The student editors of Litmag are pleased to share with you the 26th installment of UMSL’s undergraduate literary magazine, Litmag 2014. Much of this year’s production took place among the backdrop of a snow-laden winter, as poet Miryam Matos captures so well in her poem, “At the Moment.” She writes,

“The day is wearing white today:
everything is white outside, as white as my feelings for you.”

But warmed by the written word, our staff members read through more than 300 submissions this spring semester, and we were quite impressed with the diversity of the submissions we received—a true reflection of the talented student body present on campus. This made our selection process difficult and highly competitive. Editing a literary magazine is often bittersweet in this way, as there are more submissions deserving of publication than we have room to print. Fortunately, the talented artists and writers on this campus have two undergraduate literary publications to showcase their work—Litmag and Bellerive.

Many thanks to each and every one of our staff members for their commitment to reading the hearty supply of submissions we received, for bringing critical insight and creativity to our discussions, and for working so diligently to make Litmag a professional and quality magazine. And thank you to all the authors and artists who submitted; we hope you continue to submit your work in the future.

Sincerely,

Kate Dwiggins
Litmag Instructor
English 4895 Editing Litmag, a course in editing and publishing a student literary magazine, is offered at the University of Missouri-St. Louis for the spring semester. Students interested in enrolling are invited to contact Mary Troy at marytroy@umsl.edu for more information.

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## contents

### prose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conner W. H. Meyer</td>
<td>The Men Drank Fire**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.R. Curry</td>
<td>After the Dust Storm</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Chrisco</td>
<td>Succor*</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Gamache</td>
<td>Late Night Surgery</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL Kirk</td>
<td>Fissure</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Clark</td>
<td>Shaving Mother</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrainbeau Willis</td>
<td>The Plight of Fertilization</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy Gorse</td>
<td>Perfecting Holiness in the Fear of God</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Bezushko</td>
<td>Is Anybody Out There?</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.R. Curry</td>
<td>Fortune</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily Robinson</td>
<td>Pledge</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Kaufman</td>
<td>The Gamut of Emotion</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close of Day</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake Hughes</td>
<td>Smoker</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica Eikmann</td>
<td>Blades</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Replacement Bop</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximilian Tsimerman</td>
<td>My America</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope Votaw</td>
<td>Down Honey Street</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bio Dad</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society Knows Best</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Maurer</td>
<td>Behind Me in Line at the Supermarket, Somewhere Around Midnight*</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Bennett</td>
<td>Cycle</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sunflower Surviving the Storm</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Vasser</td>
<td>Love Note</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan Bishop</td>
<td>Lluvia</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Dipert</td>
<td>One Line</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Contest Winner **Besse Patterson Gephardt Winner*
**Artwork and Photography**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexis Nugent</td>
<td><em>Looking to the Past from the Present</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Opportunity Lost</em></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaetlin Lafargue</td>
<td><em>Paris, France</em></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney Baker</td>
<td><em>Metamorphosis</em></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick LaFoy</td>
<td><em>Tree</em></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina James</td>
<td><em>In All of Her Glory</em></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Renez Nash</td>
<td><em>Still Life Study</em></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Textural Study</em></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Lewis</td>
<td><em>South Island, NZ</em></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Australian Coast</em></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Butterfly House</em></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Chicago Street</em></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Bangkok Apartments</em></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cover Photo**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afton Joiner</td>
<td><em>Never Withering Music</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Biographies**
The heat rippled the air above the Chevy, children pranced across the lawns, and the men fought hard against the rising temperature with beer after beer. The heat wave was the hottest on record since 1938. The thermometers shone a faint red glow even after sundown. The people began to feel as though the heat had evolved somehow, had developed intent and means to carry out its intent. This intent, some people would say, was to suffocate and consume. The air weighed down on the men’s shoulders, pressed them down, brought them down, and kept them down. The heat was inescapable, even inside houses it seeped. The only real relief came at night. The mild night wind swept the balmy air away, but it seemed as though the heat began to linger a bit longer each night.

The men stood in the driveway of the one called Denton. There were three of them, including Denton, and they all wore dirty pants and dirty shirts. They stood and talked, and yelled at the children to stay away from the shed or, “they’d whoop some ass”. Overhead an ocean of sky sat idle and plain blue. The bestial orb sailed through with its blazing white mane. Full of fire and always, always, in all ways, charging them like batteries with infernal energy.

An emerald station wagon pulled out of Denton’s driveway—a lone, stoic faced woman occupying the car drove off. Crouching down next to his son, Denton greeted his strong-jawed, lanky cub. No more than a hey was exchanged but the boy knew to stand and wait until his father excused him. Denton stayed crouched looking at his boy, seeing his boy, seeing his mother in his eyes but none of himself. More and more he saw his own blood being drained from his son and amidst the heat, this fact began to boil inside him. Then Denton shoved him off to play with the others. The child ran into the house to drop his things in his room and change.

The children of the neighborhood chased each other with water pistols in their swimming suits and underwear. The water splashed against their unbroken skin, making shiny, tanned dolls of them. They ran through the yards and sometimes into the street to avoid being sprayed, as the game was. Their high-pitched shrieks and laughs drowned in the rising mercury. They played, and the sun blared, and the men drank. The one missing most his
teeth, Ellis, took a swig of beer too quickly and dribbled down his chin to the
ground. The liquid left a dark splotch on the concrete that vanished immedi-
ately.

“Got a drinkin’ problem?” said Jake.
“Har Har Har. You think your so schmuckin’ fart don’t you?” re-
marked Ellis.

The men chuckled and went on to other conversation. They spoke
brashly about their jobs or the jobs they didn’t have because of the stuck-up
pricks sitting in the offices. Jake pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.
The package was white with red stripes and was wrinkled and bent; few ciga-
rettes remained unsmoked.

“Who’s got a lighter?” he peeped from the corner of his mouth.
Denton tossed an orange Bic, which he caught and flicked a few times
before getting a flame. The fire emitted from the lighter felt cooler than the
surrounding air. He tossed it back.

The day had reached its long arm passed noon and the men were
running out of beer. All the ice from the chest had melted a while ago and two
lonely cans bobbed half-submerged in water. Somewhere in the distance of
the sky, a bird—a hawk, swung wide ovals. The men watched it as they sipped
and smoked. Ellis stretched his left arm out, lining his hand up in front of his
face, making his index finger line out his sight. He aimed at the bird with his
finger and followed the bird through its maneuvers. He flicked the top of his
thumb down as he fired a pew from his lips. He smirked as he finished
watching the bird fly in front of the sun where his eyes could not follow; he
looked away quickly, squinting and cursing, “god dammit.”

It was midafternoon. The children had slowed down now and were throwing
small rocks at an old street sign. The base of which was almost rusted
through, making it lean to one side. The son of Denton walked up the drive,
where the men were standing, to find out what was for lunch. The boy had his
hair ruffled by the two men and his father gave him a mock punch on the
shoulder. He winced, and jogged back to playing while Denton grabbed the
burger meat, Jake went for charcoal, and Ellis went for beer.

“Thanks for starting the grill,” Denton said. Both men grabbed the
last two beers. Denton made hamburgers for everyone. The burgers couldn’t
help but char over the pit of flames. Denton poured some of his inestimable
beer over the meat and coals to settle the flames but they would not dampen.
Pulling the burgers off the grill was difficult as well. The fire held on to them.
It wreathed its clutches around the meat, creeping higher, working fast to
reach human flesh. Denton couldn’t feel it pulling against his hand, or per-
haps he didn’t care, maybe both. He had had many beers in him, deadening
his nerves. The flames lay against his hand for a moment, and there they felt
comfortable. Denton, too, felt a sensation—one that stirred an irascible groaning within him. The crackle of the children’s laughter drew his gaze away from the cauldron of smoldering charcoal and hellfire. They could smell the meat roasting and came running. Slapping the burgers onto pieces of white bread, Denton handed out lunch.

A small pick-up truck rolled to a stop across the street from Denton’s house. Out came Ellis with two more cases of beer. His boots clopped against the pavement. The kids ran up contorting their faces into monsters, to which he returned a grotesque visage, complete with black, fractured teeth back at them; the girls eeked with giddy excitement.

The men all took another beer and dumped the rest back into the freshly replenished ice chest, though much had already melted. They dragged it under shade to hide it from the trying rays of the sun. The day meandered on as the children found various ways to entertain themselves and the men drank and smoked cigarettes and sometimes talked. The glaring gaze of the sun had finally lowered down passed the trees. They were looking forward to the declining temperature when all of a sudden, the black half sphered barbecue pit erupted, and a gout of flame as tall as the house shot out. “God damn!” they all seemed to bark in unison. The pillar of flame stood straight up with tassels of fire dancing from the top like the small arms of infants wagging for milk. One of the men grabbed a ratty blanket lying in the garage and tossed it over the searing stalk to suffocate it, but the blanket was engulfed like tissue paper. Denton and Ellis picked up the ice chest; all the ice melted, and poured it over the pit, beer and all. Muffled explosions emitted from the center as some of the cans boiled and burst instantaneously—but the water overcame and black smoke churned from the cauldron. The children stood around, mouths agape, mesmerized by the spectacle. Denton stumbled over to the small group and grabbed his son under the arm.

“One uh you lil shits throw a match on that?” sweat poured from the man. All of the children stood in silence, beads of sweat running down their smirking faces. They picked up the unsullied beer off the pavement. “Have you ever seen a thing like nat?” Denton ventured.

“Fire? No, never.” said Ellis.
“Yeah? No, you smartass. You owe me a blanket.”
“You threw our beer in nare, so I think we’re even.”
“Even my eye. I s’pose if the house went up in flame, we’d be even too?”

“That depends, any of my beer inside?”

The men decided to make their way home, as the explosion of the grill seemed as good a note to end on as they would get. Denton left the barbecue pit out on the driveway and marched his son inside. The sun had set for the most part. It was that time of night where the last remnants of light linger in the sky and there is still an illusion that night has yet to catch up with the day. The sweltering temperature did not succumb to the oncoming
night, however. Denton and his son were inside their house now with the ceiling fans on and the attic fan sucking air through the open windows. The draft created wasn’t cool, just hot, oppressive air, washing over the house. He took his son up the steps and into his room where he laid him down to bed. He kissed his forehead and flicked the light off as he shut the door. It was not yet bedtime for Denton, so he made his way to the kitchen where he sat at the table and consumed more beer and more beer.

Denton awoke in a sitting position, his arms crossed on the kitchen table and beer cans surrounding him. It was late, he could tell, but it was so hot—it hadn’t cooled off at all. He was sweat through his clothes and he noticed heat waves in the air above the toaster. Impossible, he thought shaking his head. He walked to his son’s room to check on him. The door opened smoothly and he peered in to see his son also drenched in sweat. He thought nothing of it and began to close the door, his eye scanning the room as he did. On the dresser sat a deformed T-Rex that stood on its two feet but the head and arms were melted and drooping down. Denton walked to his living room with its sparse furniture and peered out of the sliding back door. He fixated on the tree that overhung branches next to the house, the kind of tree with large heart-shaped leaves. The end of one of the branches had a very big leaf that caught Denton’s attention. It seemed to be changing colors, as if it had forgotten that it was the middle of summer. It was green, but was slowly beginning to lose its hue and turn to a yellow, then to an orange and then brown and then a poof and a sizzle! All at once it ignited, just like that. It was the perfect shape of a leaf, dipped in fire. Denton stepped back at the sight. Naturally, the leaves started popping into flame all over the huge tree and it was in a single blink of his eye that all he saw was fire, all-consuming fire.

He ran towards his telephone, tried to snatch it up just to have it deflate into a puddle of plastic; it too, had melted down unto itself and was rendered useless. He looked at his hand, beet red, but otherwise fine. He flipped it over, also fine. Sweat still poured from his body as if there were a secret reservoir inside his chest that never ran out. He spun in place trying to think what to do. He could hear the burning branches falling on the roof. The wallpaper started to peel, the light bulb above his head burst, and the carpet fibers were stiff, baked.

He darted for his son’s room, through the living room, up the small steps and down the hall. His skin felt different. It felt as if the heat had gotten underneath it and something from inside was percolating. The sensation was invigorating. Branches of charred, burning wood kept falling on the house. He was just steps away from his son’s room when a massive limb from the tree buckled and clashed through the roof. It came down directly in front of Denton, knocking him into the bathroom across the hall. Laid out across the
linoleum, he groaned. Debris covered both him and the hall. He sat up in the
darkened bathroom, gaining light only from the hallway where the flaring
embers from the tree outside shone. Denton heard a train, he thought, in the
distance, a steam whistle. The remarkable hissing began to grow. Louder and
louder. And then the pipes from behind the wall burst open, spewing scalding
steam everywhere. The shirt he wore was in tatters, but Denton remained un-
harmed. The huge extremity of the tree was completely wedged into the door
frame of his son’s room, making it impossible to gain entry. Small floating
embers of dying tree floated down through the open roof. They landed all
about Denton as he stood thinking, breathing through his mouth. The smoke
and heat filled his lungs which caused no discomfort; in fact, he was able to
think more clearly as he drew in deeper breaths of the toxic air.

