

Otterbein University

Digital Commons @ Otterbein

Quiz and Quill

Otterbein Journals & Magazines

Spring 2014

2014 Spring Quiz & Quill Magazine

Otterbein English Department

Otterbein University, englishdept@otterbein.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/quizquill>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Otterbein English Department, "2014 Spring Quiz & Quill Magazine" (2014). *Quiz and Quill*. 131.
<https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/quizquill/131>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Otterbein Journals & Magazines at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quiz and Quill by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact digitalcommons07@otterbein.edu.

QUIZ & QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE | VOL. 95 | SPRING MAGAZINE 2014



QUIZ & QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE | VOL. 95 | SPRING MAGAZINE 2014



QUIZ&QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE | VOL. 95 | SPRING MAGAZINE 2014

MANAGING EDITORS Jessica Campbell & Josh Brandon

SECRETARY Lillian Laura

FACULTY ADVISOR Dr. James Gorman

STAFF

Mackenzie Boyer

Stephanie Collart

Amelia Christmas Gramling

Katharine Major

Lillian Laura

Borealis Pfeiffer

Lindsey Rowland

Tim Warner

Claire Winslow

SUBMISSION POLICY

Q&Q prides itself on publishing the highest-quality creative work. Therefore, every precaution is taken to assure writers' anonymity during the selection process. Only the advisor of Q&Q knows the identities of those who submit work to the magazine until after staff members' selections are finalized.

CONTACT US

Send all inquiries to quizandquill@otterbein.edu.

COVER ART

"Dérive" By Haley Amicon

- 8 **IT'S TIME TO GET FUCKING WEIRD**
Andrew Miller
- 18 **THE BASCULE**
Alexandra Putnam
- 21 **BEACH DAY**
Emily Clark
- 23 **CARTOGRAPHER'S PRAYER**
Lindsey Rowland
- 25 **ALWAYS HOME**
Megan Gray
- 33 **PARAFFIN**
Claire Winslow
- 40 **CURVE**
Alexandra Putnam
- 43 **RIVULETS**
Amelia Gramling
- 44 **PEANUTS**
Jessica Campbell
- 46 **CANNIBALISM IN CONCEPT**
Lindsey Rowland
- 47 **A NAME FOR THE CLIMBING TREE**
Claire Winslow
- 51 **ON THE BATHROOM FLOOR AGAIN**
Stephanie Collart
- 55 **TUCK ME UNDER**
Amelia Gramling
- 63 **GATLINBURG, TN.**
Jessica Campbell
- 65 **AUNT JERRY AND UNCLE DEBBIE**
Lillian Laura
- 71 **S.A.D.**
Alexandra Putnam
- 73 **WADING THROUGH THE DOWN-POUR, FINDING SEA EYES**
Katharine Major
- 79 **DOWN RIVER**
Megan Gray
- 80 **ADONIS**
Katharine Major
- 82 **SIGNIFICANT INSIGNIFICANCE**
Katelyn Hanzel
- 91 **REBIRTH**
Meghan Crawford
- 99 **THE SEA, AT ONCE**
Jessica Campbell
- 100 **MY NAME**
Amelia Gramling

The background of the entire page is a solid tan color. Overlaid on this background are several large, stylized, grey swirls or scrollwork patterns. These patterns are reminiscent of Art Deco or mid-century modern decorative motifs. They are scattered across the page, with some being more prominent than others. The swirls are composed of thick, rounded lines that curve and loop in various directions.

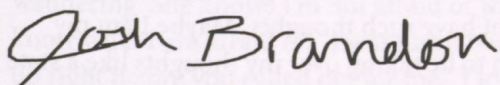
LETTERS from the **EDITORS**

Josh Brandon

I cannot begin to describe how proud I am of this year's staff. They, like me and Jess, are dedicated to the written word, and strove to put a quality magazine together. In my (very humble) opinion, they've succeeded. I want to congratulate them on a job well done, and thank them for their hard work. I want to thank Jess for being an awesome co-editor who definitely helped carry the weight of a magazine with such an established brand already (while co-editing KATE might I mention). Finally, I want to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to pick up our humble little magazine and giving the astounding authors within a chance to be heard. They all have such strong and unique voices, and there isn't a piece in this magazine I wouldn't recommend reading. Don't take my word for it though, let them speak for themselves.

Enjoy,

Josh Brandon

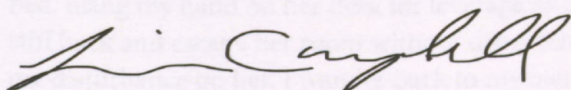
A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Josh Brandon". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Jessica Campbell

With two new student editors, the first change of faculty advisor in fifteen years, and a predominantly fresh staff, Quiz & Quill was truly starting from scratch this year. All the more reason, I believe, to celebrate the wonderful things we accomplished together- from our Winter Chapbook to the annual Haiku Death Match and the 2014 Spring Magazine you currently hold in your hands, there is a lot to be proud of. I want to thank our dedicated staff for sticking with us while Josh and I learned together what it means to be managing editors of Quiz & Quill. This magazine truly culminates the hard work we have all put in towards making this year's publication just as impressive and entertaining as it has been every year- and to keeping Quiz & Quill a prominent and vital voice on Otterbein's campus.

I hope you enjoy reading these pieces as much as I did.

Jessica Campbell

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Jessica Campbell". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

IT'S TIME TO GET FUCKING WEIRD

Andrew Miller

“Generally speaking, art is an expression of man’s need for an harmonious and complete life, that is to say, his need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him. That is why a protest against reality, conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work. Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion.”

– Leon Trotsky

My dreams keep forcing themselves upon my consciousness, leaving me dazed and at odds with myself over whether or not my subconscious being can make a victim of me. I awake from these dreams wondering who I am that I might have such thoughts. Maybe I am my more sadistic desires. They seem to be taking over my thoughts like a state of permanent revolution. In my dreams I berate those people I would do everything to help in my waking hours, I seduce those that I am too shy to speak to, I eat and drink with abandon and I no longer vilify people who had once done some perceived harm to me – instead I identify with their demons as I embrace my own. When I am awake I feel more like I’m asleep in so much as I lie to those close to me about what I want, in favor of what they want. In return they call me a good person. My dreams are not of me being a good person, and I’m sure that they are destined to destroy the waking, bourgeois notion that hiding my true self to fit social expectations is how I am meant to behave. Dreams rewire our brains, connecting thoughts and memories and experiences that otherwise share no conscious connection. I am being rewritten. I question whether there is a way I am meant to behave. I listen to White Riot on repeat. I think I am meant to be a revolution to myself. To strip bare my being until something wholly new can be brought out, until I am no longer the “good kid” written about so long ago in the Benton Harbor Herald Tribune for my straight-A’s and civic engagement and varsity letters. Until I am no longer hiding inside my skin. Ultimately, isn’t this how everyone feels?

To: Jeff

"I'm an asshole. That's what I'm writing about. I'm an asshole and I feel like I need to deal with that and understand it and deal with whatever it is. I know people don't think I'm an asshole, well, some people, but I am. Regardless, I'm confused and I'm not happy."

I click send. Moments later a response comes back.

"We are to others as they would like us to be – for the most part anyway. I think that, to ourselves, we are the assholes. Hiding. Depriving. Unforgiving. Stubborn. – JJ."

It's not a dream. It's not a dream. It's not a dream. My daughter screams out from the other room. She's had a nightmare. I am able to comfort her. She's afraid of Bart Simpson from one of the Treehouse of Terror Halloween episodes. She doesn't know where my mind has been wandering. She knows I'm not afraid of what scares her. But she doesn't know what I am afraid of. "I was just having a bad dream too, it woke me up right before you called out for me," I touched her head, gentle stroking her hair. I try to think of something to say. "There's a book called House of Leaves I read, it said that no one ever really gets used to nightmares, and that's true, but what you're afraid of changes as you grow older." Her glance catches my eyes just before she squints under the pressure of a yawn.

"Daddy, what are you afraid of in your dreams?"

"Things I can't really describe sweetie, now let's try and sleep again, and dream happy dreams." I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't know what happy dreams are.

Regardless, she doesn't need to worry about fearing her own mind. I don't tell her that what I'm afraid of is that I'm afraid of myself. I hide it from her because I have to. Because I believe I have to. Because when I was her age I was taught to hide it all. I sit in silent contemplation over whether I'm protecting her or just stubbornly hiding from my own fears for the next hour.

Lying next to her I feel her grip on my arm loosen as she falls back off to sleep. Slowly I drop one leg, then the other, off the side of her bed, using my hand on her desk for leverage as I attempt to straighten my stiff back and escape her room without disturbing her; without inflicting my disturbance on her. I wander back to my own bed where I lie in a state

of half-consciousness.

Words I read two weeks ago ring in my head, “it’s time to get fucking weird.” I try to remember where I read the words but I can’t. Doesn’t matter, they’ve become a sort of mantra for this mission I’m not certain I’m embarking upon intentionally – but that has apparently already begun.

It’s time to get fucking weird – those words form brackets around each of my thoughts, the ones I try not to speak out loud, except when my sleep betrays me, fantasies and mental masturbation spew forth from my mouth out of my unconscious: “fucking cut me, cut me” – it was pornographic and gratifying. My current partner, Gail, found it terrifying; in the light of day maybe I do too. Sometimes when I scream out, or more often, when I lie still as death, she shakes me awake, worried that I won’t start breathing again. Maybe I’m not just dreaming that I’m underwater; maybe the blackness and negative space I allow myself to inhabit during those moments are actually consuming me, drowning me. It’s time to get fucking weird – every night lying alone next to Tina/Jennifer/Jen, wives and girlfriends and partners and stretching on and on into the reverse, it’s like I can feel the pleasure of warm blood spilling from my cold veins, embracing my exit from this world. The hot burn of the knife making a clean cut, the sting not coming until after the brain processes what has happened, then the cool sweat that forms along the crest of the forehead, the whole arousing action one sensuous fantasy. There’s power in an exit plan; there’s some sort of peace in knowing a big red button exists and the persona elected via a lowest-common-denominator-process is in control. My generation knew it could apocalyptically be all over in a minute, and we’d be sitting there alone watching an afterschool special, the key still tied on a shoestring around our neck. It’s time to get fucking weird – whatever this all is, it isn’t me fucking, or dying; it’s my disembodied spectator watching the fruit of my father’s loins suffer in the physical world – a sort of schizophrenic illusion – voyeur and viewed and both at the same time, questioning if voyeurism really is a one way street, or is the voyeur also complicit, a necessary part of the performance. And are my memories, sitting in the isolating lonely darkness of my room, or even on this page, mere performance and exposition to be toyed with, or are they part of some true exploration? It’s time to get fucking weird – at that moment in my eye’s final flutter, before I drift back off into the stillness of sleep or the numbness of the daily grind, that’s where I enter my own

House of Leaves. It's the stories I tell about myself and the lies I use to hide those stories away. "I'm fine." "Really." "Nothing's wrong, just enjoying the quiet." "I love you." When I tell the truth, when I attempt to thwart myself, people leave or else I chase them off. They lock me up: hospitals, courts, jail cells. The last time I stopped being a danger just to myself: that last time when I wandered the streets fried on acid, that last time when I sought out unknown and unsafe secret sexual pleasures, that last time when I ran down innocent bystanders. Then again, maybe I've never been a danger just to myself. Then again, there may never be a last time as long as idle hands remain able.

This is my nonfiction game; my flavor of mental illness. A narrative of telling lies to tell the truth, and everything I tell you, I promise, is as truthful as the bible. I am a fact collector and a fetishist of secrets. The facts I collect are there in my mind to be re-assembled into a narrative that supports my truth. The facts provide me a foundation for exploring my avoidance, my isolation; but maintenance sometimes feels easier. Avoidance and isolation can make me invisible. Freedom to sit and stare blankly at the leather orgy or the stripper or the priest giving a sermon while he eyeballs the alter-boy, the place where I tell myself I'm my own helpless victim, watching as my actions crumble family and career, or even those moments where I fight myself to comfort my daughter, who hopefully has none of this predilection in her veins to detach from everyone, to detach from herself. Really, what happens when you realize what an asshole you've been? To Jeff's point, what is it that I am unable to forgive myself for that makes me want to hide away from my rampant desires and continue to appear like that well-adjusted father, living in the suburbs of Middle America. Am I in anyway well adjusted? Post that to Facebook and see how quickly well-meaning people come to your defense, trying to remind you of what a nice guy you are. In Middle America, where no matter what the bible says, we don't want to be honest with each other. Amazing how uncomfortable we all get about someone else's self-examination. Instead, we'll all just say we're all nice guys and good people.

There once had been a time when I thought I wasn't an asshole, I wasn't the problem. That period where I believed the hype – that I was a good kid and a nice guy – it was that nice guy part that so often figured into my narrative of being disabused by others who were honest with me, whether I was ready to be so honest with myself or not.

The night I met Norm I was at some punk rock show on the main

floor of St. Andy's in downtown Detroit. Might have been Three Floors of Fun night, what was colloquially known at the time as Free Whores for Fun. I was under 21 but downed beers anyways, or if I couldn't get ahold of those I'd just do some acid, maybe smoke a little weed or find some ecstasy before

opening the old theater door, paying my couple bucks entry and heading inside. My surplus military issue parka had plenty of pockets for road pops - covered in punk rock, scooter rally, and northern soul patches it placed me in no group and yet every group I gave a shit about, all in one inane gesture of self-righteous-exclusion via geeky association.

This short-shaggy-headed-goatee-faced-guy-wearing-a-Pharaoh's S.C.-bomber-jacket-smoking-like-100-cigarettes-at-a-time steps up to me, "I gotta fucked up P200 with a kit, but when it runs it is badass," he said to me, with an odd southern-Californian meets Michigander accent, the word badass lingering on forever - bahhhhhddddd ahsssssssss. "You ride scooters?"

"Yeah, I ride scooters. I've got a modded out Vespa VNA. I'm Andy."

The words sliding lazily and uncontrollably loud out of my drunken mouth, the thumping of bass and screech of guitar shaking my already shaky rail-thin frame. Norm wasn't a handsome man, but he was confident in a way that made him completely, fuckably attractive. Even before settling into some middle aged sense of sexual ambiguity I was oddly drawn to him - tattooed and pierced head to toe, long before the first fucking millennium-era-hipster was born; he pulled back his bomber sleeve to show me a collection of scooter boy, punk rock and skinhead tattoos covering his forearms. Hold Fast in fading ink across his knuckles. "If you're blasting down the highway or banging a chick, fucking Hold Fast," Norm shouted to me in those first moments, and then he introduced me to Amy, his wife.

We exchanged phone numbers. Back in those days there weren't many of us scooter boys in the Midwest, especially that I knew, and in Detroit you had to stick together, because you couldn't count on Detroit for anything but getting into trouble. He called a few days later and told me to meet him at City Club, AKA Shitty Club - located in the basement of a mostly cracked-out downtown hotel, the Leland, with walls painted in Day-Glo and a crowd that resembled a massive leather clad BDSM orgy. I was nobody there and I could tell any lie I wanted. It felt like home. Driving down I-75, pushing 85 past Hamtramck in my old Plymouth

Horizon, already fuzzy from a 40oz of Old English, chewing on spearmint gum, my skin crawling. I was looking for ways out of my skull, my mind full of claustrophobia all trapped inside of that bone prison with neurons popping off in an attempt to blast an escape route out of there; I think it's always

been this way. Washing my thoughts in alcohol and adrenaline, hiding out among the other night creeps, helped calm my anxiety. Without the availability of GPS or the mental capacity to look at a map, my steering wheel seemed to function like a divining rod leading me directly to the non-descript parking lot and the twenty-ish story blank brick wall, broken up only by a service entrance halfway below street level that served as the doorway into my world. Walking toward the dance floor I spotted Norm and his girlfriend. My girlfriend, Jen, was at home or out with her friends somewhere or who the fuck even remembers.

That's the thing about drug abuse and alcoholism – who the fuck even remembers – except for those memories I can't escape. Those facts I can't let go of. Those stories I keep alive without knowing why. At this moment though it seems so important to remember if I was with Jen or not – because I think if I was with her, if I was still caring for her, still coming home to her after degrading stupid and self-destructive nights of debauchery, that would go a long way to understanding why I feel like such a sack of shit. But there are the facts I can't remember, even as I tell you that she was still with me, still waiting for me at home. Maybe it helps to make up stories when you can't remember the truth.

As if you might not have really been alive at all were it not for the story you're telling yourself.

The world my consciousness inhabits is bound somewhere within my personal experience, imagined scenarios and my (in)ability to discern between them, between the fact and fiction. The blackouts were frequent, giving me even more opportunity to divine my own truth out of the few facts available to me. Norm bellied up to this mental illness buffet of mine, grabbed a knife and fork, and stuffed himself in my world. His manic, intentionally bad behavior drawing me in until there was no turning back, similar to how cops manipulate confessions, trapping their prey seemingly without effort, just a turn-of-phrase or two, good cop, bad cop, liars, all liars. I hate cops. I convinced myself I was just an observer; my consciousness detaching with every new intoxicant I ingested, allowing me to float outside my body, watching myself partake in all manner of social taboo as if it wasn't me at all.

The next morning, less than a week after first meeting her, I was lying to Amy about Norm being asleep on my futon, then about him being down the street getting cigarettes, then I found myself picking him up from some flea-trap motel near the airport where he'd gotten into some sort of sex-swap poker game between his girlfriend and a cousin or boyfriend or something of hers.

"Dude, Amy call?"

"Yeah, twice, probably more but I stopped answering. I told her you slept on my futon and went to get smokes."

"Shit. You got some smokes; I ain't got two nickels to rub a dick with much less a pack of smokes. Can't go home empty handed."

"Yeah, I got ya covered."

It was all as easy as that. "I got ya covered." It was what a nice guy would do, but really, it was so much of me wanting to not be a nice guy; wanting to be more like Norm; wanting to think a blowjob on the main floor of Free Whores for Fun was totally acceptable. I spent my weekdays working in a high-rise out in the suburbs as a computer technician, surrounded by all the trappings of large parking lots and boxy office towers, a bleak reflection of Soviet era construction in capitalist America, where we all somehow have decided what we've created is better; that our injustices are somehow just-enough. I would sometimes vomit in my cubicle trashcan after an hour's sleep and little to no sobriety over the preceding 14-or-so-hours since I'd last sat in the same seat. I had to keep a job however, because Norm couldn't. He'd learned as a military mechanic how to use vice grips to hold his sleeves and thus arms up in the undercarriage of a Hummer while snoring away, laid flat on his back on a creeper. Banging his girlfriend-come-airport-janitor-coworker in the Detroit Metro bathroom ultimately led to dismissal; at least I think that may have been the story. Regardless, I had to support my girlfriend, myself, and now at some level Norm too; it was the first in many similar roles I'd play in life as a support system for other people – and as such I used it as an excuse to continue pretending I was a decent human being. I was caring. I was a nurturer. I was good. But I wasn't. I expected things in return for my efforts, I expected Norm to provide me cover for my own bad behavior – as if he'd forced me into it or something. I expected Norm to provide me with experiences. I expected Jen to clean up after me, after making a mess of myself: emotionally, physically. I was using them at least as much as they used me, and that's exactly how the nice guy is the asshole. That's exactly how I am an asshole.

Summer Saturdays became titty-bar days. A ten or so mile stretch of Eminem's infamous 8-mile lay between Norm and my houses. I'd ride west for what seemed like forever, past the same titty-bars I'd stop at on the way back into the city, past gang-war-worn neighborhoods, dotted with

liquor stores and car-stereo shops; the little 125cc 2-stroke piston vibrating back and forth between my legs, barely keeping pace with the hulking American steel still so common on the streets of Detroit. A mile from my destination and I'd fouled a plug, the engine coasting to a halt, the Detroit steel driving on. Fortunately it wasn't much to push the little Italian bike. No cell phone to call anyone with those days, no working payphone to be found. Just me and my dead scooter on the berm with traffic blowing by, garbage filled McDonald's bags being tossed out in my general direction from any number of them. When I finally arrived, Amy had some spicy sausages laid out on the grill. Norm passed me a cold beer. I tussled their young son Alex's hair and kept from locking eyes with Norm's in-laws, who surely thought as little of me as they did Norm. He knew that too. Why not marinate our mutual disenchantment in alcohol then? Norm wouldn't be home tonight, we all knew it no matter what he told Alex or Amy – best case scenario for them, and possibly for me, was that he'd pass out on my futon. He lived a poor-man's life of Riley on her meager income, his in-law's good will, and my desire for his company. Walking out the front door he turned to me, trying to break the tension, saying, "If it's got tits-r-tires it's gonna give ya trouble." We'd spend the rest of the drunken afternoon stopping in as many glitter-littered strip-joints as we could make it to before we'd blown our wad, my wad.

