

2013

touchstone

Kansas State University

No. 42

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touchstone invites poetry, creative prose, and art submissions from students enrolled in college or university. Send submissions or inquiries to touch@ksu.edu.

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2013

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Editor's Note

This volume of **touchstone** has arrived very late. However, its lateness had nothing to do with the quality of the work we received and selected.

The stories and poems in these pages explore themes of home, nostalgia, identity, and the complicity of relationships – from one-night stands to first dates to long-held family ties.

Thank you to the genre and copy editors for the reading, reviewing, and editing. You have all spent more time and thought on this volume than you signed up for, and your efforts are greatly appreciated. Thank you to Corrina Honeycutt, the proxy editor of the 2013 edition.

And thank you, writers and readers, for being patient while **touchstone** sorted out leadership issues. I hope you enjoy the poems, stories, and essays. They are belated, but worth the wait.



Maggie Kuhlman

Feeling for Home

The roses at the orphanage in Dumbrava are unlike any I have ever picked. Brother Ilie (EE-lee), the founder of the orphanage, plucks an orange one for us to smell. Plump blossoms the size of a splayed-fingered hand line the back of the girls' dormitory in a dark mulch. If you stand at the door looking outside you see the line of rosebushes, then the soccer field in front of endless yellow-green meadows and dirt roads until you hit the Carpathian mountain range that sweeps across the Eastern portion of Romania.

When the people here talk, it sounds like Spanish or Italian, except I can't understand it. When I close my eyes to listen better, my ears catch similarities from the deep lingual roots of our Romantic tongues. The children cry, "La machina," as the ride to their morning lessons pulls up the

road. The car, the machine, shudders away to school. My youth group friends and I are assigned to work projects and household chores until they return and we can play with them. After several hours of manually turning the damp hay over in the fields to help it dry, I pause to lean on my rake. Rubbing the rawness away from my palms, I glance down the road towards the school to see if it has been let out yet. Here, they revenire acasă after school; En Español, they would regresar a la casa; In English, they would come home.

Later at a flea market I pick up a black-and-yellow checkered scarf and read the tag. "Made in India." It's a rustic pattern that looks somewhat Romanian, so I buy it anyway. It holds more authenticity than the oversized ceramic coffee mugs from Dracula's Castle that had "souvenir" literally printed as the logo. I suppose just in case it gets mixed in with your other cups and you forget where it came from. I walk away feeling the rough fibers of the scarf between my fingers. Romania doesn't produce much. Even twenty years after communism fell, the population is still picking up the broken pieces of their former country.

Back at the orphanage, I wrap the imported scarf snugly around my neck to ward off the chilly cold front that the rain brought in from the Carpathians. My friends and I gasp and gush to the kids about the closeness and the beauty of the overcast mountain range standing sentinel over the horizon. They raise their eyebrows quizzically and look again at the peaks. They don't understand. Jordan, one of the teenage boys, shrugs and says simply, "They are the mountains. They are very beautiful, but we see them everyday. They will be there again tomorrow, too." As a Kansan, I can't imagine ever getting used to the mountains, but admittedly, they have not been my visual companion since birth. Every spare moment I quietly watch the colors change from bluish-green to slate-gray to purple and back to blue again, right before my eyes, in the living sunlight.

Brother Ilie has always been a gifted storyteller, and left his country to find freedom and refuge in America for twenty years before returning. Communism came and gripped the nation in a breathless chokehold after World War II and hung around until 40 years later after the cold war. Ilie speaks casually and with a soft voice to unfold bits of what happened in the dark years before he left, when Romania had lost its luminescence.

He was led by God safely out of the country when staying meant unavoidable death. What he called the secret police was the force who worked for the government and sounded the equivalent of the Russian mafia. Whenever the police started visiting a house, people would begin to disappear. Inquiring about what happened would only make yourself look

suspicious. People kept to themselves and stopped speaking in public until the questions evaporated altogether.

As Ilie speaks, we are drawn in. Soon, we aren't just looking into his aged brown eyes, but into his kitchen forty-five years ago. I picture his wife, Aurica, much younger in 1965, kneading the bread dough. She throws her body behind each push with strong arms, floured up to her elbows. A stack of Bibles sits patiently in plastic wrapping waiting for Ilie to finish his prayer. The government doesn't advise possessing such things, and to be caught sharing them invites the swift attack of the secret police.

She cradles a lump and folds the soft dough over the first book. Suspicions arise and secrets whisper dangerously about the streets. Yet the crust encloses the words in the homemade bread. The Bibles all ride safely within the fibrous gluten across the Eastern border into the USSR. Thousands of sourdough, rye, and cracked wheat travel to the hands of hungry people, and not one incriminating book is found by the wrong people. The police lift the terry cloths off the baskets in Ilie's load and, finding only bread, sniff and saunter off. Aurica's prayers for him do not cease until he returns safely across the border, back into Romania.

Right now, with my feet standing on foreign soil, it troubles me to think that not just a thin, arbitrary border divides me from America, but an oceanic mass of water. The German International airline had hurtled us East for nine hours, and another three from Munich. My breathing gets shallow and faint when I imagine how long it would take for me to walk back to Kansas if I just started walking in a straight line away from the mountains. I close my eyes and feel for home.

I will myself not to think about it during the day. But later, when everyone else's breathing steadies into a sleep rhythm, I find myself still awake. I mull over these thoughts. The quiet shadows on the walls tell me not to think of how far I really am from my own room. Inevitably, reality grips me, and the gaping distance sits on my chest in a compressing anxiety and desperate dread until I will myself to think on something else like the moon. The moon is still the same.

I imagine that Brother Ilie, when he moved to America, looked up frequently to gaze at the familiar Romanian moon. America was wonderful for him; he no longer risked his life daily by being a Christian. There wasn't certainty that Romanian communism would ever end. Not in his lifetime at least. No stop in sight, only memories of being captured, interrogated, and beaten by his own government. He settled and served in California until late one unexpected September night Ceaușescu (chow-ches-coo), the dictator at

the time, was killed in a coup. Whether it was a bullet in the back or poison coursing through his gut, I'm not sure, but Ilie and his wife returned immediately to the land that had pressed them out decades before. After twenty years in America, it was time again to feel the rich Romanian dirt and breathe in the smell of home.

The land had changed when they returned. The Carpathians, the moon, all there, just different. Aurica's soul wept when visiting government orphanages. Empty, unattached eyes stared hollow back at her in dark rooms from the babies lying five or six to a crib. There was no crying, because crying never brought anyone. There was only a quiet anger and a deep-rooted sense of homelessness that the children would probably never realize the cause of. It was here Ilie and Aurica held each other and dreamt of their own orphanage—one with hopeful windows to let the sunlit mountains shine in, and the scent of roses to linger in the air.

A week later, our plane accelerates to take flight and I feel settled. I leave with stories, histories I hadn't even realized existed. When we reach full flight I look down through the window for my last glimpse of the bright meadows. I play with new delicious words on my tongue: Mulțumesc, thank you; Dumnezeu, God; and la revedere, goodbye.

James Gilson

Senior Summer

The Imperial River Co. Hotel runs up right to it.
And beneath a chandelier crystal night sky,
we rock a rustic log bench back and forth.

Carson smokes a cigarette and each drag
follows the seat's metronome,
while Charles and I sit in serenity--
maybe just sobriety.

And we simply stare at a small Oregon town,
split in two with a river.
Across it jumps bridges and highways,
but all that I can hear are the chuckles of
faintly reminiscent stories.

