

A photograph of a window with a spiderweb and a bright light source. The window is framed by dark vertical bars. A bright, glowing light source is visible through the window, creating a strong backlight effect. A dense spiderweb is visible in the foreground, partially obscuring the view. The overall scene is illuminated with a warm, golden light.

touchstone²⁰¹¹

touchstone is published with the permission of the featured writers and artists by the College of Arts and Sciences at Kansas State University with assistance from the KSU Creative Writing Faculty, the KSU Fine Arts Council, and the KSU Department of English. The copyrights to the works featured belong to the individual writers and artists.

Copyright 2011 by **touchstone**
All Rights Reserved

touch@ksu.edu

cover art:
Happy Halloween
Cody Hadrick

To order additional copies, please contact:

Kansas State University
Bookstore and Mail Center
16 Umberger Hall
Manhattan, KS 66506-3400

orderpub@ksre.ksu.edu

(785) 532-5830 – voice
(785) 532-7938 – fax

(Tax and shipping fees apply.)

touchstone staff

Editor-in-Chief:

Lindsey Givens

Fiction Editor:

Jordan Kimbrell

Assistant Fiction Editors:

Jacob Euteneuer

Adam Herbener

Jeff Lanter

Rebecca Passannate

Nonfiction Editor:

Christopher Urban

Assistant Nonfiction Editors:

Shaun Baker

Emi Griess

Kelly O'Sullivan

Jessica Reffner

Poetry Editor:

Michael Mlekoday

Assistant Poetry Editors:

Sara Austin

Kelsey Hopson

Kristin Praeuner

Art Editor:

Tara Terkildsen

Assistant Art Editor:

Emily Worrell

Layout/Design Editor:

Mariya Vaughan

Submissions Management:

Skylar Moore

Copy Editors:

Maggie Borders

Angel Theriot

Faculty Advisor:

Kimball Smith

Contents

Editor's Note	8	Lindsey Givens
Mirror	10	Emily Glass (art)
10 Hometown Plagues	11	Dan Hornsby (poetry)
Between Lines and Mona	12	Heather Etelamaki (poetry)
Windrows	14	J.C. Smith (fiction)
Untitled	24	Luke Severson (art)
Aaron Murphy	25	Carrie Cook (poetry)
Chasing Fireflies	26	Joshua Mans (poetry)
I Kind of Wish	27	Joseph Henry Kester (poetry)
Headlines from Earth	28	John Quinn (poetry)
Hypertext: On Researching Walt Whitman Through the Likes of Wikipedia	30	D. Gilson (poetry)
Variations on a Line by Thoreau	32	John Quinn (poetry)
The Book of Superman	34	Carrie Cook (poetry)
In This City	35	Lorena Williams (poetry)
The Pine Cage	36	Christy Pottroff (nonfiction)
A Fair Reality	41	Elisabeth Short (fiction)
Valley of Tranquility	48	Monique Belitz (art)
Catch and Release	49	D. Gilson (poetry)
At JCCC	52	Andrew West (poetry)
Insect House	53	Dan Horsby (poetry)
Lemons	54	Andrew Bales (fiction)
Icy Leaf	63	Paula Ebert (art)
Through the Lens of a Face Shield	64	Emily Schomaker (nonfiction)
The Massacre at No Gun Ri	75	Elisabeth Short (fiction)

The Orange Burn that Sags Above Industry	77	Zachary Michael Powell (poetry)
Recalling St. Joseph Catholic Church	78	Andrew West (poetry)
In and Out: Numbness in the Back Row	80	Matt Felzke (nonfiction)
Zombie Sonnet	87	Nicholas White (poetry)
Lidded Jar	88	Chris Graber (art)
The Goddess of Destruction Single- Handedly Kills a Chicken Somewhere in Mexico	89	Dan Hornsby (poetry)
Red Dye #2	90	Tiffany Roney (fiction)
Tuesday Cancellation, New York	99	Heather Etelamaki (poetry)
Western Meditation	100	John Quinn (poetry)
You Gonna Eat That?	102	Aaron Logan (art)
We'll Get There When We Get There	103	Kaylea Pallister (nonfiction)
A touchstone Interview with Philipp Meyer	109	Lindsey Givens and Michael Mlekoday
Tire Swing	112	J.C. Smith (poetry)
Pink Rose	114	Ellen Ludwig (art)
Paper Cranes	115	Heather Etelamaki (fiction)
Awards	121	
Contributors	123	

Editor's Note

Lindsey Givens

The written word has miraculously evolved from pictures and hieroglyphics to modern alphabets, from charred sticks to pen and ink, typewriters, and the word processor used to write this. The creative process follows a similar progression. A poem, a book, a play, or a work of art first begins with inspiration, then the struggle to capture it on paper or canvas or film, going through countless edits and revisions. Art never stops evolving. There are too many ideas to be explored and things to be invented.

Like writing, **touchstone** has undergone several changes this year. Our staff has been expanded to include art editors, which has greatly improved our number of submissions in that genre. We have also switched to a more economical and environmentally-friendly printing option. Previously, we've estimated the number of copies needed, and then sold and shipped them ourselves, and stored extra copies in the Editor-in-Chief's office. This year, **touchstone** has negotiated a print-on-demand service, which allows our readers to purchase copies themselves, reduces surplus printing, and allows us to use our funds more efficiently. Also, **touchstone** is now available to read online. My good friend Aaron Jones has completed a major overhaul of our site, creating a much more user-friendly and professional virtual edition. As Editor-in-Chief of this year's **touchstone**, I've been honored and privileged to take part in these changes.

I would like to thank everyone who helped bring this year's edition from inspiration to print and virtual publication. The editors, staff, and advisors have fearlessly navigated these changes to **touchstone** and their hard work and fresh ideas have created an issue that tests new innovations and yet reflects our traditions. **touchstone's** faculty advisor, Kim Smith, has my profound appreciation for his endless support and wisdom, as does Elizabeth Dodd for her sound advice and cheerful optimism. The editors and staff have been amazing. Not only did they assist with advertising, reading submissions, copy-editing, and a myriad of other tasks, they also patiently and diligently handled all of the changes regarding publication and submissions management as well. I wish to thank Philipp Meyer for taking time away from the draft of his latest novel to talk about his own experienc-

es with the innovation of writing. Special thanks also go to **touchstone's** previous Editor-in-Chief, Kim Peek, whose exhaustive documentation of last year's edition has been an invaluable resource, to Aaron Jones, who lent his expertise to the renovation of our website, and to Cheryl Rauh, unofficial copy-editor and personal sounding board for all of my ideas.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lindsey L. Givens".

Lindsey Givens
Editor-in-Chief
Touchstone 2011



Lay
Emily Glass

10 Hometown Plagues

Dan Hornsby

Do you remember that summer when the creek turned to blood,
and the frogs washed up and crowded the porches,
and my sister got head lice (and we had to throw plastic on the chairs),
and the flies filled the kitchen like smoke,
and all the cows happily turned over and died,
and all our friends broke out in pimples,
and we hurled rocks at the sports cars from the overpass,
and the cicadas crawled out of the ground like Lazarus,
and we slept all day and never saw the sun,
and your older brother died,
and the police chased us over the bridge where they nearly fell off and drowned,
and we knew we had to leave?

Between Lines and Mona

Heather Etelamaki

I.

Leo drew Mona
daily,
studying the

curve
of her neck, the delicate

swoop

of her collarbone

And how her head
seemed to weigh down
her body,
spine folded and
creased

like the drawings he
kept of her

in the corner by the dusty easel
he used long ago.

II.

Mona reaches to grab her bare
right shoulder
with a
bare left hand.

Posture is puckered,
but gentle.

She knows her
muse
is only but an
ideal to him.

She is alone.

III.
Leo buttons his
smock
 and his lips

then his arm moves
around the
 toned paper the color of autumn,
only leaving
contours behind,
those that are thin
 and feeble.

His eyes are on her
 form, hardly straying.

IV.
She slips into her skirt—
 Bohemian—

and buttons her
 sweater—wool.

Before closing the
door
behind her, she tucks
her bag into the crook
of her arm,

and she glances back,
to the pile of her
thoughts, her
 essence that is collecting
dust

by the easel Leo once used
before his own muse
evaporated
before and behind her eyes.

Windrows

J.C. Smith

It was ten o'clock in the morning and already it felt like it was a hundred degrees. Mason knew he should've started two hours earlier than he did. The neat piles of alfalfa were already starting to dry out, and soon the grass tumbling in the baler behind him would start to break up. The last thing he wanted was to plug the machine, or even worse, break a belt.

Few implements are more finicky than swathers and balers. So many zerks to grease, joints to oil, belts to check, and yet the process of putting down and baling hay was one of Mason's favorite things to do. He continued down the line of mowed alfalfa, throttling the cabless John Deere tractor up and down along with the contours of the land. He closely monitored the gauge that informed him of the bale's shape, and maneuvered the tractor and baler carefully back and forth in order to keep everything in balance. A light began to blink, signifying a full and finished bail. Once it turned solid, Mason brought the tractor to a halt. The machine being towed continued to churn and bounce as the giant cylinder of grass inside remained spinning. An arm sliding back and forth under the belly of the machine fed twine around the spinning bale, forming the tight, finished product. Mason shut off the PTO mechanism that made the baler spin, and then he pulled a lever that raised the giant hydraulic door on the rear of the machine, allowing the bale to roll out where it would later be picked up and hauled back to the barn for winter storage. After everything was reset, Mason began the process all over again.

He began to sweat profusely. Mason's shirt was starting to stick to his back and it made him squirm in the yellow-cushioned seat. It made him wonder what it would be like to sit in one of those luxurious brand new tractors that the big farmers drove. Mason closed his eyes. He could feel the ice-cold air conditioning. He would actually have to shut it off from time to time because it got a bit too cold. He could hear the mundane Top Forty hits of the digital radio filling the cab and the pesky commercials that separated them. He could see what seemed like hundreds of levers, joysticks, buttons, switches, knobs, gauges, and meters. It was like the cockpit of a jetliner. Mason opened his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose. The alfalfa smelled as sweet as a freshly cut honeydew melon. A breeze picked up out of the west and made its way to Mason's damp back. It made him think of just two weeks earlier when he burned his ring finger on the exhaust vent of an air compressor. Colleen put the scalded finger in her mouth and then slowly pull it out. She blew gently on the irritated skin.

He turned his head back and angled it down to listen carefully to the sounds of the baler, just like his dad had taught him to do almost twenty years ago. He could hear friction, a slight squeal developing somewhere around the rear drive roller. It was getting to be just too damn dry. Mason popped open the storage compartment underneath his seat to search for a can of lubricant. He found a rusty metal aerosol can with no label, only a post-it note stuck on the side with nothing written on it.

He made it only another hundred yards down the windrow when one of the belts popped. Mason looked off to the west, down into the draw where his father was swathing in a separate field of prairie hay. He started down the hill towards his dad, pulling the disabled baler behind him. His day in the field was likely over.

* * * * *

“I don’t know, Dad, seems like she’s got her mind pretty well made up,” Mason said, as he took a bite of his smoked turkey sandwich.

Once Mason’s father had noticed something was wrong with the baler, he stopped swathing to see what the problem was. After some various cooperative diagnostics had been performed, the two decided it would be a good time to break for lunch. They took their water jugs and coolers over to a line of old abandoned bales that had never made the trek back home to the farm. They sat down with their backs leaning against the sagging mounds of hay. It was a good spot to relax, thanks to the shade that the run of towering cottonwoods provided.

“Well, sounds to me like you’re just ready to throw in the towel,” Mason’s father said as he pulled a handful of fresh Bing cherries out of his cooler. He put them into his mouth one by one, plucking the stems and tossing them aside while hocking the pits as far as he could.

“That’s not it at all. Hell no, Dad. It’s just I don’t have any damn idea what to do, or where to even start for that matter. I mean, how the hell do you bring something like that up?” Mason picked up his water jug. The ice inside sounded like a tribal instrument as he tossed it up to his mouth. Cold water ran down both sides of his chin and all the way down to his chest. He wiped his face with his forearm. “It’s like she just doesn’t want me to know.”

“She’s probably just in the same boat as you, Mason. Trying to

find a way to talk about it.”

“I don’t know. Since I’ve known her I can’t remember her ever having any trouble telling me what’s on her mind. I always thought that was one reason why we worked so well together. She wasn’t ever afraid to say the things that I couldn’t. I just don’t know what’s so different this time.”

Mason’s dad rolled to his left onto his knees and then slowly stood up, bracing himself on one of the tattered bales. “Maybe it’s not as bad as you think,” his father said as he walked into the tall brush behind the bales to take a piss. “How do you know for sure she’s going to take this job? She’s been getting these letters for months now, right?”

“Yeah, she has, but it’s just different now. And I don’t even know how to explain how. It’s just little shit. Like, and I know this is going to sound crazy, but she just sleeps different now. Like she’s stranded in the cold somewhere without a blanket, all tense and coiled. Jesus, you’d never have seen anyone in your life sleep as relaxed as she used to, and now this.”

Mason’s dad had finished “watering the world” as he always liked to say, and took his seat back next to his son. After getting situated he dug around in his shirt pocket and pulled out a short dark cigar. Mason could smell the rich maduro wrapper before it was even completely drawn out of the pocket. He could recognize by the intricate red and gold label that his dad brought out a good one today. “There’s another one in the cab of the swather if you want a smoke. Help yourself.”

“Considering the situation, Dad, I doubt walking in the door tonight smelling like cigar smoke would help my case much.”

“Aw, hell, your mom was the same damn way. She’ll get over it.”

“Sure, Dad, she’ll get over it alright. Just before she hops a flight to Boston.”

“Boston, eh? That’s where you think she’s going?”

“Hell, I don’t know. It’s where the last letter came from.”

Mason’s dad took an extended draw from the cigar. Mason could hear the crackle of tobacco leaves succumbing to the neon ember. His dad blew out a murky cloud of white smoke that smelled like the floor of a dense forest.

“Mason, I don’t know what to tell you exactly. It’s a tough spot you’re in. That’s for damn certain. And I really do hope for the best. Your mother and I love Colleen to death. We’ve been pulling for her to be a part of this family since the first time you brought her home a couple years back. That said, I think you’re making things more complicated than they need to be.” With his cigar clenched in his teeth, making the words a bit harder to

understand, his dad continued, saying, “It’s as easy as this. Forget everything else you’ve heard and just answer this question. Do you want her to leave?”

“Of course not, Dad.”

“Well then, do you still have the ring your mother gave you?”

Mason could see where his father was going with this and began to pack up everything from his lunch.

“God damn it, Mason, just calm down and listen to me for a second.”

“Dad, I’ve told you again and again. That’s not what she wants. That’s not what I want. That’s not what *we* want.”

“Christ, Mason, how long are you going to keep telling yourself that? Maybe that isn’t what she wants, but I have a hard time believing that you’re fine with the fact that you’re the only couple living together around here who’s not hitched.”

“Dad, do you really think I give two shits about what anyone else in this town thinks about my life?”

“I do. Yeah, I think you do a bit. Despite whether or not you want to. Fact is, it doesn’t matter much whether or not you care. The same goes for her. Problem is, you both are surrounded by people in this community who do care, and right or wrong, that makes you both uncomfortable.”

Mason sharply snatched up his cooler and water jug and said quietly without making eye contact, “I have to get going, Dad. Mary and Lonnie are coming over for dinner in a couple hours. I’ll get that belt fixed in the morning and have the north forty done tomorrow.” He headed back to the tractor.

From behind, Mason’s father shouted, “Mason, whether it’s what you think she wants or not, that ring is all you’ve got!”

* * * * *

The steaks were almost done. Mason went inside to get a plate for the meat. Colleen and Mary were at the kitchen sink, slicing cherry tomatoes for the salad. Colleen was picking them up one at a time, carefully sliding the knife all the way through to her thumb, letting each half fall individually into the large bowl already full of romaine lettuce. Mary was using the cutting board. She diced the tomatoes three at a time and used the knife blade along with her left hand to pick up the pile that had accumulated. She dropped the tomatoes in the bowl and then washed the knife and her hands off in the sink.

“Thanks for the help, Mary. I meant to have all this done before you guys got here,” Colleen said while halving the last tomato.

“Don’t even mention it. It’s the least I can do. You learn to be pretty quick with a knife when you got hungry kids waiting at the table.” Mason stepped in between the women and grabbed a platter from the cabinet next to the stove.

“I wish you would’ve told me you were going to get so dressed up, Colleen, I feel like slob over here in my jeans,” Mary said.

“Mary, you look fine. We’re just eating dinner; no one is dressed up.”

“She’s right, Mary, you look fine,” Mason said over his shoulder as he walked out the sliding door to the back yard.

Mason thought it was funny Mary said what she did. Not because she thought she was underdressed; she wasn’t. This really was just a simple get together. It was the fact that after knowing Colleen for almost a year now, Mary still didn’t know that that was how Colleen dressed every day. It was never anything flashy, just simple. Simple, yet elegant. Like the light floral print summer dress she was wearing behind him in the kitchen. She never tried to get people’s attention, but she always did.

“You plan on eating those steaks or you going to drive some posts with them?” Lonnie said from his reclined lawn chair a few feet away.

“I tell you what, you go fetch me another beer, and I’ll rescue your steak from the flames.”

After supper was finished, they all went outside and carried on in conversation for a couple hours over a few drinks. It was mostly small talk and gossip. Colleen didn’t have much to say all night. She just laughed when she was supposed to, and occasionally chimed in with subtle nods and quiet replies. Several times Mason caught her staring into her glass. She rolled the braided glass stem back and forth between her thumb and index finger, gradually tipping the bowl lower and lower until the deep red Port that she loved to drink after dinner nearly spilled out on to the concrete.

After it had been dark for an hour or so, Lonnie and Mary decided they had better get back home to make sure their kids got to bed. They all stood up and exchanged pleasantries and then it was just Mason and Colleen on the back porch. Mason plopped back in his chair.

“I’m going to go clean up,” Colleen said.

“Need any help?”

Colleen never answered. She just kissed Mason on the top of the head and went inside, sliding the glass door shut behind her.

* * * * *

The note on the table was written in manuscript, which seemed odd to Mason. He'd only ever seen her write in cursive. Something about the harsh angles of the disconnected letters spoke louder than any of their actual collaborative meanings. They were as cold as the new form Colleen's body took in the night.

"Hey Mace, I'm up at the cartwheel...meet me there?"
—Colleen

The pale blue post-it stuck to his ring finger as he consciously tried to drop it to the floor. Mason looked out the window toward the pond dam, toward Colleen. The phone rang behind him. He let it ring four times before answering. The voice on the other end sounded annoyingly intelligent. Mason listened courteously, responding in simple monosyllabic tones, and then he hung up. He looked back down at Colleen's note and folded it in half again and again until it was too thick to crease and then opened the front door. He let the easy wind take it out of his hand and watched it tumble down the long rock driveway. Every wrinkle in his neck and face was filled with dirt. It was a windy day in the field and the dust and sweat made him itch all over. He wanted to take a shower.

Mason went inside and changed into a clean white v-neck t-shirt and was ready to head back out to meet Colleen. He stopped at the front door and thought about the conversation with his dad the day before. Mason went back to the bedroom. He spun the dial on his gun safe and opened the door. There were three drawers. Mason opened the top one and removed his .22 caliber Ruger pistol, the one with the bull barrel, and the brick of ammo next to it. He set them both on top of the safe. In the back of the drawer was a small cedar box. Mason sat down on the bed behind him and opened it. He slid his finger into the dainty chain inside. On the chain was the ring that Mason's mom had given him. She told him that it was the wedding ring of his great, great grandma. He held the ring up by the chain and watched it swing gently in front of his eyes. The antique metal didn't shine, but it looked precious. The single small elegant stone was set in a tiny box elevated by six prongs that led the eye down to the skinny band full of elaborate sterling filigree. Mason fell into a slight daze, thinking about the women that had wore the ring. Then he thought about Colleen. He tried to picture her wearing it.

Mason snapped out of his trance as the alarm on his emergency

weather band radio sounded. It was the same howl he dreaded hearing as a kid. Mason shook his head slightly and took a deep breath to pace his pounding heart. "Possible severe storms late tonight," he heard. He slid the ring and chain in his jeans pocket and left the bedroom. Mason walked out the front door and headed south toward the pond.

* * * * *

"Guess you found my note," Colleen said with her back turned to Mason. She was sitting in the tree, their tree, with her legs dangling and rhythmically swinging like those of a 5 year-old boy in a church pew.

"Yep. Were you hoping I wouldn't?" Mason said playfully as he walked over to the top of the tree. Over time, the old cottonwood had arched its back, like that of a prima ballerina. The trunk followed the contour of the dam forming a bridge of sorts with the canopy ending at ground level, partly submerged in the small spring-fed pond.

Colleen snickered and turned her head toward Mason who was working his way up the fingers, hands, and arms of the wise wooden dancer. "Did you get the baler fixed?"

"Yep," Mason said after finally getting situated in the tree. The two sat staring off into the west like they had so many times before.

"Good... that's good. What was wrong with it?"

"Oh, nothing was wrong with her. It was my fault. My stubborn ass... just pushed her too hard."

The next several moments went by in silence. The air was sticky and their sweat felt like sap. The only ones talking were the bullfrogs, a groaning amphibious chorus that, when combined with the steady buzz of crickets, sounded like home to Mason.

"See that dark spot out there where those two hills meet?" Mason pointed out towards a shale bed that was barely visible in the distant plains that were now little more than silhouettes in the setting sun.

Colleen nodded her head.

"I used to spend hours out there as a kid, looking for sharks' teeth, and other fossils."

"Did you ever find anything?"

