

litmus

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litmus

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South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities
15 University Street
Greenville, South Carolina 29601

Dedicated to:

*Scott's newly replaced knee
and all of our
amazing teachers
(in alphabetic order)*

*Cynie Cory
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Mamie Morgan
George Singleton
and
Ashley Warlick*

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Raven Campbell

The Cackle

Tell me about your father. His eyes, his laughter that echoes between
antmounds and skyscrapers. Where did he learn to laugh more than
baboons, louder, without a larynx?

*

Spiderwebs stick to your hair again. I swat at your temple. Laughter peals from
the river.

*

We are not of the Reedy. We are not of Belgium. We are not of Earth or the
Moon. Even if we escaped to the Kuiper Belt, we could still hear your
dead father, the baboons.

*

You become him. The laughter strikes you anywhere—drinking, sleeping,
hiking. You don't stop. Your face turns blue and your body red. You both
laugh even as you collapse.

*

In my bed, I could have sworn I heard him, his *hee hee hee ha ha ha* hovering
around my ear. He is anything mechanic, every blip, boop, whistle, rattle.
He takes a different tone each device. He is squeaks in the soles of my
shoes. Even barefoot, he laughs through the mud.

*

I would give anything for quiet. No whirs, no chimes, no beeps. An absence of
any.

daughter grieves in a corner

mother drops a white handkerchief
and anything that touches it
disappears into a place i don't know
haven't smelled
can't touch

where are you storing your perfection

father the cook last male on earth
has no face no head
thin stick for a neck

she likes him better
now he can't blab about
dragonflies grasses history
or argue

we the only survivors

no solid ground beneath us

i don't want to live
what remains

Carnivore Lily

Among spangled lilies
and algae, decompose.

Let the roots gouge the quicks
of your fingernails, drill the marrow

of your ribs. Teeth
will not remain.

Shoulders flinch to the bone,
roots twist their hooks into lungs.

Photosynthesize when your brain
forgets how to command.

The sun cannot shine
on remains of your

pupils, sleep on.
Forget what rest is.

This, the simple
diet of the lily.

The Bricks Reply

The soil wants to take you back. Breathe—its tendrils grope to taste:
your mother and uncle and boyfriend;
the poplar-shaded stream you escape to Sunday afternoons;
the blanks between second grade and age fourteen.
Ants take chunks out of your skin
while you gaze at the roofline of a church
and grass curls to shackle when you lie down.
Maples and willows wait for the moment
they can wrap their roots around you.
In the sun, creeping, your body meditate, they almost succeed.

K2, Cavern 779

the yeti huddles deeper
into his cave.

he listens. there's nothing
but the specks
of light thousands of meters
above his face,
silhouette of an angel.

but the wind that undulates
above the specks—
the sound of bells traveling
up and down, all that distance.
the constant ring, the scream, the heights
huddle him further, smaller.

the climber plummets
down a crevasse,
from heaven, crashes.
the yeti pokes
the man, but he
lies limp, contorted like
an m (even if the man
breathed, he wouldn't
see or feel).

the yeti buries
him among the other angels.
necessity makes him
his own pastor.

in the rigor of the burial,
the yeti counts his angels,
wonders if he has too many
pictures the last seconds of each fall
decides that he's blessed to guard
the corpses of angels, the sewers
of heaven.

Olvido

I forget
the place to the left of your heart
where your chest inverts.

I refuse to remember
sitting under a willow, tracing
the curl of your elbow.

You pile into a mountain of paper
covered in smooth off-white. Your
fingers don't poke through.

Language doesn't flick
the back of your teeth. It doesn't even
nip at your throat.

I hope you speak
again so I can remember
how *forgive* echoes.

Plea #6

Let me compress, mutilated
under the new green of willows, under
the twisted rope of branches, under
the cotton steel of clouds.

If I can, let me
disappear into the bark,
into the fishless river, into the bricks
of houses, only foundation left.

Let a boy, not initiated in the ways
of men, pursue the contour
of my face through
the house, through
the river, through
the willow, and mind—

permitting, let me show him
the world of ghosts.

Wake up with ticks

Seventy dots on the periwinkle.
He, alone.
Each tick takes his skin,
thirty square millimeter gashes.

He tears them off.
Ticks still bite as their bodies implode.

He wishes he could give his blood to something
other than himself,
other than cotton,
other than parasites.

Insulin-wiped,
he watches
a spider web above his head
from age six.

He understands
the fascination with dew
in the morning,
yet he cannot fathom
the vocabulary—ticks
siphon it away.

Jessica Chao

Disfigurement

Have you seen
his left shoulder-blade?
The scar, running

effortless
as shadows on street
corners that swallow the feeble lights and

dark
like the quiet that
comes before an uncontrolled storm.

His flaws are
unforgivable.
How does the surface

of that hazy sea
seem so smooth
when we all know

there's a downpour raging
underneath.
He runs a dusky hand

across his mark and hair.
*We can't all
speak at once.*

Revisions

We spent our lives searching
for people who were never there.

*I now see time like
I see a movie—
flat, illusionary.*

Your fingers clenched mine
and never left a mark,
smooth and dark
lost in shadows
between two worlds.

Life has only one dimension.

The letters from your mouth
collided into fiery explosions and
spilled over your shoulders,
spun a rope that covered your elbows.

*Is the glowing hair on that screen
always so lifeless, so emotionless.*

The Summer Intern

Room 321

A skinny man in jeans and a flannel button-up shirt sits on the edge of the bed, begging Mrs. Nancy for Demerol or morphine. Mrs. Nancy, a nurse tech, has short gray hair and is back in school for her nursing degree. She wears a different pair of colorful scrubs each day, bright patterns of puppies or hearts. His name is Mr. Roberts. When she refuses to give him Demerol, Mr. Roberts cries, smearing the dirt on his face with tears. He lies about how sick he is. The room smells horrible, like he hasn't showered in days. Mrs. Nancy asks me to get him a warm blanket and water.

When I give him a white blanket and a Styrofoam cup, we leave. Mrs. Nancy says she feels sorry for him because he's addicted to pain killers. I wish I could get him some medication so he'll stop crying, but I don't know what Demerol or morphine looks like.

Later, when Mrs. Nancy and I pass the room, Mr. Roberts is gone.

"What happened to him?" I ask.

"Probably back on the streets," she says, closing the chart she's holding and moving on to the next patient.

Room 324

A frail old lady, all bones, stares up at the ceiling without expression, without emotion. The air in Mrs. Brewer's room feels hopeless, like she's given up. The room smells sterile and ancient. Mrs. Brewer's chart indicates that she is from the Still Hopes nursing home, has dementia and is a no-code.

Mrs. Brewer's form states that she signed a paper exactly ten years ago indicating she would not prefer to be resuscitated. I wondered why Mrs. Brewer's children would allow this. I tried to imagine myself as an adult, resigned to my mother's wish to die without being revived, and found that I couldn't. Adults had power. They should know better than that.

I want to tell her not to give up, but Mrs. Nancy leaves the room, expecting me to follow. She is done taking Mrs. Brewer's vital signs.

Room 325

Mr. Johnson now has a stable heart rate after going into cardiac arrest. His blue shirt is ripped, exposing his large, dark chest. Periodic beeping sounds indicate his heart rate. Mrs. Nancy says Mr. Johnson was at Fuddrucker's when he had the heart attack, and that he also tested positive for cocaine. I want to put a blanket over Mr. Johnson—the room is a sharp, icy cold and nothing protects him.

Dr. Halbert, a short woman with short brown hair monitors the vital signs screen. I pick up a blanket from a chair beside the bed and step toward Mr. Johnson. I spread out the blanket like a cape and let it float down.

In a matter of seconds, the heart monitor beeps slower and slower until an alarm goes off. Dr. Halbert rushes over, shoves me back, and commences CPR. For a second, I'm upset that Dr. Halbert pushed me. Then, I hear bones cracking, and I'm not sure if the bones belong to the doctor or patient. Mrs. Nancy takes over the CPR, her main duty during cardiac arrests. Dr. Halbert yells orders and a nurse in the corner near me records the medications and treatments. A nurse injects three solutions into his arm—adrenaline and two others.

All the people in the room (with the exception of me) know exactly what they are supposed to be doing, even though the room looks like complete chaos. I want to jump in and do something, but I don't know how to help. I try to hand the nurse a syringe he can't quite reach, but my shaking hand drops the syringe back on the table.

After ten minutes, Mr. Johnson's heart rate speeds up again. Everyone leaves but his assigned nurse and doctor. I expected smiling faces and congratulations, but no one seems happy or relieved except me.

Room 327

The woman's short red hair sits on top of her head like a beret. She weighs approximately three-hundred pounds. Mrs. Nancy tells me Mrs. Fisher is frequently in ER because of breathing problems. The nurse anesthetist can't fit a breathing tube down her throat because her neck blocking the entrance. She is unconscious and not fully inhaling. Her heart rate drops, and I leave the room. It must be horrible, like drowning. I can't look at the nurse anesthetist poking and jabbing a tube at her throat. I can't look at Mrs. Fisher suffocating herself.

Room 404

A man having seizures is lashed onto the stretcher next to the hospital bed. The chains are similar to prison chains—there are leather straps tight around his wrists and ankles, but the chains still give him a limited range of motion.

His eyes roll, and his leg won't stop shaking. I'm scared to get close enough to find out the name written on his hospital bracelet. The paramedic says that he's been in and out of consciousness for a while now. The man wakes up and thrashes his hands and feet. The sound of chains beating against the metal railings of the bed fills my head. I back away to the door and watch as he helplessly tries to break free.

Mrs. Nancy says that he doesn't know where he is, something common among people who experience seizures. The leather straps dig at his raw wrists and ankles, drawing blood. I can't imagine what I would do if I woke up strapped to a stretcher with no idea where I was or how I got there.

Two security guards run in and help the male nurses restrain him. His purple, black, and forest green polo shirt is completely soaked with sweat from thrashing and screaming. The guards and nurses get him on the hospital bed,

inject some mild tranquilizers, and lash him tighter onto the bed. Everyone leaves. He stops moving, chest heaving, and lies there defeated. A security guard assigned to watch him settles outside the room with a cup of coffee.

Room 345

This room is empty right now. About a year ago, my mom and I sat here. The night before the last day of school, I unsuccessfully tried to re-pierce my ear. When I poked an earring into the half-grown-in hole, my ear started bleeding on one side. The blood had nowhere to go and my earlobe swelled three times its normal size.

Since my vital signs were normal, I waited for almost three hours. During the entire wait, my mom stared at my ear, asking every few seconds how I felt.

By the time we actually got to the room, the doctor only saw me for about five minutes. Despite reassurances from the doctor, my mom still insisted on extra antibiotics in case my ear became infected.