"Dude, this place has some terrible old ladies dancin' the pole. They just like someone to be looking at 'em, so the drinks are always cheap."

Norm said, giving me a bit of a Popeye-ish wink and shimmy before opening the door. The noon sun slashed the sagging tits of the 30ish-year-old career stripper like a blade, her severed mammaries flopping to-and-fro casting shadows across the smoke stained red velour wall coverings. We might all be better off if we'd been cut down with a blade at that moment. The club, if it's fair to even call it that, didn't even bother with a door man, instead the bartender yelled for you to come over and pay a nominal cover with your first round of drinks. The bar itself was made of cheap faux-walnut paneling with the yellowish pre-nicotine-stained-bottle-bottom-glass diffusing the otherwise harsh fluorescent

lighting. Before long Norm knew all the dancers - and they knew him - even without handing out dollar bills, or maybe because of it, Norm was a king in his palace. This is where he collected his haram.

There were weekends like that where we ended up loaded and getting off with women right in the middle of a crowd, drunk on any number

of substances, our senses on overload; our morals fully extinct. And at the time there seemed to be no backlash for any of it, seemingly no real trouble came about in our ever present states of mind. We were too wasted to be reflective, too driven by instant gratification to look forward and see where we were headed. Specifically, and only somewhat ironically, we were headed to Hell, Michigan.

Days before the Detroit chapter of the Pharaohs Scooter Club held its first rally deep in the rural woods of southeastern Michigan I'd been pulled over for drunk driving, my first official offense - but far and away not my first time driving intoxicated. Over the weekend I'd drive back and forth between the campsite in Hell and my court assigned drunk-school classes. While I didn't take the classes that seriously I did take my court ordered sobriety seriously, if for no other reason than the fact that I knew they would be pee testing me for alcohol and I didn't want to spend any more time behind bars - at least jail bars, my mind wasn't so made up about all matter of other bars. There was, however, a flicker of something else inside me that those couple of days of sobriety brought. Reflection. With each passing day I wasn't drunk it became harder to imagine how my life had transformed into this world where it seemed normal to drink until puking, then drink some more. Being drunk all the time I'd become a character that I didn't know, pulling out my cock in front of a crowd for a giggle; diving in and out of bonfires not sure if it was for entertainment value or because I wanted this character to burn, to be destroyed. Somewhere my escape from who I was at the office, from the boring good-kid, flipped. It was time to move. Time to get away from all of this chaos. Time to start fresh in Chicago. Norm didn't get it. My other friends didn't get it either. Detroit had provided me with all manner of excess and yet I treated it, and I suppose them, like I'd been tricked. Maybe I'd tricked myself, you know, the way a dog's legs run through the air as its dreaming mind constructs a situation warranting the effort - I was running from myself and running from what I'd believed I'd become, and maybe I was running from what I should've been all along. Time hasn't necessarily proven this out though, as I sit here, in this

reflection, dominated so by my fear and self-loathing.

Before I left Detroit to move to Chicago Norm gave me a book he thought I'd enjoy, Tom Robbin's *Still Life with Woodpecker*. Leigh-Cheri may think there is a peaceful and liberated world out there just waiting to be, but ultimately winds up finding her true self through falling in love with the mad-bomber-outlaw Bernard, aka the Woodpecker. Bernard's mantra

is Yum – succumbing to whatever immediately pleasurable motivation he catches scent of. Leigh-Cheri's self-righteousness is overwhelmed by Bernard's addictive passion for living. It's easy to draw parallels in hindsight, but if only I'd read it before meeting Norm - would I have guessed who was to be Leigh-Cheri and who would be Bernard?

The last time I spoke to him, he was as squirrely as ever, driving a town car for some Russians that owned a few strip clubs, living with then girlfriend Michelle, one of the Russian's strippers, in a house that as far as the city of Detroit was concerned had been condemned and no one owned; however, they paid rent to the local landlord, someone Norm had said before he didn't want to skip a payment to.

"Drew. It's Norm. What's goin' on man?"

"Norm? Hey, how are you? Where are you?"

"Dude, listen, I'm going to make a cigarette run with my mom down to Georgia. She said she'd cut me in on the profit if I do the driving, thought I might stop and see you."

"Wow, uh, when?"

"Two or three weeks. Dude, your old lady still around?"

"Yeah."

"Man, me and Melissa are still OK too. Damn, dude, let me tell you, Melissa and I were super fucked up the other night and we were fucking so hard the bed collapsed right on the goddamn cat. Took me a couple days to realize we killed the fucking cat fucking. Can you fucking believe that shit?"

"That's some crazy shit Norm. Look, I gotta go but give me a call when you know you're coming. We'll make up a bed for you or something. Just don't kill our cat."

"Alright bro, talk atchya then. You know, you got my number again now, this thing rings both ways."

"I got it Norm. See you soon."

THE BASCULE

Alexandra Putnam

It lived inside her mind it said
Always reminding her she was no more
Than the measure of her words
And the cracks in the clay live on
To this day

They are generic and
Boring and
Dusty and
She sneezes at them, "go away."
A new format is only new for a little

She just wants some
Brilliance beyond third person
So esoteric
Digging desperately through nails
Pounding them

They drink in the creases they've split
Open- eggshells succumb
So easily to their hands
So vehemently yoke traces her spine
Licking her like open wounds

Digressive and smooth tongues on fire with weight
They illuminate any small indiscretion
A puzzle beats itself to candor
And laugh
And laugh and laugh

Giggles painting flames
On clown faces capricious brush
Strokes and they are sated
By an intercourse with their fists

With their cleats they stomp and color the world

She is encumbered
Restraints unstitching

She is subjugated
They extol each other's august presence and
She loosens her glory

They hide in the fissures of her
Diffidence and slave to a task
They opted for happily
Their vibrations are sonorous
In her head where she is concealed within plastic

In a tenor, they sing to her like
They sang to her mother
Voluble their lyrics
Prod sores in
Bricks desiring collapse from orbit like a snake's crawl

Is silent
They denounce legs
Their arms pinioned and
They fall like lepers and
They have nothing

Her mouth is not salient
Not yet.
The cannot pluck the seeds, they fail
And her anodyne tongue remains, bold thoughts are
Not yet orotund and accessible

Ready almost
Not polemical enough, not raw enough
Still not to the peak, if there is one
The synopsis of her dedication
Is too simple; a single interpretation

Will lay it like a flat Earth
And angles make it round again,
How ironic.
The combination is a beast's fangs; the open viewpoints
Unlock the line segment

The angles sharpen its circular gut
Sacrifice their time for the sake of
Holding it up
The zenith presents it differently when
All eyes face the nadir

Simply a point in space until
Condensed to matter in
The setting of here; the horizon will
Cut back the curtains
The sun is in eyes it makes everyone blind

It will never stultify
The ever moving dance of human
Pining for plans incongruent, never obscure the
Hercules within the multilingual
Tongue; it cannot chain words to ellipsis as she

Safeguards her rights; the denouement will remain the same
Where similarities and differences can both thrive on multilingual
Tongues and she is just a different branch of many cognate subjects
One person cannot be defined by another,
never, never.

BEACH DAY

Emily Clark

My clock is melting. The red blinking letters start to fall out of their black frame, and I watch them with half opened eyes.

I turned to face the other side of my bed, away from my melting clock, and you're sitting there on my bed. I didn't feel the weight shift.

You weren't supposed to be there.

I was told you died quickly.

Alma, you say.

"Sadie?" I say. I think I say it. I don't know.

You should stop sleeping so much, you say.

I get very mad at you for saying this. I take the clock from the other side of the wall and throw it at your head. You duck out of the way and the clock knocks down the wall behind you.

I'm outside in the summertime. I walk out onto the grass in my pajamas. It's broad daylight and I'm in pajamas. I should probably have put on some pants at least. I can see our treehouse that your dad built in your backyard, right on the edge of the woods. I climb up the treehouse on the little blocks nailed in. My sock gets stuck on a nail and it gets pulled off my foot. Oh well, I don't really need that sock anyway.

When I get up to the treehouse you're sitting there. You're ten again, and you walk up to me and take my hand.

Alma, you're too tall.

"Oh, am I?" I ask. I sort of feel like my head is going to hit the roof of the treehouse.

I love you, that's why my mouth is on fire. It's everything bad I spit out onto the ground.

"What?"

I don't know what that's supposed to mean. I shake my head.

Sit down, you say. So I do. You put your tiny ten year old palms over my eyes. When you take them away, I'm at your fifteenth birthday party.

Your parents are here, my parents are here. All of our friends are here, including Joey who I kissed in the tenth grade.

I want you to read this for everyone. For me, it's my birthday, you explain. You're fifteen now, all legs and black hair. You're so pretty. You

hand me a piece of paper. It's a list. I start reading it out loud.

"I'm Alma," I say. "In English class we read about a dog dying and I got so sad I had to leave the classroom and go to the bathroom and cry until the class period ended."

I shake my head, that's weird.

"When I found out my mom cheated on my dad I didn't feel bad for him at all and I don't know why," I say. I can't believe I'm saying this out loud. I'm horrified. I look up to my parent's faces and they both just smile unabashedly at me. I can't do this. I look at Sadie.

Keep it up! She says.

I swallow hard and nod.

"I'm afraid to have sex," I say, and immediately look to Joey who laughs a little. I don't want to do this anymore.

"When I kissed Joey I thought about Sadie instead," I say, and I can feel my knees buckle.

I actually fall down the entirely and end up in darkness.

It's you. You're in the last outfit I ever saw you wear, black ripped jeans and a red hoodie with your long hair covering half your face.

I go to you, and hug you. You feel so much thinner than you should. I feel sick. You begin talking quietly, watching me intently with big orb eyes.

I picture my last day of life with you. We'll go to the beach. You'd be wearing those watermelon flip flops your mom gave you when you were six. I would take off your glasses and stare at your eyes and then I'd go out for a swim. We both would. But I accidentally go out to far and drown.

You could come with me?

"That's not how you died," I say, and I'm very angry with you.

How did I die?

"You died because you took all your grandma's pills. I hate you."

You don't hate me at all.

I know.

I turn and there's Joey. He's kissing me. I put my hand on the back of his neck and all of the sudden his hair is so long. I pull back and it's you. I start crying.

The little red numbers on my clock are blinking at me. I wipe my eyes. I've been crying. I can't remember why.

CARTOGRAPHER'S PRAYER

Lindsey Rowland

If I were a cartographer, I would consider it an honor to look at the sculpture of your landscape. I would retrace it the best that I can, but my heart would rest in the fact that I could never truly do your artistry justice. By the standards of crumbling humanity, my hand is steady and my eyes are keen, but there's more. There's so much more.

While my illustrations powered up mountains and rolled in the dust of plains, I would look to the stars to direct me north. I get turned around so often, but there is always a point for my wandering heart to find again, your unwavering eye contact. From there, I spread my arms wide to try to embrace the expanse of the Heavens, which are splashed with pinpricks and smears of light, sparkling, present and living above my map, your world. What a compass rose doesn't tell you is that there is so much to celebrate overhead and underfoot; the Earth is a sphere of existence, calling for jubilation and reverence to join hands.

To take steps, to draw my paces as footprints on the big picture, is to get blissfully distracted by the details you've painted in. Here's the thing: I can't walk by a tree, I can't look at the woods. Instead, I'm a magnet to the bark. I must get close to the details and touch and, pressing my cheek to the kiss of the wood, feel the pulse of the sap, pumping like my own sticky blood. I hook my toes on the roots and pray, not only that I would grow big and tall and strong, but that I could see the higher calling of moss on my torso and ants in my wrinkles. The tiny things, the minute and the simple, are the catalyst for the Earth's very axis. You are the most intricate architect, and I am the tiniest speck, your utensil. I'm happy with that. Thank you for that.

But can I ask for more?

There's an entire world to explore. Please, pull my gaze outward and I will look down in awe, with palms itching to smooth along the breathing surface of the universe. I will faithfully wield my pencil and do my best to absorb that which so greatly overwhelms me, joyfully marking borders and continents. My left hand will sport a smear (like those stars of yours) as it follows the trail of rivers spinning pirouettes through countries and cultures, emptying themselves out into wide, blue and green seas, resting, at last, in the cradle of rocking waves as they ever stretch

toward the sun, or the clouds, or Heaven. I want to paint everything, that is, everything that screams your glory, but I would love even more if I could map the lines of your face.

I want to trace the worn crinkles by your eyes, your resolute jaw and your gentle lips; the dip of your brow and the gnarly bones of your toes. With all of creation at my feet, all I want is to hold your hands, tightly, and meticulously draw the highway of your veins, those blessed veins, which run with the life of the man I love. My existence swims in those veins, too. I am more braided with you than my hair ever could be with flowers, than my fingers ever could be with the grass. I want to dance my knuckles across the expanse of your shoulders, to mark the distance between outstretched arms and to fall against the only spine strong enough to bear all of me, firmly, tenderly. I would slide down the stripes on your back with careful tools so that any piece that this humble cartographer can offer the world would direct eyes toward the only destination worth traveling toward.

More than I desire the world, I want to know all of you.

Humble Prayer:

May every journey I travel end in you; even more, may every road have you on it, may every river have you in it, may every detail and record be teeming with you, may every compass needle fight its way toward the dead center of

You.

Up to the heavens, in the bed of the depths, on the wings of the dawn, on the far side of the sea; everywhere. You.

If I were a cartographer, I would waste away in bliss, trying to map eternity.

ALWAYS HOME

Megan Gray

The event: We are on a plane, heading back from Disney World when our lives change forever.

What Mom says: I still love your dad, but I just can't live with him. I want the only change to be two addresses.

What I see: Mom is sitting two seats to my left, my sister between us.

Across the aisle on Mom's side, Dad sits next to a stranger; perhaps aware, perhaps not that this happening right now. My sister, mom, and I are all crying; everyone else is looking, or trying not to look. We are trying not to look at each other, too.

What I feel: Physical pain. My heart pounding like it's going to explode—my first literal heartache. Wetness on my cheek; a steady flow. My eyes stinging, my head hurts, I kind of want to throw up.

What I hear: Mom is talking, but after I realize what's going on I stop listening. I am aware of crying, sobs. They are quickly covered by the blaring words of "Heartbreak Warfare" as I shove my ear buds in.

I don't care if we don't sleep at all tonight/Let's just fix this whole thing now.

No one ever wins in heartbreak warfare.

What I see: A family, four lives, falling apart. Through a stream I see a husband deserted, a mother deserting, children confused, angry, and despondent. A life that once could have been that can no longer be. No more family vacations, no more Christmases, Thanksgivings, anything all together. No, nothing will feel normal anymore.

When I was little, "home" was the one story yellow and brick house with the barn in the back. I nicknamed it "The Yellow Submarine." It was ugly, but I didn't know it when we lived there. When you grow up in a house, you take it as it is; everything is wonderful. The seven foot ceilings aren't short, not being able to flush the toilet when the power goes out is normal, and the Dalmatian wallpaper in your bedroom? Well that is obviously irreplaceable.

Ok, so maybe the basement was haunted and I never went down there without my trusty sidekick Milo, who thank God is still around at his incredible age of 17 (which is over 120 in dog years—because apparently pets WebMD only calculates up to 16; basically my dog is ancient). The basement was only safe if the TV was on, but then I could never turn it off because the colors left in the middle of the old screen when it shut

off looked like a creepy smiley face. And whenever I did turn it off, the washer or the furnace would just happen to kick on and scare the crap out of me. But it was also where I used to watch Looney Tunes with my dad on Saturday mornings. It was where I learned to read with a game on the old computer, the same place where Kelsey and I played a really awesome-but-awful Barbie Detective computer game with our one time babysitter that used to work for Mom until she got fired. I wrote my first poem down there, too.

When I was little I assumed that we would live there forever. Literally. I wanted to live there with my parents forever. Of course, when you're little you want crazy things and you don't understand why they're crazy, but that's beside the point. When my parents first brought up the notion of moving, I was in first grade and abhorrently against it. What a ridiculous suggestion! I remember countless birthday parties at the dining room table. The year mom forgot to put a very important ingredient in Dad's birthday cake and it tasted awful. How Dad messed up the phrase "stink pot" and said instead "stink in the pot", which we have since adopted. Wanting to learn and then pretending to practice the piano. Waiting for Santa on Christmas Eve, and hearing his sleigh bells ring just outside my window as he flew away.

I was born and raised here. Why on Earth would I ever consider leaving this place?

It's home.

The event: I'm helping Mom move to Minnesota following the divorce, a few days after my high school graduation.

What I hear: Aqua, Dr. Horrible's Singalong Blog, The Monkees. Peter, a friend of mine, made some road trip CDs for our 12 hour trek from Indiana.

What I see: Mostly the backside of the moving truck. Mom is riding with our neighbor, Mr. McMendes, who volunteered to help move Mom and her stuff, while Peter and I follow in my car with Oreo and Hot Shot—Mom's cats. There are also miles and miles of fields and forests. Every so often we point out a funny road sign, or trucks carrying explosives or other scary things.

What I feel: Anxiety. I'm trying not to feel; right now the excitement of the road trip is good distraction for the purpose of the road trip. Not to mention Peter is keeping me plenty preoccupied. Also, having to drive for 3 to 4 hours at a time and concentrate on the road helps, too.

What I see: A house. A house that my mom calls home. After bringing in a few boxes, I collapse on a seat in the will-be dining room.

What I feel: Overwhelming grief. I can't remember why I ever agreed to come. Yes, Mom needs me, but is this really worth it?

What Mom says: Don't sit around, get back to work. There's a lot of stuff to move.

What I see: Peter is worried about me. After half a day in a car we're finally here and moving stuff inside. The movers, Mom, and Mr. McMIndes are hauling in furniture and boxes from the truck. This house is strange and foreign. I try to connect to it by organizing the things myself, but when I come back later to visit will be rearranged.

A night later: I wake Peter up because I can't sleep. He stays up with me and we play 3DS for a couple of hours. This may be Mom's home, but I can't sleep easily here.

After years of being led to believe my family was going to build a log house on the 11 acre plot of land we owned, we finally ended up moving into a 4 year old house in the country. It was weird living there at first. No longer in West Lafayette, we had moved out far enough to be part of Battle Ground. We started sleeping at the house before we had moved all of our things. The previous owners had taken most of the appliances, so we bought a microwave in order to make easy meals in the meantime. My sister and I slept on mattresses on the floor, and at night I would creep out of my new room with Milo to listen to Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix at the top of the stairs which my dad was listening to on audio cassette while he worked down in the living room.

This house didn't feel like home all at once. In fact, I still rode the bus home in sixth grade to The Yellow Submarine for a while, until we sold it. It was an odd experience. Most of our stuff was gone, except for a chair and a small television in the kitchen. Sometimes I would walk through the bones of the house. All the rooms were like appendages on either side of the house-length hall, the spine. I finally began to notice the imperfections. Having grown used to our new ceilings, the "old" house felt narrow and closed in. We repainted after some rebellious teenagers ransacked it—spray painting the sides of the house and the trampoline. The yellow we repainted it with didn't match the yellow that had been there before. The subtle shift made me realize how ugly the house really was. Though I admit I was sad to see the new owners had painted over it with a more acceptable blue-gray color. Maybe it was these little changes, or maybe something else, but eventually The Yellow Submarine was no longer home to me. I don't know when this shift occurred, but our new house in the country was now home in my mind.

When Kelsey went to college I was still a sophomore in high

school. The idea of leaving home was still daunting to me. I've always been and continue to be a home body; content to be around my family, sit at home. On one of her few visits back, Kelsey and I were talking when she said that she had left something at home. Confused, I asked, "Don't you mean at school?" No, she hadn't. Well. Maybe. But school was where she lived at more than our parents' house, so somewhere along the line school had become "home". The fact that she had made this mistake (if you can call it that) irked me. On some level, I felt betrayed. Were we no longer her family? Was that not what home was? I couldn't understand how my sister could consider some other place to be home. She still had a room and a bed here, after all.

The only place other than the house that I would willingly call home was our timeshare at Disney World: Saratoga Springs. They even say "Welcome home," when you arrive. With our timeshare we could stay in a two bedroom villa complete with living room, kitchen, and a washer and dryer. All the amenities of home.

The event: Our last trip to Disney World as a family. We're all going to bed, but Dad is awkwardly staying behind in the living room.

What I say: Are you going to bed?

What Dad says: No, I was just going to watch some TV.

What I say: But there's a TV in your room, isn't there? Have you been sleeping out here?

What Dad says: I don't want to keep Mom up; I'll go to bed soon.

What I feel: *Déjà vu*. This is kind of like the time I asked Mom if she was ever going to stop sleeping in the sewing room. She'd started sleeping in there rather than in the bedroom due to the fact that she had hot flashes and the sewing room was the coolest room in the house. Her answer was, "I don't know."

Hindsight is 20/20.