He regained some clarity. He again, ran down to the living room
where he went to open the back door. The metal handle was glowing, a red
branding iron; he grabbed it without hesitation, adrenaline pumping. The
door slid open and he stepped out onto the deck, which had begun to catch
fire. It had not yet been fully engulfed, but the fire was playing at the railings.
He ran down the stairs into the backyard where he looked up at the window
of his boy’s room. It was open but so high up; there would be no way to jump.
For all Denton knew, his son was still alive, maybe even still sleeping. While
Denton stood absorbing the weight of everything, the deck had completely
succumb to the flames and detached from the house. It teetered and fell into
the backyard, a jumbled pile of flaming toothpicks. Denton’s skin began to
writhe in a way that he half expected. It squirmed a bit, moved in the light of
the bonfire. He looked at the window and the deck and the tree. All burning,
everything burning, and he stood alone.

He felt alone at that moment in time, truly alone, and he clenched his
fists and gnashed his teeth. The death of his child was imminent and only
seconds away. He kept staring at the house that was slowly being swallowed
by fire and the smoldering pile of deck beside him shed a hideous orange
glow about him, waved in and out of shadow. An infernal rage filled him,
surging through his body, as a hellish scream breached his mouth into the
roaring night. From his back, the skin cracking, protrusions erupted and
grew. These appendages grew and grew until they unfolded like the sails of
some great ship—black, leathery wings. His chest now puffed like the bust of
a Greek god as he beat his wings in the satanic, heat-filled air to lift him to his
child.

He landed in the room where his son lay curled up in the corner, cov-
ered in burns. Denton walked to the frightened boy and knelt down. It was
then his son looked into the eyes of his father, two perfect spheres of fire, and
spoke, “Dad, it burns. I’m not like you”. Impassivity fell upon the room, and
in the wake of that last word, there was an explosion so deafeningly loud, that
it not only shook the house, but blew part of it away. The gas cans in the
garage had caught, and Denton and his son were tossed against the wall as
half of the room was torn away in the blast. Drywall, two-by-fours, and yellow insulation spat across the outside world. All Denton could hear was screaming, screaming, screaming. The sirens of the fire trucks echoed in the distance, louder every second.

Parts of the roof and tree were blocking their way out of the door, and the wall with the window where Denton made his entry, was now collapsed and impassable. Every surface crawled with skittering flame. The air was so dense with destruction that movement was near impossible. Denton could hear crackling, a sort of creaking, and knew that another huge branch, or the tree itself, had snapped and was coming down on top of them. Denton lunged over his son, enveloping him with the crude, monstrous wings right as the mass of house and tree came down on them.

The firefighters and EMTs had materialized in front of the house and began the rescue. The monumental, fiery show had summoned a flock of spectators that scattered like a break on a billiards table when the firefighters stepped onto the scene. “My god,” muttered a firefighter under his helmet—the blaze reflected in the clear facemask. They worked fast, ran the hose and started dousing the flames with water from all directions. The blaze was immense and the firefighters stood watching the water do slow work. Some were looking in, deep into the guts of the house, past the flames to see inside. They thought they saw something moving; inside the rubble and chaos, through the curtains of smog, they saw a figure—a shadow in the smoke and flames—the silhouette of a man with wings. The wings beat once and the shadow shot up into the air and a drift of smoke came rolling outward. The firefighters went in with halligans and axes, prying up wood and metal. They trudged to the door of the boy’s bedroom and knocked it down. In the corner of the room was the rigid, blackened form of a man hunkered over the small frame of a child, like a heap of igneous rock carved up to advertise pain. The two would remain bound together, one born of the other, fused by fire.
I pledge allegiance to the flag
Of the United States of
Energy and chemistry and
All the life squeezed in between,
Not to an idol or single cause, but to
Santa Clause and menopause,
And our Lord Byron and dandelions;
I'll blame your shameful games for fame
On puberty and lack of name,
Regardless, hoping we reach nirvana
A single bodied, harmonious flame
Of glorious life, ridden of strife,
Arteries pulsing with blood zero type,
And we'll strip the bare truth clean from the hype of
Liberty and justice
For all.
7:36 am

I feel the hum of the fine line between loneliness and loss, the white-knuckled hope that we can stay here—in between and the quick heartbeat that says no, we cannot.

10:15 am

There is no immunity to lies.

Even angels lie.

I guess it’s no surprise, since Satan spread his wings in glory before he fell, that even heavenly things have a point of departure.

11:55 am

Swallow the sun-swollen honesty of the moment, when we are clear-eyed and know what business we’re about.
1:47 pm

Do not hit me with your words.
Just because the sum of the letters
is something sweet,
doesn’t mean you can splatter them
all over me.

4:04 pm

It is the cruel cyclical
nature of the world, that
after the idiom of “sweet success”
comes the crawling back.

6:08 pm

I love you with gossamer tears
that, when they fall, break
against the wind and catch its current—
such delicate drops are meant
to burst.

I love you with gossamer tears
that, when they form, burn
intensely before they
trip
across
the lid.

I love you with gossamer tears
that, when strung together,
form a web around you—
tenuously strong,
ropes of perfect pearls—
shimmering.
10:12 pm

Your form so still
My hand on yours
sheet anchored between
Let’s stay here a moment

—watching

I wish there was some way
to fall asleep with your eyes
wide
open

—noticing
This is the dog-tired drag of the day
when light has nodded its head to night.
And we are two sunburned scraps of girlhood,
thudding up, up, up back steps, smelling of tree sap
and the sick, sweet odor of plastic.

Then come the fine-tuned mini-sagas
before we let go and give in and call it a day.

Half past eight and we give weakness to our knees
and crawl into bunks, pretending it was our idea—
this whole going to bed bit.

These are the soft moments
when the world pretends
to be whole, and I,
I am too young to know any better.
Because I am ten and Anna is eight,
and we will quite possibly conquer the world
tomorrow.
After the dust storm settled, Greg and his daughter, Annie, climbed out from the dumpster and stared, bewildered by all the damage. Nothing moved that wasn’t being blown by the wind, and an empty silence hung in the air.

Annie scampered into his arms, struggling to breathe, so he carried her towards the desolate wreckage of vehicles in search of their own. He didn’t want to return, but she needed her inhaler, and whatever she needed, he would get. At the curb, he unwrapped her arms from around his neck and said, “I’m gonna have to set you down for a second.”

“Daddy...” she began, but stopped, biting her lip. He already knew her question, but dreaded having to answer it. “Jus’ wait here,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

He had only walked a mere dozen or so feet before his daughter, left standing beside a stop sign hugging herself in a frightened embrace, became a mere silhouette in the dust-filled air. A dozen feet further and she would be gone to him. He waited a second for her to come running, but she didn’t. She’s a brave girl, he thought, but couldn’t bring himself to smile.

Finding their car wasn’t difficult. In his haste to get to safety, he had half-parked, half-wrecked it against a city bus. It had been carmine red, but now appeared pink beneath the settled dust. He wiped a circular spot off the back passenger window only to find the inside thickly coated as well. He could see his reflection staring back. He imagined that the look on his face screamed, “abandoner, failure, coward,” though he took solace in the fact that he had done something right when he saved his daughter. After all, the storm had come out of nowhere. It had filled the horizon from end to end, and only when it began to filter between the high-rise buildings did he grasp what it was. Many people hadn’t even seen it. Many more hadn’t made it out of their cars, or had simply chosen not to get out of them....

The door was locked and he had lost the keys. The front of the car was partly scrunched beneath the bus, so he walked around the back to check the other side, but there was no need. This was the side the storm had hit from, and both the front and back windows were shattered out. He reached in and opened the door thinking, don’t look, don’t look, don’t look, but his curiosity was too strong. In the front passenger seat sat the corpse of his wife,
her mouth ajar and warped, her body half-buried with dirt and coated so thoroughly with soil it appeared fake, like a filthy manikin left out to bake in the desert sun.

“Damn it. Why didn’t you listen?” he asked. “Why didn’t you just get out and follow us?” When she didn’t answer, as he had expected, he grabbed their daughter’s inhaler and hurried back.

He found Annie in the same spot, still hugging herself. She looked at him; then she looked around him, and above him, and below him, through him even, before directing her piercing gaze into his eyes, questioning him with a desperation that made his chest tighten. He knew what was wrong. She had hoped he’d bring her mother back. When she fell to her knees sobbing, he rushed over and placed the inhaler to her mouth. “Annie,” he said, and looked her square in her eyes, wiping tears away with his dusty thumb. “It’s okay. Shh. There, there.” He wanted to tell her the truth. She needed to know it... but not today. Today had been bad enough. “It’s okay,” he lied. “She wasn’t in the car, Princess. She made it out. She’s safe somewhere. Safe and sound.”
He is the smoker;  
She, the cigarette.

Unassuming, crisp  
She meets his lips  
And smolders.

With his breath  
He stirs up sparks inside,  
Watches her skin disintegrate.

The longer they touch,  
The more she fades.  
What she was turns to ash;  
A paper heart consumed by the cold night air.  
Her self scatters on the wind.  
Having used up what was left, his fingers loosen.

Chemical reactions, heat, and hunger pangs.  
By his kiss, she is transmuted—ephemeral, evanescent...  
Lost to herself, she floats through her remaining days,  
A secondhand spectre bitterly gnawing at all of those who come too close.

The smoker goes through the motions, numbed. Alone.  
Seared by passion, branded by such toxins, burned by betrayal,  
She aches. But unbeknownst to her, she has left a mark.  
Shaking hands, dirty nails, yellowing teeth...  
A quiet cancer upon his soul.

To him, she is merely ashes.  
Through her, he turns to dust.
He had carved condemnations on his arm.
FREAK was stifled under his right shirtsleeve.
The lines of SLUT were just starting to blur on his left ribcage.
I traced the lines—straight, surgeon’s precision—proposed a trade:
hide your blades,
I’ll toss mine.

My mother ambushed me coming out of the shower.
Her eyes disapproved of my smooth front,
curly blond fibers clogging the back of disposable razors.
The sigh was laced with a lecture about squeals and bedsheets that I couldn’t unravel at thirteen.
He skewered a California Roll badly with his chopsticks. The chef glided through pink flesh, lined the fillets on a cutting board. The knife smiled in the lantern light; I smiled in turn when his fingers scored my hair and his lips pecked my cheek.

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Kitchen knife hid under my pillow. The playground heartthrob’s sniveling sliced my ear. The point had shadowed a vein, nuzzled its coolness on my wrist, but my hand quivered— reconsidered. The knife resumed its slumber, waited until I would have nothing to lose.

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Steam coiled thick. He twisted his arm, swiping with the razor at his shoulder blade. I giggled, swiped he missed patch. Black stubble floated down, bobbed in the puddles on the shower floor. He wrapped around my waist. Droplets blended with droplets; as the razor clinked to the floor wet lips inched closer.
His memory faded.
The grind of my last job
as a cutlery-hawker:
I flashed custom steel,
lectured on ergonomic handles,
flush rivets, blade shapes—
while bored fifty-something
housewives grimaced
over the catalog,
looked straight through me.

———

He’d planted
the word IMP above his groin.
We both brandished the sword,
nursed duel-wounds,
but the jagged gashes of revenge
I painted on his chest
still bleed me dry.
The knife handle
I finger now
begs to sprout
between my breasts.
He’s no Adonis.
His skin is plaster,
eyes too far apart,
girth that could snap a spine.
And the stare that says,
Classical literature?
Whatever. When do I get to taste you?
isn’t a merit badge on his vest.
But compared to your skiff,
he’s a kayak—and one smooth ride.

A simple prop to occupy my time
He’s no Mother Theresa.
Lies fly from his mouth
like air eking out a balloon.
His mind is so far in the gutter
that it’s built from moldy leaves.
But hey, we’re both gophers.
We’ll live in dirt together.

A simple prop to occupy my time
He’s no Columbo.
Driftwood-Brain here
can’t even figure out how to open
my baggage. No need for a bellhop.
We left my bags in the lobby.
Why open them? They’re just
a jack-in-the-box waiting
to reel in some sucker with the punch line:
You don’t want to know about
my ex-fiancé—
SPROING!
Unzip that and he flies in seconds.

A simple prop to occupy my time

He’s no you.
He’s too restless to dissect
moral scruples with a safety pin,
too macho to analyze
the how and why
of crumbs on his plate.
But this newly christened harlot
needs some easy sugar, and he’s really super-
ficial. Besides, when we dance
in the dark, I can always
pretend the flesh smothering
mine is yours.

A simple prop to occupy my time

See? He’s perfect for me.
See? He’s perfect
for me.
He woke up.

He woke up from something that couldn’t quite be called sleep. Sleep left one groggy, and if lucky, with quickly fading memories of an imagination run wild. The man had neither of these symptoms. It was as if he had simply popped back into existence.

He looked around. At first he was frightened; as far as his eyes could penetrate the veil of night there was nothing he recognized, only grass. It came to his waist and swayed like soft currents of a green ocean. Not that he was very sure that he had ever even seen an ocean. The comparison had come to his mind, unbidden. The result, though, was that he was left feeling very alone.

Disregarding the thought as best he could, he waded through the stalks until they gave way to colors far less majestic: a ruddy and brown dirt path. It was well-trod and packed dirt. This was a road that frequently carried travellers. It was a road that went somewhere.

It was a road that could handle one more.

He had been walking for an hour before the scenery changed. In the distant horizon, a plume of deep, black smoke floated menacingly into the sky. He wouldn’t have seen it at all if there hadn’t been a soft, orange glow that lit up that portion of the sky near the horizon. Even to his amnesiac mind he knew it was a sign of danger; it was a sign of war. He wasn’t sure why, but when the path split, he headed toward it.

Foot after foot, step after step; eventually he lost track of the hours. The sun must have recently set when he “awoke,” because the darkness he had been greeted by showed no sign of yielding. He wondered how long nights were in this part of the land. What season was it? Perhaps there was a curse running its course, keeping everything under perpetual night.

