brogue:

(brog) n.
1. a Scottish accent in the pronunciation of English
2. any strong regional accent
(1680-90, perh. identical with BROGUE)
The Brogue
the creative arts journal of Belhaven College

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Rachel Wiley is a student at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. She won first place in the fiction category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for her story “T witch.”
Table of Contents

From the Editor ................................................................. 7
The Brogue Awards
    Undergraduate ....................................................... 106
    High School .......................................................... 108
Student Awards and Publications .......................................... 109
Staff and Contributor Biographies ....................................... 111
Belhaven College Information ............................................ 116

POETRY

More Last Questions, Jill Matarazzi ........................................ 12
Regatta, Cathy Karlak .......................................................... 13
Child of the Sun Returning, Lydia Goeglein ................................ 15
[And what do you call this little piece of heaven?], Michael Bryant ....................................... 20
Miasma, James Humphries ................................................... 21
Time and Confusion, Addie Leak ........................................... 24
Writers Converse in a Field, David Rahaim ................................ 26
The Law of Conservation of Energy, Dione Bagby .......................... 30
Out of Step, Seth McNeill .................................................... 33
Greenhouse Rebuilt, Jill Matarazzi .......................................... 34
Overthinking, Lydia Goeglein ............................................... 59
Spirits, Jennifer Wells .......................................................... 60
It Snowed, Stacie Nott ........................................................ 61
Worn, Daniel Shaw ............................................................ 62
Out on a Whim, Seth McNeill ............................................... 63
The Thirteenth Floor Mobile, Alabama, Marriot:
    An Unreliable Sonnet, David Rahaim .................................. 64
Burritos with Arthur, Andrew Hilleke ..................................... 76
Vanille Coco, Addie Leak ..................................................... 77
[Salty spray crusts my eyelashes], Martha Krystaponis ............... 95
America the Beautiful Letdown, Sarah Senff.............................. 96
Thanksgiving in New Hampshire: Observation, David Rahaim ...... 97
Science Friday on NPR, Cathy Karlak ..................................... 99
FICTION

Mattie Alone, Stacie Nott ...................................................... 35
Sunset, Andrew Hilleke .......................................................... 66
Pond Jumping, Bret Kenyon .................................................... 78

NON-FICTION

Songs of Experience, Andrew Hilleke ...................................... 10
Near Death Valley, Jennifer Wells ........................................... 17
Young Love, Sarah Christine Bolton ....................................... 22
Hiding in Bathrooms in Other People’s Homes, Michael Bryant .... 28
Lessons in Belonging, Addie Leak ........................................... 53
Natural History, Cathy Karlak .................................................. 87
Tension, Andrew Hedglin ......................................................... 73
Visiting Hours, Stephanie Evans .............................................. 88

SCREENPLAY

How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane, Nickie Albert ........ 38

ARTWORK

Untitled #2, Titkemeier ......................................................... 9
Untitled #1, Samantha Lewis .................................................. 14
 Unspeakable, Sarah Senff ...................................................... 16
 Eastward Bound, Paul-Andrew Sechler ................................ 19
 Home No More, Katie Shipman ............................................. 25
 (In)Dignity, Sarah Senff ....................................................... 32
 Untitled #1, Debra Titkemeier ............................................... 37
 Untitled #3, Samantha Lewis ................................................. 52
 Untitled, Kenya Trigg ............................................................ 58
 Untitled #2, Samantha Lewis ................................................. 65
 Sunset Play, Katie Shipman ................................................... 72
Stephanie Evans is a sophomore international studies major and a dance/creative writing minor from Westfield, IN. As a girl, she spent many flashlight nights reading the Little House books, The Chronicles of Narnia, and of course The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. She loves to travel God’s world: she has fled drunken, tear-gassed mobs in Ecuador; rafted through opium-drenched jungles in Thailand; and free fallen through the atmosphere with only some cords and a piece of fabric to call her own. After law school, she may do something really adventurous, like marry and have a family or something.

Claire Ferris is a senior English major from Nashville, TN, and Jackson, MS.

Lydia Goeglein is a senior English major and a secondary education minor for all over, most recently Tyrone, GA. She is the missionary kid of a missionary kid and a California surfer. Her story includes six or seven and-then-we-moved’s, the coolest one being the Philip pines. She likes binge reading (reading entire books in one sitting,) goofing off with friends, loitering in coffee shops talking about God’s hugeness, and drawing faces on Styrofoam cups. Her favorite author at the moment is C. S. Lewis and her favorite poets are John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins. She wants to teach English in India (or maybe Mongolia) after she graduates.

Andrew Hedglin is a freshman creative writing major and history minor from Madison, MS. He has, in the words of his hero Jimmy Buffett, read dozens of books about heroes and crooks, and learned much from both of their styles. In fact, he spent his fifth and sixth grade years absorbed in the creative nonfiction of Lewis Grizzard, Mike Royko, and Dave Berry. His favorite author is John Irving, and he hopes to pursue further education in writing after graduation. His witty and loving family has been a major source of inspiration and support.

Andrew Hilleke is a senior history major from Alexandria, LA.

James Humphries is a sophomore English major from Pocatello, ID.

Cathy Karlak is a senior biology major from Seattle, WA. She really enjoyed being editor of the Brogue this year. She used to be an Untitled #1, Addie Leak .......................................................... 86
Untitled # 3, Debra Titkemeier ................................................. 94

BELHAVEN HIGH-SCHOOL CONTEST WINNERS

Skeleton Bones, Julia Cheng (Poetry) ........................................... 100
Twitch, Rachel Wiley (Fiction) ..................................................... 101
Get the Pots!, Kurt Smith (Nonfiction) ............................... 104
Staff and Contributor Biographies

Heather "Nickie" Albert is a senior art major and creative writing minor from Mobile, AL. For "How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane," she received her first third-place prize ever—she says she is thrilled to know that at least three pieces were entered in the competition. Someday, she hopes to write and draw graphic novels and to earn her very own collective of freakishly devoted fans who rummage through her garbage for her fingernail clippings.

Dione Bagby is a junior biology major from Vicksburg, MS.

Sarah Bolton is a senior dance major and creative writing minor from Santa Margarita, CA. One of her favorite things to do is to go on long runs, observing people, cars, and the road. She also loves live theater, coffee, and sleeping in. She hopes to teach theater and dance to high-school students after she graduates.

Michael Bryant is a junior creative writing and history double major from Madison, MS. He is a native of Houston, Texas. He enjoys baseball, weather, music not found on television, and bird watching. This list is exhaustive.

Laura Chaires is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. She won honorable mention in the poetry category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for her poem "Four Days After the Death of Her Husband."

Julie Cheng is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. She won first place in the poetry category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for her poem "Skeleton Bones." She also won honorable mention in the creative nonfiction category for her essay "Brevity."

Dave Eilon is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. He won honorable mention in the fiction category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for his story "Chitterling and Falafel Balls."
From the Editor

Another Brogue, another semester winding down, another year gone by—it’s cliché to say, but so much has happened over these past four years: some good things, some bad, some comings, many goings, some predictable, and so many unexpected turns of events. Given the past few years, it’s both exhilarating and terrifying to think of what the next few will bring.

I suppose this is the main reason we write: to make connections, to make sense of all the little (and huge) happenings, to provide a little “clarification of life” as Robert Frost termed it. In fact, things often don’t make much sense until they are put down on paper. Somehow, through hard work and a God-given miracle, something meaningful becomes apparent in our words, surprising even us. Good writing occurs when we set out to share our understanding the best way we know how, clarifying a bit of the reader’s life in the process. The pieces in this journal are by no means momentous works of literature, but they are honest writing from our own experiences, and because of that, I’m very proud to present the Brogue for 2006.

A big thank you is in order for our faculty advisor, Dr. Randy Smith, both for his help with the Brogue and especially for his indefatigable work for the creative writing program and his enthusiasm in nurturing each “little sheep in the creative writing flock.” Also, thanks to my large and exceptionally efficient staff, to Bryant Butler for layout and design, and to Darren Schwindaman for designing this edition’s cover.

In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Frost concludes that a good poem “can never lose its sense of meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.” I think this applies to all creative writing, and I hope you are pleasantly surprised by the best we have to offer this year.

Cathy Karlak
Editor
Student Awards and Publications
2003 to 2006

CADEMIC
YeAwards

Cathy Karlak
Elizabeth Spencer Writing Award
Belhaven College

Nickie Albert
Third Place, One-Act Play: "How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane"
Southern Literary Festival

Sarah Bolton
"Nana's House," Fiction
Forthcoming, Cedarville Review (Cedarville University)

Andrew Hedglin
"Matinee Mantra of H. G. Edgar Degas," Poetry
Forthcoming, The Albion Review (Albion College)

David Rahaim
"Belhaven's Creative Writing Program: One Year Strong"
Feature Article, Belhaven Tartan (Belhaven College)

CADEMIC
YeAwards

Ian Bennett
First Place, Fiction: "The Sable"
Arrowhead (Mississippi College)

Ian Bennett
Second Place, Nonfiction Essay: "Black Tuesday"
Arrowhead (Mississippi College)

Skip Davis
Second Place, One-Act Play: "Mr. Holloway's Toy Company"
Southern Literary Festival

Sharmeisha Jordan
Second Place, Poetry
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
Belhaven High-School Writing Contest Winners

Poe TR

First Place
Julia Cheng, "Skeleton Bones"

Honorable Mention
Laura Chaires, "Four Days After the Death of Her Husband"

Fi CT

First Place
Rachel Wiley, "Twitch"

Honorable Mention
David Elion, "Chitterling and Falafel Balls"

No Fi CT

First Place
Kurt Smith, "Get the Pots!"

Honorable Mention
Julia Cheng, "Brevity"

Untitled #2, B/W Photograph

DEBRA TITKEMEI R
My earliest memories are in grayscale; they did not lose their color over time, they simply never had it to begin with. No, I was not color blind, and yes, I could identify colors as early as anyone else could. I can remember thinking, *This is black; that is white. I like white.*

But I never appreciated colors—until I heard them.

Consider: At nearly four years old, my vocabulary barely impressed a two-year old. Because of my medical history, the doctors concluded the problem was a mental disability. For the first few years of my life, then, my family labored under the belief that I was possibly mentally handicapped. My speech difficulty, as well as lack of concentration, seemed to confirm this.

In late 1986, though, my parents learned of a special, intensive program of education and exercise being used with children with varying degrees of disabilities. The child was submitted to a team of doctors who worked with the child over several days to learn all the problems they faced, from locomotion to memory. They then put together a special all-day routine to be adhered to strictly over several years. After seeing several successful children, my parents decided to enroll me in the program. All I remember from going to Philadelphia that first time, when I was three, is white-coated doctors.

We kept a grueling routine, from my rising up to my going down. My mother and I spent hours every day going through white flashcards, saying aloud what each card depicted. Cat. Bird. Forty-nine dots. The number twelve.

I remember a white ladder, suspended, and my hands reaching up to grasp the rungs, so I could swing hand-to-hand. Later I walked on the rungs, holding a rail as I went faster and faster. I liked that ladder, unless I got stuck on it.

Doctors still say crawling is good for brain development in infants. I never crawled as an infant, so the doctors prescribed forced simulated crawling. I remember we had a black-leather-padded board we put on the kitchen table. My mother and two others took my arms, legs, and head as they simulated crawling. Back and forth, back and forth they moved my limbs, all while I listened to Disney audio cassettes: Three Little Pigs, Snow White, etc. Since the tape player was right next to my head, I had no trouble hearing it.

After eight months of this daily routine of ladders, cards, and crawling, the fruits were clear: My vocabulary and strength were positively exceptional for my age group. However, the routine was wearing my parents down: They kept it even on Sundays; they had no break. They had to record
their every action to submit to the program doctors for review; when they began taking Sundays off, they were severely reprimanded.

At this time, my progress stalled. My mother says it was like I wasn’t hearing them, like I was on a different channel. Taking me to the doctor, they discovered my deafness. The program doctors told my parents, “Just shout louder; don’t get him hearing aids.” After shouting herself hoarse for a month, my mother decided this approach was ridiculous. My parents prayed and realized that to remain in the program would require deception, so we withdrew. I remember my mother explaining to my four-year-old person that we were done with the routine of the last thirteen months. *No program, nothing? No, we’re finished.*

I also remember going to the doctor’s office to get my hearing aids. I did not realize the change that was about to take place. When the doctor set the hearing aid in place, and turned it on, a transformation occurred, a miracle that is now a daily occurrence for me.

I woke up. I gasped, as though I had been underwater and just come up.

The first new sound I noticed—*cars passing by outside.*

*What color are they?* I thought.

My parents felt like I had joined the family for the first time. At the table, I followed the conversations and participated as never before. We celebrated my fifth birthday just a few weeks later; by then, I had mastered my hearing aids, never taking them out all day except to go to bed. Now, as soon as I wake up, I put them on.

You turn on the lights. I turn on the sound.
More Last Questions

J I L L  M A T A R A Z Z I

What is a finger
A. Flexible delicate movement

What is an ear
A. Ignoring another human being

What are the shoulders
A. Pain

No what are shoulders
A. The strength of people and a measurement
   Of how much they can handle and the resistance to
   Avoid taking advantage of others

What is a nose
A. A search for the comforting things
   From our past

What are the lips
A. Lies

Now what are the lips
A. False conveyances of emotion

What is noise
A. Longing for silence

What is a stranger
A. A person we see everyday
Dad always said, "Someone has to do it, and I know how." It was just one of those traditional sayings that he used when he wanted me to help him fix something, I thought, never really listening with more than one ear just long enough to appease the man. However, things always seemed to go wrong in our house. Every week another component of our rickety ranch either cracked, squeaked, wouldn't close right, or in the case of our aluminum water pipes, just flat out explode, thus altering our weekend plans from a relaxing fishing trip on the lake to fixing, or in many cases re-fixing, whatever came unfixed. The plague of system failures reached all corners of our one-acre town lot: the yard was infested with weeds, the wind toppled the wooden fence, and the driveway was always carved into ruts where stagnant water collected like the Mississippi backwash after a rise.

I remember being roused in the middle of the night by the screeching voice of my mother yelling, "Get the pots! It's raining!" Frantically my three older sisters and I began the routine of jumping out of bed, grabbing every one of our mismatched pots and pans from the kitchen, and placing them under our strategically assigned positions known for frequent leaks, including one on top of the bed where my mother slept. Eventually the problem spread so much that we had to decide whether to re-shingle the house or buy more pots. After glancing at the decade's worth of yellow water rings on our ceiling, Dad finally broke down and exhausted his bank account on thirty bags of brown asphalt shingles. Hiring professionals was not only out of the budget, but out of the question. My dad knows how to do it, and soon I would.

I had been on the roof several times before on little repair mistakes for the really bad leaks, but this trip would leave me perched there for much longer. I carried up the hammers and nails as Dad managed the huge fifty-pound bundles of shingle. We started work immediately. The muggy Mississippi Delta air engulfed us as the sun rose, saturating our clothes with sweat. Shingles have to be applied from the bottom of the roof to the top, because each layer builds on the previous one to keep water from getting underneath. "Now watch and pay attention," Dad said with a commanding voice. He lined up a new light-brown shingle on top of the original 1955 moss-green one and drove three nails across the top with three swift and sure hammer strokes. About four hours later he completed the bottom three rows, so that when I started I wouldn't be dangling my feet over the edge.

The next morning Dad gave me his hammer and nail belt simply said, "Do it like I did, and don't mess it up!" At that he went to work at Delta Wire, Regatta

Regatta
CATHY KARLAK

Cellophane tell-tales finger a breeze, closed-hauled, daggerboard stumbling on a trough—and all this eloquence, the cream curve of a sail splitting

the green world from the blue—
We are still poets, harnessing the wind,
dabbling in boom vangs, halyards, the beloved arcane, pirouetting
to round the mark, spinnakers unfurled in a burst of grandiloquence, racing back
to the beginning, past the Admiralty, all rules and bric-a-brac and brine—

Pedants. The wind blows where it will.
In a field of shadows and light we tack

and tack and tack, graceful and effortless as the late August sun.
Great, just one more thing for her to scream about later, " he muttered to himself. As usual, no one heard him.

"Egotistical, self-centered, over demanding, jerk!" Rin heard from the living room, but he knew better than to stick his head in there. The picture was predictable. His father, standing tall and proud in the center of the living room among the items his mother chucked at him and his mother herself moving around him like a cat taunting her prey. The last thing either of them needed was for another player to enter their game. That's all it was to them, a game. Neither cared about how their game hurt their children, as long as one triumphed over the other in the end.

It's disgusting, Rin thought to himself, hands twitching in time with his neck and head now. He tried to restart his c.d. player, but the batteries chose that moment to go dead. Rin shook the useless device before tossing it in a random drawer in the kitchen. The thing was a piece of junk anyway. He kept the headphones though; they were the important part. As long as he had those, he could at least pretend the music didn't stop.

Rin placed the chicken in the freezer, not at all surprised to see pre-cut slices of the same meat already there. His mother was so fanatical about how she wanted her food that she insisted that everything be fresh, even if she already had the particular ingredient in her kitchen. Rin threw the bag away, and got to the stairs just as a VCR tape flew out of the living room threshold.

"Woman, stop already!" his father's booming, baritone voice rang throughout the house. Rin shook his head at his father's approach.

You don't tell her to stop throwing things, he thought. You just avoid them and get out of the room.

Slipping his headphones back on out of habit, he climbed the stairs as his mother screeched banshee-like and threw more VCR tapes at his father.

Securely in his room with the door locked, Rin fell against the sturdy wood and buried his head in his hands. His fingers were twitching and shaking franticly. If he fell asleep right now, he wouldn't have to hear his parents insulting each other anymore. The sweet oblivion would be a perfect release from this hellish nightmare he had to call a life. Yes, sleep sounded like a good idea now, then the twitching would stop. For a little while, everything would be still in his life.
Shoes constrict unsure feet.
Cold dryness sucks
heat from sun-warmed limbs.
Mahogany-skinned and guava-scented fades
into pale and perfumed.
Carded grass and slippery banana trees
prickle and grow into needled forest floor and shooting, towering,
darkening pines.

Bayang magiliw,
Perlas ng Silanganan,
Alab ng puso,
Sa dibdib mo’y buhay
Oh say can you see by the dawn’s early light....

They always mix up their p’s and f’s saying pilippino or filiffino
Lee-ja they call
But now it’s not my name.
Sugar-fried cooking bananas swaddled
in banana leaves,
Knock, knock onto the roof of the jeepnee
this is my stop; horns blare and the rosary on the rear-view mirror
slaps into the windshield on turns.
Women toss crushed rice to the air then
catch and cradle it again in reed baskets.

Bayang magiliw,
perlas ng Silanganan
Oh say can you see...

The plane brings placid roads
and minivans
and funny rice.
Grandma, this rice doesn’t stick together, it falls off the fork.
A typhoon of open mouths talking so fast:
I remember you when you were this tall!
I used to change your diapers.
Where did you like living best?
Isn’t it good to be home again?

Perlas ng Silanganan,
can you see?

From the “Lupang Hinirang” (Land of the Morning)
The Philippine National Anthem
Rin twitched. It wasn’t a noticeable twitch, but a subtle jerk of this neck and head. A quick spasm of his hands and body. He glanced up to see if the butcher had noticed, but the chubby man seemed content to chop away at a harmless piece of meat while rambling over one thing or another. Rin couldn’t hear the man over the heavy electric guitar chords and screaming voices emitting from his headphones, but it was annoying nonetheless. The butcher’s voice seemed to cut through his music as easily as his knife cut through the chunk of meat before it.

“We’re so proud!” the butcher yelled. “She got herself a full ride to school and everything!” The accent meshed horribly with Marylin Manson’s screams. Rin returned his eyes to the floor and adjusted the volume on his c.d. player to it’s loudest setting.

The knife came down in a particularly brutal attack, digging in to the wooden chopping block, and Rin twitched again, his thin body constricting and tightening to an almost painful level. He resisted the urge to rock back and forth, and instead let his eyes wonder around the small store.

It wasn’t impressive to say the least. Different types of beef and chicken were crammed into frozen display cases, little lines of red blood squirming around in under the plastic casings. Above the displays, towering a good two feet over Rin’s head, large scales and weights stood precariously, and he mentally pictured them toppling down on the butcher’s customers when one ventured too close to the counter. They looked heavy enough to easily crush Rin’s straggly body, so he kept his distance.