"Nah. I didn't have a clue in the world what in the hell I was looking for. I didn't care, though. It was an adventure every time."

The long line of elderly cottonwoods cast their soft tufts into the air by what seemed like the millions. It looked like a gentle snow falling on the deep green alfalfa.

“I tell you, sometimes I still feel exactly like that little kid out there, digging in the dirt, oblivious to the world.”

“What do you mean?”

Mason didn’t answer. Instead he snapped off a small dead branch from the tree and began breaking it into little pieces.

Colleen shifted her weight back and forth and then sat on her hands. She leaned forward and seemed to speak while exhaling, “When me and my sister used to go upstate to visit my dad on the weekends, we’d spend most all of our time there in this tree house he had built for us. It was in a kind of a secluded spot, out back behind the stables. We would just get lost in that thing. I remember one time, we had fallen asleep watching clouds or some damn thing, and anyway, we woke up and the sun had gone down completely. For a few minutes neither of us knew where we were.” Colleen laughed out loud while rubbing her left forearm. “It was terrifying.”

“I bet it was,” Mason said.

There was another extended period of silence during which the wind picked up out of the north. It was completely dark now, and Colleen’s teeth began to click slightly. Mason moved closer and held Colleen under his right arm beneath what was now a star filled sky. His left hand was in his pocket fiddling with the ring. He looked up and saw a deathly thin crescent moon, the kind that Colleen always referred to as a Cheshire cat smile when they stargazed from the cartwheel tree. The lunar slice gave off a great deal of light for as thin as it was, yet to Mason, it looked frail and weak, like at any given second it might flicker and disappear from the night sky altogether.

“I was thinking, Colleen, maybe we could set out for that shale bed tomorrow. Just for the hell of it.”

“Maybe, Mace. We’ll see.” Colleen craned her head to the right and left, popping her neck, and then ran her hands through her hair. “It’s getting too damn chilly. I think I’m going to head back to the house. You coming?”

Mason didn’t answer, and didn’t even appear to hear the question. He just stared down at his feet while biting the inside of his lip.

“Mason,” Colleen said louder as if to snap him out of a daze. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right behind you.”

Colleen crawled over him and then maneuvered down the branches to the pond dam. Mason took the ring out and examined it for a few seconds. He rolled it between his thumb and forefinger while looking at the

spot on the tree that Colleen had just vacated. Mason closed the ring tight in his fist and then slid it back in his pocket.

He didn't watch her walk away but listened to her steps crunching in the tall overgrown brush behind him, fading into the wildlife silence. The steps sounded slow, yet at the same time, definite. And then she was gone.

* * * * *

He had never seen her take a bath before. All they'd ever known was the shower. In a way, Mason was glad. This image of Colleen, half submerged in the steamy tub, was the only one he ever wanted. There were no luxurious drifting bubbles or soothing oils. No lavender candles or effervescent salts. Just Colleen.

She invited him in to the cast iron tub that had seen more years pass than the two of them put together. Mason's rough, sun ripened face, turned a new shade of red and the corners of his mouth rose slightly as his eyes dropped down to the corroding nickel clawfeet of the tub.

"Come on, Mace, how 'bout it?" she said faintly while swishing a few strands of her hair in the water.

Mason sat on the toilet lid leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His eyes rose to Colleen's face, then drifted to where one knee jutted out of the limpid water like a flawless white glacier, showing Mason what he was missing.

"I guess... maybe not such a great idea," Colleen said, looking down into the reflection of her own face. She flicked water off her fingers into the mirror image.

He remained silent but didn't wait long before saying, "I'm gonna go put the vehicles away. I think it's supposed to storm late tonight." Mason got up and walked to the doorway, which was behind Colleen and around the corner of a small dividing wall. With his left hand on the door-knob Mason hesitated and said quietly, while looking at the grain pattern in the door, "Another one called you back today. I took a message. It's under the phone." Mason left the bathroom and gently shut the door behind him.

He could hear her frustration in the shifting water on the other side of the door. He stopped and sat down at the bottom of the staircase that was situated just a few feet from the bathroom door. Mason's throat tightened and his jaw seized as he listened to the gentle splashes seeping from underneath the door he had just closed. Mason put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes and temples simultaneously. He stood up and made his way into the bedroom. He took the ring and chain out of his pocket and held

it in his left hand as he opened the safe with his right. Mason took out the cedar box from the top drawer and carefully dropped the ring and necklace back into the tiny crate. He stared at it for a few moments, taking note of how it looked, coiled alone in the emptiness of the wooden cavity. He could hear the water being drained from the tub. Mason slipped the cedar box back into the top drawer of the safe, followed by the small pistol and brick of ammo. Mason shut the thick steel door and spun the combination wheel as he thought about the treasure he might find the next day in the shale.



Untitled
Luke Severson

Aaron Murphy

Carrie Cook

A few hours before Aaron Murphy finally escaped the war on the barrel of a Colt 45, a girl, drunk on youthful idealism and vodka, forced her finger, loose and lazy, into his chest. He could feel the point of it under his shirt, above his heart. “Did you mutilate the faceless enemy?” she slurred, and he laughed uneasily, because there was nothing to say to a girl for whom war was abstract—background noise for a make-out session.

His enemy had never been faceless. His enemy wore the face of an eight year-old boy, all scabby knees and elbows, who waved his father’s bejeweled AK-47 while shouting his father’s rhetoric. His only unofficial enemy kill.

The shot that pierced the boy’s skull also rang in Aaron’s ears. The world turned inside out and he was emptied, as he watched the wailing mother cradle her boy’s body and gently reunite pieces of bone decorated with red and pink sludge with his ruined skull with her own loose fingers.

Chasing Fireflies

Joshua Mans

From my front porch step
I watch the fireflies alight
upon shoots of grass
in the dried-up creek beds
on a warm summer night,
flashing like bulbs
from a thousand tiny cameras
beneath a canvas of cottonwoods,
all swaying to the symphony of blinking lights

like the way your dress used to flow
in a soft prairie breeze,
taking each strand of golden hair
and letting it brush across
your freckled face, scrunched up in a smile
while we chased fireflies like children,
grasping playfully and coming up with only palmfuls of air
and your hand clasped tightly in mine.

I sit here now in shimmering silence
and let the incandescent lights
illuminate my thoughts, tracing back
to when we so blissfully and blindly sought
what only flickered and faded before our eyes,
and I can't help but wish
you were here with me tonight
to take my hand like you once did

and run with me,
chasing those fireflies,
only this time hanging on
to what was there all along.

I Kind of Wish

Joseph Henry Kester

i kind of wish there had been thunder and
fire and a cloud of smoke that had swallowed
me up for days on the day i was born
i kind of wish that there had been thousands
of trumpets breaking open thousand year
old hills and bones and a voice that rattled
the ground a voice that rattled the knees of
everybody who kind of stood around
i kind of wish it had been a little
more dreadful with gold wings of cherubim
almost touching over the mercy seat
and seven eyes all looking in every
direction and wheels and armies grinding
all our teeth to dust but instead of dread
a homeless Man Who everybody thought
was crazy was tortured until He was
dead because He called Himself God and told
us we needed Him and instead of a
dirty grave He came back and told us all
about how wrong we'd been and instead of
floods and fires swallowing me whole i knelt
and i cried as soon as i realized i
wasn't whole and that spot in me where once
was a gaping hole was plugged and i could
finally breathe and i got up off my
knees and felt a hand on my shoulder and
heard a voice in my ear and right then when
i kind of wished i could collapse instead
i went to war

Headlines from Earth

John Quinn

MAN WITH RADIO

picks up three stations at once
from scabbled dirt of UNIVERSE.

MAN HEARS SYMPHONY of alternative rock,
SOUL-CRUSHING sermon, and
used-car sale BONANZA.

SOUND IS PRODUCED:

NO ONE TO HEAR AGAIN—
not if they crawled from Everest

to the deepest Pacific trench
and recorded everything in-between—
THE SOUND! THE ONE AND ONLY!
SWAN-SONG OF CIVILIZATION!

In other news:

FEARLESS SQUIRREL
faces oncoming vehicle—

is CRUSHED
in slow-motion suicide.
NEON-GREEN PARAKEET escapes Earth

on clipped wings; Mars-bound—
DROWNS
in ANOXIC SKY.

The STORM-TRAILED SUNRISE
was faster than a thousand cameras—
'NOTHING UNIQUE
is useless'
says ROOSTER IN AWE,

says HUMAN BRAIN,
says genetic
and environmental influence,

says the BIG BANG
in static from cosmic radiation
13.75 billion years old.

Hypertext: On Researching Walt Whitman Through the Likes of Wikipedia

D. Gilson

This morning, an umbrella. You have to walk to work today but yesterday left your umbrella there. That was a Tuesday. It did not rain on Tuesday but it is raining on this Wednesday.

She paid \$0.00004933 for 1987's *Piss Christ*.

The car parked in the fire lane ignites. Never shake a baby or stop on rail road tracks.

Who pizza?

On some Wednesdays the levees open above New Orleans to alleviate pressure. As the waters receded the flood plain one such night, a three foot Lady of Guadalupe sat with her stockings wet in murk, waiting.

Alice fell into the rabbit hole. The Secretary of State had no comment.

Loren goes at the bench press but has a poem written in his clenched hand. I ask to see it and we agree: Do not open until Christmas.

Seattle completely fell into the ocean. Just fell! Is the Puget Sound the Pacific? How many Red Lobsters were lost and where can we go on Thursdays?

Cats is the best-selling musical of all time. That's bull.

Marty's suicide note is in Mother's safety deposit box. We went—my sister
and I—to play dress up, to borrow the jewels. There was no note.
The chimney?

Jake wanted to name his band Gay Witch Abortion but played no
instrument. In other news, punk becomes scene and everyone
dances.

Whatever happened to Angela Lansbury?

Archangel Gabriel slipped it in Mary, frightened her, pissed off Joseph, and
nine months later a savior was born
and unto you a savior is born.
Something about some shepherds and three wisemen looking like a
United Colors of Benetton advertisement.

Where the hell is my umbrella?

Variations on a Line by Thoreau

John Quinn

All our winged thoughts are turned to poultry.

– Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

1. Our flying fancies transform into domestic fowl.
2. Our thoughts drink Red Bull and get a job.
3. Thinks
like chicken.
4. The stuff in our heads is all
flying around for a minute, then placed
in a coop and used for subsistence.
5. A family sits to Thanksgiving dinner (“This turkey
is so delicious and tender!”) and Icarus
the dog watches quietly from his cage
in the darkest corner of the house.
6. Our thoughts had state-of-the-art rocket propulsion systems
and we got addicted to those rotisserie chickens from Wal-Mart,
which can get sorta expensive, and so we hadda sell off all our
winged thoughts
but thur still down at the pawn shop if we really need ‘em—
ICARUS don’t take the wish-bone yet it’s still got
some meat on it...

7. We suffer from obesity, and our thoughts are too fat
to fly. However, once completely digested, they slide
down the colon really fast and ramp skyward!
and change to eggs, and float obediently
towards the fridge.

8. Biologists were startled to discover a new species of turkey
thriving in American suburbs. These new turkeys
are prone to suicidal hallucinations about soaring
like golden eagles
through wide desert skies,
until hunters shoot them for lunch meat.

9. We winged creatures have seen
our reflections, sun-baked and featherless
in the deep mirror of a lake, the window
of a microwave oven.

The Book of Superman

Carrie Cook

1 In the beginning, there was Krypton.
And Krypton was annihilated, exterminated,
and from the ashes of Krypton issued forth a savior,
a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes,
lying in a spaceship.

2 Long did Superman care for Metropolis,
magnanimously outstretching his arms of steel,
halting meteors with a word, a look,
a contemptuous palm. And Superman did look
at the city around him, and He said it was good.

3 He said unto Lois Lane, “I am Clark; I am meek
and lowly in heart.”

4 Doomsday and Superman did battle
and the writers took counsel against Superman
and put Him to death.
But after the third month,
Superman was raised again
and the writers were exceedingly sorry.

5 And verily Superman did retain His place
as protector of the city, forever to fight
for truth,
for justice,
and the American way.

6 He said unto Lois, “I am Clark.
I am just Clark.
I am meek and lowly in heart.”

In This City

Lorena Williams

where women eat alone
at the kitchen sink, I reach
for another mouthful.
Juice slides down my chin.

In this city I searched,
paced the brick
aisles of East End.
You weren't there.
Hollowness sent me home
to this bare refrigerator,
this bag of tangerines.

Today is your birthday.
Are you standing in your kitchen,
listening to the murmur of the radio?
Do you stare at the empty table,
reach up and switch off the voices
to hear mine?
I'm standing in my kitchen.

I'm talking to you.

The Pine Cage

Christy Pottroff

I excitedly jammed my hands into the pockets of my polka-dot stirrup pants, searching for the three dollars I had worked all week to save, which was a quite a feat for an 8-year-old “pool rat” with an addiction to Green Apple Laffy Taffy.

This was worth it.

I looked at my little brother who stood next to me. Well, danced next to me. He had a death grip on the side of the carnival booth and was flailing his legs backwards, rocketing gravel into the spitters of half-drunk locals who were celebrating another year of farming. David wasn’t focused on any of the people, games, or cheap plastic toys. This year’s fair had a new prize to offer the youth of Brown County—a small herd of baby bunnies. From the moment we saw the huddled masses of scraggly, dusty baby rabbits, we immediately planned to build a home for one that would always be stocked with fresh clover from our front yard and have a warm bed made of straw. Previously petless, my brother and I knew we would be excellent rabbit masters.

Only three things stood between us and our new furry family member:

1. Three dollars
2. Tossing a ping-pong ball into a cup
3. Mom

In our youth, we were confident that as a pair, we could overcome all of these obstacles. My brother was, after all, David Pottroff: the most precious preschooler on earth. If his white-blond hair, chubby cheeks, and blue eyes weren’t enough, his interdental lisp and inability to pronounce the letter “r” made him the object of everyone’s affection. Even he knew he was adow-able. Combine him with a fluffy bunny and even our mom couldn’t say, “No.” And for a shrimpy girl with a bowl-cut, I already had an aptitude for basketball.

1. I finally found the balled-up three one-dollar bills in my pocket among navy blue lint and Green Apple Laffy Taffy wrappers. Wanting to look professional, I rubbed the crumpled bills across my pant-leg to make them as straight as possible. Then I fanned them out, leaned against the carnival booth, and shouted, “One chance over here!”

2. Ball in hand, I looked back over at my brother's hopeful blue eyes. I could tell that he was nervous. Earlier, he had no doubt in my ball tossing abilities, but now reality had set in. This was our one bunny chance. Again, wanting to look as confident as possible, I blew on the ping-pong ball for luck and held it out for David to do the same. I stepped up to the carnival booth and ran my eyes over the rows of cups forming a perfectly filled-in 3-foot square. I knew I should aim for the middle. I closed one eye, stood on one foot, and loaded my arm into shooting position. After a deep breath, I released the ball...

David let out a squeal—it looked like the perfect toss—the right arc, the right distance. I watched breathlessly as the ball floated through the air toward my intended target. I took in a violent gasp as my hope bounced off the lip of one of the center cups, sharply sending the grubby ping pong ball away from our dream.

In his grief, David yelled incoherently and I stood in disbelief. Never before did we house this kind of desire. We loved those bunnies. We knew that we could care for them like no one else in the world. In our mutual fantasy, we saw ourselves covered in heavenly clouds of soft, loving bunnies. Not being unreasonable children, we would be happy to settle for one shared, precious animal. But even that dream had been plucked from our hearts. Unable to help myself, my bottom lip started to quiver and David's face was already flushed with tears. I'm sure we were a sight to behold.

In our agony, we didn't notice Walter, a middle-aged man from our neighborhood, come up behind us. We knew Walter, but not well. Our mother had told us to stay away from him because he drank too much and he wasn't "nice." However, her warning rang hollow, and during the summer we would bring his dog, Prince, our leftover chicken nuggets and hamburgers on a daily basis. Walter had probably seen me riding my scooter up and down our chip-and-seal street and my brother peeing on our neighbor Bernie's flowers.

Walter pulled three dollars out of his wallet and took the ping-pong ball from the carnival worker. We give him our full attention when he flipped his long, jet-black hair over his shoulder. Like a basketball star, he shot the

ball with impeccable form, and it landed cleanly into one of the cups. My bottom lip stilled as I watched Walter pick out one of the baby bunnies with a huge smile on his face. With cupped hands, he pulled the shivering animal close to his body and turned toward my brother and me. In that moment, our hearts nearly burst with hope. My brother ran up to Walter and reached to pet the caramel-colored bunny—I held back a bit, intimidated by his stature and darker skin. Then Walter squatted down and asked, “Do you have a name picked out?”

3. Like a hawk, my mother swooped in out of nowhere and grabbed David’s shoulder, pulling him away from his newfound love. Without acknowledging Walter or his kindness, she tried to shoo David and me away from the booth.

“It’s time to go home,” she said, giving Walter a hard look over her shoulder. But we were not prepared to let go of our dream so easily.

“He won that bunny!” I said.

“Chwisty mithed the shot! But Wahter made it!” yelled David as he pushed his way past my mother to pet the bunny in Walter’s hands.

Walter stood up and said to my mother, “I have a dog, so I don’t need a rabbit. If your kids. . .”

“No. They can’t. They’re allergic,” she lied as she turned away. She picked up my brother and pulled me from Walter’s side.

I’m sure we put up a fight. But I don’t remember. I would like to think that I dragged my feet and yelled at my mother in protest with David following my lead. What I do remember are my mother’s angry words when we met up with my father and older sister a few moments later. “Stupid, irresponsible Indian! He tried to give my kids a pet! He’s probably drunk—why do they even come to the fair? Isn’t that what powwows are for?!”

In the weeks following the fair that summer, David and I constructed a cage for our imaginary rabbit. We spent our non-swimming hours fastening together chicken wire and scraps of pine from our dad’s shop into a semi-respectable hutch. Our father had given us advice and supplies, but the hutch was our project. After hours of fastening and unfastening wood

and wire, we would go stand with our dad in his shop. David and I would drink strawberry sodas and Dad would open a Coors—all kept in the shop mini-fridge reserved for beverages our mother forbade in the house. While we drank, our dad would subtly teach us skills necessary to build the hutch, never making direct reference to our cage.

The final product was about two square feet and sat on unintentionally lopsided legs to keep our prospective pet safe from neighborhood cats and foxes. Our hutch had a hinged back roof to allow easy access for bunny hugs. I was especially proud of my idea for the wire floor that would allow the poops to drop to the ground and not dirty our bunny's feet.

But we didn't get a bunny that summer. No matter how much we whined, begged, or cried. My mother had told a man that we were allergic to rabbits and didn't want to be proven a hypocrite. Racist, yes. Hypocrite, never. The next winter, after Walter moved away, our wish was finally granted and we got Muffin, a snow white rabbit from a pet store.

A few weeks after our heartbreak at the fair, my brother came running inside and jumped right between me, lounging on the turquoise bean bag, and the TV. "I found a baby bihd in the backyawd!" he squealed.

Forced out of my afternoon daze, I followed him through the back door and saw the animal he was so excited about. Clearly, the bird had fallen from its nest and it was chirping steadily and loudly, which surprised me when I saw how small it actually was. Even we, in our desperation for a pet, could recognize that this was an ugly baby. It looked like a miniature greasy old man with an oversized beak. But, as new parents, we could accept that looks weren't everything. We felt called to action to care for this creature that seemed so alone in the world.

I knew I shouldn't, but I picked up the little bird. I felt its tiny heart vibrating in my hand and the chirping intensified with desperation. "It must be scared," I thought aloud. "Let's put it in the hutch!" Holding the bird gently in both hands against my stomach, I swiftly walked over to the hutch with David close behind. He opened the roof and I sat our baby in its new home. For a few minutes, we frantically ran around finding things that might make the bird feel more at home. We threw in twigs, grass, acorns, a little bit of gravel and waited, with our faces pressed against the chicken wire, for our new pet to reciprocate our love.

After a few minutes of constant, frantic chirping, David and I knew something was wrong. Knowing that we would get in trouble if our parents discovered that we touched a disease-ridden bird, we had to take care of this on our own. Our love for the little creature evaporated from our hearts in haste to avoid getting in trouble.

David reached in and tried to get the baby bird back out of the hutch. But it was stuck. I took a closer look and realized that its tiny claws were gripping the chicken wire floor in fright. The bird chirping like an alarm all the while, I ordered David to unclench the bird's claws while I gently lifted its legs from the top. Again, I felt the bird's heart beat and thought that mine was moving just as fast. Finally, we were able to free the creature.

I walked with the bird cupped in my hands back to the shade of the tree from which it fell. I thought about hiding it in the bush that surrounded the base of the tree to protect the trembling baby from the usual neighborhood predators. Realizing that it would never survive on its own, I put the bird out in the open expanse of our yard. I hoped to all of nature that the bird's mother would fly down and rescue the baby from harm. And, in my mind, I imagined my own parents walking by and picking up the little creature to lift it back to the safety of its nest.

Preferring the unknown to being witnesses to the potential violent demise of our baby bird, David and I flew back into the house. We were both frightened and appalled by what we had done, but we knew we had to hide our emotions. So we sat together in the turquoise bean bag chair where I could feel both of our hearts beating wildly. Through the open window I could hear the creature's cries. Regretting my decision of inaction, I tried to remove myself from the chair, but I was stuck. Looking down, I saw my small hands, bone-white with strain, clenching the cheap vinyl.

A Fair Reality

Elisabeth Short

I swung my leg out the car door and onto the ground below and immediately regretted my choice of shoes. My flip-flop tan had just started to form, and even though the sun set two hours ago, I wasn't going to risk it fading. The brambles and weeds cut at my toes as I balanced on the hill and waited for Liz.

