BROGUE

(brog), n.

1. a marked accent, esp. Irish or Scottish, when speaking English: a sweet lilt of brogue in her voice.

2. any strong regional accent.

3. a rough shoe of untanned leather, formerly worn in parts of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands.
From the Editor ........................................................................................................... 7
the Brogue Awards .................................................................................................... 142
Student Accomplishments ...................................................................................... 144
Contributor Biographies ....................................................................................... 150
Belhaven University Information .......................................................................... 152

Section One
Cycles, Chris Brown ................................................................................................. 10
The Grandfather Clock, Sarah Swenson ................................................................. 12
A Long Trip in a Quiet Car, Jonathan Eastman ..................................................... 22
The Shield: A Eulogy, Rebecca Yantis ................................................................... 23
Unintended Consequences, Douglas Coker ......................................................... 26
Monologue for Papaw, Moving to a Nursing Home, Kirsten Callahan ................ 32
Markers, Ashlee Davidson ..................................................................................... 34
134 South Carney Street, Atmore Alabama, Douglas Coker ............................... 36
The Break In, Joy McWilliams .............................................................................. 38

Section Two
Bird Watching, Emily Goff .................................................................................... 42
Bessie, Douglas Coker ........................................................................................... 43
Lessons on Fishing, Emily Goff ............................................................................ 46
Recipe for Happiness, Anna McNeese .................................................................. 48
Practice Room, Laura Van Dalen .......................................................................... 49

Section Three
Denzel in Reverse, Jonathan Eastman ..................................................................... 52
The Writer’s Lyric, Rex Bradshaw ........................................................................ 53
The Muse, A. J. Buffinet ....................................................................................... 54
The Weeping Wall, Lea Schumacher .................................................................... 55
Sunset from C’Paw’s Parking Lot, November 2009, Kirsten Callahan .................. 71
Describing a Place, Joy McWilliams ........................................................... 81
Truth Be Told, Anna Rebmann .................................................................... 82
Going to St. Louis, Derrick French .............................................................. 83
English Majors, Alex Freel ......................................................................... 91
Stephen Plowman, Rex Bradshaw .............................................................. 92
Something Is Not Right, Jonathan Eastman ............................................. 95

Section Four
Death and the Writer, Sarah Swenson .......................................................... 98
Warmth, Chris Brown .............................................................................. 100
Reading on Eternity’s Doorstep, Anna Rebmann ........................................ 101
Red Paths and White, Rex Bradshaw ......................................................... 105
Dom St. Peter, Rebecca Yantis .................................................................. 112
The Marabou Stork, Ashlee Davidson ....................................................... 114

Section Five
Grace, Chris Brown ................................................................................... 118
Pecan Picking, Emily Goff ......................................................................... 119
Unshattered, Rebecca Davis ....................................................................... 120
Oh, Sweetie!, Ethan Samsel ...................................................................... 122
Blood Sisters, Anna McNeese ................................................................... 123
All the Goodbyes I Ever Told You: A Remembrance, Sarah Vanbiber ....... 126
October, Miranda Shugars ....................................................................... 132
Fishing Lights, William Mason .................................................................. 133
Carrot Cake, Yingnan (Kalina) Deng .......................................................... 140

Artwork
Untitled, Ji Zong L’ang .............................................................................. 11
Changing Paces, Evy Baehr ...................................................................... 24
Untitled, Ji Zong L’ang .............................................................................. 33
Yad, Kateri Tolo ........................................................................................ 45
Social Covering, Megan Prosper ............................................................... 72
Kaph Yarech, Kateri Tolo ......................................................................... 73
Untitled, Alison Galloway ........................................................................ 74
Untitled, Emily Goff ................................................................................. 75
Throw Back, Rebecca Riley ...................................................................... 76
Archipelago, Joy McWilliams ................................................................... 78
Sheath, Adie Smith .................................................................................... 79
Untitled, Wesley Sumrall .......................................................................... 80
Finding Recollection, Alyce Hardee .......................................................... 90
Covering No. 18, Megan Prosper .............................................................. 103
Reclamation, Paul Farrar ........................................................................... 125
In Mississippi, the seasons blend into one another, slow variations of damp and warmth. I grew up in the Midwest, where each season has a distinct look, smell, and taste. Spring is an ice-cold stream of melted snow running through the middle of your lawn. Summer is the sticky green smell of tomato vines and the hum of cicadas. Autumn is the bright white flesh of a fresh apple. Winter is powdery snow balanced precariously on thin fingers of trees, and slow-moving sap deep within heavy trunks.

I love this rhythm, this cycle—partly due to my mother, who is a gardener. As a child I watched her plant seeds, and saw them sprout, and unfold their first pale green leaves toward the sun. The time came when they burst into brilliant bloom. Too soon, it seemed, the wilted petals carpeted the ground, and new seeds formed on the flower head.

In the life cycle of a flower, we see how death begets life. A seed must fall to the ground and die for a new plant to find life; a flower must wilt and die for a new seed to form. The Apostle Paul uses this very idea in 1 Corinthians 15, when he describes how we will be changed at the Second Coming. He says, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies… So it is with the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:36, 42). Jesus tells us that we must lose our lives to find them in Him (Luke 9:23-24). This cycle is something God has worked into the very fabric of existence. We have organized the pieces in the Brogue to fit this cycle, beginning with a thematic section on “death,” or old age, and ending with a thematic section on “life,” or youth.

As we looked through the content of this year’s edition of the Brogue, the staff and I saw this death-to-life thematic thread in the recurrence of natural, organic imagery. This made me think of nature journals, the sort an amateur botanist with an artistic eye might have kept a hundred years ago, which gave rise to the thematic design of this publication. The more I thought about it, the more similarities I began to see between science and creative writing. Both are ways of exploring the world, of recognizing the mystery of all that surrounds us and trying to unpack it. The world is fascinating. We explore,
experiment, or write because the world captures and intrigues us.

Putting together a publication like this takes a lot of time and energy, and I would like to thank the people who helped me throughout the year: Bryant Butler, for his help with thematic layout and design; Dr. Smith, for showing up to class and letting me do my thing; Adie Smith, for sorting through art submissions; and my excellent staff, for selecting excellent content, replying to countless email threads, and editing sections of the text.

I hope you all enjoy what we have done.

Sarah Swenson
Senior Editor of the Brogue
In late Autumn the tree’s fingerlings reach up into the cloud covered sky, grasping only vapor, which rises as a mist, like steam climbing from a kettle which slowly cools and condenses on a crackling ceiling.

The billowing clouds open and rain falls heavily on the naked oaks, stripping the remnants of colored clothing from the trembling trees.

The tea comes to a boil. The poplars pulse with the pellets of rain. The water in the kettle gently whistles away, slinking up the room’s white walls in a moist heat.
Untitled

Ji Zong L'ang

pen and ink
When Mrs. Elder woke that morning, her husband was dead beside her. He lay stiffly with one arm folded across his chest, hand pressed to his heart. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open, as though soul had left body mid-snore, fled swiftly through the yellowing half-window curtains and into the chill October air to hover, weightless at last, tired of the noise it was making. The great grandfather clock in the downstairs living room struck the hour. She sat in the bed beside him, looking slightly shocked. Her hair was in curlers, and she was wearing her blue flannel night dress. She shivered and clutched the bedclothes to her chin, then reached out slowly and wrapped a blue-veined hand around his cold thumb.

“Charles,” she said. “How could you?”

She shook his thumb, but his whole stiff body rocked, so she let it go quickly. Her frail fingers fluttered around her mouth for a moment like hovering moths. Then she grasped the quilt again with both hands. “I’ve got my lady’s book club today,” she said, leaning over his face, which had already taken on a waxy hue. “You’ll miss your papers.”

She sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, looking at him. He looked at rest for the first time in many years. She tried to remember when he had last looked so peaceful.

Once they drove out to Yellowstone. When they arrived at last at their final campsite they parked the rattling car and climbed out, shuffling heavy feet on the hard-packed earth. Charles turned toward the setting sun and stretched his arms out to his very fingertips. His whole face glowed golden, and he smiled with his teeth, and they shone like bright fierce battlements, and she, Helen, stood and saw this with astonishment. She saw in him someone she did not know, someone she could not understand, and she was
afraid. Then she looked down at the dust on her good shoes and crushed a
dried clump of dirt with her toe, her hands on her hips.

Mrs. Elder eased herself out of bed, feeling the old stiff box springs
against her thighs. She went to the washroom. It smelled of mildew and
liquid hand soap. There was a blue ceramic sink with tarnished fixtures, and
a blue chipped soap dish mounted on the wall. The linoleum floor was soft
and discolored and beginning to curl at the edges along the floorboards. She
took a small glass from the corner of the sink, filled it with a rushing gurgle
of water from the faucet, and drank it all in one long, breathless draught. As
she set the glass back in its corner, it hit the metal sink handle with a gentle
empty sound. She stared at her reflection in the mirror; at her soft elastic lips
with all their little folds and crevices; her blue, watery eyes; the curlers rolled
in small tight bundles around her face. How thin her hair had grown, how
fine, like a newborn's. She stood there until her knuckles began to hurt from
gripping the heavy sides of the sink.

Out in the hallway, the brown carpet was wearing thin in the middle, a
beaten trail to mark their slowing progress up and down the narrow stairs to
their room. The house was eerily quiet. She went downstairs. One hand held
the railing, smooth and gleaming in the pale morning light that permeated
the windows in the living room. The other hand, fingers splayed wide,
trailed along the wall beside her. Her wedding band scraped against the wall,
startling her until she realized what it was.

She paused, in her slippers, on the rounded bottom stair to survey the
living room. The old yellow couch sat complacently against the wall. The
shadow of the lace curtains, a speckled, spotted web of flowers, was cast upon
the braided rug. She stepped carefully from the bottom stair and crossed the
room to stand by the window. Her hands trembled. She crossed them over
her chest and tucked them under her arms. Her nightgown fluttered around
her legs and she felt sorry for her ankles, so thin and exposed, with their blue
veins. Out in the yard was the old cottonwood. It had been bright and green
with foliage when they moved into
the house, and now it was full of dried
branches. Dead bunches of leaves
had shriveled, sticking to their places,
and could not let go. Behind her, the
grandfather clock ticked endlessly in
the corner, steadily, like the beating of
a heart. She shuddered. She had not
noticed that small sound in years.

Behind her, the
grandfather clock
ticked endlessly
in the corner,
steadily, like the
beating of a heart.

*It was a long time ago,* Charles said, leaning forward in his chair at the
kitchen table. *Years. She found me, I don't know how, but she came, with a little*
A thick pulsing life ran through her—it was in her eyelids, it coursed between her rib bones.

boy. She said, ‘This is your son.’ She didn’t want anything. Just to see me. He held his hands out toward her, open, palms up. There were calluses at the base of his fingers. She said nothing, did nothing, rooted to her chair. A thick pulsing life ran through her—it was in her eyelids, it coursed between her rib bones, it lay in the dark space beneath her tongue, it swelled every single tiny part of her body. She felt enormous. She felt she would burst. She stood up and walked to the kitchen window. A hot breeze blew in, heavy with the scent of rain. She scratched at the metal edge of the sink with her thumbnail.

When? she asked.

Right before our trip to Yellowstone, he said. He picked up the salt shaker and turned it around and around in his heavy fingers. I saw them once more after that, he said. He set the shaker down and leaned back in his chair. He passed an unsteady hand over his eyes.

What did he look like? she asked. She looked out the window, at all the green, growing things rocking in the first gusts of wind the storm drove before it. Was he beautiful?

Charles laughed, a short, tight laugh. Yes, he said. He was beautiful. Dark hair, big, blue eyes…You would have loved him.

She thought she would cry out and clasped a hand over her mouth. She rocked back and forth, silently. Charles cleared his throat.

I know…he said, shifted in his seat, and started again, I know we’d hoped we would—

She turned to face him, both hands on the counter behind her. Could we not talk about that right now? she asked. This is different. This isn’t about us. This is something before us, something I would have wanted to know. If it all happened so long ago, why didn’t you tell me? She crossed the kitchen before he could say any more, stopped in the doorway to the living room, and turned back to him. You should have told me, she said. I should have known. She went out the front door. He did not follow her.

The storm grumbled in, great dark clouds gathering up and up against an invisible barrier, raising their gray faces heavenward, breathing a hot, heavy wind before them. It tore through the cottonwood. She pressed her palm flat on the trunk, felt the deep, green, groaning life under the bark, raised her pale face to the rustling treetop, saw loose leaves break free and tumble away in the eddies and swirling currents of the wind. She wondered what the neighbors would think if they looked out and saw her there, crying.

In the beginning, she imagined how they would use those great towering trees; the rope swings that would hang from the branches, the treasured
marbles and pretty stones that would be hidden among the hollows of the roots. She imagined the shouts of their children chasing each other around the enormous trunks.

Now she sat slowly on the grass, her back against the rough bark, and looked up at the tree towering above her. When the rain came, she stayed under its shelter. The ground around her grew damp and warm. It drank in the moisture greedily. The air hung heavy with water, but her mouth was dry, her throat was dry, inside her head behind her eyes her skull was dry. The thick pulsing life she had felt coursing through her in the kitchen had become a solid mass settled in the knotted coil of her gut. The leaves dripped down on her upturned face, fat, heavy drops. She closed her eyes. It smelled to her like the trees were crying. Her hair curled in soft strands around her face, and she brushed them back. The skin on her fingertips was rough and pulled the strands ever so gently, and the rain fell on the leaves, whispering, whispering. She listened.

When she went back inside Charles was not in the kitchen. She wandered through the house like a ghost until she found him down in the garage, bent fiercely over his sawhorse, a layer of sweat already beading on his forehead. His great arm worked violently back and forth across a pine board. When the unwanted end clattered to the cement floor he looked up and saw her in the doorway. They stood this way for a long moment while the rain muttered all around the house.

She pulled her sweater tight across her chest. I'll go put some supper on, she said. As she walked slowly up the stairs, one hand on the railing, she heard the saw resume its work with rough rasping gasps. She turned the water on in the sink and watched it tumble down, swirl around the basin, and slip easily into the drain. He worked restlessly, ceaselessly. In the basement, raw end after raw end clattered to the cement floor. The faucet ran and ran, and still the sink was empty.

After that, she began visiting the Reverend. He was a tall man with a quick smile and strong white teeth. He wore trim dark suits and smelled of aftershave and his hair was always combed neatly back. All his actions were energetic, as though he would fall over himself with eagerness before the task could be accomplished, whether he was standing at the pulpit to preach or opening a door for you.

She wanted someone to tell her she could not be angry with God, or with Charles, but she could not tell the Reverend what kept bringing her back to his office week after week. She sat in a chair across from his desk with her stockings on, ankles neatly crossed, a kerchief knotted around her throat, and her small gray handbag clutched in her lap. She talked about her neighbors, and her volunteer work at the school, and the Women's Aid Society from the church.

Then, one afternoon, with the rich sunlight bursting in through the
window, the Reverend leaned forward to rest his forearms on the edge of his enormous mahogany desk.

_Mrs. Elder, _he said, _I have very much enjoyed your visits. But I must ask—why are we here?_

Mrs. Elder shifted a little in her seat and clutched her gray handbag tighter. _Oh, _she said.

_Allow me, _said the Reverend. She saw the perfect crescent of each of his fingernails. He opened his hands towards her and she studied his palms, pale and soft. _You've never mentioned your husband, _he said. She swallowed.

_I believe, _said the Reverend, _your husband is our problem. _He folded his slender fingers together. _Mrs. Elder, _he said. _Helen. Is this true?_ The air of the small parsonage office became impossible to breathe.

_Yes, _said Mrs. Elder. _How did he know? _The small, fragile tendons flexed on the backs of her hands. She looked up and met the reverend’s gaze. _Yes, _she said again. _I—_

_Not another word, _said the Reverend, holding up his hand. _I understand. We find ourselves in a very delicate situation._ Behind the Reverend and his intent expression were rows and rows of books placed neatly in their shelves. Out the window, the bushes shuddered in the wind.

Mrs. Elder looked down at her watch. _I—I think must go home, _she said, and rose from her seat.

The Reverend thrust his chair back and stood. _Of course you must, _he said, and came around the desk. He reached out and grasped her elbow as she stepped away. _You will come back? _he asked. She nodded. _Next week?_ She nodded again.

He came with her to the door. She thought he would open it, but instead he took her in his arms. _Helen, _he said, tenderly. Before she turned her head she saw his dark-lashed eyes, shining. He drew her in close until he held her tightly to his chest. One of his hands was in the middle of her back, the other, more softly, on the back of her head. Her arms were pinned between them. She was frozen in shock. A floorboard groaned beneath her foot. Beside them, up against the wall, was a grandfather clock. It was ticking, ticking into the silence. She heard the ticking of the clock with one ear and the beat of the Reverend’s heart with the other, rushing, agitated, pulsing with life. She pulled away and looked up at him, pressing her palm flat against his chest. His heart beat against her hand. Her mouth was open but she could not breathe.

_Yes? _he asked. His mouth twitched in a tiny smile and she saw a glimmer of his white teeth. Around his lips was the faintest hint of a shadow. She smelled his aftershave. It occurred to Mrs. Elder that she could kiss the Reverend, and he would kiss her back. He wanted her to kiss him. She thought of Charles, and that other woman—what was her name? did she even know her name?—and their son. Something trembled deep in her
stomach and she was terrified. _I—that clock_, she gasped. _It's lovely. Are you—_ are you fond of it? 

The Reverend leaned toward her slightly. The fingers behind her head grew tense with the energy that filled his whole being. _I_, he said, raising his eyebrows, _am especially fond of that clock._

Mrs. Elder cleared her throat. She swallowed and looked away. The clock struck, three long, ringing notes, while they stood by the closed door of the small room. The chairs were at odd angles to the desk.

_Well_, she said. She pushed herself from him, and tucked her clutch under one arm. She opened the door and walked briskly out into the afternoon light. He was left silhouetted against the bookshelves and the mahogany desk, watching her go.

_What do you talk about?_ Charles asked her that night. He stood by her shoulder as she washed the dishes in the sink, steam and the scent of lemon dish soap swirling around them. _Why do you go, again and again?_

_We talked about his clock_, she said. She scrubbed violently at the rim of a glass. _He has a lovely grandfather clock._

Charles shifted his weight. _A clock?_ he asked.

She rinsed the glass, set it on the counter, and reached into the soapy water for another dish. _Yes_, she said. _A clock_. She washed and rinsed the plate, setting it carefully in the drying rack. She held the wash rag in her hands and stood there while the hot water slowly filled the sink. She turned and looked Charles in the face. _I won't go back_, she said.

The next day the deacons came to their weekly meeting and could not find the Reverend. They did find an empty liquor bottle and a tray of cigarette butts in the kitchen of the parsonage. That Sunday the choir director did not show up for service, and the choir had a miserable time fumbling through their hymns without her. When the monthly bank statement arrived, the account was empty.

The Reverend was appointed on the recommendation of a prominent family in town, a family who had known his father. Well, they said when they heard the news, sometimes the apple falls far from the tree.

After all that the church decided to renovate the parsonage and fit it out for a new Reverend—a real Reverend. They held an auction. One of the items sold was an elaborate grandfather clock.

Charles bought her that clock. He called it an anniversary gift. She saw his face, broad like the face of the clock, as he stood at the back of his pickup and pulled the cover off. He watched her intently as the sheet billowed away and she recognized what was beneath it. She stayed at the top of the stoop by
the front door with a hand on the doorframe and she gripped the wood until she felt her fingernails sink into it slightly. The afternoon was bright. The sun shone hot on her cold face and a breeze ruffled the skirt of her dress.

She said simply, Thank you, it's a lovely clock.

He said, I thought you would like it. You had such an interest in it after your meetings with the Reverend.

Yes, she said, I believe the Reverend is very fond of that clock.

He said, So you told me. He's gone, you know. Gone with Charlotte Blythe. As he said this he watched her eyes and her mouth. She knew, suddenly, that he suspected her. She nearly laughed out loud at the idea, at the possibility that she could have done such a thing, that she could be strong enough to do such a thing. She saw Charles was convinced. It was amazing. It was horrific. She told him to bring it inside so they could find a place for it and she went upstairs and wrung out a washcloth with cold water. She went into their bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed and twisted and twisted the wet cloth in her hands.

Mrs. Elder had never cared for the Reverend, but she tried sometimes to imagine how he had left, tried to think of what he'd looked like carrying things back and forth from the parsonage to his old red Ford in the fog of early morning. She could only think of him in his dark suit with his hair combed back, his cuffed pant legs skimming the worn path to the concrete front steps, his black shoes shined and treading the dirt with all that energy, that pent-up restless energy always driving him. Miss Charlotte Blythe, the choir director, with her blonde hair curled neatly beneath her chin, watching him from the passenger seat and pursing her red lips. The thrill of the engine as they started off.

The parsonage was filled up again and a new Reverend came to live in it. He had three children and a pregnant wife. Soon the small house was transformed, with red geraniums beneath the windows, and tulips lining the front walk. There was always a bicycle or two on its side in the driveway, one wheel still spinning. The red bricks rang with children's voices.

Charles chose the place for the clock in the living room, beside the couch where she sat in the evenings to do her needlework and listen to the radio. She said nothing, but for weeks she didn't hear a word of her programs because of that ticking in her ear, that constant throbbing beat like a heart. It filled her mind until she looked down and realized that the shadows on the rugs had been swallowed by night, the radio was playing a faint remnant of static, and her hands lay idly in her lap, needle warm between her fingers from the touch of her flesh. In her fingertips she felt her heart beating steadily

She would lie back down with her back to him and nurse her bitter grief until morning.
with the monotony of the grandfather clock.

Mrs. Elder turned to face the grandfather clock. She had not looked at that clock, really looked at it, in years. Now, standing in her nightdress, she watched the heavy pendulum swinging in its hollow cage, and she remembered. On those long evenings when the lacy-webbed shadows stretched longer on the living room rug, she sat with her needlework in her lap while her programs played on and on beside her, and she wrestled feverishly with doubt.

First, she thought that Charles should know. He should know that she had not been unfaithful, had not done the unspeakable thing he suspected she had. But she did not want to tell him. For the first time in their lives he looked at her with awe, the same terrible awe she herself had known when they got out of the car in Yellowstone and he stretched out his arms to the blazing sun, the awe she felt in the face of all that fierce brilliant life she did not have. If this was what Charles thought of her now, let him ache with it.

Then she thought, perhaps she had been unfaithful. Her ears pricked to the steady beat of the clock; her cheeks burned when she remembered the cool, slippery grain of the Reverend’s cheap suit. She heard his heartbeat again—so like the clock’s, and so unlike—throbbing wildly in her ear, felt the pressure of his slender fingers in her hair. She had thought about kissing him, but she was afraid. Whenever she remembered that afternoon, she felt again the strange trembling within her. Was this not unfaithfulness? Some nights she lay awake beside Charles long into the night and stared up at the dark. Once or twice she sat up and leaned over him, placed a hand softly on his shoulder, determined to wake him and explain everything—but then she would hear the wind in the cottonwood, and remember the smell of rain, and imagine a small, beautiful boy. She would lie back down with her back to him and nurse her bitter grief until morning.

Gradually she thought of it less and less. She could sit beneath the face of the clock and do some mindless needlework, and soon she could hear the radio again, and after that she scarcely saw the swinging pendulum or heard the chiming of the hours. Years passed, in fact, when she did not think seriously of what had happened. Lightning struck the old cottonwood in the front yard so that half of it was withered and dry. She began a literary club at the local library and organized bake sales for the Women’s Committee at the Church. Charles grew softer. His broad shoulders rounded, and he had a bald spot, and he began to shuffle his feet. He wore sweater vests and slacks and loafers. Eventually she looked up and saw with surprise that she could no longer see in him the man from Yellowstone. He had become, like the clock, an ordinary thing to her.

