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2013 Winter Chapbook

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QUIZ & QUILL

2013 WINTER CHAPBOOK



STILLNESS

QUIZ&QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE

WINTER 2013

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"Wyeth" by Alyssa Mazey

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Still•ness [stil-nis]

(noun.)

Middle English stille, from Old English; stillan (verb), from a base meaning 'be fixed, stand.'

Unmoving, suspended, calm, undisturbed, hushed, stagnant, soundless, static, paused. Not moving or making a sound.

Deep silence or calm. Lifelessness, motionless, fixedness.

Immobility. Subdued, muted. Still.

TO THE WINTER SADNESS

Amelia Christmas Gramling

To the winter sadness (as I hear you through the window already on your way),

One.

Do you remember, do you, how could you, me in James Island wishing for any kind of duller pain. It's not yet dawn. I am curled between Mom and Dad in the Jos' loft before they refurbished it, and my ear is not throbbing; it's seeping. It's deep and relentless. I'm crying. Sleep licks and ebbs but doesn't pull me under. And the night is warm, when we breathe it, when Dad carries me wedding style instead of over the shoulder, potato sack style, because my ear makes me fragile and smaller, somehow. We breathe salt and an under-belly of Red Tide decay. Breathe in Sunday. The sanctioned rest. And I think this is pain. This is pain. If I can rise like salt to the sun, above this and apart from this, then I can become untouchable. I can retreat from the skin. And I do. And I am. I rise. And then the doctor shoots me up with some kind of prescription dope, and the last thing I recall clearly before after-church chocolate cake, are the backs of my parents' heads in the front seat, and the windshield framing, impossibly, the sunrise. The sea.

Two.

Steigman mentioned yesterday something called trauma theory. When a body undergoes a trauma, the tongue and the teeth are unable to ever fully articulate it. But the person returns, the person returns and returns to the wound like a refrain. Like a liturgy of memory. Enshrining the trauma in their minds, but still unable to speak its name. Though most likely they will spend large parts of their lives trying. This is how I think about you. This is why.

The bathtub.

The bedside.

The weeping. The inability to purge. The purging. The aimlessness. The night closing in. The carving my name in the ceiling vents. Mom and Daddy. The safety pin.

Three.

I am blonde and feather still and Mom is teaching lessons today, which is rare. She says make a retablo to the car accident. Like Frida with the bus and the polio. Give color to the pain. The accident was last night. She over-worries about me and Maggie's fragility, our inability to move on from the possibility of tragedy. From how closely it looms, how readily safety uncaps. I don't think she wondered, worried about you yet. Winter sadness is reserved for people who survive of the Spring of their lives. I draw the cat whose body the sheriff couldn't find. The cat Daddy didn't break in time to spare. I draw it purple. I draw it wings. X the eyes. I draw the maroon Oldsmobile. Try to crumple its backend in gingersnap crayon. Fail. Try again in pink. Fail again. I draw the other car, but not the girl inside. Orange is too sunny to encapsulate her tears. And I smile at Mama like yes. Yes, now I am okay.

Four.

Four is called waiting. A scavenger's game. I play the part of okay, and you hold off a while longer, let me trick myself once again. That the memory of warm will suffice this time, that I won't sink into the refrain. My retreat from the skin. I'll rise and stay risen.

Five.

Like the wind.

SPRINGTIME

Josh Brandon

High school years.

The time when everyone is in crisis. I was no exception.

My mind began to unravel at the abuse I had faced in the past.

Spiraling depression.

I welcomed death openly. Suicide attempt number four? Five? I lost count after my friends had to jerk me out of an open window. Nothing could cure my heavy heart until snow began to fall.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

is what they call it. Your mood changes as the seasons do. Winter was the time when everyone else became depressed. I found that I was different.

I became kind of happy

knowing everyone around me was finally down to my level. I was no longer "that lonely kid." We were all out of touch with the world, with each other – with ourselves. The world finally stopped turning when the trees began to wither.

-Collective isolation-

I soon discovered how fickle seasons can be.

Winter passed – turned its back on me. The days grew longer and the sun grew louder. Spring came to fruition, and the snow melted to rain. Flowers began to bloom and birds began to sing.

I hated it.

Spring brought hope. It brought a resurgence of life in the wilted and decaying. Trees and people alike were able to breathe a contented sigh.

Except for me.

I was trapped in winter. Trapped in depression. Trapped in nightmares revisiting a past I wanted so badly to repress again. Time stole what little joy I had found:

Other's misery.

My disease will never fade.

Melancholy lingers no matter what I inject into my body to numb it. Snow falls, and the world becomes still – just as I had prayed.

It won't last forever.

The frosted breaths of those in despair will evanesce, and rain will pour.

Winter will be washed away by hope and new life.

And Spring will rear its head to kill me once again.

STILLBORN

Hannah Klump

1. stillborn.

you are a thousand fruitless attempts
and the sound of a ribcage shattering;

your words are like poison
that seeps into overflowing wounds,
dismantling braids of stitches,
and your heart is a prison
that has been overrun with
needles and tangled weeds.

sometimes your indifference
becomes an unlucky smile
and stabs me through the
throat –

with unruly memory,
lost in a sea of apathy,
i can taste a wave of agony
among the lifeless pulse
that keeps me alive -
trapped under ice,
wrapped in a nameless,
ticking purge,

i am a lost cause,
a cracked mirror,
a heavy, spectral shadow
buried, dead, and
dismantled

2.burned.

in my mind there is nothing

but a sea of tangled thoughts.
a web of resonant lies coils
in the wake of dissatisfied,
lukewarm water, and it swims
around my fingertips,

my memories are the heart of

the sound of a door as it

shut, the pluck of a string
right before it snaps,
resonating indecisively,
wobbling between the realms
of past and present,
seen and unseen.
that is where i sleep –

tendrils of grey,
layers of overlapping
idiosyncrasy and scattered
thoughts.
i rest within

own nightmare,
a chaotic paradise
filled with an enigma of
shadows and banal
memories,
and this dream i'll
never wake from

relevant

silent.

darkness.

slams

in

my

lies within the chambers
of my own irrelevant,
unmoving

head

3. identity.

tonight i am an existentialist.
i've made my arms and sleeves
vacant and i've fallen headfirst
into the riptide of reality,
leaving forsaken emotions behind –

i've traveled beyond burning
bridges and have rid my feet of
memory's ash, because what once
was is what never will be,
so what swims in the dust of
time's wake is now irrelevant.

i've learned to look away
from scars, pretend they're
absent, hollow as the heart in
my ribcage; for if past pain is
insignificant, isn't it as if it's
entirely nonexistent?

i've taught myself to tape my
mouth shut, chain my words
to the back of my throat,
because the world is merciless to
suffering, and despair is merciless
to me.

