

Otterbein University

Digital Commons @ Otterbein

Quiz and Quill

Otterbein Journals & Magazines

Spring 2010

2010 Spring Quiz and 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, "2010 Spring Quiz and Quill Magazine" (2010). *Quiz and Quill*. 132.
<https://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/quizquill/132>

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

Quiz & Quill

Spring 2010

Quiz & Quill
Spring 2010
Otterbein College
Westerville, OH

Covert art: "Disaffection 2" by Katelyn Dougless

Quiz & Quill prides itself on publishing the highest quality creative work. Therefore, every precaution is taken to ensure a writer's anonymity during the selection process. All identifying information is removed from the submissions, and each manuscript is given a submission number.

Quiz & Quill Staff



Managing Editor:

Wes Jamison

Secretary:

Jenn Johnston

Page Designer:

Jeremy Hirschfelt

Editors

Poetry:

Stephanie Freas

Fiction:

Ben Daniels

Nonfiction:

Morgan Ritchie

Copy Editor:

Kathlene Boone

Academic Advisor:

Shannon Lakanen

Claire Augustine • Tony DeGenaro • JT Hillier • Jeff Kitner •
Alice McCutheon • Manny Melendez • Debbie Sherriffs • Lillie Teeters

Table of Contents

Editor's Note Wes Jamison	10
On Having Interviewed Mark Doty Wes Jamison	12
Stage Notes (<i>non-fiction</i>) Clarie Augustine	17
An Imaginary Chinatown (<i>poetry</i>) Heather Leslie	27
Fruits of my Labor (<i>poetry</i>) Stephanie Freas	29
Hold on Loosely (<i>non-fiction</i>) Erik S. Lutes	30
Desire (<i>art</i>) Katelyn Douglass	39
He Asked Me to Tell Him (<i>non-fiction</i>) Wes Jamison	40
My Dearest Julia (<i>poetry</i>) Erika Loch-Test	47
Vulnerability (<i>art</i>) Katelyn Douglass	49
When Life as You Know it Ends— (<i>poetry</i>) Wes Jamison	50

Table of Contents

Flesh and Blood (<i>fiction</i>)	52
Justin McAtee	
Disaffection (<i>art</i>)	59
Katelyn Douglass	
Eyes Black as a Moonless Night (<i>fiction</i>)	60
Lillie Teeters	
White Life Choices (<i>poetry</i>)	66
Bess Proper	
Platte River (<i>poetry</i>)	68
Claire Parsons	
Diffidence (<i>art</i>)	69
Katelyn Douglass	
The Store that Sells Emptiness (<i>fiction</i>)	70
Jennifer Rish	
I am the River (<i>poetry</i>)	82
Jestine Ware	
Esteban (<i>non-fiction</i>)	83
Bess Proper	
Diffidence 2 (<i>art</i>)	88
Katelyn Douglass	
From Mrs. Ott's Window (<i>poetry</i>)	89
Lillie Teeters	

The Ring (<i>poetry</i>)	91
Claire Parsons	
Presentiment (<i>art</i>)	93
Katelyn Douglass	
Seashells and Ashes (<i>poetry</i>)	94
Bess Proper	
Always a Minute Late (<i>non-fiction</i>)	96
Erik S. Lutes	
Presentiment 2 (<i>art</i>)	113
Katelyn Douglass	
Dead Flies and Walls Made Out of Chalk (<i>poetry</i>)	114
Lillie Teeters	
Stille Nacht (<i>fiction</i>)	116
Justin McAtee	
I Come From Worlds Ending (<i>poetry</i>)	121
Kylene Watts	
Spirit's Song (<i>non-fiction</i>)	123
Jenna Barnett	
Growing Old (<i>poetry</i>)	125
Erika Loch-Test	
Paradise Found (<i>poetry</i>)	127
Tony DeGenaro	
Contributor Biographies	129

Editor's Note

The obvious thing to say here is "Thank you", but I am not entirely interested in verbalizing what is already visible to the majority. So, while I do thank you – you, the reader, the contributor, the advisor, the staff member – that gesture and that list seem inauthentic. Instead of trying to do that, I find myself succumbing to the weight of certain narratives pressing on me, ready to spill out of me onto the page. This late in the year, with all my energies spent, I am incapable of telling any story in its entirety – so I hope vignettes will do.

I want to tell a story of teamwork and cooperation: Kathlene Boone asked me to be the copyeditor for *Kate*, Otterbein's feminist magazine, for which she acts as editor. I agreed. Thusly, she copyedited under my editorship, and I copyedited under her editorship.

I want to tell a story of trust: Stephanie Freas offered to take care of our t-shirts. I was reluctant to pass the burden, but she assured me by saying she wouldn't have offered if she couldn't afford to do it. I was worried, but she took care of everything. And nothing bad happened.

I want to tell a story of growth: Morgan Ritchie and I sat outside of the library and talked about how many letters of gratitude we have to write before we leave Otterbein. We talked about how much we've changed – and how we are now witnessing that same change in others. We miss it, that youth and excitement, but are also very pleased to be where we are.

I want to tell a story of honesty: Yes, we brought a dog to class. Yes, it peed on the carpeted floor. No, we did not feel bad about it.

And I am honestly thankful for every moment I have spent looking through our old publications, preparing for the week's meeting, working on a publication – and every moment I have spent with

the Quiz & Quill staff. And I am honestly thankful for the submissions, for the readers, for the help.

And I want you to tell me a story of enjoyable reading.

Peace for now,
Wes Jamison
Q&Q Managing Editor

On Having Interviewed Mark Doty

by Wes Jamison

During his visit to Otterbein College, I interviewed Mark Doty on April 20, 2010. After an English department picnic lunch, I took him to Java Central in Uptown Westerville. For approximately an hour and a half, I asked him questions about language, writing, reading, despair, and representation.

All I can do is try to do the best I can at being whatever it is that is myself on the page. And so, as I write this piece, this "interview with Mark Doty," I can't help but make my admiration and respect, my nervousness and awe visible. This can't be written as a transcript of an interview, because that is not who I am, not what I do – and that is not even how it went. It was a conversation between the two of us. These, then, are my impressions.

I thought that it would be easy to write about this – about those fifty six minutes and twenty-two seconds I recorded and saved on my computer – because I'd simply be repeating his words. After having typed up most of what he said, though, I realize that there is something missing, something that cannot quite be described by transcribing our conversation. And that is something we talked about, Mark and I: *the deformity of words*, how language, in a way, deforms experience. I guess then that that is a good place to start:

"That is the poets's paradox. So much of what we approach is wordlessness and unsayable," Mark said, "yet we can't resist attempting to do this impossible thing with the tools that we have." While he was saying this, in my head, I kept repeating the quote he pulled from Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, which I found in his memoir, *Dog*

Years: Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words. Mark maintained the paradox's mystery by simply telling me, "Somehow or other, it happens. Rilke, Woolf, Proust – they say impossible things. They make language go where language can't go." It is obvious, though, that he too makes language go where it cannot go. I've seen it: when he describes his holding a seeping black lab on the floor of a veterinarian office, so many auctions to which he went, a sign, a dog, or a street.

Does this paradox, this concept not too different from Woolf's well-known "angel of the house," come in to play while you are writing? "When I am writing, I have to proceed with what I would call 'operational faith,' by which I mean that during the time I am trying to make this *thing*, I have to act as if I believe that language is capable of doing what I am asking it to do, that language can create a common experience between us, and that this experience matters. During the act of making, I have to have this 'as if' mentality from which I can go forward."

So *that's* how he does it – as if it were as simple as saying "my words can do what I want them to" and then having created a masterpiece. It, of course, is *not* that simple. He said the *Flush* quote "becomes important later on," as a mentality from which one edits and revises. It is likely, though, that if you repeated it like a mantra, such a quote would cripple you: instead, you "introduce doubt" after the work is drafted. "Doubt is a good revision tool.... I think that that ability to doubt the value and quality of what you make is essential. Without that, you're doomed. The reality is that few of us have the no-doubt problem. More of us have the too-much-doubt problem – which will shut us up."

The fine line Mark points to is important: while too much doubt will shut you up, having none will make you seem arrogant, which is just as detrimental. "Writing often fails when it operates in this position of assuming that it can name a shared reality." It seemed

to me that what he was advocating for instead was a sort of solipsism: "All I can do is try to do the best I can at being whatever it is that is myself on the page."

Be you on the page. Trust language. Let doubt be your revision tool.

That is what I have tried to do here. Because of this, I still have, sitting at the top of this Word document, a dozen or so quotes from that conversation that I intend to share with you. These remaining quotes, though, are disconnected from each other – nothing that I can piece together like I did above. While talking, we jumped between many subjects, most to which we did not return. The transcript seems broken, because I have omitted the pauses, the *ums*, all those times either of us misspoke, and everything that I said. The transcript is fragmented. And I want to share what he said. This seems to be the only way, if I am to be myself and trust language:

Most of my questions were generated from *Dog Years*, because that was what I had read most recently. I suspected he would notice, so I confided this in him (repeatedly). The first question I asked him was one of such questions, inspired by what I found in the memoir about despair. He discussed briefly, in a classroom talk earlier in the day, personal despairs – specifically, losing Wally and friends to HIV – but I wanted to know how he encountered and navigated despairs that were not his alone, something like a national despair.

"When we feel overcome by the grief and gravity of any situation – whether it be the devastation of 9/11 or the crisis years of the epidemic.... You know, I just read a statistic quoted somewhere, some survey that said that only 39% of people believe that the human race will survive this century. Isn't that something? Almost *half* of us believe that we will not last another hundred years. It is easy in such circumstances to not speak because of that feeling of futility. It is

crucial that the feeling of helplessness, meaninglessness, the weight of such crises be articulated; because, if we can say them, and if we can take in other people's naming of them, we're that much less likely to be immobilized by them."

He once wrote that despair is *an appropriate response to the world*. "Despair," he explained to me, "keeps us by wrapping us up in silence and by muffling us. If we can work against the silence, then we can begin to push back against despair. Despair is not something that we want to eliminate. I *do* think it is an appropriate response to things, and without an appropriate degree of pain in response to the conditions in which we live, art is kind of doomed to be flimsy. We have to make space for that pain and darkness within ourselves and within our work. The trick would be to make room for it but not be overcome by it." He added to this something that broke the heaviness that had begun to linger around us: "Also, I would not be interested in work that *only* expresses despair."

I loved the beauty of it, of what he said, how he answered the question. Once he had finished speaking, I was taken aback by that beauty, by his honesty, by the truths he just expressed, and by knowing that he spoke those words on the spot and without time for revisions. My momentary silence after his speaking became a regular thing: every time he spoke, I finished the note I was making, and I sat there looking at him.

But I was also struck by his humor – intentional or otherwise. His comment about works that only express despair, for example, I don't find particularly funny. Listening to how he said it, though – the inflection present in *interested*, the immediacy of *also* – I laugh. Listening to the recording, there is one moment in particular where I can hardly make out his words through my laughter: I hear him describe his husband, Paul, as being "a very well preserved 56... boyish," and then I hear my most jolly of laughs followed by a slap

that I can only take to be my hand hitting the table.

I laughed too when he said, "My life is an open book," because I wasn't entirely sure he understood exactly what I heard in his saying that.

Stage Notes

by Claire Augustine

A *n interview with the choreographer.*

Question: What is The Great Crash Around?

The Great Crash Around has been a subject of mine for a while. I guess here I need to insert a prose poem that I had written back in February.

The Crash Around

Because I like it too much, you wanting me to come over, dance a little, have some fun, and beer beer beer beer beer. It was fine when I was young, when I felt young and not like what I was, like some new light fluff thing that was cute. That was nice, just nice, not much thought. But when I realized that I was the in to parties, that I was the one that everyone knew, and when I found myself puking myself to just not giving a damn about that cop coming up the road and passing in the thin space between consciousness and blackout, I wondered--what's wrong?

I don't know where girls my age are. What age am I? The point being we've been crashing as fast as we can into some invisible brick wall, the one we used to be scared of when mom let us go, but the one we all delight when we realized, well hell, we've been growing up with lies. I joined in the dance, but what is the next move? If I keep going, I'm going to leap and smash myself into a bar, smack face first in intoxication. And even if I find someone I remember,

someone I recognize, recognize that the space behind their eyes used to hold something magical, some bits and pieces I used to have, I won't know what those things floating around back there are. 'Cause I forgot.

Here, the crash around is not great yet. "Great" makes it a universal thing, a fucked up state we all seem to jump into, or at least, that is my assumption, or my impression.

But I took a double take of who I was on Halloween, when I realized that my group of friends couldn't really go to a party because I was the one who knew the hosts of the party. The threat of me not going came about by me becoming food poisoned. But it was Halloween with a living room full of people bored out of their minds wanting to go to this party. I changed my clothes and I went. What was my costume? "The girl who's about to puke her brains out" costume. I brought a hair tie. Sure enough, after four or five beers, I was vomiting in a back room, my friends holding my hair. And since I was the in to the party, I was in a room, separated from the party, not in the bathroom holding up the line and making a fool of myself. I had dignified vomiting. During the walk back, I was hanging off my friend, clearly gone. As we walked, a cop drove right in front of us. Usually, I am incredibly afraid of cops. I said, out loud, "I don't give a flying fuck if that cop stops us." We kept walking, and he kept driving. As much as I didn't care, the inside, sane part couldn't believe our luck. I ended up puking more, on a couch, going in and out of consciousness to finally passing out. I woke up, puked more and waited to come to focus. When we recovered consciousness, we compared what was a dream to what was real of last night.

There is a part of that story I need to make clear. I was terrified when I was on that couch. I'm not sure how to describe it,

but the fear running through me was a fear of death, a fear of not knowing if I would just stay in the unconscious, or if I would stay in the not understandable. Being conscious in that drugged up state was like looking at the world like a wavy line.

The more I went to the house, the more I questioned going. I observed that the girls I used to know that came here weren't showing up anymore, and I wanted to know why. I didn't want them to come back; I just wanted to know how they got past this place. I wanted to know what they were doing now. What was better than here, and can I find it too?

The fear I express at the end of this prose poem is the fear that I will keep up these habits of excessive drinking and that I won't end up in any good relationship, because even the people with fire in their eyes will be dull to me. I have to reference Radiohead's "Jigsaw Falling Into Place" because it describes this scene.

Question: You say this whole dance piece is from a dream. What dream?

During Spring Break of my sophomore year, I went back home to a house that was very clean. My parents had it recently painted and in the process, all of my white shelves had to be emptied so that they could move the shelves and not risk having any of my stuff getting painted on. I go to sleep with these pristine, white shelves staring at me. For some, that would be an object of beauty, emptiness, cleanliness. For me, it was bare and unrecognizable. My room is usually always a mess, a mess that I create and is mine. These shelves were oppressive as I went to bed. Also, my parents had the carpet taken out in place of wood floors, which added to the clean feeling of the house. Stupidly, I listened to music before going to sleep that put me in a weird mood; "Golden Hair" by Slowdive.

In the mist of this music, I fell into a vivid dream. I was

in my house, but it was bigger and reminded me of modern white houses that you'd find in California. Every wall was white with the wood floor standing out in my vision. My parents were leaving for the night, and I was home alone. I waited till they were gone to change out of my nightclothes into clothes I could go out in. Next flash is of me walking down the street with this group of guys, a group of people who are my friends in the dream. Next flash we are in an apartment that also has white walls and it is filled with people. A combination of boys I know at home and boys from the fraternity house are there and we are sliding down the white walls in different states of fucked-up-ness; drugs, alcohol, sex. Someone says, "What the fuck is that shit out there?" We look out the window and a gigantic pine tree painted white with pink branches is being dragged across the lawn by a crane. Another flash and I have a bird's eye view of my house and my parents driving in circles (as if the Von Trap Family's front yard is our yard). It's a passage of time. Then another flash, I'm inside the house, I've snuck in and changed back into my night clothes. I hear a knock on the front door and I sneak in the front room to see who it is, my feet feeling the smoothness of the wood floors. I see who it is through the small window by the door and breathe a sigh of relief that it's not my parents, but then I am frightened because it is a scary looking farm man with a big face poking in the window. My fear spikes as the door is knocked down by a gigantic dog that comes at me and starts growling for my blood. The dog is held back by a leash held by the angry looking man in overalls. My own big dogs come to try to help me, but they are next to useless, just roaming around sadly. I start screaming, "What the fuck are you doing?" And the man says, "What the fuck is that shit out there?" And then I know but I don't want it to be true and I force myself to look out the window. The same tree is being pulled across my lawn. The repetition is too frightening so I start screaming. That is the end of my dream.

Question: Why this piece now? Why not another piece?

The reason why this piece had to be done now, during this quarter was because of my current situation heavily reminding me of being separated from my cousin as a child. My cousin David and I were very close as children, and he was like a brother to me. When he was 14, and I 12, he was sent to a reform school in Utah because he had been caught doing drugs too much. The story he tells me is nuts, one I don't really understand...something about being in a robbery where the older guys he was with stole liquor and four cars and how he crashed a car...some crazy story I had never heard of until this year when David decided to randomly call me on my 21st birthday. And though I'm tempted to say that it was Utah or jail, I'm not even sure if this is true. He's told me that he's been to jail six times. The perspective that my family gave me was just this strange disappearance, where I wasn't allowed to know what was happening to David. As a child, I was so angry and hurt that I had lost my brother figure; he was one of the few people who was close to my age in my family.

Currently, a deep friendship of mine is changing, maybe deteriorating. We have been very close, maybe, dare I say, a brother-sister like relationship. He used to be someone I admired, someone I found smart and creative. But multiple times, I feel very much silenced in the relationship. The deep conversations we used to have when we first knew each other didn't keep going. They just stopped. And when I would complain about this, he would respond with responses like, "having deep conversations is too tiring," or "I like you much more when you're quiet." Still, I felt we were very much supportive of each other's creative work; the only times that he hugs me is after a performance of mine. But I fear his creative life is diminishing. He's not going after the projects that he used to want, and I have no clue about the change. All I can assume is apathy towards former goals. It angers me that creative potential is

going to waste when it really doesn't have to.

The moment of collision with past and present occurred when I learned that he dropped acid. My reaction surprised me; I'm angry, I'm disappointed. I don't care if some random Joe drops acid, but my friend in my mind is not allowed to drop acid, and I wasn't even aware of this restriction in myself. Maybe this hits closer because I have been offered acid in the past, and I have always said no. I just couldn't cross over to chemical drugs, I was too scared that it would take too long to recover and I would miss class. So yes, maybe if I had been offered it when I had more time, more contemplation would happen. I guess I'm trying to say all this because...I have to admit that there was a time when I didn't want to rule acid out. But presently, the more I know, the more I realize that I don't want to do chemical drugs. I found myself on a Sunday night watching a documentary on Steve-o and his drug life. I wanted to know how he got over it, how he made himself stop. I started to relate my cousin to my friend, and the sadness of losing my cousin crashed into my current state. The Great Crash Around was occurring in my chest as I couldn't stop crying that night until my roommate picked me up, hugged me, and told me through my apologies that it was okay to care about someone. I sent him a text...but no...I have not really confronted him about it.

