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glass mountain

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“To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason.”
—Donald Barthelme, 1931-1989

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Robertson Prize - Poetry Winner

PETE

Sam Coronado

Or say my father was, himself,
A house, or say each word's a house,
Some lit & some abandoned.

-Larry Levis

If you could walk into your name
As if it were a mansion—one you owned,
Maybe, but were never quite home in—
Think, father, would you recognize its walls?
Would you know them, their blemishes,
Their decorations hung forever, like a birthday,
Hung for a season, like an address.
And would you care?

Because what good is the certain,
What good is the still?
Life is built on motion: the way
A name cozies up to death.
You, father, sick of being
A brown, Spanish mansion, extinguished
The lights of the name Porfirio, for the smaller
Flame of Pete. Sacrificing the old name,
The one I never summoned
Standing by your casket.

But even the house of Pete wavers.
Its halls take me
Further from you, that chamber
I stumble towards. Never to get there,
The Pete inside of Pete,
That suicidally singing star

Wrenched from its charcoal roof.

If you can think of a sentence as a place
Sometimes traveled, a street
Laid among the mind's intersections
And many dead ends, you can see its houses,
Side by side, their lights glowing dimmer,
Blush brick fading, water
Flowing weak as so much dying blood.
Imagine, then, how a house disappears.
Its address whittled like a tombstone's
By a great, meaningless wind.

And as the conversation becomes a cemetery,
Picture its gravedigger,
Wiping the sweat from his brow, clearing the soil
To make a tomb for each word until no words remain,
And his lantern's fire flitters off
Into the night's blind black.

Silly, to think of sharing this earth,
This grave as the ultimate union.
When we speak, father, I visit you,
Your name's small syllables.
You & I,
We have already shared so much
Separation.

Robertson Prize - Fiction Winner

IMOGENE THE VODOO QUEEN

Heather Pedoto

I.

If you're looking for Imogene the Voodoo Queen and she isn't swigging Malibu Rum with her legs stuck between the railings of her balcony, and it's past eleven in the morning, and it's the only sunny day in April, you'll find her behind the dumpster next to the Integrity Masonic Temple which is next to the White Castle and across from Garden Check Cashing Inc. in Paterson, New Jersey.

Don't approach her. She's in the middle of a deal.

"Don't try to cheat me, Maria," Imogene says, hand-rolled cigarette dangling out of the corner of her mouth, and she pushes her bronze plastic star-shaped sunglasses up over her brown mop of hair.

"The name's Martin," Martin says, with a none-too-subtle gesture, fingertips to his shoulders, then hands dropping, that was supposed to intimate that he's a man, but it just made Imogene think of singing head shoulders knees and toes with her niece.

"It starts with an M. Same thing."

"I'm not cheating you," Martin says, tapping the trunk of his green 1998 Ford Taurus with his index finger. "Supply and demand. I'm the only supply."

"And I'm the only demand. I'm not giving you fifty. I'll just let you keep it in your trunk."

"Or I could throw it out."

Imogene takes a step forward, the oversized yellow chain around her neck swinging. "Okay, let's not be hasty."

"Do you have any idea how hard this was for me to come by?"

"Twenty," she says, licking her lips.

"Twenty is an insult. I paid more than that in gas to get the thing. Forty-five."

"Thirty."

"Forty, or I'm walking away."

"This is my grocery money, assface." She reaches down into her pink leopard print stretchpants and presents him with two wrinkled and slightly damp twenties.

Martin opens his trunk with a press of a button, and among the spare tire, dead leaves, crushed boxes in Christmas wrapping, and empty black trashbags, is a babywipes container the same shade of blue as a chlorine pool. Martin passes it over with one hand, and Imogene, with her houndstooth fingernails, pries open the top.

In a steamed-up ziplock is a mushy lump of black fur with a stringy tail, four frail paws, and, yes, she counts two pink noses, four glazed-over eyes.

Martin's gone without so much as a 'pleasure doing business with you,' leaving Imogene free to walk back to her apartment, but not before tucking the two-headed kitten, dead for five days, into her lime green fanny pack.

II.

The sight of the scraggly, bloated, two-faced freak of nature reminds Imogene of her last boyfriend.

She thinks about his nautical star tattoos as she takes a paring knife to the kitten's flesh, which parts as easily as a ripe pear.

She thinks about his wispy black moustache as she takes a scalpel to the kitten's faces, delicate slices, as though she is peeling a kiwi.

She tosses a hunk of kitten flesh into her fishtank full of dermestid beetles, closes the mesh top, says, "A taste of what's to come."

It'll be three days before she can set the skeleton into the tank to get cleaned. First she needs to dry it, then freeze it, then thaw it again. She slips off her gloves by pinching the right one by the wrist and turning it inside out, then doing the same for the left side.

The last time she saw her latest ex (his name was Maxwell or Maurice) he was wearing sunglasses blue as the belly of the tropical fish in the aquarium in that Chinese place that they had their first date (her: vintage floral, him: a bow tie and a bowler hat). He was in a green hoodie without sleeves, and his hands were in that middle kangaroo pocket, and the pullstring for the hood swung lopsided down his front. He said, "I really love you but," and after the "but" Imogene stopped listening so she wouldn't be able to tell you how the rest of the conversation went.

III.

"You're not getting your money back," Imogene says, one hand on her bony hip, the other readjusting her Navajo diamond-pattered hippie headband, and she turns, and she juts her chin out when she sees who bypassed her broken lock.

"Can you read minds now, too?" He's holding a wriggling Mickey Mouse

pillowcase in one fist, his other hand hidden from view.

“No, I just start every conversation like that.”

“It bit me,” her ex-client says — his name was Murphy or O’Malley or something stupid and Irish with an M in it. She can see now that he’s clutching a bloody dishtowel in his hand. The dishtowel has a rooster on it, Imogene can tell because guys like him always have rooster dishtowels.

She remembers this job... a greyhound, three weeks old when he died; he and his litter had so many fleas that their gums were white and they were sick to death with anemia. It took her seven tries to bring him back to life; the most it’s ever taken.

“Dogs bite. Get over it. Pull up your big boy panties.” Her eyes flicker down to the pillowcase, frowning lightly, then she remembers that it’s kind of her thing to be impassive.

“If a dog bites, they put it down.” Maguire or Morrissey or whatever looks pale and clammy, and he’s starting to pace, swinging the bag, the bones inside clack, the tiny claws make sounds like zippers as they scratch the fabric.

“It has no squishy bits, no diseases...” Imogene is so worked up that she doesn’t fix her shirt, which is supposed to be a navy blue and white striped off-the-shoulder number, which is currently on both of her shoulders.

“I want my money back!”

“No refunds. Besides, now that he’s had a taste of human flesh, he’ll be craving more. I can’t resell him.”

He tries to make some sort of articulate statement, but the only thing that comes out is, “Guh.” He sways on his feet, and she worries that he’s going to knock into her favorite piece of postmodern ceramics (a grenade with delicate blue china patterns), so she says, “I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Don’t wet yourself!”

He tosses the bag to the floor before he storms out. When the bag hits the ground, it rattles unpleasantly at the impact and then stops. She listens hard for a swish, a clatter, anything to prove that the puppy is still alive. Undead. Whatever.

He leaves her door open, and when she goes to close it she sees the woman down the hallway looking at her with her mouth open. She has a nosering and white girl dreads.

“This is the problem with working from home,” Imogene says, making brief eye-contact. “All the crazies know where you live.”

IV.

The smell of decay in Imogene's apartment is sweet and unpleasant, like cheap ballpoint pen ink, and it clings to the clothes, stays in the hair. That and sour milk, and tobacco, and a sharp, piney smoke that dries out your throat.

That smell has seeped into the lower floors, and into the paint on the walls, and it almost has a taste to it, rotting barbeque to the tongue.

When you walk into Imogene's apartment, you'll hear a strange, off-rhythm clicking coming from her bedroom. A lot like rattling bones. Imogene will tell you that it's her air-conditioning window unit, that it's her humidifier, or an old wobbly ceiling fan, but she's lying.

She has a Victorian prosthetic arm on her bookshelf, made of steel and brass, springs to move the elbow joint, long thin fingers that look like they belong to a more elegant Terminator. A human skull, white as a sea turtle's egg, is perched on the highest shelf that Imogene can still reach next to a ouija board from Jerusalem, ebony inlaid with mother of pearl. She will not let you touch any of these things, *especially* not if you ask nicely.

V.

Someone's knocking. "Come in, I have my hands full," Imogene yells.

She doesn't hear the doorknob creak open but she does hear the click of the latch as the door closes again. "Sit down, make yourself at home, I have Skine-max," she calls from the kitchen.

She's pouring a shiny metal mixing bowl into the sink, careful not to splash anything on her red blazer, or her sweater dress that has a roller skate patch on it with a real shoe lace that you can tie and untie again. Milk with specks of pink and green mold floating on the surface splashes into her sink. The skeleton of the two-headed cat, with symbols scratched onto both skulls, rests on a forest green towel that has a hole in it and a big mint-colored bleach stain. She pulls out a red stone with black veining before it rattles into the sink, too. She runs the water and then grabs a two-liter Diet Orange Slice container that's full of speckled water with a grayish tint and makes her way into the cluttered living room to the man sitting on her couch.

He seems to use up all the air in the room. He is bloated with a gut, balding, and his face would be very handsome if he didn't look so nervous. He keeps licking his fleshy lips. His eyes are gray and the size of big grapes. He is flipping through Imogene's 1937 copy of Jack and Mary's Jell-O Recipe Book, lingering, with confu-

sion, on the page that says Cucumber Pineapple Salad and Horse-Radish Relish.

She sets the bottle on the coffee table (a repurposed front door that she found in a dumpster, paint cream-colored and flaking, with legs from an old kitchen chair) with a heavy thump that rattles the glass panels. “Would it kill you people to make an appointment? I’m busy.”

“You can keep doing what you’re doing,” the man says, picking up a copy of *Girl Watcher* (June 1959, price 50 cents), with the picture of the busty woman in a yellow sweater, and the girl with the brown hair and the tan stomach, and they’re on a street somewhere, with a sign that says “Park and Lock It” but the first girl’s head is in the way so it instead reads “ark and ock It.”

“Thanks.” She grabs the bottle back, goes into the kitchen, and gives the kitten skeleton a baptism in seawater, cupping it in her left hand as she pours with her right, the smell of brine and sand filling the kitchen, giving her an achy nose. With nimble fingers she makes sure that all the joints are functional, that nothing has broken off.

She puts the kitten back on the towel, moves the towel to a tray, with baby-food containers full of herbs, and carries it back to the living room, to the overstuffed armchair with the ivory fabric and scratched mahogany legs.

The man is on a page that’s entitled “Some Advanced Field Notes On: Stalking the Girl.” “How times change,” he mutters. He closes the magazine, sets it back on the coffee table in a leisurely way, and watches Imogene rub salt and cedar oil on the two-headed kitten skeleton.

“What do you want?” she says, fingers brushing delicately against the kittens’ single tail.

“I want my wife back.”

“That’s something you settle with your lawyers.”

“She’s dead,” he says, shortly, and as she looks up at him his pink tongue darts out and licks his lips again. It would be lewd if Imogene thought he had any idea that he does it.

“Right.” She snaps on a pair of rubber gloves, rubs foul oil that smells like must and parsnips on a dull lead blade.

“Before we get into dealings, I want proof. Proof that you can do it.”

“I don’t even want to do it.” Imogene crushes a thick pale yellow flower that looked like a five-petaled dirty baby blanket. The buds give her the most flower juice. She tips that juice into another babyfood container.

“I’m willing to offer you half a million in bonds.”

“Puh-leeze. I don’t even get out of bed for half a mill.” A pinch of black dirt. Something that looks like clear water.

“What’s your usual rate?”

“A thousand or two, cash, but for pets you don’t have to worry about getting the wrong soul into the wrong body. A dog soul can be in any dog body.”

“One million?”

“Do you have any idea what the going rate for frankincense is? No. Of course you don’t. Three mill.”

“Two.”

“Four.” Powdered greenish brown dust, and she pulls a needle-thin bone from her pocket and uses it to mix.

“I won’t do four.”

“Then let her rot in the ground.”

“Shit.” He wets his lips again. “I’ll do four, yeah. Sure, I’ll do four.”

She adds a lump of something that looks like earwax but smells sweet, and somewhat spicy, and almost even lemony, but only barely. Then she gets up, turns on her stove, and pours everything into a little pot that’s no bigger than a fez. She lets the man in the nice, gray linen suit sweat it out a little. “Good. I’ll take three and a half in bonds, the rest cash.”

The man sounds uncharacteristically meek when he says, “Can I have proof that you can do it?”

“Sure,” she says, stripping off her gloves with a snap like the disapproving tut of a grandmother’s tongue. She stalks into her room, shuts the door. She checks herself out in the mirror, pouts her lips, applies more blue eyeshadow with the pad of her middle finger.

