pain of a scream
as the strings begin to cut
into the soft flesh
where fingers connect to the hand.
while the blood drips
from injured fingers,
the art flows out
staining the fabric of my skirt.
I feel my ability to create
compromised by a thin cord.
it slices into my skin, damages
my most precious tools
and I feel the pain wash over,
but when my voice leaves
the inside of my mouth
spills out into the room,
it is no longer a scream
but a siren song
singing the truth, and at last
I am to be believed.

LEAVING LUKE

Colleen Bednar

When you ask, I will tell you that it was the image of you holding your camera to the bathroom mirror. It was the picture of you taking a picture of yourself that did it. I have asked you not to call me angel, but since you never listen, I wrote down a million words that mean **stop** and left them in all their tangled alphabet glory, upon your desk.

I guess it wasn't just the picture that ruined things. Remember that tattoo you talked about getting? You said you wanted the stencil of a shark on the ridge of your shoulder-bone and I kept waiting for the sandpaper feel of silver skin; the ripping of tiny inked-in teeth. I got tired of waiting and my fingers got sick of smoothness. I wish you could've shown me just one scar with a story behind it. I have a million rough spots to break up the monotony of my body; I told you the story about how the skin on my forehead split open like gentle red lips to kiss the corner of a bookshelf, but you were always lousy at show-and-tell.

Looking back, I blame your eyes mostly. I thought, watching the sleepy movement beneath the canopy of your lashes, you might be a writer; but your eyes are the only poetic thing about you. They're the color of the sea in the Caribbean where you studied biology on a boat for five months and returned, humming, "A Pirate's Life for Me." You carried a journal off the boat full of photographs of different species of seaweed, and I was hoping for a breathless caption about how the feathery branches look like the patterned explosion of dying stars – you said you were tired of talking about dead green stuff.

When you ask me why I'm leaving, I'll say something about missing the winters in Michigan. Here on Long Island, the snow is heavy and wet; it puddles around my feet as I walk and I'm tired of being unable to leave footprints. You and I, we take our pictures differently, I'll say. I've been outlining this island with my pen for a year now; I've tried to write the beauty of the snails stranded in the tide pools at Cooper's Beach; I've wondered at the rain as it meets the ocean with the silent sound of a million eyelids closing. I have a photo in my mind of the time I climbed the roof of the dorm, when you wouldn't follow, even after I swore that I was afraid of heights too. I guess we take our pictures differently. I play with words, while you stand in front of the mirror with your camera, and smile into the flash.



MOUNT EVER-REST CEMETERY

(3941 South Westnedge)

Keegan O'Connor

Is death a mountain to climb? Is it so cold
it doesn't snow there anymore? Is it the Himalayas,
where people die trying to conquer death,
trying to scale it for the first time,
in the fastest time, alone?

Or is it here, in snowy mounds not so high
as mountains, but high enough to chill our soles
at night? Is it here, where paths are paved
to take us to our graves, and fields of green surround us
half the year? There is an easier path to death here,

a summer solace from the bitter wind of mountains.
There is death to be had in the water here: in lakes
and rivers and creeks and ponds. People drown
in bathtubs with one inch of water. Not all death
comes with a struggle. Sometimes it comes as a gentle

wheeze or a steady beep or with nothing but the hum
of cicadas, just the eyes glaze over and the skin goes cold.
Or it comes without water: too little water
and the blood goes solid and the world goes white.
But even in the presence of gentler deaths, we imagine

a mountain of ice beside the artery of our city.
We have built it up so we can bury our dead there,
so we can sow our corpses into the permafrost
and still make it to the lake in time
to shed our clothes and bake. So we can forget

that death is sometimes more like life
than a mountain in permanent winter. Sometimes
it is ordinary, sometimes it is not memorable. We have named it
so we can laugh at death, so we can believe it is nothing
like life, as though our lives will never end.

THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS: A BITTER TIRADE IN THREE FEVER-DREAMS

Carly Orosz

The boys come up from the warm lands below,
They come with full duffels clean faces willingness to learn or absorb,
They come energized idealistic wanting to make a difference or maybe
just wanting some of the wealth that always seems to be drawn
back to our industries and interests,
They come for cars money jobs food whores, for a decent living.
They come sure as maggots to the rich raw flesh of a corpse.
They learn English baseball mom's apple pie, keeping white people safe
from dark people and the value of freedom of speech as long as the
ideas are ours.
They leave green-spotted beasts swaggering in sunglasses, frowning
upright protectors of Northern decency in crisp dress uniforms,
They leave to serve their people and keep them in drab cement prisons
and send electricity through their jerking bodies like the wrath of
God and tear them from homes and families to beat rape
dismember gouge eyes out pull tongues out, leave them in hidden
graves when they are no longer a threat,
They leave with our childish vestigial fear of Marxist doctrine and
domino effect, to chase imaginary communists and keep our living
museum-piece conflict, the Cold War, fresh as the day it started or
didn't start,
They leave primed to guard sweatshops, shoot on sight, pilot the
screaming planes that piss chemicals on the coca fields that are
some farmer's only livelihood,
They kill and are killed.

I am with them in Fort Benning, I know;
I sign the banner proclaiming KALAMAZOO COLLEGE SAYS CLOSE
THE SOA NOW in purple and wonder if they in their Spanish-
flavored English would call me a traitor.
After all, they are my taxes, my CIA, the eager consumers of my culture,
my embarrassing Southern cousins, if you will.
Your guilty work is my guilty leisure, my friends;
You do the dirty tasks while we who—let's face it—don't respect you
and never will because you are not born here eat the meat you
bring home and slyly lick our fingers,
Most of us without even realizing our shared sin.
I hate love pity you, pity so strong and sad and fierce that like Yossarian I
want to smash you all in your pale sad sickly proud arrogant cruel
leering imitative faces, over and over and over and over till your
blood pours in sacrificial rivers down my soft shapely fingers and I
can taste it and laugh in shared pain.

THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS: A BITTER TIRADE IN THREE FEVER-DREAMS

•continued•

O holy Fort Benning! Fount of social injustice! Greatest of altars to
Tezcatlipoca!

Black Tezcatlipoca, taker of hearts, lord of money and steel!

O god whose breathing is the hum of engines in the sky, whose laughter
is the caustic hiss of herbicide, whose priests are assassins, whose
sacrifices disappear without a trace into the steamy jungle of your
industrial hunger,

O god whose pleasure is torture, whose desire is submission, whose
gaze is the sharp penetrating pulse of electricity, whose drumbeats
are the hypnotized pounding of a thousand thousand polished
boots,

O god whose fingers stretch invisibly across two continents and covet
more, whose eyes are the flat black mirrors in which we see our
ruin,

O god, lord of near and nigh who is warrior, enemy, phantom of fear,
night wind, His Slaves We Are,

Hear my prayer.

Four red thorns he gave me, curve of his nails, curl of his lip, when he let
me overcome him in the darkness, sign of his promise. They are
deep in my flesh in my heart in my eyes in my worldview.

By his power we are wealthy, by his power we rule make war cannot
name the president of the country next to ours chant the sacred
simple hymn USA USA USA.

In him we destroy and self-destruct.



NIGHT CLIMB

Louis Jeannot

i had a real brother once,
in spoiled old days
when the leaves had teeth
that chattered
us all to sleep
in the long auburn dusk
of November.
i had a real brother
who
would night-climb down the side
of this house with me,
break open these streets with me,
who would laugh
and breathe smoke; eye that
tarnished medal of a moon.
we would even smear color
beneath each other's eyes
just right;
march out into the cold
and fire arrows at the thing,
firing arrows because even
climbing trees, reaching up,
you couldn't feel the
bruised plum night sky
close enough.
loosed arrows would scream,
but so would we,
shieldless,
cracking our voices on that ceiling
when god sent our arrows back
like wordless replies.
what was it we were building
when our lips
grazed the same lips,
whispering over those bottles,
or when we were
banging drums made of
the skins of dissected days
for song,
if not a loyalty?
after we cracked the ribs,
hinged them back,
we knelt on either side
of those skinned days,

hands pulling out organs unidentifiable,
 things we'd never before seen;
 braving some carnage,
 just to see how it worked.
 what was it that we learned?
 and when did we forget?

 because
 i'll never forget the feel of the night
 you knuckled the screen free
 from the cut cement square of a window
 and disappeared like a breeze
 between the curtains.
 you night-climbed this house
 without me —
 with a backpack full of sand
 and feet quiet enough
 to let the dead rest,
 you left.
 that feeling
 of a snaking downed power line
 weeping sparks onto the pavement,
 of watching buildings on the news
 collapsing down upon themselves and
 heaving out dust in huge sighs,
 of beating a torn drum —
 this
 was sorrow.

the moon sees me now,
 a missing piece
 wandering cobblestone alone,
 writing him letters
 in a crumbling red chalk
 where i know he'll see it best:
 dear brother,
 i have spoken of you for so long
 without malice;
 ignorant,
 for so long
 of song
 that this quiet and invisible life
 is now a comfortable suit.
 without both our hands
 these once-sharp knives just

NIGHT CLIMB

•continued •

dance dull
outside impenetrable days.
the rain responds by
wiping these slates clean,
wet arrows descending;
wordless replies.

It seems as if I have never shaken her form entirely. Hard as I resist, she whispers her name to me when I least expected it. Sometimes I see her in the market at noon examining a not-yet ripe piece of fruit. Other times she follows me around dark corners when I return to the studio at night. But usually, it is as I drift off to sleep that she whispers her name in the dark. *Judith*. Sometimes I am still afraid she will slip into the tent with me after all.

~

He then threw me onto the edge of the bed, pushing me with a hand on my breast, and he put a knee between my thighs to prevent me from closing them. Lifting my clothes, which he had a great deal of trouble doing, he placed a hand with a handkerchief at my throat and on my mouth to keep me from screaming. He let go of my hands, which he had been holding with his other hand, and, having previously put both knees between my legs with his penis pointed at my vagina, he began to push it inside. I felt a strong burning and it hurt me very much, but because he held my mouth I couldn't cry out. However, I tried to scream as best I could, calling Tuzia. I scratched his face and pulled his hair before he penetrated me again I grasped his penis so tight that I even removed a piece of flesh. All this didn't bother him at all and he and he continued to do his business, which kept him on top of me for a while, holding his penis inside my vagina.

