THE CAULDRON
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AWARDS

**STEPHANIE VIBBERT***

The Stephanie Vibbert Award is given to one piece of writing in the magazine which most exemplifies the intersection between creative writing and community engagement. This award honors Stephanie Vibbert, an English and Psychology double major who died in a car accident, returning from a peace march in Washington D.C., in her senior year at K. Stephanie’s life was passionately devoted to both creativity and to community service. This award was created to encourage Kalamazoo College writers to use their creativity to reflect upon and explore issues of poverty, human rights, sexual orientation, race, class, gender and cultural diversity.

The winner of this year’s Stephanie Vibbert Award for work in *The Cauldron* that best enacts the intersection between creative writing and social justice is Gabriella Donofrio. The pieces in the magazine are excerpts from her Senior Individualized Project, *Ask, Tell: Documentary Poetry on the Experiences of LGBTQ Military Members*. For the project, Gabriella interviewed a range of current and former LGBTQ+ members of the military. She then transcribed the interviews and “framed” brief segments of them in white space, thereby revealing the artfulness and complexity of their own descriptions of their experiences. This genre—documentary poetry—brings a new aesthetic to oral history and to social justice narratives. The poems reveal the personal toll that Don’t Ask Don’t Tell took on so many members of the military, and the heroic measures required to survive within the nearly impossible constraints of the policy.

**DIVINE CROW**

The Divine Crow is awarded each year to three pieces of outstanding written work. The pieces are judged blind—this year by visiting professor of English Shanna Salinas.

This years winners are “Bad Poetry or The Ways in which We Use Our Hands” by Jane Huffman, “Finding Tongue” by Jasmine An, and “I will make you an admin of this event,” by Fran Hoepfner.
PREFACE

Within the pieces selected for the 2013 issue of The Cauldron, we found reoccurring themes of youth and modernity to be prevalent. More so than in recent years, we found this year’s pieces were truly the work of students: young people caught in the middle of both everything and nothing.

Keeping the theme of youth in mind (maybe coupled with a little bit of premature nostalgia), we’ve chosen a cover photograph of the Davis fields (Chandler Smith) to represent this year’s magazine. The Davis fields are located southeast of Kalamazoo College, and have become a free space for many students of the college. The Davis neighborhood is home to many of the off-campus upperclassmen at K (and host to many a Friday night party. #youth)

We open this year’s issue with Michelle Keohane’s vulnerable “Downtown U-Turn, Similes,” a poem that exemplifies the uncertainty of driving, and perhaps more so, the startling nature in which circumstances change very quickly. “These Decadent Years,” a poem by Jane Huffman, features whimsical rhyming and playful language, and “a compassion ahead of our times.” Jasmine An’s “Red Elephant” captures the anxiety of budding sensuality and youth.

There is also a less symbolic and more literal representation of youth in this year’s magazine, as highlighted by Paul Lovaas’s narrative journalism piece entitled, “The Vine.” Taking place in the Vine neighborhood (located not at all far from the Davis fields), his piece is a tableau of the diverse nature of college towns, prefaced by a photograph of cover photographer Chandler Smith. What better representation of youth, perhaps, than smashing pumpkins? We laughed.

To claim that all pieces in this publication are directly related to the notion of youth does a disservice to our writers. Brittany Worthington’s story “Apathetics at the End of the World or KABOOM” is a delightfully dark piece that laughs at an impending fictional apocalypse. Emily Townsend’s “Ghazal 2” is a play on form: an abstract array of images that comes together in the earliest hours of the day. (Although, yeah, okay, it’s about youth too.)

We end The Cauldron with Hannah Daly’s “The butter dish still has butter,” the only piece in the publication that explicitly discusses old age and reminiscence, a poem that observes the quiet sadness of an estate sale.

The Cauldron is a publication that is just as much yours as it is ours. The future of this magazine (and also, to some extent, the future of this world #wentthere) is in your hands. We urge you to continue to share yourselves through this publication, and thank you for participating in one of Kalamazoo College’s richest traditions.

– co-editors Kelsey Nuttall and Fran Hoepfner
Like acupuncture
needles in a bucket seat
and a cockroach-coated
steering wheel.

There's a prayer in my stoplight
heart,
arched eyebrows and eyes on a lateral swivel.
*God, shrink my turn radius.*

I am clenching
like trigger finger and
clay pigeons or
hair tangled
in a ceiling fan.

*I can make it, right?*

Like a toppled water tower
or melted ice cream
in a bowl
at the top

of the staircase, but you think there's
one more step

until your left foot lands
in quicksand
bubbling and
sinking and grains stuck
to the sweat on your back.

Like praying for climax at the fingers of a bad lover

The acceleration, and

the
curb.
Rumi and Shams are still up drinking Fireball on my porch. It’s a hour before dawn.
Cops called on their howling: shaking up centuries of longing dust, an hour before dawn.

Brother and sister stare on into rosy fingers shining once more, paddle’s appendages, canoe is home.
Forgot themselves, praying into each stroke. They are just: . . . an hour before dawn.

Rain bursts on Memorial day. Neighborhood’s gone mad, fearing school and cold. An old friend
drenched, biking by with no hands and no shirt, screaming and cussed an hour before dawn.

I wish to another place–got pulled over, mouth tangy and swabbed dry–not late to class,
not early gone from the farm party. Officer, boy, asks: You must know the hour? Before dawn.

I am the negative before it gets its reverse. Oceanic nothing reach between fish and star,
high aperture, short lens speed: contact sheet all inky and lost an hour before dawn.

Unasleep at the all night cafe. I beg the tornadoes of bees scraping around, behind my eyes to slow down.
Alone except for the barista: riding academic angel dust an hour before dawn.