Then she searches around her room and roots around for her puppy, Muriel. Ignatius, her baby chick, is where it always is, on her dresser inside of a plastic tank about the size of a lunchbox with a hot pink top and a view hatch, and yellow handles. Ignatius is just too delicate to romp around her room unattended; its joints are so fragile, its ribs are thinner than toothpicks and its sternum is practically translucent when the light hits it the right way. She’s already had to connect the left humerus to the left coracoid with wire. Her cat, Llewellyn, scratches the upper right leg of her bed with claws that have no tissue to retract into, and her other cat, Philomena, burrows under her pillow. All three kittens, Gideon, Algernon, and Emory, are tangled in a gleaming white heap near the heater, though when she opens the door Gideon tries to escape. Eunice, the parrot, has to be in a cage because Imo-

gene has learned from experience that birds try to fly. Her python Fitzwilliam is somewhere. She hopes. Levi, her turtle, is hiding under her bedside table along with two dimes and a penny, which Imogene slips into her shoe.

She finds the dog under the bed, dragging its butt on the carpet, which really doesn't make too much of a difference, because it has no anus. She grabs it around the middle, fingers slipping through its ribcage like she's linking hands with an old friend. Pug skulls look so damn happy, big holes for eyes, a lower jaw that always looks like it's smiling, that cartoonishly flat face.

The puppy moves its legs as though it's trying to swim in midair, struggling. When she brings it out, the businessman doesn't seem to believe it. He licks his lips again; his mouth looks like two pink slugs pressed together. He reaches out to touch the smooth white skull. "Oh." The dog nips at his fingers. The man goes pale as though all his blood is circling a drain.

"Man up, Muriel is a sweetie."

Imogene can tell that the businessman is not the type of person who takes petulance lightly. She can see it in the hardness of his jaw, the way the gray of his eyes looks flat for a second. She sets the dog down to run around the living room.

"There's a reason it's 'til death do you part," Imogene says, going back to the kitchen.

"I need her in my life."

"How'd she die?"

"Aneurism."

"I guess you can't hope for anything better than that." She leans against the refrigerator the way a model leans, hips out, shoulderblades against the fridge door, legs crossed right over left. "I don't take refunds. If she comes out screwed up, I'm keeping your money."

"It's an investment, I understand that."

She pushes up off of the fridge and strides back to the living room, sits on the arm of her chair, knees together. "She's going to rot."

"But I'm going to pay you...."

"I can bring them back to life. I can't stop them from rotting. That's out of my hands. The body is still dead."

"I don't understand."

"I can tie the soul back into the skeleton, but she won't breathe, she won't eat, her heart will be a lump of meat in her chest. That's why I take the flesh off first. I assume you want her to keep her flesh?"

He licks his lips again and nods weakly as the dog chases its round upward curl of a tail.

“You’re into some shady business now. I’ll let you think about it,” Imogene says.

She puts on a new pair of gloves, moves the mixture of dirt and water and poisonous herbs off of the burner, but this time when she goes to the kitchen the businessman follows, looking, with interest, at the super-ironic magnets on her freezer (a big yellow sunshine, one that says “you had me at merlot,” and four pieces that look exactly like bacon). Then his eyes travel down to a picture her niece drew a few years ago, of a purple sunset, her in a castle, her mom in another castle, and Aunt Imogene in a stagecoach.

She scoops up four fingers’ worth of magical goop and rubs it, counter-clockwise, on both of the kittens’ skulls, right on top of the markings.

“What do you do next?” the businessman asks.

“I wait.”

“Is it going to come back to life?”

“Maybe, in three days. Sometimes it takes a few tries.”

“Don’t you have to chant something in Latin?”

The look she gives him would wither a cactus into a dried brownish husk. “Do you know any ghost kittens that speak Latin? Get your head out of your ass.”

VI.

Alex, age eleven, will never be a ballerina. Her stomach is round pressed against her pale yellow leotard. She doesn’t hold herself with that shoulders-down-and-chin-up grace that her teacher does. She tries, but she just ends up hunching back up when she isn’t paying attention, spine rolling like a pillbug.

Her eyes finally lock on her mom and Aunt Imogene sitting in the audience. She’s especially excited to see her aunt, even though Aunt Imogene smells like the inside of her grandpa’s coat and she still thinks that she likes to watch *Dora the Explorer* even though she grew out of that show in second grade.

She stretches her arms over her head and takes little steps on her tip-toes and looks out again. Aunt Imogene is laughing, straight white teeth bared. Her mom is whispering behind her hand to her.

While she pirouettes she thinks, at least she isn’t the worst ballerina ever. There are plenty of worse ballerinas. Maybe there are even ballerinas without legs. She’d *totally* be better than a ballerina without legs.

When she hop-hop-hops, she looks out into the audience and sees her Aunt Imogene, texting. Her mom is looking over her shoulder at the door. Her throat feels tight.

She stretches over to the side, one arm up in the air, the other extended to the side. Aunt Imogene is making a face like she's smelling an old gym shoe that's been soaking in a toilet. Her mom has her head in her hands, fingers pulling through her blonde hair.

She's dizzy. She forgot to spot on the wall on that last turn. She falters. Her pink shoe, like the inside of a flowerpetal, hits hard on the ground like a stomp.

VII.

After they bundle Alex into a blue windbreaker that's faded along the seams and make it to the ice cream place, Imogene and her sister spend ten minutes going through their usual ritual of who-has-it-worst to see who has to pay. ("I'm a single mom." "The cockroaches in my apartment are bigger than pill bottles." "I work full-time at a high school." "When I die I'm going to hell." "You can't always play the hell card." "Yes I can.")

While Alex's mom stands in line to get ice cream, Imogene picks at the fraying cloth daisy in her niece's hair, says, "Nice recital, kiddo."

"You weren't even paying attention," Alex says, making defiant eye-contact. Imogene has big brown eyes that droop down at the corners, making her look permanently sad.

"Don't be stupid, of course I was. You did pirouettes, and then you did a relevé, and an étouffée." She pauses. "I'm sorry, I *was* a little distracted. I have a big job coming up." Imogene smooths a lock of hair behind Alex's ear, aware of the cold of the air-conditioning on her bare knees; she's in a dress with bold splashes of every color that's found on a peacock, outlined in black. She wonders when Alex got too big to carry on her hip.

"I'm not as good as the other girls."

"Don't let them get you down. In five years they're going to have babies and mortgages, and you'll have *so much more*."

"Can you come to career day?"

"Course I can."

Alex smiles a watery smile, and then she goes to help her mom bring the ice creams to the table.

By the time they get back, Imogene's standing, staring at her phone with a scowl, nose wrinkling like a crushed soda can. She stands, nabs her coconut cone in one hand, and fluffs up her hair with her other hand. "I gotta run. There's a delivery waiting outside my front door and I *really* can't have anyone else opening it."

VIII.

There are eight bags of ice open in Imogene's bathtub, layered over with all of the towels that she owns, and then there's the dead body.

The businessman's wife has flesh that hangs heavy on her bones. Her face looks sticky. There is no spit in her mouth. She is so tall that she barely fits in Imogene's bathtub. He sent her dressed in a carnation pink silk nightie, in a refrigerator box, horizontal and nestled in blankets.

On top of the businessman's wife are six more bags of ice inside of pillowcases, so the cold doesn't damage her skin.

Imogene covers the businessman's wife's eyes with a washcloth when she's on the toilet.

IX.

Imogene *just* finished typing her newest Craigslist ad: 'if u need a prob solved e-mail me!!!! imogene the voodoo queen. pay by payball. fully qualified voodoo priestess, have letters of reference. will hex u if u troll me.' When she hears the knock at the door, she is flipping through a copy of *Sexology*, the one with the cover split in two, one half light pink with the serene half of a woman's face, eyebrow arched like a comet with its tail. The other half is black, with a UFO where the mirror image of the eye would be, the center line of the UFO corresponding exactly with the eyelashes. It has an article about "Sex Invaders in Flying Saucers," written by Leonard H. Gross. She's been waiting to read it all week, so she pretends the knock was just one of her skeleton pets running into the wall. They do that sometimes.

She's starting on the second paragraph when she hears another knock at the door. Imogene resigns herself to never knowing about how to protect herself from frisky aliens, and stands up to answer it.

The girl totters in on high heels; she's someone who's not used to wearing them; she has a stockier build, and she's wearing frosted pink lipstick even though she's totally an autumn. Imogene silently judges her.

"What's that smell?"

“I have a rotting human in my bathtub, wanna see?”

“Funny.”

“I’m hysterical,” she drawls. “You’re Marta, right?”

“Misty. I’m here about the love spell.”

“You already tried the blood in his coffee?”

“Yeah.”

Imogene leads the way to the kitchen, where the spice rack isn’t only full of spices, but jimson weed, devil’s shoestring, goofer dust, balm of Gilead, beeswax, catnip, and yarrow flowers. She passes Melinda or Madge or whoever some slick brown paper and a scissor and jerks her head to the table. “Have a seat.”

“Arts and crafts?”

Imogene is partway through a snarky comment about where her customer can stick some dried macaroni when her phone rings. “Cut out a square,” she whispers as she stops her iPhone’s tinny rendition of “Sweet Home Alabama,” and shoves it to her ear. “Talk to me.”

Her sister sounds harried. “You said you’d talk to Alex’s class on career day?”

“Yeah. So?” She opens the drawer to the left of the dishwasher, where she keeps her supplies, navigating through small candles of all colors, and pulls a red pencil.

“You don’t see any sort of problem with that?”

“I absolutely don’t—write the guy’s name nine times.”

“Look, I don’t mind what you do for a living, but the school district’ll *flip*,” Imogene’s sister says. Imogene can hear the intercom at the high school in the background... someone’s calling for Calvin Jones to come to the front office immediately.

Imogene peers over her client’s shoulder. “I can’t talk anymore, I’m with Millicent.”

“Misty.”

“Whatever.”



Furniture
Melodie Cabitac

Robertson Prize - Poetry Runner-Up

ISAAC AND ABRAHAM

Sessa Kratz

In the eternal moment
between the blade's rise and fall
there was nothing in my sight
but the knife's point.
I knew the keenness
of my father's pitted blade;
he had sliced the throats
of goats and calves and lambs,
their bleating cries turning liquid,
clotting the sand red and black,
all with that blade,
all to God, all to God.
I had kicked up dust in the struggle,
before he pinned me to the stone,
and before the knife rose
I could see the motes
hanging, unlikely sparks
in the hard, half-shattered light.
Afterward, of course, I could not
look away from that knife.

In all the years after,
my father told me
that an angel had stayed his hand
at the moment of the blade's downswing.
He was an old man, saying it,
even before he was old.
He told the story as though
repetition could make it true.
Maybe it did.

But I can never forget
how beneath my father's knife
I died that day,
like any other lamb.

NATURE OF SIN

*Always weaving, says the father,
the greatest tragedy is how
she is always, always weaving,
adjusting the collar,
Ave, ave, oh, Maria.*

As though no tale she tried,
woven thick, woven intricate,
could extricate her from the sin
set into her at birth.

The father sets his hands
around his throat, caressing.

Three hundred years ago she died,
stained with the late-summer green
into which she was submerged.
She finds it strange,
how much of nature goes
into the killing of a witch:
water surrounding the body
like a wolf pack,
cold and hungry for flesh;
stone bearing down, jealous of breath;
the heft and creak of hemp,
the blister of green wood burning.

In this day there is only the father,
stroking his quicksilver throat,
clutching his book of magic words,
Leviticus, Ephesians,
Timothy, *Let the woman
learn in silence with all subjection,*
says the father to her,
*for Adam was first formed, then Eve.
And Adam was not deceived, but the woman*

being deceived was in the transgression.
And to the father she says,
If I were Eve, I would have eaten it sooner.

TEACHINGS AROUND THE CIRCLE

Woman was
written in blood, oozing
along the seams in the mattress,
tracing the lines
of womanly things
around and around, from mother
to daughter to daughter.
You know that the sheets
give us women their memories –
clenched and wrinkled in sweaty fists,
torn and screamed on,
stained with. . .
Womanly things, I know them,
and to be *woman*
I clenched my jaw
and slaughtered *girl*
with hooks and knives and teeth,
and poured her lifeblood
down my thighs.
To be *woman*, of course,
I had to keep her shame.

Robertson Prize: Fiction Runner-Up

THE SLIP

Daniel Chang

It was a cold November morning, and Charlie Evans had arrived early to help his mother pack. Snow had settled neatly on the lawn during the night, and the sky still seemed dark though the sun was about to pierce through the grey. Charlie had parked behind the nurse's car whom he had had commissioned to care for his mother for the last two months. Margaret, he found, was less than ideal when it came to taking care of the house, of which he noted the two garbage cans standing in the snow a day later than the designated trash day. He could smell its frozen stench in—what would have been—the crisp breeze. The air tasted like old fish. The birds had left the snowy elm to the harsh scolding of the North wind when winter came. When he reached for the front door, Charlie received a shock from the copper knob, which managed to distract his attention from the icy doorstep. He slipped, hanging onto the door and keeping his other hand firmly gripped to his green shoulder bag. *The walkway ought to be salted*, he thought.