~

I found Judith for the first time as I finished a painting for my father. He had already painted her figure, outlined her clothing, and sketched the background. My work came in the delicate detailing of her dress, and the filling of her surroundings. I should have known that touching her gently this way, only at edges and in safe expanses, should remain my limit. As I painted, Agostino sat watching me, motionless and nearly silent. He had crept up the stairs in the house on via del Croce and entered my room. He watched, motionless and nearly silent. Judith stared up and away, refusing to look toward either of us. She questioned his presence from the safety of the canvas. My muscles burned with the exertion of feigned effortlessness while his gaze locked on the bones of my back protruding through my dress. His rhythmic breathing eventually fell in line with my regular brush strokes, the motion of my arms moving my shoulders in calculated fans as I painted. The first time he broke the heavy silence of the room I had been folding shadows into the deep rust fabric of her apron. He asked me how it was that my drawings of the male form, submitted to him as part of our weekly lesson, seemed

DRAWING ARTEMESIA, PAINTING JUDITH

•continued •

drawn from life. Without turning, I crisply explained that I had access to the works and drawings of many important artists in the city, which provided all the education I required. He laughed and offered to further my studies.

~

It was already too late to appeal to father for help. The simple fact that he had entered our house, unaccompanied, and found me painting proved a disgrace to both my father and I. And so Tassi and I began our delicate dance. Judith's solemn eyes burned with judgment each time I raised a brush to her body. She refused to turn her gaze towards me, but I could see the accusation in her face. She blamed me for enticing him. While I painted, I focused on her eyes. I could not look down at my own hand to see it tremble. I cannot remember how it happened that I colored the clothing, or shaped her sleeve. I only remember those eyes: dark, but knowing, sad and reproachful.

I had just begun the cream colored bodice of her gown the first time he touched me. So subtle was that initial brush of his hand on my back that I didn't disturb the scallop of lace across her neck. Instead, slowly, I lowered the brush and turned to face him. I looked into his face, locked eyes on that man wearily, and then turned back again to concentrate. I forced myself to ponder the work: a bit more green into the color for the lace, I thought, or maybe the pattern seemed uneven. Something felt wrong, I tried so hard to keep my attention on these small details of the canvas that I could hardly react when he grabbed for my wrist. The brush fell from my hand. It hit the floor with a small sound, but in the moment that small sound cried out louder and more powerfully than my voice could scream.

~

Later, once he had gone, I sat mending a place in my skirt he had ripped. Again, my fingers trembled so much with the needle that again I could hardly control them. Searching for anything that felt normal, my sight returned to the painting. Suddenly, Judith's eyes had changed. I could read still read the hurt, yet a sense of strength and a triumph of healing and survival beamed more strongly through the canvas. She welcomed me back into the protection offered by the rhythm of painting. She comforted me in the simple mixing of colors and cleaning of brushes. I colored the space behind her figure and detailed the hem of her skirt, soothed by the repetition of these simple acts. The chores of the studio and the cyclical practices of painting dulled my senses to a bearable ache. I must have painted Judith's dress over and over again, till I knew the place and position of every wrinkle and shadow in the fabric with

my eyes closed. I colored the background first with a lively gold brocade paper, then covered it over with a solid expanse of paint. I first chose a solid green, then a blue so dark it seemed black. Eventually, my father's patron grew impatient with the slow progress of the painting and demanded that it be brought to him immediately. My father expressed his concern at my seemingly unending work on the Judith, but believed my story that I had only been attempting to replicate his own sense of color and shade. When it came time to deliver her to the patron, I remained in bed sick all day. I refused to allow myself to catch her eyes and feel the shame once more before the cloth was thrown over the canvas and they took her from me.

~

And after he had done his business he got off me. When I saw myself free, I went to the table drawer and took a knife and moved toward Agostino saying 'I'd like to kill you with this knife because you have dishonored me.' He opened his coat and said: 'Here I am,' and I threw the knife at him and he shielded himself; otherwise I would have hurt him and might easily have killed him. However, I wounded him slightly on the chest and some blood came out, only a little since I had barely touched him with the point of the knife. And the said Agostino then fastened his coat. I was crying and suffering over the wrong he had done me, and to pacify me, he said: 'Give me your hand, I promise to marry you as soon as I get out of the labyrinth I am in.' He added: 'I warn you that when I take you [as my wife] I don't want any foolishness,' and I answered: 'I think you will see if there is any foolishness.' And with this good promise I felt calmer, and with this promise he induced me later to yield lovingly, many times, to his desires, since many times he has also reconfirmed this promise to me.

~

My father brought Agostino Tassi to trial after rumors spread throughout Rome about Tassi's repeated encounters with me. Tassi had confided in a friend, another painter, who felt obliged to inform my father that the rumors indeed proved correct. My father confronted Tassi one afternoon in the studio. Neither knew that I had returned from an errand just in time to witness their conversation. Tassi had climbed a ladder to work on some of the higher frescoes and had just finished curled hand of a cherub when my father began violently shaking the ladder. Agostino nearly tumbled to the floor as my father cursed him, demanding Tassi to explain how he could betray his good friend and his virtuous daughter. Tassi proclaimed his love for me from the top of the ladder, his words loud and emotive so that I immediately blushed

DRAWING ARTEMESIA, PAINTING JUDITH

•continued •

with a mixture of pride and shame. My father then asked Tassi why he had not asked for my hand in marriage. Tassi replied that he intended to marry me, and that he had promised me this many times. However, he explained, he would need to resolve a longstanding conflict with his wife in Florence before we could marry.

I did not hear the rest of their conversation. Stunned by the news of his wife, I ran home crying. I cursed myself for believing Tassi's promises. Through my pain I remembered only the comfort of painting, and the consolation of Judith's eyes on the first night that Agostino had raped me. I returned to a sketch I had started of Judith and Holofernes. I erased Judith's hands holding the sword upright, just about to make its deadly blow. Instead I began to redraw the composition: Holofernes bleeding as Judith held him down with one hand and cut at his neck with the other. I drew the blood spurting from his wounded neck. I drew it splashing onto Judith's gown. I drew the blood staining the white sheets of the bed. I drew the blood dripping even to the floor. And then I drew Judith's eyes. I drew them with her brow furrowed in concentration. I did not draw a Judith virtuously weak and detached from her act, as was the correct portrayal. In my sketch, Judith was not a thin and helpless porcelain-faced girl. My Judith had a woman's body, a woman's hands strengthened from the daily work of maintaining a household. She required Abra's strong effort to hold down the writhing general. My Judith leaned over him, steadied herself and cut. She felt his skin's resistance to the blade. She felt the muscles begin to give way. My Judith smelled blood, heard his hopeless screams, and kept cutting.

Not only had Agostino hurt my body, he had irrevocably ruined my reputation and the reputation of my family. This can never heal the same way the body heals. I sketched Holofernes naked, stripped of his power. He layed on the bed exposed to the two women. They stood clothed, over him, to determine his fate. All the while I painted, I thought of Tassi and I prayed I would turn into Judith, strong, determined, and powerful. I wished I could have held him down the way that she did: to put my hand on his neck, thumb into the soft indentation there, and push. I would have stabbed him, knife entering his body slowly again and again. I would enjoy bringing this pain to his body, the way he had enjoyed my body.

~

"You have taken something away from me that you can never replace!"

I had considered leaving Florence, a city which had brought me much success and respect, on multiple occasions, particularly after my second daughter passed away at the age of six months. However, in the spring of 1619, I felt significantly tempted by the invitation of my father to come to Genoa and work with him on a large commission. I had not yet made a decision to leave the city, when I returned home to the

studio to find a letter from Genoa. It did not bear my father's distinctive pointed handwriting, so I opened the letter curiously. Inside, I found a request from a wealthy magistrate from Genoa. He desired a commission, offering to pay me significantly more than I would receive from Buonarrotti for a similar work. The magistrate requested a scene depicting Jael and Sisera. This project, I thought, showed me it was indeed the right time to leave Florence. I would arrive with two projects awaiting me, and my father to help introduce me to the major patrons and artists in Genoa. As I began to settle my affairs, I started work on some sketches which I believed would become the Jael and Sisera. These sketches contained a biblical theme familiar to me: that of a woman killing the man who threatens her freedom. However, each time I began to draw, instead of a stake, Jael held a sword. Sisera reclined over a bed, drunk with lust and wine. The face of Jael became Judith, and Sisera turned to Holofernes. I could not escape her, the face that haunted my sketches and my sights. I realized I had not yet finished with Judith, though I had painted her on many occasions. Some task remained to be completed, and I needed to remedy my mistake before I could put her to rest. Before leaving Florence, I must again stare into those eyes and bring my nemesis-partner to life on the canvas.

~

When I look into our two pairs of eyes now, the anger has softened. My Judith no longer represents my betrayal. She still stands tall, however, and uses her work-hardened hands to grip the heavy sword. She still rolls her sleeves up, conscious of the task at hand. Judith does not tilt her face away from violence she creates; she does not reel from the blood. She leans in, capable and ready for the moment. And yet she has changed. Not in movement or emotion. She and Abra occupy nearly the same positions over the tyrant general. I have concentrated the composition somewhat, forming a cross with the three figures. It brings focus to the center of action, and draws attention inward to the story. I have let their the three characters' arms intertwine to obscure the placement of blame on one hand or another. I have made the story happen all at once now. But these formal changes can never relieve the tension between she and I. Instead, it is that I have now managed to do correctly what I intended to create the first time she gazed out across the canvas in front of me: to take enough care with her dress, the shadows, the jewelry on her wrist. I've traded the dark blue fabric of Judith's skirt for a vibrant gold, and added scarlet panels to her sleeves. I spent days mixing the color, hoping for the correct mix of wealth and humble sophistication. I restyled her hair, painting it pinned up elegantly, allowing a few tendrils to escape from her effort. I added a bracelet, gently etching the gold links with the face of Minerva. I let the

DRAWING ARTEMESIA, PAINTING JUDITH

•continued•

bracelet spot with Holofernes' blood. And last, after finishing every other part, I deftly detailed the white scalloped lace on her bodice which had made my fingers shake so violently long ago in the studio on Via del Croce. It was only then that I had finally finished, having at last painted her as a true, full woman. No, she no longer speaks of betrayal; she now conveys my strength, my power. She tells of the power of women who come through unbroken, those who remain intact.