While we sat there in Room 345, my mom wanted the hospital to be all about me. But the doctor sent a nurse in, stepped out of the room, and completely forgot about me and my health as he went on to his next patient.

People only stay in ER for a few hours before they leave one way or another—a constant flow of humans and situations. Nothing is ever dull or calm. And for those two hours when we're all in ER together, everyone is connected, each of the patients, the interns, nurses, doctors. Then, the spell breaks and we move on, forgetting that Mr. Roberts returned to the street painkillers, that Mr. Johnson had yet another heart attack, that Mrs. Brewer just died quietly and alone. We move onto the next patient, the next life, and there is nothing to bind us to each other except the beating of a patient's heart.

Austin Gresham

Folly Beach

Winter; the ocean climbs a driftwood stair,
seagulls feign kites against the wind,
sand meets sky. Overcast. Elegant
as a woman's long black hair in the breeze.
Flames licking a tree's husky ankle.
Dark evergreen.

Oyster mongers in the marsh.
 Their lips chap.
 Their beards grey.
Their pale barnacled fingers bleeding
 a tired mud.
One takes a break,
cracks open a tear-shaped mollusk for himself –
salty to his tongue,
wet as a goldfish down his throat.

A moment's retreat.

The night is barren; dead with cold.
Empty beach. New moon Atlantic,
ghost crab low tide
a song I can hear but never sing.

Island Chain

Imagine
a viridian chain of islands,
curling like an old man's finger
in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

This is an aerial shot.

The sun winks off the water,
low-level clouds cast funeral shadows,
and white birds, if you can see them,
flock over a Jurassic mountain head.

*

I remember volcanoes,
the days of dust and spit
that turned the sky black
and the water gray.

The images dressed in tinsel:
a man holding a woman's jaw
between his thumb and forefinger
and her feeling nothing at all,

numb to the flames
and the hot sticky lava
that drew roots like scars down her back,
tribal tattoos around her kidneys.

*

Today,
a Polynesian rides his canoe to shore,
a woman cuts her hair with a knife,
and a girl makes flower necklaces by the surf.

Marsh Poem

My father roves the pluff mud like a lone sentry,
not an easy task
when underwater, the dark earth tightens around his legs;
submarine pressure, a coiling, invisible snake.

He extracts a crown of oyster shells,
grips them at their base like a bouquet of flowers.
Petals, whitened at their tips, reach toward Venus
some old symbol of beauty and lust—now planet,
engraved like a rhinestone into the night's sky.

And hammer from hip, my father beats at the arrangement,
spotting a single, tear-shaped blade at its core.
In the store, they're selects. Saltwater tongues
now tiny cups brought to a woman's lips
like a wineglass. The bivalve down her throat.

My brother and I watch from the boat
as my father continues to break the clusters apart,
tossing handfuls into an orange plastic crate.
The overcast sky is the color of his beard,
and I want to pick with him,
leave the graces of the stagnant, shallow water
and feel the pluff mud
 that sinking
that coil tighten around
my pants leg
like some great sucking mouth.

Meditation #9

In the middle of a slender V,
leaves twinkle like daytime stars,

Limbs

 Meet branches

 Meet bark

(Wrinkled sandpaper and viridian confetti)

I see the V flex its fissured fingers,
tighten to a pincer. A wrench. A snake's tongue.

How am I the center?

A dent between kidney and shoulder,

a rib shot. A gnarled fist in my side.

Clunky and out of place. A soda bottle

in a kaleidoscope tree. Leaves

streaming around me. Then falling.

This breeze whimpers morning.

Untold Truths of Sex Ed

Whenever people discuss their sex ed experience, they tend to share similar reactions. Most shake their heads and smile, embarrassed like they kissed their date too early in the night. I think it's the ages. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen. Middle school is such a superficial three years. Girls pledge allegiance to Britney Spears one day and then change their wardrobes to Marilyn Manson black when "pop punk" hits MTV. I was no better. I hung out with skateboarders, divided the school into poseurs and preps and wore a tattered fatigue jacket (which I made into a vest and added safety pins). Sex ed was the equalizer, the common ground, the place where I was just as ignorant as the next person beside me, and through that sensation of brainless unity came a strange understanding. That is, until I screwed it all up. And there was only one thing that could strip the feeling away: a dumb question on the subject of something Evan Boney's best friend's older brother leaked into the class about girls' periods while I wasn't there.

If it wasn't for a sexual education class, I don't think I'd ever get *the talk* from my parents. The only words I heard about the birds and the bees were, "Wrap it up!" from my step-mother and then, "If you have any questions just, uh, ask your mother," from my dad. In fact, the only way I learned about doing it was through the wonders of satellite television. One day in the summer of my fifth grade year, I was at my friend Jimmy's house playing a computer game. The night before, a storm knocked out the power in my neighborhood, zapping Jimmy's satellite TV and unlocking all the XXX channels that had been previously locked under parental control. While I played the Sims (a game about life for people too bored to live it) in the guest room/office, Jimmy and his friend explored the uncharted channels. They invited me into the living room. I asked what the couple was doing onscreen. Jimmy's exact words: "That's how your mommy and daddy made you."

Although, eleven-year-old Austin Gresham would've described the incident as nightmarish and haunting, I can say now that the experience, no matter how embarrassing it was, became a turning point in my young life. My friends and I began to replace fart jokes with crude Beavis and Butthead humor, and my idea that all girls were as chaste and pure as Disney Princesses proved quite wrong. In fact, I was wrong about lot things in the sixth grade: OCD wasn't a gang, collecting Japanese trading cards wasn't cool, and popular kids didn't wear Wal-Mart tennis shoes. Sex ed ended up being a relief, a place where I saw that almost everyone was as clueless as me.

My sex ed teacher, Coach Martin, yelled all the time, using the tone of voice that would be common on the sidelines of a football field or basketball court. And his voice wasn't just a yell but an easily imitated bark like something from a Rottweiler or Doberman. He was a good man, though, a strong man, a man who could step inside a classroom with fifteen middle school boys and

say testes and vagina without flinching, a man known for his vasectomy that he described in great detail. Year after year after year. Class became a gory emergency room show. With his sandpaper-smooth voice, Coach Martin told us twelve and thirteen year olds how cold the stirrups were against his calves, how the nurse discussed college football while she ran the shaving razor under hot water and how the numbing shots hurt worse than the actual operation (which he had to stay awake for). He had the entire group, including the experienced dunces who were old enough to drive to school, in his hands, crumpling us into a ball like an old math test.

So there I was, cringing and laughing alongside John Bell, who had slammed my back against a locker half an hour ago; Cory King, who remained at an unparalleled level of fashion by taking day trips to Atlanta with his parents; and Evan Boney, who hadn't acted quite the same since taking a whiff of the rubber cement in art class. That day, sex ed became this cheesy teen movie finale: freaks and geeks smiling with preps and poseurs. However, it didn't always turn out that way.

In the sixth grade, everyone in class had to describe their "dream girl." After this announcement, I remember a lot of weird hand motions and a few kids in the front row wondering if the girls had to do a similar exercise – what went on in the girls' class was always a mystery. At the time, my femme fatal was a Drew Barrymore clone: red hair, soft complexion and deep brown eyes, which I think I described as "sultry" even though I had no clue what that meant. At the end of the day, Coach Martin read a few descriptions aloud, leaving the authors' names anonymous. The class turned left and right in their desks to sniff out whose "dream girl" was being read, and, of course, Coach Martin read mine. My face turned more crimson than Drew Barrymore's flowing strawberry locks, but my peers didn't humiliate me for my sensual adjectives. Instead, they made fun because I didn't include my lady's cup size and measurements. "What's a cup size?" I asked. The room shook with laughter.

Sex ed had its hills and valleys. When I wasn't being laughed at, I was laughing with the group. This was a new idea to me but not as fresh as the thought of being on the same social and intelligence level as Well-Dressed Cory King and John Bell Bully. Years after the event, I can hardly recall the academic portion of the two week program. Some things can't be taught from a dated, paperback textbook. Only in sex ed could a class of superficial teenagers be lectured on vasectomies, quizzed about their dream girls, and connected by the equalizing bond of ignorance.

Malia Griggs

Dreams Are Like Diaries

after Donald Hall

At night, I dream of people who will never know.
Their faces are suggestions of faces,
Their bodies chalk outlines hanging in air.
They tell me secrets and I listen.

The morning is awkward. I cannot
Hold gazes, watch the clock instead.
I want truth. Four-minute dreams
Say all I could not think but feel.

Dreams are like diaries, whose spices
Linger in the pages of a book, hovering
Between words like strange birds,
Resolute as space moving forward.

tenno heika banzai

u.s. invaded okinawa
ryukyus jumped from cliffs
cried like forefathers
long live the emperor

>

she falls on her stomach
stone tears skin
whispers
nuchi do takara
life itself is a treasure

who dictates the light?

Excerpt from Letters to My Unborn Child

Dear Fred/Holly,

Your father says to tell you he hopes you're a boy, but you be anything you want to. This was my cousin, Lynn's, idea. I'll write this letter, seal it away, and give it to you when you're thirty. So—you've got a ways to go.

I can't imagine what you'll be like. I think you'll have Rob's nose; it's prominent. Been in his family for generations, he says. And you'll have dark hair because we both do. I hope you're handsome, but don't worry, we'll love you just the way you are. I'm excited about this. Rob and I are still thinking about names. If you're a boy, you might be Fred, but I'm hoping you're a girl so we can call you Holly. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is the only movie I feel like watching these days. It's such a sad movie. Holly living in that apartment with no furniture and that cat. Holly and her dead brother. Holly the escort.

Now, I don't mean to force this early, but do well in school. I'm begging you. I press the stereo next to my stomach every day, playing Bach, Mozart, Chopin. I read Dickens and Poe to you. *Hamlet*. Robert Frost. I've even taken up Calculus for you—bought some Math books. Admittedly, I'm not very good at it. Numbers have never made sense to me like they do to Rob, but if I keep trying, maybe I'll spark within you some will to succeed. I made As and Bs in school, but never went Ivy League or anything. I'm not saying you have to go to Harvard; nobody expects that. I just—well, it's hard for Rob and me now. He's working two jobs, and I used to work two, but since my pregnancy, I've cut down to one. Soon, I'll be at home. The point is—I should've worked harder. I should've joined all those community service clubs, learned how to play the clarinet, something. Maybe I would've gone out of state for school—to New York City, say—learned about all those great thinkers. Plato, Aristotle, you know. Now, I'm stuck here, reading Freud in bed, and it's taking me nowhere. I'm losing circulation in my legs, that's all.

I'm three months along now. Six left. Labor scares me. Lynn was in labor for almost eighteen hours. *Eighteen hours*. I was with her the whole time; she doesn't have a husband. I held her hand and felt like she was trying to squeeze juice out of me. She kept screaming randomly, sweat everywhere, telling me things like, "Never get pregnant!" and "I hate you, stupid baby!" I told her, "Shh, Lynn. You don't mean that. It's the drugs talking." But she scared me. I don't want to hate you, not ever.