"Hey Liz! Lock Ellie, would you?"

"Sure," she said. I'd named my car Ellie a few years ago when I first got her. She used to be a shiny silver Pontiac, but after a few years of wear and tear, Ellie required more TLC than usual. I watched as Liz slowly bent over and manually locked the passenger door. I noticed her shove her bright orange purse under the seat before joining me. I didn't blame her. If I used a purse, I'd have done it too.

We walked past the array of beat up Oldsmobiles and F150s, and I saw Liz's eyes narrow at some drunks in a pick-up. I just smiled and silently laughed.

"When's the last time you were here, Liz?"

"I don't know." Her words slurred together in a mumbled way. I figured she hadn't been since before high school, but I said nothing.

"Think it'll be the same?"

I knew the answer before I asked it. The county fair never changed, ever. Even as we trudged up the hill in sweaty flip-flops, we both knew that the sight of the blinding lights would hit us in the same pattern they always did and the stench of manure mixed with funnel cakes would temporarily shock us.

Then there it was. I looked at Liz. She took a deep breath and then looked at me.

"After you," I said. She put her shoulders back and stood for a moment before carving a path through the field.

Once I took my first step into the area, the smell stalled me. It reminded me of trips to Dodge City with my dad. We'd come within a few miles of the town and the smell penetrated the car and engulfed our nostrils.

"Smells like money," he'd always say. And of course, that's just what it was: money. But I always told my dad that even I didn't love money enough to endure that smell for a lifetime. He'd make a face and talk about how he worked on a hog farm for a year in high school, which was his roundabout way of saying he agreed.

Liz veered towards the back end of the fairgrounds, away from the

lights and rides. She found a dark bench to sit, no doubt to increase visibility on her iPod. I followed her and tried to coax her away, but she ignored me as the glare of the minute screen cast a ghostly sheen upon her face.

Actually, I should've been glad to get her this far. It took a 30 minute phone call and free tickets just to get her out of the house. She obviously didn't want to go farther in, and I couldn't figure out why. So I sat down with her.

A few feet away stood a sizable woman in Daisy Dukes and a tank top. She ordered a funnel cake as her short hair clung to her head, dripping under the yellow light. Behind her stood a short guy in cowboy boots, a ten-gallon hat and a belt buckle the size of Texas. Liz silently chuckled then said guys wore those belt buckles because they were compensating for something.

"Why do the little boys wear them then?" I said.

"Because their fathers are compensating for something." One side of her mouth turned up, but it only lasted a second, then she looked back at her music.

"Come on, Liz. Let's go."

I looked down at her. Her auburn locks curled in such a way that if they weren't held to her head, they'd bounce right off. I surveyed the crowd before I stepped away from the table. Liz clung to the edge of the shadow for a moment before following.

As we stepped onto the gravel path, I felt the dust settle between my toes. I knew that by the end of the night, a pale film would encase my feet, making my tan almost useless. Liz stood beside me gazing at her feet too, sighing at every opportunity.

We stood at one end of the large oval loop the path through the fair made. To our right, a long line of children stood to make their way through the House of Mirrors. I remembered going through the maze with Liz back in elementary school. That seemed like ages ago. Liz saw me staring at it. She crossed her arms and looked like a frightened rabbit ready to jump.

I knew what was coming. She'd say it was a waste of my money, spending twenty-five bucks on a neon pink bracelet for the rides. In fact, she probably wanted to go over to that line of kids and tell them to stare at the floorboards. That was the only way to get through the mirrored maze without making a fool of yourself. She probably imagined stacks of bills flowing out of kids' college funds and into the cashier's hands. Rigged games, useless junk, and bacteria-infested rides—that's what she'd call them.

I didn't want to hear it so I moved forward toward the food stands. Sometimes Liz couldn't see the magic and innocence of things. It might've

been because the kids treated her weird at school. Perhaps it was how the school administrators screwed her mom over to hire a cheaper replacement.

Maybe it was her father getting laid off. Whatever it was, the fair wasn't putting her in a better mood.

I stopped in front of one of the food stands. I could smell the greasy pizza and sticky cotton candy as it wafted through the air. Funnel cakes, lemonade, popcorn, and barbeque masked the terrible nacho cheese scent, and for that, I was glad.

“Want anything, Liz?”

She walked over and surveyed the area. The menus, sticky from candy-covered fingers, lined the sides of the booths. Her nose scrunched slightly. Then I followed her gaze to the prices. Sure, two dollars for a can of soda was pretty steep, but it was the fair and I decided to splurge. So while Liz looked on, I spent eight dollars on a Sierra Mist, a slice of pizza, and a bag of pink cotton candy.

I handed the cotton candy to Liz, and she hesitated before grabbing it, putting it behind her back, and walking away. We walked over to an empty bench and sat down. Liz had her headphones back on, and now I was forced to listen to some sort of instrumental music as it blared out her ears. It didn't sound like Bach, but it was something melancholy. If only Liz invested in some Ben Folds. Heck, George Strait would be better than this, but not by much.

She pitched the cotton candy next to me as I ate. We sat right in front of a small children's roller coaster shaped like a dragon. It was a cool ride, in fact, if I hadn't been two feet taller than the requirement, I'd have ridden it, with or without Liz.

I slurped the soda and nibbled the pizza slice, focusing on not dripping the grease down my white tank top. However, I failed miserably, and now a bright orange drip stain defaced the purity of my chest. I cursed loudly, and turned to see if Liz heard, but she wasn't paying attention. She stared at something else, and I followed her gaze.

A cute couple stood about twenty feet from us, chatting coyly. He wore a green and white letter jacket with multiple pins on the front, and ovular patches on the arms. Her hair, brown with blonde streaks, was pulled into a ponytail. Her jean shorts and tank top left nothing to the imagination, but most of the girls at the fair dressed this way. Besides, by the way he looked at her, he didn't have to imagine much, if anything.

I ate as they stood and talked, wearing bright pink bracelets for the rides. He grabbed her arm and pointed towards the Zipper, then, after I had a few more bites, they left. I looked over at Liz, but she didn't move. Her

face fell as they left and for the briefest moment, a single tear formed in the corner of her right eye.

Liz bowed her head and stood up. She walked over to where the couple stood only moments before. She stood there while I crushed my pop can and tossed the grease-soaked plate. She walked back over to me and removed one earphone.

“Come on. Let’s get this over with.” She put the earphone back in, and marched forward towards the far end of the path. I grabbed the cotton candy and raced after her.

We passed over-enthused employees, trying desperately to coax people to play their games. Some involved shooting ducks, throwing basketballs, catching soda bottles with rings, while others involved mechanical horse races and electronic poker games. Each booth glittered with racing lights and fanciful clowns. Others were lined with stuffed animals of all shapes and sizes. Life-size purple bears, miniature Tweety birds, Hannah Montana pillows, and Elvis mugs. I marveled at the variety and vastness of the collection, but I had my heart set on one of the pillows shaped like a black Fender guitar.

I poked Liz and asked if she wanted to throw the rings with me, but she shook her head. She started to say something, but I turned around before she could. I marched over to a thin boy in a uniform and handed him five dollars. He exchanged it for three wooden rings, and while I threw them out into the ocean of pop bottles, I could hear an announcer exclaim loudly, narrating my attempts to acquire the guitar pillow. It hung just out of reach, taunting me. I tossed the rings but only the second one found its way to the pop bottle.

I could hear Liz now. I would walk over to her with my bottle of Shasta grape soda that I just won and cotton candy and I knew what she would say. She’d say I just spent five dollars on a fifty-cent bottle of soda. She’d say I spent eight dollars for a meal when she probably ate at home for free. I would hear about all her negative convoluted ideas about wasteful spending. But I didn’t want to; this trip to the fair was supposed to cheer her up.

I walked over to her with my head held high, soda and cotton candy in hand. She stared at me, then kept going. I had to commend her, though. This was probably the first time in years she’d said so little. For once, perhaps, she would see the forgotten magic and thrill that the fair brought to this pitiful county every year.

We passed rides, the Zipper, the Ferris wheel, and a merry-go-round. There were rides that spun so fast, kids stumbling out of them with

sunburned-pink cheeks. Others swung you upside down and at impossible angles, leaving passengers wobbly and disoriented.

Large strawberry-shaped rides, miniature trains, slides, and bumper cars enticed everyone. Small boys tried to bump each other repeatedly, despite the warnings of the fair employees. A couple walked out from the Spinning Strawberries, probably hiding in the strawberry rides to catch a quick cuddle and kiss. As I passed, the hopeless romantic in me smiled. It was the same couple I saw a little while ago. The blushing girl kept her chin down as she walked next to her boyfriend, who still clasped her arm.

As they walked away, I noticed a bag of pink cotton candy bouncing down the path in front of me. That was when I remembered Liz. I looked around. She wasn't there. I ran forward to see if the arm attached to the bouncing bag belonged to her. As I approached, I discovered a blond ponytail swinging above the rose-colored plastic. I looked down; an identical bag of sugary heart disease swung from my own hand. Groaning, I retraced my steps, passing kiddy rides, stuffed animals, and the food booths. Then I saw her.

He held her arm in his hand, and I could see the white of his knuckles from here. Liz kept turning her head away, curls dancing. He would say something inaudible, then she'd shake her head and he'd shake her. He stood a foot above her, watching her curls dance. The silent dialogue seemed more powerful than the audible. Liz finally mouthed a few words.

"Greg, let go." The echo of fist against face sounded throughout the park, but it paled in comparison to Liz's whimpering shriek.

"Let go of her!" I dropped the bottle of soda, making it burst and fizz onto the gravel below. It smashed into the airy cotton candy, popping the bag, and rolling it into a crusted loaf. I marched over to Liz, and his hand shot off her arm like a young boy touching a red-hot stove. He folded his arms as I stood in front of Liz, shaking with false confidence.

"Hey, we're doin' fine. So just go mind your own business, okay?"

I turned around. A dark red shape remained where his hand was, and it would be a purple bruise by morning. Her left cheek bore a bright red mark and her eyes were puffed up from crying. Dark red drops fell from her mouth, and brightened in color as oxygen hit them. I put my arm around her shoulder.

"Hey, didn't you hear me? We're fine."

I shot a glare at him before I said, "She is not fine. Stay away from her. You hear me? Stay away."

He sneered as he raised his fist above my head. Images of softball sized bruises and Liz in a battered women's shelter skewed my vision; I

closed my eyes and prepared for what came next.

“Is there a problem here?” The voice, accompanied by the crunch of gravel, stopped the fist, still high in the air. I opened my eyes just in time to see the monster lower it slightly, but it still pulsed with rage. A man with the golden badge and a utility belt stood calmly by my side and evaluated Liz. “Is he bothering you?”

I wanted to scream, “Yes!” as loud as I could. I wanted to tell this man, who could easily send this freak away in handcuffs, that he hurt Liz. I wanted to tell him that he’d hit her. I wanted to tell him everything, but I couldn’t.

“Restraining order.” These two words, this fragmented sentence, this phrase came out of a bloody mouth and bruised jaw, and I had never been so relieved. He slapped handcuffs on the bastard and walked him away. Another officer sat us down and as we gave a full report.

She sat on the bench in front of the dragon coaster. Her auburn ringlets drooped and swayed in the wind. I walked up behind her and sat. She didn’t look at me, but now unmistakable wet streaks trailed down her dimpled cheeks. She stared straight out to the spot where the couple once stood. I set the clump of pink sugar next to her, looking from the spun sugar to her swollen face. I didn’t know what to make of it.

I put my hand on her shoulder, just like they do in the movies. She turned and looked at me. No more tears fell, but the streaks still remained. She took a deep breath. She looked away from me again.

“Did you see that couple over there? You probably noticed her cute little outfit and his letter jacket and greasy hair. I saw the bruises on her arms and bite marks on her legs; reapplied mascara and puffy eye, his hand like a vise on her arm. I saw myself in her, and Greg in the boy.”

Liz looked down at the cotton candy bag. “I bought this same cotton candy, and he ate it. I bought us tickets to ride the rides. He beat me in the shadows behind the tents for wasting all his money. I got a restraining order a week later.” Liz looked at her lap and fell silent. Her words hit me like icicles in my chest, and suddenly the fair mocked me.

The tasteless food, the boring rides, and the manipulating employees with their rigged games played with my emotions. They tried to reel me in with multi-colored lights that ran around their booths. Booming voices from microphones attempted to guilt trip me into shooting the cardboard duck and throwing basketballs. And amidst children’s false screams on the Ferris wheel and the creepy clown music used in tacky horror films, was me.

We got up to leave and walked past the laughing children, the

stressed out 4-H moms, and the preoccupied dads. They all smiled. These people lingered in their happiness as we passed by with blank stares. Kids waited all year to go see the rides and eat cotton candy. Parents laughed as children's college funds raced into the grimy hands of some fat manager smoking a cheap cigar. They escaped to a world where nothing rang true and the only genuine reminder of their reality was future credit card bills and a hangover. In some cases, even lung disease and purple bruises.

We walked past them to the eerie entrance. Liz trudged through the gate, and when her head was turned, I pitched the cotton candy lump, bag and all, in the dumpster. As we lugged ourselves up the hill, the pickup full of drunkards hollered. Ellie sat in her parking space as I manually unlocked the doors. The second Liz got in and checked for her purse, I put Ellie in gear and drove. The dust and carnival lights mixed to give my rearview mirror a rosy glow. I grimaced and floored the gas pedal, flying into the purple night.



Valley of Tranquility

Monique Belitz

Catch and Release

D. Gilson

I.

Mike knew the Technicolor
possibilities of pan fish
 and cruising through
 Lawson's Cove
on Stockton Lake he taught
me, his little brother,
 their possibilities, too.

II.

Dad's just back from Vietnam, married to Ginger still. My half-sister—they are all halves—shows me a picture of our father and her mother on the beach in Puerto Rico, a damp Tuesday in April. They seem comfortable, but he knows she is sleeping with his brother, was the whole time he was holed up in rice patties and field hospitals, in fox hole charley alpha. A transistor radio plays—wouldn't it be nice if we could wake up in the morning, when the day is new and after having spent the day together, hold each other close the whole night through—but the tide is still, frozen at the serrated edge of the chrome print.

III.

Ben, please write and tell me every goddamned thing please lend me a cigarette and give me a drink of your whiskey friend please make me listen really listen to what you have written because the world may never know our valor may never know our mothers and these Ozark Mountains which were never really mountains at all.

IV.

Mama had four sons. Marty killed himself, Mike tried. Randy and I stood at the edge of
 the pond skipping rocks.

VII.

We rent two canoes and put in at Aker's Ferry to float among the drunken American youth for eight miles or so, among calls from men giving beads to women who show their breasts, fleshy, young and clad in Star Spangled print. Perhaps I want to see them, too, for pure entertainment and nothing else but Jesus is floating among us, someone says. Shit, we just paddle forward. Kyle is getting married soon, Nathan is moving to Washington, Scott still works at the church where we all met and I'm figuring out what it all means, having forgotten our food and beginning to feel a bit delirious. We stop at Arrow Rock Cave. Frightened by the strong current, I stay behind while the boys go spelunking.

VIII.

When Mike and I go fishing
he is quieter now. At first,
I try to fill this
 but let silence enter
the boat. I cast my line,
catch little when left to my own
devices except the occasional
oak branch or lazy bluegill.

At JCCC
Andrew West

a party
begins,

in a tearoom:
where whites

yellow, pictures
captured

of a photograph:
pray for

a hanging,
nails

Insect House

Dan Horsby

There are cockroaches in the kitchen.
They leave shit in the coffee cups
and hide below the drain, waiting for me to leave.
I wash every plate twice.
I have already eaten too many of their eggs.

There are spiders in the attic.
They peek through the vents
and haunt me like hangmen
until night invites them to dine downstairs.

There are fleas in the living room,
waiting in sleeper cells beneath the carpet
to throw themselves on me in red grenades
faster than I can pick them off.

There are mosquitoes in the bathroom.
They hide under the rim of the toilet
and make babies in the bathwater.
I cannot shit without courting the West Nile virus.
I cannot shower without risking Malaria.

The carpet twitches like millions of antennae.
The furniture molts periodically.
They are becoming the walls, the floor, the pipes, the ceiling.
Soon legs will wriggle from the windows,
and the rooftop shingles will melt into wings.
Someday the house will scurry off
behind the stoves and refrigerators of the universe.

There are flies in my bedroom.
At first, the buzzing kept me awake.
Now it is a lullaby.
I wake wondering how many of them I have eaten in my sleep.
I crawl into bed wondering how many of them will eat me
when I sleep.

Lemons

Andrew Bales

Amanda hiccups from the doorway. This is the fourth time she's hiccupped today, the twenty-sixth time this week. I reach for the desk drawer, and from the corner of my vision, I see her red wooden clogs shifting on the carpet. They make a warm sound, like wood shaped by fine-grain sandpaper. Watching them lift and lower, imagining her stretching toes, I forget to wonder how long she's been standing there. Held at her slim hip is the green file folder. I finally stop wondering where my crunch statistics have gone and start worrying about what's coming. She holds up the file of notes I've made as I watched her at reception, opening that small metal tin from her purse, slipping yellow lemon candies into her mouth.

"You read them?" I ask.

She works over another candy in her mouth, nodding yes.

"Last year you averaged two minutes and thirty-five seconds from start to crunch," I say and she jerks her head, swooping her bleached bangs across her face. "I disregarded the non-chew occasions."

She tucks the candy into her cheek. I don't tell her how much I enjoy the muted clink of it against her bottom molar.

"You've been keeping this for two years?" she asks.

"Statistical practice," I say.

She tosses the folder on my desk. "That's all?"

"That's all," I say.

She looks more frustrated than when she appeared and crunches hard on the lemon drop. Just then, Pop's head comes around the corner about five feet up.

He says, "That C.N. report?"

"Ya?" I say, and Pop nods like I've answered something and is gone.

These are the kinds of exchanges I find myself a part of with Pop, whose real name I've forgotten or never learned. Within thirty seconds, he'll bustle off with a stout authority and I'll have agreed to something, presumably, but to what exactly I'm never certain. Usually it doesn't come up again, but sometimes I get Top Boss towering in the doorway with folded dress shirt arms over whatever I've gotten myself into.

Amanda huffs and spins, pulling the hem of her skirt in a wild orbit and leaves me to wonder if she's found the other files—bathroom breaks, popped neck, yawns. My desk has plenty of file space. My first day, Top Boss made it a take-your-teens-to-work day. He set Pop and me to work

with his sons to haul the back section of his old executive's desk into my office. As we turned the corner, the boys' knees wobbled and Top Boss looked down upon the scene like a camp leader, instructing, "Easy with that, boys. Watch the corners."

Just the three of us work under Top Boss, who we could call Boss (there's no middle or low boss), but don't. We work insurance. Amanda receives calls and I move paper. We're unsure what Pop does, but it must be something important because a business couldn't stay afloat on our contributions alone. I spend much of my time watching Amanda. I sit in an uncomfortable chair that coaxes me into delusions of doctors' offices. I imagine I've been handed my number and shown to my seat in the corner of the waiting room. For long stretches I live in this corner, skimming *Time* and *US Weekly*, reading about unremarkable medical advancements and celebrity nip slips. Only aware of dry mouth and strong thirst, I thumb through pamphlets about diabetes and whisper to my mental bookie. He's seated beside me, crunching and cramming tidbits of information, littering the floor with illegible, contradictory scribbles about television news tickers, screen shots of Paula Zahn and Wolf Blitzer, gobs of probabilities.

The office does that to you. Originally the room must have been a storage closet: a windowless, austere white cube with a low ceiling and walls lined with large metal filing cabinets, which seem even grander in relation to the ceiling. Amanda said they say to make your office your own, so I brought in an energy efficient fan and a solar calculator that feeds off the humming fluorescents. I lined the top of the filing cabinets with two decades of *The Guinness Book of World Records*. I put an easel with a pad of paper in the corner for quick charts and graphs. I tacked up a poster of Pi written out to 10,000 places and wrote at the bottom, "Life's a Numbers Game." A motivational poster of sorts.

Amanda even brought me a potted plant. I steadied a creaky, wheeled office chair as she teetered in those clunky red clogs, hanging the plant from a fluorescent. It died quickly. But for a week it hung over my desk dangling sprouts of green over my head. As the people on the floor above us—we were unaware of what happens outside our floor—shuffled about, doing whatever it was that they were doing, dirt sprinkled on my desk, dusted me in earth.

Amanda doesn't smell like earth at all. She's all lemon. And Friday, following the green folder incident, she comes into work with lip gloss

and a makeuped face like a sixth grader who's been gifted her first compact. Every time she plucks out a lemon candy she looks me eye to shadowed eye and I freeze till she looks away. When I feel her gaze avert, I write down the time in her file.

On Monday, I get to work an hour before the others—before the computer exhaust fans wave dust bunnies like flags and the phones vibrate on the wood laminate and the fluorescent lights whine till I forget there ever was silence. I punch in my door code—1991, a palindrome—and shake grounds into the coffeemaker. It looks like, and almost has the smell of, potted dirt. I pour in six cups of tap water and wait for it to bubble before I start in on my newspapers. The break room is the only place with a lamp that still uses an incandescent bulb. I don't know what I'll do when it finally gives. You can't find light like that, the familiar soft yellow of my childhood, anymore.

In statistics, I find myself fully involved. Breaking the world into pieces the mind can digest, into small truths, is relieving. I find that my mind has an insatiable appetite. That bookie within is greedy and does not sleep. I unfold my paper across a low, white table. Small truths can be found in the most mundane places like the *USA Today* reader polls, which sit all cozy in the corner of the front page. Peppermint is the candy most likely to be used as a street name. The penguin is this year's most exploited animal in commercial art. Senior citizens enjoy ice cream over hard candy. Endless.