Astra

Nature enraptures the boy as he walks along the shallow creek. The canopy filters angled shafts of warmth that refract in the stirring waters. The gully had been formed, rain after rain, into a wide path that lay just beyond the tree line. From the child's perspective, walking with the water, the gully is a verdant valley full of new life and discovery. His pupils dance from leaf to flower; from frog to splash; from rustle to fluttering blue jay. He stops and sits near a pile of neatly stacked rocks. Beneath it lies the mangled corpse of a fully grown garter snake, desecrated in sport by the other children of the neighborhood. In the wall of the gully, on the other side of the creek, is a burrow inhabited by raccoons. It is overshadowed by an outcropping tree with dangling roots. What was once a small hole was now bolstered with a lean-to style entrance fashioned from a sturdy hunk of bark and two sheets of plywood. The small clearing in front of the den was scattered with handprints of various sizes. The child tracks the family's growth by the number of variations he finds: at least five currently, he presumes. In hopes of meeting them, the child once again waits to spy even the slightest peek at one of the enigmas lying beyond his construction. He is patient and his curiosity demands rapt attention. However, as the sunlight fades, the lullaby of the creek and the caress of the wind coax him to sleep.

"James, dinner!"

The child's eyes open and are granted a view of the stars through a recess in the canopy. They hold his gaze: a fond goodnight. Two small glints catch his eye from the burrow.

"James, come inside! It's dark!"

The porch light flickers on and off through the trees in his peripheral vision. He climbs out of the gully and runs past the playground toward home. The fireflies and the night sky amalgamate. The child bounds through the stars.

Blindsided

One of the many issues that children face today that Robin C. Moore lists in his article "The Need for Nature: A Childhood Right," is a simple lack of play space. Moore argues that there is a severe lack of general guidelines on a global level that mandate public, outdoor space in which children may play. Since there are no legal restrictions, children, especially living in heavily populated areas, are continually losing the very option to be able to play outside. If the issue is ignored, as industry thrives, urban land will continue to become more and more of a commodity and therefore be allocated to more "important" functions.

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"Thanks, have a nice day," says the gate guard as he returns two military identification cards to the driver.

With a nod, he rolls up the window and the Corolla cruises onto the grounds of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He hands his passenger her card.

"So, what's this place you're kidnapping me to today?"

She places a hand on his thigh for balance while she fiddles with the radio to find a station.

"A place I spent a lot of time at as a kid. I'm not sure how much it has changed... but you'll love it, I'm sure."

After driving for a minute or so, he takes a right turn onto a familiar street.

"Here's Stilwell, I lived here for a good five or so years until we moved off of fort."

"You sure this is worth skipping out on Richard's gig?"

"Look, no offense to Richard, but there's really no comparison. You know the place I told you about with the raccoons and the creek?"

"Mhmm," she mumbles into her lap as she sends a text.

"Well this is the place." He taps the radio off.

"I swear, God Himself handcrafted it. See this last house on the end with the chain-link fence? That was ours. The fence was for our dogs. A deer jumped over it once. It probably came from the gully. Speaking of which, just to our right is--"

He's lost.

"James?"

"It's different. This is the wrong -- No, that was the house, so -- but this isn't--"

Words fail him.

"Are you okay?"

"This road: it shouldn't be here."

He pulls the car to the side of the road and he hurries out onto the sidewalk. His eyes dart from the "Stilwell" street sign to the old porch; from the old porch to the playground; from the playground to the road he now stands upon.

"We're standing on it."

The passenger door opens.

"James, what's going on?" she asks in a strained tone.

"The gully. It's gone. They've built over it."

"Oh, is that it?"

Is that it?

"I heard they've been doing more construction on fort." She wraps her arms around him from behind. "I'm glad I got to see the house you grew up in."

"Let's go to Richard's place."

"Okay!" she pulls out her phone, shoots off another text, and climbs back into the car.

He walks back to the driver's side, opens the door and lingers for a moment, looking to the sky. A black sheet is all that faces him. He climbs into the car, slamming the door shut. Silence fills the car's interior. With the key in the ignition, he sparks the vehicle to life.

"Thanks for showing me around here." She turns on the radio. "I know it's important to you."

"I didn't show you anything."

## **Sanctuary**

A study performed by the University of Rochester in 2010 had 97 undergraduates observe scenes of nature and architecture. The groups viewing the natural scenes experienced an increase in vitality, while the

groups viewing the architecture suffered a decrease according to the Subjective Vitality Scale (Ryan & Fredrick, 1997). Furthermore, another of their studies led eighty undergraduates on fifteen minute walks. Forty students took this walk in a space furnished with all synthetic materials, while the other forty took the walk on a tree-lined footpath alongside a river. Also according to the Subjective Vitality Scale, all participants on the nature trail experienced an increase in vitality, while the indoor participants remained wholly unaffected. Being psychologically nourished by nature is hardwired into the human psyche. You can't remove a species from its supplements and expect no side effects, regardless of its cognitive ability.

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My feet beat against the pavement as I trudge across the campus of Kansas State University. I look up, scouring the black void. A waning moon is smothered by the clouds. The streetlights guide my path along the sidewalk. I pass a green-- no, black SUV parked along the road. Its murmuring and a distant car alarm fill the void in the night's silence. The driver's lackadaisical expression is dimly illuminated by his phone. The fumes wafting from the vehicle's tailpipe catch in my lungs as I carry on. My eyes land upon a jagged series of steel beams protruding from the grass to my right: a dedication to the engineering department. "Ad Astra E Terra," its plaque reads. I check the skies again, but all that greets me is a billowing smokestack: a gargantuan stogie hanging out of the mouth of Manhattan, Kansas. Liars.

On my way back to Putnam Hall, I pass the Student Union, I pass Eisenhower Hall, I pass the illuminated, arched windows of Hale Library, yet all I can look at is the pavement at my feet. These flat tombstones that I walk on every day. I wonder if the Roman that invented concrete truly realized the extent of his transgression. Gray, white, gray, white, gray. The crosswalk passes beneath me.

Creak.

The wood from the bridge in Quinlan Natural Area takes me by surprise. It is lenient. I slow my pace to return the favor. The small nature reserve is noticeably smaller than it was last semester. I recall that the walls of shrubbery used to block out the geometric forms of the campus; that if I sat in the center, near the creek, I could hear the songs of the creek and the whistling of the wind through the branches. I step off of the other side of the bridge and see a path to my left. It leads into darkness, away from the streetlight's glow and away from the sidewalk. My first step resounds with the crunching of leaves. The aftershock rustles in the bushes. As I make my way along the path, curious boughs and branches run along my jacket. My eyes

begin to adjust. The trees stand tipped at an inquiring angle. I can feel the quizzical gaze of nocturnal eyes from the bushes. With a breeze, the forest shudders in anticipation. My foot lands on a hard surface.

It is a cement ring, roughly fifteen feet in diameter. There are four stumps protruding from the center of the ring. Along the border of the far half of the circle, a wide assortment of 76 stumps separate the ring from the brush. Befuddled, I approach what appears to be the back of the arrangement. I pull the overgrowth away from a plaque that dubs the small sanctuary "Quinlan Outdoor Classroom." I take note that I had read it from no known light source. I look up. Polaris matches my glance brightly in the sky. The trees encompassing me had cut a swath in the streetlight's veil. I sit in a web of shadows, leaning against the rough lectern in the center of the ring and observe the classroom of empty stumps by starlight. I have all of the notes I need within the grain of the wood, the leaves are my presentation, but where are my students?

My eyes close and I pray for the whimsical comforts of long ago. Instead, I am treated with the voices of students walking to the dormitories. I open my eyes and spot the light of my windows in Putnam Hall through the branches. I see the form of a small creature exiting the brush in an attempt to make distance between it and the voices. After the students pass, the animal meanders toward the classroom. I shift my weight and its eyes snap to me. They gleam amidst a patch of black fur on the upper half of the animal's face. It is posed for a quick escape, with one small hand lifted slightly from the grass. Its eyes gaze at me timidly; angrily; accusingly.

"I miss it too, you know."

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Kenan Dannenberg

Tuesday Morning after Sex

Two pairs of jeans and layers, used against the cold, lie
Heaped in piles on the forty year old linoleum floor.
The shower head stops trickling onto your dark tangles.
Your hand slides over the three or four freckles on my back,
Forcing little pebbles of water to my waist.
I whisk the cheap curtain aside
And look into the mirror at your fogged over face
Forgetting if you had said “first time” or
If that was the girl from last week.
I think I see your reflection smile and turn to check, but I am wrong.
You begin to wring out your auburn tendrils;
We both start to shiver when I pull on the chain
hanging from the bare lightbulb,
And restrain from kissing in the distorted January light
Crawling in through the frosted glass window.