The labor itself is gross. I've never seen so much of Lynn, nor do I want to again. It was bloody. Lynn screamed and screamed. Cried and cursed. Crushed my hand. And then this shriveled, little thing slid out. I assured Lynn her Floyd was the most *gorgeous* creature I'd ever seen, but between you and me, newborns aren't that cute. Everyone *oohs* and *ahhs* all over them, but they look puny. Like raisins. Still, I guess Floyd's birth was miraculous for all the blood

and gore. I know—Floyd—what kind of name is that? I tried to talk Lynn out of it, but she never listens to me.

Floyd's almost two now. Lynn used to bring him over when she got tired. It's hard being a single mother, so I'm lucky to have your dad. Floyd was a real crier. If I put him in his crib for a second, he'd wail and wail until I came back. He spit up on me once, and I didn't have a towel covering my shirt. It was my favorite shirt, too—the blue one I wore with Rob on our first date. Please don't cry too much. I know that's selfish to ask; crying's just how you communicate. But Lynn had puffy eyes all the time, and when I asked why, she'd say, "The baby." Kept her up nights. I'm not looking forward to those times.

Rob's more optimistic, but he's never in one place long enough to think about everything that's coming. He kisses me on the forehead and tells me not to worry. But I have to worry! There are so *many* things to worry about. He says six months is forever, but I know it's not. I know how time passes. One minute you're thirteen, arguing with your father about stupid stuff, and the next you're twenty-six, figuring out how you're going to deal with someone else's life. Don't get me wrong—Rob's great. He's working so hard right now, trying to support three. All I do is complain about my aching feet, watch *Tiffany's*, and eat ice cream. Which reminds me, don't turn into a sugar tooth like me. Eat your vegetables. At the rate I'm going, I'll look like a cheese danish when this pregnancy's over.

Well, you're going to love your father. I just—I don't know. Is it self-centered that I want him home with me? Our schedules rarely match. When I'm not vegetating, I'm at the grocery store, ringing customers up. That's my job. I used to work in the elementary school's library, too, but Rob said I shouldn't overexert myself. So, I sit on my stool and pass egg carton after Ritz cracker box over the scanner. Vegetables don't have barcodes, so I refer to a little chart for the lettuce heads and artichokes. People buy some interesting things. Last week, this woman wearing nothing but a sports bra and some biker shorts bought six giant bars of dark chocolate, three wheels of cheese, two cans of Reddi-Wip, and two pints of Ben & Jerry's Phish Food ice cream. Sometimes I make up stories about these people. That woman was probably some health nut who reached her breaking point. Or maybe she was pregnant like me. Anyway. The job's not so bad, but it makes me hungry a lot of the time, so when we're closing up, I buy a bunch of food with my employee's discount. Then, I go home, and while I'm watching the six o'clock news, I eat. Rob comes home around nine, after he gets off his shift waiting tables at the Starlite Diner. During the day, he works at Lowe's. He wants to work with computers, but he figures now's not a great time since we've got you on the way.

Hear that, baby? We're getting ready for you. Rob says he's going to build a crib, and we'll put it next to our bed. We live in an apartment now, but I know that'll change in the future. I get these real estate pamphlets in the mail, so I look at houses a lot. I don't have anything specific in mind yet. Two

bedrooms—three maybe. Kitchen. An office for Rob, a space for me. Back and front yards. White picket fence.

You're going to be happy. I watch these primetime specials about abused children—children with cracked faces who come from drug-infested homes. Maybe it's the hormones, but those specials make me cry all over the place. I could never treat my own kid like that.

Oh, great. I'm tearing up. Look, let me finish this letter another time, okay? You understand. I love you.

Sincerely,
Laura (Mom)

Silence

“Some soul is passing over,” my grandmother said.

We were sitting in her kitchen, waiting for the water to boil.

“What do you mean, Grandma?” I asked.

“I mean just that,” she said. “People die every minute. So, in the afternoon, I sit for a while and think about all the souls passing over. If you’re quiet, Lena, you can hear their spirits rising. Listen.”

I listened, but could only hear the bubbling of the water and the low hum of the refrigerator. My grandmother closed her eyes and folded herself in her quilt.

“Did you hear them?” she asked when she opened her eyes.

“Not really,” I said, playing with my tea bag.

“You will someday,” she said.

I spent afternoons with my grandmother, while my parents worked. She picked me up from school in her wide, cushy car. We’d go for ice cream or take a drive through the neighborhood. My grandmother liked waving at her neighbors and critiquing the state of their gardens.

“Shameful,” she’d say. “Look at all those wilted pansies.”

She’d park the car by the playground and ask me about my day. Sometimes, she’d tell me stories about her life—about her childhood, her travels with my grandfather, about being a single mother to my father and aunt after my grandfather died.

“Were you scared, Grandma? When Grandpa was gone?” I asked.

“No, I wouldn’t say so,” she said. “There’s pain everywhere—it would’ve been selfish for me to be scared when so many other people were suffering.”

Then she’d change the subject. We’d drive home, and I’d fall asleep to the rhythm of the car.

My mother’s sister, May, was the first death I experienced. I was nine years old. Aunt May was in a car accident late one evening, driving in the rain. Aunt May’s husband insisted upon an open casket. Her body was displayed in the parlor of a funeral home amid clusters of somber carnations.

“Oh,” was all my mother said. She buried her head into my father’s shoulder and he helped her sit down. I was left staring at Aunt May. She wore a lilac suit with a sprig of fake flowers pressed in the suit pocket. Her face was over-powdered, her lips a vibrant pink. I realized this wasn’t Aunt May. It was her shell—the left behind of what she once was.

My mother didn’t leave her room or speak for two weeks. My father and I alternated between bringing her meals. She’d watch the TV listlessly, comedies only—nothing sad. My father made sure of that. She didn’t laugh.

She got better, but it took time. She didn’t talk about Aunt May.

My grandmother died when I was fifteen.

I visited her the afternoon of the day she died. We drank tea by the window. I asked her about her yard.

“The leaves will fall soon,” my grandmother said. “This is my favorite time of year.”

The clock chimed five.

“Grandma—” I said.

“Shh, Lena. The souls,” she said.

She shut her eyes. She looked older than I remembered. Wrinkled hands and cropped, colorless hair. Another shell of sorts—like my Aunt May’s—but the breath of one about to depart. Through her fading skin, I could almost see her heart.

“Grandma,” I said. “What do you hear? When the souls pass?”

“Silk,” my grandmother said. “Silk, air, water. I hear silence.”

When my mother told me my grandmother had passed in her sleep, I listened to the silence. I spread myself on my bed, arms outstretched.

I could hear the music from another room, and then—a slow cool, an awakening, a stream of space and planets, a beating of wings, silence—absolute silence.

Solitaire

While my parents admired Nick's aquarium
and the floors in his kitchen,
I, the nosy ten-year-old,
wandered down the hall to his room.

Nick lived alone in a steel-plated house,
his only companion
a snake named Clara.

A birdwatcher
like my father, a lover of nature.

Used to wind down boardwalks
every Saturday, fingers focusing
binoculars with ease.

He wore Texas and wrote me e-mails
that ended with sweet dreams.

Inside his room, I listened to the gurgling
of his waterbed,
watched the 3-D clock bounce
across his computer screen.

I jiggled the mouse,
ready for a round of Solitaire.

Time disappeared,
and there she was:

a young girl, twelve maybe,
stretched across a grassy patch,
nothing on but a straw hat, yellow hair
tickling breasts which almost weren't.

My mother leaned into the room,
ginger ale in hand. *Whatcha doing?*
She stopped by the computer,
made a small noise and pulled me away.
Nick came then, shook his head. *It's art.*

But I wanted to go,
wanted to leave the sinking bed
and the snake coiled in her glass cell,
dreaming of dark,
sweet things.

Shannelle Mills _____

Boy

Tonight, while you sleep,
I will carry our bed to the river.
As we push out,
I will kiss your fingernails,
and sing you awake.

Monologue from *Ivory*

CHRIS

When I got the call, I was more relieved. It was midnight and I had just laid my daughter down to bed, and the phone rang. I picked it up—it was my sister, telling me that mom had tried to kill herself, and she was in critical condition in the hospital. I hung up the phone, packed a suitcase, told my wife where I was going, and my daughter I loved her. I started my car, pulled out of the driveway and left without even thinking about where I was going. Because the thing is, I'm not even surprised or even sad that it happened. Because my whole life I've waited for this day. I've waited for the call where I'd find out how and why my mom finally decided to off herself. She had been threatening since I was a little kid. I can remember prying a steak knife out of her hand, and leaving her notes in the dash of her car, begging her not to run into a tree like she always threatened. And she never did. And after years and years of it, I just became numb of it. It was like a routine. Something tragic or not-so-tragic would happen or there'd be a fight. She'd go to her room and cry—if no one came in to see if she was all right, she'd cry louder. Several minutes later she'd run out to the kitchen and make a big scene of looking for a knife, or some pills, or her keys. After awhile it became more of a chore for my sisters and me to go and save mom's life. We'd be upstairs after a fight, and we'd hear her, and play rock-paper-scissors, to see who had to go down and deal with her. I usually lost. Sometimes on purpose. So, when the call came, I was almost proud that she finally did it. She finally did what she had been talking about for years. But when I saw her, lying in that bed hooked up to all those machines, I couldn't help but hope to God she wasn't alone. I hope she wasn't thinking about all of those nights no one came to listen to her cry and see if she was okay. I couldn't help, but at that moment, blame everyone but myself.

Lisa

I've learned five kids
can change a life
the way
a broken leg does
a dancer or athlete.
You wanted to be a
French interpreter
work in the twin towers.
In a way, we saved you—
from windows and planes.
When your belly
swelled, you didn't think
of September, or ash,
or geometry collapsing.

Please leave the door
open while you sleep.
When I pretend to get
water, I want to count
each breath.

Monologue from *Mania*

OWEN

I'm pretty sure I inherited it. I mean, I know I did. My mom had it. Her mom had it, and her mom's mom had it. I remember as I got older it either became more prevalent to me or the symptoms got worse. One or the other. I remember when I was younger and she would be in her mania states. She was like super-mom. Baking cookies, letting friends spend the night, cleaning the house. It was all really great. But I got older you know? And then I started seeing what was really happening. How much it was affecting her. She uh, she would do things like beat my brothers and me. And I don't mean a swat because we missed curfew. I mean, she would throw us against walls, break bones and stuff. But she would go through these phases like that—smacking us around, and then smothering us with love, then staying in bed for days, doing nothing. I used to get so mad at her. I just wanted her to be normal, you know? I remember this one time. She was going through her depressive state, and she was just lying in bed. And I hated her because she had given me a black eye a couple of days before when she was beating me. And it was right before a dance... I think it was prom. And I just stood over her bed screaming at her, wanting her to be normal so badly. I just screamed at the top of my lungs, "I hate you, you crazy bitch. I hate you." And the whole time, she just lied there, she didn't even flinch. And then I started having mania fits of my own. And I thought, "Oh man, this is bad." And I realized exactly what she was going through. I just wanted to hold her forever you know? Just cut out her brain or something to make it all right. But I couldn't for her anymore than I could myself.