The knife fell down on the chicken, and Rin’s body jerked almost painfully. He brought his hands up to clamp down on his arms through his jacket. He knew it would do no good though, the twitch was a subconscious habit Rin had obtained over the years, and would probably never go away. He couldn’t even remember when he noticed the habit. His mother hated it, saying it showed a weakness and insecurity people could and would exploit. Rin didn’t understand that, but he never spoke against it. What was the point?

The butcher was still talking, and Rin could still hear him. “He’s got himself a good job, he does!” the butcher continued, drawing out the “o” in good as if to emphasize the word. “Got himself a nice hat and everything!” Rin thought about pausing his music to try and decipher the accent, but decided against it. He just wanted to pay and leave. His body was starting to shake in anticipation of the next drop of the knife, and the next twitch. Rin’s gaze never left the floor, but he could still see it in his mind’s eye.
Near Death Valley

JENNIFER WELLS

Death Valley, California—named for the 49’ers who died there during the gold rush—is one of the hottest, driest places on earth. In 1913, the valley attained the second-highest temperature ever recorded, 134 degrees. The valley is also home to Badwater, which, at 282 feet below sea level, is the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere.

Dad and I sat silently in the rented Budget truck; we had long since given up listening to the radio fuzz. It was April in the valley, with mid-day temperatures of about 90 degrees. Dad’s motorcycle occasionally thumped the wall behind us as we wound through the mountain pass down towards the valley floor. We were coming into the valley from the Nevada side—North of Dante’s View and South of Hell’s Gate—on CA 190. I decided that Dante’s View got its name because whoever stood on top of it saw what they thought Dante must have imagined when he was writing his “Inferno.”

Coming out of the pass was like landing on Mars. The red-brown earth circumvented our view. The only growing things were the brown tufts of desert grasses, and the rock and salt that formed such scenery as Devil’s Golf Course. In some places, even those small signs of life did not exist and we were surrounded by dust. Somewhere before Furnace Creek and the turn-off sign to Badwater, Dad asked, “Why does God allow things like this to happen?” I turned to look out the window so that he would not see the tears welling up in my eyes. When I had composed myself enough, I looked down at the cab floor, and at the hospital “possessions” bag lying there. Its contents were cut pieces of my brother’s motorcycle jacket and pants, his silver ring, and pieces of his black shoe laces.

“I’m not doubting God,” he said. “I just want to know why.”

Silence again. Looking out at the valley floor I could not tell if I saw the stagnant water of Badwater, or just a mirage. After Furnace Creek, we passed signs for ghost towns—Skidoo, Ballarat, Chloride City, and Greenwater—where during the gold mining days water could be bought for fifteen dollars per barrel. Behind the signs, more Martian landscape formed out of the dust. I imagined that if I stepped out of the car I would die of asphyxiation.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I don’t think God wants these things to happen. I think that he will make something out of them when they do.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he said before returning us again to silence.

Next, we passed the turn-off for Scotty’s Castle. This mansion in the middle of the desert was originally named Death Valley Ranch, but was later changed to Scotty’s Castle in honor of the gold miner and swindler who inspired its construction. We turned, instead of going on to the castle, and passed by the Mesquite Flat Dunes where a busload of tourists were basking for a moment in their own miniature Sahara.
“Those are the dunes we stopped at when Troop 73 took its Death Valley trip. There are other dunes in the valley—the Eureka Dunes—but you can’t get to those by car,” Dad commented.

We kept driving. The first key to driving in Death Valley is not to stop. The second key is to never turn on the AC, especially in the summer, because if you do the car will inevitably overheat. There are water stops every so often along the way, not for humans, but for radiators.

We next drove through the tiny hamlet of Stovepipe Wells—home to a gas station/convenience store, a water stop, and a campground. I cannot imagine who would want to camp in Death Valley.

“Bryan and I stopped here two days ago. I have pictures on the digital camera that I’ll download when we get home. Later, we were going to stop at the site where they filmed *Tremors*. Bryan wanted to stop there.”

*Tremors*, arguably one of the greatest movies ever, is a story about a small California desert town that is terrorized by giant, man-eating earth-worms. Bryan and mom watched *Tremors* whenever it was on the Sci-Fi channel. As dusk began to fall, we were still winding our way through the valley on CA 190.

“I hope we get to the scene before it gets totally dark,” Dad said. “I want to take pictures to show the guys, and Bryan will want to see them too.”

“The guys” were my Dad’s motorcycling buddies. Thinking back on it, I have no idea why anyone would want a picture of that God-forsaken place. It seems now that returning to the scene might only have been for our closure, not for the pictures.

Our truck reached the flat, five-mile stretch before Panamint Springs—which is actually just outside of Death Valley National Park—with enough light left for the digital camera. We pulled over, opened our air locks, and made one small step for man. That particular section of road was covered in skid marks, probably because there was a barely-visible road branching off to the left. However, we were only concerned with the skids that had fresh orange spray paint on them. We eyed a single long skid mark and collectively decided that it was about 25 feet from the beginning to the point where it came to a very abrupt end in the middle of the road.

“This is where the bike landed,” Dad pointed, “and over there is where he was.”

I looked down, first at the orange motorcycle outline still visible in the grainy dirt next to a sagebrush. Then, I glanced over at the spray-painted marks that showed where the front and back tires of the van had been. Dad took pictures of the long skid mark and outlines before we drove on. Our destination was Lone Pine, a small town on the very outskirts of the desert, where we would pick up Bryan’s wrecked motorcycle and my dad’s and brother’s gear from their hotel room. We would charge up our dead cell phones at the hotel so that we could call family and friends. Then, we would try to sleep in the shadow of the snowy desert peaks. To us, the valley wasn’t Death Valley anymore, just Near Death Valley.
and his ears catch the sudden sound of ice crystals breaking. I watch. His head jerks up and down, then his endless brown eyes focus on mine. He freezes and I can see, for a moment, the stretch of his muscles before he snorts and bounds away, leaving behind a thin mist of breath. The forest is silent again. I turn to walk back, following my trail of heavy boot prints pressed deep in the snow.

Eastward Bound, B/W Photograph
PAUL ANDREW SECHLER
And what do you call this little piece of heaven?]

MICHAEL BRYANT

“And what do you call this little piece of heaven?”

Hold on here young parents,
please don’t bother me right now.
Can’t ya see I’ve found a little piece of heaven:

Endless sea of clouds speaking to my soul,
showin’ me where to go, who to see, and what to say,
keeps me in line and reminds me to love

But here you are young parents
interrupting all the time
always weighing down my mind

Do us all some good
mind your own business
don’t call the police
just mind to you and yours
until you learn to love

Can’t you see what’s in front of you
I’m just watching a storm unfold:
looks like grey wolf fur rolling overhead
you’d say they’re out for blood
I’ll tell you—it’s a family looking for a new den.
Miasma
JAMES HUMPHRIES

Soft light from the lamps,
gave the thick, strangling fog
an otherworldly appearance.
The beautifully choking miasma
enveloped my legs
with its chilling comfort.
It muffled my footsteps
as I quietly slid
along the slick sidewalk.
A blue, black sky
devoid of clouds and moon.
Odd wisps of white-gray
ran up my clothing.
Dripping noises echoed
from the trees to the left
as dew drops came together
and fell to the ground
through the mist blanket.
My feet seemed reluctant
to move through the fog.
As if they wanted
to take root
and live in the Earth
from whence all life
sprang.
I remember the very first time I fell in love. It was the summer after my twelfth birthday, and we were vacationing at Priest Lake, in Washington State.

He was tall and blond and probably ten years older than me, but when he bravely rescued a woman stranded in her motorboat, I was smitten. I was just old enough to think that I was in love, and young enough to think that my love was realistic.

One day, my dad and I took our canoe and paddled across the lake. When we reached the middle, I looked down into the flickering depths, and felt my stomach do flip-flops. I dug my paddle deep into the water, and we surged toward shore. When I could see the bottom again, I felt secure.

After we explored an inlet, we paddled to the dock restaurant.

“What is frog pie?” I asked from across the table. “It’s not really frog, is it?” “Actually, they mix frog skin in with the frosting, to make it smooth,” my dad answered, deadpan. I looked at him sideways for a second.

“You are kidding, aren’t you?”

A smile pulled up the right corner of his mouth. “Yep. There’s no frog in frog pie. Honestly, I don’t know why they call it that.”

“Can I get coffee, too?” I said.

“I don’t know if mom wants you to drink it,” he said. “It might stunt your growth.”

“I wouldn’t mind that. I don’t want to be any taller than I am.”

“Being tall is a good thing,” he said, laying his menu flat in front of him. “You might not like it now, but later, when you are older, you’ll appreciate being taller.” He paused. “I guess maybe you don’t like it because you are taller than boys? You know, boys get their growing spurt later than girls.”

I wriggled my legs sideways and looked intently at my menu. “Uh, huh.” I didn’t really want to start talking about boys, mostly because I didn’t want him to ask me if I had a crush on anybody. The waitress came to take our orders.

“Frog mud pie and coffee, please, without cream,” I said, handing her my menu.

“Same for me,” my dad said. “Except, cream with my coffee. I can’t drink it black like this brave young lady.”

I smiled at him as he handed over his menu.

A few days later, we all dressed up and walked the back road to the dock restaurant. The waiter gave us a table right next to the window, and we ate trout and watched the lights twinkle off the water. Walking back later, bats swooped low over our heads, and our screams of delighted terror echoed through the trees.
When we checked out, my crush was at the counter, and I saw him face-to-face for the first time. His smile was just as cute, but I was shocked at how old he was. Probably at least thirty, his face lined.

“Did you have a nice stay?” he asked. His voice was soft. I leaned against the counter next to my dad, tinkering with the souvenir magnets. Slyly looking sideways, I watched him write out the receipts with his left hand, angled slightly over the paper. His hair fell forward slightly over his eyes. Suddenly, he looked up and saw me watching him. I turned back quickly to the magnets, but not before I saw him smile at me.

“You guys have a great facility here,” my mom said, walking up behind me. “We will definitely be coming back. This lake is so much more private than Coeur d’Alene.”

“Much safer when you are out there swimming or riding jet skis,” my dad said, slipping his credit card into his wallet and his wallet into his pocket.

“Yes, that is true,” the man said. “Have a safe trip.”

“Thank you,” my mom said. I followed her out the door, afraid to look back, but wishing I could have one more smile. We piled into the car and I pressed my face against the window, watching the lake disappear along with my dream of romance.
Time and Confusion
ADDIE LEAK

I don’t know how
to write love poetry.
Too many clichés—
and too much
that I don’t know,
and can’t:

the meaning of the word,
for example.

But I remember you
and wish that I could.
I can still see your smile,
contagious in its spontaneity.
I can hear your laughter,
almost taste the joy
I feel at being near you.
It tastes like
chocolate sauce
and tart cherries—
surprising

in a good way.

Memorable.
Unforgettable, actually.

The memories
are scented with burned sugar
and smoke and the
flowers
of the cemetery
we walked through.

If only I could
call it love
and be through with it.
I try not to imagine what has occurred there. The fixtures are every shade similar to white, and the toilet paper is crispy—like when you spill water or some other liquid on a borrowed book and then you cuss because the person you borrowed it from is very particular and then you look around and hope no one heard you cuss and then you go home and leave it on the counter and forget about it and then when the person calls and wants her book back, you search for hours until you find it on the counter where you had left it, except it took you hours because it was buried under piles of newspaper and to-do lists and then you cuss again because even though the book is now dry, the pages are all wavy and stuck together and crispy—very, very crispy.

After I manage to make it out of the bathroom alive, I sit at the table again with grandma while she has a snack. She offers me her Jell-O of course, and I of course say, "No thanks, that's your food." She just wrinkles her nose. I tell Ruth about our adventures with ElVince.

"That's a nice, " she says warmly. She seems to have forgotten she ever wanted to go.

After ten minutes or so, I try not to tap my feet or speak in short sentences, but the grimy crown molding, dripping noses, and paper-thin background noise starts to get to me. I begin to yawn and decide I've been there long enough that I can leave without appearing eager to go. As I say goodbye, Grandma insists on standing up and hugs me like a heavyweight—gripping my arms with thin, iron fingers. I ease her back down gently until she is just inches from the seat, and then she just drops into it jerking me forward. Still holding onto me, she says, "Now you know what they say in Tennessee?"

I ask, though I know exactly "what they say in Tennessee." I'd been hearing it ever since I was a little girl picking blueberries and chasing lizards all around their Smoky Mountain cabin. After weeks of hiking, chigger scratching, and eating grandma's homemade berry cobbler my family would pack up the old Chevy van, pile onto the hot leather seats and start down the winding gravel road that would lead us back to Indiana. My grandparents would stand on their big wooden porch and wave goodbye until the tree-lined sides of the mountain folded in around us. Always just before we disappeared from sight, their words carried on the breeze coming through the open van window, they would yell, "Ya'll come back now, ya hear!" We laugh together and grandma gives my hands one last squeeze. I gently unwrap her fingers from mine, missing their warm pressure as it's gone.

After saying goodbye to Ruth and the others, I ask the Nazi nurse to give me the code to get out—I always forget it. She takes me aside and whispers it to me, her eyes darting around the room, eyeing any nearby residents suspiciously.
Writers Converse in a Field
DAVID RAHAIM

I.

In the darkness of the mowed hayfield we stumble over hidden tractor ruts.

We wear layered jackets and sweatshirts but still the air needles through to our skin.

Under the open sky we occasionally step flat on newly cut stalks, splitting hollow stems into pieces that try to bounce back once we have moved on.

Already they are soaked with rain and dew, stringy fibers molding and separating, losing strength that a solid form brings.

Killdeer, feeling our vibrations, explode in whirs of sound to our left, right, then twice in front.

Why are they called Killdeer?

The birds flutter, unseen, stuttering in their call.

Do they give away the location of deer to hunters?

As we make our way through an unmowed thicket we find a deer’s bedding, the pressed grass and vines woven in a circle mat.

I don’t know. Maybe.
II.

At a satellite dish in the middle of the field a sign warns us, “Danger: Tampering with Site May Result in Massive Loss of Life”

but we prop against the feeble plastic fence, take turns swigging cheap wine and philosophy, tobacco smoke curling together.

Our blood, heated for a moment by the alcohol, circles our bodies, chills before it reaches the surface of our skin
Our noses, ears, fingers are only warm enough to tell us they are not and we fumble with our blankets.

_As writers, what is it we wish to do?_

Cigarettes, cigars, and a pipe mix scents and floating sparks, which lift, filtering through the dream-catcher sky.

_We are hunters of truth._

Chunks from some celestial body burn as they splash through the atmosphere, and one, the first we notice, flares then splits in half,

—as if we seek to pull knowledge and experience around ourselves, to wrap ourselves,

twin sparks tumbling before they seem to re-join and flicker away into the dark.
Hiding in Bathrooms in Other People’s Homes

MICHAEL BRYANT

Are they suspicious of me? I need more than one place to take these little breaks from these people. They just seem so cold; I can’t bear them for long. Specifically the mother. My God, my soul has never been pained by such a torturous glare veiled with a smile. Just beyond that smile is something darker than—I’m not sure. I think I can only give an opposite example: one of the last American P.O.W.s from Viet Nam getting off a transport plane in California.

The footage shows a small-frame, gaunt, black man appear in the doorway of the plane: cleaned up and in grand style wearing his U.S. Army dress uniform. He’s a staff sergeant and makes his way down the stairs from the plane to the waiting officers. He salutes the general, shakes his hand, and takes in the comments inaudible to us. Being U.S. Army we can conclude he was in a jungle prison camp rather than a place like the Hanoi Hilton where most captives were downed airmen. Not that either is any better a place. After conversing with the general and saluting some more he takes a few more steps down the red carpet where at the end one may notice a middle-aged couple standing embracing each other. The soldier makes a dash toward them and they to him almost simultaneously, and the camera stays on them for several minutes until it cuts out. They never let go of their son.

I think I hear the table being set. I guess I’ll crawl out of my hole. This only brings up another problem. They draw me out with food; then they pressure me to pray without even lifting a finger. They are ready for me to be an elder. It’s like because I was converted only a year ago that I have a lifetime of make-up work. Such thoughts are false, and I doubt they realize what they are doing. Even the dark one doesn’t see this. I should want to pray they are taught.

“Who’s gonna pray tonight?” the father asks and looks around the table, five people, then me. They live in a small, rural town, and I am the oldest male except for the father. I say nothing and stare back at him, striking fear and confusion in the others.

It’s not a big deal. And when it’s offered up like this I can’t help but think how arbitrary and meaningless it seems to be. If no one feels
anything, then let’s just keep it personal. Plus, the father has a deep and impressive grasp of all these things, and he seems to do a good job. He’s a good man apart from his wife. Why cause all this tension? Or am I the only one feeling it? They wouldn’t admit even if they did feel it. They come from hard love, and they don’t open up easily. It’s like they are a pack of hyenas contending for—something. They only open up when one is severely wrong about something and being punished. Me, I guess I’m just a wolf in sheep’s clothing to them. But at least I kill my own food and respect the moon.
The Law of Conservation of Energy

DIONE BAGBY

When does age
become old?
I see a man
riding his cycle towards me.
Looking up
from internal consumption
I glance
at his muscular legs.
A young man, I suppose.
Face to face,
I see a man
well into his years,
Weathered,
Silverying hair.
What then,
I must ask,
Is the cause
of pieces
of the body aging?
Is it the countless times
that hands cradle the face
In despair?
Looking for answers
to questions
that only God can provide?
Is it then
that age begins to seep
from one part to another?
Or does life simply
start to fade
from the face down?
The highest point beginning
to slip down first?
Is it the inevitable
gravitational pull,
draining
the youth from our bodies?
And the last
showing signs of age
Is the lowest point?
And
In the end, does
youth fall down
into
the earth
abiding by the law?
Absorbing
every last drop
of energy?
Waiting,
to continue
the cycle?
It was five minutes before either spoke as the cousins lay panting. Matt broke the silence. “You’re welcome,” he said, rolling his head to face Rick. “What, I’m supposed to thank you?” Rick shot back. “You dumped me in the lake, buddy.” “Oh, come on,” Matt replied, “You would have fallen in anyway.” He pulled himself to his feet and looked back out across the pond at the abandoned paddle boat, now accompanied by the floating half of the pond’s dock. “Pop’s is going to kill us,” he muttered. Rick stood up and joined him. “Oh well,” he said. He glanced over at his cousin, still dripping wet and shaking from the ordeal. “Had to be the hero, didn’t you?” “I wasn’t thinking,” Matt said. “Still, you know… not bad,” Rick said softly, looking into the distance. “Rick?” Matt asked quietly. “Yeah?” Rick answered, not looking at Matt. Matt, however, chose to reply by shoving a ball of mud into Rick’s ear. “You jerk” Rick shouted, shaking the mud off of his head. But Matt had already begun sprinting home.

$ $ $

You’re still a jerk, you know. Sure, yeah, you’re married and all-grown-up now, but you’re still a jerk. But for a jerk, you’re a decent guy. Tell the missus she made a good choice.

So here’s the toast I didn’t give. Thanks for the dumb ideas, thanks for the trouble, thanks for mud in my ear, but most of all, thanks for twenty-two years of jumping into the ponds with me. Cheers.

Your Happily Single and Carefree Cousin,

Rick P.

P.S. Oh, yeah, the gift. Dad and I went down to the pond a week after we saw the snake. Guess what? We not only found it, but Dad caught it. We took it home and mounted it for kicks and giggles. I couldn’t think of a better wedding gift for you, my man. Enjoy the trophy. And if you want to know the species, you’ll want to look in the operating manual of Pop’s 1975 Ford truck—check under battery cables. You’re such a jerk.
Out of Step
SETH MCNEILL

A steady crescendo to a slow, muted waltz.
We step back and move in to finally come
together, each step weaving and meshing
patterns already stitched in stone.
With a tentative three-step, we brush out the rhythm
as if to spare the fragile floor our marks,
our hands just barely clasped, careful to see
every foot is in its space, separated
by impenetrable air. But weren’t we made for other
than subdued turns on smooth tile floors,
and wooden movements in this glass waltz?
Or must we subside as the music slowly dies,
parting ways with muffled soft adieu,
to step away, off of the floor, out of step?
Greenhouse Rebuilt
J I L L  M A T A R A Z Z I

The pots are shattered now,
a remembrance of the
summer that's over.
The snow-crushed roof
is barely recognizable.
I wipe my wrinkled hands
on my overalls,
trying to limber my
fingers to repair the roof.
My daughter, Janie
picks up the pieces
to try and clean them.
The smell of bleach
tells when she's found something.
She talks of planting
tomato seedlings
and asks what else
I think she should plant.
How should I know?
She gathers the
rich, dark potting soil,
and pours it in a few
salvaged pots.
She lines them up on a bench
as I finish the roof,
ready for Spring.
Mattie Alone

Mattie walked alone in the afternoon, pushing her shadow on the ground in front of her.