Instead I choreographed it, my silent protest.

A story-like description of the piece "The Great Crash Around"

I am looking out the window made out of a David, his arms wrapped around my head as my hair falls down like Rapunzel. The Follower comes out, an aspect of me on drugs.

(I guess I just want to be like everyone else when I drink and smoke.)

Loneliness comes out (another aspect of me on drugs), her books are read, and she doesn't read anymore. David leaves as I keep

watching myself. The 5-Year-Old skips on while The Erotic summersaults on, experiencing everything.

(I'm sick of geeking out and feeling like a five year old. It just sucks. I don't feel more creative...I feel afraid.)

All of me melts to the floor, coming up with our head down and then flipping our hair back. We are in the mist of drugs, of succumbing. The mist rolls over us. We reach for each other; I run to David offstage and start to play with him. The girls are skipping then crashing into individual movement that exemplifies their character. The Follower is copying everyone else's movement. The 5-Year-Old is scared out of her mind. The Erotic is experiencing it all. Loneliness is alone with her books. Everyone at some point is shaking their heads as if they don't want this.

(David said last winter that the only two things he knew about me was that I liked to dance and read...nowadays I'm a horrible reader, but back when we were kids he would ask me every time I saw him what book I was reading.)

I come on David's back, follow him to shooting games in the back of the car, pretending to be a Mutant with him, wanting to be like him. He becomes annoyed with me, starts to push me away, but it's all funny to him. For me, this isn't how I want things to be. I get out of his hugs so I can go back and try to fix him. But he just holds my head so I can't reach him.

(It is actually a move my half-brother did to me as a child. My half-brother is more than ten years older than me and whenever I would see him, I would try to kiss him or just hug him, and he would just hold my head at arms distance so I couldn't get to him. Since he was barely around, it wasn't funny, just mean in my kid eyes.)

I've had enough and I run away. Before David can reach me, he sees what's beyond the tree, the girls on drugs, The Erotic especially entices him to come to the other side. He does and he is dragged

off by the girls. I turn around, and try to join, but Loneliness has been sleeping by the tree and she grabs my foot. I wake her up and take her place. She doesn't go very far and we shake our heads and look back, over and over, looking back at David being lost in drugs.

(The dancer who played Loneliness also has a brother named David who became very distant from his family, a relationship that was strikingly different from this dancer's early childhood with her brother. They were very close when they were young.)

Some Reaction Quotes:

"Good job!"

"Great, great job!"

"Great work! It really felt inspired, like it came from somewhere."

"Good job! The tree was great, the lines you created...wonderful!"

"She's brilliant."

"Good job!"

"Great job! Liked that you put some nature on stage...cause you know you don't see props or anything so that was nice to see."

"Good job."

"It was like a Salvador Dali painting...you're piece really stood out...the colors that the girls were wearing really worked."

"Nice work."

"When your piece came along, it took the workshop in a new direction. It was so different."

"The story was so sad!"

"Good job."

Back to the Story...

I wonder if he knows that it's about him. Like I said, he hugs me because it's a performance that he knows I care about. But...he doesn't say much. Nothing really changes in the aftermath. I still

fall into these depressive moods, grieving the loss of our friendship, sad that I'm so disenchanted by him these days, and hating the paradox that after the workshop was over that it was apparent that we still cared about each other. But I don't want to believe that he cares, because it doesn't make any sense to me. I don't understand how you can care about someone and take them for granted...but it's a common problem now isn't it? I'm trying my hardest to be angry; I'm trying hard to not care.

As far as me and drugs, I realize that David was the main reason I never touched drugs until I was older. No one had to tell me that the same could happen to me if I was caught with drugs; I just assumed that I could as easily be sent away as David. I feel as though through fantasy I have de-fantasized drugs for myself. There has been this dissatisfaction for a long time over the things I was doing, the people I was following. I think now it is starting to come to the surface. I am hoping that this has all been a process to a change for the better. I hope that I am over it.

The Importance of Stage Notes

As you can see, all I get are what I gave you in the quote section, basically people giving me an obligatory "good job". It is so unsatisfying, especially when I do these pieces that tug on my heartstrings. The last time I did a piece, I had to go to counseling mainly because I felt no one cared about my work, and that was a very depressing thing. I started to question why I choreographed. I love everything about choreographing except for the after, all of these useless "good jobs." It was such an incredible let down. It still is. There is so much background for my pieces; there is a reason why I am doing them at that particular time. I listen so closely to my muse; am I going to be rewarded for my work? This is why I'm writing these stage notes; to finally have a place to say to someone why I made a group of people sit through four minutes of

choreography. Maybe that is how it will be for the rest of my life, never knowing if anyone understands my choreography or if it is something they enjoyed watching. And though I might not go into this much detail, there is a lot of what I have just written that I wish people knew about my piece. I wish there was a change in this system, a way to have some sort of symposium. But for now, these notes are all I have.

• • •

Aftermath

Two major changes have occurred since I wrote this essay:

I have received wonderful, positive reactions from a dance piece I did later on. I went into my next choreographic project without depending on how the audience reacted to it; I just focused on doing a good job for myself. But what I got in return was appreciation ten fold. Even though I tried to ask how exactly my work affected them, it was hard for my audience members to put it in words. I believe that I have successfully affected a large group of people emotionally, something that is difficult to describe with words...and that's okay with me.

My friend and I find each other on equal ground these days. He's off the pedestal I had put him on, we both have accomplished and are working on great creative work. We have both made something that made the other cry their eyes out. We both are still figuring out the ups and downs of the creative life.

An Imaginary China Town

by Heather Leslie

The mellophone player
 Moved by the smooth melody
Swings his instrument
 As if creating a crop circle
With notes that would even sooth a
 Cubicle worker, trapped by more
Than just removable walls.
 The music academy did not
Teach him everything he knows,
 This man who I've seen
At the grocery store, buying cheese
 Graters to top his homemade
Jambalaya with in the express lane,
 One of the few moments in time
He was not playing the phone.
 His smudged fingerprints
Grace each key, each valve
 A messenger to the masses
In China Town slums, living
 In department stores
Never seeing a fox trot through the woods
 Or a boat float in an aquatic
Bathtub of a fancy hotel room
 Where rich crooks eat minced meat
And talk about the dough they're makin'.
 But he would never do that;
He would rather play for people
 On the bus, people whose frowns

Morph into smiles when he plays,
Each person a trapeze artist in
A circus they can't pay their way out of.
In his music, they glimpse
Log rolling woodsmen of old
And Apache buffalo skinners
Who are peaceful on Election Day
And would rather watch the
Picturesque waterfalls entertain their children.

Fruits of My Labor

by Stephanie Freas

A response to Giuseppe Arcimboldo's "Summer."

Take no heed of my smirk today.
Tomorrow, the fruits of my work
will have rotted away. My countenance,
a plethora of the crops I harvested,
masks a barren tree. Olives do not
mingle well with raspberries or peaches.
Some things must stay segregated.
I made the mistake of biting my lip,
urging garlic to leak with one breath,
a scent that cannot be hidden.

Don't be fooled, the pumpkins I planted
have ripened as these cherries shrivel.
Tomorrow, the harvest begins again
and I'll decorate these eyes with figs
and grapes. Another batch of crops
to suffice. I am only what I plant,
you are only what you make,
we are only the crop of gods
without a sense of humor.

Hold On Loosely

by Erik S. Lutes

I peek in on her while she sleeps, just to watch her breathe. She is beautiful every time. Her chest always rises and falls. Invariably, she'll make some innocently sweet noise as though she knows I'm watching, and am in awe of every noise she makes. I am in awe of *her*. She is my redemption, and I must protect her from the entire world. Not everyone gets a second chance. Invariably, I will cross the room, stepping carefully and softly so I don't molest her peace. Invariably, I will stand directly over her, admiring her; I will suppress an urge to cry because I love her so damned much. And invariably, I will lean down to plant the softest of kisses on her softest of cheeks.

I watch.

I swell with immeasurable pride.

I question. I question whether or not I can pull this off without fucking it up.

No, I insist, fucking it up is not even an option.

• • •

Being a father again at 37 wasn't exactly something I had etched into my day-planner. I'd already had two children. My son was 13, and I had just lost my 11-year-old daughter to suicide. For immensely complicated reasons, I missed out on a lot of their lives—not my choice, mind you. I didn't get to witness either of them taking their first steps. I was excluded for more birthdays than for those I attended. I grew to hate Christmas, I was bitter on Thanksgiving Day, and Easter held none of the symbolic renewal for me.

I would withdraw from the damnably merry families and their complete little lives with their disgusting Christmas trees and how-

cute-the-kids-are anecdotes. I'd simultaneously stifle that crippling pain of emptiness without my kids while silently praying that someone would recognize that I didn't *really* want to be left alone to brood and include me in their festivities. I would seclude myself anyway, afraid to infect anyone with my curdled attitude. Not being a terribly great actor, I always knew that my heartbreak would materialize on my sleeve and people would give me a wide berth in order to maintain their unblemished, joyful moods. I couldn't blame them—I wanted to stay away from me, too. Sometimes I wanted to stick a gun in my mouth, the despair was so intense. That would ruin a family function, wouldn't it?

• • •

The number that showed up on my caller ID was Erin's, but the voice that I heard from the other end was not, "Erik, it's Rashawn! Erin's water just broke!"

Microseconds after the words had gushed into my ear, I barked simply, "I'm on my way!" Have you ever watched those cartoons where the character moves so fast from a stationary position that whatever object he's holding (phone, gun, pencil, etc.) is suspended in mid-air—spinning or hanging—as the suggested inertial effect? That's how fast I'd kicked into overdrive and was on the move. While my instinct and newly-acquired parental knowledge automated my movements, I couldn't keep up with the sudden cacophony that now flooded my head.

What the hell? The baby's not due for another month! Where are my shoes? I'm too old for this shit! We were supposed to have a ready-bag for this! We're not ready! The baby's not due for another month! Where are my keys? Do I pack a bag? No—just get to the office, pick Erin up, and get her to the hospital. Oh my God! It's happening! The baby's really coming! WHERE ARE MY KEYS?!

My Ford Explorer has seen much better days, and I'm still

convinced that it hasn't forgiven me for the whipping it took that chilly April day as I mounted it like a sick steed, and forced it to gallop to Clintonville. Slamming through gears and jamming the accelerator to the floor like I was competing for position in a neck-and-neck horse race, I could almost hear the truck whinnying and snorting –trying to accommodate my impossible demands. Breaking all the laws of God and man to reach Erin's office in due time, I challenged the police to stop me for speeding.

I stormed into her office and snatched her up like a trauma patient. I paused only to visually confirm her water *had* broken –the evidence forming a wet stain on Erin's maternity-jeans. I hauled her out the door and into the passenger seat of her Corolla (which is newer, faster and more reliable). The entire operation was the practical equivalent of tossing her over my shoulders like a sack of potatoes and sprinting. Since I'd gotten the phone call from her co-worker, I'd forgotten how to *walk*. Every footstep was a *run*. The irony? Erin was cool and calm. She chuckled at my anxiety, and I silently cursed her for being so nonchalant.

"Goddammit! We need gas; we won't make it to the hospital on fumes!" How many times had I told her to keep at least a quarter-tank of gas in her car? Once? A hundred times?

"Honey, calm down. I'm ok, it's ok." She shifted in the seat, the amniotic fluids likely making her uncomfortable and grossing her out. "We should go to the house and pack up some things before we go to the hospital," She leaned back, and I was hunched forward, nearly touching the windshield with my nose while I weaved in and out of traffic, flashing my lights and willing drivers out of my way.

From the gas station to the house to the hospital, I challenged the police to stop me, and I spoke aloud my wish for a police escort, "And think of it, I'd get to speed *legally*!" A demonic grin flashed from the driver's seat.

A wan smile hung from the other, "You're crazy."

Over the curb and around the car at the light. Flash lights. Try to cut through Roush Hardware at Westerville Center. Growl in frustration at red light and even lazier traffic that just doesn't understand my need for it to move the hell out of my way. Flash lights. Will light to turn green. Make hard right turn at 75mph, probably on only two wheels. Haul ass, weaving in and out of traffic. Flash lights. Almost there.

• • •

I'm sure I hurt her when I wrap her tiny body in my arms and squeeze her like I do. I don't mean to. I can't help it. I try to channel the adoration and love I have for her *into* her, so she feels it. I hold her tight enough that it might appear as though I'm trying to fuse us together. Maybe I am. If we're fused together, then I'll always be there to protect her. I need to protect her.

The morbid possibilities I entertain are infinite. I worry she may stop breathing in the middle of the night. I worry she might contract some heinous virus and die. I worry she will fall and bump her head, and be dragged into some miserable coma. I worry some sick sonofabitch will nab her. I worry I'm going to falter, that I'm going to fail her in some way. I worry she will need me, and I won't be there—just like before.

• • •

When Erik and Bethany were born in 1995 and 1996, respectively, the average American household didn't have the Internet. If you wanted to know what to expect as an expectant father, you had to sit down and read a book, like *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. I ask you—*who* in the world has the time for that? *Go, go, go!* Everything I knew about fatherhood at the age of 23 was what I'd grown up with and, frankly, it didn't amount to much.

Changing diapers and feeding babies was something that I *had* to

do. Being a father wasn't transformative, it was an inconvenience. It was a hiccup. I didn't know any better. And don't you know –when you don't appreciate things or people in your life the way you should, Fate will come thundering along in his cold black chariot swinging a rusty guilt-infected scythe to lay your soul wide open, and wake you right the fuck up by taking away that which you had taken for granted?

All you can do is learn from your mistakes. When confronted with a situation you've faced before, one in which you have faltered or completely screwed up, you unlock that mental safe –the one that stores your contingency plans for [insert life-changing circumstance here]. You begin the process that first recalls all the stuff you didn't do right the first damned time, and *hopefully* you adjust accordingly; you step up to the plate, remember your lessons, and do better this time around. I guess that would be true of anything, from putting your hand on a hot stove burner to just not knowing enough.

This time around, I was armed with the Internet. The 'net affords the immediate answers to life-and-death answers (like, "how to save a laptop that's had coffee spilled on it") that I didn't have at my fingertips in 1996.

After Erin and I had her pregnancy confirmed in September of '08, I subscribed to a weekly email newsletter sent by a website known as *babycenter.com*. Synchronized with the projected due date in May, the newsletter gave me a week-by-week synopsis on how the baby should be developing *in utero*, as well as articles and features written in order to better educate the expectant parents by obstetricians, nutritionists, pediatricians, and other baby-related professional-types. I eagerly gobbled up most of what I read, and as the pregnancy wore on, I felt more and more confident in the role I was about to play. Even though this was to be my third child, it felt like it was my first. In a way, it was.

I was older, wiser...wasn't I?

Leave it to a psychologist to shake your foundation and bring you back to reality. Dr. Jerrold Lee Shapiro wrote an article for the newsletter called "Seven Fears Expectant Fathers Face." According to him, they were:

- Security fears (*Am I going to be able to provide for my baby?*)
- Performance fears (*Am I gonna pass out at the sight of blood during delivery?*)
- Paternity fears (*Is the baby even mine?*)
- Mortality fears (*I'm thinking about the end of life now that I'm about to face the beginning of one.*)
- Fear for your spouse's or child's health (*Bad things can happen during childbirth.*)
- Relationship fears (*Is Baby Mama still going to like me after the baby comes, or am I to be relegated to mere errand boy and post-partum whipping post?*)
- Fears of "women's medicine" (*Does watching a doctor prod and poke in places a man would rather not think of as "anatomy" shiver my timbers?*)

I wasn't worried about the baby's security—I knew that if I had to sell every ounce of blood and semen in my body, she would never need for anything. I wasn't worried whether or not she was mine, or whether I'd be able to hold up in the delivery room (I'd watched Erik's Caesarean delivery with great interest). To the best of my recollection, I never missed a regular visit to our OB/GYN, so I wasn't afraid of women's medicine. The prospect of Erin neglecting me in favor of the baby wasn't even a vague concern—we already knew the baby

was going to be a daddy's girl. More accurate was the specter of Erin being neglected by me.

And as heartless as it may seem, I didn't really worry about Erin's health at risk during the course of delivery –she's a bad-ass.

What I *did* fear, though, was something bad happening to the baby. I feared her being stillborn, even though we kept tabs on the heartbeat, and even though I had bought Erin a baby heartbeat monitor. I feared her having the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, being oxygen-starved, and having to live as a vegetable. I feared having that unconditional parental love constantly tested by having to forever care for a vegetable.

• • •

I am sure I looked like a complete jackass bursting into the maternity ward at St. Ann's, wresting the wheelchair out the door, and beating the hell out of it because it had the audacity to not open for me in my moment of need. I had forgotten how to breathe and think, let alone perform the simple task of opening a wheelchair. "You looked so cute trying to do everything right," Erin said later. Usually, when a woman tells a guy he looked cute doing something important, it means he looked like a complete jackass.

Strap her in. Race to the registration desk. Be prepared to take the head off any staff who doesn't immediately respond to Baby's impending birth. Meet charge nurse who wields the demeanor of a drill instructor. Orders are barked, she is running this show. Dad is put in his place. Reconsider head-removal. Drum fingers. Announce imminent birth on Facebook. Hurry up and wait. Make phone calls. Drum fingers. Almost there.

She arrived less than seven hours later. Shapiro's article said that dads who took part in his survey "secretly" counted toes and fingers. There was nothing covert about my instantaneous inspection and assessment. Shayne Bethany Lutes had ten fingers, ten toes, a full

head of hair, a healthy cry...and my heart.

• • •

I don't *have* to feed her, I want to. I know she's getting nourishment. I don't balk at changing diapers. I'm vigilant about her hygiene and health. The first time she ever pooped (a milestone in any new baby's life), she let go right in the palm of my hand, leaving a black sticky puddle. There was no disgust, no frustration. I cried.

I love making her laugh. Her wide, bright, toothless smile rights even the greyest of days. She lights up when I enter the room, and it melts my heart without fail. I've learned where she's ticklish, and just to hear her laugh, I'll go for her "giggle spots."