Then, yesterday, she came into the living room, searching for a book she had left lying there, and she found Charles standing in front of the clock.
with his arms crossed. The sight stopped her cold. In the early afternoon sunlight his thin white tufts of hair made a kind of glowing halo around his head. His arms and legs could have been sticks in his clothes, they were so thin, but his narrow shoulders were squared, and his feet were planted firmly on the carpet, and he regarded the clock intently, head pulled back, lofty and arrogant. He had the look of a man facing his enemy. He had the look of a holy martyr. It took her breath away until she could not stand the silence.

*What are you looking at that old clock for?* she asked. Her voice was loud in the reverent hush of the room. He turned toward her, startled, and his sweater hung limply on his body. His shoulders assumed their usual slump. The top of his head shone, and his hair was plain and dull again. He rubbed one heavy hand up his arm and back down, fingers still blunt and calloused from the manual labor he had done all his life. The look in his eyes was of utter tenderness.

*I forgive you, you know,* he said. *A long time ago.* The color drained from her face. She clasped her hands together and pressed them to her stomach. Her eyes were fixed on his, and in her daze the shadows playing on the carpet between them looked like black, dancing flames, flickering silently.

She did not know what to say, so after a moment she said, *All right,* turned hesitantly, and went upstairs.

That night there was a hint of chill in the air. She put on her blue flannel nightgown with the cold metal snaps and rolled her hair in curlers. When Charles came up, she was already in bed, clutching the quilt up to her chin. She listened to the creak of the stairs as he made his way slowly to the bathroom, heard the water turned on and off again, and the toilet flush, and again the faucet, on and off. She watched him hang up his sweater, carefully, in the closet. He turned down the quilt and sat on the edge of the bed and eased his shoes off one at a time, then bent down to untie the laces and straighten the shoes neatly beside one another. He swung his legs up onto the mattress and pulled the covers over his stomach with a sigh. He reached out and turned off the lamp.

They lay there in silence and darkness. Then he turned his head toward her and said, *I would like to kiss you goodnight.* She turned her head so they were facing each other blindly in the dark. She closed her eyes. He reached out a cold hand until he found her face, the soft edges of her old mouth, and leaned over and kissed her and leaned back again to his pillow. She rolled over onto her other side and faced the wall. A tear trickled from the corner of her eye onto her pillow. It had been decades since he had kissed her goodnight.

Before her now was the cottonwood, half dead, half living. The dry leaves rattled in the cool air that had come in overnight. Behind her was the clock, and its round white face, and its long swinging pendulum, so steady,
so tired, marking the minutes on and on with no end in sight. She shivered and shivered, standing on the rug. She was cold. Beneath her blue flannel nightdress, her body was frail, her bones and the skin folded over them, and she felt too heavy for herself. She touched her dry lips, passed an unsteady hand over her eyes. Her chin quivered and she cupped it in her hand, caught the tears that spread slowly down the folds and wrinkles of her face, then wiped her eyes and her cheeks and started back up the stairs.

She stood beside the bed and looked down at him. There were his shoes, side by side, laces loosened. His wristwatch ticked on the bureau by his head. In the closet the sweater he had put away the night before stuck out a little from the rest of his clothes.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. She put her hand over her mouth. She took it off again. “I should have told you,” she said. “You should have known.” She reached out and touched his folded hands lightly with her fingertips. They were cold.

She went into the washroom and took the curlers out of her hair. She put on her green dress and a black cardigan. She sat on the bed by his feet and laced and tied her nice leather shoes. She put on some rouge and filled in her eyebrows and tied a silk kerchief over her hair to protect it from the wind. She found her book on the bedside table. They were reading *Great Expectations*. As she slipped it into her purse, she saw that her hands were shaking.

She went to their bedroom door and looked back at his still figure in the bed. “I’ll just be waiting in the car,” she said, and closed it softly. The garage was chilly and damp, and it smelled of gasoline and cardboard. Some pale sunlight seeped in through a dirty window. She climbed into their Buick, long and low like a retired greyhound, and sat quietly in the passenger seat with her hands in her lap and her headscarf tied under her chin. It was cold. She pulled at the collar of her coat, shrugging her thin body deeper inside that soft shell. She would wait. She would wait, and then she would not be so sad.

She was cold. She looked at the keys, dangling from the ignition. She reached over and turned the key. The engine sputtered, choked, and came to life. She sat facing the back of the garage door, with the car warming around her.

Outside the sun was changing, slipping slowly toward the horizon and the end of its shortening day. It was nearly dark in the garage. She was deliciously warm. She was so tired.

“Charles?” she said. “I think I’m falling asleep.” She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the headrest.
A Long Trip in a Quiet Car

Jonathan Eastman

1) Today we sacrifice
our beloved mongrel
to the obliteration of deep sleep.
A decade has been ours
to have and to hold,
to feed and to scratch.

2) The form politely requests
we pencil in her name.
Beauty Queen Eastman.
We had other names for her:
  Beauty-bop
  Beauty-baker
  Beauty-boppy-baker
  Zimbabwe
Sometimes the least logical
is the most logical of all.
Zimbabwe is what we called her
unless she was being bad.
Then she was Beauuuuuuty.

3) We sit and socialize with other pet
lovers, we who will leave Zimbabwe
here with the white coats and the needles.
The drive back is long. It is quiet.
We roll the windows up, try to imagine
a Beauty-less day.
She bolstered me against wind and rain, stood fast under thundering threats of lightning-fast blinding-white javelins.

Choking grey mist dampened the air, icy-hot slingstones battered her slick evergreen hide in futile assaults.

Now her joints are snapped, her metal-cold bones bent and warped under ripped lackluster skin.

Twisted-grey shards of her flesh scatter across cold-glitter grass, a guardian’s grave of green needles.
Changing Faces
Changing Paces
Evy Baehr
silver gelatin print
Howard walked up the bare concrete stairs and opened the unmarked door. A man of about sixty was sprawled over two chairs in the corner, fat rolled into folds over threadbare sweatpants. He was dozing; his eyes rolled back in his head behind half-closed lids, his mouth slightly open. A tiny waterfall of spit beaded off three distinct chins before forming a small puddle on the chair.

What was wrong with him? Cancer or heart disease? Or just obesity? Maybe the inability to crap unassisted finally broke him.

Something broke everyone in this room. Something made them cowards. Left them terrified of one painful instant. Left them facing death just as they faced life; waiting on it to come to them. At least I’m not waiting, Howard thought.

“May I help you?” The secretary was a homely woman, maybe forty or fifty, grey blond hair pulled back into a bun, and a warm smile that accentuated the wrinkles around her mouth. “What can I do for you?” she asked. The wrinkles smiled, but her blue eyes questioned.

“Hello. Yes, you can do something for me.” He repeated his mantra over and over in his head: Cool, calm, and collected. Yet all his thoughts suddenly fled his mind. But he was prepared. “I have terminal colon cancer,” he almost whispered.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” she replied, typing without interruption. “Have a seat and the doctor will see you in just a moment.”

“I have to have a consultation?” he asked.

She looked up briefly, then back at the computer screen. “It’s just a formality, Sir. We just need to see which doctor you are currently seeing and confirm his diagnosis. We like to be holistically involved with our patients.”

He sat down in the corner and clumsily tried to pull a crumpled piece of paper from the inner pocket of his blazer. The smeared ink made it almost un-intelligible; it made his attempt at a covert reading nearly impossible. But
he awkwardly twisted his back towards the room and muttered as he read. “Anemia, jaundice, fatigue, weight loss.” He took a Sharpie from his pocket and scribbled on his wrist, under the sleeve of his dress shirt.

“Mr. Epperson?” He started at the sound of his name. A nurse stood in the doorway behind the desk. “Mr. Epperson, Dr. Holbert will see you now,” the nurse said. Stuffing the paper and the Sharpie back into his pocket, he stumbled towards her.

“Right through this door sir,” she said, smiling a wide, red-lipsticked smile. “Dr. Holbert is ready for you in the first room on the left.”

Fake pine paneling covered the walls, lending its particular scent to the hallway, somewhere between an old office building and a musty couch. The first door on the left hung open just a crack. He pushed it the rest of the way and entered the tiny, sparse office.

“Well hello Mr. Epperson, I would ask how you were, but that doesn’t seem to go over so well in here.” The doctor stared at him; waited for some sort of visual cue signaling the appropriateness of laughter. Nothing.

“I’m not doing so well. I’m dying,” Howard snapped.

“I’m sorry.” The doctor looked contrite enough; he was sitting behind a large mahogany desk that felt rather out of place in such a small room. “I just try to break the ice. I shouldn’t, it hardly ever—never mind. My name is Matthew Holbert.” He extended his hand across the expanse of desk. “Please, have a seat. Who was your consulting physician?” he asked. His brown eyes darted around the room; they settled on everything except the only other set of eyes.

“Consulting physician?” Howard repeated the question and left the doctor’s hand suspended in midair as he lowered himself into the small leather chair in front of the desk. “Uhh—Dr. McGraw over at Methodist.” He tried to hold his voice steady, even make it sound confident.

“I don’t remember ever having a patient from that doctor,” Holbert said, finally retracting his hand. “But no matter,” he reassured. “We get new referrals all the time. I just need a signed sheet from him.”

Howard’s hands quivered and he tried to hold them steady. “I don’t have the signed sheet for you today, but I’ll get it,” he said. “I just need to get it from him.” He clenched his knees with his hands to stop their shaking. “But I do know my symptoms, and I know life isn’t worth it.” His foot rhythmically banged the front of Dr. Holbert’s desk. He slid his sleeve up a bit and struggled to stealthily read the faded black marks on his wrist. “I have jaundice, anemia, and sometimes I’m so tired I just can’t get out of bed.”

“I understand,” Holbert said. “I do. But what we need to do is get that sheet for you.” The doctor’s eyes finally seemed to settle on Howard. “No one—well hardly anyone—even knows they need the sheet. We ask their consulting physicians to remind them, but in the usual stress and emotions of the process, they often forget. I’ll tell you what, you go get me the sheet
today and we'll get started with your treatment tomorrow.”

“Well, I don't know if I can get it by today, but I’ll try,” Howard said as he stood up.

“Tomorrow, the next day, it doesn't matter to me,” Holbert said. “Just come on in when you get it.”

“All right.” Howard didn't even notice the people in the waiting room as he stumbled towards the outer door.

*Three years have passed since that day. The day my world turned upside down. I can still see her sitting there, getting her things ready. She died the way she lived; her own way. I can still see her.*

“Howie, you've been so good to me. But it's my time, it's just my time. Everyone has a time you know. I can feel it in my bones. The good Lord knows yours as well as He knows mine. He'll let you know when yours is gettin' close. Just listen.”

Right. The Lord giveth and He taketh away. “You're right, Mom. Now lay down. I don't want it to be your time just yet.”

Howard turned his key in the car's ignition and waited on the reassuring growl of the engine. It came right on cue and he sped out of the clinic parking lot. He punched in Methodist Hospital on his GPS, letting it find the address. “Chinese piece of crap won't even pick up satellites,” he said aloud. The Acura behind him honked, causing him to look away from the GPS screen and realize that he hadn't even slowed down for a stop sign. “Damn.” He slammed his head against the steering wheel. “Gotta have concentration here.” He slowed the car, swerved into the right lane, and collected his thoughts as the GPS finally squawked to life: “Turn right in two miles.”

*The Lord this. The Lord that. If she really believed in the Lord, why all the preparation? She had all her things ready to go, all her photos boxed up, and now she was working on her goodbyes. I've been the only one here with her for five years, but now she needs to tell everyone goodbye. She even called Dad. After all these years, she called Dad. And the crazy thing is, he called her back. Everyone called her back. The mayor of this crazy town came over to thank her for “years of distinguished service,” whatever that meant. And I sat in the front room watching her just as I had every day for almost two years.*

The parking lot at Methodist Medical Center was always full, but today it overflowed into the McDonald's across the street. “You can’t park here sir,” a policeman said as Howard opened his car door in the lot. “Unless you're a McDonald's customer.”

“I am,” Howard said as he walked away. “Give me a parking ticket, that would be the best part of my day,” he muttered, halfway across the street already.

The inside of the hospital smelled like a mix of lattes from the lobby Starbucks and rotting flesh. He tried not to inhale through his nose while...
waiting for the elevator. The door opened, and he stepped in.

“What floor?” A cute nurse or intern or something smiled at him slightly. Her short blond hair brushed in front of blue-green eyes.

“Seven. Floor seven,” he said.

“Aww, did your wife have a baby?” she asked. “That’s so amazing.”

“No, she didn’t,” he said. “My mother actually used to work in maternity and I’m going to see an old friend of hers.”

“Well, that’s still awesome,” she said, but her voice lacked some of its previous perky conviction. “I bet she still comes in to see the babies. They’re so, so cute.”

“She doesn’t. She’s dead,” he said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She looked at the floor as the elevator door opened. Howard got out without even looking back at her.

Cindy was standing behind the front desk, scribbling notes on a clipboard. She looked up. “Sir, may I help you?” Then she saw it was him. “Oh, Howard! It’s been so long.” She walked around the desk to hug him. She surveyed his face. “You look good. I haven’t seen you since . . . since Margaret died, I guess.”

He had to remind himself to be polite and friendly. “Cindy, it’s good to see you too. Really good. You look . . . you look great. But listen, I won’t keep you long. I need to ask a favor of you.”

She tipped her head to one side. “Of course. I’d be glad to help you with anything.”

He took a deep breath. “This is kinda weird, but I need a blank patient chart.”

“Howard, why?” she asked.

“It’s a long story, but I made a bet with a friend,” he said. “I bet him that I could get an official letterhead from the government or a patient chart from a hospital faster than he could. I got beer and a dinner riding on this.” He tried hard to genuinely smile.

“Well, it’s technically—I could lose my job for giving you a blank chart,” she said. “And you came all the way up here to win a bet?” Her blue eyes were even more piercing since she went totally grey.

“Look, I know it sounds stupid. It’s just a male ego thing.” His hands slowly formed fists underneath his blazer.

“Howard, you know as well as anyone that I can’t give you a chart,” she said. “Besides, who bets on a hospital chart? What group of guys even talks about hospital charts?” Her eyes almost shone in the light and did not waver from his, even though he tried to look away.

“Cindy, I just need the chart. You have to trust me on this one,” Howard said. “Look, sometimes you do things you’re not proud of. Everyone does
things they’re not proud of,” he stammered.

“What?” Cindy’s eyes squinted a little and she raised her eyebrows.

“Howard, what are you talking about?”

“I mean, I’m just not proud of betting on something so stupid,” Howard said. “I just really need the chart, and I’m not proud of betting on a patient chart.”

“Howard, I don’t know what’s going on, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She leaned towards him and lowered her voice. “Look, I can’t give you a chart. I would lose my job, and if it got into the wrong hands, terrible things could happen. You know I loved your mom. She was the best boss I ever had; but I can’t risk something like this for a bet or something. I’m sorry.”

“Fine. I’ll get it somewhere else,” Howard said, turning to leave. His fists clenched tighter.

“Here,” said Cindy, running after him. “Take my card. Call me anytime you need someone to talk to—” But he was already halfway to the elevator.

He stopped for a latte in the lobby to calm himself. The acne-ridden teenage boy behind the counter didn’t even know how to make a latte. “Hey, I’m in a hurry here,” Howard said. “Some of us have places to be. We can’t just pretend to make espresso in a hospital lobby all day.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” The boy smiled weakly. “I just have to grind some new decaf espresso, but your drink’s on me today.”

“I don’t care about the money, I care about the time,” Howard said. “Someday, you’ll understand that time is money. And you’ve lost my money.” He turned and pushed his way through the large glass entry doors into the parking lot.

He realized his car was all the way in the McDonalds lot. His hands were trembling. I need to get a grip, he thought. I need to find somewhere else to get a chart. I might have to come back here tonight and break in. He started walking across the lot, mumbling to himself.

“Hospital security can’t be that tough, especially at night. I can pretend to have a hernia or something and swipe a chart from the emergency room. I’ll just hide behind the nurses’ station until the shift changes, and sneak into the records room. I’ll need a map,” he said. “Some dark colored clothing.” He pressed the walk button by the crosswalk and waited on the beep and flash. “I’ll show Cindy that I’m not the kind of person who takes no for an answer. I can just see the look on her face when she comes in and realizes that not just one chart, but a whole stack of blank charts is missing.” He started walking across the street, still talking to himself. “The hospital will have to spend more on security. They won’t believe that only one man—”
The SUV didn’t even slow down for the light. The woman driving screamed and slammed on brakes, but it was too late. She jumped out of her car. Blood marred the chrome bumper. She ran inside the hospital. “Help! Help me! I hit someone, there’s blood everywhere,” she screamed. Nurses and interns stopped their bustling and stared at her. “Please, please help,” she sobbed. Outside, Howard lay still and crumpled beneath the wheels.

The day she died, I stared at her chest for hours. Her last breath looked so peaceful. Her chest rose, and fell, and rose slower, and fell and kept falling through her ribs as the atmosphere accepted the last bit of her being. Her pastor cried a little, but I didn’t. No one in that room would ever see me cry.
When my offspring were dating, I’d advise them
That they were only sparking on the end
Of a thirty-six-foot tube half-full of crap.
Now, looming like a crane above my wheelchair,
My son is slowly lowering my wife
(Who trembles like a frail, if hefty, leaf)
Because I cannot stand for her to leave here
Until I’ve touched her lips, and been a man
For just a little longer.

Sometimes I wake up in the morning mumbling,
Still half-asleep, enlightening those peasants
Down at the IRS who can’t get straight
That I’ve already sent that payment in
Thirteenth of April, nineteen sixty-eight,
And have the letter in my files to prove it!—
Or bellowing Wagner at the country cows,
Back home from seminary on the weekends.
(I swear the cows would mate when I would sing,
And now at least the CNAs will grin
And tell my daughter when she comes to visit,
Her dad was singing in his sleep again.)
Untitled
Ji Zong L'ang
pen and ink
Graveyards fascinate me. As I walk carefully around headstones, I wonder about the people whose memories and remains are marked in stone. Who were they? What did they do in life? How did they die? Were they loved? Did they love? Are they remembered?

Memory seems to be the key to these carefully etched granite markers. Most people want to leave something behind, a legacy that will carry on their name far after they’ve ceased to exist. For some, perhaps it is only these crumbling stones. We want to believe that once we are gone, the memory of our presence does not perish as well.

I grew up in my great-grandmother’s old farmstead house. It was given to her family by the government: a small house, a barn, and a plot of land to till over. I loved that little white house—the coal pit at the side of the house that my sister and I spent hours digging through, pretending to be archeologists; the wooden floorboards that creaked and moaned under each step; the doors and cabinets that swelled in the humidity and had to be pried open. We never had a hot water heater, and the pipes froze in the winter.

Walnut and pine trees loomed protectively over our house; azaleas and honesuckle were nestled closely around the four sides. A gnarled dogwood tree lounged outside my window, occasionally reaching out and scratching the window screen. The dogwood was planted by Virgil Clarence Theodore Williams the day his daughter—my great-grandmother—was born in 1911.

We had no central heat and air, just a wood-burning fireplace in winter and open windows in the summer. Our bathroom was situated in the corner of a room, which also served as a laundry and storage area, added on to the kitchen; we bathed in an old claw-foot iron bathtub. My dad fixed the roof one year, scraped off the tarpaper shingles and replaced them with a tin roof. I would lie awake at night during storms, captivated by the staccato of rain on the metal roof.
My family moved from our house when I was twelve. I didn’t want to leave—it wasn’t the only home I had ever known, but it was the one I loved best, and I didn’t want our house to forget me. I snuck a steak knife from the kitchen and painstakingly carved my name into the inside of my bedroom windowsill.

I like to imagine that one day, when my own headstone is crumbling, a little girl will be leaning out that window when she spots the faded but still legible scratches, a name dug into the wood, a marker of another life. And perhaps she will wonder, who was this Ashlee? What did she do in her life? How did she die? Was she loved? Did she love? Is she remembered?

We bathed in an old claw-foot iron bathtub.
I.
Live oaks always droop in that peculiar way. The Spanish moss grasping for soil never quite reached the earth.

Earth that I dug
twice in the same week.
Oak that I planted
twenty years before
my first car payment.

This house has a ghost.

Even before my grandmother
lay among the bundles of tubes
leading from her to the machine
that pervaded what life
she had left,

this house had a ghost.

She always pretended
that it was us whispering.
That the unexplained bumps
in the attic
never happened.

Her steady hands
just continued to cut apples.
Constantly formed new moons
of dough and created new orbits
in hot oil.

She pretended
and she believed.
Then we ate,
on a tablecloth of white lace
 to the tune of a choir
 filtered by rusty metal.

And she watched,
 hummed,
 warmed the kitchen
 that now lies cold.

II.
The front door creaks
 as it opens to reveal
 the first and last scene of life.

Green linoleum makes a strange sound
 when disturbed,
 somewhere between a creak
 and a groan.

Alabama humidity breeds mildew,
 the odd smell that permeates
 this place makes me sick,
 and restless.

What’s so beautiful about white lace?
 Faded, raveled, shredded by age,
 covering every table.
 Maybe she was ashamed of wood.

I never knew my great grandmother.
 Only an old rotary phone
 and closets full of antique porcelain
 show me her life.
 And other things.

The Archangel,
 forever trapped behind glass,
 silently walks the lifeless
 through the valley of death.

Eyes permanently transfixed on mahogany and lace,
 she stands on a wooden bridge
 and lovingly stares.

Rotten apples on the table
 receive the blessing,
 mark the yellowed paper.

Black letters faded to grey;
It all happened so suddenly,” Adie said. She stared vacantly at her dying, scraggly lawn, and wondered how long she had been standing on her crumbling curb. It was that strange day in November about a week after Halloween, the day that oppressive, dripping heat, characteristic only of an August in Mississippi, crept over the city. We stood by the street dumbly; the humidity and sweat seeping down the small of our backs, the heavy heat pushing down. Her bare heels were planted on the cement, her toes pressed into the loose red clay of her yard.

Adie had lived alone for a while now in the weathered old house down High Street. It had once been beautiful with its ivory wood siding, wide windows, wraparound porch, the bird of paradise, and a banana tree planted by the porch stairs. A decade had passed. The shutter’s peeling yellow paint and the rusted metal ladder leaning against the sagging front gutter were silent reminders of past intentions to fix up the place. But the reason to fix up the house had packed up and left. Over recent months her little car had gradually come to settle in the center of the two-person driveway. She stared down that driveway now. “I knew I was moving into a rough neighborhood, but really?”

Adie had come back late last Saturday night, Halloween. She had worked late and didn’t care much about holidays this year. Her head lights cut through the neighborhood, revealing particles and bugs in the black air, grazing off smashed pumpkin bits and glittering off of the orange lights strewn about. She no longer tried to miss the potholes in the road, just rolling right through them without noticing the thuds in the car, and rounded the last corner. Her front tires were jerking into the driveway when she popped the clutch and stalled out. She pulled the parking brake with the car still running and half in the street. The headlights reflected dully off the splintered doorframe and black square.
THE BREAK IN

black square. Adie paused for a moment, then jumped out of her car. The front door was completely missing. She sprinted up the saggy wood stairs, stepping over a threshold of glass and wood shards. She noticed the missing bike, the TV cabinet with no TV, and the cord with no laptop attached to it. A few small things and some cash were also missing. That was the first time.

The day after the break-in, someone had made a tasteless joke, “You better give kids their damn Halloween candy in this neighborhood!” and Adie had laughed. After the initial shock, she had taken it pretty well. She felt like her home had been violated, but it was nothing she couldn’t handle.

Wednesday, Adie was walking back from class. The sun slanted strong through the trees, casting bold shadows on the road, their turning leaves falling to the pavement. It took a lot longer to get home without the bike, but it was okay. She told me before the walk that she had been thinking about how little you actually need to live. All of the things taken were blessings, not necessities. Maybe life is better without them anyway. It’s definitely simpler.