“I was hoping you would come! It seems like forever since I saw you!”

Mattie skipped along beside the pond, watching the grasshoppers fly from her feet in the grass.

“Of course, we were talking together a minute ago, but that was different. Anyhow, you’ve no idea how I’ve missed you!”

She pulled a scarlet leaf from a maple and began tearing it into tiny bits.

“You mustn’t tell a soul you’ve been here, for it is a profound secret.”

Mattie shook her finger, held it to her lips, and laughed.

“Oh, I forgot that! Naturally, since I’m the only person you’ve spoken to in your entire life, you won’t tell anyone else. How old are you, anyway?”

Hands on her hips, Mattie cocked her head, considering.

“Ah, yes, to be sure! We met last May, so that would make you six months old. How absurdly young you are for all the things you’ve done in your life.”

She dropped the last bit of leaf onto the pond’s shining surface. It fell on the reflection of sky and grass and lay like a tiny raft on the water.

“You were a frog when I met you. I bent down to say ‘How do you do?’ and you jumped into the pond and stepped out again, a princess! I was so shocked!”

Mattie whirled in a sudden circle, trying to see the back of her shadow. It was too fast for her.

“And I invited you to come home with me. And we had tea. And Kitty behaved very badly and sat on the table and drank your tea for you. (Because you had put a great deal of cream in your tea, and he does enjoy cream.)”

Mattie made her mouth into a cheerio and blew dandelion fuzz into the wind. The downy seeds drifted back into her face and stuck in her curls.

“Do you remember when we went to the jungle and rode on an elephant? You were terribly frightened, but I told you I would protect you. And I did protect you, because when we came home, my clothes were muddy and wet, and you had not a speck of dust on your gown.”
Mattie stooped to pick up a ladybug and stared, cross-eyed, at it as it crawled along her finger. She waved her hand, and the ladybug flew away.

“You are awfully quiet today. Are you feeling quite well? Do you remember when you were ill, and I doctored you? I was so afraid that you would die!”

She poked a stick down a crawdad hole, hoping the crawdad would be clinging to the stick when she pulled it out. She found only mud.

“You know, when you grow up, you will have flocks of princes wanting to marry you. Perhaps I can marry one of the ones you reject, because, after all, you can only have one, and I would very much like to be a princess and wear a sparkly crown.”

Mattie walked with a stately step, holding her head at an aristocratic angle.

“Oh! Look at that mouse in the cloud! There—now it’s become a dragon!”

Pointing excitedly, she gazed into the blueness above her.

“Do you know, I think you ought to be very careful how near you get to the pond? Suppose you fell in and became a frog again and were eaten by a big fish?”

Mattie dropped a pebble into the water and watched the ripples spread. She noticed that her shadow had grown taller.

“I think we ought to be walking home now. I am hungry.”

She danced a few steps and leapt to catch a falling leaf. It escaped her and fell slowly into the grass.

“I do wish I didn’t have to tell you everything to say! Princesses ought to be able to think and speak for themselves. But then, I suppose I oughtn’t to complain, for you were my idea in the first place.”

Looking down at the damp toes of her boots, she sighed.

“It’s too bad you aren’t real.”

Mattie walked alone in the evening, pulling her shadow on the ground behind her.
Matt looked out across the smooth surface of the pond. The paddle boat had indeed snagged in a large patch of algae near the center of the pond.

"Let's go get it!" Rick said, pulling off his shoes.

"How? It's at least fifty feet away from the dock!"

"Easy, dummy. We wade out there. The water's only a couple feet deep. Waist-deep at the very most!" Rick said with a roll of his eyes. He sat on the end of the dock and poked his feet in. "Kind of cold, though," he added.

Matt looked unconvinced.

"Deep isn't the problem," he said in a hushed voice. "I heard there might be snakes."

Rick jerked his feet out of the water.

"Where'd you hear that? Your dad?"

"No, Pops."

Rick relaxed and stuck his feet back in the water.

"Pops?" he said. "He just doesn't want us swimming around and getting drowned in algae. He's making the snakes up."

"I'm not so sure. A friend of mine said he may have seen one once."

"Seeing as I was that friend, and seeing as that 'snake' turned out to be a stick, I'm still not convinced." Rick slipped off the end of the dock and sank to his thighs in the cool water.

"Rick! Wait!" Matt cried, his eyes begging Rick to return to the safety of the dock. "I'm serious, I think there's snakes in there. Let's not risk this one, ok?"

Rick stared at Matt a second, searching his face for any sign of joking. Finding none, he waded back to the dock and pulled himself up. The dock rocked back and forth with the added weight on the side.

"Fine," Rick said, putting his shoes back on. "How're we getting out there?"

"We need another raft," Matt said, squinting his eyes toward the stuck boat.

"We could try making one again," Rick suggested. Matt gave him a dark look. "Oh. Right. That didn't go so well last time. Forget I said any-thing about it."

Matt rose to his feet and looked out over the water again. Rick sat back and watched. He recognized the look on Matt's face and knew that if he waited long enough, his cousin would cook something up. He always did.

"The poles," Matt said softly. Rick looked up confused. "The poles!" Matt yelled and let loose a wild laugh. Rick jumped to his feet. That laugh was always a good sign.

"We'll take out the poles," said Matt excitedly as he ran to the corner of the floating platform. "We'll take out the poles and use the dock! The floating dock!"

Rick looked to the corners of the dock. A grin spread across his face as he realized what Matt was talking about.

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**ARTWORK**

**Untitled #1, B/W Photograph**

**DEBRA TITKEMEIER**

37
EXT. BIDDY’S FRONT PORCH, STAR POINT, MS – ESTABLISHING

WIND and RAIN howl in the background.

Biddy’s rickety old HOUSE, composed of old, weathered wood, sits on the shore of a tiny island in the Gulf of Mexico, just off the Mississippi coast.

The front of the house has one dirty WINDOW with a broken pane, and a SCREEN DOOR with a heavily mended screen. The DOOR behind it is open. The PORCH juts out in front of the structure, supported by cement blocks at one end and sinking lopsided into the sand on the other, with uneven STEPS in front of it, and just in front of them, the WATER. The SUPPORT BEAMS look like they can barely support their own weight, and have been reinforced with DUCT TAPE. A ROCKING CHAIR, and a metal TRASHCAN (among other things) litter the place. Tacky homemade SIGNS, such as “Forget the dog—beware of owner!” and “I shoot solicitors” are posted on the railings and by the screen door. A rusty, wire RABBIT HUTCH sits on the corner of the porch near the chair, with bits of hay scattered about.

GILLIAN (late 20s, short red hair, yellow rain slicker with official-looking lettering), enters in a small BOAT with an outboard motor. She kills the motor as she approaches the shore. She stumbles a bit while she ties it down, as her eyes dart back and forth between the ropes and the house, SMILING a bit.

She finishes with the boat and makes her way toward the screen door.

GILLIAN
(calling cheerfully)
Miss McEnroe? Miss McEnroe!

She reaches the door and knocks as she eagerly peers past the screen.

GILLIAN
Miss McEnroe!
A DOG BARKS in the background.

BIDDY
(from inside)
What the... who the hell'd be callin’ on me now? I’m a comin’!

BIDDY (89, yet spry; wears old T-shirt and rubber waders held up by suspenders; crazy gray hair) reaches the screen and cracks it open.

BIDDY
Watcha want, dearie?

GILLIAN
Miss Tallulah McEnroe?

BIDDY
Oh, ain’t nobody called me by that name for years. Just call me Biddy, like everyone else.

GILLIAN
(nervously smiling)
Oh, I know, ma’am! I just thought I oughta be formal!

A ROTTWEILER tries to push through the door. Gillian GASPS.

BIDDY
Get back, dog! Shush!
(to Gillian)
You shouldn’t be out here, there’s a bad storm comin’.

Gillian draws herself to attention.

GILLIAN
Oh, yes ma’am, that’s why I’m here! We’ve never met officially before, but my name’s Gillian, Gillian Murphy. I lived right down yonder, till about eight years back.

Biddy stares politely at her.
Gillian BLUSHES.

GILLIAN
Um, well, I’m a rescue worker now, see?

She points to her slicker.

GILLIAN
(continuing)
I’m here to get ya and take ya to the shelter, before the hurricane comes. And we ain’t got long now, only forty-eight hours, so we better get a move on.

BIDDY
(grins)
Oh, did Charlie put you up to this?

GILLIAN
I...um...what, ma’am?

BIDDY
I’m sorry, dearie, I already told that son of a bitch mayor I ain’t goin’ to no shelter.

GILLIAN
Oh, ma’am you don’t got to worry! We’ve got the high school gym set up all nice and cozy. The Baptists gave some air mattresses and blankets and stuff, and you won’t need to bring hardly anything!

BIDDY
(pleasantly)
And I ain’t gonna bring anything, I’m stayin’ right here.

Gillian starts to fidget with her hands. Her voice starts to quake nervously.
Burritos with Arthur

ANDREW HILLEK

A beef and bean burrito wafts across the page with Pellinore, Arthur, Lancelot, and Gawain, whose rusty swords slice open foes, bleeding purple fountains, spilling organs and lumpy intestines, releasing that gaseous gagging pungency—death.

Hungering, I put down Arthur, pick up my knife and slice, baring the red-orange innards of a burrito. No thicker than my wrist, a small torso, corpse-white, oozing red-orange cheese stuffed into it earlier, spilling kidney-pinto beans. Impaling it on my blade, I rejoin Arthur's Beowulfian quests, killing Morgians and Mordreds, and finding holy grails and swords.

GILLIAN
But, um, it ain't that far away! It's only 'bout twenty miles. C'mon, everybody from the town is already there—all we need is you and we got the whole set!

BIDDY
Well, that's okay. Without me they'll have a little more legroom.

Biddy turns to head back inside.

GILLIAN
(almost panicked)
Miss Biddy, please come! They didn't send me out here for nothing but to get you! I can't go back without you!

Biddy faces Gillian, smiles, and pats her on the shoulder.

BIDDY
Oh, dearie, they'll know it ain't your fault! Shame on them, making you to come get the most stubborn of stubborn old ladies.

Gillian looks at her, confused.

GILLIAN
No, ma'am, I volunteered.

BIDDY
Well, now ya know better, don't ya?

Gillian is dumbfounded as Biddy gives her shoulder a squeeze and turns back to the door.

BIDDY
I'm sorry you took the trouble to come all the way out—I'm fixin' some tea, would you like some?
GILLIAN
(horrified)
Miss Biddy! How can you think of tea at a time like this?

BIDDY
Oh, I insist! I ain’t gonna send you away with nothin’!

She disappears inside the house. Gillian stiffens a bit, quietly STOMPING her foot in frustration before trying again, yelling through the screen.

GILLIAN
There’s a huge hurricane comin’! Ain’t you been watchin’ TV?

BIDDY
(from inside)
Got a radio. I busted my TV. Didn’t care for it much after J.R. came back to life. Said him gettin’ shot was a dream an all! Bullshit!

GILLIAN
(exasperated)
Well, have you listened to your radio at least?

Biddy emerges carrying TWO TACKY COFFEE MUGS with tea bags in them. The Rottweiler comes out as well, and lies down next to the rocking chair. Biddy hands a mug to Gillian.

BIDDY
Sure do. Hurricane Orion, the biggest storm ever to be. Headed straight for us. Total devastation expected, or somethin’ like that.

She sits in the rocking chair.

Gillian sighs and sinks down onto the front step.

GILLIAN
Yeah, it’s gonna be bad. And you’ve
gotta leave! This house’ll be knocked over like it was matchsticks!

BIDDY
(nonchalantly)
Yep. The whole town’ll go that way, I reckon.

Gillian SLAMS her mug onto the porch, sending TEA everywhere.

GILLIAN
Then why on earth are you stayin’?

BIDDY
Dearie, do you know how old I am? I’ve been on this earth 89 years come last May. I was born right here in this house, and I intend to die in this house, and if this house weren’t here to die in, then I guess I’d live forever. But it’s better to die some time than not to.

GILLIAN
It’s better not to die if you don’t have to! And you’re not gonna.

She stands and straightens her jacket, pointing again to the official lettering.

GILLIAN
(As if rehearsed)
By the power ‘vested in me by Gwinnett County Fire Rescue and Mayor Charlie Bosarge, I have the authority to forcibly remove you from this island of Star Point, Mississippi and take you to the designated shelter area!

BIDDY
(slyly)
An’ just how are ya gonna force me?

Gillian FREEZES for a moment.
GILLIAN
I...I, I don’t know!

She collapses to the front step again.

GILLIAN
(continuing)
I ain’t got a gun, and if I did, I don’t think I could pull it on ya anyway. An, no offense, ma’am, but me tryin’ to pick you up just ain’t gonna work out too good.

BIDDY
(helpfully)
You coulda used your finger in your pocket and made pretend you had a gun.

GILLIAN
You’d have figured that out.

BIDDY
I know, but at least I coulda gave you an A for effort. Right now, I reckon this’d be a D-plus rescue.

GILLIAN
Oh, Miss Biddy, I can’t go back without you, I just can’t! The townsfolk are all waitin’ for ya. Oh, they’re gonna hate me now! Instead of bein’ “Gillian, who Saved Biddy from the Hurricane,” I’ll be “Gillian, Murderer of Biddy.”

BIDDY
Now, dearie, they ain’t gonna hate you! They might hate me a little for not comin’, but they’ll know it ain’t your fault!

GILLIAN
No, everyone’ll hate me! No one’s
liked me since I left Star Point after high school...said I was too good to be one of them.

BIDDY
Well, that’s what happens in a small town. Stick out too much an’ people’ll try and tear you down.

GILLIAN
But you stick out, and everyone loves you! They all know you, got stories ‘bout you...all but me. I ain’t never even got to talk to you till now.

Gillian smiles sadly.

GILLIAN
I remember...that pony you used to have? I wanted so badly for you to bring him to my birthdays when I was little. I didn’t wanna bother Daddy ‘bout it, but I thought, surely everyone’d come to my party if I hired Biddy’s pony.

BIDDY
Ah, little Pickle! That Shetland was the darndest thing. Didn’t do much but eat and shit, but I raked in buckets of cash off him. Kasey Zirlott had him hired every year till she turned fourteen.

GILLIAN
I loved that pony. I only got invited to two parties where he was at, though, and didn’t get to ride him but at one of ‘em.

Biddy SNORTS.
BIDDY
You’re all misty cause you didn’t get to ride a dumb beast ‘round a circle a couple times? There’s plenty better things to fret about. Speakin’ of dumb beasts, I gotta get Pinky and Butch their food.

The dog PERKS UP at the word “food.” His stump wags as Biddy opens the can and scoops out TWO BOWLS of KIBBLE.

She lowers one into the rabbit hutch and places the other before the dog, which sits up and stares at it expectantly.

Biddy ducks inside for a moment and returns with a bottle of JACK DANIELS. She liberally douses the kibble, which the dog then starts eating greedily.

Gillian is stunned.

GILLIAN
You—you can’t give a dog liquor!

BIDDY
You can give Pinky liquor. He won’t touch his food without it.

Biddy puts the bottle away.

GILLIAN
(sarcastically)
What, don’t the rabbit get some?

BIDDY
Nah, Butch is a mean drunk.

Gillian SIGHS and cups her chin in her hands.

GILLIAN
I didn’t figure you’d be the type for rabbits. They seem too...fluffy.

BIDDY
Tommy Malone brought him to me,
‘bout two years ago. Had an extra bunny he couldn’t sell and thought I might like him.

GILLIAN
Tommy was just a few years ahead of me. He never stopped braggin’ bout the time he hit a baseball threw your window, and you came out to threaten to tan his hide, only to play the rest of the ballgame with him.

BIDDY
(laughs)
Ah, he thought we was best buds after that. Showed up on my doorstep when he was fifteen, wanting me to hide rattlesnake eggs for him from his mother. I made him smash every one of’em and sent him home.

GILLIAN
(slyly)
Ya know, Tommy oughta be at the shelter. Bet he sure would like to see ya there.

BIDDY
For the last time, I ain’t goin’ to no damn shelter! Ain’t nobody there who’d mind much whether I go out with a hurricane or at some plum old age where I piss all over myself!

GILLIAN
What’re you talkin’ about, Miss Biddy? I’m sure people would line up to take care of you! I’d even—

BIDDY
What, come an gimme a sponge bath? Chew my food for me, like an iddy
biddy bird? I ain’t needed nobody my entire life, and if this storm’s a way to stay that way, so be it.

GILLIAN
Surely you ain’t been alone forever?

BIDDY
(softly)
I didn’t say alone. This town’s been good to me. Real good. Lemme tell ya, if ya got good friends, it makes up for any family ya don’t got.

GILLIAN
(angrily)
If you got friends, why’m I the only one out here in the storm come to get you?

BIDDY
(sadly cheerful)
Oh, dearie, my most real friends are dead! Died long ago. All these folks that’re left, well, I’m Miss Biddy, the substitute bus driver, or Miss Biddy, the sewin’ lady, or Miss Biddy and her pony Pickle to them. (laughs) And even a few think I’m Miss Biddy, the crazy ol’ lady.

GILLIAN
I never thought you were none of those things! I mean, I liked Pickle, but I liked you more! And those times you drove my bus, I always hoped something exciting might happen, like we’d get stuck in the mud or turn over and you’d get to save us all, like when you saved Ashley Stevens from the undertow.

BIDDY
Oh, lil’ Ashley, she didn’t want to be
saved by me. She had her eye on this fellow who worked at the pier—she was so mad when it was me who pulled her out an’ tried to giver mouth to mouth!

Biddy laughs heartily, then squints over at Gillian.

BIDDY
Still, I never knew I had me such an admirer.

GILLIAN
(flustered)
Well, I just thought, when I was little, that if I could live my life the way you did yours...driving busses and training ponies and fixin’ cars and saving people... that that’d sit fine by me.

BIDDY
Well, damn it, Gilly, there’s just one problem with that.

GILLIAN
What’s that?

BIDDY
You, dilly-dallying here, wastin’ your time on me!

GILLIAN
(firmly)
Well, that’s too bad! Cause I decided—I ain’t leavin’ till you do!

BIDDY
(angrily)
Why the hell would you wanna do such a stupid thing? You must be nine kinds of foolish!
GILLIAN
You may say it’s foolish, but I don’t care! I’m not gonna give up and let the first person I try an’ rescue send me away and die! If Orion comes before you change your mind, so be it!

Gillian turns away from Biddy and crosses her arms, scowling.

BIDDY
Throwin’ your life away for the sake of a tired old woman? You won’t be doin’ no favors for anyone else if ya get washed away with me!

Gillian stays turned away, but starts to CRY silently. Biddy reaches over and tugs at the shoulder of Gillian’s slicker.

BIDDY
Look at you, with your fancy slicker... You’ve got a job helpin’ people! Do ya really think there won’t be no one else to help if I die? This is what’s right for me, to go out in a heap of trouble.

GILLIAN
(crying)
Well, I...I, I think you’re bein’ selfish! Here I am, just gettin’ to know you, to maybe be friends even, and you’re tellin’ me to go away, and never see you again? To let you die and be happy about it? That ain’t fair!

Gillian starts openly sobbing.

BIDDY
Oh, dearie...Gillian...come here...

She joins Gillian on the steps and wraps her arms around her.

BIDDY
Now, I’ve really appreciated this visit by you. I think we are friends, now.
And maybe it is a little selfish of me to wanna go out this way, but part of bein’ friends is doin’ what’s right by each other. And I think you’d do right by me to let me go, and be gettin’ on to what’s next for me. But I think I can do right by you, too...

Gillian looks up at Biddy.

Biddy places her hand on Gillian’s cheek and smiles warmly at her.

**BIDDY**
I told you...I wasn’t gonna send ya away with nothin’.

**FADE OUT**

**FADE IN**

**EXT. BIDDY’S FRONT PORCH – FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER**

Gillian is standing in her boat, and has just pushed off. The rabbit hutch and Pinky are in the boat, too.

Biddy is sitting in her rocking chair, rocking slowly. The wind and rain are LOUDER.

Biddy’s porch starts to fade into the fog as Gillian’s boat pulls away. Gillian turns and waves.

Biddy raises her arm and waves back.

Gillian waves even more frantically, until the porch and Biddy can no longer be seen.