MEANINGLESS GLORIFICATION

Rob Morrison



ISLE DE MADELEINE

Emelie Griffin

I felt it when I heard that a rock slide had taken out
some other American girl, there where we ourselves

had climbed, up above the small inlet of ocean, to see down:
the city against the horizon looking small and fake and clean.

One of the heavy, porous stones falling straight
into her leg and snapping it like a sweet pea pod,

the same clear, moist sound. I imagined her fallen
into the lagoon below, body twisted like a fish's,

beautiful and white through the moving surface,
the blood just starting to seep out, spreading

around her like pink fog. The water so clear,
the urchins black and silent as praying nuns.

Again when we sat outside the wall of the mosque
in the dark, bottles lined up and sticking out of the sand

like lampposts between us and the wide black presence
of the ocean, white lips of water moving across it.

The stray dog came hovering like a hungry
ghost or a child. I remember reaching my hand

out toward it, how I felt the sameness of our needs,
how it was covered with dust and dry, pinkish wounds.

Most when I came back home, and saw you, your face
the moonface I had been carrying. How I felt

myself being pulled toward you like a school
of fish to some light-giving plant underwater.

How I began to need you
to be as beautiful

as the black ocean in the dark.
How dangerous it is to live, to live for even one day.

I get lost inside of these skies. The snow is post-apocalyptic, falling like the whited ashes of the living world. Look around: ice, like chains or claws gripping roads, or sap expanding in the finger bones of trees until they burst and drop. Or the night moon skating, displaced and twinned on the sheer surface of a frozen lake.

On the sheer surfaces of frozen lakes, I walk where we walked before. Everything is grey. It is a secret hope of mine that those jaws will open up once more, not to spit him out all blue and ragged, but to swallow me. I imagine cartwheeling into those jaws. The crane, with its long red neck suspended over the fragile lake, had dropped its line into the water to retrieve him. The scuba diver wore a thermal red suit when he hooked my brother like a trout. The people surrounded the lake in vigil, watching, like birds that had forgotten to fly south. The crane's cable housing spun in reverse. The tree limbs, branching violently against the grey sky were tremulant in their nudity. Halfway up, when my brother's blue body began slowly emerging from inside the lake, the crane shrieked and the cable halted. Men; mechanics scrambled to find the anomaly in the automaton. And in the winter silence, my brother spun on the end of an iron cable like a ballerina in a jewelry box, frozen arms spread in ascension, sprouting from the bosom of the water.

The water near the shore was green at noon; purple at midnight. In summer, we would swim or we would sit in the branches of our tree, lying parallel to the Earth, jutting like a hangnail from the side of the sandy cliffs that rose far above Lake Michigan. I remember a Fourth of July in the outstretched skeletal palm of that tree. The twofold fireworks bursting into bloom above the mirror of water illuminated us, and the flaw in our impersonation is what I remember most: the thirty centimeter barbed-wire scar that crossed your chest like a graduation, just beneath your bowed clavicles.

Just beneath your bowed clavicles, the glowing white sheets stopped, gave way to skin. Beneath that, your two lungs filled and vacated over and over again. The sand that had nested near your scalp was now in the sheets, scratching at our skin. You mumble something, drowning in sleep, and pull the sheet off of me. I stare at the ceiling, dreading something.

Something broke, you say, gasping and resting your head on my shoulder. Small tempests rise from the Earth, blowing in circles, surrounding us and then falling away. The stillborn children of the trees crunch with every step. *I know*, I say. I know this because my leg hurts too, burning where the fibula widens to support weight. Now, I support your weight, carrying you through this sparse Autumn-eaten forest, slowly, on the way back home.

REFLECTIONS OF A REMAINING IDENTICAL TWIN, PART 2

•continued•

On the way back home, our dad drives the car through the rapt silence of night. All I can see is the light from a Game Boy reflected in your eyes as you tell me slowly about co-evolution, the romantic fates of the yucca plant and the yucca moth. *Yucca moths gather pollen from the stamen of the yucca plant, you know the kind, green spiky things—Grandma has one in her yard.* You pause, biting your lip the same way I do, for two or three minutes. I listen to the wind rushing past the car. *Then they take the pollen to the other plants and drill holes into the ovaries, where they plant their eggs and surround them in the creamy pollen.* Pause. Mom is sleeping in the front seat. Through the thickness of the night, I can see her only as an outline. *The moths can only hatch when nourished by the pollen of the yucca. The yucca plant can only be fertilized by these little moths.* You look up over dad's shoulder at the threatening shadows of two rock masses that flank the road. *In this, you say, straining against the leashing of your seat-belt, they are linked.*

They are linked, you'll see, at the head and hip. He switches it on to gasps. Gross, someone says. The erupted ray of light from the mouth of the projector catches tiny pieces of dust. I breathe in, thinking about all that dust caking on the walls of my lungs, choking my breath, constricting tubes, until I just suffocate. The biology teacher sits on his desk, talking. *Conjoined, or Siamese twins are a rare phenomenon. The survival rate of conjoined twins is about five to 20 percent,* he says, pursing his lips and raising his eyebrows. Shuffling sheets of plastic; a photo of a baby laid deformed across aluminum appears on the wall. *These twins had separate brains, but shared a circulatory system,* he says. At their chest, the four-armed beast conjoins. The skin is stretched tight over the strange topography of their tiny chest. I realize slowly that they shared a heart. Beneath the malformed knot of their ribcage, where bones met and melted together unnaturally like a pile of candles laid in the sun, it had beat for both of them.

—*for both of them,* he says, his voice a shade grayer when it rises through the ventilation shafts. He looks up the stairs where I am standing. *Brad, come down here.* I shake my head and say, *Wrong one, Dad.*

Dad and mom fucked once, and had two children, you say, lying across the room, on a red sofa. Your hand is down your pants. Sunday morning intrudes at the window, spilling a glare over half the television screen. There, Fern keeps her father from drowning the runt pig of a litter. You wait for me to respond, but I don't.

I don't speak for the rest of the week. When Cara had her pups in the cool shade beneath the porch, we let her be. In the morning, I wake up

to a funereal silence. Dad is sitting on the porch when we wander out in pajamas to the horror strewn across the lawn. The pups: stillborn, some yet sheathed in amniotic sacs, caked in dirt, lavender and translucent, like stars in some sick constellation. Crying into your shoulder, you just watch as Cara licks each of her serene sleeping children clean of dirt and blood, and then eats them. I look up at the sky, staring at the white fiery cataract of the sun until my eyes burn.

My eyes burn when someone asks me my birthday—our birthday. When, at a party, some boy with champagne-colored hair volunteers to refill my cup and then asks me what my star sign is, I just lie and say Leo or Cancer and lose my balance a little more. Because now, when I tell the truth and say Gemini, no one finds it surprising.

No one finds it surprising that I didn't go to the funeral. No one finds it odd that I stayed in my bedroom that day and the day after, colder than I'd ever been in my life, coated in the sweat of sleep. I started with the tiny bamboo plant you'd nurtured for years. I broke away the inches that you had seen to slowly, I guillotined the leaves from the stalks. It felt so good that I brushed the dust from your unused guitar, and smashed it over the bureau until all I was holding was an anemone of wood and steel strings. I wadded up your sheets and set them free from the open window. I destroyed the scrapbook we had shared—what I couldn't rip with my hands I ripped with my teeth. Who could deny my ferocity? Because you had left, I lifted your bedside table to the window and tipped its weight out. Its construction was revealed briefly as it exploded on the lawn. I tried to rip the vines of your memory clear of my eyes, to keep them from enveloping me. They cling still. I write letters to the mirror in my despair, brother: *Brad, I got glasses and cut my hair short. I wake up feeling like a half-person. Memory erodes me. I don't know what to do because I will never be able to tell you that I love you, and that I will always, always miss you.*

Miss you, you said into the pay phone receiver, tucked somewhere in Canada, on a mountain. The static threatened to overwhelm you. I screamed, sitting in the kitchen: *When will you come back?* But the line had already gone dead.

Dead flowers strangle the garden. The ones we forgot to clip, the way we forgot the garden altogether, all of this builds up. The house is just disrepair. A lot of your things, disinterred from your bedside table, have blown away. Some of it, books or trinkets, are just rotting and rusting in the yard. The evidence slowly dissolves, I guess. Each morning, the curtains of dawn draw back to find me kneeling in neglected soil, burying bulbs away in that richness of black. My fingernails are like dirt display

REFLECTIONS OF A REMAINING IDENTICAL TWIN, PART 2

•continued•

cases. I plant the flowers, hoping that by spring they will bloom. Perhaps by spring I can clean the house, scrub the floors and maybe paint the room that I destroyed. Maybe by spring I can cut all those dead flowers down with a giant pair of shears. Excise. Sometimes, I sit back on my heels and watch the sun slowly rise behind the house, over the lake. Sometimes, I think it will never make it. In this, I am just waiting. I went to grandma's house the other day. Wandering from the burdening silence of the house, I found the yucca, green and healthy still, in the bronze light of dusk. It had grown a lot since I last saw it. I was waiting, even then, when I stood watching in the eventual sunset, expecting a moth to arrive. None came.

**[NOT A SECOND CHANCE SHE'LL BE GETTING
WITH A SMILE OBLIVIOUS]**

Basquiat (1996, Julian Schnabel, dir.)

Elizabeth Gillstrom

not a second chance she'll be getting with a smile oblivious
as an easter dress the map of her body:
a trenched and tented battleground

with acumen the air sighs and pauses parts for her loaded
paintbrush. She fires a blank and the canvas cries
over its nakedness: the only need: an easter dress someone whispers art

as an alternative to god let's pray over the casual casualties
coughed catechisms. She burns the candle at both ends
votive wax melting to the middle and her hair catches fire: the distinct smell

of blistered feathers, bits of bone and wasted breath rise
in long curly Qs from the crack in her coffin

FRACTURED

Rob Morrison



Driving down a country road,
your eyes like too late blooming lightning
bugs, beam at me from the right
side, as I slow, the north wind blowing folk
tunes through wide open
windows, where cigarette ash meets air, the outlines of haunted
trees begin to shiver and quake
with anticipation for the oncoming head
lights of a semi and the brilliant daydream
drift of a fog.

