genesis

a literary magazine

spring 2013

Front Cover by:
Shane Collins
Illustrious Peacock

Editor's Note

As we write this snow covers most of the ground that was starting to blossom, making it hard to believe that spring is even near. Every semester presents its own challenges, and this semester we were faced with an art dilemma. Usually various mediums of artwork color the pages between stories and poems, allowing the reader a moment to mediate. However, you will notice as you flip through this semester's various works that this issue is void of art. We made the tough decision this semester to not include art because we simply did not have enough pieces to complete the issue. It is our hope, as we step down from as managing editors to graduate, that the new staff will not face a lack of art in the future. We hope to see the fall issue as full of art as our previous editions.

Throughout these past two semesters, we have had the honor to serve as managing editors of this magazine. At times it has been tough, but every moment has been an opportunity to gain knowledge and experience for our futures, while helping improve and carry on *genesis*.

Nevertheless, it is time for yet another issue, and with it, time to usher out the old and make way for the new. Without further ado, we give you the 2013 Spring issue and a legacy that will be carried out by next year's editors.

Erica Swanfeldt Stout & Katie Reidy
Managing Editors

genesis

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Feast of Me

I am the eggroll.

A flaky outer layer wrapped,
rolled, tucked, folded,
like a pale paper crane,
strains: stuffed with shredded
scraps of "things good for you,"
things not so good for you,
piquant spices, traveled half a world away
to tantalize the nostrils and agitate the wanderlust lobe
of the brain.

I am the lobster tail.

Dredged from the briny deeps,
flesh salted with black and time,
shell cracked and pried back—
a butterflied specimen,
red, enamel wings;
tenderness spills from the slit, puffy and pink with life.
The green boils away to cries for a homeland known only
by the soles
of the feet.

I am the bread pudding.

Aromatic in the manner that shouts,
Crisp! Golden Brown!
a taut, burnished skin
dimples a hint
of its innards.
The hesitant caress of steel splits the crust, sending
a luscious, sticky liquid gushing to the surface, where it burbles
and blanches the whole, bearing the unsavory sweetness
of the heart.

John Erby

About-Face

The squirrel's eyes darted left to right, scanning the branches of the nearby tree for each possible bridge to safety, his hind claws planted firmly into the top of the wooden swing set. Mickey noticed this because the new neighbor's two Dobermans had noticed. Now Mickey watched the squirrel that he'd nicknamed "The General" because of the demonstrative flare of his unusually large, white tail—that and the way Mickey swore the squirrel would often stand at attention as if saluting his brother in arms.

"It's too damn early for this shit," Mickey grumbled to himself as he took a long, delicious swig of beer and exhaled a thick fog of vapor into the cool autumn air. The dogs had been barking steadily for nearly twenty minutes, and it was giving Mickey a headache. He'd been drinking since seven, when he walked outside to find the mailbox his deceased wife had built splintered into a thousand multi-colored, hand-painted, memory-filled slivers across the driveway and sidewalk. Before he could start cleaning, the Dobermans began barking, and The General's situation grabbed his attention. Mickey looked on with a jilted sort of despair. He'd grown rather fond of the squirrel, which was more than he could say about the majority of his neighbors—most of them the children of those who'd settled the area when it was built in the seventies. The few settlers that remained were those Mickey cared for the least. Standing in his driveway holding a beer and a broom, he watched the squirrel and waited to see what course of action it would take. The General was trapped, six feet or more from the nearest branch sturdy enough to hold the weight

of that goddamn tail. He'd never make the jump; he'd have to make a run for it, but that option wasn't any better. The Dobermans were vicious and seemed pissed that this lesser vermin dare step foot in their yard.

Mickey was engrossed in the standoff and half-gone in a daydream. The squirrel's predicament reminded Mickey of something that had happened during the war. He had come across the body of a British soldier dangling from the top of a fifty-foot tree. The thought of the man climbing the tree to escape the Germans only to be used as target practice once discovered had stuck with Mickey all these years—as had so many bad memories, with so few good ones to fill the void.

The screech of tires stirred Mickey from his trance, and he looked over to see Connor Murphy kneeling in the center of the four-way stop, picking his newspapers up off the ground, twenty-four hundred pounds of Volkswagen steaming just feet away. Connor Murphy was the nine-year-old son of the local mechanic whose family lived in the tri-level near the top of the hill on Rafferty Drive. He had just begun a paper route in the neighborhood. Mickey always viewed the boy as a little dim, peculiar perhaps. Over the summer he had found tire tracks through his flower garden, and Connor was his prime suspect. In recent weeks, Connor had ridden around on his bike all day, even school days, down and back up the hill and through the intersecting alleys of the low-income red-brick houses that had been built more recently.

"What the hell's wrong with you, boy?" Mickey hollered in his grave timbre as Connor limped over, to which Connor offered no reply. Mickey was normally short of patience, but after the events of the morning he had no tolerance for a kid being disrespectful and ignoring his question. His eyes seemed magnetically drawn to the ground. He looked like a boy caught stealing in a thrift store, terrified of Old Man Callahan—the moniker that the neighborhood children had given him. Mickey unsteadily leaned over so the two were eye-to-eye.

"There's an old saying that goes like this, son: your feet may control the pace with which you travel, but it's your eyes that control the destination. Do you know what that means?" After a short pause, Mickey said, "It means watch where you're fucking going."

Mickey stood up and took an extra-long drink of beer, but Connor stayed perfectly still, quivering like a skyscraper absorbing the force of an earthquake. He didn't move until Mickey motioned down the hill, beer dripping from his finger, and returned his attention to the squirrel and the dogs. Connor made it about one hundred feet before Mickey snapped around and yelled, "Where's my paper, boy? And your damn bike?"

Connor explained that some bullies from school had thrown it down the big hill in McGovern Park, rendering it useless, but his eyes drifted to the inside of Mickey's garage. Mickey followed Connor's gaze and noticed a pile of overturned boxes. One had a red sleeve with white trim poking out, and was marked "Stay Out!" Another was full of old grainy pictures that had spilled onto the garage floor. Mickey couldn't remem-

ber, but assumed that he'd taken a drunken trip down memory lane the night before.

"Give me my paper and be on your way, boy," he snarled. As soon as Connor was out of sight, Mickey returned the boxes to their places on the shelf and looked back to The General as he sat at the very edge of the swing set. Suddenly its tail stiffened, eyes fixed on the shaky branch ahead. Then it jumped.

"Damn thing made it, Edith!" Mickey chuckled as he entered the garage door that connected it to the empty kitchen, passing the hallway cluttered with pictures of Edith and his son Sean when he was young. He tossed the empty beer can and opened a new one. While most people were eating breakfast he was finishing a six-pack. He sat in his recliner, contemplating how he missed his wife as he gazed at a framed picture of her from before the stroke, when she still had that gorgeous smile. Then he stood again, returning to the kitchen. An envelope sitting on the table caught his eye. It was a letter he'd written Sean months before, but had never sent. He stared at it, wondering yet again if he should send it. "Not yet," he whispered into the beer can as it approached his lips.

Mickey made his way back outside to find Blanche, the nosiest of nosey neighbors, making her way across the street to observe the fractured post.

"Oh my goodness," she gasped. "What in the Lord's name happened?"

Meddling bitch, Mickey thought, sure her concern was feigned. "Don't know. Looks like someone took a fucking bat to it," he took another drink from his beer. He could see that his choice of words and the beer for breakfast caught her a bit off-guard, and he enjoyed watching her blush. She hid her disgust well, however, and continued prying.

"Well, I didn't hear that, but I did hear some yelling from up the hill around midnight," she explained. "Sounded like two women, but I'm not sure *yet*." Mickey noted that she said yet. She was surely just getting her daily snooping started. "Might have been the people making all that noise that broke your mailbox. Maybe you should ask around."

"No, no. I'm not going on any manhunt. Besides, it seems the neighborhood's best bloodhound is on the case." He gave her a devilish wink, which set her skin ablaze as he turned his back to her. He felt her eyes stare a hole into the back of him as he walked into the garage and turned the sprinklers on.

Mickey didn't care to ask questions, because he suspected the culprit was more likely someone from the low-income houses built along the backside of his comfy ridge like barnacles attached to the back of a whale. Mickey's house sat on Calleigh, the steep, hilly street that ran down the middle of the neighborhood, and through his kitchen window he could see the encroaching houses perched atop the ridge behind his home. They weren't quite tenements, but the uniformity of them gave Mickey an uneasy feeling; all red-brick and single-story with about ten feet separating each home. Housing like that, Mickey proclaimed, is meant for those who are slowly dying but don't know it yet.

As Mickey drove to the hardware store later that day, he saw Connor standing at the corner of the turn-in to their neighborhood. He appeared lost, looking back and forth in either direction, like a foreigner who'd rather stay lost in one spot than lost in another. As Mickey thought of how much time Connor had spent riding his bike by himself, something he had overheard Blanche tell Vera Kelley a few weeks prior rang in his mind. "They're getting a divorce," she had half-whispered.

Connor's distant stare stuck with Mickey throughout the evening. He'd seen that look before, but couldn't place it, even though it seemed so embedded in his memory. Maybe it reminded Mickey of a soldier he knew who'd received a letter that his father had been murdered back home, or perhaps he recalled it from one of his co-workers when the steel mill had closed down. He kept searching for the image in his mind that matched Connor's expression and couldn't, but no matter who it was, it caused him to feel great sympathy for the boy.

After a few glasses of whiskey while he did odd jobs around the house, he went to the garage to try to replicate the blue-and-white mailbox that Edith had made for him just before her body began to falter. The silence of his empty home was yet another reminder to Mickey of those he'd lost. As he looked around in his drunken haze, he saw phantoms of his past—Edith washing dishes, watching Mickey and Sean as they ate their dinner, her hands holding a cool, wet cloth to calm Mickey whenever he would wake up from a nightmare.

Oh Sean, his smart little boy. Mickey thought of his son often, but tended to remember him as a child, not an adult or even a young man in high school. A rift had grown between the two when Mickey's suspicions were confirmed. Just after Thanksgiving dinner, when Sean was fifteen, he went down to the den where Mickey sat and told him he was gay. He had met a boy who made him happy, happier than he'd been in his whole life. Mickey took that statement as an affront to not only manhood, but to his relationship with his son. The thought that some homosexual relationship made him happier than anything Mickey had done over the years made him stand up and stomp away. As he left, Sean reached out and grabbed his arm, demanding a response, any response. Mickey whipped around and told him that he was disgusted, that Sean, their only son, was destroying the family name. Then he stormed out of the house, out into a snowstorm in his loafers and without a coat.

Giving up on the mailbox, Mickey re-entered the house. Memories, every tender moment and every heated argument, flooded his mind. He stood in his living room and saw Sean as a child standing near the window, looking outside and watching the snowflakes fall and all the neighborhood children romp through the porcelain drifts. He teetered into the kitchen and sat down at the table. He reached for the bottle of whiskey and his arm brushed the unsent letter to his son. He ripped open the envelope and unfolded the letter. Over the past few years, Mickey had begun to feel that he should be the bigger man, forgive his son for his life choices and try to put all this animosity

behind them. So he wrote a letter to Sean describing his feelings and why he didn't approve of a lifestyle that was damned in the eyes of God, even though Mickey hadn't been to mass in over a decade. The tone of the letter changed as he told Sean how he missed him. He missed Sean's wit and that sophisticated mind that Mickey didn't have. How Sean's point of view on topics of conversation would often catch him off-guard; how Sean helped him see in ways he'd never dreamed of.

His emotions mixed with the alcohol, and he soon began to cry. He was all alone, and it was his own fault. After Edith had passed, he pushed everyone in his life away, began to drink more, and looked skeptically at every person he passed. Everyone was a suspect of some crime he had yet to discover. His paranoia grew every day. He was angry and alone; a tragic combination. Gripping the bottle in one hand, he reached for the wall-mounted telephone and dialed a distantly familiar number.

"Hello?" said the voice on the other end.

Mickey paused for a moment, then slurred, "I love you, son."

There was another pause before Sean responded, "Sir, I think you have the wrong number," and hung up the phone.

"I love you…" Mickey mumbled. He slumped to the floor, leaving the phone dangling and the dial tone humming.

The following morning, Mickey awoke and staggered out to the porch to get his paper, but it wasn't there. A light drizzle of rain was falling, bringing a chill—a sign of the approaching winter. Across the street, the General was back on the swing set, the Dobermans in their backyard. The General was still and calm, nothing like the skittish behavior he'd displayed before. He held an apple core, ignoring the barking dogs. The branch that he'd jumped to the day before had broken from his weight, so this escape route was blocked. Mickey smirked at the boldness of the General, who stood up on his hind legs and looked in Mickey's direction. Mickey saluted him as his other hand patted his pockets, searching for a cigarette. The squirrel dropped the apple core and the two dogs fought for it. By the time they realized that the squirrel was gone, he had scaled the fence and the closest tree. Mickey laughed aloud at the General's ingenuity—he'd taken that damn apple with him in case the dogs came out!

Mickey spied Connor limping down the street then. His back popped and cracked as he rose. Sleeping on a linoleum floor was not a wise decision. "Hey lad, might I have a word with you?" he called out.

Connor froze in place and slowly looked at Mickey.

"Come on, before the sun sets," Mickey rasped. Connor hesitantly made his way across the street and into Mickey's yard. The limp was noticeable, and it appeared the boy was wearing the same clothes as the day before. His hair was a mess

The General was still and calm, nothing like the skittish bahavior he'd displayed before.

and his eyes were still coated with sleep. He was covered with a thin coat of dirt, and a bright blue sliver of wood stuck in the fabric of his hood. Mickey's mind buzzed as things began to come together.