Gillian turns forward, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. She gives the dog a pat, and looks forward, as the boat exits the scene.

**FIN.**
Untitled #3, B/W Photograph

SAMANTHA LEWIS
Lessons in Belonging
ADDIE LEAK

He paused, letting his eyes drift into the almost-empty street beside our table on the terrace of Au Pied de Cochon, his brow furrowing under his longish sandy hair as he considered the question. “Well…” he finally began—slowly, as though searching for the correct words. “I haven’t seen many Parisians with a jupe like yours.”

I glanced down at my skirt and smoothed the water-colored tiers absentmindedly. That meant that the answer was yes—I was very obviously américaine. I did ask. I wasn’t even sure why, really, I wanted to fit in here. It had begun simply as a tourist’s desire not to stick out, but I’d since fallen completely in love with the city, spellbound by the silvery architecture and the beauty of the people and the language—the last of which I’d loved from the beginning anyway.

“But, then, I doubt I pass for French, either—even though I’ve been here for seven months; my sneakers give me away.” David grimaced at his next thought; even his grimace looked French. Honestly, I doubted that the sneakers mattered much when he opened his mouth; seven months had made him all but fluent. “But have you noticed the shoes they wear here?”

I nodded and laughed. “They do look painful.” Fancy leather and pointed toes in a city where most people walk everywhere. I was impressed. Especially considering that my own Puma ballet flats—almost sneakers themselves—had begun to rub my heels raw, and my upper legs were almost bleeding because of the amount of friction they’d been forced to endure over the past sixteen or so hours of walking. 

This is the last time I wear a jupe in Paris, I thought to myself, already dreading the end of the meal when I would be forced to walk again. I could already feel the splinters of pain shooting through my thighs and ankles. I looked out over the grey cobblestones into the park opposite our café, where the only things moving were the leaves as they lazily swayed in the slight breeze. It was so quiet outside; it seemed as though the entire world was sleeping around us. Our conversation and that at the table next to us drifted out into the dark warmth and dissolved there slowly.

I studied David as I took a sip of Evian, washing down the last of my mussels. He’d gone to school with me for a year at our boarding school and then graduated, having been accepted to MIT, but instead of going straight there the next fall he deferred matriculation and applied for a year of work in France. Now he was going to teach English in China for six weeks before going back to school in Massachusetts. I hadn’t known him very well at school; he’d fixed my computer once, but that was more or less all I recalled. A teacher had given me his address upon discovering that I was going to Paris. I almost hadn’t emailed him. I was glad now that I had.
“And then... The other thing, I guess, that marks you as foreign, is the way you sit—but I guess you already know about that.” He looked almost apologetic mentioning it.

“No, I don’t know, actually...” I was intrigued. “What’s wrong with the way I sit?” My back was straight, my hands in my lap when I wasn’t eating; according to any definition at home, I was seated like a proper young lady. My grandmother, a southern belle and a stickler for rules, had drilled my posture into me; as a girl, I had once informed her, to her amusement (and my increased irritation), that “God made me this way, and you can’t change it!” but had eventually gotten tired of fighting and acquiesced. I had a tendency to sit like this now; if it weren’t blasphemous, one might almost say that Mamma made me this way, and God couldn’t change it, much less the French. But it was worth a try.

“Europeans tend to lean forward like I am, with their elbows on the table and their arms crossed like this—or with their hands clasped in front of them in a triangle like this.” Ohh. I was delighted. Elbows on the table! What would Mamma think about that? I copied his posture and found myself suddenly a lot closer to him than I had been. He’d been sitting like that all evening, at the Café de la Gare earlier when we’d stopped for much-needed mineral water and now here; I had been a little surprised by it at first, assuming that he was just especially interested in what I was saying (which, frankly, I didn’t think was that interesting). Maybe it wasn’t, then—but I liked this so much more than our southern politeness; it implied genuine interest instead of being detached and aloof. There was obviously something to be said for body language. It gave off a sense of ease and self-confidence, too, that I adored and envied; the French all seemed to have it. I didn’t; it felt awkward leaning forward like this—but maybe it got more comfortable with practice.

I glanced at my watch. Nearly 2:00 in the morning. I grinned to think what my roommate would say when I got back to the hotel. I’d have to wake her up; Mister Bed City Bagnolet (my grin widened as I recalled the name), like most European hotels, only gave out one key, which was left at the front desk when the guests went out into the city. It was a big metal, tasseled object, and I’d left it with Dana when I took the metro to the Île de la Cité to find David twelve hours ago. I wasn’t really in any hurry to be back. She snored, and our train for Milan wasn’t leaving for another four hours.

“Are you sure you didn’t have to be back at any specific time?”

I started a little, suddenly reminded by the heaviness in my eyelids that I’d never really recovered from jet lag in the three days since I’d arrived in France. He must’ve seen me checking my watch. “Oh... no—when I left, all I could get anyone to say was ‘Well, you’re eighteen, and you’re not my child... so go ahead.’” There were obviously perks to traveling with an agency in a group of almost-strangers. I shivered a little with excitement as the newness of my surroundings returned to me. I was in Paris. I’d eaten escargot—
and liked them. I was sitting, for heavens sake, outside a café at 2 o'clock in the morning with a boy that I might as well have just met.

He nodded at my response and smiled distractedly, shaking his head and falling uncharacteristically quiet, his blue eyes preoccupied behind his wire glasses; he was apparently listening to the conversation going on at the table next to us, where a dark-haired woman sat with two men. I glanced over at them, too. They were very clearly French; the woman was perhaps the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen in my life. She was slender, with voluminous dark hair, carefully constructed cheekbones, and the expressive eyes and strong nose that I'd come to associate with her countrymen; she looked like a sprite, with a slightly mischievous air of complete self-confidence about her. Their voices were chocolaty; I couldn't blame David for listening in. I'd been sitting alone (David had gone to the restroom) and was reading the menu when they arrived. I had completely zoned out, though, staring at the menu in my lap simply because it was the easiest thing to focus on without looking insane. It didn't work, though, obviously. The three of them watched me for a minute or two before I noticed their presence, and one of the men laughed at me and asked—in English—if I needed some help. I'd flushed, not sure if he was making fun of me, and assured him that I was fine, feeling very pitifully American. Ten or fifteen minutes later, when our entrée of oysters and escargot arrived, David asked them in French if they knew what his sauce was supposed to be used for. The man gave him the same patronizing, half-derisive smile that he'd graced me with and said "You don't like it?" David shook his head, frowning, and continued to explain in French that he'd never come across it before; the man's expression changed to one of surprise and respect as he responded—this time also in French. I couldn't resist grinning, surprised at myself for being so fiercely proud of David. Well, even if I haven't got the language down yet, he does. So there.

It didn't surprise me that he asked; I was quickly discovering that that's just how he was—open and outgoing and fearless. It had shocked me at first that he was so talkative. For the past two days, I'd been spending my time on the streets trying to blend in, to look like I didn't belong with the group of 27 very southern Americans that I was traveling with—particularly the ones who threw their steak and french fries to the pigeons and complained at top volume about everything, especially in the closely-quartered metro. As long as I keep my mouth shut, maybe I won't stand out. I had dark hair and eyes. I could pass for French, I thought. Well, apparently not (I glanced down at my skirt again)—but I'd tried. David wasn't at all loud, but he was loquacious. He spoke to me in a mixture of English and French without worrying who heard. That threw me off a bit at the beginning. You're blowing my cover! I laughed to myself when I realized I was thinking it, and I soon warmed to him in spite of my surprise.

One day, I'll blend in. One day, people will assume that I'm French instead of assuming that I'm American—like they do with David now. I shook
myself out of my thoughts as David smiled slightly at something our neighbors said, completely unabashed by the fact that he was eavesdropping, and turned his attention to the last of the pig’s foot that he’d ordered on a whim because it was the café’s specialty. He wrinkled his nose just a bit and dug his fork into it with renewed vigor. “I’m glad I got this… It will be something to tell my grandchildren about, right?—but I don’t think I’ll order it a second time… oh—Excusez-moi, monsieur—nous voudrions une crème brûlée à la vanille pour dessert.” The waiter nodded as he passed us, looking slightly shocked by the abrupt transition from English to French coming from the blonde-haired young man with the goatee, and I felt a smile tugging on the corners of my lips. Maybe it didn’t really matter if I fit in here or not. Chances were that I never would, even if I made it my home. Being American was just part of me… like it was part of David. It was part of what made him unique. In the States, I had always been fascinated by people who spoke English with an accent; their culture made them different and endlessly interesting to me. They were free—completely—to be different because their origins made them outsiders.

The crème brûlée took another half an hour to appear, and by the time we finished it and got the check, it was pushing 3:30. If there is any one thing that can be said absolutely of the French, it is that they take their food seriously. I wondered in passing if all meals were enjoyed so leisurely or if the service had something to do with the time of night. Our French neighbors were long gone by the time we finally tracked down the waiter and grabbed our things. “Was there anything else that you wanted to do in Paris?” David asked me. “We could always go to a nightclub…”

I glanced up at him somewhat abruptly. Was he serious? He looked pensive. Yes.

“Of course, you’d be a dead woman walking tomorrow if you did that.”

I grinned at him, nodding. “I would. Maybe next time.” Though of course we both knew how likely that was. That would be a story to take home with me, though, wouldn’t it? Not only did I stay out all night in Paris with a guy, but we went clubbing. My grandmother would have a fainting spell; somehow I didn’t think that proper young ladies did things like that. “I did sort of want to see the Eiffel Tower at night before I left though.”

He paused, his blue eyes glinting in the street lights as we slipped out of the gate, bidding our au revoirs and mercis to the waiter, who seemed to have gotten used to us and grinned amiably, if a bit tiredly. “I think they might already have turned it off for the night, but we can go check.” I steeled myself for the needles of fire that began shooting through my legs as we started walking again at full throttle through the darkened streets; Parisians might eat at a leisurely pace, but everything else—speaking, driving, walking—seemed to be done at top speed. “Oh.” He stopped, and I almost ran into him, biting my lip to keep from laughing with surprise. “I forgot—the
metro stops running at 12:30.” He frowned. “But—I guess we can find a taxi once we get to the Seine. We should be able to see la Tour Eiffel from there.”

I shrugged. “Sounds great.” He led me through the courtyard of the Louvre to the Seine, which we walked along in silence for awhile. The Eiffel Tower had indeed been turned off, but the lights along the river were cloaked in red, yellow, blue, and green—a part of the campaign to have the 2012 Olympics in Paris. They sent their brilliant multicolored glow out across the black water like Christmas lights, and I promised myself then and there that if Paris won the Olympics, I was coming back for them. I told David, who grinned and assured me that he’d decided the same thing.

The breathy vocals of an accordion drifted across the noise of the river to us. I started in surprise and then grinned; I hadn’t heard an accordion since I’d been in Paris. Was it “Ma Vie en Rose”? No. But all the same... David was apparently thinking along the same lines because he laughed when he heard it, throwing his arms open and gesturing toward the music. “We are in Paris, my dear.” I nodded, almost too tired to speak now, and just continued to smile contentedly. “Ma chère.” Another slight jolt of surprise washed over me at the term; I decided that perhaps the old cliché was true and everything did actually sound better in French. Caressing, almost. Ma chère. My dear. My darling... I wondered if the French used terms of endearment as frequently as they were used in the American south.

“Oh, wait—I want to take a picture.” I turned my attention back to the Seine and wrestled my camera out of my purse, turning the flash off.

“Do you want me to take one with you in it?”

“Oh, no, that’s fine. Thanks...”

He frowned at me quizzically. “Are you sure?”

“Mmhm.” I raised the viewfinder to my eye. I didn’t need proof that I’d come. I knew; that was all that mattered. I considered for a moment asking to take a picture of him—or trying to take one of both of us. Or maybe not. I snapped my photo and turned to go, surprised to see that he was still watching me with an odd look on his face.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take a picture of you?” I nodded, amused. He shook his head in mock frustration—“You’re a pretty bad tourist, you know that?” I smiled at him as we turned back from the river to find a taxi. Yes, I knew that. That was the general idea.
When we poured our possessions into boxes and moved again, we did so knowing this wouldn't be the last time. We'd left before and would again, as if we were afraid to stay. "It'll become normal soon," we told ourselves as we gazed on the alien state.

What do we do now?

I twisted my hair. New neighbors bustled in and out. We took green-bean casseroles with smiles pretending we were happy to be here.

Before moving I cultivated friends who knew my lies and my likes. Now, I was alone, isolated by spaces of highway and states bloated as corpses.

Alone, I pulled into myself. They tried to lure me out into the sun, the lake, the backyard swing, but I lingered in my air-conditioned shell, shaking my head to all queries, no thanks. No thanks. A weak, depressed decline.


The silence swallowing my room—the fog filtering hush of thought, the quiet of ideas chased inside ones head, like the fox chase on the silver screen.

There was no going back. My chased thoughts changed. Inside my head, if you broke me open—

melancholy existence theory
murky abstraction.

Only in my dreams sometimes, the rainbowed world sirens.
Overthinking
LYDIA GOEGLIN

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Painstakingly, I traversed my mind-paths. It drove them mad. The silence swallowing my room—the fog filtering hush of thought, the quiet of ideas chased inside ones head, like the fox chase on the silver screen.

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Only in my dreams sometimes, the rainbowed world sirens.
Day is done. Gone the sun—from the lake, from the hills, from the sky. All is well, safely rest. God is nigh. -Taps-

Wind-molded granite is my seat
in front of the bonfire—

fire like the natives would have made
for prayer.

Behind the blazing pillar stretches
the black hole of Lake Spaulding.

Darkness dampens the valley.

My eyes are opened
then closed and They appear—

bodies tangled
on the roadside,

footsteps creaking up
stairs at midnight.

Hollow voices echo ritual songs in the deep black
and my eyes reopen.

On Omega ridge, only coals remain.

The event horizon extinguishes
the signal fire to the Stars—

Gideon’s torch
before armies swallowed
by parted still waters.
myself out of my thoughts as David smiled slightly at something our neighbors said, completely unabashed by the fact that he was eavesdropping, and turned his attention to the last of the pig’s foot that he’d ordered on a whim because it was the café’s specialty. He wrinkled his nose just a bit and dug his fork into it with renewed vigor. “I’m glad I got this… It will be something to tell my grandchildren about, right?—but I don’t think I’ll order it a second time… oh—Excusez-moi, monsieur—nous voudrions une crème brûlée à la vanille pour dessert.

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I grinned at him, nodding. “I would. Maybe next time.” Though of course we both knew how likely that was.

That would be a story to take home with me, though, wouldn’t it? Not only did I stay out all night in Paris with a guy, but we went clubbing. My grandmother would have a fainting spell; somehow I didn’t think that proper young ladies did things like that.

“I did sort of want to see the Eiffel Tower at night before I left though.” He paused, his blue eyes glinting in the street lights as we slipped out of the gate, bidding our au revoirs and mercis to the waiter, who seemed to have gotten used to us and grinned amiably, if a bit tiredly. “I think they might already have turned it off for the night, but we can go check.” I steeled myself for the needles of fire that began shooting through my legs as we started walking again at full throttle through the darkened streets; Parisians might eat at a leisurely pace, but everything else—speaking, driving, walking—seemed to be done at top speed. “Oh.” He stopped, and I almost ran into him, biting my lip to keep from laughing with surprise. “I forgot—the

It Snowed
STACIE NOTT

Borne on winter’s frosty breath,
Under steely skies,
Over slushy fields, and ponds
That stare like frozen eyes,

’Round trees’ naked branches,
And shivering church spires,
Past homey, smoky chimneys,
And between bare power wires,

White flurries, sifting slowly,
Dust the world with icy flakes,
Blanket the world in fluffy bedding,
And when the world awakes—

We know it snowed.
Worn
DANIEL SHAW

I set them where they’d be forgotten—
   Caked and crusted, worn and withered,
Dingy, gray, and out of sight.
Eleven years had strained the seams
And countless miles had worn a hole—
   A slit, a gash, an open wound
Where the flesh began to fall.
The dusty paths and muddy streams
Infected them and made them foul
   With an odor rank and festering.
I saw that they had done enough
And laid them by the ones before them,
   Over-worn and long outgrown.
There they sat in darkness and decay,
   Replaced, unused, and set aside—
So I put on a newer pair and went my way.
Out on a Whim

The stripes on my clothes were never supposed to meet
Except this night, when the stars make no lines
And the streets do the driving

We could ask why we are here
If we weren’t so busy finding there
If we lived here we’d be home by now
But if we lived there we couldn’t afford the rent

We could ask why
But then we wouldn’t be lost
And that’s not a good place to be
If we knew why
We wouldn’t be here
And we surely wouldn’t be going there
And neither would anyone else

An odd number
Together for one odd moment
And no purpose but one goal
To enter by two’s and three’s
Where someone expects us less than we do
At dawn, dim water clung to the window
till the wind’s claws scattered droplets across
the pane. After knuckling my eyes free
of night I stood against the cold window.

Two pigeons huddled up, inches apart
against the friendless rain and one nodded
his head slowly; mechanical. The night
before I sat up, whispering love-talk
to the new girl I was now seeing.
*I miss you too. I can’t wait to be home,
to kiss you.* The bird blinked once then turned back
to peer out over the city through eyes

shallow, black beads worn smooth, shining, but flat.
Untitled #2, B/W Photograph

SAMANTHA LEWIS
Two days. He’d been gone two whole days, three once the sun sets tonight. Why doesn’t Paw-paw get a new job?

Owen sighed, and after finishing off his regular afternoon snack—a tomato sandwich with mayonnaise and a slice of cheese—he climbed out of his air-conditioned pickup into the sweltering sun of central Louisiana.

It wasn’t that Owen’s father Leon neglected them or was never around; even when he was home for days at a time, he hardly talked much, truck-driving not being the most intellectually stimulating career, nor, for that matter, exciting to him. Leon refused to change, though, for all Owen’s badgering. Leon might not be stubborn about most things—his clothes were whatever his wife Mildred made or bought for him, and he wore every piece of it out before asking for more, if he even remembered to ask—but one thing you could always depend on him for was taking his time to make decisions.

Once he had come to a decision, though, mountains moved before he did. He wasn’t generally stubborn, but his choice of career was one thing he refused to give up on.

“What’s so great about truck-driving?” Owen groaned after one particularly hot discussion. Most of the heat was on Owen’s side; Leon never raised his voice above a conversational volume, even when Owen got to shouting or constantly interrupting him.

“It gets me away from you kids,” Leon chuckled. “Plus I’d never work if I worked in my own backyard; always be coming home for something during the day.”

“Why would you need to come home for anything?”

“C’mon, now; ya know how yer mother is, always calling on me to fix this or that dispute between y’all kids, me being the head of the household and all. Your mother does better without me underfoot.”

Owen reached the tractor across the field he’d been mowing around. Climbing up to his seat, he looked back towards his pickup, parked along the highway bordering one side of the field. His family’s driveway exited off that same highway about a mile north-west of here.

I like working close to home, Owen thought. If anything bad ever happened, I can get home quick enough to help.

Pulling his hat down against the mid-afternoon sun, Owen revved up the tractor mower.

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The Fredericks’ home was a picture of rural Louisiana. Just outside Empire City, as you drive south on the Old Baton Rouge Highway, take Beaufort Road, one of the many dozens of dirt roads leading away from the highway to civilization, and just stay on to the end; their house was on a virtual island among mostly muddy fields at the end of the. In the fall the house looked like it was floating on clouds, with the snow-white cotton spilling from end to end of the field. In spring’s rainy seasons the fields were covered over with water, some places reaching a depth of four or five feet. Their driveway at the end of Beaufort became their land bridge from one world to another.

A four bedroom house, with a living room separated by a step down from the dining room, the latter being no more than the central floor of the kitchen. The eldest daughter Heidi had her own room—the guest room, which had been their grandfather’s before he died. Two sisters, Delilah and Connie. One brother, Sean, had his own room, whereas Owen, the eldest of all, slept on the living room couch, having outgrown his old bed. Even on the couch, his feet rested on one armrest while his head lay on the other.

A bedroom in disarray, clothes and articles lying about where they were thrown. A bursting suitcase on a bed, laundry scattered out over the quilt and exposed bedsprad. A young lady emptied another drawer on the floor to rummage through and toss her pickings at the open suitcase. She stood, her eyes sweeping the room again, looking for anything she might use on the road or pawn. The creak and slam of a screen door startled the girl. She ran to the window to see who had left—or arrived. But no, it was only a younger girl in a blue dress, skipping away down the dusty driveway.