Waving hello to the kids, who were jumping off rickety porch railings onto a mattress in their front yard, she rounded her corner then stopped short. The plywood nailed over the door had been pried off, and none of the windows had curtains.

“Everything was gone. The saggy couch, the refrigerator. The bookshelf, everything on it. My bed, used dishtowels, recycling, laundry basket, potted plants, rugs, the old screw driver, shoes, flour, my photographs and the hooks holding them—kitty litter! Anything that wasn’t bolted down, including the fridge. I thought that was strange. I just wandered the house listening to my footsteps echo, too stunned to cuss. I think they might have swept the floor and taken the dust.”

It didn’t make sense. Coming back and stealing the rest of it—okay, fine. But everything? Half the stuff was junk, and impossible to move. She had large collections of sheet metal, and an old piano upstairs that could only be moved by crane. She was so amazed she didn’t have room left for anger. It was as if the house had become a great void, and she had wandered through it as if was a catacomb.

But now it was Saturday. She had called me over and I stood there uneasily, watching her stand close to her mailbox the way some women might stand next to their man. Her canvas side bag was half dropped in the dirt and she limply held the shoulder strap. The yard looked flat and full of crab grass, desperate for fertilizer, all normal except the house itself, which had been unearthed. It was as if it had been pulled up like a seedling.
pine. There was only upheaved soil around the contours of the disappeared house. In that soil was a wrench that went missing when they were fixing the house, and bits of crumbled concrete from the foundation. The one pathetic banana tree was drooping almost horizontally. Adie kept looking, but there were no walls or windows, just a beautifully clear view of the backyard.

“Where is my f---ing house?” she asked the void. “I don’t understand. Houses don’t go.”

We looked again, but the house was still gone. Her property consisted of an ugly tree and a hole. We stayed on that curb with the sun pounding down, and the humidity swelling the air, watching. For some reason, it felt like trespassing to walk forward. As if the land itself was now repossessed.
Section Two
A door blew open last
Autumn and let
A nesting of motley foliage
Build thick and curl
Along a wall,
All mortared with the rain.

Among the waterlogged
Were leaves,
Broken twigs,
And the ochre beadwork
Of the oaks along the drive.

Dashed and wet, a warbler
Sat alert
Atop the mass and
I watched

The silent
Minstrel shake
And pucker from the cold,
Ever preening the delicate yellow
Back from where it had been blown.

As the bird settled into the heap,
I left it alone
And took inside with me
The memory of the fellow.
Our garage door never shut all the way. Something in the sensor was broken, and the door always stopped two inches from the concrete. This crack let a beam of light into the garage that diffused in clouds of dust and lent its florescent glow to the piles of junk. It was the perfect place for an eight-year-old boy to spend a fall afternoon.

Or that’s what I thought anyway. I spent many afternoons in that garage; my dreams and ambitions in life were all based on things that were in the garage. I sat in that garage by myself many afternoons, looking out the crack under the door. Our neighbor always came home around the same time and fed his horses. Real horses. A beautiful bay, and a tall, lean roan. I just sat there and wondered and envied; real horses in the city. I dreamed of someday sneaking into his yard and riding one, but his Dobermans always ended this ambition. In my mind, just because he was the chief of police did not mean he should be allowed horses.

But one day, I didn’t care about my neighbor’s horses anymore. I got my own horse. She was a great horse, quiet and not smelly at all. No one ever complained that the garage smelled like oats. A good thing, because I was pretty sure that only the chief of police was allowed to bypass the livestock regulations in our community, but Bessie wasn’t going anywhere. I even brushed her every afternoon. One of my favorite books, *The Legend of King Arthur*, informed me that the great King of the Britons brushed his horse every afternoon. If Arthur did it, who was I to argue?

Bessie loved me. She always stood right by the back door, waiting for me to touch her wide, red nose on my way in from school or playtime. She didn’t seem to mind the daily endangerment I put her through. Most horses would shy away when confronted by animals over twice their size, but not Bessie. She stood tough, all three feet of her steeled against the onslaught of an opposing lance. She was a great jouster, and I wasn’t such a bad rider.

Not many people could handle Bessie. My best friend James never quite mastered her tricks. He never really tried enough; he lost interest too quickly.
Like many great animals, it took trust and patience to understand her. She could spit fire, and I was the only one who could calm her down. Some days, my dad would ride her. He thought he could break her; he rode her in geometric patterns for hours. But as soon as he got off, I was the only one who could calm her down.

One afternoon, I could sense that Bessie was uneasy. Her skin always flaked when something wasn’t right. Then I remembered: today was the championship joust. Suddenly I was as nervous as Bessie. Everything had to be just right today. Her saddle-blanket gleamed white as I slid it over her dark back. I carefully selected the perfect green lance and steeled myself. Bessie could be high strung sometimes, but now, in a pressure situation, she remained perfectly calm. I took her cue, took a deep breath, and prayed.

Our first opponent looked a bit unkempt. The early rounds were always the easiest, even on the championship day. She was a thoroughbred, with a small knight clinging to her back. Bessie felt confident. The music played, the crowd screamed, and we charged. My lance cut the air as we moved faster and faster. I lurched forward as my lance met cold steel. The knight flipped backwards, a clean fall.

“What are you doing?” The question didn’t come from any of my screaming fans, rather it came from behind me. I turned my head and saw my friend James sitting on a broken ladder. “Why do you have your dad’s old fishing pole? And what’s with sitting on the mower?” My face slowly turned red as I looked down at Bessie’s cracked seat, covered with a towel. She must have been embarrassed too. Oil was slowly dripping from her 5.5 HP Briggs and Stratton and seeping onto the grass.

“Nothing—I was just—I’ll be right back.” I slowly wheeled Bessie back into the garage. Inside, I gently lifted her white saddle blanket off her back and laid it on the dusty ground. I patted her nose one more time. “Good job today, girl,” I whispered. Then I walked back outside and shut the garage door.
Yad
Kateri Tolo
oil pastel, india ink, watercolor
Our clear lines were suspended in the air. They drifted and fell like the spiders’ webs we saw stretching from cypress knees to cypress knolls all around us, weighted only with anticipation, swivel, cricket, and quill.

Morning was in the branches above us and the warmth of summer was already pressing down, making the aluminum on the boat seat below hot enough to burn her little legs.

“Watch your line,” I insisted. It might, like the first dozen times, have been a silent reminder. I knew I'd say it a dozen more before the day’s end.

Just then she reeled in a small bream, swinging and flapping on the end of her line. I watched her pick it up by the lower jaw, thumb and index finger like grips. She took out the hook and turned to me saying, “What do you think, Dad? A keeper?”

She already knew the answer. It had been the same all morning.

Without so much as a groan, she sank her hand below the surface, fish intact, and released it with little more noise than a natural breaking. The surface of the water closed. The fish sat a moment hypnotized before it darted away, sucking brown murk and granules of algae to the depths.

“You'll get him before the day’s up. Why don’t you try over there by that broken branch?”

I tried to coax her away from the open water that she had been trying to fish all morning. She had ignored my warnings about trolling. She sat patiently awaiting the triumphant rush of a big fish.

I knew she wouldn't catch it out there. Everyone knows that in open water, it’s easier to catch twigs than fish, and that it’s easier to throw the fish back.

There would be no coaxing this five-year-old. Somehow she managed to pull out fingerling after fingerling. She never lost her patience as she made
her release, but my hopes for a good day were starting to get the better of me.

“Fish by that knoll,” I whispered firmly through my teeth.

Just then, I caught a glimpse of light and felt a tugging at the end of my line. My quill bobbed the dance of stolen bait.

“Shit.”

I quickly reeled in my line with all the impatience and frustration I could exhibit. I plunged my hand into the crickets and pulled one out, several others scurrying up my arm and falling into the bottom of the boat. I pierced the cricket and cast it to its certain death. Just then I looked up and realized that she had gone back to open water.

“I told you to…” I started to chastise her. But I had broken the silence all too soon. She had yanked her line at the insistent nibble of a large bream. She brought him up, but my shout had startled it from taking her bait. He plunked into the dark water, breaking the thick silence.

I turned, expecting to see her crying. Instead she calmly returned my gaze and said, “There went my damn fish.” Then she reached out her hand and asked me for the bait.

Everyone knows that in open water, it’s easier to catch twigs than fish.
2 pairs starched and glowing white Keds, 
laces yanked free, 

raced and tripped down 
John Muir Lane, sloshed 
through Strawberry Creek, dripped, 
slipped, and scrambled over 
mossy granite boulders, 

dragged home through 
mulchy pine needles, 
peeled off pruney feet, set out, 
mud soiled, with soles worn bare, 
caked with satisfaction to dry.
I. Click  
Alone, my  
Breath drawn in  
Deep and released,  
Away from the  
Crowd of faces  
Swirling around  
Me like a net  
And the music  
Hammering in  
My ears. I’m  
Drowning in  
Voices so loud and  
I can’t seem to  
Escape all of the  
Noise!

II. Room  
Three stark, gray  
Walls enclose a  
Piano, and a slight hum  
Vibrates through the  
Room. The door  
Is embedded with a  
Thick pane of glass,  
And I can’t help but  
Sympathize with a  
Goldfish. The air  
Smells stale, but  
No matter, this room  
Is now mine.
III. Respire
In the quiet,
I sink onto the bench, my
Fingers straying to
White keys, pressing
Down. Listen to
That first note, which
Sings in the silence
Small, but strong.
It fades, but
Memory will not
Let it disappear,
So it will linger.

IV. Sanctuary
That place where
The soul can find
Rest. Where everything
Melts away into
The quiet, the music
The darkness, a grove,
Under a tree, within a book,
In the heart of a lover
Or the arms of a friend.
Wherever that one
Place of safety is,
There is the freedom
To just be.
Section Three
Aftermath
A candy red helmet dwarfs his face.
As shaking hands shift levers,
the powered wheelchair responds,
zooming down cracked concrete.
Eyes dodging, shoulders hunched,
Denzel scoots.
A cigarette dangles loose on his lips;
nicotine soothes his twisted nerves.
Shriveled legs tucked into place….
He shifts his weight,
a gutted house.

Tragedy
His dreadlocks dangle over a proud smile
as nimble fingers plunge in ice
to grab a third Red Stripe.
He pops the cap with pearl teeth
and takes a hefty swig.
Denzel soars
with luck swelling his shoulders
and backpedals boldly across the balcony
with his beer raised in a victory toast….
He falls two stories,
a crashing star.

Triumph
White helmet strapped under his thick chin
as huge hands grip the ball
and strong legs backpedal boldly.
His nimble eyes search for a gap,
a narrow path to victory.
Denzel explodes.
His cleats pummel wet earth
while his heaving chest feasts on oxygen
and adrenaline surges through his blood….
He lowers his shoulders,
a bull in full strength.
I am Creator,
The shaper of the windows of the world,
Poured from ideas of once and will and now,
Within the stormy palace of my soul.

Within my gated walls of adamant,
I keep a thing as large as moon-eyed Time,
I keep a thing as free as comet-dust
Around the spiraled galaxies of stars.

There darkness lies, I find a ghoul-spun wind
And demons of the mountain dark and bare,
Or Agamemnon’s holy, dreadful mask,
Mirthless raised to Armageddon skies.

There glory lies, an infant king asleep,
A sword beneath his cradle and his cloth;
His eyes are sheathed in pearly temple shrouds
To open in the blazing of the dawn.

Each day another colored shard I make,
And spread the stained-glass fragments on the sward,
Each for a place unthought-of in the scheme
Of images that only God has known.
What comfort is there in words?
What is a decoration on a falling house?

Art is useless.
When the wellspring is contaminated,
I am sick unto my soul.
My soul and my spirit cry out for comfort,
Cry out for healing and justice.
Yet my art calls after me too,
Reminds me daily to pick up the torch,
To create and live and have joy and peace.
Where is my joy?
Perhaps it has flown away to the same place as my words.
Or there is
A muse on a rampage
Stealing art,
Life,
Joy.
Damn the muse.
Their teeth gaped like rabbit teeth.

Smoke hung in the air for a millisecond. When Adam blinked, it disappeared with the rain. He crouched behind the corner of Denny’s (“Real Breakfast 24/7”) and watched the rain fall across the parking lot, splashing like a fountain from the lit streetlight onto the roof of the parked cars. He watched it drip onto the hood of his car, an old rusted-out Ford with worn-out shocks. It's a car, he thought. Maybe one day he would buy a new one. A Camaro. He always liked Camaros. He smoked slowly, savoring the smell of the smoke and letting the rain rest on his face. He was sticky. He didn’t mind getting wet.

Adam knew he was three minutes over his ten-minute break limit, but the rain hypnotized him, and he hadn't finished his cigarette yet. He watched the cars go by on Blackgrove Street. None of them stopped for breakfast. After all, it was almost nine o’clock at night. Adam took one more drag on his cigarette and closed his eyes.

Long, long ago, Adam was conceived in a whirlwind of field grass and summer sunlight, and his mother, Violet, told him that the July sun still shone in his hair and sometimes, he smelled to her like that field. But Adam was sixteen, smoked two packs a day, and had dull, lank brown hair. Every morning, as he buttoned his maroon Denny’s uniform, he looked into the mirror and studied his face. He looked to see the reflection of summer or the brightness of the sun. But he only saw himself, and sometimes a vague shadow of his father.

Now the back door opened and Greene, his boss, poked his head out. “Hey, Adam! Adam, get the hell back in here. You’re five minutes late.”

Adam stomped out his cigarette, popped a mint in his mouth, and went inside.

Greene was at the counter, talking to the new girl. Even in a shapeless uniform, she had the body of a Maxim model. Adam watched them for a little while and turned the knobs on the griddle. Greene leaned against
the counter next to the girl, closer and closer, and she tossed her ponytail and fingered the collar of her uniform. Then the door opened, and Greene snapped away from her.

A stocky woman in a sweat suit marched to the counter, a pink scrunchy knotted tightly in her hair. She was followed by two pudgy children, a boy and a girl. They slapped each other behind her back, grinning. Their teeth gaped like rabbit teeth.

“I want two chicken-strip combos with two Sprites and a country-fried steak with a Pepsi, to go.” She dug into her purse. The children pinched each other. Coins rattled across the floor. The children scrambled to pick them up, stuffing them in their pants pockets. “Kids! Trixie, Bobby! Give those back!” The woman’s voice was loud and harsh. The children grinned at her and began to run through the restaurant, ducking under the tables and sliding through the booths. Adam handed the bags of food to Greene. The woman took them from him and marched away from the counter. Her voice rose. “You kids aren’t getting dinner! Get over here!” The children scampered out the door and she charged after them, swearing under her breath. Adam watched them run across the street until the rain swallowed them up.

Greene shook his head. “Never have kids,” he said to Adam. “I never wanna be a dad.” The new girl blinked and chewed her fingernail. Adam turned the knobs on the griddle again.

Adam didn’t remember his own father, but a charcoal portrait of him hung over the kitchen table. It was three feet tall. His father was not smiling. There were deep smudges under his eyes — undoubtedly from an error on the part of the artist — and a smudge over his lip that was probably supposed to represent facial hair. According to Violet, it was an inaccurate drawing, done by an amateur who had given it to them as a wedding present. But Adam had the same eyebrows: pointed, pixie eyebrows, like little questioning triangles. He had the same thin, firm lips. He had the same hollow cheekbones. Sometimes Adam looked at that portrait so long, he felt dizzy.

The door opened again. Greene and the girl were somewhere in the back, so Adam went to the counter.

A man walked in, dripping from the rain. The darkness seemed to form a shroud behind him as he closed the glass door. He was black, and tall, and he wore a crimson suede jacket and carried a thick wooden walking stick.

He stood against the door for a moment, looking around. Then he came to the counter.

Adam felt himself shrink as the man walked towards him. He swallowed.
The man scowled at the menu. “Look here,” he said. “You got some sandwich or burger or somethin’?”

“Well, we have a turkey club and a chicken sandwich and a mushroom Swiss burger and a classic cheeseburger — ”

“Yeah, yeah. The cheeseburger.” The man threw two dirty, crumpled bills on the counter. “My name’s King. No onions.”

Adam took the bills in his hand. Two dollars. “Sir — ” The man had walked to the condiments counter and was pouring ketchup on a napkin. “Excuse me. Sir.” The man took another napkin and poured ketchup on it. “Um — King?” The man turned around.

“Look.” The man held up the napkins. On one he had written ‘King’ in ketchup. On the other it said ‘Adam.’ The letter ‘A’ dripped down the white napkin and spilled on King’s shoe.

“How — how did you know my name?”

King began to laugh, leaning against the condiments. “It’s on your name tag. Didn’t you know? Your name’s on your name tag.” He wheezed and wiped his eyes. “You look like you seen a ghost.”

Adam cleared his throat. He wondered where Greene was. With that girl probably. “Sir.” King threw the napkins away. “Sir. You gave me two dollars. The cheeseburger is four.”

King came back to Adam. He stood before him and held out his hands. “I got two bucks. I gave you two bucks. Either take that, or I won’t take the burger.”

“But sir — that’s not the way — I can’t — ”

King looked at him. There were lines on his forehead, deep, like scars or cracks in the earth, and his nose was bent as if it had been broken once. His skin shone darker than coffee in the weak, white light, and he smelled like rain and pavement and something else that reminded Adam of the way the church smelled after the priest had burned incense. King’s eyes still burned like a fire, and Adam sighed and dug into his pocket.

“I think I got two bucks myself,” he said. “Now you wait while I get that burger for you.”

King ate the burger in four gulps, crouched over a table near the front counter. He licked his fingers. Adam looked at the clock on the back of the wall. Almost nine, the end of his shift. He unpinned his name tag. King was sitting in the booth, his head in his hands.

Adam went to the computer and punched in his employee number to clock out: 009435. “I’m going home!” he yelled to the back of the kitchen. Silence. “Hey guys?” No answer. Adam cursed and walked out the door and into the moist darkness. He walked to his car and fumbled for his keys.

“You gonna leave me here?” The voice was right in his ear. Adam jumped and almost fell. A hand grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to stand on his feet. “You gonna leave me in this place?” The light of the streetlight
illuminated King. “Don’ leave me,” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Adam unlocked his car. He stood in the light, and the sullen rain began to fall again. “I don’t know you. I’m going home.”

“But I know you,” said King.

Adam forced his voice to be steady: “You don’t know me. I don’t know you. We’ve never met. Now let me go, let me go home.”

King shook his head, shook it and shook it, and closed his eyes. He let go of Adam’s shoulder. “Awright then,” he said. “I don’ know you. But I know that you’re not gonna forget me, and you’re gonna come back for me. I know that you’re mad about somethin’, and maybe it burns, maybe it’ll kill you someday. But I know there’s somethin’ in you soft, too, so you’ll tell me where to go tonight and be dry, and you’ll see me again.”

That smooth voice was like a rush of water in Adam, pouring through him. He opened the door of his car. Rain splashed in his ears, and it smeared King’s face, dripping off his crooked nose. The air hung with moisture, thick like a web, and Adam smelled the water and the wet asphalt. King’s jacket was slimy from the rain. He clutched his stick and stared at Adam.

“Get in the car,” Adam said.

They drove silently through the storm, about six miles out of town and another two miles up his dirt driveway. Adam pulled over at a ditch. He looked at King, who was hunched against the window, tracing raindrops with his broad finger. “King. Listen to me.” In the darkness, he could only see the outline of the man’s face against the window. “There’s a flashlight in the glove compartment. If you walk straight through those woods, you’ll come to a lean-to about a hundred yards in. It’s near a pond. Stay there, and in the morning, I’ll bring you something to eat.” King nodded. He took the flashlight and opened the car door. “And King,” Adam had to talk loudly over the hard sound of the rain. “That’s it. You leave tomorrow.”

King nodded again, his eyes glimmering in the darkness. “If tomorrow ever comes,” he said and slammed the door. Adam waited until he saw his shadow disappear in the trees. Then he drove home.

One yellow light shone in the kitchen. Violet was drinking warm milk from a brown mug. The light came from a single candle on the table. She smiled wanly at Adam. “Dinner’s in the pot on the stove,” she said. “You’re wet.”

It was beef stew. Adam looked at it, stirred it, and felt the cigarette box in his pocket. “Not hungry,” he said.

Violet nodded, slowly, and took a sip of milk. “You eat far too much at Denny’s.” She sighed and clutched the mug against her chest. “If this rain would stop,” she murmured. “I could not go to the wall today.”

Violet had no vices except her weeping wall, an old, crumbling stone
wall hidden behind a clump of pines and half-buried in the long silky pine needles a quarter mile from their house. Violet went there to weep every day because she believed it made her clean inside. But Adam thought she didn’t even know what she was crying for. She left newspaper cuttings and old letters and scraps of cloth as memorials to people she had never met. Sometimes she brought beach roses and daisies, and as she wept, she crumpled them in her fingers until her skin smelled too sweet, and the petals dropped as quickly as her tears. Adam knew this because he watched her, and later he looked at the wall with its rotting layers of newspaper and photographs. There were twenty-one photos, in various degrees of decay, of his father. There was a picture of the former village priest, who had retired after a scandal involving the choir-director’s wife, and an article about another priest in Brazil, who had attached himself to hundreds of red and yellow balloons, then floated away forever. There were obituaries from the whole town for the past ten years. There were burnt stubs of candles from weddings and Christmas Eve services. But there was not a single picture of Adam. He made sure of that.

Now the kitchen was hushed except for the sound of the rain against the windows and Violet’s heavy breathing. The candle flickered. Adam snapped on a light above the sink.

“Turn it off,” said Violet. She did not turn her head to look at him. She stared into her mug. Adam turned the light off and walked away.

His room was small and dim and smelled of smoke. His sheets were rumpled. Under his bed was his secret collection of Playboy magazines and comic books. There was one window in his room, right next to his bed, and he spent whole Saturday mornings staring out the window into the back field, staring at the swaying grass and the daylilies and the fringe of far-off pine trees. Sometimes he just stared out the window and thought. There was a girl named Angelica who came to him, early in the morning, and touched his lips with dew. Her skin was softer than his cotton sheets, and he imagined holding her in the crook of his arm as they slept through the dawn. But when he opened his eyes, she was gone. Sometimes he thought he could feel a warm spot on his bed from where she had been, and he rubbed his hand across it and smoked his first cigarette of the day.

Scrawled on the walls above his bed were words his father had written in permanent marker. They were mostly illegible, as his father was drunk at the time. Adam remembered hiding under the bed that night years ago when his father tromped in, still in his work boots, and how he smelled sour, like sweat and dirt and beer. Adam lay on his stomach and studied the toes of his father’s boots; scuffed, mud-crusted, tramping back and forth by his bed.
He almost sneezed from the dust, but he held his breath. The floorboards seemed slanted in the dim light, and his father cursed and shouted. Adam watched one boot stand still on the floor and heard a creak as he placed his heavy knee on the bed.

“I’m gonna write all over this room! I’m gonna write my damn story everywhere!”

Violet stood at the door, crying, and Adam could see her feet too, pale and bare on the wood. He couldn’t hear what she whispered to his father, but his father threw the marker across the room, and it rolled over the floor, leaving a skinny streak of black behind. Then his father tromped out again and switched the light off. Adam stayed under his bed and slept; a dark, deep sleep.

When he woke up, his wall was covered with black words, scribbles that he didn’t understand. But one word, over and over, that he slowly spelled out and traced with his finger: S-H-A-D-E.

Shade. The one word his father left him. The last thing he said. That morning, his father walked away and never came back.

When Adam awoke at sunrise, he remembered King and how the man’s eyes had burned through him. You’ll see me again, King had said. Adam took a disposable camera from his bedside table and crept to the kitchen for a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. He let himself out the back door and made his way through the back field where the daylilies dripped dew and the grass shone in the sunlight. It was a Friday, and he didn’t have to work. The morning birds were singing in the trees at the edge of the field, and he walked slowly and let his mind wander. He thought of Angelica. He thought of her skimming across the field to him like a vapor, and he thought of her walking beside him through the wet field, into the forest.