The argument that Blanche had overheard was not between two women, but a mother and a nine-year-old boy. Connor must have sped off on his bike in the middle of the night, fleeing from the argument, and wrecked into Mickey's mailbox. Mickey had thought that if he found the person who destroyed one of the last connections he had to Edith, that he would unleash a fury on them the likes of which they hadn't thought possible. But now, seeing this broken boy before him, he felt no anger, only pity.

"What did you say was wrong with your bike?" Mickey asked.

"The front rim's bent and the spokes are snapped and the chain's broken," Connor responded.

"All that from a fall down a hill, huh?"

"I guess so," Connor said, his voice quivering. He obviously wasn't used to lying, he wasn't very good at it, Mickey thought.

"Come with me," Mickey said, leading Connor into the living room. "Wait here." He walked upstairs and returned with some of Sean's old clothes. He told Connor to change as he walked into the kitchen and poured a shot. When he returned, he stopped in the doorway and saw Connor standing near the window, looking outside at the rain. It struck him soundly. That look, that hopeless, joyless stare he'd seen from Connor, had been the same look he'd seen on Sean's face when he was Connor's age. A look of hopelessness, of unhappiness. Mickey had always attributed it to the normal changes of adolescence, but now it made sense.

Mickey ushered Connor out to his car and drove him from house to house to deliver his papers. He loaned Connor his old golfing umbrella for protection as the rain turned to sleet. They spoke little in the car. Connor fell asleep as they approached the last eight houses. Mickey delivered those papers. When they arrived at Connor's home, Mickey shook him awake. Connor looked around and down into his paper bag and realized what Mickey had done. "Bout time for school, eh?" Mickey asked.

"We're on fall break this week. No school."

"Okay, then be at my house at 0700 tomorrow morning," he ordered. "That's seven a.m. And bring your bike."

"Are you going to fix it for me?" Connor asked with a guilty look.

"No, you are, but I'm going to show you how."

Connor's mother Moira was sitting on the porch without the slightest look of interest as to why her son hadn't been home or why he was in the car with a stranger. "I've got your son, Ma'am!" Mickey hollered out the window, faking a smile. She merely raised her hand in response and took a drag on her cigarette. Her blasé demeanor angered Mickey, not only because of what it meant for Connor, but because it reminded him of his own indifferent attitude with Sean all those years.

That evening, he received a phone call

from his sister Marianne informing him that Sean had just passed the bar exam and been hired as a public defender. Mickey felt a pride that had been suppressed by alcohol and anger for years. He tried to compose himself after the conversation, but the guilt was overbearing. That night he dreamed he was running through Hurtgen Forest alone at night. He had no idea where his regiment was located. Every footstep was a possible suicide, because it might take him closer to the German lines. So he stayed in one spot, hiding in a sewer drain, doing his best to muffle his sobs.

At seven o'clock sharp Connor rang the doorbell. Mickey took him into the garage and they got to work on Connor's bike. Mickey handed Connor tools, explaining what to do. Connor caught on quickly, and afterward Mickey once again drove Connor from house to house to deliver his papers. When they returned to Connor's home Mickey stopped the car.

"Same time tomorrow and we'll see what we can do about those spokes," Mickey said.

Connor didn't respond, just stared at the floorboard. "Can I go with you?"

Mickey watched a few straggling brown leaves let go of their branch and float down to his windshield. "I have some things to do today. Perhaps tomorrow."

"But maybe I could help you with something. I forgot the key to my house. I could go with you to the bar and sit in one of the booths. I know you like going there. I wouldn't bother you. I promise."

Mickey stared out through the spaces between the leaves on his windshield. For a moment his heart warmed at the thought of the boy wanting his company, but he wondered if it had more to do with avoiding his own home. "Where's your mother? Can't she let you in?"

Connor was silent.

"Where's your pop these days?" Mickey pushed.

Connor threw the car door open and ran to the end of the street, veering up towards the brick homes on the ridge before Mickey could get out of the car.

Mickey walked up to the house and knocked on the door and got no answer. He could hear the television, so he knocked harder.

"Just wait a goddamn second!" Moira Murphy yelled from inside. "Did you forget your fucking key again? You got half a brain like your fath—" she gulped down the last few words as she opened the door to Mickey's glaring eyes. "I'm sorry. I thought you were my boy."

"And that's how you talk to him?" Mickey's blood boiled over at this sad excuse for a mother. "What the hell's the matter with you? Do you even care where Connor's been the past few days? He got in a wreck and has been limping, which I'm sure you hadn't noticed. He should see a doctor. He's nine years old! He needs to be home with parents that give half a shit about him, not some drunken idiot!"

"Oh," she laughed. "You're one to talk. Everyone in this neighborhood knows how big an asshole you are. Always walking around like you own the fucking place. You should step down off of that high horse, mister, because I can smell the

alcohol on you too." She took a long drag from her cigarette. "Where's your son, huh?" Her long, thin body leaned against the door jamb, one arm wrapped around her waist. Moira's ammunition hit Mickey square in the chest. Blanche must have mentioned him and his family. Speechless and shaking with fury, Mickey stalked off the porch and away from Connor's house.

Mickey awoke the following day, a Saturday, to see Connor standing on his porch at exactly seven a.m. Mickey asked Connor to meet him in the garage and made himself a drink. He found Connor sitting Indian-style on the floor, going through one of the boxes from the shelf.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, boy?" he yelled, and raced over to see that the box Connor was looking in was the one containing his service uniform, some medals, and pictures he'd taken during his time in the war. The box marked "Stay Out" still sat in its place on the top shelf. Relieved, Mickey relaxed.

"You were a soldier!" Connor exclaimed, as if he'd just met Captain America himself.

"Aye, I was," Mickey responded, lost in the memories that the photos resurfaced.

Connor held Mickey's Silver Star in astonishment. "A real hero," he mumbled to himself.

Mickey broke from his reverie. "Enough of this, lad. Your bike's almost finished. Let's see to that, and I'll show you this stuff another time." Mickey tossed the pictures and medal back in the box and returned it to the shelf. "You don't touch anything without asking me first, understand?"

As they worked, Connor seemed to talk and smile more. "Christmas is only a month away," he said. "What will you ask Santa for?"

Oh, the things Mickey would ask for, if asking was all it took. "People like me don't get presents from Santa," he said. "I'm on the permanent naughty list. I've done some really bad things in my life."

"Like during the war?" Connor asked.

Mickey paused for a moment, looking into Connor's wide eyes. "Mostly after," he replied.

Then Connor asked the one question Mickey couldn't answer: "Why?"

Mickey spent the rest of the day contemplating Connor's question. Snow was beginning to fall, each flake that passed reflecting a single moment in time. A replacement cowering in a foxhole. Sean's first steps. Edith's deathbed. "Why?" he whispered to himself as he watched from the garage as Connor made a snow angel in the thin layer of snow building on the driveway. Connor rose rather suddenly as a boy a little older than him came over the hill on his bike. As he approached Mickey's house the other boy yelled, "Nice snow angel, fag!" Mickey woke from his daze, his nostrils flaring. He reached for the closest object, a hammer, stood up, and hurled it at the boy, barely missing. The boy's expression changed drastically, as if it hadn't occurred to him that the home belonged to Old Man Callahan, and he kicked up a snow cloud as he peddled away.

"Who was that?" Mickey growled.

"Just one of the kids at school that pick on me. He lives down at the bottom of the hill."

"Little fucker," Mickey grumbled, then

turned to Connor. "Go get my hammer, will ya?"

"But what if he comes back?" Connor replied.

"Then you hit the little bastard. You show him you won't take his shit, then he'll leave you alone. That's how bullies work. They push you as far as they can and retaliation is the only language they understand."

"I'm not big enough," Connor said.

"Then you damn well better be smart enough," Mickey said. "You're about the smartest boy I've ever met. Hell, you learned how to take a bike apart and put it back together in less than a week's time." Mickey placed his finger to his temple. "The mind is the strongest weapon you have, if you know how to use it."

That's when it hit him. Mickey realized that all those years it had been he who was the bully, and Sean's retaliation was leaving home at eighteen. Recalling his reaction to the bully's slur, he felt a hint of shock. He hadn't felt a paternal instinct in a long time. He thought he was helping Connor, but Connor was the one who had helped him. Mickey excused himself, went inside, and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" the familiar voice on the other end said.

"May I speak to Sean?" Mickey stammered into the phone.

"Dad?" Sean asked with a hint of astonishment, as if it had never crossed his mind that his father would call him in an intelligible tone at a normal hour.

"Hello son, how've you been?" Mickey asked, although his sister Marianne had kept him updated.

"I'm good. I passed the bar a few months back." A long pause followed. "Hello?"

"I'm here," Mickey said, tears running down his face. "I just wanted to say I'm proud of you. I know it may not mean shit from a mean, old drunk like me, but I... I love you, and I thought you should know that."

"I do, Dad," Sean said. "You told me a few weeks ago when you called."

Mickey heard someone speak in the background and could tell from the muffled voices that Sean had covered the phone. He looked over at a picture of Sean sitting on the porch swing when he was nine, his smile brighter than the sun. Though Mickey had never been the lovey-dovey type of man, his family was his life, and Mickey wanted that back.

"I was wondering if you'd like to come over and have dinner with your old man," he said apprehensively. "Do a little catching up."

The few seconds of silence before Sean spoke seemed like years. "Um, I'm going to be busy the next few weeks. I have a lot of cases in litigation right now, you know?"

Mickey knew it was a lie, but he had to be patient. He'd built the wall between them and he couldn't be angry when it didn't crumble after one phone call. He choked back the tears and responded, "That's fine, son. I'm available anytime you got time. Just give me a call. I'll be here."

"Ok," Sean said. "Well, I have to go, but it was good talking to you, Dad."

"You too, son," Mickey said, and hung up. He rested his tear-stained face on the wall with a shaky

breath. He hated himself for the things he'd said and done to Sean, his boy. He'd failed him and he knew it.

Then he felt something wrap around him. It was Connor, giving him a hug, showing him that he wasn't a wasted soul; that his life meant something besides regrets and guilt and lonely, drunken nights.

Mickey told Connor he'd be busy the following morning, and for the first time, Connor didn't seem to mind. He told Mickey he too had some things to do, and asked if he could use a few of Mickey's gardening buckets and his Allen Wrench set.

The next day, Mickey sat at his kitchen table and wrote a new letter to Sean. With it he put a picture of him, Edith, and a nine-year-old Sean from his violin recital. On the back he wrote, "Proudest father in the world." The mail had already run, so he drove to the post office. As he reached the bottom of the hill, he spotted the bully from the day before, standing in his driveway looking quite perplexed. Mickey slowed down, laughing so hard he spilled his coffee. In the driveway lay the boy's dissected bicycle, each piece strewn over the concrete, and all of it encased in a thick layer of ice.

When Mickey got home, he found Connor sitting on his porch. He gave him a wink and an assuring pat on the back. Then something caught his eye.

"Come look at this, Connor," he whispered, pointing to the swing set across the street.

"I don't see anything," Connor said, squinting.

"On top of the swing set. Look closely. It's the General." The squirrel, using his giant white tail as camouflage sat on the swing set, the Dobermans none the wiser below. "See? You don't have to be bigger or stronger, just smarter." Mickey chuckled and looked toward the open garage, at the box marked "Stay Out."

"So, Mr. Murphy, what will you ask Santa to bring you for Christmas?"

●

Kimberly Steinmetz

I Have Been Awake for Nine Days

Wavy blue wisps, threads and fibers floating through sterile clouds of oxygen, land in the porcelain wax of my concealer. My grubby finger takes a swipe at the pot, collecting flesh-colored goo beneath a jagged nail tangled with ash and THC. Black with bisque, ivory with carbon, a marbled contrast brings out the dead whites of my eyes.

Across the latex-tiled room, she sleeps unaware of the grey creeping out of her scalp like bone dust, powdering down the dark of her hair, once a mocha the color of the surgeon's skin. She's won the colorless roots I've bleached my black in a fever to achieve—the ebony she passed down to me. The dahlia of her blood contained, safe in the rolling ropes of her veins, drinks a steady drip of painlessness threaded into the black and blue stain of her arm.

I am yawning and memorizing round pegs of color in a medical Lite Brite—tiny digits whose values describe her vitality and keep me breathing.

Ars Poetica: Velocipede

On my patio,
where the rose bush
blocks the gate,
I store my bicycle.
Now, I am famously inert,
full of excuses,
yet even I put my
lazy ass on that seat
and make it go.

Though my foot
slips off the pedal
when I mount,
scraping my ankle,
and I curse hard
like my parents
taught me,
I get going.

The pavement flies by
and the wind cools
my ears,
leaving my face bare.
I forgot my sunglasses
and the sun blinds me.
I keep going.

My legs tighten like ropes,
downhill is uphill,
and the sunscreen in my sweat
stings my eyes.
I keep going.

I count the peaks
and valleys
of my feet.
Maybe tomorrow
I'll go further.

Sara Smith

The Power of Storms

When I was little, my father used to slip into the heart of thunderstorms to collect hail in ten-gallon buckets.

I remember how my mother used to shout after him, muttering and cursing his stupidity as we cowered in the back closet of my one-story home. Surrounded by dust, old fabric, and moth balls, I'd listen to the thundering march of rain against our roof and the ominous wail of wind on the siding. He'd come booming in with the face of a grinning poltergeist, his bucket rattling with his forbidden spoils.

"They're as big as golf balls!" he'd declare with a quick dip of the rim to show me. I'd have just enough time to admire the collection with a glance, before he'd whip his treasures away again and charge right back into the line of fire.