CORN BELT, QUIET

Katy Major

We might have known it would come to this.

The plane ride was six hours. Six hours and an unsatisfying slice of the country, and then Iowa. For the thousandth time, I idly wondered why I was dumping a meager salary into a plane ticket to nowhere. The irony even startled me: the body of shame from a small Ohioan town ventures to the land of the Corn Belt. If the universe doesn't play tricks on us, we play tricks on ourselves.

The other passengers are preternaturally still and silent. Each seat is a separate, exclusive sphere. Even craning my head to peek at the iPad that the man next to me is peering at, I am unable to access any detail of his world. Words and numbers flash by, and I wonder how they fit into the empty nooks and crannies between folds of brain matter, what is etched on the inside of him to make meaning from the hieroglyphs on the pure white screen of the new world. I feel those small, changeable shifts of anxiety in my abdomen, and I press it, fighting the urge to vomit.

I am bored and I am unproductive. Grad school trained me into a mode of thinking that doesn't account for interruptions like plane rides. My bag sits on my lap, but I know that if I try to grade a single composition on this plane, I will completely unhinge. My mind inflicts punishment for my lapses in productivity—I feel my consciousness yawning in the silence, expanding uncomfortably. The lack of focus is pulling me into pieces.

She meets me at the gate, and I remember why I came. The familiarity of her face is still jarring in this strange place. Flickers of memory flash at the corners of my eyes as soon as I see her. She looks how I probably look to outsiders—powerful, but strangely fragile. The sharp intelligence of her gaze doesn't do anything to conceal the vulnerability of sleeplessness. Her expression is as paradoxical as her post-teaching attire: a sharp thrift store blazer paired with scuffed TOMs that have been around since our undergraduate days. Liza looks defeated, somehow.

I kiss her hello, closing the distance between us for a brief few seconds.

"Hi, honey."

"How was the flight?"

"Anxiety-inducing. I hate being suspended in air."

She smiles at the familiarity of my unceasing anxiety. I was always the worrier, the protector. I was once omnipresent enough to wash her dishes, keep bill collectors at bay. Now, miles of Middle American agriculture away, I can only offer her advice at increasingly odd hours. At five in the morning, I call her, filled with terror of the night, and she asks me how to cook minute rice.

"You taught today?" I gesture at her clothing.

"Yeah." Her eyes shift distractedly. "I don't know. I'm so behind."

"I have a lot to grade, too." A year ahead of her in my program, I am already sufficiently worn down by teaching and building theses, beaten into submission by sleepless nights and ulcers burned in my stomach from too much black coffee. Liza is still breaking.

Our opening words to each other are disquietingly empty. I remember our first date, when neither of us knew we were about to fall in love, when we had no idea that our next years would be brimming with each other. We talked about whether a god existed just beyond the stars, and I remember the yellow from the streetlights reflecting in her already-light eyes as she told me she didn't believe in anything but darkness. I knew we were good for each other because, ever pragmatic, I lacked a fear of the dark.

We head from the airport to a nearby roadside restaurant. It couldn't be farther from the dining at our liberal arts college a few short years ago. The cafeteria had boasted free-range chicken, vegan options, soy milk, a full salad bar—fodder for our impending liberal yuppiedom. I went vegetarian when Liza and I started dating in the weeks following that first conversation, too embarrassed and ashamed to eat ground beef in front of someone noble enough to turn down animal meat that had even already been cooked, the animals tortured and slaughtered in the distant past. Someone else could always eat that meat, fueling the evil meat industry, but it wouldn't be Liza. My vegetarianism had more or less dissolved when I moved away from college; while Liza continued subsisting on vegetarian soup and vegetables in our cafeteria, I entered graduate school and ate a

lot of canned tuna fish, the least sustainable fish in our plastic-soup ocean, riddled with guilt and a hefty identity crisis.

The menu at Frank's Kitchen did not offer tuna fish. Meat and potatoes exclusively, hard evidence that we didn't belong. Liza didn't bat an eyelash and ordered a side salad and mashed potatoes. I ordered a meatloaf sandwich. They brought us weak coffee in tiny porcelain mugs, the kind that my colleagues refilled five to six times before noon. I couldn't tell if Liza was genuinely hungry. She usually wasn't, but it seemed like a natural next step—off the plane by evening, dinner out, back to her place. It was ritualistic. We had lived this reality before.

We both pretended that the silence was comfortable for the other's benefit. No one was fooled. Even in college, when we only spent our two-hour chunks of class apart, our silences had been charged, never peaceful. The quiet meant secret warfare, resentments being hurled in the opposite direction, anxieties floating unspoken.

She used to get frustrated with me for my silences. The truth was that I was never sure that I had anything of value to say to this bright, straw-haired girl who I was in love with. Her casual intelligence, her charming wit, her noble ideals, had always seemed infinitely more appealing than my sharp, critical "jokes"—bitter comments about the world around me, nasty little bites at society, a word or two on a recent book or film. I had felt like I was never more than my criticism, that picking apart everything and everyone around me made me better, even if I wasn't adding to the world in any significant way, even though I made nothing better. Even when she waved her arms and yelled, her little white arms emphatic in her frustration, telling me *Why are you shutting me out?* and *I feel like we never talk anymore!*, I just stared at her, silent and sullen.

We could have seen this coming, had we been looking, had we been thinking.