~

Walking down a cedar trail,
wood mulch crunching
beneath boots, surrounding ferns
sprouted from their mother
like a fevered fungus
released from within her, and a dead stump
falling tree, criss-crossed with background
branches, created a crucifix
in a forest not far from civilization, on which I hung
my sights of exemplified beauty,
crucify faith, crucify love, as leafless
branches drip brown blood,
frozen, limp, hanging
still down.

You appear, bold brown
eyes, distinguished ears standing up,
your face follows my hand
on the page.

The north wind picked up to blow
down the old
criss-crossed branches of crucifixion, to gently
rest planted in the cradle
of its infancy, the grounded
stump uprooted, free,
engulfed in deciduous air.

~

Looking over the bay,
I spread out on the beach

WARNING: DEER CROSSING

•continued•

bench, assuring comfort and space.
The lake, cold and calming, misted
over my frozen rose-turned
cheeks, fall, beginning to lose the specks
of sun, Petoskey under foot, green
sprouting from small boulders, waves tumbling over.

You're not here, but if water
would not drown
your presence, you would be.
Waiting, watching like the eye of Horus
buried deep within my name.

I remember this is happy.
Collecting unpolished hexagons,
stones beside the wide expanse of blue
contrast, till dawn, Aunt Jenny's hand
still coiled around my cold morning knuckles.

~

Like a revelation, I recall the philosophic
remarks of my father, a language
I could not, until recently, define. I see his language
built into my walls, a mixture of the exotic,
the creepy, the quirky comments and voice alterations.
I am born into his wisdom,
and with growth, realize these wisdoms
do come tainted,
but generous. Wisdom echoes,
"All around me, Beauty."

I searched a sandy green meadow,
collecting long stray
leaves, earth shifts underneath bombarding
boots quake tremors through saltless
sea soil, the sky a color of white-blue like the floating
lightness surrounding the iris of a holy
eye. The dulled-down holy
above me, I utter, "Oh, there's plenty of duende
in barren places, you just got to see
where you're looking."

Once, life was barren, the outback
surrounded me with expanse. You, wild

grace, approach with caution my squatting frame,
outstretched hands. Waiting for your panic
signal, you nudge me, awaiting help from tamed,
steady fingers. I pluck pain from your soft, molting
chest, tucked inside of tufts of fur, you wait for me
till after the thorns are released.
In gratitude, you've stayed
waiting. You, captured in dis-
membered photo graphs, slowly
reconvening.

THE TIME IS

Meridel Thomson

I am 21.

The time is 2:15 A.M. I check the gas dials on the stove every night before bed. First, I look at each dial from several feet back and make sure all of them are pointed to OFF, the little black knobs perfectly vertical and parallel to one another, like piano keys or tally marks. Even though each knob is already OFF, the dial turned as far right as it can go, I move down the row, from knob to knob, to make sure. I turn them to ON and then spin them to OFF, as hard as I can. I push the knob as far right as it will go until the pad of my thumb stings against the plastic. I stand back and survey the knob to make sure it is completely, absolutely OFF. I do this for each of the four knobs, the left front knob, the left back knob, the right back knob, the right front knob, in that order, always. I do this two or four times for each knob—it doesn't matter exactly how many, just as long as it is an even number. There are six members in my family, an even number.

I am nine.

I can hear my older brother, Gabe, watching "The Terminator" on the television in the living room. I am in the next room, the dining room, perched at the oval-shaped oak table with crayons and construction paper fanned out in front of me. I can hear the explosions and dramatic soundtrack through the swinging door. Arnold Schwarzenegger outrunning cars and bending metal is more enticing than drawing another pony to color in, so I get up from the table to join Gabe. I push in my chair with my right hand and tap it four times. I count my steps away from the table and toward the door. I need them to be an even number in total. I arrive at the door in seven steps, so I take a step back and two small ones forward again so that the final step summation is eight, an even number—perfect. I reach out with my right hand to push open the door. I accidentally touch the door with my left shoulder so I awkwardly swivel my body to touch it with my right shoulder. I brush it twice with the right to completely counteract the accidental collision with the left. As I pass through the door, I furtively tap the frame with my hand six times. My brother spots me in the door, mid-ritual.

"Jesus Christ, you are a crazy one. Cut that shit out. I'll tell mom you are still doing those weirdo things," he warns from the couch. Now I can't remember how many times I tapped the door frame and I have to start all over again. Gabe watches me perform my ritual while tears of embarrassment pool in my eyes. They quiver on the edge of my lower eyelids like a basketball circling the rim, and I try not to blink so they don't begin their inevitable descent. I feel my cheeks burning and I hurry through the ritual as fast as I can. I want to stop doing it, but I can't. Gabe just shakes his head and turns up the volume for the car chase scene.

I am 21, still in the kitchen.

I step back again. There is always one knob that won't turn as far as the others. It refuses to line up perfectly with OFF and springs back a little when my thumb pushes against it. This knob gets turned on and then off a couple extra (even-numbered) times. I remember a story about a whole family that was asphyxiated while they slept. Even the dog died.

The house is completely silent. The air is electric with the gentle buzzing work of unconscious minds making dreams. I can feel the deep, even breaths of sleep of my housemates radiate through their doors. Their breathing is so loud, I imagine they must be inhaling and exhaling in unison, like synchronized swimmers flipping together, pushing through the heavy, underwater world as one.

My own eyelids are stage curtains, as weighty and seductive as red velvet. The clock above the stove reads 2:17 AM. I have an early class in the morning and I only slept four hours last night. I turn to shut off the kitchen lights but that one damn knob forces me to flip them on again. I walk to the stove and begin the ritual once more,
ONOFFONOFFONOFFONOFF.

The time is 2:18 AM.

I am nine again.

My mom says I will get a prize if I stop performing what she calls my "superstitions." We make a prize chart on three pieces of computer paper taped together and hang it on the back of my bedroom door. For every day of the month that I resist doing my rituals, I can place a sparkly star sticker on the paper. When I have enough stickers, my mom says, she will buy me another fairy figurine for my collection.

The fairies hang on long pieces of fishing line from the ceiling down to my bed. Their bodies are made of papier mâché, and their dresses are just strips of blue and green chiffon, so they twist and sway when I open the door or walk by them fast. They twirl alone, but their movements are all the same so they seem to be dancing in synch, as clouds move separately but together. When I open the door too fast, I always worry their strings will entwine and they will collide. I imagine their small white arms snapping with the impact. I imagine them becoming a beehive of string and sequins above me.

The superstitions started when we moved to Michigan three years ago and my mom commuted back to Chicago for work. Every week, she drove five-and-a-half hours alone each way, and I was left with my two older brothers and dad. When she came in to kiss me goodnight, I cried and threw a fit because I knew she was leaving in the morning. To avoid these recurring scenes, she crept in after I was already asleep. I didn't

THE TIME IS

•continued•

stir when her long hair tickled my face or when she brushed her lips across my cool forehead.

I am dreaming.

I imagine my mother driving on I-90, somewhere between South Haven and Gary. The road stretches out as a grey ribbon in front of her. I see her take the curve around Lake Michigan too fast, and the car skids on the silver ice and spins like a coin. I hear her scream cut short as the Toyota hits a large tree on the side of the highway. When the car makes contact with the trunk, the snow on the branches above is loosened and large chunks tumble down fast. With the impact, she is thrown forward against the wheel. The car crumples up around her broken body like a closed fist and everything is quiet. The last bits of snow from the tree drift down slowly like feathers over her. I am not there, but I can feel the winter wind as cut glass on my skin.

When I place a sticker on the chart, I use my right hand and tap it four times into place.

21-years-old, too old to still be doing this.

I'm in the kitchen every night after my roommates are all asleep. The blue tile is cold under my bare feet and the windows are yawning black mouths next to me. I am on the second floor but when I turn my head, in the periphery, I think I see things glide past them in the night. They are pale things without feet, flying things with long hair that floats around them as if the world is suddenly underwater. I look at the knobs once more before switching off the light. I wonder how it must look to someone standing on the street outside, the light flickering on and off like a lightning bug. Standing there, I imagine the gas leaking out as an apparition and drifting from the kitchen to our rooms while we sleep. I see it slip underneath our doors and fill the space as we fall deeper and deeper.

I switch on the light, begin the ritual again. The time is 2: 20 A.M. The sun won't rise for another three hours.



MADEMBA (THE ELECTRICITY IS OUT AGAIN)

Nora Hickey

Senabou likes it when the electricity goes out. The humming of lights and machines suddenly quenched by some unknown body slumbering on the job. Momentary

blindness causes others to grope wildly for solidity. The mango tree, the cool cement of the walls, root to our hands while

Senabou moves efficiently, her onion-scented wake the only sign of her passing. Our ears prickle with her presence. With the flaring of a candle

our mom calls to her, Senabou's name inflated to a prayer by my mom's muscular vocal cords. Her plea drifts to Senabou, elbow deep in chicken gut, the pale bare

thighs plucked to resemble my own. Later, our round stomachs smile at the empty platter in front of us, only an oily sheen left to reflect the burning light

stroked into existence by Senabou. She gathers the silverware in her hands, her nightly bouquet of bissap flecked flowers, which she lays in the shell of an empty calabash. She gazes at the pitted gourd,

now a sink to harbor the dirtied remnants of feasts. She wishes she could fill her hollowed out heart as easily as she scoops cupfuls of clear water into the open cavity before her. Pausing, her

eyes are drawn to the moon like a vine stealing towards the warmth of the sun. Without the candlelight she looks ethereal, a lingering mermaid spied on by a mere human. Detecting the human,

she reaches for my hand. Pushing back the tangled branches of a bush, she reveals a family nestling. The mother's green eyes flicker violently from her suckling babies to us, dangerous

strangers. The mewling kittens lap up the moon
like it is mother's milk. Nourished,
their cries soften to bleats of content. Senabou
laughs, her dark mouth hungry enough to swallow

the sky. Her laughter drowns the renewed whirr of fans,
eclipses the oppressive glare of lamps.