That’s Connie, thought the girl. Where’s she going this late in the afternoon? Turning back to the room, she looked it over one more time. Her gaze stopped the closet, her mother’s. Should she get it, the present her grandfather gave her mother after the wedding, which she has never needed to use? She’ll never need it; she’s got three boys to protect her when Pa’s away. Owen or Sean alone would be enough.

Owen. Scowling, the girl opened the closet. The shoebox was on the top shelf.
Who is that, Owen said to himself, wiping his nose with the back of his gloved hand. Pulling back a long stick shift, he slowed the tractor. He’d been here hours carefully moving the tractors out of the miry fields. A figure was standing on the road across the field from Owen’s tractor. Shielding his eyes against the setting sun, he stared towards the road, seeing—

A dress.
The tractor came to a complete stop.

_Couldn’t be—Delilah?

The figure was waving.

What is she doing here, thought Owen as he jumped down from the tractor, sinking to his knees in the muddy field. Careful not to yank his feet out of his boots, he pushed straight for the figure, trudging out a steady pace.

How did she get here, he wondered. Is she alone? She’d better have a good reason for coming out here!

The lady-figure—now unmistakably female, her blue dress waving like a flag in the wind—stopped waving and, with her face turned down to watch her feet, began moving towards him through the field, stepping slow and careful between a few dry spots.

“No, don’t—I’ll meet you on the road,” yelled Owen. The figure acknowledged and skipped back to the road, turning back to watch him continuing straight for her position.

Ignoring the water splashed up by his heavy stomping, Owen grumbled. She better have a good reason for coming out here, this close to sundown.

Leon loved driving home at night, particularly if he got home from a long day’s work on the road driving his company’s eighteen-wheeler to and from whatever service station or fueling depot ordered some. His company didn’t actually sell the fuel; it just transported it, cleaning up any messes that might result from accidents. The company prided itself on having a low accident rate.

“Oh? What’s this,” said Leon, his attention fixing down the dirt road.

Two glowing yellow globes appeared a few a hundred yards ahead of him on the road, at first dim then suddenly brightening up, as though the driver had just seen him and deliberately turned the brights on. Squinting against the brights, Leon studied the approaching vehicle, and realized it must be going fast, kicking up a gray cloud of dust in its wake.

“That Owen’s pickup? What’s he going to town this time of night for? Wait—”
The truck was unsteadily racing towards him, almost as if the driver was inexperienced.

Clearly not Owen, Leon thought. I think I see a passenger, too. Maybe Delilah’s doing another driving lesson. This late in the day, though? Wait—God, they’re going to hit me!

Leon yanked the wheel right, driving almost straight into the muddy field. As the pickup sped past him, he got a glimpse of the driver’s ghost-pale face. A stranger, male. The passenger was female, though, and looked like—

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“Heidi, you can’t go,” said Delilah. “Owen won’t have it, and neither will Paw.”

“Paw does whatever Owen says to do,” said Heidi. “So you might as well leave him out, he don’t scare me any.” But Owen, she thought.

“Mother isn’t too happy with him, either. You’ve seen how she’s always asking about his parents and his plans for the future. She only asks those things of him when you’re around, so she knows you hear.”

“And I don’t care what mother thinks, Miss Perfect Daughter.”

“Heidi—”

A soft clap as of a car door shutting interrupted them. Delilah gasped, wide-eyed; Heidi set her mouth into a firm line of resolve, with only the slightest quiver. Surely Owen wasn’t coming home yet? The sun hadn’t even gone down yet.

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Leon had parked alongside the house and started getting out when he noticed an unfamiliar car parked silently along the front porch.

That’s not Mildred’s, he thought. Nor any of the kids’ regular friends’ car. One of those small, sporty cars, too; city folk, I shouldn’t wonder. Must be one of Heidi’s friends.

Walking up to it, he noticed the tires.

They were all flat.

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Soft steps on the porch eased their fears, and when the girls heard the gentle, almost nervous-sounding knock on the door, they knew it wasn’t Owen. Heidi opened the door to a young man not much older than her, with dark black hair, ghostly white skin and dark, freshly shredded jeans. Tattoos glared from his pathetic arms. His black leather jacket was so clean it shone.
“Hello, Sammy.”
“Hey, Heidi.”
“You know my sister, Delilah.”
“Yeah, hey again, Delly.”
Delilah glared at him a moment before replying, “Hello, Sam.”
“You never call me Sammy, Delly; why’s that?”
“Because I don’t like you like Heidi.”
“Fair enough. You ready, Heidi?”
Heidi nodded, tapping on the stuffed suitcase beside her. When he failed to respond, Heidi opened her mouth to say something, when she heard it: the unmistakable sound of Owen’s pickup peeling out into their dirt driveway.

Seeing Heidi stiffen up in mid speech, Sam and Delilah froze. Furious stomping towards the front porch followed the loud clap of a slammed car door. Delilah caught the flash of a blue dress next to a pair of mud-spattered jeans and browned T-shirt. Owen and Connie, she thought. Connie found him after all. Wait. Why have they stopped?

The stomping had ceased around Sam’s car on the side of the porch without windows, so Delilah and the others couldn’t see what Owen was doing. A short series of pops followed by low hissing left no question.

“He’s popping my tires! Why, that little—!
“Careful, Sammy; here he comes.”
Owen pounded into view on the porch at last, bursting through the screen door like a frenzied bull.

“Who the hell are you,” Owen shouted at Sam, who took a step back.

“Owen, now—"’
“Shut up, Heidi; I see the suitcase. You’re leaving with him, aren’t you?”
At this, Heidi had enough. “Yes, I am, and you won’t stop me this time!”

“The hell I won’t!
“Then stop this,” Heidi said, raising their mother’s revolver up from her side.

Connie, who had come up behind Owen, screamed and ran outside. Delilah gasped, then sat into the nearest chair. Owen didn’t flinch.

Delilah started first, “Heidi, you wouldn’t—”
“You don’t think by now I’ve thought this through a million times, Dell? Well I tell you I have. I knew if he got home before—”

“—You eloped with this garbage here,” Owen finished, “you’d never leave.”

Heidi glared, then looked at Delilah. Seeing Heidi’s focus shift, Sammy cleared his throat and beckoned towards Owen, and the door.

“C’mon, Heidi; we can take his pickup.”
Heidi ignored him, staring with sudden comprehension towards her sister. “You sent Connie after him, didn’t you?”

Delilah sat still, silent, looking towards Owen.

“She’s a mean drunk.” Heidi said, “I oughtta—” Her gun wavered slightly as she spoke, but that was enough.

Owen lunged at her, roaring. Though startled, Heidi turned it back towards him just before he ran into her.

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★
ATI SHIPMAN liked me since I left Star Point after high school...said I was too good to be one of them.

BIDDY Well, that’s what happens in a small town. Stick out too much an’ people’ll try and tear you down.

GILLIAN But you stick out, and everyone loves you! They all know you, got stories ’bout you…all but me. I ain’t never even got to talk to you till now.

Gillian smiles sadly.

GILLIAN I remember…that pony you used to have? I wanted so badly for you to bring him to my birthdays when I was little. I didn’t wanna bother Daddy ’bout it, but I thought, surely everyone’d come to my party if I hired Biddy’s pony.

BIDDY Ah, little Pickle! That Shetland was the darndest thing. Didn’t do much but eat and shit, but I raked in bucks of cash off him. Kasey Zirlott had him hired every year till she turned fourteen.

GILLIAN I loved that pony. I only got invited to two parties where he was at, though, and didn’t get to ride him but at one of ’em.

Biddy SNORTS.
Tension
ANDREW HEDGLIN

If I have discovered anything about maturity (though I’m no expert), it is that one has to make an active decision to grow up. We all age, but to mature we must take risks. Sometime risks involve lying about your whereabouts and a full tank of gas.

I was an abnormally sheltered kid. By sheltered, I do not mean to say that my parents were ever terribly concerned after the age of nine about what sort of media messages to which I was exposed. I was a precocious little kid who brought Lewis Grizzard books out to the playground instead of playing touch football. Though my parents would see me reading anything and everything, I do not think it ever occurred to them to say, “Hey, maybe an impressionable little kid shouldn’t be reading about swearing and drugs and sex.”

What I mean by “sheltered” is that while my parents let me live however I damn well pleased vicariously, they were not particularly keen on me having my own “adventures.” I was always the indoors sort anyway, and I was so loved and entertained by a wonderful and affectionate family that school and church was pretty much all I asked for out of my social life. This is still deeply ingrained into my personality. However, the social pressures exerted on any normal teenager would me to join the big, scary world out there.

My absence of experience outside the bubble of my house is what led to my parents being petrified about me getting my driver’s license. This was also due, in some terrifying mixture, to my general mechanical inability, my tendency to not react well in pressure situations, and the memory of when I got my Camaro stuck in the back of the Wright and Ferguson Cemetery. I didn’t get my full license until I was 17, and I was not permitted to drive the Interstate, not that my Camaro could safely travel any higher than 60 MPH anyway. Problem presented, and problem solved. But when my parents bought me my Civic, it just didn’t occur to them that I would traverse the sacred strips of forbidden highway. And I didn’t—for months.

But one fine day in March I said to myself, “Andrew, this is ridiculous. You’ll be in college soon, and you need to know how to drive the interstate.” Now, of course, I have driven to my college plenty of times without even seeing the interstate, but, I suppose, interstate driving is a handy thing to know.

So, without any prior experience and no one else in the car, I decided to drive to Clinton from Madison, via Interstate 55. I had scheduled to meet at the Mississippi College library with my friend Emily, because that was the only place in Clinton I knew with any certainty how to reach. The
Academy dismissed at 12:30, so I headed out then for a 3:00 meeting. I suppose I’m just terminally punctual.

I ran the perilous gauntlet of the interstate with just a Todd Snider album to keep me company and soothe my nerves. I was a rebel, and a rule-breaker.

*Tension...tension...tension is all that I know,* crooned Todd. I breathed deep and tried not to let my panic anxiety disorder get the better of me. I don’t remember what made me more nervous, the cars whizzing past me or the exhilaration of ditching my parents for once in life. *Don’t worry...about a thing. ‘Cuz every little thing...is gonna be alright.*

I stopped at a Subway, and paused a little bit to read a little more of *Watership Down.* I had just made it to the evil General Woundwort’s military encampment Efrafa, but the Subway was noisy and busy and strange. Part of panic disorder had to do with food, and I had to get the hell out of there. Later, I attempted to visit my former youth pastor at his new church, Northside Baptist, but apparently on Tuesdays he was never there. I decided to see if I could reach the library, but the parking situation at Mississippi College seemed absurd to me. I spent half an hour trying to find a legal parking space, and avoid a ticket at a college I didn’t even attend. I finally remembered something Emily had said about a church parking lot, and I entered the library I knew so well from Quiz Bowl competitions.

Finally, the appointed time came, and I went to the back to greet them. Emily brought a friend, Amy. Amy was pretty quiet and wore glasses, and I had a sneaking suspicion that Emily was trying to set her up. I lent Emily the book I had been trying to give to her since last summer. I gave her my copy of *Colony Girl,* because she reminded a lot of the main character, Eve.

She asked if I wanted to go to Northpark Mall with her, which was in Ridgeland. The problem was that I didn’t know how to get to Ridgeland from Clinton. I was already disoriented, and a monsoon had descended upon central Mississippi. I was fairly certain that I would become lost without hope of return.

I called my mother because she should have been home from work by then. She asked where I was, and I believe I told her at was at the Ridgeland library because I didn’t see what good the truth would do at that point. As it turns out, I did not die. That was a real victory for me. I trailed Emily like I was some James Bond villain, in the pouring rain. I arrived at the Northpark Mall like the victor at the Indianapolis 500.

When we got to the mall, I was a little puzzled. I had never shopped with a girl before, so I was surprised at the promiscuous nature of the clothing aimed at upper middle-class young ladies, which I deemed more appropriate for a brothel.

The real mystery, was, however, that I was hanging out at the mall with anybody. I had often gone there by myself, and always wondered what
it would be like to hang out with friends there, instead of alone or with parents. I ran into an acquaintance from church, and I felt like I was on the other side of the mirror. Instead of being embarrassed to be at the Victoria’s Secret cosmetics station or wherever we were, I thought *Look at me! I have friends!*

Eventually, we parted ways and I went home. For most kids, that would have been a pretty lame Tuesday afternoon, I’m sure. But for me, the whole affair was a moral victory beyond compare. I had broken the bonds of my own social stringency, and proved to myself that while I might not yet be prepared for the world, I was prepared to learn. It’s these small steps and moments of maturity that we all truly grow as persons.
Burritos with Arthur

A beef and bean burrito
wafts across the page
with Pellinore, Arthur, Lancelot, and Gawain,
whose rusty swords slice open foes,
bleeding purple fountains,
spilling organs and lumpy intestines,
releasing that gaseous gagging pungency—
death.

Hungering, I put down Arthur,
pick up my knife and \textit{slice},
baring the red-orange innards of
a burrito.
No thicker than my wrist,
a small torso, corpse-white,
oozing red-orange cheese
stuffed into it earlier,
spilling kidney-
pinto beans.

Impaling it on my blade,
I rejoin
Arthur’s Beowulfian quests,
killing Morgians and Mordreds,
and finding holy grails and swords.
Vanille Coco

ADDIE LEAK

Vanille
And thick, creamy chocolate
With pecans, blanketing my Great-Great
Aunt Addie’s famous brownies
In her homespun, sweet-
Smelling walk-up apartment
In Baton Rouge. She was ninety-four—

Before the stroke, and there was still
A cat to hide from me when I pulled its tail.
Afterward, there was only the Siamese cat pillow
With nappy fur and blue marble eyes
In the assisted-living building
That smelled like old people and smoke.
But at the old apartment there was
A Christmas tin always waiting for me,
Whether I was expected or not;

I would sit on the chintz-pillow covered
Daybed, trying to divine its reason for being
And sneaking fudge-topped brownies
From the tin till Mama noticed, then arguing
Futilely that Aunt Addie gave them to me—
And you can’t tell me not to eat them.

Aunt Addie always laughed—at least inside.
I’m sure she did; I was a spitfire like her.
My inheritance—a name, some silver, and
Her “secret” brownie recipe
That found its way into three southern cookbooks;
But, of course, the brownies were always best

Made by her. Her hands—
Old healing, teaching hands, blue-veined with
Years and wrinkled with love-labor—
Were magic.
And mine, wrists scented with
Youth and vanilla French perfume,
Beat the dark batter
To the same rhythm
In the sweet home-comfort
And blanketing sugar-warmth
Of an ageless southern kitchen
And two lifetimes of memories.
What’s up, Cuz?

How’s the ball-and-chain, you married man, you? Dude, I can’t believe you went through with it. I could have sworn you were stuck single for life. But hey, I picked a good assumption to get wrong, right?

I figure that by the time you read this you’ll have just gotten back from the ‘moon. I’m ticked that you wouldn’t tell me where you were going. Come on, give me a little credit. I wouldn’t try anything—aw, who am I kidding? Good move on your part.

I know when you open my present you’re going to have a lot questions, so I’ll leave a little note at the bottom of this letter to explain things. If the package smells funny, it’s because there were cats prowling around your porch when I left it there. I swear, man, it was the cats. The cats!

Hope you liked the toast. I know I had several months to work on it, but seeing as you forgot to send your best man a wedding invitation—well, let’s just say I don’t feel too bad about how things went. I mean, it wasn’t terrible or anything, right? I pulled a couple heart strings, made the grandparents laugh, and got you to turn red a couple times. You’ve left me with no shortage of embarrassing stories to tell, my man. I’d have more if seventy-five percent of them didn’t incriminate me as well. I guess that’s one of the prices you pay for being cousins and buds, right?

I had quite the library of tales to choose from, didn’t I? I’ll prove how well I know you right now: When you read that last sentence, you instantly thought of the Rescue Squad incident, the Septic Tank, and the Apple Fight. Ha, I’m right, aren’t I? Those were classics. Once again, nothing I could use for the toast, but hey, they’ll always be great memories.

Still, out of all those times we got in trouble—or should have gotten in trouble—I think the Snake has yet to be replaced as the Ultimate Adventure of All Time. I know you still remember that one.

Let’s see, that had to have been ninety… three? That’d put you at eleven years old and me at ten. Sounds about right. Anyway, I know it was summer, because we were heading down to Pop’s pond to see what trouble we could find with his paddle boat. I can still hear the disappointment in your voice when you saw...

“...The paddle boat’s gone!” moaned Matt, dropping to his knees on the muddy ground. “I knew the girls would forget to tie it up.”

“We’ll get’em back,” Rick said softly through clenched teeth. He reached down and packed a large ball of mud. “Look! I’ve been inspired!”

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Matt stood up and brushed off his knees.  
“Nah,” he said. “Mud balls was last week. We need something new... something unique.”

“Like putting rocks in the mud-balls?”
Matt considered Rick’s suggestion for a moment.

“Hey, it worked for snowballs,” he said with a mischievous grin. He reached for a large skipping stone and shoved it into a ball of mud.

One o’clock quickly turned to four o’clock, and the small pile of mud-rock balls became a small mountain. Unfortunately, the mud began to run together into a shapeless mound after a while, leaving Matt and Rick with muddy hands and no ammunition.

“Well, that was a waste of time,” Rick said matter-of-factly. He glared over at Matt, who was surveying the pile thoughtfully. The moment of silence proved too much for Rick to handle, and with a quick side step and swing of the arms, he shoved Matt headfirst into the mound. Rick collapsed to the ground laughing. Matt, on the other hand, didn’t find the situation quite as comical as Rick had.

“You...” Matt growled, rising from the mud. A large chunk of mud that had attached itself to Matt’s chin dropped and stuck to his shoe, sending Rick into another gale of laughter.

“You!” Matt repeated, climbing from the mud and lurching for his cousin.

“Woah, stop!” Rick squealed from between laughs. He pulled himself to his feet and staggered away from Matt. Matt tried to leap from the mud pile to grab him, but his foot slipped in the ooze and sent him tumbling back to the ground. Now he was mad.

“You’ll paaay!” he roared and crawled from the mud. He leapt to his feet and raced after Rick.

“It was just a joke!” Rick yelled back, running hard along the bank of the pond.

“Your joke is running down my underwear,” screamed Matt, slowly closing the gap between him and Rick. Rick was quickly running out of options and had just begun to think that maybe Matt wasn’t kidding. He leapt from the muddy bank of the pond onto the adjoining dock and sprinted to the floating platform at the end.

“You’re all mine,” Matt panted, marching down the center of the dock towards Rick. “Hope you brought a change of underwear.”

Rick skidded to a stop on the edge of the dock and stared out over the water.

“Paddle boat!” he yelled. Matt, who was just reaching to push Rick into the water, stopped short.

“What?”

“The paddle boat!”

“What? Where?”

“Out there! Stuck in the algae!”
Matt looked out across the smooth surface of the pond. The paddle boat had indeed snagged in a large patch of algae near the center of the pond.

“Let’s go get it!” Rick said, pulling off his shoes.

“How? It’s at least fifty feet away from the dock!”

“Easy, dummy. We wade out there. The water’s only a couple feet deep. Waist-deep at the very most!” Rick said with a roll of his eyes. He sat on the end of the dock and poked his feet in. “Kind of cold, though,” he added.

Matt looked unconvinced.

“Deep isn’t the problem,” he said in a hushed voice. “I heard there might be snakes.”

Rick jerked his feet out of the water.

“Where’d you hear that? Your dad?”

“No, Pops.”

Rick relaxed and stuck his feet back in the water.

“Pops?” he said. “He just doesn’t want us swimming around and getting drowned in algae. He’s making the snakes up.”

“I’m not so sure. A friend of mine said he may have seen one once.”

“Seeing as I was that friend, and seeing as that ‘snake’ turned out to be a stick, I’m still not convinced.” Rick slipped off the end of the dock and sank to his thighs in the cool water.

“Rick! Wait!” Matt cried, his eyes begging Rick to return to the safety of the dock. “I’m serious, I think there’s snakes in there. Let’s not risk this one, ok?”

Rick stared at Matt a second, searching his face for any sign of joking. Finding none, he waded back to the dock and pulled himself up. The dock rocked back and forth with the added weight on the side.

“Fine,” Rick said, putting his shoes back on. “How’re we getting out there?”

“We need another raft,” Matt said, squinting his eyes toward the stuck boat.

“We could try making one again,” Rick suggested. Matt gave him a dark look. “Oh. Right. That didn’t go so well last time. Forget I said anything about it.”

Matt rose to his feet and looked out over the water again. Rick sat back and watched. He recognized the look on Matt’s face and knew that if he waited long enough, his cousin would cook something up. He always did.