In the wake of our silence, I am oddly reminded of my experiences visiting my mother during college—that strange point in time when my conception of home shifted to the college campus and away from the small-town ranch house I had been raised in. After that, when I went home, my mother stopped caring about what I was doing at college and my interest in my hometown quickly faded into nothing. The silences with my mother were long and dry, devoid of anything to say, filled with the cynicism that comes with age, the impermanence of things that promised to endure. Even

when I tried to recount stories about school, tidbits I learned in class, she lacked the context to understand them. The cast of characters was always shifting, the information always changing. It became impossible for her to hold onto. Now our phone conversations revolve around how my grandfather is doing, how much money I'm making, and how my bad the pain from my stomach ulcers is. We have become strangers, me and the mother who once held me during my first moments of existence.

Liza was determinedly filling the silence by rehashing yet another run-in with yet another entitled male faculty member. The power trips of men prefixed "Doctor" were forever common experiences for us, both at rural Middle American campuses with huge student bodies and illustrious faculty lists.

"It's like working with Jonathon Franzen. He might as well be throwing my essays into an incinerator for all the constructive criticism he's giving me. Misogynistic ass. How am I possibly supposed to improve when I'm being dismissed on account of my female perspective?" Her tone was scathing. The female perspective was our male colleagues' way of dismissing our work as a special interest topic, some obscure crap that only a handful of freshmen in a Women's Lit class would pick up. The implication was that the mainstream would never take our writing seriously, but continue to snap up Dave Eggers' every new book with increasing enthusiasm. The woman's voice was doomed to remain in only the likes of Elizabeth Gilbert and J.A. Jance—or so Dr. Male Ego hoped.

"Do you want me to read it?"

She hesitated. That meant I was probably in the essay. Either that, or she was insecure about it, though in our undergrad days, she had always been sharing her work, reading me her drafts, speaking at open-mic readings, submitting to the school's magazine. I had been the covert one, emailing my pieces to the magazine quietly, shutting my laptop when she tried to sneak a peek. Liza's confidence had been shaken in recent years, and now she was more and more hesitant to let anyone in on what she was writing.

"Maybe later," she said uneasily.

Trading stories over dinner was an exercise in patience. I recognized a few names that she had mentioned before, but without faces, I was lost in ennui. Liza's friend Liz—confusing on the most basic of levels—Liza's sworn

enemy, David, Dr. Something-or-Other, Liza's boss, Dr...Jordan? Alex? A

first-name last-name. I couldn't recall. I couldn't translate the bursts of emotion in the story—why was she upset? Why was she exhausted? The work? The emotional output? I struggled to keep up as Liza's familiar white face rippled from disappointment to musing.

She threw in one name that I recognized. There were the usual enemies, and then there was Candy, Liza's favorite student, the source of much tight-lipped musing on my part. Candy, from what Liza had told me, was the next great thing to happen to literature. She was an undergraduate in English Literature taking Liza's composition class. She was a feminist, Liza had told me proudly, interested in women's literature and gender studies. I imagined her fresh-faced and young, newly hatched from a smart liberal upbringing, maybe with mousy hair dyed an inoffensive tawny color straight from the school's local pharmacy. Maybe she carried a canvas messenger bag toned a stark military green like me, a marker of the gender transgressor, or maybe she had the omnipresent quilted backpack indicative of a suburban upbringing. No, I thought, Candy was different. Given her open-minded ideals and social consciousness, it was more likely that she carried her possessions in some canvas creation whose purchase funded a massive charity geared toward African children. A recycled feed bag or something, impossibly hip and twenty-first century.

Candy often stopped by Liza's office after class to discuss something she saw on MSNBC or a particular injustice that had popped up on her Facebook newsfeed. I had cynically thought of the frantic posts of my culturally illiterate aging aunts: Save the sharks! Sign this petition for affordable healthcare! Don't let the liberals take down big business! Misaimed political commentary was the bane of feminist existence—once you marked yourself as a champion of social justice, new global crises were hurled at you by non-activist laypeople on a daily basis. I wasn't remotely surprised to hear that a budding feminist was clinging to Liza—coded lesbian by virtue of her clipped, professional appearance and androgynous, naked face—and spilling her guilty guts about how much she wanted to help the cause. Liza was infatuated with the idea of cultivating a young feminist and had more or less taken Candy under her wing. I disdainfully regarded the relationship as immature, and listened not without a hint of jealousy.

We were both relieved when dinner ended. Tangibly relieved. It was easier to talk when we weren't face-to-face in the box of the restaurant booth. My meatloaf sandwich shifted uncomfortably in my stomach. I

remembered Liza reaching for my stomach in college, patting it indulgently in a show of caretaking when my ulcers flared up. My waistline was widening these days, and I doubted her hand would drift anywhere near the bulge under my sweater. I had become one of my own professors, lumpy and androgynous in my single-minded academe. Concern for healthy eating, I found, was not prevalent in the world of the writer-professor.

We pulled up to her apartment after several minutes of passing cornfields and me complaining about my students. Cranky and fed up with teaching basic required classes, I lamented over the lack of depth. "They don't even quote! These kids copy and paste Joan fucking Didion and then they give me not only zero analysis of the quote, but they also don't cite her!"

"Hmm," Liza said, half-immersed in some thought of her own. "You sound a bit pretentious, dear."

Annoyance flared up. "Pretentious? Really? Am I asking too much of my adult students?"

"I didn't say that. I just think you need to be more patient with freshmen." She turned the wheel, carefully pulling into her apartment complex. "They don't know yet. They're babies. They just got out of high school."

Her rationality only further exacerbated my irritation. All I ever need from her is support, but god forbid Liza let some unfair criticism lie. Liza, the champion of the undefended. "When did you become so defensive of freshmen?"

She let it slide, her face remaining neutral as she parked. "I'm just saying, if you expect to teach for the rest of your life, you're probably going to have to teach some freshman courses." Her tone was clipped, as if I had proclaimed that I was too good for freshmen, that I would undoubtedly be teaching junior and senior level courses on the art of the essay and post-modernist literature. I was furious. Mostly because I knew that, on some level, she had hit the nail on the head, and that I did believe this, in a deep unspoken part of my consciousness, that I did believe I was too smart to be teaching freshman seminars. Self-hatred flared up. I felt my face flush.