UNPOLISHED LETTERS TO MOM, POEM 3

Zakia Carpenter

momma im not the zakia you want me to be/ im not angelic
purity like my name signifies/ & for some time i thought demons
would claim me for their own/ dreamed i was on the front line
facing evil & in the realm of divine/ in one of my dreams i fell in love
with the most unholy – the prince of darkness & believed he calmed
& relented his fury when with me/ on the edge of another dream i jumped
from debilitating fear into your reality so i could warn you that the devil
was trying to get into the house/ & you believed me & checked/ remember
our broken screen & sleeping by the door all night/ protecting us both
wasn't always so easy/

in my middle consciousness i felt blades pierce
the mattress of my pink & yellow sheeted bed/ cuz at age 10
i saw the exorcist & watched demons violently take over a young
girl's body/ disfigure her face/ use their own voices & speak that timeless
language/ i could think of nothing better that the demons could steal
from me/ no better way to terrorize innocence than to wear it
like a cloaked mask/ torn/ ravaged/ the defamed violation in acting
walking & living continuous replay/ a spiritual physical rape canceling
out my voice with white noise/

I kept my lights on/ stayed moving/ crawled into your room/ to protect against
an unguarded sleep/ i knew the devil wanted my holy/ & God sought to destroy
my iniquity/ im not unholy either momma/ i often pleaded to God to protect
my soul/ & drifted to sleep after his blessings filled my emptiness & offered
themselves up like a mother's milk/ i am the _ & _ because i couldn't divide/ did
not become a whole anything other than fused fractional parts/ the interceder/
the intermediary/ a woman who dips & dives into taboo/
& i don't believe in the completely holy untainted woman/ my name means pure
& im not this society's pure & virtuous woman/ to be that would be to deny myself
& my godly power altogether/ but don't be disappointed in my purity momma/ i
guarantee
you that inside me grows a pure love/ you named me pure maybe
because you knew that if you prayed an angel would come/ & i came momma/
with black wings & an intuitive mind/ i know you don't believe in female angels
momma/ but i am strong/ & i have fought/ & I have come to bring a radiant love.





HIGH NOON





Erin Agee

Water held me down,
the river current would not release me,
and I felt the darkness I had heard about,
the momentum of multiplying bubbles
fondling my ears. The cold kneaded
my thoughts into water.
I can't get up, I can't get out.

And sunshine burned me, so I couldn't
hug, and my friend patted me hard on the back
with his habitual hands, and I shrieked, arched
my scorched wings, and took flight from my body
to leave the pain. I didn't come back till night,
when I teetered on one soar side and hoped to stay
there till morning.
Hoped to teeter till morning.

And earth dislodged me, when I was 6,
and the ground shook, chandeliers swung,
and the safest place was the car.
The trees could sway and bend, but I, I fell over.
My great grandmother's vase fell
from the cabinet, 10 feet to the tile floor,
and remained upright.
I fell over, but the vase landed upright.

And the wind shriveled my ears,
lifted my hat from my head, scooted it
across the snow. My hair, which was long
at the time, was thin against the beating wind.
The snow swirled between my legs as I hurried
downhill, but the faster I ran from the howling,
the tighter it curled inside my ears, which
later shrank like red apricots dried in sun.
I couldn't touch them for days, and
I couldn't hear anything but the sweep of snow.

I am tired of critiques. Unless they come from the heron,
who disturbs the stagnant pool, coated with pastel algae. The heron,
who does not tolerate anything, does not place one unnecessary foot,
or utter one hurtful sound. Unless they come from a pitcher plant,
nestled in moss, soaked and cold. Unless they come from
the mosquito that ventures down into the vessel and clings to the thin
white hairs on the inner cup.

I cannot help but want to be a vessel for the mere thought of heron,
and stretch my white hairs down into myself, and hope, and wait
for a visitor, and know when to hide in moss.

Erin Agee

Inspired by Mary Oliver's "Gratitude"

What did you notice?

The fox, crossing the river,
the dragonflies locked in flying union.
The moon's sudden light on the canyon wall,
the smooth and dangerous mud,
the lizard, with neck pulsing, resting in shade.
The rain in sheets.

What did you hear?

Thunder echoing in side canyons,
water soothing rock,
the inhale of wind,
an eddy, reversing itself.

What did you admire?

The heron, no matter what it did,
the rocks beneath the mud slide, their propensity
for smoothness, their grip beneath my feet.
The darkness, entering a desert of light, with no disclaimer.
What astonished you?
The mud, dried, and curled toward the sun.

What would you like to see again?

The light on the rock wall,
the raindrop craters in the sand.
A red canyon slab forever
about to fall.
That tree, clutching to rock, growing
out of hardness, out of stone.

What was most tender?

The weight of water,
the arch of the Great Blue Heron's neck,
the purple fold of rock between red and brown.

What did you want to do?

Fall backwards into sand.
Heat myself on rock, touch my own skin,
cut my hair, make a mud boat.







DAY

WHAT I WANT TO TELL PEOPLE WHEN THEY ASK ME WHY I WRITE

Keegan O'Connor

I write because of the bird on the sidewalk. I lived in a flat in Philly that was all white with rented furniture, and this thing was the size of a sparrow, just outside our front door. We lived on South Street, a street that swarms with walkers and shoppers and eaters with money to burn. It's busy all day, but we lived just far enough away from the epicenter of activity that we typically only had one or two people walking by our stoop at any given time. I was on my way to work: *two blocks to Broad, into the subway, North, transfer to East, off at Chestnut, two blocks and upstairs* but I stopped when I saw the bird was still breathing. It was on its back, wings spread slightly, lungs pressing out at the pace of the wheels on a train at full speed. Its eyes were still, maybe glazed over, I don't know enough about bird biology to know the right words. It saw me. People were walking past me, past where I lived, just like they had every other morning, but stepping to the side when they noticed the helpless bundle of broken feathers and bones heaving some of its last breaths on the crack they were about to step on. It was in their way, and it made them change. Big as my fist, and it forced people out of its way. Nearing death, it took up space like a parking meter, like a streetlight, like a tree. Had it been able, that bird would have garnered no sympathy, no disgust: it would have moved.



Emelie Griffin

The bow and arrow rests
in the soft angle of my white

elbow the way I would carry
a pile of gladiolas.

It is not a sleeping baby.
I feel it heavy

and charged, its mad
lunar pull, let myself be held

still under the irresistible
slant toward destruction.

The cardinal—reddest of all
things. You beating

heart, you small planet, the way
you ride the air guided

as a dart.
My arrow goes through it

like a pulse of light. It falls,
a dead star. The blood-

stained dirt is its same color,
the bird seems to grow.

I wait. No electric satisfaction.
Its power does not seep into me

like sap. Not even a desire
to open it. I feel the connection

between us unwinding.
I can think only

to sit like a sentinel or a dove
in the mess I have made.

GOSPEL FROM A PLAYGROUND IN JERUSALEM, TENNESSEE

Nick Benca

Back in the day, I used to go to elementary school with Jesus Christ, and the dude was a real shithead. He was always one of the coolest kids because he wore the most stylish sandals and tunic...apparently his dad was a "made" man and had an intricate network of connections, the kind of guy you'd never want to fuck with. Even though he had money falling out of his ass, everyday Jesus and some of his goons would collect a dollar from each kid in the locker room before gym class. Sometimes, during the day Jesus would get bored and call someone forth, and at recess he would lead them to a corner of the playground where a crowd of select people would be waiting and the adults never seemed to look. If it was a girl, Jesus would make her lay her hands upon his body while he called her a dirty whore or something to that effect. If it was a boy, violence would be involved; the one and only time I witnessed the ritual up close, the Lamb of God had chosen a child named Ezekiel who had been burdened with the nickname, Zeke the Freak. He made Zeke take off his loincloth and everyone laughed at the boy's pasty rolls of flesh surrounding a belly that resembled a swollen grape about to burst open. Christ's disciples assembled in two lines, and Zeke begged for mercy as he walked the gauntlet back and forth, each boy whipping Zeke's bare ass with yardsticks until his cheeks were royal purple. Jesus selected certain people habitually, but when he'd pick someone new, he seemed to instinctually choose someone who wouldn't refuse to follow him to the secluded part of the playground. I didn't go to school with Jesus the next year because Jerusalem was rezoned and we were in different districts, but in high school I heard a lot about how he'd change water into wine and get people to commit abominations with some of the livestock at his wild parties. I was always tempted to go but never did. Lately people have been talking, saying he's getting into some heavier shit and how he's really gonna get crucified if he's not careful, but I just don't know. I am not a believer, but I cannot deny the power of Christ.

VOWEL SOUNDS

Sarah Martina

A, like sharp Angles, the Angle made between your shoulder bone and my cocked hip, my Ankle and your Arm. A, like Ache, the Ancient Architecture of our bodies in the morning. A, like Arson, like copper flames creeping towards my clavicle, the firefighter climbing each vertebrae of my spine like a ladder. A, like Amber, like Agate slices strung as sun catchers in your window. A, like the puddle of Apology, like being sorry for All that. A, like your Aorta, sliced open by an Aluminum can. A, like my Anatomy, like even from this Airplane I'm in Awe of your Altitude, the Abstraction of your Ash blonde hair.

E, like Elevator, like smile, are you going up? E, like Espresso beans make me jumpy, jump into my arms. E, like your Ebb and my Echo, the constant Explosion of our Equation, me divided by you. E, like the Eruption of steam that scorched my Esophagus. E, like Endless, like End, like End up with me. E, like the flutter of your Eyelashes that says be my Eden. E, like my Exhaustion at your Envy, like this game of Espionage, the search for me in the dark and dusty Evenings of you.

I, like my anemia, the Itch for Iron in my blood. Like the twelve square Inches of Ivy around the grave. I, like you are me Incarnate, the Inverse of me is you. I, like the Instep of my foot, the arc of these gentle bones. I, like Interlocking puzzle pieces, locking bodies into place. I, like the Impression of your Index finger on my skin. I, like we are at an Impasse, a crowded Intersection, where to go from here? I, like the Isolation of this deserted Island, only Ivory clouds and a flat horizon.