He smiled. In the hours he had been walking, the only questions that had come to mind were those of seasons and of metaphors. Not once had he considered why or how he had come to be here. Who was he, even? It didn’t seem important.

Eventually he came upon a campsite. It appeared so welcoming, it all but invited him over: one medium-sized tent, a small cooking fire, and very
near the road. There was only one person and she didn’t seem concerned with hiding from anyone. It was a trustworthy place, he decided. As if to confirm, a friendly voice called out to him.

“Hail, traveler!”
He waited until he had approached the light of the fire to respond.
“Evening. Share your fire?” The words came to his mouth as if he’d had years of practice, as if finding a lonely camper on the road was the most natural thing in the world to him. Maybe to his illusive past, it was.

The camper was a young woman. In the playful light of fire he immediately noticed two things. First, her eyes held a deep sincerity, the kind of openness that only came from a complete trust of everyone else—a strange attitude to carry on roads like this, in sight of a fiery sky.

The second thing was that she was incredibly frail. Once, maybe, she had been beautiful. She had a soft face with gentle hands, but the skin was drawn too tight. Her eyes were sunk a little too deep for health.

His mind chased at the possibilities the combination represented for only a few moments. Then, like he seemed to do a lot, he let it go.

“Of course. Cold night like this? I couldn’t turn anyone away. It’s not much of a fire, but it’s better than walking, right?” She smiled strongly, belying the weakness in her eyes.

He nodded agreement, but didn’t mean it. He hadn’t even noticed the cold. He felt like he could have walked another day and night without rest. Instinctively, he sat down and reached his hands out towards the fire. Like his greeting earlier, it was more form than substance. The fire didn’t feel warm at all. He simply sat there, staring into it.

The girl watched him curiously, unable or unwilling to continue the conversation. After stoking the fire, messing around with her pack, and fidgeting for the better part of a half hour, she decided that he wasn’t going to initiate any conversations and, perhaps, any talking would be better than the silence between them.

“My name’s Anna,” she said awkwardly, yet amiably.
“Short for Annabelle?” he mused, aloud.
“Why... yes,” she said, clearly surprised. She wasn’t the only one. Where had that come from? The comment had frightened her, he could see. He could hardly blame her. Strange traveller joining her in a war-torn country, dressed in dark robes, not speaking for a spell, and then knowing her name... it was a wonder she hadn’t chased him off already.

“Sorry, you... seemed like an Annabelle. The full name is much prettier, I think.” The words didn’t sound nervous or rushed, despite his hasty intent to calm her fears. Though he didn’t fear the cold or the empty roads, he felt deep in his bones that he needed to be here.

“That’s what my mother told me,” she responded; the fear gone from her voice. Nostalgia had a way of doing that, he remembered. “What’s your name?”
He paused. Despite where he was, talking to another traveler it was not a question he had expected. What was his name? His mind frantically searched his blacked out memories for any clue.

“Gray,” he said smoothly, silently thanking the ghost lurking in his mind that kept filling in the blanks.

He wondered where the name came from. It didn’t seem to be him, but at the same time he knew he had been called it, at some point. Perhaps he had many names? Regardless, Annabelle appeared satisfied.

“It’s good to meet you, Gray. I was beginning to worry that I wouldn’t encounter anyone out here. I decided to travel, and all I’ve found are endless fields and boredom. Not exactly the adventurer’s life I had in mind.” She laughed softly.

She stood up to grab another log for the fire and tripped. No, not tripped—he noticed—her legs had simply failed her unexpectedly. She fell to the ground and he reflexively stood up to help her. But as soon as he reached out to her he snatched his hand back like he had been stung. A voice from nowhere reminded him that he could not help her yet.

She grabbed a log, tossed it onto the fire, and brushed herself off. Not once did she curse or frown. A happy woman, he thought, and was surprised to feel pity welling up in his chest. The silence, comforting earlier, now seemed oppressive.

“What are you doing out here? This doesn’t seem the place for someone to be traveling alone,” he said quickly, gesturing to the war flames growing over the skyline.

“I could say the same for you, couldn’t I?” She said, raising a challenging eyebrow. “But, of course, you’re right. Any thief or worse could see a clear difference between the two of us. That long, white hair, tall frame—no, I don’t think many people would try and give you trouble. Me, on the other hand,” she shrugged her shoulders. “It’s a strange story how I got here.”

He smiled comfortingly. It was an unfamiliar feeling for him. Her hands fidgeted around as she spoke.

“I’m not sure where to start. Have you heard the stories?”

He had heard a great many stories, but he shook his head.

“The stories of people... people living? Sorry, no, that’s a silly way to say it,” she chided herself. Her eyes searched the space between them for a better explanation. “There have been rumors of people recovering from grievous wounds and horrible illnesses. All of this started a few weeks ago. At first I dismissed it as a rumor—who didn’t?—but then I saw it for myself.”

She didn’t notice her hands reaching up to her chest, holding fast there.

“I was dying since my sixteenth summer. The doctors knew what it was, but they had no idea how to stop it. Funny how that so often seems to be the case? All of our knowledge and we still stand helpless. What good is knowledge then?” She looked at him seriously, and then quietly apologized
for changing the subject. Gray waited patiently, unexpectedly enthralled by the story.

“\textbf{\textit{My whole family watched me day after day, bedridden, and so often would come in and feel sad for me and for what the world had done to me. Sometimes I think they were sadder than I was. Knowing you’re going to die... it somehow makes it easier to deal with. At least I knew that I was dying, it felt like it gave me control.”}} She smiled. \textit{\textbf{“I know it’s weird, I know it sounds strange, but it was reassuring in a way. No, don’t get me wrong. It was by no means what I wanted. I wanted to adventure and explore, see everything in the world, but knowing exactly how fate had dealt my hand made it all understandable and acceptable.”}}

Her words touched him somewhere deeply. Her gratitude, understanding... he had never heard such kind words. For her part she seemed to be losing her nervousness with each word she spoke.

“\textbf{\textit{Go on, please,”}} he said with a slightly hoarse voice. He needed to hear more.

“\textbf{\textit{Eventually the sickness progressed. Each day I found my waking hours shrink. Gently, I was being taken from my world. It was the first time I was scared. The doctors told me I had a few days left, at most. If I could push it, I could last perhaps a few more beyond that. I didn’t tell anyone, but I had no desire to hang on. I just wanted to close my eyes and never wake up. If I had told my parents that... could you imagine? They would think me mad, for all it was worth. I think it was cowardice, it’s not something I’m proud of.”}}

He nodded gently.

“\textbf{\textit{But then I heard the rumors: people miraculously recovering from everything, even illnesses that the doctors didn’t understand. In my few hours of wakefulness each day, my family and friends rushed this news to me, as if hearing the news would heal me. I thought it futile at first, but then it all reversed. In less than a week, I was on my feet again! No one understood it. In a small town like mine, few bothered to question it anyway. One of their own had survived—how didn’t matter.”}}

She drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She stared into the fire.

“I had lived. I, the girl who secretly accepted and welcomed her own endless sleep, had beaten a disease that no one lived from. Everyone was ecstatic. I was... confused. I had lived, yes, but I knew I shouldn’t have. I was certain that something had gone wrong. So I packed up and came out here, after the rumors.”

He almost inquired further, but the same shapeless voice in the back of his mind told him not to. Her family likely didn’t understand her need to escape, her need to \textit{\textbf{know}}. Her quick exit could not have been easy or simple for her.

After a time, she continued.

“At first I thought that this was a great thing. I had a second chance
at life. However confusing or wrong I felt that it was—it was a new opportu-
nity to be a part of this world. How great would it be if everyone had that? If
the rumors were true the whole world would change for the better,” she
stopped to sigh, “at least, that’s what I thought before I got out here.”

She paused again and stared out into the horizon.

“They say that battle has been going on for over a month: not a single
 casualty. The generals called it a godsend, a sign that the deities bless their
own armies. Neither of them has backed off. Their attacks grow more fear-
some with each day. Why wouldn’t they, when nobody dies?”

His hands gripped the log he was seated on tightly. The story, he felt,
was about to take a disturbing turn. He knew the pattern of it all well enough,
mankind never ceased in its arrogance. Every crack their fingers found, they
would tear open to see what was inside. Reverence was no virtue to them.

“Strange, isn’t it? It gets worse, though, as it always seems to,” she
said, mirroring his own thoughts. “They say the generals, realizing standard
murder isn’t cutting it anymore, are coming up with new ways to deal with it.
Men have been buried, flayed, crucified... all while living. It’s terrifying. It’s
terrifying and that’s exactly why they’re doing it. We find out that death is
gone from us and we don’t rejoice; we invent new ways to cause suffering
since the old ones don’t work.”

He caught a tear shine on its way down her cheek. She turned away
from the horizon, rubbing her eyes. Some people would blame it on the
smoke, he knew, but not this girl. She returned his gaze with wet eyes and
said nothing to excuse herself.

“Are you saying death’s absence hasn’t brought the joy every priest
and doctor claims it would?” His voice was filled with a deep, subtle anger,
but she didn’t hear it. She hurriedly spoke more words.

“No, not when it leads to this. A rumor spreads of immortality, free
from the chains of hell or damnation or pits of sulfur and what do we do?
Make our own eternal torture here. What will happen when the church gets
word of this and their threats of divine punishment after death no longer
work? What threats will come then? What if people no longer feel any need to
do well in the sight of a higher authority? What’s wrong with us?” She de-
manded, more fiercely than anything he had seen yet.

He nodded along with her rant. Images played in his mind, vast his-
tories of warfare, chaos, violence, and hatred: images of death. It was an
overwhelming sensation.

He placed his hand over his face and leaned over. Annabelle leaned
over.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. It’s just... you’re right. Only a fool could think other-
wise.” He sat up and looked around. He noticed that it was much closer to
dawn, now; it had snuck up on him. The orange haze on the horizon had hid-
den the coming twilight.
He rose to his feet.
“Thank you, Annabelle. I think you’ve helped a lot. It has yet to be
seen.” His words were his own again, he realized. No longer were they spoken
from a second voice, hidden in his head. He was whole again.

She didn’t bother to hide the confusion on her face. He strode over to
her, quiet as dust, and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. At first she looked
shocked to the point of retreat, but it was almost immediately replaced by
calmness.

“Oh,” she mumbled, the confusion leaving her.
“My work has long been subject to fear and hatred,” he spoke quietly.
He looked her hard in the eyes, but knew that she couldn’t look back. “Your
words gave me the strength to carry on for a while longer. For that, the whole
world thanks you,” he stopped, hesitating at his next words. “For the sincerity
behind them, I thank you.”

His hand remained on her shoulder. She showed no surprise or fear.
It was just as she said; she only welcomed death. Her eyes lost their focus,
her body gently began to sway.

“You didn’t give up, Anna, you weren’t a coward. You’ve been closer
to understanding it all than most. Thank you, again.”

And then she was gone. He laid her now limp body down on the
ground, taking care not to move her quickly, as if it mattered. She couldn’t
feel anything any longer. Still, he had learned the mortal laws of respect, for-
eign to him as they were.

He stood up, struggling to break his eyes away from her. For several
minutes he stayed there watching over her body, until the first rays of dawn
reached her body. He frowned at the encroaching dawn, at its audacity and
intrusion.

He cursed and stepped away from the bleeding light into a shadow.
In a twist, he was gone. He had work to do.
My America is a Big Gulp... with Coca-Cola and crack
Drizzled with high fructose corn syrup,
a hint of Budweiser, Coors, and Jack
Daniels, and Dons, and Johns, Jacks, and Jerry’s
Meeting with Clint and Steve, and Sally meeting Harry
Over fries and a shake.

Oh, please, could you make
A book about my life?
About that scandal with my wife?
Is THIS pen stronger than a knife?
How could these pages hold my life?
Should I make them scratch-n-snip?
It’s a meaty-salty-fatty-MSG-deep-fried sweetness
Want a whiff?

It smells a little musky
Like a pair of gym shorts, size: husky.
With traces of DNA from a Mr. Sandusky
Too soon?
My America is a bucket... with fried chicken and plastic.
There’s an auto-tuner-tablet-phone-camera-blade
It’s fantastic.

Oh wait, you don’t have the new one? WTF, dude!
What a hoosier! You’re so lame. Watch the game.
You don’t wanna be a loser.
Fantasy football, baseball, soccer.
Wait... we don’t watch soccer? WHAT A SHOCKER
If it’s European: it’s a cock-blocker.
Metric System?! Get the fuck out.
And take your kikes, micks, and krauts.
You wanna shout? What about?
You wanna protest? Give it a rest.
We shall no longer overcome.
The fight is over. OVER-DONE.
Time to go back to the store,
I need a refill, let’s drink some more.
After the third ring, Ami finally finds her way downstairs through the dark and answers her front door. She doesn’t check through the peephole; she already knows who it is, and as soon as she opens the door, it’s confirmed.

“God damn it, Hunter! It’s 2:15 in the morning.”

“I know, I know. I just need some help,” he responds quickly. “I promise this is the... last time.”

“That’s what you said the last four times. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not gonna make it ‘til the morning.”

“There’s a free clinic like ten minutes from here,” Ami points out.

“Why don’t you ever go there? That’s where most people with no jobs go.”

“They’ll ask questions. And they’ll prolly... try to file a police report about it. I can’t spend... time in jail, Ami.”

Ami breathes a long disappointed breath, knowing she’s going to let him in even though she doesn’t want to.