Then he thought of his father, how his father had walked just so into the woods and never come back. He wanted to really know if he was dead. Sometimes he imagined what it would be like to find him: bare bones now, half-buried under wet oak leaves and moss. Maybe he hadn’t walked that far before he fell, exhausted and drunk, to the floor of the forest. Maybe he was somewhere on this very land, his coat buttons and belt buckle crushed into the earth beneath Adam’s feet.

Adam shivered a little as he walked between the twisted forest saplings and the tall pines. He paused under a hemlock to light a cigarette. The forest smelled damp and sweet, but then smoke filled the air and he coughed a little. Far-off he heard a sound, different than the birdcalls and the rustling of leaves. He listened, smoking slowly and letting the smoke swirl around his face. Someone whistling.

As he made his way to the lean-to, the whistling grew louder, and it
seemed to fill the forest even as the sunlight began to sift through the pine needles and spatter the ground. *Hit the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, hit the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more.*

King was sitting in the lean-to, his crimson jacket spread over him like a blanket. Adam slipped behind a tree and watched him. Quietly, he drew the camera from his pocket and snapped a picture. King rocked back and forth, whistling, and then sang, *Oh woman, don't treat me so mean, you're the meanest woman I've ever seen.* He sprang up, suddenly, and pulled his walking stick from the ground. Then he turned towards where Adam was hidden. Adam put the camera back in his pocket and stomped out his cigarette.

“I smell my breakfast,” King called. “Just in time.”

Adam stepped out from behind the tree. “Hey, King,” he said.

King smiled at him, the smile a white gash in his face. He motioned Adam over, then took the bread and the peanut butter and began to lick the peanut butter from the jar. Adam stood beside him, his arms crossed. Through the trees, a thin shimmer came off the pond.

King ripped a slice of bread in half. “You know,” he said, “I didn’t really smell breakfast.”

Adam looked at him.

“I smelled you. Your smoke.”

Adam looked away.

“How’d you find this ol’ place, anyway?” the old man asked.

“I live here.”

King laughed. “The lean-to. You live in this lean-to.”

“This is my land.”

King shook his head. His fingers were covered with peanut butter.

“Yours.”

“My father’s. Now mine.”

King gestured at the lean-to. “And you built this thing?”

“No. My father did.”

His father built the lean-to long before Adam was born; before Violet was anyone but a girl at school; he built it by hand for nights when he wanted to sleep alone under the trees. And later, his father brought Violet there, and still later, Adam came and sat with his father on the edge of the lean-to and watched the forest grow darker and darker until he fell asleep on his father’s legs.

“Where’s your daddy now?”

The question sliced through the morning stillness. Adam stared at King’s fingers—blunt, thick, smeared with peanut butter, and he watched as King slowly began to lick each one, drawing them across his tongue. The light grew in the forest, shining through the translucent oak and beech leaves. Adam thought he could hear the sound of King’s tongue.
“Gone,” said Adam. “You done eating yet?”
“I’m gone too!” shouted King, and he stood up, throwing his arms up to the sun. “I’m gone, far-off from home. Look, kid, you gone yet? You finished?”
Adam backed away a little.
“You finished? You gone?” King leaned towards him. “Guess what, I am finished!”
“Then go,” said Adam.
King looked at him for a moment. Then he grinned. “What, you thought I meant it?”

Adam looked up, up through the leaves and into the blank, blue sky. If he squinted, he could imagine that there was nothing but sky, and he was plunging into it, and sometimes he stood so for long minutes and just breathed, staring into the atmosphere. He closed his eyes and listened to the silence, broken only by a lone birdcall and King rustling the bread bag. Then King spoke:
“You gonna show me this town or what?”

Main Street was busy. People milled about, and street vendors brought their wares along the sidewalk. Little children scampered by like so many puppies let loose in a field, and the Hotdog Magician had set up his cart on a corner.

King walked up to him deliberately and leaned against a Ryder truck parked beside the cart. “Look,” he said, and pointed to the dust that filmed the back of the truck. With his finger he wrote ‘Greatful Dead’ in the pale grime.

“It’s spelled wrong,” said Adam. “You spell it — ”
“I’ll take a hotdog,” said King, and the Hotdog Magician, a wrinkled man with bony shoulders, opened the grill and was enveloped in a cloud of steam. King grinned at Adam. Adam looked at the sky.

The Hotdog Magician had a rainbow-striped umbrella over his cart. The umbrella fluttered in the wind like wide petals, and nearby, an old lady pruned her dying lilies. In her garden, a mountain ash hung its candied orange berries above her head as she clipped away the clumps of falling lily blossoms. The Hotdog Magician gave King a hotdog wrapped in foil. King walked off without paying.

“What does he think? It’s free?” Sweat dripped from the Hotdog Magician’s hooked nose. “I’m runnin’ a business here!” Adam dug in his pocket and handed the Hotdog Magician a wad of dollar bills. He followed King to a closed bicycle repair shop. King squatted down, unwrapped the
hotdog, and stuffed half of it in his mouth.
  “Life’s a carnival,” said King as he chewed. “Life’s a carnival, and I’m
the clown.” Adam watched King as he gnawed on the hotdog. Relish slid
out of the corners of his mouth, reminding
Adam of little green slugs. He handed King a
napkin.
  “We’re all clowns, right King?”
King shook his head. “Some more than
others.” He held out the half-eaten hotdog to
Adam. “Wanna bite?”

Adam turned his face away. A little boy walked by, clutching a blue
balloon. He started to cross the street, and a car swerved around the corner,
and the boy jumped back. He let go of the balloon. It floated slowly above
the head of the boy and above the Hotdog Magician’s cart and the old lady’s
house, and the little boy cried and shouted, “Get that balloon! Get it!” The
balloon floated lazily into the air, higher and higher, until it blended into the
sky.
  King laughed. “I ever tell you what I used to think?”
Adam picked at some rocks on the asphalt. King cleared his throat and
spat. “Used to think a giant lived in the sky and stole all the balloons that
floated away.”

Adam smiled. “That’s funny.”
King crumpled the foil in his hand. “Wasn’t funny then.”

At the old, dirty pond, he sat cross-legged on the blanket, his back
against a rock on the shore. He ate a few crackers, drank a few sips of root
beer, and smoked two cigarettes. He thought if he sat long enough, someone
would come. King, maybe, or Angelica, or his father even. The forest was
silent, and he wondered if King was in the lean-to. He wondered if King
could see him sitting there alone. He watched as heavy clouds rolled in and
settled thickly on the horizon.

The sun began to fall, and the muddy water was turned to copper in
the light. The water splashed against the rocks, and wherever it spilled it left
a bright metallic stain. Filaments of copper streaked out across the water,
stretching like threads from the long reflection of orange light. Adam looked
at the sky. It seemed to him like a painting, the way the sky zoomed down
to the water, and there was a hole in the low, heavy clouds, a smooth sheen
of pale blue under the thick layer of darkness. He felt dizzy. Cliff swallows
swooped above him and before him, and he was sure they would fall into the
water, but they flew on, frail silhouettes hovering between the water and the
sky. Now the sun had almost disappeared, except for a burning line of fire
etched in the clouds. The copper strands of light faded slowly, and the water
grew darker, greener, heavier like the clouds. Adam shivered.

If only someone would come — but the forest was silent, the pond
dark and silent. Adam wrapped the blanket around him and closed his eyes. He didn’t want to sleep, but his body was heavy and tired. He dreamt of Angelica that long, still night, and the thick night air breathed with him, and when he awoke, the sun was just beginning to rise.

He ate a few crackers, damp from the dew, and watched the hemlocks dipping down to the edge of the pond. The morning air was empty, and a film of mist hung over the water like a condensed breath. Adam exhaled slowly and closed his eyes. If only someone would come. If only Angelica would come. A thousand voices seemed to whisper at him in the forest, and a thousand phantoms filled his mind. He could see them: gray vapors, swirling like the morning mist, ghost-clouds slipping across the sky, pale faces like moon-lit leaves scattering across the grass, and when he opened his eyes, a flock of sparrows fluttered above him, making him jump.

He heard a splash in the water. A woman was swimming slowly towards him, gliding through the pond like a water beetle. Adam leaned closer to the rock and held his breath. He imagined Angelica coming to him, moving between the layers of the water, her long hair floating like wet silk. The sparrows flew back across the pond, twittering. The woman rose to the surface of the water and stood up.

Her skin hung in folds from her tiny bones, and the water slid off her body like a silver dress. Even her black bathing suit sagged around her hips and breasts, and her gray hair streamed against her wrinkled face. She did not see Adam. She stretched her arms above her head, slowly, and held her palms up to the sky. The sun seeped through the hemlocks and reflected off the pond and off her skin, so she looked as transparent as the water. Adam watched as she closed her eyes and stood so still he thought she had fallen asleep. Then, slowly, she put her arms behind her and arched her back. Her ribs seemed to pop out under her suit. Finally, she relaxed and shuffled to a tree, pulling a white towel out from behind it. She dried herself, bending slowly to dry her legs and feet. The sun was brighter, and her hair shone like a silver cloud around her head. She wrapped the towel around her waist and turned to look at the water. Her lips moved. Adam fancied he heard her speak: “I will go, passionless, through the door of the sun.” She half-smiled, then turned and disappeared in the trees.

Adam realized he was still holding his breath. He exhaled deeply. He thought he smelled Angelica, the warm, pine-scented perfume she had when she blew through his window. He closed his eyes and breathed her in. She was here. Maybe she was with the woman. A thought flickered through him like a puff of smoke. Could it be that the woman was Angelica? He shook his head. No. No. Angelica was young, beautiful, a ghost of silver skin. But
he decided to follow the old woman.

He crept into the forest. He didn’t know which way she had gone. He walked slowly to the lean-to, but the lean-to stood silent and empty against the trees. Far-off, he saw a figure moving. He stumbled forward.

He thought he saw the old woman, waiting by a fringe of moist trees at the edge of the forest. She smiled at him, and Adam smelled pungent pine so strongly he felt dizzy. Her smile was like a flash of light in the morning-dark forest. Then she faded into the mist.

Adam’s head hurt. He wandered out of the forest onto his neighbor’s land. No sign of the woman. “Angelica,” he whispered. He could not smell her anymore. He wandered on, his hands damp and cold.

In a field dashed with mustard clumps of goldenrod, the power lines stretched to the horizon like great silver trees. Hemlocks flanked the lines in long, somber rows, and in the morning stillness, they seemed to Adam like black wraiths formed from the mist. The lines were draped in mist, too, as if they were exhaling silver clouds of dust in the air. He stood underneath and gazed upward. The sky made him feel dizzy, and the power cords crossed the emptiness in terrifying black lines. Adam looked ahead, and far-off, he saw a bent stump of a man. He began to run, tripping over little holes in the wet grass, stumbling, but running faster and faster into the mist. As he came closer, he saw King crouched against a sumac tree, wearing his crimson jacket. He was sitting, his head buried in his hands.

King didn’t move, but Adam crouched next to him. “King. What’s wrong?” King turned his face away from Adam. “You okay?”

“Leave me be.” He pouted, his lips pursed like an old woman’s.

Adam sat on the ground and put his hand on King’s shoulder. “King. You been here all night?”

King moaned and shook his head. “Leave me be.”

Adam waited for a few minutes, but King was silent. The mist hung across the hemlocks, like ghost curtains, and for a moment, Adam smelled pine again. He wanted to hold out his arms and call Angelica to him, but he heard King’s heavy breathing beside him. “King!” King jumped. “Tell me, what the hell’s wrong with you?”

King turned and looked at him. His eyes were bloodshot and couched in folds of skin, and his jowls hung like dough. But something burned in his face, out from his eyes. Light glittered on the power lines, touching them with gold. King stood up slowly, and in the deceptive light, his jacket seemed to pour off him, holding him in an orb of crimson. He took his walking stick in his right hand. Then he spoke.

“You ‘member Curtis Ward, Jr.?”

Adam didn’t.

“I asked, do you know Curtis Ward, Jr.?” King’s eyes burned brighter, and the sun touched the top of the scrub tree.
“What are you talking about?”

King pounded his walking stick into the ground. “The man. The man whose family had that sign. About his remains.”

And suddenly, Adam saw that sign as if it was being held before his face: the glossy black print, the photo of the thin, balding, man. Please help! The family of Curtis Ward, Jr., would like assistance finding his remains. He was legally declared dead after disappearing from his job at Barret Distributers on July 4 2007. Any information please call 478-999-0126. Adam swallowed. “I remember. I remember, King. We put it at the wall.”

King nodded. “Now, King, you don’t need to worry about that — it’s not —”

“I killed him.”

Adam felt the mist shrouding him, and King seemed like a blur, but he was talking, and Adam had to listen. “I don’ know why, and I don’ know how, but I was walking and he was there and I was angry — so angry, you know what that is Adam, you know. And I took him in my hands — he was alone, it was dark.” King’s voice went on like a monotone, and not even the birds dared to call over that cold voice. “I took him, but then I didn’t know where to put him. And then I forgot all about it until I saw that sign. So now I gotta go, before they find me, before they know.”

He turned away, his coat snapping behind him. “I don’ wanna to be found.”

Adam clutched clumps of dirt and tried to swallow, again. He tried to call King: “King — King — ” and King turned back and looked at him. “His family,” said Adam. “Where did you put him?”

King’s hand clenched his walking stick, and his jaw clenched. “Where you think?”

He began to whistle his little tune as he swept away, across the goldenrod and Queen Anne’s lace: Hit the road Jack, and don’t you come back no more, no more, no more, no more! But Adam heard him speak before he disappeared: “He’s under you.” And then he was gone.

When they dug up the remains, Adam called in sick to work. He lay in his bed, his mind spinning, his head buried under the covers. He imagined he could hear the shovel chopping into the earth, into the bones of a dead man. He put his fingers in his ears, and as the sun rose higher in the sky, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He awoke later that afternoon with the sun lighting up the wall behind his head. He sat up. His mouth was dry. The sun light shone onto his father’s writing: “Shade. Shade. Shade.” Dizzying scribbles on the wall, like an elegy written across his head.

He leaned against the wall and hugged his knees.
“Life’s a carnival,” said Adam, “And I’m a shade.”

The door opened, and Violet stood there, her hand on the knob.

“You asleep?” she asked. Her voice was thin like a sandpiper’s, and the skin on her hands stretched across her veins like blue-streaked paper.

“Just woke up.”

“They don’t know who it is.”

Adam put his chin on his knees.

“It’s not Curtis Ward. It can’t be. The body’s too — too fresh.”

Adam didn’t say anything.

Violet blinked. “I thought you’d want to know, since you found it.” She looked at Adam, then softly closed the door.

Adam sat with his chin still on his knees. His sheets were rumpled, swirls of cotton twisted around his legs, as if he were tied to the bed. He remembered what Violet told him once about his father. Adam was born in his parents’ bed, and Violet said that when he was born, his father was so drunk he held Adam upside down for a full five minutes before anyone could get him away.

Perhaps he was afraid to be a father, Violet said. She was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the charcoal portrait on the wall.

But he never was a father, Adam thought.

He did not say this to Violet. He nodded over and over, until his head hurt. Then he went in his room, shut the door, and looked at his old comic books.

Now his comic books were still strewn across the dirty wood floor. And Adam’s throat hurt from thirst. He went to get a drink.

Violet stood in the kitchen, her back to Adam. She was sipping iced tea from her favorite cut blue glass, the one she only let the priest drink out of when he came to visit. She wore her frayed pink robe, tied tightly around her thin waist. Her bony ankles stuck out from under the worn hem of the robe, and she was wearing two different socks, a gray wool sock on one foot and a nubbly pink-striped sock on the other. She turned and coughed slightly.

Adam walked across the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, fumbling through the Coke cans and leftover macaroni and tapioca pudding to find a bottle of seltzer water. “Adam.” He jumped. Violet put the glass on the counter and folded her hands. “Adam, answer me when I speak to you.”

Adam slowly unscrewed the top of the seltzer and set it on the counter. The bubbles fizzed and hissed. He took a sip. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. “Ma’am,” he said.

Violet bit her lip. The skin around her mouth was pale and wrinkled, pulled tight like wet cloth. “Are you really sick?” she asked.

Adam took another sip of seltzer and nodded.

“I don’t believe you.”

Adam looked at Violet, studied the way her forehead was also wrinkled,
furrows of skin forming a pale pattern across her skull. She frowned and turned away, running her fingers across the counter. “I don’t believe you,” she repeated.

Adam shrugged and took two gulps of seltzer. Violet shook her head slowly. Her hair, caught in its tight knot, moved with her head as if it was cemented to her skull. She turned again to Adam. “Adam, baby.” She spoke softly, gently, as if to a child. “I know you’re not really sick. You’re worried, aren’t you.” Adam remained silent, running his fingers against the cold plastic bottle. Violet sighed. “Baby, you have to talk to me. I can help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, Adam,” and Violet’s voice was smooth and soft. “I know you. I’m your mother.” Her voice hardened slightly. “I know when you aren’t telling the truth.”

The seltzer was suddenly bitter in Adam’s mouth, and he looked at the floor. The green cracks in the linoleum seemed to start under his feet and crawl all around the room, like little reaching fingers.

“Look at me, baby.” Violet held out her hands to him. “Listen, I know you and I know the company you keep and I know — baby, listen. You don’t need to be afraid to tell me the truth. That’s all you need to do.” Violet’s face trembled, ever so slightly, and she dropped her hands to her sides. The green cracks in the floor massed chaotically in front of her. “Adam. You’ve got to tell the truth.”

Adam clenched the bottle in his fist. His knees were shaking, and he breathed a prayer to Angelica. “I did.” His voice seemed to echo across the room and disappear through the window. “I told you the truth.”

Violet shook her head again. “So you were taking a walk and you saw a body? Just out there, in a field?” Her voice rose. “I know you’re lying. I know. And I think I know why.”

Adam tried to sip more seltzer and almost choked. His stomach churned.

“It’s that wretched man you found. King.”

A sudden burst of sunlight illuminated the green fingers in the floor, and Adam felt that they all pointed at him. His heart pounded, and he squeezed the bottle so tightly, it popped and poured seltzer down his arm. He couldn’t breath.

Violet smiled a worn, vacant smile. She walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, Adam.”

Adam felt as if a fire had started in his chest, and it burned the inside of his throat. Violet stroked his shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said, but her voice seemed far away and Adam leaned against the counter. The fire was choking him, strangling him. A smear of sweat crawled down his back.

“Adam, listen to me.” She kept stroking his shoulder. Adam stiffened. “It’ll be all right. I’ve been to the weeping wall, and I laid a flower there, and
that old photo you had. That picture of King.” She smiled, her eyes vacant in the sunlight. “That poor old man. Maybe God will pity him.”

Adam’s breath stopped completely, and then, just as suddenly, something breathed inside of him. The sun was bright in his eyes, but he knew. Angelica had come to help him. She had come to make him strong. He took a deep breath, her breath, and looked at Violet. Her skin was gray in the bright light, and her mouth was caved in, like a sick sheep’s, but her eyes seemed like green orbs, reflecting pools of summer. The moment was frozen in time, like a picture, but he shattered it with a cry and threw the seltzer bottle across the room.

He didn’t wait to hear it slam against the wall but ran past Violet, out the door and across the back field, through the asters and goldenrod, weaving in the grass and then under the pines, past the rotted lean-to and the sickly pond. He ran blindly, as if he had wings, and he could feel Angelica pounding inside him. He ran until he came to the weeping wall. Then he stopped, panting, and knelt before it.

It was as he had always remembered, crumbling under layers of pine needles, heavy with the scent of incense and woods and his mother’s perfume. The sign for Curtis Ward, Jr. lay facedown by the wall. Adam picked it up and leaned it against the wall, and as he did, he saw King’s face stacked at the top of the pile of photographs, cloth, and candle stubs. It was the photo Adam had taken on his disposable camera. King wasn’t smiling. He was sitting with his arms crossed, leaning against the lean-to. In his eyes was the eternal question Adam had always seen and always longed to understand, a fire burning stronger than anything he had felt. Adam’s chest thumped. His throat was dry, and when he brushed his hand against his face, he realized he was crying.

He looked above him, at the swirling pines against the deep, soft sky. He looked into the sky for long moments, until his head pounded and he could hardly breathe. Then he looked at King again. Underneath King’s photo, he saw something else. A newer photo. When he pulled it out, he looked into his own eyes.

He heard Violet’s voice, calling him, but he stood still and gazed at the picture: his forehead, with the pixie eyebrows; his lank hair; his flat, brown eyes and his smile with the yellow spot on his left front tooth. In the shade of the forest, the photo was almost identical to the charcoal drawing of his father, down to the deep smudged shadows under his eyes.

His mother had given him up for dead. And yet she called for him, even as she wept over him and placed him with King and Curtis Ward, Jr. She placed him with the accursed, the dying, the lost. He crumbled the photo and...
Or was she old and wrinkled, the phantom sibyl surfacing from a dirty pond?

threw it to the ground. He slammed his hands against his legs, cursing, and his fingers bumped something in his pocket. His cigarette lighter.

The wind sighed in the trees, and he knew Angelica was watching him. He closed his eyes and imagined her leaning against his shoulders, breathing down his neck. He imagined what her face would be like, if he could only see it. Would she have a birthmark above her mouth, or freckles dancing across her nose? Would her eyes sparkle, and would her hair slide like the ocean through his hands? Or was she old and wrinkled, the phantom sibyl surfacing from a dirty pond? He stood up, holding his own face in his hands and weeping. He wept for Angelica, a ghost, and for his own dead soul; for the trees, dying also in the wind, and for King, who perhaps had killed a man for nothing and now walked on, alone, into the eternal night.

Then he bent down and flicked the cigarette lighter onto his picture. He watched it eat his lips. His mother called him. He watched it eat his nose. His mother’s voice hung in the air. He threw the photo onto the wall. Angelica’s arms were around him, and she was kissing his cheek. He could hardly break away from her, but the flames from the wall seemed to rise higher than the flames of hell, and everyone was burning, right before his eyes. As he ran, it seemed as if the whole forest was burning, every pine tree, every stone, and he ran to his car, parked in the field in front of his house, and started the engine. Angelica pounded the window, but he was afraid to open it. Far, far away, he could see his mother at the edge of the forest, running to him. The flames towered above the forest, and the stench of the smoke burned in his nostrils, even as he backed down the road and drove away. The stench of the smoke followed him, and his mother followed him, but he drove until he couldn’t see her anymore. He left his mother in the sour, empty house, to build a new wall. To have a reason to weep for him, and the world that he left her with. He went to join his father.
Someone knocked over a giant blueberry Christmas candle on the afternoon sky, with the hottest, whitest yolk of it leaking through tree-shaped cracks in the horizon.

Swinging low above car-tops, a fat bird, intent on homing early, letting down after a long day’s thrift, passes a white-socked boy hopping over vacant spaces, shaking a pebble out of one shoe:

If he’d seen me, he would have thought I looked for the bowspring poise of his shoulders, or the yellow swoop of his soft and feminine hair. He passes on:

the restaurant where we’ll work this day’s dregs from grey wax all the way to dark, a little white house coy to the road behind brick industrial buildings, brave shuttered windows westward. Sunset

boils up around stencil-limbs, skates fool’s gold fingers over cracked clouds and shiny auto bodies, squeezes homage out of each dumb object, shadow brightly-etched, prostrated, praying.
Social Covering

Megan Prosper

silver gelatin print
Kaph Yarech
Kateri Tolo

oil pastel, india ink, watercolor
Untitled
Alison Galloway
mixed media
Untitled
Emily Goff
mixed media
Throw Back
Throw Back
Rebecca Riley
mixed media
Archipelago

Joy McWilliams

pastel
Sheath
Adie Smith
latex, cheesecloth, cord
Untitled
Wesley Sumrall
oil paint
Go sit under the flickering orange street lights;
Hide away in a gravel parking lot
While dusks shadows stretch from crumbing brick buildings.
It isn’t ugly.
Watch for a night the bits of broken glass
Sparkle in the headlights of a lone passing car,
Tangled telephone wires dancing above our heads,
Connecting all in the city.
Be still. Watch a neglected slab of concrete
Reveal the world of its unique shattering—
If you can see it.
The elegance within an eroding city.
Brush the rough brick walls with their humming AC units,
Looking for a chance to
Hook your fingers through the cold chain link fence, and climb
Onto the sagging roof of an old building above town.
The old orange sky above, on a night like so many others,
Traffic lights below blinking their colors,
The flat rooftops growing darker into one sleeping puzzle
As the lonely wires carry a thousand goodnights.
The man I love lies to me
And I don’t mind at all.
Each night my eyes drift open;
The shadows from a quiet moon
Sway dreamily across the wall.
I feel his eyes on my back—
Did I snore? I ask; he tells me, No,
And his loving eyes smile at me.