When I found out my parents were getting a divorce, I quit the tennis team even though it was my senior year. I stopped going out and I spent as much time at home as I could. It was probably not the healthiest of decisions, as my mom lived in the house for a couple more months before we moved her Minnesota, but I wanted to spend as much time as I could soaking up the dwindling time I had left to spend with my parents as a family. I spent a majority of this time watching my parents closely. They acted more or less the same, but were perhaps a bit more formal than usual, a cool civility to their actions and exchanges. I also spent a lot of time hating the situation. I wanted to appreciate this time, but it was

already changing into a darkness that had started to eat at me.

My boyfriend of the time, Andrew, would come over to the house but often we ended up fighting. His parents divorced when he was a toddler, and he thought that I was overreacting, that I shouldn't be feeling the way I was. Says the boy who cried to me about the circumstances of his own parents' divorce, events that he was too young to remember. He couldn't understand my pain, the fact that my entire world was changing, the fear I had about living here without my mom. Of course, these things only added to the problems we were already having. This was our second attempt at dating—I had broken up with him originally because he was pressuring me for sex and I refused to give it. He told me I was being unfair by withholding something and expecting him to change (and by change I meant to stop pressuring me and to wait until I was ready—if that time would ever come).

We should never have lasted as long as we did the second time, because he had taken to underage drinking and blamed me for it. But I was young and naïve and thought I loved him. We switched points of view: while originally I was not looking for anything long term or long distance, he was set on making us work. The second time around I was desperate to keep him, if not because I thought I loved him, then because I could not stand the thought of losing him on top of my mom moving out. It's probably not surprising that the reason Peter came along to help me move my mom to Minnesota was because Andrew refused to go. Needless to say he "felt it was best" that we break up sooner rather than later in order to give us plenty of time to "get over it" before school started in the fall. Of course, he so graciously broke the news to me a couple of days after I got back from my trip to Minnesota.

Living alone with my Dad started off with him finding me crying on the front porch an hour after Andrew had driven away. Never much for sharing feelings, Dad was probably ill prepared to handle my grief, and I was just as ill prepared to take his comfort. Dad had always been Kelsey's parent. Or rather, she had always been his favorite child, and perhaps as a result, I was my mother's. It was because of this that finding ourselves living alone together was so jarring. My previous attempts at trying to understand my dad or bond with him (usually by asking to for homework help) typically ended in a heated argument and me in tears. Suddenly he was realizing that he had no idea who I was.

With Mom gone, the house felt empty. Certain rooms were especially haunted. The sewing room, where Mom had most of her things was now empty. My dad's bedroom a painful reminder that it was now only my dad's room. To keep myself from drowning in the memories that filled

my head, I withdrew and spent a lot of time alone. Dad didn't really intervene much because he worked and probably wasn't sure how to approach me any more than I knew how to approach him. But I needed someone to be there for me. Desperate, I called to my friends online, posting the status, "To whoever's listening, I really, really need you..." But the hours passed with no response. Eventually I was able to reconnect with Peter, and he took it upon himself to watch out for me that summer. He spent most days at the house with me and my dad. He not only helped me stay occupied, but he acted as a much needed liaison, a neutral party that made interacting with Dad easier, until we were able to communicate on our own. And eventually, just as before, the house felt like home again.

The same cannot be said for Mom's house.

I never got the chance to consider Mom's house to be "home". A couple of months into my freshman year at Otterbein, I got a call from Mom saying that she'd lost her job. Long story short: by Thanksgiving she had moved in temporarily with my grandparents, and she was in an awful place emotionally. She cornered Kelsey and me in the basement and told us exactly how miserable she was. While I'd like to say I understood, and was sympathetic, I wasn't. To be honest, it felt like she was preaching to the choir. Kelsey and I were miserable, too. We didn't feel sorry for her, she was the one who had left, who had put us all here. We were, and sometimes still are, quite unforgiving. Of course, we took on the roles of comforting and understanding daughters, a role that she put me in a lot over the years following the divorce—more friend than daughter; more parent than child; the messenger, the go-between, everything I shouldn't have been, but everything I was.

When she got a new job and moved to Plymouth, IN she wasn't much better. She was close enough that I took turns visiting her and Dad every other week (seeing each of them about once a month). But having a job didn't seem to be what Mom needed to feel okay with this new life. She was still miserable. And she still made me miserable with her. I visited her because I wanted to see her and she wanted to see me, but I resisted or struggled with seeing her because I didn't want to be pulled into her sorrow. Knowing she was unhappy was one thing, but to experience it with her like that was just too much for me. I tried to compromise. Whenever I visited, I brought my boyfriend Steve along for support. However, she still found ways to get me alone, and then she would complain about how my relationship was making her feel bad about not having one of her own. I was stuck. I couldn't go with Steve, but I wouldn't go without him. I con-

tinued to bring him with me. But the sadness of that place kept it distant. Or perhaps it was the fact that after another few months Mom would move again.

I still consider my dad's house to be home. I'm fairly confident that the reason is mainly because it holds the last memories of my family prior to the divorce. But it could also be a myriad of other things: I have a room that is mine, my dad is a constant figure there, that house is the only thing that remains mostly the same from my old life. I'm tied to it and I am terrified of the day when I'll have to say goodbye to it forever. Part of the divorce agreement was that after so many years, Dad would sell the house. The mere notion that this place, which is my safe haven, will someday not be there for me can leave me in tears and sobs.

Steve tries to understand my paralyzing fears about home, but falls short. He accidentally upset me by questioning me quite determinedly about what I would do when my dad sold the house. Would I consider a place home if we moved in together? He knows now that the subject is touchy, and he is careful about what he says, but I envy his freedom. Free from the chains that are the aftermath of a divorce coming at a major milestone, he was eager to leave his parents' house and didn't even care that his mom had turned his room into a meditation room a couple of months later. He literally has no room of his own there anymore. Maybe that's normal, but I can't imagine that. I'd be devastated.

My therapist tells me that getting a divorce right before I went off to college was probably the worst thing my parents could have done. She says that kids need that anchor when they go away, and without it...well, without it they turn out exactly like me: paranoid, constantly homesick, and perpetually anxious. Sort of like how children use their parents as "safe bases" when first starting to explore their worlds. Maybe this is also why I never quite feel at home with my mom. She left not once, but five times if you count all the moves she'd made in that first year and a half. I used to wonder why I never felt at home in her house in Florida, her new husband's house at which she lived for over a year. I mused once that perhaps it was because I was worried that as soon as I let it become home it would be taken away. Ironically enough, they moved "to the country" (wherever that is in Florida) this past January.

Perhaps the one reprieve from my home anxieties is the fact that those anxieties seem to settle whenever I'm with Steve. I still worry about my dad's house just as much, but I feel at home wherever we are together. It's been a long time since I could feel that way. It used to be I only felt that way when I was with my family, wherever that happened to be. But it started coming back first with him, even before I felt that way with my

dad. Maybe it has less to do with where I am and more to do with the fact that I am increasingly considering him to be my family. This might mean that my idea of family has shifted; at least in the context of how family relates to home. I don't necessarily feel at home at my aunt's house, but she is still my family. Has my mom become more of a secondary family member? Has my dad? Maybe part of this is that I am making Steve such a large part of my life. Ever since the divorce I have been coping mostly by prioritizing my own life and establishing my own family. A family that likely will be with Steve. His family has already adopted me into their circle, even asking where I am if I happen not to be at a family function. The common denominator here is my being with Steve. Maybe as I've grown up, home has shifted from a place, to family—whoever and however it be defined.

The event: My impending graduation from Otterbein

What I feel: Terror and excitement. Even though I'm not ready to become a functioning member of society, I look forward to this new chapter of my life as a step forward. The step towards the direction of being ok with leaving home. As much as I want to stay there, I also increasingly find the idea of having my own place, with my two cats, quite inviting. And while my dad has offered to let me stay with him in the event I attend Purdue for graduate school, I am trying to convince myself to get an apartment. Even if I spend a majority of my time at my Dad's house instead of my own, it would be a step towards finding out what home really is to me. Is it this house? Is it Steve? Is it something else entirely?

What I know: I can't define home yet, but I'm learning what I need to feel at home. And that, at least, is a step towards never being without home again.

PARAFFIN, OR: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION AND YESTERDAY'S BREAKFAST

Claire Winslow

It feels as though the memory has been dipped in paraffin wax. I didn't remember it yesterday, but I was floating in that in between space after awake but before asleep that always seems to last so much longer for me, and it was there, unbidden, unasked for. It's not even a special memory, or really a pleasant one. It's one of those far-off bits of early childhood, frosted with insomnia and embarrassment, as I try to brush off the film with only the very tips of my outstretched fingers. I was lost. I don't know where, or why; it's only an outline of a shadow of a recollection that swam under my eyelids in that purgatory of almost wakefulness and not nearly enough sleep. I was lost, separated from my parents, heart beating fast, at the mercy of the whims of the passing strangers. But there was my dad, up ahead with his back to me and his arms at his sides. So I did what any sensible child would do. I ran to my father, took his hand, and looked up at that familiar face of hazel eyes and gingery beard. But this man didn't have either of those things. I dropped the imposter's hand, backing away faster than was wise, but still not fast enough. I tripped.

I don't remember what happened after that. I'm sure I scrambled to my feet and found my parents just around the next corner and all was safe in the world again, but still I wonder at the memory. I don't remember the man's face, only that he wasn't my father. Everything is waxy around the edges, more color and emotion than anything else. The stranger's face is a whitewashed void of unknown variables that my toddler mind didn't choose to hold on to. Or was that just the way that I saw him? Dangerous, faceless, fuzzy around the edges. I'm not even sure if it's real. Perhaps it was only a dream.

Sometimes it feels as though my brain is an uncatalogued library. All the information is there precariously piled on shelves with no way to

locate what I need. It's only after stumbling into those dusty back rooms that I remember things long forgotten, filed away with the lyrics to the entire Best of Marc Cohn album, and the smell of no tears shampoo. I could never find those things on my own, but when I do, I wonder how I ever managed to misplace them to begin with. And I marvel over the nostalgia of it all, reveling in how everything looks different through frosted glass. But I wonder again if that was just how everything looked, back before I had the tools or the eyes or the words? Or is that just time, stealing all those sharp edges, melting them in the heat? And then I set the memory down, and immediately lose it again as I have so many other times before. I really should invest in a better organizational system.

We moved from 804 Melinda Drive the summer after second grade. It was only across town, but I hated the new house, hated the idea of moving, and sulked for weeks afterward. I remember telling my mom that it was our house, and I was afraid that if we moved, I would forget everything that happened there. I don't remember her reply. Several families have lived there since, but a few years ago I found myself at a party in my childhood home. I walked in the door, and I immediately felt too tall. The entire house seemed to have shrunk since I was a child; the linen closet where my sister and I used to hide had become impossibly tiny. I always thought the bar in the basement was so high up. Molly and I would clamber to the very tip top (the perfect jaguar's lair) and it lifted us almost to the ceiling. It seemed taller than anything had ever been, high in the tangles of the dripping green jungle. But when I returned, forcing my host to take me on a tour of the rooms that I had seen a thousand times before, it all seemed so small. But I suppose that's just what life does to you. You grow, the world shrinks and those memories where it all towers above you become fuzzy, blurred and waxen. Or maybe everything really was bigger back then.

A few nights ago, on the phone with Patrick, I remembered something. We were in the middle of a conversation about poetry, and Jell-O, and that toy box in the back of every grandmother's closet; the sort of late-night ramblings that every long-distance relationship needs. And then I had a sudden flash of something that may have been vivid once. I had completely forgotten about The Hot Dog Truck, though I'm not sure how I ever did. It was the stupidest, most obnoxious toy that I think has ever been created, so of course Molly and I loved it. It was a plastic,

battery operated, singing, dancing, hot dog vendor's truck. The little man sitting behind the wheel rocked back and forth to the song that I always assumed was being sung by the hot dogs dancing in the serving window. I now realize that it was probably the man himself who sang the monotonous "HOT DOG HOT DOG", because the giant plastic one stretching across the entire roof of the truck was clearly not enough to tell customers exactly what he was selling. When you flipped the switch, it would roll forward a few feet, stop to sing its rousing chorus of "HOT DOG HOT DOG", and then move on. Three feet of plastic wheels clattering against the linoleum (It didn't work on the carpet), and Molly and I would join in, with an enthusiastic "HOT DOG HOT DOG". This continued until our mother unfailingly came to confiscate the batteries. I hadn't thought about The Hot Dog Truck in ages, but it was still there, taking up space inside my head.

Immediately, I took that re-remembered memory, and translated it into a fumbling Google search. I want to find it. It's not like I'm gonna buy a new one; I just want to find a picture of it, a record, some way to remove the frosted glass from my way-back memory. But it was futile; I'm sure it was discontinued very quickly, as everyone else tried to forget just how annoying it was. I searched for over an hour, sifting through old toy databases, e-bay listings, getting more frustrated by the minute. I'm not even sure why I want to find it so badly, it's like an itch that can only be scratched by dancing frankfurters. I said to Patrick that it was "my destiny to find this goddamn Hot Dog Truck", which may have been a little overdramatic, but still strangely true. Maybe it never existed in the first place, some dream that I created, a bizarre obnoxious fantasy, fabricated out of nostalgia and paraffin wax. But despite that possibility, despite the more probable reality that no one ever cared enough about that wonderfully obnoxious little toy to document it, I will keep looking. Because in a weird way it does feel like it's my destiny to find that goddamn Hot Dog Truck. It's like somehow just a picture of it, some sort of proof that it really existed, could somehow validate everything. Though, what "everything" is, I have no idea.

If you were to ask me about my earliest memory, my response would be just as fuzzy as it all is in my head. I think its one moment when I believe I was two; standing at the end of the hallway that I always thought was so long. I don't have any context for it; it wasn't an important moment, or even a unique one. Molly, then 4, is to my left, in the doorway

of her bedroom. It's another one of those waxing memories, waning away, more feeling than actual recollection. I was angry standing in that hallway which I have since learned was really very short; angry at my sister and all of her injustices. It's really only important because it's listed as first, the earliest entry in that mental rolodex of my childhood. The hem of my father's oversized t-shirt trembled around my calves, as I heard Molly tell me that she was in charge of me. She was practically a grown-up after all.

I wish life was more like kindergarten, where you only ever had half days. Both my parents worked, so I went in the mornings, and then after school I had a schedule that I still have memorized, though God knows why. I went to Harling's house on Mondays, and we would pull nearly everything out of the giant closet in the play room trying to reach that elephant game with the butterfly nets. Or else we glued together pets made of pom-poms and googly-eyes from the old blue suitcase full of craft supplies. Once, we balanced our creations on top of the red gingham lamp, not thinking anything of it until they burst into flames and Harling's mom had to come and stomp them into the carpet. Tuesdays, Grandma came to our house. She would make me lunch and then I would sit in the laundry basket as she piled it full of clothes fresh from the dryer, pretending I was being buried in warm snow. I would beg her to sing "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" over and over while she folded. I never let her sing anything else. The middle of the week was spent at the Hoovers' across the street. Sometimes, on Thursdays, Harling or Robby would be there too, and we would sit in the old green tree house, pretending it was a sailing ship, or an airplane, or an eagle's nest. But Wednesdays were always spent sulking in the basement while Justin and Jonah played hockey and ignored me. So Wednesdays were the worst, but Fridays were the best. Mom came home early on Fridays, and I got the whole afternoon, just the two of us. I don't remember what we did on those days. So many other tiny moments fill my head, Monday through Thursday in absurd detail. But not the Fridays. That just what happens though; you can never remember the Fridays.

Julia and I played a game in high school, where we would try to incorporate Harry Potter quotes into our English discussions. It was surprisingly easy. The class always knew what we were up to, and every time I started my point with "This reminds of a line from Order of the Phoenix..." there was always a subtle mix of chuckles and groans that made

its way around the classroom. My favorite line, and one of the easiest to connect to classic literature, is from the very end of the very last book. After an existential meeting with his dead mentor, suspended in a sort of limbo, Harry asks Dumbledore “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?” And Dumbledore’s response has always stuck with me, and it forms the basis for one of my most important beliefs (of course it’s built upon a Harry Potter quote, as so much of my life is). Dumbledore tells him, “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” And when I first read that, my twelve year-old mind was very nearly blown, because as the Velveteen Rabbit will also tell you, the idea of what is “real” isn’t about what is tangible. There are things in my life that have no physical shape; I can’t set them on my bookshelf and point to the ways that they have changed me. My very Real^{est} of things, capital R included, are the ones that are really only inside my head. We are all just a collection of memories anyway; experiences, relationships, books we’ve read, trips we’ve taken, dreams half remembered. We interpret those experiences, copy them down and throw them into the cluttered backroom of a diary with half its pages missing. My handwriting is hardly legible anyway. But that’s all we are; all the way back to those memories dipped in paraffin wax, I am a collection of things inside my head. And that is more Real than anything. It has to be.

I had a friend in preschool with brown hair and a sister named Bonnie. I remember being at her house, playing with her toys. I remember her dark bangs, cut so cleanly across her forehead. I remember eating honeydew melon at her kitchen table. I don’t remember her name. My family went on a three week long road trip when I was four, trekking out west to the national parks. I remember we stayed a few nights in a bed and breakfast that had a secret passageway under the kitchen cabinets. There was a tiny rocking chair in the living room, just my size. I don’t remember going to Yellowstone. I don’t remember the geysers, or the mountains, or the buffalo. My great aunt Florence died when I was three. She was my grandmother’s closest sister, and only 68 when she died, but those were things that I learned later. I remember waking on the heels of my black dress shoes and stealing sugar cubes off the coffee tray at the funeral home. I remember the rack of somber black coats in the corner, weaving between them, hiding from my parents who weren’t looking for me anyway. Despite having forgotten so much else, I remember the bright

gold of the coat hangers on the rack. I don't remember Florence at all.

My aunt Julie is, and always has been, a memory stealer. She will go on some longwinded story about something that happened in her childhood, but about half way through my mother will stop her. Ninety percent of the time, it will have been something that actually happened to my mom, but Julie has claimed it for her own. It's not like she means to, but a large portion of Julie's memories seem to have actually happened to other people. We're not quite sure what Julie's own childhood was like. That sort of thing seems to happen all the time; memories that aren't our own. Amelia says that she remembers her dog eating her childhood hamster, despite being out of town when it happened, and the hamster actually belonging to her sister. It seems that everyone I ask has a story like that, something in their head that is actually borrowed, or stolen, or fabricated. The memory exists, taking up space in our brains, with images and details, despite knowing that it never actually happened. But I don't have that pleasure of knowing. I'm sure I have those counterfeit memories, like everyone else, but I don't know which ones they are. It could all be wrong, for all I know. I know that all I am is a ball of past experience, the memories inside my head, and that is what is Real. But what if it's not? Everything I have could be a misremembered dream. As children, did we really see the world in that indistinct whirl of color, hope, and fear, or is that just the blessing/curse of time, stealing my memories like it has already stolen so much else? Our own flawed senses are all we really have, the only definite thing in this universe, able to be fooled with smoke, or distraction, or a turned head and child's eyes. But that's just information, raw data. We take it all in, we interpret it, and then we throw it in the wash with everything else, colors bleeding, blurring, everything melding together into a whole person's whole life story. That's all we are; a story. I'm not a fiction writer. I've always been so terrible at writing stories. So what happens if it's not real? If all I am is memory, and those memories might have never even happened at all, then who am I, really? A collection of synthetic thoughts, stolen, fuzzy, dipped in paraffin wax to make it seem authentic. Half of them are forgotten anyway, or half-remembered, some of them half-formed to begin with. Did the world just look blurry back then? How can I ever be sure? Maybe I am good at fiction. Maybe I am just a story that I tell myself as I try too hard to sleep.

My mother's father died of prostate cancer when I was 11 years

old. I hardly remember a time when Poppa wasn't sick. My mom bought me a new outfit for the funeral before he had even died, that's what I remember. It was a scratchy-necked, pale blue sweater, and a brown corduroy skirt that came just below my knees. I never can remember the important things; all I have is the prickle of new wool, and the way my voice quivered when Molly and I sang at the funeral. But there was another song that was bigger, it was more important, but it was shuffled to that back room a long time ago, so if you asked me how it goes, I couldn't tell you. Poppa had a cassette player in the cabinet in the living room, and a short stack of tapes that were really useless because we only ever let him play just the one. It was the soundtrack to a 1990 Ken Burns documentary, but Molly and I just knew it as "The Civil War Music". I don't think I even knew what that meant then, but it was pretty, and soft, and it was my first taste of that beautiful kind of sad that I later became so familiar with in my adolescence. We would beg him to put it on, and the three of us would dance around the living room, the bright green carpet becoming grass under my tippy toes. And Poppa would hold my hands as I stood on his feet and he would twirl me around until laughing, we both got dizzy and had to stop. And sure, the memory is dipped in paraffin, fuzzy and soft edged, and when I'm not listening to it I can't ever remember the melody. But sometimes someone will play just a snippet of that sighing violin, in a movie, or television commercial, or just as I pass by on the street, and then it all comes back. And I can feel his papery hands wrapped around mine, cool, soft, with those knobby knuckles reassuring me that he won't let me fall. He spins me around the room, bumping into the coffee table as Grandma yells from the kitchen to be careful, knowing full well that he will just laugh it off anyway. The magic of all those partial moments, partial memories fused into one sunlit afternoon that seeps through all the barriers. So despite the frosted glass of my memory, I can still feel my heart jump and my head spin. I can still see the flecks of dust swirling with us through the air, floating on sunlight, just like we were.