I tried coffee for the first time from his thermos. He hummed Neil Young
into my DNA. We may close our eyes, but we never sleep: like rust, an hour before dawn.
Lacing up boots. Roots come up between snowbeds. Feeding the zipper in. Tying the snowshoe on without sin. I hum to remember.

Feet trussed: remove the soul’s husk, an hour before dawn.

Sleeping prophet next to me, you breath like a bear, sputtering dreams out your nose.

I sit aglow, cradle this poem in my legs, my knee brushed to your bust, an hour before dawn.

Your hand made plans to meet with mine. Let’s arrange to meet sometime, before we know how this will end. Future sum greater than its past parts. Let us meet with gusto an hour before dawn.
1. Thus he and I sit at a dwindling table and discuss what it means that the moon.

2. Thus we sit and I, the moon, dwindle above a significance of table scraps left by him to feed them.

3. Thus sits the table and between I and he the moon and the table cloth covered table.

4. Thus he begins the inquiry into him and I and his cratered face hovering just above the cloth.

5. Thus he and the God of his forefathers rest on stools beneath the white clay of their hovel.

6. Thus unscroll his hands under mine like shells and now the moon to us is many skulls.

7. Thus are the clues to the wan light revealed and thus do I and he sit with our God under the table.
Go rescue the mice from the sticky traps so your grandmother doesn’t have to, and don’t you forget to replace the peanut butter. Put the rascal in a plastic bag. Don’t fill the bag with ammonia like your cousin does. Never be cruel for the sake of it. Walk with your head up. When your grandmother asks you if you stole Li-Li’s dollar, look her in the eye. Then go find her house slippers. Never let people tell you to fail, otherwise you will eventually say it to yourself. Don’t smile too much when you walk down the street, and keep an eye on your environment. Your surroundings can change quickly. Never argue with a guy with a gun, especially if that person is a cop. When you see your cousin’s new blue Dickies and black LOCS, don’t ask if he is a crip. Sometimes it is better not to know things. When the older boy in front of Jack Rabbit Liquor Store asks you if you bang, watch his hands. Look him in the eye. Don’t walk too far past Elizabeth Street. That girl on the south side ain’t worth it. If you let your homies talk you into selling weed your mom will kill you. Besides, at the end of the day, Air Jordans are just sneakers. If you couldn’t dunk before you put them on you won’t be able to dunk afterwards. When you see your grandfather being strangled by his final breath, don’t turn away. Remember, he is still a man. Look him in the eye. Never argue with a guy with a gun, especially if that person is a cop. If you put off calling Granny until tomorrow, be prepared for tomorrow to never come. What if tomorrow never comes.
HEAVE

PAUL LOVIGAS
I recently moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan. I live in a lopsided, three-story, mold-accented, rental house – with seven other people. My housemates include an aspiring photojournalist, an Ultimate Frisbee guru, three National Science Foundation sponsored scholars, two practicing microbrew specialists, and a bike mechanic. The walls of our nearly 100-year old home hum with activity. And we are never alone. Across the street, three starving artists endure and paint and smoke away their days. Next-door, our neighbor Mike – or “Mikey” as his uniform reads – can be found most nights either barbequing on his front porch or working on renovations to his recently acquired 1980’s RV. His engorged American Bulldog, Lexi, is always by his side, or pooping in our lawn. Our block perpetually smells of marijuana, charcoal, and mildew. It rings with the drone of stereos and window fans, punctuated by occasional screams of laughter and carburetor backfires. Garlic mustard shoots outnumber flower beds, and it simultaneously looks as if everyone has just moved in is about to leave. I live on a street named Austin, on a hill named Prospect, in a neighborhood named Vine. These blocks, near the heart of Kalamazoo, are sometimes referred to as the “student ghetto” with the full spectrum of connotations that the title bears. The place is dynamic, potent, and very much alive, and I have to admit, it’s rubbing off on me.

The Vine Neighborhood, near the urban center of Kalamazoo, is sandwiched between downtown and two university campuses. The place, which borrows its name from Vine Street, running east to west through its approximate center, is a “vibrant haven” for a diverse community of college students, young families, and entrepreneurs. Seventy to eighty percent of all properties in the Vine Neighborhood are rentals according to the Neighborhood Association which also describes the surrounding tree lined streets

THE VINE

PAUL LOVAAS
as a place for “committed urban pioneers who are reclaiming historic beauties as single-family homes.” As the result of this heterogeneous makeup and the relatively transient nature of the people who live here, Vine feels quite unlike other urban neighborhoods. It’s an eclectic place bubbling with a distinctive culture. The streets come with the antics associated with the emancipation of a college experience, balanced with an atmosphere of economic redevelopment, a few young families, and a long, colorful history.

When I recently spoke with Steve Walsh, the cordial Director of the Vine Neighborhood Association and a new neighbor of mine, our conversation quickly turned to the subject of history. As one of the oldest neighborhoods in Kalamazoo, Vine has been home to dozens of generations of traditional families and “families” of college students. It has changed significantly as the waves of new homeowners and tenants have flowed in and out of the blocks over the decades. The neighborhood officially dates back to the 1840’s but by the turn of the century, the Vine Neighborhood was one of Kalamazoo’s most fashionable, and slow changes began that would eventually result in the unique place that Steve and I live in today. As the years passed and the twentieth century rolled on, residents could eventually live, work, and shop within the borders of the neighborhood. As small businesses began to pop up within the borders of the neighborhood, Vine became an ideal place for all types of people to live– a trend that Steve believes still holds true today.

“As demand increased for university students in the area, the original, large properties were chopped up and subdivided to make more room– smaller lots with more homes made more sense, and more money.”

In several cases, Steve explained, older buildings were moved back in from the street in order to make room for new houses, resulting in the helter-skelter patchwork of properties you can see in the neighborhood today. As the neighborhood’s composition changed significantly, students and other low-income groups took advantage of the newly available, convenient, and affordable housing niche.