“You’re an ass, Hunter,” Ami replies as she swings the door open for him. “Sit on the couch and don’t bleed all over my shit.”

“Thank you so much, Ami.” Hunter goes in to hug her, but she quickly turns around to deny him and heads to the closet in the hallway.

Hunter limps his way in, leaving a red trail behind him. He slowly sits down on the crimson speckled couch, careful not to agitate the spot he holds preciously with his left hand. As he lowers himself into a comfortable position, he throws his head back and attempts to relax through the pain.

“So how bad is it?” Ami shouts from the other room.

“It’s pretty bad... nothing vital, though.”

“So it’s just a big opening, basically?”

“Yeah,” Hunter assures her. “Just right below the right ribs.”

“Okay. And how will you be paying today?”

“Credit,” Hunter says jokingly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, your credit isn’t welcome here,” Ami replies sarcastically as she grabs the medical chest at the very front of the top shelf. “We can only accept cash at this time.”

“How ’bout... an IOU?”

“Got enough of those from you, and they’re not worth anything in my...
His pain begins to intensify. “You think you could quit making jokes? I’m losing a lot of blood over here.”

“All over the couch, I’m sure. Let’s just get to business.”

Ami shuts the door to the closet and walks back into the living room. She pulls up the ottoman next to him and prepares her things. She begins to pour a clear liquid onto a disinfectant rag.

As she looks up, she can see that Hunter is in bad condition. Blood is running from his torso despite his effort to stop the flow with his hand. His face is dirty. His breathing is heavy and slow. Ami can see it now in his eyes: Hunter is hurt. Hurt badly. She can see that the long wound goes down past his pant line into his hip, which is exposed by a torn area on his jeans, indicated by the spots that are bloody. The wound is the most open by Hunter’s right ribcage, the spot he has been holding.

“Take your shirt off. Let me see what I’m dealing with,” Ami says, more seriously than her previous tone. Hunter does as she instructs and tosses his now red shirt to the hardwood floor. “It doesn’t look that bad, but the blood is coming out pretty rapidly.” Ami points to his upper chest to a long purple and red line along his collarbone, “But you’ve had worse.”

“You can say that again. I thought I was gonna die for sure from this one,” Hunter jokes as he points to the still red wound circling his right ribcage. “Luckily I’ve got the best nurse in the world to help me out.”

Ami rolls her eyes. “Oh, whatever. Flattery has no effect on me anymore. Wish I wasn’t such a great nurse so I could actually get some sleep at night.”

“Well… thanks again.”

Ami takes the wet rag and places it on Hunter’s bloody ribcage.

“Ahh! That burns like hell!”

Ami snickers. “Good. But don’t be such a baby. You think you’d be used to this by now.”

“I am, but it still stings like nothing else,” Hunter smiles as he looks at Ami. For a quick second, Ami smiles back.

“Slide your pants down.”

“What?” Hunter says, completely caught off guard. “I’m kind of bleeding over here. Now’s not really—”

“Oh my god, you pervert. Not like that. Your wound is past your pant line. I need to clean it. Just slide your pants off your hip so I can get to it with the rag.” Hunter does as instructed. “And don’t even think about whipping it out. My night’s already been ruined enough.”

“Oh please, I remember a certain time when—”

“Shut the fuck up, Hunter! I don’t wanna be reminded about that right now. I’m too tired for you to be a douchebag.”

Ami removes the rag from Hunter after disinfecting all the bloody spots and puts it back in the kit. She then digs her fingers through the med-
ical supplies to find her next item.

“I’m gonna stitch you,” Ami says, holding up a thread attached to a needle.

Hunter grunts angrily. “I hate getting stitches.”

“Well, then, maybe you should stop doing the things that cause you to need stitches.”

“You know I can’t do that, Ami. This thing is a part of who I am.”

Ami takes in a big breath of air and blows it out slowly as she inserts the needle into his skin for the first stitch. Hunter could start to feel the vibe that she didn’t want to talk about it, but was going to anyway. “Hunter, we both know that you could get help for this if you wanted to. You can join a group and talk about it or go into rehab or something.”

“I don’t think that a group can help me with this because no one else understands it, and why would I go to rehab? It’s not like I’m on drugs or anything.”

“Well, then, you should talk to a therapist.” Ami pulls the thread a bit tighter than needed on purpose, and Hunter grunts as she slightly pulls him forward.

“That costs money, money that I don’t have,” Hunter points out.

“I know, because you don’t have a job. Maybe you should focus on looking for one instead of getting yourself killed every night.”

“Ami, I would love to be that kind of person who has a job, a wife and kids, a purpose. But all those things will always have to come second for me, because I’m a fighter. I live for the thrill of fighting, putting my life on the line again and again. I can’t stop. I don’t want to stop.”

Ami stabs the needle into Hunter’s abdomen and looks him square in the eyes. Hunter groans from the pain, but quickly dismisses it when he looks at Ami, who is very pissed off. Tears began to form at the bottom of her eyelids. Her face then changes from sorrow to anger, and she smacks Hunter across the cheek so hard the dirt on his face makes a small cloud as Ami removes her hand. “You son-of-a-bitch! You fucking son-of-a-bitch!” A tear begins to run from her right cheek. “There are people that really care about you, and you just wanna get yourself killed because you think it’s fun! Just what the fuck is your problem?”

Ami gets up from the ottoman and turns away from Hunter as she takes four steps away from him. Hunter slowly twists the needle and pops it out of his torso. As he drops it, the needle falls in between the couch cushions. He sticks his hand back over the half-stitched wound and stands up on the second attempt. He walks over to Ami, who is quietly whimpering, and rests his non-bloody hand on her shoulder. Ami immediately smacks it off.

“You’re an asshole, Hunter. I hate you.”

“We both know that’s not true. And believe me, I’m so sorry. I wish I wasn’t like this, but I am. It doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you still.”

“I’m just second. I’ll always be second. That doesn’t bother you, but it
“I’m sorry. This is who I am.”
“And that’s why we won’t ever be together.”
Hunter tries to say something, but the words won’t come out, and the two stand in silence—Ami with a bitter frown and Hunter with sorrow in his eyes and lips.

An eternal minute passes, and Ami’s tears dry up. “Come on, let’s finish stitching you up.”

Hunter sits down, and Ami grabs a new needle from the kit. As she inserts the needle from where she left off, Hunter can tell she’s trying to make the sewing a bit more painful. She is looking only at his torso, avoiding his face.

“I love you, Ami.” Ami does nothing to acknowledge Hunter’s words. She just continues to work on his cut. “I love you.”
“I heard you the first time.”
“Well, you didn’t move or anything. I wasn’t sure it you heard me.”
“Well, I’m not gonna say it back.”
“That’s fine.”
Ami finishes up the long row of stitching. She then pulls out some gauze and medical tape and drapes it over the wound. She tapes down the gauze and wraps it around his torso a few times to help it stay in place.
“Okay. You’ll survive now.”
“Thanks. Really, Ami, I know I’m asking a lot from you.”
“Yeah, you are. More than you deserve,” she says with attitude in her voice.

“Maybe I’ll be different someday. Maybe I won’t always—”
“Hunter, just get the fuck out.”
Hunter gets up and looks down as he heads toward the door. Ami expels a long breath, the only thing she can do anymore to keep herself calm.
“I’m sorry, Ami. I really am.”
“I know you are, Hunter. And I honestly do believe you.”
“Thanks. That does mean a lot to me.”
Hunter grabs a hold of the front door handle and swings it open to let himself out.
“You’re mowing my lawn tomorrow. It’d better be done by the time I get off work, and don’t think about half-assing it either.”
“Fair enough. Just leave the door open to the garage.”
“You know where I hide the key.”
Hunter limps out. Ami doesn’t even bother to lock the door behind him. She just heads up to bed and leaves the medical kit on the table.
The boys down Honey Street
Helped me learn the thrill of
Soccer, basketball, and hockey.

They brushed along
During hide and seek,
Touching only to pass the title of *It,*

Resting on the sun-soaked surface
Of my cracking driveway
After our long day outside,

Where their smiles would spread
Alongside my own,
As our sweat trickled down
Marking our playful day.

And all the boys relaxed,
As to enjoy the summer evenings.

The men down Honey Street
Forced me to learn the notion of
Fear, pain, and emptiness.

They pushed along
During hide and seek,
Groping only to satisfy selfish desires,

Resting on the cold-cracked surface,
Innocence shattered
After a brief moment inside,
Where their smiles would spread,
Alongside my legs,
As blood trickled down
Marking the last Autumn day.

And all the men left,
As to avoid the winter evenings.
Daddy,
Dad,
Jim,
—Mr. Evans.

To what name
Do I owe
This pleasure?
I should know you—
I feel
I do.

I do not know the success
You’ve achieved at work,
Nor the success
From your wife—
*The growth of your seeds.*

I do not know the
Giggles of goodnight stories,
Or the gentle touch
After removing a splinter,

Or the pride felt after
Graduating from
Training wheels
Kindergarten
High school.

I know not the immaculate white
House in which you live,
Nor the obscene amount
To charity you give.
No, I do not know *that* daddy—
But I do know you.

I know the dirty, black
Cavern where your heart should live,
As well as the goodnight kisses
You would never give,

It know the tears I've wiped
From my sister’s face,
And the love in my mother
She had to replace.

I should know you,
I feel
I do,
Mr. Evans.
Better wear your skirt real high,
With your head real low,
And toss that Innocence
Alongside those clothes

Keep your legs wide open—
Don’t let Integrity show,
Wear your shirt too tight
To ensure they all know:

You’re nothing but a
Big chest
Skimpy-dressed
Minimum-waged
—At best,

Little girl
They will use
To press
Their bodies against.

Oh, to catch a man
Use those legs as your hook
Forget education,
It’s all how you look

Reel him in with red lips,
Lure him in with your scent,
Seduce with your body—
Forget where Pride went
‘Cause these men won’t value
A girl’s independence,
You’ll only be used to create
His descendants—

The ones he’ll forget,
Or not care to father,
‘Cause he got what he wanted,
And now you’re a bother,

But the World tells us
Each and every day,
*To catch a man,*
*You must use this way,*

So you’ll listen and follow,
Memorize the directions,
Ignore your heart’s hollow,
And sell your affections, and

Oh! You’ll catch a man—
If you use this World’s way,
But he’ll use you then lose you
‘Cause a caught man won’t stay.
The noodles were a bit firm. The chicken was fine, but the pasta was undercooked and chopped too short. Andie’s tetrazzini on the night of the storm wasn’t her best, but she tried. Our son, Noah, didn’t care much for dinner either.

“Mom,” he said, “why are my noodles so crunchy?”
“What do you mean?” He had forgotten he needed to start watching what he said to her. “Is it bad?”
“Well,” he hesitated, but eventually admitted, “kind of.”
“Oh,” she said. “I probably didn’t bake it long enough. Sorry, you two. I can’t do anything right lately.” She pushed her chair away from the table and circled around Noah and me, snatching up our plates.

“Honey,” I tried to grab the plate back, but missed, “I still would’ve eaten mine.”

She ignored me and slinked away toward the counter. “What would you rather have, boys?”

Noah hadn’t intended to insult his mother’s cooking. He was only being honest, as children often are. Since Andie’s father had passed away two months prior, her mood could swing from one side of the room to the other in only a moment.

“Well, is anything in the freezer still good?” I asked, turning around in my chair to face her.

“There’s a lot of ice cream, but—”

“Perfect,” Noah said.

Andie and I both laughed—I was happy to see her smile—and she said, “We’ll have ice cream for dinner tomorrow. Tonight, let’s order pizza.” Her mood appeared to be picking up.

“Or,” I gathered myself and moved away from my seat, wanting to help with the dishes, “we can eat something I’ve already paid for. No sense in buying more food.”

Noah wasn’t having it. “No, pizza sounds good,” he said. “I’m buying.”

“Is that so?”

“I still have the money Gram gave me for Easter,” the boy walked to
the window in the dining room. Rain had been pattering heavily against the
glass all evening. “Plus,” he turned back, “at school, we’re having a contest.”
“Oh?” Andie said, grabbing a rag from the oven’s handle.
Noah joined us in the kitchen and started drying the dishes we had
cleaned. “Yeah, the class that buys the most pizza from Rickie’s gets a party
for lunch, and Mrs. Richards thinks we can win.” He looked up at us, “It’s for
charity.”
“Fine,” I said, “we can order pizza.”
“I’ll go get my money,” he threw the dish towel behind him onto the
countertop.
I hurriedly leaned over and wrapped my arm around his chest, “This
one’s on me,” and I kissed him on his cheek.

When I returned from the linen closet with a lime beach towel, Andie and
Noah were already eating from the box. Noah called this “having a picnic.” I
laughed and popped the towel out into the air with a flick of my wrists. As it
floated down onto the carpet in the middle of our living room, Andie plopped
the open box onto the towel’s bright green center.
“Will you grab a few colas?” she asked Noah, who had just settled in.
“Why can’t Dad do it?” he said in return.
“Excuse me?”
“What?”
“Hey, hey,” I said, reassuring him with my demeanor, “can you be a
pal?”
He sighed and obliged, tossing his half-eaten slice onto the box’s top-
side.
Andie pulled another piece of pie from its whole and tore away the
thin corner with her teeth. She had been eating worse since her dad’s passing.
“I don’t remember Rickie’s being this good,” she said.
“I hope my friends are buying pizza, too,” the boy said, returning
with three cans pinned against his chest.
“I’m sure they are. They want to win the pizza party, too, don’t you
think?” I cracked my cola open.
He gave a soda to Andie and told her, “Mom, you have something on
your lip.”
“Where?” She wiped under her nose and looked at the back of her
hand for evidence. “Is it still there?”
“Oh,” he said, cheeks reddening, “never mind. It’s just your scar.
Sorry, there was a weird shadow on it.”
She blushed. Andie was born with a cleft palate, and, even in her
adulthood, she was embarrassed by the blemish running down from her nos-
tril to her lip. She tucked her chin against her neck and bit once more into her
pizza.