O, like the Overpass above Orchid Street. O, like Oh my an Orgasm. O, like Open Ocean, like Overcast sky, Outcrop of jagged rock. O, like my Ovaries, my Own body. O, like this song is an Original, this Opera is Old. O, like the Optical illusion of your smile, make sure to squint and tilt your head. O, like we have Oatmeal in the morning and Opium at night. O, like the Oxygen mask that swan-dives into my lap. O, like Our father who art in Ourselves. O, like the flicker of Orion's belt, like this One Onion is enough to make me cry.

U, like the way you Unbutton my clothes, Uproot me and all that is Unsaid. U, like burnt Umber, the color we find as we till this Uneven earth, the search for the Us hidden somewhere deep Underground. U, like we are the ship that was Unsinkable, now resting in silt with blind fish and rusty coral in Uncharted waters. U, like Utensils, the way you stack yourself against me. U, like the Urgent rope that ties me down, Unravels at your slightest touch.

And then she is inside him,
setting up her steelrod
tripod and focusing
on the broken chest cavity
she mistakes for a factory.
She photographs

steam charts
seared by boiled air
and wet with rotting words
in the backlog of his lungs.
She documents

blue-red pipe-veins
strung up behind his flaking
drywall, and roped
across the floor
like broken shackles.
She takes stock

of rotten stacks of empty paper
stored snug in the once-vibrating
metallic box
beside the smokestack
of his windpipe.
She trespasses here
in the name of art;

there are rusted signs bolted
to the fences outside,
threatening to shoot.

But she doubles over his ribs
until they splinter
like cheap picket posts.
Then she crawls in
camera first,

shoots roll after roll
of rooms gutted bare.



MARCO POLO

Christopher Peplin



I have always known what I am.
Even before I understood the words, I remember
two services per Sunday and Calvinism

dripping from my pores like a spirited eater's
lips, the clean and digested presence of God,
the roots neatly planted. When Baptists say

they are reborn, I say that I was always
God's, and he chose me before water, soil,
temptation, before crucifixion and sin.

It's like being a child, this birth between two legs
of a woman who will always be "mother,"
who feeds, whispers, touches in a way that sanctifies,

that keeps you whole, safe against her body heat.
Can you deny this woman's familiar hands?
Can you truly say, "I have never been yours"?

STRANGERS

Colleen Bednar

I rode my first motorcycle this past summer, sitting behind a boy who thought he might be in love. I met him the first night I was home from school, at a bar with big tables that had been painted dark red, the shade of fresh bruises. The paint was chipping and every time my friend Tasha lifted her arms there were flaky red freckles clinging to her elbows. I saw him walking towards our table with some friends and I thought he was attractive, with his wide blue eyes, bored looking, and his firm-set mouth unsmiling. At the end of the night, when he asked, I gave him my number as we stood outside, balanced on the curb.

He used to call me from his job at Detroit Metro Airport to tell me about how his boss was busting his balls, and I would listen to his tense voice through the phone as I walked around my backyard pulling up dandelions with my toes. He was brooding and independent, from a broken home – a family with sharp edges. He showed me outlines he'd drawn of his room from different perspectives on mornings before work, and they were good. A kind of good that caught me by surprise – he had the kind of talent that fills a sketch pad with beautiful black charcoal lamps and chairs.

That was June. In July he ruined things slowly, unknowingly, with the changing weather pattern of his voice. I couldn't stand the lack of intensity in his breath. He wanted to talk about money and about how much he hated living at home. I wanted to yell about how he should be saving for an apartment, and I ached to talk about the shadow of a charcoal chair – how it would be drawn, and where.

I missed the edgy, bored look of his eyes in June. I could hardly remember the way he'd been when I met him, as though I'd never known the earlier version, or even worse, as though the person I thought he was had never existed.

He bought a bike before I left to go back to school, and I held onto him as he drove us once around my neighborhood. I liked the idea of a motorcycle, but this wasn't some big black and chrome Harley. It was a little "crotch-rocket" painted with yellow flames that turned a non-threatening shade of fuchsia around the side by the kickstand. It was so small that we dwarfed it with our bodies and I was afraid that it would disappear beneath our weight. Worried that I'd fall off, I told him not to go too fast, my arms cinched around his waist, but he didn't listen, or didn't care. When he finally stopped the bike in front of my house, I punched him as I was getting off.

"You're such an asshole! I told you not to go fast!"

"We weren't going that fast." He grunted as he took off his helmet. And looking at him I couldn't remember a past when he was anyone but this sullen kid - looking silly beneath the weight of a leather jacket that was a size and a half too big.

* * *

There's only one photo of my mom in her early twenties. I've looked at it carefully, searching for my face in the smooth cheekbones and sun-burned forehead, but the woman in the picture is a stranger. Her hair is brown, and so long and thick that I imagine her braid makes an audible thump with each swing against her back. In the picture she shades her eyes with one hand, while my Michigan fingers begin to melt at just the thought of so much sun. Sometimes, I watch the slightly dented, porous valleys of my mom's face, trying to imagine her silver hair turning back to shades of brown. I try to convince myself that once she was young and breathless, reckless as a dying star which, while shooting, is impatient to fall. But it's hard to believe this when faced with my mom's practicality – she rides the bus to EMU, where she's a professor, to save gas money, and she runs the washing machine on cold so that our dark-colored clothes won't fade.

The stranger in the picture, on the other hand, is adventurous. She lives in a trailer in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the poorer regions where they only speak Spanish. The Teacher Corps has sent her to teach elementary school in a tiny stucco building that bakes both her and the children in its oven-like insides. She watches over her students, takes note of their mutinying stomachs distended over the waistbands of their pants. She listens to their Spanish and the way the words hover just past their lips after being spoken. Sometimes she is in awe of them, like they are in awe of her with her dark green Teacher Corps t-shirts, stained with sweat around the armpits and bellybutton by the end of each day. They go home and tell stories about how Señorita Bednar magically split an orange she'd brought for lunch into enough pieces so that everyone got a slice.

My mom doesn't talk much about those kids, now. Maybe it makes her sad to think how, somewhere, they are adults, with hungry children of their own whose fragile bones are too weak to support the weight of empty bellies. Instead, she tells me the stories that she knows will make me laugh, like when her fat, old cat cornered a tarantula out behind the trailer and she had to go rescue it from its own prey.

The stranger in the picture buys a motorcycle that's like an angry tempest, stirring up the ground beneath her. On the first day she gets it, she rides away from the trailer, out of town, to explore sandy stretches of the desert's skin. About an hour out, she sees a horse corral in the distance, segmented by stitches of dark fencing. Riding up along the fence she admires the horses, but they become frantic with the angry buzzing of her bike. Many of the larger horses panic, rear their front feet, and run at the smaller ones. Frightened, the woman stops her bike at approximately the same time a shotgun is fired into the air. A Pueblo man steps out of the ranch house that runs along side the corral, and points the gun at the stranger on the motorcycle.

"Do you know this is Pueblo land? You're on a goddamn reservation!" he is shouting at her. "Get the hell out of here with that bike before you start a fucking stampede! If I see you around again I'll shoot you for trespassing."

The gun stays pointed at her while her petrified fingers fumble to grip the clutch. She is crying by the time she makes it back to the frayed edges of the city. Suddenly, she hates the loudness of the motorcycle's engine, and the elephantine shadow it drags along beside it in the sun.

The stranger who will some day become my mother will be shed like the skin of a dream. For me, she doesn't exist, except in a picture. I do not recognize this woman who props her bike alongside the back of the trailer, thinking she will ride it again when the time comes. In the end, she just watches it grow old, and smiles at the rust that sprouts up to claim it.

* * *

I hardly knew Amanda when she lived down the hall from me our freshman year of college. I remember thinking she looked sick when I passed her on the way to the bathroom. Her flesh was as pale and thin as onion paper with veins like huge rivers underneath, and her body was made of sharp angles, bone pressed tightly against skin.

We had an Intro to Biology course together first semester, but she hardly ever showed up to the early morning classes. She and her friends would close themselves in her room late at night, and in the morning I'd see them leaving, boys and girls with sleepless mascara-bruises smudged into their skin. My roommate, Kasey, said that Amanda had invited her to do cocaine once, and I couldn't help but imagine Amanda's head bent over a powder-white line, breathing in the chalky particles like we did as children, playing at snorting pixie-sticks. I wondered sometimes, passing her on my way to class, if she ever used a needle. Maybe she was hiding track marks in the bends of her elbows, at the places where she passed the fireworks through her veins. I was fascinated with the idea of having a cokehead living down the hall - I'd only ever known potheads. Part of me thought of her as dirty, with tiny pin-prick scabs traveling incognito beneath long sleeves. To me, she looked like she was dying.

On a day in July, Amanda held her paper-doll arms around her boyfriend on his motorcycle, and they smiled in the sun at the thought of getting pulled over for not wearing helmets. Her shoulders were beginning to burn in the heat, the skin turning from alabaster to crimson, her elbows bent slightly and turned into him, with no needle marks chewing up her veins.

The car that hit them was pulling out of a parking lot, going a little too fast, not watching carefully. Maybe Amanda's bones had been waiting for this, and the cement, when she fell, just sprung the trap, setting the cocooned butterfly of her skeleton free.

The funeral was small, for family members only. I probably wouldn't have gone, anyway - I didn't want to see the displaced cemetery dirt. Kasey called to ask me if I'd heard about the accident, and she wanted to know if I thought Amanda had been high, sitting on the back of that bike, before the pavement kissed her oblivious. I told her that I wasn't sure it mattered either way.

I have a hard time picturing Amanda as she was freshman year when she lived down the hall, back when I thought she looked sick and see-through. Often now, I think that what I saw was just a shell. Maybe Amanda wasn't really alive, wasn't truly born, until that last day. In my memory she exists not as a pale stranger, but as that slightly sunburned girl, riding on the back of a motorcycle, smiling, going fast enough to give the impression of flight.

FOLLOWING THE TRACKS

Christopher Peplin



Dad, was it on your way
home from the DMV to change
the Kentucky tags on our

Chevy, that you saw
HOUSE FOR RENT
in the classifieds? Mom,

what was it, at 19, about that
agent-orange shag
that suggested wedding dress?

