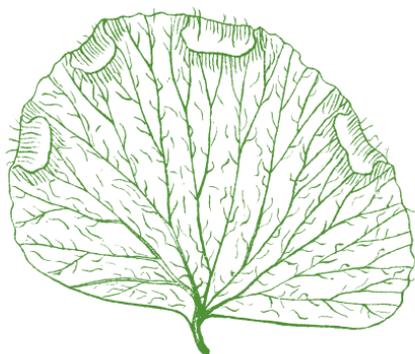
A close-up photograph of a cauldron. The rim is dark and has a small, smooth, red, oval-shaped object resting on it. Inside the cauldron, there is a large, dark, textured rock or piece of wood. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and brown, suggesting a natural setting. The lighting is warm and directional, creating highlights and shadows.

# THE CAULDRON

Volume 25, 2004-2005





# THE CAULDRON

2004—2005

Volume 25

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## **OUR ENDLESS THANKS GO TO:**

–Diane Seuss the Faculty Advisor of the magazine. Her energy, intelligence, and guidance allows the legacy of The Cauldron to continue each year. The creative community on campus is grateful for her inspiring presence.

–The Kalamazoo College English Department, for fostering and guiding the College’s creative writers and urging them to submit their work to the magazine.

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–Amy Smith and Amelia Katanski for carefully selecting this year’s Divine Crow Awards.

–Provost Gregory Mahler, for his steadfast support of creative writing at Kalamazoo College.

Special thanks to all of the writers and visual artists who shared their work with our editors and reading staff. This year The Cauldron received the largest number of submissions in the history of the magazine. Although we were only able to select a fraction for publication, we are grateful to everyone who submitted.

Also, special thanks to Dianne and Rob Vibbert for supporting us in our wish to honor their daughter with The Stephanie Vibbert Award. This annual award is given to a piece of writing in The Cauldron that best demonstrates the important relationship between creative writing and political and social justice. This year’s winner is Julie Faust for her creative nonfiction piece “A \_\_ Story.”



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\* Denotes Stephanie Vibbert Award Winner

\*\* Denotes Divine Crow Award Winner



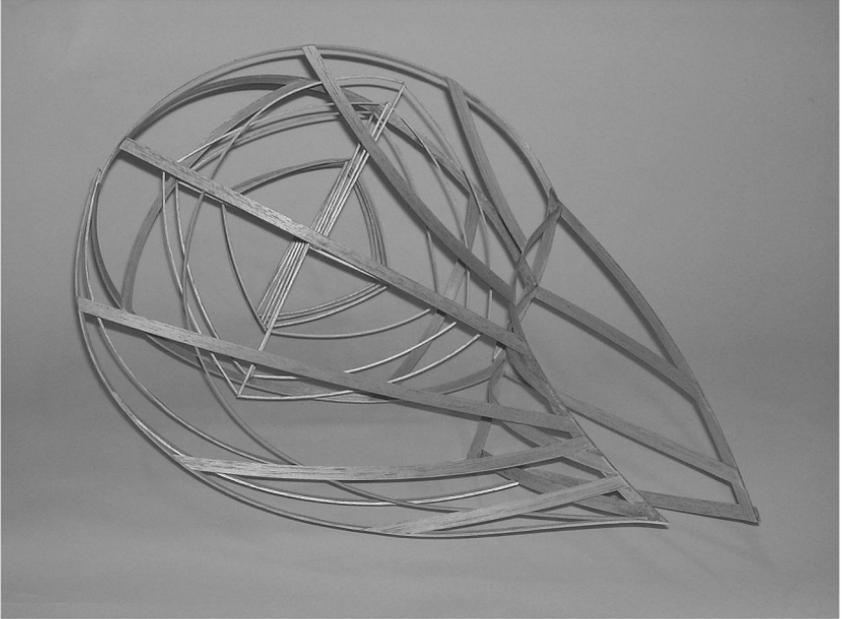
The Divine Crow Awards are given annually to three outstanding pieces in The Cauldron, regardless of genre, and are judged "blind." This year's Divine Crow judges were Dr. Amy Smith and Dr. Amelia Katanski from the Kalamazoo College English Department.





**NICK BEIMER**

Turning Tide





**DAVID SIEGEL**

**The Nest**  
from *Source*

That night  
the reckless flaps of shovels  
were mistaken for the birth of wings.

The crowd watched the sweeping movements  
of a dig and swore the diggers  
to be baby birds.

Spades beat like feathers  
and shovels crisped  
like hungry chirps.

But when the diggers disappeared from sight  
and the dig could only be heard  
by leaning over the pit,

everyone who listened agreed:  
the digging was unmistakably  
the pecking of an egg.





**RAMSEY SPRATTMORAN**

## The Taste of a Blood Orange

I remember tasting blood  
oranges for the first time, wary  
of the bruised fruit my father  
held out to me. I remember  
the way we sat at the kitchen table,  
the light overhead casting  
shadows, dark pools beneath  
our eyes and noses, laughing  
mouths cavernous, stalactite  
teeth.

I remember playing cribbage late  
at night, fanning cards, chapped  
hands, ring-fingers matching, ink  
from pens seeping into our skins.

I remember the way the orange tasted  
when I bit into it, the way it tensed  
then gushed against my tongue.  
I remember the taste, so bitter  
and so soothing.

I remember fearing words, worrying  
that I would say the wrong  
thing, that laughter would convert  
to anger, that joy would fade,  
hissing as it left, like fire.





**KELSEY FOWLER**

Clementines





**MEREDITH ADAMS-SMART**

**Becoming Jack**

*for Dora*

This was after her brother Roscoe  
died in childhood, the one son  
leaving five daughters.

It was in the attic that she found  
a pine crate full of his clothes,  
knee-high pants, jackets, vests,  
a newsboy cap given to him  
on his last birthday.

In front of the mirror layered  
with ghostly dust and warped glass,  
she stepped out of her stockings,  
half-slip, stripped the ribbon from her hair.

She introduced herself as Jack,  
a new healthy brother eager  
to play with his four sisters.  
Everyone loved her as a boy.

Because she was the youngest  
she was the last to sit in the tin tub  
during the evening baths.  
Even though the water was cold  
and the color of the Kaskaskia,  
she soaked in it without worrying  
who was impatiently waiting.  
She slicked lye soap over her chest,  
still perfectly flat, still Jack's.  
She prayed in that tub,  
begged God to make her a boy,  
waited in the cold water, eyes closed tight.  
She opened them slowly, heartbroken  
to see the soft clamshell curve between her legs.





**LISA FINDLEY**

## Head to Foot

*Mary Magdalene*

It was a strange feeling, to comb cleansing oil  
into my hair, dipping the brush in a shallow  
bowl, tapping off the excess and tipping my head  
down so my long, thick hair hung straight,  
then pulling the brush through, from the top  
to the straggly ends, and back to my head  
to do it all over again, until there was no more  
oil in the bowl, and my head was heavy  
with yellow-clear beads.

It was an even stranger feeling to tip my head  
again and hold all that oiled hair, to twist it  
in a rope of brown and squeeze  
until those beads dripped onto his feet.  
I rubbed the coarse hairs, sticky with viscous oil,  
over his dirt-caked soles, his hairy ankles,  
his gnarled toes.

Washing away the mud of the day  
and preparing his feet for the next,  
I was a bridesmaid preparing for the bridegroom,  
my head so close I could kiss his feet  
and taste a miracle, a healing,  
a transformation of feet into relics,  
cleansing oil into holy wine,  
ropes of hair into fishing nets.





**JULIE FAUST**

A \_\_\_\_ Story

STEPHANIE VIBBERT AWARD WINNER

**PROLOGUE: DEFINING IT**

I am twenty-one years old now. I walk through the hallways of my house or over the grass of my campus and sometimes I swear I hear a whisper. It's the voice of a young girl. In her shame-laced whispers she confesses: *I am an Oriental girl.*

Gallimard (a man who believed he was in love with the perfect Asian woman, only to find she was actually a man, in the play *M. Butterfly*):

"I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth."

In class we read *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang. Sitting in the back, an unnamed student raised her hand.

– Student: What I didn't like about Song, the Oriental—

– Me: Excuse me, I'm uncomfortable with you using that word.

– Student: Why?

– Me: Because you are White and I am not. Because that means the word is closer to me and I want to be able to define why I hate it in easy images that will expose the whole ugly truth of it, but I hate even more that it, that ugly word, will just hang there in the air, because I cannot pin down for you why it is so awful in a set of easy images.

The dictionary offers this definition:

**O-RI-EN-TAL PRONUNCIATION KEY** (ô-r-ntl, r-)

*adj.*

1. often **ORIENTAL** Of or relating to the countries of the Orient or their peoples or cultures; eastern.

2. Lustrous and valuable: *oriental pearls.*

*Often Offensive.* An Asian.

**USAGE NOTE:** *Asian* is now strongly preferred in place of *Oriental* for persons native to Asia or descended from an Asian people. The usual objection to *Oriental* meaning "eastern" is that it identifies Asian countries



and peoples in terms of their location relative to Europe. However, the real problem with *Oriental* is more likely its connotations stemming from an earlier era when Europeans viewed the regions east of the Mediterranean as exotic lands full of romance and intrigue, the home of despotic empires and inscrutable customs. At the least these associations can give *Oriental* a dated feel, and as a noun in contemporary contexts (as in *the first Oriental to be elected from the district*) it is now widely taken to be offensive. However, *Oriental* should not be thought of as an ethnic slur to be avoided in all situations. As with *Asiatic*, in phrases such as *Oriental cuisine* or *Oriental medicine*, is not usually considered objectionable.<sup>ii</sup>

– Student: See, even they say it's alright to use it in some cases.

– Me: I don't think it's ever alright. There are just some instances where people get away with it—where it goes unnoticed so it is excused.

I wonder what the exact moment was when this single word ceased to be a single word and took on stereotypes that built up into a single word monster. And even in my wonderings, the little girl's voice who haunts me whispers it again: *I am an Oriental girl.*

Iggy Pop and David Bowie—“China Girl”

“My little China Girl, you shouldn't mess with me

I'll ruin everything you are

I'll give you television, I'll give you eyes of blue

I'll give you men who want to rule the world

And when I get excited

My little China Girl says

Oh baby, just you shut your mouth

She says shhhh”<sup>iii</sup>

– Student: I love that song. Although I think the David Bowie version is the best.

– Me: It's not about the song, it's not who is singing at all. It's about the message and how people will sing the song and sing that message and





## A \_\_\_\_ Story

*Continued*

not even think about what it really means. They'll be singing, "My little China Girl" and the words will float around and come to nest in their brain. And pretty soon, you won't be able to pick their well-educated brain apart from the decaying mess that used to be brain before it was rotted away by the false stereotypes in that dumb song.

Song (a man who lived as a woman in the play *M. Butterfly*):

"I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man." iv

– Student: But what if the stereotypes are true?

– Me: But what if they're not?

Sometimes at night, before I go to sleep, I think about the little girl who confesses that she is an Oriental girl. I want to answer her, but I don't know how. I wonder why she confesses to me—I worry that she expects me to tell her story.

### THE STORY: FLESHING IT OUT

The way she told it to me was that at her high school there was one hallway where all the Asian kids hung out. They had their lockers there or something. And everyone, students and staff, called that hallway "Chinatown." She said that no one really ever thought about whether or not it made the Asian kids mad. She said she was walking down that hall one day to get to class and passed a (White) teacher lecturing one of the (Asian) girls on why the word "oriental" was acceptable. (*It's a word and there are words that are out of your control. Everyone uses that one, so you'll just have to get used to it.*)

– Student: I think I'd like that teacher.

– Me: Yeah. Yeah, you would.

– Student: So you know why your poem's no good so far?

– Me: Why?

– Student: Because nobody cares about definitions. Nobody cares about this high school—they didn't go there. You're writing around these things, because I bet you're afraid that people will find out your secret.

– Me: That's what you think....



### *My Terrible Secret*

Until I was twenty, I think I still, underneath everything, believed I was a White girl. I grew up in the White suburbs of Detroit, had White parents and identified with Whiteness (I was born in Korea, adopted by a couple in Michigan). My friends were a constant assurance of my Whiteness (*huh, it's strange when I look at you, I don't see anyone who is Asian, I just see...you like...you're like one of us*).

There were reminders, of course. Family albums, pictures of my own Brownness nestled between my pale parents. Older people at shopping malls who asked me in raised voices how long I'd been in this country. A little boy at a shoe store who said I had Chinese eyes. I was reminded, but I could forget again.

It took going to Thailand when I was twenty and living there for six months. It took other Asian people constantly reminding me that I am Asian to lift me from my illusions.

– Student: That's ridiculous. Why didn't you just look in the mirror?

– Me: I don't know what to say. It's funny how our eyes are blind to some things.

– Student: I think you have more secrets. I bet you have worse ones.

Once there was a little girl. She was probably only six or seven (I forget). She went to school and she was quiet everyday. Her teacher liked her because she never started trouble. And one day the teacher was talking to her and asked her something (this I forget, as well). And for some reason, maybe it was the tone of the teacher's voice, maybe she was leading the girl and the girl was too young to catch on (this will remain a mystery). But somehow, the little girl knew the teacher expected her to say "I am an Oriental girl." The girl knew it wasn't a good word to use, but didn't know why and didn't want to upset her teacher. So she said it.

*I am an Oriental girl. I am an Oriental girl.*





## A \_\_\_ Story

*Continued*

### EPILOGUE: REDEFINING IT?

#### COMMUNICATION—THIRD DEFINITION:

3. a. The art and technique of using words effectively to impart information or ideas.<sup>v</sup>

– Student: More definitions? I suppose now you’re going to attempt to redefine Oriental. It’ll probably be a poor attempt at that. I suppose you’ll have to take it back for Asians everywhere.

– Me: No. I’d rather just release it. Get rid of it.

From this day forth:

Oriental—I release you. You are free of your duties as a word. Go. We don’t need you anymore.

Signs that used to say Oriental Cuisine shall have the letters fall off until they only read \_\_\_ Cuisine. The Oriental rug store shall sell \_\_\_ rugs. And anyone who tries to describe someone (themselves or otherwise) as Oriental will not be able to form the word. Their tongue will be confused. They’ll vaguely remember there was a label they used to use, but can no longer grasp...\_\_\_ person.

And while I’m at it—I release you—WhiteGirlStudentThaiKoreanTribal-AdoptedChineseAsianSubmissiveEffeminateGayQuietSilentSacrificeSong-ScaredSecrets

– I don’t need you anymore. Go.

I am \_\_\_.