The rippled and cracked sidewalks of my new neighborhood haphazardly collect half-block-long pools of rainwater in the spring. The low points on Davis Street are frequently visited by children jumping and stomping in the puddles. Their shrieks of laughter are a reminder that actual children live here alongside the college students.

Saturday and Sunday mornings on the corner of Vine and Westnedge, patrons of the Crow’s Nest– a local breakfast spot– line up out the door and onto the sidewalk waiting for a table and a good hangover remedy. The house parties and block parties that fill evenings in the Vine Neighborhood with music and drunken pedestrians often end here. And it’s not the only good eatery in the area. Half a dozen small, locally owned restaurants and bars dot the neighborhood including O’Duffy’s Irish Pub which, ironically, draws a relatively affluent, middle-aged crowd into the “student ghetto” six nights a week.

“I have to say, the people here in the Vine neighborhood really care and are really supportive of each other and this restaurant.”
That’s the sentiment of Chris Danek, the man, entrepreneur, and aging hippie who has been behind the Crow’s Nest for the past 18 years. The restaurant thrives on the Vine neighborhood, reportedly experiencing a twenty to thirty percent loss of business in the summer months after Western Michigan University students leave town. The place has become an icon among student tenants in the neighborhood and features a 24-hour café and bakery that have both spawned from the nearly two decades of success Chris has experienced.

“That’s a great place to live…on the cutting edge of something.”

Chandler Smith is a Kalamazoo College student who lives in the Vine neighborhood. When I asked him to summarize how he felt in his new home he responded with a story.

“I was out back, taking pot-shots with [my buddy’s] BB gun. You know, just popping eggs and bottles in the backyard and a few shots kept bouncing off the wood fence, when all of a sudden I hear this lady’s voice, right, and she just yells, ‘Learn to shoot better so you stop hitting my fence!’ It was really funny. I just froze, like my mom had yelled at me or something, but she clearly was cooler than my mom would have been.”

Chandler brags that his aim has improved; his neighbor hasn’t called the cops or piped up about the shooting since, but the encounter “sums up the atmosphere on [his] block. Everyone is chilled out and decent…the place has a good vibe.”

Chuck Taylors hang next to hiking boots along the telephone line over the corner of Vine and Davis. The sacrificial footwear seems less like a gang sign and more like artwork; either alternative is highly plausible.

Just last week I was walking through the neighborhood when I was nearly run over by a girl on a bicycle. It was a classmate, friend, and neighbor of mine. She had been racing her antique Schwinn down Austin Street, where I lived. Fortunately, the forty-year-old brakes on her bike still functioned and she narrowly avoided knocking my block off. When she stopped to say hello, and reprimand me for walking so carelessly, she also brought up an art project she had recently undertaken inspired by our neighborhood. I think she said it best:

“Walking these streets is like walking through a poem!”
My friends and I play beer pong on the Bible.
We dig through trash for hymnal paper joints.

My bed a pew, sweet dreams goodbye.
We dance. The music, pagan trance, joins us at the hip and knees. Skin-colored flashlight, skinny kids, would-be orgasm.

You, drink the day. You, smoke the night. Deformed creature, zombie Jesus, strong-stitched eyelids.

Join me, my friends, heathen kings, film de femme.
Let's rule this night in crotchless pants. I say back you snakes of day, you sun-searching them.
We future we moist poised. New anthem for the lichen moss.

Feel my disguised sin, drink my cool-aid, not theirs. I am young and you are cool.
If I am not the black bear,  
I am the threat of the black bear.  
Circle grove claw marks,  
broken bark from the tree slide.  
You will never be alone.  

If I am not the black bear,  
I am the clouds over the tree line.  
The storm that accuses all day,  
but never proves anything.  
I am dark and breaking.  
The feeling of spinal fluid boiling  
on the stove.  

If I am not the black bear  
I am the waiting in the trees.  
Threat of black hair left  
in paw prints.  
The argument about existence.  

Always in front of you,  
but you keep looking back.  
I will wait for you ahead on the trail.  
My nose to air. Inhalation  
of the storm,  
and its passing.
ABSTRACT SUNSET

JULIA SMUCKER
I woke up one morning to a strange sound outside. It was like someone blowing up a balloon combined with a low train whistle. I got out of bed and opened up the blinds to see a large unfamiliar lump across the yard in the gutter. I left my room and tiptoed past Mom's room, knowing that she'd go berserk if she found out I was visiting the gutter. I quietly closed the front door behind me and walked barefoot across the yard. As I got closer, I identified the lump as some kind of animal. It kept making the strange noises as I walked, but it fell silent as soon as I reached it.

On first inspection, all I saw was a mound of heaving brown flesh and I thought it was a hippo. But then it turned its face to me and I saw the tusks.

The walrus introduced himself, and then I introduced myself. He was a very masculine walrus, with a deep-set love for carnality and clams. He explained to me that the noises he was making were mating calls. I told him that he was a good-looking fellow and sooner or later someone would come and mate with him. After talking with him for quite some time, I made my way back to the house. The walrus resumed his noises.

As soon as I got inside, Mom grabbed my arm.

"Where were you?" she asked.

I told her where I had been, and she slapped me.

"I've told you three hundred and seventy times to stay away from the gutter," she hissed. "Go make me breakfast."

I went to the kitchen and started preparing some eggs.
“What is that unordinary noise?” Mom asked, peeking out the window.

I told her what it was.

“That’s why you stay away from the gutter,” Mom said, going to her closet. “You’re lucky he didn’t rape you.” She pulled out a medium-sized flowerpot and brought it to the table, which was already heaped with her jars of paint. She grabbed the yellow jar and the red jar and slowly began painting the flowerpot. I put the eggs on a plate and put them on the table with a glass of orange juice. Mom stopped painting and shoved the plate and the glass off of the table. They fell to the ground and shattered, glass and eggs and orange juice going everywhere.