When my sister and I shared a room
We learned each other’s secrets.
She kept her diary at the foot of her mattress;
Supposedly, the pink clasp was locked.
During sleep my mouth would open
And a mosquito-drone would fill the air.
My sister finally demanded her own room.
She slept on the sofa until it was finished.

Today he asked me, Do I snore?
I laughed, and told him, No.
He thought that I was being kind
But I wasn’t.
I could listen to his mumbled conversations
Forever, as he speaks with his deceased father
And hunts squirrels with his childhood dog.
This way I can touch his dreams
With loving, caressing fingertips.
He liked places with "Falls" in their names.

Rex Hansen loved to travel. That’s why he was doing this. Back and down, up the aisles of Wal-Mart, indecisive, grabbing this and that. He was going to St. Louis.

Why St. Louis? Well, it was one of those places you could get to in a night, turn around, and make it home in less than a day. This wasn’t the first time he’d done this.

Rex always wanted to go somewhere. The portion of the day in which he wasn’t working was spent consulting his small Rand McNally’s Student Atlas for places he might like to visit, then supplementing it with Wikipedia articles and Google images about the town to whet his appetite. Places like Twin Falls, Idaho, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He liked places with “Falls” in their names.

Rex looked into the basket of his cart. Pre-cooked shrimp egg rolls, cobb salad, pork rinds. He needed a health shake, like Bolthouse Farms or Naked. Well, dang-it—back down the aisle.

Back when he had money, Rex had bought Bolthouse Farms all the time, when he had big all-night tests to finish up. He couldn’t remember if there was any practical motivation to this. Maybe something healthy to counterbalance the fact that he was keeping himself up all night, on those ridiculous sugar, guarana, and taurine-based, heart-palpitating soda substitutes he thought would somehow save his grades.

Rex didn’t have money now. He had spent it all then on petty pleasures like shrimp egg rolls, Monsters, and Jelly-Bellies. He was hoping to spend less than twenty dollars tonight. It hadn’t crossed his mind quite yet that gas prices were not what they were last time he had tried to pull this. Was it twenty bucks for gas last time? Thirty? Doubtless it would be twice as much this time around.

Bolthouse Farms wasn’t in the vegetable section anymore. Strawberries instead. He figured it must be over in the juice section.
It was really late. Everyone was restocking. Rex always had a fear at times like this that everyone was staring at him, because none of them trusted him. He was just waiting for someone to stop him and question him. Of course, no one did. He had just as much right to be in Wal-Mart at midnight as anyone else. But they did stare.

He wanted to go to St. Louis with someone else, spend a day or two, see the sights, eat fried brain. That was a cult delicacy of St. Louis once—fried brain sandwiches. It was more rare now, with many cheating ways of serving it—like from ground or frozen brain. That’s not what he wanted to do with someone else. Who would eat fried brain? He just wanted to visit a few museums, stay in a cheap motel, see the arch. The fried brain was a personal thing.

He reached the juice section. There was Bolthouse Farms and Naked, in small and large containers. The Naked, as always, was a dollar more expensive. He didn’t particularly like Naked, anyway. It always made heavy use of banana as a filler. The other fruits were just flavoring. One tires of the flavor of banana. Now, which flavor? Ah, berry—he was a big fan of tangy intensity.

He didn’t need much else, and started for the checkout. And then—mostly there—he realized he had forgotten the most important part of an insane, spontaneous, all-night trip—the energy drink! He turned right back around. The soda section was on the far end, past even the juice section.

Why does one go on a trip like this, just to turn around and go home without actually enjoying anything other than the open road? What compulsion drives a man to flee life, to begin a vacation, only to end it a few hours later?

Rex bustled past an employee, his cart rocking noisily and insistently.

“Are you finding everything all right, sir?”

“Yih,” he grunted. It was an awkward-looking, blond, balding boy, probably a few years younger than himself, chunky, head conforming perhaps to the “chuckle-headed” shape. He was stocking those little blue Gatorades they serve kids at soccer tournaments to dehydrate them. Dang it, they’re getting suspicious. I need to get out of here before I actually have to explain myself. He contemplated his hodge-podge. No normal person buys this. What will they think of me?

Everyone thought Rex was ridiculous. I mean, he wanted to try fried brain, for crying out loud. He also liked liver and steak-and-kidney pie. The one thing he couldn’t stand was asparagus. Steamed asparagus was all right, but dang-it, it still tasted like asparagus. He also didn’t like wine. The rotted fruit flavor just didn’t appeal to him. That’s not why they thought he was ridiculous, though.
He finally pulled to the front of the store, a Starbucks Double-Shot added to his basket. It was the only canned drink available individually. There were two lanes open, which was abnormal. Usually only the ten-items-or-less line was open. This was the one he swung to, being the empty one, but the lady waved him over to the other line, saying she was waiting on a customer—and thus, he had to wait. He pulled the cart beside him so that he could unload more easily.

Back outside at the car, he unloaded his groceries into the front seat, so that he could enjoy them while driving. First he put the Double-Shot in the cupholder and the Bolthouse on the floor, then decided to switch them. He wasn’t tired yet, anyway. Then he swung around to the driver’s side and popped in. He opened the shrimp egg rolls and bit into one. An old BMW turned into the space in front of him, which reminded him to start his engine and leave.

It wouldn’t start. What looked like a family popped out of the BMW. The engine kept choking just short of the massive retch and vroom that meant success—only, as always happened only at Wal-Mart for some reason (and every time), the choking became more wretched, not more successful. He was embarrassed. What if they thought this was some sort of trap? He was also infuriated. It was a fifteen-minute drive, at least, back to his apartment, and it always seemed longer up I-25. He didn’t want to call a roommate—or anyone—for help, again. He hammered on the rim of his steering wheel.

The driver of the BMW wended his way between the fronts of their cars. The others had already started off—invisible behind other cars—toward the store. Rex lowered his window. It was a kid, age indeterminate—as he was blond, skinny, fat, and wearing yuppie glasses.

“Do you need a jump?”

“I was hoping not, but I guess so.”

The other kids, obviously high-schoolers, of the private-schooled kind—the only kind that make Wal-Mart runs, past midnight, in old BMW’s—started filtering back around the other car. He headed back to his trunk—“I’ve got jumper cables,” he offered.

“I do, too,” Rex said, hoping to use his own. The conceptual snootiness of rich kids prompted a desire to embody some form of rural efficiency, some inspirational, superior, natural dignity. He had to take his keys out of his ignition because they had a flashlight to find the latch on the hood of the car.

The yuppie kid pulled the BMW closer. Rex thought he heard one of the girls say something about a trap or “just in case” or something. He was embarrassed.

Additionally annoying was the fact that not only do BMW hoods open forward, but they have their batteries on the same side as little Nissans, far too great a distance for either’s jumper cables to reach, meaning that Rex had to
shove his little Nissan backward far enough that the yuppie kid could pull his nose beside Rex’s. He forgot to use the parking brake to stop the momentum until almost too late.

Then there was the question of which of the kid’s battery terminals was which, until Rex realized that the red terminal was always the covered one, even if it wasn’t red. He could hear the girl saying something about a man hovering in the background being their “guardian angel,” or at least that’s what he thought she said, but he just let it roll. The BMW was a stick, like the Nissan, and so the yuppie’s instructions to the other guy in that group about leaving the car in neutral so that the engine could run, just like he had to do, were far more interesting. For a few seconds, he could identify with the kid.

Then his engine was going, and he was in his car, and the group of little preppie teenagers drove off before he even knew it. He did get a chance to thank the kid as he was rolling by later, and he took it.

Soon, he was back on the road to St. Louis. Twenty-five was a back road, but there was another—Thirty-five, that could take him to the interstate—and that all the way up to St. Louis. He was pretty sure he could do it in the time he wanted to, though. He put the Bolthouse Farms between his legs so that he could unscrew it while he kept his eyes on the road.

But then there was the question of whether his car would conk out again. The battery was getting weaker and weaker and these jumps more and more frequent. The last thing he wanted was to be unable to start the car after he refilled his gas, which was already making its way toward half-tank, and have to beg the station manager, at three in the morning, to jump his vehicle—or some random skinny old man with a dirty grey Walrus mustache—the kind of man he admired most. Nor did he want the cops called on him. He would have to have his battery checked on soon. He took a swig of the Bolthouse.

It tasted of banana. They had started using banana as a filler in Bolthouse, too. It was a sign of the economy, no doubt.

Should he finish what he had started? He had bought all this food for the trip, after all. This was just a one-night thing—he could go to St. Louis for real, with someone else, some other time.

The thought of the economy brought on the thought of gas prices, and the smallness of his paycheck. Was he really willing to spend a hundred dollars just to drive to some city that he would probably visit and actually enjoy later?

It was a question of the spirit of adventure. Could he really spend the rest of his summer between grubbing away at his little food-service job and trying to read classics to improve himself and ending up on the Internet instead?
The thought of vacation turned his mind to marriage, because married people take vacations, and the thought of marriage, purely conceptual, quickly turned to the thought of the women he wished to marry. There was more than one that he thought he knew well enough that he could be fairly certain he could live happily with for life. He couldn't even ask one out, though. Their relationships, in his mind, had progressed too far past the mystery necessary to ask them on a date. Thus, they could never marry, because he could not tell the women, in the only way he knew how, his feelings for them. He very consciously munched another egg roll. It was a pity too, because he was very certain that he would love them even when they were fat and ugly. “When” was the operative term. They were American, after all. He was putting on a good bit of pudge himself. He munched another egg roll.

He was so tired of how little time he spent with other people. He was alone, away from home, in a big city. All of his friends had gone home for the summer. He was tired of wasting all his time on the Internet. He had started looking at sites he shouldn’t have. Of this he was very ashamed because once, his moral resilience in this area was invincible. Now he was vulnerable, just like every other man, and he didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t like he could just get rid of his computer. Not yet, anyhow. That was three egg rolls. He would save the other two for later. That was enough eating for now.

He couldn’t just read and live in total isolation any more. He could do that when he was seventeen, when he had that summer of spiritual crisis and spent the whole time fasting and praying about whether he should go to college, and cleaning toilets at a homeless shelter. He could do that when he was eighteen and trying to recover from a mainly failed church internship. He could do that when he was nineteen and trying to recover from being rejected by the love of his life. Now he couldn’t. Now he needed friends and all he had was books.

Rex saw a Shell station to the side of the road. It was big and glowing and looked like it was open. He swung in, as soon as he finally saw where the turn lane was.

_I sure hope I’ll be able to start my car up again._

Rex still bragged about the last time he had done this. He had started at midnight from the movie theater and driven for a total of fifteen hours, almost making it to Nashville, then turning back for fear of big-city morning traffic. He had made it back in time for Shakespeare, his only class that day. He had prank-called his terrified roommate, pretending he was lost in Arkansas—when he was really only five minutes away. To back down from a repetition of such an epic and pleasant
journey would be, at least, a very disappointing thing. Of course, near the end, no amount of cytosine could keep his eyes open, and he had nearly crashed several times.

It so happened that his card wouldn’t work, just like it almost hadn’t at Wal-Mart (the lady had to run it through her keyboard), but after it refused to read his card at all when he tried again, he realized that it was because the station was closed. So he couldn’t get gas. Luckily, he still had plenty, though maybe not for these back roads.

That was it. He screwed the gas cap back on, turning it till it ground locked. Going back around to the driver’s side, he hopped in, checking his mirror to make sure he had closed the gas door, which would be a sign that he had put the gas cap back on. He never forgot to, but he always forgot whether he had. That was the story with everything. That’s why he took so much longer closing at work than anyone else. Once, having left a Texaco, he had noticed that the gas door was open. He freaked out and pulled over to the side of the road. He hadn’t forgotten, but he had pulled over to the median instead of the far side of the road, and he had locked his keys in the ignition with the car running. This was another of those stupid incidences in which the police cast him away, telling, in many fewer words, that his emergencies were not emergency enough for 911. Luckily, the locksmith he called, who of course benefitted financially, cared enough to roll out and help him. He was a more-than-likeable man, practical, chunky, with a huge white beard. Rex had had to roll over to the nearest ATM afterward, with the man following in his van, to get enough cash to pay for the bill. He still liked the man. It wasn’t until it happened again, on the way to his real home, that he had started carrying his spare key in his wallet. That time the police had recommended someone, though they still couldn’t help themselves.

The car wouldn’t start. What was worse, this was a place where there was very little chance of a car full of snooty rich kids, or anyone at all, coming by to help. If it didn’t start, Rex was stranded . . . or would have been twenty years ago, before the cell phone. Still, he had his dignity.

But it started, after many tries, coughing turning to choking; then, with one massive shove on the brake, he could move.

The next decision was simple. He couldn’t continue on the back roads till he died some place in the black middle of the night, with no possibility of help, and little possibility of an open gas station. He turned back westward, toward the interstate, closer in that direction. If he had to die on the road, it was probably best to do it where someone could help him. The appeal of a higher speed limit was also not lost on him.

Thinking of marriage, and women, and children and names and diapers, he found his thoughts turning to the moral responsibility of driving all night to St. Louis with the amount of gas he had, when he very well could end up in a ditch on the way back, as drunk with sleep as many a man has been
with alcohol. It was a waste of money and of time. There was no real reward, after the gas and the risk of death—except the open road, which was a great reward.

He had bought all this food, and it was really disappointing to have to deny an impulse this greatly adventurous. To the fattening suburbanite, with no prospects in this world but poverty and moral decay, adventurousness is the highest form of heroism.

He gave up. He was accountable to many people, and to a higher form of accountability not easily maintained by waste of time and money. Even if he had wasted some, he did not have to waste more.

In the routine on-and-off of stop-lights at the periphery of a big city, a thin, pale, fattening suburbanite changed his intended direction from many hours north to five minutes south, and made it home safely that night to tell another story and dream another day.
Finding Recollection
Alyce Hardee
silver gelatin print
Unskilled and untrained, the crème de la crème
read, talk, write
about people who did things.

Their minds are soggy garden soil, overly-watered.
Books and books and unfinished journals sit on shelves,
filled like Mason jars with thoughts, concepts canned for winter.

Turning an eye to the window,
they see happy people playing in the sunshine.
Without realizing,
they wish for rain
and are consoled with cups of tea,
indirect sunlight sufficing.
Beneath the cold November moon’s last phase,
    The coal-winged seraph swims through seas of lead.
The mist conspires to veil the monarch’s gaze
    That seeks to glimpse the black-boned seabank dread.
From on his high forecastled warship’s head,
    Wine-robed King Edward, nigh to Wortland draws
With all the ash-speared host to mete his laws.

Blue-crowned the hills, and chill the vales with wind,
    The Wild Place, some in scorn the Wortland name,
That land the Englishfolk had never kenned;
For there the mountains set the skies in flame,
The woods were never hindered in their game,
But in the fields the fruits of Eden grow,
And Stephen Plowman pushed in peace his plow.

Strong Stephen’s beard was thick, and broad his frame,
    On morning cream, his children twain were weaned,
His wife was like the lily, void of shame.
No honest man his character demeaned,
That sowed in April and in August gleaned,
Until the night before Saint Oswald’s day,
When cheerless news passed down the farmer’s way.

Came blackfriar Wymark to the plowman’s door.
    He told his tale, a man of good repute,
A preacher that all humble men adore,
Both hale of back and with the Book astute:
    “Tonight the merry swallow-songs are mute.
In Edrechester ere the vespers rung
Thy wife’s good brother and three friends were hung.”
The Marcher Lord of Wortland, brutish fiend,
Named Hugh de Warenne by the English king,
In distant courts of Londontown was preened
Each man to tax, to clip each pauper’s wing,
In Edrechester where the willows spring;
For but few unpaid pence from coffers poor
The grim gray poplars flowered with corpses four.

Straight Wymark told the tale, the plowman spoke,
In anger said, “Call out the husbandmen,
The princes of the soil, let rise the smoke
Of Hugh de Warenne’s ruin and his sin.
Reshape the scythes and let our war begin.”
The preacher went from honest Stephen’s home
To bring to council masters of the loam.

A thousand valiant farmers gathered there
To hear the plowman’s fiery voice upraised
Against de Warenne’s deeds, in holy prayer
To God that where the sheep and cattle grazed
The English knights would hear their downfall praised.
A thousand valiant men cast down their sheaves
And bound about their arms the ivy-leaves.

With ivy green, the sign the plowman took,
The men went marching to de Warenne’s hold
In Edrechester, home of dove and rook,
And pulled him from his table graced with gold
While grave the bells in all the Wortland tolled,
With deep respect then, buried were the dead
And Hugh de Warrene raised up in their stead.

To hallowed lands the English host arrived,
And cried good Stephen as on them he gazed,
“Long has the English crown the farmers gyved,
With many fires the goodman’s fields were razed,
But now a flame he did not seek has blazed.”
Proud Edward marched across the churlish rills
And fought the husbandmen upon the hills.
Bold Stephen bore a battle-stave of oak
And red was steel amid the conflict there
When Wymark, blackfriar bold, rose up and spoke
To all the fey-things of the Wortland fair,
“Rise up and conquer, rivers, stones, and air!”
Then rose the rills and swept the foe away
As Edward knew the failing of the day.

The storms assailed the English where they stood
And hills would crack to laughter of the fey;
So Wymark raised to Heaven the holy rood
While Edward bowed his head and sailed away,
So Stephen gave him leave, his pride to slay,
But for a seat the plowman found a throne
And Wymark placed upon his head a crown.

Full thirty years the plowman ruled the land
Which gave to him the fruit of field and sky,
Full thirty years a plow touched not his hand
Until at last he heard a fey-voice sigh,
“In time even the ivy-bough must die.”
When all the farmers woke at morning’s glow,
They found him cold and dreaming on his plow.
He never stood a chance against my love. Even the instinctual cautious nature of a squirrel could not compete with the superior intellect and insatiable appetite of a middle school boy. Perhaps it was the gray fur stretched soft and easy over the slender skeleton or the careful movements of his busy hands. Perhaps it was his mysterious elusiveness or the way his head bobbed when he was munching acorns. Whatever the case, I wanted him—wanted to touch him and hold him, wanted to suck out his essence and drink the warmth of his being.

When my parents bought me a break-action pellet rifle, I discovered that I finally had a way to make him feel my love. From a distance, I could send him a personal message of love that he could not ignore.

For weeks I prowled around my backyard with the sleek black rifle slung over my shoulder, peering up into the tops of the pine trees, searching for the miniscule movements of beauty. I soon realized that he could feel my presence, could smell my desire. He made himself scarce. I countered with a new tactic—cutting a rifle-barrel-sized hole in the screen of my bedroom window, I waited patiently for him to wander into my field of vision.

It was only a matter of time. His search for food eventually brought him back to our front yard, and I was ready for him. The eternal moment as I leveled my rifle’s sights on him, the thrilling moment as I paused with death in my fingers and drank of his delicate beauty, the painful moment of desperately temporary desire, will forever be seared on my memory.

With a twitch of the trigger, I splintered the slender moment. Shocked, he jumped two feet in the air, then dashed up a tree while I ran out the front door to follow up my shot. I found him seeking refuge in a twenty-year-old oak, the same oak that I had hacked and scarred with my machete earlier that year.

I aimed and squeezed the trigger again—he jumped again, then scampered into a neighboring tree. I placed another pellet in the barrel.
I grabbed a pickaxe to finish him off. He moved, then tried to hide himself in the branches of a neighboring tree. Eventually he hunkered down in an abandoned bird's nest. I sent several pellets whistling up through the intertwined twigs and pine straw. Nothing happened. He didn't move or poke his head out. I grabbed a ladder, climbed up as high as I could, and began shaking the top of the tree.

He popped out of the shelter of the nest, clambered down the tree trunk, and began a halting, diagonal dash toward the edge of the yard, clumsily dragging one of his back legs behind him. I grabbed a pickaxe to finish him off.

Despite his severe wounds, he made it all the way to the base of another tree but couldn't muster the strength to climb. I aimed carefully and slammed the pickaxe down on his spine, expecting instant annihilation. Instead, he made an odd gurgling sound and kept trying to climb the tree. I slammed the axe down several more times. After every blow, his movements grew slower and slower until he finally became quite still.

This, then, was the end of my mad courtship: a mangled body and a sudden, sickening stillness. I sat down in dead leaves and stared and wondered what sort of love this could be. This was all wrong. It wasn't supposed to end like this at all.
Section Four
At some moment in his life—even if this is the moment of death—every man is confronted with his own mortality. In this moment, he raises his head from the roiling sea of life, and breath, and beating hearts, and takes a shocked gasp of the clean air of eternity. He sees his life as it is—the faintest ripple in a vast ocean of time. He sees death as it is—a fellow traveler, temporal himself, but the only one who meets us all. He descends again into the throbbing throng, both terrified and relieved.

I first met Death on a farm in southeast Minnesota, in a glass cabinet, on the bottom of a tea cup. I was seventeen, and I was looking at my grandmother’s china with her. I turned the smooth, cold cups in my hands one by one, then placed them gently back in their places on the shelves.

“This is my favorite,” I said. I picked up a blue cup with a fluted lip, and rubbed the curving edge with my thumb. My grandmother went into the kitchen and came back with a Sharpie.

“We’ll put your name on it,” she said. “One day, you’ll take it home.”

She wrote my name in a shaky hand on the bottom of the cup. Sarah. I saw the spreading freckles on her forearm, blurred with age. I smelled the bitter scent of the marker. I knew she meant me to take that cup home when she was dead, and I didn’t want it anymore.

In the moment when I saw my name, thick and black on the porcelain arc of the cup’s base, I knew death was certain. I knew one day I would hold that cup, and trace the letters written there, and the hand that had written them would be gone. I knew one day someone else would hold that cup, and read the name written there, and the woman it belonged to would be gone. I realized life was more than my involvement in it, and that something as fragile as a tea cup would out-live me.

In the moment when a man meets death, he sees the world does not depend on him. I think he must be both terrified and relieved. His life, his
world depends upon his existence—but the world he is a part of does not. This world rolls onward, forward, to a glorious, phoenix-like rebirth and recreation.

As a Christian, I have come to anticipate death with a sense of wonder and amazement. What is it, this dark-shrouded thing that will suck me up from my present existence and plunge me into eternity? As a human being, I am afraid of it. I love this world. I love beautiful fabrics, and crunching green acorns underfoot, and neatly stacked bookshelves, and the thin crust of salt that dries on your skin in the sun after swimming in the ocean. I even love to be hurt and grieve, because it means I am alive. Are there things more beautiful than these? It is here that my head and my heart are in conflict. My heart says there is nothing more profound or meaningful than this world. My head says something greater surrounds this world and gives it meaning.

In I Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul compares our bodies to “bare kernels” that must die before they can take on their true nature. In Romans 8, Paul also says this world itself, the rocks and the seas, are groaning to be made new. I am not what I was meant to be, and I think this is where my fear comes from. In death, I will know the truth about my life.