"What's your name?"

"Sara Smith."

"And how old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"And was there anyone else in the house when it happened?"

"My sister…She's eight."

"Eleven," my aunt corrected, and I nodded.

"Eleven."

A police officer made a note on his ever-expanding clipboard and continued without inflection. "And what did you see on the night in question?"

"Well, I didn't really…see anything. I heard it. From my room. They were arguing and then I heard this scream…"

"When did you hear the scream?"

"Uh…About one in the morning, I guess, but…Well, I just found her on the ground. I don't know what happened. That doesn't mean he…"

"Can we speak with your sister?"

"I…I don't know. She's pretty young, and…Well, she said he didn't push her, that she just fell. I don't want her getting upset, you know, with everyone running around and asking questions."

"And where is your father?"

"He's…not here right now…"

The officer had stopped writing. He gave me a look that made it hard to remember what a father was, let alone where he might be. The police left with the ambulance that carried out my mother on a stretcher, as though she was already dead. They didn't call again, until five months later when we'd all tried to forget what had happened, and they came to my doorstep with a warrant for his arrest.

The doorbell rang at six a.m. that early May morning. Two men in bulky black uniforms stood on the porch, showed me their badges, asked for "David Smith," and I called him down. He came still dressed in his pajamas: an electric blue t-shirt with a lime green tree frog in the center. They took him away that morning, before the sun had fully risen. As they bound his wrists and led him past the door, he looked at me and laughed.

"Well, never been to jail before. Should be fun."

I watched the car reverse into the street and flee into the morning traffic.

When they came calling for my testimony, I made the mistake of telling them the truth. I told them about that scream at one in the morning. I told them how I'd found her writhing on her back like a turtle flipped in its shell. I told them how I'd tried to help her downstairs, but she'd hiss as I pulled on her shoulders, her tongue between her teeth like a bursting berry. I told them how I'd called my grandmother who'd called my aunt who'd called the police. I told them how I'd found my father upon our return from the hospital, watching TV even though he hadn't been answering his phone.

The truth didn't paint the best of pictures.

On the day of the trial, my mother and I waited in plastic chairs as the prisoners were led in on a line of old handcuffs and orange cloth. When my father's name was called, he stood in the back of the courtroom, wearing an old business suit and a tie my mother had bought him for Christmas. Compared to the orange-suited brutes who couldn't afford bail, he looked almost harmless.

"Name?"

"Angela Smith."

"Age?"

"46."

"Profession?"

"Well, I'm on disability now, but I was an RN…"

"Mrs. Smith, do you feel that your husband would ever pose a physical or emotional danger to

your children?"

"No…No, he'd never hurt them."

"And do you feel that he poses a danger to you?"

"No. I just want him to come home."

"I see that you've changed your statement."

"He didn't push me—I fell. With my back, it's hard to keep balance…And we were both so drunk and angry, I couldn't really be sure…But I must have fallen and hit the railing. He wasn't anywhere near me."

The judge watched her for a long time, and then dropped his charges. We left that room while countless others continued on in their line because they were too tattooed or broke or honest to go unpunished.

With the trial over, my father came to resent his new status as a married man. He hated my mother, he hated our house, and he wanted more than anything to be young again. By the next year, he'd hooked up with an old girlfriend and decided, under the combined assault of alcohol and pot, that he would leave with her forever. He stumbled into the house that night, and loudly bragged of the many ways she could satisfy him—things we didn't want to hear. Then he left, driving away into the night, swearing after his freedom and the pleasure it would bring.

…my father came to resent his new status as a married man.

When I was young, I used to huddle in the back of my closet and listen to the wind and rain on the siding. I'd hear the crash and count the seconds until he'd return, but he never did. Not until the storm had died and I'd emerge to find him sitting on our water-stained porch, counting pieces of ice that would melt before nightfall.

●

Brooke Booram

Tomato Soup

The first time you had me over, you made me soup, and the wind
that month begged for something hot. You roasted sliced tomatoes
and stewed them into a solitary thickness that you stirred in the same
way my finger would encircle the clustered freckles on your shoulder.

After I first kissed the spoon, my lips trembled "More," tasting salt
from your hands, where you had stripped the skin from each tomato's
flesh and seed. I searched its depths for a full belly, but it would not
nourish me. It could not feed the needs to make a woman stay.

You asked me what I thought, and I considered your skill as an amateur
critic might, trying to compose the ideal cruel words to describe the flaws.
Maybe it needed fresher harvest, grown from your own backyard,
or maybe some herbs, like basil, because it was not seasoned to taste.

But I really craved more violence: a thick cut of steak, cooked rare
and hard to chew. Still you spooned more mouthfuls to my swollen
cheeks. No, I wouldn't swallow. I wouldn't make myself sick.

So I quit your kitchen, with a tainted tongue, no remembrance
of sweetness. Weighed down by your spoiled leftovers, I took a seat
at my own table, and used stale bread to scratch off any burnt skin.

Meagan Lacy

My Grandmother Goes to IKEA

Be back.

You write
in the script
the nuns
taught you.

Each letter
slants, points
to Heaven.

Went to pick

Pick?
Pick what?

A wardrobe
you mean to say,
for the room downstairs.
In your daughter's house—
where you now
sleep.

But your pen slows.
You draw
an A,
hesitate,
scribble it out.
Maybe it looks intentional.
Maybe no one will notice.

Oh,
what the hell.
You're running out of space anyway.
Love

For who?
For what?

You drop
the pen,
huff,
shiver towards the door.

Sarah Taylor

Second Cutting

The hay baler was broken and by the next day, the forecast called for heavy storms in our part of the county. There was a seventy percent chance that my second cutting of alfalfa would be washed out before it was even baled. Thirty acres of hay would have to wait until the ground dried once more. I didn't have that kind of time. Besides my measly handful of cows, two buyers waited on their share of the crop. If I didn't get that baler fixed soon, I'd be out nearly two months' worth of profit— money I certainly couldn't make waitressing at June's Café. This was one of the many times that I damned my husband for dying on me.

Instead, it was my brother-in-law, Jim, who peered up from the gear box of my rusty Moline baler, sweating through his work shirt in the August sun.

"The chain's busted," he said simply.

It was the first sound other than the ring of a hammer I'd heard from him all morning. Jim wasn't a man of many words, at least not since my husband had died. It was almost hard to believe that for nearly four years, we'd run this farm together with little more than the barest of conversations. It was as if we were complete strangers most days, not family who had grown up together. I guess death does that sometimes.

I stepped back out of the sun to watch Jim pull himself under the hay bine and bang on something else. I could tell he was as anxious as I was about the weather. I looked past the ancient gabled barn to the hay field beyond and watched our winter propane money seem to disappear with each passing moment. We had the smallest

window of opportunity to get the hay baled and off the ground before the summer help went back to school. My neighbor, Bill Hinson, usually sent his teenage sons over when he didn't need them. They worked hard for dirt cheap, perfect for someone on a thin budget.

As I sat in the shade of the elms around the old farm house, there was a sudden crunch of gravel and the growl of a Dodge pickup pulling into the front drive. I didn't even have to look to know who it was.

After a moment, from the front of the house appeared Tyler Ferguson, bare-chested in the heat. He grinned boyishly at me from where he stood. He helped out sometimes when he wasn't working for the Coopers. Jim was still tucked underneath the baler when Tyler ran lazy fingers down the length of my arm. I shook him away, praying Jim didn't look up. Then, as if nothing had happened, Tyler strode over and leaned down into the baler by Jim.

"What's the problem, Jim?"

At the sight of Tyler, there was an almost imperceptible ripple in Jim's demeanor. He didn't like him or, at least, his cocky attitude. If you asked Jim though, he would've said it was because of his sloppy work around the place—fences held together with wire instead of restrung tight, or boards nailed haphazardly across kicked out places in the stalls of the barn. Tyler was about speed and making do with whatever was lying around. Jim was methodical in his work, always doing it right the first time so there was no second time around. The two never seemed to see eye to eye on much of anything.

Jim hoisted himself up from the ground and tossed down the hammer. "The damn thing's got another busted chain. She managed to shear a pin, too."

As the two stood together, I couldn't help but feel a sudden stab of guilt. My husband had been dead for nearly four years, but I still had that tiny hint of betrayal seeing my brother-in-law next to my on-and-off again fling.

Jim was something of a complicated issue that I hadn't quite reckoned with. Although he never said it, I knew he often wondered why I never remarried. Perhaps, if I did, he wouldn't be stuck with the job of checking up on me. Nevertheless, he stopped in every evening to see if things were alright.

Somehow, though, I got the distinct feeling I was always disappointing him.

As I lifted a knot of auburn curls from my damp neck, Jim skirted around Tyler to stop short in front of me.

"I'll have to run to Connersville to get those parts," Jim said. "I think the rain's going to hold off until tomorrow, but we'll be cutting it close."

"I know," I said. I looked to the sky. It was clear now, but the humidity was nearly stifling. This seemed to happen every time we went to bale.

Tyler moseyed towards us and planted himself close to me. "You guys need any help with the hay crew?"

I could tell Jim wanted nothing more than to say no, but he knew better with the rain threatening to come on. We would need all the help we could get, Tyler included.

"Sure," Jim said finally. "We'll be rolling tomorrow morning if everything works out right."

Then he skirted around me without another word and got in his truck.

I could feel the rain creeping closer.

The autumn my husband died was the best growing season we'd ever had. Corn and bean prices were good, and the weather held out during the harvest. He and Jim were out from dawn until well after dark, shelling corn and cutting beans. The Tutterow brothers worked over a thousand acres of the prime farm ground their father had grown up on and bought over the years. When their parents died, they took over, continuing the cycle. My husband, Gordon, and I moved into their parent's old home. Jim, still single, built his house across the field. A thin, dirt road connected our places.

I've thought of those times as the closest my brother-in-law and I had ever been. Although Jim was still the quiet older brother to my husband, it was a softer kind of silence that surrounded him. He was the reason juxtaposing my husband's hot temper, and many nights they'd sit arguing in my kitchen over expanding the farm or buying new equipment. Once, Gordon got so mad over Jim's refusal to buy Jared Scott's old place, he went to stew in the barn for half the night. I sat with Jim at the table long after.

"It's just not the time, Ruth," he said quietly.

I smiled, because I knew he was right. He always was.

I nudged him with my elbow. "You know how he is when he gets his mind set on something."

Jim watched his reflection in his coffee cup. I'd known him for as long as I'd known my husband—we'd all grown up together. I placed a hand over his.

"He'll come around eventually," I said.

Jim studied my hand for a long time before pulling his away. I didn't realize then that it would be one of the last times Jim would ever touch me.

It was a few short months later that my husband died. Early one morning, as Gordon and Jim hauled two loads of corn up the interstate to National Starch, a grey Buick swerved to miss a tire. My husband locked up eighteen wheels before slamming into an embankment. Fifteen tons of corn spilled onto the road. It took hours to clean up. Jim watched it all from three cars behind.

After that, the closeness my brother-in-law and I once shared was gone. For months, he'd hardly even look at me. Yet, he was always somewhere on the periphery, checking equipment, fixing busted waterlines—even more meticulous than before. Wordlessly, he'd stepped in where Gordon had left off. I just assumed he was working through his grief the only way he knew how.

It was about a year after the funeral that Jim came to me one night, over the long, dirt path between our homes. He walked the fields when he couldn't sleep. Jim gazed out over the land his father worked his whole life for and closed his eyes.

"I don't want to do this anymore."

Truth be told, I didn't know what to do. Gordon's insurance only covered half the loans on the land and equipment, and Jim was hard pressed to keep everything running. But at that moment, I felt as though if Jim were to leave too, the fragile pieces holding me together would completely come apart. The farm was the last part of my husband I could hold onto. I thought, after a time, Jim would feel that way, too. So I begged him to keep going.

And Jim did.

We followed some strange routine that mimicked our former lives but could never be the same. Jim hired on a few workers, but they never seemed to hold out. It was as if they knew they were just replacements and could never really fill the spot Gordon had left.

After a time, I began to feel guilty about living in the old Tutterow home—the place where Gordon and Jim had grown up, where their family had grown up. I asked Jim if he wanted the place back. He had more claim to it than I did.

Jim ran a hand over the faded porch railing, looking anywhere but at me.

"You've always belonged in this place, Ruth, one way or another."

Jim finally met my eyes for the first time in months then made the slow walk home. I pondered over his words for a long time after.

It was still early in the evening, when Jim returned with the parts, but late enough we'd have to take our chances on getting started in the morning. I'd have to re-rake the hay, praying we'd get it baled and off the ground before the first clouds rolled in. Bill Hinson's sons were just waiting on the call, and Tyler said he'd be back in the morning, too. He'd left to take care of the Cooper's stock for the evening. Jim seemed relieved to have the barn lot back to himself. I sat as close as he'd allow, handing him tools as he cranked down the new chain.

Jim seemed more anxious than usual to get the work over with. I could tell by the careless way he was going about everything. It made me wonder if I'd unknowingly interrupted his plans for the night. Jim was never vocal about many things, but I got the feeling he'd been seeing a girl from town and not letting anyone in on it. Rita Haggard had been sweet on him since we were in school; it made me wonder idly if she'd finally managed to nab him.

Some tiny part of me felt bothered by this.

"It won't take much more to get this done," I said. "The whole night won't be a complete waste for you."

Jim didn't even look up as I said this. Instead, I watched him become more focused on his hands in the light of the hook lamp. Some days, I just wanted to shake him out of the shell he'd become. Jim had always been quiet, but this silence was more stifling than the boyhood shyness he'd once held. This silence felt like an

"You've always belonged in this place, Ruth, one way or another."

acute punishment.