“I’m trying to paint here,” she snarled. “Don’t disturb me.”

I started to clean up the mess. As I gingerly picked up shards of glass I asked Mom if she had found anyone yet who could make her pregnant.

“No,” she said. “And I won’t. I’ve told you twenty-two times. No more children. I mean, just look at you. I don’t need any more of that.”

I was disappointed that Mom didn’t want any more children. It may have been a bit selfish of me, but I wanted a brother or sister to play with. It was tough living in the middle of nowhere with just her. Life had been a little bit more bearable when Grandma was still around, but now that she was gone Mom directed all of her badness at me. I don’t know if she was too old to have kids or not, but she could have at least tried.

“Jack and Jill! Why won’t that thing in the gutter just shut up!” Mom screamed. “I’ve got eight pots to paint today, and I can’t focus with all of that blaring.”

I finished mopping up the last of the orange juice and went back to my room to read. Mom was right. The walrus’s calls were fairly annoying.

Two hours later, Mom yelled my name. I went to the kitchen and she showed me her completed flowerpot.

“What do you think?” she asked. If I said I liked it she’d throw it away, and if I said I didn’t like it she’d scream at me but keep the pot. I told her it wasn’t my favorite. As expected, she screamed and cursed at me. “You aren’t even an art person. You’re my son and you know nothing about paint and you always disobey me. You’re a filthy little cod. You hate it? Well, I think it’s an amazing piece of artwork. I’m going to keep it.” She smiled defiantly at me and went to her closet. I noticed that the walrus had stopped his noises. Mom grabbed a giant flowerpot and hauled it to the table. She selected the pink and blue and magenta paint jars and started to paint. The walrus noises resumed. I asked Mom if the flowerpots were like children to her and is that why she ignores me and doesn’t want any more kids? Mom stopped painting.

“You,” she whispered, “are a very bad boy. A very bad son.” She grew quiet for a couple of seconds and then let loose. “Your Grandma was right. I should never have had sexual intercourse with a man. Then I wouldn’t have conceived you and I could live here peacefully with my pots and not have to worry about you being evil or going to the gutter. You are a worthless kin and if I didn’t believe in non-murder I would—”
I grabbed the completed medium-sized flowerpot and smashed it over her head. She fell back against her chair, senseless. The walrus was quiet as well.

I retrieved some rope from my bedroom and bound her hands and feet together. I dragged her outside, across the yard, and to the gutter. I threw her into the gutter, and the walrus thanked me. As I made my way back to the house, I heard Mom wake up and scream as the walrus had his way with her.

Hopefully, if she wasn’t already too old, I’d get a new brother or sister.
MY INHERITANCE

KELSEY NUTTALL
Way down there where the upholstery is pink,
we’ll leave strands of olive-colored hair in the bathroom sink

and spend our last pennies to keep fire in our flasks,
and in crushed velvet tailcoats and paper mâché masks

we will cross the threshold of rosemary and wine,
and in usual fashion, we will get there just in time

to push our tiny sailboats into the streaming vat,
where the eucalyptus honey drowns the lonely rat,

where the bones of this city rattle like a chandelier,
where the water never boils at this time of year.

We will build our houses from aluminum foil
and we will plant our gardens in petroleum soil,

and with ginger-root fingers and cherry-tomato-toes,
we will rake the surface until something pretty grows,

and when we yank the heads and bulbs from their earthly wombs,
we will pulverize the petals, the pistils and the blooms,

and with it we will concoct a pigment for our pens
and press flower-powder paper, and make pencils from the stems,

and we will write our stories of corduroy and silk,
of renaissance and rhyme, of miracles and milk.

And with weary eyes and frostbitten ears
we’ll pray for the end of these decadent years.
And you will listen, but the creaks in the floor
will consume you, and you will reach for the door,
but the greys and the greens will sneak up the stairs
on the backs of songbirds and grizzly bears
and you’ll find that the lines on your unshaven face
resemble the lines on the map of this place.
And we’ll try to hold out for a little while,
until we clear out the frozen vegetable aisle
and with arrows of carrots and cannon of peas,
we will aim at the place on the back of your knees,
and you’ll kneel and look into the antelope eyes
of a people who worship the spiders and flies,
and with a compassion ahead of our times,
we’ll recite the last stanzas of nursery rhymes,
and with wax paper, razors and amethyst rocks,
and battalions of muskrat and badger and fox,
we will launch war between forefinger and thumb
and march to the beat of a dandelion drum.
So sharpen your weapons, your wordplay, and wit,
carve the fat from golden calf on the spit,
draw a line with a stick in the dirt,
straighten the pleats at the hem of your skirt.

Because when we arrive, that spring in your spines
will be the first of our convocational signs.
And your closets will blossom with mildew and mold
in spirals and rings of cumin and gold
and a peculiar electricity will glow in your thighs
and something will brighten your cataract eyes
and there will be a great battle of rubber and rust
and we will chisel the noses from your marble busts.
And you’ll see us, through the drapes of chiffon,
And you’ll try to say something but by then we’ll be gone.
QUEEN OF HEARTS

ALLISON HAMMERLY
LUCHO and RICHARD, CLAM FISHERMEN: MUISNE, ECUADOR

CHANDLER SMITH
Finding Toungue

Jasmine An

Divine Crow Award Recipient

I am afraid of white people. Never admitted that before deep secret.
- Chrystos

I kissed a girl once. I lost my tongue between her lips. I am looking for it now, afraid of finding someone else's instead, of speaking in tongues not my own. White tongues thrust hungry against mine. People asking, "where're you from?" I've never said China. I've said Ann Arbor, then admitted to being 3rd generation. She asked me that in bed, her fingers in my hair before we were naked. I swallowed my tongue deep, told her I couldn't speak Chinese, softly, as if a secret.
I. Coming Out at the World’s Fair

I came out at the age of fifteen at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York. I was walking around the fair with a friend of mine who started a two-hour monologue and talked and talked and talked and halfway through I realized what was going on—he was coming out to me. And that was very very scary. Finally he finished and said, “So, I’m a homosexual. Do you want to punch me in the nose?” And there was a long, long pause while my throat went dry and for the first time in my life I said, “Charlie, you’re not the only one.”