"Talk about pretention. Didn't I hear this during our grad school info session senior year?"

"You don't need to be cranky with me, too. I'm not one of your students." Her voice was sharp.

We got out of the car, silent in the cool aftermath. She's too on-target and I'm too cynical. The same story told again and again over the years. Distance only made it worse—it was as if without Liza to monitor my crotchety side, I morphed into the summation of every professor I loathed and struggled to impress in college. And without me, Liza became an insufferable know-it-all goody-goody. Without each other, we were worse. Or maybe, Liza was better, and I was worse. I shoved that thought back venomously, fighting my lasting secret suspicion that Liza could have done so much better than the bitter shell of a woman that I was, had always been.

Her apartment is filled with the same crap as mine and the pounding dread of procrastination returns to me as I survey the piles of graded and ungraded papers, stacks of books with Post-its sticking up, and her laptop, waiting darkly in the corner for her attention. I think of my own academic debris and feel my saliva sour in my mouth. That's what will be waiting when I return home. That's what I will be doing each night instead of sleeping, to compensate for the time I'm spending here, the lost time spent on my relationship. Forever, I am paying for my happiness. I am being punished for being in love. Wasn't this the deal I made? Didn't I tell Liza, I'll fly out to see you all the time. I'll call you every day. I'll love you every second. And hadn't I? Wasn't that why I was here?

You must put in the time, though. You must, you must. Long distance relationships center around evidence. Prove that you love me. Prove that you won't leave me. Prove that this can work. That we weren't crazy when we fell in love. That we planned for this. That we understood.

We both committed unquestioningly to the unwritten contract of our long-distance relationship, in the same way that we have committed to our studies, constantly offering new evidence in earnest, making an effort, telling stories, listening. Our daily phone calls are prompt and regular. We remind each other, I love you. We call each other on Skype, which has somehow become a modern trope of commitment, the hallmark of long-distance. And, of course, there are the visits. Hundreds and hundreds of dollars dumped into American Airlines, exhausted conversation, simmering anxiety about the weekend away from work. And the visits are never frequent enough. Even if we manage to cram in more than one visit in a month, it almost seems to increase the distance between us, as though the frequency of the trips to the airport only emphasizes the effort it takes to hold us together.

I slump down on her couch. It smells like Liza. The scent fills me with nostalgia for our undergrad days—always looking back on the undergrad, always partially existing in the past—when we were constantly crammed together on someone's couch and even if she hadn't showered for three days, she still smelled perfect, like Liza. How even her sweat smelled sweeter than anyone else's sweat. How her hair fell onto my face. Us passing a bowl around, getting high after class. Our unwitting confidence in the future, our certainty. Our casually laid plans about school and growing old together.

I shifted and yanked something out from under me. It was a sweatshirt. I frowned at it. It was a lurid teal that Liza would never be seen in, a distracting incongruity in her apartment's browns and tans.

"Liza?"

She looked over, and I saw something in her face shift.

I looked back down at the sweatshirt. "Is this Candy's?"

The words sprung from my mouth unbidden. I instantly knew, as if someone had whispered the answer in my ear.

"Candy's been coming over here?" I asked.

"Yeah. She's been coming over," Liza said, as casually as she could.

She was carefully showing no hint of guilt, to convince me that she had no reason to feel guilty. Her expression was crafted, startling me. It was not one of a hundred natural expressions that I was used to on Liza.

"Instead of meeting at your office at school, you've been meeting at your apartment?"

"Yes," she said again.

"Do you think that's professional?"

"Please, Alice. It's 2013. Students text their professors on a daily basis," she said dismissively.

"I see. So this is a professional arrangement, huh?"

She stopped in her tracks, poised defensively, her shoulders tensed.

"Really? You think I'm sleeping with her?"

I considered it. A free-thinking undergrad girl, curious about feminism. Probably anxious to immerse herself in the activist community. Probably questioning her sexual orientation, identity politics being at the crux of feminism. And definitely, without question, looking up to Liza. Beautiful, interesting, long-legged Liza.

"I don't know."

"You don't know."

"Well, you give her special attention, that's for sure. How would you feel?"

She rolled her eyes, making sparks of anger flare up in my vision. "I don't know, Alice. I would probably assume that you were doing your job and engaging with students. Which is what I'm doing."

I tossed the sweatshirt back onto the couch. "Fine. Okay."

A few minutes of silence.

"I call you every day," she finally said. Her voice was almost pleading. She was begging me to believe her.

"I know," was all I could say. What did that prove? I didn't know. But it did, didn't it?

We should have known it would come to this.

Shifting aside the sweatshirt, she sat down beside me on the couch and flipped on the T.V. After a few minutes of watching mutely, she rested her head on my shoulder. I feel twenty-one again, Liza's weight on me as we picked apart bad sitcoms. Her hair caught on my sweater. I inhaled her, feeling suddenly young and vulnerable and weak at the knees.

The little sweatshirt, a size medium at most, on the other side of Liza, seemed to cast an enormous shadow, distracting me from the T.V. and holding my gaze.

Silence between us, except for the chatter of the T.V., the rollicking mutter of the sitcom's laugh track.

Deep down, we knew it would come to this.





CONSCIOUS BEGINNINGS

Cassidy Brauner

MONTAIGNE

Joshua Park

Pen stabs paper, bleeding black ink
on an already ink-stained page.
He was strengthening his marriage
to his artwork, to his writings.

Retiring to his country estate at 38
to write essays, Monty was 64 now.
He wound up becoming one of the most
famous writers of all time, but he chucked
it all to do whatever he wanted.
His words, once meaningful
and breathing, were flat-lining.

He loved to be alone,
in a diseased room, cluttered
with rat shit and used tissues.
The pleasure he gave himself tickled
his imagination more sweetly than that
which he felt.

He ate native food,
prepared only in the native manner.
For days Monty went hungry,
his stomach gnawing and writhing,
howling like the wolves perched outside his door,
waiting for him to walk outside and fall
to the ground, where they'd dismantle
his body like children to the chocolate bar.
Pieces flying.