<sup>i</sup>Hwang, David Henry. *M Butterfly*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

<sup>ii</sup>Online dictionary, <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=oriental>

<sup>iii</sup>Pop, Iggy and David Bowie. “China Girl.” *The Idiot*. RCA, 1977.

<sup>iv</sup>Hwang, David Henry. *M Butterfly*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

<sup>v</sup>Online dictionary,

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=communication>





**MERIDEL THOMSON**

Dressing Oscar Wilde

First, his sleeping suit made of silk,  
striped in blue and red,  
an import from India.  
I slide it over his white body  
that curves around my feet  
like a question mark  
on the prison floor.

Then the white shirt  
with high, starched cuffs,  
and real gold studs  
that glint like yellow  
commas in the slanting  
cell light. I close them  
over his lovely, weak wrists,

my warm fingers  
surprised by their cold.

And, of course, trousers  
in Turkish style,  
clean lines of lilac-colored velvet  
with a matching vest  
and round collar  
that drooped about  
his long neck.

You will want to know  
how the ripped pages  
of *De Profundis*  
curled like nail  
clippings on the ground,  
that I tip-toed around  
the sacred works as I costumed  
his nakedness with rich  
fabric and my fast breath.





## Dressing Oscar Wilde

*Continued*

I will not tell you, however,  
what notes he made  
in the margins of those pages,  
or what shade of shadow kissed  
his face when I led him  
to his reflection,  
when I uncovered the dusty  
painting we had stowed  
in the dark attic  
alongside the dried flowers  
and costume jewelry.





**ANTHONY ABBORENO**

## Godzilla: A Life in Retrospect

### GODZILLA THE HERO

Time is running out for the human race, and Godzilla is here to save us. Godzilla appears at the edge of the city and people cheer. Godzilla is a force of nature done right: an eighteen story atomic success. His eyes are open and welcoming like the doors of an all-night clinic; his arms wave to people watching from subway exits, office windows, passing airplanes.

Children run behind him, careful not to stumble in the craters left by his monster feet, or be crushed by debris kicked loose by his waving tail. Look, a city bus is sent hurtling skyward with one angular swipe, its passengers screaming with astonishment and joy.

Godzilla will fight all the monsters, whether they are subterranean turtles from time immemorial or hideous mutants of our own creation: genetically tampered corn-stalk Biolante, pollution spitting Smog-Monster or eldritch beasts awakened by reckless industry. Rubber-suited corruptions of ourselves quiver when they hear his metallic battle cry, and shudder beneath the impact of his atomic breath.

The glow of his spines has a deep warmth, like a ray of sunlight in winter, and spectators close their eyes and think of swimming pools and ice-cream trucks as the offending mutant is driven into the concrete, tentacles flailing. Power lines snap and whiplash across the monster's body with sparks burning like independence-day fireworks. The monster squeals. Godzilla is what people find best in themselves, and onlookers cheer like spectators at a football game. People laugh in hysterical joy and embrace. Children squeal in happiness, and declare their intention to grow up and be *just like Godzilla*.

And if Godzilla is sometimes clumsy, he is forgiven. Buildings can be rebuilt, and victims' families can be compensated. But the hero is irreplaceable. He lumbers back into the ocean where he will wait until he is needed again, yet the memory of him lingers. For months afterwards, people wake up at night without knowing why they are smiling. Kindergarten halls are filled with crayon drawings of mommy, daddy, and Godzilla. Men and women shout Godzilla's name in their moments of orgasm. College students bring pictures of Godzilla to their exams for luck. A monument is erected in city center—thirty feet tall and solid bronze—dedicated to Godzilla: our savior.





## Godzilla: A Life in Retrospect

*Continued*

### GODZILLA THE MONSTER

Godzilla is an atomic nightmare: warped by nuclear testing and awakened by depth charges, he appears on the coast as an eighty story Frankenstein's monster. He drips saltwater like amniotic slime; he roars, and people scream in terror. They shout his name: "It's Godzilla!" Office workers leap from thirteen-story windows to escape him, the edges of their coats flapping like the wings of Icarus, sheets of paper floating behind them like discarded feathers. Godzilla must be stopped, but Godzilla cannot be stopped. The National Guard shoots him with missiles and lasers, and he retaliates. His feet crush them. His breath turns them to dust, leaving nothing but blast-shadows on the ground.

But in Godzilla's wake, everyone sees the value of living. The suicide stops before pulling the trigger, realizing how wonderful life was in Godzilla's *absence*. The abusive father, spared between the toe-marks of a footprint, rushes home and hugs his wife and children. The corrupt executive who stayed home sick watches his office crumble on the evening news, and donates all of his money to charity.

Godzilla leaves and memorials are built. But Godzilla is still alive. The craters are filled with asphalt, the buildings are replaced, and the soldiers' outlines are painted or paved over. And although Godzilla could come back at any time, every day in which he does not appear is a good day. Every morning in which he is not on the horizon is a joy, and the sunrise is beautiful when he is not there to blot it out, and the cornflakes are sweet and rich, and the coffee is hot and invigorating.

### GODZILLA SWIMS

Godzilla is Gojira, gorilla-whale, although he is much bigger than either animal. And although on land he is clumsy and horrible, in the ocean he is beautiful.

He swims with perfect grace: his body traces an arc from head to tail, his spines luminesce, and a school of dolphins rushes through the space between his limbs. Godzilla destroys nothing when he is in the water. He lives off of plankton and the heat from deep-sea vents, and for years on end his conscience is untouched by violence. Underwater, his roar sounds deep and melodic. Submarine crews who hear it stop working, falling into reverential bliss.



When Godzilla sleeps, he dreams of life as a tadpole. His paws twitch, and the shoreline quakes.

### **GODZILLA VS MECHA-GODZILLA**

Godzilla comes to destroy us, and people ask *why* their hero has turned on them. News helicopters report a second Godzilla and people watch in horror, and then for a moment there are two Godzillas fighting. The flesh is stripped from one, and it is revealed to be a robot imposter: an evil clone. And missiles may shoot from its chest, and lasers may shoot from its eyes, but Godzilla the hero has come to fight it, although the battle will be hard.

People watch, and they wish that everything could be this easy: that every corrupt institution or failed hero could be revealed as a trick, and that the real thing—the good and pure original—could come riding back to victory. They wish that everything about themselves that is cruel or despicable could be an alien deception—something they could pummel to the sound of a triumphant symphony—and that they could be perfect parents or children or lovers or firefighters or painters.

Godzilla returns to the ocean covered in burns and wounds; his spine plates cracked and dripping ichor. He is unaware of how easy he has it, and that when people look at him and the shattered robot he leaves behind, they do so with envy.

### **GODZILLA IN MONSTER LAND**

Godzilla retires to Monster Land, where he lives in peace with the other monsters. The island is forested and dotted with volcanoes, and although there are military bases where men wear jumpsuits and hardhats, there is never any trouble. There is no realism in Monster Land: monsters that Godzilla has killed have come back to life and made friends with him. Spectators of crushed pedestrians live in the trees, smiling.

And although Monster Land is ridiculous, it is important to me. I need to know that, even in the face of Godzilla, things can turn out clean and well: that there is sense even in that which is stupid and terrible, and that good things will prevail.

The soldiers on the island all have dance parties in their jumpsuits and hardhats, and the sound of their music is cheerful. It echoes through the forest like an anthem.



**ALANA SCHAFFER**

Legs





**SARAH MARTINA**

## She Breathes In

Six years old, and already she knows that her body is not hers. WEBN, the modern rock station in Cincinnati, and home to the most offensive DJs on morning talk radio, puts up a billboard a few blocks from her house. A woman in a blue bikini stretches across the length of it, the words *on March 31st the top comes off* line her curves. The girl imagines that men wearing tight jeans and construction boots used buckets of sloppy adhesive to put up this sign in pieces, slowly covering up an advertisement for fast food. She holds her mother's hand and a cardboard sign as she stands in the gravel parking lot next to the highway overpass where the billboard sits on its metal stilts. The news cameras are there from two channels, and there is a reporter and a photographer from *The Post*. They take pictures of the woman on the billboard, but ignore the real women that surround her. Several days and several protests later, on March 31st, the top of the sign is taken off; the edge is jagged to look as though it had been torn. The model's head is ripped off along with the top of the sign, and driving by, the girl stares at this headless, nameless woman in a blue string bikini, call letters stamped across her chest.

\*\*\*

Your chest has never been as big as you wished, but when you complain about this he tells you that he is sure it's gotten bigger. He loves to trace the bones of your shoulder blades, he loves to rest his hand on the bones of your hips. You smile at this as you leave your last class, thinking to yourself that calculus is bad enough, calculus eighth bell is approaching ridiculous, and calculus eighth bell on a Friday is nothing short of unbearable. You catch his eye in the hallway, and his look unwinds you. His eyes are blue and his skin is dusty, and you want to lose yourself between his freckles, you want to bite your fingernails to the quick.

\*\*\*

She loses it, quickly, on the same day she got her first period, exactly three years later, but this time she knows what the blood is for. She loses it on a twin bed that belongs to her boyfriend's little brother. She is cloudy with alcohol but she can still feel the scratchy comforter patterned with red and blue dinosaurs rubbing against her bare legs. She wishes that she hadn't missed the spiky bits of hair on the bony parts of her knee when she shaved





## She Breathes In

*Continued*

and she wishes that she had removed the chipped blue polish from her fingers and toes. She watches his face, and she pretends that she loves this.

\*\*\*

You love, without pretense, your nakedness. This was not always so. It took a late night swim in the Atlantic Ocean for you to realize it. You undress beside your best friend and the sand on your bodies sparkles gold, your calves strain as you push through it toward the waves. This ocean is angry, it swirls silt furiously around you; this ocean is not timid like lake water, so still the entrance of a single toe disturbs its silence. In this ocean, you wonder at the brownness of your body and how quickly the dirt is swept from under your fingernails. The moon seems to light your skin from within, the blood in your veins is infused with silver metal. You watch your navel shiver as the line of the water reaches up to swallow it, and you crave words like *baptism*, *rebirth*, and *beauty*. You suck the salty water in through the gaps in your teeth, and you think of how you have always loved to spill table salt from its shakers and taste the scattered grains with a wet index finger. The stickiness of the water lingers on you like a second skin as you get out and wrap your towel around you. You think of another baptism, the one that you can only remember through photographs taken a month after you were born. You had a round belly, your tiny body was all belly. You picture it, smooth as a honeydew melon, glistening like how you imagine the skin of dolphins does. You feel so beautiful in this moment, and you are not afraid.

\*\*\*

The girl is afraid of the water falling on her; she will only take baths. Her mother has to shower with her, softening the hard fluoride of the city water solely by her presence. The girl stands under this new waterfall, her fingers wondering at her mother's stretch marks, the tiny pale scars tucked into the folds of her stomach betraying her three caesarian sections. Many years later when showers are an afterthought, she will no longer marvel at the sight of her mother's naked body. She will instead want to tell it to eat less, to exercise more, to hide itself under loose silk shirts. She pictures her mother getting ready for a party, seated naked on the floor struggling with a pair of pantyhose. She watches as her mother pulls them up high over her dimpled



thighs, her stomach, sealing herself in, the hair between her legs matted down underneath. Later when she pulls them off they will be wrinkly and stretched large; they will become a twisted ball on the bedroom floor, an ugly nest of brown.

\*\*\*

Brown hair is not exciting, and you know this. You go to expensive salons with your mother and watch as her curls are painted gold and folded into strips of shiny foil. You sit in an empty chair next to her and your little sister amuses herself by spinning you in circles, your face flashing quickly across the mirror opposite you. She smiles a cherry-chapstick grin and her hair reminds you that true highlights come from long hours spent running through the sprinkler and not the salon. Your mother is reading a magazine, and as you look around you realize she is the only one in the room who has not chosen something with a fresh-faced model on the cover. Her stylist approaches and unfolds the foil, and your mother's curls fall coffee-colored onto her shoulders.

\*\*\*

A young woman now, she goes to coffee shops so she can drown herself in large warm cups, so she can write without distraction, but she finds herself instead watching the women who gather there, judging herself against them as she judges herself against the women on glossy magazine covers. She goes to the bathroom and sits on the toilet imagining the hips, the hair, the faces that are attached to the feet she can see in the stalls next to her. She remembers a horror movie she once watched in which a woman is nearly killed in a bathroom with red stalls, a beautiful woman wearing a red dress and white nylons. When she returns to her table she is antsy; she finds herself looking behind her shoulder, unable to shake this image from her mind. When a man enters the coffee shop, bringing with him a gust of cold air, she convinces herself that he is carrying guns in his backpack, or thick knives, or even a bomb strapped to his chest, barely visible under his coat. And when this man explodes against her imagination, the women she has been watching are defenseless, and the pretty ones always go first.

\*\*\*





## She Breathes In

*Continued*

You love watching him drive, you really do; you are defenseless against it. You sit in the passenger seat and page through an Abercrombie catalog. The models are thin, piled into a white convertible, apparently on their way to go surfing, and yet you can't imagine wanting to be anywhere else, be anyone else. You simply love the way he sits, leaning back, with his left hand on the wheel and his right hand resting lazily on your knee. As he shifts from first to third, you notice that his hands are brown and his nails are so white. You love the way he uses his knees to steer when his hands are busy loading a CD, adjusting the heat, pushing buttons on the radio. Mostly, you love the way he turns to look at you at stop signs and red lights, leaning across the awkwardly placed console to kiss you or touch your hair. You are not and have never been a patient driver, but when you are in a car with him you find yourself secretly hoping to catch every red light.

\*\*\*

When she is in a car with him, she worries that he will run red lights, run stop signs, run over squirrels. She feels unwound, like her life is tied to a ball of yarn that has fallen from a rooftop somewhere. She can't help wondering if he would ever drive drunk. Sometimes he slams the door, sometimes she wants to slam it. He has a sticker on his steering wheel of the playboy bunny, and a hula girl stripped of her skirt dances on the dashboard. It bothers her when he doesn't wait for her to get into the house after dropping her off. He pulls the car into the driveway across the street to turn around, and so she gets out there, but only after kissing his cheek, running her fingers through his hair. She always runs up the sidewalk and up the steps, afraid to go slowly, her house key ready in her hand. By the time she reaches the shelter of the porch he is gone, his red taillights have disappeared around the corner.

\*\*\*

His red taillights disappear around the corner and you are so sad. You stand quietly as the snow is falling and your tears are falling and you want instead to kiss away the silver from his cheeks, the left and then the right, and taste salt. So you breathe deeply and imagine that in his car, a block away now, he inhales as you inhale and exhales as you exhale and you smile.