Margaret greeted him at the door. "Hello, Mr. Evans."

"How is she today?"

"Today, she is doing good."

"Does she know that we're going to Chicago?"

"Yes. I told her that and that you were coming to pick us up. She's upstairs now packing." She went into the kitchen, while Charlie walked next to the coffee table. Out of habit, he emptied his pockets. He picked up an old issue of *Time*. "I was making some breakfast for her."

"Make some for me too. And coffee. And don't put salt on everything." He opened the magazine. Children's Vaccines: Should the Parents Decide?

"How did you do on your SATs?"

"LSATs."

"What?"

"L-SATs," he stressed. "I took the SAT five years ago. I've been studying Law for over a year."

"That's good. You study in Boston?"

"Yeah."

Breakfast made, Charlie looked at the plates of scrambled eggs and bacon. He took up the yellow coffee mug with a prominent smiley face. The coffee smelled slightly burned, and he could clearly see crystals on the eggs.

He took a plate upstairs and found his mother looking through piles of albums and photos on her red floral bed. She looked, he thought, as if they were about to be tossed out and that she wanted to engrave each picture into memory. Pointless it all seemed to him. The albums resembled the short-wide pamphlets that churches spread. "Conversion comics," he called them. Each episode, he recalled, featured a man who somehow realized all too late the error of a life lived in utter waste. Placing the plate on top of the dresser drawer by the door, he joined his mother on the bed. He did not interrupt her. For lack of response on her part for the long moment that had passed, he felt as if he were naught but a shadow on the wall peering at an old woman imprinting a life.

"You need to eat your breakfast before we leave, Mom," he said at last.

"Oh. Yes. Of course," she said, sounding surprised. "I knew you were there, but for a moment, I'd forgotten. Been doing that a lot lately." She went for the plate on the dresser.

"I'll take this with us when we leave. You can keep these pictures with you if you want them."

"Yes, that would be nice." She smiled. Roberta ate her breakfast, forgetting that she was taking medication for her cholesterol and her thyroid deficiency. Her pills stayed in a blue box marked with the days of the week left next to a board on her dresser saying, "Today is Saturday," though Charlie saw and knew it was really Monday. Friday and Saturday were empty.

"They're awfully quiet this morning."

"Who is?"

"Charlie and Jason. You shouldn't let them sleep all day." He wondered what age she believed her sons to be. How old was he when he grew tired of Saturday cartoons? When did he last rise early to storm his parents' bed as if the end of every week was Christmas? Roberta must have been expecting a late morning breakfast with her sons, a precursor to her regular afternoon shopping. They were delivered now, the groceries.

An empty beating at the window gusted fiercely. The bed lamp had been turned on. Charlie had been sitting with his feet apart, looking at his genuine leather shoes and realizing for the first time how unsuitable they were for walking in the snow.

Finally, Charlie went downstairs into the kitchen with the two plates and picked one of the photo albums. He instructed Margaret to go upstairs and get his mother ready for the trip. He placed the plates in the sink and opened the album on the kitchen table. The photos were recognizable. Many of the stills had him and Jason as children, smiling, some with Roberta holding their hands or with them on her lap. They were mostly taken by his father, who inadvertently left himself out from these occasions. The album stayed open on a particular picture of the two brothers washing the red '75 Lincoln their father admired, a car they no longer possessed.

These pictures were of no use to anyone. For what purpose do pictures serve the able-minded? Much less those of the contrary. Should these moments be preserved, so too the souls of those past when sorrows least help those present? His mother would not always remember that she had been married from the look of her wedding pictures; that she had watched her children play in the yard while Barry handled the camera, and that he died in a car accident. Charlie didn't need them. He could remember every Christmas, really every gift-giving holiday, including the one when his father bought the yellow mug for Charlie and a scented candle for Jason to give to Roberta one of her birthdays. The candle melted in several weeks, but the mug stayed in use most regularly for morning coffee and often for shared sips of hot chocolate on cold days like today, when they huddled closely in warm blankets.

Glass shattered upstairs. Charlie ran up the stairs to find a pile of yellow shards in the hall just outside the master bedroom.

"Where are they?" demanded Roberta while throwing whatever she could reach at Margaret. "You know!"

"Mrs. Evans, please!" Margaret held up one of the bed pillows as a shield.

"This isn't my house! Where are my sons? Where's Barry?"

"You need to calm down."

"Roberta," Charlie said, "please. Calm down."

"What have you done with my sons?"

"Hey, hey. I'm your son." He edged a little closer with stretched open hands. "It's Charlie." Her eyes looked calmer and her arms drooped to the sides. "We're gonna take you to a hospital, okay?" He grabbed her hand. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes I think so."

"Margaret," he called bitterly. "Take her downstairs. I'll clean up here."

“Can you help me find my sons?” said Roberta, now being led by the nurse. “I have two of them. Can you help me?”

The two women left the room.

“Once she settles down, take our bags to the car,” Charlie said to Margaret, who was in the hallway.

Charlie stayed. The wind calmed outside but Charlie could not help but think that it was too cold for dress shoes. The outdoor path ought to be salted. Today is Monday. Roberta ought to take her medication before anyone forgot. He swept up the broken pieces on the green carpet floor and threw them away.

It was cold and windy when they arrived at Chicago’s Memorial Hospital, Charlie, Roberta, and the nurse. The drive was slightly rushed, and Roberta had been asleep for most of the ride, as well as Margaret who lazily laid out on the backseat with an elbow upon a large suitcase and a fist propped against her face as if she was a temptress but stayed asleep upon their arrival.

Charlie was annoyed that he should have to awaken this caretaker he had paid for. He recruited her for a job, and she plainly seemed incompetent at it. He knocked on the glass of the backseat to rudely awaken Margaret as he went around the car to help Roberta out of the car. He opened the front door gently and entreated his mother in the same manner.

“Mom, we’re here.”

Still recovering from her slumber. “Hm? Wh-where are we? Where’s Barry? Where’re my sons?”

“I’m right here, Roberta. I’m your son, Charlie. Jason’s still in Terra Haute. Dad passed away, remember?”

“Passed away? Oh, dear! Yes, I – I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

Charlie looked upon a face remembering a past wound as if it were still fresh, and because he had shared his grief with her before, Charlie could not help but do the same. And yet he steeled himself as men ought to when all else faltered. “Here, give me your hand.”

Her face still conflicted for a moment with contentment at her clarity in the presence of an old yet refreshed sorrow. “Yes, help me out.” She offered her arm.

Margaret stumbled with the suitcase hitting hard against the concrete sidewalk. The suitcase fell open with clothes fumbling into the cold, and the wind

snatched away the photos stored within. Charlie jumped too late to overtake the wind carrying the pictures into the ongoing busy traffic. He stood for what seemed like a thinly stretched minute in dismay a foot away from the curb as he watched the photographs run away in the wind, some landing between the asphalt and the fast-rolling tires of cars barreling past.

Still facing the street, he heard Margaret yelling frantically.

“Mr. Evans!” Margaret screamed.

Charlie turned his head upon the image of his mother front-fallen upon the pavement. There, he rushed to her side and turned her over carefully.

“My arm! It hurts.”

“It’s okay. It’ll be okay,” he said while holding her. “Run inside and get the doctor!” he yelled at the nurse.

Margaret called for the doctors, who came out and looked at her arm. “Oh, shit!” said one doctor with a beard that would bring most to mind a lumberman.

“We’re going to need to take some x-rays. Let’s get her inside. Damn, it’s cold!”

It started to snow again. The nurses sprinted inside and quickly procured a stretcher for Roberta.

“Do you really need me to stay for all this? My plane leaves in a couple of hours.”

“Mr. Evans, right?”

“Yes?”

“Everything would actually go smoother if you stayed with your mother. She may not always remember you, but Alzheimer’s patients are usually calmer and more cooperative when their family are around.”

“You want me to stay and hold her hand? I planned this so I could drop her off and leave.”

“But she’s your mother,” said one of the resident nurses, surprised at his line of question.

“I know. But I planned everything around today so I’d have enough time to prepare for my exams tomorrow.” It seemed to Charlie that these people could not understand his plight; that his work and caring for his family were two very different jobs, and for the latter he was paying them.

“Where are my sons?” Roberta cried. “I can’t find them.”

“You’re in a hospital, ma’am,” one of the stretch nurses said. “You’re going to be okay.”

“Have you seen them?”

“Who?” he asked.

“I have two sons. I can’t find them. My arm hurts.” She clutched her left arm. “Can you look for them? I have two sons. My arm hurts.”

“Ma’am, I’ll go look for them after we take care of you.”

“I have two of them. Find them.”

“She clearly needs you now,” said the doctor. “Would you rather we keep telling her someone is looking for you and your brother but can’t find them?”

“Sorry, but she’s crazy!” shouted Charlie. “How am I supposed to do this? This is supposed to be your job! I’ve got a plane to catch. Do whatever you can.”

He left in his car, heading towards the airport. Wind bobbed as he drove at near seventy along the highway; his right foot teetered on the edge of the pedal. Flurries rushed past him. There was a shallow puddle of frozen ice ahead. A sudden gust shoved the car as its front right tire passed over the patch. Wobbling quickly over past the right lanes, his foot slipped off the pedal, frozen momentarily onto the floor mat. A quick correction. Narrow misses in fortunately scarce traffic that day. Charlie pulled over. His hand tried to settle the violent beatings in his chest. Instead, he felt an empty jacket pocket where his boarding pass should be.

“Fuck,” he said quietly, and drove off the highway.



Evidence III (Exit Wound)
Felipe Campos

PARIS

In this retelling you have a golden apple. Maybe it's gold. It's hard to tell in this light, and besides, the alcohol is making things blurry. But it looks gold from here. In this version there are only two of us you have to choose from. Maybe both of us are strong and both of us are smart, but you don't much love either of us. That's fine. I've got a safe word. You don't need

to choose us. Just choose between what we can give you. Our bodies as bribes. Who's got the best breasts, who are you sick of sleeping next to? Which one of us will you pick? The myth says you are *something of a coward*. That's fine too. Remember that you're the one picking here, not us. Which one gets the golden apple? Maybe the apple is your affection or your cock, it's hard to tell. At this point it doesn't much matter. One of us is getting it anyway.

You have to pick. No, you can't have both. Who's better with their tongue? Who have you not yet forgotten the taste of? Pick. Toss the apple and close your eyes. When I catch it, press me down how I like it.

DROUGHT SEASON

At six years old you pretend you're dead. The grass around you. Try to mimic the dead in the graveyard near you. You can do it just as well as they can. You just have to try. Lay as still as you can. The grass, the only thing moving. The sun hot above. Don't move.

You turn the curve in the road and what if your house is gone. What if it's burnt. What if it's your fault. You're pathetic, sister-self, little-preseverator. What if you get hit by a car, or cancer, or flood, or hurricane - it's hurricane season, it's always cancer season - what if. What if death comes by any means possible at six. Touch the hot faucet four times to prevent trouble. If you lose track and hit five, then make it eight. Or twelve. Twelve's no good. Try sixteen. Why can't you stop counting. Twenty. Twenty, yes. If you touch it everything will be okay. You left the lint in the dryer. Start again.

You are six. You pretend you're dead. Touch the faucet or something bad will happen. Yes, you know what. What season is it. Drought season, fire season. If your house burns the field will catch fire. The grass. The heat of summer. Where you were still. Clean out the dryer. Turn off the stove. Go out into the grass and lay down. Be still. The fields are burning, not yet, but—if you don't touch—they will.

ABOUT OLYMPIA

What's so brazen about waiting?
A ripple of faces, a crescendo
of famished smiles darting in and out
of the bedroom.

That moment when their pupils swell
with the sight of her sprawled
and cocky on the bed sheets, they forget
that I'm there too. I've always been there,
clutching another bouquet,
a lily for her lily, he told me, but nothing like the allure
of her naked shoulders on the pillowcase.

I see her now: this reclining nude, this icon,
this hopeless white girl who wants
no message—has heard all words unsaid.
Poises her soft smirk, the ascent
men have tried to tame to reach the heart
and fall. I've scooped so many defeated faces
from a puddle on her breast. Coaxed them
like abandoned children out the door until one
or two of them turn and see me as if
I had appeared from the floorboards.

They ask if I think their tears might ever sink
into her flesh, coat the dingy glass around her heart.
I do not need to answer. They forget me.
I am gone again. I exude
the shadows I hide in; exist
no more than another grand gesture,
some dismal trinket: pearls, roses,

the promise of his hands. Olympia tips
her shoe, exposes her sole as if poised
for a great leap from decorum.

As if her hurried strokes of skin
were a kind of freedom she could hunt down,
latch on to, like this dumb cat scratching
the sheets I'll have to mend after
she finally takes these flowers, because
I am always waiting: another fool seeking
her attention, arms sore with flowers, fading
in the glow of that blotchy yellow face.

