

# TOUCHSTONE



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Kansas State University

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*Editor's Note*

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What is *Touchstone*? *The American Heritage Dictionary* provides two definitions of the word "touchstone."

***touch•stone:*** 1. *A hard black stone, such as jasper or basalt, formerly used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one these metals with that of a standard alloy.* 2. *An excellent quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others.*

For the past two years, *Touchstone* staffs of graduate and undergraduate students at KSU have devoted their time and efforts to contribute to the collective vision of this magazine—to increase the quantity and quality of submissions received and to broaden *Touchstone's* audience base. After years of accepting submissions only from KSU undergraduate students, last year's magazine was opened to graduate students in creative writing programs nationwide. This year, even more submissions were received from graduate students across the country—from the University of Iowa to Vermont College, from the University of Arizona to Emerson College in Massachusetts. As a result, we received more good work than we could print this year, and had to reject nine out of ten submissions received. We hope to further expand the journal to include more quality work in future issues.

Interested readers can purchase copies of *Touchstone* at the national meeting of the Associated Writing Programs in Kansas City, Missouri, March 29-April 2, 2000, or subscribe through our updated website: <http://www.ksu.edu/english/touch.htm>

I'd like to thank this year's staff for their contributions to the development of *Touchstone*, and all students who submitted to this year's journal. Also, thanks to our faculty advisor, Dave Smit, as well as the KSU Fine Arts Council, KSU English Department and creative writing faculty for their continued support.

Sheyene Foster  
Editor In Chief

*Kate Bertine*

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Human Nature

Mrs. Vernon was a delicate and eccentric woman who read passionately to her sixth grade English class from tattered poetry anthologies and ancient mythology textbooks. Nature was her favorite theme, and whether she thundered on about Zeus and the events on Mt. Olympus or rustled softly through the stanzas of Whitman's famous *Leaves*, Mrs. Vernon paused at every description of earth, wind, and water to gaze rhetorically out at her sea of eleven-year-olds, and state, "Isn't that beautiful, class?" We would giggle at her kooky inflection of over-dramatized words. The way Mrs. Vernon sighed "*class*" was all-encompassing and lovingly possessive, and we liked being hers.

Despite mispronunciations or grammatical errors, when we read out loud or wrote short stories, everything was *Goooooooood!* to Mrs. Vernon. Our vocabulary tests were returned with star stickers by our names, or little animal decals that offered positive adjectives floating in bubbled thought above their heads. Even those who misspelled more words than they should have always received some sparkly adornment too. She wore floral print dresses and woven espadrille sandals in the spring-time, and a wide smile of teeth neither vertical nor buck, every day of every season.

When I attempted my first written poem, Mrs. Vernon said I was a *natural*. She was natural. Her dark brown hair was too short to hang down or tie up, and its simple style drew attention to her kind, oval face. Only the lightest dusting of make-up could be seen upon her gentle features. She had the kind of demeanor that made children comfortable in her presence; not trendy and intimidating like Mrs. Miozzi, the science teacher, or old and outdated like Ms. Jordan, the math dictator. Mrs. Vernon looked like herself, the illustration of a nature poem. I wonder what she thinks of nature, now. It has been three years since the Colorado River swallowed her only son. Kayaks are designed to roll 360 degrees with ease and safety, but an unseen river rock stopped Nathan short, at the 180 degree mark.

Does she still tell her class about Pan or Maia or Faunus, and the other contingent Greek and Roman nature gods? I wonder about the tone of her voice when she reads the myth of Nereus, the god of water. The poem I wrote for Mrs. Vernon's Christmas assignment was called "Candyland," and it rhymed. It told of candy-cane people, a chocolate snowman mayor, the sugar beaches, the jujubee trees, and the cocoa

river that flowed through the town and gave life to this fantasy place. *Journey into Candyland, where sugar takes the place of sand . . .* Mrs. Vernon's favorite part was the hot chocolate river, and the soft marshmallows that drifted down its sticky current.

If only Nathan could have kayaked down the river I had written, instead of the River Styx. If only he had dodged the puffy sugar rocks instead of stirring himself into Charybdis. I wonder if the rock he struck his head against is the one his mother now silently rolls uphill, as she reads the myth of Sisyphus to her class. How heavy it must feel when the children ask her to explain immortality.

In the final paragraph of Nathan's short obituary, his mother commented on her son's love of the natural environment, and then requested that any contributions be made to Nathan's favorite eco-charity. In lieu of flowers.



*Jaimee Kuperman*

---

The Doctors Know Something

What if we wrote about what didn't happen:  
Germany and the war and the United States  
choking on a piece of meat or looking pretty  
standing on the side with her sundress and  
spaghetti straps. What if Hitler's doctor  
who I've always seen as A woman with  
A white paper cloth over her face, held  
his breath, placed a cloth over his face  
like a hand and held it there.

The way I see it Hitler never leaves the hospital  
on April 20<sup>th</sup>. He is stuck between births.

The doctors know something.  
A death quite remarkable and people  
call it a still death and they cry  
because that's what people do.

*Matthew Pitt*

---

Natural Child

He was hypnotized. As Dianne undid her large yellow robe, Everett drew back a step from her breasts. The rings framed the lower part of Dianne's nipples like bibs of silver. Everett had to admit to their beautiful strangeness. "Can I touch?" he asked.

She took a step forward, a vaguely thunderous step. She was growing so big! The doctors must just be guessing about how far along she was—surely it wouldn't be another four weeks, surely his wife was enormous enough to carry their child to term this very moment. Each night, after hours of tiring cross-exam at the courthouse and wild motions to dismiss, Everett came home to a body a bit different from the one that had greeted him the evening before. It was almost as if he were making contact with, each evening, a new species of alien—*Communion*, the serial.

"What do you think?"

He didn't think. Looking was enough; the coloration of Dianne's nipples: a temperate pink, the color of guava flesh. When he looked at it long enough, the nipple ring and breast began to look like different things altogether: a drainage plug maybe, or a pacifier. Everett set his briefcase down and leaned closer. What would it feel like at night, he wondered, brushing against it by accident? He touched the metal gently and tried to catch his own reflection in the silver, an effort which only left him dizzy.

"Does it hurt? I mean, with, well, the nerves and all, I mean, do you..."

Dianne shook her head. "Watch," she said. She pulled the thin band and let it go. The skin jiggled a bit, as though bouncing on a trampoline. Everett winced, but at no time averted his eyes. Maybe this would be a change he could adapt to—just as he'd had to learn to hold Dianne differently in bed as her stomach blossomed and hardened. Just as there came a day—sometime in early February—when he finally stopped writing the previous year on his checks. He placed his lips around the silver; the cool metal began to melt against his tongue. It was only when her nipple hardened into a column of rigid flesh, when she let fly a breathy, sexual gasp of satisfaction, that he turned angry. "Dianne," he asked, "how will the baby be able to—you know—nourish itself?"

"It won't be a problem. I checked it out."

"Where?"

“At the Piercing Parlor.”

Everett looked in the direction of the front window; the curtains were drawn. “Oh good. I’m glad you got the okay from the fine technicians at the Piercing Parlor. I mean, they’re the experts.”

Dianne became flush. Not from his question but from the tone looming beneath, the underwire of rage. “So what if they’re not?” She turned off a lamp next to Everett’s head. “The hole will close up before she’s born.”

“Before he’s born.”

“Before *whichever* is born.” Dianne drew her robe, but not before Everett tapped the silver ring once more, examining it with expert impudence.

“That’s not the point,” he said. “You need to think through each decision you make.”

“You think that’s what it’s about,” Dianne said, heading toward the bathroom. She did not slam the door. Everett was used to her rushing off to the toilet. She had to urinate all the time now. She was pissing for two.

Dianne’s bladder control was the only thing that made sense about her since the pregnancy began. Everett had anticipated ice cream cravings, sacrilegious combinations of junk food in the middle of the night. Relinquishing control of the television remote. He had anticipated a ravaged, weary wife, and looked forward to taking care of her. But not this wife, this defiant woman. She he could not have anticipated, and could barely endure. From day to day, Dianne spited Everett’s every suggestion. She exploited his goodwill, and worse, she was living her life heedless of the rules of pregnancy.

It wasn’t enough she got her nipples pierced. That was just the latest incident. She had pulled plenty of other startling things in these past few months. She drank cup upon cup of coffee without eating anything. She exercised in the middle of the night, well past the point of exhaustion. She refused her folic acid supplements because they “made her feel queasy,” and refused to *stop* taking the topical cream for her acne. Sometimes in the car, Everett would look over to see she was riding without a seat belt. Her lifestyle choices seemed to spit out as free and undirected as buckshot.

It was a dangerous and embarrassing trend. It had begun in a restaurant, the month after they found out they were pregnant. Dianne had unzipped her pants at Yemi’s (why she insisted on wearing pants she couldn’t fit into even *before* the pregnancy was beyond Everett) and called the waiter over. She told the waiter she was deciding between steak tartar and shepherd’s pie. Thank God he recommended the pie. But still...Dianne knew undercooked meat was out. They’d read all those books together. Her behavior, at this juncture, was inconceivable. And it got worse. At cocktail parties she continued drinking well

into the second trimester. It disgusted him that she couldn't stop. Their friends, he knew, were alarmed, probably appalled by Dianne's behavior, and Everett's inability to stop it. Everett even thought about switching to juice to get his point across. But why should *he* have to suffer? Why did she insist on being such a child, now?

Dianne's distant voice from another room drew Everett back. Who was she speaking with? He checked the kitchen; the cordless phone was lying atop its cradle. He stepped into the bedroom, closing in on the sound. Her voice was sinuous and resonant, in as low a register as his, or lower. She'd undone the laundry he'd folded neatly the night before. It lay tumbled and twisted over itself. Her nylons constricted around his favorite slacks like anacondas.

"What are you..."

"Shh!" Dianne hissed, without looking up. She was seated on the toilet, her robe parted open. She was holding their tape recorder. "Now I'll have to start all over."

"All over with what?"

She answered not with speech but song. Rewinding the tape to its beginning, she pressed "Record" and crooned into the internal microphone: "This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home, this little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none." Her voice was a tunnel, unseen, and traveling somewhere. "And this little piggy cried *wee wee wee* all the way home." She stopped the tape and rose with a satisfied smile. "I'm making a catalogue of lullabies for the baby. In case I don't make it through the labor, it'll still have my voice."

Everett watched her depart. He flushed the toilet. He glanced at their sink top—her toothpaste covered by his cap, his hairbrush with her hairs—the overlapping toiletries. He wanted to stop Dianne and tell her she was crazy for thinking such things. But it was impossible to deny that it did seem that something tragic was going to occur the day she delivered.

Everett invited himself over to his in-laws the weekend after the nipple ring incident. He did it, as with his other visits, on the sly. He'd begun seeing George and Lily Dawles behind his wife's back going on two months now. Everett knew they were as concerned over Dianne's behavior as he was. Yvonne, their other child, had produced four healthy grandchildren, and was a sterling mother. And Yvonne had been a mess before motherhood: alcohol problem, a dead-end job, and, though Dianne's parents never spoke of it, a suicide attempt in high school.

Mrs. Dawles set aside a plate of finger sandwiches and crudités for her husband and Everett in the TV room. "I'm going to freshen up," Lily said. "And then you'll tell us all about this...piercing." Everett watched Lily walk to the guest bathroom. He envisioned the way it looked. The way he felt when he used it, like he was defacing their

property. The soaps in there were small and pink and shaped like seashells, and were always manicured--the carved lines defining the shells always clear, as though the soap had only that hour been broken from its box. He hated washing at the Dawles'; even when his hands were clean, Everett felt as if he were leaving dark, greasy stains across the whole house.

"Ah, Arnie, fine mess you got us into."

"What are we watching, George?"

Mr. Dawles simply flicked his fingers toward the screen in response, as though feeding his hand to the television. It was a Seniors' PGA tournament. Arnold Palmer was using a wedge to claw out of a nasty sand trap. He looked fatigued and hot, like he might collapse right there in the trap.

"You've got to control your wife," Mr. Dawles said, banging two carrot sticks together for emphasis. Dianne's father ruled the house with a ghostly toughness. He rarely spoke, and when he did, his comments took the form of prescriptions. He liked his steak fatty and his presidents blustery. When Dianne and Everett became engaged, Paul Tsongas was running for President. Everett remembered the way Mr. Dawles had sneered at the candidate: "That guy can't fight off a bad *cold*, let alone a terrorist attack!" Note To Self, Everett had thought at that moment, join gym tomorrow.

Everett tried to imagine Mr. Dawles in a delivery room. Arnold Palmer in the sand trap, a twenty-hour sand trap. He envied his father-in-law, thought his generation blessed. In those days, fathers got these nine months off, free of emotional clutter. They announced themselves to the child only when the child announced itself to them. "I'm not sure, sir, it's control Dianne needs...maybe direction..."

"Everett I like you. If you want to pussyfoot around it that's your business. But we both know the answer."

"Could you remind me again, what it is?"

"Respect. Take some control of your environment." Everett nodded dumbly. He thought he had taken control. He spent so much of his time orchestrating the future, the way tomorrow would go. He'd decided on the names. Not that he hadn't wanted Dianne's input in the matter, but she was taking the devil's time making up her mind. Three months was long enough. They were about to be plagued with a living question mark. They needed to stockpile answers, and fast. So he'd decided: Shane for a boy, Allison for a girl. He'd decided where the baby would get christened, which minister would preside.

And they had decided together on the most difficult decision. Not to rely on medicine, no matter how hard the labor. In the end he'd convinced Dianne what was safest and best for the baby: a natural childbirth. And she had nodded her head! After that it all became a downhill escapade. First the drinking. Then Dianne refused to get the

ultrasound. Then her parents started waking up to the situation.

Lily walked into the room. Everett offered his chair. Lily declined and took a stool from the bar. "This is better for my posture anyway," she said.

Mr. Dawles turned to Everett. "Remember what I said to you before your wedding? I've never regretted it."

Everett did remember. Mr. Dawles claimed to have dated his wife's sister for three months, while knowing the whole time it was Lily he really wanted. By doing this, he claimed Lily would see, firsthand, what George was going to be like, and what he would—and would not—tolerate in a marriage.

But Dianne had never made anyone worry. She'd been a perfect child. Never swiped her father's credit cards. Used to call her parents from parties where alcohol was served, and ask for a ride home. In some ways she'd never been a child at all—her childhood was devoid of the minor, gangster acts of youth—making this turnabout all the more striking.

"She doesn't still drink, does she?" Lily asked.

"No, of course not," responded Everett. "I mean I don't think."

"George is right," Lily whispered, trying to escape her husband's earshot. "It's up to you to steer her back. She'll either learn now or then. Through you, or too late." Everett heard the gallery cheering an Eagle putt.

George turned around, the leather in his seat twisting and squeezing. "Has this ever happened to you before? With other girlfriends?"

Most of Everett's old lovers were walking cautionary tales, filled with criminal backgrounds, shady histories, track marks, all of it. He'd loved the botched, engorged anarchy of those women. Everett made a ring around his temple with his finger. "Dianne is different from the others," he explained, "She isn't my, you know, usual choice of, well..."

Lily set a finger sandwich down. "Please, Everett. We love you like a child almost, but let's be realistic about what passes for lunchtime conversation." Everett liked Lily—she was sensible. She pretended not to know the temptations of the world, not to care for them. When he looked at Lily, he saw a matured version of Dianne, and it pleased him. He could envision a time, of course, when Lily's obsequious way of clinging to manners and customs would drive him batty (as it had Mr. Dawles), just as he could envision feeling someday the same grating feelings for Dianne. But that was a better fate to face than a life lived with a woman on edge, a woman who every moment exuded airs of secrecy, a woman like any of those he'd had before Dianne. Besides, before it began to annoy him, Everett was sure both of them would feel settled in, fit in their security, on the receding grade of the arc of time.

On his way back home from the Dawles', Everett stopped at the

corner deli for a pint of bottled water. The heat in the store made him upgrade to a quart. Two high school girls were working the register, smacking gum, their every move being slurped up by a couple of young boys with smooth faces and thin necks.

Everett approached the counter, and the girls rang him up. One of the boys gave way to Everett and his bottled water, then raised his voice. "So what are you saying, we're not good enough?"

"No, that's not it, right? I just want to see what it's like, you know. Just to see. If it's different with a black guy."

"So this prom guy is black?"

"Who is this?" the second boy demanded. "He goes here?"

"No, he's white, he's white. This year he's white. The guy I wanted didn't ask me. But I got my bead on him."

The other girl came alive. "Shandra went with Mateen last year, almost caused a race riot. That'll be \$1.50, please, sir." She held her hand out for Everett's money, her second and third fingers extended, the other two and the thumb, curled in.

"What about one of us?" the first boy pleaded.

"Nuh-uh," the first girl said. "As for you, no way, and as for *you*, you had your chance, and you were no good, honey. You got to satisfy me quick or not at all."

The second girl laughed and returned to Everett two quarters. "Have a nice day."

When he'd left the store, Everett couldn't remember in which direction he was supposed to be going. He circled the trashcan twice, trying to remember if he'd thrown away the cap to the water bottle. No. It was in his hands. Was that his future in there? Would his son or daughter become one of those? Maybe he was witnessing a preview of the birth. Maybe his wife was acting out the qualities of the child growing inside her. A child who eventually would grow into one of those girls, or worse. Heedless to reason. Not at all like Dianne. My baby, the poltergeist.

Back in the bathroom, there was blood in the sink. Red stains on the shower curtain. The basin was filled with it; it was dark and motionless and smelled of wet salt, like a lake at night. Everett dipped his fingers in and lifted them. This was no mistake. This was blood.

A piece of Everett's past awoke from the dead to become, for a moment again, clear as the present. Once, in college, he and his frat brothers had thrown bottles of grenadine at the wall in a drunken spectacle. The stains dripped and swiveled down the wall. Before receiving their university reprimand, they had bought a gilded frame and had nailed it up around the stains. He recalled the whole celebratory affair. How proudly his housemates had gazed at the damage. The perfect, beautiful contrast of scarlet on white. Modern art. Everett

cupped the blood in his hands. He thought of Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, all the women who had at some point snapped apart. Dianne's sister Yvonne. He grabbed towels out of the linen closet—so many, as many as he could, some not even towels, just sheets and rags—and ran to the kitchen.

“Don't walk in with bare feet!” Dianne pointed to the floor. It was covered with glass shards.

“I'm wearing shoes.” He stepped toward her, but her arms flailed sharply, like blades of knives. Her movements were rejuvenated, quick. She made him feel off-balance.

“Don't walk in just yet. I dropped my glass. I've got to pick up.” Everett shook his head; he handed her a frayed dishrag and told Dianne to wrap up the wound. He stared at the spilt water beneath her sandals. On the counter, like a frozen bear claw, the intact bottom half of the glass stood upright for Everett. “How much blood have you lost?”

“No, no, no, just a teaspoon, baby,” Dianne said. “I swear. The sink is filled with water. I just put my hand in there to flush out the glass. Don't come near a sec, okay?”

Dianne's lips were thin and dull, and moist and brown, like a strand of Everett's hair. She stepped gingerly; glass crackled beneath her like dry twigs. “You're going to get infected,” he said, stepping toward her, “You've got to let me take care of you.”

He took Dianne and moved her away from the glass, his hands planted firmly on her hips. He held his wife like a razor, gently, at arm's length, with severe caution.

George, Lily, and Everett held their collective breath as they awaited the doctor's report on the health of Allison. But the statistics, when announced, all sounded nearly precisely the same—baby 19 inches long, 7lbs, 7oz, Apgar scores a perfect string of twos (muscle tone: active motion; irritability: cough; respiratory: crying and spontaneous breath)—as Everett had read about in the books. Twenty-four hour labor, born at 6:32 p.m. The blue eyes were reactive to the hospital lights, which were as harsh and sharp as thistles.

Everett's parents arrived an hour later. Their bickering over whose fault it was that they were late filled the delivery room with gaiety it otherwise would not have held. The two tussled over who had read the map wrong, and *if you hadn't insisted on buying coffee versus well I wasn't the one who left the camera in the diner's bathroom, was I?* The blame sounded careless and balmy and inessential, and proved a relief to the interminable noiselessness of the previous hour.

Up until that point, little had been said. Everett seemed more exhausted than his wife, and he confined himself mainly to squatting beneath Dianne's hand. The cut from her hand was already healed, except for a faint line beneath the epidermis, like a pencil marking. Lily



and George had taken turns sitting in the room's one chair. A giving and taking of comfort. While the other might have thought to sit on the corner of Dianne's bed, they never did. Even the baby seemed aware of the reclusive state of things: after wailing for a few minutes, she coiled her voice and shut her eyes until a nurse gathered her up and took her away for tests.

The worst thing about Everett's parents visiting was that, eventually, they had to cut the visit short, returning to everyone the custody of themselves. They did not want this privilege. Back at Dianne and Everett's home, Lily took sips from a diet soda. George thrust his hands into the deep pockets of his stovepipe pants. He made an occasional gesture to wink at Allison, or was it Dianne he was winking at?

And Everett flashed back to the taxi ride to the hospital. At one point, stuck in traffic, there was nothing to do but watch the other stuck people and hope you were moving just a little faster through it all than they. He'd watched a minivan slow to a crawling stop beside a man wearing overlong trousers. The man pointed north. He held up three fingers, signifying stoplights. He had said, "And that'll take you straight into the tunnel." The minivan sailed on. In that moment, Everett imagined the act he'd just witnessed—the giving of directions to another human being—to be the most graceful and bounteous act one person could grant to another, helping someone travel further along, discover their destination in one quick and calming stroke.

But it was all bullshit. If only Everett and his in-laws felt blameless enough to speak freely, they would learn that. But they were helpless, in some way, to the desire they knew they had felt, a lust to see Allison born with a defect. Each had wished for some minor blight on the baby's body, one risk she would be exposed to all her life, some punishment with which Dianne would have to reckon, the fate of her glib disobedience.

"Ev, will you get the camera?" Dianne was wrapping her first diaper. Everett wasn't sure that was something he wanted recorded for posterity, but he did not argue with the whims of Dianne's rhapsody.

Dianne shrieked, stomping her foot heavily on the floor. "Rat! Rat! God, get it away from her!" Everyone stared at the ground, sober and confused. Lily bent down and picked up a length of black extension cord. "This is what you stepped on, honey," she said. She lifted it to Dianne's face, so she would know what it was and what it was not. "When Everett got up, his chair tugged it along. Some of the cord was bundled up by your feet, and that's what you saw moving. That's all it was. Without your contacts on, I guess it might look like a rat. But it's a cord. That's all it is." Dianne blushed. She told Everett to come back to her, that they would just watch this diaper changing, take pictures of the next changing and pretend it was the first. By the time

they got the film developed, maybe their memories might fracture enough to forget the difference. Dianne rolled the bottom of the cloth into a tight hem. The others breathed on her arms and looked down at her handiwork. Outside on the street, women and men made way for one another. Four children Double-Dutched in the adjacent park, reciting rhyme and moving rope in an agreed and spinning spectrum. A bit up the road, a meter maid excused a driver's violation of a parking ordinance. She tore the ticket in thirds after hearing his plea for leniency. The whole world, except for that room in that moment, seemed to be flying by lightly, passing easily through the barriers of change.

*Hiram Lucke*

---

Daisy Fleabane

*for my nephew, Shelton Edward Shively, because you finally figured out how to crawl*

You look like me,  
Remember  
Every toilet is a chance for communication with yourself—  
Stubbed toe, genitals, hack, spit—When you're alone—  
Snow man ghosts, bald monk scowls  
Stars, dresses, icons, stained imagination.  
The TV flips, snows. Life is fortunate.

I've seen porn actresses sneeze and cough and wheeze,  
say sorry.

Once I interpreted the actions of a Japanese porno  
That was set in the woods

*It is important to point out at this time*

*That I only know three pieces of Japanese;*

*Teriyaki=sunshine roast,*

*Ohio Gazimus=good morning,*

*And Marijuana Soo-e-tie=You wanna smoke some dope?*

a porno

In which a girl  
Starts crying before the camera cuts away,  
The man apologizes.

I thought it was her first time, I thought she was scared—

Headlights, torn tapestries, bees swarming in her eyes,

A branch catching her in the nose

When she thought she could trust the guide.

I cried with her,

My stomach a twisted railroad penny.

I have seen Beats go from villas,

Staffed and stiffened pixels

Chugging and huffing like a curmudgeon tractor.

My back to the sun on the front porch.

The light causes my glasses to give me eyes

In the back of my head. It's always

Amazing: vitamin D, C, heat, bugs, sweat,

Smack in the middle of a too warm fall.  
 It isn't right to see dead trees in the sunshine, in shorts.  
 The fires on their tops are only reminders of summer,  
 Reminders of the cycles of promises  
 To be perfect forever.