You have lost something beautiful yet again. You think of your grandmother, her gnarled hands, her nails thick and brittle. She was small and thin, and she cooked like only an Italian grandmother can—your father claimed she had olive oil running through her veins. You remember how she once broke through the static of your dream and whispered “look...,” tilting your face upward, to the trees growing in your bedroom, to the gnarled bedposts becoming trunks becoming branches becoming leaves that pushed through the cracks in the ceiling and sheltered you from the night. In the dust of your dreaming, she came to visit.

\*\*\*

A young woman now, and beautiful, she is visiting the new contemporary art museum with her boyfriend. They walk into the last room of the exhibit, and see three television screens attached to the high white walls. The first screen shows a woman, her body contorted, holding an unwavering acrobat’s pose. They move on. The second screen shows the same woman; she is sitting on a chair and her breasts are made of two ripe cantaloupes. She is eating the melon messily with a spoon, its peach flesh falling from her lips as she speaks of the women she has known. The young woman loves this, she thinks it is true. She stares at the screen, tells her boyfriend excitedly that it is about self-mutilation for the purpose of nourishment, pain and separation bringing beauty and wholeness. He tells her it disgusts him. The third screen makes them both stop. The same woman sits on a chair, her legs spread open for the camera, her face cropped off at the top. She dips a razor in water, and shaves herself violently between her thighs. The tight black curls fall away and her skin underneath becomes raw and goosebumped like a baby bird. An older couple walks by the screen, winces at the loud scratching of the razor. The man cradles his wife’s shoulder and calls it *pornographic*, his tongue snapping at the final sharp “c” of the word. They leave as the sequence ends, and the young woman watches the tape fade to a soft static, rewind, and begin again.





**SARAH MAYVILLE**

*Il Biglietto del Metro*

Descend down to the dark  
tunnel, past posters  
proclaiming upper world

events, shiny in the fluorescent lights  
revealing the winding hallway,  
littered with loose cigarettes

and ash, brown bags and bodies  
slumped in corners, rank with piss  
and stale air. Winding, *avanti*,

*da Manarolo*, the hollow worm hole  
and platform appear, damp with dank,  
dripping water puddling on

*bianco* marble, drool from the earthy  
ceiling above. A stray woman  
hunches over her bags, silver-gray

hairs poking out like quills,  
disconnected gaze glancing toward  
the flickering sidelights

of the track, matching  
their oscillations to that of her breath,  
waiting for some lifeless animal

to emerge. Feverishly clanking,  
the blind beast rattles  
through, chasing dead air,



throwing it against our  
bodies, a nauseous  
wind grabbing at loose,

white, paper *biglietti* that flutter  
out of grasping hands, drawn  
to the intestinal underbelly

of the monster. Tricked  
by some visceral vacuum, lost  
fireflies migrate towards

impulsive lights, the gleam  
of flying desire echoed in the child's eyes  
as he leapt from the roof

towards stars unreachable  
in the celestial night  
and fell

becoming bone structure  
of the steel soil walls while singing  
soulful arias to decorate

the desolate curtain,  
waving to Charon who  
ferries us down the river

Lethe, as we swallow forgetful  
white paper breath under  
a dirt sky.





**LISA FINDLEY**

salt of the earth

*“Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah...But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” Genesis 19:24, 26*

desert wind flagellated  
our wicked shoulders.  
i smelled danger,  
the sulfur burning  
our home, too close.  
i feared for my daughters.  
i turned to challenge  
the sand that flamed  
with judgment.  
i inhaled the angel’s fury  
and smoldered with no  
second chances.  
i crystallized.  
i was the salt.





**WILL MILLER**

**Honduran Dinner Sonnet with Friends**

Just after I got twelve hundred lempiras  
(under a spinning roof of woven thatch  
which seeped silt like leakage through sluiceways)  
for eating twelve fish eyes at once

(a bleary,

boogery taste, chased with sourmash—  
went out perchance to retch)

culled from six plates,

I leaned out backward into the downpour  
(with both my elbows wrapped around a railing)  
and caught the rain in my mouth. I gargled, spat,  
and—saw a skiff. Two men inside. One oared  
it out into the churning bay, one bailed.  
Their rods and reels and nets all piled in back.

I longed

(from where I stood they were the size

of fish)

to cast, to reel, to eat their eyes.





**TIFFANY ANTOR**

Healing  
*(Mary)*

Grandma had no makeup in  
the medicine cabinet,  
just ipecac, a spool

of cream thread, a tiny cross,  
and Infant Jesus of Prague, who

rested on the porcelain next to me  
during my bath. My cheeks were both  
swollen with mumps, my body

had not yet begun to bloom or stretch—  
I still believed I was made  
in His image. All Grandma

had was prayers and a rosary,  
nothing for the pain,

no hot chocolate or broth to make  
my heart warm. Just a musty, barren  
house, the cave before He rose again.





**JESS ALPER**

## Acid Things

It only takes about fifteen minutes, but it feels longer because it is raining. My mother used to tell me raindrops were God's tears—once I caught one on my tongue and panicked because there was no salt. That was when I began to fear God, the invisible man who cries cold fat flavorless drops that darken clouds and make the whole sky break open. I've never seen my dad cry. When he told me about the Holocaust, I thought he was going to; his eyes looked shiny and wet and I waited, but tears never came. When I lie under my bed during thunderstorms I am hiding from Jesus, not lightning. I make my mother check my closets for Nazis.

In the summer between third and fourth grade, my sister climbs every tree on our block. Erin is two years older and three inches taller. She is friends with everyone in her grade. She is thinner and blonder and smiles faster than I do, and I am beginning to learn what this means. I am scared of the rope that swings from the ceiling in gym class. Every Monday I feel a little bit sick.

From across the kitchen table I watch my sister swallow Cheerios; I reach for the box before she takes her second bite. When Erin complains to our father that I am copying her again I deny it, even muster indignation at the accusation. Never mind that sugarless cereal makes my stomach turn or that I have to suppress my gag reflex to finish the bowl; at ten years old I am already learning to believe my own lies.

The girl down the street helps us pick chestnuts. Her name is Laura. She smells like leather and cigarettes. We have buckets and a wheelbarrow and gardening gloves stained with apple pulp and the insides of worms. Erin, Laura and I put nuts in one pile and husks in another. I slip my right hand out of its glove and stroke the velvety interior of a chestnut shell, carefully shielding my skin from the surrounding spikes. I have never felt such softness before. When Laura sees me slacking she calls me names I've never heard, hissing swear words through vocal chords strained from smoking in what sounds like a witch's curse or a Hebrew prayer. Before I realize what I'm doing I am running to my house. Laura hurls husks at my back and they cling to my clothes; I can't turn around or she'll see me crying. I slam the front door. Beneath the bed I barely fit under anymore, I curl my knees to my chin and curse Laura and my sister for not stopping her.





## Acid Things

*Continued*

All the kids in my neighborhood play hide-and-go-seek. We can use the entire subdivision as long as we promise to come home when the streetlights come on. The teams are always the same: boys against girls. Boys can run faster but girls are better at hiding; we know how to fit into small spaces and avoid being seen. Seventh grade summer, Jason Bradshaw, the oldest boy on our block, finds me in my secret spot out back by the pine trees. I resign myself to being caught, but he doesn't want to tag me. It only takes about fifteen minutes, but it feels longer because it is raining. The streetlights flicker in violent fluorescence as I vomit into my hair and stumble home on aching thighs. I ask my mother to check my closet before bed. Erin rolls her eyes and tells me to grow up. Six years later the smell of pine will still make me nauseous, but I don't know that yet. Mom says I am too old to be afraid all the time.

My mother tells me I might start my period before my sister gets hers because *Erin is so lean and mean*. I scowl out the car window and wrap my arms tightly across my torso in case the seatbelt isn't strong enough to keep my skeleton from falling out of my body. I wake up three months later with my thighs covered in blood. When weeks later, Erin knocks softly at my door and asks for Tampax without meeting my eyes, I feel smug and shamefaced and slightly sick all at once. It is the first time she has ever asked me for anything. I shove the box at her and lock my door when she leaves. I take off all of my clothes and stand naked in front of my full-length mirror until my mother calls me downstairs for dinner. I break bread into pieces and swirl strands of spaghetti in spiraling circles. I excuse myself while Erin is still eating. The garbage disposal roars in triumph, drowning out the meeker mumbblings of my still empty stomach.

The girls' names written in reprimand on first grade chalkboards graduate to the stalls of boys' bathrooms in high school. My name never makes it to either. Before my voice was too soft and my handwriting too round; now my grades are too high and I don't wear enough eyeliner. In both cases I am secretly disappointed. Melanie moves to my school too late for playground prestige, but she is quickly able to achieve the reverence and revulsion that graffiti glory grants girls. She talks louder and faster than anyone I've ever known; when she laughs she throws her head back and opens her mouth so

wide I can see silver fillings flash in the light. I've never had a single cavity. I can't believe my luck when she invites me to her party planned for Friday, when her parents will be leaving for Florida. After school I drive downtown and buy six sticks of eyeliner.

His tongue is kind of coated, so that kissing him feels like licking an envelope. His lips are softer than the insides of chestnuts; his mouth is wetter and warmer than raindrops or tears. He tells me I'm beautiful so many times I begin to believe him. He slides his hand up my denim thigh and I push it away. He brings it back and I stand up, saying I have to go. He says *No don't...* and I roll my eyes. He asks if he can call me later and I smirk, *Whatever*. As I walk away I feel his eyes trailing after me. I toss my hair with the arrogant adolescent grace of girls who know they are being watched.

"Creep" by Radiohead is playing softly on the CD player. I accept the joint Melanie passes and sink further down into the beanbag chair. I close my eyes as I inhale: *I don't care if it hurts...* I know all the words by ear; so does Melanie. It is one of our shared favorite songs. *I want to have control...* I listen intently; the silence feels profound. I don't like singing in front of people. When I do it's mostly just to show off how well I know the lyrics, to make sure the people around me know that I know their songs. I don't need to prove anything here in Melanie's bedroom, where my mother jokes we practically live. Sometimes I wish that I did live here; sometimes I hate to go home. *I want a perfect body, I want a perfect soul...*

I want to live in the space inside sound. I want to burrow beneath backbeats and rise over rhythms. I want to slide into Thom Yorke's voice and shroud my skin in the fraying silk of his sadness. I want to absorb the acoustic sweetness of self-deprecation. I want to bleed base lines; I want to travel in waves. I exhale. I open my eyes. It's more than just knowing the words: I feel them, I breathe them, I am them. I smile at Melanie through the smoke and feel a rush of warmth surge through me. If I ever live inside music, I want her there, too.

We steal Dexatrim from the drugstore and skip all the way home. I recite my student council speech from memory and Melanie says to speak louder on stage. I tell her microphones make me nervous and she pushes me off the edge of the sidewalk. A Jeep filled with frat boys flies by and the driver leans



## Acid Things

*Continued*

on the horn. I jump; Melanie brandishes both middle fingers. When the next car catcalls we shout *Fuck you!* in unison. I square my shoulders to make my shadow match Melanie's.

Erin is elected student body president the same day I'm named secretary. She brushes off our mother's compliments, claiming *It's just a popularity contest*. She glances at me; we both know that's why it matters. Mom takes us out to dinner to celebrate the power of cliques and politics. I throw up in the girls' room while she and my sister sip coffee and anticipate college applications. I don't know how to take minutes and consider asking Erin, since she steals mine with such careless grace.

The first time I give a blowjob he comes before I am ready. I swallow quickly and think, *So that's where God's salt goes*. It's just like men to steal from the rain. Aside from the timing, it's the way I thought it would be; Melanie told me everything to expect in advance. The last time I tried talking to Erin about anything remotely related to sex, she confided her crush on Jason Bradshaw. *He liked you way back in middle school, you're so lucky... Did he ever do anything about it?* Erin wanted to know.

I walked through the backyard blaring Radiohead in my headphones without singing along. It's starting to sprinkle; when I wipe my face I imagine my eyeliner running in the rain, smearing black swastikas over my cheekbones. Out back I kneel on a bed of pine needles, knowing my mother can't see this far from the house. My stomach is already stirring from the smell; I thrust my fingers as far back in my throat as they'll go. I gag. Melanie told me most girls do at first, but then you get used to it. My vomit tastes like chestnuts and Cheerios. I realize I am too old to ever stop feeling afraid.

It only takes about fifteen minutes, but it feels like longer because it is raining.



**LYNN BREWER**

## Dancesteps

In high school I hid from my family. I hid for four years in a bunker in our basement. As soon as I arrived home every day at 3:20, I grabbed a cereal box and scampered down concrete steps with Mulligan trailing behind. An unknown number of blankets littered the floor beside six or seven pillows, all leftovers of dream bedrooms and dream living rooms. The entertainment system was badly outdated—a telly from the 70s and a stereo system complete with three-foot-high speakers from the 80s. The wooden-paneled walls always managed to tickle my nose with cedar. This was my haven, my protection that was stronger than a castle but more delicate than a latex condom.

From down there I could hear their entrances, each one as prompt as an actor's cue. My mother would already be home when I arrived, and her heeled pumps tapped above me in the kitchen as she prepared the roast/meatloaf/casserole. The taps passed over my head as they traveled from the oven to the television in an endless orbit. Her quick steps kept me company while Mulligan delicately padded into my lap and settled himself, head resting on my inner thigh and tail flipping gently over my crossed ankles.

At precisely 3:50, the screen banged open and two new sets of feet clattered above me, momentarily waking Mulligan. My brother, with his loping gallop in Velcro sneakers, headed straight for the telly to change the channel. My sister's feet passed over me on the way to the pantry, where she would remain for seven minutes as she debated whether to eat or not. Every day, after her self-conscious body and adolescent brain told her to wait until dinner, her combat boots barreled up the carpeted stairs to her bedroom, outside my hearing range. I listened to the patterns my mother and my brother made, a sort of auditory Morse code that I received but could not interpret. We remained like this for over an hour, with my mother surrounded by her children, above, below, and before her.

My father entered the scene promptly at 5:30, his shoes clicking on the red-orange ceramic tiles. My brother's gallop ran to meet his clicks as they ascended the staircase together. Minutes later they returned, and the clicks met the taps as my parents kissed each other. Fifteen minutes later a bell rang throughout the house, calling everyone to dinner to eat the roast/meatloaf/casserole.





## Dancesteps

*Continued*

I returned to the safety of the soft bunker floor less than an hour later, usually bearing scraps of meat for Mulligan. As his rough pink tongue caressed my fingers, I listened to the boots move out of range, the gallop gravitate back to the telly, and the clicks and taps circle each other from the table to the sink. Everyone's movement slowed at this point for the rest of the evening. Perhaps the taps searched for the boots, maybe the gallop would hover toward the clicks. Inevitably, the clicks followed my route down the stairs but stopped at the secondary fridge. This fridge bored me, for it was filled with nothing but alcohol, and the bottle hadn't started its siren song to me quite yet. The clicks returned upstairs.