Late one summer night, with the stars all above me, I waded into the ocean on the Gulf. The cool waves swelled and peaked, a black, rolling mass with white crests. The ocean was a vast chasm of immeasurable depth. I was small and pale in comparison, watching my fingers and arms disappear into the liquid dark, then reemerge, glowing. I had just learned about those passages by Paul, and I was thinking about them, with my wet hair soft as seaweed on my shoulders. In that moment, I yearned for Heaven. I felt the beauty of that midnight ocean, and I could not imagine it in perfection. The things surrounding us are temporal. They will not last forever, even if we can hold them in our hands, trace their edges with our fingers, or write our names on them in Sharpie.
The sun garbed the old
oak in a thick blanket of golden light
while shadows grew, slowly tickling their ways through
thick branches and patches of glowing leaves.

We all stare through windows, wrapping
our selves in solipsism, slowly bundling up the warmth
of body heat, wanting to ward off the cold
of dusk—watching as the tree stretches
its creaking wooden fingers to grasp the fleeting light.
But falling short it withers up into the night.
Recently, I heard Dad’s rich voice roughen and drip with emotion. My grandfather had dropped into a coma early that morning. I could hear the muffled sounds of the hospital around us: the clatter of dinner pans, nurses’ alerts, and the constant, hacking cough from across the hall. Dad and I sat on a stiff couch, watching my grandfather. He was still except for the steady heaving of his chest.

Dad got up and sat down in the chair by Papa Bear’s head. “Dad, I have Anna’s Bible here. I’d like to read some passages to you.” My father paged through the Bible for a few moments then began to read. Romans 8—the keystone of reformed theology, but also a summary of Christian hope. When he reached “If God is for us, then who shall be against us?” Dad nearly lost control, but he cleared his voice and continued. After he finished, I picked up the Bible and read from the Psalms. We took turns for a while, hoping that my grandfather heard us through the thickening fog.

As a child, nightly reading was a part of life. We would sit around the table after dinner and Dad would read aloud. My brother and I would watch the flame of a single candle and listen. Stories from books, memoirs, and Dad’s own life came alive. Just beyond the circle of light, I could almost see dim faces watching, listening to their history told again.

Reading aloud continued throughout elementary and high school, but became less frequent. Uncle Remus’s “Brer’ Rabbit” stories and “Capt’n Frank’s” letters became fond memories. Their names still occasionally surface in conversation. “Oh, yeah, remember how you’d do the Southern accents, Dad? You were sure good at it.” “Captain Frank was a character. He didn’t hide his opinion of his commanding officer.”

As the years passed, I realized that I wanted to become a storyteller in my own right. After graduation, I went from my hometown in Pennsylvania to Belhaven University, a liberal arts school in Jackson, Mississippi. My old
life of farm chores and bulging bookshelves seemed to have no continuity with the kinescope called college.

Sometimes, you wondered whether he really loved you.

Ever since my grandfather entered St. Dominic’s hospital in Jackson, two miles from campus, I visited him consistently. When he began to fail, I called my family. “Get Dad down here,” I told my mother. “I don’t know how to explain this, but Papa Bear actually wanted to talk to me.” After eighteen years of polite, noncommittal conversation, my grandfather listened to me like I was the only thing that mattered.

The previous fall, I flew down to Jackson to visit Belhaven and Papa Bear picked me up from the airport. I remember riding with him in the car. Papa Bear talked to me about politics; he seemed to distrust all of the presidential candidates. I listened and struggled to respond. I was always slightly in awe of my grandfather. He was extroverted, but reserved about his own feelings. You were never entirely sure of what he was thinking. Sometimes, you wondered whether he really loved you.

A week after I called my family, my grandfather died. I wasn’t there, but Dad told me about it: “I watched the monitor and his vital signs got weaker and weaker. Finally, there was nothing. His screen was blank; he just slipped away.” An hour later, a friend drove me to the hospital so that I could help my father clean out the room. Papa Bear’s body was still on the bed. He looked like a large ivory tortoise, strangely twisted within his shell. My grandfather’s mouth gently drooped open—death had suddenly engulfed him and carried him out into a peaceful sea.

That night, I was numb. I calmly hugged my father, joked with the nurses and made small talk with the technicians. I could only think, I’m so glad that I’m here in Mississippi—so glad that I could spend those last few weeks with Papa Bear—so glad that I could read the Bible aloud with my father at the doorstep of eternity.
Covering No. 18

Megan Prosper

silver gelatin print
Arsham lay on his back. The man’s dark eyes were turned upward, gazing at the blue canopy of the sky. His hair, once black but now as gray as the bark of the hazel, fell across the green spring grass, and a griseous beard rested on his heaving chest. His robe, long, deep blue like a night in the desert, was embroidered in gold with floral patterns and the emblem of a great boar’s head. He fingered a ring set with almandine on his left hand.

The old soldier was dreaming; he found himself falling into the habit more and more often as the years wore on and the progression of time sapped the life from his body. Images paraded through his mind in no particular order. He saw the banner of Kaveh raised aloft amidst a knot of Savaran, their horses since slain from beneath them, as they raised their flashing swords in a last despairing effort to save the ancient battle-flag from the tide of Muslim soldiers. He saw the ranks of Immortals as they rode through the defiles of Nahavand, the sun glittering off their mail and the points of their spears as they fell like slaughter-animals to the butchering arrows of the barbarian invaders. He saw the faces of his family as he left them behind to go to war. They were not there when he returned.

He turned his head and attempted to clear his misty eyes. “Pooya,” he said.

“Yes, Salar?” A young man dressed in green answered from where he leaned against the trunk of a nearby willow. A silver crucifix hung from his neck. His left hand rested on the flank of a black mastiff who was sprawled lazily over the grass. The dog’s eyes, however, looked across the valley with devilish intensity. Was he dreaming of battle, Arsham briefly wondered, or of a sweet death in a lonely land?

“Where is Bahdin?” he asked aloud, blinking, trying to clear his half-awake mind. “I don’t remember seeing him on our journey here.”

“Commander Bahdin was killed five years ago.”

“Oh.” Arsham shook his head. He had forgotten. Of course Bahdin was
dead, like so many others. The soldier returned to his memories.

The hound reared up and bayed. “Salar!” said Pooya suddenly and sharply, so that Arsham raised himself.

“What is it?” he asked.

“A rider comes up the valley.”

Arsham immediately stood and picked up his belt from where he had placed it on the grass, a sword seated in a gilded scabbard hanging down from it and a garland of cherry-blossoms wrapped around the woven leather. He buckled it to his waist, grunting slightly as his joints creaked.

“Is it one of the sentries?” the commander asked.

Pooya stood beside him. “I do not think so.”

The horseman rode at a fast clip down the narrow strip of green that was the Bamiyan Valley. As he came closer, Pooya’s face grew eager. “Tis Shafar the Kushan. He must bring news from the king.”

The rider reigned in before them and hastily dismounted. “Hail, Pushtigban-salar.” He raised his right hand to his shoulder, palm outward, in salute.

“What do you have to tell us, Shafar?”

The dark-skinned Kushan, a son of the silver-tined mountains, bent his head. “Tidings born of demons. Yazdgerd, King of Kings, Defender of the Faith, has been slain at Merv. His faithful are scattered.”

Pooya gave an exclamation and crossed himself while the mastiff whined at his feet. “Then all is lost.”

“We had a brave king,” Arsham said. “God forgive him that he did not flee when he had the chance.” He suddenly felt very tired. “I could not persuade him to leave the home of his fathers. Now I must convince his son.”

“What you do, do quickly, Salar,” Shafar said. “There are mounted barbarians less than a day behind me, and a larger army will be sure to follow.”

Arsham turned to Pooya. “Go rouse the commanders and tell them what has happened. I will attend to the prince. Come with me, Shafar.”

Arsham left the quiet mound and walked east up the valley. As he walked, a hundred thoughts swirling in his head, he reached down and withdrew a fragrant pinch of cardamom and saffron from a small pouch on his belt. He pressed it to his tongue, savoring the pungent, bittersweet spices in an attempt to restore clarity to his mind. It did not work.

“I am old,” he thought. “What is left for those who remember the better days?”
He soon reached the cluster of tents, erected to shelter the survivors of the court, the army and their families, and made his way to a gilded canopy near the center of the camp. Passing the guards, who saluted him, he threw open the flap and entered. Shafar waited outside.

The young prince slept peacefully under the tent’s shade, dressed in an incarnadine robe inlaid with gold, like the sun before it rises from the mountains of the east. Arsham hesitated as he looked at the boy with his smooth face and tangled dark hair. Prince Pirooz had seen fewer than ten summers. When he woke he would be the Heavenly Lord, ruler and fire-priest of a failing people; while he slept, however, he was a mere dreaming child. Could he not have been left that way, Arsham thought with bitterness.

“My lord, may you live forever,” the Commander said, shaking the boy’s shoulder gently.

Pirooz stirred. “What is it, Arsham?”

“You must rise. Shafar the Kushan has arrived with word.”

The prince yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Has my father been victorious?”

“He is dead. You are our King; may you live forever.”

Pirooz sat up. His voice quavered. “What am I to do, Arsham?”

“Be strong.” Arsham helped him to his feet. “Come outside, and there we shall talk.”

They seated themselves beneath a poplar tree outside the tent. Shafar, after kissing the ground in front of the prince, gave a full account of what he had seen. Yazdgerd had again been defeated, but this time he had been caught in his flight by a miller who robbed and killed him. The body had been found and exploited by the barbarians, and all his followers were scattered.

“The dogs must have tortured a prisoner to find out where you were,” Shafar said to Pirooz. His white teeth glistened as he spoke. “At least five hundreds on horses are on their way here as I speak.” The Prince’s fright was great, but remained only briefly on his face.

“Salar Arsham,” Pirooz said, “will you walk with me?”

The boy and the Commander strode side by side up the rocky face of the valley walls. It was not long before they reached a small shelf of rock that gave them a good view of the valley. Trees were sprinkled over green meadows blossoming with white flowers. Grain grew in some cultivated patches, almost ready for harvest, and in the distance could be seen the small houses of the city of Bamiyan. The barren mountains curved upward like the fingers of the earth, clutching a verdant shard of paradise, Arsham’s heart welled up within him. Although they were far from home, here he had felt some little peace after years of hopeless struggle.

Prince Pirooz sighed. “Now what I am to do?”

“You must go to Chin,” Arsham said. “Your father foresaw this when he sent you here. It is many days of hard journey over the mountains. But you
are the king, and you shall endure. Your sister is the Emperor’s wife, and he shall not turn you away.”

“She did not reply to my letters.”

“There is no time to wait. If we defeat the barbarians down the valley, more will come, and we will be trapped here. You must leave Eranshahr for a time.”

Pirooz looked grave, and Arsham pitied him. It was not right that so young a child should see the fall of his dynasty. It was not right that he should learn so quickly about death.

“Why was I born the king?” the prince asked. “I have no land to rule over.”

“You have your people.” Arsham stroked his beard and his eyes followed a dark eagle as it flew over the valley. “There shall always be a remnant. Someday you shall return and free your land. But you are not strong enough yet.”

“I hope so,” Pirooz said, looking up at Arsham. “You have always treated me well, Arsham. I will reward you when I am king.”

“You are king, and I am not worthy of a reward. I am not a Rustam.”

“Do you remember Lord Rustam?” Pirooz asked.

“Yes,” Arsham said. “He was the greatest hero that has ever lived, but he fell before your birth.”

“Do you remember when we captured the Emperor of Rome?”

“I am not that old,” Arsham said with a smile. “Not yet. But I remember that glorious hour when we defeated the desert dogs at the bridge over Euphrates, and days of gold and laughter beneath timbered arches in Tusfun.”

“It has all gone forever, hasn’t it?” Pirooz said. His voice was inflected with sadness. “I thought we were the people of God.”

“The Evil One is strong,” Arsham said. “But the Empire has not ended so long as you are alive.”

“At least I shall feel safe in Chin with you there,” Pirooz said earnestly. “I do not think even the Evil One could hurt me.”

Arsham felt a familiar sorrow seize him, but he showed nothing in his face or demeanor. “I will not go with you, unless you bid me come. I am too old to follow, but perhaps I can be of some last service here. I will take the members of the Royal Guard and fight the barbarian soldiers in the pass.”

Pirooz turned to him in surprise and fear. “But you’ll die.”

“Perhaps,” Arsham said. “Perhaps not. Each of my guards is a match for fifty barbarian peasants.” He spoke boldly, like a young warrior before his first battle, but his might was like a small flask of water to be poured into the endless sands of a desert.
endless sands of a desert, as he knew well. Hope was not cheaply bought.

“If you win will you follow me to Chin?”

Arsham shook his head. “You will be too far ahead. I will go west and seek my family.”

“How did you lose them?”

The commander recalled their faces once more. “My village was ravaged by the barbarians. I could not find them.” He smiled, feeling for just a moment, like the touch of a passing ray of sunlight, that he was young again. For an instant only, he almost believed he was the same brave and laughing soldier he had been, who had a wife to return to and a fine palace of his own. He remembered the glances of his servants; they appreciated Arsham for his generosity, but even so he wished hazily that he had done more for them. He also remembered the kind condescension of the King of Kings, and greater still to him the proud glance of his old father and the loving kiss of his wife. “I had a son like you,” he said aloud to Pirooz. “I want very much to see him again.”

Pirooz glanced to the east, toward the Empire of Chin, and he shivered. “What if you cannot find them? What if they are dead like my father?”

“I will go to Daylam in the north,” Arsham said. “The barbarians have not yet conquered its hardy folk, and many of your people have fled there. I will await your return. Someday you shall receive the throne in Tusfun, for you are King of Kings.”

“I have no crown.”

“You will not wear the diadem of your ancestors, not yet,” Arsham said. “But you shall not be without a crown. I had Pooya make this for you.”

He drew the chaplet of cherry-blossoms from his belt. “By your leave, my king.” His throat tightened with emotion as he placed it gently on Pirooz’s dark head. “It is worthy of Jamshid himself. May you live forever!” The child prince gravely accepted the gift. Arsham straightened; they were, to all eyes, commander of the royal guard and monarch once more.

“With your permission, my king,” Arsham said, “I will put you under the care of Shafar. He knows the mountains well, and can take you as far as you need to go. The Immortals will protect you on your way.”

Arsham and Pirooz descended from their perch. They found Pooya below, his swart hound beside him, and a score of officers and courtiers in states of disconcertion. While Pirooz stepped forward, Pooya stood beside Arsham.

“Did he agree, Salar?” the young man asked. Arsham nodded.

“He trusts me. Perhaps too much.”

“Are you still ready to leave him?”

Arsham pressed his lips together. “I must. If I do not hold them back for as long as I am able, they will catch up to him in the mountains. Prepare my horse and armor.”
He refocused his attention to what was happening in front. The prince stood ready to address the nobles, who kissed the ground at his presence.

“May you live forever,” they chorused.
“I have made my decision,” Pirooz said.
“We are going to cross the mountains.”

“Exalted One,” an officer said, “have you considered this carefully?”
“The King of Kings has chosen his course.”
“It is a hard road,” another said. “We will be burdened down by the women and children. The Emperor may not even accept us into his court.”

Arsham leaned down to whisper in the prince’s ear. “You are the son of heaven now. Be strong in front of them.”

Pirooz frowned at the bold officer, straightening his back. He looked like a young Siavash, hero of old, with his pale round face under the crown of flowers. “I have said we will take the mountain way. We are the people of Eranshaht, and we shall endure. Leave everything heavy behind. Begin preparing for the march immediately.”

The old commander felt a deep peace. Here was a king. But he only said with all the others, “May my king live forever.”

As the officers scurried to work at tearing down the camp and getting the people ready to move, Arsham gathered the remaining thirty-two men of the Royal Guard. They dressed themselves in armor, coats of mail and lamellar. Their round shields were overlaid in gold, silver and bright gems, and their high feathered helms were polished so that they reflected the rays of the sun.

While Arsham’s white horse was caparisoned by Pooya, Shafar hurried up to him and saluted. “Salar, the barbarians are within sight of our furthest sentries.”

“We shall recall them when we go,” the commander replied. “Take care of him, Shafar. Remember the loyalty of your fathers.”

“I will, Salar,” Shafar said. “May the Lord of Heaven be with you.”

They kissed one another on the cheeks. The dark Kushan departed with a last salute. Pirooz appeared as Arsham prepared to mount, and the commander dropped to his knees.

“May you live forever,” he said.
“Shall I ever see you again, Arsham?” Pirooz asked.

Arsham gripped the hilt of his sword tightly. “Let us hope so, my king.”
“I want you to take this with you,” the child monarch said. He extended his arm. Within his hand was clasped a cylindrical, seven-ringed cup wrought of silver that sparkled with rubies and emeralds. “This is the cup of my forefather Jamshid. It is all that is left of the treasures of my house, and it is my gift for you.”

**RED PATHS AND WHITE**

Arsham gathered the remaining thirty-two men of the Royal Guard.
The Brogue

Arsham was astonished. “Why do you give it to me?”

“I just have a feeling,” Pirooz answered, and the attitude of the ruler seemed of greater sway on his face as every moment passed. “It should not leave Eranshahr. When you give it back to me, then I shall know that I am truly the king. You gave me my crown, and I want you to give me this as well.”

The sun will rise in the east whether there is a king in Eranshahr or not.

The old commander took it and hung it from his belt. “I shall guard it for as long as I live.” He kissed the king’s hand.

“Farewell,” Pirooz said. A lone tear trickled down his cheek. “I swear I will return.”

Arsham looked down at his hand, wrinkled like a dried and dying vine. He knew he would not see the child king again. Images passed through his mind as he knelt there. He remembered the sweetness of his life and the bitterness of many partings. He saw for an instant the bodies of the myriads of dead warriors, the men for whom no sacred fire burned and the blood of no offering was spilt. When he looked up, Pirooz was gone.

“Help me mount, Pooya,” Arsham said. “It is time to ride.”

Arsham rode at the head of the Royal Guard as they filed down the valley. As they rounded the bend that would take them out of sight of the city, Arsham halted and turned back. He saw the survivors of Eranshahr in a cluster, heading up toward the mountain passes that would bring them far from the reach of the barbarian princes. He raised his jeweled sword in a last farewell to Pirooz, King of Kings.

“Pray that the Emperor looks kindly upon him,” he said to Pooya, who rode beside him on a bay, singing a hymn to his crucified God. The great hound trotted along nearby. “We have seen the sunset of the world and the end of an order that was supposed to last for eternity. My father once told me, ‘Men are men, but gods are only gods.’ Not even Ohrmazd could keep his people safe from the corrupt and the barbarian.”

Pooya smiled. “It is not the end of the song.” He handed the commander a flask. “I have saved some wine. Drink, Salar.”

“It is our end at least, Pooya my friend.” Arsham took the flask and drank.

Pooya shook his head. “Resurrection.” He said the word slowly, cradling each syllable in his mouth. “The sun will rise in the east whether there is a king in Eranshahr or not, but we, we who have lost our empire, shall look into the sun without fear of blindness. Perhaps that sun will be Pirooz, or it will be something greater.”

Arsham gazed to the west. The Muslim cavalry were not far off. Men swathed in mail and layers of cloth were mounted on swift desert horses,
carrying long lances and swords of watered steel.

When the barbarian soldiers were less than five bowshots away, Arsham raised his hand and the thirty-two came to a stop. Arsham turned to the guardsmen. He looked at each excited face in turn, trying vaguely to recall their names, those last who had remained true and survived the fall of their world.

“We saw Rustam perish, and the banner of Kaveh sold in the markets of a foreign people,” he said, raising his voice so that all his followers could hear. “We have seen the loss of our homeland. But there is still a King of Kings on this earth, a flame in the darkness. The holy fire flickers, but it shall one day burn again in Eranshahr!” He lifted the cup of Jamshid in the air, and its many gems sparkled under the fleeing sun.

The Royal Guards lowered their spears and shouted aloud. Pooya made the sign of the cross over his forehead, and his black war-mastiff bayed like a desert wind. The barbarians were swiftly approaching, the cry of “Allah Akbar!” arising from their lips. Arsham signaled the charge, and the last defenders of Eranshahr leaped down on the foemen like a flock of birds.

Arsham, as his mount carried him forward, thought he saw a vision of the past. The bearded King Jamshid, clothed in scarlet and purple, was walking over the hills of dawn into the land of Eranshahr, a sword in his right hand and the gemmed cup in his left. The king lifted up his eyes to the blue heavens and sang.

All the lovers of Good Thought shall meet the Wise Lord,
But the loved of the demons shall be cast to the wind.

The king looked straight through the vision at Arsham, and the commander saw that it was not Jamshid, but an older and stronger Pirooz, who sang. The crown of cherry-blossoms still adorned his head.

“Yours is the inheritance!” the commander cried. “Death cannot take it from you!”

Arsham rode upon a highway paved with the faces of his enemies, then it seemed he was dancing over a sea of fire. His sword glowed like a brand, and a light on the horizon grew gradually nearer. His white steed like an angel seemed to be carrying him into eternity. He felt himself rising, grasping at the stars like flowers and looking down upon the dying sun.

He laughed, and the world laughed with him.
Warm Gluwein slips down my throat,
spiced, sweet, tingling my tongue,
chasing away chills that shiver
my bones and chatter my teeth.

The din of the Christmas market is
muffled by thick stone walls,
murmurs of tourists and the penitent
echoing from vaulted wood beams.

Veined marble squeaks my shoes,
mirror-bright after one thousand
years of polishing and worn smooth
by countless shuffling feet.

Figures of old stand piously against
thick pillars and arch overhead,
saints beside Apostles,
the Son of God with arms open wide.

Pacing alongside the wall, my fingers
brush over elegant engraving,
archaic German smoothed by the
light touches of centuries of pilgrims.

Words are barely visible, inked
with fading gold, evidence of
a man entombed behind chilled
stone: Albero, died 1152 A.D.
A shadowy corner is guarded by lit candles and a sweetly smiling wooden Madonna, where a rough stone archway leads into cool gloom.

I step from marble to rough-hewn stone, the slabs dipping inward, slick with age. The walls around are rough, unpolished, cold.

It’s lonely down here, echoing, damp, as the slightest sound is amplified, electric lights flickering from wrought-iron lamps hanging from fragile chains.

Tattered ropes of red velvet frame tiny black metal plaques set in the floor, coarsely stamped with name and date: Magnericus, died 596 A.D.
I’ve known death in my life, but I once thought of it only as the loss of someone beloved. In Africa, death and I met face to face, several times, but the first time was in a garbage pit in the desolate heart of Uganda.

Marabou storks haunt the skies and rooftops of Kampala, the capital. The Marabou is a repulsive bird with its sharp scavenger’s beak, bald head and neck, and long knobby legs. But it is also majestic in its startling height—up to five feet—and impressive ten-foot wingspan. The Marabou is found all over the city, especially in the bleaker areas with their wooden or mud shacks, where ever-growing piles of garbage and human filth flood the deep gutters and streets. The stench of rotting food, unwashed bodies, and feces attracts the Marabou.

I stood in the doorway of a wooden shack that leaned conspicuously to the left. The remnants of the afternoon rain dripped from the roof. The rain had washed mud and trash over the threshold of the door and into the fruit and vegetable stand, and the vender stood in ankle-deep muck.

“Twenty shillings!” the short, wiry man exclaimed. “My final offer to the young white lady.”

“You’re trying to rob me,” I said, placing the armful of bananas, papayas, mangos, and tomatoes back on the rickety table. “I’m not paying more than ten shillings for this. I’ll find a better price in Kisamenti.”

At the mention of the other marketplace, the man said hurriedly, “Why, that is what I said. Ten shillings! That is my final offer to the young white lady.” His smile revealed brown, crooked teeth, and I fought back a shudder.

“You handed him the coins, picked up the fruits, and placed them carefully in my bag. As I zipped the bag closed, an inhuman cry cut the air, followed by the raucous laughter of men. I glanced behind me at the people and then back at the man in the shack. “What was that noise?”