"I hear Rita's waitressing at the café now," I tried again.

Jim sighed suddenly and tossed down his wrench. "Ruth, don't." Jim pushed himself up and ran a hand over his face.

"What is wrong with you?" I stood from the milk crate where I'd been sitting. Suddenly, I found myself wanting to needle away at him for the first time in years. "Can't I talk to you anymore?"

As much as I'd wanted him to, Jim didn't get mad. Instead, he finally faced me with an unexpected deflation I hadn't seen since Gordon first died.

"Ruth, I've been offered a job." Jim couldn't have surprised me more if he'd slapped me then. He studied his hands before going on. "John Arnold said a position's opened at the machine shop. The pay's good, and he said it's there as long as I want it."

I swallowed hard. Of all the things I was expecting from him, this was far from it. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "Honestly, I was going to leave it up to you. If you want me to stay here, I will. If not, we'll have to decide what stays and what goes."

I turned away from him then. Faced with the idea of selling part of the land my husband had worked hard for—what we'd worked hard for—struck something in me I hadn't felt in four long years.

"I can't decide that for you," I said finally.

It was as if Jim didn't hear me as he picked up his tools. After he clicked off the lamp, he paused in the darkness.

"I'll be back in the morning to bale."

And then he was gone.

Jim wasn't gone long when Tyler appeared once more in my drive. Tyler was never one to take no for an answer, and I found myself in his company, despite the fact I desperately wanted to be alone. I stood in my bedroom doorway, trying to coax him out.

"Look, you need to go home."

Lately, he'd taken to staying longer than I liked. He remained twisted in my cotton sheets, despite my insistence. In the past, I could simply bring up my dead husband, and men slinked away. I think Tyler had turned it into a game of who could hold out the longest.

"You're always trying to rush me out of here." Tyler's lips held something that wasn't quite a smirk. "Are you afraid of being seen with me?"

I was quiet for a moment. Mostly, I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts but, then again, I didn't want to admit that he was partially right.

"Look, you knew what this was beforehand," I said more gently.

He looked baffled by this and, for a moment, I questioned whether he really did know. Tyler had been different than the others. Over the years, I'd had plenty of men stop at my doorway, offering their help to the "poor widow." Men, who after bush-hogging the back pasture

or cleaning out the cow barn, stood expectantly at my front door. I guess they'd heard some things about me. Most of the men I left standing there with a mason jar of sweet tea. Tyler, on the other hand, had wanted nothing or, at least, not yet. I guess he hadn't heard any of the rumors. When he tried to walk away, I tugged him inside. That was nearly two years ago.

"People expect you to move on, Ruth," Tyler stood up to put on his clothes. "You don't have to be a damn martyr forever."

I wished suddenly that it could be as easy as that—that I was a woman who just couldn't get over her dead husband, but it wasn't. Hell, after four years I couldn't even say what it was. Somewhere in my mind, I wanted it to be this farm and this life that I wanted to preserve, but something else whispered that it was beyond even that.

As Tyler gathered his clothes, a light clicked on in the barn lot, and I knew it had to be Jim returning for his tools. In all these years, he still left half of them in the old milk house connected to the barn. I left Tyler on the stairway and followed the trail of light outside. The dew felt cool against my bare feet.

I could hear him shuffling through the drawers of his oily tool chest before I entered. I could even picture him in his rolled up shirt sleeves, his big shoulders hunched over the workbench. I startled him when I finally called out his name.

"Jim, what are you doing?"

It was as if the room wasn't big enough for him then, like there wasn't enough space to distance us. He methodically wiped his hands across a shop rag.

"I was just making sure everything's ready for in the morning." He tossed away the mangled rag. He glanced quickly at my oversized night shirt. "I didn't mean to wake you."

I shook my head. "You didn't."

"Ruth," Jim started and then stopped again. "Ruth, I won't go if you don't want me to. I'll stay. If that's what you want, I'll stay."

For the first time in years, Jim reminded me of the boy I'd grown up with—the one who had held my hand when we were small, the one who teased me mercilessly in school, and the one who'd wished me every bit of happiness on my wedding day.

To this Jim, I didn't know what to say.

That silence was broken, though, when the meaty rumble of a Dodge truck blasted from its hiding place behind the shed. I followed Jim's eyes as he watched the headlights of that truck pull out of the drive. I'd told Tyler a hundred times he needed a better exhaust on the damn thing, and now it echoed in the most humiliating way down the road. Jim turned his back to me.

"Jesus Christ, Ruth!"

I felt like a scolded child as Jim slammed the drawers closed on his tool box. I blocked his path to the door so instead he stalked into the main hall of the barn, shoving feed sacks and crates blindly as he went. I stumbled behind him in the murky light.

"Jim, stop."

He faced me with dark eyes, nothing more than a large silhouette in the blackness. I realized he was expecting me to say something, but nothing came to mind.

"Why him," he seethed, after a moment.

I remained silent. His simple question seemed marked as something else entirely. I was afraid to answer; I'd never seen Jim so angry.

"Gordon's gone, Jim." I looked to my feet. "Tyler was there."

By the look on Jim's face, I'd said the wrong thing. He laughed, but not in the way that something was funny.

"Do you know what it's like for me to watch you whore yourself out to these men?" Jim looked wildly about. "And for what? Chores on the farm? A broken fence? A Goddamned baler?" Jim pointed angrily towards the door. "I'm right there, Ruth. I've always been right there!"

By then, Jim stood over me, as close as he'd ever been, and I wanted desperately for him to touch me. For as long as I'd known him, it was as if we'd orbited each other and never crossed some invisible line. I leaned in closer to him, forcing the breach to be made.

Jim held me away, pressing his large palm against my collarbone and the base of my throat. I could smell the axel grease that lingered on his fingertips and the Lava soap that missed it. I waited for his other hand to reach the side of my face.

But it didn't.

Instead, Jim pushed me away like nothing. Then, he strode into the light and back out to be consumed by the darkness of the night. I leaned against a stall door.

In the stillness, I listened to the light sweep of the wind, to the faint patters on the tin roof of the barn, and realized Jim was right.

The rain had come a day early.

●

Kyle Keller

Tympanoplasty: *For My Generation*

We were born feet first
to the red & the white
lights of a Coke
commercial, & late cries
of foreign coups & new flannel
mop haired metal bands
on channel 51,
& tree high ads, peeled
like shed petals,
for FIREW RKS,
whose modest booms stretch
for a sky, wide, starred,
& dark blue, & pixelated PORN
store emporiums, with doors
of black glass that blur
their hazy neon letters,
or so i've heard.
& we'd mature
through war, & war,
& more on abstractions,
while young brown
backs bleed holes
in fashionable fatigues,
to puddle & roll
like the slow train
down slanted concrete.

In the 3000,
700 & 80
6 dollar, after tax
& rounded down,
mid grade Prada purse
on the baby
sitter in the trailer
park, from the red carpet
we're the pampered
dogs with snarky barks,
& wrapped in chum, sincerity
is fed to
f i n s.

We've beaten irony
like a rug on a line,
caught in a fist fight,

over a barrel fire,
on a wet westside
street, in the cover
of night, where a free gun
kiosk sits & triggers
response to live riots
who refuse
to breathe. Next up,
hyperbole.

We're easy,
because it is
& criticize without
act as de-evolution
's televised daily,
we're the sprung cogs
& puttered coughs
of bone dry social, political
& economic
troughs that are inherent
ly flawed. We're whatever
couldn't be grounded
by any parents of god,
& the appearance of good
seems a crayon box of rubber
trendy, bracelet plots.

We're afflicted
wiAth cDondiDtions like
& hey, don't talk to me,
txt me, with tips of your fingers,
conversation is sexy
buzzwords, heard from suits
at desks on tv, we're loud
nationalists & sweat passion
past cotton when there's a ball
involved, & passive
terrorists when a bomb
on a sandy village
falls & will Google
midSEARCH:sentence
to matter of factly
verify your faulty
opinion, & tell you when
the day you blow
candles, truly is.

We're the still silent,
unsatisfied submissives,
whose sleep will usher
drones to their seats
quiet as smoke
above our own,
single-parent
Asbestos buildings,
with our face to phones
on auto-defect.
correct*
Subdued, our collective
intellect is melted ghosts
of number 2 graphite
spilt over borders of green
Scantron bubbles.

The vast majority
of us should be pissed
that we'll probably never
enter outer space,
but on the other hand,
we'll see more
& more
& more progress
repealed. Wait.
i write this & bet
the blue roads
on my wrist,
that some dipshit
of my generation,
maybe me,
will RT #jeeze
tellushowyoureallyfeel

Kyle Keller

Choosing a Tomato from the Produce Section of the Grocery Store Down the Street

I eye past the lives in plastic,
arranged neatly
on gunmetal grey Styrofoam rafts,
stacked
side by side,
two at a time.

I don't bother.
They've been washed clean
of their smell of leaves,
& the warmth gained
from spending months in the sun.
They've forgotten the calloused hands
of sweat-soaked mothers,
who lose whole days to fields
& won't see their children
until they're paid for their pounds.
Anyway, in the cup of my hand,
they're too firm to the touch,
a bit like a June peach,
or a lover's knee.

Show me your wild & weird,
with orange-yellow hues ooh!
Or the shades that grew from a drop
of forgotten purple, & spread
like a splash of stray coffee
on a sheet of daily news.
I want the one that's plump
with purpose, at the stem
bursting with a frozen explosion
in a stoplight summer sky.

Flowers bloom on the tight,
ripe, red canvas
while timid fingers hover
close enough to feel the heat
of secrets. My tomato tells me
that it's working toward rotting.
Asks if there was a cause,
& if so, is it lost?
After all, her seeds will be eaten
on a hot sandwich, with melted cheese.
My tomato knows
that if she's seen sadness,
then her bite's sweetened.

Jamie Engel

Tales of a First Grade Junkie

The radar's eye over the front door might be the only thing that sees me. Of course that's intentional. I approach the front of the building from the left side. The sliding glass doors are gracious enough to open, like a friend welcoming me as a guest into their home. The smell of fresh produce, slightly damp from the misting machines, has already made its long journey to the opposite side of the store to greet me. The semi bright fluorescent lighting bathes the store in a shade of mediocrity, and reflecting off the linoleum floor, it amplifies the drab. The dull beeps of the checkout lanes echo out of sync with one another and drum like a form of Chinese water torture. Drone ant colonies of shoppers move swiftly through the aisles grabbing items off shelves before the others get them first. Each and every one of them is mindless of the little boy meandering around the store, seemingly aimless in his movements.

I couldn't care less about groceries: produce, the butcher, even the cereal aisle. What I want is on the merchandise side of the store. Down the aisle of junk. Plastic bats and whiffle balls, Barbies and Legos, G.I. Joes and Transformers. A parent's nightmare, but heaven to every child that gets dragged along shopping, ever hopeful that "Mommy, PLEASE?!" will, this time, pay off. I'm going for the Micro Machines, every first grader's favorite new toy. They're just like Hot Wheels, except better. Shrunk down. Tiny plastic masterpieces: a 1967 Corvette Sting Ray in banana yellow; a color changing 1969 Mustang GT500 that morphs from candy apple red to a vibrant fuchsia; a Ducati 1000 motorcycle with, and without, a rider; a classic farm-green John Deere Harvester

Combine; and my absolute favorite, a Lamborghini Countach (deluxe edition) in neon yellow with pink tinted windows. The deluxe edition is so perfect it even has doors, hood, and a trunk that all open to reveal the most minute details of the seating and dashboard within. I can even find a spare tire under the hood, which is so cool because the Lamborghini's engine is in the trunk.

Cars and motorcycles, trucks and tractors, they even have little town scenes that connect to each other to make up a Micro Machines world that I can escape inside. The Sinclair gas station, the Firestone tire shop, the Pennzoil motor oil center, the Super Van City play set, highways and byways, mining pits and shopping malls, they're all there, just waiting for the little boy that's going to get them. The vehicles are my favorite and the easiest to obtain. I can fit exactly 146 in my pockets on a single trip, and let's be honest, 146 Micro Machines is way better than five Hot Wheels any day.

My pocket. The final destination of the day. My victory lap will be shuffling my long, skinny, six-year-old fingers through a pocket full of plastic automobiles that are each roughly the size of a quarter. I will be a rich man by the end of this trip. And the best part is, I'm not going to pay for a single one.

They are ever watching, like a falcon circling its prey.

They are displayed so masterfully, hanging just within reach, and taunting me from the moment I lay my eyes on them. A classic '80s color scheme paints the tag board in horizontal bars, descending from the top down: pink, orange, yellow and baby blue, with all four blending together on the bottom, like the sky at dusk on a perfect August evening. I caress the packaging. Dirty little fingers trace the edge of the tag board, slowly working their way across the glossed front panel to the plastic casing that contains the toy itself. I make several selections that encase the vehicles I want, and slowly remove them from their metal prongs. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck begin to tingle and rise. Blood flow increases as the sensation of my heartbeat can be felt in my fingertips. My ears are on heightened alert, playing backup for my eyes that are now searching above for the placement of every store camera.

Giant black bubbles protruding from the otherwise ivory ceiling conceal each one. They are ever watching, like a falcon circling its prey. They never want me out of their sight, but escape is possible. If you think about it, the falcon rarely catches the mouse before he escapes into the underbrush, as long as the mouse is cunning enough to make the attempt to flee.