Near nine, a white-haired head poked its way into my bunker. Gamma lived above the garage, a separate building connected to the house by an underground tunnel. It had been used to transport runaway slaves in the 19th century and liquor during Prohibition. Gamma asked about school, friends, writing. I asked about relatives in England, PBS programs, National Geographic articles. Finally, she'd cross the room so I could stand and kiss her cheek, soft as flannel and smelling of lavender and Earl Gray. Gamma's slippered steps joined the rest, pausing beside the taps and clicks before meeting the gallop.

Soon her soft steps prodded the gallop upstairs to bed. The next to retreat was the taps. The clicks waited until the steps returned and left for their own bed. Finally, after setting the coffeemaker and turning off lights, the clicks ascended the stairs for the night, leaving me and Mulligan to face the late night silence by ourselves, where we would try and decipher the Morse codes long after they were received.



**STACIE REMENSNYDER**

two-fold

The Religious man

is God-fearing,

Church-going,

His crucifix clock  
sits above the television

next to a stack  
of vintage *Playboy* magazines.

The religious man  
hopes that his daughters fear God.

He enjoys watching  
as they undress.





**JESS ALPER**

## Learning to Walk Broken

I remember when we realized  
We were more real than everyone else.  
We were only eighteen then;  
Was it something about the end of the summer?

We were more real than everyone else.  
We knew little girl secrets and witch women spells.  
Was it something about the end of the summer?  
The leaves on the trees were already changing.

We knew little girl secrets and witch women spells.  
You showed me your scars and I told you his name.  
The leaves on the trees were already changing;  
I felt myself falling before, you let go.

You showed me your scars and I told you his name.  
*You can tell by the way a girl walks if she's been broken—*  
I feel myself falling before you let go.  
The trees released their leaves and my body peeled off in pieces.

*You can tell by the way a girl walks if she's been broken—*  
My thighs hurt that night when I walked home alone.  
I can hardly remember his face.  
The rotting leaves smelled like semen and blood.

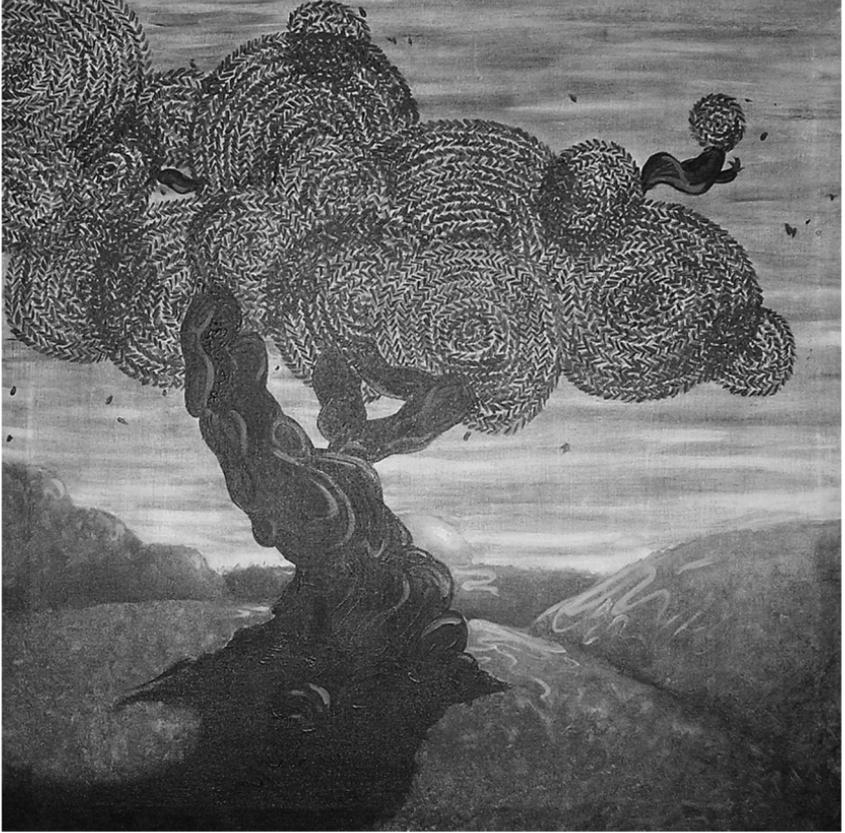
Reality resides in the scar tissue of summer.  
I remember when we realized  
the rotting leaves smelled like semen and blood.  
We were only eighteen then.





**MICHELLE HAUK**

Bodhi Tree





**MICHAEL D. WHITE**

## Princess Suburbia

*Commercial Power and the Teenage Subject*

*One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.*

—Simone de Beauvoir

In an ordinary suburban house, on a lovely tree-lined street, in the middle of 1970s America, lived the five beautiful, dreamy Lisbon sisters, whose doomed fates indelibly marked the neighborhood boys who to this day continue to obsess over them. What happened to the Lisbon sisters is a tale at once darkly funny and deeply poignant, a story of love and repression, fantasy and terror, sex and death, memory and longing. It is at its core a mystery story: a heart-rending investigation into the impenetrable, life-altering secrets of American adolescence. Based on Jeffrey Eugenides' acclaimed novel, *The Virgin Suicides* is a dark, grown-up fairy tale carved out of the funny-sad fabric of suburban teenhood. The film is written and directed by Sofia Coppola, who makes her feature film directorial debut.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing on earth will ever allow me to access precisely what it is to be a 13 year-old girl. It's tough enough trying to negotiate being a teenage boy. The social expectations, the responsibilities, the hormones, the interactions, the differences in perspective...all of these things rise into the slightly sweaty spectrum of awkward teenage boyhood. If I just barely balance all of these on my own plate, how can I even attempt to understand the existence of a teenage girl? I can stand on the outside of that world and try to peek in—magazines, movies, and television shows try to provide me with that perspective, but often by mortgaging certitude for the glitz of mainstream Hollywood commercialism. However, I do have some experience in the business of being a teenage boy. Perhaps this is why I connect with the imagery in Sofia Coppola's debut film, *The Virgin Suicides*. Based on Jeffrey Eugenides' cult novel, *The Virgin Suicides* vividly depicts the struggle of five beautiful teenage sisters to make it through the awkwardness of adolescence as seen through the longing gaze of the neighborhood boys. The novel is actually about the role perception plays in forging memories, and the affective capabilities of our memories. The musical score meshes seamlessly with the poignant familiarity of the *mise en scene* at any given point in the film to evoke strong notions of nostalgia from the audience. By filming through the tortured and peripheral memory of the adolescent boy, Coppola presents a startlingly realistic portrait of the life of teenage girls.



As a 19 year-old college student interested in film criticism, I watch *The Virgin Suicides* with a critical eye: I know that the image of 13 year-old Cecilia Lisbon, blood creeping into the bathtub from her recently slit wrists, is designed to grab the breath from my throat. The sunny, backlit shots of the Lisbon sisters hope to portray the anxious wonder and tragicomic nature of being a teenager. I can recognize these images as potent and manipulative; they *do*, in fact, remind me of this anxious and epic time. The images presented in *The Virgin Suicides* are so precise that they, in fact, can be dangerous if not consumed by the proper audience. *The Virgin Suicides*, a poignant and powerful independent art film, is marketed for girls and women ages 12-22; some critics even argued that it should have been granted a PG-13 rating instead of the R rating that it did receive. These critics argue that the sex and violence are minimal; thus, the film is appropriate for younger audiences.

I focus on specific trees as we fly by them, forcing my eyes to arrest each and every cylinder as we pass, but I eventually grow exhausted and let them fade into a greenish-brown blur. Surprisingly enough, my mind wanders to *The Virgin Suicides* as I stare out the car window, rushing to the hospital. My thoughts are stained with the graphic demonstrations of suicide and the majestic teenage rebellion from the film, and I keep wondering how I'd let Kait see them, why I hadn't had more foresight or discretion. Could this film have had any effect on her? Did Kait think the glossy suicides on screen looked like a viable alternative to teen life?

My sister Kaitlin is 16 years old, and she's remarkable. One of the prettiest and most talented people I've ever met, Kaitlin has always been one of the popular girls in school; she's the one that looks like she belongs on the cover of *Seventeen*. With all these assets, shouldn't she be the happiest person I know? Social interaction, she tells me, proves difficult at times. The reason? She'll tell you it's because she's depressed. I think she's just too smart for her own good. A little bit of intellect and zero discretion can be a dangerous combination when attempting to navigate the vicious liquid of teenage existence.

Most of Kaitlin's brash actions betray her true reflexivity. Not only does Kait actively participate in activities in her high school such as track, theatre,



## Princess Suburbia

*Commercial Power and the Teenage Subject*

*Continued*

and student council, she also likes to play piano and write in journals. Kait has more journals than I can count—*never* a diary, mind you—and they are all the colors of the rainbow. She once showed me one of them. It was in the shape of a butterfly, and the cover had little magenta and teal plastic jewels. She had it opened to a specific page for me; Kaitlin wanted me to read about how angry she was at our stepfather. With her permission, I flipped through the rest of the journal, my eyes occasionally stopping to peruse a page more closely. Kaitlin's handwriting is not especially elegant or stereotypically feminine; in fact, she usually scribbled upon the pages in marker. One page in particular caught my eye. In black indelible ink, Kait had written the words: BEAUTIFUL DEATH PAIN LOVE SINKING JOHN TEARS. Under these words, a few scrawled flowers, an angel, an awkward lightning bolt, and a skull, two black bones crossed beneath its toothy grin. Kait had never been an artist, and this was made particularly clear by her journal sketch. Some of the words on the page looked as though they had been carved into the paper with a knife; others seemed only to be angry splotches. I asked her what this entry meant, and she told me that I wouldn't understand. That I couldn't. She took the journal away from me, and there on the back, once again in nearly illegible black permanent marker, was a word. A cartoon heart surrounded the word, and both heart and name were barely visible beneath the large Xs she'd drawn over the entire page. I looked at the drawing, then at her, and tried to understand the situation. At best, I tried to cope with the possibility of her statement being true. Maybe Kait was right. Maybe I couldn't understand.

*The Virgin Suicides* is a film about the five beautiful Lisbon sisters who, given the chance, would probably agree with my sister's contention about the impossible ambiguity of the teenage girl. How am I so blind to Kait's problems? I'd grown up with images of teenage girls permeating my perception of them. Most of these images were archetypes created by men: the naive slut, the prude intellectual, the party girl, the tragic poetess, the perky athlete. They appeared on television shows that portrayed high schools; all I had to do to please them was slip a sweet note into their locker and maybe meet them after school with a flower. Clearly, the television producers had figured out teenage girls—why couldn't I? Age and education

provided perspective, and eventually I saw how media representations were almost wholly problematic. The images of women I saw on television were a result of both social gender construction and a primarily male hegemony in the media hierarchy. However, occasionally a work of art provides an accurate portrayal of the female identity. After reading Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola was so impressed with the poignancy with which the girl's situation was dealt that she wrote a screenplay based on the book, despite her inability to obtain the rights to produce the film. Jeffrey Eugenides' heartfelt novel captures the essence of true adolescent obsession, and Sofia Coppola transforms the dry irony of Eugenides' tone into beautiful cinematography.

The reason I feel so frustrated when my sister refuses to seek my help or even hear my advice is because I feel like someone who *must* know what with what she is dealing. *I* grew up in this same house; *I* went to a same-sex catholic prep school; *I* got in just as many fights with my parents as she does; *I'm* bipolar. "Kait," I'll moan, "how can you think you're in this all by yourself? I'm right here! I did this too!" This is one problem with teenage social perception, particularly of those teens with depression. The individual sees herself as the center of a swiftly expanding and increasingly tumultuous universe.

My mother tries to find consolation in me: "She's just so ego-centric. She has no basis to draw from. She can't draw from others' experience to gain perspective. She's so young." I hug my mother, but I'm just as perplexed about how to help Kait. Dealing with Kaitlin is like walking the tightrope: one quick move, and serious damage could be done.

However, some people do understand precisely what it was like to be a teenage girl; these people were once teenage girls themselves. Twenty-seven year-old Sofia Coppola is well-equipped to capture this viewpoint; it's not so long ago that she herself was a teenage girl. Her *Virgin Suicides* is so effective as an art film because of its attention to detail: the fascination with pseudo-religious images such as crosses and the Virgin Mary, the name of the girl's crush written on her underwear, the fantasy of global voyages played out in the pages of mail-order travel magazines. People who view these images can relate to the way they are depicted, whether due to a



Continued



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*Commercial Power and the Teenage Subject*

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similarity to their own perception or due to these images echoing their own experience. For instance, I remember when religious iconography fascinated me, and though I never wrote anyone's name in my underwear, Lux Lisbon doing so in the film reminds me a bit of Kait writing her crush's name in a heart with permanent marker on the back of her notebook, her pledge of devotion, only to cross it all out when her mood changes.

Though Coppola's films are brilliant and poignant, they present some very real problems to the greater social landscape. *The Virgin Suicides* opens with the line: "Everyone dates the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry." Coppola does a good job of shooting the film from the boys' perspective: the Lisbon house is always shot from across the street to give the appearance of the spectator's gaze; the camera plays over trinkets and objects that belong to the girls in a very voyeuristic way. Even though the film is specifically about the lives of five girls, their voices are muffled, in fact, provided only via the memories of men, the neighborhood boys across the street.

The gaze of the male narrator helps dictate the position of women in society. Some critics have (I feel, correctly) viewed the conclusion of the film in which the five girls take their own lives as the film's discursive metaphor—the ultimate silencing of the female voice.

As the opening line suggests, the girls' suicide brings about a change in the neighborhood that is devastating; in fact, the girls' deaths signal the symbolic unraveling of the community. This is a critical take on the function of the female characters as symbols in a sociological landscape. It would be easy to get lost in a sea of attempts to denote precisely what semiotic theory these characters serve to prove. However, by realizing that *any* system of denotation is problematic and implicates women into semiotic interlocutorship without consultation, the critical viewer will stumble upon a much greater problem of how to determine what constitutes a 'positive image'. In her article "There's More to a Positive Image Than Meets the Eye," Diane Waldman critiques the structural rubric that film critics Artel and Wengraf devised to determine the possibility of positive sociological effects of cinematic imagery. "*Positive Images* seems to be predicated upon a notion

of a sexist society and media, but with little analysis of how this sexism functions in an advanced industrial capitalist society...the notion of the 'positive image' is predicated upon the assumption of *identification* of the spectator with a character depicted in the film" (Erens 17). This immediately constructs a relationship between the boys and girls of *The Virgin Suicides* diegesis. The boys hold the power to speak about the girls and provide them a voice in a greater social context. The boys can afford to misinterpret the girls' cues and be wowed by their beauty and elusiveness since *they* are the scribes of the girls' story. In fact, this precise circumstance makes Jeffrey Eugenides' book particularly poignant and often beautiful.