“The poles,” Matt said softly. Rick looked up confused. “The poles!” Matt yelled and let loose a wild laugh. Rick jumped to his feet. That laugh was always a good sign.

“We’ll take out the poles,” said Matt excitedly as he ran to the corner of the floating platform. “We’ll take out the poles and use the dock! The floating dock!”

Rick looked to the corners of the dock. A grin spread across his face as he realized what Matt was talking about.
“Atta boy,” Rick said, joining Matt at the corner to give him a hand. 

The poles, however, proved to be grounded better than either had anticipated. But after a half-hour of tugging and levering, the last of the poles popped from the mud with a muffled slurp. The boys tossed two of the posts onto the stationary portion of the dock, having decided to use the last two as oars. A minute later, the dock had successfully been detached and began floating lazily out into the pond. With a roar of triumph, the cousins picked up their respective poles and began pushing themselves toward the algae patch.

“Almost there,” Rick grunted as he gave his pole a hard shove. “Yeah, so, we need to think of a plan,” Matt replied through his labored breathing.

“For what?”

“For getting the boat back. I think there’s a piece of rope tied to the front of the boat.”

“The one the girls were supposed to use to tie it back on the dock?”

“Yeah,” Matt replied with a grimace. Girls were so annoying.

“So,” Rick began slowly, trying to follow Matt’s line of thinking. “One of us, probably you, climbs into the paddle boat. We tie it to the dock, and you use the paddle boat to tug me and the dock back to shore.”

“Brilliant, but one change—You get into the boat, not me,” Matt said.

“Loser. You’re still scared of falling in and getting eaten by snakes.”

“Not eaten. Bitten. They’re poisonous, you know.”

“Nuh-uh, not water snakes. They just bite.”

“Just bite? And you’re ok with that?” Matt asked incredulously.

“Well, no, but its better than poison,” Rick answered, turning his attention to steering the dock towards the boat. Matt gave a final push with his pole and felt the dock thump against the side of the paddle boat. He gave another maniacal laugh.

“Even though I know it means good news,” Rick said with a sideways glance at Matt, “it still creeps me out. So stop.”

Matt flashed Rick a wide grin.

“That’s creepy, too. You’re just Mr. Creepy today,” Rick mumbled, scooting to the edge of the dock to climb into the boat. The dock, free of its anchors, tipped wildly as he shifted his weight.

“Knock it off!” Matt shrieked, flattening himself on the floor of the platform. Rick froze, and the dock settled back to a level position.

“Geez, grow up,” Rick grumbled and carefully crawled to the edge. He peeked over the side and into the water beside the boat.

Rick’s head snapped back up and he scrambled towards the center of the dock. Matt, feeling the dock beginning to tip again, joined Rick at the center as quickly as he could crawl. Rick stared at Matt, breathing hard.

“What are you doing?” Matt yelled. “What’s wrong with you?”
“Sn... sna...” Rick stammered.
“What? What are you say—”
“Snake!”
The word “snake” echoed loudly across the suddenly silent pond.

The boys sat absolutely still for almost an entire minute.

“Snake?” Matt whispered.

“Snake,” Rick said, looking Matt dead in the eye. Matt realized that Rick was definitely not joking and was definitely scared.

“Where?” Matt asked, feeling fear creep into his own voice.

“Just under the boat, a little ways underwater. It’s not very deep over there. I can just see it sticking out from under a patch of grass.”

Matt, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to think clearly until he had seen the beast, pulled himself with trembling arms to the end of the dock. He poked his head over the edge and peered into the shimmering water. Sure enough, about three feet away from the surface of the water lay a long, brownish-gray snake. It looked at least a couple inches thick and though partially hidden, Matt guessed that it had to be at least three feet long.

“See it?” Rick said, joining Matt at the edge. The dock tipped sharply to the side. Matt screamed and the boys threw themselves face first onto the hard, wooden floor.

“You... idiot...” Matt gasped, willing the air to pump back into his lungs.

“S... sorry,” Rick gasped back. The two boys rolled over and lay on their backs a moment.

Rick sat up with a start.

“The poles!”

Matt rolled to the side and looked out into the water to watch the poles, their last remaining means of returning to shore, float lazily out of reach. He closed his eyes in defeat.

“We must of knocked ‘em off when the dock tipped,” Rick said softly, a look of impending doom settling over him. Matt curled up into a ball and stared at the floor.

“It’s not that bad,” Rick added, putting a hand on Matt’s shoulder.

“I mean, it looks like an old snake. It might not even care if we disturb the water a little bit. We could swim for it!”

“No!” Matt shouted in terror. “If there’s one, there may be more.”

“Look,” Rick said after a moment. “I know snakes bug you more than me. Tell you what,” he said, looking back into the water where the snake lay motionless. “I’ll go get help.”

“How?” Matt said with raised eyebrows. “You’re not going to try and swim it, are you?”

“Noooo way,” Rick answered quickly. “But I’m willing to try getting into the boat.”

“Can you still reach it?” Matt asked, pulling himself up onto his hands and knees.

Mattie Alone

Mattie walked alone in the afternoon, pushing her shadow on the ground in front of her.

“I was hoping you would come! It seems like forever since I saw you!”

Mattie skipped along beside the pond, watching the grasshoppers fly from her feet in the grass.

“Of course, we were talking together a minute ago, but that was different. Anyhow, you’ve no idea how I’ve missed you!”

She pulled a scarlet leaf from a maple and began tearing it into tiny bits.

“You mustn’t tell a soul you’ve been here, for it is a profound secret.”

Mattie shook her finger, held it to her lips, and laughed.

“Oh, I forgot that! Naturally, since I’m the only person you’ve spoken to in your entire life, you won’t tell anyone else. How old are you, anyway?”

Hands on her hips, Mattie cocked her head, considering.

“Ah, yes, to be sure! We met last May, so that would make you six months old. How absurdly young you are for all the things you’ve done in your life.”

She dropped the last bit of leaf onto the pond’s shining surface. It fell on the reflection of sky and grass and lay like a tiny raft on the water.

“You were a frog when I met you. I bent down to say ‘How do you do?’ and you jumped into the pond and stepped out again, a princess! I was so shocked!”

Mattie whirled in a sudden circle, trying to see the back of her shadow. It was too fast for her.

“And I invited you to come home with me. And we had tea. And Kitty behaved very badly and sat on the table and drank your tea for you. (Because you had put a great deal of cream in your tea, and he does enjoy cream.)”

Mattie made her mouth into a cheerio and blew dandelion fuzz into the wind. The downy seeds drifted back into her face and stuck in her curls.

“Do you remember when we went to the jungle and rode on an elephant? You were terribly frightened, but I told you I would protect you. And I did protect you, because when we came home, my clothes were muddy and wet, and you had not a speck of dust on your gown.”
Don’t know,” Rick murmured, crawling to the edge. “Let’s see.” Rick stretched his hand as far as he could across the water. His fingertips barely brushed the sides of the paddle boat.

“It’s too far,” Matt said, sitting back down glumly. “You’ll fall in. You even have trouble getting in when the boat’s anchored to the dock!”

“Yeah, but who’s to say I won’t be able to do this easily? Maybe I’ll do great!” “But you only get one chance,” Matt said, grabbing Rick’s T-shirt sleeve. Rick shrugged Matt’s hand off.

“That’s why you’re going to help me,” Rick stated firmly. “I’m going to get a running start, so I’ll need you to stand on this end of the dock and run to the other end as I run to this end.”

Matt stared at Rick blankly.

“You need to help me balance the dock, Matt,” Rick explained. “Just be on the opposite end as me and it won’t tip. I can jump this distance no problem.” Rick carefully crossed to the opposite end of the dock. The platform began to rise from the water on the other side.

“Get on the side!” Rick yelled to Matt, who was still standing confused at the dock’s center. Matt reflexively jumped backwards to balance the platform. Rick grinned.

“Yeah, this’ll definitely work.” Rick shook his arms and crouched into a set position. Matt took one last glance backwards off the end of the dock. The snake was still there, and though it could have been the rippling of the water, it looked almost like—

Matt’s eyes flew wide open. The snake was moving. It knew what was about to happen, and it was moving. Matt jerked his head back around to warn Rick.

“Hold on,” Matt shouted. He took two steps toward Rick to stop him from jumping.

Unfortunately, Rick hadn’t begun to move yet, and Matt’s movement caused the dock to rise drastically out of the water opposite Rick. Rick’s eyes bugged as he flailed to catch his balance. Matt threw himself against the rising end of the dock to balance it, but seconds too late. Rick couldn’t catch himself in time.

“Heeelp!” Rick screamed, then tumbled backwards into the pond.

“Riick!” Matt shrieked. He shot a look into the water behind him. The snake had definitely moved. And it had moved towards Rick.

“Noooo!” Matt shouted. He turned to see Rick hysterically flailing through the water towards the shore, screaming the whole way.

“Faster, Rick. You’re not going fast enough!” Rick turned and looked back over his shoulder at Matt as he ran, his eyes still bugging out of his face.

“I can’t go any faster!” he screamed back. His feet caught on a piece of algae, and he tumbled face first into the water.

The snake, Matt thought. Gotta watch the snake. He slid back to the side of the dock and peered into the water. Rick’s rampage across the pond floor was beginning to stir up a thick fog of silt.
I can't see the snake, Matt thought in a panic. “I can’t see the snake!” he shouted across the pond. Rick, still struggling through the algae, hadn’t made much progress towards the shore. “It’s after me! It’s going to kill me!” Rick cried. He pulled harder against the algae and fell backwards into the water as he broke free.

He’ll never make it, Matt thought as he watched Rick struggle. He’s going to die and I’m just sitting here watching!

Matt stood and stared into the murky pond where he had last seen the snake. He realized what had to happen.

“Rick, whatever you do, don’t stop running!” Matt yelled to his thrashing cousin. Rick turned in surprise. “Matt, what are you—?” But Rick never finished the question.

“Come and get me, snake!” Matt roared and executed a perfect cannonball into the water beside the dock. Rick stared in stunned surprise. He turned and began running back towards where he had last seen his cousin.

“Matt, are you crazy?” Rick bellowed, pushing back through the algae. Matt burst out of the water fifteen feet away and flung the water from his eyes. He rapidly jerked his head around, trying to get his bearings. His eyes locked on Rick’s. His mouth dropped open.

“Rick!” Matt yelled in exasperated disbelief as he crashed through the pond towards his cousin. “I said run!”

“Oh. Right.” Rick said, spinning around again and heading for the shore. “Where’s the snake?” he called back.

“I don’t want to know,” yelled Matt. “Keep going!”

The boys crashed noisily across the pond, slowly but surely closing the gap between them and safety. Every blade of grass that brushed their legs became a snake’s tail, and every rough root they snagged themselves on became fangs. With every step towards safety, they felt their luck giving out.

Rick reached the pond’s side first and raced from the water onto the grass. He spun around and yelled unintelligible support back to Matt, who was still at least fifteen feet from the bank. Rick grabbed a handful of pond rocks and began throwing them.

“Ow!” yelled Matt as a rock smacked him in the shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry!” Rick yelled, continuing to throw rocks. Matt ducked as another near miss whizzed past him. “Why are you throwing rocks at me?”

“Not at you. At the snake!” Rick yelled back, chucking more stones into the water behind Matt. Matt threw his arms over his head and slogged on.

Ten feet, eight feet, five feet, then three, then one. Rick ran down to the shore and helped pull Matt to the safety of the grass. Then, as if having received an unseen signal, both collapsed face first onto the soft sod.
It was five minutes before either spoke as the cousins lay panting. Matt broke the silence.

“You’re welcome,” he said, rolling his head to face Rick.

“What, I’m supposed to thank you?” Rick shot back. “You dumped me in the lake, buddy.”

“Oh, come on,” Matt replied, “You would have fallen in anyway.” He pulled himself to his feet and looked back out across the pond at the abandoned paddle boat, now accompanied by the floating half of the pond’s dock.

“Pop’s is going to kill us,” he muttered. Rick stood up and joined him.

“Oh well,” he said. He glanced over at his cousin, still dripping wet and shaking from the ordeal. “Had to be the hero, didn’t you?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Matt said. “Still, you know... not bad,” Rick said softly, looking into the distance.

“Rick?” Matt asked quietly.

“Yeah?” Rick answered, not looking at Matt. Matt, however, chose to reply by shoving a ball of mud into Rick’s ear.

“You jerk” Rick shouted, shaking the mud off of his head. But Matt had already begun sprinting home.

★★★★★★

You’re still a jerk, you know. Sure, yeah, you’re married and all-grown-up now, but you’re still a jerk. But for a jerk, you’re a decent guy. Tell the missus she made a good choice.

So here’s the toast I didn’t give. Thanks for the dumb ideas, thanks for the trouble, thanks for mud in my ear, but most of all, thanks for twenty-two years of jumping into the ponds with me. Cheers.

Your Happily Single and Carefree Cousin,

Rick

P.S. Oh, yeah, the gift. Dad and I went down to the pond a week after we saw the snake. Guess what? We not only found it, but Dad caught it. We took it home and mounted it for kicks and giggles. I couldn’t think of a better wedding gift for you, my man. Enjoy the trophy. And if you want to know the species, you’ll want to look in the operating manual of Pop’s 1975 Ford truck—check under battery cables. You’re such a jerk.
draining the youth from our bodies?
And the last showing signs of age
Is the lowest point?
And In the end, does youth fall down
into the earth
abiding by the law?
Absorbing every last drop
of energy?
Waiting, to continue
the cycle?
We went to Vicksburg to see the monuments. Attentive at first, we read each plaque and bronze tablet, but, burned out by Tour Stop 6 (Thayer’s Approach), we eventually gave up. There was too much history. The landscape was too altered to see just how it all played out, in massive exchanges of men and gunfire, shifts in battle, grand turns of tide, so instead we perched on steep mounds of grass and dangled our feet over the zigzag trench, eating oranges and vying to spit the seeds out farthest across the sprawling field.

It’s a natural irony how peaceful the battlefield was: silent, save for the winter-braving crickets and the restless oak leaves, finally turning, drifting down aimlessly in the late November sun. Lisa spoke first, about the time she went to Normandy, of her mixed emotions as she stood on Omaha beach and watched children play, completely oblivious to all that went on beneath their feet. Even here, they straddled cannons, clambered over statues of generals and gods, slid down the hillside on collapsed cardboard boxes, down to the valleys where the Union stacked its dead.

I responded with all I knew about war: Korea, when I visited the demilitarized zone in Panmunjom and stood at the arbitrary border, the 49th parallel, which was no more than line drawn in the dirt, fiercely guarded by soldiers who never cracked a smile as communist tourists pointed across the gap.

We lapsed into silence, and that silence was broken, as just up the road from of us, a large family from Texas stopped to ponder an obelisk, striking and wrong among the sun-dappled greens and shadowy groves.

It’s a sort of kindness, then, I guess, that nature always takes its course, that trees grow and hills slide—once, the ground eroded under a display of cannons and one by one they dropped into the river—poppies bloom and grass takes root, erasing memory and our best intentions.

Later that afternoon we wandered through the cemetery, where thousands of short stones radiated out from some invisible center. Some of the graves had names, others just numbers, and some had crumbled away entirely. The temperature dropped and dry magnolia leaves snapped underfoot as we searched for the few Confederates that were buried here by accident, and, after some consideration, were let be. They were buried so deep in the park that we never did find them, but climbed back up to the parking lot, turning our backs on the early-setting sun and leaving them behind once more, to rest, buried at random among the enemy, or compatriots now, all consigned to the politics of dirt.
Visiting Hours

STEPHANIE EVANS

I always forget the code to Westminster North Retirement Home. You don’t need the code to get in but you need the code to get out. It’s a simple code, consisting of four simple digits. You would think that one would have no trouble remembering this simple, four-digit code and consequently, have no trouble getting out. But as I said before, I always forget the code. And somehow, I always forget that I always forget the code, so I never hesitate in going in. You see, getting in isn’t a problem, that is if you can make it past the never-ending construction projects going on outside the oversized front door. You can’t just walk up to that door—you must trot briskly, your heart beating slightly faster than normal, as you dodge beeping trucks, piles of torn up asphalt, and the staring eyes of the it’s-Sunday-afternoon-and-I’d-rather-be-at-home-in-bed construction workers. Then with nostrils twitching from the thick clouds of dust, you pause briefly to slap the big green button to the left of the dirty, white painted door, turn the brass door handle, and then pop inside, letting the door slam itself shut.

You find yourself in a very quiet in the hallway, the buzz of the machines outside no louder than a fly at the window. As you stand there, your eyes adjusting to the artificial lighting, your heartbeat softens to normalcy. You wonder if your eyes are playing tricks on you as you stare at the egg-yolk yellow painted walls. And then you begin to walk.

I always go to the right—the smell of stale potpourri and soured carpet seems to diminish when you go that way. A convenient railing lines either side; years of feeble fingers have worn away what used to be a brassy shine. I avoid using it. Along the way, doors open off the hallway into individual rooms. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of a wrinkled resident staring blearily at her fake-wood covered TV set, soaking up “The Price Is Right.” Today, she is gazing out of her blue velvet curtained windows. There is one gentleman who is always lying in the dark on his narrow bed—like a corpse—almost like he is practicing. Halfway down the hall on the left, there is an archway that leads into the dining hall/living area. A small, bright yellow finch, perched inside an oversized white plastic cage, guards the entrance. When I stop to stare at him, he just stares back.

I wonder who’s staring at who? I think and then chuckle at my attempt to be philosophical. What movie did I get that from?

Today, grandma is sitting at a scratched wooden table, in the front corner of the small room. She never sits on the plaid couch by the entertainment center. That’s where Helga and Ruth sit, eavesdropping on everyone else’s conversations. Ruth is from Italy and very polite—until you cross her. But if she cusses you out, don’t freak out—she will forget the whole incident.
momentarily and soon be inquiring warmly after your family in her charming Italian lisp.

Because grandma’s spine is so bent over, she hears my voice first.

“Hi Grandma, its Stephanie,” I say loudly.

She gasps through large straight teeth like she has heard an angel. Slowly, with much effort, she lifts her head up and smiles, gracefully reaching her splotchy, crooked hands towards me. I take them in my own, noticing how soft and fragile her skin feels.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Ohhh...Woonnnderful, now that you’re here.”

It’s about 4:00 p.m. and she is just finishing up dinner. Dinnertime seems to come earlier and earlier every time I visit. She always tries to feed me her synthetic food, but the thought of eating even a bit of that prepackaged cardboard turns my stomach. Today is no exception.

“Here...have a cookie,” she says as she begins to push the plastic wrapped creations toward me.

“No thank you. I promise, I don’t want them.” She asks me a few more times and I refuse her a few more times and then she finally sighs and forgets about it. Maybe I should just eat the things, but instead I sit on the edge of the stained, green satin dining chair, hoping that she won’t hear my stomach growling.

There is plenty of light in the dining hall. With windows on every side, the sun is free to meander in and out, casting sun beams on the spotted carpet, striped wallpapered walls, and dusty glass china cabinet. There are lots of old, stately trees outside the windows; the residents seem especially fascinated by them on windy days like today, watching their feathery leafed branches blow wildly about. I have never seen grandma look out the window when I am here. She looks only at her food or at me while I tell her several times what I have been up to.

“...So that’s how I got the job in Nashville and that lasted for a year and now I am home again for the summer working at the bakery.”

“What were you doing in Nashville?”

“Dancing in a show.”

“Now where was the show?”

“Nashville.”

“What were you doing in Nashville?

“Dancing and now I am home for the summer.” That’s usually when she takes her gnarled slender fist and beats it mockingly against her head.

“Oh...come on...wake up in there!” she jokes.

When I was young, my ability to execute a cartwheel made quite an impression on grandma. Sometimes when I am feeling sprightly, I grant her requests to show off my skills—moving the mismatched dining tables and chairs out of the way as the other residents observe my scandalous
behavior. But today there will be no cartwheels. I have something else in mind.

“Hey Grandma, do you want to see the Elvis impersonator?” I had heard the ladies at the other tables talking about “ElVince.” I wasn’t about to pass this opportunity up. But she just stares at me as if she doesn’t understand, so I repeat myself.

“There is an Elvis impersonator over in the activities hall today. You want to go? It’ll be fun.” She sighs and I realize her silence hadn’t been from confusion; it was from lack of enthusiasm.

“If you want to,” she says slowly.

“Yes, I do want to. I think it will be fun. Will you go with me?”

“I guess,” she says apprehensively, but I think she is smiling.