Uproot

But slowly, you let the pomegranate juice,
run down your chin. And onto your shirt.
Which, you never really liked
much in the first place.

Do you remember that night?
My hair, long as a catfish.
Yours, tied down like a near rotted artichoke.

That was the night, you told me about
Chinese kitchens, used bookstores, slip-and-slides.

It was a life I couldn't fathom.

Was that the night you decided
to oil your chain and call it quits?
When you chose the Turnpike
and frayed white rope?
When you left a damp Altoid
on my pillow,
that I have since recycled?

Last night I set my hair on fire, thinking of you.

Urgency

Light the furnace quickly.
Burn away these bones.
Smoldering,
I will try and forget
the way your knees bent.
Tomorrow, your elbows.
Until finally,
no more joints
connected to my heart.

Why Aren't You Smiling?

Two days after the hospice nurse delivered the bed, her husband, Greg, ordered purple silk sheets. After his wife's diagnosis with cervical cancer, and her refusing treatment seven weeks ago, he tried his hardest to make his wife's final months as comfortable as possible. Every day he picked fresh roses from their garden. He washed her body with a sea sponge and brushed her teeth and hair. When he did these things, she cried. Sometimes as she fell asleep he stayed up and traced Orion's belt on her face. He did this to try and ward off thoughts of black umbrellas and marble epitaphs.

Sometimes his wife woke up at midnight crying out for warm water or a kiss on the cheek; just so that she knew he had not left her.

One night as he was just beginning to enter sleep, he heard a soft muffled cry. The tears were child-like and sounded like somebody trying to laugh through cotton. He could tell she was trying not to wake him. He stood up and walked over to the silver bed. Her hands were covering her face and the pillow was a darker purple from her tears. He took three of her fingers and slipped them into his mouth. He held them there for a few seconds before releasing them slowly, and kissing each one.

"My face," she whispered. "That's why I won. My face."

Her tears were harder now, making it difficult for her to talk.

He nodded his head and tried to keep his own tears down.

* * *

Twelve years earlier, she had been a beauty queen. That was how they first met. He was a judge because his father owned a cattle company that made six figure donations to the Ms. Texas pageants. When the judges met in the large blue room to discuss the winner, it was no question who it was going to be. It was her face. They all knew it, but wouldn't let on that that was the only reason for their decision. She had the most beautifully striking face of any other girl in the pageant. It was soft and staccato at the same time. Her cheekbones and mouth stood out from the rest of the tanned blonds so significantly. When she smiled, her plump lips extended from one cheek to the other and the judges would sigh quietly.

* * *

He trained himself not to cry in front of her.

"You're still beautiful," he told her.

"I haven't showered myself in weeks, I haven't brushed my own teeth, I haven't even put on lipstick." She covered her face. "Please don't look at me. Let me sleep."

He kissed her hands and sat on the edge of his bed. He rubbed his forehead several times, before getting his coat and keys and walking out of

the door. He drove to the twenty-four hour drug store and picked up the red plastic basket and walked to the cosmetics section. All of the brands of blushes, powders, and mascaras intimidated him at first. He wasn't sure which to get of anything now that her skin was so pale and lifeless. He took every color of foundation, lipstick, eye shadow, blush, mascara, concealer, eyeliner, and bronzer that he could fit into the basket, before walking toward the front counter. The teenage boy working scoffed as he dumped the contents of the basket out.

“Your total is two-hundred-twelve dollars and eighty-eight cents.”

The man wrote a check and carried the basket to his car.

* * *

He drove back to his saggy house and quietly opened the door. On his way to the bedroom, he stopped in the kitchen, just to remember some nights when they would turn on the radio and dance around the kitchen, while pork chops popped in the frying pan—neither of them saying much of anything. The man leaned against a counter and wondered if their love would have ever run short if they had twenty or thirty more years. He wondered if ten years from now she would run away with the pool boy or he would sleep with his secretary before serving her divorce papers. He shook his head and walked back into his room. He stared at his bed. If he had to pick the loneliest feeling in the world, it would be sleeping in a bed made for two alone. He dumped the makeup on his sheets and stared at it for several seconds. A bottle of foundation rolled onto the floor. He picked it up, and held it up against his wife's skin. He hated seeing her like this. Just a year earlier they were discussing Christmas presents, children, and cheese—not IV drips, family plots, and life insurance. Looking at the makeup scattered around his linen sheets, he realized that makeup wasn't going to change anything. His wife was going to die.

* * *

He picked up the red and white bag from Walgreen's and scooped the makeup back into it. He thought of the mornings when he would wake up and watch her spend thirty minutes doing her own makeup, or the way she would never leave the house, not even for the newspaper, without some sort of powder on her face. He walked into the bathroom and dumped the makeup into the sink, turning on the water. The water leaked in through the lids. The blush and powder became runny and pink, and ran into the skin. The way the red mixed with white, it reminded him of the pageant gown she was wearing the first time they kissed. After she was crowned Ms. Texas, he stood beside her car for six hours, waiting for her. When she did, he had to convince her that he wasn't a stalker. That night, they went to a bar and watched the UT versus Texas A&M football game. She drank beer, and shot pool like she came from a trailer park, but crossed her legs and sat up straight like she was too good,

even for a prince. That night, he drove her home and wrote down her phone number on his arm with red lipstick.

She moved in two weeks after the Ms. America pageant. After she lost to Ms. Pennsylvania. He sat beside her then too, comforting her and telling her that it wasn't the end of the world. It seems he's spent the majority of their marriage holding her in some way or another.

He turned off the light in the bathroom and walked into his bedroom. For a second, he wondered what it would have been like if he did wake her and show her the makeup he bought. She would have smiled and thanked him and they would laugh if lipstick stuck to her teeth, or blush wandered into her hairline. They both would know however, that it was all fake—she was only doing it for his sake.

Instead, he laid his head on his cotton pillow and closed his eyes, imagining a time when he would have no need for anything at all.

Joshua Moore

About My Father

18 months seems like
Forever
I'm missing him now

He hasn't left the states
Yet
He's in Mississippi

I will make it
And
So will he

I just have to remember
Soldiers
Are in God's hands too

Blues Song

Hair an autumn brown mixed with streaks of gray, my grandmother rocks back and forth in a rustic rocker. Swaying with ease like pen strokes, she rests her eyes. The rick-rock or crick-crack of the chair bristles through the house quiet. Rocking back and forth, my grandmother hums in her sleep blues songs of brown people. I'm capitalized by her movements, decisive. The sun sprays demonstrative beams of cherry-almond rays onto her skin. She opens her eyes, the sound of a phone ringing, and I am too young to answer.

Coca-Cola Filled XTC

she speaks in dreams
of making it big

while she sleeps
down the bay

of biscuit fears
womanizing herself

with the thoughts
in the mines

of many minds
of perverted men

her mother always said
don't speak too fast

and don't sleep with no boys
but she always chose

to be part of the other
she always spoke too fast

and slept with many boys
she crept through the night

and shifted through the winds
her skirt up-lifting

thinking she's Marilyn
Monroe your boat

gently down the stream
of Coca-Cola filled XTC

guess who
just gave birth to a song

named him Sky
because she longed to get high

now her days of Coca-Cola
are something closed
she went down the lake
to see the medicine man

she didn't have any money
and she wanted to get lifted

Genarlow Wilson: 2007

When I first got here
My mother could only afford Vibe
I asked for some Cornel West
Some Henry Louis Gates, or Tavis Smiley
You know something to keep me educated
Something to keep me learning
I was thankful for the magazines
I didn't force my mom to buy no more
The real reason
I didn't want Vibe to remind my mom
Of my present condition: cell mate 71-06654
But I wanted her to hold on to the past
Hold on like that Christian song she would play in the mornings before church
I know my scholarship to Duke still hangs on her wall
One day, I'm going to get out of here
I believe God will work it out.
Duke will accept me for me; I hope
I'm not some statistic that people can blame hip hop for
I'm not some rapist, having sex with women against their will
We were both young, consenting, and under the influence
I won't allow for me to be a burden
To my mama, I want to scream
I see her smile everyday

Grandma

But birds don't fly in springtime
Was her reply for everything
Dealing with nature

And how the sky looked purple
On some nights
Black on others

She hated the moon
Loved the stars
God's eyes she called them once

She told me stories
About emancipation
The freedom riders

Riding on buses
When she was a little girl
Clutching fake pearls

Regrets

few things I regret
you should feel proud
that you are one of them

I align your face
 on my wall a picture
I won't remember never
but always

I climb against
your skin the feel
of which I hate

I tell you
 close your eyes
and listen to my
 tongue

Austin

Divorce.

I don't
want to know
about life
at a young age.

Saying it is.

A freeing
experience.
Awesome red eyes
of flowers
growing out of
graves.

Wherever you
go
it changes.

Eucalyptus. morning
relief
after you
crash the wave.

Conversations

Synthetic connotations
burn traces
whip lashed ears
simple yet effective
wordy spitballs
fall close but lost
of the mouth
dangling from the lip.

Diction

Ataraxy [at-ər-ak-si] n. *Freedom from disturbance of mind or passion; imperturbability.*

I stared at the ceiling for hours, interpreting the shadows of the tree that grew in the back yard. A hand, a rake; I couldn't sleep. My brother could sleep his whole life away if we let him, but my mother shared my restlessness. On a couple occasions, I tapped on her bedroom door. She was never asleep when I snuggled into bed beside her. As much as I loved the sound of her soft breathing and the smell of vanilla in her pillows, I stayed in my own bed most of the time. I didn't want to be in my parents' room when my dad came home; I already knew his drinking patterns. If he didn't come home by one in the morning he wasn't coming home at all. When he did come home, the whole house would know. I never took the risk of seeing him hit her, but I always heard it anyway. My mother and I both slept a little easier on the nights he didn't come home.