My lungs fill and collapse, each time amplifying my heartbeat until I can almost hear it in my ears. My tiny feet glide along a carefully determined path, constantly avoiding as many direct lines of sight with the bubbles as possible. I evade store clerks along the path in front of me as well. As if I'm

running the gauntlet, I dodge obstacle after obstacle on my journey to the bathroom, packaging gripped in my hands. "Pretend you're going to pee," I tell myself, "no one knows the difference." I put on the emotional face of disappointment that you would find on a child who was told, "No, you absolutely cannot get a new toy today," eyes now pointed to the floor, head hung down, shoulders drooped, feet shuffling loud across the linoleum. "Sell the disappointment, like Mom said no. Make'em believe it. They never know the difference. They'll never know you're lying."

I pass the checkout lines, and slightly increase speed as I walk past the customer service desk. Stop and pause at the candy dispensers. Look them all over with longing. The red-based machines each showcase a delicious treat in their globe-top window. Mike N' Ikes, SweeTarts, Gumballs, Runts, M&Ms, Peanut M&Ms. "I wish I had a quarter."

Down a hallway on my right-hand side lay the bathrooms, just past the candy machines. I pivot on my heel and move to the door. Inside, I quickly make my way to the big handicap stall at the back of the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind me. One other person is standing with his back to me as I enter, his hips pressed close to the urinal, whistling some old fifties tune I've heard a hundred times before in my mom's car on the radio. Stupid song. I listen for the urinal flush. The sink faucet turns on, and he jams on the soap dispenser's button loud enough to create an echo around the entire room. Shuffling hands rubbing vigorously together with a slight suction and furious roar, louder than the running water itself, drown out the sound of my heartbeat. He shuts the faucet off. Hearing the spatter against the porcelain basin of the sink, I can almost see him flick the remaining droplets of water from his hands. The steel dispenser on the wall rattles as he snatches several paper towels before exiting the restroom and leaving me in peace.

The silence returns as I begin to salivate. My heart rate rises again, and my breaths get shallow. My palms get clammy as I finger the edge of the plastic case that is glued to the cardboard (?) backing of the toy's package. I sit on the toilet with my legs pressed together as tight as possible, creating a trough. I don't want to risk dropping the Micro Machines anywhere but my lap. As the two pieces of the packaging tear apart and the tiny vehicle drops to my legs, the rush begins to amplify. I begin to tingle from head to toe. Mimicking the sensation I get when my fever is high and everything that touches my body makes me quiver, I get the chills. The sensation is incredible. I'm a first grade junkie, getting high off adrenaline.

Tossing the packaging aside, I roll the wheels of the cars over my palms, amplifying the rush surging through my body. I carefully fold up the cardboard and crumple down the plastic packaging, burying it below the damp paper towels that congest the garbage can. No evidence. I pocket the toys—five or six cars to each box—and exit the stall, carefully looking myself over in the mirror for any signs of guilt or remorse. Nope, none, clean as a whistle. Exiting the bathroom I keep my head tipped to the ground and venture

back for a second round, altering my path to make it less suspicious to anyone who might have seen me the first time around.

Repeated success has me hemorrhaging Micro Machines from every open pocket as I cautiously exit the restroom from the last trip of the day. My hands are plunged deep in my pockets to mask the bulges now clearly visible to any passerby. I am graceful as I make my way out past the candy machine and under the radar's eye once again. The doors in front of me open. I nearly drown in a tidal wave of ecstasy. I got away with it. I let the feeling wash over me. There is nothing like it that I have yet to discover. I stroll to my bicycle that lay hidden in the tree line along the side of the parking lot. The smaller bushes engulf all but the grip on my handlebar. I lift my little red Huffy out of the brush and hop on. I head to my friend Neil's house to unload. His apartment is halfway between our school and the store. I tear down the dirt path through the trees that separate his apartment complex from the parking lot.

Neil collects Micro Machines, and I have too many already. Besides, I don't even really want them after all is said and done. All I really want is the rush. I just want to get away with it. With stealing. It's all I really care about. Neil loves our friendship. He gets new toys, and I have an excuse for my parents to let me bike to school every day. "I'm going to Neil's to play." It's just that simple.

It's like I can't stop. I need to go back. All the Micro Machines in the world aren't satisfying this craving. I dump my pockets at Neil's, and quickly excuse myself, stepping carefully over the bedroom floor littered with the spoils of my escapades.

●

D. L. Nuzum

Epiphany

A row of barn swallows on the line
stir, one by one, as I pass by,
taking to the air like corn shucks in a dust devil,
whirling overhead.
The ground reverberates just before
my foot strikes it.
Queen Anne's Lace bobs heavy on its stem before me.
Red clover cranes toward my fingertips,
begging me to pluck
the purple flowers, to sip
their sweet nectar.

It is this moment—
these moments—
when I know I am not contained
within the boundaries of my body—
my edges waver in sunlight.
I expand
until I feel the brush of clouds at my head,
the churning of a liquid planet beneath my soles.
I am becoming the center of a whirlwind,
the eye of violence,
of power,
of beauty,
of hurricane.
My lungs swell with epiphany.

But then,

I spring back into myself,
a triggered sapling snare,
a snapped rubber band.
And I reach only as far
as my fingertips.

Heredity

To sing of the devil
pulls me to the edge of the same cliff
where my mother ate a blackberry,
licked her lips, and plunged off.
I know I am not her
as I imagine her voice,
the needle in her hand (or arm?).
Wind whirs through the sugar maple,
as clouds evaporate in the sun.
I'll leave this place,
go back home, and put the coffee on.
Even so,
there is a dribble of juice on my lips.
Seeds are stuck in my teeth.

D. L. Nuzum

Baptism

Lord, have mercy.
Incense smokes, burns my eyes until
I see more clearly.
Our voices rise and fall
like smoke themselves, sweet savor.
Spirit and flesh collided in a virgin's womb.
The unnameable God took on a face,
strapped sandals on His feet and walked a
bloody road.
Let angels prostrate fall.
Plunge me beneath the water.
It feels like a grave.
But a veil was torn in two,
top to bottom,
and God got out of the room
we had stuck Him in.
I, too, rise gasping
dripping water.
Water to wine.
I taste blood.

Ryan Musselman

Intersections

The pregnant girl wasn't there. Frank noticed this as he walked to his corner of the intersection, resenting each tentative step that led him closer to the cooking asphalt. He looked past the teeming traffic to the vacant corner on the opposite side where the pregnant girl usually stood with her cardboard sign. Her absence created an eerie portrait of abandonment—of neglect—a composition that would take well to black and white. Frank rested his own sign against his leg and looked through his framed fingers with one squinted eye. He moved his hands left and right and tilted them vertically and horizontally, before concluding that a more poignant photograph would require a subject.

His attention wandered across the scene in an attempt to find a single aesthetically pleasing feature to the urban sprawl and strip mall clutter—and then miraculously, there she was: in the parking lot across the street, sitting in the passenger seat of a car. She was with a boy around her age—eighteen or nineteen. Frank couldn't hear their words, but those razor-thin eyes and fast-moving mouths suggested that they weren't "Goodbye, sweetheart." He watched the girl step out and slam the door shut as the engine stuttered its way to a roar. The boy spun the car out of the lot, tires screaming.

The girl stood staring at the empty parking space with the same scowl Frank had seen every day since she first appeared at the intersection the week before. He was still alarmed by those chocolate-diamond eyes that glared in the sunlight, that subtle rise of a nose suspended above a pink-lipped frown. Ignoring the tattoos

that stained her exposed limbs, the cluster of jewelry that clung to her face, and the melon-sized bump that erupted from her black t-shirt, Frank had to admit that she held an unsettling resemblance to his daughter Abby—or what he imagined Abby would have looked like at that age.

A moment later, Frank saw the girl start off across the street in his direction, eyeing him like a target. He quickly fumbled the sign back into his hands and shifted his weight, gazing out into the traffic, struggling to appear unaware of her approach. She arrived, clutching her piece of cardboard.

"Can I bum a cigarette?" she asked.

Frank could feel the unopened pack in his pocket. Smoking eased his migraines, but those cranial lightning storms hadn't ravaged his skull in over a month. He kept some cigarettes on hand, just in case, but lately the extra weight in his jeans served only as a reminder of the pain, and he was eager to get rid of them. He glanced at the girl's sign that read "Homeless and pregnant." Her belly was aimed at him, and he regarded it with the same alert concern he would a loaded gun.

"You really shouldn't smoke," he said.

The girl shot an edgy look over each shoulder. With her free hand, she yanked the hem of her shirt up a few inches, exposing the pink fabric of a prosthetic pregnancy pad. She gave Frank just enough time to realize what it was before tugging her shirt back down. "There," she said. "Now can I have a cigarette?"

Frank didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. The recent summer-sticky days had been a montage of the girl accepting everything drivers offered to her through their open windows, pocketing more money in one hour than what Frank would make in an entire shift. Countless saps had bought into this guise of a destitute mother-to-be, and he had been one of them. The whole charade was devilishly clever. He felt compelled to reward her ingenuity, deceitful and beggarly as it was.

"Here," he said, tossing her the pack of cigarettes.

She caught it with one hand and opened it with her teeth. Up close, she looked more like Abby than Frank wanted to believe. With hair gleaming like wet shale and skin like pink granite the girl could have been Abby's older sister. Frank watched her scoop a lighter from her pocket and ignite the cigarette dangling from her lips. He wanted her to leave now, to return to her own side of the intersection where the translucent smog cast her as a distant mirage, and not the discernible ghost that stood before him. But she didn't move.

"You've been staring at me all week," she said, exhaling smoke through the tiny hoop that hung between her nostrils. "It's starting to creep me out."

Frank mentally recounted the previous days and realized how much of his focus had unintentionally fallen upon the girl. It never occurred to him that she would be aware of his presence as well. Since Abby's death the year before, he felt invisible—imperceptible to the world—but that had merely been

wishful thinking.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just—you remind me of my daughter." He hadn't wanted to bring it up, but he felt bad for distressing the girl and she deserved an explanation. He also couldn't produce a convincing lie on such short notice.

Thankfully, the girl seemed to accept his unelaborated answer. She shrugged and took another pull on her cigarette, her eyes skipping across the cars that rushed by. Frank hadn't considered how frustrating it would be to watch this living picture of Abby smoke in front of him so proficiently, knowing that she'd then stand beneath the scorching sun and collect money from strangers. It was an alternate future—every father's nightmare awakened—and he could almost feel the adrenaline of paternal instinct surge inside him.

"Do your parents know you smoke?" he asked.

"Yep," the girl replied, still scanning the street.

"Do they know about that?" Frank asked, pointing to her cardboard sign.

Her head swiveled slowly toward him, her face hosting a hint of irritation. With narrowed eyes she said, "No, they don't. And it's none of their business."

"Panhandling isn't a very becoming profession for a young lady," Frank said.

"And working for a pawnshop is much better," the girl snapped. She pointed to his sign. "Does your daughter know about that?" Frank peered down at the Midtown Jewelry-N-Loan logo watermarked behind the words "We Buy Gold!"

He hesitated. "We don't see each other anymore," he said, reinstating his policy of avoiding the truth. This was the longest conversation he had endured in months. He just wanted to get it over with and retreat into his solitude.

"We have the same job. The only difference is I make more money."

The girl let the cigarette butt drop from her mouth before grinding it into the sidewalk with the tip of her sneaker. "Smart daughter," she said, releasing her last lungful of smoke. "My dad is a deadbeat, and I don't see him either." She turned on her heel and checked for traffic in either direction. Before she crossed the street, she looked back at Frank. "Don't kid yourself," she said, those familiar eyes burning. "We have the same job. The only difference is I make more money."

The man with the sign had gawked at her from across the intersection all week. Zoe gritted her teeth, one hand squeezed into a fist, the other one clasped to her piece of cardboard that she swung at her side like a paddle propelling her across the street away from the man's condescending interrogation. She hadn't minded it at first, his staring. He was handsome the way your best friend's dad is handsome: hair mostly intact, muscles just beginning to give way to fat, a masculine brooding in his eyes. But Zoe never

would have imagined he'd be so opinionated about her job or about her smoking.

She knew for a fact that pregnant smokers who quit cold turkey risked sending their bodies into shock and affecting the baby's development. She had read it in an article the day after finding out she was, in fact, pregnant. She sat up in bed with a women's health magazine and read it aloud to her boyfriend Josh who lay beside her, tapping the remote, unwilling to commit to a channel.

"Babe," he had said through a yawn. "You worry too much."

Maybe she did worry too much. She was only six weeks along, and she had honestly been trying to quit, but her fight with Josh that morning had necessitated a cigarette.

Zoe reached her usual spot and twisted to face the street. She adjusted her fake belly, the plunder of a department store's maternity mannequin, and displayed her sign right below it. The man across the intersection was watching her again, probably out of shock, but when their eyes met he quickly looked away. It was obvious that he considered her work as lazy fraudulence, but she saw it as resourcefulness. If anyone was a fraud, he was. Zoe saw the nice car he drove to work every morning. She bet he could have a better job if he actually tried, but he was just using the pawnshop as a venue to wallow in his own self-pity.

After a few seconds a sedan stopped at the red light, and the elderly driver extended her shaky, wrinkled arm at the end of which fluttered a ten-dollar bill. Zoe took the money, revering it with wide eyes.

"Thank you," she said, rubbing her belly theatrically. "This means so much to us."

The woman smiled. "God bless," she said before rolling up her window.