Then the last quivering stroke of the violin fades, I open my eyes, and immediately I've forgotten the tune again. But still I remember the feel of my Poppa's hands covering mine; the paraffin, and the dizziness, and the too green carpet that has since been switched out for a more sensible beige. I still remember, despite everything. When I open my eyes the world is crisp again, new, real in the way that I don't believe in.

CURVE

Alexandra Putnam

Crave it and catch it in your hands
Watch it flutter like lilies blacken like onyx
Sneeze the dust out to me with gold capes

Brooch on my neck
Brooding in a sense that sees me incapacitate reason
That sees me snapping sticks from underneath
Slapping through pages of nothing like obligation

Does it change colors?
Oh, aspiration, you are a pretty thing.
It dies and sticks it out to live
Golden leaves make no sense to me now

Differentiate, tear apart, what it is that
No, no, nothing
Disembark disengage my shift is over
My time is up

There isn't enough sand in the world to count it all
Enough glass to contain it all
It would break anyway
Leaving cracks in the places where we count our blessings

They fall through like earthquakes that shake out of our ears
All of the miscellaneous items that no one needs
But us here and now we see no difference
In writing or talking or walking or playing

We're just waiting for something a little more potent
That breaks a little more rapidly
Swirling out in the traffic of our minds
As we present our latest thought to the jury

"Read my mind," they force you to look up their throats
They force you to climb inside of them and try them on for size
They force you to live there for a little while
Until a home comes along

Home is a place to hide,
Not to live, I decide
A couch a think tank that derides us
"Get off now."

Going through the moves is tiring
Sometimes different makes a good change
Unwelcomed and unanalyzed
Imperfect and welcome.
That's all we had to say and then again,
If we ever needed something to remind us of our dirt
We'd look at all of the perfections handed out to the water
But dirty creatures lie inside
We wash ourselves to purify like it even makes a difference

The shore can hold beauty that we've never seen before
But swim in it for a while and it will bite you the way it has
With you, yourself, and I
We know the pain it brings to dinner

Hidden pain is still pain.
Important to the onlookers who know so well how to get hurt
It's like an art to us as an entity
It bites our arm off and we cry... a little maybe

We get over the sting and it carries us
To islands of long ago
And we're too bored to carry ourselves
To castles not yet known.

How can we see ourselves individually when we all play the pawn
How can we float away to paradise when we float on blackened waters
We are ignorant of our own pain.
We are ventriloquists of our own bodies- body

We suck what's left out from marrow and bone
And gold leaves make no sense to us
If the dead washed upon the shore,
Would we still deem it beautiful?

Worth a second glance, perhaps
True, yes, but not beautiful
We were not meant for beauty
We were not meant to define it, either.

Jaws stand tall to talk the time away
Laptops tick tock the way we stare
Like dummies, we are playing our own strings
And we stand for wooden legs and painted eyes,

And we stand for absolutely nothing

RIVULETS

Amelia Christmas Gramling

She begins by
unearthing what blessings Grandma hid
here, this triangle seam,
some moment of long-since buttoned up moonlight
there, the track marks of
heavy-lidded blinds,
she still can't trace whose histories of thumb prints
made hollow
mounds of dusty sleep,
sand catches the creases of last night's swallowed kisses --
she rolls up her sleeves,
sows synthetic sunrise
into rivulets of need,
she blurs scorched stretches of
yesterday's winds
pooling gray matter, the salt slick
of too fond and too far and too many
pillow slips,
shades rot gut
with bat shit
with kidney pink.
Where is your Mama, the Logan County tobacco queen,
here, in this bleached dry
quiet,
a story
she molds into her morning coffee
& slowly
breathes clean

PEANUTS

Jessica Campbell

She told me when we stepped out into the blinding
Midday heat with a bag of salted peanuts
That when you open one it's something no one else has ever seen,
A lone boil expunged from the dirt's skin
And you have to eat it whole before it explodes-

She was so desperate, then,
Shoving crumbling pieces in her mouth whole,
Licking salt off her fingers and fumbling the shells
While simultaneously reaching for another-

It was a hot summer,
The first one in years and I watched
Her skirt drag dirt off the street
As we walked to the corner to
Get pop and look at magazines-
She chewed on hardened shells and spit occasionally,
Bare foot in the grass-
Her forehead and shoulders raw pink from the sun,
Sweat matted hair on the back of her neck-

An old man watched us go by, sitting on his porch holding a dirty tin,
Nodded slowly as we walked past-
Then his dog, panting, black fur, out on the lawn
Barked at my ankles but didn't sit up-

Later on we stopped for a moment while she got sick
On the side of the road,
Stomach too full of a surprisingly sweet paste
And a blinding, sweaty heat-
All the while our jumbo bag, "salted," held tight to her chest-
Not the kind that came pre-shelled, no,
She had always wanted to work for it-

And when her pale frame doubled up afterwards
She wiped her mouth, hands shaking, laughed while she hung her head,
Dropped the almost empty bag of peanuts into my hands
And spit once more into the grass,
Her dirty tattered skirt hanging limp
In the stagnant, humid air.

CANNIBALISM IN CONCEPT

Lindsey Rowland

"I think," she said to herself, "the flesh that's caught between my back two molars is from the area around his jugular."

But she couldn't be sure. She had never done this before.

With a smooth, melodramatic swipe of the tongue across the gap that introduces her smile, she gathers up the last of the remaining blood, which warmly twirls down her throat in what she images looks a lot like some sort of crimson tango, although, in the back of her mind, she knows it is actually quite reminiscent of Golgotha.

The bright red stain remains behind; as does the taste of his submission. She speaks out loud, as if someone mortal were there to listen, "You know, everyone always talks about the thrill of this, and I can't say that I'm disappointed."

Those shivers, the same that she had only just gotten used to, that have never, to this day, ceased to thrill her, ran up her spine as she thought of how his legs had broken so easily. Oh, his lungs had rattled and his hands had curled and his fluids were sapped and his cries were wretched and She loved it.

She had gone there, she had done it. It is finished, it is finished.

"I'm still smiling! I should look more somber," she whispered aloud, trying to stifle her wide, goofy grin. With a cough and an exhalation, she bent her head over the carnage and said,

"Hey, thanks."

Because what else could be said, really?

Nothing could ever taste as good as life.

"I feel changed."

A NAME FOR THE CLIMBING TREE

Claire Winslow

I remember my dad cut down a tree in our front yard when I was about six. I cried, saying that he was killing it. And then I remembered that I had once skinned my knee on its roots, so I stopped crying, and just watched.

When you're talking about trees, there are two types of growth. Indeterminate growth is the type that trunks and branches have; they grow and they keep growing until the tree is dead. But leaves are different. Leaves have determinate growth; they grow until they are just the right size, and then they stop growing forever. But sometimes, on a Sycamore tree, something gets messed up, a genetic mutation or something, and the growth doesn't stop. But leaves aren't supposed to grow like branches, and soon it's a foot wide and too heavy to hold itself to the tree anymore. That's when the oversized leaf falls to the ground, and someone like me picks it up and takes it home. It blankets my desk for a few days, until it crinkles and shreds, and then I have to vacuum it off the carpet.

I never really wanted to take that class, but by senior year, scheduling conflicts were just a part of life. Between my French class, Drama, Choir, and the Advanced Placement, there was hardly a period that didn't require special timing. I wanted to take AP Biology. They were going to get to dissect stuff, and grow cultures, and do genetic experiments with fruit flies; and that sounded exactly like my sort of deal. But of course, because I had never had a first day of school where my schedule was actually the way I wanted it, I couldn't take AP Bio. And that's how I ended up in Botany.

Plants were never really something that I thought about before that. I was able to walk through a park without mentally classifying the trees, or noting venation patterns on a nearby leaf. I was entirely ignorant of the difference between a moss and a fern, and I cared little about the level of direct sunlight in my now bedroom/greenhouse. I never realized how much I had never noticed until I noticed it, and suddenly the world was infinitely more confusing, more complicated, and more beautiful than I had ever wanted it to be.

Ben Mattox was there in the hospital the day after I was born,

with flowers, despite being allergic. He and my father had already worked together for over 10 years in the high school science department, and the summer night department barbeques in his yard directly behind ours are what I see when I picture my childhood. I grew up with his daughters, had fed his fish, had slept on his couch, and had helped to reorganize his dizzying movie collection more times that I care to recollect. This made my first day of Botany all the stranger. On the occasions that I had seen my dad teach, he became a completely different person from “my dad”. But Ben Mattox is the sort of teacher that lacks the “teacher voice”, so Mr. Mattox is the exact same person as the Ben whose basement I played in. He makes constant fart jokes, and the rip off calendar on his desk told you a new fact about poop every day of the year. He always shared these with the class. My friends and I had a list, secreted in the back of a notebook, of the memorable things he said; some funny, some just plain weird. Some prime examples were things like “So everyone starts out life looking a bit like a hotdog bun, and then your head splits in half!” and “That’s a nice voice that you have today, but if you don’t stop talking I’m going to have to punch you in the face in a second”.

He was quick to tell the class about seeing me on my second day, still in the hospital. He told them how all the nurses swore up and down that I was a month old already, despite being three weeks early, and how he had been there at my first real concert; an acoustic guitarist, playing above a restaurant in Kentucky with my dad. And I couldn’t be angry with him. It was Ben. Ben, with his telescope, and his endless allergies, and his beat up guitar that he always paired with a voice just rough enough to be soothing. I had fallen asleep to that voice more times than I remember; past my bedtime, full of taco dip and sticky summer nights, the air dripping with Marc Cohn and Billy Joel.

So Botany was a bit awkward. And then layer on top of that the fact that I really didn’t care much about plants anyway, and I was still jealous of the dissections going on in the next class, that I spent the first few weeks trying to muster up the motivation to diagram leaves. But once that was done, it was time to start keying trees.

Identification keys are a complicated and frustrating invention, useless to anyone but a Biologist, or something of that ilk. If it’s animals that you are keying out for their specific species, you get to examine reproductive organs, or sharp teeth. But when it’s a tree that you are shoving through this dense stapled packet of qualifications, you get the joy of debating over whether these leaves are opposite or alternate. You look at

the rachis and the petiole, the veining, asking if it's pinnate or palmate. The most exciting bit is if the veins are Anastomosing, which is only fun because it's fun to say out loud on the rare occasion that you find it.

Despite this torture of keying, I found that I liked knowing the names of the trees; I liked knowing the little secrets that made them unique. The Hedge Maple has funny squat little leaves that are just a little bit fuzzy to the touch, and no two Mulberry leaves are precisely the same shape. Tulip Poplars have leaves where the tips point in instead of out and under the curling white bark of the River Birch, there is a beautiful russet color, like a brick patio, or the sky just as the night is cooling down. All these details that I had never even thought to notice before were suddenly jumping out at me, all I could see.

I don't know what kind of tree the Climbing Tree was. By the time I remember it, it didn't have leaves anymore, or even bark. Its smooth, low branches twisted just next to the Mattox's garage, and on those purple evenings we would climb like monkeys until the baked beans finally came out of the oven. I can almost still feel the smooth softness under my bare feet; smell the must of dry wood, and the muted tang of sunset and campfire. Against the rules, I would climb to the very top, on the side that was hidden behind the garage, feeling the strong branches bend beneath my feet and I felt invincible; like the dusk, and that tree, and my thumping heart would last until far beyond the end of time, and on into eternity.

But that tree is gone now.

It was dead before I was even alive, without leaves or bark. And after years of children growing up among its twisting naked branches, it became too dangerous and it was cut down. But that was long after I was too old for climbing anyway.

My favorite sort of tree is the Bald Cypress. It's a tall, pine tree looking thing, but with the softest needles you ever felt. And there's one major difference that makes the Bald Cypress so special. Those pale green, feather-soft leaflets turn amber every fall, and carpet the roots of a bare tree till spring. No one ever seems to notice this strange phenomenon. I walk past one of these singular trees every day on my way to class, and no one else notices the pine tree that by all standards should be dead. No other coniferous tree goes the winter with any needles, and if it does it means it needs to be cut down. But not my Bald Cypress. It waits patiently until spring when it gets a whole new coat of downy soft needles, and

starts the whole process over again.

In class, on days when we had identification tests, we always finished early. So Mr. Mattox would pull out that old guitar and we would pretend that we knew all the verses of Jack and Diane, surrounded by the branches and leaves lopped off for our test. Those days were always my favorites. After the stress of memorizing trees by only their leaves, we would just sit with the sharp green snap of chlorophyll filling our noses, and I would pretend that it was another one of those summer parties, falling asleep on my dad's lap in a camp chair. I was waiting to be carried away from the nameless Climbing Tree, back by the Silver Maple, through the line of Hemlocks, past the Mulberry, and the Blue Spruce, in the back door and into my bed. But I didn't know all those names back then. I didn't know how the Silver Maple was different from the red. All I knew was that the backs of the leaves seemed to shine when you pulled them off and put them in the birdbath, a boat for the chickadees. And I didn't know that that Spruce would someday be taller than our house, and much more than just the boundary mark between our yard and the Wespisers' next door. And I didn't know that the tiny Dogwood was supposed to be so much bigger, but our soil wasn't right. All I knew was its paper white flowers, and how their beautiful hello-wave heralded spring.

And I didn't know that the Climbing Tree was supposed to have leaves.

But now I notice the venation of a pinnately compound leaf, and I can tell you how the Xylem and the Phloem carry the nutrients up its stem. And if you see an Ash tree, there will always be another one close by, and if you crush the leaves of the Sassafras, it will smell of honey and of lemon. And that is beautiful, and it's a magic that doesn't have to be myth. And it's everywhere, and we walk past it every day and we never notice it. And it's the Bald Cypress, and the brick patio, and the old guitar. It's the row of ferns on the windowsill. And it's the Hedge Maple, and the way a leaf's veins crisscross like cracks in the driveway. And it's waiting for the baked beans to be done. And it's waiting for the leaves to grow and die and grow again. And it's forgetting the words to a song that you knew yesterday, and it's the smell of a campfire, and sticky summer air, and being allergic to everything but loving it anyway.

And the Climbing Tree was dead the whole time.

And I don't need a name for it.

ON THE BATHROOM FLOOR AGAIN

Stephanie Collart

The yellowing linoleum felt cool against my shins as I knelt on the tiny bathroom floor in the dark. I could not see but I knew where the toilet was out of habit. Between heaves into the porcelain bowl I tried to catch my breath. It was getting easier to breathe now, as it usually did when I had nothing left in my stomach to get rid of. Not that it was ever really full anymore, anyway. All I had eaten for the past week was a can of creamed corn for each meal, since they were on sale at Wal-Mart the last time I risked a trip to the grocery store. I heaved one last time, feeling the aching pull of my stomach hopping around in my broken body. I could almost picture it, saggy and empty, contracting and bouncing against my rib cage.

I finally managed to stand long enough to lean against the sink and brush my teeth for the third time that morning. It was only nine and I already knew it would be better to just go right back to sleep. It was easier to just sleep. It always was. The only problem sleeping never managed to solve was the nausea, though. I have yet to meet someone – other than friends who had been pregnant – who cannot sleep through the night without waking up from the overwhelming, uncontrollable urge to vomit. I had actually gotten used to throwing up. I was the only girl my family physician had ever seen who he worried would unintentionally become bulimic. In his Vietnamese accent he articulated to me, a stern look on his face, that because my stomach had been throwing up any food I ate for so many months now, it might not remember how to keep food down once my situation improved. I did not have an eating disorder, though. I had no agency in contributing to my frail figure.

After another half an hour (which felt much more like an eternity), I managed to shuffle back across the now dimly sunlit hallway into Nick's room. I winced as I took in the surge-protector stabbed with eight different plugs leading to the laptop, desktop computer, Xbox game system, cell phone charger, guitar amplifier, iPod touch charger, and the chrome floor lamp. I bent over to flick the "off" switch and wondered what time he had gone to bed last night, hoping the power was not on too long. I tried to think about what Dr. Sandy had told me about emergency appointments. Could I call and get an appointment later today without

a fee? It probably was not worth the risk. I pushed the thought from my mind and grabbed Nick's black cell phone (a Droid X, the newest one for sale at Best Buy), next to the three bowls of putrefying old cereal and milk he had left on the computer desk. I pretended not to know that without an upgrade, he paid hundreds for the phone. I waved the gnats away and tried to avoid stepping on the ants. The ants really seemed to enjoy the discarded candy wrappers under his brand new computer desk (he firmly believed any money obtained from a tax refund should be spent to stimulate the economy by being spent at the mall and not wasted on the utility bills) and the bottles of liquor displayed like trophies on the windowsill. I would have to ask permission to enter the room again later to clean. My hopes that he would finally decide to tidy up for the first time in the six months we had lived in the apartment were shattered yet again. I opened our bedroom door and fought back the tears I was too dehydrated to cry with a clenched fist as I turned the light switch on. I licked my cracked, dry lips in wary anticipation of the argument I knew I was about to start.

Agitated, Nick rolled over, his greasy black hair falling over his sweaty forehead – I preferred not to turn on the air conditioning unless the heat was unbearable – and he grumbled something about the light. I cleared my throat, gaining the most convincingly strong voice I had in weeks (still hardly above a hoarse whisper since the stomach acid had scorched my throat, causing laryngitis again). “Nick,” I coughed out, “I need you to sit up and wake up right away. This is serious.” After another three minutes (I checked the alarm clock), I managed to coax him into a sitting position. He was as coherent in the post-slumber fogginess as possible this early in the morning so I decided I should just start the dreaded conversation now. If I did not confront him today, I knew I would wait until it was too late and he no longer deemed a fight applicable. There was a statute of limitations with Nick's infidelities, as there had always been.

“I need you to tell me who Melanie is.” I tried to meet his eyes but they were staring at the unmade bed sheets. “I don't think I know a Melanie.” He lied. I wondered, as I often did, if sociopaths knew they were lying or if they deluded themselves into thinking they told the truth. Not important. I went on. “Well your phone would not stop going off so I had to go into your room to turn it off. I know you need your privacy and you know I would NEVER go snooping but the text was on the screen as soon as I turned your alarm off. I was not fishing around, I promise.”

Now I really had his attention. He snapped his head up and scowled in my direction. “You went through my personal things. You

went through my phone?"

Too fatigued to go into any further elaboration, I blinked to steady myself. "Answer my question first, please." I sighed, already too weak to stand in the doorway. I stumbled to the bed and sat down; facing the mirror, so I could read his eyes to see when he would quit deflecting and continue lying. He did. He denied everything until I read the text message aloud: "So, Melanie, on a scale of one to ten, how good at fucking am I?" and she had replied that he was a seven. This clearly did not satisfy him so he had inquired when they could meet again so he could gain the ego boost of being a ten. "So," I continued, "Now can you tell me who Melanie is?" I always seemed to give him a chance to admit his wrongdoings, in hopes he was changing for the better.

In the stillness before he spoke, I went through my mental checklist of responsibilities. Regardless of the circumstances, I still had a busy day ahead of me. I could not recall whether I had unplugged the toaster and microwave last night before bed. I would have to check those. The bathroom sink was clogged again from Nick's facial hair. I knew there was not enough money in the budget for Liquid Plumber since Nick needed new guitar strings, so I would have to boil water and run it over to the sink instead. I still had to take the trash bags out to the dumpster but that could wait until after I tackled Nick's room – assuming he would let me clean it. I still had a midterm essay to type for my English class but I would need to go to the library for that since I could not justify using the electricity it would take to charge my laptop. That meant I would have to call Mom and ask for a ride since my gas tank was more or less empty. That also meant I would have to do laundry late tonight after I closed at work. At least it was payday so I could pay rent. Only six more months until the lease was up and I could move out! Maybe the guilt from cheating would motivate Nick to pitch in a couple dollars this month. Highly unlikely.

As I was watching, his reflection in the mirror indicated he was thinking. Calculating. What were the odds he could pull off blaming the text on Justin? He had used that excuse before, claiming Justin's phone died and he had borrowed Nick's (even though he was not with Justin when that text message had been sent). He had gone to the bar last night again so I knew he was with Justin this time. On the other hand, I also knew Justin's phone was charged because he was passed out on the couch in the living room, phone displayed on the coffee table. Reclining back onto the pillow behind him, Nick covered his face with his hands and

rolled on his side. I had to lean toward him to hear his whispered answer: “Not without you leaving me.”