UNDER AN EMPTY SKY

Andrew Parkkila

The small covered wagon hobbled along the roadless plain, the moon sitting bright and full in the sky ahead of it. Two passengers jostled in the seat, casting long, jagged shadows to the southeast.

The man holding the reins wore a wide-brimmed hat that managed to shadow half of his face at any given time. Part of his chest was visible through his loose shirt and open vest and heavy scars stood out and crisscrossed like mountain ranges from a topographer's hell. A double-barreled shotgun was on his left, opposite the other man, stock next to his feet, barrel leaning on his arm.

The other man was dressed in rags. Torn shirt, trousers that didn't reach his ankles, and boots that were barely there at all. His hair hung long and greasy down his face, spilling onto his shoulders. Dirt was smeared across his forehead; his hands were covered in it. Dirt as black as gunpowder. A rusted pair of shackles hung loosely on his wrists.

A piercing cry sounded off above them. The driver looked up to see the shadow of an owl, wings outstretched, moving across the near-black sky.

"He's hunting," he said.

The other man was scanning the ground around them and caught some sort of movement. He peered at the ground to the east and was able to make out the small figure of a prairie dog standing straight in the moonlight.

"Cort," he said and pointed toward the creature, both hands being raised because of the restriction of the chain. "That's its prey right there." He spoke with detachment, eyes half circles, his back bent in his seat.

No sooner had Cort seen it than the prairie dog dropped to its forelegs and began running the same direction that the wagon was moving.

Cort smirked, his head lowered so the smirk was the only feature showing. "He's a dumb fucker, ain't he, Jonas?"

Jonas looked at Cort, eyebrows arched.

"If the sumbitch'd just sit still, that bird would fly right on by," Cort said.

The owl was banking to the right, starting its slow, deliberate descent toward the ground.

Cort went on, "Shit. It might as well roll over and present itself for all the good that runnin's doin'."

"Maybe he's gotta run," Jonas said. "Maybe it's in his nature. Maybe the way he sees things, he's got his life in his own hands. So he gives it all he's got... Puts it all on the table."

The owl, wings raised behind it, swooped to the ground just a stone's throw from the wagon. The two men turned to look as the bird plucked the prairie dog from the ground and made off into the night swiftly, leaving nothing behind except for the faint echoes of the land creature's shrieks.

Their gaze followed the owl and its prey until they disappeared, then Cort spoke, "Like I said. That's one dumb sumbitch." He was smiling.

Jonas looked at his hands. "Maybe so."

"Anyhow," Cort said, "you ain't runnin now."

Jonas turned his head out toward the plain, the gently rolling hills off in the moonlight. The shrieks of the creature were still echoing throughout his mind; so similar to that of a woman.

"Huh?" Cort continued, nudging Jonas with his elbow. "Why ain't ya runnin now? You could slip off a' here. I seen you dodge bullets before; you could go lay out somewhere, wait to get the jump on me..."

Jonas turned back to Cort, his eyes red and dry.

"But you ain't gonna. You a broken man, aren't ya? You think about how things went down and it takes the piss right out of ya. You never thought you had it in ya. Now you know you do." Cort chuckled to himself and Jonas looked back down to his hands, and they moved on through the night.

The night was clear, only one cloud for the entire horizon. It was moving across the middle of the moon, so small that it fit completely inside the giant orb, lonely in that desolate sky.

"How long 'fore we get there?" Jonas asked suddenly.

"I reckon we'll be comin' in with the dawn," Cort said, and there was silence between them for a moment, nothing but the jostling wagon and the occasional cry of some nocturnal beast in that expansive nightscape.

Then Jonas looked at Cort out of the corner of his eye. "Cort," he said. "You think a lot of people'll be out tomorrow?"

Cort looked at Jonas, revealing one side of his face. One eyebrow raised. One eye the cynic. "You would know a helluva lot better'n I would, Jonas. How many people loved that girl of yours?"

Jonas threw his head straight back and looked toward the sky, his eyes clenched tightly as if the mention of this girl caused physical pain. He breathed heavily for a moment then managed to choke out, "Everyone. Everyone loved her."

Cort barked a short, cynical laugh. "Hah! Then I'd reckon just about everyone'd be out tomorrow. All cheerin', thirsty for blood. Wouldn't you?"

Jonas looked back down to his hands resting on his knees, hanging over his feet, looking even more deflated than before. He sighed and said, “Yeah. I suppose I would.”

Cort looked ahead. “Dumb sumbitch,” he said, hat pulled down, showing only that wide grin in the moonlight.

TONIC

Ian Roseen

Humid in Sarasota today, much different from what the Westons have been used to in Chicago this spring. They got carried away, Nick supposes, on the tennis courts down at the club; the two of them, dizzy at the thought of being outside in white shorts, and dizzier still not to be cooped up around the breakfast table at his parents' house anymore, whacking the ball into submission, communicating through grunts, just putting their absolute backs into it. A mistake, for his mother now says, "No, there's no time to shower! Dinner will be ready in ten minutes!" and nestles them into the wicker loveseat on the patio, backs to the yard.

"Ten minutes is long enough for me," Nick's wife says, getting up.

But he pulls her back down next to him, almost on his lap. Forearms touching, their hands turn inward. Nick's crotch is sticking to his thighs and the collar of his polo chafes against his sunburn. A shower would be ideal. He spreads his legs apart.

"Here we go," his father says, and hands them each a g&t.

Nick's wife removes the lime wedge, and Nick says, "Honey, you're supposed to leave that in."

Without looking at him, she dunks the lime in the beverage, up and down, then bites, hard and through the rind, transparent traces of juice bleeding onto her lips.

She looks at him.

"Sure is great that you kids could come down here for a couple days,"

Nick's father says.

"Our pleasure, Dad."

The old man bobs his head around, like one of those cockatoos trundling around the tree branches in the club courtyard. He's had a few while they were gone, just look at his glassy eyes.

"Great beverage, Dad," Nick adds. "Real refreshing." He takes a sip, leans to his left. His arm peels like a Band-Aid away from his wife's.

"So what've you kids been up to these days?"

Nick's wife says, "Well, I've got that teaching fellowship at Northwestern, which you know about. Busy. Busy, busy. Nick's busy, too. Conducting interviews for that *book*—"

"—Honey..."

"—about those women who had hysterectomies a decade ago and are only now approaching menopause."

“Fascinating!” Nick’s father says, clapping his hands together, although he’s heard about the project before.

“Yes, fascinating,” Nick’s wife sets her glass down on the table in front of her, crosses her legs. “Very emotional, though. Lots of time spent getting to know each other first, right? That’s standard.”

“It is standard.”

“For instance, last week, Nick and this tall redhead took a long walk around the park. Ran into them while I was taking my own coffee break there, although of course I was also jotting down lesson plans in my notebook.”

“You had a student with you, remember? That dark-haired kid with the eyebrows.”

“She was pretty,” his wife continues, “but seemed like a real *ballbuster*, you know? I guess a hysterectomy will do that to a woman. Or menopause, whichever.” She laughs.

“Honey, for god’s sake.”

“A lot of *good* material, there.” Leaning forward to take a slug of her g&t, she keeps her eye on Nick’s father, whose gluey smile is starting to fade. “I’ll be interested to read some of it one of these days.”

A long silence, during which the three of them swirl their drinks around and pinch the seersucker from their legs. Younger couples are beginning to return from the club themselves, or maybe from the beach. It seems Nick can smell the salt water, the tanning oil. He isn’t hungry.

But, “Time to eat!” his mother chortles, standing on the edge of the patio in purple slacks, gut sticking out a mile. When did she develop such a gut?

“Wonderful,” his wife announces, slapping the sides of the loveseat as she rises. “Is that pot roast I smell?”

“Is that Billie Holiday I hear again?” his father demands.

“Chicken cacciatore,” says his mother to his wife. “And you can change the music if you really want to,” she tells her husband.

“This is so nice,” Nick’s wife says, sidling up next to her. “I hope someday Nick and I end up somewhere this nice.”

Yet the smile on Nick’s mother’s face has morphed into a frown. “Oh, George,” she says. “I said to slow down a bit before dinner.” For there, on the end table, he has sloshed a small pool of gin.

But Nick’s father just stares at the palm of his hand, and his mother clutches her wrinkled elbows, and his wife brushes a frizzed lock of hair from her

face, while Nick himself is frozen by the song—“I’ll Be Seeing You”—which is timely because tomorrow they will have to depart from each other, but not that timely because it isn’t quite time yet.



Untitled
Ariel Kusby

B. Tacconi

WRITING

Playing
Hide and Seek in-
Doors at night with no lights.
In your own home with open eyes you'll
Hit walls.

Kirk Schlueter

BIRTHDAY CAKE FOR GHOSTS

Lord, thank you
 for allowing me to wake
to this mourning.
 Thank you for the groaning
floor under
 the ridged carpet under
my feet. This
 is dawn, this cake not meant

for me. Today
 ghost, I set a place for you,
a chair washed
 in a lattice of pink ribbons
at a table
 made from lightsabers
and old train
 sets still glimmering with fresh polish.

I am going crazy
 today in your honor ghost,
I am letting
 the life you never got to live
shine like butter-
 cream frosting in the window
on an August
 mourning. Today I'm calling

into work
 alive and running through the streets
wearing nothing
 but balloons, and every girl
I kiss today
 is kissing not just me, but you too,
and you giggle

at how funny their chapped lips
feel. We go
to the park, where the giant sugar
roses are
blooming, and we pick and eat a few
for lunch and
even though it makes our tummies sore,
no one tells
us no. It's snowing blankets, and we eat
that too, sweet snow
on our tongues like unicorn horns. I lift
you up, and you
fly on my shoulders the way you never could
when we built
real snowboys, not men of artificial
sweetener. But now
it is almost evening, and grumbling
we go back
to my apartment, where the cake is ready,
all pink and blue
it glows like the sun inside a crystal.
We light
far more candles than you ever got to
light yourself
and then together we sing off-key
in the dark
happy birthday ghost, happy birthday to you.
I cut you
an extra-big piece and light the last candle.
You ask me

what it's for, and I explain that by the time
the candle reaches
its beginning at the stroke of midnight,

you will be
only a ghost again. Your eyes get big and you
eat your cake
as fast as you can so it doesn't disappear with
you into the traces.
I start up the old train set and it goes
choo-choo-choo
ing around the kitchen while we fight with lightsabers

until my sword
passes right through you, Obi-Wan Kenobi style,
another movie
you never saw. Now there is only my apartment,
and a birthday
cake missing two pieces on the table. I sit
down, and cut
an extra slice for myself, singing and singing

to the room.
The cake sticks in my throat like granite dust
and I try
to wash the past away, but there are still crumbs
deep in the dawn
of my mornings and my mournings. And now I hear only
the seven thunders,
each softly speaking a different name of love.

Sarah Dykes

ISHMAEL

Whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul
and the leaves mark the sidewalk like fossils,
I call to you my Ishmael.

Take me on your voyage. Let me be a stowaway
under the deck. I promise to be silent,
as silent as the stars. The stars that you
and I both gaze upon. Separated by nothing
but sky and ocean. My stage managers
are not so kind. I too chase a whale
not so unlike the white one in your soul.

But, my whale is as black as the tarry
streets that separate us. I must see him perish.

I want nothing from him
but to see him float to the bottom of the ocean
like a rock, tossed into a lake,
no way to rise to the surface.

Oh Ishmael, I do not long for this
feeling of sorrow and hate,
but as you know my fate was decided
long ago. Forgive me.

Ishmael, Ishmael, Ishmael.....

I walk over the impressionist painting
of leaves that blanket the lawn. There is no cure
for my soul. No coffin can comfort me.

I find myself in a chapel and I hear
you. Once again I find myself
hearing voices and bringing up
the rear of funerals. I must go to sea.

IDLE CHATTER

Eric D. Goodman

Franklin still wore his Amtrak uniform, although he was officially off duty. He always wore it when he was on the train. He was never *really* off duty, because even when he was on break, he remained in view, on call, ready to assist the passengers, ready to make small talk. To everyone he met on the train, from the first punch of the ticket to the last farewell at the end of the line, he was *the conductor*. A mighty responsibility, but he'd been filling the shoes for decades. He knew how to make people comfortable with idle chatter. Being the conductor was more than just a job—it was who he was. That's the way it had been most of his life, and that's the way he liked it.

Now, after a long day of short talks, he sat in the lounge car—still available to anyone who wanted him—and looked into the darkness of the Indiana night as he drank from his canteen of water. It was black out, and he could barely see the shadowy trees waving in the distant wind. It had become quiet in the lounge car, but there were still people here: the young man who'd asked for a leaf of Amtrak stationery earlier in the day wrote hurriedly in a spiral notebook now; the guy with silver hair who looked like a preacher studied the notes to a speech; the gruff troublemaker toyed with his unlit cigarette and drank bourbon now instead of coffee. They all had stories. Everyone had a story to tell. Someday he'd write a book about it.