Zoe shoved the money into her pocket. Such generous donators were rare; a typical day involved more dirty looks and verbal harassment than anything else, but she had tried other jobs before and nothing paid like panhandling—though it hadn't always been so lucrative. At first, she had posed on the sizzling street corner with her flat stomach, and people took one sneering glimpse at her tattoos and piercing before driving off, reluctant to facilitate the drug habit of some teenage punk. If it weren't for the fake belly, she'd just be another idiot on the sidewalk, an idiot who couldn't afford the boxes of diapers and formula she had begun stockpiling in Josh's apartment. He thought she was being irrational by wasting money on things they didn't need, which was the topic of their most recent argument. Money was tight since Josh was between jobs, but he was working on getting a bartending license so he could support his family. That's more than Zoe could say about her own father.

Just then, a car full of boys braked in front of her. They giggled as the one riding shotgun rolled down his window. "Hey, pretty mama," he said, presenting a debit card. "Where do I swipe?" The car ruptured with laughter as it drove away.

The sun loomed threateningly over the horizon when Frank parked at work the next morning. He instinctively checked for the not-so-

pregnant girl at her corner, but it was empty so he looked at the parking lot, and there she was. Same car, same boy, same fight—but louder. He was still unable to decipher what was being shouted, but he could clearly hear the gruffness in their voices.

Inevitably, the girl jumped out, kicked the door shut, and the boy sped off. Frank watched for a moment as she stalked to her corner. He was glad he hadn't confessed to her about Abby's death. Reliving those frantic moments—finding his daughter in the middle of the road and begging her to wake up wasn't something he could brave without a debilitating migraine. Sometimes between explosions of pain, he'd still see her blood on his hands.

He walked into the shop to get his sign and was greeted by snapping fingers.

"Frank," his boss said, producing a box from behind a sparkling jewelry cabinet. "Business is slow. You need a gimmick. Pick something out of here and put it on your head." Frank inspected the box warily, sifting through a leftover heap of mismatched Halloween costumes. He dug through multicolored wigs, inspected a believable plastic police badge set in a leather wallet, and eventually decided upon an inconspicuous propeller cap. He slapped it onto his scalp before heading out into the sweltering heat.

He felt the propeller spin in the weak breeze, and although he was aware of his absurd appearance, he would sooner don a clown suit than return to his previous job at the studio. For the majority of his adulthood, Frank had made a comfortable living as a portrait photographer. He returned to work a few weeks after Abby's funeral, but those bright lights weren't good for his headaches, and the images of smiling parents and their breathing children in his viewfinder every day weren't good for them either. He tolerated it for a while, but then one day, a man and his young daughter came in. Frank had to leave and he never went back.

The pawnshop was an escape from the silent museum that was his house. Even the few pictures that remained on the walls were dusty relics of the past; evidence of a happier life. It had always been just him and Abby. Her mother, who had declined all of Frank's marriage proposals, hadn't wanted kids. When they discovered she was pregnant, Frank talked her into keeping it. She gave birth to Abby and played mommy for two years before running away with some wealthy playboy; inevitability Frank had seen coming but never tried to avoid. He knew Abby was better off without a mother than with the forced love of a resentful parent.

The sidewalk had just finished cooling down when Frank arrived at his post, but the sun would warm it up before long, turning the cement into a litter-strewn skillet and him into an oversized strip of bacon with a propeller cap. He had actually grown accustomed to the heat, to the ache in his spine at the end of a long shift, and to the stiffness in his legs after standing motionless all day. Against his better judgment, he glanced over at the girl. He wondered how she dealt with it all.

She was studying something in her hands, turning it over and over with her fingers, and it

glinted in the sunlight with each revolution. Something in her demeanor had changed. She no longer stood with the rigid posture that she had stormed away from the argument with, but rather slouched into herself, as if she had crumbled inside and was now caving in. Frank couldn't imagine how her parents would react if they drove by and found her there, seemingly eight months pregnant with a pocket full of money. He wondered if they'd care at all. His experience with Abby's mother had taught him that not all parents were fit to raise their own children.

Frank watched as the girl stood there, disregarding her sign, and giving her undivided attention on the shiny thing in her hands. She poured it from one palm to the other, and then twirled it gently in her fingers, and then repeated. After almost an hour of this, her head shot up and she looked straight at Frank, as if she had known he was staring again.

When Zoe looked up at the man with the sign, his head twisted to face another direction—any direction—as it did every time she looked his way. She couldn't bother to be annoyed, however; she was more concerned with the fate of the gold ring she had been handling all morning. It had belonged to her mother who died of cancer when Zoe was six. She couldn't always remember her mother's face or the sound of her voice, but the heartache was still there, as she knew it would be for the rest of her life. It wasn't the sort of trauma that lingered on her consciousness—more of a dull pigment that colored only her most heightened emotions. It didn't affect her daily life. Not like it affected her father's.

As long as Zoe could remember, he had been a drunk, or what someone might call a "functioning alcoholic." His routine involved drinking himself awake, going to work, coming home, and drinking himself to sleep. His coworkers and bosses must have assumed his minor speech impediments and inaccurate motor skills were congenital, a characteristic imperfection, most likely because they had never seen him sober. It was his default setting, an irreversible side effect of his unmanaged depression.

Zoe gazed at the ring for a moment, its polished surface casting beams of light across her face. And then she looked over at the man's sign again: "We Buy Gold!"

"Just see what you can get for it," Josh had suggested. Bills were piling up. Rent was due. "You don't have to sell it," he had said. "Just get a loan for it and we'll buy it back later." But Zoe knew that was impossible. Josh hadn't cashed a paycheck in months, and while Zoe made decent money for the hours she put in, it was never a guarantee.

His routine involved drinking himself awake, going to work, coming home, and drinking himself to sleep.

She knew she'd have to sell the ring outright to get as much money as possible. For most of the morning she had scrutinized the gold band, trying to convince herself that it had more monetary value than sentimental.

She and Josh needed the money to continue living together, and Zoe wouldn't consider anything else. She had grown up without a mother and had essentially grown up without a father, but her child wouldn't. Looking once more at the man across the intersection—recalling what she had said about his daughter—Zoe realized that's probably why she had been so hard on him. When the traffic cleared, she scurried across the street. After the man finished feigning surprise at her arrival, she showed him the ring.

"How much do you think I can get for this?" she asked.

The man gently plucked the ring from her hand and surveyed it closely. "I have no idea," he said. "Maybe fifty." He faced Zoe, but her apprehension must have shown because his expression flickered when their eyes met. "Are you sure you want to sell this?" he asked.

Zoe nodded vigorously. She had barely even known her mother. In the long run, she'd never miss the ring. The man paused for a moment.

"I'll take it in after my shift," he said. "If they're buying from me, they'll cut a better deal."

"Thanks," Zoe said. "Take whatever they offer. My boyfriend's on his way, so I'll just get the money from you tomorrow."

...she could still feel his grip on her arm, and she could still feel his stare.

"Sure thing," the man said. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then must have thought better of it. Zoe took one last look at the ring before he dropped it into his pocket. She quickly turned toward the street and had one leg off the curb when she heard a gasp and was yanked backward onto the sidewalk right as a car flew by with its horn blaring. Zoe stared at the spot in the road where she would have been hit, and then she looked up at the man, his fingers still pressing into her arm. He had gone pale.

"Thanks for that, too," Zoe said.

He let go of her and told her to be more careful. But even after the cars thinned out and she crossed the street, after she made it to the parking lot and climbed into Josh's car, she could still feel his grip on her arm, and she could still feel his stare.

Frank swayed at his corner the next morning, doing everything he could to keep from collapsing into a heap on the sidewalk. He had a hundred dollars for the girl, and he was regretting the whole ordeal already. He was being too nice, too approachable. He just wanted to give her the money so he could stumble back to the shop, and tell his boss that he was too sick to work. It was a migraine—a bad one. He was used to the nausea and the light-sensitivity, but the pounding in his head had never been so aggressive. He thought everything had been getting better, but then that morning, the phone

rang. Ever since, it felt as if a million cymbals had been pushed off a cliff, one by one, and were now crashing inside his skull.

"So you're just giving up?" Frank had asked into the phone earlier that morning, using his other hand to squeeze his throbbing temples.

"It's been nearly a year," said the bureaucratic voice on the other end. "There were no witnesses. There was no vehicle description. Every possible lead has been exhausted." A static silence filled Frank's ear for a moment, followed by a muffled cough. "We're very sorry," the voice said. "It's simply regulation that we notify you."

Frank hung up, went to the bathroom to puke, and then drove to work.

Now, he stood at his corner waiting for the girl to show up. Thankfully, it was a matter of minutes before the car swerved into the parking lot across the street. The girl got out and Frank waved her down, flailing his hand impatiently. When she reached his corner, he pushed the hundred-dollar bill at her.

"Here," he said. "Take it."

The girl's delight at seeing the money quickly turned to annoyance at Frank's brusque words. She frowned at him. "What's your problem?" she asked, setting a hand on her hip.

Frank groaned. He didn't have time to tolerate any of the girl's questions. He needed to leave. He needed to go home. He needed to forget. "Nothing," he said. "Just take it and leave."

The girl ripped the bill from Frank's fingertips and shoved it in her pocket. "Sorry," she said harshly. "I was just trying to help."

At that, Frank released a single, hooting laugh. He couldn't help it. The idea of this free-loading teenager giving him any beneficial advice was ludicrous.

But the girl didn't find it amusing. "What?" she demanded. "What's so funny?"

Frank shook his head weakly. "You couldn't possibly help me," he said. "What do you know about loss? What do you know about grief? What do you know about anything?" The words poured from his mouth like an oil spill leaving a dark, unavoidable mess between them. Frank knew he had said too much.

The girl was silent. Her face slowly morphed from signs of anger to confusion and then finally, to understanding. "Your daughter," she said, her eyes suddenly wider, brighter. Her mouth hung open, the corners curving up into a disbelieving, drop-jawed smile. She shook her head and gazed into the street for a moment before snapping her attention back to Frank. "It all makes sense," she began loudly. "Now I know why you remind me of my dad. It's because you're both so pathetic—so busy feeling sorry for yourselves that you can't let anyone in. Maybe you guys can help each other pull your heads out of your asses, because I'm done dealing with sad, old, pitiful men." She turned around and glanced down the street, left and right. She stalled for a moment and peered back over her shoulder at Frank. "She's never coming back," the girl said. "Get over it." And then she was gone.

The next day had crept along with the same muggy monotony as every other day. As usual, the man had stood across the intersection,

eyeing Zoe every now and then, and in return, Zoe flipped him off. But rush hour had ended, the sun was setting, and Zoe sat in the car with Josh. The ringing in her ears was finally gone, but her cheek still burned where Josh's hand had landed a few minutes before, as if he had only just smacked her.

"I told you to get out of the car," he said.

Zoe could just make out the blurry outline of her lap through the welling tears. She felt a guttural rage rising inside her—a volcano on the verge of eruption—and she restrained the impulse to clobber his nose because she wasn't sure how violently he would react. He had never hit her before.

"Get out of the car," she heard again, but from a different and much deeper voice. Zoe looked up, and Josh was staring out his open window, eye-level with the man from the pawnshop who glared at him, their faces inches apart. "You think it's alright to slap a woman?" the man asked, leaning further into the window.

"Fuck you, old man," Josh said, turning his head away.

Zoe watched the man lean back to stand straight. He crossed his arms and cleared his throat. "Get out of the car," the man repeated, nearly yelling. "Before I arrest you." Josh looked back at the window to where a shiny, gold badge swayed in its leather case from the man's fist. Josh was quiet, and then he jerked his head at Zoe.

"Bitch," he said, before kicking his door open and disappearing into the parking lot. The man plopped down into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut. It was silent.

Zoe stared blankly at the man's chest as it rose and fell with each labored breath. She didn't know how she could have been so naïve—how she hadn't seen it coming. There was no way in hell that she could ever have raised a child with Josh. She had just been so consumed by the fear of her child having no father that she had ignored the likely possibility of her child having a bad father. If Zoe stayed with Josh and something were ever to happen to her, her child would end up just like she did—abandoned and unloved.

But now she had nowhere to go. Nowhere to live. She could still feel the sting in her cheek. Josh had never hit her before, and she doubted that he would have done it again, but she was still glad the man showed up. Her eyes rose from his chest to his face. He gazed through the windshield, transfixed by the meager traffic. He must have sensed her watching because he scooted around in his seat to face her.

"You look a lot like her," he said. "It's the eyes mostly." He paused, examining the features of her face for a moment before looking away. "Your tattoos and stuff help distract from it," he said. "I like that."

Ever since Zoe found out about the man's daughter, she had been trying to evade the fact that she owed him an apology. "How old was she?" she asked.

The man took a few calm breaths. His eyes were dry, and he didn't appear to be close to any sort of emotional purge. Zoe recognized that feeling, that hollowness. When you live through something so devastating, so unfair, you end up crying

your tear ducts dry and frying that part of your brain that controls sadness. Your heart becomes an empty shell that regresses to its less significant purpose of pumping blood.

"She was ten years old," the man said. "Ten years and one day." He was gazing out the window again. "For her birthday, I got her a bike," he continued. "I was in the house when I heard her scream. I ran outside, and she was in the road. But whoever hit her had already driven away."

When you live through something so devastating, so unfair, you end up crying your tear ducts dry and frying that part of your brain that controls sadness.

Outside, the hum of a streetlight began as it flickered to life, cloaking the car in a soft, yellow glow. The man turned to Zoe. "I think that's why I've closed up," he said. "Whoever killed Abby—they got away. They could be anybody. The idea of possibly meeting the person who hit her—and not even knowing it—makes me sick."

Zoe couldn't believe it. Josh had been right for once—she was a bitch. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have just assumed things about you."