You ever heard a man die?  
 I have. Doors go (hit the table as hard as you can)  
 The lights and walls and paint and your body  
 That they've cut the clothes from throb  
 DUH dumdum  
 DUH dummdum  
 DUH dumdum  
 DUH dummdum  
 They trap your head  
 DUH dumdum  
 DUH dummdum  
 Head-wound-unresponsive-lots-of-lost-blood  
 DUH dumdum  
 DUH dummdum  
 And it still comes across the thrum,  
 The shattering  
 The absence of those accessible things.  
 Things, all just things.  
 But it's you,  
     not the dead one

Waking  
 Listening to the flitting sounds of morning  
     you are alive  
         alive  
         alive

With train tracks across your body  
 In strategic places for journey  
 Away from you  
 Chugging  
 Wheezing  
 But not moving.  
 When it looks  
 Like it, you will know  
 How Moses' real mother may  
 Have felt, eyeing rushes  
 Or rippling waters.

"Just the smell of the summer can make me fall in love."  
 My roommate's radio alarm is going off

And he's not here to stop it  
 So I let the static sound loudly throughout the house.  
 I snap my fingers and dance,  
 Moving like James Brown on muscle relaxers.  
 But, in reality, it's not James  
 Or even Maceo or Bootsy Collins that I'm moving like.  
 It's not Rufus Thomas, Al Green, Afrika Bambaata, Eminem, Don  
 Cherry, Neenah Cherry, Pat  
 Static, and crickets.  
 It's the liquid in my brain, my lungs, my railroad stomach,  
 My legs, my arms, my toenails.

Even trapeze families that practice  
 For hundreds of years lose someone  
 Because people  
 Decide to be their great uncle Oshmi,  
 They lose that wire between their toes  
 And then it's the ground, because no one  
 Wants to see the safety net, so they don't use one.  
 That's how the family loses them.

History.

There are 145 shades of black,  
 Just ask Reinhardt.

*They have one of his paintings*

*In The Nelson. I only ever remember the Cornell, the Calder,*

*And the Buddha which always slams the breath out of me*

*When I turn that corner and see him there,*

*Smiling at my miniscule body.*

These days, 95% of my friends take  
 Psychoactive, social-enhancing drugs.  
 I don't know why.

Ask your mother if she remembers

When we saw

The clowns in Chanute

And she started crying?

Oh, maybe it was me.

Have your mother read you

*Where the Wild Things Are.*

I bought it for you. She said it always scared her

When we were young. I hope that you understand.

Have your mother realize

That all babies look like monkeys

For awhile.

*Jessica Lundin*

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Windows

*Inspired by "Ride Cowboy Bun Sam," a work of art by Alan Shields*

I'm looking through the red-browns and dark greens, and my feet are planted firmly on the sterile hardwood floor, the kind of floor everyone wants but can't afford. The dark red squares are windows. I can't look directly at them, only straight through. I remember looking through the windows of our red cabin and watching the other kids my age out on the dock, the big fancy one with the diving board. We called it "the big dock." I always wanted to swim out to the big dock, but when I was sixteen a tall boy at the park called me fat, and I didn't want them to see me in my wet bathing suit. So instead I would lie on the dock in front of our cabin, listening to the waves lap softly against the wooden platform. Stretching in my blue one-piece, I could hear the boats at the other end of the lake, kids laughing in the park, splashing in the water. Next to the shoreline the two big trees, Siamese twins they grew so close together, would rustle their leaves in the wind, whispering to me. Underneath my skin the wood was hot, and I let the warmth sink into the back of my thighs.

In my sixteenth summer I rummaged through the stacks of old *Life* magazines that had accumulated under the cabin stairs. There was one with walrus on it, from 1968. And one from 1980 where I read about AIDS and thought maybe I had it, but my grandma said it was just a rash from my wet bathing suit. When I was sixteen I sat in front of the old green player piano. The player piano didn't play anymore. It had been broken for years, ever since I could remember, and it was painfully out of tune. But I didn't care. I'd let my fingers wander over the keys, making sounds I've forgotten now. My aunt Mary would say, "You've got so much talent, Jessie-ca. Don't ever stop playing." Then I'd play longer, sitting on the green bench in my suit, a damp towel wrapped around my waist.

Later, before dinner, I'd slip back outside and run across the lawn, plunging into the lake. I'd swim out far enough so it was just over my head, even though my grandma told me not to. Pulling myself under, I would dig my toes into the goeey sand at the bottom. When I came up for air, my sun-bleached hair slicked back smooth from the water, I'd see my grandma waving from the porch.

In the old outhouse I'd take off my wet suit and put on my shorts and tank top. With my skin tan and cooled from the water, I'd walk

back to the cabin in my bare feet, carefully avoiding acorns hidden in the grass. In the back of the cabin, I could hear my grandma in the kitchen, counting the number of plates she needed. She used to tell me how pretty I was. She said when I got older there would be so many boys at our door, my dad would have to fight them off with a stick. That made me feel good. It felt good when she said everyone thought freckles were cute.

I can't remember my grandma's voice anymore. Four years later, when I was twenty, I was standing outside in the snow with my friends when my dad called. "Grandma just died," he told me. "I thought you should know." I should have been surprised that he called. My dad has never been very good at telling me things he knows I don't want to hear.

I didn't cry at the memorial service. When I think back, I wish I had, but I wanted for once to be the one who wasn't crying. Why do people cover their faces when they cry? I was tired of hiding myself, tired of being the only one who could be real. So I watched my grandma's picture, hearing voices but not remembering anything they said, and I remembered that when I was sixteen, my grandma made spaghetti in July and sat laughing at the dining room table.

When I was seventeen, I kissed Jon Campbell in his brother's bedroom. It was dark and the porch light shone in through the window, and when we kissed my arms tightened and my legs went numb. When we heard his mother's voice, we peered outside into the dim light of the patio. She was small in her pink terry cloth robe and bare legs. "There's so many bugs," she said, turning to us and grinding her slippers into the cement. "Too many bugs."

I thought I was so old when I was seventeen, because I had been kissed and my best friend had had sex and I drove to school every day instead of taking the bus. I'd sit in the bathtub every night, loathing my awkward body and pimply face. I would pretend I was swimming in the lake of my childhood, and I'd hear the kids playing on the merry-go-round at the park and diving off the floating logs that lined the swimming area. I could smell the deep cedar of the cabin and the linoleum floors, and see through the square windowpanes in the dining room.

We drove across country that summer. I rode in the back of our blue conversion van, reading *Gone With the Wind*. Old Faithful, which wasn't faithful anymore, spewed steam high above me with my dad standing behind, peering through the lens of his camera. In Wyoming, the wind was so strong it blew down our tent, and I imagined living there would be perfect as I watched my dad smile across the prairie. His hands were on his hips, and his eyes turned towards the mountains in the distance.

That was the summer I swam out to the big dock. I swam at dusk,

when the lake was quiet and empty. I did the breaststroke easily, stopping to tread water and float on my back. The sun was setting on the west end of the lake, and I could see the dock ahead of me, looming against the few streams of burning light that reflected across the water. When I reached it, it was big and I swam around its metal sides, listening to the water echo quietly underneath it. I pulled myself up the short ladder and awkwardly flopped up onto the deck on my belly.

From the big dock, I could see our red cabin nestled behind the Siamese trees and I could see my dad and my aunt sitting in lawn chairs, their drinks in their hands. A dragonfly floated past me out across the water and left the marked-off swimming area, and I moved over to the edge and hung my legs over the side, unable to reach the water with my feet.

“Dad!” I called out over the water. He stood up, pushing the brim of his hat out of his eyes and motioned for me to swim back. He called, but I couldn’t hear him. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I rubbed my feet against the no-slip texture of the dock and then putting my hands behind me, pushed myself up, and dove into the dark water.

As I swam back towards shore, the water was like glass, my hands making tiny ripples across the surface. The next day I would look through the window and watch strangers dive off the dock, laughing. But I can’t always hide on the other side of the glass; someone will always see.



*Jessica Shadoian*

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## Ice Lock

The old brown horse lay motionless on the ice of the lake. It was on its side, belly pushed up in a rounded arc, neck stretched forward, its legs tumbled knock-kneed in a semblance of running. As I looked out from the plate-glass window, the chipped yellow mug slipped through my fingers then bounced from the floor and scalded my shins with coffee. "Fuck," I hissed, alone in the Adirondack cabin. My legs were burned. Shane was gone. The horse was dead.

I dropped the empty mug in the sink and checked the temperature. Sixteen degrees. Ignoring my red burned ankles, I pulled on wool socks and my L.L. Bean boots. I yanked a hat over my head and closed my bathrobe tight around me, then pushed out the door.

It had snowed all yesterday, beginning just after Shane left, and had held steady through most of the night. This morning eight inches sat atop the six already there from the previous week. I shuffled through dry crystals that blew up in my tracks, flittering ice against my reddened shins. By the barn, the two fence rails closest to the stall were down, split in dry splinters through the middle. I traced his clear path over the rails. The old horse had simply walked through, heedless, out across the front lawn to the ice edge of the shore, then onto the frozen flat of Indian Lake.

Joshua was his name. Shane and I rented the cabin from Mr. Keelie, an old Adirondack native with milky eyes and bad rheumatism. We had met with him at the end of October to make rental arrangements. He gave us the cabin for all of January for two hundred dollars, so long as we agreed to feed Joshua and keep the ice from blocking up the shingles on the north side of the roof.

"Not too many folks come out here past the foliage season," Mr. Keelie said, squatting and poking at the mouth of the wood stove. "No phone, nobody but the Old Forge General Store for over nine miles. Young folks like you will get cabin-fever." He banged a gloved hand against the stove pipe and flakes of black creosote tinkled down inside. "It's cold now, and it ain't even November yet. The wind comes off Indian Lake and you'll feel it. Especially right by that window," he said, using the poker to indicate the broad glass of the picture window. "That whole lake's going to freeze."

Shane smiled over at me and winked, prep-school cute with his new haircut and J. Crew sweater. Roughing it appealed to the Dartmouth-bred sensibility that nine-to-five legal work in the city couldn't satisfy. "Elizabeth and I will find something to keep us warm," he said,

reaching his arm around my waist and pulling me to him. I manufactured a grin and looked out the window, feeling doubtful about such close quarters for all of January break. The morning ride up from the city had left me leg-cramped and impatient. Shane had insisted we leave at the crack of dawn. He insisted on driving. He insisted on reaching over the stickshift and eating my french fries. Already I felt a little claustrophobic, less about the cabin than the company.

Mr. Keelie prodded the fire. Shane tugged on a hank of my hair, turning my face to him. "Right babe?" He winked again. "We can stay warm in here."

"Sure," I said, trying on a more genuine smile and pulling my hair back from between his fingers. Mr. Keelie was right; it was already cold, even in October and standing by the stove.

"Sure you will," Mr. Keelie said, fixing Shane with his cloudy eyes. He nodded at me. "You got yourself a fiery little red-head there. But when the snow comes, no one plows these roads. The sun's got to melt its way through to the dirt before you can go anywhere. Bring chains. Four wheel drive even on that fancy Volvo won't help you much." Mr. Keelie looked at me and I pulled myself up straighter under his eyes. "We call it Northwoods Winter Lock Down. Like I said, I don't usually rent in winter. Bring a good book. You all are going to be trapped in like prisoners. Frozen in."

On the way outside Shane pulled me in close behind Mr. Keelie. "You're going to be my prisoner out here," he whispered, biting my ear.

Out in the barn, Mr. Keelie wrestled aside an ancient lawn mower. "Winter tenants don't need to worry about the grass," he said. Shane lit a cigarette. "Don't smoke in here," he warned, shaking a finger. "One spark and you'll burn up everything, horse included." Shane dropped his cigarette on the concrete floor and stepped on it. Mr. Keelie frowned and I picked up the butt, embarrassed. Wiping his hands on his overalls, Mr. Keelie opened an aluminum garbage can filled with a sweet crumbling mixture of molasses, corn and oats. It smelled rich and warm like holiday cookies before they bake. Joshua, hearing the familiar clatter, nickered and moved up slowly from the paddock. "Give this old guy two quarts in the evening, a little more if it's real cold. Two flakes of hay morning and night. He'll be fine. The water's got a de-icer. Don't go leaving any gates open." Joshua stuck his head over the stall door. He was a big horse, a bay, with long whiskers and a wildly thick, black, knotted mane. Mr. Keelie said he was a full blooded Shire. Joshua had been his wife's. Years ago they'd used him as a work horse for plowing the field.

"Thirty one years old," Mr. Keelie said, stroking a gnarled, arthritic hand down the horse's broad face. Joshua lowered his head into the old man's chest and breathed. We watched and I felt like maybe I should reach for Shane's hand in the dark barn. I felt the cigarette butt between

my fingers and decided not to. "Thirty one years," Mr. Keelie repeated. "My wife loved this horse. She was a red-head, like you, Elizabeth." I looked up, surprised to hear my name. Mr. Keelie had his back to us. "I'm almost glad she went before he did." He worked at a burr in Joshua's forelock. I wedged my hands into my pockets. "She'd never have recovered if he'd gone first."

I stumbled to the edge of the lake and onto the ice. "Joshua," I called, softly, twenty yards out onto the frozen water. The horse didn't move. The sun glared hard against the new whiteness, the sky a pale, unsatisfied blue. I walked, watchful for movement, a switch of his tail, a kick of a hind hoof. His back was amazingly broad and brown against the snow. I circled around his rump and stood before him. The ice was solid and silent beneath us.

There were no signs of any stumbling, no evidence of a struggle. His tracks led calmly to the spot where he simply went down. I imagined his knees folding beneath him, his cheek settling into the snow. The lake bore no snow angel swishes where his legs swung in the effort to regain his feet. Joshua's one visible eye was half-lidded, his huge jaw shut, pressed into the snow. I examined the odd vulnerability of horse belly. Joshua's stomach was lighter than the rest of him, long pale guard hairs fringed his girth, tapering to a pure white up under his back legs. His tail was knotted and trapped under his hip. I squatted down at his muzzle and ran my fingers down his face as I had seen Mr. Keelie do.

"Joshua," I said. "Hey."

My fingers grew numb in the cold as I kneeled on the hem of my bathrobe, looking into the queer crescent of his eye. The wind puffed the top layer of snow in regular bouts, tiny ice particles melting against my skin. Beneath his nostrils the snow had slowly been blown away into a hollow trough, the edges melted into a crisp, icy shell. I realized Joshua was still breathing.

"Joshua!" I called, putting my hand against his huge neck. "Joshua!" I wrapped my fingers into his mane and pulled, trying to rouse him as if he were merely asleep, an absurd nap in the middle of the ice. "Get up, big guy," I pleaded. I slapped his neck, then slapped it again, then brought the heel of my hand down hard on the meat of his shoulder. My flesh against his made dead noise in the air. I took off my hat and whapped it into the snow by his face. Ice crystals puffed up and settled. Some struck his open eye and I saw them begin to melt in the precious heat Joshua still managed to contain. "Get up, get up!" I yelled into the thin air.

Joshua blinked once, closing his eye and then returning his gaze to gummy half-lid. He exhaled a more laborious gust and made a feeble attempt to swish the tail anchored beneath his haunches. He wasn't

going to move. I rocked back on my heels, unsure what to do. The wind pulled my hair in a red curtain across my eyes. I had never been so close to such a big death.

Shane had left yesterday, Sunday, just after our first full week on Indian Lake.

On the drive up we had been compatible enough, agreeing on radio stations and pit-stops, and this time when Shane polished off my french fries I looked out the window at the winter stripped trees and decided I wouldn't care. We arrived in the afternoon and spent the rest of the first day fucking like crazy, making ourselves sore, enjoying the novelty of the tiny bed with the shot springs and the piles of blankets we burrowed under to keep warm. We ate dinner in bed, cheese and bread warmed on the wood stove, and I woke up the next morning hard-ridden and hungry.

"Blanket thief," I said, rolling onto Shane, still naked and warm beneath his hoard of covers.

"My blankets," he murmured. "What's for breakfast?"

Shane and I had been dating for six months. Though we didn't live together, at home in the city we spent most weekends with one another and thus were more or less familiar with the less glamorous bits of stale breath and gurgling stomachs. We had gotten comfortable alone together. But in the cabin, it was a different alone. We shared canned-food dinners and a tiny hot-water tank. There was no coffee maker, so we made cowboy coffee, boiling the grounds on the stove and decanting bitter, cloudy espresso. The only radio station was NPR and it wouldn't come in if the wind was blowing. Shane's cigarettes made me cough, the butts littered cold black ash in the coffee cups. Something changed when it was just us, no city, no friends, no background noise. We echoed. In the cabin in the woods, when Shane yanked me to him I felt each of his fingers digging in firm below my ribs.

Each day that week passed a little more slowly. Mr. Keelie was right. It was cold outside and almost as cold inside. The warmest spot was by the wood stove, but I began not wanting to crowd that close to Shane to share it.

Wednesday night I rolled away from Shane in bed. "Some fiery haired prisoner you turn out to be," he said. I huddled under the covers, my palms pressed together and wedged between my thighs. In the darkness, I wondered about the nature of this particular failure on my part. Shane began smoking his cigarettes faster and faster, filling the cabin with a silent, blue haze.

Two days before he would leave, Shane came out of the bathroom, toweling his hair by the stove. "You took all the hot water," he said.

I looked up from an outdated *Time*, one I had found in the

kindling box with a picture of Dr. Kevorkian waving feebly from the cover. "I was only in five minutes."

"Come here," he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the bathroom. "Look how small that tank is." He pointed at the squat, rust-flowered hot water heater. It crouched, accused, near the toilet.

"I know how big it is," I said, yanking back my wrist.

"Then be more fucking considerate," he spat, and pushed by me into the kitchen.

"Next time wait a little longer before you get in," I yelled.

"Next time, let me go first."

I threw up my arms in disgust and turned on the radio, hoping the wind had died down. I needed another voice between me and Shane.

"I want to read," Shane said, dropping his towel over the back of a kitchen chair.

"No one's stopping you," I answered, not looking up.

"The radio's on," he said, and lit a cigarette.

"Observant of you."

"I can't concentrate with it on."

"Then turn the fucking thing off!" I threw Dr. Kevorkian on the floor. "Can I go over into this little corner and quietly breathe, or does that belong to you too?" My face felt hot and I clenched my fists.

"Next time you should bring headphones," he said.

"What next time?" I asked, glaring up at him. "Next time you go to the Adirondacks in the middle of winter, bring a dog. Or a cook. Or a whore. Find someone better to order around."

"Leave it on, I don't care," Shane said. He wrapped an old orange afghan around his legs and flopped out on the couch. He made sucking sounds as he dragged on his Camel. I went into the bedroom and got under the covers. Leaning up on the headboard, I could still see him. I got up and shut the door.

It had only gotten worse. It got dark at night and even colder, and there was nothing to do, so we went to sleep. The fifth and sixth nights we rolled grudgingly away to the far corners of the only bed. Once before dawn I woke and found myself curling into Shane for heat. Awake, I moved back away to my sliver of cold territory.

Yesterday morning it was nineteen degrees in the grey air outside the kitchen window. Shane thumped around listlessly in the kitchen, looking for breakfast. The icebox held nothing new, there were no unexplored cupboards. The pantry held a dull, gargantuan stock of beans, canned vegetables, soups, eggs and dry cereal. We had run out of milk.

"This sucks," Shane muttered.

I looked up from where I was reading on the couch. "You could drive to the store," I said.

"The point of roughing it," Shane said, one hand on his hip, the other clinging to an open cupboard door, "is actually making do,

Elizabeth.”

“Fine, I’m not complaining.”

“Then don’t tell me to go to the store.”

“I didn’t.”

“You finished the milk.”

“I hate milk,” I said.

“Then who finished it?” Shane asked, neck pushed forward in accusation.

“You finished the milk. I finished the milk. It doesn’t matter who finished the fucking milk. Can’t you manage?”

“No,” Shane yelled and slammed the cabinet door. “No, I can’t manage. This sucks.” He slapped a pile of empty cans off the counter and they sprayed hollow and clanging across the wooden floor. A squat can of corn niblets in butter rolled up to the foot of the couch. The Green Giant grinned up at me like an idiot. I looked at Shane.

“This sucks,” he said again. “It’s freezing. I don’t even want to go outside. I’m running out of cigarettes.” He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. “We should go back to the city.”

“There’s a horse to feed, Shane. You should go back to the city,” I said, picking up the corn can. I put my thumb to the jagged edge of aluminum.

“Without you?” Shane’s mouth dropped open, his lips chapped.

“Alone,” I said. I dropped the can. “Pick up your own mess,” I said.

So he did, piling into his Volvo and promising to pick me back up on the thirtieth. We gritted our teeth and kissed goodbye, dry-lipped through the car window. I ran back to the cabin and stoked up the stove. I wasn’t worried, even with NPR promising the coming snow. Shane left me his orange Northface parka. If worse came to worst I could walk or ski the six miles downhill to Old Forge, but I couldn’t imagine needing to. There was plenty of food, lots of wood, and aside from the outdated *Time*, I had a stack of new Christmas books I wanted to read. I puttered around, humming after Shane left, the radio chattering away, coffee on the stove. As the storm clouds scudded up, I went for a walk around the property, gathering kindling. I watched bluejays squabble over territory in a big pine tree, bickering and anxious under the impending grey sky.

I walked back by the barn and gave Joshua his dinner. As he ate, nose buried in the feed bucket, I opened the stall door and stood up close to his shoulder, breathing in the warm, earthy smell of horse and leather and hay. I used an old curry comb and rubbed small circles on his neck. I began to work some of the twisted knots out of his mane, but ungloved, my hands got too cold and I had to stop. I gave him an extra flake of hay and latched the stall. I wondered if red-haired Mrs. Keelie had been the one to feed Joshua. “Goodnight, big horse,” I said.

It was starting to snow when I got back inside. The wind was

blowing and NPR was too fuzzy to understand, so I turned off the radio. I loaded up the stove and heated up soup. The air was clean without Shane's cigarette smoke, and I read until my eyes grew tired. Satisfied with the quiet, I went to bed, nestling down in the middle of the mattress, lodged snugly under a double layer of comforters.

I scrambled back inside, shed my bathrobe and pulled on long underwear, jeans and a double layer of sweaters. Running my hands under hot water, I looked out the window at Joshua, motionless on the lake. I searched the cabin for a gun, an old .22 or the type of rusty shotgun all Adirondack camps are supposed to be equipped with. I thought if I actually found a gun, I would be able to muster up the strength to shoot Joshua, to dispatch him a little faster. It felt wrong to let him sit out there, three-quarters dead and freezing to the ice on Indian Lake. When I found no gun, I thought about a kitchen knife, but realized there was no way I could saw through the old horse's throat. He would freeze to death overnight, but that was too slow. I pressed my fingers against the cold glass. I hoped he was dead.

Grey clouds were gathering again at the opposite end of the lake and the temperature hovered at sixteen degrees. As the blue sky disappeared, I spotted movement against the new snow, three dark shadows swimming at the edge of the woods behind the barn. A trio of coyotes, bold in the morning gloom, skulked onto the lawn, heads swiveling as they hunkered down to the ground. They trotted low-belly towards the lake.

I wheeled around to pull Shane's parka on, wishing again for a gun. I grabbed two logs from the wood pile and pushed out the door. The dogs froze as the door slammed open and I raised the wood over my head, yelling, "Get away from him! Fuck off, dogs. Shoo! Go home!" Their eyes flashed and they were gone in an instant gallop back to the woods. As I walked out to Joshua, I saw them milling around each other, weaving around the tree-trunks at the edge of the woods. I squatted down to the horse, hoping, but he was still alive. He blinked again, breathing the same, shallow breaths, otherwise completely still. "Now what?" I asked him softly, running my hand down his neck. I eyed the coyotes. "Why are you taking so long?"

Leaving one log behind, I watched the woods as I walked to the barn. I shook the other log at the perimeter. In the barn, my eyes adjusted in the dark and I stumbled to the aluminum feed can. Behind it was the mower.

I drained the remaining gasoline into Joshua's feed bucket, propping the mower on its side and twisting it clumsily to empty the tank. The mower scraped on the floor and the barn began to stink in the cold air. The bucket stood one third full. Not enough. I hunted out three dusty quarts of motor oil from behind the hay. I found a dubious

bucket of rank greenish liquid labeled 'kerosene' in shaky old-man script. I mixed these all together with the gas to make a brown viscous fluid that stung my eyes and over-flowed the feed bucket. It would have to be enough. I collected an old musty horse blanket and slung it over my shoulder, buckles tinkling in the dark. I rooted in Shane's parka for matches. I found a full pack.

The three coyotes melted back into the woods as I emerged from the barn, bucket in one hand, log in the other. I envisioned them let loose on Joshua, crawling forward on their bellies, biting at his back fetlocks. Braver, the dogs would work up his legs to his hocks, worrying Joshua's knees with their teeth. They would snarl and snap at each other, squabbling over soft bits. I put the bucket down in the snow and knelt next to Joshua. I pulled my hand over his soft belly, and knew this was better. My nose began to run and sting, freezing salt above my upper lip. I spread the red blanket over his body, anchoring it on the ice with the logs.