II. A Joke

When I signed up at the height of the Vietnam War they were raking in 4,000 people a day at every recruiting station. So for the induction process—which was a medical exam and this and that—there were 4,000 guys in their underwear because that’s the way they do it, going from one doctor to the next and looking at your eyes, asking you to cough and all that nonsense. And so one half second is in front of a psychologist who did not look up from his rubber stamp and his paperwork and said, “Any problem with homosexuality?” And I honestly said, “No,” because I didn’t have any problem being gay. And he said, “Next,” and that was the end of that.

III. The Witch-Hunt

There were scares, many scares, but in my case it never happened. Many people were caught by no fault of their own. They drag you into a room and shine a bright light on your head and beat you with a rubber hose and threaten you with being in jail for life—all nonsense—in order to demand the names of others. That was the game; that was the witch-hunt. They would always want to know
who else is. And they would scare people so badly by threatening to
throw them in jail forever just for being gay, that people would spill
names and then they would drag in the next one and the next one
and the next one. Now I could tell who was gay; my gaydar worked
just fine. But I never talked to anybody and most people who were
gay didn’t talk to me because we were afraid of that. And so it was not
just serving in silence, it was enforced loneliness. You couldn’t even
acknowledge your own kind. I kept to that very strictly and so I never
got caught, but there’s a price to pay for that.
them well enough to make that call. I made that mistake until earlier last week when a friend tipped me off – armpit hair grows in every direction, not just down. Oh, I thought. Next you’ll tell me everyone already knows that. Then you’ll add did you hear, Pluto isn’t a planet any longer? And that’s just it. I don’t know any more about Jupiter than I do my own junk.

Our bodies are just planets we farm, hoping to grow a crop that will go bumper. Even still, there is no place on Earth without more than one season. Every seven years, the cells in your body replace themselves. You cut your hair, your dad dies, she stands in the doorway once again.

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WE CAN HATE OUR BODIES BECAUSE WE THINK WE KNOW

EMILY DRUCKER
When Ashley was seventeen she stopped eating. When Ashley was nineteen she spent her summer at a rehab center in Brookfield for girls like her. Upon entering the rehab center a flock of fifty-year-old women in turtlenecks surrounded Ashley and began treating her with therapy. One woman weighed Ashley but didn’t tell Ashley how much she weighed. Another gave Ashley washable markers and made her draw a life-sized picture of how Ashley thought she looked. Another one watched Ashley while she ate oatmeal. Right before Ashley left the rehab center one of the women said she was one hundred percent cured.

Later that year, Ashley went back to her parent’s house for a Christmas party. She wore a dress that draped over her body like a picnic blanket and the same shoes she wore for prom. She arrived at the party gripping a cookie tin with teddy bears dancing around the border of the lid. She handed the tin to her uncle who shouted that Ashley was here and that she made her famous peanut clusters. Ashley ate a sloppy Joe and watched “Die Hard” in the basement with her cousins. Ashley’s cousins all agreed that Ashley looked much better and said it was good to see her again.

After Ashley’s extended family left at 1:32 a.m. Ashley’s mother told Ashley how selfish Ashley had been the past year. How dare she drop out of college and waste her father’s hard earned money. How dare she waste even more of it at a glorified spa. How dare she prance out of the snow and into this house and expect everything to be normal. Ashley’s mom did so much for her and the least Ashley could do was be grateful.
EXTREME CLOSE-UP OF A ROSE

JULIA SMUCKER
HAIRY COWS: SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

FRAN HOEPFNER
The first time a girl went down on me, I was staring at the elephant on her ceiling. We'd painted it the hour before. It was red, and her tongue was just as warm as it had been in my mouth and as slippery. “So, we’re on the same page?” she’d asked me. Her fingers were twisted through mine. So cold. “We’re just friends, right?” “Yeah,” I said. “We’re friends.” And even with this truth lying in the bed between us, we still didn’t get things right on the first try. Her fingers between my legs hurt, too much to stay silent. The elephant’s trunk was too long and looked like a penis. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t want to hurt you.” “I’ll tell you if you do,” I told her, and, “here, follow my finger. It angles forward.” Neither of us wanted a penis, so we painted a pig. The extra bit of the elephant’s trunk turned into the pig’s snout and then they were kissing. We were kissing, and I don’t know what I’d been expecting but it wasn’t her lips strong like an elephant’s trunk and so hungry. We ran out of red paint just finishing that elephant, so she upended a jar of nail polish over the paper plate of our palette and we painted the pig with the fumes curling up around our heads, driving us dizzy. Later, on my back in her bed, I was still dizzy. “Can I try something?” she asked and when I said yes her hands parted the hair of my crotch. Her tongue went between my thighs and I don’t know if we “got things right” but I can’t believe we got them wrong, not with her hands on my skin and mine on hers and her mouth on mine, in mine, and she still had paint on her fingernails. It was red. I stared up at the ceiling and it looked like the elephant was standing on the lip of a chasm, the pig dangling from its trunk over an abyss of white. Lips locked together, refusing to fall.
JELLYFISH 1
AND
JELLYFISH 2

STEFANO CAGNATO
"Read me a line from a poem." When he gets home, she is standing on the top of a ladder, nailing a strand of Christmas lights in shape of a lotus flower on the wall above the mattress. They tentacle down her back in a lattice of white light. Before he has his boots off, she turns around to speak to him.