When she cries, though, it slices into me like a samurai's calculated attack. Hearing her wail in pain when she got her first shots reduced me to a dithering, apologetic blob. I could swear I saw betrayal in her eyes, too. *How could you let them hurt me like this, Daddy?*

It's for your own good, honey. I promise. But know this is the only time I'll ever allow anyone to hurt you. You are my redemption. I must protect you from the entire world. Not everyone gets a second chance.

The other day, I was chatting with a friend on Facebook. He just so happens to be the police chief of a certain city in which I reside. We chatted about the economy and its effect on rising crime statistics. We chatted about the decay in morals and standards. We chatted about being protective fathers. I told him that if I could lock my daughter away until she is 50, I'd be ok with that—after all, I know how boys are. He reminded me of *his* daughter, who's attending Ohio State, and told me, "Enjoy it while it lasts, Erik. She's not going to be that young forever, and you can't protect her from every little thing in life. You'll have to watch her grow up, eventually." But I don't want to. I don't ever want her to venture from under my wing—how else can I shield and protect her? I don't ever want her to wander

any farther than my arms can reach –how else will I catch her if she falls?

*Just hold on loosely, but don't let go
If you cling too tight babe,
you're gonna lose control.
Your baby needs someone to believe in,
And a whole lot of space to breathe in.
("Hold on Loosely" by 38 Special)*

• • •

True to its stealthy nature, the holiday season is fast approaching. Erik Jr. is still going to be kept from me, and Bethany is still going to lie in the cold ground on that windswept, lonely hill in Springdale Cemetery. It doesn't get any easier, ever.

But I will have a new addition to my woefully diminished family this year. I will have a reason to smile and partake in the revelry that comes part and parcel with this time of year.

I will be witness to Shayne's first taste of home-made turkey gravy. I will watch her gleefully rip the wrapping paper off her first Christmas gift, only to abandon the toy I thought she'd love in favor of chewing and shredding the paper.

I will scoop her up into my arms, and I'll smother her with kisses, and nearly suffocate her with hugs. Except for her eating the wrapping paper, those scenes will replay themselves every year.

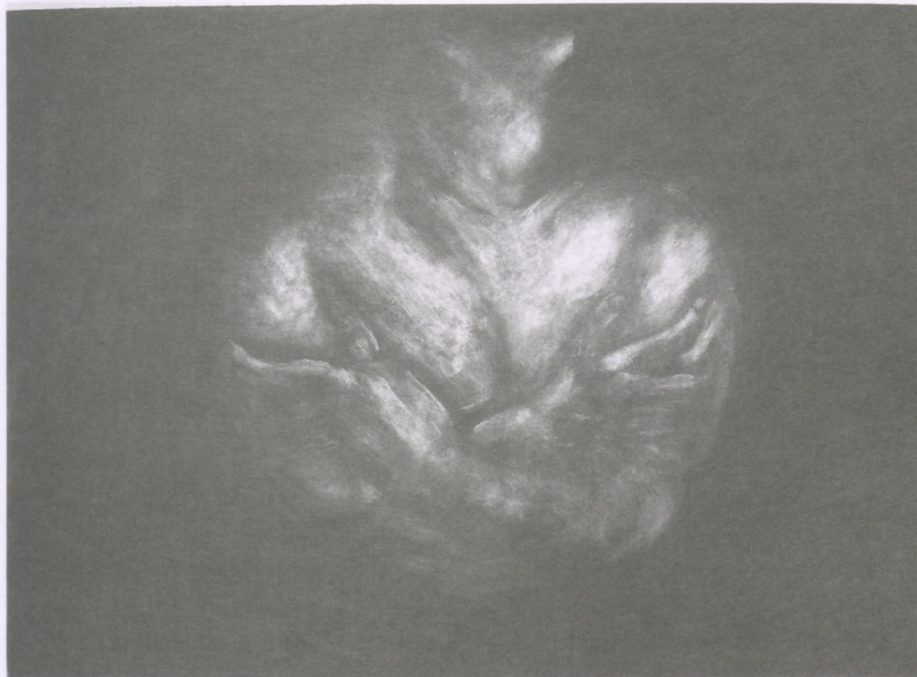
In April she'll be a year old, and I will take innumerable photos of her painting her angelic face with the rich frosting from her first birthday cake. Only my own death, my last fear, will prevent me from watching her blow out every candle thereafter.

I have to hold on loosely, though.

I know I can't fuse her to me. I know I can't protect her from everything. I will do my damndest. Where I have failed before, I will not fail this time. Not everyone gets a second chance.

Desire

by Katelyn Douglass



He Asked Me to Tell Him

by Wes Jamison

“What word would you give me if you could?”

‘I can’t. There’s no use for words here.’

‘But if you could?’ - Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook*

He asked me to tell him what people meant to me.
Everyone means something, and this one especially.
I don’t know, I said.

You know.

He asked me what a certain person means to me.

I thought a lot, I said.

He asked again.

And I wanted to give him a proper answer.

I wanted to formulate, right then, at that moment, what that person meant to me –

because I wasn’t certain.

I hadn’t yet chosen words to mean what I needed them to.

There were hidden meanings, but no language I knew could unravel them.

So I answered him the only way I could –

slack jaw, guttural vibrations, verbose hands, without sound:
the language of stones.¹

¹ Dorothy Alison tries to find a language for sex, making outrageous noises – screams, moans – during her readings, reading exactly what she has written on the page, and, similarly, I am trying to find a language for something: those moments that one initially believes are beyond words. I try to make it easy on myself, though, by simply quoting. Instead of trying to explain that I am me as

well as my mother as well as my family as well as a(n imaginary) father as well as a boyfriend as well as an ex-boyfriend, but not necessarily simultaneously – instead of that, I merely quote *The Waves* and say “I am not one and simple but complex and many.”

Instead of trying to explain how I would start a phrase, speak one syllable, watch it fall dead on my pillow before starting over again, before, after what seems a billion tries, I forced myself to settle for something that could not express the truth I wanted to convey – instead of that, I merely quoted *Eurydice* and say “it’s the language of stones.”

The Stones in Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, who are a sort of Trinity (three but one), functioning like a Greek chorus, are the first to explain the language of stones: it is, quite simply, the language the dead speak. Ruhl imagines that language is forgotten in the Underworld, but it is possible for one to communicate – the listener just has to be willing. When Eurydice first tries to speak to the audience from the Underworld, horrible noise exits her, not her true voice, then the stones explain the language of the dead:

“Little Stone:

It’s a very quiet language.

Loud Stone:

Like if the pores in your face
opened up and talked.

Big Stone:

Like potatoes sleeping in the dirt...

Loud Stone:

Listen to her the way you would listen
to your own daughter
if she died too young
and tried to speak to you
across long distances.”

Because Eurydice is a daughter who has died too young and does wish to communicate across long distances, seeing her for that, the audience is able to understand her. Once we are told the situation, once we become understanding,

we become willing to actually listen, then her words are ones we can understand. Sometimes, though, it is not merely a matter of willingness to understand.

Later in the play, once Eurydice has learned to speak the language of the stones, she meets her father:

Father:
Eurydice!

Eurydice:
What is that language you're speaking? It gives me tingles. Say it again.

Father:
Eurydice!

Eurydice:
Oooh – it's like a fruit! Again!

Father:
Eurydice – I'm your father....

The Stones:
Father is not a word that dead people understand....

Father:
When you were alive, I was your tree."

Perhaps sometimes metaphor is the only way to convey true meaning: when mundane language fails, figurative language takes the reigns. But what about when figurative language fails.

That is what I am trying to describe, what I am trying to find a language for: when you know that "father" doesn't work, but the connotations of "tree" don't quite fit or are not strong enough. What if Eurydice also forgot the word "tree." Then what would her father have said. Could a hug have sufficed. I imagine that his gesture of making her her own private room out of string in the

Thinking back, I don't even know that this is how I responded.

I merely recall lying next to him, consciously ignoring his words for his body heat.

Whatever I spoke, it was a clumsy language –

nothing like the French I hoped he would one day read to
me

from the pages of Eliot –

and the syllables climbed out of me like wasps and fell
onto the pillow between us like apples onto the floor of a garden.

While these words didn't seem to suffice,

I imagined he heard me.

Exactly

what I meant,

as if, languageless, I simply emoted.

There was something else, though. So,

I had chosen my language intentionally. I hoped that
he would use it –

that heavy, quiet, unnamed, broken, and clumsy language –
to build houses and monuments –

because, despite the few sounds available, each bears a
world of burden,
making each syllable heavy and dense.

Pick up an apple and place it.

Underworld may have been language enough to express the caring, the love, the affinity toward, the protectiveness of “father.” Of “tree.”

I wonder, though, if he would have wanted to convey all that by creating a room for her.

I suspect that when language fails, physical language might, too.

Now choose another.²

Grab a wasp and use it as mortar between them.

I was trying to give him the materials with which he could have built
shelter for us.

So that the acorns wouldn't fall so hard.

So that the wind wouldn't be so cold.

I was trying to give him reasons to shelter me –
to embrace me.

So that the acorns would no longer bruise my shoulders.

So that the wind would no longer crack my lips.

I was trying to give him the material he wanted for the exact
structure he wanted.

So that I could embrace him.

So that he wouldn't bruise so easily.

Because I was trying to build something –

something from which I could experience

What If, Could Be, Will Be, Has Been, and Is
all at once.

Because I thrive in possibilities.

Because I desire nothing more than possession.

Because I cannot escape the past anyway.

I wanted time stacked vertically without a ground level.³

²"You could have chosen differently. You did not." - Jeanette Winterson,
Weight

³Ali, from Jeanette Winterson's *The PowerBook* used time vertically "to use time fully." S/he says, "One life is not enough. I use the past as a stalking horse to come nearer to my quarry." After I knew the appropriate meaning for "quarry" (it is game, it is what is hunted, the object of one's desire – or that word that refers to stones, like where my grandfather used to work: a stone quarry), I saw just how much in this piece I identify with the virtually multi-sexed protagonist.

Here, Ali expresses what it is to love her lover. A lover who never want-

His short fingers with short fingernails,
a reminder of the disrepair of my own –
they were wide, but not thick, and I imagine articulate in all
languages –
I imagine they tried to pick up the stone words I conjured for him,

ed to be loved. It isn't about that, though. It is about the fact that Ali hates *the game*. Ali wants to change time so that s/he may simply be with her. Change time so that s/he is plummeted into a future time in which s/he already has his/her lover, or change time so that s/he is thrust into a past in which s/he got his/her quarry early. I think that s/he wanted to translate his/herself from this courting ritual to a chronologic space in which they are able to love each other openly. I get the sense that Ali does not want *could be*, but desperately desires *is*.

It is possible that s/he wants to prolong *the game*, too – be transported to the first time they spoke, when they knew nothing about each other, so that s/he may fall in love with her repeatedly for the rest of his/her life. Perhaps that is the “slot” – where there is an un-lived past and future, but s/he experiences only the same few months of his/her life. Those months of *could be*. Of perpetually only “coming nearer” to his/her quarry.

I never wanted to chase him, though. I wanted my life to be transposed into a future in which I had him. (I never much liked *the game*.) But it is possible that I wanted my life to be transposed into the past – a past in which Matt was replaced by Sean, so that I never had to endure the loss; a past in which Sean is the loss I endure, but then Sean too would be replaced by yet another. And maybe that third one would be *the one*. (Why must I continually fail.) I want control over time, so that I don't have to hunt. So that I am not hunted. So that my quarry will already be had. So that I am not sifting through stones in a quarry to find the only one I am meant for.

I wanted control over time so that I would no longer love Matt. Because I thought Sean would be the perfect replacement. The perfect object to which my desire would shift. (As if it were that simple.) I could not tell him that I may have still been in love with someone from my past. Because I didn't know if it was true. And because I didn't want it to be true. I wanted to tell him that all of my energies were invested in him, and in hunting him.

but they were utterly unliftable.
They were too unwieldy for him –
he didn't have enough fingernail to get under them.

He asked again.
So I answered in another tongue,
one that I hoped my body could speak when I could not:
a whisper spoken by my tattoo, a murmur from my hip,
set to the lulling volume of my eyes and the rhythm of my lips.

From his response, I tried to understand what he was building –
what kind of home he desired for himself.

I tried to mine his few words

(and his exasperated sighs, his thrusts, his kisses, his light
snoring)

for meaning, but

I don't even know that he codes his language –

that he may not be consciously trying not to code his
language –

that there may be an uncoded language –

that he doesn't know the meaning behind any of it.

Now, I see that

simplicity sometimes has its advantage.

So I try to answer as simply as I can –

but it has taken months for me to find even these words,

and there is no real answer here, either:

What does that other person mean to me.

Not nearly as much as you could.

My Dearest Julia

by Erika Loch-Test

My dearest Julia,
Forgive me for expressing my embarrassment
Through hand written form,
Tucked underneath the mattress
For you to discover, the next time you made the bed
When your hand grips this page
I will be with your father.
Please tell your husband I apologize
For the academics he might pursue,
The philosophies he might lose.
Aristotle and Socrates,
I never could remember who taught who
Don't pass this off,
Due to my weakened mind
And lose sight of thanking you
I never meant to be a nuisance.
Understand that life's uncertainties will dissipate.
The long snow melted will produce
Unyielding breadths of clarity.
Flowers bloom again and time unfrozen.
My passing, a forgotten memory.
Remember that photograph of you?
My little girl!
Julia, this feeling will release, I know
For a mother's senses are heightened,
Carrying the only daughter in her womb.
Promise me you'll return to the city
You fondly love,

'til then the wind whispers your name.
Julia, don't forget Chicago.

Vulnerability

by Katelyn Douglass



When Life As You Know It Ends-

by Wes Jamison

that is what she said, and now I know
it's true – that you begin to feel
even the slightest breeze
on your fingertips, and
you begin to notice just how close each car is
as you cross the street.
That if you stopped
to feel the wind on your fingertips for another moment –
you'd feel breezes all over
and forever.

And hair-ties on pavement begin
to hold a certain interest;
lenses abandoned, dandelions
in limitless grasses, lush
from the semblance of domesticity
you've recently sloughed.

In the car you're afraid to start,
you wonder if you can endure
the sound of music or the images that will flash by;
because life becomes a slideshow
of images you can no longer afford
to remember.

You hear trains leaving miles and miles away
and wings held against the wind.
The simplest task *does* seem impossible.

And you have to relearn how to live:
 you wake up holding your breath,
because you've forgotten how to breathe,
and with that first breath come residues
of a past life – like so many balloon animals
left trapped in the heat of a car.
And you lose cognition for moments stretching miles
 while you forget how to feel.
And once you're back,
you have to force together pieces of elastic;
after moments of barely doing more than being,
you have to remember.

*I never want to forget the heat of your forehead
on mine, or the weight of your limbs on me. Or
the curve of your eyebrows, or –*

I wanted to say the curve of his lips,
but I couldn't.

Now, every time I step with my left foot,
I shake the world.
Because it is that fragile.
Because eight syllables sometimes cause earthquakes.
And a Year of Silence sends you messages
you may never receive.

I shake the world,
and I wonder if he can feel it.

Flesh and Blood

by Justin McAtee

The night before deer season started, I was sure to be in bed early, because Dad always beat the sun, and he would never wait around for people who couldn't pull their own weight. Before the sun was up, I was awake to clanging sounds from the kitchen, the smell of bacon and pancakes, and then I heard the cracking of Dad's long legs loping up the stairs. I opened my five a.m. eyelids, all crusted and heavy, and saw the light in the hallway, then my father's form blocking out the light and the whisper, "Hey bud, ready to kill your first deer?"

I found myself in the kitchen minutes later, layered up in Dad's old long john thermals that he used to wear when he was my age. We ate our bacon and pancakes together, mostly silent, drinking tall glasses of orange juice. Mom walked by in her pink bathrobe, about to start her day with a cup of coffee. She smiled at me but did not seem to notice Dad. He had been sleeping on the couch a lot and was unshaven for two or three days, and it made the tight skin between his cheekbones and jaw form dark grizzly pockets as he chewed. He could still eat faster than me, and he finished breakfast first and started pulling on the rough brown Carhart work jeans, the plaid hunting coat, then those ancient muddy boots he'd had since forever. I hurried to cram the rest of the breakfast in my mouth and drop the dishes in the sink, because I always half-wondered if he'd really leave my slow butt behind like he teased. My boots were new and too big and didn't have the muddy crust like Dad's. Their smell was the pungent bitter-sweet of rubber and polish, which I was sure the deer would detect. But Dad said not to worry, the deep woods would rub out the chemical stench. "Here now, put on a scarf. It's cold out there, buddy."

The old pickup sat in the driveway with a new coat of snow. The keys jangled as Dad stuck them in the ignition and started up his baby. Nobody ever used old Eleanor but Dad. He had had her since he was nineteen, so for like thirty years almost she had been his baby. I wondered what Dad was like when he was nineteen. He would never sell her. It was his farm and work truck most of the time, but sometimes he would go for long fishing trips with his buddies. The scratched-up bed was good for holding stuff like tackle and fishing poles and tents. Dad was actually planning one for next week, which I thought was strange because it was winter, and because it would still be deer season. Ice-fishing up in Lake Erie, that's what he said, with a friend of one of his friends from work who had grown up on the lake in someplace called Sandusky, or something like that.

"How can you pay for my Christmas presents if you spend so much money on gas?" I asked Dad while we sat in the truck in the dark.

Dad thumped a gloved hand on my shoulder and chuckled and shook his head. "Why don't you believe in Santa Claus anymore?"

"Cause it doesn't make any sense."

"My boy's too smart for his own age." Dad thumped me again. "Now, your mom and I, we make it work. So don't you worry about your presents, ok bud."

When the truck had warmed up, Dad ran the wipers to get the half-melted slurry off the windshield. He took his gloves off and slid one rough palm over the gear shift and thrust her hard into drive. He eased forward to give her the juice and soon we were moving, rolling through the pre-dawn toward the fields. Dad did her slow at first, as always, so as not to damage anything important. He had good snow tires and could handle himself, but it was a long way to the back of the farm where the woods were, and we needed all four wheels. The heater was on full blast and my eyelids were getting heavy from sitting all toasty and bundled up in my warm hunting clothes. I watched

Dad's hands working the wheel, finessing it all smooth along the leather, his fingers coursing over the ridges and folds, and then down the curves of the big O. He handled her through the field without spinning the tires once, and then we were at the woods. Dad patted me on the shoulder, making me start a bit. "Come on, bub, the sun's almost out! We gotta get settled before the deer start moving."