For some reason, *this* did me in. Even though I had already known, some inner defense mechanism had prevented me from reacting until now. I tore out of the room, my eyes speckling to blackness as I nearly passed out before reaching the toilet again. This was, by far, the closest Nick had ever come to a genuine confession. I collapsed onto the toilet, heaving out the last bit of sour stomach acid I had left before my vision faded to black. Hoping the coldness of it would jar me into alertness, I lay my cheek onto the seat. My last thought before I lost consciousness was that I had left the bedroom light on. That meant I would have to compensate by doing my homework by candlelight for a few more nights.

TUCK ME UNDER

Amelia Christmas Gramling

Dear Cotton,

I'm sure you've heard. How the ocean on your side of the world ravages these days. I read an article: Tacloban is choking on the stink of its un-rested dead. I read another: The living sustain life by salvaging coconut milk. I read about Haiyan, and before sending our Dad's credit card info, before sending petition or prayer, I Googled the distance between you and the cities most decimated in the typhoon's wake. Over fifteen hundred miles, it turns out. And I'll tell you, I breathed in relief.

I continue to breathe.

Still, I ink you in the map of my mind, sometimes, a blight across the Thai coast, like Magellan to the South American straits, in the not-so long ago cartography of the colonies as God divined them. The lack of distance between your footpath and Tacloban's mass burials, or for that matter, between you and Fukushima's mutated strains of butterfly wings, between you and the South-East Asian sea, seems too near to reconcile from where I sit on this couch from behind the safety of my screen. And relief hits me distantly.

Dear Cotton,

Do you ever, do you sometimes, miss snow?

Dear Cotton,

When you dream of your childhood, do you dream of it in Thai?

Dear Cotton,

Did you know that the veins of Blue Whales loom wide enough to swim inside?

Dear Cotton,

Dad tells me you crashed your motorcycle.

Dear Cotton,

Dad tells me you're learning to fly.

My Dad turns sixty six in April, and he just accepted his first book offer a couple weeks ago. He writes to detail the ways in which the politics and bureaucracy of Head Start, the program he's spent the last twenty years of his life cultivating and championing, threaten to undermine its purpose -- to provide a language-rich environment for under-

privileged preschoolers and support for their families in need. He sent me his sample chapter as an Email attachment on Tuesday. The subject line read "to my children." And it was. All five of us called upon to give feedback for *Different Ways of Being*. Me from this library at college in central Ohio, Maggie from what must be ten feet down the hallway -- having just moved back home, Lauren from the cabin in the woods my uncle built in what remains of the Frog Farm in Kentucky, Willie from Chicago in the modest downtown apartment he rents despite his bad credit (outstanding Best Buy charges), and finally, Cotton from a country I can't visualize. A street I couldn't begin to name. He's lived in Bangkok for something like ten years. Two days ago, embedded in the thread of Dad's *Different Ways of Being*, preceding Lauren's praise and Willie's mild taunts, I found him: johnralphcotton@yahoo.com. Casually, as if Cotton, like Maggie, sat ten feet from my father's side. As if I could say Hi. Say what's up. Say I miss you. Say yeah. Say it's been a while. Say I heard you got married. Say do you ever think of me. Say If I squint I can still conjure your face, but barely.

Say how are things.

I am seven or eight, tonguing the spaces between my teeth, and Willie will graduate come May. Maggie and I, bored and hot in the upstairs of this coffee shop want to leave almost as much as everyone else wishes we would. Willie's favorite teacher has asked his creative writing class to exhibit his writing at the WKU sanctioned Open Mic. Most of his peers are twenty and non-majors, and their fiction is riddled with gratuitous sex, and their poetry is riddled with gratuitous sex, thinly veiled by pollination metaphors. And many are embarrassed to read in the presence of Willie's half-sisters, little Maggie and Millie with their too-dark Delphic eyes that are his father's second wife's. But if we flush, it's from the heat. I'm in and out, only catching the twist of a plot here, a stanza there. I'm thinking were I to pretend to fall asleep would Daddy carry me over-the-shoulder-potato-sack style away from here and on to some place I could better breathe? And then my eye gets caught. A girl who was probably pale and freckled, were not all the blood in her body pooled in her cheeks, steps to the mic. She pauses to catch and release several breaths before her lungs steady enough for speech. But after she begins to read, I make a face like confusion -- I don't understand her raw nerves on display. I can only trace the faintest allusion to sex, no "fuck" or "goddamns," no gore or death, like the kind Mom winces at on TV. I zero

in, not just on the groove of her mouth, but her words as she forms them. What and how she means.

She tells the story of a man who leaves. A man who sleeps too late in the day, whose toenails jab her through the sheets, who snores like torrential downpours to come. Allergic to both shellfish and commitment, they eat pasta salad in the light of her afternoons, and she'll miss him. She drives him to the airport. Says her slow-to-dry goodbyes. And yet I sit unsettled, as a reader of tidy conclusions, found treasure and resolved pain, her ending registers in me as unfinished and unlikely. The girl in the story didn't ask him how long he'd be gone, why he was leaving, and the man didn't ask her whether or not she'd wait. The girl returned to her cool and unburdened bed, as if the answers, even if they someday found her, were beside the point.

The blushing girl steps away from the mic and back into the crowd. In the row of chairs directly ahead, I see through the space between them, my mom take and squeeze Daddy's hand. I think, though I can't say for sure, my dad looks to his feet. Rubs his knees.

Some measure of time later (hours, years?) Willie, or Maggie or maybe even my mom finally tells me why that girl's story left me wanting; the girl was wanting too. Every word true and every trait of the man in her story, Cotton's. Down to the mangled toenails and the shellfish allergy. By that time, my brother had only been gone a couple of months maybe, and his presents were still arriving in big, elephant painted packages, his plans to visit solid, his promises kept.

It's still difficult for me to imagine those outside my family feeling my brother's absence like we felt it, feel it. Forgetting him the ways I've forgotten. Like the girl. The girl whose salad bowl my mom thinks resides where Cotton left it behind (another failure in returning) somewhere deep in his kitchen cabinets; the girl whose story predicted what the rest of us couldn't bear to hear. What Cotton's move signified. The story he chose not to tell. What we were in for. What to expect. Fourteen hours behind.

Cotton is the first son born to my Dad, born on the fourth of July, born the summer of '74, born in the shadow of the atomic bomb. And born with him and by and in him, the hope for brighter summers to come and the kind of winters ten or twenty city kids fielding tobacco on new Kentucky green could stomach. Could survive. My brother, in the single act of his birth, reaffirmed more than one light.

By the time Cotton and Willie's Mama, Bumpo, (nicknamed for Natty Bumpo) went into labor, the plan to deliver Cotton naturally, cooed within the safety of the commune, where neither birth certificate nor draft card could ever reach him, had been well set. That didn't make it any less crazy or farfetched, however. Paula Brown was no mid-wife, but she'd given birth before, and my dad had read an awful lot on the subject, so they thought between the two of them they could pull this off. I don't know how long my brother's mother labored in the main cabin across from the softball field, but I know my dad held Bumpo's hand and wiped her brow and whispered charged moments into her hair, alluding to the magnitude of all the life, this life, could be. And I know that you know there's no way I could know that for sure. But it's the story I tell myself. What I long for when I crave founding, when I miss believing in such a thing as resolved pain. Here's what's as true as anything: they were all there. All my dad's and Bumpo's best friends. Jack and Janet, Dan and Alvin, Rocky and Rose, and Alice and Paula and February. And more whose memories I'm failing. And in the first moments of his life, every one of those loved ones, those Hippies, those long-haired creek bathers, those children of change, held my brother like his being, like his breath, was a marvel. And it was. And it is. Miraculous that this handful of dumb kids brought a life to beam beneath the sun, named him for the way it bleached his hair. As miraculous as all the dumb, scared shitless kids who have ever brought a child to be in the history of humankind. And that feeling, it doesn't dim.

The miracle never loses its novelty. He never becomes any less true.

If you were to ask my dad on a bad day, after a long, slurred phone call from Cotton at what's a reasonable hour Central Standard Time, he'd say he knows, of course, he's always known why Cotton's story is the story of a man who leaves.

First, Cotton's was the story of being left behind.

There are many reasons Bumpo and Dad's marriage sputtered and hummed itself a not-so-quiet ending. Not all of them matter here, few I can verify and most of which I've only picked up from years of my childhood playing possum while lofty, adult talk was exchanged in the air above my ears. I can tell you that by Will's birth, the commune had all but fragmented. The winters were hard. I imagine, some of the Frog Farmer's volleyed for a return to central heating, a return to steady income through

the hungriest months. Money and personal property become more and more difficult to regard as a collective, and the needs and desires, petty or legitimate, warranted or not, of the individual bared themselves more and more boldly as time unraveled before them, faster than they could jar, keep safe, keep whole. They grew accustomed to life under the shadow of the atomic. Convinced themselves society needed to be altered from the inside, that they were power-less under the trees, out there on their lonesome, in the blue Kentucky green. They grew tired. Grew older. Spent.

So, first, the witnesses left.

The same loved ones who held my brother like hope renewed on the day of his birth, cut their losses, divvied up the property and their blame, their wounds and heartbreaks, and set off for Nashville, for Baltimore, for Detroit and St. Louis. For New Jersey, James Island, and for Bowling Green, forty five minutes and half a world away, for the promise of somewhere, of anywhere new.

Dad and Bump found jobs working at the university in town, Western Kentucky, but commuted from the farm. Shielding their boys in their childhood for as long as they could. But like once under the atomic, always under the atomic, once the outside had been let in, Cotton lost something he could never re-find. He was recorded. A cog in the public school system, herded and detained and scolded and not special, not in the way we value children. If I were to guess why Cotton has criticized my homeschooling my whole life from afar, I'd say it's because he resents my dad for providing opportunities for Maggie and I, Dad was unable (Cotton might say unwilling) to provide for him. City school was at best useless and at worst Hell for my brother. And I wish I could say this is the only well of resentment between us from which he could draw, but there are oceans. There is still my mom.

I could recount all the ways in which Dad and Bumpo were disintegrating as a unit, the ways their marriage operated as an agreement between friends less than a promise of devoted love, the way jealousy infected and made poison even their friendship. The way he held her became an omission of something much more true; how they choked on words and swallowed pockets of each other's stagnant air. The story might have wound itself differently, a longer more painful crescendo, but it didn't. Michael fell in love with Teresa. He moved out of the cabin he built by hand, the commune he'd conceived of in a dorm room in Towson College, the family he loved. He became a weekend Dad. He chose his happiness. He chose his guilt. And he left the once sun-beam baby, now

brunette boy, behind.

So, Cotton drinks, and sometimes Cotton calls my father, and my dad takes the calls in the other room. From the other side of the wall, I've spent ten years hearing my brother's anguish reflected in my daddy's tone, but incapable of deciphering either's words, any word, especially my own. The truth is I don't ask, because for my part in this story, I blame him. Cotton. Because he's nearly forty, because it's time to move on, grow up, get over it. Because these talks turn my daddy gray, age him in ways hard work hasn't, in ways Cotton doesn't have to see from across the world at the other end of the telephone calls I imagine he mostly forgets. In ways for which my brother will never be able to account because, hey, by the next time Cotton visits, (though as Dad tells me it won't be this Christmas) he can attribute the new worry lines, the added strain to his shoulders, Dad's ever-feathering white and gray and straw blonde hair to Maggie dropping out of college, to the insurance premiums that followed me after having totaled our car, to Lauren's money squandering husband, and I wonder if the reason I never call, never email, never reach for his hand is that I imagine he must blame me too.

And then there are the moments I can take a step back from the screen. Put my finger on the hair's breadth of perspective distance relents me.

And I am a witness, a loved one, Among Rocky, Rose, Alvin and Dan. I see that baby. That affirmation of beginnings. Speaking the language too new for old resentments to taper, too familiar for this stranger he will someday become. And the hope, the communal family, our family, it's umbilical. It's every atom grown in the mythology of the womb. Fed through story lines, the blood he can't chase. He tucks the summers to be spent, of Frog Farm reunions and forgiveness over cheap beer and old tunes played well, pop-fly catches for the record books, home-grown homeruns; he tucks the way only he can say "Millie" with the lilt of farm boy and a little like a joke; he tucks the good times I gloss over, swinging me ankle-wise through the atmosphere, making the world go topsy turvy before I knew it could be round; tucks Teresa before she became Mom, as his Head Start preschool teacher, the way her cave dark Delphic eyes shone when she and Willie shared a story, when she let Cotton play teacher; tucks every great talk he's ever had with Dad including the very first ones: Cotton at three years old telling Dad he wants pineapple for breakfast, teaching my dad before he'd ever studied child development what a "language -rich environment" sounds like-- home; tucks sneaking

out with Lauren, too-loud music, driving too fast around Horseshoe Bend in the moonlight, tempting too much fate and laughing because this time they lived; he tucks Magnolia Ray the first baby of the new beginning, the one that made us family, and then Amelia Rachel the one that made us whole; he tucks each of us into his belly. Where we'll keep. Even when he forgets. Even when his breath goes sour. Even for all the moments he's missed.

On good days I recognize that there's nothing I can do to change the wounds as they opened for him. And reopen for the rest of Cotton's days. Licked and made to fester, as if from a second tongue. I think about living my whole childhood unbroken, time with dad to spare, his lessons to ignore, jokes to roll my eyes to. Every book he's ever read me. Every book I've ever read back. All the stories I carry in my skin. I am who I am because I come last. When I ask myself, when I must be irreconcilably honest, if I would ever forgive Daddy if he left us for new love, I can't make sound, can't begin to voice an answer. I fix the question, instead, like a painting on the cave of my throat, where it will decay, a thousand swallowings from now, unanswered.

Dad will age, no matter who I blame. As gracefully as he can. He mourns for each of our childhoods, he's told me, because they were the summer of his life. His best years. The utopia he once imagined modeling for the world. If I could do more than bear witness to one thing, I would ask Cotton to mourn for the good times he lived, instead of mourning for all the ones he never will. And even on the good days I feel the tenuous nature of my reaching. How it looks an awful lot like not reaching at all. Even today, I woke up feeling him receding. I dreamt of Cotton a shadow beneath the tide; the fear of him floating away on an ocean I'll never see. I don't know. I wish I could say that fear was enough. I don't know. I breathe, I breathe, and I try to breathe out more relief than I take in.

Dear Cotton,

I was trying today to catalogue the memories I can conjure of you before you left, and there's one I keep returning to, more vivid than the rest. Tell me if you know the time I mean. I went out of town with Dad and Maggie and Mom, and we left Will in charge of our house. He threw a party. Bob was there, before he was Lauren's idiot husband, just as her idiot boyfriend. He drank too much and let our Parakeet Felix out of his cage. Thought he'd take Felix to feel the breeze glance off his wings. Bob took him out the porch, and our bird flew away. He was born and

bred a captive. He was never gonna make it in the wild. I remember, for days, to me it seemed like weeks we could hear Felix chirping to us in the neighboring trees. You took one look at Maggie's and my tear stained t-shirts, the backs of our wrists, and you took to scaling trees. Any limb we imagined Felix's chirping to be circling around, you tried, relentlessly, for much longer than you had to, to coax him down. At least that's how I remember it. I know we never did find him. Or at least, he didn't allow himself to be found. You even climbed up to our roof and set his cage at the tippy top of our chimney. The door open wide for little Felix the bird, in case he ever changed his mind. One day I'll stop waiting.

As if I could.

GATLINBURG, TN.

Jessica Campbell

I wish to be taken back to the room where you dealt pirated CDs
To me when I was only sixteen
In the music store I returned to three years later
To find you had been fired
From within that tapestry draped stickered strip mall
Where everything felt like porn
Wrapped in confederate flags

Believe it or not,
We thought of this city with great mystique,
Visited henna bars on every corner
And watched massive wheels of spinning taffy
As country boys dangled from the balcony
Of half empty motel lots

Somehow the pitching woods and creeks
And raw stunning beauty of mist covered foothills
Was not what I came there for,
Until we were able to wake up before sunrise one night
And watch the green painted mountains light up
With glistening fury
A nervous kind of elation being higher and quite able
To touch the largest rolling clouds and
Hidden berry patches
With flowers of golden purple shining through
The thick escaping scent of cedar and moss

Afterwards we quickly descended again into a local construction zone
And ate, bleary eyed, donuts and hot coffee
Nestled in between racists
And neon glistening tourists
Before returning to a light vacation cabin
Full of wooden bears
And guest book memories

Surrounded by the sickening sense of an unchanging continuity
And feeling haunted by the leftover shadowed spirit
Of a sad, lost, sixteen year old girl
Etched into the walls and draped into the sheets
Because this is where she had finally shed her skin and discovered
What it means to be reborn
And begin to live again

AUNT JERRY AND UNCLE DEBBIE

Lillian Laura

My mom tells me that my dad's side of the family was a lot different before I was born.

The Mills family consists of six children, four boys, two girls, and they all have names that start with the letter J including my Grandma and Grandpa. The Mills are quiet people around people they don't know, and keep to themselves unless they feel like they have had enough time to process what is going on in their thoughts. They love the outdoors and all took weeklong camping trips to the Northern Peninsula in Michigan every year growing up. They used to all smoke cigarettes; one pack every other day, and they used to all have the thickest black hair, like polar bear fur. Above all, and the number one thing to know about a Mills is that they are loyal. They always have been, always will be to all who they love, and to what they believe in.

Back before I was born everyone only got together as a whole for Christmas, Thanksgiving and always Grandma and Grandpa's Anniversary. But that was it. My mom went to a dinner one year with my dad before they were married, she says at the end of the night everyone went back to their cars without saying goodbyes, or exchanging hugs. My mom said to my dad, "Aren't you going to hug your Mom?" and he just shrugged, physical expression of love or verbal for that matter used to be taboo. My Mom thought this was crazy so she sprinted across the parking lot in her heels to hug her future mother in law. Grandma was stunned, her arms were rigid and straight at her sides and her eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of her head. If someone compared this Mills family to the one we are today they would be stunned at the transformation.

I was the first baby to be born into the family and after that the family really came together. It was as if everyone was fascinated by me because I was a baby. My Uncle Jerry and Aunt Debbie especially gravitated to me. Before I was born, Jerry and Debbie were the quietest Mills at family gatherings; they liked to keep to themselves even more than they do now.

My parents were both in the restaurant business when I was growing up so they both worked long hours making ends meet for the

family. My sister and I spent a lot of our weekends growing up at my Uncle Jerry and Aunt Debbie's house. When I was young, maybe four, I would confuse the whole "aunt, uncle" title and call them Aunt Jerry and Uncle Debbie. They loved my quirkiness. Claire and I spent countless days after school there until Mom and Dad got off work late into the night, and many a New Year Eves where Claire and I would share a bottle of sparkling cider and every year we swore we'd stay up later and later just in the hopes we'd see the Ball drop even if it was for a couple seconds before we'd fall asleep.

So many of my childhood memories are still alive in that house on Farragut road in Greenhills, Ohio. In the winter we would sled down the littlest hill in their yard and crash into the fence and let the snow fall down all around us. Claire and I would help Uncle Jerry pick the ripe tomatoes from their little garden and we were horrified as he would pop them into his mouth and eat them like candy. Tomatoes were gross. Aunt Debbie ordered magazine subscriptions for us from Highlights magazine, their slogan was, "Helping your child become their best self." There were puzzles and word teasers to solve and cartoon stories to read that kept me busy on the rainy days. I'd snuggle down in the big red recliner and drink hot chocolate with more mini marshmallows than should have been allowed. We watched more movies there than I feel like I have at every other place combined; The Star Wars Episodes, The Mummy, The Dark Crystal, and also we watched many old time cartoons like Rocky and Bulwinkle. Their dog loved me, Mitzi was a Husky, Chihuahua and Beagle mix, she was the perfect size and our birthdays were almost the same day. She was the closest to having a dog I've still ever had.