As we get up to go, Ruth shuffles over excitedly.

“Are you going to see ElVince?” she asks. Her eyes are sparkling.

“Yeah! You want to come?” Her smile tells me all I need to know, but I hear a loud sniff behind me. I turn around to see the nurse on duty staring at us.

“She can’t go,” she says flatly. “Not by herself.” Ruth scowls at her.

“What do you mean I can’t go?” I look from one to the other before interjecting,

“I’ll be with her. My grandmother and I will walk over with her.”

“You aren’t family and there is no one to take her over.”

“Can’t you take her?”

“There aren’t enough people; I have to stay here.” The look on her face reminds me of the time I rode a concrete water slide at Thunder Island. It appeared nice and smooth, until you touched it. I looked like a *Jaws* survivor by the time I reached the bottom. They tore that place down years ago—rumor is somebody fell off the slide and died. True, no one was dying here, after all it was just ElVince, but I wasn’t sure if anyone was living either, I mean after all it was ElVince.

Seeing that Ruth is looking absolutely dejected, I mean totally crestfallen, I try once more.

“Please, can’t she just walk over with us?”

“Sorry Hon, that’s the policy.”

*Hon? She just called me Hon. There is nothing I hate more than being patronized.*

*But what can I do? She’s the law here.* Except for speeding, I’m a law-abiding citizen. I’m just not good jailbreak material. But I am a good sigher. So I sigh pointedly and slip my arm into grandma’s. I’m not going to let this “that’s the policy” nurse ruin our day. I smile at Ruth as kindly as I can.

“Sorry Ruth, maybe next time. I’m sure your not missing much,” I say, shaking my head and scrunching my eyebrows together. “We’ll tell you all about it.” We turn to walk down the hallway while Ruth shuffles back.
to the couch. Before we are out of earshot, I hear her addressing the group around the entertainment center.

“’Tis worse than a prizon...”

The activities center is packed. The shiny linoleum flooring is lined wall to wall with smiling, wrinkled faces. Some are in their wheel chairs and some are standing. Most of them are women. Grandma and I find two large cushioned dining chairs in the safety of the second row and sit down. ELVince has already started his routine and is singing, “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog...” with a gusto that would have tired even The King. Grandma is looking around the room totally uninterested and totally bored. She watches ELVince for a moment and then nudges me with her elbow. Leaning into me, she whispers out of the side of her mouth,

“Stephanie, go do some cartwheels and show him how to really dance!”

When my newly wedded grandma and her husband, Joseph Svrchek, first became Christians, they were Baptists. Baptists (at least the kind grandma was) despise dancing. They feel it is the welcoming window to the immorality drive-in. So dancing was out. Until last year. My Aunt Rhoda, grandma’s youngest daughter who is now in her forties, got married for the second time to a good man for the first time. They went ballroom dancing on their first date, so of course the wedding reception was rockin’: a full swing band, huge dance floor, and plenty of alcohol. Everyone was bustin’ it out, but one woman took home the prize for sheer endurance: Harriet Svrchek. Being in her eighties, she had simply forgotten that she didn’t believe in dancing. I’ll never forget dancing the night away with grandma.

I’ll probably never forget seeing ELVince with grandma either, I think as I watch him circle the room crooning, “Love me tender...” and grasping ladies hands as they mouth the words back to him. When he winks at a lady in front of us, she leans in excitedly to a friend sitting next to her.

“He touched my hand!” she gushes. Suddenly, ELVince is standing right in front of grandma and I. To her horror, he kneels down on one knee and begins to take grandma’s hand, and to my horror she shakes her head and points vigorously at me. He smiles a wicked, slippery smile and takes my hand instead. Thanks Grandma. I blush and say thank you when the song is over and then wipe my hands on the side of my pant leg. I derive a small sense of pleasure from the fact that I am the envy of a few ladies in the room who think we are still in the Cold War and this is really Elvis.

Thankfully, the rest of the show is uneventful. He thanks us for being a wonderful audience and informs us of when we can catch his act again. Some of the ladies ask for his autograph. He is very kind and makes them laugh. The King is smiling down from somewhere I’m sure.

By this time we make the slow trek back to Grandma’s wing, I have to use the restroom pretty badly. I only use the restroom there when I have too. I wish they would give you a complimentary sanitation suit upon
entry—I try not to imagine what has occurred there. The fixtures are every shade similar to white, and the toilet paper is crispy—like when you spill water or some other liquid on a borrowed book and then you cuss because the person you borrowed it from is very particular and then you look around and hope no one heard you cuss and then you go home and leave it on the counter and forget about it and then when the person calls and wants her book back, you search for hours until you find it on the counter where you had left it, except it took you hours because it was buried under piles of newspaper and to-do lists and then you cuss again because even though the book is now dry, the pages are all wavy and stuck together and crispy—very, very crispy.

After I manage to make it out of the bathroom alive, I sit at the table again with grandma while she has a snack. She offers me her Jell-O of course, and I of course say,

“No thanks, that’s your food.” She just wrinkles her nose. I tell Ruth about our adventures with ElVince.

“That’s nice,” she says warmly. She seems to have forgotten she ever wanted to go.

After ten minutes or so, I try not to tap my feet or speak in short sentences, but the grimy crown molding, dripping noses, and paper-thin background noise starts to get to me. I begin to yawn and decide I’ve been there long enough that I can leave without appearing eager to go. As I say goodbye, Grandma insists on standing up and hugs me like a heavyweight—gripping my arms with thin, iron fingers. I ease her back down gently until she is just inches from the seat, and then she just drops into it jerking me forward. Still holding onto me, she says,

“Now you know what they say in Tennessee?”

“What’s that?” I ask, though I know exactly “what they say in Tennessee.” I’d been hearing it ever since I was a little girl picking blueberries and chasing lizards all around their Smoky Mountain cabin. After weeks of hiking, chigger scratching, and eating grandma’s homemade berry cobbler my family would pack up the old Chevy van, pile onto the hot leather seats and start down the winding gravel road that would lead us back to Indiana. My grandparents would stand on their big wooden porch and wave goodbye until the tree-lined sides of the mountain folded in around us. Always just before we disappeared from sight, their words carried on the breeze coming through the open van window, they would yell,

“Y’all come back now, ya hear!” We laugh together and grandma gives my hands one last squeeze. I gently unwrap her fingers from mine, missing their warm pressure a soon as it’s gone.

After saying goodbye to Ruth and the others, I ask the Nazi nurse to give me the code to get out—I always forget it. She takes me aside and whispers it to me, her eyes darting around the room, eyeing any nearby residents suspiciously.
“Thanks,” I say, more out of ingrained obligatory politeness than sincerity, and head for the door, disturbing momentarily the heavy, sterilized air of the yellow hallway. Punching the dusty buttons of the keypad, my heart sinks as the light stays red. I feel my teeth clenching together as I try again.

...1...3...no...125...no...12...5...6...no... I begin to panic.
I can’t ask that nurse again. She’ll scowl at me and make me feel stupid.

“1...24...6...no...!”

I can’t go back in there! I already said goodbye! One only says goodbye once and she will be confused and ask me questions! As I begin to frantically punch the buttons, I can almost hear the little light gleefully screaming “No!” gargling and spitting up cackles of glowing, red laughter.

Abhh, dear Lord! I am beginning to lose all hope of escape. The red light blinks on and off and on and off with cruel, rhythmic predictability and then suddenly, 1...2...4......7? Abh-baa! Green! I wrench the doorknob clockwise and burst open the heavy door, escape down the crumbly ramp and into the blowing, hot noisy wind.
When we checked out, my crush was at the counter, and I saw him face-to-face for the first time. His smile was just as cute, but I was shocked at how old he was. Probably at least thirty, his face lined.

"Did you have a nice stay?" he asked. His voice was soft. I leaned against the counter next to my dad, tinkering with the souvenir magnets. Slyly looking sideways, I watched him write out the receipts with his left hand, angled slightly over the paper. His hair fell forward slightly over his eyes. Suddenly, he looked up and saw me watching him. I turned back quickly to the magnets, but not before I saw him smile at me.

"You guys have a great facility here," my mom said, walking up behind me. "We will definitely be coming back. This lake is so much more private than Coeur d'Alene."

"Much safer when you are out there swimming or riding jet skis," my dad said, slipping his credit card into his wallet and his wallet into his pocket.

"Yes, that is true," the man said. "Have a safe trip."

"Thank you," my mom said. I followed her out the door, afraid to look back, but wishing I could have one more smile.

We piled into the car and I pressed my face against the window, watching the lake disappear along with my dream of romance.
Young Love

S A R A H C H R I S T I N E B O L T O N

I remember the very first time I fell in love. It was the summer after my twelfth birthday, and we were vacationing at Priest Lake, in Washington State.

He was tall and blond and probably ten years older than me, but when he bravely rescued a woman stranded in her motorboat, I was smitten. I was just old enough to think that I was in love, and young enough to think that my love was realistic.

One day, my dad and I took our canoe and paddled across the lake. When we reached the middle, I looked down into the flickering depths, and felt my stomach do flip-flops. I dug my paddle deep into the water, and we surged toward shore. When I could see the bottom again, I felt secure.

After we explored an inlet, we paddled to the dock restaurant.

“What is frog pie?” I asked from across the table. “It’s not really frog, is it?”

“Actually, they mix frog skin in with the frosting, to make it smooth,” my dad answered, deadpan. I looked at him sideways for a second. “You are kidding, aren’t you?”

A smile pulled up the right corner of his mouth. “Yes. There’s no frog in frog pie. Honestly, I don’t know why they call it that.”

“I wouldn’t mind that. I don’t want to be any taller than I am.”

“Being tall is a good thing,” he said, laying his menu flat in front of him. “You might not like it now, but later, when you are older, you’ll appreciate being taller.” He paused. “I guess maybe you don’t like it because you are taller than boys? You know, boys get their growing spurt later than girls.”

I wriggled my legs sideways and looked intently at my menu. “Uh, huh.” I didn’t really want to start talking about boys, mostly because I didn’t want him to ask me if I had a crush on anybody. The waitress came to take our orders.

“Frog mud pie and coffee, please, without cream,” I said, handing her my menu.

“Same for me,” my dad said. “Except, cream with my coffee. I can’t drink it black like this brave young lady.”

I smiled at him as he handed over his menu.

A few days later, we all dressed up and walked the back road to the dock restaurant. The waiter gave us a table right next to the window, and we ate trout and watched the lights twinkle off the water. Walking back later, bats swooped low over our heads, and our screams of delighted terror echoed through the trees.

[Salty spray crusts my eyelashes]

M A R T H A K R Y S T A P O N I S

Salty spray crusts my eyelashes.
The waves pound a roaring rhythm upon my eardrums.
I can feel water droplets beading on my arms,
Specks from the breakers shattering against my feet.
Looking down, there are millions of fragmented mirrors, clinging to me,
Lest they be swallowed by the foaming masses.
Sand grinds between my teeth. Will it form a pearl? I spit it out.

On the horizon, briny swells chase each other, like amoebas,
Somehow finding their momentum—inanimate objects, yet not.
America the Beautiful Letdown
SARAH SENFF

Fallow fields and empty factories lie in mourning as the highway screams by
Our pace demands pause, yet we punish ourselves with “purpose”
Beauty queens in magazines are painted, but purportedly perfect
Slaves to our snooze buttons, we slam our digital alarm clocks against
the wall
Silently pleading a prayer for peace
But we speak to the ceiling, not the Sovereign
And all the little ants go marching,
Directionless,
Blindly stumbling on toward someone else’s goal
Merrily we roll along
As status quo becomes our song
Behind us are the battered, broken, bruised bodies of those we used
to get ahead
Before, the bitterness of a bountiful life lived without love
We dreamed the American dream
And then we woke up screaming...
Thanksgiving in New Hampshire: Observation
DAVID RAHAIM

The night before
snow fell to soften the shape of the hills
and dress naked trees whose leaves
were turning to soggy mulch.

In the woods behind my Grandfather’s house the air is silent,
as if all old sounds had frozen in the night
and dropped to be covered by white.

I find deer prints, light and indistinct
as I duck under weighted limbs

snapping twigs

that catch my overcoat.

I sink into the snow as I walk, feel the ice
creep up around my boots and begin to melt
against my ankles.

I settle on a slope for a moment,
scan between the trees and see a young buck step lightly
under a low branch, his breath coming in regular wet clouds.

As my Zen and my poetry have taught I watch.

The deer ducks his head, ears pointed, clips off
a mouthful of pine then moves silently forward.
He pauses again to drink at a slushed pond

and I watch,

shift my weight for balance,

the snow compacts under my foot
and his ears catch the sudden sound

of ice crystals breaking.

I watch.

His head jerks up and down,
then his endless brown eyes focus on mine.
He freezes and I can see, for a moment, the stretch of his muscles

before he snorts and bounds away, leaving behind a thin mist of breath.

The forest is silent again.
I turn to walk back, following my trail of heavy boot prints

pressed deep in the snow.
Those are the dunes we stopped at when Troop 73 took its Death Valley trip. There are other dunes in the valley—the Eureka Dunes—but you can’t get to those by car, Dad commented. We kept driving. The first key to driving in Death Valley is not to stop. The second key is to never turn on the AC, especially in the summer, because if you do the car will inevitably overheat. There are water stops ever so often along the way, not for humans, but for radiators.

We next drove through the tiny hamlet of Stovepipe Wells—home to a gas station/convenience store, a water stop, and a campground. I cannot imagine who would want to camp in Death Valley.

“Bryan and I stopped here two days ago. I have pictures on the digital camera that I’ll download when we get home. Later, we were going to stop at the site where they filmed *Tremors*.

*Tremors*, arguably one of the greatest movies ever, is a story about a small California desert town that is terrorized by giant, man-eating earthworms. Bryan and mom watched *Tremors* whenever it was on the Sci-Fi channel. As dusk began to fall, we were still winding our way through the valley on CA 190.

“I hope we get to the scene before it gets totally dark,” Dad said. “I want to take pictures to show the guys, and Bryan will want to see them too.”

“The guys” were my Dad’s motorcycling buddies. Thinking back on it, I have no idea why anyone would want a picture of that God-forsaken place. It seems now that returning to the scene might only have been for our closure, not for the pictures.

Our truck reached the flat, five-mile stretch before Panamint Springs—which is actually just outside of Death Valley National Park—with enough light left for the digital camera. We pulled over, opened our air locks, and made one small step for man. That particular section of road was covered in skid marks, probably because there was a barely-visible road branching off to the left. However, we were only concerned with the skids that had fresh orange spray paint on them. We eyed a single long skid mark and collectively decided that it was about 25 feet from the beginning to the point where it came to a very abrupt end in the middle of the road.

“This is where the bike landed,” Dad pointed, “and over there is where he was.”

I looked down, first at the orange motorcycle outline still visible in the grainy dirt next to a sagebrush. Then, I glanced over at the spray-painted marks that showed where the front and back tires of the van had been. Dad took pictures of the long skid mark and outlines before we drove on. Our destination was Lone Pine, a small town on the very outskirts of the desert, where we would pick up Bryan’s wrecked motorcycle and my dad’s and brother’s gear from their hotel room. We would charge up our dead cell phones at the hotel so that we could call family and friends. Then, we would try to sleep in the shadow of the snowy desert peaks. To us, the valley wasn’t Death Valley anymore, just Near Death Valley.

Science Friday on NPR

They’ve discovered gamma rays lurking at the edge of the universe, easily a trillion times brighter than any known star.

It’s past dinner, but I’m still down in the lab, grading exams as the commentators bicker over Science and Faith.

Is taxonomy a valid answer? I don’t know. No. They’re failing, anyway. I flip the grade book shut. Outside, rain is really coming down. Someone built a wall in front of the one window, but I can hear the hollow echo of each drop, clanging down the fume hood’s vent like dull distant bells.

Locking the door, I reach for the switch and pause, face-to-face with something suspended in a jar of formaldehyde. Something fetal. A rat? A dog? It could even be human, we all look the same at the start:

Pink and raw, eyes closed, floating in limbo.

I turn off the lights.

Somewhere, at the end of the universe, sparks fly out into a vacuum, pure energy traveling impossibly fast.

The past, the absolute beginning, always just ahead, out of reach, just a flicker, passing between sheer nothing and the ever-expanding dark.
Skeleton Bones

JULIA CHENG

High-School Poetry Prize

We were both too thin, and the way we hugged made bone knock bone.
We spoke of poetry and beautiful things,
And both lived for pretty stories concocted with
Graceful nouns, verbs, adjectives.
She reminded me of a faded fairytale,
Our antiquated ways, and speech
In which sometimes sly slang inserted.
Some days, I separated—not wishing to bring such harsher things,
For I was of this world, not of fey.
Not a faded fairytale, nor a grandmother’s quilt,
The dusty chestnut piano, where her fingertips caressed lilting song.
When we hugged, we grasped too tightly, taking breath out of breath,
And making bone knock bone.
She took me under feather, and petted my hair
And we danced like awkward herons.
The butchers voice seemed to cut through his music as easily as his knife cut through the chunk of meat before it.

“Our so proud!” the butcher yelled. “She got herself a full ride to school and everything!” The accent meshed horribly with Marylin Manson’s screams. Rin returned his eyes to the floor and adjusted the volume on his c.d. player to it’s loudest setting.

The knife came down in a particularly brutal attack, digging in to the wooden chopping block, and Rin twitched again, his thin body constricting and tightening to an almost painful level. He resisted the urge to rock back and forth, and instead let his eyes wonder around the small store. It wasn’t impressive to say the least. Different types of beef and chicken where crammed into frozen display cases, little lines of red blood squirming around in under the plastic casings. Above the displays, towering a good two feet over Rin’s head, large scales and weights stood precariously, and he mentally pictured them toppling down on the butcher’s customers when one ventured too close to the counter. They looked heavy enough to easily crush Rin’s straggly body, so he kept his distance.

The knife fell down on the chicken, and Rin’s body jerked almost painfully. He brought his hands up to clamp down on his arms through his jacket. He knew it would do no good though, the twitch was a subconscious habit Rin had obtained over the years, and would probably never go away. He couldn’t even remember when he noticed the habit. His mother hated it, saying it showed a weakness and insecurity people could and would exploit. Rin didn’t understand that, but he never spoke against it. What was the point?

The butcher was still talking, and Rin could still hear him. “He’s got himself a good job, he does!” the butcher continued, drawing out the “o” in good as if to emphasize the word. “Got himself a nice hat and everything!” Rin thought about pausing his music to try and decipher the accent, but decided against it. He just wanted to pay and leave. His body was starting to shake in anticipation of the next drop of the knife, and the next twitch. Rin’s gaze never left the floor, but he could still see it in his mind’s
eye. The battered blade, deadly sharp on one side and hatched on the other, arching down gracefully to bite into the meat’s skin and pierce it through. It separated piece by piece, carving off the skin and fat. The twitch shook his entire body and was enough to catch the butcher’s attention.

“Ye be fine, lad?!” His question came out more as a demand in his deep voice. Rin’s hand shot up and waved the man’s worry away, his eyes not breaking contact with the floor.

“Just hurry up,” Rin muttered, but he doubted the butcher heard him. He hadn’t even heard himself over the Marilyn Manson. There was a crackly of paper, and the warping sound of plastic wrap after. A large parcel came into Rin’s field of vision.

Rin’s hands twitched as he took the chicken, and he felt the butcher’s eyes on him, cutting into him, just like everything else the man did. He stood on his toes to slap the money on the counter, heedless of the scales and weights now, and walked out, eyes glued to the concrete floor the whole time. Next time his mother wanted to make chicken and dumplings, his little sister could come get the blasted meat for it. Rin wasn’t going through that again.

The walk home was uneventful, for which Rin was thankful. He’d need all the quiet time he could get before dealing with his...mother. Even in his mind, the word called for scorn and frustration. Walking down the street, Rin couldn’t help but twitch at the idea of what mother dearest was going to be like when he got home. He stopped in front of his house and stared at it forlornly. Like every other house in the neighborhood, the house was an average two story, with white wash walls and navy blue shutters. There was no landscaping, and no welcome mat at the front door. His mother said they didn’t need either, so they weren’t important. Mudvayne’s lyrics of hate and violence playing in his ears seemed out of place in the perfect suburban scene.

Rin’s eyes came to rest on the cars parked in the driveway and frowned slightly. There was his mother’s company car, a red Acura that she never let anyone drive, but also a golden 4-Runner that looked like it just went slashing through the mud. His father’s car. What was he doing here? Rin’s parents divorced years ago and rarely kept in contact with each other, and even then it was only to trade insults. Rin himself didn’t mind in the least, but his little sister, Eliza, often complained bitterly about not having a father. He stopped his c.d. player half-way through Slipknot’s “Duality” and pulled his headphones down around the neck.