Dactylonomy [dac-tyl-on-o-my] n. *The art of counting on the fingers.*

I was seven when I found it interesting to count things. Walking down a street, I kept count of trees, cars, squirrels, birds or anything that was ten or less. Ten was my limit. Once I hit ten, I stopped counting. I knew numbers bigger than ten; I just didn't care about them as much. Ten seemed like a big enough number and I was able to hold that number. I could see the number in my hands even though the objects were not actually there. If eleven kids were standing in a group, talking about the world ending the next day, I wouldn't care. But if one of them happened to have only ten teeth in his mouth, I thought it was the coolest thing in the world. I felt betrayed by the world when it was time to learn multiplication. My fingers could no longer aid me in my attempts to stay a minimalist with numbers. "What are you going to do when you turn eleven?" asked my mother. I just shrugged my shoulders. Maybe I could stay ten forever like Peter Pan, I thought. But when I think about it now, I could've said that I'd just wear flip-flops until I turn twenty-one.

Epeolatry [ep-e-al-a-tri] n. *The worship of words.*

Whenever I wasn't in the mood for school, I would invent a word that described my sudden sickness. Once, I suffered from Cyclophosis. My mom, yawning with her arms crossed, asked me for the symptoms. I explained that one of my eyes could not stay open for a long period of time. "Sometimes, the virus even switches from eye to eye. It's highly contagious," I said, rubbing my eyes. I'd practiced my diagnosis in the bathroom mirror that morning. My mom looked at me for a moment and then suggested eye drops. I hated eye drops. She knew it. My mother went into the bathroom. She emerged with

a tiny plastic bottle. I tried to say something but it came out unintelligible as she slowly approached me. None of the words I thought of (made up or real) stopped her from holding me down and putting the forbidden liquid into my squinted eyes. Two drops into the “infected” eye and one in the eye at risk. “Better?” she asked, unpinning me from the couch. Our living room was a red, green and white blur accented by the brown form that was my mother. I nodded, blinking. There was no need for a second dose of what I considered water torture.

Catoptromancy [ka-top-troə-mansi] n. *Divination by means of mirrors.*

My mother’s full-length mirror was one of the most powerful things in the world when I was a kid. The wooden frame gave it a magical appearance. It would’ve been pretty cool to see a ghostly face appear and tell me I was the fairest of my fourth grade class. But instead, I positioned the mirror in front of my mom’s bed so I could see myself fly like a superhero. I draped my brightly colored Care Bears blanket around my shoulders and jumped off the bed landing onto a bean bag chair on the floor. Sometimes, I wore my mother’s high-heeled shoes along with a dress and become a classy jazz lady, like the ones my father listened to on the radio. I often traded in the shoes for a hat to become a paper boy on the run from dogs, or I wrapped a towel around my head and became a genie. My mom always made the same wish when she found me doing my impersonation of a genie. First, she rubbed me like a lamp and then kissed me three times for good luck. “I wish I had my daughter back,” she said.

Hobbledehoy [hob-ol-de-hoi] n. *A clumsy or awkward youth.*

Grace was not one of my finer points. My mother never dragged me to ballet lessons or balanced a book on my head. I climbed trees and jumped ditches, both of which involved me falling. I was okay with a little dirt and blood; my mother and father weren’t. “You’re a girl,” they said. “You have dolls. Leave the dirt for the boys.” I never actually broke anything but there was always the fear that I would, and they’d be nowhere around to help. My father made me change my school clothes once I set foot in the house. He figured if I insisted on getting dirty, I should at least wear something old. One day, when he wasn’t home, I decided I didn’t have to change my clothes. I’ve been ditch-jumping forever. I’m really good at it. He’d never know, I thought as I walked toward the trench-like territory I’d conquered so many times before. After my fifth fantastic feat, I was going to attempt a running jump. I ran about six feet before tripping over a tree root and falling flat on my face into the muddy, trash-littered ditch. I lifted my head. The wet soil made a soft crunch in my mouth; I spat a couple times. A small piece of glass from a broken Heineken bottle sliced open the thumb of my right hand. I got to my feet and climbed out of the ditch, spitting. My father’s car still wasn’t in the yard. I felt the slosh in my sneakers as I ran into the house. I kicked them off. I had just enough time to

shower, change, and throw my filthy evidence in the washing machine. My father's voice rang in the hall, just as I put a Band-Aid over my regret. I stepped out of the bathroom in time to see him pick up my muddy sneakers.

Malapert [mal-a-purt] adj. *Boldly disrespectful or impudent.*

My father was in prison for at least a year before my mother entered a drug rehab center. I was left to live with my aunt. My cousin, her daughter, always tried to pick a fight with me. The reasons for her provocations were never significant: a doll, who rode shotgun, etc. I usually shrugged off her snide actions and comments. That is until she pushed me off her trampoline. Then, I couldn't sit back and ignore her anymore. With dirt in my hair and my back hurting, I stood up. My cousin was slightly bigger than me but at that point, I didn't care about size. I climbed back onto the tattered, rusted trampoline and attacked her, pulling her hair. She screamed. My aunt came to her rescue by grabbing my arm. She pulled me off the trampoline and into the house. A word never left either of our lips as she sat me in a corner of the room my cousin and I shared. She left the room, shutting the door behind her. I sat in the stillness of the room for a few moments before standing up. I walked over to where she sat in the living room. "You're not my mother," I said. She looked at me for a second, then without hesitation smacked me across the mouth. I touched my lips as the tears began to fall. It hurt of course, but I cried because it caught me by surprise. She didn't yell, she didn't cock her hand back, she probably didn't even think about doing it. Her hand just came straight at me. I never tried talking back to her again.

Mulligrubs [mul-ig-rubs] n. *A state of depression or low spirits.*

On July 23, 2001, when I was twelve, I became a foster child. At that age, you don't really know who you are, but I did know this: I stood out from everyone else in my class. If a friend asked me to spend the night, I couldn't because there was always a liability issue hanging over my head. It didn't matter that I could fall off the monkey bars and crack my skull open at school, as long as I didn't do it at someone else's house. When Parent's Night rolled around, I saw the same parents over and over again, but I had a different "parent" every time – someone I didn't resemble in the slightest. I ran out of names: "This is my Aunt Sally, my Uncle George, my Cousin twice removed." I tried my hardest not to let the words escape my lips: "This is my foster parent." I wasn't always proud of where I'd been. Naïve didn't even describe what it was that made me feel like I would never amount to anything and "real" parents were everything.

Panglossian [pan-gloss-uhn] adj. *A person who is optimistic regardless of the circumstances.*

The way I see it, things could've been worse.

Rob a Bank

(for Joshua Moore)

Uncertainty,
loves what he does
the sun goes down,
sturdy, beautiful, majestic
invokes fear to dance
into a person
unlike anything else,
meager,
just weak
secretly
has so many meanings.

Book Lungs

We used to run through the Church
of the Advent cemetery in the rain;
my shoulders swelled under costume
jewels, old gold, moon veins ran
through your braids and into the ice fields
on the edge of town, where the yelping
old men sat around their chessboards and accordions
to clear the lungs, and the strange icons
someone leaned against the chapel door
thawed into our watery hands.

Poor Devil

An essay in dream sequence

SUSANNA

I find out about my grandfather's suicide from the index of *American Painters*. "Town officials found Dillwyn Parrish in his father's pool house," I read, "with a Magnum in his hand and a bullet in his temple."

My knees press against Colin Diver's marble-topped desk. My parents gave Colin a case of church bazaar artichoke relish, so he's looking after me while they snorkel and eat pumpnickel bread on the Sea of Marmara. I want to make Jell-O, but all I see on Colin's shelves are cans of black beans and some books he left in stacks during one of his opium dreams. He sits at the kitchen counter stirring a mug of coffee and looking over papers from his Political Science class. He says he's editing notes for a lecture on *Faust* and *Scenes That Apply to the de Gaulle Administration*. Nobody ever talks about my grandfather, so the only times I see him and speak with him are in dreams. I ask Colin if he has any Jell-O and if he's seen my grandfather Dillwyn since January. He says he hasn't.

DILLWYN

Dillwyn hasn't worn the linen suit since my grandmother left him, eight years before, for her childhood sweetheart. He wears the suit this morning and hums as he walks through the gravelly field on the edge of his father's land. I sit in a lawn chair by a patch of white zinnias and read a book he left in one of our kitchen cabinets. "Poor devil," I mutter, and count the sand burrs on his white pants. Dillwyn's temples have gotten grayer since the last time I saw him, January in the Church of the Advent cemetery.

"How about this?" he asks, and waves an advertisement. It reads: "14 Point Lawn Analysis".

"Fourteen?" I ask. "The good Lord had only ten."

FIRAT

"Dillwyn ran a hand down the spine of his motorcycle and turned to look at his sixteen year old bride. He asked her to fix him a margarita in one of their blue glasses from the Sonora Desert," Firat reads from a pamphlet on the second floor of the Pine Street library. At the circulation desk, he checks out the new novel by Colin Diver: a history of the Indo-European subgroups as told through the letters of Confederate deserters in the American Civil War. Firat calls me on the red telephone in the library lobby and tells me that the Anatolian subgroup's fall into extinction had nothing to do with his eighteenth birthday party in the Sea of Marmara, nothing to do with the girls in red and the American liquor. Firat says he wants to know why Dillwyn had to shoot himself in the head when the gray was beginning to look so good.

COLIN DIVER

I stand in Colin's kitchen, by his refrigerator, and ask if he can spare a dish of orange Jell-O. "Jell-O's easy," he says, and pushes his horn-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. "What I want to know is whether or not you'll dance with me. Make an old man happy."

"Dance?" I ask. "My feet may as well be made of paper."

"So much the better," he says. "I'll teach you the Madison."

"My grandfather wouldn't approve," I say.

"Oh, go on," he says. "Then draw me a pair of bifocals. Right here." He hands me his tax return. "On the back. I'll take you for a bagel."

As a little boy, Colin caught frogs with Firat down by Lawson's Fork Creek and made shoebox dioramas of the plays of Aristophanes, with clothespins for actors. This is how he came to be the preeminent political scientist of the South Carolina piedmont.

NEIL SUTTON

Colin and I pull in to the parking lot of Broadway Bagels at ten minutes to seven. Neil Sutton leans against the cash register, and I ask him for an Everything bagel, toasted and without any cream cheese. Neil is just my age and used to sit with me in seventh grade science class. One day in January, before the eighth grade's papier mâché reproduction of the *Nike of Samothrace* went up in the school lobby, he asked me if I'd go on a date with him. I told him I wouldn't and continued to read from my *Ecce Romani* Latin reader. Neil's sun-browned knees knocked against the science table and he wrote: "Susanna is a sand burr" in black Sharpie on the wood-grain finish.

I lean against the counter in Broadway Bagels and read the menu on the wall behind Neil. "Hello ladies," he says. Colin turns around. His horn-rimmed glasses are slightly askew. Neil tells me if you're human, you've got to wear shoes in Broadway Bagels, and I'm no exception.