Pavlov's Dog

What happened to
the poor beast?

Did he slowly
starve to death,
still barking at bells
that never brought
a dish of food?

Or did they feed him
just enough to keep
him alive, prove
the experiment
worked again
and again?

Maybe he escaped.

There were city streets,
garbage cans to
eat from, until he
he was forgotten,
a permanent stray.

And maybe he lived
long enough to
ignore the sound
of any bell,
church or streetcar,
saliva never dripping
from his tongue.

He snarled when anyone
came near, tried to
lure him into a
van with other
lost dogs.

All cages were
the same,
all masters quick
to tame and teach
new tricks,
amaze their friends.

Finding Time

I don't have time. There's not enough time. If you could just see my to-do list, you'd know. I scribble, and check, and then add more. Time for a new list, this one needs to be updated. I can feel it now – the heat – it's inside of me growling and crawling, scratching its way out through my tear ducts, burning my cheeks. I can't breathe. I'm paralyzed by the overwhelming voice of failure coming from the words I, myself, have inscribed - acts which must come to fruition, or else. *Or else, what?* I feel that it is inevitable that we shall find out soon enough.

There is a place, between the clink of the knife on the sticky glass rim of grape jam and the clank as I settle the knife into the stainless steel sink, where a memory lives. I find them everywhere; the memories. *Wheat toast*, usually. My mind is triggered as my knife pulls slowly across the golden crisp, up to the edge of where the past meets the present. In that moment, I am no longer standing in the glaring bask of fluorescent bulbs, but in the shadow of a woman with a pin curl perm, only a handful of gray hairs dancing through her natural golden brown set. I can almost feel my young, tan, wiry knees digging into the springs of the antique dining chair, bouncing. The woman's hand, spotted and knotty, like the rings inside a tree trunk – each celebrating another year of survival, spreads the deep purple puree with meticulous ease.

I wonder if this memory was among the few she had left at the end, tucked away for safe keeping, and if I will still remember it when I'm feeble and grasping for whatever pieces of me I can still reach.

As far back as I can remember I had a working list of ideas for the ultimate accomplishment, what I would become “when I grew up.” Both of my parents fostered this curious question, this quest of sorts, allowing my creativity to flourish. At one point I pictured myself twirling in the sparkly costumes and white skates on the ice, like they do in *Ice Castles*. Obviously that didn't work out, so here I am, so many years later still wandering the halls of uncertainty. In moments of neurosis my obituary pays a visit, flashing

wishful thoughts and dreams of accomplishment. All the real life checkboxes: college degree, job, babies, pets, house. Life can't cut me off. I fear the clock will lose its momentum and my long list of things to do will be left in a heap of scrap paper, marked with multi-colored slashes of ink. A piece of art I never finished, or started. That bag of decaying plastic, cardboard, and glass, waiting to be made into something else, to save the Earth. All of these things left undone – reminders of my failed attempts, a legacy for my loved ones.

Thankfully, that guilt won't follow me past my grave. At least I hope not. If all goes according to plan, I'll be a prune, blue-haired Betty. An accomplished writer, of course, and my genes would foster many artsy spawn. Perhaps I'll even live to see a century or so. But most sessions of this daytime dreaming, this cloud of philanthropic days and cabin dwelling summers, grows heavy over my head and bursts, all to my dismay. Constant in these pandering, life-in-a-bubble moments, is the One who will someday sit next to me on the porch of the summer cabin; just he and I, rocking along to the music in the breeze. My husband, my anchor – the one who helps to keep these hopes from dissipating, as clouds often do, and keeps me from completely losing grips – lost in between my obit and my to-do list.

I forget, a lot. "What was that one thing you told me not to forget the other day? I didn't write it down," is just one of the things I say to my husband a few times a week. I would give more examples, but I can't remember any. My lists are my little helpers, at least most of the time, as long as there isn't an army of them all barking orders at once, driving me to madness. I must have got this reliance on lists from somewhere. My obsession with lists became blaringly obvious after noticing my dad's list-making skills. He even has symbols assigned to tasks. I haven't taken it to that level, yet. That's expert level. His Christmas card spreadsheet has X's and O's under each year that a card is sent to someone. He says to picture the X's and O's as fish; this helps. An X (fish swimming away) and O (fish swimming back) under 2009 means he mailed a card and got one back, two X's means he sent one and didn't get one back. If they get only X's for a couple years, they get axed. No more Christmas card for them. It's brilliant, really. Did I mention he's an engineer? That's one career choice that I never added to my list of prospects.

Folded pieces of paper snarl in secrecy, in pockets of my bag or jeans, but I know they are there. I've had enough. I can't take anymore. I seek solace in my bed, a fort of blankets and pillows. If I can't get everything done, I won't

do anything at all. I start to spiral, about to find out what the “or else” was that I previously mentioned. My sweet husband finds me, losing control that I probably never had to begin with, and soaking the cloth of the pillow where my dreams are made. I feel my words spew and they have never felt so small. In his presence, the snarls are mere whimpers. He quells their tempers, their impatience, the urgency that constantly barks from the tiny papers. I peer out from my refuge and to my surprise the world is still intact. Perhaps my level-headed reasoning skills won't make the cut in my newspaper clipping, my life on display in four hundred words or less.

There is always a list – prioritized by urgency, including papers and assignments due, another for groceries, and one for errands. I question if the lists are too much of a crutch to get me from one dot to another each day. Could I remember better if I didn't rely on them so heavily, or would it be completely debilitating? *Note to self: Google reliance on list-making.*

Of course, a list is never complete. I should probably use pencil, not permanent ink, to scrawl my duties. But that would look less neat or smear, and I just can't have that. Time to revise again. The laundry is done, my paper is complete, and my rocking-chair pal is taking a few delegated items to put on his honey-do list. Next up: the calendar. It's almost October, and fall always brings tasks my way. Maybe I should have said I wanted to be a list-maker when I grow up, so at least my obit would read: She passed away while doing what she loved.

An all-out social gathering of lists invaded their space: torn sheets of steno paper, post-its, blank, white slices tattooed with Howard Johnson or Embassy Suites, even the backside of receipts were welcome.

My Grandma made lists too. Notes dotted the tidy landscape of her and my Grandpa's tiny, but efficient, 1950s era home. I can picture the slips of paper, congregating around the kitchen calendar and gathering next to the

telephone. An all-out social gathering of lists invaded their space: torn sheets of steno paper, post-its, blank, white slices tattooed with Howard Johnson or Embassy Suites, even the backside of receipts were welcome. I wonder if she realized how much she relied on those lists. I don't think she used my technique, though, condensing into one master list.

At first she tagged mostly family heirlooms or anything with sentimental value. They had a note secured to them somewhere, with a paper-clip, or a string. Her cursive writing, in pencil, detailed the significance of a knitted blanket, whose hands made the piece, and when. As my Grandma broached her eighties, before she was moved into a secured "memory-care" unit, she had post-its on her pill organizer detailing why she took them, when, and how often. When she started taking them off and rearranging them because it didn't make sense any more, my dad took her to the doctor. Her forgetfulness had taken on a new level.

I don't know if I really want to find out if my grandma and I have the same ominous gene, the one that gives us a predisposition towards Alzheimer's. I have poured over pages of Alzheimer's research, but the disease is as complicated as it is cruel. In fact, I could be void of the APOE-4 gene variation and still end up with Alzheimer's. I figure, either way, I should take any precautions I can, but having a piece of paper with words confirming that I carry one or two of the gene variations might as well be a death sentence to me. I've seen it in action. The Alzheimer's Beast eats your to-do lists for breakfast, your memories for lunch, followed by a reckless abandon at the buffet which is your brain for dinner.