He shrugged. “Probably a dog. Or a woman. No matter.”
I stepped out of the doorway and peered around the leaning shack. Across a wide expanse of garbage stood a group of men in a circle. I held my breath as I crossed the field of waste, thankful I had worn rain boots instead of my usual sandals. I choked at the smell. As I got closer, I saw that in the center of the circle stood another man turning around and around. He held one end of a rope in his hand. I stopped, horrified when I saw what was being dragged through the mud and trash at the other end of the rope. A wounded young Marabou stork. It had probably fallen from a tree or a rooftop, and, helpless to defend itself, the injured bird was being made into a cruel sport. The men forming the circle lashed out and kicked the bird as it swung past them. The Marabou croaked weakly, the knot of rope around its neck cutting off the cry.

“Hey,” I shouted and stormed towards them. “Hey!”

Their laughter died as I reached them and shoved my way into the center of the circle.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I pulled the pocketknife from my bag and knelt in the mud and sawed furiously at the thick cord until it fell from around the Marabou’s neck. The bird, matted with blood and filth, its long wing lying broken, flopped to the ground. I stood, returned the knife to my pocket, and faced the man in the center of the circle. A ring of eyes watched me closely.

The man I faced glared at me with bloodshot eyes. The whites of his eyes were a strange yellow-brown. He smirked.

“You…you think this is funny?” I snapped.

His eyes narrowed. “Be carefully, mzungu,” he warned.

“Or what?” I drew myself up and took a step towards him. I looked around the circle of men, but they carefully avoided my glare. “Your cruelty makes you feel like—like big men, eh?” I spat on the ground. An insult.

The man in the center of the circle stepped forward suddenly, but I refused to back away. Holding my gaze, he reached down, grasped the stunned bird’s beak, placed his bare, dirty foot on it neck, and jerked its head up sharply. With a quick twist, he snapped the Marabou’s neck.

He released the beak and stepped back, the dead bird limp on the ground. Jeeringly, he said, “It was only an animal.”

Eyes burning, I took a deep, ragged breath and swallowed against the thick lump in my throat. “Y-you…you’re the animal.”

His large, rough hand cracked across the side of my face and I stumbled. Black spots swam before my eyes. Straightening, cupping my throbbing cheek, I reached out and slapped him as hard as I could across the face. My hand stung from the force of it.

I pulled the pocketknife from my bag and knelt in the mud.
He stared at me, shocked and enraged. The men around the circle were silent, their eyes focused on the ground. They shifted back and forth, and then they slowly filed away, one by one, shoulders slumped, until I was left facing the one man. After several long minutes, the man left too. Then I was alone, standing at the edge of the garbage pit with the great dead bird at my feet.

Then I was alone.
I remember the dead
mosses clinging to the massive
oak, rooted firmly behind the house,

Swinging like skinny
arms, they drooped off the tree’s knobby
limbs, graphite compressed into spindly fingers.

They hung over my head as I played, tangled
up in the ragged skin of the tree- ashes
softly spiraling down onto my head.

They were gently fitting
a crown of grey lace.
Scattered across the yard
Are pecans—
Ripened and half hidden,
Calling to be found.
Sitting under the oak, its
Tangled roots enveloping us,
You say, “Let’s pick them up.”
You gather and
I crack.
Shell against shell in my palm,
I press.
Under pressure,
One crushes into itself like
A skull between two rocks—
The meat is tasty but you will not share.
I don’t mind—I crack and you eat—
The pecan-pickers that we are.
Long ago...two sisters spun worlds
together in a system of perfect synchrony

Amish paper dolls moved with
Belle and the Beast as they
waltzed over mountains,
singing a few of their favorite
things to soldiers with
Barbie-blonde hair;
an entire mobile world
carried in the confines
of a pink Minnie Mouse
beach towel

A fish twirled through the air
above the swaying
waves of a red tip bush, it
didn’t take the bait
on the end of my jump rope

On the stage
of our swing set, starships
twisted through the galaxies
of our backyard;
wielding our plastic golf club swords,
we took off on our
mission, but the dancing
fighters of the Galactic Empire were
no match for our smooth
moves, as we rolled
and parried our way to the
heart of the Death
Star, where evil warriors
fell at the end of our
majestic weapons

our plenteous adventures we never
shared with anyone,
each one a single wire
connecting an unbreakable circuit
between sisters that cannot be
switched off by
time or distance.
Bristles from the rope stuck in my hands. I cinched it tight. My breath came in quick spurts. Sweat beaded on my brow. Sliding, slowly, closer to the precipice, I prepared myself. Mind over matter; I could do this. Leaning back, I paused for the last time. Boards creaked on the aged platform. As I checked my knot, I drew a steady breath. Off the platform I leapt—down, down, down. Sky was my only view as I flew past clouds, diving. Shouldn’t I have slowed by now? On I fell, trees whipped past—a blur of green and brown. Wham, I felt the ground.

When I was six, I had a first-hand experience with stupidity. My day had started much like any other. The difference was that today I was determined to become a professional “explorer.” Explorers, of course, start their careers dangling from extraordinarily death-defying heights. Accordingly, I had scaled my six-foot high backyard fort and tied a rope around my waist in order to repel down the “cliff.” Regrettably, however, I forgot to attach my rope to the backyard stronghold before plummeting off of the platform. Consequently, I unexpectedly plunged to the ground, instead of gracefully dangling midway in the air.

My parents, who beheld this act of intrepidity from the distance of the backyard swing, rushed over. In the typical, maternal fashion, mom gushed, “Oh, Sweetie . . .” After that, I have no idea what she said—I was too offended. I was an explorer! How could she? “Sweetie,” the very thought . . . A rugged man like me, I reflected as I staggered to my feet with a bruised ego and an aching behind.
After we picked our scabs and became blood sisters
and you saved me from Captain Hook
and taught me to roller skate
and I showed you how to tie your shoes,

after we moved together from our Idyllwild, California,
haven of mountains and make-believe, to
Saint Cloud, Florida of blacktop streets and growing up,

after we biked to jazz band practice,
carting our saxophones, and protected
each other from gossiping girls in middle school,

after we dreamt about our first kisses,
and laughed about Daniel and Luke promising
hope to die never to tell anyone,
and read Nancy Drew aloud while
braiding each others’ hair,

after we sat wide eyed in Miss Camp’s classroom eating
turkey sandwiches on our first day of high school,

came that barefoot walk to the lakefront when I told you.
You thought I was joking and laughed,
and then you knew that I was telling the truth,
which we thought we had eluded.

We promised that seven hours would never keep us apart.
We’d be roommates in college,
call every day, write every week, meet every break.
We packed my room into boxes-slowly
reminiscing in piles of baby doll clothes, red
and yellow soccer jerseys, dried wildflower wreaths,
princess dress-ups, childish stories

unfinished, and our favorite sheet music.
We held hands singing in the back pew until
lumps grew too large in our throats.
We hugged and tasted a salty kiss on the cheek,
and I sat in the back seat as my dad
pulled away from our life as us.
It was fall. A soft breeze touched the apple trees in the neighbor’s orchard and dropped the apples into the long yellow grass below. I sat beneath a Carolina ash with my sister’s head in my lap. I twisted small strands of her curly hair into knots and then smoothed them out. She watched clouds tumble lazily across the sky.

A car started in the driveway. Hannah propped herself on one elbow and turned to watch the green Acura backing out, its old engine rattling loudly. Nate Ethridge rolled down the window and leaned out.

“See you guys tomorrow!” he called. We both waved and watched him speed away down the street, pressing the horn a few times as he went.

Hannah lay back against me and sighed. I plucked a few clover flowers and began to form them into a crown for her dark hair.

“Sarah?” she asked timidly after a few moments of still air and the chirping of sparrows.

“Yeah?” I answered, knotting two slender stems together.

“I want to tell you something.” Hannah sat up, folded her knees to her chest and looked closely into my face. I thought I knew; at least, I suspected. The air seemed to get thinner and sharper.

“I think I’m falling for Nate.” A curl drifted into her eyes. Two mourning doves flew out of the ash tree over our heads, crying as they lifted themselves. I took a deep breath.

“I already have,” I said. Hannah’s face didn’t change. She looked at the gray bark that I leaned against and nodded.

“I thought so,” she whispered. With one of her pale hands she reached and took my own. I pressed hers and smiled.

“We won’t let this come between us,” she said, her large brown eyes pleading. I took the clover chain and placed it in her hair.

“No. We won’t.”
Many have speculated on the connection between twins: that they can read one another’s thoughts, feel one another’s physical pains, communicate telepathically over the span of hundreds of miles. I can neither affirm nor negate these claims. Sometimes, Hannah and I give voice to the same idea at the same moment using the same words, but that may have more to do with our coincidental upbringing than any psycho-connection. And yet, it may be that our minds were shaped by the same mold, our bodies formed simultaneously in the same darkness, our souls conceived in the same act of love and unity. The separation of a twin is like the separation of a soul. We have been chasing the same sunlight since the beginning of our time. To chase two different suns is inconceivable. Yet we have done it.

The top of Lookout Mountain was cool for August. That night I had Daddy’s jacket wrapped around me. No heat rose from the asphalt of the parking lot where I stood, quietly holding my sister’s hand as Daddy hoisted the last box from the trunk of the family car. He carried it on his shoulder like a pallbearer. Dimly I watched him retreat up the sidewalk toward the dormitory; dimly I saw his figure through her lit second story window, saw him from that distance shift, and carefully lower the box to the floor out of my sight. Dimly I noticed as he joined us again, standing there in the cooling twilight.

We were above the city, and the night was black. One orange light flickered over the lot. Car unloaded, mail key collected, forms signed—nothing was left to do now. Still I stood in my father’s oversized jacket clutching Hannah’s hand. Mamma was wringing out her hundredth tissue while Daddy spoke rapidly, giving last instructions, sharing last advice. Hannah’s responses were soft and high, an almost ghostly voice I didn’t recognize. Her hand squeezed mine tightly. I had no words of wisdom, advice, or comic relief. My constricted throat held all sounds from escaping. As if from a distance, I saw my parents hugging my sister, giving one last kiss on the top of the head, again affirming their affection. I heard the sound of Hannah’s shallow breathing as she turned to embrace me.

“Bye, Sarah.”

That was all. It was over; the car doors were closed, the windows were rolled up from shouting last goodbyes, and we were driving away from all that I had known for eighteen years. We spiraled down the mountain, down, down, down into the darkening night, away from the one with whom I had shared close quarters of darkness long before I knew anything of love or separation.
I remember Mamma pulling our red Celica up to the curb on a frozen January evening years before. Car tires had kicked mounds of icy snow onto the sidewalk where it slowly grayed. Street lamps began to light up as the sun set early. We had lived three years in Michigan, but it still seemed colder and darker than I remembered the South. But then, Southern winters rarely reached temperatures in the ‘teens. Hannah opened the car door and jumped onto the icy walk next to the Flint Institute of Music. She reached back into the car and slid the passenger seat forward so that I was able to step out cautiously behind her.

“You know where the auditorium is,” Mamma said, “where we always go for your recitals.”

Hannah nodded. We had both taken piano lessons inside of the brown brick building for three years now. Hannah entered the unknown corridor of our high school days with a rambunctious enthusiasm to try new things. Halfway through our freshman year, she decided to join the Flint Institute Choir. I, on the other hand, was joining the Flint Ballet Academy. Mamma had recommended that I try something different then Hannah.

“And ballet,” she said, “would be perfect for you. You used to love dancing when we were in Florida.” I remembered the fluidity of movement as our dance teacher waltzed to the rhythm of the shadows twisting through a patch of sunlight on the wall. Her arms swayed as gracefully as the willow branches that played these shadows into the dance studio. I also remembered thinking that maybe I was a better dancer than even Hannah. So I agreed.

“Do you have all your books?” Mamma asked. Hannah showed her the clean copies of choir books she clutched tightly to her bright red sweater.

“Anything else you need? Sarah?” I shook my head, pushing the bobby pins deeper into my tightly wound hair. Mamma rolled up the window and drove away as Hannah and I slipped across the sidewalk and into the glass doors of the large building. The auditorium was on the left just inside, its doors flung wide to the long rows of orange seats descending toward the stage. I could hear the sound of a piano and voices singing scales. The dance studio was three long halls away.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take a dance class?” I asked tentatively.

Hannah smiled. “After auditioning and everything? Yeah, I’m sure.” I stood and watched until her red sweater disappeared through the doors of the auditorium, her boots squeaking on the linoleum floor. Hannah left me that evening to travel a few halls down, a thousand leagues away, to a foreign place where she might seek definition unaccompanied by a twin. I am still uncertain if either of us ever found it.

Pine trees and palm trees, clay and sand, whole jungles burst onto our unaccustomed sight as our parents lifted our lives from Baton Rouge, the only home we’d ever known, and dropped us, suddenly and uncertainly, in
the tropics of Orlando. We cried little tears and then ran outside to watch
the sun drop behind these stucco bungalows Mamma and Daddy called
our neighborhood. We fastened
our eyes on the oranges dropping
over the neighbor’s fence into our
yard. The hyacinths crowned our
curls in rubies, and the stiff St.
Augustine grass raised pricked carpets under our feet. Louisiana had taught
us for the first six years of our lives about humidity and what it meant to
swim in the air, but this air smelled like citrus and salt and boiling asphalt.

First grade at Wekiva Christian School taught us much. We learned
how to read a clock; we learned how to say “hello” in Spanish, though I had
forgotten by the time the fried bananas were passed around; we learned that
it was important to bring another person when using the commode, for
there was a rumor that Bloody Mary dwelt within the murky sink drain in
the lavatory and preyed on unsuspecting little girls. (No one knew exactly
who Bloody Mary was, but then no one wanted to find out.) This was the
first place I learned to love dance. I wore a white gown during the Christmas
play and danced across the stage with a ribbon. Hannah sang Christmas
carols with the kids who didn’t dance. Hannah learned how to read the story
about a puppy and how to tie her shoes, I remember, two years before I could
read or tie shoes. She learned the art of holding hands with a boy, too.

The first day I saw her hold hands, I was collecting pine cones that had
wandered somehow beneath that big oak draped in Spanish moss on the
edge of the playground. When I looked up, Hannah was swinging, back
and forth, and Joel was swinging next to her. It was timed perfectly: when
her white tennis shoes swung outward, his swung outward; when her legs
disappeared beneath her navy jumper and she began to rocket backwards,
his gangly legs folded under his seat and he rocketed backwards too. I knew,
as everyone knew, that this meant one day she was going to marry him: she
in her neat blue jumper, and he with his big gray eyes, pressed khaki pants,
and skinny arms dangling from the sleeves of his polo.

“Watch this!” Hannah screamed. “I can fly!” And she lifted herself into
the air as the swing went forward, landing on her feet a few paces beyond the
swing set. Joel followed, stumbling a little as he landed. That was when he
grabbed Hannah’s hand.

I jumped behind the oak. I couldn’t believe what I saw. Joel was
violating the understood boys-don’t-touch-girls code. Slowly, I peered from
behind the wrinkled trunk. Hannah looked around to be sure no one was
watching as she swung her hand back and forth in his. I nervously toed the
dirt beside the curled roots of the oak. I wanted to run to her, to stand in
between them and take Joel’s hand in one of mine and Hannah’s hand in the
other. I wanted to stomp my feet and yell, No! This is not how it’s supposed
Suddenly Hannah looked toward me. I retreated behind the tree trunk and sat on the ground. Pine cones tumbled from the folds of my skirt and away from the oak. My heart tumbled in my chest.

When we got home from school that day, we closed ourselves into our room while Mamma made supper. I took the Aladdin doll from Hannah’s bed and pretended to fix his cloak. Hannah skipped over and leaned against the bed next to me, picking up the plastic Jasmine and smoothing her hair neatly behind her neck.

“Were you spying on me earlier?” she asked.

I stared hard at the pink flower print of her bedspread. Blood was rushing to my brain, and I could think of no response except to pretend that somehow I had not heard the question.

“Well?” she asked, turning her big brown eyes to me.

“Well, what?” I mumbled.

“Were you spying on me?” she repeated.

“No!” I lied. “Why would I spy on you?”

That was the first lie I ever told her. That day, as we made stories with our dollhouses and gave tea to our teddy bears, I knew that something—a boy, a lie—could divide us. Something that we chose ourselves.

Nate Ethridge grabbed Hannah’s hand one night on a beach in Miami. He had steel blue eyes, a strong jaw, and a tuft of blond hair that would never lie flat. We traveled to Miami with a group of friends just before going off to college. I had told Hannah I was in love with Nate. Now, as she glanced shyly into those steel blue eyes with her own large brown ones, I turned away. The lights of grand beach resorts decked for the Christmas holidays played on the water, and I heard the echo of laughter and the dull clank of beer bottles. I sat in the cold sand clutching my knees to my chest, while a stillness descended in the December air that I could not recognize. This was not the familiar jealousy of childhood, the desire to have something Hannah possessed. I believed myself to be as different in talent and personality as a person could be. She commanded attention. She was the one with the voice, the laughing one who liked the lemon, while I liked the meringue; I kept journals and wrote poetry on napkins while others talked; I danced. I grew to admire rather than envy this bone of my bone. Scraping the sand with my fingers that night and listening to the ocean scrape the Miami shoreline, I found that, rather than wishing Nate to gently capture my hand, the idea of Nate was vacating my imagination. My attention was entirely drawn to the curly-headed Merope beside him who was abandoning the divinity of our sisterhood for a mortal. He held the coveted seat. That night I stopped loving Nate Ethridge.
ALL THE GOODBYES I EVER TOLD YOU: A REMEMBRANCE

In the beginning, purple-faced and screaming, I said my first goodbye. I said goodbye to the safe and comfortable darkness inside my mother’s body; I said goodbye to my mother as I was jerked away and scratched head to foot with a sponge in a sink; but most of all my tiny hands reached (learned in seconds the art of grasping), my first-opened eyes strained (learned in a moment the nakedness of light), my inexperienced lungs wailed brokenly (immediately understood the futility of crying out) for her who shared the tiny space, the darkness, my known world. I said my first goodbye to Twin.
Harvest
the sunset leaves
at night
into the street
so that the dawn
sees them flutter
through the ash
and your mother’s cigarette.

They burn
in your hand, living pigment
purple red orange-green and yellow—
they crackle black
in piles down the street.

Dry
by Halloween
they are autumn’s cicada
shells, shattering underfoot.
Hey, dude!” Lawrence Wright shouted awkwardly above the music in the old record store. Jack Orcutt, feeling no need to answer, stared blankly at the T section of the CDs.

“I heard it was yer B-Day! What you gonna do now that you’re the big eighteen? Hey, I know! You can finally come down with us to da clubs!” Lawrence talked in that white boy slang that cursed every ear that heard it. He was the guy who always answered his own questions, never wanted any disruption to his own voice. “You know what? I think we should go tonight! As a sort of last-hang-out-before-school-starts party. All right, sweet! I think we should go at like 10:30-sih. Does that sound good?”

“Um…sure,” Jack said somberly. It wasn’t that Jack was having a bad day or the fact that his birthday had been two weeks before. That is how Jack just was. Jack lazily went with the flow. His face always held the look of either deep thought or complete apathy. Lawrence was his self-appointed friend who had constant control of the Jack Orcutt remote. Tonight was going to be like any other Saturday night. Lawrence would call him up, they would ultimately have no fun, and Lawrence would be satisfied in the end.

Jack was a quiet teenager, the middle child separated from each of his brothers by four years. He was naturally muscular, but a little on the slim slide. He was about five feet ten inches and had thick and black hair that came down over his eyes.

When nighttime came, Jack was lying on his bed listening to his stereo and thinking about the night to come. “A club?” he thought. “People are gonna be dancing!” This idea made his stomach feel bubbly and sick. At this stage in his life, he was most of all concerned with not embarrassing himself. He would most likely be forced into performing something that would reach the pinnacle of awkwardness.
His phone vibrated off his bedside table. It was Lawrence; he was outside. Jack slid into Lawrence’s 1965 Ford Mustang with the engine muffling all traces of outside noise.

“What’s up, Brotha?” said Lawrence in the background. His blond hair was slicked back and his face was holding a half smile, the kind that deserves a fist. Lawrence had dressed for just the proper occasion in a red button down shirt with blue slant lines. The shirt had two breast pockets with pearl-like buttons that closed over the pockets. His brown plaid shorts reflected off the driver side window. In Jack’s mind, he looked utterly uncomfortable. He wanted to burst out laughing at his friends clothes, but feeling too nervous about the night, he remained silent.

“Man, I can’t believe school starts on Monday. I am so totally bummed about it,” Lawrence tried to yell over the rumbling of his car. Jack didn’t really care about the arrival of school. He just stared out the window as Lawrence talked. Lawrence gossiped and blabbered about everyone. It was hard to hear exactly what he was saying, but it didn’t really matter; it was all stereotypical high school garbage. Jack hated when Lawrence would go on and on about ridiculous mishaps and mostly untrue stories passed along by who knew whom. It continued for twenty minutes until they arrived at the club in downtown Atlanta. Jack felt he was a prisoner as soon as he saw the club.

As the car pulled alongside the curb, Jack’s gaze fell out of the window. This particular club was on the top floor of a three-story building. Lights flashed from inside, and the sound of heavy drums echoed down the street. The entrance was in the alley. Lawrence led the way with his white shoes flapping on the steps. Jack didn’t want to be there, but he didn’t want to start conflict. The drumbeats from the club now became a death march as Jack and Lawrence approached the top floor. After walking up three flights of stairs, they arrived at a line leading to double doors. Jack was never happier in his life to see a line of waiting people.

Lawrence stomped in frustration. “Geez!” he said.

“Maybe they’re too crowded.” Jack dropped the best excuse he could think of. “Let’s just leave.”

“Oh no way! You’re not getting’ off that easy.”

The sound of heavy drums echoed down the street. Jack’s heart sank while his stomach continued to twist and turn inside of him. The line wait lasted for fifteen minutes and consisted of more of Lawrence’s blathering about relationships. His talk was as if he had no ties. He spoke freely and harshly about everyone he possibly could, as if to build himself up. Jack remained quiet and let Lawrence’s words bounce off the walls. As they moved closer to the double doors, Jack saw a desk with a girl who was checking identification.
“Please let them think my I.D is fake,” Jack hoped to himself. The desk arrived too quickly, and Lawrence pushed Jack up first.

“I.D please!” said the black haired girl with a nose ring.

Next to her was a large muscular body builder type. As the girl took Jack’s I.D, she examined it, held it under a special light, and then typed some numbers onto a calculating machine before giving it back. His hands were then marked with big black Xs. He waited for Lawrence next to the big guy right in front of the double doors, music blasting from in between them. To his left the body builder’s shirt had “Security” stretched across the back. As the cool air seeped out from between the crack in the doors, loud bursts of dance music poured into his ears. Before Jack could listen, Lawrence pushed him from behind, sending him right into the doors. With a noiseless crack, the door swung open, and Jack fell onto the sticky floor. Lawrence helped Jack off the floor while he tried not to laugh. Jack’s head throbbed for a couple of seconds; then his pain was gone. He watched Lawrence’s lips form a fake apology. No audible noise could be heard. They passed into a world completely controlled by music and lights. Jack’s face turned to a sea of bodies, all of them moving with the drums and bass. Lights flashing, catching people in an instant, then letting them move freely. Jack felt so different. He didn’t feel like himself. He felt as if the orange and yellow lights were turning his body into a stage. He didn’t feel like he had thought he would. No one was staring at him. What a relief he felt. He was also feeling something different. His body understood what his brain could not. He took a few steps and then entered a sphere of inhuman magic. His shoulders swayed up against others. His feet stomped, shaking the floor. His arms rose and pointed.

He then felt the need to know who was making this beautiful music that was becoming the soundtrack of his soul. His eyes searched. In the middle of the floor stood the creator. His tools were a laptop, a turntable, and a soundboard with colorful knobs. His nimble fingers turned the knobs and spun the records. His whole body was glowing. Jack’s body began to move faster to stay with the beautifully crafted melody.