DILLWYN

print of foxhunts on his mantelpiece, soundtrack to doctor zhivago on vinyl, dostoevsky's short stories translated by david magarshack in the everyman's library edition

tonight we will not talk about why alexander hamilton was better than aaron burr

tonight is for bifocals and platform gravel and for reading publius james madison

SUSANNA

Dillwyn got rid of January by getting rid of himself. There's still a stain on the rug in the pool house when I read the indexes of all the books in Colin's living room. *American Painters* is the only one that says anything about the

Magnum and the dried blood on his left temple. Colin dances around the suicide after I ask him for the dish of orange Jell-O. He tells me Dillwyn didn't like duels very much, that he looked at the world through a thin layer of mud. At some point in my second or third dream that night, Dillwyn shows up on a train platform made all of granite, in his white suit pants. He says that we reenact the plays of Aristophanes on a daily basis, nothing more than clothespin actors in shoeboxes. Dillwyn drags his foot across the gravel of the platform and I see that he and I and the rest of the world each live in our own diorama.

An excerpt from the short story *A Word of Truth*

I was so small back then – the shortest kid in my first grade class. Every morning, my dad plopped me on the bathroom counter so I could see him combing my hair before I went to school. His big fingers fighting to untangle my thick blonde waves.

That year, the newsworthy hurricane of the season spun right past us, harmless as a sun shower. Our roof was sprayed with a thin sheen of rainwater and a few gusts while as a town twenty miles north of us got demolished. Afterwards, I remember my dad peering through the blinds at the breeze blowing the darkened trees, the crickets chirping, and the cloudless night sky – disappointed. My mother, who had been clanging around in the pantry trying to re-organize our canned goods, seemed to read his mind. More likely, they had a conversation before I entered the room.

“Why don’t you go to bed, sweetie,” my mom said to me.

I told her I wanted to stay awake with them; the doomsayer weathermen on TV had rattled me. My mom and dad glanced at each other – she, wiping her damp hands on her jeans, and he, arms crossed and leaning against the window across the room.

“We’re going to clean up a bit,” my dad said to me. “Get everything that’s yours out of the living room and the dining room. Put it in your room and shut the door.”

On my bedroom floor I heaped eight Uno cards; a picture book; and a stuffed bear named Candy, after me. My dad, who had followed me, led me outside by the hand. The dewy grass itched at my bare feet. The ground faded into blackness outside the pale streetlamp’s glow, and I hoped an unseen frog wouldn’t jump on me. I could hear my mom moving around the house, opening up windows all around the perimeter, until she joined us on the front lawn.

Dad walked to the hose, which was wound up on a plastic hoop fixed to the house, and he gave me the nozzle to hold while he unraveled it. I twisted the silver nozzle experimentally. A dribble of water glazed my hands.

“Good thing the hose wasn’t on,” Dad said. “Otherwise you’d be all washed up!” He laughed and poked me in the tummy. “Go see Mommy,” he said. I gave him the hose, darted over to my mother, and when I turned around again he was standing on his toes to spray water directly into all the windows.

I gasped and took a long breath to yell, but my mom shushed me. We were all quiet for a long time; filling the house with water must be slow work, I thought. He went to every window and pressed the nozzle to the screen, splattering his button-down shirt with hundreds of tiny droplets. It was a warm night, but I still worried he might catch cold. And he had to stand on tiptoe every time – sometimes I still forget how short he is, for a man. After a while, he finished and put the hose away again.

“Why’d you do that, Daddy?” I asked his back as he opened the front door for us.

“Well, it’s complicated, baby doll,” he said.

We squelched through the soaked carpet. I couldn’t help but brush the darkened, cold sofa as we passed, but my mom said, “That’s dirty, Candy.” She kissed my forehead after she pulled my sheets up to my chin. Just when I noticed that my dad hadn’t followed us to my bedroom, I heard a huge bang – I did yell, then – and the clean tinkling of shattered glass. My mother put one finger over my lips.

Somehow, the insurance officers believed my charismatic father when he said that our house was the only one on our street to be damaged by the hurricane. How else would a branch have broken the window and let all that water into the living room?

Houdini Incarcerated

Prisoners sharpen coins into blades,
hide them in starry blows.

The guards don't allow him coins.

No coins, no needles, no pins. Even the cards
are too limp and peeling to use.
His fingers unfurl to remember:
a deck is the size of a lady's palm.

Even after his release, guards are everyone
unfooled by misdirection and gimmicks.
He shrivels under their eyes,
descends into crook magic.
Card tricks trap him back in the box.

When one lock opens, every chain loosens.
If bolts won't break under his jimmy fingers,
perhaps they might rot away.
When I clap my hands three times –
behold a miracle. Metamorphose.
And bow.

Iron Age

Once there was a way to see the rocks for the trees
but now I only see New York –
city of a thousand romantic comedies.

Never been there.

Dont think Id fit in cause I got this mixed up
face not even Picasso could love
and its not like you care what I look like right?

Regret the red harvest hand you left on my jaw.
Tell me of your bats too ancient to describe.

About your hailandented car
the new moon is my apology cousin
and youre my Lake Michigan.

Push when I pull.

The Beach

Weapons, all of them.
The dawn air settles wet
on piles and piles of stones.
Tony thinks he's building

towers but here is the water sucking
his ankles. Secret insects catch light
when the rocks grit apart. He flinches.

Glass coast. Full time.
In the distance a radio tower gleams

blue and seabirds circle like winded picnic napkins.

Jung Love

I own enough hate
in my toes,
enough doubt
in my earlobes
to wear his Varsity jacket
like the girl I've been
at Ridgemont High.
We shuffle through
the carnival dust
and approach
the kernel-toothed gypsy
for a ticket to ride.
He oughtta think twice.
He oughtta do right
by me.

Nine

for Borges

A pair of hibiscus,
growing from the same stem,
wet from a passing storm.

One was conjured from the other, long ago

before clones came into vogue but after the great sleep
in which you took threads from the air

and laid them across the threshold.

A messenger snipped them all in thirds.

The flowers squirm toothily as they steel, tiny oracles
with one roundest eye between them.

Cheer for them! and for
their progeny. Those pale,
frail
decades of change.

Orphic

she wears garlic paper
head bristly with fur
yellow like bread
her head:
loose-stitched leaving her
the song won't stop won't stop needing her
 and that sisyphus toll
rolling through dim halls
beyond the parlors
where attention crawls on the floor like a foal
 at birth
who hears her first?
 neck bowed
 chest cowed

THE GODS

a panorama for the ages!
what a night! what a crowd!

Raven on the Bull's-Eye

in the middle of things i was launched

floated around for a while and then
the fall didn't hurt

the ants on the other hand –
you'll die if you touch them

the poisoned solution to a word

e
the silent

e
that comes from the average monster to the cedar tree:
a sword made only of wood

this makes no sense but the parts are good
and it's easy to get into

The Kid

I will die on a sunny Thursday –
not old, because I am a pure soul,
but so young that they will say
I was too young because they can hardly
say anything else.

You should probably be there, but you won't.
You will be swimming underneath streets
in your only suit & devoid of any memory
of me. You are actually thinking of my mother,
whom you met only once but liked instinctively
when she laughed into your smile.

Without you, Samantha Perez will be dying.
Clawing at my hair – a cynic's pointed fingernails.
My breath comes like caramel, nostrils flare & heat
hot as the blood that no longer comes while I remember
a doctor's chill fingers against my chest, where my heart
mumbled against her touch but did not hurt me
back then. I wish I were folded in my bed, not spread eagled
outside with a stupid white dog who paces, trailing a
clattering leash and not fetching any help whatsoever.

But you live nearby. Maybe you'll see me.
Maybe you'll surface, eyelashes shed like snow,
to shove my rasping body into the ditch.

The Lifting of the Veil

The ash tree dies aflame.
It seems my messianic flair goes ignored.

It seems the pelican is the ultimate moment
when it cannot skirt the lightning—

its stomach boils with the last meal, its eyes
are dry as walnuts, its feathers are smoke—
and it cleaves the sea like a crisp arrow,

as quiet as the end.

Distraction Haiku

The road slithers up
side mirrors with easy stealth.
Change lanes without fear.

The mind, a goldfish.
The sun rides scales of the face.
Such summers to live!

White snake rises, strains
in no-limbed rebellion.
By night, his cage cracks.

On a church steeple,
a shadowed rag hovers
without form or son.

My thoughts, far in dust,
in mirrors, in mill towns where
the dead sigh again.

Well, Pa Sold the Farm

We are as gods and
might as well
get good at it.

There are no more crops in the world –
only opportunity.

Big city
opportunity.

The farmers are less popular than polyester,
than sugar and whole milk.
In recent Gallup polls they rate
a qualitative six – only six!

Clowns rate at least an eight.

The livestock, the knowledge, the overalls
are all gone from us. I'm told they went someplace
in the green countryside
where they will have lots of room to run.

Melody Rood_____

Bloom

He is a thunder cloud
 rumbling over my chest unraveling
those childhood terrors
 the mud puddles in my eyes

Sprouting fingers
 slipped from his mountainside
I felt him slide into my hair
 turning my tangled twigs
in a tree house that I only dreamt about
 where he cornered and crushed me

I remember the endless rain
his shapeless weight

Lantern

Hello honest glow between suburban houses
where I meet you. You who show
your teeth and say don't look at me.
You with sunflowers sewn to your eyes,
breathing cinnamon on my bones.

Hello bursting air in my mouth,
cold everything. I feel my
girl-child's body expanding
and I greet you with frozen lungs.

Perceive

I'm losing time, falling small
in black haired woods where
I watch my father drill a woman's
head to the rocks—my eyes shaking
like wildebeests before the crocodile feast.
And since the beginning of lanterns,
I can't help but take this nonsense—
Sliding into endless shapes,
unaware of surroundings.
I die small.

Tangible

Eli and Meg waited until three in the morning to hunt for ghosts. It was a hobby they picked up after watching a program on the Discovery Channel called "A Haunting: Where Demons Dwell." Eli didn't believe in ghosts but never told Meg. He knew how excited she got each weekend when they prepared to search a new cemetery. In his backpack were two flashlights, a cell sensor gauss meter, a digital thermometer with sensing probe, a list of frequent ghost sightings, and a crucifix.

Meg treated their summer hobby of ghost hunting as something sacred. She took it very seriously and made Eli swear to never tell anybody about it. Even when all he wanted to do was sleep, he went along with her anyway. At work, he'd often find notes and maps in his pocket that she left him of new places to be searched. Sometimes she would even show up at the peach orchard where Eli worked just to tell him about the new ghost equipment she bought online.

"I'm feeling this place," she said, pointing to a map.

"You said that about the last place," Eli said. He yawned and stared at the stove's digital clock. It was 2:15 A.M. Meg had read somewhere that ghosts were at their ripest from three to six in the morning.

"But this place is different," she said. "It's deep in the woods and apparently a lot of people have gone missing there."

"This isn't another graveyard?"