I jumped out of the truck, and Dad pulled the seat forward. I reached into the back compartment where my gun was laying across the bench seats, and then I stopped cold. I stared, surprised and confused. My Winchester was lying on top of a red dress. The dress was velvet, with sparkly things sewn into the neck area, and it was inside one of those plastic sheaths that you put your nice clothes in when you go to the dry cleaner. I wanted to ask, "is that for Mom," but for some reason nothing came out and then Dad reached over my shoulders with his long arms and grabbed the shotgun. "Come on, buddy, let's get down there." He patted my shoulder and thrust the Winchester into my hands and said "come on" again, and then he was heading toward the woods, his shoulders rigid with cold, the barrel of his big twelve gauge sticking stiff into the dark sky over his head. I fell in behind him, crunching through the snowy stubble of the field. Dad moved brisk and sure across the moonlit space, and I tried to time my steps so I stepped when he stepped. Once Dad had told me this was a way to stay quieter, because then it became like we were the same person—one instead of two. So I tried to step with him as we crossed the field, but my legs were too short. I was thinking of the red dress. Mom would never wear a thing like that.

Soon we had crossed the tree line, and now we were in the woods, heading down into the big hollow where Dad killed his big buck last year. I remembered where he killed it. He called it "the lucky tree." It was a big oak, the biggest on a hillside all covered with oaks. "The deer like this place," he told me. Sure enough we headed to the big oak and Dad sat me down first, then he settled down next

to me. "Here," Dad took my arm, and I opened my hand while he laid two slugs into my palm. I turned my shotgun upside down and slid the bullets into the tube like he had taught me before. "Go ahead and chamber one." I jerked the pump and Click Snap, I was ready to go, finger on the safety. I imagined a deer walking out through the trees, and I breathed a sigh to steady myself. Buck fever. I squirmed a bit, my butt already getting cold, and settled in against the tree and began to wait for the woods to start moving.

Daybreak had barely come, and I could not see well, so I strained to listen. The woods were silent except for the chirping of a few birds. I knew they were chickadees since Dad had told me they are the only songbirds around here that don't migrate in the winter. They tough it out, singing and everything, through the cold. I listened to them and cradled my Winchester. Dad put his arm across my shoulders and gave a little rub. I wasn't sure why, and I thought of Mom out in town at work and what if she was here.

Suddenly there was an elbow jab into my side and Dad's voice came down in a whisper. "Listen, listen."

I held my breath and felt the blood rising to the surface of my skin, warming me all over. I could hear my heart pumping through my ears and it was loud. I struggled to separate the sound inside me from that of the woods, and then, suddenly, I could hear it—the sharp, cautious footfalls, stabbing through the snow and leaves, faint and steady. "It's coming our way. Get your gun ready."

I slowly pulled my knees up and eased them high enough that I could rest the gun on the kneecaps. I pulled the butt tight against my shoulder, laid the stock on the right knee and slid my finger into the trigger guard. My gloves were thick, almost too thick against the trigger, and I wondered how hard I would have to pull for it to fire. Maybe I should take the gloves off. But no, that's too much noise and movement. I kept my thumb on the safety and felt my lungs working faster. The breaths were struggling to get out of me, and I tried to

squeeze them into slow, steady drags. But my chest wanted to heave, and the breaths were too big to space out. I didn't want the deer to hear me. I didn't want Dad to feel how hard I was breathing.

I felt a nudge and then Dad's gloved arm shot out in front of my face. His finger was aiming down through the woods. I peered through the trees and there it was, stopped between two small oaks. I looked down the barrel of my Winchester and followed the tawny broadside up to the long graceful neck, and I could tell it was a big doe. She was standing stock still, ears twitching, her head turned toward me. I could see her big brown eyes staring at us. My heart pounded in my ears. I slid the safety off and felt the gun wavering in my hands. My breaths were coming ragged, and I tried to line the sights up on her. They weaved back and forth across her broadside. I could hear Dad's voice, faint but urgent and commanding "Shoot her. Shoot her." The doe jerked like she was about to run. It was now or never. I've got to do it. I held my breath, then felt the pulse against my fingertip and squeezed. The gun lurched back into my shoulder. Suddenly, my ears were numb, then ringing, and as the smoke cleared, I could hear the echo of the shot reverberating along the hollow and up into the morning sky. The doe was gone. I thought I had missed, but then Dad was elbowing me, "Hey, you got her, you got her, she's down!" I looked up, and sure enough, I could see movement between the two small oaks where she'd stood. She was lying on her side, thrashing. I looked up at Dad and he was grinning down at me, his face red with cold and pride and maybe relief. I smiled back and felt my chest rising in triumph. "Let's go get her." Dad pulled me up. I wobbled, shaky and my feet unsteady in their boots. "But first make sure you've got a round chambered. Be ready to shoot if she tries to run."

When we reached the doe, she was still thrashing her legs. Her neck was curled back, and she was straining to watch us with big, bulging eyes. They rolled in fear as we got close to her. "Whoa boy, that was a heck of a shot, buddy! You hit her from way out!"

Dad called. "Be careful, though. Don't let her hooves get you. They hurt." I circled around her and stood at her head. I could see where the bullet had entered her belly. There was a tear in the skin and the fur around it was matted and stained a thick crimson. There was fur in the snow. The big belly was rising and falling and steam was coming up out of the hole in her side. She was snorting loudly. "I hit her in the gut, Dad."

Dad came over and kneeled down next to her. "She's a big old doe. Hard to kill. We need to get her back to the barn so you can get her hung up and skinned before breakfast."

"What are we going to do? She's not dead."

Dad didn't answer but reached back into his pocket. The knife balanced in his palm. With a flick, the blade opened, and then he turned and grabbed the doe's head. She writhed away from him and bleated once, loudly. The sound echoed through the hollow, bouncing back on my ears. Dad wrenched hold of her again, and I could see his arms straining against the doe's squirming neck as he squeezed her into a chokehold. Then the blade was up on the white fur and the tip pressed down, digging in beneath the hairs. The skin resisted, tight, then gave suddenly, and the blade slid in to the hilt, and Dad flicked his wrist out again in one clean motion. The neck opened up to let the red spray shoot out across the snow, a cascading stream of liquid velvet. The sound was like rain, and Dad held the head as she struggled to bleat a final time. The sound was a gurgling whine and her brown eyes rolled back and soon she was still. Dad dropped her head and stepped around the red snow to her belly. He gestured with the blade, "Here, bud, let's gut her." He held out the dripping knife. "Do you wanna start or do you want me to start?"

Before I could answer, there was a scuttle of tiny footsteps in the snow behind us and another bleat. We turned together and there in the trees was a speckled form gliding back and forth, watching us. I looked at Dad, and he did not see me, but just sat crouched by

the dead doe, the blood rolling down the hilt of his knife. "That's a shame."

The Winchester was heavy as I worked the pump and chambered my last slug. I tried not to let the barrel quaver as I raised it and placed the crosshairs on the spotted side. The little fawn stopped and stared, its tiny muscles drawn tight, its back arched and four legs sticking out at awkward angles, wanting to run. But his mother wouldn't move—she'd been bled out by the big man, and I knew he couldn't leave her anymore. The little fawn, he couldn't understand, and he couldn't survive now all by himself out in the cold. Too small, too soft. The barrel steadied, then I squeezed, and a slug went into the soft coat and exploded the fawn's tiny heart.

After we had finished the gutting and had dragged the empty carcasses through the woods and out to the tree line at the edge of the field, Dad went back for the truck. When he returned, we threw our kills into the pickup bed. Blood was still running from the little fawn's cavernous body and out its open mouth, and, when we were done, I could see that streaks of red were smeared all along the place where we laid him. I followed Dad back down to the bottom of the hollow, where the creek ran through, and we washed the blood from our hands and the mud from our boots. Neither of us spoke. When we were done, the sun was out strong and melting the snow. I stripped off my coat and laid my empty shotgun back on top of the red dress before jumping into the cab with Dad. He revved the engine and jerked her into gear as we headed triumphant back to the house.

Disaffection

by Katelyn Douglass



Eyes Black As a Moonless Night

by Lillie Teeters

The Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial School

Mount Pleasant, Michigan

Circa 1903

AGNES

The last time I saw my mother, she was alive, but there was no telling now. The white man who pulled me from her arms smelled like pig fat and smoke, not the kind of smoke from the cook fires I remember, or the smoke swirling up from the sacred pipe, but dirty smoke, billowing grey and putrid inside my nostrils. I fought him as hard as I could. With a face wet from tears and snot, I was put into the wagon, arms tied with brown rope and attached behind me to the wagon's railing, because I fought so hard. I thought about just falling off, maybe the rope would break before I went under the wooden wheel and I could run back to Momma and Uncle Timmy. Uncle Timmy was my mom's brother, and he carved things out of wood. He was very good at it. He had carved a bed for my doll. I can remember the curve of the bottom board that ran along the floor. I would run my fingers over it while rocking my doll to sleep and wonder how Uncle Timmy got it so smooth. The natural wood was yellowish, with dark brown streaks. He had rubbed it down with some kind of oil from a deer that one of the hunters had taken. They used every part of that deer. As I lay in this cot, with all the other young girls surrounding me, I remember.

I remember that I never met my dad. I knew Momma and Uncle Timmy and Grandma and Grandpa, but I had no dad. They never talked much of it, and all the others would treat me like their own, but sometimes the other kids would say things. I heard a

boy two years older than me laughing once. He'd said, "Look out everyone, here she comes," and I knew I heard him use a word that means white, but I could not figure it out. I was only ten then, and now, as I lay here on this cot, far away from my family, I can't help but wonder if my daddy was white. I see my reflection in the mirror, and my hair, before they made me cut it, was long and black, just like my momma's. I hope I am not part white.

So, every night, I lay here and share what I think with Chiksikay who sleeps next to me. She thinks I am crazy for staying awake so much and tells me I should stop thinking and telling stories; that it just causes me pain, but I have to remember!

Loritta, a nine-year-old from West Virginia got here a week ago. She cries every night, and I try to hold her and help her to get to sleep. Last night, I told her how being here wasn't so bad. I told her how Miss Clancy really does like us, even though it seems like she is hard on us. Miss Clancy is the only one of them that I feel safe with. She is kind and will come and help you when you seem sad. She's Mister Clancy's daughter. Mister Clancy's belly hangs out over his pants and his reddish beard, scratchy and sparse, covers what I imagine is an ugly face. His blue eyes are big, and one of them always strays away when he is looking at you, like he's watching you and someone else. Eli (that is the name that he chose as his English name) says Mister Clancy's got two more eyes in the back of his head, so that he can watch four of us Indians at a time, so we are always trying to test him. Every time, he turns around just when one of us is going to do something. I think he might have two more back there.

Loritta laughed at the thought of a four-eyed man. She fell asleep after that, while I was stroking her forehead.

I can't remember the sound of my Momma's voice anymore. I think that one day I might remember it. I hope that I do. I can see her, with her braids on either side of her face. Her eyes black as a moonless night. When I would look into them, I was enveloped in

pure love. People here don't have eyes like that, especially not Mister Clancy.

The horns playing reveille always come too soon. My own eyes, which I think look like Momma's, are not as deep as hers. The school and the teachers are taking my memories and replacing them with white words. My waters shall never run as deep as Momma's.

Miss Clancy was exceptionally quiet today. She sat close to the window during most of class. She had us work on our own. Her red bullfrog eyes must have been wet all night, but she held it in while here in the classroom. She shielded us from her pain. I think Mister Clancy did something. He probably saw her with his back-head-eyes, and now she's in trouble. I wonder what she did.

One night, I saw Mister Clancy out behind the stable with Isobel. She's a fourteen year old girl from up north. Mister Clancy was fancy footing all around her, dancing and twirling. His crooked teeth smiled up at her as he bowed down his head, took his hat off and curtsied towards her. She was a little nervous; you could tell because, though she laughed at him a little, she held her hands behind her back and laced her fingers real tight inside one another. I kept quiet and still, like a tree, and watched. He stopped smiling, his voice went stoic. He said she should know by now that when a man bows like that, she should return the gesture. Isobel did so quickly and said, "So sorry mister." His face softened again, and he said, "that's better, my little Isobella-bella" in a sing-songy way, as he swayed back and forth in front of her. I watched as he walked toward the stable and said, "Come now, Isobel." Isobel followed him into the closest stall, and then I heard some panting and moaning and it was hard to swallow my own spit. The heat was rising up from my toes, and I wanted to leave, but I couldn't. I listened to the horses neighing and snorting. After a while, I got tired of waiting to see them come out, so I snuck back into the girls' barracks, and, while under the thin sheets in my bed, I put my hand between my legs.

I went up to Miss Clancy and asked her what I should do, now that I had completed my reading. She pulled her attention from the daisy-colored curtains and said softly, "Go back to your seat, Agnes, and read chapter seven." I said, "Yes Ma'am".

Miss Clancy got up from her spot and went back to work at her desk. It was as if nothing had happened and she was back to being her old self again, except from that day on Miss Clancy stopped being so nice. I stopped feeling safe with her. I don't know what changed her.

ISOBEL

I got here when I was just six years old. I learned early on how to stay alive. I am not strong enough to run away like Agnes did. Sometimes I wish I could be more like her.

Mister Clancy takes good care of me though, as long as I do what he likes. He doesn't ever really hurt me, but sometimes I wish I was somewhere else: sometimes I go to the waterhole by my village in my head, so's that when he's messin' with me, I don't really feel it.

Agnes used to look at me with those sundown eyes of hers. I think she knew about me and Mister Clancy. Her eyes would narrow and point at me in that accusing way. Sometimes when he'd be around she'd even flip her eyes back and forth between the two of us, and I was sure she knew, but she never said nothin'.

I steer clear of Miss Clancy, because I cannot look her straight in her face. It was a good thing that I had already done all the learnin' from the books before she became a teacher and I did not have to be in her class. I am one of the oldest girls here, so they use me to cook and clean and work in the gardens. I like the garden. The smell of tomatoes and cucumbers in the summer makes me happy. Watching sprouts push up through the dirt and grow big, green, and leafy makes me remember gathering medicine plants for healing with

my Grandma. I've been here for eight years now, and I am glad that I have some memories left, but they are few and seem to be disappearing, like the sun does every night in the far off sky.

It's been two days since Agnes has been gone and Mister Clancy keeps pressuring little Loritta, asking her where Agnes went and telling her that she is gonna go to Hell if she knows and don't tell. I heard Loritta crying last night in her bunk. No one told her any stories or stroked her hair like Agnes would have. Agnes must have run off as opposed to somebody hurting her or something, otherwise Mister Clancy would not be trying to find out. I hope she finds her momma.

MARGARET CLANCY

I have been teaching here for a year and a half. My daddy runs this place, and, when I first came here, I wanted to help the Indian children, help them learn civilized ways, wanted to expand their futures. I still want to do that, but it has become increasingly hard for me to focus.

A few weeks ago, I happened to see my daddy and Isobel together. Well, they were doing things that they should not be doing! I saw this, and I knew that it should not be happening. I had been at the stables brushing my horse when I saw it. At first, I just heard some voices and laughter, and then I heard noises that should be kept behind the doors of a married couple's bedroom. It seemed sweltering and, even though I should not have done so, I peeked through the slats of wood between the stable stalls, and I saw it. It was a large man, and he was on his knees, and there were two tan legs up in the air and curved a little around his waist, and then I saw his red hair. Under his heavy belly, I could see the small body that I soon recognized as Isobel. I knew it was Daddy. I tore my eyes away fast and then made my way quietly to my room. I did not know what to do. I got to my room, slid inside, and closed the door behind me.

I leaned on it for a bit, covered my mouth, and cried.

The day after I saw this, I was in class with the students, and I could not even teach. I made them work on their own. Agnes came up to me, and I sent her back to her desk to work. I always liked Agnes.

That night I went to talk to Isobel. She lied to me, told me that it wasn't her, but I knew it was. She was not even able to look me in the eye, kept her head real low, barely spoke, just enough to tell me it was not her. I stopped trying and left her alone. As I exited her garden, I heard her make a sound, like a puppy whimpering. I kept walking away.

I decided I was going to talk to my father, which was probably not the best thing to do, but I am his daughter and it seemed like the right thing to do. I made preparations in my head about how I was going to talk to him and what I was going to say.

Several weeks passed, and my teaching became languid. The students recognized a change in me. I had lost the passion I had once felt for them, for the Indians. Isobel was a liar, and as I looked into the faces of the children in my class, all I could see was more little liars.

Today, I noticed that Agnes was not present, and I asked Loritta if she knew where Agnes was. She said, "No, Ma'am." I asked the entire class if they had seen Agnes, and no one had, and it sent a shiver up my spine.

Agnes was a strong headed young woman, and she could have gotten herself into trouble. But at this point, I felt no power to protect these children, and so I ignored the feelings I had; I learned how to bury them. I became numb and taught systematically how to write, how to read, and by example, how to survive. Isobel knew how. Now I do too.

White Life Choices

by Bess Proper

White

Like the smoke billowing in tufts before my eyes

I really should quit

Instead of smoking this cigarette

White

Like the background of Microsoft Word –

What I *should* be doing instead of smoking

A black cursor blinking ominously,

Mocking my chronic writer's block

White

Like the blank page I see in my head

When I picture the perfect poem

The poem that I never can write

No matter how hard I try

White

Like my New Year's dress,

The color of bad life choices that evening

And boys who should have been long gone

But still have us at their beck and call

White

Like the still blank Word document

Where I am *not* writing about that boy

Because every love song has already been written

And every bitter break-up poem has been written twice

White

Like the wrapper for my Jr. Bacon Cheeseburger

Another bad life choice

It'll go straight to my damn gut

But I'm up at midnight writing poems and I'm hungry
White
Like the fan next to my bed
Running constantly through all four seasons
Relaxing and lulling me to sleep
I should probably turn it off if I want to get anything done
White
Like a blank slate
And like my bedroom door, or any other nondescript door
Just waiting to be opened, to reveal another option
Let's just hope this option involves better life choices...

Platte River

by Claire Parsons

Ice and Snow Retreat
At the warmth of spring
The Platte begins its seasonal thaw

Melting snow brings high headwaters and narrow channels
between sandbar islands overgrown
with willows and cottonwoods

Sandhill Cranes gather as history dictates
Winged refugees seek food and rest
And barefoot brides to share their journey

Dancing gracefully before one another
They sing love songs of Mexico
and summer suns from long ago

Half a million strong
They leave for warmer climes
Above a soaring kettle of cranes
Darken the Nebraska sky

Diffidence

by Katelyn Douglass



The Store That Sells Emptiness

by Jennifer Rish

Tommy loped through what his mother would have called the “broken bottle side of town”, where the plastic bags rolled like tumbleweeds and you were just as likely to be told to get the hell outta Dodge as if you were in a Clint Eastwood picture. He wasn’t normally the kind of guy to hang around this kind of place. But cold reality had made him bold, and not just a little numb to the danger, so he shuffled over the broken concrete and looked for what he needed. He went unharmed and unmolested, which surprised him, though it really shouldn’t have. Nobody threatens you when you’re hazy with death.