When young boys drew naughty pictures

on his outside wall as they passed the field

of his house on the way to school,
Monty watched, pointing, encouraging
the boys that a bell end is more rounded,
“Like this,” he’d say, taking the marker
from one.

Like iron weights, the pen he carried
in his pockets made him drag,
lifeless to his desk.

Slamming to the wooden table, it
grinded like squealing tires against
the paper.

Tread marks of ink were the only thing
left of a right man gone wrong.

STILL PERFECT TREES

Lillian Mills

Reason burns a brighter fire, and the bones
Found me and said, "She's done."
If you notice anything
glossy and rowdy
not loud,
notice how beautiful is her unshakable sleep.
Isn't darkness after all
God's colored thumb?
I was thinking,
My ripped mind, thinking
of the perfect trees that remained still in the night.
There's a beauty there that only who venture
will see.
And as for the ceremony of the bones, and of still trees with
ripped open minds,
it pulls me
into its trap of attention.

UNTITLED

-Inspiration from "Untitled"

by Mark Rothko

Alyssa Mazey

Bark is not just bark
Dead wood, fell trees
All encompassed by fungus, somehow, stones. Debris.
Leaves litter.
Moss is softly apathetic, don't you think?
Stones in stones, upon stones-
Think quietly.
Many things are echoing here. Like time.
Look carefully for dashes of color, bright.
What is culture? How is love?
Does the wood relax when metal does not?
Denim is meant to harbor dirt.
Flesh, when clean and pale, is a puzzle piece.

THE CAVE OF OUR THROATS; THE STORY UNSUNG

Amelia Christmas Gramling

When I was little and home alone on Hilltop, I sometimes challenged myself to be still for what felt like whole erosionary periods, whole generations of geological decay perched backward on my mom's hand-made rocking chair, waiting, impatient, for the lonely descent of the afternoon sun. When it filtered through the glass panels of the door we never used, I could bear witness to the air made no longer see-through, empty, but filled and ever filling. Of dust of, hair, of skin. "How am I still breathing?" I never asked anyone aloud, but sometimes voiced in whisperings to further mystify the air.

On one of Otterbein's lawns, here with my back against a tree, the air is dense with gnats and dandelion debris, and I wonder. When I return Southward, what of this air, if any, will I keep? And when I stay at school, which I am prone to more often these days, what do I fail to bring? And what have I scattered in hundreds of nondescript hotel rooms, in gas station bathrooms, in candle wicks, and scratched CD's; how much of twenty years of breathing still culture the lining of my lungs? When Mom and Maggie and I were rooting through boxes of dishes in the basement before I left for school this fall, looking to fill the empty cabinets of my new grown-up life, I opened and inhaled the inside of an old coffee canister not knowing until she later told me what it was in which I breathed: the smell of every morning my mama ever spent with the Granddad I didn't meet. Some thirty years sealed.

We don't fully disappear.

Katy is sitting cross-legged on my bed twirling a phantom cigarette when she lets it slip that this house is haunted, "no, for real" -- a figure in the doorway, she claims shadows the landing, a new and naked filter to the light from the hall. The hairs on the back of my neck lay as still and heavy as rest. I don't tell her I've been conjuring ghosts for weeks.

Every ancestor on my Mom's side for two hundred years, since before the New Madrid Fault line spit dust, since the Mississippi River ran backwards, has been born and birthed and laid to rest in a holler somewhere around Cave City, Kentucky. The name Collins spread out and onward through the sons, but the stories like the cave-dark eyes trickle down through the Grandmothers to every new-born baby girl .

They call us Melungeon: a Tri-racial blend, an Appalachian footnote, a mountain people whose very existence is speculative and much disputed in Academia as it is among our living kin. This I inherit from those Collins' on my mother's side who by the time their record got kept, had slid down from the Tennessee Ridge a-ways to their Western Kentucky hollers and tobacco farms -- to the soft spun Sandstone earth its Bowling Green city dwellers sometimes feared would crack open and swallow them whole, and sometimes did. The French "Melangee" means mixture, while the Turkish Meluncan from the Arabic "Melun Jinn" means something like cursed or lost souls. When I look to my Great Great Great Grandmother, Almarinda Collins, pictured in grainy tones of beige before me --those eyes like liquid sorrow hollow me through the frame; it's this legacy of lostness that I live, but I believe, in ways less diluted than her gaze.

This will make year two of living north of my native ground, and the longer I stay -- the more ways in which I am tethered to this corn-fed flat land, this dependable land that almost never swallows or shakes, the more difficult it becomes to make the trek back. And it's possible, it's more and more likely that I'll live from Ohio onward and out, a Kentucky cave girl someplace nobody knows exactly what that means. I want to know what I carry and who it comes from and how to read my own skin, and when I catch my reflection unaware and vacant, in a store front, or a still puddle after a long rain, I want to know whose river lost eyes watch me until I remember they're mine.

The history of the earth is written in the rocks.

It's been told that we tilled this land before the Mayflower took shore. Reckoned, even, that we descend from the Island settlers of Roanoke, lost souls as they were, but more resilient than the mother-land figured,

perhaps. Or the survivors of some shipwrecked castaways thought long-since lost to sea. Or the bastard sons and daughters of Portuguese or Spanish conquistadors, the descendants of the Black Legend and the new world cleanse. My aunt Fannie swears to God we come from the same stock as Elvis. As a people forgotten to this land's hillsides for so long nobody remembers how we came to gather here, our origin tends to weave itself a dream catcher of old wives tales and wishful thinking. What DNA research I can find names my ancestry as nothing so elusive or difficult to pronounce: European, Native American, and Sub-Saharan African. Most folks prefer their own theories. To claim Melungeon is to claim descent from the survivors of this country's most heinous woundings as from those who manned the shackles and fashioned their chains.

The children of perdition, they called us, the devil's unholy offspring. The link between the destroyers and the destroyed. What of this legacy do I continue to breathe?