Opening the front door, Rin slipped into the relative safety of the foyer, but not before he heard the breaking sound of glass against the wall on his right. His head twitched at the impact, and Rin glanced down to see the remains of the decorative vase his mother had gotten earlier that year. It had been extremely expensive, if Rin remembered correctly.
“Great, just one more thing for her to scream about later,” he muttered to himself. As usual, no one heard him.

“Egotistical, self-centered, over demanding, jerk!” Rin heard from the living room, but he knew better than to stick his head in there. The picture was predictable. His father, standing tall and proud in the center of the living room among the items his mother chucked at him and his mother herself moving around him like a cat taunting her prey. The last thing either of them needed was for another player to enter their game. That’s all it was to them, a game. Neither cared about how their game hurt their children, as long as one triumphed over the other in the end. It’s disgusting, Rin thought to himself, hands twitching in time with his neck and head now. He tried to restart his c.d. player, but the batteries chose that moment to go dead. Rin shook the useless device before tossing it in a random drawer in the kitchen. The thing was a piece of junk anyway. He kept the headphones though; they were the important part. As long as he had those, he could at least pretend the music didn’t stop.

Rin placed the chicken in the freezer, not at all surprised to see pre-cut slices of the same meat already there. His mother was so fanatical about how she wanted her food that she insisted that everything be fresh, even if she already had the particular ingredient in her kitchen. Rin threw the bag away, and got to the stairs just as a VCR tape flew out of the living room threshold.

“Woman, stop already!” his father’s booming, baritone voice rang throughout the house. Rin shook his head at his father’s approach. You don’t tell her to stop throwing things, he thought. You just avoid them and get out of the room. Slipping his headphones back on out of habit, he climbed the stairs as his mother screeched banshee-like and threw more VCR tapes at his father.

Securely in his room with the door locked, Rin fell against the sturdy wood and buried his head in his hands. His fingers were twitching and shaking frantically. If he fell asleep right now, he wouldn’t have to hear his parents insulting each other anymore. The sweet oblivion would be a perfect release from this hellish nightmare he had to call a life. Yes, sleep sounded like a good idea now, then the twitching would stop. For a little while, everything would be still in his life.
Get the Pots!
KURT SMITH
High-School Nonfiction Prize

Dad always said, “Someone has to do it, and I know how.” It was just one of those traditional sayings that he used when he wanted me to help him fix something, I thought, never really listening with more than one ear just long enough to appease the man. However, things always seemed to go wrong in our house. Every week another component of our rickety ranch either cracked, squeaked, wouldn’t close right, or in the case of our aluminum water pipes, just flat out explode, thus altering our weekend plans from a relaxing fishing trip on the lake to fixing, or in many cases re-fixing, whatever came unfixed. The plague of system failures reached all corners of our one-acre town lot: the yard was infested with weeds, the wind toppled the wooden fence, and the driveway was always carved into ruts where stagnant water collected like the Mississippi backwash after a rise.

I remember being roused in the middle of the night by the screeching voice of my mother yelling, “Get the pots! It’s raining!” Frantically my three older sisters and I began the routine of jumping out of bed, grabbing every one of our mismatched pots and pans from the kitchen, and placing them under our strategically assigned positions known for frequent leaks, including one on top of the bed where my mother slept. Eventually the problem spread so much that we had to decide whether to re-shingle the house or buy more pots. After glancing at the decade’s worth of yellow water rings on our ceiling, Dad finally broke down and exhausted his bank account on thirty bags of brown asphalt shingles. Hiring professionals was not only out of the budget, but out of the question. My dad knows how to do it, and soon I would.

I had been on the roof several times before on little repair missions for the really bad leaks, but this trip would leave me perched there for much longer. I carried up the hammers and nails as Dad managed the huge fifty-pound bundles of shingle. We started work immediately. The muggy Mississippi Delta air engulfed us as the sun rose, saturating our clothes with sweat. Shingles have to be applied from the bottom of the roof to the top, because each layer builds on the previous one to keep water from getting underneath. “Now watch and pay attention,” Dad said with a commanding voice. He lined up a new light-brown shingle on top of the original 1955 moss-green one and drove three nails across the top with three swift and sure hammer strokes. About four hours later he completed the bottom three rows, so that when I started I wouldn’t be dangling my feet over the edge. The next morning Dad gave me his hammer and nail belt simply said, “Do it like I did, and don’t mess it up!” At that he went to work at Delta Wire,
where he spends eight hours a day fixing and re-fixing the mechanical components of the plant. He left his iron hammer, weathered with years of use by well-skilled hands, in the weak grasp of a twelve year old boy.

I did as he did, lining up the shoehorning roofing nails into the layers of shingles and the cedar-slab roof. A professional would take off the old layer of shingles before adding a new layer, but Dad wanted to make sure that he would never have to re-shingle again in his lifetime. After completing five rows, to my horror I discovered that my lines had become crooked! Luckily this was on the side of the house that was hidden from view by a large, veiling oak. I corrected the next rows and carried on. Finished with that side, I started on the more tedious one; the side exposed to the road. After my previous error of crooked lines, I searched for a way to improve my method of guess hammering.

I had a good eye for things most of the time, but my ability fell far short of the precision and accuracy of my father, who has spent the better part of his life working with his hands and eyes. I searched our work-shed for some tool that could make my lines more consistent. I rummaged through drawers of pipe joints, socket wrenches, and measuring rods before coming across a familiar tool that I had used before while hanging gypsum board in our ceiling: a chalk box. In fact, I would not have known what a chalk-box was used for had it not been for the leaky roof, because the gypsum board we hung was a replacement section of ceiling that had given way one night during a storm (of course, the soggy sheetrock completely missed the cooking pot I had placed under it). A chalk-box is a metal container filled with fine, colored powder with a string that can be rolled inside. Working with the same principals as a tape measurer, you stretch the chalky string from one side of the roof to the other horizontally, measuring the exact distance from the previous row of shingles on each end. While holding the string taut, you lift up and release the string so that it snaps down on the roof, leaving a light blue line of chalk exactly even all the way across. Using this method I shingled that roof better that any other twelve year old in town.

“Looks pretty good,” Dad said, with a hidden smile of satisfaction cracking from his cheeks. I soon got used to sleeping through the storms without waking to the sound of “Get the pots!” It was a hard and trying task to re-roof the roof. But after years pass, along with my aging father, and the leaks return, I will know what to do, because when something had to be done, Dad taught me how to do it.
The Brogue bio

POETRY

First Place
David Rahaim, “Writers Converse in a Field”

Honorable Mentions
Cathy Karlak, “Science Friday on NPR”
Jennifer Wells, “Spirits”
Lydia Goeglein, “Child of the Sun Returning”
Jill Matarazzi, “More Last Questions”

FICTION

First Place
Andrew Hilleke, “Sunset”

Honorable Mention
Bret Kenyon, “Pond Jumping”

NONFICTION

First Place
Stephanie Evans, “Visiting Hours”

Honorable Mentions
Jennifer Wells, “Near Death Valley”
Addie Leak, “Lessons in Belonging”
Andrew Hedglin, “Tension”
My earliest memories are in grayscale; they did not lose their color over time, they simply never had it to begin with. No, I was not color blind, and yes, I could identify colors as early as anyone else could. I can remember thinking, This is black; that is white. I like white.

But I never appreciated colors—until I heard them.

Consider: At nearly four years old, my vocabulary barely impressed a two-year old. Because of my medical history, the doctors concluded the problem was a mental disability. For the first few years of my life, then, my family labored under the belief that I was possibly mentally handicapped. My speech difficulty, as well as lack of concentration, seemed to confirm this.

In late 1986, though, my parents learned of a special, intensive program of education and exercise being used with children with varying degrees of disabilities. The child was submitted to a team of doctors who worked with the child over several days to learn all the problems they faced, from locomotion to memory. They then put together a special all-day routine to be adhered to strictly over several years. After seeing several successful children, my parents decided to enroll me in the program.

All I remember from going to Philadelphia that first time, when I was three, is white-coated doctors. We kept a grueling routine, from my rising up to my going down. My mother and I spent hours every day going through white flash cards, saying aloud what each card depicted. Cat. Bird. Forty-nine dots. The number twelve. I remember a white ladder, suspended, and my hands reaching up to grasp the rungs, so I could swing hand-to-hand. Later I walked on the rungs, holding a rail as I went faster and faster. I liked that ladder, unless I got stuck on it.

Doctors still say crawling is good for brain development in infants. I never crawled as an infant, so the doctors prescribed forced simulated crawling. I remember we had a black-leather-padded board we put on the kitchen table. My mother and two others took my arms, legs, and head as they simulated crawling. Back and forth, back and forth they moved my limbs, all while I listened to Disney audio cassettes: Three Little Pigs, Snow White, etc. Since the tape player was right next to my head, I had no trouble hearing it.

After eight months of this daily routine of ladders, cards, and crawling, the fruits were clear: My vocabulary and strength were positively exceptional for my age group. However, the routine was wearing my parents down: They kept it even on Sundays; they had no break. They had to record...

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SCRIPT

First Place
Nickie Albert, “How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane”

ARTWORK

First Place
Debra Titkemeier, “Untitled #2” (b/w photograph)

Honorable Mentions
Katie Shipman, “Sunset Play” (b/w photograph)
Sarah Senff, “Unspeakable” (b/w photograph)
Paul-Andrew Sechler, “Eastward Bound” (b/w photograph)
Belhaven High-School Writing Contest Winners

POETRY

First Place
Julia Cheng, “Skeleton Bones”

Honorable Mention
Laura Chaires, “Four Days After the Death of Her Husband”

FICTION

First Place
Rachel Wiley, “Twitch”

Honorable Mention
David Elion, “Chitterling and Falafel Balls”

NONFICTION

First Place
Kurt Smith, “Get the Pots!”

Honorable Mention
Julia Cheng, “Brevity”
Student Awards and Publications  
2003 to 2006

ACADEMIC YEAR 2005-2006

AWARDS

Cathy Karlak  
Elizabeth Spencer Writing Award  
Belhaven College

Nickie Albert  
Third Place, One-Act Play:  
“How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane”  
Southern Literary Festival

PUBLICATIONS

Sarah Bolton  
“Nana’s House,” Fiction  
Forthcoming, Cedarville Review  
(Cedarville University)

Andrew Hedglin  
“Matinee Mantra of H. G. Edgar Degas,” Poetry  
Forthcoming, The Albion Review  
(Albion College)

David Rahaim  
“Belhaven’s Creative Writing Program: One Year Strong”  
Feature Article, Belhaven Tartan  
(Belhaven College)

ACADEMIC YEAR 2004-2005

AWARDS

Ian Bennett  
First Place, Fiction: “The Sable”  
Arrowhead (Mississippi College)

Ian Bennett  
Second Place, Nonfiction Essay: “Black Tuesday”  
Arrowhead (Mississippi College)

Skip Davis  
Second Place, One-Act Play:  
“Mr. Holloway’s Toy Company”  
Southern Literary Festival

Sharmeisha Jordan  
Second Place, Poetry  
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
David Rahaim  First Place, Poetry:  
“Scottish Baptism” and “2:42 A.M.”  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers  

Jennifer Wells  First Place, Creative Nonfiction Essay:  
“Near Death Valley”  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers  

PUBLICATIONS  
Ian Bennett  “Black Tuesday,” Creative Nonfiction Essay  
*Arrowhead* (Mississippi College)  
Ian Bennett  “The Sable,” Fiction  
*Arrowhead* (Mississippi College)  
Sarah Bolton  “The House of Bread,” Fiction  
*Spring Hill Review* (Washington)  

ACADEMIC YEAR 2003-2004  

AWARDS  
Philip Bassett  First Place, Fiction  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers  
Sarah Bolton  First Place, Poetry: “Security”  
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society  
Jennifer Chajon  First Place, Creative Nonfiction Essay  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers  
Roman Merry  Honorable Mention, Poetry:  
“Prufrock Creeps Creole”  
Southern Literary Festival  

PUBLICATIONS  
Trey Bruce  “A Man and His Tusk,” Poetry  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)  
Jennifer Chajon  “Illusion,” Creative Nonfiction Essay  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)  
Jeremiah Maeda  “Gods Without Earthly Desires,” Poetry  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)
Staff and Contributor Biographies

Heather “Nickie” Albert is a senior art major and creative writing minor from Mobile, AL. For “How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane,” she received her first third-place prize ever—she says she is thrilled to know that at least three pieces were entered in the competition. Someday, she hopes to write and draw graphic novels and to earn her very own collective of freakishly devoted fans who rummage through her garbage for her fingernail clippings.

Dione Bagby is a junior biology major from Vicksburg, MS.

Sarah Bolton is a senior dance major and creative writing minor from Santa Margarita, CA. One of her favorite things to do is to go on long runs, observing people, cars, and the road. She also loves live theater, coffee, and sleeping in. She hopes to teach theater and dance to high-school students after she graduates.

Michael Bryant is a junior creative writing and history double major from Madison, MS. He is a native of Houston, Texas. He enjoys baseball, weather, music not found on television, and bird watching. This list is exhaustive.

Laura Chaires is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. She won honorable mention in the poetry category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for her poem “Four Days After the Death of Her Husband.”

Julie Cheng is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. She won first place in the poetry category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for her poem “Skeleton Bones.” She also won honorable mention in the creative nonfiction category for her essay “Brevity.”

Dave Elion is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. He won honorable mention in the fiction category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for his story “Chitterling and Falafel Balls.”
Stephanie Evans is a sophomore international studies major and a dance/creative writing minor from Westfield, IN. As a girl, she spent many flashlight nights reading the Little House books, The Chronicles of Narnia, and of course The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. She loves to travel God’s world: she has fled drunken, tear-gassed mobs in Ecuador; rafted through opium-drenched jungles in Thailand; and free fallen through the atmosphere with only some cords and a piece of fabric to call her own. After law school, she may do something really adventurous, like marry and have a family or something.

Claire Ferris is a senior English major from Nashville, TN, and Jackson, MS.

Lydia Goeglein is a senior English major and a secondary education minor for all over, most recently Tyrone, GA. She is the missionary kid of a missionary kid and a California surfer. Her story includes six or seven and-then-we-moved’s, the coolest one being the Philippines. She likes binge reading (reading entire books in one sitting,) goofing off with friends, loitering in coffee shops talking about God’s hugeness, and drawing faces on Styrofoam cups. Her favorite author at the moment is C. S. Lewis and her favorite poets are John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins. She wants to teach English in India (or maybe Mongolia) after she graduates.

Andrew Hedglin is a freshman creative writing major and history minor from Madison, MS. He has, in the words of his hero Jimmy Buffett, read dozens of books about heroes and crooks, and learned much from both of their styles. In fact, he spent his fifth and sixth grade years absorbed in the creative nonfiction of Lewis Grizzard, Mike Royko, and Dave Berry. His favorite author is John Irving, and he hopes to pursue further education in writing after graduation. His witty and loving family has been a major source of inspiration and support.

Andrew Hilleke is a senior history major from Alexandria, LA. James Humphries is a sophomore English major from Pocatello, ID.

Cathy Karlak is a senior biology major from Seattle, WA. She really enjoyed being editor of the Brogue this year. She used to be an
English major but wasn’t to good at grammar. (Now she has a *creative* writing minor.) Her favorite things in the world are coffee, the Beatles, tea with milk, and visits to the ocean during winter. After she graduates, she is going to fuse her left brain and her right brain to write about science, while somehow traveling profusely. Some of her literary heroes include Fitzgerald, Keats, Dumas, Douglas Adams, C. S. Forester, and Claude Esteban. Cathy is the 2006 recipient of the Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award given by Belhaven College.

**Bret Kenyon** graduated from Belhaven College in December 2005 with a major in theater. His favorite authors are C. S. Lewis, Mark Twain, and Stephen King, in that order. His favorite books include C. S. Lewis’ “Space Trilogy,” Orwell’s “1984,” Golding’s “Lord of the Flies,” and “Penguin Dreams and Stranger Things” by Berke Breathed. In the next few years he plans to work a year at the Aslan Theatre in Madrid, Spain; found a theatre and acting company based in Pittsburgh, PA; and stage one of his own plays. Bret has no sense of smell.

**Martha Krystaponis** is a freshman creative writing major from Louisville, Kentucky. In the little time that she can squeeze away from work and school, she enjoys watching movies, reading, playing with her laptop, experimenting with her mom’s old manual camera, sipping coffee and tea, listening to music, enjoying the outdoors, and being with her friends.

**Addie Leak** is a freshman creative writing major from Woodville, MS, who wants to stay in school as long as she possibly can. Her future plans include being a published writer, world traveler, and Renaissance woman, though she’ll probably end up working as a college professor, as well—hopefully in some foreign country. She loves poetry and well-written creative nonfiction like Blue Like Jazz, Under the Tuscan Sun, and The Piano Shop on the Left Bank. Her favorite book is Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables; she intends to read all 1432 pages in French one day.

**Molly Lehan** is a junior humanities major from Clinton, MS.

**Samantha Lewis** is a history major and an art minor from Clinton, MS. She is a military brat who has lived in Italy, Turkey, Nebraska,
Alaska, and Mississippi. She loves reading historic novels and biographies and taking pictures. She has been married for two years and three months to her husband David. They are in the process of building their dream house right now, and they have one child, a bull terrier named Bentley.

**Jill Matarazzi** is a junior creative writing major from Campbell-town, PA.

**Seth McNeill** is a senior philosophy major from Brandon, MS.

**Rashell Meredith** is a senior English major originally from LA. She is very happily married and looks forward to graduating in May so that she can spend more time with her husband. She has no idea what she is going to do after graduation, but she does have a good job that she may hold onto for a while.

**Stacy Nott** is a freshman piano major and creative writing minor from Bentonia, MS. If she could write like Charles Dickens, she would; as it is, she is learning to write like Stacy Nott. Her free time is mostly full of people, who, incidentally, are her chief interest. A child of the Navy, she never lived anywhere more than three years—four years at college will be quite a novelty. She would like to be remembered as a “bondslave of Christ Jesus.” She strives, in everything, to bring glory to God.

**David Rahaim** is a senior creative writing major from Jackson, MS. He loves transcendent beings but is terrified by ghosts. He fears degeneration of language but has not yet learned Spanish. He needs to simplify.

**Paul-Andrew Sechler** is a freshman music major from El Paso, TX.

**Sarah Senff** is a junior theater major from Chillicothe, OH.

**Danny Shaw** is a senior English major from Warminster, PA.

**Katie Shipman** is a sophomore English major from Sierra Vista, AZ.
Darren Schwindaman grew up in Jackson, MS, studied graphic design at Loyola University in New Orleans, and now works as a freelance graphic designer in Jackson. He runs his own graphic design studio called Entropy Theory (entropytheory.com). Darren designed the cover for this year’s Brogue.

Kurt Smith is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. He won first place in the creative nonfiction category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for his essay “Get the Pots!”

Debra Titkemeier is a senior biblical studies major and an art minor from Port Orange, FL (five minutes south from Daytona Beach). She has been doing photography for seven years. She loves to organize things! Someday she wants to have a French bulldog. She played the drums in middle school. She loves to travel and to watch movies. She wants to do youth ministry when she graduates.

Kenya Trigg is a senior history major from Pearl, MS.

Jennifer Wells is a senior creative writing major (without a minor because she is a slacker) from Novato, CA. She writes mostly creative nonfiction. Her story “Near Death Valley” got a gold star and smiley face in the Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers Student Writing Contest last spring. When she grows up, she is going to live in her parent’s garage and sell vacuums door to door, unless Anne Lamott lets Jennifer stay in her guest bedroom.

Rachel Wiley is a student at the Mississippi School for Math and Science. She won first place in the fiction category in the 2006 Belhaven High-School Writing Contest for her story “Twitch.”
Belhaven College Information

If you would like to learn more about the BFA Degree in Creative Writing at Belhaven College, then contact the Director of Creative Writing at the following address:

Randall A. Smith
Creative Writing Program Director
Belhaven College, Box 612
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

rsmith@belhaven.edu
601-968-8996

Visit the creative writing program on the web at http://www.belhaven.edu/Academics/Divisions/Humanities/Creative_writing

If you would like to learn more about Belhaven College in general, then contact the Admission Department at the following address:

Office of Admission
Belhaven College, Box 153
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

1-800-960-5940 (Toll Free)
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