A flash of light came in through the door to the patio and an ensuing quake of thunder shook the wall behind us. The clock hanging there rattled with the vibrations sent down from the sky.

“That was a close one,” Noah said.

“Rusty,” Andie forced out through her full mouth, “will you hand me the remote? I want to see what the weather says.”

We were taken aback by the tone of the man speaking to us from the screen. He said the cell wasn’t like those often seen in our area. Though there had been rain all night, things were beginning to progress more rapidly than he was expecting. The cloud took up not only our county, but many to the west of ours as well. He couldn’t pinpoint where the worst of it was, but one tornado had already been reported as having touched down about 45 miles away. Power lines were covering some of the major roads. A few houses had pieces of their roofs missing.

Then came a whirling howl.

“What’s that noise, Dad?”

“That’s the wind,” I lied. The sirens had sounded. “There’s a storm coming.”

“Show me on the map.”

“See that triangle shape close to the right side?” I tapped my finger on the screen. He nodded. “That’s us. And the storm’s coming this way. Should be about half an hour. Honey,” I looked at Andie as I closed the pizza box, “will you give him a quick bath while I grab what we need?”

“Russ, it’s storming. There’s lightning. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Well just do it quickly. Noah had soccer practice earlier. He stinks, and he has school tomorrow,” I said. “He needs to take a bath. It’ll be fine if you go now.”

She huffed and finished the crust from her slice. “Come on, Noah. Bath-time.”

The half-finished pizza was in the fridge. I could hear my wife in the bathroom, hurrying to get Noah clean. The Ziploc bag I was carrying through the house only held a flashlight. I was trying to get everything set for the storm—in preparation for the worst, though I had my doubts—but I didn’t know what I needed to grab. I took the flashlight out of the bag and set it by the sink.

“Are you two almost done?” I called. The thunder was progressively rolling closer.

From the back of the house came the sound of my son screaming, calling for me. Daddy.

I ran to the bathroom and was met by Andie’s figure in the doorway,
her blouse soaked and clinging to her chest. Noah was crying in the tub.

“What’s wrong?” I said. “Why are you all wet?”

“Your son splashed water everywhere, all over me. It’s on the floor, too.”

“But Mom pushed me into the bath,” he was having trouble controlling his pitch. “She shoved me in the water.”

I shook my head quickly in disbelief and knelt down beside the tub. I remained calm; Noah had a knack for exaggerating. He was a great deal like his mother. “You pushed him under water?”

“I didn’t push him. I didn’t even—”

“Yes she did.” He was still crying. “She pushed me down.”

“Why—”

“He was laughing at my face, Russell,” she pleaded. “Noah was making fun of my scar.”

“No I wasn’t, Dad. Honest.” I lifted him from the tub and wrapped him in his towel. “I just asked what had happened to her. I wanted to know if someone hurt Mom.”

“Hey, calm down. Everything is okay.” I rubbed my fingertips across his back. The motion had always soothed him. “Andie, can you give us a second? Go grab Noah some clothes?”

A crackle of thunder rolled through our home again. Andie, shaken and startled, left the bathroom and went down the hall to Noah’s bedroom. I heard her open his dresser drawer.

He was quieting, but what could I do to soothe my wife? What had she done?

“No, Mom scared me.”

“I know,” I sat on the toilet and dried his body off, “I know. Just remember, she hasn’t been herself lately—I told you that. But everything will be okay. Mom’s going to be okay, I promise.”

Andie returned with a t-shirt and a pair of pajamas pants for Noah. “Here.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the clothes from her. “Put these on, bud. No need to be naked.” Noah smiled slightly.

Just as he was stretching the neck of the shirt over his head, the lights flickered like a sleepy eye and then went out completely. Noah let loose a screech.

“Hey now,” I said, “no need for that.” He laughed to himself, knowing he had overreacted.

“Rusty, I don’t like this,” came Andie’s voice from somewhere in the room. “Did you bring a flashlight in here? Weren’t you grabbing things?”

“I left it in the kitchen, but it’s fine, honey. Noah, give me your towel.” In the dark, I reached out and felt for the cloth. When I had it in my hands, I turned to the shower and swept away the remaining droplets from the tub. “Thank you. Now get dressed.” I heard him struggle.
“I don’t like this either, Dad.”
“When you have your clothes on, I’ll put you in the tub. I want you to lay there and try to relax.”
“Will you lay with me?”
“Your mother will be in there with you. I want you two to be the safest.”
“But I want you to lay with me, Dad.” Andie had scared him.
“Noah—”
“It’s fine, Russell. He doesn’t want to lay with me. You can lay with him. Go ahead.”
“Andie—” I attempted to play peacemaker.
“It’s fine,” she insisted, “really.”
Noah walked toward me through the blackness. I grabbed him under his arms and lifted him into the basin of the shower.
“Ready or not, here I come.” He giggled as I crawled in with him.
“Tight squeeze.”
“Gosh, fatty,” he said.
“Watch out for my belly.” We laughed at each other, and Andie was silent.

“Why are we in here?” he asked. “It’s quiet. I don’t think anything is happening anymore. I think the thunder stopped.”
“That’s called the calm before the storm,” I said.
“The what?”
“You’ll see,” Andie said.
I propped my torso against one end of the tub and stretched my legs out to the other. Noah tried spreading himself across my body, but I pulled him closer and cradled him in my arms.
My ears picked up the sound of my wife, sliding her back down against a nearby wall until she was sitting between the sink and the toilet.
“Are you okay?” I asked her.
“Me?”
“Yeah.”
“Fine.”
“Why did you do that to him?”
A whip of lightning popped beside our house and sent a roar of thunder down through the attic into the bathroom.
Noah stiffened in my arms. “That was close,” he noticed.
“Right outside, I bet.”
Then our house trembled and Noah followed suit. The walls cried out with their broken boards. The belly of the storm was rumbling. I had been told a tornado comes heaving like a train and blows its whistle the whole way through. But instead of a locomotive echo, I felt the storm was mocking me and laughing in the faces of my son and my wife.
“Dad, I don’t like this. I’m scared.” The house kept shaking.
“I’m scared, too,” I assured him, “but it’ll be over soon. You, me, and Mom are going to be just fine.”

“Our house could be destroyed, Rusty,” she said while we were still in the darkness. “Don’t you hear it? Don’t you hear the chaos? I bet Jim and Kathy’s house is gone. I bet they’re gone, Russ. Our beds and our books, gone.”

I tried to keep collected for Noah’s sake, “We are still in this room, Andie. We are here, and our house is here. Jim and Kathy are next-door. They’re fine.”

“I can hear everything ripping away,” she said.

“Stop it. You’re scaring our son.” Noah was shaking in my arms. I cupped his head under my chin and ran my fingers along his back again.

“Russell—”

“Don’t say another word.”

After I spoke, no one said anything for a good while. In the darkness, where I discovered the sound of a brittle home, I lost track of time.

Eventually, the clamor came to an end.

“Is it over, Dad? Is the storm gone?”

My body had grown numb due to Noah’s weight, and his voice startled me.

“Yeah,” I said, “I think it’s all over. Andie?”

She responded with a brief hum.

“Do you think it’s passed?”

“Sounds like it.”

“Can we get out of here, Dad?”

“Sure, buddy. Come on.”

He pushed off against my stomach and lifted himself out from the tub. I sat up and stretched my arms in front of me. They had been curled around Noah for as long as the lights had been out, and they were aching for movement.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Is our house still here?”

“I don’t know. But we are. We’re safe, and that’s all that matters.”

“Is my room still there, with my bed and my books?”

“I sure hope so.”

“What if they’re not?”

“We’ll figure it out. Don’t worry,” I told him, crawling out from the shower bowl. “No worries.”

Andie was standing, too, when I bumped into her. “Everything could be gone,” she said.

Three faceless voices mingled in the dark, where they seemed to hang for days.

“Andie,” I placed one hand on my son’s nape. With the other, I
reached out for my wife with hesitation, blind, and felt her collarbone. I ran it up the thick vein in her neck and felt the defined structures of her jaw and chin in my palm. One shaking finger came across her lips, felt for the scar, and lived—for a moment—in the valley of her face. “Be quiet.”
behind me in line at the supermarket, somewhere around midnight

Her voice is a piano played with dissonant chords, her eyes the silhouettes of Spanish dancers flailing, and her skin a canvas for loneliness—all reflected transparently by the bottle of vodka she lays on the rusted belt: a glass infant.
looking to the past from the present, alexis nugent
opportunity lost, alexis nugent
paris, france, kaetlin lafargue
metamorphosis, sidney baker

award winner
tree, nick lafoy
in all of her glory, regina james
still life study, mike renez nash
Who are Ayat al-Akhras from Palestine and Rachel Levy in Israel? One murderer, one casualty, or both victims? Did not both mothers cry and say This is not the way, this is not the way When ideas are the cause of war, and resolution is hard because violence begets violence begets violence begets Ayat strapping a bomb to herself to send a message through television to show all she knows nothing other than violence and fear.
My brother and I planted fifty sunflower seeds,  
only one survived.  
We buried it in a brown, moist patch of land dug with a sand shovel.  
The sunflower grew and the thick, fuzz-covered stem bore an over-large head.  
It seemed to bow, acknowledging the strength of the storm  
when Hurricane Bob hit.  

I sat on a quilt eating Cheerios  
as I peeked through the wooden boards covering our windows.  
The sky was gothic, and the waves rough and grey  
behind the pale yellow petals that seemed out of place,  
as the cold September ocean hurled waves at its back.  
The winds pulled damp yellow teeth out of the honeycomb mouth  
shaking back and forth.  

My brother and I wailed about the oncoming death,  
sure our flower could not survive.  
It refused the demands of the ocean storm,  
bending with the wind.  
The lone flower did not crack and tumble to the ground like the trees nearby,  
but allowed the gusts to pass,  
its mouth smiling with missing gold teeth.  
I heard a silence radiating from its green and golden dance,  
drowning out the wind and rush of the sea.
Like most women, Mother spent the usual amount of time inspecting her face, sitting before her dresser and its huge mirror. The French doors and their frosted glass were open from her bedroom as KXOK made tinny background music from her yellow, nicotine stained radio. It had been my Christmas present from last year, but she had to get up early to go to work. I didn’t, and it got adopted. Mother carefully sought chin whiskers and plucked them with tweezers or used a hair removal cream, spreading a white circle of it on her chin or under her nose because she had a slight moustache. One of those fine-haired woman’s things you needed a second glance to notice, or would if you were a man. Women only need a first glance.

I got to know the cream. As the radio played “Eleanor Rigby” and “Hey Jude” between bulletins about Vietnam and the Great Society’s unraveling, my cheeks fuzzed from a frontal attack of puberty. Light hair brushed on my jaws, and a moustache began to sprout. Hair made a footbridge between my eyebrows. I took razzing from the guys. In the hallway, the principal’s dark brows narrowed when he saw me. Facial hair was verboten, as was sartorial disorder of any sort, and I was expected to do something about it. Soon. A man’s way.

I reached into our medicine cabinet and found a metal, t-shaped razor with a double edge: heavy, a symbol of a new burden of life to be taken up. A razor blade was carefully unwrapped from stiff, thin, wax paper and inserted. I puffed shaving cream and went to work. There was a nick here and there, but I was rewarded with bare cheeks. When I licked my lips, there was a new sensation of stubble, like when the cat licked me and I felt the barbs of his tongue.

The business at school stopped, and the principal went back to important things like chasing guys out of the smoke-filled restroom, but Mother and Ebie, my grandmother, disapproved. In the vague commandments of the house matriarchy, shaving was wrong for boys; a kind of facial masturbation.

“Betty,” she warned Mother, “that boy’s been shaving.”

Mother called me into her room. As she combed the hair of her wig and I smelled the room’s usual mixture of perfume, skin creams and cigarette smoke, she lectured me on shaving.
“I can’t just let it grow,” I replied.

“Yeah, but don’t bug her.” Mother’s comb-filled hand gestured beyond the closed French doors to the living room, where Ebie sat in her easy chair and watched Lawrence Welk, our cat serenely dozing on her lap.

When we lost our house and had to move in with Ebie, we had to go along with her rules and, as it was, the house seemed to rebel against our intrusion. It was early summer, and Mother’s air-conditioner was already humming. The house was built in 1927, and still had the original wiring. It took to our new post-Roosevelt era appliances like a fat man heaving his way up cardiac hill. When Mother flicked on the AC, lights dimmed throughout the house and on our stereo, a tenor’s voice would sink into low baritone, then rise as the power clicked on. The need to conform to Ebie’s world was explained and understood, but there was still the problem of my beard. As the champagne music makers tootled away a song from Ebie’s youth, Mother motioned for me to sit on the edge of her bed.

Reaching around the sacred ring of creams, lotions, and bottles that circled the dresser, Mother squeezed a white paste from her hair removal tube. Eyes intent, she applied it above my lips and below my sideburns.

“Hold still,” she said. Her fingers made slow, careful strokes like serious finger painting. She leaned back. “Wait a few minutes, and I’ll wipe it off.”