Uncle Dave was not supposed to die. Dave was the kind of guy to pull you out on his back porch to drink a beer and watch the robins build their nests in March. He had a laugh that ricocheted off the corners of rooms and played blues guitar like God or the Devil himself. Dave loved life. And he was young. His dying now was the ultimate insult.

Tommy had gotten the call just after getting back from a wild night out, and he’d listened to his mother’s frantic, grief-hushed voice with a hangover the size of Montana. It had seemed off, to find out, half drunk, his favorite Uncle was dead, but it was the way things were. Death had no respect for convention. If it did, Dave would still be alive.

The store looked like a piece of shit. He glanced up at the yellowed plastic sign, black letters overgrown with cobwebs and dirt, and wrinkled his nose at the faint, mildewed smell of antiques that carried out onto the street from the place.

Belden, Bourgeois and Beaker
Seller of Fine Antiques
Luggage

He glanced at the pile of refuse that littered the store front: a wicker-backed rocker with the back punched out, a lava lamp that wouldn't work if your life depended on it, and two pairs of hosiery, still in their plastic packets and sure to fade to rags like a DaVinci as soon as the oxygen hit them.

He ducked out of the hard August heat and into the shade of the store. It had that sweet smell of accumulated time, banked in years of furniture and faded posters. The sunlight filtered through the dust as if the dust lay on the air, which was still and stale in the silence of the old relics the shop housed.

Tommy walked in through the silence, cutting through it the way an explorer will cut through the undergrowth with a machete. His feet left imprints in the dust on the warping wooden floor like snow. He wrinkled his nose at the state of the place, and wondered momentarily if he had wandered in by mistake.

He was just about to walk right back out when a thin, reedy voice knifed through the silence and right into his back. "Can I help you, son?"

He turned around. Standing behind the counter was a man that went about to Tommy's shoulder, stooped with age like a bent twist of licorice, with long white whiskers that scraggled over his knobbly chin. Tommy marveled that he hadn't seen him before—the counter was directly across from the door—but the old man was like the rest of his shop. He just blended into the quiet.

"Yeah..." Tommy said, scratching at the back of his neck. "I need a suitcase that can hold about a week's worth of clothes, and I need it pretty cheap, please."

The man waggled caterpillar eyebrows at him. "You can't

come to an antique store and expect to get things for cheap, son."

Tommy sighed and shoved his hands in the denim pockets of his jeans. "I figured, but I haven't seen any pawn shops—"

"So it's a good thing we're not an antique store."

Tommy knitted his brows, puzzled. "What? But the sign—"

"Aren't you old enough to know not to trust what you read, son?"

Tommy paused, and as the man hustled out from behind his counter, unlatching and relatching the side door, he found himself smiling despite himself. "Well what about the stuff outside?"

"Rubbish." The man snorted. "Red herrings for the passersby."

Curiouser and curiouser. "For the passersby?"

The man nodded sagely, fiddling at something at the side of his waist. "To hide our true business."

Tommy hesitated, unsettled by this statement. "Look, I don't want any trouble."

The old man chuckled. "Relax, son. We don't sell anything stolen here. Everything we have was acquired by contract, fair and square." The old man's fingers moved caressingly over what had been at the side of his waist. It was a red velvet ribbon tied to his belt. He had shifted it over so that his owlsh eyes could see to untie the knot, but what truly interested Tommy was what the ribbon held there.

A ring of keys, keys of all manner and shape, tiny silver keys made of cheap metal that may have gone to a little girl's diary, and great old keys that may have graced the hands of Victorian ladies going to explore their attics. Gold keys and brass keys, plain keys and fancy ones. Keys for every mind and every fashion.

The shopkeeper brushed through the keys with the air of one greeting old friends, knowing every one of them in turn, knowing their exteriors and their secrets as well.

After Tommy regained his voice, he asked, "What are those?"

"Keys." The keeper replied.

Tommy frowned, watching as the old man paged through key after key after key. "Sir, I just need a suitcase. Nothing special. I can't afford to buy very much—"

"You aren't buying anything."

Tommy knitted his dark eyebrows together. "What?"

"You say that a lot. Lots of those words that start with 'w'. What, why, where, how... they don't mean anything. So why use them?"

Tommy wryly thought to himself about telling the man that "how" did in fact start with H, but he thought better of it.

The man wasn't about to hear any arguments anyway. He was already scuffling back behind the counter, and using the largest key, a brass one that may have been an accessory for a giant's doll, to open the door that lay behind the counter.

It was a door that Tommy had a hard time explaining to himself. It was somehow too big for the frame it inhabited, as if it pushed at the warped posts and lintel like a thing trying to escape. Like a thing that would occasionally break into our world and trail destruction behind it.

Tommy was reminded dizzily of the coming funeral. He pushed the thought away.

"You won't be buying anything because we trade here. Money doesn't survive the press of ages, son."

Tommy felt a creeping unease in the center of his chest. What was this place? Who was this man?

"More of those damn 'w's'," The man said softly, and turned the key in the lock.

Finally, Tommy spoke up. "Where am I? What do you sell here?"

The man turned. A cold breeze came in through the crack of the door and fixed Tommy with the steady stare of time. "This is the

Store that Sells Emptiness, son. Welcome to our establishment."

Tommy felt a thrill of cold race all the way from the bottom of his spine to his neck, making the fine hairs on the skin rise to attention like the hackles of a dog. The door opened with a groan as if it were dying under the weight of its contents, which indeed it was. It was crushed under the weight of the nothing behind it.

Tommy turned his face away, coughing at the onslaught of dust that stirred up in the room like a storm, getting into his mouth and tasting just faintly of sulfur. He covered his face until it settled.

Then, as soon as it had begun, it was over. Tommy looked up, and saw the old man standing in the open doorway, beckoning to him with one gnarled claw. "Come on, son," he said. "Don't just stand there like a dummy."

Feeling foolish and yet still with that vine of distrust winding around his heart, Tommy stepped into the dark back room.

He blinked in the overwhelming black for a moment, blinded by the shade the way one is blinded by sunlight. He breathed in the smell of old leather and quiet, and it insidiously crept over his scalp and through his clothes until he felt like he had stepped through a gate back, far back.

There was an electrical click, and a cobwebby bulb burst into a semi-glow, watts that lit more like candlelight than electricity. It buzzed like the conversation of ghosts through the storage still.

"What did you say you sold?" Tommy asked, his voice somewhat swallowed up by the hush.

"Emptiness, my boy, emptiness," replied the old man, rubbing his arthritic knuckles together as he began to pace the shelves. They were loaded with every container one could possibly imagine. Hatboxes and jewelry boxes, Tupperware and shoe boxes, empty diaries and empty urns, empty teapots and empty baskets. All of them somehow worn, as if exhausted by the contents that they had carried in a past life. They sat precariously in their places, defying the laws of

gravity by their haphazard nature alone.

Tommy's stomach flipped in warning, as if the canyon of objects around him was about to create an avalanche that would bury him alive.

It didn't, though. The keeper shuffled through the shelves, sifting through the debris, without incident.

Tommy shivered in the chill, and waited.

"I'm glad you found the place," the old man said, taking a storage bin off of the wall and peering inside. "Customers like you don't come around often."

"What do you mean, customers like me?"

"Well, son... Every store owner knows when a good customer comes in the door. If a guy walks into a restaurant about a hundred pounds overweight, the restaurant owner knows he's gonna eat a lot of food. If a depressed middle aged woman comes in to a department store... look out, clothing department. See?"

Tommy squinted at a ballerina jewelry box that had seen better days. "So what has that got to do with me?"

"You're a good customer. A regular gold mine in the making. You've got that wanting look in your eye."

Tommy looked at the man blankly. "What wanting look?"

Unfazed by the staring twenty year old, the man shrugged. "You've got the haze, son. All my good customers have got the haze."

Tommy squinted in confusion. "What do you mean... 'the haze?'"

The man started removing odd containers from the shelves, raising clouds of dust as he went. "Well, son, how a twenty year old can have hazy edges is a strange phenomenon. It's not common to see a man so young hover between the borders. Army men hover, and terminal cancer patients, and old men and women. They look beyond a curtain none of us even notice most of the time. We try not to look

at the curtain. It stands neglected at the corner of our living room. But it is always there.

"It is always, always there."

Tommy's insides broiled at the sound of those words. He took a step back, sending up clouds of ashy dust up beneath his feet. "Who the hell are you?"

"Well phrased," murmured the man, turning over something small in his hand. He turned toward Tommy and merely looked at him with his oracular blue eyes. "Now do you want to see what I've got for you, or not?"

Tommy's feet itched for the door. But his curiosity held him. "What is it?"

"It's a deal," replied the man, scratching at the object in his palm with one finger. "It's what we trade here. You give me your emptiness and I'll give you mine. Sounds fair, right?"

Tommy shook his head the way a skittish horse will toss its mane, conscious of the storm in the wind. He laughed nervously, "You're crazy."

"I'm not!" Screeched the old man, shaking Tommy up. But then, just as suddenly, he was quiet again. "My emptiness for yours," he said, tapping Tommy on the chest with a finger laced with wrinkles like burn scars. "I can make all that raw, empty space inside of you go away. Just trade me for the box."

Here he uncurled his fingers, and in the center of his palm was a matchbox, light as a dead leaf, garden variety.

Tommy stared at it with something of foreboding and something of hunger. His mouth went dry, and he licked his lips, looking at the box and then at the strange old man who offered it, eyes gleaming like coins at the bottom of a well.

"What's in it?" Tommy asked, hearing his voice from far away, as if he was on the edge of that well and the echoes of his voice were coming back warped and foreign.

"Emptiness. I'm not asking for your soul, son. I'm asking for all that grief that sticks to the insides of you, burning at you like stomach acid, melting your tissues away. That's all I want. Nothing will hurt when it's gone. I'll take it, and I'll put it in one of these containers for you. Then the emptiness the container has will be yours to keep. Eh?"

Tommy closed up on the inside. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bet you wish Dave didn't die, don't you?" whispered the old man.

Tommy froze down to his socks and didn't say a word.

"Bet you wish you weren't drunk when you heard. Disrespectful. Bet you wish you'd let him teach you how to play the guitar. Yep. Bet you wonder why he died. Don't you, son? Well I can fix that. You just sign the waiver and take the box and you won't ever have to wonder again. Never again, son. Chew on that for a minute."

Tommy didn't believe it. Couldn't believe it. This man was crazy. On drugs. Wacked out. But he knew everything. He knew it all. Knew every frantic pain that buzzed around Tommy's head, every question that Dave's death had raised and then left unanswered.

"What do you mean," Tommy slowly began, "I'll never have to wonder again?"

The man chuckled softly, the way a parent will to a child having a hard time understanding an easy lesson. "The pain will be gone. Nothing to deal with. No regrets. Just life back to normal. You don't have to feel a thing. Nothing has to change."

Tommy paused. "What's the deal?"

The man grinned with teeth that looked as if seventy years of tea and a paving brick had had their way with them. "You give me the key in your pocket and sign the contract. I give you the box and a new life. Whadda ya say?"

Something in Tommy was screaming. He could hear it, like

white noise, trying to break out into the silence.

It was muffled by dust.

"Let me see the contract."

The man scrabbled in his pockets, taking out a ream of tattered copy paper, printed so small Tommy could barely make out the letters.

"Don't bother reading it," the man said impatiently, waving a paw. "It's only words, son. Only words."

Tommy's eyes wandered, irresistibly attracted, to the box. It had something to it that held him. Like naked women, or a car accident, or corpses. Things that make you look, and won't let you look away.

"I don't have a key in my pocket."

The man beamed like a jack-o-lantern freak. "Oh, yes you do. Check it. Look and see, and I'll be damned if it isn't there. Things like that are always there."

Reluctantly, Tommy slipped his hand inside of the pocket of his jeans. His fingers met something cold, with a serrated edge. He drew it out in amazement. It was a small silver key. Like the key to a house, only no brand name to mark it, and no lock in this world to match it.

"That's it!" Squealed the man, clapping his hands once, and then offering Tommy a cheap black pen. "Now hand it over and sign the form, son. It's just a business deal, one for the other. Emptiness for emptiness. A key for the box."

Tommy looked at the glittering thing in his hand and then the contract, with its dusty promises. "I dunno. It seems like an awful big deal for a key..."

The man sighed, frustrated, and opened and shut his fist around the box. "Look, if you don't sign it now, you will someday. You'll go into business. You'll go into politics. You'll betray a friend. Everybody sells the key somewhere along the line. You just get to

decide when." He thrust the papers in front of Tommy's face, and suddenly all Tommy could see was the enormous X, and the dotted line.

"Sign."

Obediently, and with the daze of horrible things done only in dreams, Tommy took the pen, and scrawled his name in indelible letters just before it ran out of ink.

"Good, good," the man said gleefully. "Your emptiness for mine. Give me that piece of silver. I have twenty nine to match."

In a fog, Tommy felt the man slide the key from his palm, and felt the cardboard matchbox slide into its place.

"Now that I have your key," said the man, rubbing his gnarled hands together. "I'll do a little switch. I'll put your emptiness in the box, and my emptiness where yours used to be. See? It's a storage issue."

Tommy, still woozy from the exchange, sat in a rickety rocking chair. The dust on it streaked his back like paint. "How are you going to do that?"

The man turned away to a little desk, setting down the key. "It's an easy switch. I have the key to your lock now, and anything on the inside of you I can take and put it away, shelve it, stick it so far back that you don't even know it's there. You won't grieve, son. You won't feel anything at all. My emptiness for yours.

"You see, people can take things and hide them away inside themselves, but it's not as effective as a direct removal. Eventually it all bubbles to the surface and all that emptiness will have to be dealt with. My kind of emptiness is the kind you don't. It's acceptance. It's apathy. You won't wonder what you could have done differently. You won't miss what you lost. You won't care."

Suddenly, Tommy wondered what he had given up. The key. The key to his lock. This man was going in and mixing things up, taking the grief he felt, the last thing you can do for the dead, the thing

that he would learn from and grow from and become a better man from.... What else would this man take if he had the key?

The man turned to his desk so that all Tommy could see was his back. There was a sound like metal biting into metal, and two things happened at once: Tommy stopped worrying about the key, and Dave and everything else—and the box grew cold.

The man turned around, taking the matchbox back, and taped its sides quickly shut. He put it back in Tommy's palm.

"Now whatever you do," the man warned, "Don't open it. It breaks the contract and all the pain will come rushing back in. You'll remember all that happened and we'll be back at square one. And we don't want that. We made a deal, right? Your emptiness for mine."

Tommy nodded thickly, like his mouth was full of cotton and his head was full of mud. He felt like a doll with its mouth stitched shut.

The man smiled, a smile that made the angels take shelter. "Now go and get your suitcase, son. You have to hurry home."

Tommy nodded, and without another word he pocketed the box and headed back out onto the street, into the burning heat of August.

In six steps, he had forgotten about the matchbox. In six more, he had forgotten the man. Six after that, he forgot about the shop entirely.

He ran the back of his hand over his forehead. He was sweating in the humidity. But he wasn't hazy anymore. He would never be hazy again.

He needed to find a suitcase, but he took his time. He didn't give a damn about the funeral. Dave had been a drunken fuck all of his life anyway. And Mom was a basketcase when she was upset. No party there. But he had to go.

Absently, Tommy slid his hand into his pocket, and his fingers curled around the matchbox.

He pulled it out, confused. "What the—"

He put the matchbox beside his ear and shook it. It was as silent as ashes.

He looked curiously at it, its taped sides, and felt something brush at his mind, something screaming, something vaguely familiar.

He frowned at the box. "Trash."

And without giving it a second thought, he dropped it on the sidewalk and walked away.

I Am the River

by Jestine Ware

Catch it. Keep it.
Love it. Learn it.
Do it. Drown it.
Float it. Fill it.
Use it. Yearn it.
Wave it. Win it.
Dunk below.
Tranquilize.
Go between. Go down.
Go up. Spray the fright.
Wallow the river. Wallow the stream
Cold. Cool. Cramped. Crevice.
Snake in, snake out, snake around.
Sneak.
Bring it in. Bring it out.
Lap it up. Leap it out.
Breath between the rocks
And keep a hand above. Keep the face below.
Breath. Bubble. Bring it.
Drip forward. Crack back.
Fall, dive in. Drag it under.
Wash it clean.
Smother it.
Careen with the screaming of doves.
Color the faces blue.

Esteban

by Bess Proper

I am driving 85 in the kind of morning
That lasts all afternoon
Just stuck inside the gloom
4 more exits to my apartment but
I am tempted to keep the car in drive
And leave it all behind
Cause I wonder sometimes
About the income
Of a still verdictless life
Am I living it right?
("Why Georgia" by John Mayer)

The leaves had just begun to change from their summer verdure to the fiery hues of fall and, though the sun still shone brightly, the air had cooled to a crisp temperature that required a light jacket or sweater be worn. Getting in the car that day – my beloved hunter green, 1996 Honda Accord lovingly named Esteban, my leather seats and steering wheel were scorching from sitting in the afternoon sun even amidst the cooler weather. The enthusiasm that typically met a visit home for the weekend was not present or was, at the very least, a minute fraction. Distracted by my discontent, I shoved the key into the ignition and a mix tape into my stereo and headed northeast on a route I'd come to know like the back of my hand.

Following the break-up of a summer-long, tumultuous relationship, my spirits were damaged and low returning to school in the fall. My personal and familial lives were in a state of disarray-my seven-year crush proving to be nothing more than a bona fide

pothead with good hair and charm, and the first of a series of risky but necessary surgical procedures for my mother, my saving grace and my rock, looming in the near future, all leading towards a hopeful kidney transplant. Putting a cherry on the cake (and I hate cherries) was the fact that I was also facing the possibility of being unable to return to Otterbein in the winter due to financial issues caused by her medical expenses and going to a school that costs over thirty grand per year.

My life seemed to be a rollercoaster hurtling towards the ground at lightning speed, too – things only went downhill from the beginning of the year. To redeem myself for the financial hardship I'd caused my mother, I took on 32 hours a week doing housekeeping for Extended Stay America in an attempt to help pay for living expenses in both my sorority house and the campus residence halls. I was working from 9-5 every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday while also pursuing a full-time education every other weekday. I also took it upon myself as a personal goal to learn the Arabic language – a difficult course by default further combined with a time of 9am and my own nocturnal personality. It proved to be a complete and utter catastrophe. The stress of working and studying slowly broke me down, my motivation more and more rapidly dwindling and my energy and will fading.