Do you remember painting white
the brown shutters
in the kitchenette, where

the silence hung like bloodshed
an inch above the linoleum and
the pork chops swam in carnage?

Dad, it wasn't a year after you said
"divorce" that I wrapped my childhood
in recycled paper to put into cardboard

boxes, and ten years after that
I would meet you for pancakes
and it would be so goddamn genial.

Dad, hermit crab, slash-and-burn
Republican—there's no home
for family in real-estate.

Watching you nosh that short
stack and decaf into swill—
claw to plate, claw to mandible.

I still want to vomit when I smell
that brew of Carmex and
Lagerfeld. How could you

not have known that at twenty
I would make that olfactory trip
back to Pierce and Southfield to

see what color the shutters were.



THUNDERSTORM WOMAN

For Karen Fedrau, Farmer, Newcastle, CA
Erica Bloom

She's a big horse woman,
dusty and sun-squinted tired.
Her bad frayed braid
hangs down her shoulder
reaching for her two big breasts.
She holds her shovel
like she holds the Earth,
a white knuckle grasp in the midday heat.
She has cracked heels
and dirt under her nails,
mud-bruised jeans
and wide bull hips.
She digs her mud knees
into her green cabbage rows,
listening to the black
flap of crow's wings.
She alone sows the land with
her back rounded to the sun,
the sound of harvest grunt
bellowing from her throat.
When she's done watering
her squash and cucumbers with the salt
from her forehead, she turns
her face to the sun,
hands on the curve of her spine.
Believes she's a tree,
a root in the ground,
she drinks the rain that falls
from the storm clouds.
She wakes up at first dew
to feed chickens and cows,
hums to herself when
she knows she's alone.
She understands solitude
like she understands the sky,
both a space between
the earth and something else.



HIS GIFT

Meridel Thomson

*"The maiden cut the toe off, forced the foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain,
and went out to the King's son."*

—*"Cinderella" by the Brothers Grimm*

*During copulation, the male shark flexes his clasper
and inserts it into the cloaca of the female shark.
To secure the inserted clasper, its tip unfolds
and anchors by way of one or more spikes.*

I have always wondered
about the tiger shark,

the feel of the grooves
in his clasper,

the release of sperm
like a white burial shroud.

If the clasper failed
to fit the small hole,

would she cut
the cloaca wider?

Would she rip
into herself, tear

deeper than rubber
cartilage to get

to the blood,
to release the blood

like red ghosts
into cold water?

Would she do all this
to accept his raw gift?

My mother is not a painter. She doesn't wash her hands in mineral spirits or know what linseed oil smells like. She has never had a stain she couldn't have dry-cleaned. She doesn't know what Italian words like *sfumato* or *tenebroso* or *chiaroscuro* mean—those words you have no use for until they are actually part of your life—until the whole world hangs on a shadow, until your whole life depends upon a reflection of the tendon of the furthest flexor of the of the left side of the left hand. To my mother, Rembrandt is a contemporary of Colgate, Bacon is a fatty breakfast food, Joan Mitchell is a singer she doesn't like, Pollock is that movie that Whats Hisname won the Oscar for.

That summer before I got sick, we spent an afternoon at the Detroit Institute of Art. I showed her the famous Diego Rivera mural in the main entryway. I explained how his Communist sympathies had influenced his portrayal of blue-collar autoworkers, the birth metaphor, and pointed out the Rouge Steel Plant and Edsel Ford. We then ambled through the labyrinthine museum in a kind of annotated history of art, as chronologically as I could manage. My mother stopped me in the Enlightenment exhibit in front of a mid-sized still life. The caption gave a name I didn't know. It was a capricious exercise in fluff—an ornate porcelain vase containing a stock assortment of lilies and carnations with a pear and some figs tossed onto the table for good measure.

"This is what I want you to do for the living room," she said only half-jokingly.

"Never. Not as long as I live." I had been entreated for some time to produce a space-filler for the large wall above the fireplace.

"Oh and why not?" she demanded.

"Because look at this meaningless tripe! Art isn't pretty pictures. It should be challenging. It should actually say something. No—it should yell it; it should scream it at the top of its lungs! This was painted because it matched the color of some French aristocrat's chaise. It has all the meaning of an éclair."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"That's what we have wallpaper for."

The Abstract Expressionists were on the third floor and I always liked the idea of doing penance with the old masters before finally reaching the white heaven of the Modernism wing. I showed her the Motherwells and the Klines. She liked the Rauschenberg on the far wall and we talked briefly about silk-screening. I told her Francis Bacon was my favorite artist and showed her the claustrophobic pound of flesh that is *Study for Crouching Nude*. She scrunched her nose as she suspiciously examined the painting.

"Why do you like this?"

"Because it's real," I said. She turned to look at it again as though combing for secret clues.

"It's a little dark." God I hate that word—*dark*. What does that

mean? Life's not all a bed of roses, I thought. Sometimes it's sitting naked in a shitty cage, hot as fuck and curled up in fetal position. At its most subtle, art should be nothing short of incendiary—every brushstroke is a match being struck; every smear of the knife is flint on steel. It's muscle. It's machines. I mean, the very process of it. It's smear and scrape and peel and cut and douse and slather and slop and spill. It's fucking primitive. When you smell it. That linseed, leather, pinewood, horsehair, turpentine "I-could-burn-at-any-moment" smell. That's what it's about.

"It's all relative," I said.

We rounded the corner of the gallery and my mother spotted the large orange and brown Rothko. "Oh, I like that," she said.

"That's Mark Rothko."

"Very pretty."

"*Interesting*," I corrected, only half-joking. "Yeah, I like Rothko a lot. So spiritual. You wouldn't guess he'd have slashed his wrists in his own studio, looking at these."

"Oh, that's awful!" Then she pointed to an even larger canvas next to the Rothko—one of Pollock's enormous tangled spider webs.

"Jackson Pollock."

"Oh alright. Honestly, honey, I think the dog could have done this one." At this point it was my final surrender to cover my face in shame.

"What?"

"It's not about the execution, Mom—it's the idea!"

"And what is the idea?" she asked, indignant.

"See how it's all foreground, nothing behind it? It's ironic. It's nothing, nihilism. It's the idea that the whole universe is totally random, completely spontaneous." She stared at it a moment. Wrestled it.

It was late afternoon when I woke up from the surgery; I saw my mother quickly tuck the *Us Weekly* she had been reading under her lap before she grabbed my hand—fuck the IV. Her eyes were wet and swollen, tissue stuck in her run mascara. My mother cries whenever she sees a Puppy Chow commercial on the TV so you can only imagine what this did to her. I didn't need a mirror to produce a pretty good portrait of myself.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi sweetie."

"Where's Dad?"

"They all went down to get some dinner—do you want me to tell him to bring you a Coke?"

"No thanks."

"How are you feeling?"

"Kinda woozy."

"The nurses have you on codeine right now. That's probably what it is." Her grip was constricting around my fingers. "Dr. Rock said the procedure went really well, honey. He had another surgery right after yours but he came in to talk to us a couple of hours ago. He said he didn't think it was a tumor but that the pathologists will have to confirm that. He said they got it right in the lesion and would have a pretty good sample to give them. Do you remember any of it?"

"No. I remember being wheeled into the operating room and telling Dr. Rock to take care of me." My mother laughed then—that extra big, snorting, nervous haven't-laughed-in-a-week laugh you make when you trip over your shoelace on the way out of a funeral or when your son wakes up from brain surgery.

"Did he say what it is?"

"Well, again he said he can't be sure at this point. But he thinks it's a kind of AVM—" my mother referred to a ripped piece of paper from her planner then with smeared blue ball-point scrawl on it. She kept copious notes of absolutely everything—"Arteriovenous Malformation. He called it a 'cavernoma.'"

"What is that?"

"The way he explained it—I guess it's a bundle of blood vessels that's kind of all tangled up. They're very rare. People sometimes get them in other parts of their body, apparently. In any case, some people live their whole lives without knowing it's even there."

"And in my case?"

"Well, in your case—" she paused. Then, "It hemorrhaged." *Hemorrhage*. It's one of those words that doesn't really become part of your vocabulary until you live it—until it erupts inside your own son.

"They don't know why?"

"He said an impact could have done it. You mentioned a few weeks ago you had fallen in Spanish class? Stress. Heavy lifting. He also said it could have been completely spontaneous."

The next day my father got the wheelchair and my mother pressed G in the elevator and my father wheeled me out to the car and they both helped me in and my father got in his own car and my mother shut our doors. Once we were in, I had a sip of Coke and remembered when we got in the car, that summer before I got ill, after our afternoon at the museum, before my mom hit the radio power button to get her daily fix of Top 40, and she asked me, "Do you think that everything's random?"

"No," I said. And staring dead ahead, gripping the wheel with the same white-knuckle judo with which she'd clenched my wrists, my mother replied,

"I don't know. Maybe why's not asking the right question."

OBSEQUIOUS NOSTALGIA

Will Walkington



Scarface Marathon starts at 8.
I'm chilling at the bus stop between Woodward & Griswold.
My hands have a white frost on them,
Kind of like the frost on ice skates.
"Ice Skating," only white people would come up with such bullshit.
People drive past the stop, and stare at me.
I wonder if any of them knows who I am.
My name could be Tony Montana.
I could be a gang banger. You know how it is
When you wear a lot of blue, people accuse you
sometimes police abuse you.
Standing outside, on a winter night
Cops say, "He is just itching for a fight!"
There goes a light, I have an idea.
Does God know what I fear?
I'm at a Crossroads, and don't know where to go.
Maybe my name is Bizzy Bone, because I am just looking for my way home.
(*Stomach Grumbling*) Cold breaths and warm thoughts of Chili Cheese Fries.
Damn! Look at those thighs, Shit! But she is hoppin in a ride.
I'm still a boy, but 2 her I could be a man
but in this day and time she is leaving in a ride,
and the water in my well runs dry.
A block away and headphones batteries die.
The stove heat melts the white ice off my hands.
Bizzy Bone is back in the CD case.
My blue coat is in the dryer, and volume is up
(*Television*) "Aye Tony I got the ride!"
Chili Cheese Fries always warms the soul.