I top off a styrofoam cup and hold it with both hands, waiting for it to cool. I wonder if Amanda enjoys lemon sherbert over hard candy. Somehow this idea mixes with the smell of coffee and tickles my brain. I take that first sip, the one that burns, and start to wonder what the truth of Peppermint Street has to do with me. I think on Peppermint Street. I can't imagine it. I'm no postal worker. Ungodly suicide rates, cruising around in that little counterintuitive, sliding-doored death trap. Small wheels. Spine warping messenger bags. Cold-handed winters. How can I piece it together?

During lunch I close my office door—the employee handbook says this is prohibited from eight to eleven forty-five and then from twelve-thirty to five—and wish that the *USA Today* would publish statistics that corresponded to my interests and locale. Norman, Oklahoma, women under fifty, or over fifty and unwrinkled, or pleasantly wrinkled. Name preferences: Josh is dead last at 5%. Cliché. They enjoy Jon, but not Jonathan, Zach but not Zachary. Most of all, they like Lemonde. Could Amanda truly prefer the name Lemonde over my own—which I am fortunate enough to have abbreviated to Jon? This would be a testament to the women of Norman, their yearning for the exotic—the European greaser with the Mini Cooper,

rounded voice, and body odor described as musky. I often imagine that if I had been born in Europe I wouldn't have anything to worry about, woman-wise. Mini Cooper stuffed with Oklahoma girls all admiring my chest curls and Euro musk. With these localized statistics at my disposal, I imagine I could slick back my hair, go down to O'Kelly's, find a pleasant fifty-something, introduce myself as Lemonde and wind up reading the *USA Today* in someone else's breakfast nook in the morning.

All of this, the *USA Today* researching and publishing this material and me cutting out the information like coupons to collect and arrange like puzzle pieces, somehow seems more reasonable than walking over to Amanda's desk and asking her about the clogs or lemon drops or why don't we have lunch somewhere else for a change.

* * * * *

It's two weeks or so before she has gotten the hang of the lipstick and makeup. Even Pop notices. I hear him at reception say, "So, makeup?" Amanda looks pristine. No more blotches or shine. I want to tell her it takes much of the fun out of looking at her, but don't. I just start a new makeup file and smile when she gives me the eye to eye. But today, after her third lemon candy of the day, she wobbles into my office wearing black heels and sits on the corner of my desk and works to cross her legs. She makes pleasantries about my Pi poster and *Guinness* books, and I keep on my full-teeth smile while slipping her makeup file out of sight. Right then, to my surprise, Amanda leans in and asks me to go out on a date.

Date might be the wrong word. She suggests we arrange a place and time to meet outside of work. We are coordinating a non-work-related interaction. But it is in this moment, as she leans in close, giving me a sense of envelopment in her lemon aroma, I notice her thick-framed brown glasses are bi-focals. I whisper that I've read contact lens sales were up the last quarter. "Maybe you should invest in a pair, or a stock," I say.

She giggles and her magnified, clear blue eyes bulge and split behind the bi-focals. A woman has not giggled at me, under favorable circumstances, for years. I stop myself from telling her that I wasn't kidding in the slightest. This surprises me.

She's four years older than me. This makes me more comfortable. It acts as a natural counterbalance to my lack of physical appeal. You can't have an imbalance of flaws in a relationship and expect it to continue in a healthy, solid rut. Amanda is at the runt end of the pleasantly wrinkled breed, bordering on a standard senior wrinkle, but her cheeks are high and

lovely and her eyes shine when they escape her bangs. Her teeth are straight and flush and I wonder at times how she manages to squeeze floss between them.

I see no reason not to consider her a viable prospect for romance. She has an orderly way about her. She maintains many commendable habits. She always sets her stapler back in her desk drawer after use. She straightens and alphabetizes her files. When she talks on the phone, she does so quietly while gently tapping her clogs on the floor, keeping rhythm to her end of the conversation. This gives the illusion that she speaks in a kind of natural poem, tapping stresses with some beautifully aloof scansion.

She holds tight to that idea of Swedish descent and flaunts that assumed heritage in the form of bright red clogs with hand-painted white horses along the side. I don't know where she contracted this identity, but amazingly, I feel no need to deny her of this innocent fraud.

Pop once brought up her last name, saying, "Smith, yes?" But it was an accounting thing that I pretended not to have overheard. I reason that illuminating cognitive dissonance is best kept out of the workplace. So her name is treated like a disability. I thought I was being artful enough one day when I asked, "Have you always been Swedish?" But she must have caught my drift before it got anywhere because she said she needed to place a call. Amanda does not place calls. She only receives and redirects them. After quickly jotting the time of her next bathroom break I placed the sticky note I'd written—Roll call must have been tough for you. I'm sorry.—on her desk. It was difficult to be certain from that distance, but she looked watery-eyed for the next few minutes.

I have no such disability. I have only a stigmatized belly, which is often assumed to be a sign of incompetence. Top Boss thinks my stomach bears witness to my lack of self-control. Don't give Jon the original copies of anything, the idea runs. Might lose them in his flab, or worse, his ass crack. Or worse still, grab his chest and keel over the wheel at a drive-through while asking for extra ketchup. Then they'd have to rummage through the filing half of an executive's desk, through all my personal effects in search of the originals. That would reduce morale—having to see me as a person. A dead person.

I have considered adopting an irregularity. Decorate with Christmas paraphernalia year round and learn to look happy. Then maybe they'll just think I had some sort of Santa complex, a fat man into distributing community spirit and good tidings. Fat with a cause. That might work or get me fired. It could be healthy. I imagine a good number of people every year get the boot for overstepping the norms of holiday celebration in the workplace.

Holidays invariably bring out the loons.

* * * * *

On date night, I'm nervous and leave the house too early. I wait around the block for ten minutes, licking my finger and cleaning the dash of my Corolla. It's hot out, so I roll down the windows and take deep breaths. I remembered to remove the sticky note that Amanda had returned, with my own bathroom times and her address, from the rear view mirror before walking up to her door. It opens and she is glowing. I tell myself to keep cool and suggest that we get a move on.

When we get to the restaurant, some bar and grill that we could have walked to, I vocalize my worry about the chance of rain, but Amanda insists we take a chance and sit on the patio under a Bud Light parasol. The squeaky wooden patio is empty, and its old boards shift under our feet. The kitchen door behind us is close enough to hear the occasional "order ups" and dishes clanking inside. I study her small, shiny cross, half tucked into her white blouse. Our waiter hasn't shown himself. He hasn't done the footwork to break the ice. This will impact his tip. I point at her cross and she looks down at her chest.

"I gave God a fair go," I begin. "Devoted a few solid days examining the probabilities, read some C.S. Lewis and Kreeft."

She raises an eyebrow. I realize I needed to pull my logic together.

"C.S. Lewis," I press on, "is a persuasive man, but he relies on too many assumptions. Someone should really teach him the value of numbers. You can't argue with numbers. You can't debate them. You can't be vague with them. Business," I note, "is all about the numbers for a reason." She twirls the cross around with her fingers and nods slowly.

"I can't say that God doesn't exist," I elaborate. "I can only say that C.S. Lewis can't prove it, no matter how much he beats around the moral bush. I believe that if God exists, he has no home in the sky or in the depths of the heart. God could exist in some type of universally complex super computer housing some unthinkable mathematical equation. We could all be walking numbers and codes with a mega God-computer running the show. That I could buy into." I pause for a reaction, but she has become involved with her menu. "Given the data to support it, of course."

She looks up, asking, "So, what'll you have?"

I consider it. "I don't know yet."

She wiggles the plastic menu at me and we go about our selections. As we look at the laminated sheets, I begin to think I would be lucky if she

were a devout Christian as her accessories lead me to believe. If things go sour, a woman in fear of her creator stays in an unharmonious marriage twice as long at minimum. I feel a near contentment sitting across from an almost assured traditionalist. She is nearly smiling and sits politely in a button-up blouse tucked into a skirt with sharp creases, like it has been waiting in a drawer for an occasion. I flutter for a moment in the idea that I constitute an occasion.

A teenage waiter in a ratty collared t-shirt shuffles to our table and addresses me as you and Amanda as the lady. I pointed up toward the parasol and say, "One for you and one for the lady." He doesn't understand. He squints at me and glances up at the underside of a parasol. Amanda gives him the plain English he needs: two Bud Lights. He asks to see the lady's I.D. They have their giggle and he leaves us alone.

I find it hard to keep my concentration. Amanda is relaying something about her day, but my mind is busy running the odds of the pimply waiter getting laid that night, and by whom, and for how long. My eyes roam up and over Amanda's shoulder, onto the small patch of gray coming in fast from due west. My thoughts sink into that well-trodden groove of doubt.

Here I am, defying the odds with the simple act of being on a seeming date with a lemon-fresh, all around fine traditionalist. Yet, instead of living in this, I am involved with the idea that the teen waiter is probably making as much money as me, minus health benefits. And it is neither of these things, but seeing at once what is happening that pulls within until I feel something in me drop, like a part of my resentment has broken off and slid down into my stomach. As I imagine it now, there is no clear end-game. No route laid out that is screaming to be taken. Maybe the numbers lack a definitive end. Perhaps I have thought of Pi wrong all along. Maybe it isn't the glorifiable missing link of the puzzle. Maybe life is one big Pi, an unsolvable equation, a string of numbers to ride on and on until you fall off. Those westerly clouds are rolling in more quickly than I realized. They reach us and crack open. We tuck our feet under the table as the rain makes a steady thum thum thum overhead and trickles off the edges of the plastic umbrella, closing us into a bubble of space. We lean in toward the center.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"You're alright," she says and smiles a genuine smile.

"I don't think so," I say.

I hear what sounds like a bag of marbles spilling out onto the deck. Amanda lets out a screech and grips her purse tight against her chest. But it's too late. We watch as hundreds of little yellow lemon drops bounce

across the patio. They roll toward the shouts of the kitchen, spread thin as they bounce and flirt with the rain, many hopping into wide cracks between the planks before finally settling. The patio all around us glows like an overcast sky dotted neon yellow. Amanda stares wide-mouthed and eyed as the candy becomes yellow puddles with artificial dye.

I try to imagine what could have led to this. How could this bulk of candy even fit in a purse and how could she carry it without the sound of rustling candy, without slouching to one side to compensate for the load? Any company that manufactured such a bag couldn't help being featured somewhere. Where had I been?

I realize that I, too, have a gaping mouth. I sit with Amanda in this bubble of space that separates us from the kitchen and waiter, pulls us so far from Pop and Top Boss that their images become laughable. We sit in the static of rain with the parasol above us, staring back at one another with undisguised awe. I want to hold her hand, and to my surprise I reached out and place mine over hers. And to my further surprise she curls her fingers. I feel her fingertips sliding over my palm. They move slow and soft.

The clouds pass and the rain slows to a steady patter. I motion to our waiter, who looks agreeably pitiful taking shelter under an adjacent umbrella, pretending not to notice that the lady has needed assistance. I have him fetch us another round as we absorb the new, peaking sun. We wait in a slowed time, breathing in the warm, lemony deck air.

“The Devil’s beating his wife,” she says.

I think on this. “No surprise. He’s the Devil,” I say, and she gives my hand a squeeze.

Our teen waiter strides back out, hopping over the lemony water flowing away from the base of our table. He scurries with our drinks, hair flat and damp. I decide to forgive him. Just a soggy teen with no health benefits. We drink Bud Light pints at a steady pace, watching the progression of our river and waiting for our drink to catch up with us.

Then we’re looking at each other as if we’re unsure if we feel it. The planks vibrating under our feet. The deck shifting, humming like soggy wooden strings. At our feet there’s a mob of brown snakes forcing their way through the cracks. We stand up, Amanda clutching her purse and my arm, and back away toward the kitchen. The boards whine and bend. Some crack and split as the root structure anchors itself. A mass of shiny brown trunk expands and rises up from the deck into the air, branching out ten feet above our heads.

It’s like a plastic motel lobby tree that has finally given up hope of change and forced the transformation upon itself. The shiny trunk sprouts

branches that extend over the patio table, over our craned necks and big eyes, over the gaping mouth of our teenage waiter and over the cooks and the manager who peer out from behind the patio door.

From the branches grow shiny green leaves, plastic and ornamental. Amanda's hand squeezes tight on my arm. Small green spheres are slowly expanding and yellowing like Granny Smiths re-forming into large oblongs. The clouds are gone and light shines off its slick surface. The color lightens more and more until they are a bright yellow and heavy enough to sag the branches. The tree has transitioned and is stocked with basketball-sized candy lemon drops that bow the limbs and have the kitchen staff clutching their prep knives.

A few drops weigh enough to snap from the branches and roll across the patio. Amanda isn't squeezing my arm anymore. She is click clacking over to one of the giant pieces that rolled our way. The branches might break at any moment and come crashing down on her. The manager might sic his knifed employees on Amanda, screaming about property rights, ordering his employees to load all the drops into the walk-in. But Amanda doesn't seem afraid at all. She kneels down beside one and puts her nose to it and yells at me to come have a look.

"Smell that?" she asks. I kneel beside her and breathe in deeply like we've made it to a coast and just stepped out of the car. I do smell it, the overwhelming citrus. Before I can think otherwise, I've licked it and she has, too. I want nothing more than to continue. Devour the whole thing if it takes weeks. But there's a crack above and another weighty lemon drop falls and splits a board beside us.

I pull Amanda away from the tree. She grabs hold of my shoulder and kicks off her red clogs. And then it's strange. Without thinking about a thing, my body's moving. I move without the burden of commentary. I'm running and pulling my keys from my pocket. I'm unlocking the door and turning the ignition. I don't wonder how many lemon drops might fit in the back seat, the trunk. I only know that some will. I'm hitting the gas and pulling alongside the patio. I don't think how these things came to be or how many drops are enough to satisfy us or if we will ever find them again. I just pull the Corolla around and jump out and pop the trunk. There's no time for anything but catching the giant candies, like neon bowling balls, that Amanda tosses over the small fence. Just fill the car with more and more before the manager or the wait staff or someone else tries to get in our way.



Icy Leaf
Paula Ebert

Through the Lens of a Face Shield

Emily Schomaker

The early morning wind swept under my helmet as I approached seventy miles per hour and within minutes the lower half of my face was numb. The waking sun seemed to yawn and stretch as its beams caught my eye between shadows cast down from roadside trees. As I cruised down the old, line-less highway, the trees emitted a heavenly glow with the fresh sun light catching their multicolored leaves of green, orange, red, and yellow. The dew glistened on the rolling pastures of grass and fields of crops. It was as if a fairy had come in the night and sparkled the world to make a beautiful Halloween morning. The cows grazed; the goats roamed; the farmers stayed in bed a few extra hours. The countryside had awoken that morning in content tranquility.

Living creatures stopped and observed us if they were distant enough to feel safe. To them we were odd humans sitting atop loud machines, interrupting their peace. Those close to the broken edges of the pavement like rabbits, raccoons, and squirrels scurried away when we approached. To them, the noise was something created by Satan himself, something so monstrous it could kill them with a heart attack. To me, it was therapy.

The engine roared beneath me. Exhaust thundered out of the pipes. My entire body shook with the energy of a beast, the beast in my control. I gripped the vibrating handlebars and occasionally squeezed the clutch and brake with my leather-gloved hands. The more I dropped my right wrist, the faster my problems were left behind in that dinky town, the faster my hair blew behind me, the colder my face became. Papers, tests, rent, work, bills. They were all out of my mind. My left foot travelled through the gears: down one, up two, up three, up four. My right foot reluctantly pressed the brake to decelerate only when necessary while its partner descended the gears accordingly. I was free. I was peace-filled. I was happy. My smile forced my constrained cheeks upwards as I grinned the entire way from Humboldt to St. Paul.

We approached the small, rural, Southeast Kansas town in about an hour. My small two and a quarter gallon tank was begging for some fossil fuel nourishment. I signaled with my hand and made a left turn on my vintage bike. Those with turn signals used them, of course, and the five of us occupied all three pumps at the gas station. We talked about the beautiful weather and the value of our leathers during the chilly October morning as gasoline filled our machines with life.

Inside the gas station, lines of camouflage filled the isles. Opening day of duck season had brought all of the gun-bearing Kansans out of their homes early that morning. They didn't need gasoline for their adventure. No, they needed snacks. My high school classmate, Justin, happened to be one of them. He was sitting in his parked truck looking at his phone, texting, I'm sure. My uncle, P.J., loved picking on Justin. P.J. was only three years mine and Justin's senior, the same age as Tyson, Justin's older brother. P.J. and Tyson ran around together during high school. As a result, Justin found himself at the butt of P.J.'s jokes as well as Tyson's. Although P.J. had only a couple of inches to Justin's height, he out-weighted the youngster by at least thirty or forty pounds.

P.J., a six-foot, bulky, 200 pound man, approached Justin's white Ford Ranger. He wore a black stocking cap on his head, sunglasses over his eyes, and a black leather bandana that covered his mouth and neck with an upside-down triangle. On it was a cracked skull with crossbones and the words "Road Rage." His leather jacket was zipped up and his black leather gloves covered his hands. Black leather chaps were layered over his blue jeans. His steel-toed boots covered his feet. P.J. walked tall with his chest out toward the small truck. He was a walking tower of darkness; the only flesh showing was his cheeks.

When P.J. arrived at the truck's driver's side, he was able to look down on the roof. Justin, not knowing anyone had approached his truck, sat in the driver's seat and kept his eyes focused on his phone.

BANG. BANG. BANG. P.J. beat his fist on Justin's driver's side window. Justin whipped his head up and stared at the unidentified biker with eyes the size of quarters. P.J. raised his hand and pointed with four calm, but abrupt and demanding motions to Roll. The. Window. Down.

Justin cracked the glass and quickly said, "Yeah?" in a nervous voice. P.J. pulled down his bandana, took off his shades, and let out an intoxicating belly laugh. P.J.'s shoulders slouched back into their normal position, and Justin finally exhaled, smiling just a bit.

"What's wrong, pussy? You scared?" P.J. teased, not meaning any harm.

"I didn't know it was you," Justin stammered out, now with a big smile. The stereotypical bad-ass-biker had turned out to be a common face from home.

They exchanged a few short words while I finished gassing up.

I had to admit P.J. could be intimidating, especially in leather from head to toe. The only way he could have looked scarier was if he was at a “dim lit” bar, characteristic of cliché motorcyclist images. He could have easily passed as a member of a bike gang by the way he acted and was dressed. Instead, he was a lighthearted jokester playing off his image, conscious of the preconceptions many people had. I felt glad to be on the same side as that ornery big kid. After all, Justin was initially pretty scared.

I walked up to the Ranger for a quick chat. Luckily, the guns were in the back, unloaded with sixteen dead ducks. I wouldn’t call it smart to scare someone with firearms, but P.J. never thought twice about the risk of disaster. Soon Joab, another high school classmate, came out of the gas station. He was Justin’s hunting partner. Justin deceitfully called in the prey with murderous intent, and Joab made them fall from the sky like missile stricken airplanes. Joab was extremely proud of his kill: four teal and one shoveler. He had hit limit on the opening day. Three other hunting buddies were inside. They were responsible for the remaining limp ducks.

It was time to head out once again. I departed my old friends and joined my family in our cluster of motorcycles. We formed a long, staggered line down the right side of the highway. We arrived at the Harley Davidson Training School in Frontenac, Kansas about 30 minutes later.

First Gear

“What in the heck is that thing?” a man asked me as I pulled off my helmet.

“It’s a Sportster,” Tom said.

“What year is it?”

“It’s a ‘78,” I replied.

“Vintage. Cool. I like the seat. Shows character. What’s it run?”

“1000 cc. Had it ridged when we first bought it, but Dad found the shocks. It makes the ride a whole lot smoother. It’s worth it even though I can’t sit flat foot. I hear we’ll need ‘em once we hit the Oklahoma line.”

I let my dad finish answering the questions about my bike from onlookers and went inside the Harley-Davidson Training School to see my little brother, Billy. He was working registration with the other first year students.

“Hey, Bill,” I greeted him as the warm air and scent of black coffee filled my nostrils. My boots squeaked on the freshly waxed black and white checkerboard floor.

“Hey,” he quietly replied.

“So this is it, huh? I’ve never been able to make it down here and

see your school. Manhattan has me running like crazy.” My eyes were drawn to the Harley Davidson orange lines painted on the white walls.

“Yep. This is it. Wanna see my work station?” Billy asked with excitement shining in his eyes. For being a quiet boy all of his life, motorcycles could really get him talking.

We pushed through heavy “Authorized Persons Only” doors and entered the shop. Two hundred motorcycles filled the floor space and engines were stripped on work tables. Rectangular work stations where each student completed assigned maintenance and repair jobs on the practice bikes divided the huge garage into parallel rows. Personalized tool boxes of all colors identified each student’s station. Billy’s station couldn’t be missed. In it sat a four and a half foot bright orange Snap-On toolbox with the letters S-C-H-O-M-A-K-E-R sprawled across the front. He proudly presented the engine he had been working on during his lab, exposing its innards. We browsed and looked at some bikes, and then Billy showed me the rest of his school (which consisted of only a few classrooms designed for no more than twenty-five students). It had only been in operation for five years. Although the school was small, it was very modern and specific to the program. Impressed didn’t begin to explain my reaction.

We made our way back to the registration area and met my dad on the shiny checkerboard floor. He paid for his own five poker hands and me and Billy’s two hands each. The hands consisted of only a piece of paper to be signed at every stop. At the end of the poker run, if the paper was signed three times (once at every stop) you could draw your poker hand and possibly win prizes.