The man smiled weakly, as if it were the most energy he could summon to show her that he accepted the apology. "Don't be sorry," he said. "You guessed right eventually. I am just a pitiful man. I've been avoiding the truth by torturing myself—standing in the heat until I'm sore, until I can hardly walk. I've been using the pawnshop as my own personal flogging whip." He stopped and closed his eyes, only to open them as the first cool breeze of autumn poured into the car. "Abby wouldn't want that," he whispered.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Zoe said. "Denial is human nature. It's a trick of the brain. It can make you blind to something so obvious, just for the sake of your sanity." The man nodded, and something about his face told her he understood.

"That reminds me," he said, digging a hand into his pocket. He withdrew it with his fingers closed tight and opened them all at once in front of Zoe. In the center of his palm was her mother's ring. "I think this belongs to you."

Just the sight of the ring put a lump in Zoe's throat, and she took it from his hands to squeeze it in her own. "Thank you," she said. She searched for words that more vibrantly expressed her gratitude, but somehow she knew such words didn't exist, so she just repeated, "Thank you." And then, "I guess I owe you a hundred bucks."

"Nah," the man said, smacking her offer out of the air. "I'd be insulted."

Zoe smiled. She knew that she wouldn't be able to repay him anyway, but she wished she could. They sat in silence for a moment. "So, you're a cop," Zoe said. "That's a surprise."

The man laughed and wedged the badge from his pocket. "No," he said, dropping the leather flap to flash its shiny surface. "It's a fake. Turns out you're not the only one with some tricks up your sleeve." He shook a finger at the fake belly still protruding over Zoe's stomach, and

that's when she realized she had never told him the truth. "What were you two fighting about anyway?" the man asked.

Zoe sighed. "He told me to get an abortion," she said. "So I told him I'd let him know when his first child support check is due."

The man stared at her, his eyebrows slanting toward the middle, one slightly higher than the other. His mouth hung open, as if waiting for a word to spill out, and his eyes darted back and forth from her face to her belly.

Zoe managed a guilty smile. "I'm pregnant," she said.

The man closed his mouth and scooted around in his seat to face the intersection once more. Only a few cars traveled through it now and again, and the traffic lights took turns with the reds and greens—trading as if for the sake of sharing rather than necessity. For a while, the only movement came from the chill wind that carried the ambient buzz of the city. After a few minutes, the man looked at Zoe. There was a caring softness to his eyes that suggested he knew her better than she knew herself. He reached out a hand, urging her to shake it.

"I'm Frank," he said as his fingers closed around hers. "Nice to meet you."

●

Daniel Riddle

An American Gunslinger

Far away, the idiots and fools dreamt of a shining new future.
(How clever they were). They passed our red flag to me then sent me to place it.
Nothing quite puts things into perspective like a fast five minute fuck.

But then I grew up.
and I'm told now, you never
go do it that way.

Seriously not crazy. A lunatic gave me control of time.
Their time. Not mine, of course (with the stop loss and all). Soon they made me. Go.
I went home. LT got to be a ditch buffet for carrion crows.

The desert hides things
they said. Below the dune sand:
men, nukes, slick black oil.

I'm wide awake. Fuck
these little swimming blue pills.
They choke me of life.

I see them still, sometimes. In the alleyways. Or cars. No one listens
because the government stamped me crazy. Only seventy percent
can be claimed with a disability rating of eighty—Mental.

Silver paid for life.
But they won't make eye contact
when my sleep kills work.

I stand at the heart of coincidence, just an old discharged soldier
using smoke to hide that place behind the eyes. Declared unfit to serve.
I have a machine gun mouth. In time, I'll learn to take my own face off.

The mirror's marrow,
never let it catch your gaze.
Not always your eyes.

Don't like that fellow much. Me. Can't stand that goodwill poetry,
nor his notion of utopia: the paper world, sand dancing dolls,
red and burning. Onward. The elusive snipe still sleeps. Fuck their Great Hunt.

I wear this sad look
but can't seem to remember
why it's on my face.

Lauren Stone

Inside My Toolbox

Screw Driver

It's cold outside, but under those sheets, it's warm. They warm each other as they twist and crank. He drives his body into hers and rests his head in the arch of her neck. Her heavy panting exposes her breath. She smells of cigarettes, but he chooses to use his other senses. Mostly touch. He touches, gropes, and fondles at her soft breasts. They know each other's names. She is his friend's older sister, but he never plans on telling him.

Pliers

He held her pale body tightly. His rough hands gripped onto her freckled shoulders as his body convulsed. He hunched his back like a black cat that creeps and claws in the night and closed his eyes. He was with someone else in his mind, not this woman. Her body stayed parallel, unmoving, and he knew if he could see her face through the black veil that falls on night, he would see dissatisfaction. Who cares? he thought. She is no one important. Once his body released its final, loud cry, he pulled out of her but left something behind.

Saw

"You're a slut," my mother was called as she carried the world around her waist. I was formed that winter night, under the blankets and the sheets. My real father decided that he was going to cut this woman—my mother—out of his life and whatever grew within her. On second thought, he wanted a son—maybe he would meticulously saw

a hole around her, let her fall through, and then catch the baby boy in his arms.

Socket Wrench

As a baby, I knew I was unwelcomed and I displayed my disgust. I cried and cried, refusing to allow my mother to think or to rest her weary mind. From behind a locked bathroom door, she cried too, wondering why she ever had sex with that boy on that cold December night. But I didn't care how the gray circles under her eyes got darker or how her dreams that once danced in her head were being replaced with an unrelenting voice that told her she had no future. She needed to know that I was unhappy; that what she did was not right. I did not have a father, and I would forever be unlike those who did. My mother shut my mouth—found a socket that would fit inside the wrench. Perfect. His name was Mark, and she married him. But it was never meant to be. I was never meant to have a father.

Level

The doctors told Mark: "Your heart's three sizes too big. You are going to die young." What do doctors know, though? He was young, fit and thin. But their words rang true as he fell to the ground, leveled, like he was already resting in his grave. His body knew the position the mortician would place him in and saved him the struggle. Straight and flat on his back. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth. No hug or kiss from a daughter will bring back the dead.

Hammer

The hammering, slow and concentrated, is not meant to destroy or demolish. Not used out of malice but out of necessity. It occurs because in life we put up some photos and leave others in a box. I gently rubbed my finger along the cool plastic surface of the photo. In it, my father had a thick black beard, hair that was wrapped up in a blue bandana, and a smile that extended from east to west across his face. In his hands, he held my baby sister, just a few days old. Next to him a little girl leaned against his arm and playfully sought after his undivided attention. That little girl was me, many years ago. When I felt something wet welling in the corner of my eyes, I placed the photo back into a velvet box.

Wrench

Tightly, my mom wrapped the towel around her dew-dropped body and twisted, twisted, twisted another towel around her hair. Her feet were calloused and yellow from standing on them all day and night while at work. Without a husband, she must bear a heavy load. Her fingers are wrinkled, easily cut when pricked, because she had been in the bathtub for two hours. I could hear her say, "Sorry girls, no hot water is left." She had filled the tub with scorching water, drained once it lost its sting, refilled and finally emptied the liquid. I knew her body couldn't drown in a tub so small, but I wondered why she buried herself in a watery grave every day.

Tape Measurer

Though I don't know him, my biological father has always lived in the same town as I do. He has one son and three daughters. Sometimes I wish I could just sit down on their family's couch and watch him interact with his children. I would measure his smile, examine his movements, learn his laugh, and concentrate on his friendly chats, hoping to discover something deeper about myself. Something trapped within my DNA. The dimple in his chin would be a mirror image of mine, and his children would look like me when I was their age. He would be gentle and kind, wrapping them in a father's irreplaceable love.

With envy, I would ask, "Why not to me? Why can't you be my father?" But really, it is an unfair question because I already know the answer. These children were formed with purpose, with a wife that he loved and when he was a man. I was created to make friction, to thaw the icy, cold bodies of a late December night when he was just a fifteen-year-old boy.

●

Rachel Dupont

Closet

She crawled into the back of her mother's closet and slowly shut the door, letting the beam of light from the bedroom grow thinner and thinner, until the only light left was a thin strip of silver which slid under the door like a secret.

She scooted as far back as she could, wedging her tiny body into the corner furthest from the door, and tucked the fabric of her black dress more comfortably underneath her.

Her house was full of people, and they were all wearing black. They were all crying. They were all touching her–stroking her hair and kissing her cheeks and straightening her dress and cooing and weeping.

She hated them all.

She had slipped through their fingers, pulled away, tucked her arms over the curls on her head they were touching. She had slithered under the table and run through the hall. Through the door to her right was the room with the giant box, the box where her mother lay. She would never go in that room again. She ran up the stairs on her hands and feet, down the hall, through the bedroom to the closet.

Her mother's closet.

The closet with all her mother's dresses.

The closet at which her mother had stood every day wearing a towel tucked around her chest, draping her body to the tops of her thighs, flipping through the hangers.

"Polly Rose, what color should I be today?"

She fingered the hems of all the dresses that hung around her like curtains—all but the blue one. It had been her mother's favorite, the dress she wore in the box now, and would never take off.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of jasmine and vanilla and soft leather shoes. The smell of her mother. She pressed her face into the fabric of a red-linen summer dress, and for a moment she was in her mother's arms again, her cheek pressed on the silky skin of her mother's neck, their brown curls intermixing.

She didn't know she had fallen asleep until the closet door opened and the light burst in once again.

Strong hands picked her up. Big hands. They pulled her in against her papa's chest, they stroked her curly head.

"You can come out now, Polly Rose," he whispered. She felt his whiskers brushing her cheek. "It's just you and me now."

●

Sanad El-Rahaiby

In Honor of 

How often can feminine snubs
sway you over the edge?
Girls, how they diss,
talk so sweet, grab the drink
then retreat. They scrape
your heart with spatulas
as they wipe your wallet clean.

Again you're left wide open
with spirit spread thin,
a nameless song plays the background
while you begin to wonder.

As you contemplate
switching to Kools or
steppin' up your shoe game,
or growing a goatee,
or soul-patch,
Breathe…

Consume the grown polyphony—
your JBL's have sprung a leak.
Marinate in another man's
tender experience.

When you catch whiff of how
club-banging and being drunk
off booty touches
ain't got you nowhere recently
except for sleeping alone,
peaked with a tough love,
Chill…

Fish for the artist's message
as you drive home from the bar.
You're rich in passion.
Leave those cheap thrills
at the wayside.

Once you feel like
you've lost your touch,
grown old and out
of the sexual sport,
and how happy endings
are not for you,
Relax…

Loosen that white-knuckled grasp
of the steering wheel.
Listen to the expression whistle, how
lust includes laws.
Let the tip of your interest mature.

A fellow voice,
his color purple.

Focus on the teacher
and his notion.
From beginning to end,
telling a woman
how he will be there,
how he adores her.

Shannon Miller

The Roses Whisper

The roses died the November I turned eleven. They should have been allowed to grow and twist and pour themselves out of the perfectly manicured plots my great-grandpa had tenderly planted them in. Instead someone bought up the land my great-grandparents' teetering, vein-blue house sat on, and bulldozed it all away. And all of it was gone in a split second, not unlike my great-grandparents themselves.

I would rather remember it as it was though, when the edges of the roses folded into soft, perfect layers, and the stems bowed under the weight of the lush petals as if they were stooping to whisper into my ear, to share a secret or bestow a ticklish kiss.

But no matter how I tried to remember the good memories in them, roses turned into bittersweet things. At my great-grandparents' funeral, my mom, my six-year-old brother, and I crowded into a skinny row in the front of what seemed like hundreds of pews lined up like toy soldiers. Under the eye-shaped dome of a ceiling, I tugged my black-and-white checkered dress down to my knees because even though it was too short, it was the only one I had. Death couldn't wait for me to dress the part I guess, I thought before my mom captured my hand in hers with a tight, blood-restricting grip.

She didn't have a voice, not after all that crying from losing her grandparents, but she seemed to be saying, "Don't you dare leave me too. Don't even think about it." And that was just fine with me. Death was something I wanted to avoid for a good long while. Especially when the day was dark, the faces of the visitors lifeless, the

scent of roses hanging thick and cloying in the stale air.

I couldn't look up at the caskets, where all those roses rested, cut down: even the ones that looked so bright the color seemed ready to bleed onto the gleaming mahogany. Maybe the exaggerated display of color was supposed to make up for the fact that there hadn't been a viewing.

The last time I saw my great-grandparents was through a thin glass window as we drove away. Right before we left, as always, my great-grandpa, Johnny B., took an empty metal Folgers can and stuffed it full of roses cut from his garden. He handed it to me and patted me roughly on my head and shooed me off to clamber into the car. My brother stroked the silky, veined petals, but I smudged the window with my handprints. My mom fussed with me and mumbled hotly under her breath about how there wasn't enough Windex in the world with me around. But I only focused on the picture those two made as we zipped away—a picture of them all wrapped up in each other, my great-grandpa's arms eclipsing her, while hers barely looped around him as if he were a hundred-year-old oak.

They made a strange pair. My great-grandma was so small she seemed to shrink in on herself with hollow bones like a bird, her shoulders drawn in toward her chest as if she was too weary or too delicate to fly. My great-grandpa, Johnny B., had a salt-and-pepper mustache like a wide-toothed comb, a rounded belly, and a proud Italian schnoz. I was used to great-grandma's way of effortlessly quilting, and the times great-grandpa would boost me up on the stepladder to put the star on the Christmas tree. I was used to helping her pin her silver hair into a bun and pricking my fingers on thorns with him. I was so used to the idea of the two of them that I thought they would be around forever.

I only focused on the picture of those two as we zipped away

But their car caught fire. A freak accident, the police said. My mom's mother blamed it on Johnny B.'s practice of driving with the parking brake engaged. Whatever the case, the paramedics scooped them out, but not before they both sustained third-degree burns on over seventy percent of their bodies.