"Nope," she said, "this is the woods behind an asylum."

Eli nodded, still staring at the clock.

In the car, Meg put a cassette tape in and hummed the tune to "Look at Your Game Girl." Eli pressed his head against the passenger window and closed his eyes. As Meg drove, he fell in and out of sleep. Every now and then, he'd open his eyes and forget where he was. They drove for half an hour before he finally sat up and looked around. "How far is this place?" he asked.

She looked at him and shrugged. Eli noticed that the cassette had stop playing, and that Meg had been listening to static. She bit the bottom of her lip and finally pulled off onto the shoulder of the road. She turned the car off and almost immediately the windows fogged with condensation. "Hand me the map," she said.

"We're lost," Eli said.

"I don't remember it being this far out," she said.

Eli nodded and let his head fall to the dashboard.

"We can just go back to Old State Road," Eli suggested. "You always like that place."

"It's not the same," Meg said.

She dug through Eli's backpack, making him hold the gauss meter while

she tried to find a flashlight to read the map. Outside, Eli could hear insects, the same bugs he heard every summer but never knew what they were. He looked down at the meter and laughed.

“What?” she said.

“This is ridiculous,” he said. “What was our life like before the ghost hunting days?”

Meg looked at him as if she couldn’t believe the question he just asked. Then she turned away and stared at the steering wheel. “We watched television until you fell asleep,” she said.

Eli knew she was right. Their lives had become monotonous. Every day they ate dinner together, with the television turned to the news. Neither one of them said anything except for the small comments after a story. He would say something like, “That’s terrible,” and she would just nod.

Eli looked at Meg and could feel her disappointment, a sense he picked up after the two got married. He realized why she took ghost hunting so seriously. It had nothing to do with the actual hobby, just that she was afraid of what was happening to their lives.

“Did you find it?”

Meg turned the ignition.

“No,” she said. “We’re going home.”

Meg pulled into the driveway at 4:45. She got out of the car and stretched her hands into the air. The orange glow of the porch light outlined her body, and Eli saw how young his wife really looked. He took the gauss meter out of the car and started walking toward the woods of their backyard.

“Meg,” he said. “There’s something over here.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No,” he said. “I’m getting a signal.”

She took a flashlight and ran past him.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s check it out.”

As she ran ahead of him, Eli looked down at the meter. It was off and there was never a signal. He didn’t want her to lose whatever it was she felt all those hours of searching. She stood behind a tree and shined the light toward Eli, motioning him to follow her. At that moment, all Eli could think about was how much he loved his wife, but he knew it wasn’t the right time to say so, and that it might not ever be the right time.

He felt physically drained, and didn’t know if he could keep up with Meg. She continued to run deeper into the woods while he slowly followed. The only thing he saw was the light in her hand. She called out his name, but it sounded like a whisper. “Over here,” Eli thought he heard. He had to stop and grab hold of a tree. “Meg,” he said. “Wait for me.” But she was already so far ahead of him. The glow from her flashlight continued to get smaller until he couldn’t see her anymore.

Brown Or Bust

I spent the bulk of my childhood watching television, particularly nature documentaries. They offered a more intriguing body of information about the world than school did, so I idled weekdays away, meditating on the bathing habits of Japanese macaques while the rest of the St. Anne 5B class copied transparencies about Manifest Destiny. This greatly troubled my Ethiopian parents. Despite holding PhD's in quantum mechanics and microbiology, my mother and father constantly grappled with why I couldn't solve a linear equation with the same, single-minded purpose I applied to constructing a peanut-butter and banana sandwich. They dreamed of the day when *Where's the remote?* turned into *What's a parabola?* — a distant, sunny afternoon when their wealthy post-grad daughter would enter a bistro and say, "I'll have the sea bass and a Pellegrino." For eleven years they'd lived with one terrifying realization: that their expectations were buttressed on someone with an encyclopedic knowledge of every episode of *Walking With Dinosaurs*. An intervention was required—I needed an example, a paragon of success. That summer, instead of the perfunctory family trip to Myrtle Beach, we drove to Baltimore, Maryland to stay with my cousin Meheret.

"Call me Mimi," she said, kissing the air beside my cheeks. Mimi ushered us to the couch, an Ethiopian flag afghan draped over her shoulders, and poured coffee for my parents while chatting in fluent Amharic. After she produced Cokes for my brother and me and excused herself upstairs to get her parents. My mother set her cup down and looked at me meaningfully.

"Mimi's going to South Africa in a few weeks. Her school is sponsoring a trip for potential pre-meds, you know, to see what it's like to work in an AIDS prevention clinic."

"Cool," I said, examining my pitted Coke can. I recalled a segment of the local news about deadly intestinal parasites breeding in dented cans. Somewhere in the depths of the house I heard a stereo blaring an Ethiopian folk song: *Salaam Adenan Nen*, "I Found My Love at the Market Stall."

"She did well this year," my mother continued. "All A's."

"Uh-huh." I said.

My parents made the decision to have children the same way people select a new car or compatible breed of dog. Words like "honor roll" and "mathlete" seemed like appropriate tradeoffs for the down payment of food, shelter, and cable television. At the age of three, I began to read. At four I was finishing short chapter books and tying my own shoes. By six I was able to tread water for more than thirty seconds, and as far as my parents are concerned, this is where all significant achievements stop.

I watch Mimi ascend the stairs and wondered what could have occurred during my development: an erroneous gene splice, head trauma, adoption. Whatever the case was, my mother had a right to be crestfallen. The den was a

veritable shrine to Mimi's accomplishments: equestrian medals, Youth In Government awards, perfect attendance plaques. Over our mantelpiece was a hazy photograph of me in second grade, standing beside a failed science project with an aluminum foil cone on my head to harness the power of the sun. Mimi's parents sent out holiday e-cards fashioned like newspapers, in which an entire section would be devoted to her: *Mimi Wins District Geography Bee! Or Mimi Interns at UNICEF!* In popular dinner conversation at my house, I ranked somewhere between my father's stock portfolio and an attractive set of coasters.

My mother blew on her coffee. "Mimi is taking violin lessons, you know. She hopes to continue them at Cornell, but the medicine major should occupy most of her time."

Dad chimed in. "You really should be thinking about what *you* want to do." He was referring to the requisite career survey fifth graders took before middle school. I circled the most interesting occupation I could find, *mortician*, and wrote in the margins of the *Goals* section that I wanted to host a landscaping show called *Horticultural Hijinks*, attributing the decision to my newfound taste for the Home and Garden network.

The second night of our stay Mimi and I were dispatched to Bi-Lo for barbeque sauce. Her parents were having a cookout and inviting their extended family. Upon hearing the news my mother whispered, "Good! Lots of kids your age!" a phrase I'd come to learn meant I'd spend the evening watching Power Rangers.

I examined myself in the vanity mirror as Mimi guided the Honda into two parking spots. What would I say to these people? My cousins regarded me with the amused curiosity reserved for photographs of six-legged calves or late night talk-shows featuring children nibbling cheese slices into the shapes of Canadian provinces. Mimi did things differently, attempting, in vain, to correct my behavior. She'd interject benignly, saying things like "My parents don't let me cut eyeholes in Zoobooks covers," or "The remote control isn't a Geiger counter." We took the back route around the store, hugging the meats section so she could read the aisle signs more clearly.

"I'm trying to avoid eye strain," she explained. "Stronger prescriptions totally kill your reading speed." I shivered and pulled my arms into my Pokemon t-shirt, listening to the thrumming freezer behind the Bonuscard beef brisket.

"So how do you do it?"

"Read so fast?"

"No, be so *Ethiopian*. My parents love you. They think you're perfect." Mimi squinted and moved her lips silently. For a moment I thought I'd gone deaf, but she was reading the nutrition facts on a package of fudge rounds.

"So, how?" I repeated.

"The thing you need to do is prioritize." Mimi continued as we rounded into aisle five: *condiments*. "You freak out over the stupidest things, like, re-

member when they cancelled *Wild Discovery* last night? Remember how I was like, it's not a big deal, think about those Agent Orange kids in Cambodia?"

I listened to the sharp cadence of Mimi's voice, trying to replace the rows of mustard behind her with steaming Sumatran jungles, the bleak expanse of the Sahara. I couldn't picture her saving the world. She sounded more likely to open a package of press-on nails than hold free clinics for Haitian children. She sounded like someone named Tiffany.

"I guess it's about putting things in perspective, you know, making super-huge decisions." Mimi hovered anxiously over two bottles. "Hickory-smoked or chipotle?"

As we drove back, I watched Mimi signal a left turn and apply lip gloss simultaneously. I'd hoped that she would impart some kind of special wisdom, steer me onto the path to enlightenment. I began to formulate a plan to respond to my parents' impossible demands. I couldn't beat them or join them, so I met their criticisms with a realistic standard to hold them to: sitcom parents. True, I would rather floss with barbed wire than study algebra, but when was the last time my mother set a steaming casserole on the table? Why couldn't *my* dad wear a hat and carry a tin lunchbox? My family never went shopping in coordinating outfits, let alone traveled the country in a psychedelic bus. Family shopping trips were a more crowded affair and usually ended with my uncles and aunts gathered around a display model at Sears, waving their arms at salespeople and asking things like "does it julienne?"

At the cookout, whenever one of my relatives asked to hear my future plans I shrugged and changed the subject. This behavior was met with tutting and shaking heads. It was bothersome at first—like living in a house of bobbleheads—but after a while, not only did I adjust to these lower expectations, I embraced them. Now I had a role to play: the charismatic underachiever. Ask me what colleges I'm considering and I'll be stuck for a response. Ask me if I caught the PBS special on the love lives of single-celled organisms and I'll let you borrow the tape.

During a lull in conversation my mother pulled me aside to relay the latest filial tidbits from relatives: Jared placed second in a cross country meet, Kidest will represent Ethiopia in model UN, Samson was accepted at Yale. She gave me a look as if to say, "Surely, you must feel eclipsed! Doesn't this make you want to *do* something?" I reminded her that June Cleaver would never tell her children such things.

"Well, Mimi is grilling outside, go help her," she said. "I just wish *you'd* do something constructive around the house."

I hesitated, watching my family gather around the grill, idly chatting about scholarship opportunities. Mimi's hands moved smoothly above the meat, as if she were directing a choir. I imagined her leading the beef patties in song, a rousing battle hymn. As one manicured hand maneuvered the spatula, I watched as the other, as if guided by some perverse force, rise slowly and lodge

a finger in her nostril.

“Mom,” I said, “Mimi’s picking her nose.”

My mother fiddled with the straps of her purse. “That’s unsanitary. Mimi knows better.”

I pointed outside, but Mimi lowered her hand, absentmindedly wiping it on her jeans.

“Are you sure you want to let her serve food?” I asked. “Shouldn’t she wash her hands?”