Billy unloaded his bike from the red, single bike trailer while Dad and I joined the family crew by our bikes. Billy had driven to Frontenac early that morning to help out and took his bike so he could ride in the afternoon. We all dressed in our layers of leather and protective gear once again. I pulled on my silver helmet and boarded my one passenger dark grey Harley. Billy entered our group of five, and our pipes roared as we entered the highway on the way to our first destination. My small tank needed a refill again (as it did about every fifty miles) so we pulled into a gas station one more time before our actual journey began.

Second Gear

The gravel crackled under tires as we rolled into our first official poker run stop: Bill’s Cycle, Inc., on the south side of Pittsburg, Kansas. Other riders were sitting on their bikes in front of the business casually talking. The six in our group went inside to get our papers signed, showing we

made it to the first stop. Outside, I met a very interesting young man.

“How’s it going?” the college student asked.

“Oh, not bad. It’s warming up now. It was pretty brisk at nine this morning.”

“I bet. You in college?” he questioned as he stroked his red, untamed beard. His styled hair and name-brand clothing made his beard look like an intentional effort to look rough.

“Yep. Drove down from Manhattan to be here. My brother’s in the program. How about yourself?”

“I just moved to the area from Wichita. I’m studying plastics at Pitt. The science of it really interests me, but then again, I’ve always enjoyed science.” Now that he mentioned it, he did look like a smart fellow, the way he held his head straight and stood with great posture as if he were used to wearing slacks.

“Nice major. There’s a lot of money in it if you do it well. You here with some buddies?”

“No. I haven’t met too many people. I got an apartment by myself and live alone. I thought this run would be a fun way to spend Halloween.” Unfortunately for him, his face was the most unkempt of all the riders. Instead of blending in (like he imagined his facial hair would allow) he stuck out as an untrimmed fellow.

“Yeah. I’m not much into Halloween. This is an ideal October day for me. You staying around here after you graduate? I like the area, but Southeast Kansas doesn’t exactly have many opportunities for jobs.”

“Planning on moving to Colorado. I’ve always wanted to ride in the mountains. How about you? What you doing in school?”

“Studying to be an English teacher. I have no clue where I’ll end up, though. I’m just taking it one step at a time, you know?” My family began to mount their bikes. “Looks like we’re heading to the next stop. See you around.”

I had to let myself giggle at the appearance of the college student. As hard as he tried to look like other bikers, he should have just shown up as he normally looked instead of preparing his face for weeks. The bankers and teachers on the ride didn’t look much different from him (except they were shaved and trimmed, of course). On this ride, the fun was found in meeting diverse people that might not fit the biker stereotype but enjoyed riding just the same. Once again, our group of six sped south toward our next destination: Miami, Oklahoma.

Third Gear

It was evident we made it across the state line without the oversized “Welcome to Oklahoma” signs. The ride immediately became rough when we drove over the many buckles in the road. My grandpa’s new Yamaha handled the road as if it were no feat. My rugged bike bounced me off my seat a couple times, though. There was no way I would have had a healthy back without the shocks that were just recently added to my bike.

The Oklahoma curves were a refreshing change of pace to Kansas’ straight shots, and the highways were relatively clear with it being Halloween. When we made it to Miami, the amount of traffic was considerably larger than any we had seen that day. This didn’t pose much of a problem except for their screwy stoplights. A single traffic signal was suspended over an intersection by four cables that connected to tall poles on each of the corners. In a strange city with heavy traffic, these were extremely difficult to notice. There were lights on all sides of the single traffic signal, common to four-way stops. However, it was not a four-way stop-and-go. It was a regular red light.

Tom locked his rear break to avoid hitting the car entering the intersection driven by an old woman. My dad slid past him. His rear wheel jerked to the right slightly as it squealed. I slid to a stop between the two and everyone behind me made the appropriate accommodations for the surprise light and near collision. When the old woman passed, my dad sped through the intersection and pulled into an empty parking lot to confirm that everyone was OK and that no bikes needed repaired. Everyone except my grandpa followed him, still not realizing we were infringing upon the law. Once we figured out that we were the ones at fault for running the red light, the story just grew funnier and funnier as we laughed about our sudden fear and adrenaline rush.

We pulled out onto Miami’s road once again and made our way to the Route 66 Vintage Iron Motorcycle Museum. We parked our bikes as three boys of about eight years old waved and gawked at us. Well, not really gawked at us, but me rather, seeing that I was not a boy. I had not filled their expectations of a Harley rider. My blonde hair spilled from under my helmet and the shape of my breasts could be seen in my leather jacket. A blonde, busty girl did not belong riding her own Harley; I could read it on their faces, them not being old enough to learn how to conceal such awe yet. Rather than think about the feminist spiel I would normally plan to dish out, I simply waved as they pushed themselves away on their skateboards. After all, the weather was warming up, and it was too beautiful a day to spoil it with ignorant children.

I followed our group inside to have my paper signed again. We decided to take a tour while we were there and saw quite amazing historical artifacts. One of Evel Knievel's original helmets was on display, all scratched and tattered from one of his many crashes. The museum was filled with bikes from all over the world from all different time eras. There were bikes suspended from the ceiling. There were bikes on the floor. There were bikes lifted on displays. There were bikes refurbished to the original. There were bikes left rusted.

The scene in the museum didn't fall short of the treasures it held either. A replicated 1950's gas station decorated an area while memorabilia from Steve McQueen and Evel Knievel lined the walls with vintage riding gear and helmets. The oldest bike on display was a 1917 Harley Davidson with one of the first 1000 cc engines. The bikes had been used in World War I and were produced in a standard color of army green. One stood refurbished as it would have looked when it came off the line. Another stood rusted, boasting its battle scars.

After we took our time looking through a Harley Davidson walk through history, Billy and I returned to our bikes outside. The day was turning out to be stunning. The sun was shining and warming us all up. It was a great day to meet other riders and that was just what we did. A man was standing between mine and Billy's bikes looking in admiration. Everyone on the ride (except Billy and I) was riding new model bikes. Billy's bike, a completely refurbished, red and white '72 Sportster was getting oohs and ahs. My bike was getting chuckles and questioning looks. This wasn't because my bike was ugly; it was because it was different. It didn't look like anything on the market. It was defined as a work in progress, but very custom for sure.

"Nice bike. This yours?" The man asked me.

"Yep. It is."

"Really. Hmm." The man paused, looking to pinpoint exactly what he was questioning.

"How did you get it lowered so far?"

I answered the same questions everyone gave. "What year is that? How did you lower it? What's it run? You can handle that much engine?" But then he threw me a new one: "What are your plans for it now?" No one had bothered to ask me that before. No one expected me to have input on my bike. They always asked my dad, brother, or uncles, not the girl who rode it.

I spoke with bubbly enthusiasm. "We have it running great. It hits a flat spot in the top of fourth, but with cut off streets, it's the best we've had

it. The pistons are tuned just right. There's a small leak in the gas tank. You can see it there where the paint is starting to bubble. That'll be taken care of though when my dad and I repaint it this summer. Now that it runs, we can work on the cosmetics."

"You planning on keeping it vintage?"

"I want to keep the vintage seat for sure. I'm looking around for places that recover it but no one has been able to meet my needs so far. I'm going to keep the front fender off and my back fender chopped. I like the look. It won't stay dark grey, though. I'm planning on dark purple – almost black with large metal flakes. Then doing scallops in dark silver against the purple on the tank." I suddenly realized I hadn't let him speak much. I was so excited to share my ideas I had let common courtesies of conversation pass my mind. "What do you ride?" I asked, pathetically trying to recover.

"I have that blue Softtail. It's a smoother ride than these Sportsters."

"That's for sure."

Billy signaled to me that we were about to leave. I said goodbye and pulled on my helmet. I never got to talk long when I met someone interesting. My mouth just ran on, finally getting to have a say, instead of listening. I didn't even find out much about him. Oh, well. We were heading to Sonic for lunch, and I could do my talking there.

After I was served my burger and fries by an ironically dressed carhop in a stereotypical biker costume, I asked my dad about the man I had been talking to. My dad knew him.

"He's unemployed now. He used to be a Catholic priest."

"Why is he unemployed? We need priests around here."

"The Church wanted to re-station him, but his wife is a school teacher in the area and didn't want to leave her job."

"His wife?" I questioned in disbelief.

"Yeah. He was actually a priest in a different religion and had gotten married. Then he joined Catholicism and got special permission to become a priest with a wife and kids. Not everything is so run of the mill anymore."

He was right. Previously unusual things were now becoming common – like a comedic big biker, a science guy trying to fit in, a girl who could ride on her own, and a married Catholic priest on a poker run.

We rolled out of Miami in quest of better roads in Kansas (after another gas up for my small tank) and headed to the last big stop on the run.

Fourth Gear

County roads full of manure and potholes led us to Big Brutus outside of West Mineral, Kansas. The retired giant topped the scales, being eleven million pounds and sixteen stories high. It overlooked the country side of Southeast Kansas, frozen in its position. This stop was used mainly for a bathroom break and to get our papers signed. The chatty old women who volunteered to work the museum eyed all of the leather-comers as if they were already guilty of theft in their seldom-visited tourist attraction. When our bladders were empty and our third stop was signed, we went on our way to find a gas station in the sticks.

The gas station we found was ancient. The parking lot consisted of broken concrete, letters were falling off the faded red, almost pink, building, and the pumps looked like they survived the '60s. It was back to the old days where there was not an option to pay with a credit card, and consumers weren't required to pre-pay to avoid burglary. Trust was the basis of how these people lived. Farmers filled the parking lot as gas trickled into my tank with a high pitch sound as the drops splashed against the bottom of the tank. The rural fill station was in dire need of a fill up; their tanks (as mine) were running dry. Everyone there was kind despite the retired setting and didn't seem to mind that our vehicles of choice were incredibly different from their old rusted pick-ups.

P.J.'s speedometer became loose on his bike and had to be electric-taped down as a temporary fix. My old bike was running down, too. My battery was shot and an entire night of charging didn't even do me good. After slowly filling up the tank drip by drip, my bike wouldn't start. The engine wouldn't even turn over. "Great" was all I could think. My bike was growing just as tired as I was. Dad and P.J. push-started my bike. I had just enough juice to make it back to the Harley Davidson Training School in Frontenac for a break out of the cold autumn air.

About forty minutes later, our group made our way back to Pittsburg. On the outskirts of town, stoplights speckled the highway. The intersection we approached was empty but the roads were full in every direction. A female cop was sitting to my right waiting to make a right turn in the direction I intended to go. The light turned yellow. I pressed on my brakes but couldn't slow fast enough. I had to choose the safer action rather than risk a wreck trying to stop too fast at high speeds. I let off my brake and accelerated. I sped through the intersection just as the light turned red. The police officer turned right and followed me. All I could do was follow Tom who had also made it through the intersection. I watched in my mirrors for lights although I couldn't see any specific details. My bike vibrated the

mirrors to the point of dizziness if one looked into them too long.

I couldn't get a ticket; my diversion for my last speeding ticket would be revoked, and I would have given a hundred bucks away to Woodson County. Every illegal piece of my bike ran through my mind. I had no blinkers or muffler. I did not have legal pipes, but cut off streets instead. My mirrors weren't extremely secure. My headlight couldn't be turned on because of my low battery life, and to top it off, I had no speedometer or even an RPM gauge for that matter. I caught up to Tom and followed at a steady pace, hoping I was within the speed limit. At the next intersection, I merged into the left turn lane. The officer stayed right and drove right on past.

The rest of our group reunited with us and rolled into the Harley Davidson Training School together as a family. They teased me about running a red light in front of a cop, but I didn't care. It was all in fun since I didn't even receive a warning. The officer could have seen me press my foot and hand brake (that were both on her side) in an attempt to slow. After all, I did try. My dad said she just shook her head when I passed. Whatever it was, I was glad not to deal with a lecture and a fine. My back was aching from the long trip, and it was all I could do to pull in my stiff clutch for every shift. I was ready to be back in Frontenac for a short break before making the last hour and a half trip home.

Finally, Relief

My old bike had enough by the time we reached Frontenac. Since my brother hauled his bike to the school early that morning, my bike got a free ride home and took the place of Billy's on the small trailer. Because Billy's '72 Sportster was a bit too heavy for me, Grandpa agreed to ride it while I rode his Yamaha home. Billy, like that morning, pulled the trailer.

My eyes squinted as the sun lowered into my line of vision. The dusk air became even chillier as it circulated through my helmet and filled every crevasse of my tired face. For all the crap my Harley-riding relatives gave Grandpa, his Yamaha was an easy ride. I didn't have to brace myself for imperfections in the road anymore; I just glided right over them. My back was highly appreciative. Instead of hooking themselves onto a peg, both of my feet rested easily on the footboards. The windshield blocked a majority of the wind from hitting my chest, and I didn't need to grip the handle bars quite as hard. The clutch wasn't nearly as stiff as mine so even my left hand caught a break by riding the Yamaha home.

My problems returned to me as we rolled into Humboldt, finally home after the nine-hour trip. Now, however, they were not problems; they were just things to do that pertained to my everyday life. My homework

didn't seem as difficult. My fingers created a paper with magic touch. My checkbook was not in negative numbers after paying my bills, and work didn't seem so bad. The trip refreshed my spirit and deleted my anxiety as I noticed it did in all the types of people I met that day. Being more than a hobby, riding is a method of escape and letting go of stress for me. People of all types enjoy this sense of freedom (leathers, facial hair, male genitalia, weapons, and crime not required). I returned home feeling content and calm in body and mind, in sync with the peace-filled, autumn countryside.

The Massacre at No Gun Ri

Elisabeth Short

A Response to “Your Lullaby Will Find a Home in My Head” by Dario Robleto

Rain pattered steadily on our helmets as we sat on the bridge, guns loaded, staring lazily into space. We’d only been in this barbaric nation a month yesterday, and most of the cavalry yearned for home. Some of the men joked that I was home, but the customs and language looked just as foreign to me as they were to everyone else.

When they assigned me to the seventh cavalry, I knew someone had made a terrible mistake. People called it the “Immortal Cavalry” because of its famous history, and our reputation was nothing to scoff at. Our captain looked into my transfer, but there hadn’t been a mishap. So there I was, in one of the most famous regiments, on the front line of the first war since WWII with the toughest men I’d ever known, standing in the rain.

The men called me *baesinja*, because one of our POWs yelled it at me a few weeks earlier. Private Yates looked it up in his dictionary. It means “traitor,” and every time I heard it, a pang of guilt hit my stomach, even though it shouldn’t have. It was the first time I saw a Gook up close, and while the other men laughed at him, I stared. I never wished to see a mirror again.

But so far, it had been an easy war. Our regiment merely guarded the American border and listened for inaudible noises between the rain-drops. Sometimes a tree or bush moved in this way or that, but otherwise we sat and waited.

Some men would reread letters from girlfriends or wives. Others gnawed tobacco or attempted to puff cigarettes. Some men wouldn’t risk ruining their possessions, so they did nothing but sat and watched. I would pull out my wife’s hair. The simple inky black strands were woven and tied with a white bow that felt soft in my grubby hands.

Her large almond eyes dominated her other rather small features, and her hair fell perfectly straight to the small of her back. We’d only been married two months before I shipped out, but the night before, she braided her hair and gave me the token in my hand. I stuffed it back into my arm pocket and watched.

Shadowed specks moved in the hills a mile from where I sat and I watched as they neared. Some of the men slept in patches of wet grass on the hills nearby. The specks looked bigger now, and my heart thumped faster and faster until I was sure the others could hear it over the rain. They

were people. People from the other side. I reached for my M3 and stood up. This would be the moment to prove my worth. They ran towards us, fearless. I couldn't tell how many there were. There could be hundreds of them coming over that hill.

I looked back to see the rest of the men preparing their weapons. Apparently they paid more attention than I thought. I couldn't let them take credit for this. This might be my finest hour, and I would have to act fast to keep it that way.

As the first few approached, hands waving in the air, I wiped my hands unnecessarily on my pants. Colonel Custer yelled directions, telling us to hold steady and wait for a clear shot. We had one thing on our minds. The one thing training told us to remember: shoot first, ask questions later. They were North Koreans. They might be armed. They were no match for us.

My finger twitched around the trigger as I waited for Custer to give the go ahead. He started to yell, but I pulled the trigger. My whole body shook as my M3 pelted bullets into the bastards. The other men followed, and as night fell, bodies lay below the bridge, just short of the American line. We kept watch throughout the rainy night, until morning brought us sunshine and heat waves.

We followed as Colonel Custer led us down below to assess the damage. He didn't have a spring in his step like some of the men, but stomped, head down, jaw taut. I walked behind the others, and for the first time, they didn't call me *baesinja*.

When Colonel Custer stopped, so did we. Silence in the dry heat made everything still, and we stood there. Instead of Gooks, I saw a woman with a young boy in brown shorts curled in the fetal position next to her. Their clothes stuck to their skin from the night rain, and their eyes were open, gazing nowhere—motionless. More of them lay scattered about, and only a few of them looked old enough to be in any army.

I swallowed. My mouth didn't respond. Some of the men walked away, including the Colonel.

"Come, *baesinja*," he said. But I just stood there. One by one they walked away until only I remained. The clouds darkened in the west. I pulled out my wife's braid and looked at the woman with the boy. Her eyes looked like large almonds as I bent down to close them. I took her hair, and that of the boy's, braided them, and tied them with my wife's.

The Orange Burn that Sags Above Industry

Zachary Michael Powell

The orange burn that sags above industry
at night, while it claws in your chest with such
dreamlike talons among the graveyard-sea
emptiness of vast concrete in its touch.
Walking home in darkness, an owl in thought
on cracked sidewalks with hands deep in pockets
and chin in chest, to pass the wood-pole rot
of a calming buzzing lamp-blue socket.
A long ride in unfamiliar country,
gazing out for solitary farm lights,
imagining some early barn sentry
cock's monochrome soft glow, rusted tight.
Radiating outward, boldly breaking the stars;
a modern pillow warmth, headbulbs of passing cars.

Recalling St. Joseph Catholic Church

Andrew West

forgive me, for the hail
for the hour

of a: come to
we for

the sin
of thou

mary last
of graces

forgive me, for the will
for the womb

of a: pray for
our for

the fruit
of thee

father undone
of kingdom

forgive me, for the day
for the now

of a: give to
us for

the evil
of thy

jesus hallowed
of trespass

Lucy tempts: art
of, deliverance

leads: not to,
Charlie as it is

In and Out: Numbness in the Back Row

Matt Felzke

As I stepped out of my ragged Honda on the dark brick street in Kirksville, I felt miles away. No, I didn't feel any distance shorter than out of my own person. It was a Sunday in mid-October, and I was dressed up for a church service on the corner of Harrison and Mulanix. In the air, the first hint of an autumn scent took hold of me, and it was the first time I was going to a church service for myself since I was in high school.

I ascended the steps, my throat tightened, and I worried about where I would sit. I slowed my steps and quickened my eyes to scan the quaint, dimly lit sanctuary. I found a spot in the back row, and I walked myself in front of a piano to get to my coveted anonymity. Sitting next to me were two individuals, seemingly there alone. I smiled and nodded, but retreated into my own surveying. My neck began to get the workout as I strained to take note of my surroundings and fellow church-goers. Candles lit university professors and notable community faces. I even saw our State Representative. Feelings of loneliness and difference relaxed off my once tense body and were replaced by comfort and community.

I allowed my eyes to roam as more of my teachers and colleagues filed into the dark room. It was a romantic evening for a moment. Then I remembered why I was there. This service was a special reflection in the wake of a GLBT suicide surge, as a result of bullying. The idea was that the community would come together, in a religious setting, to reflect on the tragedies and to consider the importance of aiding the bullied. As soon as I had heard about the service, I knew I needed to be there, to be present, to be a living unit in the community of support that I so desperately wanted to feel. I thought that if I contributed to this framework, I would feel uplifted by a scaffolding of human persons who could understand who I was trying to build in myself. Maybe I felt that for some part of the hour I spent in Trinity Episcopal Church, but I know that I also came down from that high, feeling numb—a sensation that I knew all too well.

I was bullied from an early age. I remember the specific turning point. In fourth grade, my class put on a religious musical called *Psalty the Singing Songbook*. I cannot remember if I wanted any specific part, but I probably did because I liked to be the center of attention, and I was well-liked at this point. Mrs. Borth, our spirited music teacher, asked us to sing to the best of our abilities while she played one of our favorite songs. From there, she walked around the classroom, listening to us and taking note of our individual performances. I don't remember the song now, but I will

never forget her name. I have always irrationally blamed exhausting Mrs. Borth for giving me the lead role of Psalty. At the time, it was another story.

I remember feeling such gratification when she announced that I would play the title role. My parents were proud, and the rehearsals became very social experiences for me. Two of my good friends were also main characters, and we enjoyed goofing off and sharing the stage. But all of the intricacies are damaged goods in my memory now because they brought great suffering.

The big day for the dress rehearsal in front of the whole school came, and my nerves brought me to a brief consciousness of the reality I was about to enter. Because of my strong personality and outwardly expressed self-esteem and sense of humor, I was accepted for my uniqueness in my class. I was hard to argue with, belittle, or question in the classroom because I owned my space. The teachers loved me without taking on the infamous role of teacher's pet, I had a good core group of friends, and the girls in my grade loved me because I was a good friend to them. But all of that meant nothing outside of my fourth grade bubble.