I doused the first log, setting it under Joshua's belly. Fingers numbing, I slopped out the rest of the brown mixture over his legs and neck, then down his back to his tail. The liquid darkened the fabric and made dirt-colored stains on the snow. The coyotes watched from behind the pine trunks. I moved back towards Joshua's head and knelt one last time. I pulled at a knot in his mane, carefully unraveling the thick black hair from its center snarl. The knot freed, I smoothed the coarse, kinked lock against Joshua's neck.

The match caught off the log and the flame spread. With a sudden sucking fwoomp, blanket and horse were ablaze. I stepped back, eyes stinging in the unexpected heat. In the wavering mix of smoke and fire, thankfully, Joshua did not thrash. The flame leaped up high into the grey sky and he lay still, mane, tail, body ablaze. A funnel of black smoke grew thick above Joshua's body, spinning into the clouds. The sickly sweet stink of charred hair and roasting flesh lodged in my throat. In the woods, the coyotes were gone. I turned and ran back to the cabin.

I watched Joshua burn from behind the plate glass window. The flames continued for an hour, then lowered as the second storm rolled in. As the snow began in earnest, all that remained on the ice was a smoldering lump settling in roughly horse form. Grey ashes scudded in, spinning in soiled eddies with the new snow, and black soot rimmed the outside glass of the plate window.

I walked out onto the ice to investigate, crossing the twenty yards to Joshua. The snow spattered into my eyes and I moved in small steps towards the charred body. His carcass steamed, sagging down in the falling snow. His naked hip, burned to the bone, jutted in front of me. A skim of melted snow pooled greyish pink water around him on the ice. My throat rose up bitter, and I wasn't sure if it was tears or revulsion. The air stank in the cold gloom.



I stepped back and my boots slipped out from under me in the wet, grey glaze. I slammed onto my hip and slid forward into Joshua's back legs, at once soaked from the melted ice, then suddenly burning where Joshua's hocks smoldered and pressed into my shins. I screamed into the falling snow, and with a rotten, sickening crack, the ice gave beneath us.

Joshua sank immediately from in front of my eyes, and I scrambled, slipping in too, the ice folding and giving way to the water waiting beneath us. Instantly Joshua was gone and as quickly, I slid underwater, suddenly dark, suddenly silent, deathly cold. My lungs tightened, my chest constricting in the ice. My boots filled with water. Shane's parka soaked through. I began to sink deeper.

The water thickened above me and I felt Joshua falling beneath me. I felt him turning lazy circles, spinning down sideways to the bottom of the lake. He landed on the sandy floor with a heavy sigh, his charred bones thudding softly together, settling into the silty lake floor. Beneath him, hibernating turtles shifted in their shells, the mussels closed their mouths. The wavering weeds adjusted, arranging undulations through ribs and around his hooves.

Feeling the weeds reach, I began to thrash, kicking, screaming, struggling upwards into the water-logged sky. A burst of air bubbles vomited explosively from my lips and opening my eyes wide, I searched for the break in the ice above me.

I dragged myself out over the jagged lip of the lake, the split ice cutting a clean gash into my belly as I hauled myself out of the water. I limped back, slowed to stupid with the cold and the weight of slush and water. I staggered across the ice making the sounds of something crushed. Numb, shaking, teeth chattering, I could not turn the handle of the cabin door to let myself in. I stood sobbing and shivering, trapped outside, my tears a steady warmth coursing down my cheeks. I finally succeeded in using both hands like a vice set, turning the handle as if with pliers. My hair had frozen in gnarled fingers, Shane's parka stiffened into orange iron. I pressed into the wood stove, and as my fingers began to work again, I pried buttons and zippers, shedding my wet clothing into a streaming pile on the brick hearth.

Shane arrived two days early, emerging smiling and ski-tanned from the front seat of the Volvo. He waved and held up a gallon jug of milk.

"You look great," he said opening the cabin door. He hadn't knocked. "Winter Lock Down does you good. Your hair's longer. Tangly, the messy look. It makes you sexy." He stepped inside past the stove. He rubbed his hands over the heat and turned to me. "Like some fiery haired prisoner." He winked.

He put down the milk and reached for me, smiling. I opened my mouth but could not speak. My breath came in shallow gusts that spiked

ice in my lungs as they left. Through the plate glass window I looked out at Indian Lake. The ice had healed over, freezing Joshua deep beneath. The surface slid smooth and flat to the mountains. There was no scar that I could point to. My eyes were frozen. Shane curled his fingers beneath my ribs and pulled a section of my hair from my eyes. "Elizabeth," he said and I felt myself spinning away slowly, down to the lake bottom, out from beneath his hands.

*Jaimee Kuperman*

Elegy

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This is an elegy to the words that have died in my mouth before I  
ever got to say them.

To the words I have said that I no longer mean;  
the words that I have signed but didn't have the courage to  
say.

This is a poem to the man I just passed on the stairs  
who I had so much to say to and didn't say anything at all.  
To the mornings I called you to hear a woman's voice in the  
background  
but never found out whose car was parked in front of your  
house.

This is to the wheelchair couple who would sit on each other's laps  
every morning on the way to school.  
The blind woman who felt my face and said she saw in  
shadows  
but didn't know what I looked like.

This is an elegy for the hearing dogs that run to the phone each time  
it rings,  
to the seeing eye dogs that graduate and leave their owners.  
To the blind kids in Tucson who lost their independence  
when construction came and their hands found a fence  
instead of a tree.

I heard for years that love had great hips this is for all the fat  
people  
that I counted with my father at small restaurants.

This is to the girl who used to sign so fast and then run away,  
to the Russian man I met in Alaska, and the only familiar sign  
was when he touched his ears to say that he was deaf.

This is an elegy to all the hearing people who can't read lips;  
To the two women I met who are hard of hearing  
who don't know where in the mouth articulation begins.

This is a poem to all the girls who are on vacation and about to have  
their first kiss.

To all the girls who were excited about kissing  
and later bored of it and started thinking about lemonade.

This is an elegy for the school in NorthHampton that ties children's  
hands

behind their backs and presses tongue depressors into their  
mouths,  
to the fathers that never learn the language.

This is a poem for all the people who know Spanish and are in the  
early twenties

the man downstairs who spills into Yiddish when he's angry,  
to the children at the school for the deaf who code-switch.

This is for all the memories that have died before reaching me,  
for all the memories that have reached me and meant nothing,  
for all the memories that aren't memories.

This is a poem to the people who I never had the chance of shaking  
their hands

because they had something on their hands.

To the six year old boy who played piano Saturday night  
and said after, that the music was stuck inside his fingers all  
week.

This is an elegy to the singers who wait onstage unaware of their  
voices.

Jenny Lagergren

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City of Incense

Around here, it signals dawn or ends the day. I am among sandalwood air in Mysore, India. Most of the city's local three million people use incense as a spiritual cleanse. It's a bit like waking up to the first snow at home in Kansas. I welcome it with a gaze, tie it to a higher force, and bless the day.

A man invites my friend Lance and me into the back of his spice and fragrance store, to meet his workers who make incense sticks. Light skin, shorts, and tee shirts separate us from the daily continuum of work and people's walks on this street. Up until the offer, we have never seen the origin of incense that sells in nearly every shop. India seemed to reveal all action on streets.

We move through one room of glass bottles labeled with fragrance names, and couches for customers to sit and test scents. One cement room tags onto this main shop. Its stone walls and narrow door hide it from the perfume customers, and the commotion on the street. Here is where the rolling of incense takes place. Two middle-aged women sit cross-legged on the floor. The only two workers seem quiet, already calm in a position they hold ten hours each day while moving hands thousands of times across a wooden board. Their time passes dipping wooden sticks into bowls of powder. Each roll and pack smoothes into a wand holding powder, callused skin, and bits of blisters fallen off into the burning promise of production.

Attention to motion is loose. The women mastered circular hand movements long ago, and now they ignore their precision. The sticks finish identical to the one before, wrapped in an industry that must be smelled. This cement room is the women's last stop before old age. Part of themselves roll up with time they spend working. A caring of relationships with countless Gods illuminates their work. The woody, musty scent that concentrates in the room and the streets, comes from the Sandalwood tree. It is their origin of livelihood.

This is the India that hovers in the corner of my mind. Sandalwood mentioned in the *Vedas* burns in kitchen corners, restaurants, or in splotches over idols of Gods. The deities are happy during worship that addresses them in a hazed dissipation of wood. Hindu temples leak mythological scents grown in the gardens of the sky.

At home in Kansas, I imagine moving back into an old idea of slowness, the beginning of speed. The women's work ends in the motion of daily ritual. The space on the cement floor they work in

holds identical hand motions, production, and thoughts I imagine move from the past, to the walk home in the evening. Thousands of sticks these two women make will circulate out of the shop. Incense moves over households, India, and countries. The women are publishers of scent. A match lights their *prasad*, lets loose their work over my desk.

*Erin Billing*

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## Coming Home

I spent the last summer, for the most part, placeless. True, I paid rent for an apartment in Manhattan, Kansas, but more than anything it served as storage space for my belongings, most of which remained in cardboard boxes, hastily sealed with masking tape. I spent an occasional night or two there, stepping around the towers of unpacked boxes and piles of unwashed clothes to climb into my neglected bed. Sometimes I even ate a meal in my apartment; a can of soup opened at 11:00 at night, or a box of pasta quickly cooked and consumed before I headed out the door.

Instead of calling one place mine, I passed the summer exploring. For a two-day drive through the American southwest I dwelled in my sister's 1988 Chevy Celebrity, curled in the cramped space left by our two backpacks, a portable stereo, the greater part of our CD collections, and a guitar. For a week I inhabited the living room of my friend's parents' house in Seattle, sleeping on an air-mattress on the hardwood floor. I also spent several nights in the places between places, reclined seats of cars and airplanes, or half-sleeping upright in uncomfortable airport terminals. I spent the summer seeking out adventure and novelty, and I found it; in exchange, I left behind the right, at least for a short while, to call any place home.

As I've grown older and more independent, I've often heard the call, like many others, to leave behind all that is familiar, to make new paths into the world. I know I have often quickly moved to the exciting things unknown, never considering that I might find everything I am looking for right where I already am. Perhaps this is because I am not part of any family who has grounded itself in one place, allowing the land to be equivalent to home. However, without a connection between home and place, home becomes a difficult thing to define. My friend Mike once commented that, "We are so encouraged to be a mobile society that we often forget what it means to come home." Thinking about his statement, I realize that I am not sure I have ever known what coming home means.

My older brother, Sam, moved to China this summer, both to study Chinese and to teach English to Chinese students. His plans to leave came with the understanding that we, his family, would not see him for at least two years, and that he would be living in China for at least ten. My mom, always protective of her children, struggled with this. She

would call me late at night in the months before he left, often crying, “Erin, so much can change in ten years. I could be dead in ten years! Who knows what will happen between now and then?”

Always I would sigh sympathetically, and stop listening only to murmur, “He’ll be okay, Mom. It’ll all be okay.” I didn’t know how to explain to her that China was his chosen new home, no matter how distant it seemed.

Eventually, Mom resigned herself to Sam’s leaving, and even supported his decision. But I noticed in the weeks after Sam left that pictures of him began to appear all over the house: photographs taken at his college graduation; pictures of him with my sister and me on a recent vacation in California; Sam fishing with Dad when he was seven years old. They hung in the walls of the living room and stood in framed clusters on table tops. It was as if she wanted to remind herself that, wherever he might be in the world, she had reserved this place as his. I began to understand that home, at least for my mother, is the place where family is.

I also began to understand that at some point I must decide, like Sam, that home is no longer the place where my mother and father live. I am in the midst of making some decisions concerning where I will be a year from now. One choice will place me halfway across the country, living on the west coast. Working in the small city of Ventura, California, I will be hundreds of miles from any place my parents have ever lived. Another choice will place me halfway across the world, working with a doctor at a leprosy hospital and writing for a missions organization in southern India. Few of the people I would share this home with would even share my language, much less my family. Nevertheless, it is not unimaginable that either of these places could conceivably become the place I next call home.

I sit stiffly in the tall wooden-backed chair in the Special Collection room at Hale Library, on Kansas State University campus. I slowly turn the pages of the oversized hardcover book before me. When I began my search for information on the small central Kansas town of Holyrood—my childhood home that we moved from when I was fifteen—I never expected to find an entire volume devoted to recording its history. But I have, and with the turn of each page I smell the familiar bookstore scent of new, unworn pages. This book has probably sat untouched since its publication and introduction to the library in 1986. It is a history interesting to few, perhaps only those who, like me, have called Holyrood their home.

While I had hoped to find some new information about Holyrood, interesting facts about the place where I spent most of my childhood, I never expected to find so much of the unfamiliar. Because Holyrood is so small, because I had always recognized the faces and buildings there,



I had assumed that I knew nearly all that could be known of the town.

However, as I glance through the first few pages of this book, I know very little of what I see. I gaze at the blurry black-and-white photo of Main Street in 1902, hoping to somehow bring into focus the pillars of City Hall that I remember so well. My best friend and I used to lean against these pillars on long summer afternoons, eating Reese's peanut butter cups and sipping Dr. Pepper from cold sweating cans. The pillars are not to be found.

Instead, I squint against a faint cloud of dust into the deep wagon-wheel furrows of an unpaved Main Street. The white boards of a newly-built general store almost gleam, not yet weathered by wind and time. *This is no place of mine*, I think to myself.

Deeper into the book, familiarities begin to pop up: last names known for generations as farmers of the surrounding land; young faces reminiscent of my classmate's grandparents. In 1927 I find my City Hall pillars. The Holyrood Theater, a building I always knew to be vacant, is booming in the 1930s.

Still these are all distant from any place I know. The almost-familiar faces are smooth, untouched by time. The City Hall's pillars are stone-white, unmarked by years of rain and adolescent carvings. The theater's windows are clean, filled with movie posters rather than filtered dust. And there are no Billings among the names in the newspaper clippings since my parents were the first of that name to make Holyrood home in 1977. They moved to Holyrood, at least a hundred miles away from each of their families, to teach in the nearby town of Ellsworth.

A bit frustrated with finding so much I don't know in a place I thought I knew well, I turn several pages at once, through several years, hoping to find something to remind me that this was once my home. It is neither family nor familiarity that have made this place mine. And suddenly, there I am. Seven-years-old, dark straight hair shining with the camera flash, thick glasses sliding down my nose—a newspaper picture of me with three of my classmates, all of us receiving an award for a school-wide contest to create a cover for our favorite book. I laugh to find myself here; it seems a bit silly that this childhood award will be remembered of me as future generations flip through this book.

Immediately afterward, though, I am strangely quieted; amidst years of people and buildings I do not know, my face has found its way into this patchwork of history. Something I have done has impacted, no matter how slightly, the people of Holyrood, Kansas. Now there is no denying that I am a part of this place. And I finally understand; this is coming home.

*Hiram Lucke*

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Superman keeps slipping

into sentences today.  
I can't figure out if they're mine or  
a punchline to a dream.  
The joke went  
"Get off my cape"

or

"Fly now, muthafucka." I don't remember.  
Something something like that.  
Superman  
is my Jungian Consciousness.  
He's the best known,  
most righteous alien from KS.

Superman, your earth mom wants to know  
when're you coming to visit?  
Also, I want to know, how did you get the job?  
How did Clark get his? Also  
Superman, does he write like Hemingway?  
Does he have his own column?  
Does he write about grammar  
or life's little foibles?  
Bet you felt strange the first time  
in tights. I shouldn't assume, I know,  
but it is hard for me to imagine.  
Well, sort of, if you believe what they've written about you.  
Personally, I am too low key to wear  
a cape but  
I would like to fly.  
Shooting through the night like a meteor.  
Shooting through the night like a bullet,  
a speeding bullet.  
Shooting through the night like a coffin.  
Shooting through the night like a lost rubber band.  
Dark haired, humble, orphaned  
Superman.  
Lead causes cancer, please be careful.

*Terry L. Welch*

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Diggers

Dad was on the phone when I came into the kitchen and he looked up at me with a hardness.

"Thanks, Dewey. We'll be right over," he said into the phone and I knew who he was talking to and knew then that he had been serious. He turned his back to me. The phone went to his chest and he stood with it there for a long moment before dropping it in the cradle. His hand rested on it for another moment, his eyes on his hand.

"Get your coat," was all he said to me, without turning, then he straightened, walked around the small table in the kitchen's center and went out the screen door into the back yard. The door seemed to take forever to shut itself, but as it did, I heard the spring sigh before the rifle shot of its slamming.

I walked back through the dining room to the stairs and up them to my room. From my closet I grabbed my Carhart jacket, my deerskin gloves and a ballcap. As I backed from the closet, snugging the cap down on my head, my mother entered the room. She stood just inside the door and seemed to be searching my face for something. I could tell that she had been crying. She was thinking about doing it again. I walked past her without a word and heard her start up before I was halfway down the stairs.

The truck was warming up, but Dad was outside it, leaning against the bed smoking a cigarette. He stared out at the corn stubble three months harvested. His breath clouded with the smoke in the cold. A November sunset was sticking to the shorn, cadaverous stalks, glistening from the first frost we'd had that hadn't melted off at midday. Winter was here or would be soon. I looked at the shining corn and tried to imagine that it was nothing but dew, that it was an early fall rain like we get in Kansas all the time and the corn was fresh-harvested. I tried to imagine it was late August again and none of this had happened or was a ways off.

Dad was looking at me by then, though. When I noticed his eyes and the set of his mouth, imagining something different than this life was out of the question for me.

He threw the cigarette down and stepped on it. I went around the truck, got in. A bottle of something sat in the middle of the bench seat in a paper wrapper. Dad took a swig off it and breathed out hard before he put the truck in drive and took off down the long dirt driveway.

We said nothing to each other.

As we entered Crossroads, the town seemed to be folding into itself for the night. Small plains towns tend to do that. Streetlights are few and the patches of darkness that can't be reached by them are darker because of the light's nearby presence.

We rolled through the town and I would glance at Dad trying to catch a glimpse in his eyes of what he might be thinking. His face was green in the dashboard light and his eyes were black slits in it. He gave nothing away until he turned to me and I saw that there was a darkness behind his eyes that no light—green dashboard, streetlight or otherwise—could reach.

At Crossroads northern edge he turned the truck and shortly the cemetery could be seen in the distance. "This damn place is gettin' to be as big as the town," Dad said, and grabbed at the bottle again and drank and sucked in a gulp of air to chase down the heat.

Jim Dewhurst sat waiting outside his pickup toward the back end of the cemetery. He wore a faded jean jacket and a watchcap rolled up so it just covered the tops of his ears. Two spades leaned beside him, their scoop ends up and leaning together as if they were sharing secrets dug from the earth. A darkened propane lantern sat between them on the ground and another lit one sat on his pickup hood.

We pulled our truck up behind his. Dad grabbed the bottle and slid out, his other hand going into his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. I followed him out. "Whaddya think, Dewey? Do we got a late frost or an early winter?"

"Shit. You know I quit payin' attention to the weather when I quit farmin'," Dewhurst said and then looked at me. "What I put in the ground now ain't gonna grow no matter what kinda weather we got."

Dad laughed in a weird way that said he knew that that was the truth and wasn't really funny, but wasn't meant to be. He handed the other man the bottle and he took it, sniffed at it and then drank.

Jim Dewhurst and my father looked like brothers. Dewey was about ten years older than Dad, but it's hard to tell a farmer's age. Sometime around their thirtieth birthday—if they're good farmers and work hard—they all start to look fifty and continue to until they get planted themselves. They look thin and brown and maybe you'd think a little weak if you didn't know farmers. I knew farmers and wouldn't want to go toe-to-toe with Dad or Dewey.

Dewhurst's readily available nickname, I suppose, was what had saved him from being called Digger. The last man who'd held the position of cemetery groundskeeper had been called that, and I'd guess every one before him. It was as much of a title as people came by in the flatlands. It was said with respect out here, if not in other places, even though I was pretty sure that graves were usually dug with backhoes nowadays, and there was little or no actual digging to be done.

The older man took another drink before passing the bottle back

to Dad. "Is the Harper boy comin'?" he asked, and looked out toward the meager lights of town.

"He's supposed to be," Dad said. "But we'll see if his old man has the balls to make him. We'll give 'em ten minutes."

It wasn't five, though, before car lights lit up the cemetery's front gate and then a long, blue sedan slowed to a stop behind our truck. Billy Harper got out of the passenger side of his father's car. He wasn't a tall kid, but broad-shouldered and with a cleanness to him always. His hair hung on the side of his face and was just long enough to be too long for Crossroads. He looked at me and the two men and the two shovels and just stood by the car door, shivering more than the cold required. The coat he wore would be too heavy once the work started, I saw, and he had no gloves.

His father got out and walked over to the two other men and said hello. He looked as scared as his son. He wore a bulky sweater over a collared shirt and jeans without a worn spot on them. I tried to remember if I had ever seen my Dad and Bob Harper side-by-side before. I didn't think that I had.

Bob Harper was the principal of the high school. He'd been hired from out of town three years ago and had been adopted into the small circle of people in town who didn't farm—the bankers, the lawyers, the newspaper editor, the grocery store manager and a few others. He was a short man with a big waist and thinning hair, but his smile seemed to hypnotize people and his eyes looked like a little kid's eyes. His eyes were full of something uncommon here.

His son and I had hit it off immediately. There was something that we saw in each other that we didn't see in ourselves, it seemed. Billy asked me about farming. It wasn't, it appeared, the fact of it that intrigued him, though, it was that I knew about it. I told him why we planted wheat when we did and talked about grain prices and tractors.

He was fascinated, especially, about the amount of blood on the hands of even the youngest country children. He wanted to hear about trapping raccoons and beaver when I was twelve or cleaning chickens at eight. I told him stories about chasing down Dad and Grampa's shot pheasants and wringing their necks by spinning them by their heads.

I introduced him to Paul McMillan, too, who had his own stories. Paul had a different way with them, though. Paul would listen, nodding and quiet, to my remembrances of the farm life I'd known and then tell what seemed to be a nearly identical story from his own. There was something in his stories—something I had missed, somehow—that would leave the three of us silent long after.

Billy had stories of his own, though. The Harper family had traveled all over the world it seemed—Bob Harper and his wife had been teachers in schools for Army brats—and Paul and I loved to hear about those places that didn't seem to exist in the same world as the

one we knew. We would sit around the Harper dining table (in the old Baker house, as it will always be called) and drink coffee and he would talk for ten minutes at a time about someplace he'd been, then I would ask him a question and he would talk for ten minutes more. I envied him desperately.

I didn't envy him that night.

"I ... I don't know about this. They're only 16," Bob Harper said, and looked at my father with his head down and his eyes up.

My father stared at the smaller man. After a time, Harper turned to his son, still standing beside the car, as if he wanted him to see how he had tried. He looked back at my father, who turned to Dewhurst. "They'd better get started," he said.

I walked over to the spades and grabbed them both and turned to where Billy Harper stood. Dewey picked up the lantern and started walking off into the graveyard without a word. I followed him, nodding for Billy to come along. I didn't look at him again and was almost surprised to see him beside me when we stopped at the gravesite fifty yards from the trucks. Dewey bent down and lit the lantern with a twist of a knob and a click of the starter. He stood up and looked at us.

"I laid out some twine so's you could see where you gotta dig," Dewey said. He talked with a cigarette burning in his mouth. His left eye was squinted because of the smoke and he cocked his head to talk to me. "You're about six feet tall, ain't ya, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I guess you can figure how much you gotta dig." He looked at Billy and I looked, too. He stood there looking down at where we were to work. When he looked up, he sighed heavily. A cloud of steam billowed out. Dewey reached into his jacket and pulled out a pair of leather gloves. He held them out toward Billy, who just stared at them.

"Take 'em," I said, "or your hands are going to get all tore up." He looked at me and his eyes slotted. He reached out and snatched the gloves from Dewey, but kept looking at me.

Dewey took the cigarette from his mouth with two fingers. "You gotta make sure the sides of this pit are smooth all the way up, you here? If that boy's casket hits a bump or a rock or a big root as it goes down, ..." He didn't finish, but he didn't have to. Neither of us wanted to picture Paul's coffin tipping sideways and, God forbid, opening up and him spilling out. I figure that wasn't really possible, that they had to lock it shut somehow, but the thought of what Paul would look like since two days had passed made me suck in deeply on the cold night air.

"Just do good work, boys," Dewey said, his voice soft in a way that seemed to embarrass him. "I think you owe the McMillan kid that much." He looked at each of us in turn and then strode back to the truck. I could see that Dad and Bob Harper stood apart from each other, both looking our way. They weren't talking.