However, the confluence of Eugenides' and Coppola's artistic vantages becomes absolutely harmful. Eugenides' enigmatic portrayal of the Lisbon suicides receives proper development throughout the book. Through the prying eyes and telescope lenses of the neighborhood boys, he can actually examine the conception of memory and go so far as to question the *ability* of concrete memories to effectively capture actual events. Part of the poignant beauty of the novel is the absolute inability of the pimply teenage narrators to possibly understand what psychological justification these transcendent deities had for killing themselves. However, once these atrocious acts are portrayed on screen by beautiful and talented actresses, displayed in haunting color schemes, and mired in a comfortable and even dreamlike musical score, the suicides seem like an act of inexplicable agency.

This solution is thus presented: If you are a teenage girl living in a difficult, confusing, and restrictive home, killing yourself will eradicate the problem. People will continue to mourn and ponder you, in fact, obsess over you. Your solemn act will permanently weave your name into the tapestry of time. The representation of this tragedy is so light-hearted—romantic, even—that it seems reverent and fantasized. Listen to that dreamlike melody in the background.... While books are a form of media unafraid of leaving its audience with a challenging ending, the viewers of films are more accustomed to a material conclusivity. One of the attractive attributes of films is their tendency to present a problem and a solution within the same text; in this sense, we watch films precisely because of their finitude!



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However, this reading of *The Virgin Suicides* is problematic: the lights go down, the music comes up, and the viewer gets the point—suicide makes sense. The idea of death is made beautiful.

Kaitlin saw *The Virgin Suicides* when she was 13 years old. Ever since she tried to commit suicide, I've been curious about her relationship with the film. I've spoken to her at length about it:

I first saw *The Virgin Suicides* in the seventh grade. I'd heard about it from my friend...I didn't really know what it was about, but...virgins, suicides...sounded interesting. I used to think I was Cecilia because we both wrote in journals about dead trees and we both wanted to die so badly.

This is my primary concern with *The Virgin Suicides*. Author Jeffrey Eugenides tells a story about obsession in suburbia with accuracy that is at once both frightening and enticing. When the doctor in the hospital insists that Cecilia, the youngest Lisbon daughter, hasn't been alive long enough to see how bad life can really get, it is with a smug (and perhaps slightly misguided) irony that Eugenides has her respond: "Obviously you've never been a 13 year-old girl, Doctor." The novel's intoxicating images are safely formed in the reader's conscious. When this line is embodied by real words spoken by a real actress on screen, the line is not ironic. Coppola presents with painstaking accuracy to just what lengths a 13 year-old may go in order to ease her pain. When my 13 year-old sister saw it, she felt her pain to be just as inescapable as Cecilia's. Kaitlin's languid tone frightens me more than her words: "I used to think I was Cecilia...I wrote in my journal, looked at the trees. I thought it was so cool that we both had entries in our journals about dead trees."

In the car riding to the hospital, I'm mentally running my finger over all of the artifacts that lay there, cluttering her desk. Could I have paid more attention to her? Could I have looked harder for warning signs? The urgent silence in the car makes me flip through the sticky pages of my scrapbook memory: I remember how my parents screamed at Kait for wrapping her wrists in gauze and taping countless plastic bracelets together in order to hide the bandages. My parents, like the Lisbon parents, cannot seem to find a

reason as to why Kaitlin acts the way she does. Maybe it's just because they hadn't seen *The Virgin Suicides* and realized that Kait was merely emulating Cecilia.

One reading this might wonder why those around her had *let* Kaitlin see this film. It's a substantive claim. If the girl is depressed, maybe she shouldn't be watching a film called *The Virgin Suicides*. However, how could Kaitlin be anything but allured by the way the film was marketed? The trailer for the film teases the viewer<sup>2</sup>; shots of beautiful girls and a male pop icon in a swimsuit are interspersed with these words:

LOVE DEATH SEX PASSION FEAR OBSESSION  
BEAUTIFUL, MYSTERIOUS, HAUNTING, INVARIABLY FATAL.  
JUST LIKE LIFE.

What teenager wouldn't want to watch this film? Hell, *I* was attracted to the film. I flip a few pages more through this none too vibrant book of memories.... There was a period of time during which Kait was going to group therapy daily; she had to be pulled from public school. I could drive a car now, so she constantly begged me: "Please, Mike! Can we go buy *Virgin Suicides*?! I found it at Walgreens!" Located about one mile from our house is a Walgreens store, so close that Kait eventually walked to the store to go purchase it. I, however, refused to let her watch that movie again, and felt profoundly guilty for ever letting her see it in the first place. One reason Kait likes this movie so much: teen heartthrob Josh Hartnett. "I saw Josh Hartnett on the cover at the video store, and I wanted to see it. Yeah, and Kirsten Dunst is my favorite actress. I knew Dad would get it because it had James Woods in it...."

*The Virgin Suicides* as a film does no work to separate itself from its subject. The opening credits of the film appear in a font emulating that of a girl's diary. As the Lisbon girls are introduced to the viewer, each of their names appears beside them in the same font. Several pop bands that appeal to younger kids provide the musical score. Teenagers are the social demographic with the most expendable income, and the distributors of this film made sure to find those dollars. Kait bought two copies of *The Virgin*





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*Suicides*. Mom took one from under her bed and threw it away; I took her other copy. I remember feeling guilty for taking something from her, rendering her purchase a complete waste of money. I flip my mental scrapbook all the way to the back, to today's page. My feet barely scrape the sterile and hollow ground as we pass through the mechanized doors of the hospital. Now I feel guilty for watching the film with her in the first place. I squeeze my wrist and curse my lack of foresight, frantically searching for some fucking sign that will lead me to intensive care. Emergency Room. Cafeteria. Visitor's Center. Sorrow smears the pages of my scrapbook memory with tears, making sure nary the salty drop falls from my eye. Anger forces an extra spurt of power into my step.

Someone could look at my sister's case and call it all a fluke. Research funded by marketers hoping to justify their product that causes social violence will state that human behavior is too complex to assume that images that are input into the human brain will cause tangible damage. Usually, these "researchers" are defending the right to produce violent or sexual video games. I, however, stand with feminist theorists such as Catharine MacKinnon, who claim that yes, human behavior *is* too complex to explain through the consumption of a particular product, such as pornography, violent video games, or a movie aimed at teenagers portraying teen suicide. However, these materials *do* affect the viewer's perception of the person or thing that is objectified in the film. If a male subject witnesses enough images of submissive women in pornography, then his paradigm for sexual arousal will eventually be based on a woman's submissiveness, and then, given countless mitigating circumstances and unknown variables, would be more likely to do violence in order to make a woman submissive, thus satiating his sexual desire. A similar subconscious process occurs in the uncritical minds of the intended audience of *The Virgin Suicides*. Of course my sister wanted to see the film. Unfortunately, she felt the need to emulate the girls in it.

I asked my sister to expand on how she felt the film affected her. Don't get me wrong—I'm not charging the film responsible for my sister's attempt to take her own life. However, her language certainly seems informed by the ideas displayed in Coppola's film. I just let her talk, at times her voice



sounding bell tones, other times, striking violent chords. The tone of her voice switches from derisive to desperate, and her baited breath provides tragic counterpoint to the frantic words drippingfallingexploding from her lips. Listening to her, sometimes it's difficult not to grimace.

I just love that movie. I love the music, I love the Trip Fontain-ness of it. I find his rebelliousness so attractive; the fact that he went to all the trouble of meeting Lux's parents in order to get her to go to the dance with him. He's the rebellious football player who smokes and has the cool car. I don't know. I just want it. I have hurt myself. I tell myself all the time that I'm not good enough. As much as I think it in my head and at home, I know that I can go out and get any guy I wanted. I dress that way, I get the attention, and that is how I get my love. That's why my dream is to be a model and to be a movie star, and that is how people will love me. I know it's shallow, but that's how I act. I know I'm mean to everyone, but in the moment, that's just how I act. I get so frustrated: my father vents to me, my mother vents to me, my stepparents vent to me, about each other and about me. I don't need to worry about how many hours my parents work. It's immature on their part. They show me bills to show me how much I cost him. It's dumb, and it hurts, and no one recognizes it but me. I have two father figures, but neither is my father. I feel like I'm in a war all the time, and nothing can be satisfactory. I've got enough problems on my own. I've got bigger fish to fry. I know I should be worrying about grades, and what parties I'm going to, when I'm gonna have sex and why, and that kind of stuff...I should be reading girl magazines. I don't even have any anymore. I see the movie, and it makes suicide look so wonderful. No more...any of this, no more tears... I have depression for the rest of my life, I'm gonna have children with depression, I don't want to deal with that shit.

I look at the way Kaitlin comports herself. She's a pretty girl, and I'm always hearing how she wants a new boyfriend, and how happy she was when she sees both boys and girls stare at her exposed midriff as she walks through the grocery store. Kaitlin is ever so anxious to put on her bikini top and short shorts to go mow the lawn, even if it's a little chilly, just as Lux, without fail, appears on her front lawn, sunbathing, earning herself "a free demonstration" from the grinning middle-aged knife sharpener. The similarity between Lux and Kaitlin (aside from striking aesthetic likenesses) is their



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constant desire for external verification. Lux rebels against her parents' ideals by sneaking men up to her roof to have sex. She usually finishes with a post-coital cig. Whether beckoning for attention or dispelling a preconceived authoritative notion, Lux is the theoretical embodiment of my sister's desire for the gaze. She calls it upon herself, and judges her self-worth based on other's reactions. This makes me recall part of our conversation:

My therapist asks me: Do you even love anybody? I realize: No, I don't. I don't even love myself. I *do*, but I feel so ugly right now, sitting in my house, gaining weight....When I don't feel pretty to myself, I feel wrong as a person. I feel like there's no beauty on the inside; there's so much hate in my body. I know this sounds weird, but sometimes I feel like I *need* to be sad. I explained to mom how the therapist went (sparsely, because usually I talk to the shrink about my parents), and I told mom, 'I'm just going to go run.' Little tears would come out, but I wouldn't let myself cry. I can't cry; I don't know why. I have to feel sorry for myself in order to be ok, but I tell myself that *that's* stupid. I'll probably let myself cry before I go to sleep, but I don't know. I'm busy. It's just rough. I'm such a bitch. I feel so discouraged going to high school because I just want to go out there and *be* a star. If I make it, my high school will be wasted. I go to school, but I don't make memories. I look at those girls on screen, and I'm so jealous. I want their boyfriends, and I wonder why I don't have a boyfriend. I want their friends. I hate talking to my step mom because she relates my brushes with suicide with those of *her* daughter...we're not the fucking same! I don't deal with this depression or anger; I just scream it out.

These words sting when I compare them to the dialogue and actions of the characters in *The Virgin Suicides*. And you know what? Our parents (all four: mom, dad, new stepmom, stepdad) are *not* the restrictive and bumbling Lisbons. Our parents work with Kaitlin, take her to counseling, attend group therapy (I go, too), and ask me for my advice. They are tender; they are firm. My mom seems to have read an entire series of therapy books with titles like *Raising A Daughter: A Mother's Guide to Sanity* and many more. My mom, though devout, has never asked Kait to "burn her rock'n'roll records," as does Mrs. Lisbon in the film. It's difficult to talk to a girl that you love so much, that is so talented and special, but will only find her self-value through someone else's reactions. She'll only look at herself through the eyes of the other.

Now tell me that the film hasn't affected her. Not only does she pull exact images right from the screen, such as Cecilia's gauze and bracelets; Kait is a walking, talking enactment of critical cinematic theory. Kaitlin perpetuates the idea of "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look" that Laura Mulvey discusses in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle...plays to and signifies male desire" (Thornham 63). Kaitlin hasn't just been affected by *The Virgin Suicides*; she's a product of a media culture that informs her actions daily in a very real way. I recall the trailer for the film: "Just like life."

Yeah, just like life.

After Kait's most dramatic suicide attempt, I searched everywhere for an apology. I wanted to know how Sofia Coppola could produce such bullshit under the moniker 'art', and I wanted to know that she would be crucified for it. I found an answer in a 2000 interview in the art magazine *Paper* where reporter Peter Davis discusses Coppola's concern with disseminating such poignant imagery:

When four of the sisters take their own lives in a group suicide toward the end of the film, the deaths are presented in an understated, almost dreamlike way. It's as if the suicides aren't real, but simply a metaphor for the loss of childhood innocence. In reality, of course, teen suicide is a troubling phenomenon. Coppola seems slightly uneasy discussing this problem. "To me, the film is not about suicide," she stresses. "It is about teenage obsession and the impressions that linger long after someone is gone." At the end of the film, it is not the suicides you remember, but the girls' glowing presence.

There seems to be a huge flaw in this line of thought, and such an unusual absence of critical uptake. Sofia Coppola is a 27 year-old woman film director. As the daughter of documentarian Eleanor Coppola and film mogul Francis Ford Coppola, Sofia grew up in the film industry. While making her films, she



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looks to her brother, director Roman Coppola, and her father and mother for artistic, financial, and personal advice. It is true that her films reflect a keen sense of nostalgic poignancy. In fact, in her latest film, *Lost in Translation* (2003), Coppola beautifully depicts a temporal relationship between a famous American actor and a recent philosophy graduate student who are both stuck in Tokyo and in restricting and arduous relationships. Coppola certainly does well elucidating the finest idiosyncrasies of human existence in both hilarious and tragic ways, sometimes at the same time. However, there is no way for me to justify or forgive producing *The Virgin Suicides* in the way it was. *The Virgin Suicides*™ stationary is not for mature audiences only. The pink and purple websites that emulate high school scrapbooks, play Air music, and offer video clips of Josh Hartnett are not aimed at older viewers. I hadn't even heard of the book until after I'd seen the film. *The Virgin Suicides* **is** intended to be consumed by my little sister, and thousands of little sisters and girls and women everywhere. Puzzled and saddened by the possibility of her response, I ask Kaitlin during our conversation, "Did you want to be those characters in *The Virgin Suicides*, Kait?"