"Read me a line from a poem," she says, "one that I haven’t heard yet."

"Right now?" He wipes his windbitten face on his jacket sleeve.

"Yes."

"Okay," he fingers a page in the back of his notebook. "My heart is thawing with the weather."

"Hand me one of those teacups."

"What are you doing?"

"The teacups. Give me one of them." He picks up a teacup from the carpet and hands it to her. She holds it in her hand for a moment before letting it crash to the ground. Against the mahogany linoleum, the shards of papery porcelain resemble a patch of snow fighting the thaw of early spring.

"Give me another one."

She pulls back the tender lips of an artichoke. Breakfast, she thinks. Her hands quake in the cold morning as she watches the gloomy
fiddlehead ferns. This peculiar bout of writer’s block resulted in the introduction of piles of library books into their cramped two-room apartment. Every day, he hauls another pile of library books into their tiny apartment. He thumbs through botany encyclopedias over breakfast. He reads her palms while she tries to fold his laundry.

"Asparagus?"

"Yeah."

"Why asparagus?" She pulls the bristly afghan around her shoulders. Wind whispers through the windowpane and catches the grimy feathers on the tiny dreamcatcher dangling at the ceiling. They waver in the silent air, warning of winter lightening and snow and snow and snow.

The apartment is barren but for a robin-egg blue mattress with hand-me-down sheets and a splattering of area rugs. Although they have lived together for nearly a year, they never bothered buying furniture. Instead, they covered the walls with weird art. Embroidery circles and fish-eye photography, curse words die-cut in geometric typography. A pointillist mural of David Lynch smiles down from the ceiling when they find each other’s bodies in the dark.

"Asparagus. Like they were pulled straight from the earth." He pulls a felt-tipped marker from his shirt pocket and dangles it between his middle fingers like a cigarette. She’d always half-admired his quiet madness, the way he could turn a bushel of kale into a metaphor. His most recent project was a working list of The Ways in Which We Use Our Hands. These Ways would come to him in the middle of the night, in the middle of a sentence.
“God, you’re so tortured. Hey, I’ve got a friend who has eyes the color of water chestnuts. She’d probably inspire your next novel.” He snaps the journal shut, as if squishing a mosquito between its pages.

“You want coffee?”

“Yeah. But for God’s sake,” she says, “not in the fancy cups. We have to stop using that stuff.” She watches him as he steps carefully around a set of four porcelain teacups, as white and pearlescent as skim milk, arranged on the floor as if waiting to be touched by the tiny hands of dolls and little girls. The dregs of earl grey breakfast tea are congealed in their crevices.

He pours cold coffee into a frying pan on the stove.

“Can you even believe those suckers are worth, like fifty thousand dollars?” he asks.

“Probably more. Come on, let’s put them back in the box. We shouldn’t even be touching them. Everything around here breaks or gets lost. God, that’s a lot of money.” She swings her naked legs onto the floor and picks up one of the teacups between her forefinger and thumb. He pours a long black curl of French roast coffee into the curve of the teacup. Fingers of steam rise from the porcelain rim like pistols from a trillium.

“You have no idea where your mother might have gotten them?” she asks.

“Not a clue.” He pours his own cupful and holds it between his palms. “She was always going to antique fairs and flea markets. I can’t imagine she paid much for them.”

“We’ve got to sell them.”

“I don’t think that’s what she would have wanted.”

“I think she would have wanted us to have a washing machine.”

The Ways in Which We Use our Hands (a working list)

9. silverware
8. sex
7. removing infant animals from adult animals
6. eating tomatoes like apples
5. crossword puzzles
4. shucking corn
3. the sign of the cross
2. mending broken things

She has the same dream twice in one week. Everything she touches turns into glimmering porcelain. The light switch, her spoon, the pinky finger of a man she brushes against on the subway. She must wear porcelain gloves. They chip and crumble when she lifts her paintbrush, when she shakes a stranger’s hand, when she rolls over in her sleep. She must make a new pair every day. She wonders what would happen if she did not. She wonders what would happen if she turned the whole world to porcelain. Soon, she figures, all would be ash.

6.

“So the lord said, ’I will blot out man whom I have created from the
face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” The priest’s throaty voice echoes into the ceiling of St. Catherine’s Catholic Church. They sit in the pew nearest to the back.

Every Sunday morning, they attend a service at a different church. While neither of them have any interest in religion, they find the stained glass, the buttresses, the incorrigible devotion of sheeplike masses to be windows into the human condition. “For inspiration,” he says, when their friends ask them why they bother, “and free wine.”

He scribbles half a stanza between the Opening Remarks and Penitential Rite in the manila program on his lap. She reads it over is shoulder. The choir begins to sing.

“I told you we should have gone Episcopalian,” she says. Their whispers carry over the little lambswool heads of elderly churchgoers in spidery black veils, over grandchildren itching at bowties and stifling giggles.

“We ask this through Christ our Lord! ” The priest’s words fall like hard rain over the congregation, drenching the room of fidgety bodies in the Liturgy of the Word.

“We did Episcopalian two Sundays ago. Besides, it is a well known fact that the Catholics do the entire month of November better than anyone else.”

She slides her hand down his forearm until her fingers find his. His pen pauses between the “t” and the “a” in the word “rutabaga.”

“I can’t stop thinking about the teacups,” she says.

“What?”

“The teacups.”

A powder blue woman turns her perfumey face in their direction. She hisses. Their voices fall into their laps.

“What about the teacups?”

“I don’t like the fact that they’re just sitting at home while we’re not there.”

“They’re not going to pee the bed. I think they’re survive for a few hours without us.”

“I’m serious,” she says. “I’ve never owned anything more valuable than a biology textbook. We don’t know what we’re doing.”