I put the tip of my spade to the ground at the edge of the twine and pushed it into the earth with my foot. Billy walked to the other end of the site and did the same. In the stillness of the night, I could clearly hear Dad and Dewey talking over the sounds of our shovels cutting and lifting and piling the dirt. I looked over at them and the circle of light their lantern threw seemed so far away.

Billy had just tossed dirt onto his growing pile when he dropped his spade to the ground, jumping back. "Jesus!" he yelped. I looked to the other men to be sure that they hadn't noticed before I looked to Billy and what was bothering him.

On top of the small mound of dirt on his end of the grave was a writhing mass of worms. A dozen or more nightcrawlers twisted together, blindly seeking their way back into the ground. Billy stared at them, a little wild-eyed, then picked up his shovel. His eyes met mine and I could see he was embarrassed. I tried to imagine what this was like for him: his soft, office-worker hands beneath the leather of the work gloves; Paul's blood being the first he'd ever seen; the newness of everything I'd known since I was knee-high.

"It's the cold," I said, going back to work. "When the first cold weather comes on, nightcrawlers head toward the surface. Grampa used to say that at night the cold would start to settle into the ground and that's what made 'em come up, but I don't know that that's it for sure. We used to dig 'em up damn near by the gross on nights like this."

Billy had begun to dig again. "I wasn't expecting them. I just saw something moving out of the corner of my eye and it surprised me, that's all. I'm not scared and I'm not stupid."

"I ain't suggestin' you're either."

The lantern was sitting on the ground and its light cut low into the deepening hole. We were getting further down faster than I expected. When I stopped to take a breath, the air's chill would seem to take a bite out of me, so I dug without stopping much. We were about a foot-and-a-half down when Bob Harper walked up with a thermos and two styrofoam cups.

"Would you like some coffee, boys?"

"I'd appreciate it, Mr. Harper." I leaned on my shovel and took one of the cups in my right hand. The man filled it there and smiled at me, but he looked like he wanted to cry as he did. The smell of the coffee was heaven, some of the stuff I knew the Harpers ordered as whole beans from a catalog that came from another place I'd never been.

He looked up into the sky. I followed his gaze past the tree limbs into the clear night. The stars were brighter out here in the country. Bob Harper had once told me that he'd lived his whole life in cities and I wondered what the country skies looked like to him with their lack of man-made light and the richness of God's. He looked back down at me, smiled again. "I'll never get used to all those stars," he said. He

walked around the hole. I tried to remember if I had said something out loud, but didn't think that I had.

As he filled his son's cup, Billy nodded toward me. "He says he's having a great time, Dad. Says it reminds him of digging for fishbait with his *graahyumpaw*." He looked at me over his coffee as he sipped it. He looked like he expected me to come after him.

Bob Harper chose to ignore his son's mocking me. I *think* he chose to, anyway. He looked at me and smiled again. "I don't think I've met your grandfather. Does he live in Crossroads?"

"He's here," I said and sipped at my coffee. "But he ain't livin'. He's about thirty yards behind you."

Bob turned a little bit, a reflex. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was a coupla years ago now." Then I added, "He was one of the good ones, though. Taught me nearly everything I know, but I didn't have the patience to learn even a quarter of what he knew."

Billy snorted. "It appears Dear Old Dad's taking over in the education department now."

I looked away from him to where Dad stood against Dewey's truck. He was smoking again and handing the bottle to the older man. He looked at me without expression.

"Billy," I started, through clenched teeth, "I think you better watch your mouth."

"Wait a second here, you two," Mr. Harper interrupted. "You've got more important things to do than fight out here in the cold. Let's get this over with and be done with it. This... this *lesson*—if that's what you want to call it—it's... well... it's," he looked at his son, who stood with a hand cocked on his hip and a thin-eyed look for his father, "it's not going to kill you. Take what you can from it. You could be worse off. You could be... well, let's get back to work, OK?" Without another word, he poured me some more coffee, turned on his heel and walked away.

We didn't talk for a long time then. The night began to dissolve away into the work. Darkness pressed against my back every time I lifted a shovelful of dirt out of the hole. The conversation of the men against the truck made me turn again and again. It sounded as if their voices were closer than the *chk-shuss* of the shovel and its burdens. I looked to Dad and the other men every now and then and saw that Bob was talking to them in the light. He was handed the bottle and I stopped, by this time waist-deep in the grave, and watched the long moment in which he held the bottle, looked to the other men and then, finally, drank. I looked away with a grin and saw that Billy was watching me from the other end of the hole. He wasn't smiling.

Billy wasn't digging as fast as I was and the hole's floor was canted toward me some. "You wanna switch ends?" I asked Billy the next time I raised up from digging.



“Whatever,” he answered.

We moved awkwardly around each other. As we did, Billy grabbed my arm and pulled me close to him. I tensed, expecting a punch, but he only whispered harshly to me, “We have to tell them.”

“No. This is going to be over real quick,” I whispered back. “It’s better if we just let it go.”

“Better for who?”

“Everybody.” I grabbed his hand and pulled it away from me. “Paul especially, I guess.”

Billy moved on to the other end of the grave. “Paul’s beyond caring, now,” he said. “We have to live with being called murderers.”

“It was a hunting accident.”

“It wasn’t. You know that.”

Dad came over with Bob Harper’s thermos and filled the two cups on the side of the hole. I reached for the closest one and thanked him.

“Your end’s lookin’ a little on the high side, son.”

“Yes, sir. I’m workin’ on it.”

Dad looked at Billy, who was sipping his coffee and smirking a little. “Son,” he said to me without looking away from Billy, “didn’t you start out over here?”

Billy looked up at Dad. The side of his face toward me was in darkness and the lantern was a halo behind him. I didn’t answer, but put my cup down and got back to digging. After a bit, I heard Dad walk off and after that, Billy’s spade biting the dirt.

As we dug further, the lantern cut a harsh shadow across the mouth of the deepening hole and the soil was so rich and black that it seemed we were scraping out pieces of that shadow with every bend of our backs. It became hard to see the bottom. I had to duck below the lip of the grave to see and close my eyes as I brought my head back into the light to preserve my night vision.

It was nearly two hours later when Billy and I went to switch ends again. I had passed him up again and he looked angry when I asked him if he wanted to move. I tried to show him a face that said I didn’t mind working more. My back was screaming at me, so I figured his must be about to give up completely. There wasn’t much left to dig, anyhow. The ground was at shoulder-level.

As we moved past each other, the sky around us was lit up. I looked to the men at the truck, but they were looking toward the cemetery gate. I followed their eyes and saw a car pulling down the cemetery drive. It pulled up behind the Harper’s car and killed its lights and a man got out and walked into the edge of the light cast by the lantern on the truck. He was big man, standing a good six inches taller than Dad, wearing nothing but a flannel shirt despite the cold. It took me a few beats to recognize him.

“Aw shit.”

“Who is it?” Billy asked.

“It’s Carl McMillan.”

McMillan stood at the edge of the light without saying anything. Dad started walking toward him. “How ya doin’, Carl?” he offered, along with his outstretched hand.

“Not good, brother,” the big man said. His voice rumbled drunkenly our way and his eyes glanced after the sound. “Is that your boy over there?”

Dad looked at me. Around him the night seemed to get darker, become thicker. In my mind I saw him towing himself through with his arms like a swimmer.

“We better get up outta here,” I said to Billy. I put my hands on the grave’s edge and kicked my way out of it, my arms straining. I stood, then realized that Billy’s arms weren’t going to get him out of the hole. The work had been too much. I turned, crouched on one knee and put out my hand to help Billy. He grabbed and I began to pull, leaning with my rubbery back. Billy got his waist to the edge and then lay on his stomach there, breathing softly with his cheek on the ground.

I felt something in the air snap behind me.

As I stood again and looked back toward the truck, McMillan had swiveled our way and was stomping in our direction, clumsy but fast. Dad and Dewey were on his heels, grabbing at his jacket and saying “Wait a minute, Carl” and “Hold on a second” and “Slow down, Carl.” Bob Harper was behind them, looking as out of place as he’d looked all night.

McMillan looked as unstoppable as a freight train. I stepped away from the grave to avoid being knocked into it when he reached me. “Get back in there if you can’t get out,” I said to Billy. I heard him thump softly behind me. I looked over my shoulder and he was out of sight in the hole.

I stood and waited.

“What the hell do you think you’re doin’, you little pissant!?” Carl McMillan reached me and shoved me back with both hands to my chest and I fell to my back out of the light and rolled up, walking backwards. Dad was yelling at him and trying to grab him, but the man was bigger, thicker and full of liquor and sadness. Dewey and Bob Harper stopped at the grave’s edge as we moved past and helped Billy out.

I looked over my shoulder as much as I could, trying not to trip over a headstone as I nearly ran backward. “Mr. McMillan, I’m sorry. I am. I don’t know what to—”

“Shut up! You murderin’ son of a bitch!”

“Damn it, Carl! This was my idea,” Dad yelled, dragging at McMillan’s arm to little effect. “He’s just a kid. He’s payin’ for this as much as you are.”

Carl McMillan spun on Dad then and swung quickly. The punch

connected solidly and Dad went down like a shot duck, fast and wondering. McMillan stood over him, breathing heavily. "If you want these boys to pay, then let go of whatever strings you pulled to keep them outta jail."

Dad came to his elbows and I could see that he was trying to decide whether to fight this man, sadness or no. "I didn't do any such thing," he said. "It was an accident. A goddamn hunting accident. They happen all the time. The cops didn't want to put these boys through anything more than they'd—"

"I don't give a *damn* what they'd been through! At least they're alive! Paul is... Paul," McMillan began to choke on sobs and his voice trailed away. He turned to me then and he yelled, "*They killed my boy!*"

Carl McMillan started toward me again. I had moved and half his face was lit by the lantern's glow, the other melting into the night. Tears rolled freely down his daylight cheek. Dad began to struggle up to his feet behind him and then another voice, loud and shrill came through it all and everything came to a stop. "*We didn't kill him!*"

"Shut up, Billy," I said, without taking my eyes off of McMillan, who had turned toward Billy's yell.

Billy wasn't going to shut up, though. He had turned to his father and was talking loudly and quickly to him, crying himself now.

"We didn't. We didn't. We were sitting there, talking at the end of the field and Paul said what a good day it was and he didn't have a lot of good days. He had his gun there on his shoulder and the next thing we know, he's sliding it down and reaching for the trigger. *He had to reach so far.* He shot himself, Dad."

Carl McMillan stepped unsurely toward Billy. "Shut up," he said.

Dad was looking at me with his mouth hanging open. He hadn't made it up off his butt. "Mr. McMillan," I said. "Mr. McMillan, don't listen to him."

Dewey and Bob Harper were staring at Billy. They stood directly over the lantern and their faces were underlit and white.

"The cops knew, Dad. They knew he'd done it to himself, but *he*"—he pointed at me—"said he'd shot him on accident, but they *knew*. I could *see* they knew." Billy broke down, then. He sagged into his father's arms. The words kept pouring from his mouth, but I understood few. He said "his head" and "so loud, so quick" and "blood blood blood."

Carl was still walking toward the trio by the lantern, but he had deteriorated as well, crying loudly. He reached them and grabbed at Billy stiffly. Now, though, he was spent. Dewey pulled him off the crying boy. He leaned heavily into the groundskeeper.

"We're leaving," Bob Harper said. He was crying now with his son as he pulled him toward their car. Dewey led Carl McMillan away toward his truck.

I stood in the sudden silence. The night was made up of something

else then, something clear still, but as thick as honey. My arms and back were numb from the work, but I could sense the coming ache. My breath came in shuddering, excited gasps.

“Help me up, son.” Dad was resting on one elbow, holding his other arm up in the air. I walked to him and gave him a hand and pulled him to his feet.

His back was to the lantern as he stood and I couldn’t see his face, but could feel him staring at me. “Carl’s a good man,” he said. “He’s gonna feel like shit about all this.”

“I know.”

He shook a cigarette out of the pack and lit it. “What the Harper boy said, was that how it was?”

I looked down at my gloves and said nothing.

“Well?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dad nodded slowly. He reached out a hand and put it on my shoulder. I let it sit there a second and then walked away toward the grave. Holding the lantern up, I located the spades at the bottom, then set the light back down and dropped into the hole. I picked up one of the shovels and pitched it out of the grave, then picked up the other and started, again, to dig.

A moment later, Dad dropped into the other end, the shovel in his hands.

Ryan G. Van Cleave

Unbreakable, The Zodiac: After Dali's *The Enigma of*

*William Tell*

A congregation of blackbirds like scarecrows returned finally to seed,  
the night overtakes until there is little but the boastful atheist chomping

a hot dog, his own cardplaying future, Pablo Neruda's second-best *gato*;  
the secret police mutter and prowl like astrologers hot on the trail of

God-knows-what but they don't surrender, so close to a truth that strokes  
the yellow warning tape of the moment like a pendulum of wood on  
a grandfather

clock older than boxcars, lead mines, hand-lettered signs in diner  
windows  
that read No Shoes, No Service. In this amnesia of leather-fisted men,

barbed walls seem to sprout up like jukebox headaches, here one minute,  
gone the next, and the boy who washes himself in a barrel of old  
rainwater

now turned the color of orange soda, he gushes helplessly about the  
Board  
of Health inspection, how those bastards in white suits took his  
lover, his father,

everything he loves; as he talks, the just-started rain worsens and  
thirsty as he is,  
the boy tries to catch some in cupped hands, but that's when he  
notices the wad

of bills from his father's wallet in his own pocket. Water brags across  
his face and  
he bangs his head on the concrete floor like a piñata, hoping to  
uncover what he

really thinks about the oozing anger he sees in mirrors; *cada puerco  
tiene su  
sabado*, he says, wishing he understood Spanish. Wobbling drunk at  
the idea

of reprieve, he is unsure which way is down, a weathervane spinning  
wild  
in the wind, rusting as he sleeps, his hosannas stolen quiet by the  
mouth of rain.

*Kate Bertine*

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The Gibledeschnarf: An Essay on Communication

*“Conversation takes the importance, the seriousness, the truth out of everything.” -  
-Franz Kafka*

“Know what that is?” Emi asked, pointing to the grayish-pink splotch on her knee. It was the first day of first grade, and we had just come in from recess. I did not yet know this girl with the shiny black hair.

“A scab!” I answered, feeling brilliant. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Emi said. “It’s gum. I fell on gum yesterday. It won’t come off.”

“Eeeww!” I shrieked, delightedly. “Can I touch it?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Until she moved away a year later, Emi was my best friend. Her family went back to Japan before the start of third grade.

“Write,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. She did. Then I did. And the pattern continued for sixteen years. During this time our letters had progressed from “Hi! How are you? I am fine. School is fun!” to “Hey, what’s up? Things here suck . . .” and finally grew deeper over the years.

*“Emi, what should I do about James?”*

*“UCLA?! Congratulations!”*

*“My mother is still in a coma . . .”*

We sent each other photographs both with and without braces, early Christmas and belated birthday cards, postcards and souvenirs, music tapes and sound advice. We always had each other’s current addresses from summer camps to college internships, and we sent our phone numbers along, too. Not once did we communicate by telephone, but in every letter, I heard Emi’s voice, and she heard mine.

In the seventh year of our written correspondence, Emi’s family returned to the United States, settling in San Jose, three thousand miles away from their first home in New York. In the tenth year of our friendship, I accompanied my father on a trip to California, and decided to surprise Emi by showing up at her home. I called her parents to arrange things, and found myself waiting in their house one afternoon, to see the girl I had not seen in a decade. When Emi came in from school, she noticed someone sitting in her living room. She looked at me, then looked away. She furrowed her brow, then unfurrowed it, and looked back at me. The books in her arm fell one-by-one onto the floor. She stood there in silence for a moment, staring at a seven-year-old in a seventeen-year-old body. Emi was wearing shorts.

I noticed that the gum scab had healed. Speechlessness is a deafening form of communication.

I have kept all of Emi's letters, and she has done the same with mine. It has been suggested to me that I keep them bound with a velvet ribbon, because they are very special. I keep them jumbled in a cardboard shoebox, because they are very special. They lie here like puzzle pieces, out of order but complete in number, and there is no need to put them in order because I already know what the finished arrangement would look like. Emi's voice, incarnate.

I shuffle through these letters from time to time, and listen to them. I search the pile for old envelopes marked with Hello Kitty stickers, and large, wobbling, block-letter addresses that slanted or squished together because we were still learning that written words took up more space than spoken ones. I listen to the different sounds of magic markers, mechanical lead pencils, ballpoint pens, type-set impressions, and computer processed words, and notice that you can tell time not only by numbers, but by alphabet as well. I listen to white-out splotches, and how their tone is much more controlled than the harsh streaks of a scratched-out word and the meek cries of the better-word or the correctly-spelled version above it. Emi used white-out. I used an eraser, sometimes. I listen to the "theirs" that should have been "there's" knowing that they're both right, because when letters *speak*, homonyms can't be heard. I listen to the fonts of handwriting in Emi's letters, and recognize that, despite the letterheads of Arthur Anderson, LLP or the yellowed Snoopy stationary, the tone of her words still sounds the same. When we read, we listen with our eyes. I read in between the lines of lineless paper, and listen to conversations that never took place. I own one-half of a chronology of sixteen years; the half that is not actually mine. I listen to this unique timeline, and all of these letters announce to me that because of each of them, I am a writer today.

As a writer, I have been trained to search for the true pulse of the story, hidden deep within the print. I must tune into the subtle whispers of tone and theme. If the subtext fails to palpitate, the story is dead. If a strong and healthy rhythm is located, the story survives. What gives life to a letter? Perhaps just the fact that when it is sent, it becomes immortal, and can talk forever.

*Everybody's* was a busy restaurant during the summer of 1996. Most of the patrons waited patiently for a patio table, even in the sweltering, southern heat, with the hopes of catching a glimpse of a famous gymnast or cyclist, who were being housed in the fraternities across the street at Emory University. From time to time, an Olympian would come into the restaurant and order a pizza, but the majority of non-Atlantan customers were foreign officials, judges and other fate-deciders who waltzed into *Everybody's* five minutes before close, drank



dozens of imported beers, and left little or no tips when they finally staggered out. The servers despised waiting on these foreigners who were either deliberate evaders of or ignorant concerning the concept of gratuity. As a hostess, I did my best to shuffle the ingrates around the seating charts, so that no one server was constantly left shortchanged. During the Olympic rush, the management had hired extra staff, especially busers, to keep the hungry crowds flowing smoothly.

Most of these dish collectors were “punk kids,” with multiple piercings in various orifices, monsterish tattoos that gnawed on shoulders, necks, and forearms, prism-colored, multi-length hair and other physical attributes that begged to be stereotyped as wild, ruthless and sad. The busers took too many smoke breaks, and in-between, they wore impenitent facial expressions as they cleared tables and washed dishes. But not Russ.

Russ was a quiet kid, not older than eighteen, with permanent markings and metal attachments just like the other busers displayed. Russ, however, went about his work with care and ease, holding no grudge against the customers who spilled their sweet tea or diet cola, and requested his cleaning services by calling to him, “Boy, hey boy . . .” Russ did not converse much with the other busers, or the servers, and he spent his breaks reading tattered paperbacks in a corner of the kitchen, or near the kudzu vines by the parking lot fence. My only communication with Russ was a small “hello” when he came in for his shift. Passing shyly by my hostess stand, Russ answered my daily salutations with a timid “hi” and then disappeared into the kitchen. We spoke two words everyday to each other, for two months. A couple of days before I left *Everybody's* to return to college, Russ quietly approached me.

“I hear you study English. I write poetry. Would you like to see my book of poems?” Russ asked, eyes studying the floor.

“Yes, Russ, of course I would. Can you bring in your notebook tomorrow?”

Russ smiled, then nodded and walked away. The next day, when I arrived at work, there was a book waiting for me on my hostess stand. A black, gloss-covered, 186 page, published paperback book of poems from the Ridgewood Press in Minnesota, copyright 1995, first edition. *Webs and Arrows*, by Russell Nye Barton. Russ the busboy.

He was watching my reaction from the kitchen door, and I motioned to him, still in shock, to come over. I expressed my surprise that he was already a published author, and wondered why he was working here. Poetry didn't pay the bills yet, he told me. I told Russ I would read the book immediately and get it back to him tomorrow.

“No,” Russ said, “Keep it, please.” I asked him why he was giving me this gift after I said nothing but “hello” to him all summer.

The shy busboy looked me in the eye, “You're the only one who

has.”

Until I met Russel, I did not know that there was a subtext to “hello.” Sometimes, I did not even say “hello,” but surrendered an interaction even more fleeting, like “hey,” “hi,” or a wordless wave of the hand. In speaking less, it seems as though I had said more. Not everybody needs the specific banter of communication, just the general enactment of it. In an untitled poem on page 64, Russell Nye Barton had written,

“your eyes swallow your voice . . .  
in our own way  
we all say who we are  
and what we need  
even though sometimes it goes along  
unheard”

Kafka would have been proud of Russ.

Something profound occurred last night, I think. I cannot say what time it happened, but it was at one of those indistinguishable hours, perhaps two or three or four a.m. My boyfriend nudged me out of sleep and whispered, “Kathryn, what if I told you something . . . I have something I need to say to you.” He propped himself up on his left side, and leaned his head against his hand. With his free hand, Drew gently brushed his fingers across my cheek. He looked into my eyes and held my gaze longer than he ever had before. Something big was coming. An affirmation of happiness? A declaration of love? The impossible opposite of either? After a moment of silence, Drew sighed away the breath he was holding in, and shifted position. Lying on his back, he broke eye contact with me, and refocused on the ceiling. Another minute of silence passed. Something *huge* was coming.

I touched his shoulder, meekly prodding “Drew . . . what? What is it?” Again, silence. The his lips parted, and he softly responded, “kkkhhuuuuuhh.” He then repeated his response. Over and over. Again and again.

“Drew!” I pressed, shaking him awake.

“Huh? Whuh?”

“You were about to tell me something? What?! What was it?!”

“I was?”

“YES!!”

“Oh. Ok. Hmmm. . . . kkkhhuuuuuhh.”

In the morning, he remembered nothing about our “conversation” but was greatly amused at the power of his nocturnal subconscious. Drew often speaks in his sleep, reciting sentence fragments from the unwritten paragraphs of his dreams. On separate occasions, I’ve been told to get the mail, watch out for descending airplanes, and keep a “heads up” for an incoming foul baseball, that is headed towards the bleachers where he thinks we are sitting.

“Really?! I did that? Ha!”

“Yes, very funny. Ha-ha-ha.” I hit him with a pillow. Touching my cheek, he told me I was beautiful. When he swung the pillow back at me, I believed him.

Like written communication, there are two pulses to our verbal efforts of conversation: the one we hear, and the one we feel. One is a rhythm loud and clear, a hearty snore. The other is faint and soft, impressionable, like a pillow. Our auditory senses give us no choice in what we can and cannot hear, but the underlying pulse of these sound waves allows us to choose what we will and will not listen to, or believe.

Five months after receiving my driver’s license, I was assaulted in my car. In a parking lot not far from the skating rink where I was headed, a man approached my door and opened it before I even noticed his arrival. In one swift movement, he communicated what he was after. Grabbing the back of my neck, the man twisted his fingers into my hair and yanked my head away from his, so that my head craned towards the ceiling in the back of the jeep, and I could no longer see his face. His mammoth build began to heave itself into the car, as he reached across my body towards the keys that dangled from the engaged ignition. I flailed a helpless arm, and caught his face with the side of my hand. “Bitch . . .” he warned.

My hand then landed on the gearshift. I pulled it from first to neutral, the stripped gear retching out with a metallic squawk, and the car began to slowly roll backwards down the incline where I had parked. To this day, I do not know how I came to do that. My instincts whispered soft, clear instructions and my body shouted them out in actions. The man, who was half inside my car, felt the momentum and was forced to abandon his entrance. He shoved me with frustration, and then, he noticed the parking brake and pushed it down. The jeep lurched to a halt. He climbed back in. Again, my instincts spoke. Push! they instructed. I put my sixteen-year-old hands on his brawny, thirty-something chest, and felt a strange surge of strength course through my arms. The man lost his balance, and fell from my car. My senses put the car into first and drove it away for me, out of the parking lot, and safely across four lanes of traffic that I still do not remember crossing.

I spoke not one word to this man who carried on a monologue of actions. Although both of us knew what he wanted and neither of us knew if he would obtain it, this man and I conversed in silent clarity. We both articulated physical communication that stemmed from private words inside us, each of us “discussing” among our inner-selves how we felt about the situation. I do not know where my survival instincts came from, or how they knew the things they did, but I *heard* them. I recognized the voice they spoke in. It was my own, although I

did not understand how that could be. I have never heard anything like that again; those shift instructions, *put the car in neutral*, and *push*. These words that resonated in my exact vocal tone, have not spoken to me like they did that day, seven years ago. The words were loud and clear. Actions, I believe, do not always speak louder than words. Actions and words are in cahoots. We are used to only hearing half of their conversation.