In third grade, I remember walking into the boys' bathroom, and this kid, Nathaniel, who was in my brother's grade, saw me enter from his position at the sink. My big brother was also in the restroom when Nathaniel turned to shake the water off his hands, and said, "You're in the wrong bathroom. The girls' bathroom is across the hall." I am sure my skin turned red, and I am positive I felt something on the inside, but on the surface, I began the practice of feeling numbness. This was coping for me in grade school and beyond. But this is what I had to face as I made my stage debut in front of Prince of Peace Catholic School on that Thursday before Thanksgiving, including my brother who never said anything on my behalf.

As the play ended, I was so relieved that I hadn't forgotten any lines, but I saw the eyes and whispers in the crowd. I felt my small world get bigger and meaner. I quickly woke up to smell the roses, except this experience was only thorny. I immediately became Psalty, then gay wad, then faggot, then fag. I am not sure I can even now make sense of the trials that I had to endure. As I write this, I am picturing a fourth grade version of me and the tragic breaking of my person that happened. I fronted the numbness that also doubled as indifference, but behind the scenes, even to myself, I believe I was objectified. I was no longer the little human in my Catholic school uniform. I became the bad joke that could be tossed around without

any threats to the psyches of the mainly male tormentors. Of course, the bystanders also had their impact as I was emotionally abused, and I didn't know how to cope.

These memories don't lose themselves in the messy holes in my memory like I sometimes wish they would. Instead, they resurface more powerfully and sometimes, more emotionally charged, at times like these, where groups of people gather to recognize psychological harm done to innocent people. Unfortunately, it always seems like a little too late. Nonetheless, the church was almost full when the doors closed, and the piano began to play behind me.

The bulletin explained the service as a means of reflection and worship. There would be times of silence after prayer or song for individuals to meditate on the ideas and words of the congregation's offerings. I started wondering if I would have a divine intervention when the piano began and the first of several short songs began.

I have often said I wouldn't have left the church if there had always been good music. The music played at this service undulated, with repetitions of short lyrics and nuanced harmonies spread around the church. It was beautiful, letting the music rock my body and soul, to the beat of the girl's tears in front of me, and the man's voice, alternating octaves and moving into Spanish every once in a while, right next to me. I ignored the generally annoying God poetry, as I called it, and I thought about the young people who had taken their own lives because of the way others had perceived their sexuality.

I tried to think of ways for people to transcend their own victimization, but I couldn't come up with any example from my own life, except my own jaded numbness. Then, I remembered I hadn't only faked an indifference, as a way to cope. I had found another scapegoat, and then I found another. For a while, I gained some momentum.

In fifth grade, my mom got a call from another mom of a boy in my class, Mark Shaukowitz. Ms. Shaukowitz called to inform my parents that I had been bullying her son, calling him cuss words and tormenting him by socially cornering him. She also called to schedule a sit-down meeting between herself and Mark, and me and my parents. My parents were none too pleased, and they were embarrassed, I am sure of it. Somehow, I was able to convince them that I was remorseful. And then, I convinced the Shaukowitzes, even going on to become friends with Mark later. It was probably because I didn't want to be a mean person. I didn't want to imprison others in solitary cells, but that was where I found myself.

I don't remember when I finally accepted that I was different, but

it was not in grade school. I allowed myself to believe that I was just like every other boy, even though I was intrigued by Barbie dolls and playing dress up. My favorite shows had strong, beautiful women as the center of the plot, and I admired them. I wanted to be just like them, not like their male counterparts. I hated sports, and I always played with the girls on the playground. If my brother and I were ever out at recess at the same time, I am sure that teachers could notice the striking difference between us. I always felt like the teachers thought I was making the choice to stand out. Deep down in my subconscious, I think they had me convinced for a long time.

So here I was, sitting in the back row of a church I had never attended, to stand in solidarity and remembrance of those who were bullied to death. Instead, I found myself thinking about me. My immediate response would be to consider this a selfish behavior. Sadly, it was also a breakthrough. I had only recently been able to consider the intricacies of my personality with an honest approach. I couldn't believe the revelations. I can't believe the almost watercolor-esque swirls of emotional turmoil that became clearer and clearer. While the girl in the pew in front of me continued to cry and the girl next to her rubbed her back, I pictured my brother.

Robert was about two years older than me, and I always wanted him to like me. I don't think he disliked me. In fact, he was very protective of me in his own subtle way, but he also was the opposite of me. The part that I believe put a wedge between us was our place on the spectrum of sensitivity. He was very commonsensical, while I always stood in stark contrast as the emotional, sentimental person. Robert could see that I was different from everyone else, and I believe it made sense for him that I should just stop being so different. Stop playing with dolls; stop watching *I Love Lucy*; stop running around with all the girls at recess; stop talking in such a high voice; stop acting like a girl. Thus, the wedge found its way between us when I didn't stop, and he became annoyed and embarrassed. Before I could consider trying to stop all that I was, the idea of friendship with him was obsolete. Not that I stopped trying.

When I wasn't sparring with him like most young siblings do, I wanted to make him laugh or make him want to hang out with me. I remember giving him all of my Legos, specifically in front of one of his friends, so that he could see that not only was I cool to him, but I also gave him and his friend more toys to play with. I can recall swinging on our swing set, asking him if there were any girls he had crushes on, any cool people he had in his new class. He claimed he didn't like anyone like that, so I told him I had a crush on Emily Dinges, even though I never liked her

before, and she looked like a rabbit. I remember things getting really hard for me as my elementary school days progressed, and I finally told my parents that people at school were calling me gay. They turned to my brother, the fairly popular eighth grader, to step in, but I knew he never would, and if he did, I never knew about it.

At this point in the service, I was over the silences. My phone doubled as a watch, and I nervously checked the bulletin to realize we were only halfway through the service. The Dean of the School of Arts and Letters surprised me when her voice reverberated a prayer for the people of the world, the gay and lesbian children of God, and their fellow citizens. Surreality became reality, and my reality was highly reflective at that point. I thought about all the church services and Catholic masses I had been to in my life, and never once did I feel like I was being remotely spoken to through prayer, until then. But it wasn't God talking. It was one of my teachers, now the Dean. She was talking about me, someone who might need a few extra prayers, but another human being, who is welcome to live and breathe the same air. This was coming from a prayer?

As I entered St. Thomas Aquinas as a freshman, I came wounded, but hopeful. I had left behind myself as the joke, bruises from every time I was the punch line. I rejoined my brother as he grew into himself at a larger battlefield with more ferocious social warriors, but I initially experienced success in large numbers. I quickly befriended many young ladies in my class with my wit and my humor, and indirectly, the boys respected my role as friend to the females. I was untouchable in one sense, but the luster didn't last.

I can still remember the one time I was shoved for being me. A guy in the class above mine, Dan, had circled me like a vulture ever since I had come to Aquinas, and in the staircase one day, he thrust his shoulder into mine and kept walking. I had never talked to him or any of his friends. And I never did. I learned right then and there that, just like fourth grade, I was hard to belittle in my own class, but outside of that bubble, I was a prime target. Some of the guys in my own class were a little intimidating, and I quickly became jaded and defeated emotionally. I threw up my old numb and indifferent front. Underneath, I didn't know that I hated myself, specifically the version of myself that everyone else perceived. And in hating myself, I fragmented the kinds of relationships I could have with anyone. If I thought so lowly of myself, imagine what I must have thought of people whom wanted to associate with me.

Thus, year by year, the number of close friends I had got smaller and smaller. I didn't have the support of peers that I didn't know I needed.

I was indifferent because it was something that I couldn't control to go my way. Fast forward a good six or seven years, and in this church, at this prayer service, I was amidst people of all ages in a church in my community that were there for people like me, mourning the people like me whom hadn't accepted themselves. The candles flickered, the people around were searching for something like answers, something like clarity, as I looked for connection.

Finally, the part of the service I had been most anticipating: the candlelight vigil. I noticed the local news station had a cameraman in attendance, as a participant and as a reporter. The piano started, and the simple song began humbly. The redhead in front of me saw the light of new candles and began to choke back sobs as if the light represented someone very real to her, now lost. I was paralyzed, and then I was crying. The words moved like trout swimming upstream, as if it were necessary for this short song to be sung in order for nature to make good on the promises of balance. There were times when I thought I could feel the current pushing me forward. But I didn't move, and I barely sang. Again, I found myself walking next to a younger version of me in memory.

My sophomore year in high school, I drove my friend Taylor to and from school. We were close mainly because our parents were best friends. He had always liked my brother better, but we got along fine. One day, Taylor and I were walking to my car after school when I noticed a group of senior guys walking to their vehicles at the back of the senior parking lot. They were walking in front of us, and I stayed in my numb, indifferent mode to stay safe from harm. Unfortunately, Taylor was there to expose me. Once the older boys went off in their direction and we in ours, my passenger turned to me right before we got to the car. He said, "Did you hear them? What they said just now?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

"They were making fun of the way you draped your coat over your arm. They said something like, 'Check out how that—they called you a fag—carries his coat.'"

Taylor was always like this. He unknowingly spoke too much because of a lack of social etiquette. He was just any average boy that could blend or stand out when he wanted. He didn't have any perception of having to soften the language that was used to belittle people because he wasn't bullied. As we approached the car, we climbed in, and I shrugged silently.

"That's not all they said," he started again. "That one guy, I think his name is Jeff, he said, 'I wish they would just have a genocide to get rid of all the faggots around here.' He said something about life being easier

that way.”

I withdrew immediately. I was indifferent on the surface, numb one layer down, and I was inaccessible underneath it all. And just like that, I came to from this memory to tears and flickering lights. Until now, I had been able to guide myself reflectively through the pain and the damage. I blinked my eyes, wiped my windshields, but I couldn't keep up. I had joined the girl in front of me in uncontrollable anguish. I was mourning. And so were many others. I couldn't even get up to light a candle. My ribs felt like they were going to collapse under me, and I would no longer be upright or one piece. The words began to wash over me as I considered the juxtaposition of the current suicides and my own pain.

Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray, watch and pray. Over and over, I revisited my memories in fragments and broken waves. I saw myself sitting at the edge of the guys' side of the cafeteria table, trying to talk to the girls who were my friends in grade school at the other end of the table. I pictured being scolded for not playing sports with the boys at recess. I didn't have birthday parties after a certain age because I didn't have anyone to invite. I revisited the end of my friendship with the two girls, who were brave and gay-friendly enough to try to tackle my issues of sexual orientation when they befriended me at the end of my sophomore year, all because they couldn't handle my deeply-founded denial. I imagined all the times someone told me that I was going to get myself beat up. And all the times I secretly wanted to die young.

As the song ended, I found my head almost completely down and my lap covered in my own tears. It had been a torrential rain, and I was cold and dreary. I had been singing the words to the song under my breath, and I thought about the words. Why didn't these kids hear these words before they took their own lives? Why didn't they stay here with me? Why didn't they remain here with me? Why did I stay?

These questions remained unanswered and overwhelmingly melancholy, even after two periods of silence for reflection during the remainder of the service. And I stood up, walked out into the night. The stars were sparkling, the orange and red leaves were rustling, and I was doing neither of these things. I had felt something, and I had experienced something in a room of community support, but I walked out alone.

Zombie Sonnet

Nicholas White

A deathly breeze comes floating through the air.
It fills the dead with a new glowing light
And fills the living with such deep despair.
A virus, new, has come to town tonight.
The townsfolk, living, grab a torch and knives,
Preparing to do battle with the horde.
For tonight they are fighting for their lives,
Protecting themselves with musket and sword.
But will we win against this undead foe?
What with this virus spreading rapidly?
Or will we die in our attempt, oh no,
We may yet find the cure successfully.
But unless we soon find the cure to our
Zombie problem, we'll all be dead within the hour.



Lidded Jar
Chris Graber

THE GODDESS OF DESTRUCTION SINGLE-HANDEDLY KILLS A CHICKEN SOMEWHERE IN MEXICO

Dan Hornsby

the truck bed is an altar.
the engine *oms* and *sahs*
before dying
as she steps down
from among the
hypostyle chicken crates.

she doesn't have blue skin
or wear a necklace of skulls.
she doesn't hold the severed heads of warriors
by their ponytails,
or carry a sword.
she has only two arms,
and holds a chicken by the legs in one
and an infant in the other.

the white wave begins
in the wormy feet
and surfs through the body.
the deity's tongue sticks out slightly
while wings flutter
until the wave washes through the neck.

the eyes of the bird stay open and hang
like doomed planets.
the bird stares up at the baby,
wishing that it was held in the other hand.
the baby stares at the bird,
wondering when he will change arms.

Red Dye #2

Tiffany Roney

Hmmm. The ketchup was free of high fructose corn syrup, which was normally a difficult quality to find. It was even fat-free, which was nice as well.

But the questionable part was this: Did it contain red dye #2? Donald gripped the bottle in his hand and turned it 360 degrees with his fingers.

It was Heinz ketchup, and Heinz knew better than to include that toxic ingredient. Didn't they? Or did they just know better than to include it on the list?

It was either: a) buy the ketchup, or b) eat the hamburgers dry.

Donald didn't want to eat the hamburgers dry, but better a dry mouth than a toxin-filled liver.

Just set it down and come back.

That was what one should do in this situation.

But it was hard. Hard to part with the ketchup he'd been carefully holding for several minutes now—learning its feel, learning what it held inside, what sort of complexities made it tick...

Like a book, it had almost become his friend.

But if he didn't set it down now—come back in a few with a fresh set of eyes—he'd be here all night, standing in the aisle as the lights began to darken.

He certainly did not want to do that again.

So, carefully, he set the ketchup on the shelf. Took two steps backward. Was about to turn and—wait. He grabbed the ketchup and hid it atop and behind some of the others.

He couldn't let just any random, thoughtless customer walk up and snatch it.

For, in some way, it had already become his.

* * * * *

Her left ring finger was stubbornly chilled. Wherever she went—from saunas to shops—its internal temperature refused to budge.

Cold.

Cold like the flat she lived in alone. Cold like the word: alone.

She shifted her weight in the landlord's line, questioning how she ended up here, how the people ahead took so long to pay rent.

Quit checking the clock. It just makes it worse.

But the clock was Karen's anchor.

3:00 here, 3:00 at the library. 3 p.m. at the house where she used to live. A semblance of some kind of same.

So odd that 60 seconds in here equaled the very length of the minute, that someone, somewhere, spent in a park.

But the seconds in here were different.

She watched the second hand trudge its journey and found herself nodding with every budge. One thousand one, one thousand—

Tap t'tap.

A woman ahead tapped her ugly black shoe, offbeat with pen-clicks of a man by the wall—click-click click-click—while a potbellied guy thumped his stupid gold belt—thump, tha-thump, tha-thump. The clock ticked slower. The room clicked faster. All four walls began to converge.

A beta enlisted in the army of taps by driving his nose to the wall of his tank.

His fin looked like a coatless orphan: cold.

* * * * *

Pacing up and down the aisles, Donald tried to remember what else he needed.

A gallon of milk? No. A bachelor did not need a whole gallon. Half a gallon should do.

He'd barely grabbed his milk and his block of American cheese when the swarm of families descended. What was it with kids and cheese?

He straightened his posture, assembled his items, and walked in the other direction, splitting the herd of moms and their young.

He advanced for the manliest section he could imagine: meats.

Beef.

Oh. . . hamburgers. He had actually managed to put the ketchup on the back burner of his mind until this.

But now all he could think when he looked at the ridged, squishy masses was the substance that made all the meat taste better: ketchup.

And all he could think when he looked at the bright containers was the other substance on his mind—the one that everyone should fear; didn't they know? Didn't they care? The one that was giving the world a scare—

Red dye #2.

Meats.

Just pay attention to all the meats. Scan the prices. . . \$4.25. . . \$3.39. . . \$2.99; that should do it.

He nestled the beef with the milk and the cheese and was feeling like quite the champion griller until he realized—he was holding the food like a baby. On his forearm, the tops resting comfortably in the crook of his elbow.

Where was a cart when you needed it?

* * * * *

Ketchup.

That's what she was craving.

Of course, what she craved more was her comfy old house, with the sheer white canopy over the bed and the loveseat where you could sink down in between the cushions. . .

Love.

It was some sort of seat, wasn't it? That's why they call it "love-seat." Because without love, she felt, a little. . . chairless.

Suspended in air, wherever she went, and there was nowhere—no place—to sit down.

But back to the craving she could actually fulfill—ketchup.

It was the one that was most tangible. The one that made sense. The one that normal, married people also wanted.

Ketchup and fries.

But not the ketchup McDonald's had. No, it had to be Heinz.

She got in her car and drove for the store. It was the first time since the divorce that she'd actually felt comfortable driving alone—the first time she didn't feel alone. Because, in this moment, she had a purpose.

Ketchup was her purpose.

Arriving at the store, she bee-lined for aisle seven. There it was, beautifully displayed in the middle of the aisle. Her crayola-red ray of hope.

Standing in front of the ketchup bottles, she reached out her hand and—

"No."

A "no" followed by silence. Could this random male voice be speaking to her?

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a man with up-turned eyebrows, his mouth in a horizontal line of urgency.

“Don’t take the ketchup.”

His balding head screamed “victim” of hair loss, and probably more. His jeans were too light to be classy, too dark to look hip. And his black leather belt—a rope of a lifeline—too slim to be taken seriously.

Karen wasn’t quite sure what sprung up within her.

Maybe it was anger at her ex-husband, Mike, who always told her where she could and couldn’t go (“Walmart? Real high class, Karen.”) and what she could and couldn’t eat (“Do you realize how many calories that is?”), or some sort of annoyance at this man’s earnest, pestered face, which reminded her in some disgusting way of a part of herself she’d rather hide. But in a moment of rebellion, against her ex-husband and against the former doormat inside her, Karen disobeyed.

She reached for a bottle.

And just to assert her feminist rights, she grabbed the one that was laying on top. Just like her, on top.

And then, the craziest thing happened: the man grabbed onto the bottle. What kind of crazy person grabs your bottle of ketchup?

He snagged the neck with his hand. Karen responded by tightening her grip.

No man was gonna take her ketchup tonight.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she blurted.

He tugged at the neck with both of his hands, but fortunately, Karen was strong, and his hands began to slip. They were almost off, almost off and—snap. His finger had caught the lip of the cap. The ketchup spurted open.

Red on his hands, red on his shirt.

He looked like some kind of criminal.

Either that or a man who needed a bib.

She stood at the foot of the decapitated bottle as it lay in a pool of its spilled-out innards. The man’s head was down when she heard him mutter, underneath his breath, “My friend.”

* * * * *

When a dead body lies between you and a stranger how exactly does one proceed? Where can you even go from here?

Of course, they were still in the grocery store. The lights were still on—for the time being—and kids and moms at the end of the aisle still paraded by, pushing leaning pizas of Lucky Charms.

But their laughter sounded so distant.

Donald couldn't decide if he wanted to look at the woman or not. She looked like a woman who kept people in line—or stressed herself out trying. The big curl at the front of her hair looked forced—like a pond trying to eek out a tidal wave, faking that it was an ocean.

A part of him wanted to know her—to know what it was that made her feel stressed, to know why she needed that ocean.

* * * * *

Despite deciding on no eye contact, Donald couldn't help but check on the woman. How would she react to their destruction of tasty merchandise? Her face seemed to carry the situation's severity—unless that expression was simple confusion.

It was very hard to tell.

Still, he felt some connection with her. Whether they were accidental murder accomplices, or witnesses to a condiment-deal gone bad, they were gonna need each other.

“Well. . . looks like we kinda made a mess,” he said with a nervous warmth.

The woman chuckled.

“I'm Karen.”

* * * * *

She hadn't gotten out much, since the divorce. Told her friends no good men were left. No one was normal; no one was nice.

And this guy, well, he wasn't either.

Though he did seem nice at this moment.

And really, it wasn't normal of her either, to ruthlessly fight for a bottle of ketchup. She could have just grabbed another if he wanted this one so bad.

But despite his possible lack of normalcy and the fact that until his very last sentence, he'd been actually kind of violent—his eyes were a nice shade of aqua-blue.

And he had just made her laugh.

Grasping for something to fill up this moment, she crouched down to clean up the mess they had made. It wasn't that she really wanted to clean the grocery store's floor, nor that it was her responsibility in any way. It's just—well—in situations like this, what else is there to do?

He touched her shoulder. “Leave it.”

Standing, she straightened her shirt, tugging at the bottom hem so everything fell even.

He grabbed two bottles from the shelf and then swiveled back to face her. He began to move one ketchup bottle forward, but then stopped and tensed his shoulders a bit. Karen looked from side to side, trying to discern the reason for this sudden loss of movement.

As if yanked back like the end of an umbrella, her eyelashes burst further apart for half a second, lengthening her view from the top of the shelves, all the way down to their lonely feet.

Both of them were cartless.

He handed her one of the bottles and started leading for the front. She wasn't certain why exactly it was that she followed.

Maybe it was because they were both sans carts. Maybe it was the absence of wedding rings. Or maybe it was this underlying sense she had, that both of these people had nowhere to go—nowhere with a seat to sink down in.

* * * * *

“Does your finger ever get really cold?” she asked. “Like, unrelentingly cold?”

There was something about late-night diners, with their shaky overhead lighting and worn, old-fashioned booths, that made her start to open up.

She told him how she loved canopies—they were hidden, private, and pure all at once; she told him of her affinity for 50s bottles—Coca-Cola, Jack Daniels, and even Jerk soda (they allowed her to be nostalgic); and told him about breaking her arm in third grade—who knew bed-jumping could actually be dangerous?

But now, with asking him about her finger, she might have crossed the line.

Donald's eyebrows moved together as he napkin'd a drop of ketchup off his bottom lip. His brows were similar to the first expression she'd seen him make tonight; only this time, instead of pitiful, Donald looked perplexed.

“My. . . finger?” he asked, reaching for another French fry.