“So I can’t shave?” I asked as I saw myself in her mirror, noticing another cigarette burn on the edge of the dresser.

Mother sighed, “Just let it go.”

I waited as “Mrs. Brown You’ve Got a Lovely Daughter” played on the radio. Mother ripped a Kleenex and wiped my face, mixing cream and hairs. I was bare faced again. I didn’t like the cream. It seemed odd. I tried tweezers (ouch!). At least they bared the space between my eyebrows. The razor was banished to the rear of the medicine cabinet, only used when needed to shave legs. Not mine.

When I visited Dad on one of his trips from St. Louis, I mentioned the ritual of the face cream. He rolled his eyes at this, as men do when women do something incredibly stupid, and said that he’d talk to Mother, but he didn’t. After he left, all communication had been severed, save for arguments over child support. Anyway, Mother and Ebie wouldn’t have listened. After all, he walked out on his family. That settled it.

I didn’t have a heavy beard, so the cream only needed to be applied once a month. Life went on. Fall. Winter. Spring. Mother studying her face in the mirror. In April, my brother Gary came home from the Army, and we had another man in the house. The basement reeked of soiled Army uniforms that were piled in the corner in the basement. Gary’s return ended the matriarchal objections to my shaving, and the ritual of creams ended. As a backhanded concession to the inevitable, I had received a bottle of shaving lotion from Ebie. I never used shaving lotion like Gary did, wrinkling my nose
at the sweet, alcoholic odor of each yearly bottle, but I nodded to it as I did to the other gifts of socks and underwear. Mother always went to Christmas parties with friends—men—presenting herself to me and Gary before heading out. How do I look? My face all right? Her hand would smooth down her skirt, pat down her hair, or wig, which she wore increasingly more often, though we always said she looked great.

That was a long time ago, but every time seems long, even twelve years ago. I had lived with Mother until I moved back to St. Louis, but I still had to take her along. She retired two years before that, but it wasn’t a happy retirement. Macular degeneration fogged her eyes. She appeared dazed and confused, spending too much time in her bedroom, the radio a low-key chorus in the background (Rush Limbaugh had replaced those trendy “now” songs). The retirement community had become a chore for her. She wouldn’t socialize, hated going out, and the only activities she completed with consistency were the laundry and her nightly ritual before the mirror. A new doctor took her off the half-dozen medications previous doctors insisted she take, and now Mother was beginning to think clearly again. Things improved. A shopping trip or two came about. Then came the emphysema.

Her trips to the hospital became frequent and longer. The manager of the community reminded my brother and me there was a waiting list for her room. By summer, she traded its tasteful pastel walls for the cinder block corner of a nursing home. No more radio, only a respirator heaving in the background. After a bout where, eyes terrified, she gulped for breath like a fish, like women are supposed to breathe when the baby is coming. The morphine was administered and the deathwatch began.

After a night of fireworks in the sky, she stopped talking. The only pleasure she mumbled for was a cold 7 Up. The mirror was abandoned. During my visits past aisles of wheelchair-bound residents, past the odor of institutional potatoes and cabbage, I noticed hairs growing from her chin. They bunched up like a flock of weeds back home, the kind Ebie immediately culled from her flowers or driveway. The hairs curled, reveling from long-denied growth. Consciousness was a lake Mother bobbed up from every so often, then sank back into morphine induced waters. Something had to be done about the hair, I thought to tell a nurse, but they were overworked and understaffed, their heavy frames bustling about all day. I could do nothing about Mother or her lungs, compacted to the size of a small paper bag, nor her sinking away. But I could do something about little things.

The face is a sacred part of the human body, so holy that some religions forbid its depiction. It’s one of the parts of the body we allow only very close friends or family to touch or stroke. I knew what had to be done.

The next visit I bent down to Mother. The evening meal of card-
board-colored oatmeal, Jello, and runny cottage cheese was ignored. Even the 7 Up by her nightstand was full of beads of water now widening and running down the can. I looked around, then pulled my razor from a pocket. Television sets made tinny noise from other rooms down the hall. Somewhere a beeper went off like a bird cheeping in a cage.

I touched Mother's face, the first time I'd done so since I was a child. It was soft and seamed. The chin hairs were bristly, like hogs hairs. I gently shaved the white weeds. A red spot stayed for a moment, but I assumed that a razor burn would be beyond her. She didn't wake, and I felt her chin again, smooth as it always had been. There wouldn't be a need for another shaving. Two weeks later I was near the end of my midnight shift early Sunday morning, when Gary pressed the buzzer at the front door of the darkened office, I knew why.

We held a burial but no funeral, deciding there wouldn't be that many mourners. There were only a handful at the gravesite in Knob Lick, a place as far away as it sounded. It was sunny and hot—September's last wave of summer. In another week, autumn would stir, and all those green trees flanking the cemetery would be ready to begin the slow changing of colors and put on a new face. Birds clustered in one large maple, and then shot off and circled around before flying off, round as the dressing room mirror.
I made the decision to be a work-away-from-home mom in 2006 when my first born son was born. I had been promoted to a full-time position with benefits, only to discover a month into the new position that I was pregnant. Going to my new boss to tell her that I’d be taking maternity leave was disconcerting. I felt the entire time that I had done something grossly wrong and worked like a demon to make up for it. I never missed a day; I scheduled all of my prenatal visits around lunch and evening hours, and I even chose an OBGYN that was located close to the office and picked the hospital across the street just in case my child had the gall to be born during a work day; I took work home with me too, figuring that I could make up for all the hours I’d be out during maternity leave by working more hours before it.

I was tired and miserable and I clearly remember the nurse at my OBGYN’s office telling me, “All pregnant women are happy and glowing.” I was not happy, and I most definitely did not glow, unless you count the perspiration from being hugely round and having to climb stairs every day to get to and from my apartment. As the weeks moved on and I grew bigger and rounder and heavier, I would hear the nurse’s comment like a mocking shadow. I grew to hate her. If she was in the office when I came in for a checkup, I would imagine all the ways I would tell her off. I would stare daggers at her if she so much as smiled at me hoping she could read the hate in my eyes. I must have slapped the smile off her face at least a half-dozen times in my fantasies. I was not a happy pregnant woman. I did not glow and I did not nest. I saw my pregnancy as something to grit my teeth against and get through. It was like a particularly onerous chore that never seemed to end, like laundry.

I had never had anything against social politeness before my pregnancy. I understood that societies need to have a ready answer for such things as “How are you today?” and “May I help you with that?” That was until every five minutes someone would ask me how I was feeling. After a while, saying “fine” became as awful to me as “happy” and “glowing.” Until my pregnancy I did not realize it was possible to hate words with such a passion. The worst comments came from perfect strangers who felt comfortable asking me if I was having twins. It became apparent to me that being preg-
nant gave society the open door to comment on a stranger’s weight with no repercussions. It was appalling to be asked when I was due and, when given the date, have them look at me with pity. I wanted to scream out that my body had been taken hostage by a vagina pirate intent on sucking all life from me for its greedy little self. I was a prisoner in my own body and everyone was telling me I was supposed to be happy about it.

I have never considered myself a person of fashion. I see clothes as costumes and dress appropriately for given occasions, but, if left to my own devices, I’d be happier in a comfortable pair of jeans and a soft broken-in t-shirt and no shoes. What I’m trying to say is that I’m pretty low maintenance in this department. Then one day I went to pull on my dress pants for work and noticed they wouldn’t button. I had reached the point in my pregnancy where I had to wear maternity clothes. Have you ever gone shopping for maternity clothes? I’m convinced this clothing industry was started by evil overlords bent on mentally destroying women. The first store I went into had posters of impossibly beautiful, happy women wearing heels. The heels were a dead giveaway that everything in this store would be a carefully constructed lie. When your feet spread and swell all the way up past the ankles, the last thing in the damn world you’d be caught wearing is six-inch heels. Hell, I had a different pair of flip flops and flats to go with anything in my closet. Just the thought of wearing actual shoes made me whimper in distress.

I took a deep breath, wiped my suddenly clammy hands down my now ill-fitting pants, and soldiered into the store. The first obstacle I faced was Salespeople.

“Oh, don’t you look beautiful! What can I help you find today?”

I instantly despised this petite blonde with her normal waist and non-puffy ankles. I had to chew back my first response. After all, I was raised southern, and rule number one is that you do not offend perfect strangers with the truth. With herculean effort, I forced a smile to my face and told her I was “just looking.” You would think she would have gotten the hint to move on, but no, she followed me through the store, pointing out merchandise with price tags that gave me sticker shock every time I turned them over. Sixty dollars for a pair of stretchy denim with a belly panel was highway robbery, and a hundred and twenty dollars for a knitted sweater?! How did these people sleep at night?

I made my way to the back of the store where I knew I would find the clearance racks. Once Little Miss Petite Blonde realized where I was going, she knew I was a lost cause. With a cheerful “Let me know if I can help you find anything,” she finally moved on to more prosperous waters.

I did discover one good thing in that maternity store: transitional clothing. I’d like to find the designer that dreamt up this amazing idea, because it was clearly a woman who clearly hated maternity clothes as much I did. Transitional clothing is just that: clothing designed to let a woman go from normal to pregnant and back to normal. The pants can be loosened or
tightened by hidden panels inside the pants while the outside of the clothing looks completely normal. There are no gigantic belly panels that are a different color from the pants. Instead you have a normal button fly with a zipper and a waistband that is adjustable. Adjustable waistbands were not just for little kids anymore. It was brilliant! Transitional clothing was the first pregnancy discovery that actually made me happy, and they were on clearance for six bucks apiece. I bought a pair in every color and tops to match. Then I treated my pregnant self to a waffle cone at the mall’s food court. I deserved it; I had survived another encounter with society and didn’t maim anyone.

Another thing they never tell you about pregnancy is that your sense of smell becomes very acute, and everything you taste changes. Foods I loved became intolerable. McDonald’s became my gastrointestinal enemy, and, after vomiting a Big Mac for the third time, I gave it up entirely. My whole diet changed, but I never really craved anything weird—except once. Vagina Pirate convinced me that we wanted a deep dish Italian pizza with anchovies and pepperoni. I hate anchovies but my unborn child was apparently communicating telepathically with Satan, because, before I knew it, I was ordering exactly that. When the pizza arrived I instantly regretted it, because the smell that wafted up to my nose made me sick. I had this insane thought that now I had finally gained the pregnancy glow. Too bad it was neon green.

The other fun side of my pregnancy was that the food I could tolerate gave me acid indigestion. I popped Tums like a professional drug addict. I carried tubs of them in my purse and in all different flavors. I had mint Tums for after meals and tropical fruit Tums for in between. My favorite flavor was cherry from the tropical fruits line. The chalky, artificial cherry flavor was soothing and I had convinced myself that it was almost as good as a jolly rancher. Desperation makes everything taste better.

Before I got pregnant, one of my favorite pastimes was sleeping. I hated to be woken up for any reason short of a house fire, and even then I’d be mildly violent until someone brought me a cup of coffee. As a child I slept with the covers pulled over my head, because I thought that if my mom couldn’t find me, then she couldn’t wake me up for school. It wasn’t even school that I hated—I loved school, I thrived in school—it was the horrible act of being woken up that I hated with a passion. My mom and siblings knew that the safest way to accomplish this was to stand in my doorway and lob stuffed animals at me until I finally rolled over and growled a sign of life.

And I haven’t grown out of this. My husband picked up on my aversion to being woken the first night we spent together. Even now he won’t touch me in the morning until after I’ve had a cup of coffee. Pregnancy shattered my favorite hobby. If there is one thing that stands out to me more than any other, it’s this. Sleep is a luxury that you are no longer afforded when you are pregnant. You are expected to get up and resume everyday life on little more than a few hours of sleep, and let’s not forget that you are also expected to be happy about it.
Even if you manage to find a comfortable position for sleeping, the pregnancy dreams will ruin it. Yes, pregnancy dreams. They are the stuff of psychotic nightmares. I will never need to know what it’s like to “trip balls,” because I have experienced pregnancy dreams. These dreams are so real and so frightening, that until you wake up screaming, sweating, or vomiting, your brain believes that’s all actually happening. PTSD symptoms seem eerily close to what I experienced in my hormone-saturated nightmares.

My first—and most vivid—plunge into the infamous pregnancy dreams came about when my husband, in an attempt to be nice, thought it was a good idea to take me to the movies to see *Slither*. The premise of the movie is that these slug-like aliens come to earth and attach themselves to humans, turning them into bigger, slimier versions of themselves. I couldn’t make it through the whole movie without covering my eyes numerous times. I was not a happy wife when we left. That night, as I finally found a comfortable position to sleep in, I drifted off and experienced my first pregnancy dream.

I was back in my college apartment with my roommates, Kelly and Nicole. It was a beautiful spring evening in Natchitoches, Louisiana, and they were discussing which party we should go to when I got up to get a drink of water from the kitchen. In our old apartment, the washer and dryer were in a recessed alcove in the kitchen. As I was getting my drink, I heard a noise inside the washing machine. I thought it might be a mouse. With caution I approached the washing machine, and, using a fork from the silverware drawer, I flung the lid up and jumped back, fully expecting a mouse to scram-bling out. My heart was pounding, my whole body shaking. I breathed a huge sigh of relief upon seeing the empty basket, and peered into the drum of the machine. Inside, sliding around the agitator, was an alien slug. I screamed and jumped back, taking off down the hall to my bedroom, where I fully intended to lock the door and climb out the window. However, I remembered that my roommates were still in the living room. I swallowed hard as I realized I had to go back through the kitchen to warn Kelly and Nicole of the impending bodysnatching. I slowly opened my bedroom door and peered down the hall looking for the alien slug. Thinking the coast was clear, I stepped out of my room and started running toward the living room. I made it halfway when the slug, now three times its original size, slithered across the doorway between the end of the hall and the kitchen. I was trapped and my sleep-deprived, over-adrenalized mind was in full flight or fight mode. I skidded to a stop and reversed directions back to my bedroom only to find that the alien slug had taken the form of a gummy bear that now had legs to chase me and arms to capture me with. I still shudder when I recall the sticky, slimy embrace of that slug-gummy-bear-thing as it caught me around the waist and dragged me back into the bathroom where I knew it was going to eat me.