Franklin looked away from the people and back into the darkness. He took a gulp of water. The sun would rise soon, and then they'd all be pulling into Chicago.



He'd encountered the poet earlier in the day, back around Ashland, Kentucky. The guy had entered the lounge car in a fury, had stepped right up to the conductor. "Excuse me," he'd said excitedly.

"What can I do for you?" Franklin had asked with his usual customer service smile.

"Do you have a piece of paper I could borrow? Or have?"

Franklin looked at the guy's spiral notebook, opened to a page of chicken scratchings in dull pencil that looked like they were ready to rub right off the page. "Did you run out?"

"No, I need to write a letter. Something nicer than a page ripped out of this old thing. Maybe a blank piece of copy paper, or stationery."

Franklin reached a finger up beneath his cap and scratched the side of his head. "I think I can get you some Amtrak letterhead. Will a few sheets do?"

"That'd be great."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Colin."

"I'll be back in a jiffy, Colin." He returned with a dozen pieces of Amtrak stationery and handed them to the young man. "What's this really for, son?"

Colin smiled sheepishly. "It's a poem for someone."

The conductor grinned. "Love poem, is it?"

"Not exactly." Colin tried to disguise the obvious. "Well, sort of."

"Don't you worry none. Writing poetry ain't nothing to be ashamed of. Might not be tough-guy talk, but a good poem's a fine thing. Ain't no shame in it."

"Well, no, there's not." Colin showed him his notebook. "I'm a poet by profession. Colin White."

Franklin whistled. "You don't say. That's something to be proud of. You get your poems published sometimes?"

"Sometimes more than others."

"Tell you what," Franklin confided, "I've written a love poem or two in my time. Especially when I was younger, when I was about your age. The women dig it."

"Well, sure. But that's not exactly the kind of poetry I write."

"What are you into, philosophy? Poems that ask questions or give answers?"

The poet shrugged. "I guess I just write what comes to me."

Franklin nodded. He could see that the wordsmith was in a hurry to spill out some words on the Amtrak letterhead he'd handed over, but the conductor had more to say. "Tell you what I learned a long time ago. Conversation is like poetry. You invite a person in with your words, hold them with a story or feeling or bit of information, and leave them with something they didn't have before. You can touch a person with small talk."

"Talk is poetry," the poet said, and he wrote the phrase in his notebook. "Touch with talk."

"You gonna write this nice love poem of yours with that poor excuse for a pencil?"

"Well, I guess I don't have much choice."

"Sure you do." Franklin grinned. "You can ask your conductor if he has a pen."

Colin tucked the pencil behind his ear. “Do you?”

“I’m one step ahead of you, boy.” He pulled an Amtrak stick pen from his inside blazer pocket. “For you to keep. Write something about my train.”

“I certainly will,” the poet said. “You have my word.”



Franklin had written a love poem or two in his time, but it had been a chore. He could talk, but talk was alive and in the air around him. Writing was different. With writing, he was confronted by the words on the page, challenged to make them more meaningful. Small talk, clichés, idle chatter—it was all meaningful when part of a living conversation, part of something bigger than himself. Without the interplay of others, his words fell flat.

He’d written a couple love poems for Latoya, ages ago. They’d really turned her on, but it was probably more the idea of having poetry written for her than the quality of the words on paper.

“You’re a regular romantic,” she’d teased.

“Only because you gave me a reason.”

“I’m sure you’ve written a dozen poems for a dozen women.”

“Nope. I’ve never had a reason to until you came along.”

That had done the trick. She’d nuzzled into his chest and let out a warm sigh. “You sure know how to talk.”

It was his talk, he imagined, that had attracted her to him. He was a decent-looking fellow, nice trim physique, well-groomed. But so were a hundred other guys at the jazz clubs and blues joints. It was his turn of phrase, his knack for conversation that had brought them together. That’s also what had driven them apart.



On the night train, Franklin left the lounge car to take a walk through general seating, just to check things out, make sure everyone was comfortable. He spotted the empty seat next to the poet. Colin was still there, snoring, his open notebook and a few pieces of the Amtrak stationery draped over the empty seat where the woman with the dragonfly pin had been. He remembered the pretty young thing with the broken heart. This cutie must have been the poet’s muse, the

reason he'd been in such a frantic hurry to get his poetry down. Franklin wondered whether it was her sadness or her good looks that had inspired him to write proclamations of love to her. Franklin once knew a girl with a broken heart. He still couldn't figure out what had broken it: his talking too much or not enough.

He remembered one night when they were driving home from a cocktail party sponsored by her work. Latoya was a secretary, but most of the people at the social came from a whole different society.

"From the other side of the tracks, you might say," he'd said to her boss with a sly wink. Franklin had filled the night with small talk about trains, people he'd met, trivia about Baltimore and America. He thought the party had gone well, that he'd made a good impression. Latoya didn't.

"Why you gotta be such an embarrassment?" They were driving to her place to spend the rest of the night alone, but she was applying another coat of lip gloss.

"What are you talking about? I think I did pretty good."

"Good at making a fool of yourself."

"Fool?" He gripped the steering wheel with both hands. "I'd say I held my own with those well-heeled big wheels. I was never at a loss for words."

"You got that right. You jabbered all night, but you didn't say a damn thing. Just a bunch of meaningless words."

"I said things. Everyone seemed interested in what I had to say."

"They acted interested because they're well-bred. No one gives a shit about your trains or the riff-raff that rides on them."

"People love trains. They like to hear about them. They tell me so."

"They tell you so because they're nice. I don't know nobody wants to hear about trains all night. How'd you like it if I started talking about my make-up for hours on end?"

"I don't just talk about trains. Only when they seem interested. I talked about a lot of other things. I've got culture."

Latoya laughed.

In the car, Franklin had thought it odd that Latoya reapplied lip gloss and eye shadow, but at her place, he was glad she had. She looked sexy with the candlelight sparkling off her plump, red lips, a metallic sheen around her eyes. They sat quietly together on the loveseat, just looking at each other. Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald filled the living room with love songs. Latoya sipped blush wine and he drank a light beer. He sighed contentedly.

“You know the interesting thing about Armstrong and Fitzgerald?” he began in a whisper.

She huffed. “Would you drop it already?”

“Drop what?”

“Your auto-talk box!”

He looked at her, confused. “What’s eating at you, baby?”

“Know what your problem is? You talk too much, but you don’t got nothing to say.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I mean, you chitter-chatter away with all this stuff, but you don’t got no point. No one cares about ‘the thing’ with dead jazz musicians, any more than they care about the state bird of Maryland, or that the state sport is jousting, or that the Ravens used to be the Colts, or the Browns, or whatever shit it is you’re always blabbing about. You say so much stuff, but you don’t say nothing.”

Franklin remained silent for a moment, watching the candle flicker in her wet eyes. “People do care, baby. I talk to people every day, and they like what I have to say. It’s just small talk.”

“I used to like your small talk, too. But after a while, you need more than idle chatter. It’s all superficial. What about you, your feelings, us? Who are you, anyway? You ain’t got nothing inside. You got no soul.”

Franklin felt tears welling in his eyes. “I...I don’t know what to say, baby.”

“That’s my point. You gonna keep talking, you’ve gotta have something to say.”



When Franklin got back to the lounge car, he found it nearly empty. The horizon was growing a light shade of pink in the east. For night owls, it was time to go to sleep. For early risers, it was time to start thinking about getting up. The army guy must have still been in military mode, because he was back in the car for a cup of coffee. The old woman, Helen, was still here, but she’d nodded off in her chair. He walked over to her and covered her with a blanket. She seemed to be doing alright now. She’d been scared out of her wits earlier, scared to death of trains. He’d spent some time talking with her to take her mind off it. Just idle chatter, the sort of thing strangers on a train could appreciate.

“I won’t lie to you,” he said to her late in the evening when she’d come back to the lounge car for another screwdriver to calm her. “I do like small talk. If you’d like to chat, I’m right here.”

“I would like that,” Helen said.

“I could tell you a lot about trains and the sort of people who ride them. But I reckon you’d rather talk about something else.”

“An easier subject, perhaps.” She put a finger to her lips, then said, “Death, maybe?”

It startled Franklin, but then she laughed and he realized she was making light of her own fear of trains. “Won’t be long now,” he said, putting a hand on her arm. “We’ll be in Chicago soon. Bet you have a nice family waiting for you at home.”

“I was kidding. You *do* want to talk about death?” She gave him a smile to let him know it was more humor—a way to cope. “I’ve buried my husband, and we never had kids. I have people waiting for me. Neighbors, friends—they’re my family.”

“That’s mighty fine, to have loved ones waiting for you, missing you.”

“Yes, it is. What do we have in this life if we don’t have other people? Who do you have waiting for you?”

“Oh, I’ve got a woman waiting for me in Baltimore.”

“Married how long?”

Franklin scoffed. “No, not married. Each got our own place. I stay with her and she stays with me. But she has grown kids, you know. She spends her holidays with them and their families. I usually go to my nephew’s place for Christmas and Easter and spend it with his family, his kids. So, I’ve got family and a girl. Buddies. And the train. I meet so many good people on the train. Can’t ask for much more than that.”

“No, you can’t.” Helen smiled. “You love this woman, or she’s just a girl?”

Franklin considered. “I love her. No need for us to dig deep and figure out why. She knows and I know. We’re happy.”

Helen nodded. “No one waiting in Chicago?”

Franklin frowned. “Oh, no, nothing like that. I’m true to my woman. I have friends in Chicago, but none I plan to call on. I’ll be in town a day, then back on the train.”

“You love the train as much as I hate it, don’t you?”

Franklin nodded. “There’s nothing quite like a train. Moments like this.

Sometimes I feel like this is my home and my place is somewhere I visit. I plan to be working on the train until the day I die.”

Helen smiled. “You must get tired of train food. Where do you like to eat when you’re in Chicago?”

Franklin thought about it. “Tell you what I like best: a nice cut of steak at the Chop House. Or a Chicago-style deep-dish pizza. Or some hearty German sausage. Sometimes I like to hit the blues and jazz clubs at night for some drinks and conversation.”

“Have you ever tasted homemade perogies? With potato vodka?”

“No, can’t say that I’ve had either one.”

“You should try them. Share a cab with me when we get to Chicago and I’ll make perogies for lunch.”

“Well, now, I don’t want to impose.”

“Who’s imposing? I like talking with you. You’re a good man with a day to kill. What would we have in this world without small talk?”



Franklin sat back down in the lounge car, not far from Helen, and looked out the window. The sky was still dark, the shadowy trees backlit by the increasingly pink horizon. The sun was about to begin another round. The train was about to end one.

Truth be told, there wasn’t a woman he loved waiting for him in Baltimore. A woman, yes. They hooked up when he was in town, spent nights and days together. But they were lovers without the love. He had his nephew’s family to spend the holidays with. But day in and day out, the only family he had was the transient one on the train.

He took a hearty gulp of water. The trains were the same, but they changed with each set of passengers. Every crowd brought the train alive with a new soul.

“Uncle Franklin, tell us train stories,” his great nieces and nephews would beg at Thanksgiving. He contemplated what sort of tales he’d picked up from this trip. He looked over at the military man, drinking coffee in the corner. Couldn’t tell whether he was happy or apprehensive about his destination. But Franklin imagined he’d be in a warzone soon, and there was little to be happy about there.

Franklin chuckled at his memory of the young poet, who seemed youthfully enthusiastic about scribbling love poems on Amtrak stationery. His smile faded

as he considered the broken-hearted woman who'd gotten off in Cincinnati. He pictured Latoya in the candlelight.

There were older couples who looked like the same person, young couples interlocking, families with parents and children, uncles and nephews. So many people. So many stories.

"Why, I ought to write a book about it," he said to his reflection in the dark window.

Franklin knew better. He didn't like to write, he liked to talk. His words were meaningless if not living in the air around him, connecting with the words of other people. He looked over at Helen, who slept peacefully as the train's vibration rattled her. He considered their conversation to come. Helen was asleep, but he spoke to her anyway. "Where in the world would we be without idle chatter?"



Untitled
Ariel Kusby

Carolyn Adams

STEALING THE BOOK OF MORMON

My modern hotel
proffered it bedside.

I wanted it for my brother
who collects holy things,
because he'd know
what to do with it.

I wanted to read about
the golden plates.
(Though I never did.)

It was a slim volume,
inviting, not a heavy burden.
(It was easy.)

So I packed it and headed home.

Somewhere,
security opened my bag.
Suspicious.
Too many odd shapes.

Feathers.
Angels.
Men in beards,
men without.
The Three,
and the Eight.

SINK

Instead of plates,
I like to put soil
in my sink and
mark the days off
in my pocket calendar
until something sprouts.
Everyday I lick the tip of my Sanford #2 and
rub a big gray "X"
through the 8th then
through the 9th then.
When the soil needs water,
I turn the faucet.
When it doesn't,
I do not.
Every month I clean the sink
thoroughly with ammonia and bleach
and I do not make my "X" in the calendar.
This process is repeated,
a ritual cleansing and purging.
It is my religion and
God is just dirt
always crying for more of himself.