“Yeah, I was just. . .” Karen faltered, looking down beside her on the seat of the booth, from right to left, as though a part of her hoped a pillow would be there, to pull up her lap and bring her some comfort. Instead, she sat alone, with Donald all the way across the table, not even understand-

ing.

Mental note: tell no one of cold finger syndrome.

She watched his face to see if he thought she was strange, but he seemed to be over her oddball question.

Was it weird that she worried about her cold finger? Was it weird that she cared if he noticed she worried? Was it weird that she worried what her friends would say, when they heard she had French fries at Freddy's with a random man from the ketchup aisle?

Watching Donald munch contentedly on his French fries, ketchup, and Coke, Karen wondered what it'd be like, to have no strange, abnormal fears.

Donald. He was lucky.

* * * * *

While Karen munched away contentedly on her third basket of fries, continuously dunking them in the little white carton of ketchup—dunk and eat, dunk and eat—Donald sat on the edge of his seat in peril.

He tried to pretend he was normal. Tried to eat fries minus ketchup, but dipped them just a teensy bit every now and then—just enough to keep her from asking.

He'd even gotten it down to a science. Every fourth fry, graze the ketchup. Bend the fingers just a little, to give the essence of a deeper dunk. Wait until she glanced down at her fry, then swipe the bit of red onto his napkin as it traveled to his mouth.

The process was exhausting.

And even with all these steps of quality control, he still couldn't quite be sure.

What if he'd been eating bits of red dye all along, and still had no idea? What was he thinking? What had he done?

He looked at the half-empty bottle of ketchup and felt his stomach churn.

A possible case of red dye poisoning was making its way through his body, twisting through his digestive system, churning through his veins. So that was this sickening feeling.

He looked up at Karen, just three feet away, and wanted to retreat inside himself. How would he ever explain to her the toxins he'd just ingested? Like everyone else, she'd laugh at him—call him a kook.

The next thought hurtled him through his chest.

What if he'd made her sick? What if he'd exposed her to red dye

#2? What if she got food poisoning, or even cancer, and because of him. . .

“Karen, we have to stop.”

“Seeing each other?” Her face looked perplexed as she spoke the words, but then she looked down with a sheepish grin, her cheeks drawing in a hint of pink.

Pink like red dye #2, when it was in small amounts. And it only took a small amount to kill.

Another time, he might’ve pondered, why his statement, drove her to blush, but he didn’t have time in the face of this urgency.

“No. We have to stop eating the ketchup. It’s red dye #2.”

* * * * *

Stepping out of the diner, into the mid-night air, Karen found herself feeling stronger. Little specklies were growing in the center of her heart. Like brand-new flesh, they were tingly.

It reminded her of coffee that’d been left for too many days—when you make two cups instead of one, out of habit, it’s easy to do—and you come back to find it’s beginning to sprout some mold. Her first reaction was never “gross” or even “time to pour it out.” Instead, she always felt some hope.

At least something was growing.

An older black woman across the street sprawled on some porch steps with her half cigarette. She looked like the type of person who groaned as she bent to take a seat but then, at the very last moment, plopped down with an ultimate thud.

Like the smack-shut of a big, thick book that has finally, finally been finished.

And though the woman’s jowls hung with the weight of undone obligations—probably had a house-full of dishes and crazy grandkids—she looked, for the moment, satisfied. Satisfied to look off into nothing. Satisfied to simply be sitting.

To sit.

Karen’s mind settled onto a picture of herself sinking into a pile of cushions, light all particle-y in the yellow section of air, rejecting all that was cold and hard and immersing herself in softness, warmth. Not since the house had she gotten to do that.

But what was it with Donald?

Sure, the red dye thing was weird. Heck, half their interactions were weird.

But something about him seemed the same—the same as her, familiar.

Like the old woman across the street, she'd probably groan and pretend to fight it—oh, the aches of giving up singleness, oh, the pains of losing freedom, oh, his annoying red dye fear.

But, really, she just couldn't wait to shake out her ankles, rest her knees, and sit.

Tuesday Cancellation, New York

Heather Etelamaki

The suitcases are heavy and
 I fear
the Oxford Street
 rolling suitcase
will burst from the
books jammed in among
 British trinkets and
Christmas presents bought six months early.

It's warmer than I remember
and

 why must I wait here?
All I want
is a cup of
 Earl Grey

and the cobblestones

 and the rain

and a warm bed
 so I may sleep.

Western Meditation

John Quinn

In the West, we think that if you're walking down the street talking to yourself too much, you're crazy. But if you talk to yourself all day long, silently—from the moment you get out of bed to the moment you fall asleep—that's perfectly normal.

—Sam Harris

Observe the people watching the people watching
the spontaneous line-dancers in the street:
A storied structure of psychologists studying
divergent behavior. Observe

the radio-walk, the one frequency of mind-speech
where the knob breaks off. A transcription
would echo in walls of asylums:
Eyes whispering, I see... a loud voice tampering,
NO, ME. It is not a dream-like quality,

the one-direction laser-walk, the concrete paths
beneath electric sky-wires. A toothache
flaring—ROOT CANAL NEXT WEEK—
faceward flies the wind, or there is none.

It's easy to ignore the sky's wide lobe,
and not just in streets of forty-story distraction.
Also in Kansas, eyes develop internal dialogues,
and roll earthward, and glaze
the teeming intentions of insects. Incidentally,

A dung beetle just rolled a ball of feces in a circle,
until the wind blew the ball away.

There must be a motive on the macro level,
in the beetle's egoless brain. Call it
a rolling amnesic shit-ball-a-thon,
or evolution, but the behavior's existence

speaks for it. To push the ball without thinking;
to self-diagnose a slow-growing tumor,

& hold it under segmented feelers,
& weigh it—& release. O dung beetle,
I suspect we have pushed an equal weight.

The trans-Kansas highway cuts to populous partitions
where the sidewalks are straight, the baseball caps—
on, the sun-roofs—closed, the sky's jets—bees.
No, not bees. *Buzzing*. The kind

with a Doppler effect;
the glassy fuel for daylight dreaming;
the hum of static hemispheres,
up there, unaware.



You Gonna Eat That?

Aaron Logan

We'll Get There When We Get There

Kaylea Pallister

It definitely smelled like autumn. It was cold enough that, after we parked the car, I glanced longingly at the warm interior and sighed. I pulled my hat down and my hood up, stuck my hands into equally thin jeans pockets, and crunched through the gutter to catch up. My breath blew out in those blue-grey color puffs of exhalation you get when you're outside, backlit by streetlights, and it's not quite winter. I slowed my trot to a walk when I caught up with my friends. Both tall guys, they moved quickly, motivated by excitement and chilly weather. I couldn't see the point of rushing. We'll get there when we get there and there'll be a long line anyway. I yanked on the sweatshirt sleeve of the blond and we slowed down the pace a little. He put his arm around me since my sweatshirt was a girl's sweatshirt, produced for looks and not utility. He was such a lovely boyfriend. I didn't even have to ask.

The line was already long. Grungy boys clustered in groups, alternating in which hand they held the cigarette so they could warm the other in their post-punk jackets. Groups of girls hung about, somehow withstanding the cold in miniskirts and what they deemed to be suitable high-heels. We stood in a row, inconspicuous, a little ragged around the edges, but warm in the fashion of utility and eclectic spirits. I looked down, shuffled my feet, and noticed my big toe working its way through the top of my shoe. Impatient. The big toe was just like everyone else there. Restless. Every once in a while, someone glanced up at the billboard that projected "311" in angular letters—just numbers for the passersby who didn't know.

Everyone in line did though; that's why we were there.

Band and product promoters circled down the line, handing out flyers and shirts. Not everyone took the freebies. Only the girls regretting the length of their skirts and the poor college kids grabbed one of everything as it went down the line. The guys who pulled up in next year's Mustang or BMW just passed them on by.

You can really get to know someone just by watching.

We were finally at the door. My toe was cold. We all got funneled roughly into two lines, tickets checked and then ripped, purses glanced at, a flashlight examining the contents. I had to throw away my granola bars. I get hungry often and I like to have food on me, but they were worried my two little granola bars were going to ruin the sales of their ridiculously overpriced snack and beverage bar. And no, I didn't buy one of their five-dollar pretzels or eight-dollar mixed drinks.

The venue was dark, old. You couldn't really see all the way up to the ceiling or into the corners, but you probably didn't want to, really. What people saw of the venue mirrored their tunnel vision; they weren't here to see anything but the people and didn't want to hear anything except the band. But people were here to be seen.

I recently looked back on a picture from this night. Ghostly white skin, no makeup. Giant smile almost touching the knitted earflaps of the hat I pulled on over my gray bandana. Pale hair straggling out the bottom.

This was the girl standing next to the guy in black pants three times his size, admiring the metallic clinks of his chains as he swayed side to side. He had some of the most infected piercings I'd ever seen. The residue of all of the makeup he wore probably infected 'em. I really didn't care what the guy looked like, though, as long as he and his scraggly mohawk didn't get in between me and the stage.

I'm not a short girl, but if there are individuals over, say, 6' 1" or 2" in my vicinity, they will make their way right into my line of vision. It is inevitable.

More people watching. The concert began. It was everything I'd hoped for, but not outstanding. It fit the general description of any concert of any band you've been dying to see. The clapping, the screaming, the jumping up and down in what passes for dancing when all you've got to dance in is the tiny square foot or two around you that's already littered with cigarette butts and spilled beers. The music was loud; my eardrums felt it, and so did the soles of my feet. Somewhere in the middle, I lost my heart-beat.

I regretted wearing a sweatshirt. The pounding music and the thumping crowd generated more heat than I preferred. Thank goodness for big purses. I stuffed it in my purse and now it was an awkward lump, hanging at my side, inhibiting my jumping.

The bass drum beat on, guitars shrilled, and amplified voices permeated my senses. I felt absorbed into the crowd, into the situation. The body heat, light, and noise created one huge, inescapable sensation. I swear some of the noise was created by the sheer energy of the screaming, singing mass. The energy was intense. The lights were intense. The heat was intense.

A little too intense. I stopped, took some deep breaths, ran my fingers through my hair. They were shaking. It was hot. There were too many people, too close. I needed my damn granola bars.

I needed to get out, now. In a state working its way toward panic, I threaded and squeezed my way through the undulating bodies, making

my way to the edge of the crowd and, hopefully, a bathroom. My stomach turned. I imagined the worst.

I made it. There was a line.

I caught sight of myself in the mirror as I tried to calm down the churning of my midsection. I was even whiter than before, if possible. Cotton white, almost gray skin surrounded purplish lips and glossy eyes. Lack of food, too much heat, and mild claustrophobia made for an impressively bad reflection.

Finally, a stall vacated and I promptly found myself reacquainted with the remains of my lunch. The rest of the girls in the bathroom probably thought I was ridding myself of an excess of those dumb eight-dollar drinks.

The music continued throughout my brief intermission, pulsating sound waves cutting the lasers, lights, and ribbons of smoke. Final, funky, resounding notes were plucked on the bass after the expected cries of “Encore!” and the inevitable return of the band to the stage. Entirely excessive clapping commenced and then finally ended and we were all rushed and bumped and jostled back outside.

Outside, where the real world was. No more of that smoky, bass drum, electric haze. It felt a good ten degrees cooler and so much more still. Everything was crisp, clean around the edges unlike, the haze blur of faces, noises, sounds and colors inside the building. We felt smaller. More human. More individual now that we weren’t an appendage of the swirling, mutating crowd.

We were tiny, cold, with temporarily deafened eardrums and hoarse throats.

We didn’t really talk much, just hurried back to the car, vigorously crunching leaves, basking in our privately muted worlds and the afterglow.

You almost feel a little let down when it’s over. Like the climax didn’t happen. Or it did, but the music, the crowd, and your brain was so loud you couldn’t notice. We got into the car, didn’t turn any music on because it felt redundant, and pulled away.

The houses flashed by. Familiar houses in a strange city. The streets were always the same, neighborhoods fit into the same molds, and people walked around like a cast of characters.

We said a few words in the car, congratulating each other on the experience, reiterating some of the more incredible moments of the show. Pulling off the highway, we coasted into a fast food restaurant, grabbed some burritos, and pulled away. Or maybe it was fries and a drink. Or maybe we didn’t stop. I really can’t remember because it wasn’t the food that was important.

Fast-food America tends to fall into the shadows.

The digital green lights in the car said it was past midnight, and we had a couple hours' driving to do. It was Sunday night. A textbook of mine slid around on the dashboard, an annoying and persistent reminder that I should have studied for Monday's test. Well, too late now. It was dark, anyway.

Up the ramp onto the interstate. Only a few pairs of headlights and taillights were visible in either direction. It was after midnight on a Sunday; of course the highway wasn't packed. The car sped along smoothly, cruising out of the city without another car in sight. The lights of the streets and buildings bounced off the rearview mirror the same way the stars did in the clear, cold sky.

Their little images burned sharply, just like we did. We felt alive and bright. Everything glittered and we rolled down the highway.

My boyfriend drove. I was tired, had that un-studied-for test early the next day, and my vision was pretty much worthless after dark. He secretly disliked driving my car, seeing as it's rather compact, almost feminine in shape, and the top of his hair brushed the roof when he sat up straight. But he'd do anything for me. And besides, it was late at night; no one was going to see.

I got settled in and curled my knees up to my chest so I'd have something to rest my head on. Our friend in the backseat promptly fell asleep. I exchanged a few words with my boyfriend; sleepy nonsense words about the concert mixed in with "Are you awake and okay to drive?" He said, "Yes."

My ecstatic sense of alive-ness faded as I fell into an inevitable, drowsy oblivion.

I opened my eyes several miles down the road. It was snowing, or sleet, or that weird mixture in between that makes trying to see out of a windshield very irritating. Icy precipitation occurred. I said something insignificant to my boyfriend and he replied, equally insignificantly. My hearing was returning to normal so I picked up the iPod and started browsing.

It's been almost a year and my stomach still clenches at this part. It'll be a year in November.

I selected my song and glanced back at the road.

The road wasn't where it was supposed to be. The ditch was coming up quickly in front of us. What was happening? I screamed his name over and over because it was the only thing I knew how to say. Nothing was happening. The ditch was still coming, looking sickly brown-green in the

headlights. I couldn't make anything happen.

He woke up. His first instinct was to jerk the wheel back toward the road, so he did.

And we started spinning.

Probably about three or three-and-a-half times. I was coherent enough to count, but not coherent enough to tell which way the car was flying, which way was up, or how long it had been. The car kicked up clods of grass so between that and the snow, we couldn't see a thing. All I could say was, "It's going to be okay, it's going to be okay."

So I did.

Somehow, my brain was trying to prepare me for an extremely abrupt impact and lots of pain, but it didn't seem real, nothing did. It felt like a dream, the kind when you wake up right before you're going to die.

Then, the car stopped spinning. No crash, no impact, no pain. Heartbeats, lots of heartbeats. "Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God."

The dashboard of the car became my altar.

Dry heaving from the driver's seat. More "Oh, my Gods" from the back.

"We're okay, it's okay. You did fine. Let's go. You did fine, we're okay." That mess was all that I could communicate.

Looking out the windshield, the car was pointed in the right direction, towards the highway. There was an on ramp just a few yards away. The ditch was flat; there was no guardrail, no fence, nothing. My car started. It started. We drove back onto the asphalt, shaking, both us and my car.

We didn't look back once.

The snow probably saved us. Otherwise, the tires would have caught the pavement, gained traction, and instead of spinning we would have flipped. There were dozens of other factors why we should have been sprawled, unconscious, underneath a growing layer of icy snow. But we weren't.

"I love you. You did fine and it's okay."

Thank you. Thank you.

The snow glistened in the headlights and the stars glittered in the rearview mirror.

* * * * *

We made it back into town perfectly, the car creeping along like a little, shivering bug on the giant highway. Thankfully, we only had about thirty miles left. Getting out and shutting the car doors, we noticed all the

muddy grass shoved up above the tires and peeking out of the hood of the car. There was a tiny dent on the left side, about the size of my fist, but that was all. The car really didn't tell the story of what had happened.

Neither did we. We were just dazed. Mute. Not shocked and not laughing hysterically. Deflated, mechanical versions of the people we were three hours ago. Those people were alive.

We didn't feel like we were.

We still talk about it today. We still can't believe it. We know we should have died. We know it wasn't his fault for driving. It could have been any of us. It was past midnight, snowing, and we had depleted all of our energy dancing like maniacs at the show.

But we should be dead. We feel singled out. Special. Undeserving.

It gives me shivers. I think about it more often than I should. I don't know if it's more often than they do. It probably is because underneath the sky spewing snow and ice, in a dirty, dented car, I decided I was going to be baptized.

A touchstone Interview with Philipp Meyer

Conducted by Lindsey Givens and Michael Mlekoday

Philipp Meyer, one of *The New Yorker*'s "20 Under 40" and a recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship, is the author of the much-lauded *American Rust*. The debut novel was named *The Economist*'s "Book of the Year," one of *The Washington Post*'s "Ten Best Books of 2009," and one of *Newsweek*'s "Best. Books. Ever" to name only a few of its awards. *American Rust* is a snapshot depiction of a declining steel town, told from the perspective of six very different characters. Meyer intricately crafted their unique voices and seamlessly wove their narrations to create this haunting story. In February 2011, Meyer visited the campus of Kansas State University and read excerpts from his novel, providing glimpses into the points of view of his various narrators. He spoke with **touchstone** in the following e-mail interview about how he manages his complex plots, how writing is like being an athlete, and his experiences before *American Rust*:

touchstone (TS): In your novel *American Rust*, there are many twists and surprises. Does your work ever surprise you while you write?

Philipp Meyer (PM): Constantly. I always have an outline or sense of direction when I write, but the stuff that comes from your subconscious, or your muse, or whatever you want to call it, is always more trustworthy than the stuff your conscious mind plans out. Occasionally, of course, you can go off track a little. So I'd say for me the process of writing is mostly trusting my subconscious mind, or instincts, with my conscious or rational mind occasionally coming in to put order to things, if need be.

TS: Your novel also frequently shifts between different characters' points of view. Where do the characters come from? How do you manage the changes?

PM: The characters all come from your subconscious. From a thought fragment, or sensory impression, or feeling—some thread that takes you inside the mind of another human being. And what you find there is generally not what you thought you would find.

You manage the changes between points of view by not writing in order. Once you have a working draft, and you are pretty sure of the arc of the story and the arc of each character, you go back and rewrite the entire book,

but in sections, only working on one character, or point of view, at a time. After I had a pretty advanced draft, I wrote Isaac from start to finish, and then Poe start to finish, and then Grace, etc. Otherwise the characters and voices all blend together. Their voices become indistinct. Which you can see in plenty of other books—the characters might say different things, but they all sound the same. They speak, think, and emote in the same ways, with the same rhythms. I wanted to avoid that.

On top of that, it is nearly impossible to truly immerse yourself in the minds of multiple people at the same time. You have to take them one by one. Of course, it's a lot more work, and takes longer this way.

TS: Which is your favorite character? Which was your favorite to write?

PM: For the reasons I mentioned above—that I was fully immersed in each character as I was writing their sections, my favorite depended on who I was working on that month.

TS: You've been featured as one of *The New Yorker's* "20 Under 40." What has that experience been like?

PM: It was really nice. I am extremely fortunate and grateful. But you cannot let the opinions of other people affect your work in any way. Whether they say good things, or bad things, you always have to trust yourself. When it's praise, sure, maybe you let yourself enjoy it for a minute or two. But then you chuck it into the box of unimportant stuff and throw it into some back corner of your mind, never to be thought about again. Doesn't matter whether it's good or bad. It's no different than some sportscaster telling a pro-athlete that they are the greatest thing since sliced bread. The athlete still has to stay focused on actually playing the game, on training and practicing. Everything else is just talk. Always be gracious and smile politely, but you have to learn to ignore every single comment that comes your way.

TS: You were an EMT during Hurricane Katrina. What was that like? Did it influence your writing?

PM: It was pretty intense. Probably a little too long to describe here. Disasters, wars, etc., reduce people to their animal elements pretty quickly. You realize that if people don't have food, water, and shelter, the rest is all BS. And medical treatment, of course. You don't really have a functioning

civilization unless people are physically healthy.

I am sure it influenced my writing, but no more than anything else. I did it to help people, not to write about it. From my point of view at that moment, I was driving into a hurricane, not knowing what was going to happen. I thought it was pretty likely I'd get hurt, I gave myself a small but real chance of getting killed. On the way there, I called a buddy of mine to tell him what I was doing in case something happened to me. I didn't call or tell my parents because I didn't want them to worry. I figured if I got hurt or worse, they could deal with it then. Anyway, it was one of those situations where I knew I could help people, and I knew I would not be able to live with myself if I didn't make an effort. Don't be a coward. As I've said before.

From a writerly point of view, it was another experience, another lesson on human nature. But you can get those sitting in a bar and just listening to people talk.

TS: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

PM: Write, write, and write. Trust your instincts. That is all that matters. There are more minor things, like making sure you read great writers, but you are probably doing that anyway. There are million minor rules that are sometimes true and sometimes not true.

All that really matters in the end is making sure you keep writing, and making sure you trust your own opinions and feelings about your work over the opinions of all other people. At some point you will look back over your career and realize that what other people have told you about your work was 99% BS.

It really is like becoming a pro-athlete. Coaching helps, but unless you're putting in the hours—day in day out, year in year out—you'll never make it. You have to actually do it, not just think about it.

TS: If you could be one of the Village People, which one would you choose and why?

PM: The Cowboy. Obviously.

Tire Swing

J.C. Smith

I once held a Governor safe to the road,
amidst rain sheets so thick
they should have washed away the world
beneath me.

Just so you know.

I wasn't always this lame and lonely
lawn ornament, this sullen
fairy-tale photo-op.