One of my favorite things we did with Uncle Jerry was drive to Grandma's house out in Harrison. She lived in a little trailer park out in the middle of the country. I always liked to see where each crop would be planted each year. Soybeans in the left fields, corn in the right, and every year they would rotate. The drive felt like it went on for miles and miles, but in reality it only took about twenty five minutes to get there. Claire and I would jump into the backseat of Uncle Jerry's emerald green diesel truck and go to Grandma's. I would buckle Claire into her car seat. She laughed because she thought the sound the muffler made because it was a diesel truck was funny, this always made me smile. For some reason Claire and I always got along best when we rode in the back of Uncle Jerry's truck and watched the trees go by the windows would be down just enough that my blonde curls would intertwine with her pin straight

brown hair. To make the time pass on our rides Uncle Jerry made up this game called the M&M game. The rules went like this, he'd pull out an M&M and the first to find a car of that color won the round, and everyone got to eat one. The brown M&Ms we used for black cars just to make it easier for our seven and five year old selves. We found that yellow cars were the hardest to find. After the M&Ms ran out we would listen to the King and I Soundtrack. Uncle Jerry's then dark mustache bumped along to every "bum, bum, bum" drum sound and it looked as if it was a caterpillar just waiting for the right moment to escape off his face. Claire and I would giggle and giggle. The only talking we did to interrupt the music was when he said to us, "Now see all these people passing us, they're speeding, and they should get a ticket. Uncle Jerry always goes the speed limit." We believed him, and I'm sure he was telling the truth. That's just the kind of man he is. Once at Grandma's we'd play Parcheesi, Claire and I even got to have our own playing piece. After a game or two Claire and I would wander into Grandpa's office that still looked the same way as it did as on the day he died, only dust had been added. We'd watch Bambi together in his big office chair for the millionth time and Claire would fall asleep, her little head resting on my shoulder.

Back at Uncle Jerry and Aunt Debbie's house when Claire and I weren't terrorizing their cat Emmitt or playing with their dog Mitzi, Aunt Debbie would think of some crafts or projects for us to work on. She loved having things for us to do that she could do with us. Whether it was printing off coloring sheets from the PBS Kids website of Curious George when I was younger, or making origami animal faces of dogs and tigers and making bumble bees and ladybugs with pom-poms and hot glue. But the biggest project we ever worked on together was when she helped me sew and make my own skirt to wear for my sixth grade graduation. We looked up patterns for skirts online and settled on one after searching a whole afternoon. We printed it out and went to Michael's so that I could pick out my own fabric. I chose a chocolate brown fabric with paisley print so that I could wear a turquoise shirt. Aunt Debbie said she loved it when I wore turquoise because it made my eyes look beautiful. Little pools of crystal she called them. Learning how to use the sewing machine was hard. Even for my twelve year old self it was hard to maintain focus on the pedal and the needle and to also move the fabric so that the stitches wouldn't be crooked. I'll admit, she ended up sewing most of it, but I sat with her and helped. We talked about how my day was at school and how excited I was about going to my new school next fall. I never

wore skirts or dresses or anything so this was a big deal for me and I think it meant a lot to her that we made it together. Aunt Debbie gave me my own sewing machine for Christmas that year. It's still sitting in the box, unused, unopened on a shelf in the laundry room at my dad's house.

Claire and I stopped going over there by the time I was in Junior High. I got busy with soccer and Mom and Dad got divorced, which lead Mom to get a different job where she worked during the day so she could be with us and Dad switched his hours at the restaurant so he worked more lunches so more evenings could be spent with me and Claire. Claire and mine's teenage lives were beginning and Mom and Dad didn't need Debbie and Jerry's help after school anymore. I think Aunt Debbie was more hurt that we stopped going over to their house. At the time I didn't see it, but as I've grown up and seen Aunt Debbie less and less at family Christmases I've wondered what really went wrong. Uncle Jerry would come alone on Christmas and he was always in a grumpier mood than usual and he never really tried to talk to me or Claire. In high school I could have only assumed that they were mad with me and Claire for not coming. They never acknowledged either of our birthdays and wouldn't come to the whole family celebrations we had where all the other Mills would come. They didn't even send a card for my graduation. I've tried to piece together the things that happened then in the late 2000's by what Grandma told us and what the other brothers speculated. Uncle Jerry got laid off his job and only found work as the guy who watered the plants at Lowes. Aunt Debbie was a nurse who worked in the Parkinson's department at a local hospital. She got laid off too and was unable to find substantial work for a couple years. They were struggling financially and I think they were embarrassed. My mom speculates that it may have had something to do with my parents' divorce that happened in 2007. I think they really were rooting for their marriage and so when things didn't work out they might have even felt a little betrayed or that my parents hadn't tried enough even though they tried as hard as they knew how to at the time. This must have played a toll.

Aunt Debbie and Uncle Jerry never had kids. They were almost too old to have kids when Claire and I were around and even now they never did and it's too late as they are now into their late fifties. My mom tells me that Aunt Debbie even talked about adoption with Uncle Jerry and we think he brushed the idea aside. It has always fascinated me that out of all my uncles and aunts only my Dad and my Uncle JP had kids. Only three Mills grandkids are in the bloodline. I think it added a lot of

tension between Debbie and Jerry that he wasn't interested in having kids. In a way I think Claire and I became Aunt Debbie's chance to spend time with kids, she treated us and loved us as her own.

After we didn't hear anything from Aunt Debbie and Uncle Jerry after my graduation I could tell my dad was pretty upset and he stopped inviting them over for the birthday celebrations we'd have for me and Claire and for the pool parties he throws in the summer for the whole Mills family. This past year for Claire's 16th birthday in June, my dad got a random call from Uncle Jerry asking if anyone was at the house because he wanted to drop something off for Claire. My dad and I were astonished. He came over, stood on the front porch for a few minutes, handed Claire an envelope and was gone. My dad politely asked if he wanted to stay because everyone else would be over in just an hour anyway. He declined and quickly left. There wasn't any hostility between them, Uncle Jerry just was awkward and said he had other things he had to do. When Claire opened the envelope there was a crisp hundred dollar bill inside. I was happy we saw him, but I felt a little pinch of something inside me.

Just a few weeks ago I was working on something on my computer when I was alerted I had a Facebook notification. It was a friend request from my Aunt Debbie. I took a chance and accepted. I thought maybe this is it; maybe this is their way of reaching out to me and Claire. Ever since then she's been commenting on just about everything I post and has messaged me and asked if Claire and I would be willing to get together with her and one of our other cousins when I come home for Christmas break. I'm sure we will, although no plans are set in stone.

I'm actually not sure why, but I've been thinking about my family a lot lately. Not just Jerry and Debbie. But Uncle Joe and Aunt Elise and how the restaurant is holding up. And also my cousin Aubrey and her new baby Lila who just turned one. I've been thinking about my Grandma whose skin gets even more transparent every time I see her, yet she still hugs me goodbye and tells me she loves me with all her might. Family is a crazy thing. They're the people who love you the most because they have to, but we all love each other because we want to. As I get ready to move to Westerville into my own house next year I cannot help but think that I want to tie up loose ends and see everyone before I begin my own family and leave. I know that I will be back most definitely, but moving to a whole other area code without them still feels strange.

My mom told me, "Lillian, you're going to be twenty years old in a few months, if you want to have an adult conversation with your

Aunt Debbie and ask her what really happened and tell her how you feel, you should.” The problem is I don’t know what I would say. In a sense I think I feel a little bit abandoned or possibly betrayed. Although Claire and I didn’t go over there because we needed to, I would have wanted to if things hadn’t been so crazy in my life and if being a “teenager” hadn’t felt so important to me. Mom and Dad’s divorce still was a fresh wound and having my aunt and uncle would have maybe made it a little better. I think I’m upset and still feel a little abandoned that they didn’t come, let alone acknowledge graduation or when I turned eighteen. I don’t know what I will ask, or if I’ll say anything about it. I do know I will go; the house will look the same maybe with only a few new pieces of furniture. I assume the Green Room where Claire and I slept on the futon will still look the same, and if it doesn’t, if it’s now another office or sitting room I won’t be sad or hurt, I’ll see it as a new start with these members of my family.

It just fascinates me how people, not even just family, have a way of not just exiting your life but coming back into it when you least expect a thing.

S.A.D.

Alexandra Putnam

Whispers.

Whispers screaming bitch
Accusatory, the clink of metal
Broken sentences writhe on the page

In my mouth, infected, like fleas carrying the plague

An interim, a gate, words in a language that doesn't matter anymore.
All of the details they steal from me, destroying the tapes they never
listened to

So they never will.

Wouldn't I be beautiful if I was compressed and stored away?

Choking, if only I could

Draw a breath and enjoy the dust, like they are simple things
Sprinkling salt down my back and worshipping it like it is snow
Like it is rain, it fills my mouth and dust cascades back out

A little boy led me to a grove

And he smiled at me, dust in his throat
And I choked.

The string pulls me back into myself

Snap my buttons in place to remind me that I'm here

But I'm not really here

My imagination breaks my sentences in half and

Ectoplasm forms around my face

Trees grow out of my head

My eyes become clocks

My lips become whispers screaming bitch

I'm made up of fingers and knives and

They have to remind me that uneven surfaces don't exist

That my compulsion toward aborted sound has no justification
“What you do isn’t who you are... You’re neither here nor there.”

I tripped on uneven surfaces in my haste to be anywhere

The verbs swallow my ankles- now can I float?

The dust made a sand dune in my throat

And I choked.

The adjectives twirled around my feet on tip-toe

Pedantic, Placid, Paralyzed all piled on top of me

Trapped in my bronchial chords, taking in words like they were simple
things

Wouldn’t I be complex if I knew how to speak?

I coveted the word “Efficacious” and I held it in my hand

It took the form of a pencil and begged me to make them understand

The dust blew like a windstorm out of my mouth

The salt was a waterfall down my back

I released a breath and the words cascaded out.

Like they were snow, like they were rain.

I’ve grown to love the simple things.

WADING THROUGH THE DOWNPOUR, FINDING SEA EYES

Katharine Major

Finn wasn't heavy then. Not the first time I held him, when he was a few days old. I held him just as gently as I could, not for fear of dropping him, but out of a form of reverence I couldn't name. My eyes trained on his, murky blue which would eventually harden into nutty hazel. I didn't pause to wipe my tears—flowing down my face, thin streams that settled in the caverns of my collarbone wetly. I listened to my own breath and his. He settled into me.

His mother, Terra, and I are not related by blood, though our relationship rings of big sister-little sister devotion. When Terra was a little girl in the 1980's, she lived up in Kent with Cherie and Natalie, her mother and sister. One day, Natalie—then, a toddler—walked out the front door of the house and headed straight for the street with a child's senseless determination. A young girl, a student at Kent State, saw Natalie heading toward the road and scooped her up, out of danger. She knocked on the door, Natalie in her arms. That girl was my mother, and behind that door, she found Cherie. A sisterhood was born that day that remains a testament to the power of fate.

My mother ended up moving into that house with Cherie, becoming another mother to Terra and Natalie. Together, my mother and Cherie built their families. Our family. The story of Natalie's rescue at the hands of my mother is now the stuff of family legend, repeated so often that it is a part of the fabric that connects us, stitched into our collective shared memory. I feel as though I can see it in the thick unwieldy quality of old eighties film, a bizarre result of listening to these women recite this tale with renewed interest at every holiday and family function. I imagine their time together in Kent as a blissful matriarchy headed by my mother and Cherie, full of the youthful carelessness of twenty-somethings, huge eighties curls bouncing and laughter booming, that laughter that still booms when they are together, as familiar and comforting to me as the first light of sun.

When Terra announced that she was pregnant, we were about to leave for a family trip to Nashville, to visit Natalie. Terra was tired. We watched movies in the backseat while my mother and Cherie drove and talked endlessly, never at a loss for conversation even after thirty years. Terra

rested her head on her hand, looking perpetually weary. Her first trimester was hitting her hard, and at two o'clock in the afternoon every day, she would be on the couch, groggy and ill. I sat with her often, partially out of concern for her—having never seen the effects of pregnancy at such a close proximity—and to observe with not a little fascination the havoc that a pinto-bean-sized fetus could wreak. Finn was on the move. So were Terra and Erich—her husband and Finn's worshipped Daddy. They were staying with Cherie's family in Hartville up north, but desperately wanted to build a home of their own. Cherie and Tom—Cherie's husband and the father of Nate, who trailed along behind me by a few years—had just found an old Victorian home in Youngstown, dilapidated but replete with its former glory. Ambitious as always, they bought it and made plans to renovate it entirely. There was talk of Terra and Erich moving in with Finn—already named, though his existence was still limited to the womb.

It was hard work for them, I remember. My brother, Colin, and I joined them at the house a few times to help with renovations. Of course, our version of "help" in our teenage days, fits of laziness and restlessness coming and leaving with the rapidity that only puberty can lend, was minimal. Terra, visibly pregnant now in the winter months, worked up a sweat tossing firewood into the ancient fireplace, while Colin and Nate and I set paper on fire and "looked for kindling" outside, rambling around the estate talking about our futures, the forbidding gray Ohioan sky a grim backdrop. Of course, these conversations were necessarily heavy with teenage irony. The running joke was that Nate would marry someone impossibly silly, because he notoriously had crushes on ditzzy girls; Colin would marry someone incredibly thin, because he was in a phase of adolescent superficiality; and I, of course, they joked, would end up marrying a girl, because I was "too picky" when it came to boys.

I'm fascinated, looking back, that we were so cavalier, talking like that. We had no idea how much hung in the balance of our maturation, how much was at stake. How could we not have known? Our biggest concern was how we would go about building conjoined houses in Nashville—would the construction be too much? Would our moms want to come with us? And, we wondered, what of these three wives? How would they fit in the context of our threesome? Our snotty red faces braced the cold as we snapped twigs, shoving each other, viscerally enjoying our bond in a way that adults do not. We tossed dreams like buckeyes against the cool gray sky, the screaming wind. Inside, Terra hollered indistinctly for our help and we retreated, seeking refuge in a house in pieces.

I liked talking to Finn, even before he was born. I liked imagining my

words drifting down to him, muffled by embryonic fluid and Terra's thumping heartbeat.

I bent down to Terra's stomach and said I love you. Said, I can't wait to meet you. Said, You're special, baby Finn. I just know it.

I always sat by Terra, the very image of the doting little sister. My mother's adored surrogate daughters had become my idols, and I loved them hugely in that specifically teenage way, every emotion crashing through my heart like a rogue wave. My mother and Cherie loved to joke about my attachment to Terra—they thought it was adorable. A particularly shy and prickly teenager, I hated their teasing. Still, I clung to Terra.

Speaking my love for Terra helps me make sense of my love for Finn. By Christmas, she was heavy with child. I watched her haul herself to her feet to hug each passing family member, everyone flush with the holiday and the tremulous excitement that grew with Finn. When she sat again, she settled her hand on her stomach once more. She turned to smile at me. "He's kicking."

To my astonishment, Terra lifted her shirt, exposing her round pregnant belly...and it was moving. She put my hand on her stomach, pressing hard. I felt a little jolt against my hand through the taut skin of her stomach. And again. I looked back at her, a wave of emotion filling me to the brim. It's Finn. Not moving my hand for fear of missing another kick, I bent down and whispered, "I love you," as close as I could get to him.

A few weeks later found Colin and I with our dad at Giant Eagle, earnestly debating which frozen appetizers to cook up for a lazy New Year's Eve. My cell phone rang.

"Hello?" I let Colin take over our battle for mozzarella sticks, turning away to hear who it was.

"Hey, Katy." It was Danny, a distant friend from my art class who I rarely saw outside of school, let alone took phone calls from. I paused in the frozen food aisle, perplexed. Colin's insistent voice in the background faded to a murmur.

"Did you get Victoria's invitation to her New Year's party?"

"Yeah..." I said, glancing back at Colin and my dad. "I'm not going. Why?"

He paused. My eyebrows lowered.

"Danny?"

"Victoria got in an accident."

"An accident? Oh." I paused, worried. "Is she okay?"

A long pause. This time, I could feel the tangible dread over the line.

"Katy, she's dead."

Dead is meaningless at seventeen. You're on the brink of maturing enough to grasp it, but understanding is always just out of reach.

One way to drive death home to children is to have an open-casket funeral. Nothing, no rationalization, negates a dead face. A dead body. Her skin was gray. There were bruises on her neck and face, chunks of makeup making her battered skin somehow more visible. She was sunken into her Christmas dress. She was Victoria and not-Victoria. I looked at her—not her—and looked up at her father's crumpled face and it all hit me with immobilizing force.

Losing Victoria and confronting death paralyzed me. I was perpetually dizzy and tired, and couldn't seem to move past my circling thoughts of everyone's frail mortality. I couldn't focus on anything except for the looming threat of loss. Who will die next? I watched everyone with unnatural closeness, wondering who I would be robbed of next. Yes, strangely, I felt abandoned. A few months before Victoria's death, my father had left the family, crushing me. I only saw him every once in a while, the occasional stray weekend. The times between those weekends seemed to stretch for ages. With another loss, the sense of aloneness intensified. I was isolated in my terror.

A grief counselor came to our high school to discuss grief with the friends of Victoria. We were asked to take photographs of our grief. When I look back on these shots, it is disorienting to realize that they are all pictures of ordinary objects. My ceiling. The table in the family foyer. A television screen.

When I look at these pictures in confusion now, it takes me time to go back to seventeen and remember that there was a time when to me, absolutely everything looked like grief.

Finn was born six weeks after Victoria's death. When I held him a few days after his birth, I felt this little boy, this new life, blooming in my consciousness, an interruption to death, death, death, the constant drum of my pulse in those days. The love was painful in its intensity. My chest felt overfull with the clashing confusion of joy and pain and fascination and grief and love, yes, actual love. Later I would learn that this veering is just me—that for me, every passing thought burns slowly through with the intensity of a searing brand, and the ache of it can feel good, but at that moment, after weeks of numbness, the raw emotion was staggering.

At seventeen, as strange as it sounds even to me, I found hope in the sea-storm eyes of a tiny baby boy.

In his blank future, I saw my own.

Baby Finn. He grew so quickly. Six months later, I stayed in Terra's and Erich's new Columbus home—the Youngstown house now a project for Tom and Cherie to determinedly shoulder alone—and watched Finn. For a week, I held his plump baby body, relishing the smell of his head, returning his caws of joy, lamenting with him when he cried. I loved him, and strangely, I understood him.

"Mah!" he said, protesting when I took him into the bright sunshine while Terra napped.

"Oh, I know," I said back.

When Colin was killed, Finn was a year old. I don't remember what Terra or Nate or even Cherie said to me at the calling hours, but I remember spotting Finn's face swimming in a crowd of mourners. I remember reaching for him, momentarily forgetting everyone else.

"Hi, baby." I touched his face. He looked at me and then away, restless.

Terra held him limply. Her eyes were swollen. She was devastated, like the rest of us. Rarely had we suffered like this.

My life had ended. The inevitable next loss had finally come.

Still, Finn grew.

I was so confused about my own identity that I would stumble over my own name.

Finn couldn't pronounce it, either. "Tatey!" he would shout. "Tatey!"

Even in the blackest forest, a ray of light is still bright.

Bright enough to hurt numb eyes.

Sometimes, when I see Finn for the first time in a long time, my eyes fill with tears and I shatter still.

Colin was naturally talented when it came to winning the affections of children. The neighbor boys used to call him *Cool Colin* and run over to play as soon as their feet hit the pavement, right after the elementary school bus dropped them off. Colin always obliged, to my mild surprise and amusement. He would run with the boys back to their house, our family dog trailing behind him. I can still see the sunshine on his dappled reddish hair.

Do you remember the stories we told with Nate behind a crumbling house?

Finn's hair glints in the summer. His skin turns nut brown.

Most toddlers experience ferocious territorialism. A developmental stage. I don't remember Finn being territorial with his possessions, at least, not

much—it must have been a phase I somehow missed in the buzz of activity that kept my visits scarce during my first few years of college. However, if there is one fragment of the universe that Finn prizes, it is Liam.

The first time I met Terra's and Erich's second son, Finn introduced him. "His name is Liam!" he crowed, beaming at me.

I looked down and fell into Liam's eyes.

If new life inevitably ends in death, why does it bring such unexpected, tenacious hope?

I hope I am long gone when Finn and Liam move on from this world.

I can only imagine the suffering that the world would sustain without them. If these two children—babies, really—have the power to keep a dead girl walking for three long years, what else can they do?

Finn, at four, has a newfound talent for storytelling. Sometimes his stories have glimmers of otherworldly understanding. Once, he told me, eyes serious, about a girl who lives in their basement—his unoccupied playroom to all outward appearances. He catches me off-guard with his empathy. I'll catch his eyes on me when I'm surreptitiously wiping tears. I'll see him watching me, eyebrows scrunched together.

Liam is a baby fat with satisfaction, his mouth a yawning gap. When he was an infant, he startled us with how loud he was—not in the raw wailing of newborns, but in constant grunts and sounds, as if he was trying to get out words that he was too small to articulate. I always wished I could crack the code of Liam's language because whatever he was saying delighted him. He would often finish off a string of sounds with a wide smile, eyes twinkling.

He loves to watch Finn. His eyes never leave his brother's string-bean frame. He gurgles with laughter when Finn giggles at himself. Finn likes to be as close to Liam as physically possible. He curls around Liam's plumb baby limbs and looks up at me, or Terra, saying, "I yove him," and beaming with the promise of this. Their siblinghood is grounded in the truth of their mutual love.

I always see echoes of Colin in their stormy eyes.