**Don't stop believing
Hold on to that feeling
("Don't Stop Believing" by Journey)**

It wasn't until I hit a red light in Centerville that I was fully aware of my surroundings. The town was a quaint little town that reminded me of home. In front of a small, weather torn apartment, a large, inflatable jack-o-lantern smiled amicably at the passersby. The wind rustled the leaves and sent a shower of fiery confetti rushing in

the street. I rolled my windows down and cranked up the heat and let the music pound through my speakers, taking it all in, forgetting everything that was bothersome and simply appreciating the simplistic beauty of an autumn day in a small town.

Track eleven on the randomly selected mix CD catalyzed my brief yet astonishing moment, somewhere north of Centerville and south of Mount Vernon. The heavy morning traffic had vanished and there was nobody on the road but me as the opening chords of Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" filled the airwaves. My speedometer read 65 MPH as I flew up route 3, the wind rushing past me and through my windows, slamming me with the scent of summer's end. The sun was at its peak and illuminated the red and gold foliage along the sides of the highway like a forest of flames. Something about this ordinary scene made my heart swell, a lump in my throat rise and waves of nostalgia engulf me. For a few brief, transcendent moments, I felt more alive than I had in years. I felt like an infinite being, unstoppable and consumed by passion and inspiration. It was as if Steve Perry's voice belting out on the radio had exorcised all pain and misery and pessimism from my life for a fleeting second, sending bittersweet waves of nostalgia through me.

• • •

My mom was first placed on dialysis during my senior year of high school. One night, she woke me to take her to the emergency room, wheezing, her face pale and her lips cracked and dry, the color of a blueberry.

"I... can't breathe," she struggled to whisper, as I hurried to pull on a jacket and shoes. I remember believing that would be the day that she died, her face burned in my memory, a scar upon my cerebrum, all hope for her recovery forgotten.

Unsinkable ships, sink
Unbreakable walls, break
Sometimes the things you think would never happen
Happens just like that
Unbendable steel, bends
If the fury of the wind is unstoppable
I've learned to never underestimate
The impossible
("The Impossible" by Joe Nichols)

The day my father died was an average Sunday in the Proper household. We all woke up and he cooked breakfast while my mother and I prepared for church. I suppose I probably argued with my mom for an hour about what I would wear before I joined my dad in the kitchen, but those details are lost in the shadows cast by the forthcoming events.

"Do you promise, Daddy?"

A half-sized version of myself clung to her father's shirttails and I begged him to take her to see my new favorite movie, *Titanic*, while he flipped my eggs, over easy – my favorite to this day; still in his morning haze, he scooped my tiny, tan sack of skin and bones and kissed my forehead.

"I promise."

Ten minutes later, Roger Proper suffered from a massive heart attack and passed away in the bathroom just steps away from where he stood, an invincible hero to his young daughter. Like an infallible ship colliding with a momentous iceberg, my father finally came face-to-face with the consequences of his lifestyle.

• • •

"We're going to have to Life Flight your mother, Bess. Her kidney function is dangerously low and her body is drowning itself.

There's a possibility that she might not make it, but we're doing everything we can."

My heart threatened to shoot out of my chest like an angry bullet, the lump in my throat felt like a bowling ball. I struggled to find my voice and, at last, I succeeded in thanking the doctor before promptly running outside to vomit. I immediately sent my best friend a text message telling her the situation, though I knew she wouldn't wake up for another few hours for school. Somehow, though, my text disturbed her slumber and I received a response within ten minutes saying, "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

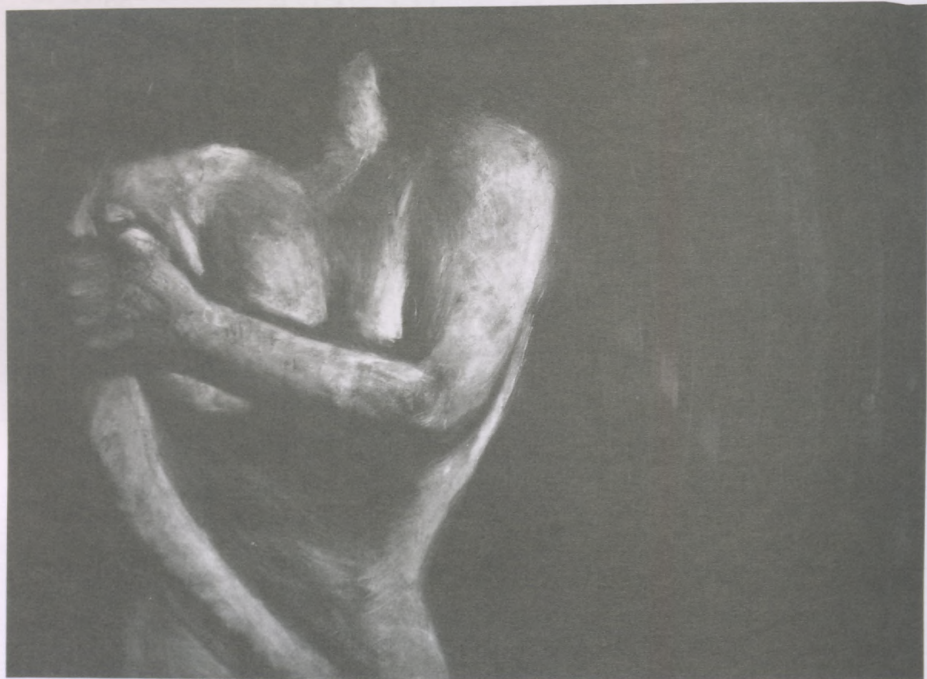
• • •

Sometimes it is, indeed, the little things that make the biggest difference in our lives – when we are the closest to breaking, salvation can come from the most unexpected places – from a best friend who visits you at the emergency room at 5am when they have an exam in four hours, from a simple compliment from a stranger, a cancelled class after a sleepless night, or a random song on a mix tape driving down the highway. The contradictory concepts of forever and a single moment dancing together in harmony, being everything and nothing at the same time, ordinary and transcendent simultaneously, exorcising all misery for a moment in time.

**Nature is on fire –
The trees ablaze in scarlet and orange
Leaves fall like burning embers,
and everywhere a sea of flames
devours the last remains of a cruel summer.**

Diffidence 2

by Katelyn Douglass



From Mrs. Ott's Window

by Lillie Teeters

Between the green leaves of full grown trees
there hangs a wooden swing.

The girl straddles the wooden plank seat
and begins to sway back and forth,
the wrong way,
side to side.

She is a cowboy,
riding bareback on a wild horse,
searching for the bag of gold
that had been tossed from the stagecoach.

Or she is a hero
trying to climb a mountain
to save the damsel in distress.

With a far-off nasal tone,
she shouts,
"Help me! Help me!"

Then quickly she begins to grab at and kick off from each tree,
bargaining with them for the release of the trapped girl.

Finally she lands her naked toes on the soft moss surrounding the
tree on the right,
grabs the trunk with outstretched arms
and struggling,

she catapults herself safely out of the swing,

The tree
all at once
is
the cliff
and
the adversary.

She maneuvers around the edge,
defeats the enemy with the wave of an invisible sword,
and saves the girl.

The Ring

by Claire Parsons

Bare knuckled brawling
Draws depression era crowds
Accents rise from bleachers
To buzz in combatants ears

Elbow to elbow a dusty mass gather
Anxiously waiting to witness
A defeat greater than their own
And marvel an ability to still bleed

Unwashed wages are placed
In unwashed hands
As bellies growl in unison
With the boxers as the bell rings

Sucker punches punctuate flesh
And skin splits like an orange
Yawning and spilling its juice
As victory is occupied elsewhere

Slow staggering footsteps
Guide an unlikely dancing pair
United in an unholy clinch
As bodies accept their partner's abuse

Embrace breaks awkwardly at the bell
The stool appears in the corner
And the crowd again passes money

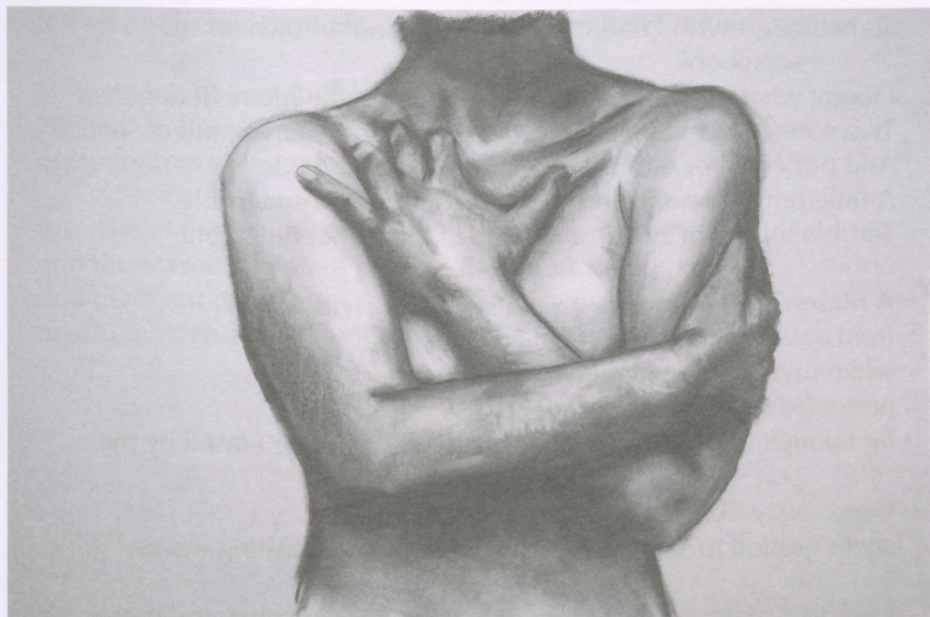
They can ill afford to loose

Weary combatants reunite
Barely strong enough to cast a shadow
Like odd dull eyed birds
They circle and peck seeing nothing

Tomorrow as light illuminates fate
Falling on eyes tattooed in red and blue
Pain will paint their bodies
In the shades of easy money

Presentiment

by Katelyn Douglass



Seashells and Ashes

by Bess Proper

Sometimes, I wish I hadn't trimmed the photo down for my
scrapbook

I forget what happened around the edges of the moment depicted
Two men, and a little girl, four letters carefully carved out of sand
And protected by a fortress from the oncoming tide
A little princess protected from dragons and those terrible,
Terrible things located just outside of this perfect moment

A Mason jar of seashells sits, gathering dust on a shelf
from a walk on the beach fifteen years past
when my father wrote my name in the sand, careful,
protected by his sand castle and
far enough from the waterline that it would not be erased by the
tide,
swept away like the shells we passed by,
shells ground to sand through the ages by the crashing waves.

Later that night, I overheard a fight between my father and mom.
He'd taken a walk on the beach to smoke a cigarette,
"One day, those things are going to kill you, Roger."
This scene was not uncommon, the argument familiar,
but stubborn is as stubborn does, and my father, he definitely was.
"You worry too much, I'll be fine,"
he said with a wave of his hand, and came back inside.
Things like that, of course, will never happen to us.

Fathers, as we think of them when young, are unsinkable ships,
incapable of pain, or sickness, or the absolution of death.

But even unsinkable ships are figments of the imagination,
and impermeable fortresses capable of destruction.
Throughout the years, the lonely shells ground to sand and ash
become angry, and become hardened to rock by time,
hiding just below the surface, unseen by unsuspecting sailors.

How wrong he was to think it wouldn't happen to him.
No ship is unsinkable, no father immortal, nothing lives forever,
every fortress will be disheveled to mere dust, each person the
same.

But when I think of him, I think of my name in the sand,
and the Mason jar full of broken, imperfect shells,
and I will not make the same mistakes, they will have to try
much, much harder to sink my ship.

Always a Minute Late

by Erik S. Lutes

While my 11-year-old daughter was tying the scarf that was knotted around her neck to a branch overhead in Peoria, Illinois, I was partying my ass off in Atlanta, Georgia. That Saturday night, the 7th of June, 2008, I ate the best goddamned mushroom-and-swiss burger in the world at the Hard Rock Café while my baby waved to a passing neighbor, wrote a note in her sketch-filled notebook to say good-bye, clasped her hands behind her back, and leaned forward to her death in her front yard.

That was the best day of my life.

*Just one minute,
Before I let you go
Let me talk to you,
There's something you should know...*

Erin's job as a training manager for water and wastewater treatment operators occasionally dictates that she attend conferences around the country so that various associations, vendors who manufacture technologies and products related to water treatment and whoever else may be vaguely close to the whole boring but necessary industry could lecture, sell/buy, network and party for a few days. With her company mostly picking up the tab, all she had to do was get to Atlanta. The hotel, transportation costs, and most of the meals were paid for.

Erin wanted the companionship and help with making the long drive, and I needed to get away from the claustrophobic intrusion of apartment life for a few days. She had just moved in the night before we were to leave, and immediately my already-small world

seemed maddenlingly smaller. On the other hand, a free trip with a woman who walked on water and the promise of all the alcohol I could possibly drink felt like pretty good reasons to go. She was a paradox to me; her spontaneously detailed-planning was as attractive to me as the confident strut which turned her hips into a seductive pendulum, swinging below the Kleininger-gleam of her honey blonde hair kept in time by her impish blue eyes. She was adamant that this voyage to Atlanta wasn't going to be a drag—it was going to be an experience. She couldn't have known how right she was.

Driving, stopping, having drinks, having dinner, driving some more, numbing our hearing with road-worthy and boisterous rock music, and discovering that posted speed limits mean absolutely nothing in Georgia (I was ecstatic that I *had* to drive at 90mph or above just to stay with the flow of traffic), we arrived at the \$300-a-night Marriott Marquis in downtown Atlanta and set to planning our invasion of the Hard Rock Café on Peachtree Avenue. As we approached the storied establishment on foot, I cheered the neon globe that spun atop.

Once inside, I absorbed, catalogued, and photographed damn near everything in that place; from Eddie Van Halen's first Peavey Music Man guitar, to the waitress who carried a tray of tall beer-filled mugs on her head, and the stage where the Black Crowes had recently given a homecoming show, I shutter-bugged like the tourist I was.

On Sunday, we went to the Georgia Aquarium, the world's largest. I videoed a lazy but graceful whale shark swimming mere feet from my face while young hammerheads lurked along the concrete floor of the massive Ocean Tank. I'd only seen most of these creatures on the Discovery Channel. I ate \$7 French fries.

*Give me just a minute
To change your mind
Baby, I don't really wanna be left behind
I'm left behind*

Streaking north from Atlanta to Peoria, Illinois, on Monday with our hastily packed-and-loaded luggage and no regard for interstate traffic laws, my jaw clenched and my fist gripped the phone so hard I caught myself admiring its construction.

"You fucking bitch! What did you do to my daughter?!" I screamed at Bethany's mother, Christina. I *knew* in my soul she was the cause of this. Her cold arrogance hinted none of the desperate devastation that was engulfing me, drowning me. I've always known her better than she could ever know herself, and what was pouring into my ear was the same acidic soullessness I'd come to know and hate.

"She's not your daughter—she's my daughter."

With the ferocious intensity that furrows her brows when she's focused, Erin handled the driving while trying to keep me from climbing through my cell phone to rend Christina to bits; the conversation was on speakerphone and Erin was hearing every word. *"Try—try to stay calm, baby,"* she was saying. I'd already scratched *staying calm* off my list of Things to Do Today.

An effort, though, hissed into the phone through clenched teeth, *"She is my daughter, goddammit. Now would you pretty fucking please tell me what happened to my daughter?"*

Christina's tone sweetened with her victory. It was a game played countless times with only one rule—her way or the highway. The sing-song, disaffected cacophony that passes for her voice matter-of-factly parroted a string of tales with not even the slightest waver. The whole thing was everyone else's fault, she said. Bethany was being teased at school for not being rich. Bethany disobeyed her mother and couldn't handle being grounded. Bethany was a pain-in-the-ass, and by the end of the conversation, the sickening feeling that Christina was relieved that Bethany's characteristic stubbornness was no longer going to be a hassle wrenched my gut.

The newspaper was sending out a reporter to interview Christina. I heard the anticipation. I heard the...*excitement*. Christina's sense of entitlement and the opportunities she saw for herself overshadowed her ability to understand the truth; my last conversation with Bethany ended with her whispering, "Dad, Mom's a failure as a parent." I'd chided her for speaking disrespectfully of her mother.

*And only you could list
All the reasons why*

Christina was only supposed to be a sexual and spiritual conquest when we met over 15 years before in a fast-food restaurant. She was days from turning 18 and I was days from turning 21. Her wide-eyed innocence of worldly pleasures such as having a beer or smoking some pot was rooted in a life-long immersion into Pentecostal warpings—none of their flock was allowed to even own televisions, and attending social gatherings such as baseball games was the most evil of taboos. Her wardrobe was restricted to long dresses and loose-fitting long-sleeved blouses—clothes meant to hide from temptation the huge boobs and perfectly round ass I knew was hiding under that get-up.

On the other hand, I had long hair, tattoos, heavy metal music, a constant thirst for all things carnal, and an unabashed love of self-medication; I was intentionally and purposefully everything her religion stood against. I took great relish in corrupting Christina—smoking pot in front of her and eventually coaxing her into trying it, goading her into incorporating as much foul language as I could, and taking her virginity on the bed that squeaked the announcement of innocence lost.

To the chagrin of her family—who'd instantly disowned her for hooking up with a "devil-worshippin' nigger"—and the curious amusement of my family and friends who couldn't understand what I

was doing with “such a nice girl,” we professed a love for one another that was borne of corruption and could never be pure.

When she got pregnant with Erik in 1995, almost two years after we met, she’d also been boinking the next-door neighbor at the apartment complex in which we were living. For nine long months, I stocked up on baby-related supplies while planning to return them and get my money back if the baby wasn’t mine. He was, but I never trusted her again.

We broke up on a weekly basis, it seemed, with her moving out for trivial reasons and moving back in days later. The days in between became weeks, until she got pregnant with Bethany. Bethany’s entire pre-natal life was constantly threatened with abortion and eventually, adoption; she never stood a chance—she was doomed to a premature death before she was even born.

*It was easy
For you to say goodbye*

Earlier that Monday morning, when Erin had left the hotel room to attend a meeting, out of sheer boredom, I decided to check my email from my phone. A message from my sister sent me spiraling down a hole I may never climb out of. My mind will only allow me to recall, “...happened to Bethany. She’s at St. Francis. They’re saying it was self-inflicted.” Frantic calls to 411 provided me with the first steps I would take off a plank leading to nowhere.

The charge nurse at St. Francis hospital in Peoria was out of breath after being paged, “Mr. Lutes! We’ve been wondering how to get ahold of you! Bethany’s mom said she didn’t know how, and would tell your family to try to find you.”