I was, Michael. I was those characters. I'm just taking up my time, living life. I want this to get better, but it's only getting worse, and I'm only 16. (giggle). The other day, I thought I was gonna die a virgin. I was thinking about suicide; I do all the time. I'll read my journals and they're all when I'm pissed off or inspired to do something. It doesn't seem like it's getting better, no one understands me, and I realize I'm just different. No one gets me.

I disagree. I think Sofia Coppola knows a lot about what Kaitlin is going through. I only wish that creative effectiveness could be coupled with artistic responsibility. Kait is sitting on her bed right now, writing in yet another journal. This one has a lock on it, and a neon sticker screaming the warning: "Do Not Read." I see and obey. I can only sit back and wonder what the words inside might say, might celebrate, might confess. Kait throws the locked tablet beneath her bed and hops out her bedroom door, flashing me her most cavalier smile. I return the toothiest rejoinder I can muster, which isn't much: my eyes can't meet her own. The flowery feminine script of the movie trailer flashes into my mind: beautiful, mysterious, haunting, invariably fatal. Each

adjective wrenches my head as though it were a sponge, forcing the first apprehensive crystal drop to slide down my cheek at the realization of the immediate appropriateness of each word. My sister is beautiful; her cognitive processes are mysterious. Her situation is haunting and almost invariably fatal. My head spins and the camera zooms out: I can see my neighborhood, criss-crossing highways, shimmering lakes, coast lines, mountains, a bluish-green orb and boundless stars. I think of humanity and how Kait fits into it, how I fit into it. The agency and faculty of human beings awes me. We have tremendous capabilities to create and destroy. These powers dangle at the end of our fingertips everyday. We may conjure up beauty, but perhaps only at the cost of our own destruction.

#### NOTES

1. <http://www24.brinkster.com/virginsuicides/>
2. [http://www.paramountclassics.com/virginsuicides/html\\_3/](http://www.paramountclassics.com/virginsuicides/html_3/)

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**MEREDITH ADAMS-SMART**

## The Silence And Just After

As soon as he was alone  
in the gaping white house  
he walked the plank steps  
to the dirt cellar.  
That cavern of Illinois earth.  
Frozen soil walls in perfect  
brown and white sheets  
coddling potatoes, canned persimmons,  
a box of dynamite to release stumps  
from farm land during planting.  
He passed the green beans and peaches too,  
but instead chose the largest  
explosive stick from the wooden crate.

Upstairs in the kitchen he sat  
at the family table with a penknife  
peeling the layers of dynamite like an orange.  
He wanted to open that stick slowly,  
have those explosive secrets revealed to him—  
rage, childhood death, a war just beginning.

He doesn't remember the noise  
as much as the silence after the detonation.  
Hot shards of brass flew into his eye,  
barely missing the black target cornea.  
And his left hand lost three fingers  
that were sent up  
into the cold air of the empty kitchen.

When his father was sponging up  
blood and brass from the tile floor  
he found them,  
nail and knuckle still intact.  
He picked up the three fingers  
that he had carefully counted at his son's birth,  
counted them once again,  
and buried them under the walnut tree.





**MERIDEL THOMSON**

**A Wonderland of Whorled Milkweed**

When Lewis said, take off your petticoat,  
Alice undid the whalebone buttons, white  
seeds popping down her flat chest, her soft throat  
thick like the creamy sap of fruit held tight  
in a dry shell. He stammered from behind  
the black, wet mouth of the hungry machine,  
and she lifted her leaf-thin arm, inclined  
her small dark head, and she, not yet thirteen,  
obeyed the artist. Then, when walking home  
in London dusk's blue light, she stopped to pluck  
a whorled milkweed just burst. When its thick foam  
salted her fingers, she bent down to suck  
the sticky juice, the lovely stem-hair feast,  
and she gagged, she retched, finally released.





## MARS GETSOIAN

### Rally for Our Boys

It was nineteen sixty-eight, if you want to know, when my troubles really started. I was just eighteen, and the whole world was going a little cuckoo, or more so than it already was.

March must have been the month. The whole world had got gray, like God Almighty ran outta colors on that great big palette of His. People weren't too happy, not at school and not in the city. Pop especially wasn't happy.

"Wilson Anthony, I hope you're keeping your damn head straight in all this nonsense," he said to me that March. "I hope you're not letting that damn Negro-loving, fairy-chasing friend of yours make you think ugly thoughts about Our Boys." He always said it that way. Our Boys. You could hear the capitols. Our Boys was cousin Charles in the 122nd Division, and Uncle Roger who was a Captain somewhere different every other week. Our Boys wasn't me, on account of my feet. You could hear that in Pop's "Our Boys" too.

"No Sir," I told Pop. "Sus wouldn't say a thing like that about the soldiers anyhow. You know she's going with Tom." Tom was Thomas the Tank Tamulevich, my best bud. He signed up the first day of the war, and looked real fine doin' pushups for the recruiters. Tom played a lotta football and didn't laugh when they told me to push off on account of my feet. We used to play baseball in the sandlot outside his house. Sus was real sweet on him but that was okay too, cause he didn't never make a fuss about it.

Guess I gotta talk about Sus for a minute. I knew Sus from the minute I was born. Ma and her Ma knew each other from back when *they* were in school. Sus was real pretty and awful nice, but Pop always talked bad about her on account of where she lived. Her Pa ran off when she was real young and her Ma had to move into a neighborhood with a lot of Negroes and even some Arabs. Pop always said she was a Communist, but I think that's an awful thing to say about a person just on account of having some colored friends. Sus was a good American girl the whole way through. She just saw things a little different than Pop did, is all.

Sus was the one who told me. About the Tank, I mean. It was later that day, an hour before the rally. It was a support rally—a lot of people were saying ugly things about the troops, and a bunch of the guys were getting together to show we didn't hold with that nonsense. I told Pop about the rally, and he looked me in the eye and he said, "Wilson Anthony, you make sure



your tie matches your suit." I couldn't wait for that rally.

But then Sus, she came up to me an hour before the rally, and she said to me, "Will?" And that's when I knew it was trouble, cause no one ever calls me Will, excepting Ma of course. Around school they always called me Willy, or Wilson even when I made a good play with the football.

So I looked at Sus, and her eyes were as round and dark as Aunt Maple's calf's eyes before she caved its head in for veal. And she told me how Tom was dead, and she said it with a real hollow sound in her voice, like she was a recording just to tell me, and not a real live person with feelings and such. And then she told me what she heard from her friend Steiner in the Tank's company, how Tom didn't die saving some skinny Asian boy from the Viet Cong or nothing. That was what he used to joke about, Tom did, how he'd probably bite it someday for some little yellow kid who couldn't even say 'thank you' proper.

But Sus said it never happened that way. She told me how she heard he just went off in the trees, on account of they'd been marching so long and hadn't had any breaks, and there with his pants down on his ankles he put his foot on a Bouncing Betty. She told me how Steiner said his whole bottom half was blown clear off and his face looked just like a smashed-up pumpkin.

Well, Sus told me that and it just kind of made me sick, to tell you the honest truth. I got to wondering for a minute, if maybe Pop wasn't quite so right as I had thought, and maybe there was something to what the city kids were saying about the war. But then I heard Matty and Danner, putting up tables for the rally, and I had to go, and Sus just looked after not moving, as if someone had taken the bones right out of her and stood her up on a frame. But I went, I went and helped Danner put out flags and buttons, and Ma came to the rally to see and brought us gelatin snacks. There was even a newspaper man came out to ask us questions and everything. I didn't know then about all the troubles Sus was going to get into, or how long it would be until I saw Pop look me in the eyes again. All I knew was, standing there I felt like I must look a bit like Sus had, like a life-size paper doll dressed up to look real, but nothing stiff inside, and just about the lightest wind ready to knock me right over.





**KATIE ADAMS**

Disrobed





**CONNOR CARROLL**

*from* The Eleventh Hour in the  
House of Cancer

Rewritten as a tragedy and put  
On the Associated Press, it was  
Like this: Jane Doe's dream momentarily  
Interrupted by her breaking water,  
The understaffed hospital letting  
Her out after a few short words, later  
Firing the orderly who mistook  
Her for a concussion from two oh eight  
When she was the eight month coma from room  
Two oh one. She quietly dressed herself,  
Coolly brushed off all offers of help,  
And checked herself out at two thirty four  
In the bitter morning, twenty second  
Day, the eleventh month, November.

She apparently walked west toward  
Richland, as if going to meet someone.  
No one remembers seeing her, almost  
Bursting as she was. She must have made good  
Time, straight west like an arrow in a red  
Ripped dress. Due west, five and one half miles  
Took her through the old industry center  
And through the barren farmland along  
The highway they used to call the desert  
Road, now highway two twelve curves  
Around the hill she climbed to have her  
Child, the hill she climbed to make a  
Premature, helpless life out of somewhere  
Deeper than death. Associated Press.



**BETH KRUGER**

## Imagining the Battlefield

Screaming through the air. Shattering bulletproof glass at the local 7-11, robbing the safe and leaving no evidence. Invisible. Floating like ghosts through the aisles of the late night inconvenience. Hot dogs turn on their rollers, gathering grease as *Playboy* and *Seventeen* hunch in their foxhole shelves. Snickers wrappers cringe and suffocate their nougat centers as the radio sets the room ablaze with the strength of Napalm. Pepsi and Coke drop from their bottles, bubbling brown sugar behind glass doors.

Across the street, phrases on picket signs leap from their cardboard onto the battlefield, finding a woman's stomach and burning their impressions below her ribs, scorching a tattoo. Abortion clinics bombed and Jesus praised, raising him from the dead and tempting the Second Coming. Pamphlets drop from airplanes like bombs, making rubble of the metropolis. The sound sends civilians into shock, lawn signs like blood over the doorframe keeping the angle of Internet pop-ups at bay. Protestors line government buildings, bullhorns firing into the street. Billboards are battle cries and preemptive attacks. Engaging in coffee table conversations lands men and women in the hands of the authorities. Intercoms blast *The Pledge of Allegiance* from the panopticon's tower as children are taught stranger danger and newspaper fear in one afternoon. Sugar water advertisements and after school special catchphrases crowd middle school hallways and rebellious poetry lands an in-school suspension. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" and hate speech echo across the playground with identical force as a librarian scans her books with a thick black marker.

Agent Orange finds its form in shampoo commercials and op-ed columns. Anthrax spores proliferate to performance poetry. National Public Radio is declared guerilla warfare as unsuspecting students hear conspiracy theories from their late night bedrooms, crouching under blankets with the lights off. The government gives prose to dictatorships to defend the world from proletariat literature. Earplugs are gas masks in case of a terrorist attack. Cults promise salvation and thousands scream as needles deflate their eyes, living an Oedipus agony but safe from the television's glow and *Newsweek's* slant.

The emergency broadcasting system blocks the waves from reaching impressionable ears and eyes, the letters on *Sesame Street* equated with the propaganda of revolutionaries and reactionaries. "This is your brain on Toni Morrison" is a public service announcement. All copies of *The Catcher in the Rye* are burned under strict Pentagon orders and the bricks of condemned public libraries collapse on their disintegrating volumes. A heap of past mistakes. Book clubs spread across the country, discussing their target practice for a new militia. Barnes and Noble enforces a five day waiting period for all literature, conducting background checks for potential buyers. Each owner of *The Grapes of Wrath* is registered and children receive a vaccination for folk music before entering kindergarten. Limericks fight the establishment and essays suppress the masses. Children are drafted into English class and high school dropouts hide out in Canada.

Rap music runs loose in the ghetto and the inner cities are unmarked sites of national disaster. Racial tension sparks like flint to rock as speeches echo in alleys. Slam poets ride shotgun with drive-by shooters. Sestinas replace crack as the new epidemic. The war on drugs becomes a war on words, as residents complain that the neighborhood is louder than it used to be. The woman in the house on the end of the block locks her door and pulls the blinds, muting her television and hoping the words will kill each other off.



**MEGAN ENDER**

Glass on Body





**CORINNE SCHNEIDER**

**A Lake Without Fish**

*DIVINE CROW AWARD WINNER*

I.

"I know that you are a virgin, Corina."

I stuttered over my Spanish, perhaps asked "What?" The one syllable word sounded clumsy in my mouth. I did not yet know how to snap it off of my tongue like an interjection instead of a question.

"Yes. Yes, I know it to be true," said Carlos.

The dining room off of the kitchen was empty, the maid scuffling back and forth the only sound in the house. Mami gave Maria her old shoes with demure heels to wear when she cleaned. The colored leather around the toes was worn almost bare because Maria's feet were much wider than Mami's, but Mami did not want her in the house with those shoes that the *indigenas* wore. Mami was too old to know that it had now become trendy to have indigenous women in traditional dress working in your kitchen. Carlos passed circles around the table, hunched over and searching for something. An unlit cigar teetered unsteadily between his thin lips, and he ran his fingers along the table across from me.

"It is obvious," he continued, as he lowered himself into his chair, "because you have a manner of walking, *mi'ja*, and of dressing yourself. With dignity, *mi'ja*." He paused for a moment, but not because he hoped for me to talk as well. He lit his cigar slowly and in anticipation of his next thought, the match burning steadily towards his fingertips. I was startled to hear him call me "*mi'ja*." My daughter. I had only lived in his house for two weeks.

"Please, Corina, pass me the sugar...Yes, *mi'ja*, you walk with dignity, with your back straight. You are not ashamed, Corina. I know you see this manner of dress in your classmates at the university here. They are not like us. They are so rich they are trying to be like *los gringos*; that is why they dress like that. You, Corina, you do not dress in bright colors. You are a young woman that knows she prefers to be covered."

I turned my eyes upward then, and thought to tell him why I wore thick sweaters everyday, despite the heat of the equator's sun at noon. I wondered if I was allowed to talk about such things in polite company. Instead I reached for a cigarette. I did not know then that it was not polite to smoke in the presence of an adult, even if he invited you to do so. He seemed to sense that I wanted to contribute, but paused only long enough





## A Lake Without Fish

*Continued*

to extend his slight arm across the table and offer me a lit match.

"Did you also know, Corina, that your name is famous in this country?"

"No," I said clearly. "I did not."

He raised his eyebrows at the sound of my voice. "Yes," he replied. "Corina is a very famous name, for a pretty young woman. There was a great man, you see, who was elected as our president five times. Five times! Can you imagine such a thing? His name was..." Carlos' voice drifted off for a moment as he contemplated the empty coffee cup in front of him. He was waiting for someone to fill it. "His name was Jose Maria Velasco de Ibarra. You may have seen the street, Corina, if you have been to the old town. He was so great that we now have a street in our capital named after him."

"Were you alive when he was president, Carlos?" I asked him.