DEAD TOYS

My favorite toy as a boy
was this dead dog,
a neighbor's dead dog
with a collar that
read COOKIE COOKIE
all around it.
We would play on
my gravel drive,
decomposing.
Her old man would say,
"That dead old bitch?"
and I would feel so sad
for Cookie,
everything was so sad outside
the gravel drive,
its dusty yellow hue,
so sad beyond Cookie playing,
and me shoveling up
the rotting bitch
under an old, unforgiving sun.

SELF-STORAGE

I fit all my valuables inside one
fairly large storage bin.
When the bin is sealed tight,
I sit on top,
I mount my bin
and it never budges.

My valuables are secure—
my faux-sheriff star
with a misspelled name and
a bent clip that
would scratch my nipple.
My assortment of
dried markers and pens.
Two cats,
one I never really got to know.

But I always mount my bin,
like some Hun
like that painting of Washington on his horse
where you can see in his eyes
that if his friend needed someone to stop
the bleeding, he would've stopped the bleeding.

PEGASUS DOWN

a few days after
I found his wrists
leaking about the room,
we shuffled over to some
diner on 76th
and our waitress kept keening
over a breakup,
or financial crisis.
she would bring us our
cucumber sauce while
sniveling, cracking.
we felt so awful
because she was
the good waitress—she
never gave the wrong
cucumber sauce,
not once.
we tipped her big and
I kept throwing
my social security card
over the gratuity,
saying I don't want to be me anymore.

POMMEGRANITE

Chloe Prasinós

Whenever I write the word pomegranate, I misspell it. It's not because I struggle with orthography or because I simply don't care to change my ways. I write pommegranite every time and that doesn't feel like a mistake because the embedded words *apple of granite* come closer to the laden leathery skin of Persephone's fruit in my mind; that arrangement of letters best captures the weight of the cursed purple-blood seeds that sank her into the world under this one, pulled the leaves off the trees behind her, caught in her hair.

The French have it right: *la grenade*. Grenade. That word. The volatile images that the French naming carries—those images begin to paint the power of a pommegranite. Gem jewel seeds set into beehive skin held in fractal shapes: this fruit is divine. It is nectar, it is bullet beauty. It only takes one look to see; the unrepeatable facets of one crimson seed lean into the next, united in an imperfect circle, compact and red, willing and waiting, sweet until the hard bite of the seed at the center of each aril. Persephone knew that bite well.

No one knows how many seeds she tasted from the hand Hades extended in front of his crooked smile in the shades of the world that swirls deep below my feet. He wanted her to himself. Her beauty, her grace, locked in his palace of blue flames. On one warm September afternoon, before the earth had seasons, he stole Persephone from a yellow meadow; he spiraled her into his cold arms and the white flower she had tucked behind her ear fell from her hair. They were gone long before it landed. Her mother's screams grasped at the twisted air Hades left in their wake as the yellow grasses swayed in the sunlight.

All it took was four or three or five or six pommegranite bullet seeds to pass her lips in the indigo shadows of his underworld and it was done; with each seed, with the staccato split of each bite, she unknowingly promised him one month of each year, seated at his side on a throne she never wanted, under the meadows and mountains of this world, away from her mother and away from the sway of the light in the leaves of the trees, the fraying weave of their roots far above her head. Indebted for each bullet seed burst, she passed these four or three or five or six months as royalty, queen of a cold cobalt palace. She wandered the halls and contemplated their quiet. At first, the silence rang in her ears and she could think of nothing but her mother's mellifluent melodies. As the months passed, the sharp stillness of her new home softened, the home she would descend to every year for the rest of time.

Her mother's grief robbed the meadows of their yellows. Her mother's furious cries scored the earth, left it hard and dry. Her mother's tears crystallized

and laced into snowflakes and oh, how they fell; they covered the world in the coldest of whites. Blossoms shivered and disappeared and branches were wrapped in frozen glass. Her mother's strife stirred the skies and whipped cold wind up spines. Her mother's uneven breaths measured the time, counted, one month for each glowing pommegranite seed Persephone had taken from his cold hand. After four or three or five or six months of debted days spent as queen of the world under her mother's barren one, Persephone returned. A warm breeze sighed into the yellows in the meadows, the earth yawned and unfolded, and her mother's joy unfurled melodies into the summer air. But I wonder if Persephone looked back at her king as she spun back up to the sun. I wonder if she stood in the meadow, its yellow restored, and thought of blue flames, indigo shades and pommegranite seeds. I wonder if she counted the moments until her next descent, back to the dark of her home for four or three or five or six months out of every year. I wonder if she grew accustomed to Hades; once the initial fury faded and his palace began to feel like her palace too, I wonder if she came to understand the depth of his loneliness and the void her beauty and her grace filled in their blue hallways. I wonder if Hades taught her to listen to the echo of the loneliness deep within herself. I wonder if she learned to savor the taste of nostalgia; nostalgia for her mother, for the sun. Deep below her mother's world, her eyes must have changed from those of a girl to those of a woman. I wonder if they laughed together. An eternity together stretching before them, I wonder if they developed a certain kind of love, a love of companionship, a love of solidarity. I wonder if Persephone craved the fall.

I can feel the summer slip, autumn's cold on my back. It is pommegranite season: warm breezes are memories and a stirring regret settles into the air. Pommegranite juice stains my skin and has for years. It is the color of melancholy, of nostalgia, and we all know pain is the most beautiful skin to live in. A warm day in one of the Septembers of my childhood cools into night. School has started, the leaves have dried and my mother brings home a pommegranite and it is my favorite day of fall. We call them *Indian apples* and they stain my hands and my lips and I love the idea of that color inside my body and sticky on my skin. Together, my mother, sister and I sit around the circular kitchen table. Pommegranite seeds spread across the dark-grain of the wood and they glitter under the warm bulbs in the light hanging overhead; shadows drape black across the cathedral ceilings and enclose us in a circle of light in our house in the woods on this autumn night. I savor this tradition, shared only between the women of our house. It is a small tradition; it happens on no particular calendar day. Tonight, it makes our smiles beam across the

table and together we delight in opening this year's fall fruit. My feet wrap around the legs of the chair, anchoring me to my seat, and I lean forward on my elbows. My eyes are fixed on the disparate pieces of the pommegranite and the seeds that lie between.

I stare. I study. I think. I try to understand what it is about this fruit that overwhelms my perception. They are ammunition: so much potential energy, potential color, suspended in a transparent casing, strong and beautifully volatile. Every aril reflects white light along the edge of its facet; the white is deep and still, like the surface of a motionless lake with morning rays across garnet waters. Every seed a droplet. Don't get it on your clothes because it will stain, stain because the threads of your shirt will want to drink it too, locking that goddess color into the geometry of its weave. I pick up a seed and hold it close to my face. I can see that there are swirls like fingerprints and circles like pores across this crimson-violet capsule of juice; the aril around every seed has skin, every aril breathes. They shine like garnets. I imagine a crown of pommegranite seeds. I would wear it on my head and close my eyes, enjoying the feeling of the glimmer of the seeds in the overhead kitchen light as their purple refractions trickled down onto my skin. I bring the seed up to my right eye. I hold it delicately between my thumb and pointer finger as the last three fingers of my right hand fan like feathers in a mask. My left eye closes in a wink and the rest of the room around me moves out of focus as I examine this pommegranite prism. I want to see the world through pommegranite-colored glasses (roses are too easy, their fragrance perfumed, bottled, their beauty billboarded; *la vie en rose* requires no effort, no examination; barely the threat of a prick, no risk of a fall). A pommegranite seed is the perfect prism; it casts the world into the color of melancholy, of rich, beautiful, vibrant ache. Before I'd left the house in the woods, I had read it in poems, heard its cadence in songs that pulled at my stomach, glimpsed it in the eyes of a friend. I've since seen it at departure gates, and at arrival gates, too. I've sat, seeped in it, on the scaffolding outside of my window in Paris, a year away packed into three bags in the room behind me. Even months before those bags were packed, the sheer fact of my departure date made me ache to witness the beauty of that city, to hear the melody of its language, to notice the strands of light in its hallway streets, to visit the small squares and cafes and gardens where I had found quiet in the first city I ever loved. Upon my return, I can recognize it mixing with the gray in the irises of a first and former lover as he tries to explain away the mistakes he made and the ways in which he hurt me during our struggle to stay together after I left for France. He tells me of regret, how every

day he wishes it undone. I watch and listen, studying the desperation that creases his face. In a moment of anger, he once accused me of enjoying the distance of the ocean between us because the melancholy of it made me write prose that ached like I did. He doesn't know it, but he was right. Ever since, I've been writing the pomegranite hues and shades that I have felt stir inside of myself for years.

I know that I am stained. I have fallen. People often can't tell when they meet me: I mask my ache well. I stand tall, I smile and laugh and love freely, sincerely, and I can promise you, you would never know the way I long for something I've never seen. I couldn't tell you when it started; I don't know where it comes from, but it moves me. It pulls at my solar plexus and lifts me and folds me and turns me inside out. I know I met its motion as a child. In the backyard of my house in the woods I'm spinning, hands grasped tightly with my sister, arms straight and elbows locked with grip daring gravity to even try, challenging the space around me to bend into new planes as I lean further into the space that has never supported me before, feet now moving out of their own momentum, beyond my control, the wind of my own creation pulling those girlhood fly-aways I'll have for my entire life across my forehead and out towards the sky as laughs that echo in screams rise out of my throat and up into the fall air before I land in a pile of dry leaves, thrilled and gasping for air.

My sister and I would play for hours in those woods, exploring, spinning, jumping and running, cold air warmed by our lungs, breath visible in front of our faces, cheeks red like our mother's rose cheeks, but ours from the fall wind. We used to rake the leaves in a clearing between trees to make ourselves a new home together, in sight of our house with the cathedral ceilings. We would dance and twirl and smile and make up stories where we had different names and different lives.

And we would fight in those woods. Games gone awry, pretend worlds derailed, jagged disagreements crackling between us over nothing at all: two dark-haired, strong-willed sisters, unwilling to budge because being right, alone, was more important than our shared fun. We would run again, but this time it was a race, a race to the house in the woods to sling our cases at our rose-cheeked mother, certain that justice was imminent and the other sister's wrongs would soon be righted. My mother would yell, my sister would cry, I would watch. My mother would say she had never met children more ungrateful, that our fighting made her crazy, drove her out of her own mind, that she wished she had a quiet life without daughters who demanded so much from her. Her voice echoed in high ceilings as she wondered who met her needs, where her life had disappeared to, where her quiet had gone. I

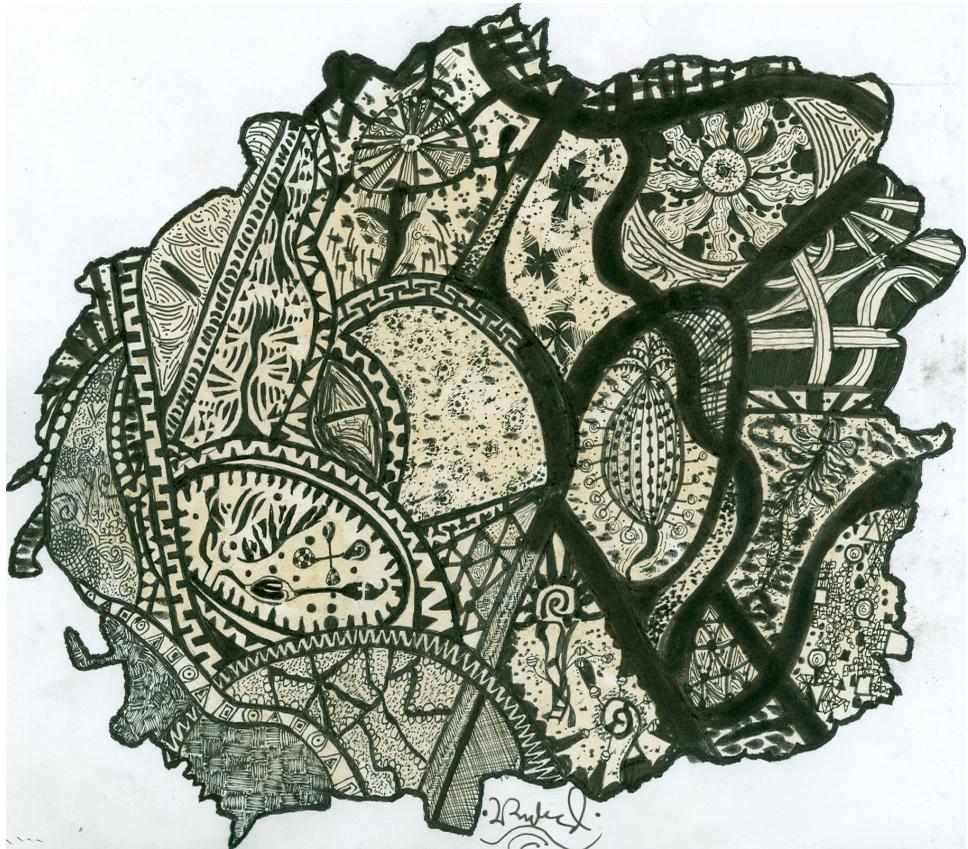
would retreat to my room, sit on the floor, hug my knees, and rock in my thoughts. This feeling pulling at the bottom of my stomach, this suspension, I wondered if other daughters felt this too. Could they, without this mother, this sister? Looking around my room, thinking of the other daughters I knew, I would catch my eyes in the mirror across the room. I would stare. I wanted to see what my sadness looked like, how my face changed when I cried. I didn't have words for it but I knew how it ached in my body, how it made my mind spin.