My mother underwent brain surgery immediately after an aneurysm erupted in her temporal lobe, five years ago. Following the operation she had a stroke, as the doctors predicted she might. After fulfilling that expectation, she had another. The next step was to enter a coma, from which we thought she would take no more steps. After a few comatose weeks, my mother proved us wrong. For the next two months of hospitalization, our family would witness the full range of powers of the human brain. Specifically, the power of communication.

At first, every day was different when we entered the hospital ward. Mostly, she slept. When she was awake, there was always a new adventure in frustration awaiting my father, brother and me. Sometimes my mother babbled unconscious speeches to an audience she did not recognize, as we nodded in agreement to all her nonsensical points. Some days she thought she knew us, and we played along to the roles she assigned.

“Yes, mom,” I lied, “swim practice was great today.” I was not a swimmer. In the hospital, I learned how to tread water before I sank into the sea of her confusion. The doctors warned us that any of these stages of her thought process and her communication pattern might be permanent, we would have to wait and see. Wait and see. Wait and see. Wade in sea.

“I see,” said my father, nodding to the doctor, as his wife of 25 years cooed sweet gibberish to him. Communication as I knew it was over. Lost for good. My father would not accept this. Weeks passed by like the squares of a calendar; same size, same shape, same consistency, differing only by the little number in the corner that eventually repeated itself too. One afternoon in late May, something, namely conversation, had changed. When I arrived at the hospital, my father—pale and worn—explained that my mother had begun to use coherent words in structured phrases, but mixed her own made-up language into most sentences.

“Some words we know,” my father said smiling, “others are pretty original.” He walked over to her cot, and took her weak hand in his.

“Hello Hello Hello Hello,” my mother greeted me, in a string of salutations.

“Hi Mom,” I responded, weakly surprised.

“Yes!” she replied. I placed a large stack of get-well cards by her

side.

“Look, dear, Kate brought more cards for you,” my father explained. My mother’s eyes grew wide, and she picked them up and frantically shuffled through the pile.

“Oooh! Yes! More cucumbers! I like cucumbers!” She began to count the cards out loud, “One! Two! Three! Four cucumbers! Look how many people like me today!”

Cucumbers? I felt sick to my stomach. She lost interest in the cards before opening most of them, and began to babble in the direction of my father, forgetting about her cucumbers and me. I tried not to listen to my parents’ dialogue and turned my attention to the television in the corner of the hospital room. A commercial came on. My mother stopped babbling and turned her frail neck towards the screen.

“Ooh! I like this!” she insisted, squinting at the t.v. She ran her hands along the sides of the bed, searching for something. She bolted upright, glancing around the room with narrowed eyes. “Where are they?” she mumbled.

“What?” my father asked in a soothing tone, “What do you need, dear?” My mother began to grow more and more frustrated.

I can’t find my . . . my . . . my . . . rigglerts! Where are my rigglerts? Have you seen them? My rigglerts?” she asked, and then called out, “Riiiiigglerrrrrrrts . . .”

My father looked over at the window. My mother’s ancient pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses, held together at the cracked nosepiece by a worn-out band aid, were lying face down on the sill. Without a moment’s hesitation, my father pointed over the ledge and said, rationally,

“Dear, your rigglerts are over on the gibbledeschnarf.”

“Oh! Is that where I left them?” She reached over and put on her glasses just in time to see the end of her favorite commercial.

My mother made a full recovery, mentally and physically, in less than a year. She speaks perfect English, and can still answer just about everything on *Jeopardy*. The brain surgeons believe that their acute skills saved my mother’s life. The hospital doctors and nurses and therapists think that certain combinations of medicines and drugs and rehabilitation enabled her to survive. Close friends and family attribute both dumb luck and my mother’s stubborn persistence to bettering her chances of life over death. I believe that it was the gibbledeschnarf that nursed my mother back to health. It put the importance, the seriousness and the truth back into conversation, and saved both of my parents’ lives.

Kafka was on to something when he summarized the power of

communication in one simple line. If verbal conversation does indeed take the importance out of everything, what forms of communication put it back in? Letters, pillowfights, assaults, surgery, and even the syllable “hi” are branches on the tree of communication, that like any other living thing, will thrive or perish depending on how it is cared for. What Kafka was getting at is that too often conversations are void of sincerity, and although each participant can sense this, the words continue to flow, flooding communication instead of quenching its parched cry for importance, seriousness, and truth. Given the innumerable branches of communication, and whether we adhere to either philosophy—we communicate by what we do say/we communicate by what we do not say—we all experience the effects of miscommunication from time to time. Verbal miscommunication is often our primary introduction to conversation.

If we read the lyrics of Metallica to a baby, in a soft voice that burbles consonants and vowels together and fluctuates through our vocal pitches like a roller coaster of tender speech, the infant will not know the difference between heavy metal and Mother Goose. Unlike babies, once we understand communication, we learn the perils of miscommunication. We are accustomed to using the phrase, “I do not understand what you are saying” but it is not often that we look at this dilemma from the standpoint, “I do not understand how to hear you.” What do we do with communication when it catches us off-guard, when words are non-existent, nonsequiters or even nonsense? Like the gibbledeschnarf, sleep-induced babble, cartoon stationary, angry fists or again, the ever basic hello, all the secrets of communication can be discovered by one word. Asking

*Jason Poole*

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Tomorrow's Eve

I hurry on down the sidewalk, passing all the stores with their Sorry We're Closed signs. Sunset's just a dull angry red glow ahead of me now. I can't believe I'm so damn late. God! If I miss them because of my mom. Should've just walked out on her and her stupid tirade, just left the moment I heard "Angela, dear, we need to talk." I can finally see the park not far away now. It's this little square of stunted trees and mostly dead grass shoved between a run-down warehouse and the busiest street in downtown. Taking a shortcut I go over the low brick wall around the park and head straight for the little gazebo near the middle. It looks pale and skeletal among all the thick dark tree trunks. Skeletal and empty. They're not here.

I slump onto the nearest bench and smoke my last cigarette. You'd think they would at least wait a few minutes. I'm not sure what time it is exactly. The watch on my wrist is broken and worthless, hands forever frozen at 6:13. I wear it mostly to cover up the scar. There's a sundial in front of me but that's even more worthless. Hoping that they'll come back I wait, peeling strips of green paint off the bench, latest in the long line of bored and impatient hands to do so. Peel paint and look at the sky. It's beautiful right now. The dusk is purple velvet draped over the earth, light from the other side every so often poking through the fabric as a star.

I love that thought. Quickly I rummage through my bag and pull out the book that Laura gave me. It's one of those blank books for diaries or whatever, with a cover that looks like deep blue marble but in this dim light it's just solid black. I flip through all the pages I've filled up with lines of writing and crappy little drawings. Without the ruling of notebook paper all the lines I've written are crooked, slanting off down the page like they'd fall off into my lap if I tilted the book. Finally finding a mostly clean page, I write about the emerging night, getting carried away with it. The stars are the light of some other world that touches ours only at night, and every new star that appears is another rip in the cloth of the sky. Eventually enough stars would appear to tear apart the sky like kleenex and flood the world with unimaginable light, but before this can happen the mundane sun of our world always comes and banishes the night. Maybe I'll turn it into a poem some time, but like most of the stuff in the book it'll probably just stay there, doing nothing, and I'll occasionally reread it and either wonder what the hell I was thinking or think it's really good "late Angela" and move

on to something else anyway.

It takes me a second to realize I just heard Lance's voice. I look up from the book, black ballpoint pen clutched tightly, urging my hand to write on. Everyone's there. "What?" I ask.

"I said, I'm sorry we're late Angela. You seem to have found something to do though."

"I had to, you took so long to get here."

"Yeah, look, I said I'm sorry. Let's go. Laura's waiting on us, we should hurry."

Lance looks impatient, but then he always does. He's perpetually wired and narrow and bony even in his baggy jeans and loose T-shirt, with short oil black hair teased up into little spikes that look like candle flames and lovely milk chocolate eyes. I brush my bangs, ghost-blonde and just long enough to be annoying, out of my eyes with my right hand, while my left keeps going its crooked way across the page. I write about them now. My friends. This may be the last night I see them. Sarah, with her wine red hair, so appropriate, never smiling but always laughing too much. Jack, cute, boyish face glued on to a wrestler's body. Kyle, hiding his face behind beautiful brown hair, subtly shaded liked polished wood. He's not really that bad looking, but he's self-conscious about it and you sorta have to feel sorry for him. And June, usually as bright and happy as her namesake, silver pentagram always about her neck.

I just want to sit there and etch them all into my brain but I can see they want to get moving. I shove the book back into my bag and get up, not bothering to ask where we're going. Lance leads the way and people part before him. I'd say like he was Moses but he doesn't deserve the comparison. The Saturday night bar crowd is only now starting to arrive, but already the streets are busy with cars and pickups fighting for the limited parking space. Lance darts into a coffee shop, the Java Joint, and we all follow after like the children of Hamlin. Laura is inside at one of the Formica tables, hands cradled around an empty cup of coffee, wearing a threadbare green sweatshirt, staring at the young man across the table from her. I don't remember the guy's name, starts with a J I think, but I don't like him. He has the sunken and desiccated look of the junkie he is. Laura nods a smile our way as we pour in and fill up the two tables closest to hers.

I end up sitting across from June. Beyond her I can see people filing past the windows. An endless procession of strangers, coming from some unknown past to head towards some unknowable future. I like to think up little life stories for people I don't know, but for once I can't think of anything. They're just people I don't know, walking. I feel like I've already left and it's only Saturday.

"So why didn't you let us throw you a special going away party?" June asks, apparently trying to drag me away from watching the world



pass by.

"It's going to be depressing enough as it is, without making a big deal of it. I want it to seem like any other Saturday night. I want to try and forget that when Sunday comes it will be time for me to head off for Charleston."

"Alright. I understand, I guess. How about I tell you your fortune though? I need the practice, it's been a while." Without waiting for my answer she digs around in her purse and pulls out one of her several tarot decks. Once she told me that she had several decks so that she didn't have to cleanse them as often. When she felt that the energies of one deck were too messed up from too many people handling it, she would switch to another. That and she liked all the different artwork. I agreed with the latter.

"No," I tell her. "I don't want to know."

"Come on," she says. "Just for fun. I know you think it's all a bunch of bullshit, but humor me, will you? Let Ariadne pierce through the veil separating the present from the future and tell you what the fates have woven for you in the tangled web of destiny." She rolls her eyes all the way back in her head, the green irises disappearing and leaving me staring at two balls of bloodshot white.

"Cute. I'm surprised you said that with a straight face. Ariadne?"

"It's my Wiccan name. And I will tell you your future whether you like it or not. I don't need you to shuffle the cards, I know you well enough. Your life and your future are in these cards," she says, flourishing the deck. "Besides, it is written in the stars that this will be so." This time she giggles and starts shuffling, her eyes normal again. I sit entranced for a moment, for some reason convinced that she really does have my future there in her hands, that in a moment, with the turn of a card, my fate will be set, forever.

"I'm not kidding. I'm really not in the mood for this." I slap my hand down on hers as she tries to turn over the first card.

"Alright! Shit, you don't have to hit me."

I feel bad about that. I hit her a lot harder than I had intended and it left the back of her hand bright red. But my mind is elsewhere and even I'm not sure where. June pouts for about all of three seconds and then goes about putting blue glitter polish on her nails.

I wish I could brush things aside as easily as she could. She seems to just accept everything. Everyone at some moment hates even the people they love most, if I could just accept this then everything would be better. But I can't. The waiter, some poor guy they force to wear a fire engine red apron, brings me my mocha. I just let it sit, getting cold. I'm not thirsty and I don't need the caffeine. I hear Lance and the rest of them talking from somewhere far away, fragments that come floating up to wherever it is I am, along with Sarah's frequent laughter, which is so brittle it's a wonder it doesn't break up in her throat on the

way out. "Asshole just pulled out in front of me...sucks man I...he's still in the hospital though...you remember when we were...did an entire gram of coke at once...she was hot, I mean the girl can...God I need to get fucked up soon." The junkie walks out at some point, probably to go shoot up somewhere, and I'm starting to feel like I'm drowning or something. I need to get out.

"I'm gonna go for a walk, be back in a few minutes," I tell them all.

"We might be leaving soon, hurry back," they say, no one but Laura really looking at me, hers a gaze I can feel as I head out the door.

Clouds are gathering in the sky, ragged and insubstantial, like the people gathering in the bars to look for one night stands and dollar fifty a shot happiness. It's Saturday, this is what people labor forty hours-plus a week to be able to do. Hypocrite. Like I do anything more. Go to school, most of the time, ring up people's candy bars and Cokes and gas, fight with my parents, and on the weekends get drunk or drop acid and pretend it all means something, that it's more than just day after day of hoping the next day will be better and knowing it will just be yesterday all over again.

Further downtown the skyscrapers stand close to each other, huddling together for comfort or struggling among each other. And all around me people are moving. Swarming like locusts. Arriving and going to some bar, leaving one club for another, or heading off to some party somewhere. Every one of them sure of where they are going and what the next dawn will bring. And then there's me, just wandering the streets while the man in the moon watches it all, looking down with saucer eyes and a gaping mouth. Like always, I can't tell if he's crying or screaming. Maybe it's both.

Glass breaking startles me from my thoughts. I'm in some unfamiliar dead end alley. A Michelob Light bottle lies shattered at the base of the wall ahead of me. I must have kicked it without realizing it. Turning around I head back to the street, trying to figure out where I am. There are few people in sight. Seeing a sudden flare of orange light illuminate a man's face to my left I turn that way, asking for a cigarette. I hate talking to strangers for any reason, even ordering food or getting a movie ticket, but I really need a cigarette. He's in his forties and he looks me up and down before he finally gives me one. A Marlboro. I hate Marlboros. I turn away quickly and head down the street, trying to light it. The little red plastic Bic is almost empty and the wind keeps blowing it out. Pausing I use an old smoker's trick Laura taught me, holding my shirt up over my mouth, the cigarette hanging down, lighting it from inside my shirt where the wind can't reach it. I walk on quickly, feeling better, and cut between two warehouses. I'm almost out of the alley when I see Laura walking, head turning about furtively, like a bird's, as she scans the street. Probably looking for me. I guess I'll allow myself to be comforted. Stepping

forward I move out under a streetlight.

Laura sees me almost immediately and glides towards me, long black silk skirt rippling around her legs, raven black hair shining around her head like a dark halo, pale face sad and pretty like the Virgin Mary's in the pre-Raphaelite painting on the wall of the art room at school. All of it natural. A born goth.

"What's up?" she asks, her voice soft and quiet as sleep.

"Not much." I shrug. Her eyes look at me reproachfully, they don't demand but I can't endure a look like that, so I speak. "I just couldn't stand it in there anymore. Listening to them." My hand waves vaguely towards the Java Joint. Still that look. "I'm just sick of everything right now I guess. I don't want to leave and move to goddamn South Carolina, but right now this place seems just as bad. They're my friends but suddenly I can't stand them any more than my fucking parents." Her eyes, sorrowful blue, are just staring at me, growing larger and swallowing me up. I look down at my feet, at the cracks lacing the cement, jagged as lightning, crooked as my life. I stomp on one, grinding my heel on it. "Step on a crack, break your crackwhore mother's back." Laura asks what happened. "Jim was so fucking happy last night, for once, happy about moving back to what he calls 'God's country'. He had a bunch of his friends come over and they all got really drunk and loud and told dirty jokes and talked about old girlfriends and Jim kept yelling about how great it would be to move back home. Mom kept laughing along with him, pretending. She doesn't want to go there anymore than I do. Earlier today I told her so. Told her to stand up. She gave me one of those damn fake speeches about how she loves my father and how much this move means to him and how much he cares for me and all that. I told her for the thousandth time never to call him my father and that I knew she didn't believe her own words; she finally broke and started yelling at me and shit. I don't know why she still puts up with that prick. And damn it, that slut Sarah laughs so much like my damn mom and they all sound like him, just wanting to sit on their asses and get drunk, tell jokes and talk about getting laid. And, and I mean—shit, I'm actually crying."

Laura's face blurs in my watery sight and then she's holding me while I cry. I feel so stupid, I can imagine all the people looking at me, all the stupid young jerks with their typically handsome faces and Tommy clothes passing by, laughing at the weird chick crying in the middle of the sidewalk. Or someone yelling something about lesbos. I bury my face deeper into her shoulder. I can smell clove cigarette smoke in her shirt and some kind of shampoo in her hair. I breathe her in, trying to ignore the taunts and stares I'm imagining in my own head. I don't know how long I'm like this, but finally there's no more tears and I pull away from her.

"Better?"

“Yeah.” That’s true. Better, but certainly not good. I’ve known her since sixth grade, but I still don’t really know how to talk to her. She’s so perfect she’s like a statue. You admire statues; you don’t talk to them. No, she’s more like a saint, it’s not like she just stands around and looks pretty. She’s got martyr’s eyes, bluer and deeper than the sky, resigned but not defeated, like she’s already accepted some fate she can’t possibly know. All I can think to say to her is “Thanks.”

“So, what, do you feel like you don’t really have a choice? Here or there, either way will be hell?” I nod. She pulls out this red Magic Marker from her bag and grabs my hand, holding my arm out. She takes my watch off and runs her finger over the scar under it. “If you’re going to do it, you should do it right.” She draws a series of dashes across my wrist and up my arm, following the vein. “Give me the other arm.”

“What are you doing?”

“Helping you. Choice made simple. Just cut along the dotted lines. You can’t just slit your wrist,” she says, tracing my scar again, “you have to go the other way as well, be sure to open the vein. That’s the only way to do it right.”

“I’m not going to take the easy way out. I’m not going to do that again.” It had taken me a long time to work up to the simple cut I made on my wrist back in middle school. But I had to know if it was an option. Once I had finally started it was disgustingly simple. Just pull the razor across, part the flesh and watch the red sea come spilling out. I could do it any time I wanted to now. “After Kerri killed herself... I, I thought a lot about it. I understand why she did it, but still every day in History I would turn to tell her a joke or something and there was just an empty desk there. I can’t do that. You know me and her mom and little brother were the only ones at the funeral?”

“Yeah, you’ve told me before. If Kerri hadn’t slit her wrists, would you?”

Would I? It would certainly make things easier. It was the surest way to run. But what was it I wanted to run from? My parents? My friends? Myself? You can’t run from something without running into something else. I’m not sure why, but I know I wouldn’t. So I say “No.”

“Well then there’s hope I suppose.” It seems an odd thing for her to say, looking like despair given a body. But then, without despair, is there really ever any reason to hope? “I’m sorry but I have to go now. Try not to be so harsh with Sarah, will you? I can’t tell you, but she’s had her problems too. She’s a slave to what happened to her, but you’re better than that.”

“What happened to her? I’m leaving soon anyway, what does it matter?”

“Well, let’s just say that her stepfather is not the best of men. I

think you can guess from there.” She gets up and looks down at me. “If you do go make sure to write or call or something. We’ll all miss you, even if some of them won’t say it. Bye.” And with that she takes off, alone, but looking less lonely than all the people who weave down the street in tight groups or arm and arm. Certainly less lonely than me, left here to sort through her words, but whatever she meant keeps sliding through my fingers like sand.

Back at the Java Joint everyone is waiting. It’s my last night, but I want to seem like any other so I feel around inside my skull until I find my mask and I put it on, peering out at the world through eyes no longer really my own. We go to some club that at least doesn’t play just Top 40 crap and bad dance music. Lance knows a guy who works there. At the door he stamps all our hands with a big green stamp that says 21-Allowed to Enter. Jack complains about being hungry so we end up at Denny’s for well over an hour, just waiting on a few simple orders of french fries which arrive cold anyway. Everything’s the same, except I’m not really there.

After the bars close we head for Lance’s place, and we have to walk, his car totaled in some accident he swears wasn’t his fault. It’s over a mile walk. On the way we pass this huge stone church, a real cathedral, soaring and brooding and beautiful, not one of those new glass and concrete churches that look like malls. The malls of God, 20% off salvation, every Sunday. We stop as Lance decides he wants to sit on the steps and roll a joint there.

"You know God smokes pot," he says, "he has to, and plenty of crack too. How else could you create a world as fucked up as this?"

Everyone laughs, especially Sarah and even me or whatever me it is that is standing there at three-something in the morning and looking up at the now completely cloudy sky. I wish the place was open, like the cathedrals in real cities are at night, so that I could walk in there, alone among all the empty pews and the vacant stares of the stained glass angels and prophets. But it’s closed and the starry eyes of heaven are closed too, an eyelid of clouds pulled tight across them. Jack asks if it’s blasphemy to smoke pot on the steps of a church. June says she hopes it is. Kyle makes one of his rare comments, saying there’s some Bob Marley song like that, that says God’s gonna take away everything and make everybody feel high. It’s an appropriate setting really, considering how religious Lance and Jack are about their weed. The me on the steps takes a hit off the joint and passes it to June. It starts raining and I look up, letting the raindrops splash down on my face, falling down from the dark sky above, past the high spire of the cathedral and on to me, on to all of us. June takes a quick hit and rushes off down the steps, literally dancing, singing what I take to be some Wiccan hymn to the rain or something. Lance and Jack roll their eyes at June and start complaining about how much farther it is to Lance’s. Kyle looks up,

the rain plastering his hair to his face. Sarah looks up into the rain as well, eyes closed, mouth open slightly. Smiling? The rain gets heavier, pouring down now. I feel cold, my clothes are stuck to me, but I feel good. Maybe it's just the weed, but though my body is wet and heavy I feel like part of me is rising up into the night. The rain is connecting the sky with the earth and I'm part of it. Abandoned in favor of the rain Lance and Jack pass the joint back and forth between each other, shielding it from the downpour with their bodies. They look hilarious, dripping wet and huddled over the joint. The rain is making a mess of Lance's hair. As soon as the joint's gone he springs up with a let's go and heads off down the stairs two at a time. I wish the rain would last forever and not end like everything else. It transforms all I see as we head off again. Traffic lights send rivers of yellow and red and green light shimmering across the wet roads. Everything is wonderful, from June practically skipping along to Lance and Jack walking quickly ahead of everybody. Too soon we arrive at Lance's apartment. The rain has let up but not stopped. I linger outside for a moment, then go through the door.

Inside Lance has gotten out several bottles: Pucker, Mad Dog, Jack Daniel's, this cheapass Viaka vodka in a plastic bottle. I mix a screwdriver and listen to the rain's song on the windows. Lance gets pretty shitfaced and clumsily throws an arm around me. I push him away and sit in a corner, getting my book out, another screwdriver sitting beside me. I watch them, trying to keep my eyes open. I don't want it to end but lack of sleep is finally catching up to me. Jack passes out, June puts on the latest Drain CD and sits on the floor in front of the speakers, listening to the music in an odd sort of meditation, and Kyle stares out the window where the rain has stopped but left the glass beaded with water. Never one to be content, Lance moves on to Sarah, as usual, and they start making out on the couch, or rather she just lies unresisting.

They are very much my second family. Baby Jack, always asleep or whining. My little stepsister June, possessed by some joy I'll never know. Silent Kyle, my older brother who I never knew and who ran away after dad died. Lance and Sarah, my parents. He can't see anyone but himself and the one person she can never see is herself. They finally get up off the couch and head for Lance's bedroom. Everyone and everywhere and everywhen are all the same. The digital clock on one of the tables stares 4:20 at me.

6:11. I've dozed off. Everyone's asleep, except for Sarah, who's out here again, leaning against the couch which June's stretched out and sleeping on. She looks at me but doesn't say anything. She doesn't look sleepy at all. I guess she was startled awake to life too early and never stopped being that way. Soon I'll have to leave for South Carolina or else leave my family to avoid that. The scales look even to me. Either way the days will pass, one after the other, fumbling for an

impossible tomorrow. The only thing to do is try, I guess. 6:13 now. For a brief moment my eternally frozen watch will be right, for a moment despite being broken it will be perfect. Sometime soon, after 6:13, the sun will rise. I go outside so I can watch it.

*Michael Steffen*

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Wings

I don't care anymore  
about short distances—couch to fridge,  
filter to ash. Sleep  
comes when I need it least. Getting up is the same  
as going to bed.  
I'm starting to forget my own story—  
Sandra What's-Her-Name  
who finally did the sensible thing, quit  
a hypothetical version of me.

I don't know why I'm saying this now.  
It's been a long time between dreams,  
straddling any invisible breath to bear me up,  
like Dante's Geryon in a flight over Buffalo—  
factories, foundries, smokestacks  
standing like lost ideals,  
above mills, black smoke, coke fields  
where my father toiled for thirty years, a mountain  
disappearing in mist, a lake of souls,  
the roof of a boxcar—so I could lean into the night,  
the way I did in '74 with Sandra  
when I scaled the Harlem Avenue bridgeworks.  
I could've stepped over the South Buffalo rail yard, floated  
above the stacked cars, embryonic,  
exiled from everything solid; I could've told her  
something about wings  
beating in a womb of stars. For an instant,  
I knew who I was.