Carlos narrowed his eyebrows, held his cigar between his thumb and forefinger. "Yes, *mi'ja*. Yes, I was. Yes, he had a beautiful wife and her name was Corina. She was like a saint in this country! She was dedicated to her husband, to her people. It was a beautiful time in the country, when people still had pride. We were once a very proud nation, you know. And this man's wife helped those most in need in this country."

"Oh?" I asked him. "Like Eva Peron in Argentina?"

"No, *mi'ja*," he responded. "Not like Eva Peron. Corina was dedicated, as I have said, to her people and her husband. She was a good woman, you see; she was not a whore like Eva Peron."

I pretended I was not surprised to hear the word whore; that it didn't feel like hot oil leaping out of the pan to scald my hands. I nodded at him as if this made sense, and he cocked his head inquisitively. "Did you know, Corina, that there are always flowers on her tomb? She was loved in this country."

### II.

Mami and I sat many afternoons alone in her upstairs parlor to take coffee. She had many hanging plants with overgrown dead leaves falling off of them on all sides. No one bothered to pick up the leaves when they eventually fell off, but instead allowed them to grind into the carpet under the feet of important guests and grandchildren. Mami would pull off the white gloves that she wore when she went visiting and sit in her high backed chair, already

satisfied with what she was going to tell me. We used the best china in that room, the kind with the rose buds engraved around the top of the teacups and around the plates, criss-crossing with the gold border. "They call this china for a reason, Corina," Mami would say. "It is from China. Not a fancy store in New York City."

Those were my favorite times alone with her, when she would explain one ornate little knick-knack or another that had passed into her collection over the years, like the Peruvian pottery that her daughter Pilar had given her, or the ceramic beer mug from her brothers in Germany. Her father had given her three large glass cases from his furniture store before he passed away. The cases were long and rectangular, with stained blue and pink glass in the center of each panel that formed a floral stamp like a trademark. Mami talked about her small trinkets, many of which she had received before her family as I knew it came to be. She told me stories of her years in medical school, that she was the first female dentist to graduate in the whole country. "You see," she would say, "you and I are very much alike. We are strong women, we know ourselves. We understand the importance of knowledge."

One afternoon as I pulled off the dried ends of an aloe plant, I asked her about the paintings of the Virgin Mary. There were three of them in the house that I had noticed so far. Mary was grasping a rosary in both hands, which sat plainly in front of her as if resting on a table. Her heart was bright red and super-imposed above her body with seven daggers cutting through the sides of it. Blood dripped down onto her blue robe, and tears fell from her left eye.

"That is *La Virgen Dolorosa*," Mami explained to me. "She is sacred in this country. The *Iglesia San Gabriel*, where all of your brothers went to school, houses a famous painting of her. Records say that she cried once, during a very bad time for our country. It occurred in front of many young boys from the school. Over twenty of them witnessed her tears."

"What do the knives mean, Mami?" I asked her. I did not feel uncomfortable speaking with her, and she did not feel uncomfortable correcting my Spanish.

"*Espadas*, Corina. *No espaldas*. *Espaldas* are backs." She pointed towards her lower back, smiled coyly at me. "The seven swords, *las siete espadas*, represent the seven deadly sins, Corina, those that lead to the death of Jesus.





## A Lake Without Fish

*Continued*

*La Virgin*, you see, was a mother devoted to her child. The seven sins are those that killed her son, and she cries for her own pain and for that of the world.”

I did not question her information, but watched her stare intently at the portrait. “She is a good woman, is she not, Corina?”

### III.

My breakfast the next morning was not as involved as other days. Usually Mami prepared eggs with toast or corn tortillas, and made me fresh juice. That morning she left me only yogurt and cereal with my morning coffee because she had a meeting with the Women of the Church organization and didn’t have time to cook for me. Mami had left a note on the table with a scribbled apology, and said that Maria would cook anything for me that I might want. Instead, I ate the yogurt, sweeter and with more fruit than yogurt from the states, and tried to read the newspaper, puzzling over words or expressions that I had not heard before.

I did not often eat alone in the house and felt relaxed enough to not use the correct piece of silverware or put my coffee cup back into its saucer after taking a sip. The dining room was quiet, and my gaze moved to the big picture window that looked out onto our front yard. I watched the hummingbirds suck nectar from the roses that Mami planted outside the front window, practiced saying words to warm up my tongue for the day. “*Colibris*,” I sounded out quietly. Hummingbirds. “*Jugo de maracuya*” meant passion fruit juice, accent over the last a.

I heard Maria drop something in the kitchen, a large pan or pot, and then she made a noise that was not quite a scream. I stood up and rushed into the kitchen to find Carlos standing in front of her, one arm resting on the stove, and the other reaching towards her. Maria was still like a trapped animal, almost bent over to pick up a long, metal baking sheet. She did not look at me or make any motion that she recognized my presence in the room. “Good morning, Maria,” I said quickly. “How are you?” I made sure to use *usted* when I addressed her, the way to show respect to an elder. Carlos turned around slowly from his pose to greet me, a smile spreading on his crooked face.

“Good morning, *mi’ja*,” he said smoothly.

Maria moved quickly over to the sink and began drying dishes as if nothing



had happened. I stood for a moment, confused. I watched Maria's hands disturb the silence of the room with the soft clinking of plates and silverware. "How did you sleep?" Carlos tried again. His voice seemed to echo at me from off of the cool tiled floor.

"Well," I said. I looked from his face to Maria's back, and then down at my sandaled feet. "I slept well. But I'm late. I have to go to class. Tell Mami thank you for breakfast."

#### IV.

After living in the country for only a month, I was happy to be out of the city for the weekend. There were few trees in the mountains where I stayed with the other students in my group, and it was very cold at night. Most days were sunny, but windy so that the sand hit our faces. We had woken up early to go to the animal market and watched the indigenous people from the area bring in their cows, horses, and goats to buy, sell, and trade for other goods. All of the animals looked famished and made small pathetic noises as they rooted in the dry soil. They smelled like old urine and had blood caked onto their faces and hooves. I stepped over a crate full of baby chicks and walked towards the back of the market, where things were calmer, to watch a mother alpaca suckle her kid. As I leaned over to pet one of the kids, the blood from a beheaded sow splattered onto my jeans. I walked quickly out of the market, stepping in animal manure and dirty sawdust on my way to the gate.

Things were better once we arrived at Lake Cuicocha. Lake Cuicocha was a volcanic crater lake in its third life stage. First it had been a strato-volcano, a tall, sharp cone in the middle of the Andes. After it erupted, it became a dome, not much bigger than the surrounding hills and mountains, but still erupting clouds of gas and ash, killing most living things around it. Eventually the dome collapsed into itself, and the hard layers of lava and ash solidified in a deep, round dip in the earth, as big around as the base of the volcano had been. The dip filled with rainwater and snow run-off from the tops of other mountains in the area. The ash deposits accumulated centuries earlier had made the soil around the lake fertile, and the growth was thick and green, despite the altitude. Although the volcano had been technically extinct for several centuries, carbon monoxide and other gases still rose from





## A Lake Without Fish

*Continued*

the fine holes in the earth and made the whole lake smell of rotten eggs.

Nelson, our program director, and I chatted about the Great Lakes. He had been to Lake Michigan for the first time some years earlier, and he told me that he had scooped the fresh water into his palm to taste it, amazed that he could not see the other side of the lake, but that the water was not salty like a sea. "We have fresh water in Ecuador," he said, "but none that you can swim in or drink. It is either too polluted, or it is like this; full of gases from under the ground. Even the people living around here get their water from small mountain rivers and reservoirs, and not from the ground."

I rode with the other *gringos* in a tourist boat around the lake, watching bubbles of carbon monoxide spring to the surface. A phosphorescent algae was growing along the shores of the lake, gleaming bright as a polished apple in the afternoon sun. I began to study the water of the lake, how it looked black and hungry, even up close. Although the lake cleaned itself naturally of anything that might make it murky, the waters were dark and cold, and seemed to be alive with themselves. I peered down into the waves, looking for some form of life, but did not even see my own reflection.

The tour guide stopped the boat on the shore where the sun was shining through the clouds. He pointed to a shallow area, and said "Several years ago we put a species of trout into these waters to see how well they would survive. The carbon monoxide in the water did not kill them, and they managed to find a sufficient amount of plant life to survive." With his right arm he directed our attention to the algae and seaweed growing from the bottom and then continued. "However, the fish could not lay their eggs because there is no water calm or shallow enough for them to survive. In other lakes there are small tributaries and creek beds, areas suitable for tadpoles and small species of fish. The fish we transplanted to this lake survived for many years, but there was no way for them to flourish."

V.

I arrived home from Cuicocha late on Sunday night, and Mami was still at mass. Carlos was home writing something on his old typewriter, and I could hear his fingers clicking from the downstairs foyer. I sneaked into the kitchen to look for something to eat, hoping that he wouldn't hear me. He padded



slowly down the stairs as I peered into the refrigerator, and I stood up suddenly so that he would not see me bending over.

"Where have you been, *mi'ja*?" he asked me. "Your Mami tells me that you went on a trip."

"Yes," I replied. "We went to Otavalo and the mountains in that area."

"Aaah, yes," he said. "Then you saw what the artisans make, no? You saw the stone jewelry and the scarves and blankets. What a beautiful craft they have in those cultures. Did you know that Ecuadorian weaving from that region is some of the best in the world?"

"Yes, I've heard that," I replied. I turned as if to open the refrigerator again, and then stopped and put my hands in my sweatshirt pockets.

"Hmm..." Carlos was pacing the room again, this time opening and closing the drawers in the kitchen, making the knives and spatulas rattle out of their comfortable compartments. He unearthed an ashtray out of one, and closed it quickly. "Are you happy to be home, *mi'ja*?" he asked me. He did not wait for my response, but continued. "You are different than other students we have had in our home. You see and hear more. You observe, Corina. I can tell that you want to know about us, about who we are as people."

He walked slowly towards me then, and I stood up straight and looked him in the eye. He was old and walked almost delicately, with his back curved over like a question mark. I was the same height as him, maybe taller. He stopped when his face was only six inches away from mine, and lifted his arm slightly as if he was going to start talking. Instead he placed his thumb just above the line of my dirty pants and stretched his small fingers forward to grab my hipbone in his palm firmly, pressing his thumb into my bare skin. I held my breath and continued staring him in the eyes. "We are happy you are here," he said. "You might learn very much in this country, *mi'ja*. You will grow and change, and your heart will never leave."

## VI.

The next weekend Mami and Carlos went to stay at his house on the coast, even though his private maid Luisa would be there. Mami spoke badly of her, saying that Luisa copied all of her recipes and that her name was sinful anyways. Luisa did not seem to be a particularly bad name to me, but her





## A Lake Without Fish

*Continued*

nickname was “*Lucha*,” which literally meant “fight.” Although I had never met Luisa, I liked this about her, and I when I told Mami this, she responded by saying that women should not be fighters. “They call her *Lucha* because she is aggressive, my dear. She probably plays cards and smokes cigarettes as well.” She chuckled to herself. “Can you imagine her life?” she asked me. “Not only does she want to be a man, but she’s a poor Indian, as well. You should not admire her, Corina, you should pity her.”

I did not understand exactly what she meant by this, but I was relieved when she picked up her suitcase. She kissed me on both cheeks and walked out to the car where Carlos was waiting for her. He leaned across the passenger side and winked at me, his thin fingers waving goodbye. I slammed the front door and ran to my bedroom, and unbuttoned my thick alpaca sweater on the way. I changed with my bedroom door wide open, pulling on tight jeans and a lacy tank top. It was not as revealing an outfit as most of the Ecuadorian women at my school wore, but the sight of my own skin surprised me. I stared at my biceps, the slow curve of each defined muscle. My reflection raised her eyebrow at me.

I went to a gay bar that night with the other *gringas* I knew from the university because we thought it would be the best place to avoid male attention. I had already had three drinks at an Irish pub in the same neighborhood, and the owner started raising his eyebrows at us when we threw the dull darts at the overweight men sitting by the bar. We muttered insults at them when they slurred dirty *piropos* at us and giggled because they could not understand us, and thus couldn’t do anything back. *Matrioshka*, the best gay bar in town was crowded that night and played Madonna and *Latina* pop stars that we had never heard of before. The men seemed to be surprised that we were there, and started yelling support for one of my friends who was dancing on top of a table.

As I watched her, I became aware of a figure standing in front of me. I felt a cold hand on my chest, and then my head hit the wall behind me. I focused on the man standing in front of me, looking to see if I recognized him. His pupils were large and dilated, and his jaw, though firm, seemed to be hanging loose from his mouth. I realized I didn’t know him, and, when I asked him what he was doing, he placed his palms firmly on my neck, tightening his fingers

around the thick veins. “Bitch,” he said to me in perfect English. “White bitch. You think you can survive anything, I will not let you, bitch.” I tasted the acid of vomit rising in the back of my throat, and my nostrils expanded as he continued speaking. I was dizzy and could not hear his words. I saw myself in his pupils, small and hot, heat rising from me in waves. He let go, finally, and I did not erupt.

I went home that night shaking, barely able to open the three locks that secured our sturdy front gate. I left my keys on a table in the parlor and kicked off my shoes and I stumbled to my room. *La Virgen* was looking down at me from the top of the stairs, her fiery heart dripping and her eyes saying everything. I stopped to examine her again. She was not angry; she was in grief. She was not vindictive; she was benevolent. I sat on the ground in front of her, curling my legs underneath my body, and leaned over until my forehead touched the floor. I cried for the first time since I had arrived.



**TIFFANY ANTOR**

**Illicit**

*(Aunt Mary)*

When the house was still,  
both parents sleeping  
in the same room,

sleeping with each other, her  
romance novels lay quietly  
under the bed. They burned

next to her vibrator, whom  
she called Henri, because lust  
was foreign and seemed French.

For a little Catholic girl, saying her  
rosary despite her acne'd face,  
even her body was secrets and lies.

But when her mother stopped coming  
home, gave up her children and the dishes  
in the sink for mustached men and dark bars,

she set the dirty books next to Jane Austen,  
next to Shakespeare, shared Henri with her sisters,  
so they could each understand what Mother went out for.