I used to hold the lives of travelers,
carefully, between the scarce spaces in my tread.
If it weren't for me, they may have never made it
to the platonic play-dates they were late for.
They may have never found little Skippy,
who finally found that flaw in the fence.

Even after I grew old
and went bald, after I was told
I was no longer capable, physically,
I kept the most beautiful girls in the world
company, on the most beautiful days,
and I'll never forget that.

Even now, while I crack like glass
and swing only with the wind,
I remember them;
Coming to me
after a difficult day, to unwind.
Showing up with skinny, skittish boys,
fumbling like faulty fireflies,
for the right places to put
their hands.

I always wanted to let them know,
I'm still here.
In case they need a ride.



Pink Rose
Ellen Ludwig

Paper Cranes

Heather Etelamaki

It was the first vacation that Mom wasn't with us.

I knew Dad didn't care. He hadn't shown any remorse throughout the whole trip. He'd done a lot of humming. He hummed whenever he got his way. He had hummed when Russ and I finally gave in to that ridiculous junkyard art exhibit two days before. He saw a sign advertising "The Biggest Peace Sign IN THE WORLD," and was convinced it was exactly the thing that Russ and I wanted to see.

"It'll be fun," he assured us. I had even become a little excited; the closer we got, the signs became more convincing of the thrill that was waiting for us. Russ didn't agree. Like he did with everything else, he was silent and had his usual look of dazed indifference. When we got there, we realized that this amazing tourist trap was nothing but a broken down building in the middle of a corn field, in which the car part peace sign sat. Russ pulled out a cigarette and started smoking. That was Russ protesting. It was so disappointing I almost asked for a cigarette, too, but I settled for tugging impatiently at my ponytail. Dad was humming the whole time. He liked it because he got his way.

I wanted to think that Russ cared, but I wasn't sure. He was slouched in the front passenger seat with a foot on the dashboard, listening to his iPod. It was his turn to sit up front. I was glad it wasn't mine. Today was too hot for me to have to deal with Dad on the same level.

The car was about fifteen degrees warmer than outside, the kind of heat that nearly kills you. After lunch, Russ and I had waited impatiently for the shelter of the air conditioner inside, hands ready on the door handles while Dad struggled to find his keys. Once we got in, though, we wished to be back outside. The metal seatbelts burned my hands, and I had to peel away the origami paper shrink-wrap from the leather seat beside me. It had taken ten minutes for the car to cool.

The pop song playing on the radio was a Top Forty hit. Its melody had that infectious hook, the kind that was guaranteed to suck you right into it. Everyone loved it. The lyrics described a tale of love, loss, and a desire to remain strong, to bounce back. It was bullshit. I took the lid off a pen and used it to make a perfect crease in the paper crane I was folding. Lunch had been a disaster. Dad and Russ threw insults at each other the whole time, and Dad got upset with me for folding cranes after I was done choking down the awful chicken fried steak I had ordered. That was another thing: the food sucked. Pasty potatoes, half-frozen hamburger patties, and

flat soda were the only things to get us ‘til supper, which would probably be hours from now and not very creative because Dad’s cooking sucked. I had expected to starve on this trip and was truly surprised that I wasn’t dead yet.

Mom, on the other hand, was an excellent cook. Every Wednesday morning she would comb issue after issue of those home-cooking magazines and find the best recipes. Dad would always chide her for the obsession. I wished I was with her instead of being here.

But it’s alright. Everything is fine. Russ is fine, Dad is fine, Mom is fine, and me? I’m especially fine.

Waiting at home was the beginning of another school year. Russ was going away to college. I didn’t think he’d come back to visit on the holidays, and honestly, I couldn’t blame him. Beyond the cornfields that zipped past was the impending threat of biology, and I had to focus on the crane in front of me to keep from having a panic attack. People said that sophomore year was the worst. Back to projects, reading, math problems, and headaches. It would be just me and Dad. Actually, that was a lie. I didn’t have to be in the same place as Dad all the time. The only good thing about going home was Jared. Half a summer is too long to have been away from him. Dad didn’t know about Jared, and I wanted it to stay that way.

With another swipe of the pen, I finished the crane. I loved the look of them. They sat with an extreme sense of purpose, heads poised, alert, structured. There wasn’t any complication about them. The one in my hand was gold and glinted dully in the sunlight. I placed the newly folded bird behind me under the rear window with the others from the trip. They were going to the attic as soon as we got home, right in the corner where the rocking chair sat with the rest, where I kept my origami book safe from everyone, especially Dad.

“Finish another one, Aly, honey?” Dad said. He was watching me in the rear view mirror.

“Yes,” I said.

“You sure do have a way with paper. Like your mother. She loved that stuff.”

“Yes. She does,” I said. I pulled my legs to my chest and squeezed tightly. I couldn’t believe his nerve. Mom wasn’t dead, like he was making it sound. *Don’t worry about it*, I thought, *everything’s fine. He’s just making conversation.*

“Are you going to get rid of those, by the way?” He turned onto the interstate.

My feet dropped to the floor. “Why?”

“They’re pretty, hon, but they take up a lot of room, and you have

tons more at home.”

The things I would have loved to say right then. Shut up! I hate you! You screwed everything up! How dare you make fun of Mom! You kept us in hell for seven years, and I’ll never forgive you for hurting Mom, hurting us! You always have to have your way! You can take your stupid high-tech gizmos and fancy wristwatches and stick them right up that selfish little—

“Okay,” I said.

Everything is fine. Perfect. Conflict avoided. In fact, there hadn’t been one in the first place.

I wanted to talk to Jared. I reached for my cell phone, desperately wishing that there was some message from him, but there wasn’t. I flipped it shut and stuffed it into the front pocket of my backpack so I wouldn’t send another message.

My hands began to twitch.

I grabbed the bag and pulled out a piece of green origami paper. Folding paper cranes was a very structured task. Corners had to be matched up perfectly. I always started folding with the right side, then the left. The head and tail had to be at a right angle to each other, perfectly balanced. The wings had to be angled toward the sky, as if it could flap its wings and fly away at any moment. The twitching lessened with every fold.

I wished I knew what had happened. No one bothered to tell me what it all was supposed to mean. My stomach hurt just thinking about it. We had been at the courthouse. There had been a lot of yelling, crying... Both had asked me, not Russ, to tell the other what they really thought about them. Many naughty words, things I didn’t know the meaning of, the only time I was allowed to say them. That was my job for a long time. As the yelling increased, I learned to hide, to get away from the naughty words and terrible conversations. The attic had been my special hiding place. I’d sit there for the longest time, rocking and folding thousands upon thousands of paper cranes.

Dad didn’t do a thing about it. He said he loved Mom too much to let her go. He said things would work out. They never really did, though. I don’t know why. The movies always make love seem so lasting, so deep. I wanted Dad to be the Beast and Mom to be Belle. Dad just had to find out how to break the spell.

No one spoke. Russ was zoning out with his heavy metal music. I never could understand his obsession with the stuff. The volume was turned up all the way; it was almost if he wanted a bubble around his head. Nothing could puncture the bubble. Well, nothing except a girl, but think-

ing about Russ and a girl made my head hurt. Dad hummed along with yet another annoying pop song—off-key.

I folded down the head of the crane, and then examined it. The right wing was not matched up with the left; it pointed slightly backwards. It would not fold where it was supposed to when I tried to fix it, flattening the wing and re-creasing it. The bird looked mockingly back at me. What did I do wrong? I breathed heavily through my nose and began pulling at my ponytail.

“So, kids, I was thinking about doing some shopping in Omaha. Maybe for school clothes. Aly, we could look for a nice skirt for you or something. Whatever you’d like.” Dad looked at me through the rear view mirror again and winked.

I nodded.

“What do you think, Russ?” Dad glanced cheerfully across the front seat.

Russ didn’t answer.

“No new hoodies? Jeans? Cool threads?” Dad chuckled.

The silence was too much. I cleared my throat, still fiddling with the lopsided crane. Something was building in my chest.

Dad’s humming softened. “How long are you going to be at your mom’s once we get home?”

I answered after a moment of silence. “Two weeks. You know that already, Dad.”

The face in the rear view was no longer cheerful.

“Russ, did you call your mother?” Dad said. A commercial for a local car dealership fought to be heard over Russ’s heavy metal music.

Again, Russ didn’t answer.

Dad had stopped humming. “Russ,” he said, a little more loudly. “Have you called Mom?”

I looked back and forth between them. Russ still hadn’t moved. I wiped my forehead. It was getting warmer in the car.

“Russell Gordon.” Dad’s voice was getting louder. “Are you listening?”

“Dad, is the air-conditioner on?” I said.

Dad didn’t answer me. He was glaring at Russ, looking from him to the road in front of us.

My hands began to twitch again.

“Dad, can we please open a window?” I couldn’t breathe.

“Aly, *hush!* Russ, don’t play around.”

No answer.

Dad banged his fist on the horn. An odd whining from the front of the car continued long after the tone of the horn stopped. I jumped, clenching my fists. There was a faintest crunching noise and I looked down. The gimpy crane sat mangled on my palm.

“Goddammit, Russ, answer me when I’m talking to you!” The sound of his voice filled up the interior, pressing against the windows with no outlet.

Russ, finally, turned to look back at him. He reached up and tugged out his earbuds. There wasn’t his normal blank look, but a frown on his face. It didn’t feel right on his gentle features; it broke his face into shards of someone who was not my brother.

“Why do you care?” Russ didn’t look away.

I gasped, wishing that it would all stop. My hands were shaking so much that the mutilated crane fell to my lap. I was sick of the fighting. I did not want the yelling. I did not want the naughty words. I wanted Mom. I wanted to fly away.

“Stop!” My breath was coming quickly. Russ and Dad both turned around, identical looks of shock on their faces.

And then, the engine died.

It all seemed like a dream. Cars passing were streaks of color, Russ’s rock music seemed jumbled, and besides that, the silence pressed us from all four walls. Dad’s hair was standing on end. He swerved, dodging other cars. The cranes under the rear window swirled around me, landing all over the backseat. Russ sat up, grasping the armrest for support. Flashes of reflected sunlight blinded me. For a moment I was sitting outside, looking in. A passing semi had a license plate that read, “SMAKDWN.” I wondered if this is what it felt like at the bottom.

The car was slowing down, and Dad pulled over to the shoulder next to a steep hill that led down to another cornfield. For a moment, we didn’t move, the shock a parasite to our minds. Dad was the first to speak.

“You okay?”

Russ nodded.

“I’m fine,” I said. My hands were clenched on my knees. I looked down. In my lap lay the green and gold paper cranes.

“Well.” Dad looked out toward the freeway, then back to the dashboard. “I suppose we should call someone about this.”

He sighed and nodded to himself, and then got out. Russ didn’t follow. He stared straight ahead, earbuds forgotten around his neck. Slowly, he looked back at me, but didn’t say a word. I stared back, trying to understand what it was he was trying to tell me with those gentle, sad eyes. After a

moment, he turned back to staring at the open stretch of interstate in front of us.

In a trance, I picked up the cranes, shielding them with both my hands, and got out of the car. Cars going twenty miles over the speed limit zoomed past, knocking me off balance. Dad was on his cell phone, pacing the shoulder, nodding and gesturing to the mechanic who wasn't there. A hot wind danced with the corn stalks below. My t-shirt was damp with sweat. The cranes still in my hands, I stumbled over to Dad.

He nodded again, said something that was drowned out by the rushing cars, then flipped his cell shut. He looked at me and smiled.

"They'll be here in thirty minutes," he said. He waved his arms excitedly, though I couldn't understand why. "What an adventure to end vacation, huh? Hey, let's get some food from the trunk. It'll be fun."

I didn't follow him, but watched him walk around to the back of the car. Russ was still sitting in the front seat, but was smoking, the door cracked open.

Everything's fine.

Thirty minutes was a long time, especially in the middle of nowhere.

I peered over the railing down into the ditch and watched the stalks sway. The cranes were still in my hands. As another gust of wind threatened to blow us over, I raised the arm in which the gold crane was clutched and opened it. The crane took flight, twirling in the air above me, and then it soared away into the sunlight until I could no longer see it.

touchstone Awards

The **touchstone** Awards are given each year to the best work by Kansas State University undergraduates in each of the four genres. Submission to **touchstone** automatically enters one's work in the contest. In addition to the contributors' payment of two copies, 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 award winners for written works. The first place award winner for art is featured on our cover.

Award Winners

Poetry

First Place:

*The Goddess of Destruction Single-
Handedly Kills a Chicken Some-
where in Mexico*

Dan Hornsby

Second Place:

Headlines from Earth

John Quinn

Nonfiction

First Place:

*We'll Get There When We Get
There*

Kaylea Pallister

Second Place:

Through the Lens of a Face Shield

Emily Schomaker

Fiction

First Place:

Windrows

Jacob Smith

Second Place:

The Massacre at No Gun Ri

Elisabeth Short

Art

First Place:

Happy Halloween (cover art)

Cody Hadrick

Contributors

Andrew Bales continues to live in Wichita, Kansas. This is both natural and confounding. He is currently working toward an M.F.A. in fiction at Wichita State University. He is a fledgling pool shark, coffee enthusiast, and editor of *Fractions Journal*, an arts and literature publication.

Monique Belitz is originally from the Netherlands. She grew up in Germany where she received her B.A. in art education from the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in 1981. She moved with her family first to Maryland and later to Oregon. For twenty-five years, she was active as a painter and printmaker, showing her work both in the Northwest and in Germany. She also taught for many years at the Maude Kerns Art Center, and she was an adjunct instructor at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, from 2002 to 2007. In the summer of 2007, she decided to move to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to pursue a M.F.A. She graduated with distinction in the fall of 2010. Her thesis show consisted of the surround installation “Thought Lines,” a 90-footlong landscape collage on paper. It functions as a palimpsest with traces of migration and different levels of cultural sediment. She is now continuing her studies towards a M.A. in art history, with emphasis in Native American Art History.

The various landscapes she lived in, each with its distinct light, left lasting impressions: the northern light of Utrecht in Holland as experienced while living on a house boat, the small-scale parcels of fields and woods draped over low hills in Bavaria, the crystalline light of rare fall days in Maryland and the solitary peaks of Oregon, now, the open and wide spaces of New Mexico, dotted with shrubs and traces of ancient history.

Carrie Cook, 35, is a senior in English (creative writing) and fashion design. Her cinquain entitled “Weekend” was previously published on on wet-paint’s twitlit site. She is originally from California, and spent four years in the Army before coming to K-State to finish her degree. She currently lives in Herington, Kansas, with her husband and two dogs.

Paula Glover Ebert is a graduate student in English. A non-traditional student, she returned to school after 30 years as a working journalist in various weekly and small daily publications, and spent eight years in the Catholic press.

Heather Etelamaki is a senior and a double major in English in creative writing and art in drawing at Kansas State University. She finds that just one cup of Earl Grey can conquer any bad day. Her work has also appeared in the 2010 edition of **touchstone**.

Matt Felzke is a second year M.A. student in Truman State University's English graduate program. As a blogger, he has written for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and wants to continue telling the stories of people whose voices aren't always understood.

D. Gilson is an M.F.A. candidate in poetry and creative nonfiction at Chatham University. An Ozark Mountain native, his work explores issues of otherness and queer identity in such a place; it has appeared in *Moon City Review*, *Plain Spoke*, *Elder Mountain*, and *The Los Angeles Review*.

Emily Glass grew up in Vermont and spent a significant amount of time exploring the woods and observing the beasts of her front yard, which some urbanites would call a farm. She considered them family pets. She received a B.F.A. at The State University of New York in painting and plans to complete an M.F.A. in painting at Kansas State University by May 2011. She engages in the play of drawing with charcoal and oil paint, and enjoys questioning and bending literal depiction in order to investigate the space around her. This is her second publication in **touchstone**.

Chris Graber is a ceramic artist born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He has a B.F.A. from Seton Hill University and is currently pursuing an M.F.A. at Kansas State University. Graber's artwork is based on ethical human interaction and stresses the importance of a stable upbringing for children. His work is on display at Meadowlark Hills, and he is a member of the Kansas Artist Craftsman Association, President of the Kansas State University Potter's Guild, and Vice-President of the Graduate Students of the Visual Arts at Kansas State University. His work has appeared in publications such as *Ceramics Monthly*, *The Salina Journal*, and *The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*.

Cody Hadrick is a resident of Niles, Michigan and graduated of Niles High School. She is currently a Kansas State college sophomore majoring in pre-veterinary medicine through the Department of Agriculture. She is a member of the K-State Equestrian Team.

Dan Hornsby was born and raised in Winnipeg, Canada, before his family moved to Indiana when he was ten. Nowadays, Dan plays in the local band, The Low End, and works in the English Language Program for K-State. His previous works have been published by Leaning House Press. He is a junior in creative writing.

Joseph Henry Kester currently attends Kansas State University and is a junior majoring in secondary education. This is his first published work.

Aaron Logan is a fine arts major with a concentration in painting. This is his junior year, and he hopes to work as a freelance illustrator someday. He currently works as an illustrator and comic artist for the *Kansas State Collegian*.

Ellen Ludwig is a sophomore in art education at Kansas State University. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri. She started doing photography two years ago and knew it was something she was good at. She always knew she wanted to do something with art but never was good at drawing or painting. When she was younger, her father taught her how to use his Pentax film camera, and gave it to her to start out her photography. Now she is in love with film photography after taking two photo classes in her hometown because of her photography teacher Janice Nesser-Chu, who pushed her to do more than she ever thought she could. Photography is one thing that gets her lost in her own world, and in the end she can make beautiful art. "Pink Rose" was taken in the beautiful Missouri Botanical Gardens with a Canon XS Rebel and was previously shown in Kemper Gallery at K-State for the University Life Cafe Art Exhibit.

Joshua Mans is a senior in secondary education with a content focus in English at Kansas State University. This is his first published work.

Kaylea Pallister is from Hays, Kansas, and is a senior studying literature in Kansas State's English program.

Christy Pottroff is a second year graduate student in cultural studies and women's studies. This is her first published work.

Zachary Michael Powell is a first year English graduate student. Originally from Bonner Springs, Kansas, he went to KU and received his degree in education. He worked at Shawnee Mission North as a high school teacher of freshman and sophomores for three years. He enjoys the arts.

John Quinn graduated from Kansas State in 2010, majoring in English. His writing has previously appeared in **touchstone**, much in the same way that dandelions recurrently appear on the lawn, or globules of saliva on the exposed tongue of a dental patient. Otherwise, he is uncirculated.

Tiffany Roney is a senior in journalism and public relations, with a minor in creative writing. Besides writing, she enjoys taking photos, baking cheesecakes (just because!), and pursuing God. She has had more than 150 news and feature articles published in the *Kansas State Collegian* and *The Wichita Eagle*, but “Red Dye #2” is her first published fiction work.

Emily Schomaker is a native of Humboldt, Kansas, and a 2007 graduate of Humboldt High School. Emily graduated from Allen County Community College in May 2008. She is currently a senior at Kansas State University. Emily will receive a B.S. in secondary education and a minor in English with an emphasis in literature.

Luke Severson is from Decorah, Iowa. He has a B.A. in philosophy from the University of Northern Iowa. He is a graduate student/teaching assistant at Kansas State University working towards a M.F.A. in studio art with a sculpture concentration. He has had work previously published in the January 2011 edition of *Ceramics Monthly*. He works with ceramics and metals.

Elisabeth Short is a junior at Kansas State University majoring in English – creative writing with a minor in German. She is a 2010 graduate of Pratt Community College. Her work has been published in her high school newspaper, *The Mirror*. She won several awards for her short stories, poetry, and editorial writing throughout her high school career.

Jacob C. Smith graduated from Kansas State University in 2008 with a B.S. in criminology. He is currently completing undergraduate coursework as a senior in the English Department’s creative writing program as a means to someday continue his writing education at the next level.

Andrew West is currently a doctoral candidate in the English Department at the University of Kansas at work on his dissertation on the intersection of Cognitive Linguistics and Ron Silliman's "new sentence." His previous publications consist primarily of scholarly work, most recently articles on Henry Adams's *Education* in the *South Central Review* (2008) and on Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces* in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (2010).

Nicolas White is a freshman at Kansas State University in animal science and industry, in the pre-veterinary option. This is his first official publication, though he has shared other poems through writing.com under the username it92. He writes during his free time, between classes. He gets ideas for his poems by reading large numbers of books, taking hikes, and spending time in nature. His writing style varies between several types of poetry, such as Shakespearian sonnets and simple rhymes. He would like to thank **touchstone** for publishing his poem and hopes to share more of his poetry with the world in the future.

Lorena Williams is a 2011 M.F.A. nonfiction candidate at Chatham University. She received her B.A. from Oregon State University in 2005. Originally from eastern Oregon, she's a desert rat at heart, but is happy to go where her writing takes her. Currently, she's hunkered down with her two cats in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Lorena was recently selected to present at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs 2011 Conference Pedagogy Forum in Washington, D.C.

This issue of **touchstone** was
designed by Mariya Vaughan.

The text face used is Times New
Roman supplemented by Adobe
Garamond Pro.

Enjoy.

touchstone

featuring

Andrew Bales

Carrie Cook

Matt Felzke

D. Gilson

Emily Glass

Chris Graber

Cody Hadrick

Dan Hornsby

Aaron Logan

Ellen Ludwig

Joshua Mans

Kaylea Pallister

Christy Pottroff

John Quinn

Tiffany Roney

Emily Schomaker

Luke Severson

Elisabeth Short

Jacob Smith

Monique Belitz

Andrew West

Nicolas White

Lorena Williams

Paula Glover Ebert

Heather Etelamaki

Joseph Henry Kester

Zachary Michael Powell