My mom didn't let me visit them, but she said they were wrapped up in gauze, on ventilators, and hooked up to a million and one rubbery tubes. I imagined they would fit in well on Halloween, the two of them dressed up as mummies. I knew it was too hopeless and too painful of a situation, but I still didn't get to see them in time to hear Johnny B. say just what needed to be said in his gruff, serious voice. I couldn't be there at just the right time for my great-grandma to comfort me by sweeping a finger under my chin and kissing my cheek.

My great-grandma died the day before Thanksgiving and Johnny B. died the day after. We picked at our Thanksgiving feast, too numb to

eat. I was already swallowing tears that felt like stones rolling down my throat. But my mom just cried and cried and couldn't stop. All she could get out was, "She told us to take care of Johnny B. after she died… and then Johnny B. made us promise to take care of her after he died! And then he died too…"

Aging to eighty-eight set a new perspective on what things were really important, I guess—a perspective I didn't have yet. The hearses crawled to the cemetery, and we crowded around their double plot and stared down six feet: stared right at our fate. There I stood, squirming by my great-grandparents' graveside in a dress too tight. All the breath seemed squeezed out of me, snapped away by the weight on my chest. I was packed like a sardine between my mom, my brother, and some old guy I had never met who had tears running down his cheeks. My mom had handed me a single white rose to drop onto their caskets.

But I couldn't let go. I gripped the stem of the rose in my palms, and the thorns jabbed into my skin. I fingered the petals and held on fast. I knew that I would save that rose. I would unwind the white-washed petals from the core and press them into a book. When I was older and grown, I could still search through the whispering of a book's pages and find comfort in the scent of my great-grandparents' roses because some things should never be forgotten. I would always have the petals to remember them by.

●

Kimberly Steinmetz

$3 Wells

I went into the bar and ordered
a friend – a fantastical best friend.
The sort of heroic, mythical friend who brings liquor
and a tub of ice cream to soak it in
when you've lost your Prince Charming.
Someone who gets your mind off
your troubles, a real margarita.
A St. Germain to dress up with
and have a fancy night downtown
where the football players dine like dragonslayers.
A beer beside the trail, to trade jokes of midnight
bike robberies on the Monon, picturing
cartoon bandits, two-wheeled pirates.
But all the barkeep had were pomegranate cosmo-
politans
and apple green martinis. Evil stepsisters
and wicked queens.

Chaleece Johnson

A Bathroom Odyssey

EXT. AUTOMATED URINAL - NIGHT

In a neighborhood of upscale boutiques and bars, the street is mostly empty an hour or so before dawn. DAYTON (28) in a wrinkled business suit and loose tie, faces a large, columnar structure plastered with adverts in the middle of the sidewalk.

Dayton leans against the column and fumbles with the front of his pants.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Good evening, sir. High levels of inebriation detected. Do you have a pressing and/or vital need to urinate, sir?

Startled, Dayton glances around for the source of the voice.

Seeing no one, he shrugs and unzips his fly.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Non-verbal indicator accepted. Please stand clear of doors.

A line bisects the column, and doors open, bathing Dayton in fluorescent light.

Bracing himself on the doorjamb, he steps inside the urinal.

INT. AUTOMATED URINAL - SAME

Cautiously, Dayton approaches the urinal on the opposite wall. It is topped with a small, black TV screen.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Welcome to Wiz Wonder 2.0, the latest in public bio-waste elimination technology.

DAYTON
Yeah, yeah, whatever....

Dayton urinates.

COMPUTER (O.S.)

Now with more laser.

DAYTON
Huh?

COMPUTER (O.S.)

Please place feet apart, square hips, and remain upright to maximize user experience.

INTERCUT - STREET PERSPECTIVE

Dayton is startled as the doors thump closed behind him.

INT. AUTOMATED URINAL - SAME

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Sir, I sense you're having difficulties maintaining a steady flow. Would you like me to sing to you?

DAYTON
What?

COMPUTER (O.S.)
It's statistically proven that music eases feelings of anxiety and vascular tension, which are common causes of irregular flow.

Dayton shifts uneasily.

DAYTON
Uh, no, I really don't think I--

The lights dim, and disco lights flash across the small space.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
My girl likes to party all the time, party all the time, party all the ti--

Dayton stiffens.

DAYTON
Really! I'm good, thanks!

Lights come up.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Maybe you'd prefer a more instrumental composition, sir?

Kenny G. blares from the walls.

Clutching his nethers, Dayton shouts over the music.

DAYTON
I'm good! I'm good! Really! Thanks!

In the ensuing quiet, Dayton sighs.

Placing an arm on the top of the urinal, he leans against it.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
...Shall we play a game? The Wiz Wonder 2.0 comes with more than fifty games from ten different genres, including text adventure.

Dayton straightens and warily eyes the dark TV screen.

DAYTON
Uh, sure.

The screen flares to life with pictures and application icons flying across it.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Please tap a selection on the screen.

Fidgeting, Dayton glances down.

DAYTON
Uh, well, y'see, my hands are kinda full....

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Random selected. Loading.

Dayton mutters to himself.

DAYTON
Geez, I really shouldn't have had all those appletinis.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Game loaded. Please take a moment to read gameplay instructions and direct your stream slightly to the left when ready. Thank you.

After reading the instructions scrolling across the screen, Dayton wiggles obligingly.

As a picture of a wooded area appears on the screen, the lights in the urinal dim.

A rustling sound interspersed with heavy breathing comes from the walls.

Suddenly, a ghostly pale man jumps out on the screen, and the booth is filled with unearthly howling.

Dayton screams and stumbles back.

The screen goes black, lights come up, and water begins flooding across the floor from a seam at the bottom of the booth.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Hygienic compromise
detected. Executing counter
measures. Please redirect your
stream at this time. Hygienic
compromise detected. Please
redirect your stream at this time.

Wobbling unsteadily in the water sloshing about his feet, Dayton toddles back to the urinal.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Level three compromise
detected. Executing final clean
sweep.

The urinal retreats into a niche in the wall, and Dayton hobbles after it.

DAYTON
Oh shit!

A bidet erupts from the floor, clipping his shins.

The bidet fountains water across Dayton's torso, and he raises his hands defensively, accidentally dropping his pants.

DAYTON
Stop! Wait! I'm not done!

COMPUTER (O.S.)
I'm sorry, Dave; I'm afraid I can't
do that.

DAYTON
What?! Who's Dave?

COMPUTER (O.S.)
That is irrelevant. You're done, sir. I'm going to have to ask you to, please, pack it in and exit the booth. Immediately.

Doors snap open, and Dayton shivers in the night air.

He struggles to rearrange his wet pants and clothing.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Industrial heat cleaning cycle commence.

DAYTON
Wait!

The doors snap shut as Dayton lunges for them.

EXT. AUTOMATED URINAL - SAME

Steam, accompanied by screaming and thumping, issues from the closed urinal.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Sir, your screams of pain are duly noted and will be recorded for customer service review at a later date.

As the sun rises, the urinal sinks into the sidewalk.

COMPUTER (O.S.)
Thank you for using the Wiz Wonder 2.0. We hope you've enjoyed this innovative experience. Please be aware all lawsuits regarding version 1.0 are still pending settlement. Thanks, and have a lovely day.

●

Contributors

Brooke Booram is a senior in the creative writing program with a focus in poetry.

Shane Collins is a graduate student in the Higher Education, Student Affairs program. He enjoys traveling the world taking pictures of all he sees.

Rachel Dupont is a sophomore at IUPUI, studying creative writing. She's always loved to write, and this semester she is taking the first of her gateway courses for her major. She is very excited to be writing and sharing her work with her classmates, and when she heard about *genesis* she was eager to submit some of her own work.

Jamie Engel is a senior studying English literature, creative writing, and applied music. His passion is working with, and building solutions for, struggling young adults. He grew up in Minneapolis, MN and has been living in recovery for just over eight years. In his free time, Jamie enjoys biking (fixed gear/ freestyle), snowboarding, wakesurfing, and scuba diving.

Sanad El-Rahaiby's parents moved from Libya to the US sometime in the seventies. Shortly after, he was born striving to be a real American; he may never know if he succeeded.

John Erby has always been intrigued by the different layers that make up who a person is. What life events have caused them to react the way they do in any situation, no matter how minute or catastrophic. Because it is in those two spectrums that you see who people truly are.

Chaleece Johnson is a second-degree-seeking student, majoring in art history and English. She's tried her hand at writing a little bit of everything because literacy, pen, and paper have been the most accessible tools for manifesting great ideas. And she really likes t-shirts, but doesn't have nearly the budget to make as many as she'd like--not all starving artists are Poes or Pollacks; some of them are just little girls who really like graphic tees.

Kyle Keller is feeling around to make sense of this. Poetry is nice in that way. He finds light in food, jazz, books, films, graffiti, hot drinks, & parallel parking. What he hopes comes across more than anything is that you, whatever you may be, are not alone.

Meagan Lacy is an Assistant Librarian at IUPUI working on her MA in English one night class at a time.

Shannon Miller is a fickle-hearted, star-gazing baker/ singer/guitarist/writer/voracious reader, who can invariably be found belting out the blues, penning eccentric stories she madly thinks will turn the world on its metaphorical ear, or devouring every book within reach (pass the salt, please?). She is nineteen, undefined, and ready to get started.

Ryan Musselman is a senior English major with a concentration in creative writing, currently in his last year of study with plans to graduate in August of 2013. While he intends on writing fiction for the rest of his life, his professional goal is to become a literary editor.

Contributors

D. L. Nuzum is in her first year studying for an English M.A. She is a daughter of Ohio wheat fields and West Virginian mountains, and she finds some of her greatest joys in being outdoors and in creating works of poetry and fiction.

Daniel Riddle is a grad student currently at IUPUI. He's a poet looking for his form.

Sara Smith is a sophomore working towards a secondary English education major and minors in creative writing and European history. She lives on campus through the Honors program and, when not doing homework, enjoys gaming, role-playing, and attending meetings with the Cosplay Club to combine the two.

Kimberly Steinmetz is a twenty-two-year-old Indianapolis native majoring in creative writing and minoring in audio/video production.

Lauren Stone is an English major, graduating this August. Writing is one of the few things that helps her evolve as a person and that is what she loves most about it. She hopes to continue her education by obtaining a Teaching Writing Certificate. Simply, life is good when you do what you love.

Sarah Taylor is of Owen County dirt.

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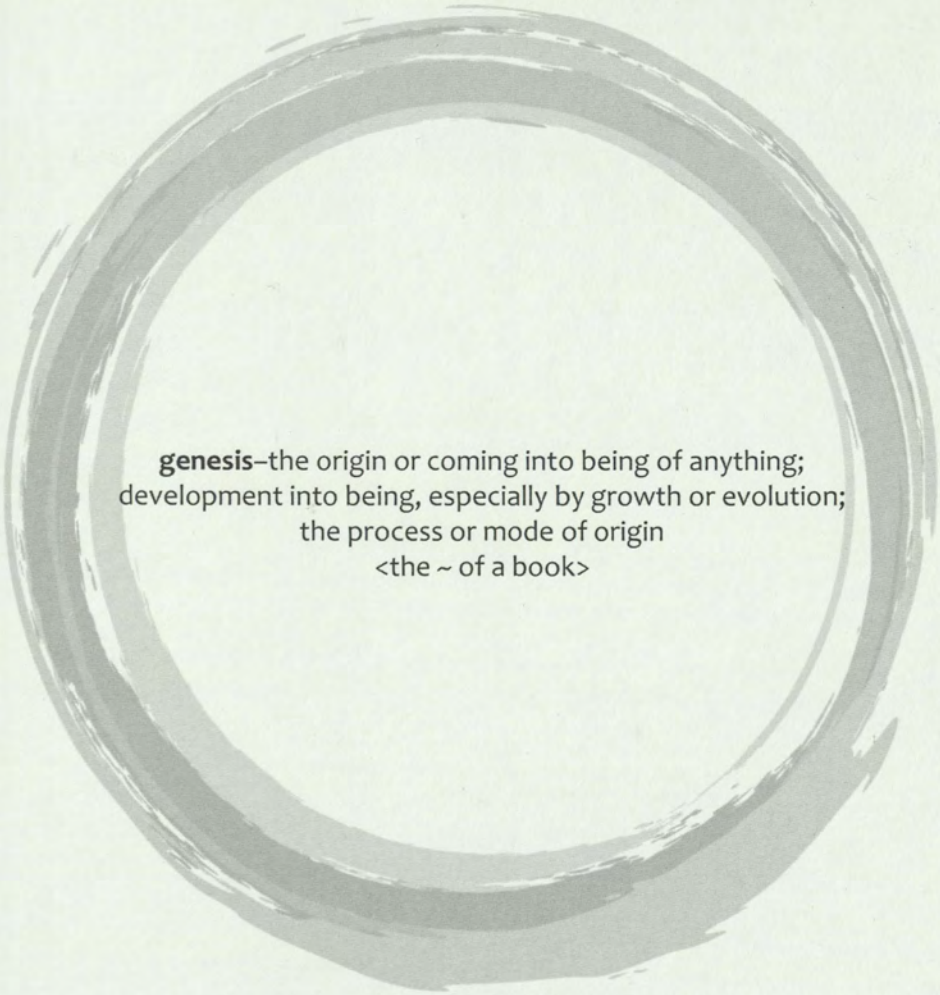

genesis–the origin or coming into being of anything;
development into being, especially by growth or evolution;
the process or mode of origin
<the ~ of a book>

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genesis

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