There is a part of me that feels an urgency to capture all of my moments on paper. My calling to be a writer perhaps stemmed from this pull, the realization that none of this is forever. So if for no other reason but paranoia and preservation, I have at least a dozen journals, scribbles on every page. I go through phases of writing in my journal. For weeks I write methodically every day, carefully recording important details and observation of life, some profound, some not. Then I will tuck it away for a month. The frequency always varies, but I've almost always had a journal. I recently found a little treasure of my earliest writing. I was ten-years-old writing page after page with my No. 2 pencil in my best cursive writing. Musings that only a third-grader would find interesting: the day I got a new bus driver and the fun of playing Monopoly for the first time. The golden-edged pages are disjointed from the binding, but the lock still clasps shut keeping all my memories safe for later access.

The first outward signs of Alzheimer's affect the short-term memories; any recent memories, or items in the "quick recall" file of the brain are at risk. Imagine my concern when I recently passed my exit on the interstate and then missed a turn the next day. There is nothing a list can do to help me with driving, and a GPS to direct me from home to the nearest gas station is out of the question. I attempt to keep sharp by using old-lady games like crossword puzzles and Wheel of Fortune, and also the website Lumosity which is aimed at the younger folk. I'm sure I need to make a list of all the ways not to get Alzheimer's, for easy reference, but I haven't gotten around to it.

"If you use a spoon, it spreads easier," Grandma says and then licks the spoon clean of the remaining jam. Her lips, thin and lined, painted pink to match the pale roses just beyond the kitchen window, give a smile and she wipes the sticky glaze from them, leaving a blot on the paper towel. She turns away and retires the spoon to the sink. This is my cue, my exit from the past back to a place where all I have left of my Grandma are the memories she and I shared. I crunch the wheat toast and jam, and remember watching the funeral director paint her lips with the same color of light-pink lipstick for her memorial service.



The Beauty in Labels

At the beginning of my (super) senior year, I found myself in the middle of an identity “crisis.” It sounds dramatic but I don’t know how else to put it. Since elementary school, black and white communities have alternated deeming me “too black” and “too white” – confusing, right? So, I began to consider the various aspects of culture that deem an individual as “too black” or “too white.” I couldn’t help but to think of names and how race is deeply intertwined in the naming process.

Dr. Ayanna F. Brown and Dr. Janice Lively focus on race in their independent research, but co-wrote, “Selling the Farm to Buy the Cow: The Narrativized Consequences of 'Black Names' From Within the African American Community,” an article which illustrates the African American struggle with the naming process. It also explores the implications for Black names that influence personal choices, regardless of a person's age, education level, and socioeconomic status. Brown and Lively suggest, “The construction of 'Black names' is a dynamic heuristic and has been labeled with a multitude of signifiers, like 'unique,' 'invented,' or 'fictitious' ... While these names reflect creative and unique ways of thinking, there remains a looming deficient cultural perspective about them. Unlike names that have national or ethnic origins, Black names are positioned negatively and are often disassociated from intellect and charisma” (Brown & Lively, 668). Unique is the word most commonly used when people describe my name - when they are being polite. Otherwise the other commonly used word is ghetto (shudder).

Charlesia (Shar-lee-see-ah) Tonita (Toe-Knee-Tah) Cherea (Sha-Ree) McKinney is my full name – yes I have two middle names. Tonita was a float in the 1989 Macy’s Day Parade that my mother liked enough to add to my identity. My parents can’t recall the specific moment or even reason, but they nicknamed me LeLe (Lee-Lee not Lay-Lay).

Honestly, I often forget my name is Charlesia because so few are capable of saying my name correctly – therefore, I rarely hear it. I have always dreaded the first day of classes, for me, butcher-my-name-day. Only a handful of teachers in my life have pronounced my name correctly from the attendance sheet on the first day of school. But it is even impossible for people to repeat my name back to me after they have heard me say it.

“What’s your name?”

“Charlesia.”

“Shirley – nice to meet you.” (you wouldn’t believe how many times I get Shirley)

“Wait, what? No, Shar-lee-see-ah.”

It’s as if after the third syllable they stop listening – and it’s at this point that I just say, call me “LeLe.” But it seems that every black girl has some nickname like this, “BeBe,” “CeCe,” “CoCo,” “KeKe,” “MiMi,” and yes I know black women by each of these names. An important segment of Brown and Lively’s research asked African Americans to identify what they considered a “good name.” A participant stated, “a good name should be something that has some type of meaning, can be easily pronounced, and something the child doesn’t have to fight every day in school to protect” (Brown and Lively, 686). I didn’t think I had a good name and I desired one. A name that was less complicated, less ... black.

Last year, a friend shared that he was interested in adopting children from Africa. And as most people do, I lightheartedly offered my name for the child’s name, to which he replied,

“No offense, but there is no way for me to name my child Charlesia without sounding like I’m trying to be really ghetto or something.”

I passively agreed but I really wanted to shout,

“What the hell do you mean, ghetto? My name isn’t ghetto! Shaniqua is ghetto! Bonquesha is ghetto!”

Outside of this moment, I know I have granted other black names as ghetto – as embarrassing and beneath me. And through those moments, I have taught others how to treat me and other uncommonly named black women. When I call another uncommon name “ghetto,” I have given others the right to label me that as well. “I had placed myself within my own words” (Brown & Lively,

685). So within my identity crisis, in a panic of not wanting to be deemed just another “ghetto girl,” I decided to start going by Lily instead of LeLe.

Initially, I thought my desire to change my name stemmed from my impatience from repeating my name so many times. I convinced myself that it was something about my (super) senior year that prompted me to create a professional and appropriate name for myself. Brown and Lively describe this exchange as “selling the farm to buy the cow.” This is the willingness to sell my African American identity in order to have my piece of capital in American society and appeal to mainstream society. “‘Selling the cow’ is in part a critique of the reactionary stance some African Americans have taken to address ways they might be able to counteract the paradigms of racism and White privilege by actively choosing racially neutral or White-sounding names” (Brown & Lively, 687-688). Since the third grade I have internalized every comment that has labeled my name – and me – as ghetto. I was subconsciously ashamed of my name, of my blackness - ashamed and tired of being difficult my entire life. My four-syllabic name is somehow more difficult than Elizabeth, Olivia, Isabella, other extremely common four-syllabic names.

I remember when “da bomb” became popular; it sounded so funny coming out of my sometimes black-sounding but sometimes white-sounding mouth.

It’s always bothered me that their name can be said but mine can’t. Then, suddenly, I no longer pitied those who struggled with saying my name – that’s their problem, not mine. So as quickly as I enforced Lily, I abandoned it. I no longer want to shake down and shrink myself to fit what’s less complicated, and less black. I have a good name.

Growing up in a predominantly white community as a black girl was very conflicting at times. I have attended a predominantly white school since the third grade.

Although I had white friends, my closest friends were black. When around my white friends, I found myself often performing their speech patterns and conforming to their media interests, but felt free to speak normal to my black friends, although often pressured to perform with them as well – mostly when new slang words were introduced that I wasn’t initially comfortable with. I remember when “da bomb” became popular; it sounds so funny

coming out of my sometimes black-sounding but sometimes white-sounding mouth.

Mostly in high school and college I encountered the following comments more consistently: “You know black people don’t do that.” “You sound so white!” “Why are you talking so ghetto?” “You don’t act like a typical black person.” “Now you know only white people do that.” “I forget you’re black sometimes.” All of these comments have been said to me, sometimes by black people, but most often by white people. Fellow blacks that have grown up in predominantly white communities understand the balancing act between being black, but not too black, and often having to sound white. But I have discovered blacks from primarily black communities don’t understand the pressure of balancing performance versus authenticity.

I have discovered America’s obsession with classifying individuals as “black” or “white.” Many Americans, black and white, feel entitled to place these labels on people of color. These comments have prompted me to think about the evolution of my identity within the dual cultures I have been raised in. I realized I was classified as “too black” or “too white” when my speech was dissected or my media choices were examined. My speech and media interests were more tightly woven into my identity than I realized. It made me wonder how much I controlled the formation of my identity and how much my identity was naturally molded for me.