DOWN RIVER

Megan Gray

I'll let you go down river
I'll wander more upstream
And when I take control
I'll want to live more than to dream
Of all the things I could have done
Or all the things to say
You might try to catch me
But your magic's washed away
You'll tell them I'm mad
And shout that we're done
While I sit back and smile
And realize I've won
Because you never knew
The strength I possessed
I'll let you go down river
And I'll wait for the best

ADONIS

Katharine Major

Split her unblemished
cloth arm
in two:
Bring forth the nectar:
Adonis' nightcap.

Take hold
of the loose skin of her
mottled knuckles
and rip it—
there you shall have
a rich licorice
to be offered to Him.

And when you bite
into her shoulder,
He too
will devoured the fruit-flesh
and core
in a ravenous fervor.

Woundless,
she plucks her sight,
twin melons,
hands them to you.

They are to be taken,
chewed slowly,
juice dripping
from His painted lips.

Take care when you crack her bones:
They splinter—

tiny daggers
turn against you.

Turn these too
over to Him:

He will soften them
under His fair tongue,
and swallow the remnants
of the stiff brackish bread—
her marrow, a fine butter.

And when you
wisely take
the heel of her divine foot
in your mouth,
savor the taste of
sugar-sweat and earthy grit
before you give these too over
to the god of desire.

When I look up and see
His constellation
glinting like
shattered nostalgia—

wailing lamentations
ring in my ears,
the voices of His mortal women
most devout.

I pray
that you will
cradle my cherry-lips in your mouth,
A sacrifice.

SIGNIFICANT INSIGNIFICANCE

Katelyn Hanzel

California was one of those places that I had easily resigned myself to never seeing. The film stars I see on the big screen would never be humanly tangible. The musical artists I listen to hourly on repeat would never actually seem accessible except through their music and social media channels. My favorite celebrities would always live in fantastical houses of my own mental creation. California itself may as well have been its own country, considering how foreign it genuinely was to me. Los Angeles had been slightly fictitious to me for most of my twenty-one years — it existed, but I never fully believed in its reality.

I still wasn't a California believer when I got to the Columbus airport on the tenth of October, with a full suitcase, freshly printed boarding passes, and Ashley standing next to me, her mom long gone after dropping us off at the doors. I was convinced our layover in Charlotte was a joke, because was it really possible for two twenty-year-olds to be flying across the country for fall break, just because? The espresso I had spilled on my cardigan sleeve was not at all as comical as the rest of that 46-minute layover, but at least the coffee stain looked and felt real. Even the five-hour flight from Charlotte to Los Angeles didn't win me over, and I read John Green's "Paper Towns" cover to cover in the air. It wasn't until we touched down at 10:30pm, reclaimed our baggage, and took a car up to our cottage in the Hollywood Hills, when I realized that I was a Northeast Ohio girl standing on west coast pavement, and I was staring at this bright, lit up city that never seems to sleep.

The entire point of this trip across the country was for Ashley. Her dream of relocating to L.A. for her career was already materializing, thanks to her dad taking care of our travel arrangements so we could explore the city. If it hadn't been for Ashley, this adventure never would have happened for me, so I made sure to indulge myself in my own explorations, because the chances of it ever happening again were already slim. We had an itinerary packed to the margins, and we were determined to hit everything worth doing, plus more. We were going to be pure tourists, and that was okay with us, because how else were we going to spend our fall break? Lounging around the house wouldn't do (although the view from the patio was gorgeous, and drinking morning tea while listening to whirring L.A. traffic and staring at the Hollywood sign quickly became a ritual I could have kept forever). We hit the ground running, and ignored

the jetlag that weighed us down in order to embark on our first day of exploration.

I was surprised at how soon it hit me.

That feeling.

Months before, I'd told Ashley that one of the places I wanted to see was the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. Superficially enough, it wasn't because I wanted to see the graves of the people who were laid to rest there. The cemetery had served as a set for the movie "Valentine's Day," and I wanted to find the place where Topher Grace and Hector Elizondo sat and talked and reached the peaks of their character development – where Topher realized he needed Anne Hathaway despite her flaws, and Hector got reunited with Shirley MacLaine in a way that made everyone sigh out of sweetness for the moment. Being the film addict she is, Ashley was more than willing, and on our first day, we hopped in a car and headed to the cemetery first thing in the morning. I think our driver might have been a bit curious as to why two college girls wanted to see a cemetery during their stay in California, but as it was a typical tourist spot – or so it seemed – he never asked us any questions.

The cemetery was beautiful, and much bigger than I ever would have imagined it would be. Just when we thought we had reached a piece of the perimeter, another corner could be turned, opening up an entirely new section to explore and study. Flowers everywhere bloomed in some of the most vibrant colors and the palm trees overhead were always a bit unusual to see when I noticed them. Ashley and I didn't see many people we knew, and while I never did find the exact spot from "Valentine's Day," we did manage to find Mel Blanc – the voice of Porky Pig and countless other characters that made childhood me giggle and feel happy. Two other visitors also let us know where we could find Johnny Ramone, should we wish to (we didn't, but we found him anyway – a statue of Ramone himself, holding a guitar). There was a mausoleum that sat on a miniature island in the middle of a pond, too, and I am sure the ducks there did not realize the company they were keeping.

It was unreal, being able to witness the essence of these lives in such a silent way. It was as if parts of their stories were being told just by the placement of their headstones. Some plots were all clustered together, as if everyone knew each other, and they couldn't bear to be the normal distance apart from one another, even in death. Instead, they were close enough that some touched, while others only had a space separating them wide enough to allow flowers to grow between. I wondered if these place-

ments were planned before passing by the people who now rested there, or were decided on and designed by family members afterward. Other memorials were huge, lavish, and intricately detailed — people I didn't know had some of the most beautiful memorials, and it made me wonder what they had done throughout their lives... what was it that made their family want to remember them in such an ornate fashion? Headstones the size of walls, plots that looked more like gardens than burial sites, water features, and memorials that were so tall we had to tilt our heads toward the sun to see them.

One gentleman's headstone had *Poet* carved into it.

I don't remember his name. I wonder what is left of his writing.

By the time we finished at the cemetery, I was long gone, submerged in thoughts that I had not encouraged to surface the way they seemed to. This was not a feeling I was used to having when I visited any other cemetery — my maternal grandparents, buried in Parkersburg, West Virginia, do not elicit this type of experience, but perhaps that is because they both passed when I was too young to truly understand the idea of losing someone close to me. When my paternal grandfather passed away, however, I was nineteen and the last in my family to know. It was days after when the news came to me, and he had already been cremated, because he did not want a service — because he did not believe in God. And as I stared at this cemetery, I felt a sense of renewed loss; what it really meant for me to miss my grandfather. My grandfather, who had always told me I was more beautiful every time he saw me, and I could do whatever I wanted to in life because I had the passion to do so; who had come to my softball games and stood at the outfield fence with his yellow lab, Brie, to watch me pitch; whose drink of choice was a tumbler filled with good scotch on the rocks.

While waiting for our car at the entrance, I stared at the sky, at the palm trees, at the fountain near the gate. I turned around and looked at the spread of the entire cemetery in a panoramic sweep — the clustered headstones, the sparkling, granite, skyscraper-like memorials, flowers so bright they might as well have been animated. None of these things were things my grandpa wanted, and now a place does not exist where I can revisit simply to be with him. Even if he had been buried and given a service, I honestly could not know who would have shown up to pay respects and say goodbye — not because he was a bad person, but because he wasn't close to many. I ignored the other tourists walking around, and the guards sitting in a golf cart near the entrance. They all saw this place merely as tourist destination, looking for and taking photos of expired lives only so they could show off to friends later. I ignored the Paramount

buildings behind the trees – sure, I had come to this cemetery originally to find a movie destination, but I ended up not caring. I was no longer in awe of the fact that the cemetery was in the middle of Hollywood. I just wanted to know that the people laid to rest there had wanted to be placed there. I wondered where my grandfather ended up – I’ve often wondered, since his death, where he went. Where he may have wanted to go. The people buried in that cemetery were obviously close to their faith. As I stood there, I asked my questions – again – to God. “Where is he? What happened? What am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to do?” These questions were asked without words, and I have come to the personal understanding that wherever Grandpa did go, God is taking care of him, if only because I’ve prayed he would. That day in the cemetery, everything was oddly quiet, considering the city we were in the middle of; there wasn’t even any wind to rustle any of the foliage around us. It was a near silence that felt loud enough to shatter windows.

I felt significantly insignificant.

Significantly insignificant. Enormously miniscule.

I am a microscopic piece of the universe, surrounded by vast unknown.

Similarly to California, I had convinced myself that it would be a long, long while before I had the chance to immerse myself in Pacific saltwater. Family vacations at younger ages had introduced me to the Gulf of Mexico during our first visit to Texas, and the Atlantic Ocean during a one-night stop in Daytona before making it to Disney World. Both experiences had been beautiful – my brother and I had even gotten to see Daytona Beach covered in jellyfish that had been washed up during high tide, the morning before we departed. I was sure, though, that if I ever were to make it out there, clear across the country to the Pacific, the experience would never measure up to what I had dreamed up in my head. Even when our driver that day, John, dropped me and Ashley off at Venice Beach, I was under the assumption that there would be an obscene amount of people there, all of whom would put an unwelcome damper on my Pacific Ocean experience. During our drive from our house in the Hollywood Hills, John had jokingly asked us if we had brought our Mace, because there were “weird people and freaks” there. I remember looking at Ashley and catching her looking right back at me with wide eyes. This was not at all reassuring or comforting, not what either of us were expecting to hear, and suddenly I found myself hoping that what John had said really was just a joke. It wouldn’t feel right, with all of them there, weird

and freaky or not. It would feel congested; the way a city highway feels during rush hour, when even the people who enjoy driving are simply dying to get out of their cars and breathe fresh air by themselves, without all the strangers around them. I was expecting this congested feeling, this constricting feeling that would hold me back, because of all the people.

All of the eyes that could have been watching me, putting me into a spotlight that I had never asked for. I already knew I was an outsider there;

I did not need unwanted attention reminding me, and making it impossible for me to disappear.

I was shocked to discover how wrong my assumption had been. How very wrong.

It goes without saying that Venice Beach was gorgeous. The houses along the coast were colorful and uniquely geometric, the palm trees that lined the beach swayed in the breeze above us, and the sand that dusted the asphalt walkway was as inviting as the beach itself. These simple details were the ones that I soaked up as easily as the sunshine, because I was sure that the locals – who saw these things every day – did not quite see them the way I did. I was genuinely stunned, however, to see that the beach was relatively empty. People were there, of course, but not nearly as many as I had envisioned before we arrived, and no “weird people” or “freaks” seemed to show themselves. Surprising to both Ashley and I, we stuck out a little, because while we walked around in sundresses, swimsuits, and sandals, the natives were bundled up in sweaters, boots, and scarves – this was their autumn, seventy-six degrees with a cloudless sky. This made us laugh, reminded both of us again that we were Ohioans, and made me appreciate true Ohio seasons just a little more, despite their inconsistencies.

Ashley and I strolled down Ocean Front Walk for a bit, snapping photos of the coastal houses, and the stretch of beach in front of us. We listened to the variety of languages that surrounded us at any given moment – from English to Spanish to even some French. It took us a bit before we were ready to step off of the asphalt and into the warm sand. This was an experience I really had only dreamed about, and I was steps away from making it a reality. It was actually going to come true for me. My mind and body felt nearly electric with anticipation.

The tide was coming up pretty far that early in the afternoon, and we quickly realized, as it engulfed our toes... the water was cold. Cold enough that Ashley almost didn't go any further, and the both of us had goose bumps spreading across our skin. This was the moment I understood the sweaters and the scarves of the locals. Ashley was quick to get in, snap her photos, and get out of the water and back onto the sand. She

was soon ready to move on, and head to the pier down the shore. She did not seem to have the desire that I did, to feel this infinitesimally beautiful sense of life. This had been a theme of our trip – Ashley moving much faster, while I wanted to slow everything down to make it all last. It felt, at times, as if I was being pulled from place to place, without being given a proper chance to breathe first.

I had no qualms with the ocean. I have always loved the water, so I toughened up and ignored the cold, because I was here and this was happening and to this day I still don't know when I will ever get that chance again. I was not thinking about the fact that there were probably sharks in the water somewhere further off the coast, or that the seaweed tangled around my ankles should be freaking me out, or that the bottom of my dress was dripping wet. None of that was crossing my mind, because my mind was refreshingly blank, if not completely numb. This was the Pacific, and I wanted to touch it. I needed to be a part of the largest part of our planet, if only for an unrepeatable moment.

I stood in the Pacific Ocean. I got knee deep, and with the sun on my shoulders and the salted breeze in my hair, I let the waves crash into me, push and pull and move me, as I stared out into this new version of oblivion I had come to see and know. I let the Pacific Ocean into my head and my heart, and I experienced an organic type of eternity. A new idea of continuity. This novel, heightened brand of liberation, that soaked through to my stretched fingertips, and made my lungs rejoice and my heart swell. I remember closing my eyes for a moment, and focusing on inhaling the salty air and feeling the softness of the breeze on my skin. I felt all of my worries and all of my stress about anything and everything wash away with the tide and disappear in the undertow. I did not have to be anywhere – no meetings, classes, appointments, or work shifts. I had no pressing work to do – no papers, research, or readings. And I didn't have to consult my little black book to see if and when I had time for anything or anyone. I was free of commitment, of obligation, of unnecessary noise and chaos... of the schedule of my life that I had left two thousand, two hundred, forty-one miles away. It is worth mentioning that that life is one I truly love, quite dearly. But standing in the Pacific Ocean, I felt like a person, and only like a person. A human being without all of the added details life includes.

I opened my eyes. I stared out at the water, saw all the sailboats that dotted the horizon, at the place where the water marries the sky and their colors melt together.

I felt significantly insignificant.

Relevantly irrelevant. Realistically imaginary.

The vast unknown seems to double, but the universe is still packed inside me.

By the end of our week, Ashley was more than ready to find herself an apartment in West Hollywood and move in, while I was ready to fly home, only wishing I could take the Pacific with me, maybe in a Mason jar. The night before our flight home, we spent our last dinner at California Pizza Kitchen, and over salads and lettuce wraps, we chatted and reflected on the experiences we had had during this fall break. While the neon night lights of Hollywood Boulevard sparkled around us, I looked at Ashley, and I saw a refreshed version of her. I thought of everything we had done during this week, and the moments in which Ashley came alive the most: The Warner Brothers Studio Tour had her practically hyperventilating – her eyes had turned dreamy when we drove past the casting offices, and I told her “That’s where you’re going to be real soon.” The Universal Studios Backlot Tour had her bouncing in her tram seat, while she ogled over the Bates Motel and Wisteria Lane. Across the table sat an eager, happier version of this friend that had come into my life two years prior. “Ashley,” I told her, “you are going to move out here after graduation and you are just going to flourish.” She was made for that big city, and she needs that nonstop atmosphere and that constant city noise in order to feel alive and active. I can only handle big cities for so long, before I need to escape from them to a quieter place better suited for my pondering, and for the introversion that thrives inside of me behind my outgoing nature. While Ashley could tackle downtown forever, I need quiet. I require reprieve from chaos, and I appreciate open, airy spaces. There in California, this yearning for solitude came after our afternoon in Little Tokyo and the Fashion District, surrounded by countless people shouting various languages at a mile a minute, and not being able to keep up with it all, let alone wanting to. That night, I had soaked in a hot bath for an hour in a porcelain bathtub with clawed feet, while a breeze floated in through the window, and the candles I had lit flickered on the floor. I had the opportunity to let my mind clear. I let my body recharge, and for a while I forgot about the wide-awake city down the hill. These kinds of moments are the ones that ground me in my significance, because they bring me out of the whirlwind, and back to my core.

I saw the hint of sadness in Ashley’s eyes when our plane took off out of LAX the morning of the sixteenth, and Los Angeles disappeared beneath us. She was leaving the place that felt like home to her already. I, contrarily, was surprised at how grateful I was to see simple Pennsylvania

farmland before we landed for our final layover in Philadelphia. I was returning to my home with a refreshed mind, saltwater in my skin and new depth to my outlook on my world.

It is intriguing to me, the way certain places have the power to reduce me to feeling like a speck of dust in a moment's notice, while simultaneously making me feel wholeheartedly invincible. Sometimes I seek them out, because I crave a brand of anonymity that both conceals me from and exposes me to the world. Yes, the ocean is the most cliché place for meditation, self-reflection, personal exploration, or eye-opening realization. Of course, cemeteries are homes to all kinds of ghosts, most of them being figurative and symbolic, and they make you wonder what it is you're doing with your rapidly dwindling life that you used to think would last forever.

But how is it that I can feel so small, and yet so meaningful at the same time?

How can these extremes on this emotional spectrum really live so close together and how can I try to balance myself between the two? Am I even supposed to attempt that?

I think these questions are what end up sparking existential crises, to be honest.

It seems as though I am a person made up of countless contradictions, and I have not yet figured out how to make sense of that facet of myself as a whole. Feeling significantly insignificant, however, does manage to make one thing undeniably clear for me, and that is the idea of perspective. The same things that have been found to make up the universe are exactly the same ingredients that we find in our own bodies, packed into our own DNA. We are actually made of the universe. And in that sense, we are equally as vast, equally as complex, equally as awe-inspiring, and equally as unexplored by those around us, including ourselves. That sounds brilliantly outstanding, but it's terrifying, too. If I am vast, complex, awe-inspiring, and unexplored, shouldn't I be contributing something much more important to society, and further exploring myself to better understand my place in this world? But in the same vein, isn't the contribution of my life now worth something decent?

So often, we find ourselves in places throughout our lives that simply make us feel small and practically irrelevant in the grand scheme of the world. For me, this happens more often than I choose to admit to myself, but in California, I thought about this feeling, and what it meant to me as... just me.

In my hometown, I can simultaneously love and loathe the emptiness that perpetuates there. While I complain about and resent the fact

that I am from a town that offers no admirable prospects to its residents, there are the days when a kind Amish man will strike up a conversation with me at work, and I will be reminded that I am blessed to be employed because of the relationships I have nurtured there. And although I feel irreparably disconnected from my high school friends more often than not, there are the moments when someone will hug me and say, "I'm glad you're here." My significant insignificance seems to follow me, but it is more potent in relatively or entirely unfamiliar locations, because I have no roots in those places. I am foreign.

Yes, I may feel insignificant sometimes in the world, and I may wonder what my purpose is in life, and what it is I am supposed to leave behind for future generations to remember me by. And all of those thoughts may generate an existential fear within me – sometimes, I'll be really scared, for reasons that feel too enormous to make proper sense of. But my feeling of insignificance is actually monumentally significant, precisely because it reminds me that I am a small piece of this world, but I am a powerful piece. I am one of nearly seven billion people on this planet, but my presence here means something, not only to myself, but to others in my life as well. And I will not always understand myself the way I probably should, and I won't always feel as though my seeming irrelevance is actually relevant.

Sometimes, I'll just feel irrelevant, insignificant, imaginary, miniscule, overall unimportant, and scared, and at some point I'll learn to believe that feeling such ways is okay.

Because if I feel those ways one minute, in another minute I could feel like I could take on the entire world at once, and those are the moments worth reaching for.

Because if I let my fear consume me, standing in the Pacific Ocean might never reoccur.

I won't ever want to feel significantly insignificant again.

REBIRTH

Megan Crawford

Left right, left right, back and forth the white gloved index finger swung like a perilous pendulum on a tireless clock. Tick-tock, tick-tock, Left right left left left. The pendulum jammed, the finger remained fixed as person after person was sent to the left. Scarf-clad elderly women wailed for their husbands, wrinkled men in the adjacent queue trying to straighten their hunched-over backs. White-faced mothers clutched helplessly to their children. I shielded my head from the soldiers' blows as we were pushed and shoved roughly off of the cattle car. Raus. Raus. Move, Move. They barked in German. Heads turned confusedly. Men in striped pajamas repeated the instructions in Polish, Hungarian, Yiddish, any tongue they could think to utter. I met one of the striped men's eyes popping out comically against his hollow cheeks, empty and desolate. They said more than the frantic whisperings I would receive in the barracks before the evening roll call. They instructed, they warned, they mourned those eyes devoid of pigment. I stared at the transparent eyes, gray being the closest color to liken them to, in horror. The man was bald, emaciated and prematurely hunched over. He had a ghastly gash across his jawline, his exposed skin ashen and dotted with purple bruises, like a sickly leopard. But those eyes, those colorless hollow eyes had me shaking to my core.

Rudy grabbed me roughly by the hand, dragging me onto the platform with his bone-crushing grip. "Ow! Rudy you're crushing my fingers," I whined. He ignored my cries and kept hold firmly, pushing his way determinedly through the chaotic crowd. Or maybe he couldn't hear me over the piercing wails and cries of the women and children, the shouts of order by the soldiers. We found Mother, Father and Illona huddled together.