“She knows what she’s doing. She’s helped *her* mother before.” My mother pulled back the sliding door and I opened my mouth to protest, but stopped to watch my family form a line. Mimi flipped the patties onto the waiting plates with the precise execution of a conveyor belt, and I smiled for the first time since we’d arrived in Maryland.

Cory Wallace

Architecture

Butterfly bones fill the spaces
between the walls
and sometimes
when it thunders
they rattle, and I don't sleep.

And I used the paper
lining of their wings
to make stained glass windows

so when the sun finally rises,
his face, next to mine,
becomes a mosaic.

Quick Money

After Ray was fined over two thousand dollars in noise pollution tickets, he sold all of his roosters, paid the fines, and purchased over 132 Siamese fighting fish. The owner of the pet store made a special order for Ray a week before, and the fish were shipped from Thailand to California, then across the country to Little Switzerland, North Carolina. Ray didn't mind that the cost for shipment was almost twice the price of the small fish themselves, but as soon as he opened the box, and saw the shimmering tails of the betas, he knew this was a good investment.

"You know not to put two of them together right? They're all males," the owner said.

"Yeah, I know that," Ray said.

"What are you doing with so many anyway?" the owner asked, hesitant to hand the box over.

"I'm doing a favor for the hospital. They say that watching fish swim can help heal patients faster. Since we can't put aquariums in the rooms, we're going to put a beta in each room, you know? One of those set-ups you see in offices and such. The ones where you have the plant, then at the bottom of the vase you have a little beta swimming around," Ray lied. He thought of this two days before as he was ten feet off the ground, cutting off cable to a home that hadn't paid their bill in two months. This was a duty Ray had lost all remorse for after working for the cable company for over five years.

"Well that's nice. Is it a church group doing all of it?"

"Yeah, it's a church thing." Ray said, keeping the conversation short. He picked up the box of fish and headed out to his work truck. He sat the fish in the floorboard, and started up the truck.

Ray and his friend Danny stood in Ray's basement, putting the small clear plastic containers on a shelf above a large toolbox. They watched as the fish flared up their tails, and stretched out their gills. Their color intensified, and this defense mechanism occurred nonstop, but Ray still didn't separate them in hopes it would make them more ornery.

"So, you're going to let them fight?" Danny asked.

"Yeah. It's quieter than those roosters, and I don't think much of two dogs fighting. They're just fish, and they cost hardly anything," Ray said.

"Where're you going to let them fight?"

"I'm going to set up a table over there," Ray said, nodding over to a corner. "Then just take bets like I used to."

"Why can't you just breed them instead of letting them fight? Just go out and get a few females, and set up an aquarium. Sell the eggs as caviar. Sell them back to the pet store."

"That takes too much time. This way, the money's quick," Ray explained.

The following Friday night, trucks lined the side of the road across from Ray's house. The neighbors found this strange, considering they couldn't hear the sounds of men shouting, and feathers and beaks rustling and clashing. They couldn't see the men standing in a circle in Ray's back yard, their quiet silhouettes bracing the soft glow of cigarettes.

In the basement the men shouted, and Ray struggled to keep up with the bets on a legal pad. They stood around the table, watching blue and red beta nip at one another's tails and thrash in the clear Rubbermaid container. The fish would stop for a few seconds, swim around one another, flaring, then the blue moved in on the red, and the water slowly turned a shade of rust. Ray would cash the men's bets and Danny walked over to the shelf and grabbed two other fish, then the men shouted out offers and Ray took them down all over again.

By now Ray had a favorite beta. There was a white fish, with specks of burgundy on its tail that managed to win Ray over three hundred dollars in one night, without two many tears in his tail. After the fight, Ray scooped up the fish in its small plastic cup, and held it at eye level. "You're a tough one," he said. "I think we're going to call you Cut Bait."

After that night Cut Bait earned a place next to the television. When Ray came home from work, he'd sit in his recliner, next to Cut Bait, eat his dinner, and usually fall asleep watching the eleven o'clock news. Ray never kept in mind the unfair advantage Cut Bait had over the other fish, being almost twice their size now. Ray also failed to mention this to the men that placed bets.

There was a man who came every Friday night to the fights with a friend of Ray's. His name was Fernando, and Ray didn't know him very well, but as long as he was placing bets Ray let him stay in his basement with the other men. What Ray knew of Fernando was that he was the co-owner of the small movie theater, and he also spent a lot of his free time at the shooting range.

That night Ray kept Cut Bait next to him the entire time. Ray would always let the other fish fight first, saving Cut Bait to fight last. That night the bets kept coming through the air, and Ray would cash in and out. Finally, the man named Fernando stood across from Ray at the table.

"I hear the white one's the best," Fernando said. He was wearing a white button-up shirt, sleeves rolled up halfway from his wrists to elbows, and had loosened his tie at some point in the night.

"Cut Bait's tough," Ray said.

"I bet you five hundred dollars he can't fight two." Fernando folded his arms, and Ray thought of the offer. The advantage Cut Bait had over two small fish came to Ray's mind.

"Cut Bait could take two of them. I'll even let you pick two from off the shelf."

"You want to put money on this?" Fernando asked.

“Go pick two off the shelf.”

Fernando walked over to the shelf, and returned shortly after with two purple fish, darting around in their containers.

“Put them in,” Ray said. Fernando poured the fish into the Rubbermaid container on the table, and the men began shouting bets again. The table rocked slightly, and small amounts of water splashed and fell onto the floor. The two purple ones circled each other, then before they started into it, Ray dumped in Cut Bait. At first the fish spent minutes flaring at one another. Seconds later it turned into a free-for-all and the water turned a familiar slight orange. Five minutes or so into the fight one fish began floating away from the others, and Ray scooped it out, leaving it in its container on the table. Cut Bait and the other purple fish flared again. Suddenly there was a flurry of torn silky fins, then like its counterpart, the purple fish slowly floated away from Cut Bait.

The men became nothing more than a soft mummer, then silent when Fernando shouted, “You cheat! You’re a cheat!”

“How did I cheat you? You even picked the fish,” Ray said, scooping out the other purple fish.

“You cheat!” he shouted. He leaned over and examined Cut Bait hovering in the Rubbermaid container. “Look at the size of this one!” The men standing around the table leaned slightly in, but said nothing about Cut Bait in particular. “That one’s almost twice the size of the others. You’re a cheat.”

“You heard before you came here tonight that Cut Bait was stronger than the rest,” Ray said. “I don’t see the big deal. You even wanted to put five hundred dollars on it, not me.”

“I’m not paying a cheat. You don’t fight fair. I’m not paying,” Fernando said, still leaning over Cut Bait, a vein in his temple bulging.

“Fine. Don’t pay. Just leave and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t come back,” Ray said, stepping closer to the table.

“I won’t be coming back. Neither will that fish,” Fernando said. Before Ray could jerk the Rubbermaid container away, or scoop out Cut Bait, Fernando knocked the container on the floor, and Ray bent down to fetch Cut Bait as Fernando raised the heel of his boot.

You said you haven't done that
since you were seventeen

Then the night then the next day

We might have been right all along
We pull up floorboards
We slam doors
We oil the hinges again
We arch our backs a little more proof

It's like an idea when you try it

In case of realizations use stairs
When we fall out of each other
We result to stairwells
We depend on now maybe
and the hope that it causes proof

I can now explain the difference between echo
and repetition a door shuts a weep hits the wall in front of him
a weep comes back presses on his shoulders
his neck
The difference we had been looking for
a quick rush between us They all have come and gone
We were all at one point We all have gone down for you
The difference we had been looking for
The shock of bed sheets The opposite of a plane crash

It was two thirty in the morning
Later you said that's not what I want to hear
We're all going down even faster

Let him show you what red hair is for
I'll show you the reasons for teeth
Close your eyes Look into the brightest light
Now you have seen your own ideas the orange of us all
That morning I could not tell the difference between a rising
sun and a setting one the orange the same bright shade
hitting the sides of the same buildings It was so cold out

Now put us in the darkest of corners
You didn't give me the benefit of an open door

The orange works its way through blinds

You could have seen every star that night

Cold makes everything clear

Knees sunk deep in leaves Upstairs they slept

In the glow of a pale blue light You were far from the first

And then you

And then you

And then you

And then

Erin Weeks

The River August

I entered the body
of doubt that night.
Dark clouds, dark grass and dark water
layered like the sadness of trees.
I jumped from the truck bed onto gravel
the engine purred and cut
till I was dark-faced too.
A boy with tea dreg hair
pushed the small of my back.
On the bank our clothing slid away.

We dove into the river

(the way free will changes
underwater, the way the tongue
pushes skullward)

and when we surfaced,
moonlight caught his face.
Irises glinting, hair slick as linseed oil.
His smile so wide
I could have built a future on it.

The Proverbial Husband

When I finger the groove
of broken cranium, crusted blood,
when I realize I am dying,
I will think of plucking stars
from a planetarium's walls
and shoving them
in your mouth,
one for every child
I will never have.

Sunshower

Moments return like crows on a telephone wire.

Our knees bob in the front seat
the car grows smaller till we touch,
and I feel your kneecaps shift.
Tight-lipped air clings like lace.

*

On the island, waves and sand
turn over our toes like cake batter.
All cloud and sun at once, you warn.
I imagine us in the scope
of this storm-swept world,
inked with tidepools and doubt.

*

I can no longer tell the difference
between your mouth in greeting
and your mouth in farewell.

Someone Else Found You First

The thought greener than poison ivy
disappears into the bloodstream
surfaces later everywhere begging
to break raw and rippled skin.

The Human Argument

YOU

when i look in the mirror
and see your face

ME

my fingers touch my skin
a stranger touches my skin

YOU

i know sex. i know
the ways of men

ME

i know calm. the smell
of an apple as it hits the ground

YOU

--money, lust, pillbox

ME

--winter, dirt, clean house

YOU

if you let me i will open
you up

ME

my heart would close
you to that world

YOU

through the eyes, through my eyes
a cloud of strangers passing by

ME

is this your grief?
is this my joy?

US

bones of a voice
scent of a knee
death of a spider
when we get there, we will know.

Between A Woman's Teeth

They cling to my clavicles like the memory of wood. My daughters are green-eyed chimeras, spinning shrouds while I sleep.

Give my body back. What do I call this horizontal energy where water and silence meet? On the riverbed—stones and snails and shards of bone, the frightening traces of those before me. My mother's tiny wedding ring, her slim wrists. My grandmother's Irish melancholy. The truth of the river is that it stops for no one. What if this love is not by choice? The hair I brush is not my own but the gift of generations. A thousand dead men have touched the dips in my back, the scars on my legs. I am wafer-weight beauty, pride of the river. But the threat of dawn aches like a fever between my teeth. These bones have always known. At daybreak I will recede and my daughters will rise, greenest and most perfect floods of replacement.