**ELIZABETH GILLSTROM**

**Cathedral Sestina**

*DIVINE CROW AWARD WINNER*

The yellow arc of my father's  
Ribcage turns the space around his heart into a cathedral.  
Whenever he exhales, wax candles glow bright from inside his throat,  
Illuminating his skin from the inside. He smokes a cigarette to hide his dogma  
And drowns his faith in cups of coffee.  
But his fists, closed like empty wombs, remind his daughters

That neither Isaac, nor Joseph, nor David begot daughters  
Of their own. Yet, there were three girls born to my father,  
Girls born addicted to his caffeine and smell of his coffee,  
Born addicted to his midnight ashtrays. Sisters who built cathedrals  
Out of his cigarette butts, neglect, and sexist dogma.  
Our own voice became choked by the swollen membrane of our throats

So we could utter what the prophet hiding in our throats  
Declared. Yes, Isaac, and Jacob and David *did* have daughters.  
But these nameless Hebrew women were prisoners to Abraham's dogma  
Like we are prisoners, trapped small inside the ribcage of our father,  
Begging for alms with Styrofoam cups shaped like cathedrals  
And trading our own girl-children for more of his coffee.

Our father has no soul, so he fills the sarcophagus inside his chest with coffee  
And the Apostle's Creed until the prayers inside his throat  
Spill out as salt and ash, graying the walls of this cathedral—  
Staining the inside of his children's wombs. His daughters,  
We three girls, we sisters, we women, love and defy our father  
For his addictions, his creeds, and his dogma

Because we three create our own holy dogma  
Where we recite feminist proverbs and are baptized in guilt and coffee.  
We sweat caffeine, worship ashtrays, and mumble catechisms behind our father's  
Back. We could be holy, if we could speak beyond the static of our throats.  
But, Isaac was a son, Joseph, David—all three were sons, not daughters.  
When we open our bibles, it is a cancer, not a cathedral,





## Cathedral Sestina

*Continued*

That fills the space between our soul and sin. It is a cancer, not a cathedral  
That grows between our father's ribs and makes him bleed dogmatic  
Salt. He smokes cigarettes to hide from his daughters  
His fraying twines of rising prayer. He drinks coffee  
To drown the violent prophet in his throat.  
He needed a son to be Jacob or David, he needed a son to be a father.

My family's cathedral is built of ashtrays and Styrofoam. It overflows with coffee  
flavored dogma that forms the new tissue of our throats.  
Our Cathedral was built to house three daughters, three sins, and a dying father.



**LYNN BREWER**

Sylvia

*DIVINE CROW AWARD WINNER*

You give me this, you give me this,  
your gift, a silent hiss  
that courses through my veins  
for twenty years, pure and golden,  
a potent poetic sort of heroin.

Mother Sylvia, I have to honor you.  
You died before you could give birth to me—  
that early February morning in 1961  
when you miscarried—that was me,  
shooting out Time's birth canal twenty-two years later

like a broken blood clot, heavy and slick  
with sweat, glistening on my  
forehead the imprint of your faded kiss,  
one of your fine blonde hairs poking between my fist.  
It's true.

In the English tongue, in the American voice  
primed by confessionalism,  
I write, write, write  
desperately picking up where you ended.  
My psychic friend

says I am your daughter,  
wrestling your same demons, writing  
your lines, your mind.  
But I could never channel you completely.  
The pen stuck in my grasp.

It stuck, not in barbed wire, but in fear.  
Can't, can't, can't  
I could hardly write.  
I thought every inspiration was yours  
and the vision brilliant.





## Sylvia

*Continued*

A scribe, a scribe  
scribbling you down like the apostles  
putting God's words down on paper.  
Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John:  
I understand the difficulty.

I write in this dying state, these united deaths  
of a nation muddled, choking on itself.  
With my anarchist mind and my protest sign  
and my anti-patriot acts and my anti-patriot acts,  
I understand the difficulty.

I have always been scared of *you*,  
with your Fulbright, your genius  
and your tidy blonde curls  
and your poet-father-husband, Ted.  
You worship him, you worship him. O You—

Not God but a man  
so real you reached out and felt flesh.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
every woman hates a saint,  
even one that married you.

You sit before your desk, Sylvia,  
in the picture I have of you.  
A dimple in your face instead of his foot  
but no less free of Electra tyranny, no not  
any less the scared girl who

lost her handsome daddy at age eight.  
You buried him at eight.  
And at twenty you tried to die.  
So did I, to try and get back, back, back to you.  
I thought a half-loved life would do.



But you pushed me back down here  
and slapped me quick across the face.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model out of you,  
a woman-poet with a Prozac-deprived leer,

and a love of the paper and pen,  
and I said I would, I would,  
So Sylvia, I'm finally here.  
The Pen is in my hand,  
your voice can worm its way through.

If I have one mother, I have two—  
the muse who fills my blood  
with words year after year,  
twenty years, if you want to know.  
Sylvia, you can lie back now.

There's peace in your pretty light eyes  
And we all love you.  
I wait now for your grace.  
And I'll always *know* it is you.  
Sylvia, Sylvia, dear mother, it is you.





**KELSEY FOWLER**

David's Shirt





## ALASUN SCHRECENGOST

### You Cast Me Aside—

Grundens with the crotch  
ripped out, moldy gloves  
at the end of the season.  
The bug-eyed Pollock  
stuck by the gills in the seine.

Left alone crying  
my salt water love  
onto smooth jade silk.  
Plans and dreams  
thrown overboard, dirty  
oil burnt off in a puff  
of black smoke.

I guess those were empty beer  
bottle dreams to you, smashed  
glittering brown glass, shining  
in between the rocks by dead  
driftwood fires.

You cast me aside—  
a bad deckhand when the pink  
bellied salmon stop running,  
a dirty oil rag, a dull knife.





**CHRIS FOSS**

Nietzche Does Vegas

“Don’t forget to visit the Mustang Ranch”

was the  
advice offered by  
airport security to

direct my travels across  
the desert and into  
the Athens of modern

America. We revel in  
desire there, unrestrained,  
advertised call-girl digits

on the T-shirts of Mexican  
sex vendors. Anything  
the mind can wish for

money can find here,  
and in this place it  
is obvious

that minds want  
money, that  
sex controls

mind. But faced  
with all this pleasure,  
what is guilt and what

is power? Limos  
cost less than cabs  
in this city.





**HOLLY TAYLOR**

Shrapnel

That night, you told me how the explosion  
had overturned the outhouses,  
ironic since the whole place smelled  
like shit anyway, and tore loose  
pieces of cinderblock from your barrack.  
Down the road, another bomb had twisted  
a car around itself like origami paper,  
an eerie mess smoking and dripping  
blood like something living.  
Inside it you saw for the first time  
the intricacies of a human brain  
inside a man's head, all  
of the lobes still intact. The shrapnel  
had made a clean slice across the top  
like a dissection. An innocent,  
you'd said, and I wondered  
how you had lost your innocence—  
if it had been in the first bullet  
released by your own fist  
exploding into another man's body,  
or had it slipped away quietly  
as you stifled your fear  
and learned to look at death  
as a means of survival,  
learned to live  
the only way you could.





**NOAH CREAGER**

## Learning to Forgive

My Father came to me in my sleep the other day, but even now I forget what he looked like. Only a few characteristics remain burned in my memory – a powerful visage, calming warmth and soft texture, and a forehead that crinkled at my fright. I begged of him an explanation and words to carry me to providence, but I do not remember that he had ears and I fear he could not hear me. I could not even hear myself. As I continued to huddle on the floor with an up-stretched neck, he continued to tower over me. Through the shadows of my disease he stretched out a hand and with a gentle squeeze we began to walk. I am abashed to say this: I did not know until later that it was to be a walk through the very house of my own life.

We walked past the furniture that I had sat on and then past the broken pitcher cradled in stale water; resurrected stain dripped from the table onto the cream carpet. He did not need to point out the pile of discarded tissues that my mother had used, all of those times I made her cry; he did not remind me of the words I had used to hurl hatred at my sisters. With his hand on my shoulder he took me to an empty wall where a limp, red leash hung, at the end of which dangled the collar of our dead dog. He silently pointed out the hole I had punched in the wall two years ago; his presence highlighted all of the mud stains I had so carelessly plastered through our house. We moved over the threadbare carpet and scratched wooden floors and into the hallway lined with picture frames, each image changing as I looked at it.

I saw a five-year-old boy crying because his top button was buttoned, I saw him crying because he had turned six. I saw him at ten throw his gift to the ground when people crowded around with happy birthdays and songs and colors and lights and noisemakers that shattered his youth.

The same boy years later pinned his best friend to a wall when he doubted their friendship. Ten years past that memory, the friend married but the boy was not invited to stand by his side.

There was a red appaloosa horse running through a grassy field with a brother and a sister on its back. I saw them dismount and dive into a pool. I saw the horse traded for a motorcycle and a rabbit die in its cage, and then the motorcycle pulled to the ground by vines.

These things washed over me, sucking me into worlds I had not known



for years. Against my will, they peeled away the Everyday covering my eyes and forced my gut to chew once again those defining moments.

Further down the hallway a girl cried in the boy's arms. They huddled in the dark, the same brother and sister, while nightmares crawled over them in that way that only the despondent can understand. Whispers of hope dared float in the air, scurrying among promises for better days or at least a final day whose greeting would address them both.

In the next frame, the boy pressed his forehead against that of another. Hand clenched hand as blood trickled down their arms and I could see the passing of youth cloud their eyes. The young men had never expected to find a brother in those days. It would be years before I came to understand this particular aspect of life; such gifts are rare and they are worth keeping, they are the things worth dying for.

In a picture topped with stars, a girl stood on a grassy hill, red brick buildings framed behind her. There the young man knelt with his arms around her knees and fumbled with new and exotic words, words she could not understand.

In a frame with no edges I saw a mother hold her son while he slept, comfort him again when he was sick, and once more when his face was scared and his body shook with fear. She taught him to dance and to leave the sidelines, but she would never see him wed.

At the end of the hall my Father waited, standing patiently. When I reached him I turned around and stood at his side. Looking back down the corridor through which I had come, I saw all of these things and many more for the last time. My Father kissed the top of my head and in that moment I realized what I had been looking for. The farthest rooms of my life slowly turned to ash. Like newspaper in the fireplace, everything I had been became a gray crumbling that started in the corners and slowly sizzled the edges. With silent but steady progress, the white fire ate through the meat of my existence, finally coming to rest at the balls of my feet. In its wake, only shells of empty stories stood. In time, even these would fall and float away.

I could feel the burning of dry tears sting my cheeks but no pity flowed through me, no sadness to mix with the scene below. No breath was left me; no pulse broke the stillness of my blood. Instead, I felt myself lean against





## Learning to Forgive

*Continued*

my Father and he turned me around so that we could walk together into the last room of blue. There sat a turquoise couch placed in front of a white paned window, yellow curtains on the sides, looking at a gnarled tree on a mossy hill. The leafless branches of shifting brown patterned behind the glass of splintering purples and oranges as my Father sat me down in front of this last painting.

“There are a lot things out there, not all of them easy to deal with,” he said to me as he knelt down. “There are some things we just don’t touch and some flavors that can’t be changed, but for the rest we do the best we can. And that’s okay because it is all that we are capable of at a point in time. But don’t forget that occasionally you need to look at the paintings in front of you. Some you will not like: some will repulse you while others bring to boil that which you will abhor. Be sure to learn from these. There are many types of paintings and it is rare for one to be without beauty. You still have the chance to stare, so take it and be amazed. The time for such will soon pass.”

I curled on the couch as his footsteps fell away and staring at the picture before me, I could see the branches of the tree move closer and curl into a face of twigs. Stalks of hair stood at awkward angles and ears of the same wiggled in delight as we made eye contact. The stick man in the window wrapped his fingers into circles around the two globes in his face and stuck out his brushwood tongue.

The five-year-old on the couch smiled back and made a face of his own. It was in that smile—in a world that stepped away from the diatribes men so often use to fill the chasms of their lives, where the past was no longer used as a sword, and the future was not yet war—that my Father taught me to forgive.



**DAVID SIEGEL**

## The Birth of Eyes

We started calling him Eyes soon after  
he stopped talking.

Soon after he came back from chasing  
horses into the woods.

He tried to speak.  
But when he had something to say

a cavern swallowed hard inside him  
and he just cried in silence.

We asked about the horses.  
We asked about the woods.

He tried gesturing instead.  
His arms would reach as though giving a gift,

but when his hands were empty,  
he would spend the rest of the day examining

the creases of his fists.  
There was something his body could not pass on.

So he gave up,  
let his eyes become his mouth—

consumed with speaking,  
focused on the treeline,

for the gaze of stray horses.





**TYLER PRAY**

## Through the Maples

He drove six hours to get an infant  
sized casket to bear her underneath the hill,  
a fern covered Golgotha. Two sticks lashed with swamp  
grass, one longer to make a cross to lay  
in the dirt in front of the stone. No nails.  
We walked the trail, the casket like lead  
in the rusty wheelbarrow, through the maples  
to the top where six of us dug and lowered,  
two of us jeered and sang. I mean  
that slow dripping of sap, like disease  
blackening the sulfuric crease between leg  
and body. I am dipping my fingers, my whole  
hand into the mire, mud to suck away the sticky  
pitch of maple, and unearth meticulous joy.





**BETH JOHNSON**

Mourning





## ALASUN SCHRECENGOST

### Walking the Docks, Kodiak, AK

Still walking through the rain,  
still looking for a boat, a captain who will see my calloused  
hands, sea steady legs and desire to work at face value—  
rather than mentally calculating side jobs.

I want to be taken from this too small town where my name  
has been slandered by a jealous, angry little man.  
I want to be taken past Ouzinki to the north side of Raspberry  
Cape where I know the red salmon are running thickly to the rivers—

so I too can catch them before they die.  
Yet still I walk from marina to marina, harbor to harbor,  
from fuel dock to water dock—back and forth cannery row.  
I have walked for a week now—talked to all who will listen,

pled my case, trying to sell myself to deaf buyers.  
I want to fill my seine at the boot, the sun cracked rubber  
galoshes, Xtratuffs, hanging in the young spruce,  
marking the spot where the pink bellied salmon run.

I just want to fish in the sun, basking between sets like the Kodiak  
grizzlies while I wait for the seine-corks to jump.





**ERIN AGEE**

## The Middleweight

She's locked inside, deep  
inside. She's fed bread and water,  
and the days on the wall mark  
20 years, and outside  
they prepare her last meal.  
She's asked for pasta, with a tomato  
or two on top, but when the keeper comes  
to her rusty bars, she reconsiders:  
On second thought (or maybe third)  
I don't want that—that food.  
Instead, bring me a tree to swing on,  
with fruit that will fall hard, bring  
me the river to sweep me off my feet,  
to soothe my burned shoulders,  
bring me an aria, sung high and winding  
in the calm of a deserted supermarket,  
bring me time, however she's dressed, I do not  
care if you have to wake her up, and drag her  
from her bed, bring me any poem  
that's ever been written about immortality,  
and bring me a fire to burn it in.







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