That’s a bold-faced lie, I thought, she’s always at least had my email address—and she’s one to talk about not staying in contact. This woman has devoted her life to keeping me from those kids ever since Erik was first born. She likes to punish me for being a bad

boyfriend.

The nurse spoke with professionally measured compassion and told me what she knew: Bethany was admitted Saturday night after a neighbor saw her hanging from the low branch of a tree in her maternal grandmother's yard. I found out later the same passing neighbor she'd sweetly waved to only moments before was the same man who'd screamed and yelled for help while he desperately worked to free Bethany's neck from her silken resolve.

She spent the rest of the weekend on life-support, her brain robbed of oxygen too long for it to function. There was no hope, but the hospital had allowed the family to try and talk her back, and "since Bethany's registered as an organ donor," she sighed, "we're going to let her go once the paperwork comes back."

BAM! It felt like being hit in the chest with a 20-pound sledgehammer.

"Waitwaitwaitwait...wait!! What do you mean 'let her go'?! What do you mean?" The walls of my hotel room swirled in and out of focus. *She's still alive, right? I can go see her, I can talk her back. She's daddy's girl. She's daddy's angel. She's still alive!*

The nurse guessed that everything would be in place that evening, probably in the nine o'clock hour. That gave me about ten hours. Peoria was 11 hours away. I needed the winds at my back. "Don't you touch my daughter! I'm in Atlanta, and I'm coming NOW!"

Bethany was still alive, but she wasn't coming back. My powers of persuasion couldn't override the decisions and signatures that would finalize Bethany's will to cup her hand behind her life and snuff it out.

*And all I'll ever want
Until the end of time
Is just one minute, babe,
To change your mind*

The nurse told me a police detective was assigned to investigate the case, and gave me his contact information. Christina had conveniently omitted that fact, and was too quick to point out that when she'd attempted CPR on her dying daughter, that Bethany had had the nerve to vomit on her. Being puked on traumatized her more than the smoldering wick of her only daughter's body in her arms.

*Wait just a minute
Can't seem to let you go
Look inside me, baby
You'll see you took my soul*

I'd made it to town only minutes too late and now wouldn't get to see Bethany until after the autopsy and subsequent craft of the undertaker. *Autopsy, undertaker*—neither of these words had any business being used in conjunction with my child.

After booking another room, the endless string of phone calls, fact-finding, questions, no answers, and the coming days of verbal warfare between Christina and me weighted around my neck like a black albatross and threatened to drown me. I allowed myself to function because none of this was really happening. I was ashamed of the surreality—I needed to see her to believe it for myself. Until then, this was all hypothetical, this was all conjecture.

The funeral was scheduled for the following Monday in order to give the detective, the coroner, the undertaker, and the press time to do their jobs. I developed a rapport with the detective and he was not bashful in expressing a sincere desire to find something on Christina in connection with Bethany's death. "*You know she's a piece of shit, and I know she's a piece of shit—but I can't charge her with being a shitty mom, Erik.*" He had to have proof that Christina directly caused Bethany's decision.

Not even Bethany's note, which began with "Mom, I'm not mad at you, but a lot of this is because of you," was enough. Bethany's hand had committed this brutal act, but she still had been murdered slowly, and no one was going to stand trial.

I finally got to see her on Saturday. Victor, the funeral director, was young but the grief of his profession had etched itself into his fair Aryan features, eroding his youth. He was sickeningly accomodating and comforting as he led me to "her" chapel, then he and Erin excused themselves.

She was lying in a cruel grey casket, her face pancaked with an attempt to mask almost a week's worth of death. At first, I refused to get any closer than a few yards—this allowed me one last attempt at denial while I paced back and forth shaking my head and repeating "No, no, no, no," as though this mantra would somehow negate the stark reality that my daughter was in that box. Then an involuntary wail escaped me and I threw myself on her.

She was so cold and quiet—not at all the affectionate and vivacious clown I'd last seen. Her eyelids, which had once blinked over sparkling brown eyes, were now glued closed to hide whatever it is undertakers use for cavity stuffing—cotton, I'd guessed. The lips that had couched the most beaming, disarming smiles were closed forever—sealed by an adhesive and coated with a grotesquely applied lipstick in a macabre attempt to lend them the appearance of life.

My hand rested on her upper chest as I bent to kiss her cold forehead, and in wretched horror, I felt the cause of many, many nightmares to come—tape covering the stitches from the autopsy. I could feel the brutality of the coroner's saw hidden under the tape ringing her head. I knew that the tape on her chest, which had become visible in my grief-stricken grip on her body, barely concealed the Y-shaped calling card left by the Peoria County coroner—whom I'd never met, and now hated for pillaging my daughter. Her torso was unnaturally quadratic—*man-made*. Her hands were clasped across

her voided abdomen. With her organs donated and her brain removed, what was before me was only a shell—an extinguished flicker.

*Can I have a minute
To look into your eyes*

I didn't even know Bethany had been born for the first two weeks of her life. Christina and I had split for good toward the end of the pregnancy, and went a couple of weeks without speaking. I knew Bethany's delivery was going to be an induced C-section, just like Erik's, and it had been scheduled for the end of October. On the 21st of October, she called me at work—I remember thinking when I heard her voice that the date had been moved up, and we were ready to go.

No, she'd only wanted my Social Security number, or something. When I asked her to confirm the projected delivery date, she told me that she'd had the baby two weeks prior.

"WHAT?!" I demanded. "What the hell, Christina? Why didn't you call me and tell me? This is bullshit!" Appalled and furious, it took near-Biblical strength to keep from slamming the phone against the wall.

"Well, first off, I didn't want you there." *Breathe, Erik—just breathe.* "Also, I didn't think it was *my* responsibility to tell you—you should have been calling *me*."

Seething, I growled: "And this would be a classic reason why I don't call you—you're fucking evil!"

I met my daughter for the first time on her 2-week birthday.

Bethany grew into a statuesque beauty. Her golden-brown skin boasted a complexion that most fairer-skinned people squandered small fortunes on in tanning salons. She could adorn the most exquisite of dress or the rattiest of playclothes with equal pulchritude. Her mind was as sharp out of the classroom as in, it and I would delight in trading witty retorts and barbs with her. She could

be frustratingly stubborn, but mostly heart-warmingly sweet; I think most of all, I miss those too-few times she would run into my arms and throw hers around my neck.

*I guess I've never been all that good at long goodbyes
No last goodbyes*

The morning of the funeral, I searched for something to accompany my daughter into the next life. After a frustrating search, I'd found a music box topped by an adult angel holding aloft a baby angel. *Daddy's Angel—Rest in Peace, Bethany* was inscribed on the base of the music box. I couldn't wait to give it to her.

Victor asked me to stand at the foot of Bethany's casket and greet the mourners. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" I spat and stormed out for a cigarette. I was not about to play a host—this was a funeral, not some goddamned dinner party. *This was my baby's funeral.*

Three hours of sitting in that chapel (kept chilly for preservation purposes, but not cold enough to stave the rivulets of sweat that soaked my deep scarlet dress shirt), the stench of embalming fluid, the beautifully haunting strains of the music box that was played over and over, the endless promenade of translucent mourners, and watching Christina put on an Oscar-worthy performance as The Grieving Mother could not have prepared me for watching my son, as tall as me and sharply handsome, load his sister's casket into the hearse. Erin's hands, assisted by my brother's and Jeff's, kept me from collapsing as I rocked unsteadily.

Jeff Farran was a hulking Irish hell-raiser, and one of my dearest long-time friends. We'd hit it off famously when we met at a party and never lost touch, even after I'd moved to Ohio. Impeccably dressed in a charcoal suit and evoking rumors that I'd brought a bodyguard, he risked his job to pay his respects to Bethany and to offer his titanium support. He was never so far away he couldn't protect me—from

myself, mostly.

*And only you could ease
The agony I feel
And how I pinch myself
Because this can't be real*

The 10-hour beeline from Atlanta had felt like the longest drive of my life. It was a jaunt across a street and back compared to the agonizing crawl to, then through, the cemetery. Winding and twisting through the historic Springdale Cemetery, I was convinced they were intentionally taking the scenic route, "Come the fuck on!" I growled, pounding the steering wheel.

The hatred boiling in me for Christina was not abated upon learning she'd been caught by Victor spitefully trying to remove the music box from Bethany's casket after the chapel emptied, and was admonished to have a little respect for the dead. This fresh knowledge was one more straw on my back as I sat behind her at the graveside service. Only Erik, sitting next to her and displaying the maturity and poise I'd tried so hard to instill in him, kept me from fulfilling my fantasy of garroting her with my tie and exacting a small measure of justice.

The freshly dug hole and the mountain of dirt that was to serve as my daughter's eternal blanket had less impact on me than did the two gouges in the ground next to the grave. Left by the backhoe commissioned to digging Bethany's grave, those marks are unmercifully still visible a year and a half after the funeral.

The graveside service concluded in a blur and I needed to talk to Erik. I'd bought for him a cell phone so that he could contact me anytime he wished, unencumbered by his mother's interference. He followed me to my car. I looked back to say something to him. Christina was in tow. "Back off," I warned. "I want to talk to my son alone."

"Nope, you'll do it right in front of me." Her smirk was the final straw.

I've tried so hard to remember what happened next, but the screen in my mind is blank...and red. I can only remember screaming, "*You fucking killed my daughter!*" Bedlam. Chaos. She later claimed in court I lunged at her. Others say I couldn't have—my brothers, Erin, and Jeff all had seen this coming, and were already herding me into the car. Christina may never know how badly I wanted to see her strung up, wrapped in concertina wire, and showered in brine in that instant.

I would like to say that I remember tearing out of the cemetery, careening and speeding—not caring if I wrecked and killed us all. I would like to recount the décor of Gorman's Pub, where I inhaled many shots of whiskey in rapid succession. I would like to say I remember asking Erin to take me back to Bethany after we'd dropped Jeff off at his car. I would like to say, in honor of Bethany, that I remembered being back at her grave, now desolate and seemingly forgotten. I can't say any of that, though. But Erin can:

"It took us a few minutes to find it again, she was so far back. We got out of the car and I think we were surprised that it was all over—nothing but tractor marks on the ground and the dirt was already over her grave.

"Sobbing quietly, you just started talking to her, saying how sorry you were and how much you loved her—telling her everything you would have said if she was there. 'I would have protected you.' You damned the ants for walking on her grave, demanding them to get away from her.

"Your demeanor started to change—to desperation, maybe? 'OK, this is enough, Bethany—stop. Just come back. You're not in trouble but you need to stop now. This isn't funny. Come on baby. I will protect you. Daddy is here now'. You begged her to talk to you, 'Just give me a minute. Why did you do this,

baby?? You can't take it back, Bethany!! You didn't have to go this far; I would have listened, I would have protected you – I'm sorry!! Please come back.'

"You took off your shirt and decided that you were going to dig her up but she had to help you. She had to give you another minute—just one. You could change her mind. You would be 'better' but she had to help you. 'Reach out your hand Bethany! I can get you out of there but you have to help me. Okay baby, I understand – you're tired...okay you rest. I'm coming. Daddy will be right there, baby – wait for Daddy'. You said to nobody, 'Find me something to dig with!' and looked around for a tractor or shovel or anything to help you dig. On your knees, you started to dig into the dirt with your hands, begging her to help you. I would try to hold you but I don't know if you even knew I was there. It was just you and her.

"You laid down on her grave. You decided you weren't leaving. You stayed like this for awhile, defeated. Eventually, you asked me to go to the car and get a glass and you placed dirt from her grave in it. I picked up your clothes and baby-step by baby-step we walked back to the car. 'I don't want to leave her here alone.' It almost killed both of us to do that."

*I'd never ask a thing,
Except for just this one last time
One more minute, love,
To change your mind?*

In the weeks that followed, whether or not I'd allow myself to live through each day was a question not even I could answer. Erin, watching me deteriorate, was sure she'd find my smoldering wick every morning. I wanted to reassure her, but I couldn't. I was seized with fits of sudden rage, usually culminating in me hurling something

across the room. We'd been so excited about her moving in with me, about waking up next to each other. Now, it seemed we woke only to my screams and sobs from the nightmares. My mind, though, had mercifully hidden the anguished episode at Bethany's grave from me.

Emails and phone calls came pouring in—all offering condolences, and some recounting stories of Christina's treatment of the kids. Ironically, most of the people who'd been reporting to me were *her* family. She and I engaged in a legal war of attrition with Erik being my estranged objective. She cleaned house by setting up a fund ostensibly to pay for the funeral. She raked in about \$10k *just that I know of*. She spent not one dime on funeral expenses, Bethany's plot, or even a headstone for her daughter despite a columnist in the local paper imploring the public's help in defraying those costs. While my baby lay in an unmarked, unpaid-for grave, Christina treated herself to (among other things) a brand-new laptop computer and gambling trips. Exhaustive efforts by the police determined the misnamed "memorial fund" was a private account, inscrutable under a fraud investigation. She was spitting on our daughter's grave.

I paid for the plot with borrowed money so Bethany would finally have a place to call her own.

The clothes I'd worn for the funeral were bagged, never to be worn again. The dirt from Bethany's grave was enshrined in a glass vase vigorously hunted for that purpose. I began lighting blue candles inside the vase, always blue; it was her favorite color.

*I'm always a minute late
Because the clock won't wait
I was wrong to hesitate
And it's cost me everything*

Erin got pregnant a couple of months later. I was happy. She was not. We moved from that matchbox-sized apartment in Newark

to a house in "historic" Uptown Westerville. We soldiered on, fighting each other—and ourselves. She struggled to see the pros of a child being born to parents with deep emotional wounds, and I struggled just to get out of bed and face another day. I needed an outlet besides the copious amounts of alcohol and cocaine that I was using to numb myself.

Music has never let me down, has always been there for me, and has always spoken the words I couldn't. When Erin bought a portable recording studio for my birthday in September, I found that I could have my own voice. "You *need* this," she said. "You *need* to write." I threw up some flimsy walls made of scrap wood in our basement, laid some salvaged carpet, bought a couple of cheap microphones, and christened the basement "My Studio." I experimented with the equipment to become familiar with it, recording songs I'd had sitting around, hoping eventually the music would come—and I would be ready to speak.

It finally did in late April of '09. I was watching TV, mildly stoned, and a melody began playing in my head. I knew this was my chance to speak. I sprang from my vegetative state and apologized to Erin for ruining our relaxing evening, "I've gotta go to the studio—now."

She understood immediately what was happening, "It's coming, isn't it?" It was. "Go," she urged. I wrote the music and lyrics, recorded the drums, bass, and three guitar parts in less than two hours. I was damned proud of the song; it was well-structured, aurally conveyed my grief, and the lyrics were as good as any I'd written—they were too good. When I wrote them, I thought I was merely stringing together words that were honest and heartfelt, but rhythmically cohesive. I couldn't wait to show Erin.

When she read them, she went white as the blood drained from her face, and tears welled in her eyes. "What?!" I asked, confused. "Erik, this is almost word-for-word what you were saying to her that

day. Holy fuckin' shit, you *do* remember." She'd known all this time that I couldn't remember, but we'd chalked it up to the Jack Daniel's I'd pounded at the pub.

"No, I don't." I was scared now. I was scared that I'd opened a Pandora's Box.

I had. The next night in the studio, I prepped to record the vocals. The vase of Bethany's dirt and a lit blue candle as my muse created an atmosphere much like a séance. As the music blared through my headphones, I opened myself and allowed it to fill me. I started to sing. I sang the words that months ago, I'd screamed in denial and desperation.

I started to *remember*.

I went to bed that night very drunk, my eyes burning from crying my way through the vocal session, and revisited by the desire to follow Bethany's lead. I admired her. Emboldened to take the most final of steps in order to alleviate pain and torment that never seemed to end; she was a hero to me.

Singing that song ripped open the scars of my grief that had just started to heal as I looked forward to the baby. I'd become consumed with writing and releasing an album dedicated to Bethany. I'd earned my GED, enrolled in college and every minute spent in class was dedicated to Bethany. I'd sent myself on a mission to be successful—for Bethany. Now, I just wanted to join her. I fell asleep that night planning my death.

*I know I can't forgive
You've left and still I live
One more minute's all I ask*

Shayne Bethany Lutes, her middle name an obvious tribute to her dead sister, arrived the next day—a month early, while I was contemplating the method by which I would die. A divine intervention? Who's to say? But she saved my life; I wanted to live again.

*Just one minute
Just one—and I swear I'll never let you go*

This past October, I went back to Illinois. I saw friends and family. I visited Bethany's grave as I always do when I'm back home. She is no longer alone, but watched over by a 30-something year-old woman who loved to help neighborhood kids and one day just dropped dead of a heart attack not long after Bethany died. I don't know her name, but I thank her every time I'm there for keeping my baby company in that awful place.

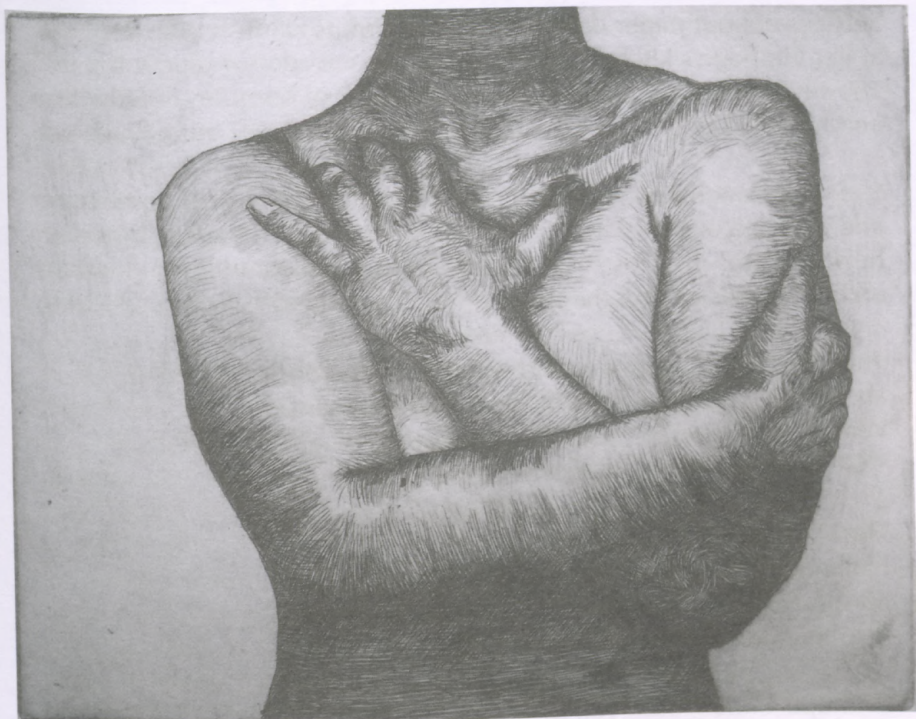
I talked to Bethany under a chilly, overcast Central Illinois sky. I updated her on goings-on, stories of her baby sister, and I repeated my litany of apologies. I took my laptop and played "Just One Minute" for her. My head hung in deferential plea.