More conflicting than being called “too black” and “too white” is *feeling* at times that I can be “too black” and can be “too white.” Those labels would hit my core as I realized both claims may sound asinine but were *true* at times. I constantly battled feelings of always performing and never being authentic. Or often feeling authentic but then being too much, too strong. I realized my identity and classifications were based on the race of the individuals I hung around, not my race itself. I hung around people that embraced whiteness and blackness. I have been simultaneously filled with both.

The *Urban Review* published an article “High School Students of Color Talk About Accusations of 'Acting White.'” A portion of this article surveyed students and asked them to provide examples of acting white. Related to speech, they said it meant talking proper, not using slang or curse words, using big words and enunciating and never talking ghettoish, making up words or only using half of words (Bergin & Cooks, 118-119).

I learned my speech styles are controlled by how often I encounter and consciously choose standard English, and the same goes for when I consciously choose to use non-standard English. “Language has been

considered by some as the single most important component of ethnic identity” (Bergin & Cooks, 114-115). I doubted my authenticity because I felt so disingenuous as I am subconsciously pressured to speak to individuals differently.

One day in the break room at JcPenney, I was sitting with a few white co-workers when I answered a phone call from my [black] best friend. We conversed for a few minutes. After I ended my call, my friend chimed in,

“Why did you sound all ghetto just now. Who were you talking to?”

“Ghetto? What are you talking about?”

“You were sounding all ... black.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

My “switch” was so subconscious I didn’t realize that I had even switched styles. Prior to this moment I was very aware that I spoke differently to people depending on their race, and also depending on their social status above or below me.

I have a few [white] friends who subconsciously imitate my elongated “girl,” well more like “girrrrl.” But out of their mouths it sounded unnatural, as if they were mocking me. But it sounds strange to me because I often don’t realize that I sound different, that I’m the different one.

Because my friend circle was mixed with white and black friends, my media choices reflected my friend circle. I quickly discovered how my classification was highly dependent upon my media interests. It wasn’t until college that I realized, all of the songs, books, and movies and I grown up listening, reading, and watching were not the norm for everyone. I could talk to my black friends about the media I engaged with, it actually gave us more ground to converse on, but I found more difficulty discussing these things with non-black people. I also learned how much white culture I was unfamiliar with. The most prominent example is The Beatles. I know they are legendary of course, but I can’t name more than two songs by The Beatles. We didn’t listen to them in my house – ever. It’s in moments like this that make me feel so foreign, so different, so *black*.

The looming questions still remain: “what does it mean to act black?” and “what does it mean to act white?” Of course I always answer, “there is no such thing, it’s a ridiculous claim that no one can answer.” Yet I keep finding myself angry and pissed off because I know *exactly* what it means to “act

black” and “act white.” And even if they deny it, I know what someone means when they say, ghetto, hood etc. – they mean black. And when they say white, it means intelligent, proper and so on. I have only partially pinned what bothers me about these labels, for it is big question that I can’t fully answer yet, but until I figure it out, I just want to be me – in all of my blackness and whiteness, my cultures. The beauty in labels is my ability to choose –what I like and don’t like. I don’t have to use or be what I don’t like.

References

- Bergin, David, and Helen Cooks. "High School Students of Color Talk About Accusations of “Acting White.” *The Urban Review* 34.2 (2002): 113-34. Print.
- Brown, Ayanna F., and Janice Lively. "“Selling the Farm to Buy the Cow”: The Narrativized Consequences of “Black Names” From Within the African American Community." *Journal of Black Studies* (2012): 667-92. Print.

Grandfather

I smiled at you in my blue polka-dot dress
because I liked the way your skin was thick
and rough like the way I imagined
an elephant's face might feel
I liked the way your wrinkles were deep like canyons
filled with dust and memories of your childhood
of times when you walked barefoot to the bean fields
for ten cents a day to help feed your family
You called me “stinky” and I didn't mind
It was a name I learned to love
because you gave it to me
the same way you gave me afternoons
of stories like how you found the hat you wore
that said “Alaska” in white letters from a man in Arizona
You told me of your brothers and sisters
some of whom I would only know through pictures
you kept in a box next to your phone book
that smelled heavy with the scent of smoke
from cigarettes I learned to love
because their smell reminded me of you
the same way I'm often reminded
of how the cheek you hadn't shaved felt
when I used to kiss it

The House My Father Built

I remember being seventeen and standing in the backyard at 2 a.m., holding my grandmother's hand, my father's arm wrapped around my shoulder. We stood there on the snow and water soaked ground, silent and still, watching all that we had worked for and built up burn, generations of memories and craftsmanship. We stood there watching the glowing embers of our home fade into the cold night.

That day had started like any other day. I got up, got ready, went to school. I had hoped school was canceled, but the few inches that had fallen the night before weren't enough to close school in the mountains. This was Tennessee, snow was a winter norm, not a rarity. School crept along slowly until softball practice. It was my last year of softball and I was the starting left fielder. This season would be a big deal for me. I couldn't wait for the weather to warm up, practices to run late, games to win. I didn't expect an athletic scholarship or anything, I just loved to play the game – I still do. My mitt gets roused from hibernation every fall and spring for intramural softball.

After practice, I met my boyfriend Brett. He was junior at the city high school (He had been “out” that day – lucky). We had made plans for family dinner and a bluegrass pickin' with friends. Brett played guitar and banjo. Back then, I sang and was interested in learning how to play the dobro – it's a lot like steel guitar, but with a more folky/bluegrass sound. We toiled with the idea of forming a band, but what high school student doesn't do that at some point?

I had been working at McDonald's in town for a little over a month, ever since the restaurant I had worked at closer to home had closed for the season. I met Brett there and left my truck (with my cell phone in the dash). We went back to his house, had dinner with his family. His Mom, Ann, had made spaghetti, one of Brett's favorites. Over dinner we talked about plans for the formal that weekend, when I should come over for Ann to help me with my hair and makeup, and how school was – the usual family chatter.

After dinner, we left with our instruments and headed to Jimmy's around 8 p.m. We played for a few hours, occasionally stopping for a few minutes to check the status of the games. Luckily Hampton wasn't playing Elizabethton that week; otherwise we would have been at the game. Around 11 p.m., Jimmy conceded that old age was getting to him and he was getting tired. I helped Sandy clean up as he and Brett chatted about new songs for me to learn.

We got back to McDonald's just before midnight. I started the truck and left it to warm up while I went inside – not that the heat ever worked, but at least the engine might offer some warmth with the vents open. Christy, the assistant manager, stood behind the counter with the store manager Deborah. I couldn't, for the life of me, understand why Deborah was still there this late. They both looked so solemn and scared. *Had the place been robbed*, I wondered?

“Your grandmother has called several times trying to find you,” Deborah said handing me the store phone. “You need to check your voice messages.” I had left my cell in the truck all evening. It was just for emergencies, and since I was with Brett all night, I didn't think I needed to carry it.

I dialed home, no answer. So I called my voicemail. Christy had yet to say a word to me. She just stood there scanning my face for answers. I didn't know what the question was. I had seven new messages. Press 1 to hear your new message. Then, a familiar, scratchy voice came through the receiver.

“Creena, et's yer Granny. The 'ouse is on far. You need to come home.”

This part of my memory has always been fuzzy. *My house was on fire. How did my house catch on fire? I'm not entirely sure what I said to Christy, if I said anything at all. Where was Dad in all this? Was he okay? Why hadn't Dad been the one to call?* I just looked at her through tear-flooded eyes and backed away to sit down. Christy came around from the counter, guiding me into a chair. Brett, seeing something was wrong, came in from outside. *Why didn't someone call Brett? I could have been home sooner.* I muttered some indiscernible sounds between the sobs. *Where were my puppies? They were all inside the house. Were they okay?* In a few words, Christy quietly filled him in.

“I'm gonna take you home,” he said firmly.

In the two seconds it took Brett to speak those words, I returned to my senses. I had to go home. I knew my family needed me and I needed them.