*Jody Brunkhardt*

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*The Little Things*

I drove home to Southwest Kansas one night in August and just as the sun sank beneath the clouded horizon, three familiar and forgotten Gano grain elevators splendidly stood along the highway. I stopped to take a picture of the rustic prairie skyscrapers, the ripe red sea of milo growing next to them and the long shadows cast by the lingering sun. I love that snapshot.

When I was in high school, our yellow buses, transporting us to school sponsored activities in Eastern Kansas, would drive by those elevators. These particular elevators were forgotten, until my senior year in college when my class and I studied Nebraska authors, including the famed photographer, Wright Morris. One of his pictures is of grain elevators, and its only attribution is: Gano grain elevators, Western Kansas. I recognized them right away. After my family moved farther south in Haskell County, I took a new road home from college. This new route, Highway 56, led them to me again.

In March, when I was moving home for the summer, I jotted down the location of those historical symbols of prairie settlement on a piece of scrap paper. Throughout my six-month sojourn, from college to Australia for three months, back home, to Florida, and to Kansas for college again, that note stayed with me. This scrap showed up in random places. When I unpacked my belongings at my host family's home in Brisbane, the note was stuck in the pocket of my luggage; two weeks later I found it between the layers of blank pages in my journal. At the end of my stay in Australia, I climbed to the top of the mammoth Ayers Rock in Northern Territory with my cousins, and I found the paper crammed into the bottom of my camera bag. I had just pulled my camera out to capture the Olgas, another magnificent rock formation on the red horizon. Thinking back on it now, I find it ironic that the note showed up when I was photographing another tower on a different prairie. I remember chuckling and placing the note in my jean's pocket. When I went to Florida, I found the scrap in a book I had been reading, and as I unpacked at home, I placed it on my dresser. When I moved to Manhattan, Kansas, for college, I discovered it in an old, otherwise empty, Nike shoebox. Finally, I placed it in my car visor where I found it one time on my way home when I was fueling my car. It was on this trip that I finally stopped to take that snapshot.

The other night I placed my hand in the pocket of my purple, terry

robe when I was getting ready to shower. Instead of paper, I felt two compressible, cylinder-shaped, foam NAPA earplugs, which almost look like marshmallows, or miniature versions of modern grain elevators. Then I remembered last summer when the water to our farmhouse had been disconnected due to well problems, and my family and I needed a shower after working outside in the hot, dusty fields. By wiring one end of a garden hose to a post and connecting the other end to the water discharge pipe at the irrigation engine, we had contrived a shower. The engine, located in a cornfield, was safely isolated and protected from any human eyes. When it was my turn to shower, I wore nothing but my robe to guard me from the dirt and grime in the pickup, a pair of rubber sandals to defend my feet from the fertilizer and oil-soaked "shower floor," and a pair of earplugs to protect my eardrums from the roaring engine. The fire-spitting exhaust pipes glared orange, red, and blue in the darkness. I turned on the water valve and stood naked under the star-filled sky and icy water that surged past the faucet at 1100 gallons per minute from 220 feet underground only seconds before. The corn plants were my encompassing, 360-degree shower curtain. After I was drenched and clean, I put on my robe and drove a half-mile to the house. Absentmindedly, I had placed the earplugs in my robe pocket where they remained forgotten, along with this memory, until recently rediscovered.

Little things count—the seemingly inconsequential objects that a person encounters again months or years later can trigger those precious memories otherwise forgotten. Whether the treasure is a perfect photo, a pair of earplugs, or a scribbled note, one can never tell.

*Brad Garmon*

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## Pulling Pins

I rented a movie this weekend, almost entirely because of the name: *Trust*. It's a small, independent film that one of my favorite filmmakers, Hal Hartley, wrote and directed back in 1990. I saw it a few years ago, but something about it seems particularly apropos of my recent concerns, so I rent it again and sit down in my Manhattan, Kansas, apartment on a cool Sunday afternoon to watch it.

The last of the yellow November leaves from the black walnut tree outside fall to my deck while on the television one of the characters, Matthew Slaughter—a twenty-something, supposed “generation X” angst-ridden guy like myself—sits peering through the Venetian blinds of his own room into the morning sun. He pulls a dark green hand grenade from the pocket of his overcoat, and says, simply, “I carry this with me at all times.”

A few weeks earlier, a friend and I are walking a quiet path through Konza Prairie Research Natural Area, through the 8,600 acres of tall grass prairie vistas, tree-lined streams, and flat-topped limestone hills north of the college we attend in Manhattan.

We started in late afternoon and the falling October twilight finds us still biding our time, talking our way carefully back toward something closer to a trust, which I hadn't, until then, realized we'd lost. She tells me stories of her father and brothers back in the northeast, of a family cabin and invitations reserved for those people she trusts completely: Her best friend from high school and one past boyfriend are the only ones, as I recall, who ever made the grade.

The message I hear from her: Brad, you won't be invited. Ever.

Trust is a tricky thing. She and I had tiptoed around the edges of a romantic encounter about three weeks earlier, and I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find that the intervening weeks of near-silence have left us both wary. But more, we are furtive, cautiously sniffing the air for hints of danger, for the moment when this conversation—now something unpredictable, devoid of trust—might turn on us.

We talk our way gingerly down into the darkening trees along the King's Creek Trail, teetering on a narrow path, faintly visible in the blue-gold evening, between small-talk and the actual conversation that waits just beyond.

The deer surprises us as we come around some trees and move down a gentle hill toward a low, dry stream crossing. She is standing

tawny gold and casual about three feet from us, just off the trail: a young doe, brown and delicate, with large, wet, black eyes and a small, busy mouth. Her head down, she crunches black walnuts noisily in the shadows beneath the dying leaves of the tree from which they've fallen.

She lifts her delicate head to look at us once, curiously, her mouth continuing to worry a nut, as the two of us stop, stunned, in the middle of the trail. She raises no white flash of tail in warning, makes no move to depart at all, but merely stares at us, gnawing until the walnut in her mouth is gone, and then she turns her body a little, drops her head again. I didn't even know deer ate walnuts.

We stand and stare, not moving, holding our collective breath, expecting her to smell us at any second, to fear us, to bolt and crash away into the safety of the twilight shadow's protective embrace. For at least three long minutes I stand, awed, before I even risk moving my cold hand slowly and gingerly toward a warm pocket.

The deer doesn't seem to notice the movement, let alone suspect any ulterior motives in my gesture, so I relax and breathe a little deeper.

A few more moments and I gradually chance a shift of my weight from one numb foot to the other.

Still, the doe gives no more than a casual glance, returns to nonchalantly nuzzling the dry leaves for more nuts.

I clear my throat.

The doe flicks a long, bored ear, picks a walnut from the leaves, begins chomping it, staring at me like a bored cow.

I cough.

I cough louder.

I turn and frown, try to resist the strange urge to jump up and down, wave my arms, anything.

We hear a noise coming toward us from up the trail: heavy footsteps pounding the dirt trail in rapid rhythm. A thin, shirtless young man in red running shorts barrels around the corner and drops down the slight hill before he sees us, slowing to a walk when he gets up next to us and sees the deer. The doe, in turn, takes a leisurely step or two away and stops again to absently eat some more.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare it away," the runner says as he walks carefully past.

"I don't think it's much of a problem," I call to him, loudly, as he begins to run again, my voice jarring in the woods and tinged with bitterness. I watch carefully. The deer, I think, might have yawned right about then.

We stand for another minute before I really begin to feel like a dupe, and finally we just turn and walk away, leaving the deer standing and eating, oblivious to my seething resentment reaching back through the trees toward it, still trying to get some kind of reaction, some

acknowledgement of the danger I am supposed to represent.

We pass three more deer in the next two miles of trail as it winds down along the dry creek. “Have the researchers and visitors been feeding these things?” I wonder aloud as we walk. Is that why they are so trusting? Or is it a hopeful example of that idyllic, peaceful coexistence some people claim is possible between humans and animals? There is no hunting here on the Konza Prairie, and I wonder, is this the result? The lamb lying down with the lion? Have the deer out here come to trust people so completely because the only visitors to places like the Konza Prairie have been “nice” people like me, coming prepared and anxious to be awed by nature?

We watch as a doe stands nursing a fawn as we, feeling like voyeurs, mill about awkwardly in the middle of the trail. It takes a few minutes for me to figure out exactly what is bothering me so much about this entire situation.

“I don’t want animals to trust us that much,” I finally tell my friend as we head back toward my truck, parked and waiting at the trailhead.

And finally, I have to admit it.

I don’t think I deserve that much trust. To be perfectly honest, I don’t think any of us do.

“How does this work?” Maria asks Matthew Slaughter in Hal’s movie, holding his grenade in her hands.

“What do you want to know that for? Gimme that thing,” he says.

“No. How’s it work?”

“Why?” he asks, sitting down close to her.

“I just want to know.”

“See this pin?” he finally says, pointing to the circular ring on the side. “Pull that. Wait eight seconds, and . . .” his voice trails off.

“Boom,” Maria says softly.

I think I’ve got it figured out. Matthew Slaughter didn’t just carry a grenade. Matthew Slaughter, like all of us, is the grenade.

I struggle to understand my distrust of people; in the search my first thought is to look to the philosophers of religion. They seem to have a name for my dilemma: in capital letters, the Problem of Evil.

The conversation around the lunch table a few weeks ago turned, not surprisingly, to the nature of human nature. As with Rousseau, inherently, basically, fundamentally good seemed the popular response in the informal poll of my friends present at the table. Sure, they admitted to exceptions; it would be hard not to in this world of war and suffering and torture. But for the most part, they wanted—even needed—to believe that most people are basically good.

I am less enthusiastic. I grew up steeped in Calvinism, a Christian

doctrine that suggests people are just simply evil, or in Calvin's words, sinful. Every Sunday in church I confess along with a congregation to being "by nature sinful and unclean, sinning against [God] in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and what we have left undone." I guess this is bound to make me a little wary of myself and the people around me. A part of my religious dogma that helps me accept it comes from St. Augustine, who back in the fifth century suggested that we were actually all created good, originally, but that thanks to free will and the Big Fall—Adam and Eve and all that—we became, through our choice to ignore God, sinful. It wasn't God's idea, but the result is the same.

The most optimistic position I can take with my friends sitting around the lunch table isn't any of these, though. Maybe we aren't necessarily anything by nature, I offer hesitantly. Maybe the Empiricists were closer in suggesting that humans are more akin to blank slates. We aren't inherently good or evil, but instead we are created open, and we become good or bad through the process of our experience of the world.

A friend of mine had a teacher who told him, after reading a poem he wrote about the Holocaust, "We all have eyes that can see how best to stack the corpses." I guess it doesn't really matter to me what we are by nature, good or evil; in the end it comes down to what we are capable of. We are all still a bunch of grenades walking around down here on earth. Right, wrong, good or evil, just don't pull the pin, and don't wait around for eight seconds if you do.

I remember meeting the new kid from across the alley. I was about six years old and he came to peer over the fence into my yard one evening.

So I threw rocks at him.

Later in the summer, after he recovered and we became friends, we took a BB gun and shot a young black bird that was sitting up in the apricot tree in his backyard. At first we thought we were just bad shots, because the bird didn't scream or fall or even attempt to hobble away with a broken wing like the scenarios I had created so vividly in my mind. It just sat there.

So we continued to shoot, taking turns filling it full of pellets and trying to guess by the small movements of its body whether we were hitting it. Maybe it was just really, really scared, I thought. Paralyzed.

Eventually, we were finally satisfied that we couldn't have missed that many times, and we climbed the tree, into the highest branches, only to find that the bird had been dead for awhile, and its nerves, maybe during that first shocking impact so long ago, had torqued its spindly feet tightly around the branch. We had to pry them loose with pocketknives before we could toss the little body away and watch it

land with a wet, bloody smack on the concrete patio far below. And unlike young Opie on the *Andy Griffith Show*, I have yet to shed any tears.

My friend and I actually reached the dangerous part of our conversation about the time we reached my pickup, parked at the trailhead of the Konza. Nothing much was resolved, even then, except to discover that she thought even worse of me than I had imagined. I had turned my back on our romance, an action I have taken with certain regularity in my life so far, and which I have always comfortably written off as benign fear or doubt. Her perception, I gather, would be more likely to include words like malice and deception.

The scary part for me is wondering if maybe she is more right than I am, and maybe I just live in denial. Or worse yet, that fear and doubt are in effect the same thing as malice and deception, with identical consequences for other people.

I sat with a date one night in my living room, desperately in need of a conversation starter to move through the uncomfortable silence. So the first place I look is the magazines strewn across the coffee table. That's what they are there for, after all, so I pick one up and flip and I begin to read aloud—as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world to me—an article about Serbia and the bombing in Yugoslavia.

Strangely, I found myself reading aloud a statement supposedly presented by the deputy prime minister Vojislav Seselj, outlining the “goals of the Serbian national policy in Kosovo.” It suggested that Albanian “political figures should be eliminated by traffic accidents and jealousy killings or by infecting them with the AIDS virus when they travel abroad.” Such “propaganda,” it was hoped, would “create the sense of an intolerable percentage of virus carriers, which could be used as an excuse to isolate large groups of Albanians and would promote a stereotype of Albanians as an infected people.”

“Do you trust me?” Maria asks Matthew Slaughter, standing beside a stop sign on East Hoffman street.

“If you trust me first,” he replies.

I sit on that same couch again, and another bird sits just outside the window, on the steel railing on the deck of my apartment, silhouetted against the yellowing leaves of the black walnut. A starling, I think: some small, gray and black and brown bird with rapid eyes looking in at me. He turns his head constantly back and forth, side to side and backward, biding his time. He is, thankfully, very nervous.

I think he wants the old pieces of bread I have recently started breaking up and scattering across my deck for the birds and squirrels. I make recompense as best I can.

Yes, there. He goes. Hops down, eats and pecks furtively, warily, always in perpetual motion, never relaxing. He hops from bread to crust, back to the railing, back again; looking, looking, always watching. I like him.



*Janét Bozarth*

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A Natural Acquaintance

I looked up at the trail at the next hill. I really didn't want to venture it. It wasn't that the hill was too tall; after all this was Kansas, I just didn't feel like making the effort. I didn't want to head back either so I sat down on a large, smooth, flat rock and stared at the sky and the prairie. Was this the way it looked when my grandmother had traveled here? That was my purpose here. I had explored this nature preserve trail many times before to get some exercise or watch animals with my fiancé, Matt, who is a wildlife biologist. This time, however, I was traveling with my grandmother in mind.

I love Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*. I like the idea of "rememories;" the idea that places hold memories and histories that later generations can experience by putting themselves in the same location. Although the book shows these as sometimes painful glimpses into the past, I took the idea of rememories to a place of hope. I had hoped to experience a rememory here in Konza Prairie to better understand my grandmother.

She was born October 9, 1900, and lived to see everything from the first flight of the Wright brothers to the launch of the Hubble Space Telescope. She also had traveled extensively through Arkansas, Missouri, Colorado, and Kansas by covered wagon in her younger days. The majority of her life she lived in Kansas, in the northeastern part where the Flint Hills and the prairies seem endless. She lived on several farms near Council Grove and Manhattan area, but she never lived in any towns around here. That was the most I really knew about her.

In fact, until I came to Manhattan, Kansas, to go our state college, I had never been in this part of the state where my grandmother had lived so much of her life. I grew up in Wichita—in the southern part of the state. Even though my grandmother moved to Wichita in her late eighties, I only saw her at family reunions and our family was so big that we never had enough time to talk to everyone. Besides, as a kid I spent most of my time outside playing with my cousins. I am sorry now that I hadn't stayed inside more often or asked her more questions.

Now she was gone. She died during my sophomore year in high school. I learned about her passing the morning before I took my first ACT test. I remember crying at her funeral but I don't remember being completely distraught. It wasn't until the summer of my junior year of college that I began to understand what she meant to me.

My mother and I had been sorting through boxes in the attic to pull

out anything we didn't want for the garage sale. The third box I began to look through was a worn-out cardboard box full of broken toys. I began pulling them out slowly and gently tossing them into the garage sale box beside me: a porcelain doll with a missing eye and matted flaxen hair, a tin train engine with thin rusty wheels, and a chipped ceramic rooster with eyes that jiggled. The toys would have been worth something as antiques if so many of them were not broken.

"Hey, Mom," I called. "Do you think anyone will buy these or should we just throw them out?"

My mother turned to me from unpacking another dusty box. She looked at the raggedy teddy bear I was about to drop into the garage sale box, and her eyes went wide.

"No, don't get rid of any of that!"

"But, why, Mom? It's not doing anyone any good up here."

"That's Grandma Bozarth's box. I mean it's your father's box of grandma's things. He's having enough trouble now that she's gone. Put that stuff back in the box and put it in the corner over there." Her voice had an edge to it that I hadn't heard for years.

I suddenly felt like a child being punished. I felt like crying.

"Sorry," I said. I collected the items from the garage sale box and carefully placed them back in the old, worn box. I began to carry it to the corner when my mother spoke again, this time with a much gentler tone.

"You can have that teddy bear if you want it."

I looked at it slumped in the corner of the box. Why would I want it, I wondered. Perhaps my mom could read my face because she said, "Grandma always gave you that to play with whenever we went to see her when you were a baby. It used to belong to Adeline, the baby Grandma lost before your dad was born."

I stared at the teddy bear, searching for some detail, some feature I could recall.

"There's also a puppet in there that she bought you when you stayed with her during my hysterectomy, when you were three," she said, her voice becoming softer and slightly shaky.

I felt like I should look for it. I set the box down and began looking at its contents again. I couldn't understand why I didn't remember any of these things. I finally found the puppet. I believe I only recognized it because it looked newer than any of the other toys in the box. I took it out of the box and set it with the things I was taking to my apartment in Manhattan. I felt so low. I couldn't even look at my mother until we climbed down out of the attic later that day.

Now, sitting at the Konza Reserve, I hoped to grasp some knowledge about my grandmother's life to make me feel more at ease. I sat on the limestone rock trying to remember everything I could about her. I dug my fingers into the soft earth remembering the time we had

kneaded bread together. I closed my eyes and pushed my hand deep into the soil, feeling the dirt slide underneath my fingernails and around my palm, trying to recreate the feeling of dough in my hands. It didn't work. My hands seemed to grow into the soil instead of knead it.

The day grew cool and dark. I stood up from the rock and started back down the trail. Many fallen trees lay along the creek; pushed over and broken by the harsh Kansas winds, their branches limply hugged the mud. I noticed the many rings of the trees that had fallen, each dark circle representing a year—a generation—of life. Each circle moving farther and farther away from the core.

I thought about the conversation I had tried to start with my father about Grandma. What was she like? What did he remember about her? Any questions I could think of. It seemed to bother him to talk about her. It seemed as though every time I would ask a question he would change the subject.

I decided to talk to my aunt Dede. Besides being the oldest child of my grandmother, she is also our family genealogist. At age seventy-two she is still bright-eyed and full of laughter; she delighted in telling me about her mother. She told me odds and ends of stories for more than two hours. She told me about the time when she and my aunt Audrey had gone swimming in the creek (something they weren't supposed to do). They swam in their underwear for two hours only to realize that they would have to dry it out quickly before they returned home or else Grandma would know. Thinking as fast as they could, they took off their underwear and put on their dresses. They then proceeded to run as fast as they could up and down the hill holding their panties high in the air to make them dry.

At supper time their clothes were as dry as could be; however, they had forgotten about their hair. The scraggly mess of hair on their heads made it obvious that they had been swimming. It didn't matter anyhow, because she had already seen them playing at the creek. Instead of punishing them, my grandmother simply said, "Did you enjoy your swim?" Both girls were so embarrassed that they never went swimming in the creek again without Grandma's permission.

Most of the stories about Grandma were like this one. While they did indeed hint at what kind of person she was, the stories detailed my aunt's and uncle's lives growing up instead of information about my grandmother. Maybe, I thought, Aunt Dede didn't know Grandma that well either. After her last story, Aunt Dede sighed and was quiet for a moment.

"Anything else you can think of?" I asked.

"Well, she always wanted to go to Scotland. That's where her part of the family is from, you know. From southern Scotland. She never went, but that's where she wanted to go."

Keeping this in mind, I made it a point that Scotland was a definite

stop for my fiancé this past summer when we went to Europe to visit friends. Money was tight, and I knew that Scotland would be an additional expense, but I also knew I had to go. I saved up money from my two jobs and tried to buy very few memorabilia-type items during the first part of our trip. Because we would be staying with friends in other countries we were visiting, we would have the additional expense of hotels during our stay, as well. But, I was able to go.

The air was thick and wet with mist. Little beads of water gently kissed my forehead as I walked with Matt up the thin rock street to Edinburgh Castle. We walked in silence along the sidewalk listening to the gentle nothingness and studying the elegant, moss-covered stonework of the buildings. The street was empty except for a small, brown and white cat that seemed to lead us in our trek up the inclined street. The absence of cars, the mist and the old buildings made us believe that we walked in a different time. This illusion would've been complete if it were not for the brightly colored signs in the store-front windows. The tourist trap items gleamed through the grayness and bid us to come inside for a better look. We ignored most of them until I saw a sign which read: Family Histories Inside.

I spent hours in that little shop. Researching family names and searching for anything that looked familiar. I didn't find anything but general information on our family name and the names of people who had left Scotland for America. I wrote down all the names and decided to look them up once I returned home—none of them sounded familiar.

Every night I would go to the hotel and write an entry in my journal as if it were a letter to my grandmother. I described the wonderful scenery and the pleasant people to her as if she were going to read it, discuss it with me when I returned.

"Grandma, you wouldn't believe the castles we saw today. The old stonework reminded me of your house in Harper, except the stone here is dark. The air here is so refreshing, you would love to feel the breeze that comes off the shores and down the closes. It is like walking in a daydream."

Each day the letters to my imagined reader became more and more detailed. It became a great kind of therapy for recovering my loss of knowledge about her. By the end of the week I decided that even if I hadn't known her, I had participated in something she would have enjoyed. I felt an enormous sense of relief.

When I returned to college I decided to walk the trail again. I started in mid-afternoon and walked the northbound trail slowly. I became lost in thought about how silly it was for me to try to recreate an image of someone I didn't know. Or, was I recreating her the way I wanted her

to be?

I looked up the trail at the next hill. I realized this was the same place where I had stopped so many months ago. To my right was the same smooth, flat rock I had rested on—it seemed small somehow. I laughed to myself and walked on. As I crested the next hill I felt a sudden rush of air. The wind sang as it put its fingers in my hair and brushed it away from my face—just as Grandma used to, with her smooth, twisted fingers. I exhaled stress and thought. I stood—floated—motionless, breathless, alive. It was as if her frail body stood next to me reliving a mix of Kansas and Scotland wind. Forgiving me for not remembering the little things she had shared with me. Smiling at me with her warm blue eyes and hugging me. Breathing again, I reopened my eyes to survey the sky and the gentle rolling hills of the Konza prairie. I had found my “rememory” place.

Fred Cooksey

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## This Friday Night

At the beginning, everything feels right. Beer stocked in neat sideways piles, glasses stacked in nice straight lines, fresh fruit cut into perfect wedges: everything ready. But it won't matter. It all comes loose soon enough. Last night it did, and the night before that, every night of every week stretching back years.

I try to remember what's good about being a bartender, and I think, the ritual of it. I like knowing where all the bottles are, grabbing without looking, pouring. The sound of the ice when it fills up a glass, the look of a wet napkin. Small pleasures.

That's enough to get me through the night, isn't it? The power of positive thinking, isn't that what they call it?

Dale appears at the end of the bar. He's a cook, a skinny young white guy who doesn't fit back there with all the black dudes and the Hispanics. I think he wants to be a bartender, but I don't see how that's going to happen. The other cooks say he's too slow, too careful. But I can't blame him for wanting to get out of the kitchen. The air smells better up here and it's not so damn hot. I've got some freedom. And this is my space. No one crosses through that opening at the end of the bar. I don't even have to put the service bar down into place to block the passageway, though sometimes I do, especially towards the end of the night, just to get some separation from the rest of the place. The old question of the cage: Does it keep me in, or everyone else out? I nod at Dale and he raises his styrofoam cup toward me.

"How's the kitchen," I ask him.

"Same as always. Too much to do. Not really enough time to do it."

"Don't be so damn careful. Do a good job and maybe they'll let you train as a bartender."

"I don't know. Maybe."