OUR HOUSE

Emelie Griffin

The garden will overflow
like glowing ribbons of hair

from a scalp. The dirt will
smell as good as the air

that churns up
out of a boat propeller:

salty and wet and mineral.
It will be the makeup we wear.

Our hands will be caked with it,
brown and creased as animal skin,

even when we eat.
We will preen each other

sometimes, pull
the brown flakes away

with our teeth like dead leaves,
uncovering the skin underneath

pale and firm as wet sand.
There will be no faucets

in it. I want to see you carrying
a bucket of streamwater

up a delicate slope, I know
the tendons in your arms

will press out like roads.
The instruments we play

we will build out of branches
and long grass. The sounds

they make will not fade out,
they will catch on the corners

of the roof and hang there,
ringing almost imperceptibly,

even after we have left.
We will draw each other

on the walls with coals
when the fire burns out.

The figures will look shadowy
and ethereal like tall jellyfish.

There will be no clocks.
Death itself is enough,

the impossible certainty of it
clinging to us like wet dirt.

The thought,
after we have forgotten,

will summon the taste
of oranges into our mouths.

The fire rushing up
like quick birds will redden.

WHEN SHE WEARS WHITE

Lauren Trager

See, here's how it all started. I mean, I didn't mean to hurt her or anything, I sure didn't know that she was gonna fall down when I pushed her. We were just playing around. And I didn't know that she would get stuck in the mud. She's a girl and all, and my friends all hate girls, but they aren't all that bad. They're cool, sometimes, when they don't talk too much or whine. I hate it when they whine; they can be such sissies.

Not Lisa, though, I wouldn't never call her a sissy or hurt her. I mean, see, its really weird, but I have dreams about her, at night, when the planes from the strip across street stop roaring and I can actually sleep. I have trouble sleeping you know. I guess its the neighbors and their fighting. I can hear the guy hit the girl sometimes and then the baby will cry and I know I won't sleep all night. Then I lay there and listen to the cats screech as they try to catch mice, or the bum when he jumps into the dumpster and starts to dig around. It used to scare me, and once, my kid brother, Dan, ran into my room because he thought aliens were attacking him. I told him he was being stupid, it was just the bum.

My older brother Tim isn't scared of anything, except I think he is scared of homos. I read once that if you shake hands with a gay guy, you'd turn out gay. Tim says homos are gross. He tells me things about the world. He's a man and I want to be just like him when I grow up. I'm almost grown up; I'm 11. But Tim is in the tenth grade and he can drive now. The other day, he picked me up from school during lunch and we drove out to the Farmer Jack parking lot and he smoked little cigarettes, much smaller than the long, tightly packed ones Mom smokes. He talked funny all afternoon, like he had honey in his throat slowing down all his words. He told me I could ask him anything in the whole world. I asked what rape meant. I'd heard it, on the news.

"It's when a guy touches a girl, but she doesn't want it," he said.

"Oh," I said.

But then he told me that girls in short skirts always want it. They are practically begging for it. Then he said,

"Anyway, anything is better than what those sick fags do."

How do I know Lisa? She started coming on the weekends. Her Dad moved into the apartment next to ours, when Old Crag McAllister croaked, like we all knew he would. Her dad is cool, he wears black suits everyday when he leaves for work, but he has big blue bags that hang under his eyes. Lisa only comes every other weekend. It's the deal that her Mom and Dad worked out. Her mom drives up in a silver Lexus and I try to be around so I can watch Lisa get out of the car. Her legs are shiny and I like it on the days when she wears pink. Or when she wears white, because then I can see her bra. It has thick straps.

Tim keeps a Victoria's Secret catalogue under his bed. One day, he left it in the bathroom next to a bottle of lotion, and I stole it. I snuck it into my room and stared at it for almost an hour, looking at each

woman for a long time. They stuck their lips out like they were trying to blow bubbles. They all had their hands on their bodies. Some had bathing suits that they would never be able to swim in. They all had big boobs. I mean, they were huge, not like Lisa's at all. And I've been to the beach before and I never see women with hair that long and flowy, or jeans cut off so that the hump of their butts show. Actually, when I look at women on the beach, some of them have tummies, like my mom. And others wear T-shirts and shorts, baggy ones, just like me and once I saw a woman with a Teen Age Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirt that I used to have. I thought she looked nice.

Lisa looks real nice most of the time. I like her white tennis shoes. She has long, shiny blond hair, so bright it glows in the sun. I want to brush it against my face. Mom used to do that when she would tuck me and Dan into bed. Her thick hair would touch my face when she kissed me, on the lips. I never let her do that anymore. Its gross, cause she's my mom. Tim says Dad wouldn't have left if Mom had done more kissing. But if Lisa kissed me, I think I'd blow up.

We watched a movie in class where two people kissed. It was about how babies were made. It showed the red canals, and the white egg inside. All the other boys laughed when they showed the pictures and I laughed too. But mostly, I looked out the window. All the girls were in the other room. I didn't hear any laughing coming from them.

Lisa is impressed by swear words. She acts like she's mad when I say them, and she tells me not to use the Lord's name in vain. But I know, that secretly, it makes her think I am grown-up. On the weekends she comes over and we play together. I try real hard to make her laugh, by making farting noises and throwing rocks at birds. She tells me I am mean. But then she will smile at me, her pretty pink lips shining. We walk back to the field behind the apartment complex, where the weeds grow tall and she picks dandelions and sticks them under my chin. Sometimes, when it's raining, I will go over to her Dad's place and we will play house. I tell her how much I hate it, but I always get to be married to her. She's The Mom and I am The Dad and once we had to pretend that we were going to sleep and I got to lie down on her bed next to her. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep, but I just stared at her.

"What happened between your Mom and Dad?" I asked her.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"Okay," I said. I wanted to touch her hand. It was inches from mine. My heart seemed to be beating out of my chest. I looked at her chest, but then I saw her boobs and my face got hot.

"My Mom had a boyfriend," she said after a while. "It was our next-door neighbor."

"Oh," I said.

"Dad called her a slut when he found out," she said. Then she was quiet for a minute. "You are supposed to be asleep," she said.

WHEN SHE WEARS WHITE

•continued•

"Sorry," I said.

I didn't think she would get hurt. We were just playing around, way beyond the field, near the pond that's covered in scum. I was trying to catch frogs and I was being real dumb, wanting her to laugh. I was swearing a lot. She was wearing pink shorts and she looked so pretty. She had on a white shirt, a little tank top, and I could see her bra. Suddenly, I wanted to touch her. I wanted to see what they felt like, those small bumps. She was looking down into the water, and I reached out to touch her. She thought I was trying to hold her hand. So she reached her hand out too, and I stupidly took it. I felt tingly, kind of like I was going to faint. My face felt really hot.

"You are pretty," I said. My voice came out all funny. Lisa just looked at me. She laughed.

"Don't be stupid," she said.

"I'm not," I said. I really wanted to touch her, to press on her. I pictured her without her shirt on. She started laughing.

"Very funny," she said and slapped me on the shoulder.

When she slapped me, I exploded on the inside. I pushed her, with both hands, shoving hard against her shoulders and she fell down to the ground. She screamed and I just stood there. She looked completely helpless, she was trying to pull herself out of the mud, but she was sticky. I didn't see her bloody knee. I didn't know what to do, but she was yelling, "Help me up," so I tried to pull her up, but I slipped and fell too. I fell on top of her and it felt good. I wanted to stay. But she started crying. Her blond hair had blobs of mud in it and her white shirt was brown. She was sobbing. And when she cried, I cried, and all I wanted was the dreams to come true and to make her laugh. So I started to wail, I cried like the neighbor's baby, and she stopped crying and she looked at me, just for a second, her wet eyes asking me to hold something for her. It could have been a bird or something.

Is it true, Bahá'u'lláh, that I am part of God?
If he is in us, around us, then we expand

his skin, taste his crop; we are welded
before birth, made golden in divine alchemy,

but we stay humble, detached,
retching excess like sour milk

because purpose on earth is service,
not clinging to soil like moth to screen.

I need to be tucked in womb,
kept from light but safe, soothed, growing,

gathering strength with tiny hands
so when this world slips away,

before I am truly born,
I have harnessed spirit inside invisible bones.



WHITE

Cherie Heiberg

We tunnel through air and water in vessels of blinding white.
The sails are stretched like skin over a drum, dead white.

I dig my fingers into geometry, searching for the shapeless.
I cannot see the wheel, but my hands are shedding white.

Ameoba, protozoa, phytoplankton and my eyelids.
None of them virgins, all dressed up in threaded white.

I am a perfect instrument, belly vibrating with sound—
Would you play my ribcage, bones spread and white?

Is the urgency of this sound a callow call of warning?
Danger drips from every corner, comely shredded white.

Could you sacrifice your God for one last litany?
How his lips trembled—ah, how they bled white.

I can't find, anything, everything, everywhere
reflects what you show it, how I dread the white.

They asked if I knew of the price of my betrayal.
"Every single demon would have fled that white—"

Suspended above carpeting like a poster of enlightenment—
on my wrists, persistent blotches turn my skin red and white.

You think too much about the earth, Cherie:
eat what you are floating in, the lotus head, white.

THE ONE WHO TAGGED ALONG

Christopher Peplin



WHEN THE POEM COMES

Meghan Lodolo

I only wake early when you're here. These mornings,
when my eyes wear the heaviness of late nights, I'll wake
in the half-light and hear your low breath, feel
your hand along my back, at my hip, in my hair.
I don't move. I won't break the seal of pale silk
that traps the heat of two bodies sleeping.
It is hard to be still. There can be no slipping into
the kitchen for water, I cannot even reach for the clock
to see that it will ring in an hour, twelve minutes, now.
What I can do is lie quiet, not even think, just feel.
Feel the coolness on my calf as it hangs on the edge,
outside of the warmth of blankets. Feel my hand
rest carefully against the top of my hipbone.
My jaw slack gently open, waiting.
And once I've listened to my body, I begin to hear
yours. Feel your breath on my shoulder—warm, humid,
regular. Watch your steady heartbeat in that soft
spot of your neck. I want to kiss there.
Lightly, not wake you. But I cannot reach out, I cannot
touch or change. Instead, I need to feel it happen.
And when I do, if I'm very quiet, this is when the poem comes.