There are no more Grandmothers left to ask. My mom and I have been working to recall them through the miles and across the years with what she can find entombed in molding cardboard, and I from ancestry.com. Her grandmother, Hazel, used to hold my mom close on stormy nights, whisper stories and mountain hymns through the unsettled dark, some of which she recorded, and some my mom has since unearthed. Hazel lived to see me born but not long after, and though the Collins' face is so much more my sister's, Mom believes Hazel's stories she left for me to read. "If she told me once she told me a thousand times, 'It's all in there, Reese. I've wrote it all down.'" So I read. My spare time lately all poured into decoding scanned copies of twenty year old chicken scratch. The untendered hand of a woman at the end of her life measuring her blessings, making right with God, and offering brief glimpses into her untamable Kentucky childhood as she knew it then-- barefoot through her Daddy's tobacco fields in the days the rivers ran clearer, and the mountains still peaked. Hazel's story reads like I'm told she spoke: "I was always fat. Not too fat to dance," and "I would take food in the field in my pockets including brown sugar. I wasn't going to starve." "I was afraid of nothing." "I was Daddy's second son." She speaks plenty of wilderness but nothing of blood. No origin story that delineates from the origin of all things. Genesis as told by Hazel. And I can feel my mom's disappointment through our email exchange. Why give precious paper-space to these stories already responsible for the deaths of

uncountable trees? Bibles like shotguns like songs, a given in each and every lean-to on her ancestors mountainsides, beneath the shrouds of tin and cardboard. The canopies of green.

But what if I'm reading from eyes who have seen too far ahead and too much of the country and never as closely as they could? When you don't know where you come from, and the scripture like the folk tales are spoken and sung from the same pairs of lungs, when your skin is the darkness on the surface of the deep, the black rock, the underground spring; to be raised from the dust of Eden or to be raised from Kentucky clay, makes little difference. There is sanctity in the Word of a people who stay in one place.

"Now don't you hear these mournin doves, flying from pine to pine? Mournin for their one true love just like I mourn for mine/ The only woman I ever did love she's on that train and gone/It's the longest train in the whole wide world comin' down from the old coal mine."

-- Hazel's song.

I don't sing. I lost my accent long ago, somewhere along the two lane highways and gravel roads this country rests its wheels on, in some failed attempt to re-find and make mine the Western sky, and I have never been rooted to one acre or a holler or a hill, and my generation of Melungeon lives indistinguishable from our neighbors now. Another blonde recreation of Midwestern white. We speak the same language and fill the same pews, and volley for the same privilege, but there is some hollow space, some New Madrid-like fault, no measure of touching or talking or shared silence can fill. Cave City sandstone is too soft to ever sit still; there exists no method to tracking its ruptures, the cave-ins, the sink holes, the landslides, the swallowings, the quakes. They come when they come, and they stay as long as they will.

My mom speaks of her dead in present tense, she bathes in lavender, she bursts into song unabated, she swears under her breath. She hides her face in her hands every time I back out of the driveway, she holds me when it storms. And then there are the times I do the holding. Out of the clear blue, in a pattern I have never been able trace, she forgets me. She is not Teresa as I know her. She grieves for no one and nothing she can name--consumed by the darkness of long-since disfigured caves. I remember being bare-legged and level with the seashell windowsill, pressing my ear against her locked bedroom door. Though I called to her, "Mama? Mama?" not

even the sound of muffled sobs made it through.

I think she feels inconsolable guilt for chains she never fashioned, and laments the wounds of a people whose suffering she could never know. Enslaved and drafted and displaced and buried alive. Made to leave, but not shown how, after ten generations in one place, to make room for the removal of mountaintops, for Eden to be split and sold and burned and breathed in by strangers in a distant land.

I know the darkness in me, I just don't know how deep it runs -- how diluted the blood has become. But I will someday speak it --this lost language of a people who almost never wrote anything down, historically illiterate in everything but pine needles and the book of Revelations. The earthquake is long over-due. After a hundred years of bated breaths, the rock will split again, and there's nothing I can do to save them, my mother or the headstones or the land. And maybe this hollowing kind of sorrow isn't ready for me yet; maybe it waits for the first time I see her. My legacy, my someday story to tell, too small and too pink and too new to ever know all it means to see through Almarinda's eyes.

"Flood light comes round when the sun comes up, the caboose when the sun goes down/look down look down that lonesome road, hang down your head and cry."

And like the doves, we mourn so as to fly.

THE ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD

Claire Winslow

The night before you left, we watched The Lion King.
The familiar silence bridged between us as the familiar story flicked away.
The credits drifted off, and I knew it was time for you to take me home,
but we sat silent until the screen went black.

Everything the light touches is our kingdom.

Your last T-shirts were rumbled dry,
almost ready to be packed in those last few inches of empty suitcase.
The whispered conversation of the ceiling fan blades filled the room,
as we pretended that I would see you tomorrow.
You drove me home like you always had,
the CD had flicked back to the beginning,
the music that you had finally let me choose,
becoming comfortably redundant.

There was a sting in your eyes that I couldn't see in the dim glimmer of the dash.

But I knew that look as the crush of tires on the drive pulled us back,
back to the reality of a time that we no longer had.

All that remained was a long look, a longer hug, two dozen breaths,
and half as many whispered words, and I was left,
standing on that strangely cool summer's night,
as you drove away to your new life.

A life in which I cannot picture you.
A life where I never belonged.

You diligently call once a week without fail,
and we listen to each other breathing.

I can't hear your ceiling fan,
or the last strains of the music that we have all heard so many times before.

We fill the silence with the pointless tales of our mundane lives,
the mandatory sharing of these compulsory phone calls.
It's silence, but it's not the good kind.

We stammer some excuse, a different obligation to fulfill,
anything to escape this muted catacomb.
I cling to the ghost of that last drive,
what used to come without trying,
lost to a dry click, and a guilty sigh.

It's that shadowy place over there,
with miles and years and secrets and breaths,
hovering between us, across those phone lines plucked tight,
the silence of our fingers fumbling with that lonely harp.
That shadowy place,
where silence suffocates,
and elephants go to die.