“We’re not doing anything. We’re sitting in this beautiful church on this beautiful morning. We came here to write. Let’s do that instead of worrying about whether the dinnerware is behaving for the babysitter.”

“We should sell them.”

“We’ve had this conversation. We don’t need that kind of money. We wouldn’t know what to do with it. We’d spend it like children. On scarves.”

“Scarves?”

“Yeah. Scarves and Sunday matinees. And Chinese food. And weed. Like, the good kind. We don’t need the good kind. We don’t need
air sneaks between her legs as she pedals over the black ice. In the waiting room, poetry floods her thoughts as violently as the white fluorescent light. She opens her day planner and writes in capital letters. “There is something in my body that isn’t in my head.” She scribbles it out. “A letter to the blastocyst I am about to destroy.” She scribbles it out. The nurse calls her name.

She tells the lady sitting next to her that she has beautiful eyes. She tells the lady sitting next to her that she’s very sorry.

The nurse ushers her into an examination room. A poster on the wall outlines proper hand-washing. She considers peeling it from the drywall when the nurse leaves, taking it home, adding it to the stacks of Orthopedist manuals and palm reading guides occupying her kitchen counter.

The nurse hands her a thin blue sheet.

“Honey, put this on, the surgeon will be in to speak to you in a minute. Is there someone waiting to drive you home?”

She says nothing.

“Well, I will personally call you a cab.”

3.

A conversation between four teacups on a Sunday morning:

“Does unrequited love exist?”
“Does not.”
“Why?”
“Just look at us.”

4.

She puts on her rattiest underwear. She knows they’ll be ruined by the end of the day. She rides her bike to the clinic. The November
until it shimmers like china. She yanks at handfuls of her hair. She digs her fingernails into her ribs. But she will not change. Around her, the walls begin to crumble. Porcelain frames holding porcelain photos crash from their porcelain nails. A porcelain tomato, glossy as an eyeball, rolls to her feet. As her fingers graze its surface, it shatters into a cloud of dust. How poetic, she thinks: the loneliness of white.

2.

“Give me another one.” Her lotus flower of Christmas lights casts odd shadows on her face. She looks down at him from her perch on top of the ladder.

“What the hell are you doing?” He stumbles to his knees, plucking the pieces of shattered teacup from the carpet and cradling them in his palm. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Give me another one.”

1.

The Ways in Which We Use our Hands (a working list) continued

1. pulverizing each other into dust
I.

the two men in the house are going to kill you.
you know this and you are ready to die on this floor
under the blue scratchy blanket because they need
to give what’s been coming to you. you are ready
to be found by these men because you wanted
to kiss the blonde girl singing karaoke at the Oasis
and she wanted to kiss back. you know why they
have guns. it’s because you wanted to kiss a woman
as a man, because you were missing something
and they needed to know what.

II.

the one with a skinny rat tail likes to burn himself.
he buys a hatchet for your head and hands, eats
a sandwich, ham & cheese, and comes for you
because nobody kills on an empty stomach.
the other with long black hair he tucks behind
his ears, the one they called dumbo, he steals
his neighbor’s gun, gropes his neighbor’s wife
and takes a change of clothes because he feels
like killing somebody today.

and after it’s done,

after five minutes, they leave the house. they go
home and tell their lovers to lie for them, make
them pour clorox over their red hands and make
love to their bodies because

the dustless highway
We are cattle, you and I. We are in the dirt, engorged teats begging to be spoon fed. I was born on the backs of your rounded knees, along the rim of your ten-gallon. You rode into a white town on a black horse, bucking at the nothing that was spoken. You are my Antonia and I keep coughing up soot-filled bowls you had already swallowed down.

I was squeezing my toes around thick blades of grass when they made you unzip your pants to prove it. It was summer, I think. Did you climb the water tower barefoot before it crumpled into itself, flooded gnawed carcass of your family’s double-wide. I hope you did. I hope you climbed all the way up over its letters.

I went to lay my head over your body, under the dirt. Together, we scratched sister, daughter off the marble steps of the courthouse.
I think it was a Saturday in late August when the first person exploded. A man in Tallahassee stormed out of the auto mechanic’s shop after learning how much it would cost him to replace his transmission. He apparently got into a verbal altercation that contained a few choice expletives before marching out. He blew up shortly afterwards. I suppose it was quite hot that day. According to the evening news, it was quite messy. His intestines got tangled in the power lines and supposedly his liver hit an old lady in the head, knocking her out cold. When authorities arrived, the only thing that remained intact were the man’s legs, still attached to the decimated trunk of his body. His head was later found in a dog house in someone’s backyard, severely gnawed.

This first incident was classified as random. Sometimes people blew up, it happened, that didn't mean other people were going to catch “exploding” like the flu virus. But a couple days later, a woman reported a loud explosion from the apartment above her. She thought someone fired a gun shot and immediately called the police. But there were no gunshot victims, just a couple in the throes of coitus; except that one of them was missing her upper-half. The man, who was still inside of the woman— or at least what was left of her—was screaming. His face was badly burned from the impact of the explosion. There wasn't a single inch of that bedroom that didn't glow under a black light.

Around that time, the explosions became more frequent: an accountant from Portland in the middle of doing someone’s tax returns. Boom. An eminent Broadway star during her second curtain call. Kablammy. There was video footage of that one. Religious groups began organizing rallies, claiming that those exploding were sinners smitten by the hand of God.
“God is punishing the unholy,” cried the fundamentalist reverend leading a gathering in Atlanta. “If we do not repent, the good Lord will not hesitate to—“

The reverend never finished his declaration, but served as an excellent display of what God would do to said sinners.