“No,” I replied quickly. “I have to drive go home.”

“You can't drive like this,” Brett protested.

“He's right,” Christy said, nodding her head slowly in agreement.

“I probably have the only drivable vehicle and the only set of keys. I need to drive the truck home. Follow me up the mountain if you want, but I'm going home.” I stood up, handed the phone back to Christy, and walked out the door.

It was ten after when I got in my truck. The cold bit and pinched at my skin. Brett followed me out and hopped in the passenger side. I had no words. I gripped the wheel with both hands and stared straight ahead. All I wanted was to get home, whatever was left of it. All I wanted was to find my dad and my puppies. I remember feeling like my family had been pulled apart – each of us scattered in some different wind. I couldn't reach them; they couldn't reach me. *How did this happen?*

Brett slid over the bench seat and put his arms around me.

“Everything will be okay,” he said. I could hear the uncertainty in his voice. “We'll help however we can. You're gonna be fine. I'll take care of you.” He brushed the hair off my face and tucked it behind my ears. Cupping my face in his right hand, he gently pinched my chin. I can't remember why he did this on our first date back in August, or why whenever he did this it made me smile, but it always worked. He pinched my chin and I smiled.

“We need to go,” I said, brushing his hand away and nudging him to get out of the truck.

“Be careful,” he replied, “The road up is probably still covered in ice.”

Driving the 8.3 miles from Hampton to Butler felt like it took hours. We snaked slowly around the lake. We passed the Point, a swimming and picnic area. A favorite for families during the warmer months, but now was a colorless void blanketed in snow. I felt cold and alone again, but seeing Brett's headlights in the rearview brought a few grains of warmth and comfort into my cab. Gradually we ascended the mountain. Rounding the bend at Little Stoney Creek, I saw my turn ahead and accelerated. I could see the trees at the top of the hill outlined in a rich orange and gray glow. I turned onto the one-lane road, downshifting to gain extra momentum up the hill. I couldn't even make it partway up the street. Fire trucks and other emergency vehicles were parked in the road all the way up to the top of the hill. I pulled over into a neighbor's field, cut off the engine and got out to walk the rest of the way.

Stepping out of the truck, I fumbled my way through some brush, stepped onto the road, and waited for Brett to park. Brett got out and stood beside me. Taking my hand in his, we started walking up to the top of Whaley Town Road. Water was rushing down the hill from the scene unfolding before us. Our shoes, socks, and pants were soaked in seconds. Black forms were running back and forth above the stone wall surrounding our house. I could see three or four men carrying hoses around the north side of the barn – not that I could see the barn, but where it was or might still have been. The air was damp and heavy. Smoke or maybe steam obscured everything.

As we got closer, we began passing the fire trucks. Light beamed from their roofs, illuminating the ground for the volunteers. Two trucks. I could finally see my driveway in all the commotion. Three trucks. We had reached my Granny's house. The fire of our house behind it outlined her small trailer in a vibrant orange glow. Four trucks. I passed who I assumed was the Captain shouting orders at the men. Five trucks. At the very top of the hill, pulled into our gravel drive, sat the final truck. Six fire trucks.

I turned and began to walk up my driveway. Water had dislodged most of the gravel, the washout rushed down the hill to the lake like little streams. Hoses were strung across the drive, around the garage, every which way. I couldn't discern where they began or ended. They looked and sounded like giant white boas hissing at the blaze raging ahead.

*For 11 minutes,
firefighters and
emergency personnel
laid belly-down on the
ground, covering their
heads, waiting for the
firing to stop.*

About an hour before we arrived at the scene, the 2,000 plus rounds of ammunition in my Dad's safe reached the terminal heat point. Like the finale of an Independence Day display, shots rang out one-right-after-the other. Shotgun shells, 9 mm, .22 caliber, 30-30, .45 caliber and other rounds exploded, undirected, out-of-control. For 11 minutes, firefighters and emergency personnel laid belly-down on the ground, covering their heads, waiting for the firing to stop.

I paused next to a volunteer wearing only jeans and a t-shirt. He must have been pulled from sleep. He looked at me and Brett. It was James Dean, my best friend's brother. Next to him, Curtis, the neighbor boy from down

the street. They held a hose directed at my front porch. As we locked eyes, all the color retreated from their faces. They looked cold and pale. What had been an exciting adventure, a heroic opportunity, vanished the moment they remembered this was *my* house they were trying to save.

I pushed past them, releasing myself from Brett's hand, turning past the garage so that I could see the entire house. Looking directly at it was blinding, like looking into the sun. Flames danced rhythmically across the roof, threatening to jump the gap between my house and my grandmother's. They taunted me and challenged the volunteer firefighters. The front door was open; I could see flames creeping down the hallway, resting on the couch. Charred pieces fell from the rafters. I was mesmerized by what I saw. Frozen in place between the raging heat before me and the icy slush behind me. What I didn't see forced me back to reality. *Where was my Dad?*

Frantic, I spun around, turning about several times, pausing only when my eyes and brain recognized a form that might resemble my father. I found him. Sitting on the tailgate of a truck, the paramedics checking his vitals. If I was crying, I didn't realize it. I just ran over to him. He hugged me with his free arm. I don't think I've had ever been so grateful in my life.

"I'm okay," he said, "I'm sure this looks worse than it is." He put the oxygen mask back to his face. The paramedics checked his breathing and his blood pressure, and finally cleared him as okay.

"Why did you even go back in there! You could have been killed!"

"I had to get Granny's medicine. And I let the puppies out."

Suddenly, I became aware of 14 little glowing sets of eyes peering out from behind chicken wire by the wood shed. Their parents Gracie and Jerry sat with them, tail wagging at the excitement surrounding us. At least they wouldn't freeze out here with the fire. And there were plenty of old blankets in the shed they could use. Their soft, little, seven-week-old paws scratched at the slush on the ground. It was the first time they ever felt snow.

"Where is Granny?"

"She's next door. I didn't want this to stress her out more that it needed to and she doesn't need to be out in this weather."

Back at the road, I heard someone yelling, "Cut the support beams from the walls. We have to get this house to collapse or the fire will spread next door."

My Dad motioned at the fire Captain.

“This house ain't gonna fall. I can promise you that.”

“Mr. Jackson, that is the only way we can save your mother's home.”

“I'm telling you, I built that house myself with 6x12 beams and 18-inch screws. She ain't going down.”

It was true. We spent over five years working on that house. When we first moved to Tennessee in the late 90s, we lived in a small, rectangular, one-bedroom trailer. Since I was a young girl, and needed my own space as I grew into my teens, my Dad gave me the room, and he slept on the couch in the living room. Over the next few years, my father, with my help, built a home from that primitive structure. We laid out the foundation when I was in middle school. Every day after I came home from school, I would meet my Dad outside to add a little bit more to the house. Sometimes it was leveling the floor supports, and sometimes it was measuring 4x4s for the walls. By the time I started high school, we had finished the floor joists and subfloor and raised four new walls. Once the walls were up, I would come home after school and tack up rolls of four-inch-thick insulation in the walls.

“Corrina, wear your mask and gloves when handling that stuff,” Dad would always remind me. “It may look pink and fluffy, but you won't like it if any of that fine fiberglass gets on your skin.”

While I worked on the walls, my Dad busied himself alternating the pattern of wood in the floor: ash, oak, black walnut, and cherry. When the floor and interior walls were done, our home glowed with rustic warmth and charm. The mosaic grain on the floor paired with the honey pine of the walls and the three giant floor-to-ceiling windows was a welcome sight to come home to.

Once the addition was finished, we cut a 12-foot-wide hole in the hallway of the first structure and opened our house into our home. It was easily my favorite part of the entire project. With a large reciprocating saw, my dad cut several smaller three- or four-foot sections (a size that I could easily handle on my own) out of the hallway wall; I would then take each section outside to the truck. The saw sliced quickly through the wood, but groaned and struggled with the old tin siding. After about an hour of cutting, and another hour or so of re-trimming the new opening, our home was finished.