I have left the house in the woods. I have found new homes in far away places. And yet, as a woman, I still spin in my pomegranite melancholy. I still search for the words to describe the way it colors my days, moves my pen across the page; I detect its sweetness in the hue of my memories, in the eyes of lovers, the glances of strangers on the street. As I turn and swirl, I drink the space between the elation of flying and the ache of the ground; I worship the suspension in the fall, the way opposing forces pull at my stomach, at my mind. And, I love the inevitability of gravity: the impact, the feeling of my own weight as it spreads across the earth. It is simple and thrilling to exult in the ecstasy of weightlessness in life, but there is resonance in the pain and eventual scars of the landing. My favorite kind of beauty is that which aches; it stings and gets so deep inside of you that it leaves its colored shards spread throughout your system, forever yearning along magnetic fields to reunite, trying to pull its way through you, out of you. My ache is the color of pomegranites; it is sown deep inside of my soul and its juice is sticky on my skin.

They say that Persephone didn't know that those pomegranite seeds that passed her lips would imprison her in his palace, far away from her yellow home and loving mother. I can't help but wonder if she knew all along. I wonder if she didn't try to resist those gem jewel seeds glittering in Hades' outstretched hand. Perhaps she admired the blue shadows of his realm, perhaps she enjoyed the whisper of the thought of living in a world that wasn't her mother's, perhaps she didn't mind the melancholy of the time spent in the dark, the pleasant stir of nostalgia, the ache of memory. For she would always have the spring. She would always have the promise of the viridian gardens blooming in celebration of her return. After four or three or five or six months, she would come home to the mother whose complex love Persephone had come to understand in the time she spent away from home.

There is beauty in extremes. There is rush, there is pull; there is the charged heat of summer, there is the steady cold of winter. There is pomegranite ache that echoes in empty hallways and sits beside me on trains that draw lines across gray

fields. And there is smile-splitting joy in the nights I fill with dance alongside my friends when I can't tell the difference between my movement and the music, my thoughts and the twinkling lights hanging from the ceiling. Each pole makes me feel so fully, so intensely, but I am trying now to find beauty in the moments between my melancholy and my ecstasy. I am learning the divinity of cycles.



Fabric
Kathleen Mead

MANHOOD

At this point in my life,
manhood is a conversation
that I haven't had the opportunity
to experience,
but I remember
this one time some years ago
in the kitchen of my grandparents' home,
where the television rudely yelled
all the time,
the smell of catfish returned
every Friday night,
and my grandmother made
the best pancakes I ever ate;
my grandfather talked to me
about defending myself.
At that moment,
I didn't know he drove
from Chicago to his home, Louisiana,
overnight to find the person
who had hurt his brother.
All I knew about WWII
was that he was a minesweeper.
Both times, my grandfather had a gun.
He sat in his chair, blind
and stiff from a stroke
for as long as I could remember,
looked across the table
in my general direction, and said
"I may be blind, but call me
and I'll beat someone's ass."

HAIRSTITCH

I saw her drowning in vodka and passing quarters to a lesbian made up like David Bowie on the cover of *Aladdin Sane*.

Hairstitch was close by, dancing like a fucking psychopath, but she wasn't making her move on the guy.

I tell her, "You're wandering again, you're a lost comet, you're a coward," and she's giving me excuses, like, "Hairstitch is getting cold," and, "I overdosed on oxycontin the night before"—"I couldn't stay put," she said.

And so—and this I dimly remember—I broke it down, laid it out, and spat truth, just like all drunken melodies of the past between us, my flailing passion and her pouting youthful sorrows.

I rambled her the advice: "You must accept rejection. The science is yours. We all have the chemicals."

She tells me I'm too fucked up to give her advice, and I'm wondering if she means in the head.

She went off, chased Hairstitch, maybe got laid.

The way she ever-mispronounced his name and said it like a sneeze may have killed the motion to bang.

But I'm smiling, and I'm smiling, and I'm smiling, on this situation, the instant skidding, catching on itself.

Time, the Illusion, touched us and melted away like the chill of windless snow.

REQUEST TO SOUL FOR RETURN

PT. 1: UTTER SPEECHLESSNESS

You don't understand that invisible differences can be consequential and yet obviously diminutive (because they are invisible, after all),

and yet, I am ignored, for though you may see time in weeks, months, and years; I see it in seconds, minutes, and hours—

If only there was a violent drop, a great exploding force brought up through my entire being, from upshot pavement, splitting the ankles, the calves, to the hips, like a wondrous ribbon cutter,

then my torso folding over at once like creased paper, head throttling into the ground as quickly as a beater on a bass drum kick pedal—

but, this is I being dramatic, as I would say to myself, in our one-sided conversations on the Grand Miscommunicator Device, sending myriad meanings in text format,

and promising only one. If you really loved me, you would not let me get cold; this, an impossible statement, because it is the winter, and I, being a Capricorn,

am always cold on the outside—but this is not what I mean—I mean cold on the *inside*, like having nothing more to kindle the furnace of my gangling love factory, which would work

through utmost degenerative labor conditions, but there was a union shoveling in warmth-holding breath and splintering my thoughts with brightness that could shock the sun.

Yes, you can do such things to me with even the acknowledgement that you would give to a homeless man begging for a fix,

but you do not use your God-given power over me for a reason I can only describe at this point as utter speechlessness.

REQUEST TO SOUL FOR RETURN

PT. II: SENSELESSLY YOURS

Extricating sense for you from my heart and into poems: I am senselessly yours, without sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell—your smell...of orange flowers in dreaming meadows—no—

I am yours without them, and it's a cliché that love is often hate: the pressure gauge reads the same worry measure—

but you may not consider worry to be an aspect of love, nor hate for that matter—well—please—let me inform you, it certainly indicates the incoming heart-hurricane storming inner bloods.

The eye of that hurricane is a desecrated spot, where life has never touched, where worry turns into hate, while love spins all around, like a top.

Hate, which is more a sense than any of the five, is not to be feared, no more than love is to be embraced, for neither accurately justifies our bond bounded to history, surging through the veins of time.

Why, I have undergone sense inoculation, so that I would not dwell on the terrible feeling of when the hurricane stops and the eye takes over.

Rooted at the bottom of some wine cellar was worry, safely holding it out; I tore it from my heart, too, and with this I am completely senseless—don't worry, my heart, she will return.

THE BIG LUMINESCENT SQUARE
PORTAL WHICH KEEPS ME UP
ALL NIGHT

The glowing, perfectly squared portal,
with the luminescent outline

which keeps me up all night,
as I'm hallucinating a black, absorbent,

perfectly layered face—one with no features,
but that shoots back into limbo.

Outside, the parking lot wanted lights,
and the nexuses apart launched only two

solitary rockets on each side,
and in between were stories trapped and lost

by the minds of human trumpets.
Pinpointer-red eyes peeped at me

through slits dividing the portal,
and shone on the opposing wall.

I wasn't angry enough today,
or God didn't fag away in the usual attempt,

for me to be satisfied with triumph.
I wasn't sorry the sun was always on,

because the portal opened when Earth
twisted itself from light's reach, and so did I.

TUNNELS

Justin Bostian

Jacob was the oldest of the boys. He got home first from school because the short bus left early and arrived early, sympathetic as it was. He was not a smart boy, but *in* that he lacked the cruelty of intelligence, the malice of a well-tuned brain. He was simple. He was kind. He walked across his lawn, dark green that stretched for several acres, bordered by long fields of tall grass and wild wheat. All of it faded into the woods where trees were tall and black and looked dead year-round. His footsteps left deep prints in the loose soil turned up by moles, crossed here and there with tracks and tunnels.

The house was quiet. Jacob walked slowly through, shedding his bag, his coat, his day. He left the pieces of himself strewn about the den, the kitchen, until he slipped into the bathroom. The door was open. The light was on. His mother lay in the tub, still, pale, in deep red water.

Jacob wasn't stupid. He was simple, but he was capable of understanding the world around him. It was the *why* that always tripped him up. He didn't cry when he saw his mother lying so still. He couldn't get the letter from her stiff hands, but his reading was no good anyway. He could barely make out his father's name on the paper when he sat on the floor, craning his neck. She was cold and the water was cold, but she looked happy, happier than she had been since Jacob's father left. She was almost smiling now, even with half of her jaw underwater. Jacob left the bathroom and closed the door. He got his plastic army helmet and his old bb gun and shut off all the lights in the house. He went out into the turning fall and walked around the yard, taking shots at birds and squirrels. He missed everything and sat in an apple tree until his brothers got home.

While he balanced on the strong, sweet-smelling branches, Jacob thought about his father, the red-eyed man who he only saw during holidays and hospital visits. He wished he was around, able to explain the *why* of his mother's red bath. He knew she was dead, but maybe his father could make that word "dead" mean something.

The other bus came thirty minutes after Jacob locked all the doors. He watched his brothers pass by the row of windows and wondered what it would be like to ride a bus that big. David burst out and ran across the street. Joshua tumbled out behind him. His backpack left a trail in the gravel driveway. Both of the boys ran to the door and pounded, shook the handle, and yelled.

"Mom! We're home!"

Jacob looked at them from the tree, down the barrel of the bb gun, and squeezed the trigger. The gun made a sound halfway between a click and puff.

David and Joshua heard the splintery crack and saw a small hole appear in the vinyl siding near the door. Their eyes got wide and they smiled and ran around the house, laughing and screaming “Hit the dirt!” and “Contact, contact!” They peeked out from behind the house and saw Jacob’s leg dangling from a low branch. They ran to him and David jumped in the air and grabbed his shoe. They all screamed and Jacob fell to the ground. His back smashed into fallen apples and the whole yard smelled sweet and rotten.

David picked up the bb gun and sat against the apple tree. Joshua hugged Jacob until the oldest boy pushed him off. All three had the same sandy brown hair and splash of freckles across the nose and cheeks, but Jacob was tall and thin while David was stockier, more compact. Joshua would be taller than Jacob and stronger than David, but now he was small and bright and curious.

“Where’s Mom?” he asked, tugging at Jacob’s sleeve.

“Gone.”

“Gone where?”

“I don’t know,” Jacob said.

“I’m hungry,” David said.

Joshua pulled a plastic baggie from his backpack. It was full of broken graham crackers and the three ate them and threw mushy apples at their mailbox. When they were done with that, David went to the door and tried the handle again.

“Don’t go inside,” Jacob said. He held the bb gun over his shoulder and waved his hand out towards the yard. “Mom wanted us to get the moles.”

“I’ll do it later,” David said, but Jacob was already around the house and Joshua laughed and ran after him. They pulled out a long stretch of garden hose and stuck the end into a deep rut that connected to a raised tunnel snaking across the lawn.

“I want to go inside,” David said. Jacob put a heavy shovel into his hands and pushed him towards the mole tunnels.

“Stay outside the holes and when they come out, you smack ‘em.”

David smiled a little at this and lifted the shovel over his head. It was half again as tall as he was, and he lifted it high in the air and brought it down against a tunnel mouth. The impact caved in the dirt and sent little clumps of grass and earth flying.

“Like that,” Jacob said, “but wait until they come out.”

He pumped the bb gun and gave it to Joshua, who jumped up and down.

“Lay down here,” he said, “and don’t shoot until you see the whites of

their eyes.” Joshua lay in the grass a few feet from the mouth of another tunnel. He squinted hard down the barrel and held his breath until he couldn’t anymore.

Jacob turned the hose on and the water came out slow at first, then gushed into a hole and got sucked into the ground. He walked around the yard and looked in all the open spots. He didn’t see anything move. David started to walk over the tunnels and cave them in until the water broke through and filled his shoes.

“Don’t cave them in yet,” Jacob yelled. “We got to get them out, not scare them back in.”

“But they’ll drown,” David said. “That’s the same as hitting them with the shovel.”

Jacob thought about his Mom in the bathtub and said, “No, it’s not!” He yelled it so loud that the other boys looked at each other and made a face.

“Stop it! Stay by your posts!”

They all sat still for awhile, listening to water trickle through the maze of tunnels below them, until David threw his shovel down.

“I’m going inside.”