A week ago he wanted to be a bartender. Or at least that's what I assumed. He makes probably six bucks an hour back there, sweats all night long, why wouldn't he want to do what I do? He asked me all these questions about how much money I make, how long it takes to learn, how long I've been doing it. Every twenty minutes I'd turn around and there he'd be, watching me from the end of the bar. Then I'd go over, see if he needed something for the kitchen, and he'd ask me, *What happens when someone walks out on a tab?* To which I responded: *You chase them down like dogs. I had to tackle a guy one night, halfway down the next block. Asshole had actually stolen a twenty off the bar. An off-duty cop handcuffed him*

*after I tackled him, and they're in the bathroom trying to get the evidence—the twenty dollar bill—off the guy, but the guy is just mumbling. They strip search the guy, find a knife in his socks, which is bad for him, and then finally make him open his mouth. There's the bill, sopping wet and wadded up into a little ball. They tell me, Sorry, we'll have to keep this for evidence. So I'm still out twenty bucks. The point is, Stay in shape.*

Tonight Dale's question is, "Does that guy always badger you for a free one like that?"

And I tell him, "That's just Paul, that's how he is."

Dale says, "Doesn't that drive you nuts?"

"No," I tell him, "you get used to it. You have to think positively."

Here's my lesson for tonight, for Dale and me both. One of the waiters overhears my little tutorial and laughs, sneers at us. But hell, he's gay, like all the waiters, so he's bitter about everything.

I have to admit I don't mind answering Dale's questions. Makes me feel like I have this secret knowledge. There's also something likable about him, something innocent and maybe a little naïve. Makes me want to help him out.

I turn to wipe the bar some more—it's not dirty, but I have this need to do it. When I turn back, Dale's gone.

Come back, Dale. I'll show you how to tend bar. Hell, you can have my shifts. Then I could—I stop myself. What happened to positive thinking?

I wait for my first customer. Read a magazine, wipe down the bottles, watch the beginning of afternoon foot traffic on the sidewalk outside the window. Pace picks up. The street musicians—four scrawny black kids—arrive, turn their pickle buckets upside down and start beating. They make a beautiful sound, almost African, the way the rhythm pulls you in, puts you in a trance. A homeless man clangs his change cup in time with the drummers. Even he looks happy—he couldn't possibly care about the weekend, but there he is, clanging away. Nodding, thanking. I don't know how they survive like that—on a cupful of change and restaurant leftovers. Makes me wonder why the rest of us need so damn much.

I hear my name for the first time of the night. "Bill, darling." It's Margaret, a good regular, decent tipper. She gets a little chatty sometimes, occasionally has a good cry by the end of the night, but usually she's fine. Heavy drinker, too. She's tried to stop, even tried to get me not to serve her, but it's never worked. It's a bit sad, I suppose, but at the same time I see her now and I think: Look how happy she is. She's about to have her first drink of the night and she's practically bouncing with giddiness. That anticipation.

I've got it, too, in my way. I'm expectant. It's a performance, and that's something else I can look forward to: the physical movement

back here in the narrow space, the way I slide back and forth from one end of the bar to the other.

Crown and seven for Margaret. Ollie comes in just as I put the drink down.

I get used to hearing my name in different forms. When Ollie says it, it comes out as Bee-il. Ollie comes in before he works the night shift in the hotel next door, drinks a couple of rum and cokes, sometimes too many. I'm used to that. I don't know why I know it, but his whole name is Oliver Jackson Love. He's about the most unattractive man I've ever seen, but by god if he isn't one of the happiest. He tips well and never has an unkind word for anyone. He smiles all the time he's here.

"Hey, Ollie." I smile at him, watch him get settled. Everyone's got a little ritual. Ollie likes to take off his hotel jacket, straighten it out, hang it over the barstool so the hotel's name shows behind him: *I'm legit. I work*, it says. I mix his rum and coke, put it gently on the napkin in front of him

"So how's it been goin', Bee-il?"

"Slow so far, but I think it'll pick up."

Ollie settles in with his drink, has his first cigarette. He nods at Margaret, who likes to sit down near the service area where the waiters hang out. I catch her staring at them, front and back—I can see her imagination going.

I'm hoping it stays slow like this 'til after five when my regulars come through. Friday night, they'll all come by. Lots of free rounds, little shots of something. Make up a stupid name to go with it, and you've got endless entertainment. *Hey, Bill, another round of Drunken Moonlight*.

They know when they look at their checks how many free ones they've gotten. They know I take care of them. That's why I can't see getting any other kind of job—they take care of me too.

All the usual folks show up, elbow to elbow, half of them standing, about twenty all together. A good crowd. No belligerent drunks tonight, no cussers or fighters or freeloaders.

It gets loud. The fag waiters whine that their drinks are coming too slow, and, just for fun but also because I'm getting a little tired of their crap, I say, "You can all blow me," which lightens the mood substantially. Now they whoop and holler and wet their lips, all this in spite of the fact that I am easily the homeliest man working there. They love to tease me, pretend I'm one of them.

My regulars at that end of the bar laugh too. The show is on.

Rennie, the soup woman, she's about the only one who really annoys me. She gets a diet coke and a bowl of chicken soup, and sucks on that soup for two hours, her elbows sticking into the real drinkers on both sides of her, taking more than her share of the bar. I keep



watching her, those damn elbows. The right one hangs off the edge of the bar, and the guy drinking the straight Stoli next to her has already caught it twice in the back. This pisses me off. Rennie's entitled to her space and her damn chicken soup, but now she's pushing it.

I clear my throat right in front of her, wait for her to catch my eye. Then I look down at the arm, nod a little.

"What," she says. She slams her spoon against the bar and little flecks of chicken spatter the stacked glasses. I reach over, wipe it clean.

Stoli Man glances over his shoulder, barely looks at Rennie, then puts a twenty on the bar. "Let me take care of this when you get a chance."

Fuck, Rennie. Now you've done it.

The guy leaves me two bucks on the shot of Stoli, which strikes me as a sympathy tip for putting up with Rennie. Who knows what I would've gotten if he'd stayed awhile.

Best just to leave Rennie alone. If I piss her off, she'll just slow down that much more. I turn away from her and see Dale at the end of the bar. He's standing a foot inside that space that no one violates, my space, holding out a small bowl. He looks like he should be saying, alms for the poor. I walk up close to him, force him to back up.

One of the waiters is putting a lime on the rim of a gin and tonic, watching Dale step back. He shakes his finger at Dale. "Don't ever go behind the bar, honey, especially not this time of night."

"What do you need?" I ask Dale.

"Kahlua."

"You don't get Kahlua," I tell him. I take the bowl and fill it with the off-brand coffee liquor. "This is what you get for cooking"

I hand it back to him and he stands there, staring at me. He looks over at Rennie and I'd swear he gives her some kind of sympathetic look. It's hard to tell, though. The kid always looks a little beaten, almost weepy. "Jesus," he says, and heads for the kitchen.

Margaret has sipped her third Crown and seven down to the ice and now makes a well-timed slurping sound. She cackles wildly and I see her eye me, smile with me. I think she believes herself to be my honorary mother or aunt; she's always encouraging me to go back to school or something. I'm too old for that now, I tell her. I couldn't sit in classes with 20-year olds. And it's true. I should go back, but I'm almost 30 and this has worked fine for me so far. I hear the stories of what people do in offices all day—it's why they come in here and their souls go a little wild, why they drink more than they should, smoke more than they should. Everyone's in the same place here, they have that camaraderie: *We're killing ourselves. So what.*

I mix Margaret another Crown and seven before she asks, which I always do, because she's always ready for the next drink. I set it down on a clean napkin, wipe up the dampness around her, make it all new. A

fresh beginning. She nods, bows slightly. She wants maybe to be dignified, but already she's swaying a little. Hard Irish face, aged and lined by drink and smoke. She lights another one, turns to Jerry: "Where was I?"

The theater crowd passes through at seven, there's a slight dinner rush, everything just floating along now. I make some shooters for the regulars—Dance with the Devil, I call them—and they come out red, sweet and strong. I try a little, spit it out.

At nine-thirty the theater lets out, we get a slight rush of coffee and brandy drinkers. Gene, the opera singer, does an extravagant version of Happy Birthday for a group in the back. He turns to the room, his room for a moment, takes his bows. The bows say: You just paid sixty bucks to listen to a bunch of saps who don't have half my talent. But the truth is, Gene isn't very good. I'm no opera critic, but even I can hear when his notes get a little thin and breathy, and you can see the strain in his neck, the veins bulging. Maybe that's why he never works. That and I've heard the other waiters say he's a prude in bed. Imagine that: a gay prude.

The bar begins to thin. Getting late. Regulars going home. The pickle-bucket players have moved on, the homeless move in. Dale's at his usual place, avoiding the night's clean-up, I suppose.

Ollie's back, smiling away, his crooked teeth pointing all over the place. Shut your mouth, would you? I hear he works way down in the bowels of the hotel, probably hauls trash or stokes an incinerator. They wouldn't let him work anyplace people might have to look at him.

He lights up one of his Menthol cigarettes. Does he think it'll make him smell any better? How can such a repulsive human being have gotten a name like Love?

Margaret outlasts almost everyone. She coughs and tries to sit up straight, tries to hold her head still, pull me closer. "Bill, Bill. Come here. I need to tell you something."

What can I do? It's time to clean the wine cases, time to restock beer, time to shoo away the fruit flies and wrap the garnishes in plastic. Time for anything but this. The end of her usual marathon session. Almost midnight, last train about to leave. Don't miss your train, Margaret. I'm not gonna walk you around the corner to the cab stand.

"Bill, Bill. I've gotta make a change. When I come in here on Monday night, don't serve me, alright?"

The first time Margaret made this request was about three years ago. That time, I sent her away the following Monday, told her I was sticking to our deal, I'd help her beat this. She nodded, thanked me, said, *You're right, you're right*, and walked out. She stumbled back in about three hours later, her face waxy and red, sick-looking. *Now all you did was miss out on half your night's tip. I had to get this one started down at Howard's bar.*

That hurt, that first time. I hated to watch this pretty decent, good-natured human being destroy herself. She wasn't even forty at the time, but I swear she looked sixty. Just beaten down. But that was a long time ago. Margaret does this act about every six or eight months, so I'm pretty used to it now. One Friday night I wrote out a contract with her. She cried all over the place, sobbed and let her nose run, hugged me for about two straight minutes. She signed the contract, seemed exceptionally clear-headed, more than she ever was at the beginning of the night: *I know I haven't followed through before, I know I keep messin' up, but this time we got it down on paper.* She banged the sheet of paper with her fist. Monday came around, I showed her the paper. She took it from me and laughed at it, swung it through the air like a butterfly net. *Now, Bill. I thought you were intelligent.* She played to the others at the bar. *This signature is absolutely invalid. It was produced in a moment of reduced mental faculty. Absolutely non-binding! Now let's have a drink.* I got her the drink, got her every drink she's ever asked for since, many she hasn't asked for.

So this night is nothing new for me.

"Get your stuff together. Let me get you some coffee." I call to one of the waiters for coffee in a to-go cup. I consider putting some ice in it in case she spills it on herself, then decide against it. I just want her out the damn door at this point. I wait at the end of the bar next to Dale. I feel this need to say something: "She does this every night," I whisper to him.

"I know," he says. "So do you."

"So do I what?"

"You do the same thing she does, every night. The two of you—you're not so different."

"What the hell are you talking about? I don't even drink."

"I don't mean getting drunk. I mean this spiral." He gestures with his hand, a swirling movement that points to the floor. "Every night you go down. By the end of the night, you're a mess."

One of the waiters has overheard. He adds in, "He's right, honey. You get downright nasty by the end of the night."

"You're both full of shit," I tell them. Dale shrugs.

Margaret pulls on my arm. "I still love you, Bill darling."

It's time to walk her to the station, though at the moment I'm repulsed by her. I have to hold her by the arm like she's my grandmother, even though she just turned forty. We walk across the street and up to the station entrance.

"I'll see you Monday," she says. She puts her card in the machine and bumps her way through the turnstile.

I turn away from her, start to walk away.

"You're so good to me." She cries, wipes her face on her sleeve. Her purse droops down her shoulder and lands in the crook of her elbow.

When I get back to the bar, almost everyone has cleared out.

I throw some silverware in the bus tub, just to make some noise. The same waiter from earlier, the one who overheard me and Dale talking, is standing at the end of the bar waiting to cash out. "Still thinking positively?" he says to me with that same stupid smirk on his face.

"Fuck off, queer boy," I say to him.

"Testy, testy," he says, then walks away.

No, asshole, I'm not thinking positively. I take a long look at the bar, wonder how it's possible to think positively in the face of this, the wreck this place has become.

But you have to have an approach to cleaning. It's easy to forget this. The most important thing is to begin. I find a spot, right in front of me on the big beer cooler, and I get started. I grind away with my bar rag at a lump of hardened food. I can feel it under my fingers, through the rag. It won't come loose. I put my whole body into it until my arm aches, and finally I toss the rag aside and pick at it with my fingernail. It comes loose, lodges itself under my nail. God am I going to need a shower after this.

"Hey, Bill." A voice from behind me. Dale again.

"Don't you have something to clean," I ask him.

"I quit."

"Just now?"

"Pretty much."

His eyes are red and his shoulders sag. He's still wearing his apron, which looks like it belongs to a slaughterhouse butcher. He seems to be covered in a thin layer of grease.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask him.

"It's a shitty job. It's hot as hell, the food's terrible, and I keep cutting myself." He shows me his hands, which have a few scars on the knuckles.

Wally, the head cook, appears. "Man, we all cut ourselves." He shows us his hands, and his knuckles are a web of scars, with one long, thick line down the edge of his thumb.

"That's just part of it," Dale says. "I can't really describe it. I just had to quit."

Wally smirks, makes a grunting noise of disgust. "So you ain't even gonna clean up your station tonight?"

Dale shakes his head.

"You a punk, man. Now I'm gonna have to clean up your shit." Wally looks like he's thinking about swinging at Dale, but Dale looks so innocent, so thin and helpless, I know he won't do it.

Wally starts to walk away, cursing Dale and the restaurant and the waiters and then me, too, because I never give him the beer he wants this time of night.

I say to Dale, "You know, you could've been a bartender if you'd stuck with it."

"I know."

"So what the hell's the problem?"

"I don't think I want to be a bartender."

"Why the hell not?"

"It looks miserable."

"Sounds like a case of sour grapes to me, my friend," I say to him. He's pissing me off now. He's probably twenty-two, thinks he knows everything.

"You should quit too," he says. He wads up the apron and sets it on top of the bar.

I watch him slip out the door without looking back. He appears entirely unburdened. I think about what he says, and it sounds perfect. The whole picture is perfect: He's crossing the street now, which is empty of traffic. He's crossing against the light, and he looks perfectly blissful. I keep watching him, thinking.

I'm starting to get pissy. Maybe I'm hungry. I walk back into the kitchen, look at what's left.

"Wally, what's good tonight?"

"Nuthin, man." He throws an empty stainless container into a bus pan, and it makes a piercing metallic clang that rings in my ears.

"Alright. Just gimme whatever you have left."

"Meatloaf."

"That'll work."

He pulls it up out of boiling water, cuts open the bag and slides the meatloaf onto a plate. You want sauce?"

"If you got it."

He dumps the end of a red sauce onto the meatloaf, throws that container into the bus pan too, hands me the plate. I take it back to the bar, sit down and take a bite. It's the worst thing I've ever eaten. I push it away, stand back and take a long look at the bar.

I count my money. 137 dollars. It all adds up to something, night after night.

I steady myself; forget the assholes, the cheap sons-of-bitches who don't know how to tip, forget Margaret stumbling away like she always does, forget Ollie smiling his broken smile, forget it all. Sleep it off like any other night. Tomorrow's a new day.

*Scott Galloway*

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Country Roads: A Nightmare

My nightmares always end in dancing.  
 They begin on the dirt and gravel  
 rolling hills that fork the road  
 when I know I'm lost. But I know  
 I'm walking toward the house with boulders  
 balancing each other—a mystery older  
 than Stonehenge, lighter than pillow down—  
 a weight negative pushing up against  
 the world so gently it forces me  
 to stand still and watch. I can't  
 go back. The old man on the rocker  
 watches me. He's been waiting.

The road becomes less clear, then disappears.  
 Pebbles work themselves into sand  
 and dust and nothing  
 but the yellow tinted air we breathe.  
 As the world swirls away from us  
 leaving just darkness behind, he squints  
 from the porch to remember me.  
 He talks with lips only, but I know  
 what he says. His wife has died.  
 He takes fourteen pills with breakfast.  
 His teeth get lost on the nightstand.

Although the ear hears even  
 in sleep, one cannot scream  
 without waking. The world is still  
 with us. Dixieland plays from the house.  
 He wants to dance, he says, but can't.  
 Women swirl the yard pastel.  
 I watch with him. I'm just a boy  
 happy and horrified. We both wait  
 to dance. It's a balance I have to endure.

*Luisa Villani*

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In the Ethereal Ladies Lounge

In the dark room we ready.

In the ready room we dark.

Born to a particular kind of light,  
we don ebony icons: chignons, penciled  
in brows, not our own. It's a Chinese restaurant.

It's a Friday, *Thank God*, a pun  
on the punctual arrival of relief. The arc  
of a white sleeve and wristwatch  
signals from the doorway:

showtime.

I've seen that summons before:

Ahab, strapped to all he thought he wanted,  
beckons, his right arm freed at the elbow,  
waving as they plunge. He's tied to that whale,  
cross hatched with desire, in the same way  
the white streets of this town are,  
tire tracks speaking of the comings and goings,  
gone to silence and snow.

Expectation is a hush. Silence in the line

about to be born. If I tell you  
of the patrons eating, of the local color  
in their lips and clicking sticks,

it is not to say that they are vulgar,  
nor peculiar, they are simply hungry  
for what a night at the Noodle Company  
has to offer: forgetfulness in its highest form  
and a floorshow by the waitresses.

We will descend to the stage  
in silk and mandarin collars,  
never questioning our construction  
nor the garments that make us exotic.

We are what every restaurant needs,  
an undulating triumvirate of sequins,  
the many minute wheels  
that keep the lights going. *It's the little things*  
we've been told

that make this place special, the paper cranes  
on the tables that unfold

into napkins, the letter for long life  
    stenciled on each white bag  
the customers take home. Even in bad weather  
    they come;  
and from this portal in the ladies room  
    I can see the evidence of their journey:  
the snow-covered cars becoming white boulders  
    waiting to be quarried. Here,  
high in the eye of this window  
    snow makes even the insides big:  
the red foil wallpaper with its raised velvet swirls  
    seems so loud it almost pulses  
like a cavernous heart. Here's that arm again.  
    We are up and coming.  
We are the comb tapping the white sink,  
    the harmonies practiced between  
dinner and desert. We were born to sing.



R. *Flowers Rivera*

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Human Body, Human Mind

“I had heard stories about the human body and the human mind, the conditions it can adapt to, the ways it chooses to survive.”

—Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*

Morning is here, too early again. I think I feel Night’s wet nose. *Night, come rest, lay down here, beside.* I tell myself, Fatima, no. I tell myself, Fatima, lay back down. At least be that reasonable. Even my breath takes shape. I imagine it a hissing blue. It fills my ears. The radiator and floor grates are a tangle of sound. Next to the radiator sits the straight-backed chair, both of these are up under the window. The window is full of light. There’s probably mud in the chair. I’m sure I dirtied the seat on my way in. I should get up and clean it. Moping around ain’t never paid no rent. I shake my head, manage to lay here. But I want to keep my eyes. Closed. At least, Night deserves that much. A couple minutes more, minutes can be hours, and hours days. Maybe I will hear him pacing. His nails clicking as he lopes across the floor, a demand that I rise again. To fill his bowl, to open the back and screen doors so he can go out. The frigerator’s empty, I shoulda brought myself a plate home from work, but I’ve got his food. A brand new bag. I can always eat later, but I can’t remember how to pray. Grandma’s wise old hands, soft and worn like her Bible. Where is it? Not underneath my pallet. Grandma’s Bible that she took with her every Sunday when she carried us to church. I reached for one thing and grabbed another. Another. Something cold and final, not mild-mannered like Grandma. Church ain’t never done me no good but I always went to please her. Church is all show. That I can get everyday. From Buster. From that boy one floor up in 2D whose wife run off and left him with them four bad-assed kids. And all this without having to get dressed up and put on airs for folks who don’t know me—who don’t know me, not like that. Night knows. Woulda knowed how to bring me back to my senses. Sooner. Drifting back into darkness.

This pallet is too small. My breath is too, too blue. I need to get up and turn on the oven. I tell myself, Fatima, get on up from here now. But my head, my back, my legs all hurt. No sharp pains. Just too many dull aches that aspirin is useless to fix, for all it tries, can’t fix. Pain makes you sweat in your sleep. There are lots of pains, so many different kinds of pain, a new one to fill every livelong day. I will wash

my sheets today. No, I won't. That would mean money. Quarters. More money that I don't have. My bus pass expired yesterday. Today is Tuesday. Payday is Friday. I gotta get to work. Out in the parking lot, some asshole. Laying on the horn. It's too early, hardscrabble people, like me, who work late, are still sleep. Have to be there by ten to prep the food. Snow peas, sweet onions, green peppers, ginger. De-vein a bushel of shrimp. Make the velvet chicken. Cleave and chop, add extra sugar and red pepper sauce. Double the amount of chicken stock to make enough extra. This is how Chinese take-out works round these parts. At least where I stay. But for how long. A week past the three-day notice. The yellow tape in a long stretch across the doorframe. The metal lock box around the knob. It's not that life has kicked me in the teeth, it's just that I keep finding my teeth on the floor.

All of a moment you become aware of such things, when you've jimmed the catch and you're climbing through your own back window. When you've scraped up your elbow to raw tatters, have soiled and scuffed the only decent pair of boots with tread you own. Nobody, working hard as I do, wants to admit that you can't afford three tight rooms. Kitchen, bedroom, bath. It takes three steps to inspect everything I call my own, less than three steps. I'm plum tuckered out. I need to talk to Grandma, to hear her voice ring a rainbow. To tell somebody who might've care, to speak about what's come of Lourdes. How I tried to help her, how I failed. My sister. Grandma should've told me that when working folks have grace it makes their strength invisible. Grandma should have told me how truly hard it is to be strong. I'm beyond tired. I want to go back home to Virginia, but Grandma's dead. No more bell voice and headscarf. There's nothing left, no patchwork quilt. Not even the house. Somebody bought it out from under us for taxes. Lourdes grabbed up and pawned the rest. Grandpa up and died. Stroke. Grandma up and died. Shot herself. Even the strong can only stand so much. The certified letter, the burial. I don't have time for nonsense this morning. I'll have to pick through dirty clothes for the least soiled. Iron them clean. I tell myself, Fatima, get up, get dressed, go to work. Because always, there's bills to pay.

Waking here, I am still. I am still waking here. Light bill, gas, groceries. X the light bill. I can turn that back on by myself, the way that boy from 2D showed me. He ain't nothing but a boy. His woman was smart to get when she did. Fatima, I says, you should be so smart. I says to myself, Fatima, you should turn the lights back on now while everybody's still sleep. If it coulda been two weeks later maybe I woulda had a little piece of money to give him. Two weeks maybe, the end of the month. But rent's due, past due. He had no right. None, I say. Barging over here high. Buster, high. Wanting money he know I don't have. Must think I still braid heads. I ain't braided nobody in over a

year. My legs, my back. Shit. Braid somebody even though I can't stand the pain, I might have to. I need the money. Money I wouldn't even have given to him. This time I woulda. No doubt. I woulda.

I can *not* think about it. I haven't lost everything, only what made my burden nigh bearable. I tell myself, Fatima, don't think 'bout it. But Buster's the one. The one who should be giving me money now. Blood money.

The night was bitter, the tuneless early dark ever so cold, but I thought of Night, how he'd be waiting for me, patient like. Glad I made it home, scraps from work or no. So I got on off the bus at the corner market, went bought him a bag of food. Came out, had some loose change left in my palm. All I remember is how odd the light. The sky was pregnant with a moon pale and full and heavy, carrying it low and big near'bout like....

Light flowed across everything, the way wind does across water. The streetlamps a bent row of lonely women what ain't got a honey to dance with. The concrete walk stained with salt, the way Buster's drool usedta look on my pillow. I ought nought to've called. I knew better. But the phone was right damn there. Nobody on it for once. I had only wanted to call and see how he was getting along. I don't know why the missing him took holt of me right then. There are those nights, seemingly no different from any other and then you do foolish things like call folks you shouldn't. For whatever reason, you want what you shouldn't oughta. It was like that. I had the quarter. I picked up the phone. I dropped in the coin. I dialed his number. A few feet away headlights and wheels rushed over and through the slush. The roar of each passing car made it right difficult to hear. The bag of food rested heavy against my leg. Numb. I was so cold even my face hurt. Shuffling back and forth and breathing hard to beat back the chills. But I called him. As contrary as I can be, yes, I'm quite shame to admit I did. Never mind all that. I did *not* ask him to come here with all his nonsense. I did *not* ask him. To make me prove just how bad I want to live.