You are the friend that I never deserved, and yet I avoid your calls.
It's been two years, but I hear that ringing with a longing dread
that twists my lungs, and sparks my heart.
The words that were never important are suddenly all we have,
our wordless world, stripped of everything but.

Three, four, five rings,
A dozen dozen words,
half as many breaths.
More words,
a few heartbeats,
and still more words.
Endless until it finally ends.

The night before you left, we watched The Lion King.
It's almost easy to remember a time when silence didn't stifle,
and everything the light touched was our kingdom.
Except for that shadowy place.
That's beyond our borders.
You must never go there.
That's The Elephant Graveyard.



LANDSCAPE

Alyssa Mazey



UNDER THE THREAT OF LUNCHTIME

Joshua Park

Soaring alarms jolt me like a nightmare.

Mrs. Ridge flails her arms the way geese do when they're landing.

Chairs grind against hardwood floors, growling as they go.

And then we're huddled, arms wrapped around our legs, under desks, staring upward to gum-laden undersides.

Mrs. Ridge's desk has a wooden frame that touches the floor, breaking contact between our faces.

We take it as if she left for the day.

Jack throws eraser residue at Cindy, the crumbles matting into her smooth, sleek blond curls.

Beverly pokes John with dull fingernails.

Lewis holds his middle finger high, proudly, a testament, and I want to tattle.

Ricky reaches for his lunch in his desk compartment like when you reach for candy in the vending machine.

His tiny fingers traced inside cavern walls.

He lifts the board and waves his arm until, there, the concentration broken on his face, he pulls out and down, revealing a small, cardboard box with fantastic colors.

Juice box.

And in that moment, all I wanted was my purple lunchbox in the confines of my cubby hole.

THE WATER'S EDGE

Kate Carey

The cottage was silent. Everyone was gone. I wanted to laze in the warm sunbeam shining through the glass doors. Instead, I crept to the front door and look out cautiously. It seemed safe. I stepped onto the front porch.

As I moved closer to the water's edge, every man, woman, and child I saw was laughing. Some were screaming with laughter. Others were shouting with joy. Even the leathery-skinned, shrunken old couple wore smiles that pushed up the wrinkles on their faces. I saw but did not hear the laughter. My ears were filled with the adrenalin buzz of pure, unadulterated fear, topped with a dollop of anxiety.

I crept closer to the advancing waves ever mindful of the rule of threes. Three calm slow rolling waves followed the wave that kicks your ass, picks you up, and slams your head against the hard, sandy bottom.

I counted, one... two... three and saw the small boy get knocked off his feet, pushed under the wave. He came up smiling and shaking the water off his brow like a spaniel retrieving a duck.

I counted again... one... two... three... and saw the baby snatched out of the father's arms, roll back under the wave, and get scooped up in the worried mother's arms as she glared at her guilty husband.

I counted again... one... two... three... and saw the wrinkled old man drop to his knees, his dentures flying one way and his sun visor flying the other. I believe I saw a miracle as his wife made a grab toward the teeth and caught them mid-flight. The old guy hoisted himself up and smiled sheepishly at her and he reached for his dentures.

I took a small step toward the ocean's edge and felt the hair on the back of my neck begin to rise. I crept nearer on my tippy toes and hunched my

shoulders closer to my ears. I stood there in the breeze, catching the mix of scents -- slightly tropical sun lotion... light coconut or banana... wet hair with a musky undertone... and dead fish. I sneezed.

I shut my eyes and counted... one, two, three. The wave drenched me, spun me around like a leaf in a winter wind, tossed me over and over like a towel in the clothes dryer, and spit me out with the velocity of a boy in a backyard watermelon seed spitting contest.

I scampered back to the cottage and vowed never to accompany my family to the beach again. Too loud! Too wet! I want the quiet of my patch of sun. They can take the dog, but this cat is staying home!

PIMPLE UNICORNS

Chelsea Craine

Everything only happens once.

Sometimes small things scream out of her forehead,

tiny droplets of tornado flashing in the night -

sirens. It

does not matter if she begins at the beginning because every time

Beethoven is seduced by that succubus Hope.

Flies wander with single-minded focus along the fire-breathing snake of her spine, each vertebra consumed by the whitening broccoli skin pandemic.

Frigid lines, unforgiving hair dyed not quite black.

Imperfect Italian complexion, another lost accent in the heat of crowded summer streets.

One November poinsettia half-dead before her time to be appreciated and who will spare a thought other than to be indignant at their own loss of acknowledgement?

CAUGHT IN THE CROTCHFIRE

Joshua Park

The boys in school call me Crotchfire
as they whisper between the strands of my auburn hair.
What was once brown became rusted
through years of furious shampooing.
Rinse. Lather. Repeat.
Rinse. Rather not. Repeat.
Somehow, I thought that the more I washed,
the brighter the color,
until my hair radiated heat from my scalp.

The boys in school watched a video
about erections and pubic hair,
and they caught on that girls developed
hair in places too.

When I saw the first hair
down there,
I raided mom's bathroom cabinets
for a bottle I'd only seen in commercials:
Nair.
Magically, the bottle declared, it would disappear.

I poured it on me in the shower
and waited
until it tingled.
The suds were kindling
to an unexpected fire that raged below.
I could feel my hair singeing,
burning through my pelvis.
Washing away the foam,
I still felt the sting of
crotchfire.

SKINNED

Amelia Christmas Gramling

I was born in a hospital, but bred in the backseat with you. Road warriors, and weary travelers, we were, weighted even then with more stories than I can know how to begin. I remember best the getting places -- Mama reading to us, you feigning carsick, so she'd let you drink a coke, and my feet gripping the window; framing the sky. I would eventually start to take note of the passing landscapes, listen to more than the hum of the engine and the thrum of my own consciousness. Eventually, I would grasp how far my reach truly extended, that I was just a little silhouette behind a window in a lane of some highway, somewhere - an instance, a blur, already out of sight, out of mind and growing forgotten. But before there was any greater understanding, there was the backseat, and my childhood unraveling over the Mississippi River, under the Smokey Mountains, across the Black Hills, and through the tree topped quiet, without me. I was the center, the nucleus, the sun, I was absorbed in what my immediate surroundings could offer me -- beyond the shatter proof glass felt far off and untouchable. Scenery.