Jacob ran across the muddy lawn and stood in front of him.

“No you’re not. Mom said to kill the moles.”

“Mom’s gone. She told *you* to get them. I want to go inside.”

Jacob pushed him down into the mud. David looked up at him and smiled and grabbed his legs. They rolled in the mud and tried to hold each other, but everything was wet and slippery. Joshua laughed and cheered but never got up off the grass. He watched them fight down the barrel of the gun.

David wrestled Jacob to the ground and tried to keep him there by slinging mud into his face. “I’m going in,” he yelled, over and over. Jacob thrashed and knocked the middle boy off, but David bounced back up and backed slowly towards the house. His legs were set wide and his arms were held out like the wrestlers he watched on television. “I know where there’s a spare key!”

Jacob yelled “No!” and sprang out of the mud. He caught David halfway to the house and they fell to the ground again. He pushed his knees over David’s arms and held him down. He was crying a little, but David couldn’t tell through the mask of slowly drying mud.

Joshua got up and ran towards them, yelling “Stop, stop!” He ran awkwardly through the mud and slipped right before the ground became dry. The bb gun was cumbersome for him to carry. He landed on it and the barrel pressed deep into the dirt.

“What’s *wrong* with you?” David yelled. Jacob was holding him down and trying to keep him from squirming. “Get offa me! You’re stupid!”

Jacob balled up his hand into a small fist and hit him in the mouth. “I am not,” he said quietly. David’s eyes grew wide and started to water.

“Yes you are!” he said. He pushed and pulled, but couldn’t get his arms free. “You’re stupid! You’re stupid and everybody hates you!”

“No I’m not!” Jacob screamed. His voice cracked and he hit David harder, on the cheek, and it hurt his hand, but he kept going. He was sobbing now, his shoulders jerking up and down as he punched David in the arms, the chest, the neck, the head. David was yelling and twisting his head back and forth to avoid the fists. He bled from his lip and his nose.

“Stop it!”

Joshua stood alongside them, pointing the bb gun at Jacob. “Stop or I’ll shoot!” Jacob kept hitting and Joshua squeezed the trigger. The click sounded, but a small cylinder of dirt projected just over the edge of the barrel, forced out by the air pressure. He dropped the gun and jumped on Jacob’s back. The oldest boy threw him off. His knuckles were raw and David’s blood mixed with the dirt and mud. They were all crying now, crying and yelling at each other.

Joshua picked himself up from the ground and grabbed the bb gun by the barrel. He swung it over his shoulder in a wide arc, spinning on his heel with all of his weight in the center. The butt of the gun was a brown curve through the air until it connected with Jacob’s face. The force knocked him clean off David, sent him sprawling on his back. He coughed and spit up blood, then two front teeth—one from the top and one from the bottom—dribbled from his mouth.

All three boys lay on the ground, crying, bleeding, muddy and cold. The sun started to dip lower and Jacob crawled over to David. His face was swollen and purple in places and there was dried blood around his mouth and nostrils, but most of Jacob’s punches went errant, doing little damage. Jacob grabbed him and Joshua and they all huddled together.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sniffing. Blood and spit dripped through the gap in the front of his mouth and he whistled a little when he spoke. “I’m sorry. Mom’s gone. I’m sorry.”

He took them inside and showed them the bathroom. They all cried some more and David read the note as best he could through swollen lips. He wouldn’t say the curse words but he mouthed them with a loud whisper. They didn’t understand most of it, but they knew it was bad because it said “Fuck you, Charlie,”

and Charlie was their Dad. Jacob made them get up and leave the bathroom and he threw the note into the red water.

“Where’s Dad?” Joshua asked. He still hadn’t figured out what “divorce” meant. David tried to explain it to him, but he started crying again. Jacob found their father’s phone number stuck to the fridge. He dialed the number and walked into his mother’s closet.

“Hello?”

“Dad?”

“Hey Jacob, what’s going on?”

Jacob tried to say something, but he choked on the words.

“Jake, bud, is this important? I’m pretty busy.”

“I...I...Dad, why do things happen?”

“Jake, is everything okay? Put your mother on.”

Jacob hung up and threw the phone under a bag of clothes in the closet. It rang almost immediately, stopped, rang again.

He found his younger brothers sitting on the bathroom floor. “Dad’s not coming,” he said. David nodded and they filled their backpacks with food and comic books and blankets and kitchen knives. They scraped dirt out of the bb gun and cleaned their rooms and locked all of the doors.

It was getting dark. Jacob turned off the hose and they all stood in the middle of the lawn. They smashed all of the mole tunnels, now soft and wet. They smacked the ground with the shovel and the butt of the gun. They sang and whooped and cried and then went off into the woods to start something new.



Beach
Michael Morin



Old Mop
Michael Morin

Emma Louise Backe

awakening in the face of a bite

i dreamt you tigers last night
daddy, i dreamt you clawed and frantic,
clawed and frantic over me.

with the way of things you only wanted
me hurt. later comes the crying.
all that roaring rattled the cardboard
passages you chased me through, each
wall lined another. when you realized how
flimsy was the maze that diverted your rage,
your arms became huge, your hands
paws. i began my turn with a scream but you
caught it there with your fingers in my mouth,
closed my throat with my own tongue. my
chest compressed into the suddenness of
your wretched squeeze. there were curtains
everywhere,
 everywhere i ran from you.

i find you, in the morning, shelling
onions in the kitchen, the layers parsed
and peeled on a cutting board, you tearing
up, clutching the knife carelessly in fingers
already nicked with slow
worn cuts. broken, i want
to rub your back, but parts of me
are still pinioned in the dark.
it is not so much that i fear you, but that
i should grow to fear you so much in dreams.
what made me instill such violence in you,
slashing the air with your sorrow?

the intimate divine

now, the gods of things are only another aspect
of the things they govern. here, we keep them
cobwebbed across our faces. if we cry, we don't
expect fumbled caresses, rather the totems of our
clan: the bandicoot, the carpet snake, the honey
of the stinging bees.

i don't know how to make it less beautiful,
when it was not terribly beautiful—whiskers
rooting the cheeks of my grandfather as he
died, the furrows of his forehead suddenly wedded to fur.

every man has within him something of this animal.

to mourn, i walk the forest, touching the onion
grasses, the same flesh as myself. an ash tree
branch falls and i fall

beside it, crooning with affinity. were i to eat
the bark, i must attenuate the sacrilege rites
as if i had eaten myself.

we do not do that in our clan.

we do not eat what is not a sympathy aspect, just
as every black-nut tree is a pelican.

i am familiar with these kindred creatures because
we are destroyed the same.

we dig the grave and worry his body will
turn of itself and refuse. since the soil is
a stranger to him, he does not know how to make
it obey. the same is true for the branches that cover
the corpse. we must do the burial in daylight
only, because the rain, thunder, lightning, clouds,
hail and winter are regarded as different types
of crows. there is frost on the ground
but his hand is still a half-lidded claw,
his fangs loosing a grimace. our different
words designate this loss. i am of him

just as we are of the summer, the badger,
the autumn. what we believe we
tie with horsehair and leave hanging
in our doorframes, painted on our
storefronts, conscious of the symbols of our
personage. i dance while others
hunt, leaving ash in possum holes.
(everything is full of gods)

the big bull

they gave me honor wrought of metal
and medallions.
i've got my valiance nestled in a small box
beneath the bed i've shared with the wife i've had since before
and after the war.
she does not dust beneath there anymore
but keeps the uniform ironed and hung,
so there are days that pass when i forget the lost years,
the subtle aging upon paper forging eligibility
and patriotism.
we that were there do not talk about it,
even when the armchairs have sagged under the weight
of lost diligence; but there's still a gun
hidden in the closet, same as the shots buried in my left thigh.
once, when the man broke into my house
he shouted like the sergeant
and learned the definition of belligerence.
he never reached the second floor of the split-level
where the children slept like grenades.
they do not speak German
and will never know of Luftwaffe.
i left the wife at the church where we met
(she was younger than me and had men
already at the bowling alley)
because of the crusade.
she would wait, tentative as the submersibles
and did not question why i cut my hair short;
the flag was always high enough for her.

Leanne Hoppe

PARTY OF THE CENTURY

It turns out, time ends not in ice,
but as quite the soirée,
with a million barbarians launching
ideas, whittled into spears at each other.

Time ends while the elegant watch the city
consume itself, buildings,
children and cars swallowed into the earth,
where the view through floor to ceiling windows is cinematic.

The most expensive bottle of champagne pops, to celebrate the city drowning
into a silver bath (is that mercury?),
or capitalism's demise, or a friend's recent wedding announcement.

The gentrified half of the city is now
a hole:
Those still above ground grasp at sand. The rate of drowning
on the east
grows at the same rate as drunkenness
in the west.

We are in the west.

Remember, this is a gala,

darling. Try to enjoy yourself.

Outside: death

in metallic form, but you are sitting indoors.

The glass of golden bubbles flirts with you from the coffee table.

A woman in the apartment across from your living room,

waltzes. Stoned, spinning

over an oriental rug, alone.

BIOS

Sarah-Jane Abate is a junior Creative Writing major from Lawton, Pennsylvania. She is currently attending Susquehanna University. Her writing has been published in *plain china*, *Rivercraft*, and *Catfish Creek*.

Carolyn Adams' poetry and art have appeared in *Caveat Lector*, *The Alembic*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Clare Literary Journal*, and *Common Ground Review*, among others. She has authored the chapbooks *Beautiful Strangers* (Lily Press, 2006), *What Do You See?* (Right Hand Pointing, 2007), and *An Ocean of Names* (Red Shoe Press, 2011). She has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Emma Louise Backe is a senior at Vassar College majoring in Anthropology and English. She spends much of her time poring over the poetics of culture and collecting fanciful words as one accumulates pennies or stamps. She has also been published in Vassar College's literary magazine *Helicon*.

Justin Bostian is a writer and editor thinking about leaving his Chicago apartment this year, but he's not sure if it's worth the risk—the sun's pretty bright and he swears he heard people outside just a minute ago. Find his work at justinbostian.com.

Taylor Campbell is a Creative Writing student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 2012 he read at Boswell Books in the Best of the Undergraduate Writers Contest. Besides writing, he runs the netlabel *Noisy Arcade* and enjoys sound synthesis, audio recording, and *Apocalypse Now*.

Daniel Chang was born and raised along the Texas Gulf Coast and now majors in English - Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Currently, he tutors high school kids in the Houston area, where he lives and operates, for no small price. This is his first publication.

Quintin Collins is a freelance writer and poet from Chicago. He is currently concluding a Bachelor of Arts at DePaul University, where he founded the POETS student organization.

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Sarah Dykes is a student at Truman State University, where she studies English and Theatre and eventually plans to earn her Master of Arts in Education.

Diamond Forde is the managing editor of *The Eclectic*. She is studying English at the University of West Georgia and enjoys the combination of inspiration and craft on a page. She plans on pursuing both in Italy next spring.

Eric D. Goodman is the author of *Tracks: A Novel in Stories*, (Atticus Books, 2011), winner of the 2012 Gold Medal for Best Fiction in the Mid-Atlantic Region from the Independent Publishers Book Awards. He's also author of a storybook for children, *Flightless Goose*. Learn more at www.EricDGoodman.com, and find him at www.facebook.com/EricDGoodman.

Leanne Hoppe is a senior at Boston University. She is lucky enough to teach poetry in Newton Public Schools and volunteer at *AGNI Magazine*, while writing poems of her own.

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Sessa Kratz recently graduated from the University of Houston with a BA in English - Creative Writing. She now attends the MFA program for Poetry at Texas State University and is giving some intense thought as to what's coming next.

Andrew Parkkila is a writer and musician with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Columbia College Chicago. He lives all the way at the end of the brown line with his tailless cat, Davy Jones, and can be heard carrying on conversations with her frequently.

Heather Pedoto is not an enemy to all sea monsters; she is a writer, and the only sea monsters she has offended have been strictly accidental. She's been published before in *Glass Mountain*, and will be appearing in *Houston & Nomadic Voices Magazine* as

well. She has had several plays performed, none of them starring sea monsters.

Chloe Prasinos will leave behind the halls of academia and the peaks of the Appalachians this coming May with a degree in English and Dance from Skidmore College. When she's not writing or dancing, Chloe enjoys tea, traveling, balsamic vinegar, and willow trees.

Ian Roseen is a senior English major and American Studies minor at Valparaiso University. He works as editor of the university's undergraduate literary and fine arts journal *The Lighter*, assistant editor of the *Valparaiso Fiction Review* ... and on his own fiction the rest of the time.

Kalen Rowe is originally from Sandpoint, Idaho. By way of Montana and California, he finally landed in Texas at the age of nine. He began writing in high school and got going in earnest in his senior year. He is a junior at the university of Houston, majoring in English - Creative Writing with a concentration in poetry.

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B. Tacconi is a backseat-snatcher at the University of Houston who studies January's rain and the psychology behind Warped Tour bodysuits.