I must have thrashed and punched and screamed my voice hoarse while in the grips of this horrific nightmare, because my husband announced
the next morning that he would be sleeping on the couch until further notice. I didn’t care. My pajamas were sticky with fear sweat, and my hair was matted. I needed a shower and to never (ever) see another gummy bear or slug again. Pregnancy had now ruined my love of horror movies and gummy bears. This child wasn’t even born yet and already he was traumatizing me.

I had another checkup at my OBGYN’s office later that same day. Perky Nurse was there. With the nightmare still fresh in my mind, I imagined the alien slug devouring her from the head down. It made me genuinely smile, even laugh.

The day that I had waited for was fast approaching. March 17 was so close I could taste it. I was so ready to get my little hijacker out of there I started researching ways to speed it up. You would be a-freaking-mazed at the list of ways women have found to induce labor on their own. I saw everything from drinking some special tea to literally walking the baby out of you. Given the amount of stairs I climbed in a day, I didn’t think the walk-it-out method would work for me. Other women swore by intercourse. The poisonous envy I felt toward my husband for not having to be pregnant meant that sex would not be advisable. I might slip and accidentally-on-purpose smash in his face. After all those hours researching online, I finally decided to just wait it out. It was only a few more weeks. I could totally do this. March 17 came and went and no baby, nothing, not even a twinge to let me know he was at least preparing. The next day came and still nothing. I started to believe that I would grow old and this child would still be lodged inside of me. I’d be that woman that was pregnant for like thirty years. At my next appointment my doctor checked me and told me my cervix hadn’t even thinned yet. He said I’d probably be pregnant for another two weeks. Two weeks! Like it was two days, or two hours, but no it was two more weeks. I felt a deep sense of betrayal. I had trusted this doctor to give me an end goal and he had just shifted the finish line.

April 1 came and went and still no baby. I was now a moody, hateful, psychotic horror show of a pregnant woman. The next time I went in to see my OBGYN, I was resolved to tell him he had to sign the eviction notice and remove the squatter. The night of April 2, I woke up to more muscle pain. My first thought was that I really had to pee but I was just too damn tired to do it. I closed my eyes and tried to will the feeling away to get just a tad more sleep...just the thought of my husband sleeping comfortably for hours on end incited within me a fiery jealousy. That used to be me! It was grossly unfair that my husband got to enjoy it while I was forced to wedge pillows between my knees and behind my back and sleep like the Elephant Man just to get a few hours of uninterrupted slumber. I think I managed another hour when the feeling became painful. I dragged my miserable carcass out of bed and padded down the hall to the bathroom. I propped my aching head on my hands and waited for my body to finish relieving itself. After forever passed, I felt lighter, washed my hands, and headed back to bed. It was on my trip
down the hall that the pain in my lower back hit me hard enough to bring me to my knees. I don’t remember much after that except praying that someone, anyone, would knock me out. I was incapable of any thought beyond “Oh, shit, that hurts.”

I vaguely remember a ride to the hospital and lots of rain and buffeting winds. I also remember being cold and wishing I had warmer socks. Once we arrived at the hospital, there were forms and insurance cards and other crap that they wanted me to fill out. I was having none of that and, in my best imitation of a pissed off drill sergeant, I told them all to go to hell. In hindsight I could have handled that better. I guess I forgot to be happy in the process of having my insides torn apart by the Omen Child.

They put me in a LDR room, or “Labor, Delivery, and Recovery.” I didn’t care what they called it as long as they gave me something for the back pain. This nurse came in to check on me and had the nerve to say they couldn’t give me anything for it. She said some other stuff too, but I had stopped listening to her. Then, that same woman had the audacity to smile at me and tell me that would all be over in a few hours. If I had been able to stand up without hunching over, I would have drop-kicked her face out of there. Instead, I made my husband massage my lower back and warned him that I would kill him one day in his sleep if he stopped. He made a more concerted effort after that.

I don’t recall much of what happened in the long hours between arriving at the hospital and giving birth. There was some poking and prodding that I suffered through, some seemingly random questions that were asked, and in one brief moment of female solidarity, another woman across the hall was screaming for pain killers. That woman was my hero. She made Smiling Condescending Nurse cry. She invoked Lucifer and all the Hounds of Hell with some of the most impressively colorful language either my husband or I had ever heard, and my husband was a Navy man.

Later in the day on April 3, my doctor came in and told me they have to start the Pitocen. For whatever reason (because my child was evil), my son was starting and stopping too infrequently and it was time to force the issue. I was all for this plan of action. So they hooked me up to my liquid freedom and that was when I realized that this was not a good plan. Pitocen feels like a punch in the cervix. I really wish I was kidding or being flippant but the sad, sad truth is that Pitocen is the absolute worst pain a woman can feel. My memories of pushing my son out of my body have faded with time, but my memory of Pitocen is clearly branded on my psyche right alongside my pregnancy nightmares. I physically feel the pain when I hear other women talking about having to be induced. The only good side effect of Pitocen is that once you’re dilated enough they finally let you have an epidural. And epidurals are awesome. I had liquid penicillin burning a molten lava line through my arm and Pitocen jackhammering my cervix and it all faded to nothing the moment my favorite man in the whole widest world gave me that epidural. I’m not
sure, but I might have asked the anesthesiologist to marry me as I wept sweet tears of relief.

Early on the morning of April 4, my son was finally born. He was beautiful, and I’m not just saying that because I was high on pain killers at the time. I mean, even my doctor was astounded by how beautiful he was. The nurses kept remarking on how perfectly round his head was and how sweet his puffy cheeks and Cupid’s bow mouth looked. When they placed him on my stomach, he and I shared a look that said, “These people are crazy, but I still love you.” Later that day, as I was learning how to nurse my newborn, I looked down at him and thought pregnancy was the worst thing that I had ever put my body through. I was not happy or glowing, but, as I cuddled Gavin to my chest and breathed in his clean baby smell, I realized that I was \textit{finally} happy.
While you were
in the shower
I had to leave, late again,
the steam, your singing,

In the mirror is
my attempt at a heart
our initials wherein
I'll be here, when you need me.
As I lay with the Indian man, I thought of my wife. God had brought our an-
cestors to the Bay Colony where we lived, and we were bound heavily by a Pu-
ritan way of life. How my wife would have felt had she known my
whereabouts, my company, or what I’d just done! I smiled at the thought,
temporarily unashamed by the judgment she would place upon me—the
judgment God would one day give. My sins were many, but they mattered not
when in the arms of the one I loved. I deeply loved Chogan—strong, yet gen-
tle Chogan. He was firm and tender all at once. He was my safety, despite the
danger the nature of our relationship posed to us. He was everything I
wanted precisely when I wanted it. Being with him felt right.

Best of all: he was a man.

On my back, I stared upward, silently contemplating while Chogan
who, speaking in the Massachuset language, used fluttering hand motions to
give an account of a time he had gone hunting. I felt the warm, bare skin of
his chest graze against my side as he moved. My eyes traced the dome-shaped
roof of the wigwam that sheltered us and the small wooden table to our left.
The view was familiar. I often found myself in this position with Chogan, and
I often found my mind roving over the same post-coital frustration: I didn’t
make a good man, and I made an even worse Puritan. I resolved to rectify my
wrongs every time, so there must have been some hope for my soul; I was not
beyond saving.

The feel of hot breath and soft lips on my cheek reigned in my wan-
dering mind. My smile returned. With my arm supporting Chogan’s shoul-
ders, I rubbed his forearm slowly with one hand, rolling toward him to press
my mouth to his. How was it that I could fall in love with such a sin? Truly, I
was obsessed with thoughts of Chogan. Every sermon I attended left me long-
ing for his company, and I lay with the Native nearly every night. As a re-
searcher of the Native culture, I defended my late nights by claiming that it
was imperative to my work to study nighttime Indian rituals. My wife reluc-
tantly accepted this excuse, and I was thankful the Puritans were so appre-
hensive about coming to the Massachuset village. I bravely endured time with
“the savage Indians”; most white men avoided them at almost any cost.

Chogan tangled an eager hand in my hair, his other hand squeezing
at my waist as I drew him closer with my hand on his hip. Abruptly, his lips were gone from mine, and my eyes opened slowly to investigate the problem. Concerned brown eyes examined my face.

“Is there something wrong?” I asked, loosening my grip as he did the same. He smiled slightly in response, running his long fingers gently through my hair. When we conversed, it was in a mixture of Massachuset and English, each of us using his own native language to convey what he did not know how to express in the other’s language.

“It is late. Your wife waits,” he told me. He pulled away, slowly sitting up and smiling over his shoulder at me. Chogan motioned for me to do the same, and I complied.

“I want to stay,” I sighed, leaning against him. He chuckled at me and patted the top of my head the way an adult might commend a small child.

“I want to keep you for myself, but your life is at risk for it. I do not wish to steal away your life.”

“Let them track me down and steal it away themselves,” I purred into his ear.

Chogan put a hand on my shoulder and gently pushed me away, slowly prying my lips away from his neck. “I meant what I said.”

With an exasperated sigh, I disentangled my legs from the linens I’d brought to him from town and got to my feet. After dressing, I took a seat at one of the stools near the table and poured some brandy into an engraved wooden cup.

“You should be leaving,” Chogan said to me after getting dressed. He sat next to me and stared disapprovingly at my drink.

“Have I told you how much I love you?” I asked, ignoring Chogan’s advice. I didn’t want to go home, and I didn’t intend to.

“Enough to risk both our lives,” he said, his voice steeped with potent disappointment.

I frowned. “My own life is the only one at risk here.”

“Perhaps,” Chogan said, avoiding my eyes.

The air became silent between us, and I turned my attention to my drink. I took a sip and gazed into the cup. Contemplating the reason for the newly formed tension in the room, I sloshed brandy around, guiltlessly watching as a bit escaped and crashed onto the table—a waste of God’s gift of alcohol. Finally, Chogan broke the silence.

“You must go. To stay is to betray me to your colony.” His eyes remained on the table. My mouth dropped open and I set down the cup with more force than I had intended. In quiet disbelief, I stared at my lover, waiting for a sign that he would acknowledge me again. He didn’t. Anger flared within my chest.

“This is betraying you?” I laughed drily and stood. “Chogan, I wouldn’t betray you. I’m defying God by just looking at you the way I do.”

Chogan turned to face me. His voice carried the same angry weight as
mine while he ranted at me in his language. “Yet betraying me is what you continue to do! If you’re so willing to turn against your God and risk your life to be here, forsake him for good and live in my wigwam. You can’t be true with me until you’re true with yourself, Samuel.” He crossed his arms over his chest and sighed, turning away. I could only stare, lips pursed as I attempted to construct a counter-argument for Chogan’s accusation. He rubbed his head, apparently deep in internal debate.

“Until you can admit your desires to yourself, you can forget the path to my home.” The Native collected the bottle of brandy and shoved it into my hands, pointing toward the way out. His stern face intently watched mine, and I returned a seething glare.

How couldn’t he understand that this was what I wanted? I enjoyed nothing more than being near him, hearing his voice, feeling his body against mine. I was committing a capital crime by being with him, and not just for the thrill of doing something ill-behaved.

I took the bottle and drained it into my mouth, taking multiple swallows to finish it off as the brandy burned its way across my tongue and down my throat. Slamming the empty bottle back onto the table, I shoved past Chogan, eyes upon the dark trail home.

Chogan stopped me with a firm hand on my arm. “That was unwise,” he told me. When I showed no intention of listening or stopping, he stepped around me to make sure I couldn’t leave, a warm hand remaining on my bicep.

“Don’t be a fool, Sam. If you return drunk and angry, they’ll punish you for certain.”

“It’s not a sin to get angry.”

“Is it not a sin to drink too much? You’ll condemn yourself with your inability to moderate your behavior.” Chogan was right about the Puritan way of thinking, but his reasoning didn’t calm me down.

“I’ll blame it on the savages, then. Excuse me—” I jerked my arm out of his caring grasp “—but I’ve another life to uphold.” I turned toward the woods—toward home—and charged off. I heard Chogan follow me only a few steps before quitting the pursuit.

“Be wise, Samuel.” I could hear Chogan’s gentle voice in the distance. I’d made it farther already than I had thought. I shook my head, trying to shake away the anger, but I was too distraught to forgive so soon. Could Chogan not see? I was not in love with the colony; I wanted as little to do with them as they did me. I wanted to spend all my days with Chogan at my side, in that cozy wigwam. I wanted to call it home.

But it wasn’t my home. I belonged to the Bay Colony. No, I belonged to God—God, who gave me the ability to love, to whom I owed everything. I was the worst of sinners because I had been blind to God’s will for far too long. I should have loved Him first; I was a traitor. These were the thoughts I wrestled with during every meeting with Chogan, but our harsh exchange of
words lit a fire beneath me that I’d not felt previously.