Daddy specialized in child development, and believed ours would accelerate if we experienced the country alongside of him. And work meant travel -- showing teachers at Head Start facilities across the US how to raise babies. Time and again, he heaved us from bed still PJ'd, bleary eyed and blinking away the imprints of our dreams. Remember what it was to be flung into the back seat like sacks of flower, like felled tree limbs? You and I departed each long trip wholly separate, I behind Daddy, you behind Mom, seat belts secure, if not stifling, but come nighttime and the cover of darkness, we unfailingly arrived as one. Your big flipper feet draped over the console, mine tucked under your thighs, your mouth agape, my drool on your t-shirt, your arm around my shoulders, mine around your waist, and our braids unraveled - a single rat's nest of indistinguishable dirty blonde. We slept more tightly wound than lovers and far more unabashed.

It wouldn't last. I know growing older means growing up, but you... you out grew me. I, unlike a mother who sneaks nightly past the creak in the floorboard and the sleeping dog and the streaming moonlight to ensure

her daughter's lungs are still serving her, am not hovering somewhere in selfless space above you. My concern is for myself. I'm almost twenty and still haven't learned how to sleep without the sound of your breathing.

Friday the thirteenth, April, six years ago. Lee Williams, noted Bowling Green bassist and ginger, towed me by the elbow behind a pickup truck in the parking lot of that coffee shop that's now a Hookah Bar, and declared something to the effect of, "Hey, kiddo. I want to date you." Then exactly three days later let it slip, before abruptly changing the subject to his tongue and teeth, "You know, Millie, you aren't my first Gramling girl."

By that day, I'd relinquished the backseat for the front, if I could be bothered to accompany Dad at all. Not because I'd yet found a good reason to stay home, or ever would, but because you were rooted, here, so deep. No amount of bribery or guilt tripping worked on you anymore, so I made believe I belonged to the stillness of unchanging scenery. But I never stopped wondering if our highway ever beckons you. Do your fingers itch to trace horizons, sometimes? I know wandering is too lonely an occupation for someone who craves company, I know your sheets are rarely vacant. I know you have a million friends you now tell all your secrets to, but, Maggie, we are each other's best story.

A girl without a sister would read what Lee said and pity me, feel sorry, but I wasn't. I saw his freckles, calloused palms, husky voice and smokers' gums, not as objects of beauty or through the lens of a thirteen year old's misplaced lust, but as something much more dangerous. We have him in common. I believed and believe him to be significant. Six years, Maggie, and to this day, he walks my dreams.

Your transition out of my arms started that time and then times Mom stayed home. The treatments left her wrapped in sheets and scarves, not eating, the kind of sick a coke did little to alleviate. Do you remember how she sent us off with kisses? With juice and pretzels and books on tape? I can't recall her goodbyes exactly -- if she said "don't worry," or "safe trip," or "I'm gonna be just fine," but I know she never let me leave harboring doubt. Maybe you remember differently. We don't talk about it much, you know, because she lived. Forgetting is a privilege.

When Mama was home, Daddy let you sit in the front seat, and called you his "little navigator," because you're older and could fold the

maps much better than me. In the backseat I read to myself, and didn't participate much in your conversation. Every once in a while, though, it grew too dark to read by the sun, or I would get a headache from the too-yellow car light, so I'd curl up, armpits cocooning my knees -- cheek sticky against the vinyl, listening. You were chattering about your birthday, and what you'd planned for this year. A pool party, you told him. Big surprise. He said, "the fifteenth? Honey, I'm so sorry. I'm in Albuquerque until the twentieth."

Silence. For a beat.

And then you sucked in your breath, "S'okay, Daddy." A swallow. "It doesn't really matter." A cough. "You can still call me, right?" I could hear the hurt in your words, because it sounded, sounds, the same in my voice. We were so young. You were a big girl, though, in Mama's seat with your big feet on the dash, and you kindly didn't let him see.

I'm not built with duplicates of your nerve endings. However often I'm mistaken for you, we didn't share a womb, so why did I cry hot and silent, until we pulled up to the hotel? That night we shared a bed, like usual and you kissed my forehead and rubbed my back like my preschool teacher during naptime -- like a mother would. It was the kind of drifting off that took me by surprise. Often, still does. "Hush, Millie, hush."

Returning from somewhere really different than home always brought with it some measure of grief. This one time, freshly delivered from James Island, brined and brittle and aching to go back, you'd brought home shore line treasures in a plastic Wal-Mart bag. I watched from the doorway to your bedroom-- the one we carved up with our soon-to-be plateau-ing growths. First. Across your carpet, you spread a turquoise towel still sandy, now mildewing. Then. You unpacked your gathering. Lettered Olives. Jingles, Cockles, and Conchs. Sand Dollars and Blood Arks. You placed them as though you crafted each by hand; reverential. You intended, I think, to display them on the sea-foam shelves Daddy built you, but succumbed to distraction instead. Sims, and Nickelodeon, babysitting, and Michael the neighborhood boy. What appeared to be a closet attached to your room was actually one of our only two bathrooms and Mama in those days took long, Epsom salt soaks. Dad like me like Jude the dog are all guilty of forgetting to tiptoe.

The loss was gradual. One day I walked in, and you were kneeling,

fingers cupping seashell dust. I wrapped both arms around you, and this time we let each other see; your tank top stained with our tears, collectively. I felt, I feel your wounds more than I've ever known my own, Maggie Ray, but it doesn't prevent me from losing you gradually. And when the day comes, and I feel it coming, that I no longer know your pain intimately enough to shoulder, who do I become? What do I mirror? It's taken more than one or two missed calls to memorize your voicemail recording by heart. Your Facebook informed me of your last heartache. I overheard that you dropped out of college from a little hipster boy outside coffee shop. I don't know how to get you to wander with me. So, for now, at least, I'll carry you. Forever in my head as the navigator with the dirty blonde braids. Barren River, to troubled creek. My skin. Your skin. We leave wholly separate, but arrive, will arrive, and for always, intertwined.

Q&Q