Amidst all the commotion, I heard the familiar sound of chainsaws

revving. Two men were beginning to split beams in the wall adjacent to Granny's trailer, the walls of the original house. Other men were working behind them with sledgehammers, attempting to remove any and all support from the walls so they would collapse and the roof could suffocate the flames. That side of the house wasn't as sturdy as what my father built. Groaning from the men at work was joined by groans from the old, abused frame.

With a sound like bones breaking, that part of the house fell. Ash, dust, and debris spewed out like an avalanche crushing a forest gorge. The dogs raced back into the shed. I turned to protect my face from the assault. Brett brought me something to wipe the dust and tears from face. He and my dad exchanged words of consolation and appreciation. It was 2 a.m. Brett shook my father's hand and gave me hug.

"I put a jacket for your Dad or Granny in your truck. I'm gonna go home and see what all Sis or Mom have that y'all can use." I walked with him to the end of the driveway. "I'll call you in the morning. I love you." With a kiss and another embrace, he walked back down the dark road.

"Creena? Is that you, honey?" Granny's warm, familiar voice cut through the cold.

"Yeah, Granny, it's me," I turned to see her sitting in the neighbor's Oldsmobile with the door open, a blanket laying over her lap. I knelt down next to her and rested my hands in her arms.

"I'm glad you got home okay. Sorry to ruin your date with Brent." *She always called him the wrong name.* "He's such a nice young man." I glanced up at her and her smile beamed down on me. I couldn't help but laugh to myself. *Only my Granny.* She petted my head and asked for help getting out of the car.

Holding my hand, she followed me over to stand next to dad. The glow from the fire had started to subside. Dad extended his arms and wrapped one around my shoulder. We stood there, silent and still, none of us quite sure where we'd go next.

The fire was dying. The emergency personnel began to pull back, confident in the battle they had won. A few nodded in our direction with flashes of apology. For what, I wondered? They didn't start the fire.

"The marshal will be up tomorrow to investigate," the Captain said. "Don't go into the house until after he's done. Then you are welcome to sort through it all. I'm sorry we couldn't save more."

“Thank you for everything,” my Dad said, meeting the Captain's hand.

“I'll pull up the truck,” I said turning to Dad.

“Be careful, sweetie, I'm sure the road is a mess”

I picked up Granny in the driveway.

“Where are the keys to your truck?” I asked Dad as he walked over to the truck.

“In the house.”

I slid over into the middle and let him drive. We slept in a hotel for two weeks after that night. On Sunday, we were allowed to go through the charred remains of our home. Dark ash and slush covered the floor and what remained of the furniture. Individual objects had melted, cooled, and combined with others to form new, alien things. The refrigerator looked like a war-torn submarine, lying on its side, bullet holes all over the hull. Evidence of the ammunition was everywhere. We were surprised nobody got injured as a result. We found my Dad's keys in what was once a kitchen. We retrieved what odd items survived: only one rifle of my Dad's twenty-two firearms, my Granny's old “Hope Chest,” the family Bible, and the few solid metal tools from my Dad's tool belt. The rest we swept up over the next few weeks and hauled off, leaving the foundation, joists, chimney, and three walls standing – ruins of a former life.

The newspaper article the following Sunday said that arson was not suspected, but the fire was still under investigation. The official report identified the origin of the fire as being outside the house, on the corner of the front porch; that was the area that had most damage. *Did my house spontaneously combust?* I think not. There were two more house fires in my town in the week that followed. Three families were also left homeless. The official report left causes “undetermined.” We knew that meant they didn't want to investigate it. My Dad and I have our own theories.

It's been seven years since the fire. I go back to visit my Dad and Granny whenever I'm back in Tennessee. The “new” house is further back on the property, away from sight, away from the road. I drive past our old home every time. It's still standing. The chimney shows the scars of the past, the wear of time and exposure. But it still stands. A carpet of moss covers the old subfloor; vines have found refuge in the walls and rafters. But our home still stands.

I'm not the same girl I was at seventeen. I've grown, sometimes not always up, but I've grown. I can look back at that home and its strength, its fortitude and I know I'm strong too. I can stand at the precipice of flame and ice and I know I will survive. Marriage has taken me away from my home for a few years. One day, when it's finally time to move back to Tennessee, my Dad, Brett, and I may build a new home on the farm. It too will survive.



I like the sound of that

The first time I ever went to a concert
was with a bearded bard who's friend
was having a show on the corner of 10th and Juliet
in a little white ranch that shook
when they turned the bass up all the way.
The grungy guitared dude told us about how
he used to sit out on his front porch writing song lyrics
for the girl he'd swore would wear his last name
like an explanation point,
but life never worked out like how it was meant.

My date spilt beer on my brand new mary-jane shoes;
the whole place smelt like stagnant smoke.
But, it was nice how he shouted J. Alfred Prufrock at me
Do I dare disturb the universe?
while the hot bodies of the room collided like balls on a pool table.

I couldn't really understand everything he said
but there was something about his earnest half shadowed face
that made me want to listen.



Alicia Dodson

Up the Stairs

A physical therapist told me to try to avoid stairs and hills. It's a difficult stricture to live with on a day-to-day basis, especially since I prefer taking the stairs over waiting on an elevator to travel only one or two floors. My right knee doesn't always agree with that preference.

Some days, stair climbing just can't be avoided. Visiting one-hundred-year-old European monuments falls into the "unavoidable" category. At least that's what I told myself as I stared at the Monument to the Battle of the Nations and the 500 steps leading to the observation deck at the top of its 91 meters.

Known also as Völkerschlachtdenkmal, the monument represents the allied victory of Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Sweden against Napoleon's forces in 1813 in the city of Leipzig in eastern Germany. Plans were made as early as 1814 for a memorial, but construction didn't begin until 1898, finishing in time for the 100th anniversary of the battle. A reflecting pool lies before the domed tower, and rows of oaks and pines spread outside in a park made for festivals. Inside, the statues representing traditional Germanic traits of bravery, faith, sacrifice, and fertility ring the second floor. The first floor is a memorial crypt, watched over by statues named the Totenwächter, the "guards of the dead."

Military memorials have fascinated me since childhood. After my own short stint in the US Army, the memorials seemed imbued with a deeper, private meaning. In the Völkerschlachtdenkmal I took pictures of the statues, making sure to get people in the shots to show the massive scale; most of the tourists' heads came to the shins of the seated guardian figures. I soaked in the history of the Napoleonic wars in this part of Germany that I'd live in for the next month while on this summer study abroad trip.

Then came the stairs, the way to the top and a view over all of Leipzig. There were no elevators to even the midlevel deck yet—that addition was completed after my trip—and the scaffolding embracing the tower was for repairing erosion and dampness damage for the eventual 2013 celebrations. My fellow students were going up the stairs. I waved them ahead as I fell behind. "I'll get there," I said. "It's just going to take a while. I'll be fine!"

The stairwell circling the interior of the monument was so narrow that my shoulders almost touched each graffiti-littered white wall. Other tourists occasionally squeezed past one another up and down the stairs. I could go for dozens of steps without seeing anyone, vague echoes the only hint of other beings within the concrete and granite until suddenly someone would round a curve and into view. My knee grated and groaned, and I leaned against the cool wall to rest, letting others sidle by me.

Normal, everyday activity like this simple act of stair climbing had rendered me lame. No one had told my 18-year-old self about arch pronation, and that due to the way my feet are built, I should wear supports in my shoes and boots. My childhood activities were theater stage crew and horseback riding—my own feet weren't my first concern. Learning to run in formation to make a two-mile run in the timeframe for my age group (under 19 minutes for 17-21 year old women) turned into pure torture and a perception in my sergeants that I was simply trying to get out of work. Shin splints, stress fractures, and an out-of-alignment knee aren't visible injuries. *Push harder, push farther, don't quit!*

I wish I could say the Army was good to me, as much as I still sometimes miss its routines and structures. I had to fight to have my injuries recognized; the Veterans Affairs doctors decided I'm slightly disabled, granting me a little over \$100 a month. It didn't make up for the loss of a third of my college money. The Montgomery GI Bill and Army College Fund are a major benefit to joining, but even Honorable Discharge a year earlier than your original contract date means not getting the ACF. Money not meant for tuition, but for rent, bills, car payments, food, supplies—money to live on, so I didn't have to work while going to school.