"Emese!" Mother cried, pulling me into her arms. She kissed me twice on the forehead, her wet cheeks brushing coolly against my skin.

"What did I say about sticking together?"

I stared at Mother blankly. Nothing. She had said nothing about sticking together. She had said nothing about anything since we had been selected from the ghetto and herded onto the cattle cars. Day after day, night after night pressed up against each other amidst the stench of sweat,

filth and decay she had stood silent, her eyes vacant. She had said nothing when the woman pressed against me turned cold and clammy and I shrieked and cried out for my mother. I had no mother. Her arms remained wrapped tightly around her shrinking frame when I reached out for her to comfort me. Nothing. She had said nothing. But playing along I kissed Mother on the cheek and clutched tighter to her embrace. "I'm sorry Mother," I whispered.

"Don't leave me," she murmured. I nodded, taking her delicate frame in my arms, clutching her head to my breast, trying to ignore the fact that it should have been the other way around.

Illona took Mother's free arm. "We won't Mama," she whispered back, tears streaming down her tragically beautiful face.

A sudden gunshot swept silence swiftly over the chaotic scene. I turned to the spot where the girl had fallen, her long blonde hair darkened and matted with blood as it poured profusely from her head. A scarf-clad woman knelt next to her, her cries echoing throughout the platform, piercingly amidst the sudden silence. Everyone froze fearfully, shirking away from the guards' readied whips.

"Now I said to form two separate lines. Men on one side, women on the other," a tall dark-haired SS man said evenly, making his way to the front of the crowd.

Rudy pushed us into the women's line, his face forcedly hardened. I watched as he dragged Father away into the horde of harassed families still unwilling to let go. I watched until they were two small dots amidst a collage of blurred and distant shapes and figures. Sobbing children were wrenched by soldiers from their fathers' arms and tossed at women who took the children regardless of whether they were their own. Those who refused to comply were flogged mercilessly with whips, clubs, the butts of guns, and when there was no other weapon available a soldier's bare hand. Those who cooperated were flogged mercilessly, there being no sort of logic to the guards' sadism. A crippled boy was tossed callously onto a cart, his bones crunching against the wood. Bodies were being dragged out of the now empty cars by the striped prisoners, faint cries coming from the carts where they were piled. I wanted to close my eyes, to block out the horrors but as if acting of their own accord my eyes remained wide open unable to shirk away from the scene that welcomed us to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Auschwitz. At the time it had been a name like any other. Foreign, unfamiliar, yet glimmering ever so slightly with a flicker of hope. "Auschwitz!" those nearest the tiny window had cried, catching

a glimpse of the town marker. Auschwitz. We were headed to Auschwitz. The name was repeated over and over again. At last a name, a place to associate with our destination. The gnawing fear of where we were headed temporarily abated. We were headed to Auschwitz! Where was it? What was it? We pushed those thoughts to the back of our heads where they took refuge with our pessimism, our despair.

Left right, left right the gloved index finger whirled as the two single file queues worked their way up to the SS doctor. He was handsome, devilishly so, the kind of handsome you only see in the pictures. He stood out sorely against the bleak and barren landscape. The grass was a yellowish brown, the plants shriveled, any sign of life long lost to the workings of the camp. Prisoners drabbed in blue and gray striped clothing so worn and faded it all blended into one miserable shade of gray. Chimneys puffed out smoke industriously in the distance, encircling the sky with black, ominous clouds that terrified and consumed the earth. A nauseating, putrid stench permeated the air overwhelmingly.

The women in front of us were arguing, one pointing anxiously at the smoke. "Up, up the chimney!" she cried madly. The other woman shook her head firmly, actually sticking her fingers in her ears and humming loudly, something I used to do when it was time for a bath.

"You, you don't think that's true, is it? Illona?" I whispered lowly so Mother couldn't hear. Illona's, white-chalked face, her silent stare was answer enough.

I began to choke on the putrid air, the burning flesh, smoking remnants of those who came before us. Again I wanted to close my eyes but the image of the crippled boy burning alive wrenched them back open permanently. I would never sleep soundly in Auschwitz. What had begun as a choked cough had developed into a sickly spasmodic hack. I bent over, spit up dribbling down my mouth, eyes watering. It felt as though I was hacking up my entire insides. I gasped for air. A sweet-faced woman, no more than 20 years old, shoved a filthy handkerchief in my mouth. Slowly, miraculously the cough subsided. I tried to wipe off the moist handkerchief on my dress but the woman merely shrugged her shoulders.

"What's a little saliva? Huh?" she laughed hollowly, shoving the handkerchief back in her pocket. "You're nineteen." It was a statement not a question.

I shook my head, smiling irritably. People were always thinking I was older than I was because of my height. I used to be short and petite like Illona and Mother and really no one in the family is that tall. Father

is average I suppose, same with Rudy. But no one was ever tall. That was until a few years ago. Suddenly dresses that were hand-me-downs from Illona didn't fall past my elbows and I had to stand in the back row for class pictures, you know where the boys usually stand. It was me and six boys. I was taller than a few of them. And all the other girls were placed daintily in the front. I burned the pictures, the faces with sadistic glee.

I tried to keep the exasperation out of my voice. "No, I'm actually only fifteen. A lot of folks think I'm older you know since I'm so tall," I sighed dramatically.

The woman shook her head firmly. "No you're nineteen." What was this woman short of hearing? "No, my sister the one with the face like Ingrid Bergman," I rolled my eyes, "she's nineteen. I am fifteen."

Impatient the woman whispered, "No. When he asks you how old you are you say nineteen. Okay?" She didn't wait for confirmation. "And make your Mother stand on her own."

"But she..." I struggled to find words to explain Mother's condition, something I didn't understand myself. Mother but not my mother not since...

"Trust me."

I looked into the woman's face, dimples still visible against her sunken cheeks, a fierce determination in her gray eyes and nodded.

The doctor, the dazzling man in white stood like a ringmaster, twirling his gloved index finger back and forth like a prized baton. I told Mother she had to try to walk on her own, that she couldn't appear weak. Her eyes that had been so vacant during the journey were attentive, the arrival at the camp seeming to have infused her with restored vigor. She gritted her teeth and nodded, slowly, incrementally leading the way. Hearts racing rapidly, we approached center stage. I held my breath, fighting back the cough that tickled my throat like thistles.

"How old are you?" the doctor asked.

"Nine-nineteen," I stuttered, hearing the uncertainty in my voice. I lowered my head, trying to hide the crimson that had crept into my cheeks, my giveaway.

The doctor smiled knowingly. He came nearer so that he was inches from my face. I could smell the expensive cologne on his closely shaved neck; feel his hot breath on my lips. He backed away slowly, surveying my entire body like he was still in medical school and I was some sort of specimen. Then he nodded to himself and repeated the procedure on Illona, pausing to tousle her hair and watch the rippling effect as the

curls cascaded down her shoulders, a prized specimen. I could see the shudder in her shoulders as the doctor turned to face his final contestant. Mother stood straight, her knees shaking violently, threatening to give way. But they didn't and with a twinge of what looked like disappointment on his handsome face, the doctor pointed all three of us to the right.

We were herded into a dank building full of what I suppose were meant to be barbers, more striped men with colorless eyes and scissors in skeletal hands. An oafish woman guard whose chest threatened to burst out of her tight uniform barked for us to undress. She was met by scandalized looks from the crowd of girls and women, mothers and daughters, sisters and friends.

I saw Mother's knees giving way out of the corner of my eye and caught her by the arm just in time. "Please Mother just a little bit longer," I pleaded. She nodded tiredly, the spark waning. Again the fat guard ordered us to undress, her bayonet glistening menacingly in the dim lighting. The striped men lowered their heads; pretending to busy themselves sharpening and wiping clean their scissors and blades. The male guards stood in the corner watching, waiting, their perverted eyes scanning the crowd, zeroing in on the prettiest girls, the ones with the biggest chests or curviest waists. Growing impatient, one of them, a rat-faced little thing with black beady eyes to match whipped out his blade swiftly, thrashing the nearest woman across the face. Fat red droplets dripped dramatically down her ashen cheeks as she stumbled to the ground. A few other women made to move forward to help her but were drawn back by the glint of Rat-Face's blade coated in blood. He thrashed the blade around menacingly in the air, women cowering behind each other.

"Get up, you fucking cunt!" Even his voice was squeaky.

An irrepressible shiver ran up my spine as we watched Rat-Face beat the woman with his boot, delivering kick after kick, and blow after blow to the abdomen.

Another younger girl jumped in between the pair, taking the next blow to the back as she attempted to shield the woman. "Please sir," she sobbed, "She is pregnant. My mother is pregnant."

The Rat-Faced guard hesitated.

The fat female guard came forward. "I am surprised he missed this. Dr. Mengele is usually so spot on. You," she motioned to the girl, "get your mother up. We are taking her to the hospital."

"The hospital?" the girl asked dazed.

The hospital? Who would have thought there would be a hospital

here?

"Yes," the fat guard smiled evilly, "to the maternity ward. She will be with all the other expecting mothers."

The girl's face lit up and she struggled to help her mother to her feet, "Oh, that would be wonderful!"

We watched cautiously as the daughter gingerly led her mother out of the undressing room, followed closely by Rat-Face. The fat guard watched with a smug expression. When she noticed us standing, still fully dressed, she barked for us to undress. No one hesitated, pulling off their clothes quickly before the Rat-Faced guard returned. I stood shivering, naked as one by one we were brought to the "barber". I watched as Illona's prized locks fell one by one to the floor, a warm nest for the rats threatening to bite our toes. Tears fell tragically down Illona's face, so perfectly smooth and porcelain, making the nearest guard laugh.

"Shallow Jewish bitch!" he mocked.

When it was my turn I didn't shed a tear. Maybe because I didn't want to give the guards the satisfaction or maybe because I had spent the last fifteen years of my existence trying to add volume to this shapeless mop to please Mother. She had tried every promotional product; cost was never a concern when it came to enhancing my appearance. Shampoos said to give you volume, hot rollers results guaranteed. And an hour later my hair was as flat as the cornfields we played in as children, back before the occupation. I laughed, thinking of the hours spent in front of the vanity mirror, as Mother stood behind me curler in hand with a look of fierce determination as she waged an ongoing war. I was rewarded with a blow to the head by the nearest guard.

"You think this is funny, you little cunt?" He sneered.

The barber said nothing, watching the guard's whip fearfully, a timid mouse shirking from the cat's claw. Blood seeped freely down the side of my head, matting the little hair that remained to be cut. When the guard turned away the barber quickly offered me a wet rag.

"Here, take it quickly," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "If they see you bleeding..." he shook his head sadly.

"So it is true then," I whispered, making sure to barely move my lips as I faced forward and he resumed cutting. "The rumors, the...the smoke..."

He nodded and then realizing that I couldn't very well see him when he was standing behind me he whispered, "Yes."

I don't know what I expected, if I had thought I would feel better,

or, well, perhaps more assured in knowing the truth. I had known, I had suspected from the moment we were herded onto that train, if I am being perfectly honest, that we were going to our death. I think we all knew in one way or another. Even the children, too young to recognize the difference between a German and a Jew, seemed to understand, to know. Perhaps it is something innate, that ability to sense imminent death, a primal instinct.

When we stepped onto the platform and inhaled the revolting stench sticking to the air like a spider's prey trapped in her tangled web I didn't just sense, I knew. And if I knew, then why did I need to hear the crazy woman shouting "Up the chimney"? Why did I need to ask Illona if it was true? Why did I ask the barber now? Because despite my knowing I wanted desperately not to know, I wanted to feign innocence if only for a little longer. I wanted to be fifteen, running through the cornfields, giggling and pretending to hide with my girlfriends from the boys chasing after us, demanding we let them kiss us.

I was going to let Erik Kovach kiss me. He had been following me around like a pathetic little puppy, begging me to be his girl. And I wanted to, I was about to say yes but Clara said that you shouldn't give in to boys so easily and that Erik was nice but if I held out a little longer someone better might come along. I told Clara I didn't want someone better, I liked Erik well enough. He brought me Kifli every morning before school and every Friday had a Flódni or Dobos torta to take home for Shabbat. He smelled like fresh bread and always had a grin on his face. I imagined his lips tasted like powdered sugar. But I hadn't kissed him. One morning I sat on the school steps waiting for him but he never came. My stomach grumbled and ached in pain all morning and come afternoon I ran to the bakery to find the shop boarded up. Mother had always shopped at the bakery a block from our apartment. She had never known the Kovachs, only seen them in passing at the Temple.

I still don't know what happened to him, whether he got away, whether he is standing right now in a filthy bathhouse one hundred yards away naked and shaven unrecognizable. How many boys do I know shivering on the other side of the camp? How many went up, up the chimney, ashes to ashes? Smoke, endless smoke. The final remnants of our generation. Who chases the girls through the cornfields now?

I am bald. My hair, the bane of my existence has fallen. I look at the women around me, deformed heads, bloodied and bruised, pink and shiny new. Infantile. Freshly hatched. Squinting around at the desolate

scene that greets them. Welcome to the new world order. We run, shirking away from the victor's whip, naked across the yard to the bathhouse. Two minutes under icy cold water that dribbles from the showerhead surrounded by a dozen other girls, all trying to clean themselves after days of travel. Scrubbing, scrubbing with their bare hands. No soap. Only water, dribbling water that suddenly runs dry. Out. Out. The whips lash our naked flesh. Powder. White powder tossed on us. Delousing it's called. We might have lice. Hurry. Hurry. We run wet, naked to the next building. Finally clothes. Not our own. They belong to Germany now. Some sort of undershirt. It offers little support. Breasts sag beneath its coarse material. A smock dress. Shoes. I am lucky to snag a real pair. The right is bigger than the left and there are no laces. Illona is stuck with clogs, hard wooden and awkward. She cries. I don't think she ever stopped. Mother's are nearly perfect, fitting her small feet so well she hardly needs the laces. She doesn't offer Illona her shoes. I don't either. Primal instinct. It is as if we already can sense the importance of this moment, this acquisition of shoes, though how vital we couldn't then have known. On. On. To the next building. Numbers tattooed into our forearms in dark blue ink. A57936. I don't even feel the needle penetrate the skin. I am A57936.

No hair. No possessions. No identity. Only memories of a life lived once upon a dream. They nip and gnaw at our hearts like rats. Reminding us of our former selves, reminding us of how far we have fallen. It is better not to remember. Not to think. No past. No future. Only here, only now. Aching with hunger and thirst, I struggle to hold on to words.

THE SEA, AT ONCE

Jessica Campbell

It's not like we haven't been here once before,
Ringlets of salted breath shaking around my
Walking fantasy body
Watching your footsteps hours ago
Vanish into the setting sun
Again and again
I can taste your death
Waiting around logs
And stained tides floating back and forth
Among the dried rotting sea
While I wait,
Smoke already clung to my clothes
From a fire burning stink
Through the winded storm clouds
Just about to burst out a second sun
And sand, I'll be picking it from my
Dirty fingernails for weeks
If I ever end up leaving
Or if I wait alone breathing in
The greasing seagull feathers
And the raw water
Waiting for your hazy shadow to rise
Over the waves of salt and spray
A rebirth bright, sudden, and
The sickening sense of disintegration
I've known once before
When you've disappeared and
Left me on my knees
To keep adding bloated bark and
Dried seaweed to the green blue fire
Begging another glimpse of your
Salted, shimmering escape

MY NAME

Amelia Christmas Gramling

My Name is Amelia Rachel Christmas Gramling and I've fumbled, swallowed, spat, strung onto the backs of guileless boys, sweat, cracked my tongue on, lied with, gritted to the marrow, and forgotten more words than many of this world's women ever read, write or make holy with the privilege of speech.

The privilege of speech.

You know, I don't sleep easy, but my Mama, Teresa, still tells me, like those nights of another life I slept safe and soundless cocooned against her breast, I run deep. Some nights I graffiti the abandoned tunnels of my mind with eulogies for women whose hands I will never shake, whose ribcages I can't un-mangle, whose homelands my grand and great fathers fostered womb-less -- distended with drowned roots of never-to-be-milked tears, quarantined, salted and stripped to KFC's; these women whose names I don't know if I should whisper or sing or bury or write BIG across sea bearing skies and thus live up to that still landing-less pilot whose name I have borrowed for going on twenty one tributes to the un-risen December sun.

Earhart, a boy named me once.

But I am scared of heights.

And if right here, in this freezer-burned and soon to be sunken daylight, I spoke one or twenty one or 1 billion names of the tortured, and crucified, the imprisoned, and the barely survived, muffled and again and again miss-told lives -- I can't honestly say if it is my place or my biggest pretention to call sisters, to claim as kin, what would change? Would the napes of your necks pool with purpose? And if so -- what comes next?

What does it mean to act within our power?

Are my lips a flipbook of cut together magazine advertisements.

Or.

Am I speaking.

Could you tell me the difference.

Am I lucky?

Am I guilty?

Is there a difference.

And if I admit to God, to the ones who would have Her cut from me

and imprisoned in gold-embossed paper-mache to every single innocent bystander, every accomplice to oppression, (potatoes, po-tah-toes,) that I am, can I step away and apart from this moment, can I dance or Rise or laugh or return to the enclosure of my padded classroom with this chin I inherit from my Grandfather, proud like his picture, mantled and gray and far away, never seemed to me?

I want to tell a story.

My father, my teacher, my longtime friend --Michael, sixty five, white skinned, blue eyed, sees much of life filtered through windshields. He believes that in the half a century since he was sole-less and dependent on rides, times have changed, we fear the roads and its trampers, its wanderers more acutely, but perhaps, he tells me, that's the spoiled ground true danger fields and whets its pallet with.

Either way, he still picks up hitch hikers.

Once he pulled up to a middle-aged Black woman, curbed to the banks of an ashy shoulder. She needed cash, not a lift, but my dad only carries plastic. He thought about leaving, he thought about the worth of trouble, (what does it cost us to afford twenty buck, invaluable, fifty buck, incalculable, moments of opportunity) He said to her, I don't know this city well, but if you want to point me towards an ATM, we can drive together, and I'll give you what I can.

Is it more of a risk to offer a strange woman your hand, than if you are a strange woman, to take a strange man's -- to say yes to what rarely lives outside of parables and old wives tales, as help? Does post-modern, post-Steubenville, post-Trayvon string-less and catch-free charity exist? I can only tell you, she got in.

On the way, she told him about herself. Hers was the story of weary feet, of social workers, divorce lawyers, of nickel & dime indebtedment, of working harder than I can neither materialize nor summarize in order to reach some wing of a flightless job whose wages were live-able (Live-a-ble not sur-viv-a-ble). This woman was never published, never asked for her words to graze the public ear. Not that I know what she would tell them, I don't even know her name. My dad, in turn, spoke of why and how he is able to rent pine-scented, Hybrid cars, keep his youngest daughter of five in a private institution, full bellied and well-read and outfitted in Target jeans for which another girl, maybe her age zippered the seams in a Cambodian textiles factory.

Thirty years ago a woman named Colleen Mendel, a woman born the May to Michael's April, 1948, a woman whose heart gave way, three

weeks ago, to the last gasp of Breast cancer in the Rocky split of the greatest snowstorm the mid-west has seen fifty years at least, offered a long haired, creek bathin' college drop-out an opportunity . To tell his story. She gave him the job that continues to stretch him, his hair now thinning, across the two-lane highways on which this country rests its wheels, its weary feet (Give me your tired, right? Your lonely hearts?).

My entire life, and longer, he has spent his best years leaving for Head Start gatherings. He tells stories about me, my brothers , my sisters, our truth, in order in order to instill into the homes of children, to the babies already sanctioned at five years old the least-likely to-contribute and most-likely-to-never-be-granted-parole brackets of the American caste system, the value of language.

What does it mean to act within our power? I am the product of prevention, the daughter of good works, the backseats of drivers who work to reverse in our youngest someday mothers, presidents, poets, and strangers, what Congolese, Cambodian, Swahili and American women are kin to one another in, if only this, a suffering that damages more than bone or skin and extends further than a billion and more deeply than tree-rot or frost bite.

Silence.

This is what an epidemic sounds like.

Before letting her out on the corner of nowhere and new-light, He said to the woman, I don't know why I am the man behind the wheel and you're traveling this country's thumbs, why I choose my kindnesses and you rely on too far between and too few heart strings but neither one of us deserves this.

If all I am is Amelia, a mouthful, a story, could you tell me --

Am I speaking

Loud

Enough?

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS:

JESSICA CAMPBELL
EMILY CLARK
STEPHANIE COLLART
MEGHAN CRAWFORD
AMELIA CHRISTMAS GRAMLING
MEGAN GRAY
KATELYN HANZEL
LILLIAN LAURA
KATHARINE MAJOR
ANDREW MILLER
ALEXANDRA PUTNAM
LINDSEY ROWLAND
CLAIRE WINSLOW

ON THE COVER

“DÉRIVE” BY HALEY AMICON