It was a flood of people. All around him were moving, jiggling humans. There were beautiful people and ugly people. There were short and tall. So diverse was the crowd. Jack noticed the women on the dance floor like any teenage boy of his age. There were girls with boyfriends, girls who danced with girl friends, and girls who danced alone. Everyone moving. As the night grooved along, Jack found himself dancing in different spots all around the room. He also noticed his freedom of movement had decreased because of a newcomer’s arrival.
As he became closer and closer with the people around him, he noticed a particular girl. She was freely wagging her body. She wore bright yellow shoes with purple jeans. Her shirt was worn and tattered and had one of Jack’s favorite bands on it, the Talking Heads. On her face, she wore fake Ray Ban Wayfarers that were baby blue. She was stomping her right foot and pointing straight up in the air with her left hand. She was shouting something, but Jack could not understand it. He turned slightly in to get closer to her. As he turned, he noticed her glance over him. She moved out of her previous dance and began to rock her shoulders, one forward while the other was back. Jack became so intrigued by her. He couldn’t tell if she was staring at him or not, but her glasses faced him. They danced. Their movements were close but never touching. He stared directly at her now. He took note of her hands. There were no Xs on them.

“She must be twenty-one,” he thought, “but she looks so young.”

As the music slowed down, they edged closer together. The mystery girl now had all of Jack’s attention. She placed her hand on her glasses and began to bring them up. Jack felt his heart pound; he felt that he must know what this girl looked like. She showed interest in him like no other girl had before. The baby blue glasses came up and displayed two big beautiful eyes. Their faces now moved only one foot away from each other. Jack took in the girl’s loveliness. Her beauty floated in a hidden aura that could only be reached by close proximity. She was one of the most attractive girls he had ever seen. She stared back at him deeply as if he was meant for her. Her arm came straight up into the air and changed colors in the light. It slowly drifted back down and landed on Jack’s shoulder. He could feel its warmth through his t-shirt. They now moved together in time as her other arm came to rest on his right shoulder. It was completed when her fingers locked on the back of his neck. Jack felt nothing but happiness. He felt his soul dance with delight.

They danced and moved together song after song, their eyes never breaking contact. He wanted it to never end. The scent of perfume mixed with sweat filled his nostrils. They grew closer, their faces only inches apart. The girl leaned in, and their noses touched. Jack’s heart burst. Was this about to happen? He felt his face turn cold. His skin crawled with ants. The girl’s hands put pressure on the back of his neck. Jack understood her decision.

Their noses passed each other, closing the gap, Jack so nervous he could barely stand. The girl’s lips touched his. Pleasure lifted Jack into the air. The music was no longer fast and heavy. It became slow like a duet between a violin and a piano. Jack felt whole. His insides stopped jumping. He felt that everything was at peace. He felt that nothing could change. His eyes were closed tightly. He knew it was no dream. He opened his eyes, their lips drifted
apart from each other. The familiar stare came back, and they treasured the moment. The music faded back in.

Suddenly Jack felt someone grab his arm and pull him around. He looked up to see Lawrence’s face.

“We gotta go!” Lawrence yelled over the club noise. He dragged Jack from the middle of the club. He couldn’t pull away; his moment kept him paralyzed. Jack watched in horror as the hungry crowd swallowed up his confused love. He was no crossing the threshold of the double doors. They stumbled down the echoing stairs. Lawrence’s grip could not be broken. He threw Jack into the passenger seat of his car.

“What’s your problem?” Jack heard himself snap.

“I got this guy totally mad! I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know,” Lawrence bellowed.

“Everything was fine! Everything was so wonderful! Why did you drag me out like a child?”

“Okay. I found this cute girl, and I started dancing with her. It wasn’t a big deal! Then Big Block-headed McMusclepants arrives on the scene like somebody dialed 9-1-idiot! He says that he’s her boyfriend and gets ready to hit me! So I did what anyone would do. Got the heck outta there with my dignity still intact.”

“Oh my gosh! You are so selfish! You only think about yourself, twenty-four seven,” Jack said.

“Whoa. What’s your beef?”

“My beef? Do you wanna know what my beef is, dude? It’s that you are constantly controlling people! If you hadn’t been so focused on your own needs, you might have looked around and seen that this girl has a boyfriend!”

Lawrence was silent for a couple of seconds. “I’ve never heard you talk like that.” He cocked his head to the side and spoke under his breath. “I’m not controlling.”

“Ah! Just forget it!” Jack screamed. His voice had never reached this volume before. He had never been so furious in his entire teenage life.

The car ride was silent for the rest of the way home. Lawrence dropped Jack off at his old vinyl-sided with smilax covered house. Jack’s legs had the weight of concrete. When he got to his room, he realized how tired he was. He let out a long beautiful sigh that summed up the night. Although he had been wrenched away from the moment he had been sharing with the perfect girl, he felt a little relieved. His night couldn’t possibly have been better. The sudden jerk by Lawrence meant that the moment was frozen. It was as if it was eternal. Now the night wasn’t poisoned by an awkward goodbye. Now he didn’t feel like a failure. He hadn’t had time to say anything stupid or out of place. Lawrence was Jack’s savior in a way. A smile wandered onto Jack’s
The problem of the girl's name drifted back into his head.

face. He was so happy with his moment. His kiss with—his mind drew a blank.

“What was her name?” Jack spoke to himself. “She must have said it!” he thought. He wouldn’t have kissed a girl whose name he didn’t know. How could he have forgotten to ask? She was now just a face, just a moment. When he pictured her now, she had a floating blank over her head. Jack threw himself on his bed. Maybe she had told him her name, but he was too tired to remember. He settled down in his jersey knit sheets. He was so comfortable that as soon as his head fell softly onto his pillow, he began to drift away. Right before he fell asleep, he had one final thought about school. It started in two days.

The next day was Jack’s day of rest. He slept until two o’clock in the afternoon. When he woke up, he still felt warm when he thought about the night before. He looked over at his phone; it was on the floor. It had buzzed off his bedside table earlier that morning. Jack flipped it open to see that Lawrence had called, but he didn’t feel like talking to anyone. The problem of the girl’s name drifted back into his head, and he felt heavy. He fell down onto his pillow and let out a sigh. He did not want to move. He closed his eyes and slept until the next morning.

That morning Jack was a drowsy zombie. With a class schedule in hand, he marched into Brookwood High School. His senior year. He checked out his schedule: First Period, Art, room 118, Ms. B.Golding. “Sounds like a sweet old lady. This should be easy,” Jack thought. When Jack arrived in room 118, he found a seat in the back and flopped down. Lawrence passed him without bumping him or offering up some silly hello like he normally did. Jack didn’t feel any hatred towards Lawrence now. In fact, he felt the need to apologize, but he decided he would wait until after class. He laid his face down on his right arm and drifted back to two nights before. “Will I ever see her again?” he thought. “Maybe we’ll go back to that club, and she’ll be there just waiting for me.” This idea gave Jack back his warm feeling inside. Having a girl waiting for him was new to Jack. He liked his thoughts. As Jack drifted to his memory, he heard Ms. Golding come in and introduce herself. He didn’t care to listen. He wanted to return to Saturday to be with his girl.

“Excuse me, you in the back with the grey shirt. Could you lift your head up?”

Ms. Golding’s voice echoed from the front of the room. Jack slowly brought his head up, examining his teacher. She wore polka-dotted flats, and a black dress that hit her knees. She had a belt around her waist and a medallion necklace that hung underneath her chin. She was not the old
woman Jack had thought she would be. His eyes climbed to her face. Jack lost feeling in his entire body. His stomach rose up into his chest. He could not breathe. He stared directly into the eyes of his teacher. She gave him a look of compliance, and then continued to speak. Jack blinked over and over again. His heart was screaming. Inside of Jack’s body screeched a loud fifteen-car pileup. The woman standing before him was none other than the mystery girl he had kissed two nights before.
I love the house at the head of the cul-de-sac on Southland Drive and down by Temple Baptist Church off Main Street in Greenville, Mississippi. The sap green patina and flat-roofed home is not mine but I do live there. I’m accustomed to the footstep tattoo on the cherry and tile floors and soft scuffles on the Oriental rugs. The smell of coffee and day-old grease hangs onto the papered walls like a portrait of the lady owner.

The lady owner, Miss Georgia, is something else. For one thing, she is my best friend Alex’s mom. For another, her hair always looks fierce. She sports a natural Cruella de Vil hairdo, one side of her head molasses brown and the other amber. “Two-toned,” she claims as she tumbles her spindle-like fingers through the umber and sienna strands of her wavy locks. Those fingers are lengthened through labor and calloused from life. She uses those hands to grate the two pounds of carrots that go into her ‘world famous’ seven-layer scratch carrot cake. She uses those hands to put her lollipop-red Kitchenaid pots and pans to work and crash supper to life. I love her blue-plate meals, the kind that induces your inner Falstaff and blissful satisfaction. She works those same hands to hem skirts, fix bodices, and take up waists. She uses them again to file land deeds, divorces, and last and final testimonies into the back storage closets of the downtown law firm. She is happy with her occupation as a lawyer’s secretary. Considering that she dropped out of college after her first semester, she believes herself blessed with such a respectable job.

When Miss Georgia speaks, she lectures. When she has no words, she speaks with her eyes. She counsels me about life’s firsts: first loves, first failed test, first scratch biscuit and maple syrup, and first losses. Her glassy eyes vacillate from hue to hue, matching her glance—reproach, empathy, and glee. In such cases, she is an inviting and intimidating figure. Her skin is leathered and weathered from manual labor, coffee, and the dust of the Old

The smell of coffee and day-old grease hangs onto the papered walls.
South. Years of stories are etched between her wrinkles and freckles. These stories have morals and parallelisms to mine and Alex’s reality. We often come to her for advice.

I come to Miss Georgia more often than Alex does. My own mother and I have a distant relationship. My mom is rooted in the traditions of China. She is the epitome of my heritage and its customs. To quote Mark Twain, she “eschew[s] surplusage.” My mom despises decorum and all things enjoyable to the American teenager. My mom doesn’t understand the importance of firsts or the cultural divide between all things Chinese and everything American. Naturally, I identify with Miss Georgia rather than with Mom. I often implore Miss Georgia for her stories and wisdom, and indulge in her carrot cake and iced Lipton tea.

Miss Georgia is my connection to the South—the South in which I was raised. My own mother is my tie to China—the past and the land in which I was born. In my senior year, I have many questions about college and, in general, the future. Of course, I lay my concerns before Miss Georgia. She looks me over with those vacillating eyes and shakes her two-toned waves. “Go ask your mom.”

I do.

To relate me to my past and her own self, Mom tells me the stories of my childhood and homeland China. She recounts the time I escaped from our townhouse and rode out to the limits of Shijiazhuang on my squeaky rubber and iron tricycle. She muses at all the times she had to get off work and walk the three blocks to my daycare—just so she could comfort me that I wouldn’t tumble out of my top bunk at naptime. We both remember the time I climbed to the roof of a dilapidated barn, fell through the rotted wood and straw, and came home with scratches up and down my body. “Well, at least you didn’t almost burn down your grandmother’s house,” Mom scoffs. Long story short, Mom got carried away with firecrackers on her ninth New Year’s party.

After an hours-long talk with Mom, I realize that I am every bit like Mom as I am like Miss Georgia. Mom and I share our love of roast duck, sciences, math, and giving our own parents hell. Miss Georgia and I both appreciate fired chicken, art, history, and getting dolled up like every other Southern belle. As much as I am an American, I am Chinese. It’s funny how Miss Georgia introduced me to my new world and yet reconciled me to my past.

About every other day, I call up Miss Georgia after catching up with Mom. I look forward to my next visit to the house at the head of the cul-de-sac on Southland Drive. I can’t wait for us three women—Miss Georgia, Mom, and myself—to discuss politics, college, and dumb boys. I can’t wait to dig into that carrot cake—Miss Georgia and me with our forks and Mom with her chopsticks.
POETRY

First Place
Emily Goff, “Bird Watching”

Honorable Mentions
Rex Bradshaw, “Stephen Plowman”
Chris Brown, “Grace”
Kirsten Callahan, “Monologue for Papaw, Moving to a Nursing Home”
Anna Rebmann, “Truth Be Told”
Rebecca Yantis, “Dom St. Peter”

FICTION

First Place
Lea Schumacher, “The Weeping Wall”

Honorable Mentions
Rex Bradshaw, “Red Paths and White”
Derrick French, “Going to St. Louis”
Joy McWilliams, “The Break In”
Sarah Swenson, “The Grandfather Clock”

NONFICTION

First Place
Sarah Vanbiber, “All the Goodbyes I Ever Told You: A Remembrance”

Honorable Mentions
Ashlee Davidson, “The Marabou Stork”
Emily Goff, “Lessons on Fishing”
Anna Rebmann, “Reading on Eternity’s Doorstep”
AWARDS

ART

First Place  Evy Baehr, “Changing Paces”
Honorable Mentions  Wesley Sumrall, “Untitled”
                      Joy McWilliams, “Archipelago”

High-School Contest Winners

POETRY

First Place  Miranda Shugars, “October”
Honorable Mention  Miranda Shugars, “Playing Soldier”

FICTION

First Place  William Mason, “Flashing Lights”
Honorable Mention  Yi Wei, “The Hospital Wall”

NONFICTION

First Place  Yingnan (Kalina) Deng, “Carrot Cake”
Honorable Mention  Audrey Orteza, “The Lamb”
ACADEMIC YEAR 2009-2010

AWARDS

the Brogue
First Place, Literary Journals
Southern Literary Festival
Martha Krystaponis, Editor

Chris Brown
Third Place, Poetry: “Resurrection”
Conference on Christianity and Literature
Student Writing Contest

Alex Freel
Second Place, Creative Nonfiction
“The Lodge”
Southern Literary Festival

Anna Rebmann
Third Place, Creative Nonfiction
“Reading on Eternity’s Doorstep”
Southern Literary Festival

Lea Schumacher
First Place, One-Act Play
“Shadows on the Wall”
Southern Literary Festival

Adie Smith
Honorable Mention, Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize
“Along the Natchez Trace”
Ruminate Magazine

Adie Smith
Second Place, Poetry: “On Home”
Southern Literary Festival

Sarah Swenson
Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven University

Sarah Swenson
First Place, Fiction
“The Grandfather Clock”
Southern Literary Festival

PUBLICATIONS

Martha Krystaponis
“Puzzle” and “The Boy”
Poetry, Diverse Voices Quarterly (Summer 2009)
STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Adie Smith  
“Along the Natchez Trace”  
Poetry, *Ruminate* (Issue #13)

SCHOLARSHIPS
David Grimes  
Maude Gurley Scholarship, Creative Writing  
Mo-T-ivation Ministry

ACADEMIC YEAR 2008-2009

AWARDS
*the Brogue*  
Third Place, Literary Journals  
Southern Literary Festival  
Andrew Hedglin, Editor

Martha Krystaponis  
Honorable Mention, Creative Nonfiction  
“Invisibility Cloak”  
Southern Literary Festival

Addie Leak  
First Place, Creative Nonfiction  
“In the Summer When It Sizzles”  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

Addie Leak  
Second Place, One-Act Play  
“The White Fedora”  
Southern Literary Festival

Addie Leak  
Honorable Mention, Creative Nonfiction  
“The Luckiest”  
Southern Literary Festival

Christina Miles  
Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award  
Belhaven College

Lea Schumacher  
Runner-up, Fiction: “The Weeping Wall”  
Hollins University National Undergraduate Fiction Competition  
Judged by Tony D’Souza (NEA and Guggenheim Fellow)

PUBLICATIONS
Ashlee Davidson  
“Apology to a Beggar Woman on the Steps of Notre Dame”  
Poetry, *Ruminate* (Issue #12)

Mandy McCullough  
Daily Devotional Entry  
Accepted for Publication in *Student to Student: A Guide to College Life*, vol. 2 (forthcoming, Regal)

Lea Schumacher  
“Ophidiophobia”  
Creative Nonfiction, *The Distillery*  
Motlow State Community College
INTERNSHIPS AND TEACHING
Mandy McCullough Mississippi Craft Center
Martha Krystaponis After-School Writing Workshop
Christina Miles Neighborhood Christian Center
Lea Schumacher

ACADEMIC YEAR 2007-2008

AWARDS
Andrew Hedglin  First Place, Poetry: “Friendship 7”
                 Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
Andrew Hedglin  Third Place, Creative Nonfiction
                 “Taking the Cure So I Can Be Quiet”
                 Southern Literary Festival
Martha Krystaponis Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
                   Belhaven College
Martha Krystaponis First Place, Poetry: “Puzzle”
                   Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Martha Krystaponis Third Place, Fiction: “A Fife Fishery”
                   Southern Literary Festival
Addie Leak  First Place, Creative Nonfiction: “The Luckiest”
              Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Lea Schumacher Third Place, Poetry: “Donut, also Doughnut, n.”
                   Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society

PUBLICATIONS
Martha Krystaponis “To Turn a Terrycloth Slipper into Glass”
                   Poetry, *Ruminate* (Issue #7)
Christina Miles  “Catamaran 452” and “I Am Not a Doctor”
                   Poetry, *Cedarville Review*
Lea Schumacher  “Seeing Red,”
                   Fiction, *Albion Review*
Rebecca Yantis  “Do You Remember?” and “Mind of a Child”
                   Poetry, *Cedarville Review*

INTERNSHIPS, STUDY ABROAD, AND SCHOLARSHIPS
Addie Leak  $5,000 Fine Arts Scholarship
           (Award Based on Creative Writing Submission)
           Institute for the International Education of Students
           Study in France, 2007/2008 Academic Year
Lea Schumacher Internship (Fall 2008)
               University Press of Mississippi
STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

ACADEMIC YEAR 2006-2007

AWARDS
Andrew Hedglin  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award  Belhaven College
Martha Krystaponis  Fifth Place, Poetry: “Tessie: Examinations of Belonging”  National Federation of State Poetry Societies
Addie Leak  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award  Belhaven College
Addie Leak  Second Place, Poetry: “Lullaby of Leaves”  Southern Literary Festival

PUBLICATIONS
Martha Krystaponis  “Tracing a Root to Lithuania”  Creative Nonfiction, *Ruminate* (Issue #5)
Addie Leak  “Letter to the Editor,” *Ruminate* (Fall 2007)
Stacy Nott  “Letter to the Editor,” *Ruminate* (Spring 2007)

ACADEMIC YEAR 2005-2006

AWARDS
Nickie Albert  Third Place, One-Act Play  “How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane”  Southern Literary Festival
Nickie Albert  Second Place, Creative Nonfiction: “A Tattler’s Tale”  Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Andrew Hedglin  Second Place, Fiction: “Under the Name of Saunders”  Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Cathy Karlak  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award  Belhaven College
Cathy Karlak  Third Place, Poetry: “Outages”  Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

PUBLICATIONS
Sarah Bolton  “Nana’s House”  Fiction, *Cedarville Review*
David Rahaim  “Belhaven’s Creative Writing Program: One Year Strong”  Feature Article, *Belhaven Tartan*
AWARDS

IAN BENNETT
First Place, Fiction: “The Sable”

ARROWHEAD (Mississippi College)

IAN BENNETT
Second Place, Creative Nonfiction: “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

“Near Death Valley”

GULF COAST ASSOCIATION OF CREATIVE WRITING TEACHERS

PUBLICATIONS

IAN BENNETT
“Black Tuesday,” Creative Nonfiction

ARROWHEAD (Mississippi College)

IAN BENNETT
“The Sable,” Fiction

ARROWHEAD (Mississippi College)

SARAH BOLTON
“The House of Bread”

FICTION, SPRING HILL REVIEW

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

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)
STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Jennifer Chajon  “Illusion,” Creative Nonfiction
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)

Jeremiah Maeda  “Gods Without Earthly Desires”
Poetry, The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)

ACADEMIC YEAR 2002-2003

PUBLICATIONS

Claire Ferris  “Pleni Sunt Coeli et Terra Gloria Tua”
and “At Ten,” Poetry
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)

Mickie Harwell  “And the Beat Goes On,” Poetry
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)

Cari Rittenhouse  “Reach,” Poetry
The Creative Spirit (Belhaven College)
REX BRADSHAW is from Manassas, Virginia and is currently a junior. He will graduate with a double major in both History and Creative Writing.

CHRIS BROWN calls Chattanooga, Tennessee home. He is a Visual Art sophomore with a minor in Creative Writing.

A. J. BUFFINET calls New Orleans, Louisiana home and is a freshman Theater major.

KIRSTEN CALLAHAN commutes from Pearl, Mississippi. She is a junior in the Creative Writing program.

DOUGLAS COKER, from Daphne, Alabama, is a senior. He is currently majoring in English.

ASHLEE DAVIDSON is from Huntsville, Alabama. She is majoring in Creative Writing and is a December graduate.

REBECCA DAVIS hails from Fayetteville, North Carolina. She is a junior Dance major with a Creative Writing minor.

YINGNAN (KALINA) DENG, from Greenville, Mississippi, is a 2010 graduate of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. She attends Wellesley College.

JONATHAN EASTMAN is from Bryan Georgia and is an English Major. He is also a December graduate.

ALEX FREEL hails from Macon, Georgia. He is a senior and majoring in English.
DERRICK FRENCH is an English major from parts unknown.

EMILY GOFF calls Tunica, Mississippi home. She is a sophomore Art major. She is also a Creative Writing minor.

ANNA MCNEESE, from Tyrone, Georgia, is a senior. She is majoring in Psychology.

JOY MCWILLIAMS is from Gainesville, Virginia. She is a junior majoring in Art.

ANNA REBMANN is from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. She is a sophomore and majoring in Theater Performance. She is also seeking a Creative Writing minor.

ETHAN SAMSEL hails from Clinton, Mississippi. He is a freshman who is double majoring in English and Political Science.

LEA SCHUMACHER hails from Essex Junction, Vermont. She is a senior with a Creative Writing major.

MIRANDA SHUGARS graduated from the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science in 2010. A resident of Vicksburg, Mississippi, she is a student at Harvard.

SARAH SWENSON calls Brookfield, Wisconsin home. She is a Creative Writing major as well as a senior.

SARAH VANBIBER calls Marshall, Texas home. She is a junior English major.

LAURA JOY VAN DALEN is from Greenville, South Carolina. She is a Creative Writing major and is currently a sophomore.

YI (ENA) WEI, a 2010 graduate of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, is enrolled in the pharmacy program at the University of Mississippi and lives in Starkville, Mississippi.

REBECCA YANTIS is from Zachary, Louisiana. She is a double major in both History and Creative Writing, and a senior.
If you would like to learn more about the BFA Degree in Creative Writing at Belhaven University, please contact the Chair of the Creative Writing Department as follows:

Dr. Randall A. Smith
Belhaven University
Creative Writing Department
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

E-mail: rsmith@belhaven.edu
Phone: 601-968-8996

Visit the creative writing program on the web at http://www.belhaven.edu/academics/Creative_writing/default.htm

If you would like to learn more about Belhaven University in general, please contact the Admission Department as follows:

Office of Admission
Belhaven University, Box 153
1500 Peachtree St.
Jackson, MS 39202

Phone: 601-968-5940
Toll-free: 800-960-5940
Fax: 601-968-8946
E-mail: admission@belhaven.edu

Visit Admission on the web at http://www.belhaven.edu/admission.htm

Visit Belhaven University on the web at http://www.belhaven.edu
CONTRIBUTORS

Rex M. Bradshaw
Christopher Brown
A. J. Buffinet
Kirsten Callahan
Douglas Coker
Ashlee M. Davidson
Rebecca L. Davis
Yingnan (Kalina) Deng
Johnathan Eastman
Alex Freel
Derrick French
Emily Goff
Anna McNeese
Joy McWilliams
Anna Rebmann
Ethan Samsel
Lea Schumacher
Miranda Shugars
Sarah Swenson
Sarah Vanbiber
Laura Joy Van Dalen
Yi (Ena) Wei
Rebecca Yantis

BELHAVEN UNIVERSITY