The money ran out the spring semester of 2008. It would not cover that summer's trip to Germany with a professor and nine other Kansas State students, mixed in with students from the US and other nations at Leipzig University's Herder Institute to learn German. I had time to reflect on this as I huddled in a narrow concrete corridor, hundreds of steps behind me and hundreds more to go, breathless, my water bottle empty, and my knee demanding to know just what the hell was I thinking, making such a climb? My brain was caught up in the cost of the souvenirs and snack vendors downstairs. Could I afford an expensive dinner with my classmates later? How was I going to pay rent and bills when I got home in six weeks? What about the money I'd already wasted on souvenirs? And the ever-looming need to find a job to finish my degree and how I was crazy to be thinking of continuing to graduate school. It'd be easier to quit and work full time.

Just when my eyes threatened to release tears, two soldiers rounded the corner. They were part of a unit taking a break to tour Leipzig. Their patches identified them as United Nations. They slid past me, grinning like the boys they were, apologetic and polite in their uniforms.

They couldn't have recognized that I had been like them once. I'd gained too much weight, gotten too soft. But I remembered, and the mocking echoes of my former sergeants' taunts and criticisms replayed in my ears. I took a breath, and returned to climbing.

I'd never seen combat, or another country while I was enlisted. I was supposed to go to Korea my final year, but my knee and a strict new captain slammed the door on that in August 2001. Just a month before 9/11 and watching my friends leave for another country, where some never returned from combat. My mother was afraid the Army would call me back; they had that option. "No, Mom," I assured her. "They don't need a gimp that can't keep up in combat."

Seven years later, and I couldn't even manage stairs. Never mind that there were 500 of them. I couldn't hack it. I was just like my father; he

couldn't hack it in the Navy, getting himself medically discharged after only 18 months. *Hey now*, a voice in my head reminded me. It sounds a little like my mom. *You made it twice as long as Dad did. You didn't quit; they had to make you leave. You can't go back down now, you may as well keep going up. There's Alevé at the dorm.* After another short break, I kept climbing.

There was finally door-sized light, and the noise of excited, relieved people enjoying the view of the city. I limped into the fresh air and waved at my classmates, grinning. I was red-faced, huffing, my knee was letting me know I would so regret this later, but I made it.

I took pictures of the city from all directions. There was only one skyscraper and few other tall buildings, the thousand-year-old city sprawling under a carpet of brilliant green trees. I tried not to look at the people standing, walking, and lounging on the low wall separating us from the long fall to the ground. I glanced at the soldiers milling around the top with us, but was too shy to speak to them, to thank them, here on this monument to other soldiers from long ago.

The worries about money faded away as I looked over Leipzig from the top of the Monument to the Battle of the Nations. I ignored my knee's complaining. I recalled other places I'd visited as a child: the Alamo, with its flags and floor plaques where I'd first fallen in love with history; Gettysburg, damp in the spring and peaceful as I roamed the museums and fields; the shining black expanse of the Vietnam Wall with flowers and trinkets left at its base. Places where the soldiers who did "hack it" were immortalized. I made a mental salute and silently offered a prayer to those other soldiers, too self-conscious for anything openly demonstrative.

I'd made it to the top. That was enough for me, for today. I hadn't quit. I could keep that momentum going, through the rest of the month, when I returned to Kansas, when classes began again in August.

The way down was easier.

William Miller

The French Round Table

These four, old Cajuns
sit at one table in the back
of the public library
on the Bayou Lafourche.

They meet once a month,
speak only in French,
the French they learned
from their fathers
and grandfathers,
shrimp boat drivers,
oystermen.

For years the table
was crowded, the laughter
loud, the stories long
and rambling, told
until their wives
were boiling crawfish,
setting the supper table.

But the first died of
cancer, the second
a heart attack, the rest
of plain, old age,
the chairs almost empty.

The last four vowed
to meet if there were only
two, tell the story
of the deportation,
how they got there
so long ago,
the stinking British ships
that hauled them
like human cargo

from Nova Scotia to the bayou.

They lost everything
but their French tongue,
spoke it though it meant
a fine they couldn't pay,
a night in jail.

And they spoke it
until it was the common
tongue, English the foreign,
broken and mispronounced
if used at all.

Now, the children
of these four speak
a little, understand more,
but move away to
New Orleans, Chicago,
keep moving.



Their little grandchildren
watch tv, talk like
Americans, have never
seen a swamp
or a pirogue paddled
across green water.

But Etienne, the oldest,
his son stayed behind,
works an oil rig
ten miles offshore.

He keeps his little boy,
only four, one week
a month, teaches him
to count to ten,
even the words of a French
child's song.

And sometimes,
for no reason, he sings it
in the hallway,
the kitchen,
out in the yard where
he swings as high
as he can.

Kenan Dannenberg

The Place on the Wall Where a Picture Used to Hang

I.

My father used to pull me aside, sometimes twice a week,
And say things like, “Thirteen is only unlucky
Because the clock goes back to one.”
Younger and confused, I’d spend hours at night
Staring into the placid face above my desk,
Waiting for the number thirteen to peek around the corner
And give a pout as the hands passed him by.
Now I’ve grown to know better
And set my digital clock to military time.

II.

The falling sun paints streaks,
Similar to those of a tinted yellow marker
That scrape across the metal hood of my ’93 Ford Ranger
While pop or some other kind of shit
Flows, blended together, out of the crackling speakers.
A date once said the car was a smart match
And I got offended so that dinner hadn’t been very good.
Tonight I’m looking for a place to meet no one in particular
But the string of parking spots along the block of bars
Lacks any vacancies.
So I keep driving straight out of town
On back roads terribly lit compared to highways and boulevards.

III.

Remember how you waited for me in bed?
With the lights off and the TV glinting your eyelids,
You'd leave a simple key for me,
Beneath a welcome mat with no words,
So I could sneak into the covers.
However, you're on to the next notch
And the the key disappeared.
Or rather perhaps it left for the place
Family photographs go after being widowed.



Laced

i.

In contempt of Reason,
her corset, pulled tight with zeal –
A costumed serpent stealing breath.
Her bosom would chafe, she knew
and her narrow waist would ache.
Pain – the price, to earn a cavalier nod.
Nocturnal hands were sure to follow
undoing her arduous efforts.

ii.

The flesh around her orbital bone
shined again – Purple,
what used to be her favorite color.
She stirred.
A bitter almond steam rose from the soup.
It spun, mimicking the crooning vinyl
tracks, to cover her own.
Expectant hands waited.
Those hands.
They would be still soon.

iii.

Smooth airbrushed pages taunt her;
Distorted reflections do the same.
On the menu today: dry toast, one slice.
The numbered ribbon hugs her waist,
no change since yesterday.
Cherished companions come to aide,
one right, one left.
Slender digits secure them tightly
with dainty knots and bows.

2013 Undergraduate Award Winners

Fiction

1st Place: Erin Coldirn “When the Painting Cracks”

2nd Place: Jessica Sovick “The Skull with the Tear Drop”

Nonfiction

1st Place: Shannon Brooks “Finding Time”

2nd Place: Charlesia McKinney “The Beauty in Labels”

Poetry

1st Place: Kenan Dannenberg “The Place on the Wall Where the Picture Used to Hang”

2nd Place: Meghan Bing “I Like the Sound of That”

Awards

The **Touchstone Creative Writing Awards** are given each year to the best work by Kansas State University undergraduates in each of the three genres. Only poetry, fiction, and nonfiction entries from undergraduates at Kansas State University are eligible. Submission to *Touchstone* automatically enters one’s work in the contest. In addition, a \$75 prize is given to each of the first place award winners and a \$25 prize is given to each of the second place winners.

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