Somebody was walking hard. That's what I remember most. The echoing steps not passing by but, instead, coming directly to my door, not continuing straight on up the stairs as they shoulda. All hours that boy got them high school girls coming and going. No wonder them kids of hisn so bad. Night was sitting up. His head jutting forward, his ears perked, him staring at the door like he was able to hear with his eyes. Night growled low. He let a long, crazed bark. Three loud raps and I knew something terrible would come to pass. I kept still. Night started pacing with his tail wagging high. It was Buster. I don't know how he had known that I'd called. No one ever picked up. Maybe just

thinking about the past can summon it like the po-lice at your door. It's possible. I asked myself, Fatima, you gonna say something or not.

"Buster. Go round back." He pounded again. I sat still and waited... "Go on round back, I said." His hard walking stretched away. Night was breathing quick and anxious. His nails clicking the way they do. What I thought then was how my stomach pooched. It didn't usedta. What it would look like to Buster, how it would feel to him. I stood up and tugged on the hem of my shirt, rolled edges down over my hips. My white T-shirt and panties were glowing like the moon.

"Come heah, boy. No. Right heah. Keep still now." I took Night's leash from the nail on the back door and clipped the ring to the hook on his collar as he pranced. With my right hand, I turned the deadbolt, unlocked the door, keeping the chain in place—I tried to remember if I had any leak stains in my drawers the last time I peed. I could slip them off without Buster seeing. The draft rushed from beneath. I looked over my shoulder. The clanking radiator, the dirty straight-backed chair, the window that had torn up my elbow. I knew my legs were ashy. Buster banged three times. I smoothed back my wild hair. I opened the door real slow. I felt the eager length of Night's fur brush past. He squeezed through and darted out and away.

"Night! Come heah, boy. And what you want?"

"To see you."

"Here I am."

Buster stepped forward. I shut the door closed part way. "Night, right heah. Come." He was searching beneath the small stairs. I could see his tail as he ran zigzag, one side to the next, to find his old tennis ball. I could see Buster from where I stood in front of the opening. His tube socks slouched down into a pair of unlaced dress shoes. But it was mainly his eyes. I noticed. I knew right away by the too certain set of his brow that he was high. "I'll get him" is what he said. I watched him move, all gangly arms and legs. And as he his long thin self negotiated the steps, Night brought him the ball, dropped it at his feet and started backing back in scoots and turning in circles, waiting for him to throw. He called Night close and eased down. He picked up the leash. He walked back up the stairs, Night leading the way.

"You gonna let me in."

"You know I ain't."

"Got any money," he sniffed and looked down as Night wandered to and fro.

"Now you know I don't. Night, come." He sat between us and his tail beat in a steady rhythm against the railing.

"How 'bout I come in."

"Ain't no need."

"Just to talk."

"Ain't no need. Night, come on, boy."

"I'll take him for a walk." The leash in hand was loose 'round his thumb. He started off and away.

"Buster!"

"I'm just taking him for a walk" is what he said. I stepped outside and moved to the edge of the steps. I hugged my arms 'cross my chest and shifted. Barefoot to barefoot. "Buster, I want my dog. Bring him back. Heah." I could hear the weepiness rising in my voice. How, tell me how, to rip out that soft handful of yearning out my gut that feels like a willow switch cutting into flesh. What makes me this way? So weak. He moved on down the alley past the big dumpster, kept going past the rusted Bonneville up on blocks. "Gimme my damn dog!" I spat. My breath froze in a burst of blue. He stopped where he stood. The wind blew cold. Night stopped.

"Cain't I talk to my lady?"

"I ain't your lady no more."

A low voice said, "Course you is." I knew. He knew.

I told myself, Fatima, hush now. I told myself, Fatima, shut the door. I was all wrought up with the full cry that was about to crack my throat. I went over and sat down on the pallet. The muslin curtains, the radiator, the mirror, the moon. I closed my eyes and began to rock back and forth to ease my mind. The heavy walking returned. He gave the door three solid pounds with his fists so certain that I would allow him back. Again there was Night's restless movement back and forth. "You know you wanna let me in." A silence bigger than everything held me as I rocked back and forth, back forth. Then a perfect calm.

Remembering can fill those empty colorless spaces better than old lust. Reach me that, Grandma's Bible, is what I wanted to say, but to who? There was nobody left to do for me, no one I could do for. I hitched up the futon for one thing found another. Another. Grandma dead, Grandpa dead. Buster had turned his head to look at me, but he never stopped firing the pipe for Lourdes. "Leave us be," is all he said. I envied her that. She sat in a dreamy-eyed pose, leaning forward in the straight-backed chair. One hand reaching back holding on to the seat, one hand cupped around the flame. Later, when it was convenient, Lourdes cussed me, told me to get some business of my own. It was my man and my house. Some things you cain't forget. And not being able to is a whirlwind that can blow the spark in your belly, stoke it into flame. It can bolster you so you're able to do what you never would have even considered possible.

His hard walking moved away and down the steps. There was no question I would've.

Let him back in.

Unimaginable, unchangeable, unavoidable.

I heard a bottle smash against, I don't know, a wall or the street. I stood up—heavy of hand, heavy of mind—and walked to the door,

moved the smelly mop that had fallen back out the way. With my left hand, I turned the dead bolt, unlocked the door, and finally, shaking, undid the chain. A draft of cold wind rushed beneath the door before I opened it. I walked toward the rail, my left hand sliding across the icy metal as I went down the steps. Sure steps moved my feet steadily over the biting rocks and pebbles in the alley. The moon was pale and my breath drew quick and sharp knives of air to my lungs. "Buster!" I yelled. He stopped and turned around. He looked around, then started to walk back. Dark shadowed places exist everywhere.

Places where you can *not* see.

The wind blew and the trash stirred in beautiful gusts of darting light.

Places you're too afraid to look.

Night sniffing, all the time sniffing. Me walking toward him. Buster stared and sniffed, drawing the back of his hand slow cross his nose, the leash still in hand. "Fatima," he said, "why you gotta be so contrary." That too certain set of his brow let me know.

"Gimme my dog."

"What you think you gonna do with that, girl."

No use bothering with words, they oft times lie.

"You give me back my dog."

"Not till you let me come. Inside."

I knew, he knew.

Great hope is more ruinous than mouthing some halfhearted hymn.

God damn. Fatima, I told myself, If someone gotta gun to your head and ask you if you want to live, you tell them *yes*—every time.

I raised my right arm. Leveled. Heard the high-pitched wail muffle, I clutched it to my chest. Watched his legs buckle and criss-cross, I clasped the image to my mind.

*Night, come rest, lay down here, beside.*

*Christopher Hennessy*

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Icarus on the Moon

*the true story*

The day's moon winks in and out of sight  
as I pursue it through the silt of clouds.  
It is still at a distance, but why save my strength  
for a safe landing? I never planned on going home.

Father calls me back, frantic I will ruin  
his waxy masterpiece; little does he know,  
when I punch into the gauzy airless layers,  
I will slough off his gadgety sticks, flaps and feathers.

I've perfected my own machine, deep in my head,  
with toothed-wheels pressing a flimsy brain  
into cog-shaped will, all powered by my thoughts  
of hairless moon men with skin like egg shells.

He'll tell mother how he tried to save me—  
jealousy or his old milk-eyes making him mistake  
a pair of twirling wings for a reckless son.  
He will say he skimmed the water for hours,  
hoping he'd find my body or the wings.

He will tell his friends what a good son  
I would have made (after a bit of hammering  
and tinkering of the genitals), all the while  
only able to remember the time he caught me  
fucking one of the pubescent bull slayers.

Ah, and on the moon I'll have breath enough  
for a life of lovers at all hours; I'll be stripped,  
seizing into ecstasy, a flying wild man—no one's son.  
No gravity, only libido and my breathing  
will make new eddies of atmosphere.

So close, I reach out to touch the onion moon—  
like all things we desire, only more or less there.

*Kimberly Pennington*

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River Walk

Inhale. I took in a breath of the early morning air. I closed my eyes, savoring in the delicate warm and moist freshness that could only be found in the early summer days. With a thunderous blast I was thrust back into the reality of where I was, on a platform, in a train station in Machida, Japan, watching the tail end of a bullet train disappear from view. All around me, the Japanese, shuffling as quickly as possible to get where they need to go. Typical men in suits, children in their school uniforms, and young women in hideously high heels, all waiting for the next train. I turned to face my group and turned down Fleetwood Mac to ask when our train would be here. With a smirk, the only one who had made this trip before pointed to a large board with the trains and their arrival times displayed electronically. I was still new at this; it had been a year and I had only ridden the trains a few times. I stared in amazement as the yellow lettered message flashed in familiar Roman characters and then again in alien Kanji.

Our train, a local express, pulled in slowly, stopping the doors so that they aligned with raised squares on the platform. We already had our bags gathered and were standing in polite lines behind the squares, following the lead of the natives. The doors slid open and abruptly the “polite lines” turned into a rushing mob of suits, uniforms, and big shoes, all cramming into the tin can-like vehicle. We were on a local express, a train that stopped at only the major stations and still it took over an hour for us to get to the end of the Odakyu line, Shinjuku.

Shinjuku was a mind-wrenching flurry of activity. It was huge, as big as any of the international airports I have been in. We met our representative and guide from the University sponsoring our trip. Once he had us in tow, he dragged us along, desperately, through a sea of people. I gave into a tiny chuckle as I noticed that I could see over every bobbing head in this vast ocean of shiny black-haired waves. The din of people and taxis brought to my attention that we were being led past an exit. This wide opening was a gateway to the city of Shinjuku. I could see a busy street, bicycles darting through traffic, towering skyscrapers, and a crowd of people that made my “ocean of people” a mere tidepool. Our small stature Japanese guide shouted something inaudible. He gave up trying to shout and just pointed to the adjacent Romatsumoto or bullet train ticket counter. The guide spoke to the man at the counter. I looked at the glowing poster of the train frozen high on the wall. These are among the fastest trains in the world. The Japanese are extremely proud



of the trains the Americans jokingly call romance trains. These two thoughts exemplified to me the contrast of the western ideas of romance and adventure on the rails to the Japanese idea that tracks and trains are for the perfection of function. He handed each of us a ticket for the Romatz. Tokai University had paid the 5700-yen or sixty-dollar price tag printed on the green tickets. As I boarded the train I was a little excited because I had never ridden on this type of train before. How do I find my seat? Can we purchase something for lunch? Where's the bathroom?

With answers to all my questions, I settled down for the six-hour ride. A soothing CD in my Discman blocked out the chatter. I slipped my headphones on and reclined my seat, turning my head toward the window just as we exited the tunnel that led us out of the station. In a blur, the generic cityscape ran past. People, taxis, buildings lapsed together in a sheet of gray under a sky so smoggy it looked like a dingy blanket on the neatly-made bed of urban Japan. Hypnotized and exhausted, I fell asleep.

Wearily I awoke in exactly the same position I had nodded off in. As my eyes lifted to the window, I was shocked into full alertness. No longer was the passing scene a dreary man-made smudge. It had changed into a beautiful and brilliant landscape. I gazed in awe at the mountain that was reaching proudly for the cloud free sky. The sun flooded my eyes with bright white light; yet I continued to look. Are we still in Japan? I was starting to realize, as I gawked out of the window, that this country wasn't just limited to crowded Tokyo, and the cities I had seen. I was looking into the wide-open spaces and pollution-free sky that I had never considered as part of Japan.

When we were finally released from the train, we found ourselves in a small, end-of-the-line station. Nothing like Shinjuku, this old open-air station is a place that you would expect to find in a third-world country, not in one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world.

We were told that our bus had not yet arrived so we must wait. The group started to wander out into the streets of this tiny town. A few of us walked over to a small grocery and purchased various ice creams and popsicles. We stood on the cobblestone street, nibbling on our frosty sweets, all the while being carefully observed by three young Japanese boys. The boys pointed and giggled. Trying to be friendly, we waved and they reciprocated with proud smiles and peace signs. Perhaps out of embarrassment, they turned away and ran at full speed up the street, vanishing around a corner.

The bus pulled up and we rid ourselves of our treats. The large vehicle was awkward in the miniature city, having to almost bend to leave the town and head for the mountain. On the two-hour ride it was explained to us that we were going to attend a five-day English camp, at

which we were to mingle with Japanese students. These students needed speaking practice for the rigorous testing of college entrance exams. We were reminded Tokai University sponsored this event and paid our way, even though the Japanese students were charged a heavy fee. In my head I heard him pleading with us not to act like typical Americans. Though our friendly guide didn't say this I know that was what he meant.

Now we could see the hotel. It was a mountain top chalet that looked as though it would be more at home in southern France, not placed on this mountain shelf in Asia. At the front of the entrance, a fog hung like the mystery of what this experience would be like. We were hastily scuttled from the bus to the lobby, from the lobby to the elevators, and from the elevators to our rooms and our roommates. When the guide left there was a stale silence as girls stared at each other across a cultural gap. Our gap was more like a large gorge with only a rickety bridge of the most basic commonalities too scary to cross before dinner.

I felt like a standard ugly American as I fumbled through social interactions with the Japanese students. The difference in American and Japanese modesty kept popping up, embarrassing girls of both cultures. Our Japanese roommates stared at us and whispered as we waited in line for the private shower every morning. We had no idea why they wanted to use the large public bath. They gasped in horror when I ran across the hotel room without removing my shoes. We were confused when the Japanese girls not only didn't laugh but also seemed offended by our tame jokes as we tried to offer some stress relief between sessions.

However, for one night we united briefly. We became just teenage girls undivided by culture. They made us green tea and taught us Japanese words, like ocha, the word for tea. We shared pictures of our friends and talked about what high school was like. Together we giggled and talked about boys. The international slumber party was topped off with a coed dance party, which was broken up at two in the morning by our angry chaperones. We said good night to the boys and went to bed. The brutal silence had been broken even if it was only for one night.

Within the next couple of days, we all seemed to have lost the connection. We were back to awkward conversations and drool-inducing "classes." We Americans were becoming restless and unwilling to cooperate. Upon the suggestion of an adult, we were advised to go out and relax, just the six of us. For our mini vacation, the majority decided to go to the river. I was the minority; I was the only one who felt this would be just as horrible if not worse than the two days spent in the hotel.

My friends were preparing to leave when I decided that I was willing to trot in the woods if it meant the slightest escape from this immersion. We wandered toward a small space of tall grass, which to my horror we had to cross on the trail to our destination. I anticipated

the disgusting feeling of weeds crawling over my skin, but I was surprised to find that I somewhat enjoyed wading through the waist-deep grass. The grass became so inviting that at one point I had the urge to lean back and sink beneath the placid surface of the plants.

We entered woods on a clearly marked path and started to hike. Every so often there was an aged sign with cryptic Kanji scrawled on it. The distant but recognizable sound of water was heard. The sound became more and more powerful with every forward step.

When finally the water was in sight, we discovered that there was a rope and another sign, possibly instructions on how to safely swing on this smelly old rope. My insides flipped as I became nervous for my turn. I did my best Tarzan impersonation and though it was not delicate or agile, I made it down to the bank of the river. I now could see the source of our guiding sound, a majestic waterfall. Blaring to the ears, yet peaceful to the eyes. The water hung from the above boulder like a sheet, a glass sheet that crumbled and broke near the bottom as it fell into the deep clear pool below.

We played in the river and hiked up as far as we could. Scaling the boulders, we slipped on moss. We climbed ferociously, as if we were devouring what we were seeing. We were extremely clumsy as we stumbled over fallen trees that looked as though they fell reaching out to their kin on the opposite bank.

We reluctantly turned back when the watery trail became too steep for us, the amateur explorers. As we descended the mountain river, following it down, back to our starting place, we commented to each other how we had felt things about nature that we had never felt before. We gained a respect and adoration for the immense beauty of something so magnificent. We stopped simultaneously for a rest, as though we had all received the same silent command. The six of us were right above the waterfall. We each sat on our own large rock and we all sat for a long while, listening to the waterfall shouting from ahead, and the whispering dribble of the water all around us. As usual, so many unrelated thoughts were running through my head, but then I looked up. It was past the water and the rocks, past the mountain peaks and treetops, up in the illuminated blue of the sky, something peaceful. Nothing was rushing, everything was calm.

What I saw or felt when I became lost in the sky, having a silent conversation with nature, was a connection. A connection to the things I've seen and the places I've been, all still part of me, in my past but not having passed me. The rocks we sat on, the trees standing on the banks listening to the river for all of their existence, and this scene connected by the river, icy and bone-chilling to the feet but irresistible to the soul, were most likely small bits of something larger, quite similar to us. I thought about my life as an Army kid. The many people and places I have left behind evoked a brief feeling of self-pity that I quickly choked

down. I couldn't long for the past only look for what's ahead.

I panned my group and tried to read in their faces that they were having the same experience as we all sat in an uncommon silence. I could tell by the look in their eyes that something was going on behind them. Even though gazes never met and no one was looking in the same direction, I had the sense that a similar change was occurring in each of us. Being in the river, having it around us, turning wheels that for the first time were grinding down the ideas we had about all the mental and emotional material we ever took in.

We eventually left our rocks and exited the woods, waddled back through the grass and crawled back into the hotel. Mentally we returned to being teenagers and not the mountain river meditators we were. Yet we carried with us the thoughts we discussed with the river, a place where we once existed, a place that was now part of us and we part of it. Suddenly the past didn't seem so far behind me. I felt as connected to the past that I had lived as I did to the future that I strive for. Nothing is left behind me; it is inside of me, molding me into an individual.

*Stacey Waite*

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Names of Trees

"For not all true things are the truth, nor should that truth which merely seems true according to human opinions be preferred to the true truth, that according to faith."

—from *The Secret Gospel of Mark*

My father was "building a bridge  
between God and man," he said.  
He knew all the constellations,  
the names of trees,  
and all the words  
to the Lord's prayer.  
The Lord spoke to my father,  
told him his children would learn  
God's discipline in the basement.

There was a certainty  
I did not want to be close to,  
a place where faith could  
swirl in the kitchen sink,  
slide and disappear in the drain.

From the basement, it was hard  
to believe the rustling was not  
an illusion, that the trees  
were still out there. It was hard  
to believe the limbs were stretching  
out, preparing their wings for sleep.

*Terry L. Welch*

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Fall River

Where the hand-made belt of cottonwoods  
meets natural, soft-fleshed catalpa,  
we crouch with sandwiches and beer—  
our rods leaning out over the water,  
whispering into its depths. A gust of wind  
nudges the cottonwoods and I watch  
their feathered seeds fall, sunlit  
and glowing, into the river  
as my father and grandfather lean out  
and sink into story.

When Dad was young, crows  
came to the county in a black storm.  
They rested in the broad-leafed catalpas  
the farmers used for fenceposts,  
the knot of a black bow tied  
around the throat of corn fields,  
wheat fields and gardens.

Grampa tied coffee cans—filled with old nails,  
screws, and rusted springs—like hostages  
to the branches. Dynamite  
was wired from Maxwell House to Hills Brothers  
and the night cracked into light and dark  
and the screaming murder of crows.

My father and uncles made coathanger loops  
and weaved them into the birds' mouths  
(out their necks), bloodied their Keds  
in a race for the nickel bounty  
on each shiny black head.

Today, this is a place of light.  
Escaping founders of future generations  
settle on my eye-closed face. There will be fish,  
and the beer for which I'm five years early  
will be bittersweet and cold. We will shake off

the seeds and stories and rise up lazily,  
passing in silence through these vacant gallows.

## Contributors

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**Kate Bertine** is a graduate student in creative nonfiction at the University of Arizona. She graduated from Colgate University in 1997. During long episodes of writer's block, she is a successful triathlete and duathlete. Her work has been published in *Blue Mesa Review*, *The Aspen Times*, and *The Colgate Scene*. She is also the current nonfiction editor for *Sonora Review*. Her nonfiction essay, "The Gibleleschnarf: An Essay on Communication" was the winner of this year's *Touchstone* graduate nonfiction award. **Jody Brunkhardt** is a first-year graduate student in English—Creative Writing at Kansas State University. She completed her undergraduate degree at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska, graduating with a secondary education degree in English and math. After completing her graduate degree, she would like to teach at a Lutheran high school, or at a school near her parents' home in Haskell County, Kansas. **Erin Billing** is from Topeka, Kansas. She is currently a senior in English—Creative Writing at Kansas State University, and will graduate in May 2000. Though plans after graduation are currently vague, she knows she will continue to write, wherever she may be. **Fred Cooksey** is pursuing an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he also teaches freshman composition. He is originally from Alexandria, Virginia, and has also lived in Seattle. Currently he is working on a novel which will be called *My Whiskey Life*. **Scott Gallaway** is pursuing his M.F.A. degree at Wichita State University. **Christopher Hennesy** studies poetry in the M.F.A. program at Emerson College in Boston. He anticipates finishing his degree in May 2000. **Jaimee Kuperman** is in the M.F.A. program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She anticipates receiving her degree in January 2000. Her poem, "The Doctors Know Something," was the recipient of this year's *Touchstone* graduate poetry award. **Jenny Lagergren** completed her B.A. in English—Literature at Kansas State University this past December, and she is now starting the M.A. program here at KSU. Her essay, "City of Incense," was the winner of this year's *Touchstone* undergraduate nonfiction award. **Hiram Lucke** received his undergraduate degree from Kansas State University in 1998 and is currently completing an M.A. at Emporia State University. He has won awards for both his essays and his poems, including the "Michael K. Schoenecke Award for Most Creative Paper" at the 1999 Southwest Texas Popular Culture Conference. **Jessica Lundin** is originally from Ann Arbor, Michigan, and she is currently a second-year graduate student at Kansas State University. Her short story, "How I Got Pretty Again," was nominated for this year's AWP Journals Project. **Kimberly Pennington** is a sophomore majoring in English and public



relations at Kansas State University. She grew up an Army Brat, and has lived in many different parts of the world. **Matthew Pitt** was born in St. Louis—the morning after Nixon’s resignation—and has paid rent in such cities as Austin, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC. Currently he is pursuing an M.F.A. at New York University, where he is a *New York Times* Fellow in Fiction. His work has appeared recently in *Prism International*, *Inkwell*, and *Grasslands Review*, and has received awards from *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *New York Stories*. His story, "Natural Child," was the winner of this year's *Touchstone* graduate fiction award. **Jason Poole** is a freshman at KSU majoring in English. He enjoys writing prose, and "Tomorrow's Eve" is his first published writing. **R. Flowers Rivera** is a Mississippi native completing a PhD in creative writing and African-American literature at Binghamton University. Her short story, "The Iron Bars," won the 1999 Peregrine Prize. Her published works may be viewed at <http://www.promethea.com>. **Bronwyn Rounds** is a fifth-year senior at Kansas State University, pursuing a dual degree in Pre-Art Therapy and Psychology. She will graduate this coming May, and plans to take a year off to work and decide which path to take next. Although she has worked in a variety of art mediums, painting is by far her favorite medium to work with. Her painting, "The Cycle of Being," was greatly inspired by Georgia O'Keefe and Judy Chicago. "The Cycle of Being" is this year's *Touchstone* cover art, and the winner of the undergraduate art contest. **Jessica Shadoian** is a third-year doctoral fellow enrolled in the University of Louisiana's writing program. Her work has previously appeared in the *Southwestern Review*, *Third Wave*, *Imprint*, and is forthcoming in *Karamu*. **Michael Steffen** is currently enrolled in the M.F.A. program at Vermont College. His work has appeared in *The Ledge*, *Antietam Review*, and *The Sow's Eat Poetry Review*. His most recent work is forthcoming in *The Comstock Review*, *Blue Violin* and *Poetry*. **Ryan G. Van Cleave** is a freelance photographer in Tallahassee, Florida, where he attends Florida State University. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Oxford Magazine*, *Maryland Review*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *Poems and Plays*. New work is forthcoming in *Shenandoah*, *Quarterly West*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. He is the editor of *Sundog: The Southeast Review* and also serves as coordinator for the annual "World's Best Short Short Story" competition. His first book, *American Diaspora*, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press. **Luisa Villani** is in the M.F.A. program at the University of Pittsburgh. She anticipates receiving her degree in Summer 2000. **Stacey Waite** is pursuing her M.F.A. degree at the University of Pittsburgh. She is originally from Long Island, and has previously published work in the *Salt River Review*. **Terry Welch** is a senior in English—Creative Writing at Kansas State University. Born and raised in St. John, Kansas, he has recently reached a milestone here at KSU, as he celebrated his tenth anniversary

semester Fall 1999. He did take time off during those ten years, however, to work as a military journalist for both the United States Navy and Army, living and working in Iceland, Bosnia, Guatemala, and aboard the U.S. Abraham Lincoln. Terry is also the father of two sons, from whom he admits to stealing his best inspirations. His story, "Diggers" received this year's *Touchstone* prize in undergraduate fiction, and his poem, "Fall River," was selected as the undergraduate poetry contest winner.



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