I so badly needed her approval.

As the last notes played, the sun forced its way through the barricade of clouds to shine a few moments' light upon us. She was smiling. My tears were forcing me to taste the pain before dripping onto the laptop's keyboard. I was smiling, too.

Presentiment 2

by Katelyn Douglass



Dead Flies and Walls Made Out of Chalk

by Lillie Teeters

Scissors cut out paper dolls and tabbed outfits
at her Grandpa's kitchen table.
The silver trim around the Formica,
and his solitaire game were just below her eye level.

She could smell Redman tobacco
and every so often
he'd spit into
an old Folger's can on the floor.

The girl and her cousin would sneak into his room
and take 16 ounce bottles of Pepsi from the carton.
When he noticed some missing, he'd yell,
"God damn it! Who took my Pepsi?"

He'd play poker with her.
He had one of those fancy,
plastic, spinning containers
that held red, white and blue ridged chips.

Grandpa Cline would yell at her for breaking off pieces of drywall in
the garage;
she used it to draw hopscotch on the sidewalk.
"How clever to have walls made out of chalk!"
she thought.

The child liked the way the metal handle of his fly swatter
could be squeezed to fit her hand,

and she spent hours killing flies.
She'd spy one on the screen door and tap it gently, careful not to
break the screen.

The fly would drunkenly buzz away.
The girl would watch
and when it returned to the porch and landed on the wall,
she'd finish the job,

connecting it with the dotted,
fly burial ground
situated upon the yellow wall
of her Grandpa's front porch.

Stille Nacht

by Justin McAtee

Private Julian Weimar wrapped his arms around his knees and pulled them close. He scooted himself backward a few more inches, straightening his back against the wall till his head rested on the sill of the room's single window. He sat swallowed in three tattered coats, each of their bloodied collars upturned against the icy midnight breeze. The window, its glass long ago shattered, released a pale stream of moonlight into the center of the room. Julian sat upon the jagged shards, which jabbed into the back pockets of his trousers and threatened to pierce all the way to the skin, though he had ceased to notice this. His only thoughts for the past two hours had been of his mother and particularly of his younger brother and sister, safe and warm in Ingolstadt, probably smelling of cinnamon and snuggled into soft beds, each dreaming of the sun rise and the presents that St. Nick would bring in the night. In some hours—it couldn't be too many more now—the sun would rise here in the ruins of Stalingrad, and then it would be Christmas Day.

Snowflakes had begun to fall in through the window and settling softly upon the tortured landscape that covered the floor. Julian shivered and averted his eyes from the frozen scene illuminated before him, for though he could no longer smell the singed flesh or the exposed organs or the congealed fluids, the moonlit tangle of arms and legs and their martyred faces still beckoned his guilt with the contortions of their bygone misery. The freezing Christmas air had preserved the final sufferings of each man in ghoulish detail. Julian had tried to resist seeing the faces when he stole their coats, for each pair of eyes and each rigid line of lips was as familiar as a brother's grin, or in the case of Sargent Rammelsburg, as a father's smile. But their distant gazes did not seem to see him as he looted and, their

grimaces did not address him as he removed the coats from the cold flesh, and for their distant stares Julian was even more horrified than if they had watched him in his act of theft, for he dreaded the object of their final visions, of the horror each man must have beheld as he bled and gurgled the last of his life onto the floor. Julian had wrestled the corpses for each precious layer of warmth, trying to find the ones that would carry the least reminder of the owner's humanity. But every coat he found had been pierced with bullets and starched stiff with blood and bile and piss.

And now Julian believed he was beginning to answer for his transgressions, for as he sat under the window and buried his chin inside the upturned collars, he realized that his own warmth had returned the power of life to the blood, the bile, and the piss. They now soaked into his own coat and he could smell the death now sticking upon himself, burning into his skin.

Outside, beneath the window, bathed in moonlight, was the central square of the city, covered in piles of snow and rubble and through which snaked a long line of abandoned and frozen bodies, sacrificed to a failed operation and stretching from the square back to the banks of the Volga, where the retreat had begun. Tonight the square was silent for the first time since Julian had sprinted across it, chased by bullets and bombs and praying to Christ that he would live to see his twentieth Christmas. Christ had spared him and only him and now, as he wrapped himself in the bloodied fleeces and searched for the impossible words required to beg Him for another Christmas at home, Julian heard boots echoing across the cobblestones beneath the window.

Julian had dropped his battered Mauser in the square, but Private Stolz had kept his, with its final bullet chambered, and had held it tightly in panic as he bled to death shortly after taking cover in the room. The rifle now trembled in Julian's hands, and he paused his breathing in order to track the echo of the boots as they landed

heavily and sharply, first upon the cobblestones beneath the window and then upon the first wooden rungs of the stairway that led to the moonlit room. There would be no time to flee. Julian felt his heart throbbing beneath the layers of wool and he could hear the blood pulsating through the veins in his ears, almost drowning the sound of the footsteps. They landed upon a second rung when Julian suddenly remembered that Private Muller had collapsed and died just outside the door, right in the middle of the stairs, and he prayed to God that the body might be an obstacle and perhaps a deterrent to what approached. And perhaps, yes, yes of course, he too should become a corpse and hide amongst the frozen forest of limbs and boots. Soundlessly, Julian lowered himself to the floor, laying his body upon his rifle. His elbows and knees trembled and he tried not to scrape or knock his boots on the floorboards. He listened all the while to the footsteps, which did not break stride and grew only louder, closer, heavier, until within seconds their harsh echo rounded the corner outside the doorway and spilled into the room and across the floor and struck Julian upon the eardrums. His hair stood on end and his body felt dank and stale and jelled, as though his blood had just curdled in its veins. The boots pounded upon the boards and Julian felt the vibration in his throat. He squeezed his eyelids closed and opened his mouth so the ragged breaths could not be heard escaping. Surely, he thought, this person can't see my chest rising underneath all these coats.

The boot heels stepped cautiously about, seeming to take great care so as not to stumble. But the hands were busy, as Julian heard much rustling and clinking and the creaking of floorboards as heavy weight was dragged and shifted upon it, twisted and rolled and scooted. The boots worked their way around the room, and Julian knew that he too would be searched. He thought in horror of his three coats, clearly collected from the other bodies, and of his warm face and of the moonlight that would turn his breath into a

gray mist. And then the hands grasped Julian's ankles in an icy vice and he felt himself dragged toward the center of the room, toward the stripped remains of his friends, where the moonlight shone upon their faces. The floorboards scraped and snagged at the rifle, which Julian clutched against his chest, praying to Christ that he would not be dragged into the moonlight. But then suddenly the hands let go and Julian's boots thudded into the floor. The fall was too abrupt, too violent, Julian thought. He could hear the heavy breathing, and he knew the moonlight had broken upon his back. The boots stood at his feet, the hands idle, the breath waiting. The eyes were watching him. Julian felt his heart beating through his chest and drumming against the frozen floor, and he knew that he could never hold his breath or hope to fake death now. In a moment those hands would reach down to roll him over and discover the rifle clutched to his chest. His racing heart would scream for air and out of his nostrils would come the betraying breath of life.

"I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive..." Julian's heart pounded in his ear. And then the boots stalked slowly toward him, circling behind his neck like two wolves about to clamp down upon his spine. A pause, and then he heard the rustle and creak of a body, of a heavy leather figure, bending over to examine. He could feel the moonlight removed from his cheeks by the giant shadow looming above and he heard the breaths drawing deeper and lower toward his ear. Julian's muscles twisted tight, his eyes flipped open, and in one motion he squeezed the stock of his rifle and whipped it up and over, rolling onto his back. His teeth ground together in anticipation and he saw the dark shape looming over him as the rifle barrel collided with its head. There was a grunt and the shadowed form stumbled back against the window, fumbling inside the folds of a great, flowing trench coat which spilled open and twisted with motion. There was a glint of metal from within the darkness of the folds, and then Julian leveled his rifle and fired. The flash dissolved the moonlight in a sulfur

spark, and the bullet burned through the cold. Julian heard neither the report of the bullet nor the wet thud of its impact with the other man's skull. Julian's ears had been submerged deep beneath a sea of stillness where the only sound to reach him was that of his own heart, thrashing against its ribcage and pounding inside his ears. The dark figure fell backward into the moonlight and Julian saw the blood gurgling through the smashed forehead, saw the eye sockets being bathed in the scarlet blanket, shiny and smooth like silk. Steam rose up from the blood, curling in a gray column and disappearing through the window like smoke from a chimney on Christmas morning. The boots were now still and silent and lying pointing outward, one gesturing toward the door and the other toward the window. They were big and black and German and shiny and without holes. As Julian bent down to pull them from the cooling feet, he noticed the open arms, spread wide with open palms. Fanned out between them was the great leather trench coat, padded and warm. From between its folds had fallen a burlap sack, its end untied. Julian emptied its contents onto the floor. Out rolled two large loaves of bread, a bar of chocolate, and a bottle of red wine that was half consumed, its coat of dust smudged with fingerprints.

Julian thought again of Ingolstadt as he wrapped himself in the great leather trench coat and hunkered back beneath the window. The moonlight continued to shine from the silent sky above. Stalingrad was still, and the room was frozen once more, and Julian cradled the wine in his lap, letting it warm his throat between mouthfuls of bread. "I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive." Julian did not smile, but only chewed and drank and let his heart slow and his muscles uncoil and his feet grow cozy in their new boots. He would save the chocolate for the morning, after rising from his precious rest, so that he could unwrap its foil packaging in the light of Christmas Day and give thanks to God for the silent, silent night.

I Come from Worlds Ending

by Kylene Watts

I Come From

The country cornfield's caveman technology
Assertive women, abusive men
Hillbillies, hicks, and rednecks,
With letters removed, lazy mouths stumble for old phrases.
Lovely houses, rare; decrepit houses, widespread; trailer parks,
Clustered together like a flock of fat hideous birds.
Gardens grew weeds, sometimes flowers, mostly dirt and weeds,
Limited happiness, ultimate depression
Deceased dreams living in hell,
Unemployment, homelessness, hunger.
Life Ends Here.

I Don't Come From

Plain white normalcy
Suits, ties, closed eyelids, grey,
A people of backwards walking
And mute talking,
And dull lives that grant
No sparks,
No fires,
No wetting of the lips.
No world ends here.

I Definitely Don't Come From

Soft cherry-colored lemon grass,
A Cloth clinging to wet concrete, drying in
The orange-peel sun,
Limited life, ultimate satisfaction.
Soft vowels form, mouths breathe poetic alliteration.
Mosquitoes that dance, lightning bugs that bite,
Gators that sit in for tea parties, while
A fawn sits with a knife and a fork over a breakfast
Of *human* flesh,
His world ends here.

Spirit's Song

by Jenna Barnett

Look at me. I look to be a member of the American majority with my fair skin, blue eyes. Now look closer. My image deceives you. Under the fair skin runs deep, rich African American blood and my eyes behold a multitude of colors and vast richness, transforming from blue to green to gray. It seems highly impossible for this blue eyed fair child to have a mother of sweet dark chocolate skin, but it is so. Look closer once again. My lips are hers, full and ready to speak truth, and my curly hair is descended straight from her people, our origins of vast and expansive hair that seems to dance and move on its own. My mother and I... our eyes, although different hues, gaze onto the people we love, and they are the same. They are the greater representative that we are of diversity, ranging from pale shades to saturated bronzed to dark tones.

Place me up once again against my mother and her family. We seem to be vastly different, contrasts, a dichotomy of skin pigment. Strip yourself of the packaging we all come in. Douse yourself in the spirit, and see that we are all but the same, a brilliant multitude of color and rainbow brilliance that our spirit exudes and magnifies. All these spirits have stories to whisper, to plea, to shout, to rejoice in, hoping that they will one day be heard and assimilated into another spirit's vast array and richness of colors, adding soft pastels, dreary grays, bold punches, and dull hues. I have been blessed to be a part of their golden rich circle, to listen and gather from their stories.

I am there, you see, in their circle around the dining room table. My spot is coveted, for I am old enough to hear the bad stories, the sad stories, the cursing, the outrageous tales that have taken place. I am the bleak ray of light in their overpowering darkness. They roar, they laugh, they rage; their emotions and thoughts and

wisdom are overbearing, heavy and weighty, and sometimes I am not too sure if I am ready to lift and carry their stories, but they always seem to know when I can and have faith in my responsibility.

My grandmother hands me the weightiest of weights, her voice and body strong enough to bear the weights of her life. Her spirit is the most colorful, the most breathtaking, the most enduring...the one who exudes and illuminates the most wisdom. I know her stories. They are drilled into my core, her desire for me to remember them is thirsty and raving, all so desperate in hopes that I learn from her past and apply it to my present and future.

I know when I am about to hear a story, not just any story, but her story, her spirit's song. Her voice plays its saxophone, and oh how it is deep and skilled in how many ranges it can play, how many emotions it can convey. Her hands dance across her lap to hold mine, capturing my attention, a strong lock of dark, elegant, strong fingers entwined with my white, plain, weak hands that have barely held this earth and owned it. Her saxophone voice is clearing to play, and her hands are holding mine now, and I am entranced and ready for another story...

Growing Old

by Erika Loch-Test

Autumn never held much mystery
The decaying leaves of summer
Crunching underneath our cold, damp feet
as we walk forgotten streets of the neighborhood
we've come to love.
Discovering something new every time-
A house I hadn't noticed until this moment
with a four foot high iron fence with a key lock,
another with bared basement windows,
or stone carved facades on rooftops
What's on the other side of a door with no steps outside?
If everything I love about the Short North
Could be encased in the red and yellow hues of leaves on the
ground,
I would gather them in my arms, collect and hand pick each one for
its own beauty.
I would seal them, if I could and place them in my memory
Open it up when I want,
Remember those details,
I would forget that
cold always signifies loneliness
my overwhelming feeling that there's nothing to look forward to
Associated me without you
But if we can stay here longer
I wouldn't mind seeing my breath,
that feeling I can even recreate now
walking the streets of this city
I've grown too fond of

To just forget,
This place, I feel is in me
And it's in you
We're too young and
I can't leave this place.

Paradise Found

by Tony DeGenaro

John Milton suggests that perhaps Satan
is mankind's hero.

An English professor tells me during a British Literature
course, showing obvious signs of age
that denote wisdom. His tired visage
seems defeated to concede this information to us,
Sad perhaps, to present the purest evil as our hero.
I consider:

This poem created to "justify the ways of God to man,"
exposes the medieval Christian to Lucifer,
an epic told exposing the nudity of Adam and Even,
awkwardly and self consciously falling from grace;
They will lay the seeds of death and hatred.
And we blame them?

Tantalized in the shade of paradise,
How couldn't woman stumble into the clutches of temptation,
glamor and wisdom, and could man resist her wishes?
She, created by a part of him, leaving a void near the
heart of man,
would not take for granted this sacrifice, this gift of life.
The geography of their bodies doomed themselves to
banishment.

Led by an angry finger,
we are ushered out of Eden. Paradise is lost,
and yet.

"To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far"
a paradise in which one must find forgiveness far more satisfying

then being simply born into Eden,
is the eternal sunshine of paradise found.

Contributor Biographies

Claire Augustine is a choreographer and writer who believes in living a creative life. Check out her blog <http://artistincreativeout.blogspot.com/> for her different day-to-day mumblings.

Jenna Barnett: The things that keep me going through life: God, praying, my Bible, friends, family, journaling, playing the piano, dancing to music that is blaring, singing along to songs on the radio, bookstores/libraries, Jeni's ice cream, plays and musicals, and watching the same movie over and over for weeks.

Tony DeGenaro is a poet and essayist studying English at Otterbein College. He is the proud wearer of the Haiku Deathmatch sash and has had several poems published in various magazines. Tony is currently working on a collection of poetry.

Katelyn Douglass is joyously escaping the undergrad experience to attend graduate school at the Adler School of Professional Psychology to study Art Therapy in the fall. When she isn't making art, she's drinking coffee, meeting people, reading books, or solving Rubik's cubes.

Stephanie Freas is a writer and lover of literature. She hopes to plant her first garden, read the books she never had time to read before, learn to cook, and apply to graduate school within the year. Stephanie loves her sisters, family, and turtle, Zoom. Thanks for the inspiration.

Wes Jamison often wears a blue, red, orange, yellow, and white knitted cap. He often ponders the unconscious, the vulva, Tarsem films, the fluidity of identities, and postmodernism. He has been accepted into Columbia College Chicago's MFA program in Creative Nonfiction and will be teaching undergrads in no time.

Heather Leslie is a senior Creative Writing major from Carroll, Ohio. She is a member of Vineyard Christian Church and attends Joshua House, the

twenty-something community at Vineyard Columbus. She hopes to live a life full of love and adventure, working in social justice and in spreading the Gospel.

Erika Loch-Test is an avid classic movie lover and credits Fred Astaire and Judy Garland for inspiring her in all things creative. For these selected poems, she relied on her parents' personal stories and her experiences of the Short North, where she plans to one day reside.

Justin McAtee: Pollen from the blooming greenwood tree has scratched his voice to a hoarse tremble and clouted his conk with snot and spring fever. And yet he continues to write.

Claire F. Parson: Because I am not under enough stress being a Cleveland Brown's fan, mother, wife, and full-time employee at Otterbein, I am also a student trying to find time to write! To all our amazingly talented faculty and students, thank you for helping me achieve my goals!

Bess Proper is (currently) majoring in creative writing and psychology and plans to graduate in 2011. She would like to throw a shout-out to Stephanie Freas because, let's get real, she never would have considered writing poetry, much less submitting it for publication, if it weren't for her. Peace and love, everyone.

Jeni Joy Rish is a Victorian woman who was born both rebellious and etiquette-conscious. She finds herself addicted to such things as singing in public places and coffee. She wrote this story for her Uncle Dan, who passed away in August 2009. Rock on, Uncle D.

Lillie Ann Teeters has been involved with Quiz and Quill for two years and has been writing poetry for thirty. She was published in Quiz and Quill in 2009 and is a member of Phoenix Writers. Lillie has co-authored a chapbook titled *Pickles, Prozac and Watermelon Ice Cream*.

Kylene Watts: Artist statement is
difficult to think about,
distraction takes me —