Scientists began referring to this explosive phenomenon as “spontaneous human combustion,” and thought it might have something to do with high-blood pressure or adult onset diabetes. The media ran rampant with its own theories. Some believed global warming was causing people’s blood to literally boil, making the body a pressure cooker just waiting to blow sky-high. Others thought the government secretly released a highly flammable noxious gas into the air but refused to admit to the conspiracy. Of course others thought the human bombs were the act of a terrorist cell. But most just thought it was aliens.

People began to stay in their homes, avoiding contact with others or any sort of stimuli that might set off an internal ticking time bomb. C-SPAN experienced a huge bump in ratings. Biohazard bins were set up around cities, just in case someone stumbled upon a dismembered arm or flyaway kidney.

I was walking my dog last Tuesday morning when I saw something dangling from my neighbor’s mailbox flag. At first I thought it was part of those paddle ball games kids like to play, the string having been cut. But when I got closer, I realized it was an eyeball dangling by its pulpy optic nerve. I bent over to get a closer look. Whomever it belonged to had hazel eyes. The tiny branching capillaries had all burst, leaving the sclera a rosy pink. Still, it was quite pretty. My dog started barking and jumping in an attempt to snatch the swinging eyeball with his mouth. Not knowing if dogs could digest this type of human tissue, I tried to yank him away from the mailbox. He worked himself into quite a frenzy strangling himself with his leash. I don’t think I even realized what happened until I fell backwards from the release of tension at the end of the leash. Apparently canines can spontaneously combust as well. On top of that, a policeman on the scene gave me a ticket for not picking up after my pet.

My girlfriend was pretty upset when I came home with a scorched collar and no dog. She yelled at me when I told her what happened. She said I never liked that dog and it was my fault. I tried to explain it was the eyeball’s fault and not mine; if people cleaned up more thoroughly, this never would have happened. She said I didn’t care about anything, that nothing upset or excited me. She said that living with me was like cohabitating with an apathetic grapefruit. I told her that comparison didn’t make sense which made her shriek with rage. Then she exploded. It really was quite unfortunate, especially since I can’t find where in the house she keeps the extra paper towels.
PARROTS ON A TREE

REBECCA ROGSTAD
Alone long enough, we forget size and we squeeze baby shoes onto our toes. Lilli feet are still feet—calloused, even. We’re true models—down to details: so minute you can’t ever get close enough. Enough. Step back and believe in the in the novelty, for we all dream in miniatures: we know. I know girls who shrink when tired. Not cute. Don’t call her hymn—sing at aphids like you know their genders intimately. Aren’t boys less cute, innocent? Or—just density-wise. Look how cute the bitty scorpion is. Keel over. Call it a toy again. Call it counterfeit. Laugh at its working parts. Likeness, imprint, mirror, miniatures with both eyes—see it all in your image. never mind the smaller scale came first. Lookit over, like you’re the more vulnerable one. Try to press power into the tip of your pinky. Smallness is just quizzing you—a game. & noticing is all that’s left & right-brained. –is everything. Disappearance is more sneaking, humility, perceptiveness, manipulation & tact. It’s manipulated tack. Realistic like the day you pin ups see your copies on posters: 2D un-flattening, 20x24 veiny & lesser-than-life. Cells of cellulite per pixel: you wonder—nail down the size of hurt & other intangibles. x plus [bruise] equals a two-by-two blob on your thigh. You see a rabbit. Little scars always look like something. Zapping them off and lasering on other shapes and stuff.
Abdulatif and the Car
Near a Crumbling Pyramid; Abusir, Egypt
Chandler Smith
When I awoke this morning, you cracked open my head like an egg,
and what fell onto the skillet was not milky insides but a collector’s edition
of timestamps and threads and Tweets and three-dimensional TED talks
and all these beautiful things sizzled together into an electronic bouquet
of buzzwords and Likes because this year I turned the Age of Information.
Like clockwork a bright red notification will let you know the date and time
of my party and should you rendez-vous s’il vous plait (anything but a dreaded Maybe),
I will give you the password to get in. There is a new layout—don’t worry,
it’s still Tahoma—and you can be privy to my piñata, shattering elegantly over our little
heads as it bursts with filters (Walden is no pond, but that doesn’t stop it
from making us look old) and we will enjoy each other’s company in a chatroom
as we share the stories of strangers because everything belongs to the public domain.

You will all sit around in a circle,
smiles defaulted on your faces,
I will read your cards dedicated with love
to my username, plus ones and yellow stars
and a rush of neurotransmitters will spark
my profound gratitude as you .gift me with:
  re-blogs and
  re-tweets and
  re-likes and
  re-views and
  re-flexes (because how many seconds will it take from the time you share a two minute and twenty-seven second video of a hungry child will it take for me to
re-solve that I will show my generosity and in turn, I will have earned your
re-spect) and we will do this until my weary
re-tinas burn—glowing, aching, yearning—and it is time for our night to end.

Before you log out, party-favors of Pinterest pin-boards with their very own
push-pins will be passed out, and I will send a fond farewell (perhaps a semi-colon
close parenthesis if we are those kinds of Friends) before curling up into my bed
of blogs, tugging my cover photos over my body for warmth: slipping, tumbling,
falling into electric dreams and manic visions as my profile flashes before my eyes,
desperately trying to remember if I cleared my history before going to sleep.
in it and the mad-eyed owl wallpaper bit
his beak at me, a toothless snap, trying
to reach the deviled egg tray stashed
in the fire place. We can keep two deviled
egg trays they say but the third—the third
has to go, no question about it. Dead
fruit flies twitch, suspended in the vanilla
wax candles fused to the electric stove
burners. The grandson pulls up his pants.
He puts her ring on his crooked right pinky
and shows me his porn collection. Just
kidding he doesn’t have a porn collection
but if he did we’d share it. Look at it right
there, in the living room with the first
and second deviled egg tray, right where
she died, on the couch they said, you can
have anything but the couch and the
fondue set because we might need that.