When I finally broke out onto the empty, beaten path, my head felt clearer than ever before. It became obvious that the source of my frustration wasn’t my colony, my wife, or even Chogan. It was that they concerned me so greatly. It was that I hadn’t bothered to take a sermon to heart in weeks. It was that I worshipped not God, but my own pleasures. It was that sin ruled me. I had to prove my allegiance to the Lord.

I faltered onto the sleeping colony grounds, set toward the minister’s home. For some time, I stood at his door. I took a deep breath; I was confessing. I was going to tell the minister everything. Then, I would be punished accordingly. And so would Chogan. Confessing would sentence us both to death, but my faith commanded it. I moved my clenched fist closer to the door. Eyes wide, I stared at the warped wooden planks of the minister’s house. My conscience dueled my will. Knock. Rap your knuckles against the boards, and knock.

With a sigh, I loosened my fist, resting my palm softly on the door instead.

Chogan was right; I needed to reevaluate my priorities. I didn’t need to confess aloud; I needed to rectify my misdeeds. God came first and my wife came second. I would abide that. I would forsake my life with Chogan. I would silently confess to God my sins. I would love my wife. It was right. Perhaps, my fate was not yet sealed.

Before I could be noticed, I turned, stumbling for home.

Cynthia startled awake when I fell onto the bed. The light of the fire was dim, but I could still make out her features. Her shock quickly faded to relief when she recognized me as her husband. Concern replaced her relief upon her discovery that I was not sober.

“Samuel, you’re drunk. I—” She couldn’t talk with my lips on hers. How easy it was to silence her! Just as she began to kiss me back, I pulled away, running a dirty hand through her hair.

“You’re worthy of so much more than I’ve given you,” I said, breathing hotly on her cheek.

“Are you unwell?” She felt my face as if checking for a fever.

I dropped my hand from her hair, sliding it down her back. I pulled her closer to me from the waist, pushing our mouths together once again, trying desperately to rouse some feelings I was certain were not within me.

Reluctantly, Cynthia pushed me back a few inches, smiling. “What has gotten into you? It’s been so long since we’ve been...” she trailed off, her eyes falling on the fire instead of my face. The thought of being intimate with her husband still embarrassed her.

“I’ve been distracted.”

“Couldn’t we spend some more time together, just you and me? You could tell me more about your studies with the savages—Natives. I would like that,” she tried to sound honest, but I already knew her feelings on our Native
neighbors. Cynthia had never approved of my research with the Indians, but she did always seem happy to get to speak with me. It was nice to have her love, even if I could not return it.

“Well, Tomorrow,” I told her, trying to pull her in for another kiss. She pushed away.

“But tomorrow is Sunday,” she protested. We were supposed to devote the Sabbath to the Lord.

“If not tomorrow, then the day after that. I think I will take a different job so that I may spend more time with my beautiful wife.” Cynthia grinned. “You will? But your research…”

“Unnecessary. Nonetheless, no one in the colony values my studies. They likely think I’m—” This time, my words were put to an end with Cynthia’s mouth on mine. I let it happen. I let her lead, her hands gripping at my clothes to get me undressed. There was little I had to do to get us both completely naked; when it came time to progress further, I found it impossible.

“It must be the alcohol,” I explained. She shook her head.

“No, you’re just not trying hard enough,” she insisted. She kissed me again. She bestrode me and moved my hands to her breasts. Rolling her hips against mine, Cynthia reached down in a futile attempt to stroke life into a dead soldier. I wrapped my arms around her waist and brushed wet lips across her collarbone. Despite both our efforts, nothing changed. A few minutes of no response, and she dropped back against the bed with a sigh.

“I told you. It’s the alcohol,” I explained again. Cynthia scowled at me.

“No, it’s not,” she reasserted. I shrugged and lay back.

“I’m telling you, that’s what it is,” I said. Silence overtook us for some time, and I resolved to sleep.

“You’ve been with someone else, haven’t you?” she asked finally, her voice startling me. I opened my eyes to see her gaze cast to the ceiling. “All those late nights with those people. Tell me. Is it one of those savage women? And now you’re—” I put a hand over her mouth.

“Be quiet, Cynthia. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Quite forcefully, she pushed my arm away. “You have! Which one is it?”

“It’s none of them.”

“Then who? Someone from the colony? No, Samuel, you couldn’t—”

“I haven’t been with another woman! Will you be quiet now?” Again, we sat in silence. Eventually, I took it we would remain that way.

“We’ll try again tomorrow night,” I promised.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday,” she said again.

“Monday then,” I sighed with frustration rather than disappointment. The covers rustled and soon I could feel her warm back against my side.
Several weeks passed. I took a job building fences, and I abandoned Chogan and all thoughts of him, for fear of being led by temptation from my wife. We tried regularly to have sex, but I failed in proper function again and again. I upheld my drinking habit so that she might excuse my impotence, but Cynthia already suspected that I was not faithful. Perhaps the act would have been successful had I closed my eyes and envisioned Chogan’s handsome, male figure—this technique had, in the past, been successful—but that would only steer me off my path to salvation. I tried only to focus on the feminine form of my wife—to no avail.

As the weeks continued, I found myself present increasingly more often at woman-free gatherings at the town meeting house, where men socialized over bottles of gin. Now with a socially acceptable occupation, I slowly worked back into the favor of the other men.

I sat down each evening with a new friend: Nathaniel. He was a single man, younger than I, just beyond his teenage years, while I had already passed thirty-three summers. I wondered what brought him to drink so often, being so young and with so much potential. Had I the same amount of years, I thought I would do things differently, most likely deciding to continue as an unmarried man and never stealing a good, loving woman from a man who deserved to have her instead. Cynthia merited a husband who could return her affections, for her nature was pious and praiseworthy—excruciatingly so; I resented her for it. How could she be such an exemplary human being when I could naught but sin? How could she reach inside herself and pull out solely virtue, when, upon reaching inside myself, out came only corruption? I abhorred her for her goodness, but to act on those bitter feelings was against my new resolution. Divorce was not unheard of, although I was certain the court would not accept my case without some sort of convincing incident to warrant my petition for dissolving our union. While I searched for a solution, I was determined to treat her the way she deserved, regardless of my feelings.

I divulged my inner struggles concerning my wife to Nathaniel, being careful, of course, to keep my more atrocious sins to myself. He learned of my want of escape, but how I wished not to wrong Cynthia in the process. I had thought of finding a way to suggest she divorce me on the basis that I could not satisfy her as man or perform well enough to ever bring her any children—a fact we were reminded of when the two of us were met with families of eight throughout the colony. Some other men and women ventured so far as to ask us when we would finally be bringing new life into the world, and our answer was always the same: Cynthia would cast her eyes to the ground, and I would utter the well-rehearsed words: “Whenever Our Lord finds us so worthy.”
“You ought to find a way to tell her the truth,” Nathaniel said.

The words surprised me, not because of what he’d said, but because he had chosen to open discourse in this manner, planting himself in the chair beside me as he said it. I sat at a long table of several men already, sitting farthest from the core of those who held conversation together, and even though Nathaniel’s presence had been announced to me, evidently no other had acknowledged his presence more than to glance to see who had joined us. I quietly withdrew from the alcohol-induced gossip about the current governor—of which I’d had little to add anyhow—and turned to look inquisitively at Nathaniel.

“What’s the meaning of that?” I asked, pulling my cup off the table to put it to my lips.

Nathaniel tilted his head, face coloring as his eyes searched for anything to look at but me. He leaned forward onto the table, his fingers scraping against mine when he put his forearms in place on the wooden surface. “The true reason you can’t—” he hesitated, seeming to search for a suitable word “—interact with your wife.”

“I can’t do that,” I said, keeping my voice low. I glanced at our nearby company to make sure no one was listening. It wasn’t something I wanted to discuss in the open. I shook my head, watching the gin in the cup catch the light of the fire as I tipped it from side to side.

“What is the truth, then?” I asked, hoping to discover his full meaning. While I had come to trust the younger man, I never came to be comfortable with revealing my relationship with Chogan or any attraction to any man.

Nathaniel tilted his head again, this time indicating the exit. He said nothing else, waiting for me to respond.

My eyes flickered to the door, but then I nodded, abandoning my gin and bidding the other men a brief farewell, to which a few of them looked up and waved before being drawn back into their gossip. I went through the door and then waited for Nathaniel before we silently walked a distance to an open part of the road, the din of our previous company still vaguely audible.

I pushed my hands into my pockets, glancing at Nathaniel occasionally as we walked on the moonlit road. I waited for him to speak, having been the last one to do any talking—and fearing that he had managed to discover my secret, I was in no rush to hear the bad news.

“You always talk about wanting to go back to the Indian encampment,” he finally said, slowing to a stop. I followed suit, and hesitating, I nodded, hoping that he would not require me to say anything for him to continue. His eyes stayed on my chest.

“And you said you have a good friend there,” he went on.

“I do.”

“And he’s a man.” It was almost a question, and I almost didn’t answer.
“He is. What of him?” I was afraid of Nathaniel’s words. Though I knew he could not have known, I imagined he had discovered my secret.

A shaky laugh escaped Nathaniel, and he wrung his fingers around his wrist. He tentatively continued. “Your wife—your problem with her—could it be that you have no attraction to any woman?”

His words only confirmed my suspicion that he understood me to be a reprobate. Surely, any other man would next seek justice—become fiery and condemn me for the inescapable sin God had cursed me with—but Nathaniel’s actions did not portray that sort of attitude, I realized.

“But I do,” I defended, lacking conviction.

“You don’t,” he accused, though his tone was gentle. “It is Chogan who interests you. You talk about him as though he, and not Cynthia, is your wife.” He dropped his arms to his sides once more, his gaze fixed on mine.

“I am devoted to my wife.”

“But you are in love with a man,” Nathaniel offered. He stepped closer to me, reaching for my arm. I looked down at his hand as it touched me, and looked back up at Nathaniel’s face.

I thought of Chogan then—or tried to—but I couldn’t imagine his handsome, stout figure when I was close enough to breathe the same breath as Nathaniel, tall and lithe. The Puritan’s brown hair was shorter than Chogan’s but long enough to grab a hold of, and looking over his sharp, clean-shaven face, I couldn’t help wetting my lips. I watched his eyes follow my tongue from one corner of my mouth to the other.

“He is only a friend,” I said. Despite my defense, I did not recoil from the fingertips he dragged through the hair of my forearm. “My heart lies with my—”

And just as I’d quieted Cynthia weeks ago, Nathaniel brought my words to an end, putting his lips gently against mine. My insides were set aflutter with excitement and apprehension, and I could not bring myself to back away. It was then that I finally understood that there was no escaping my fate. My dedication to my wife was as superficial as my dedication to God. I feared Him, but I would only ever love myself—a moment of true clarity.

I removed Nathaniel’s hesitation by taking a tight hold of his waist and pressing my lips back into his. Reenergized by my returned affection, his fingers folded around the back of my neck and my arm with a grip as tight as mine. Briefly did I wonder how long he’d yearned for the touch of a man. The passion that had arisen in him led me to believe he may have felt such conflict for years, and here I was, someone like him, freeing him of morality’s chains. I experienced a sensation of reckless abandon as I stood there, a Christian man aroused by another Christian man, a sinner in the arms of a sinner, a man bound for Hell: a blissful traitor.
Each raindrop that splatters
On the glass of the windowpane
She catalogues. It’s as if
Life is her curious science—
Watching a transparent drop
Of rain clash against
A transparent windowpane;
And yet she still sees it.

Each brave worm that ends up
Upturned on the pavement
She examines. Astute fingers
Scratch a messily gathered head;
“Seven forty-eight,” she muses,
Nudging a forlorn worm
Gently with the tip of her shoe.
“Time of death: seven forty-eight.”

Each mud puddle softly rippled
By the wafting of the breezy winds
She explores. A quick kneel
And she is on the ground, scooping up
A mud sample with two fingers
And rubbing it on the back of her hand.
Her face close to the murky water,
She looks at herself and withdraws.

Each teardrop that splatters
On the glass of the windowpane
She ignores. It’s as if
Action has no reaction;
Existence seems to be suspended
Somewhere between the ground
And the gray rain clouds
And each raindrop that splatters...
Eliza laid curled up on her side of the bed, staring out the window at the miles of dust and rock that she and Clive had been excited to call home just six months prior. Dust skimmed lightly against the glass, and Eliza shivered despite the warm morning sun rolling over to replace the barren landscape with her husband’s sleeping face. His face was near as rugged as the land, but she had always liked that about him. Clive was built for a frontier colony, brought up on a terra-farm himself. Piloting his first tractor at six, he had seen half a dozen worlds transform from desolate and hostile to self-sustaining, eco-friendly planets.

He sighed deeply in his sleep, and Eliza’s hand instinctually moved to his chest. She softly broke the motion and instead curled her hands in to one another. The feeling of his heartbeat had always comforted her, and he claimed that his dreams were more vibrant when she rested her hand on him at night. The dreams had stopped a couple of weeks earlier, however, after Eliza had noticed Clive’s ribs more than his heart, holding up his thin and sinking skin. He had been insisting that she eat a healthier ration, despite her petite figure. At the rate they were going, the food would be completely gone in another two months.

He woke slowly, as if in a vague response to her attention. Looking over, his lips curled into a sad smile, and he leaned in to kiss her forehead. Sliding his legs off of the bed, he pushed himself up and sleepily hobbled over to the coms room. Following his lead in the morning ritual, Eliza also got out of bed and prepared their breakfast: two tablespoons of hyga-grain apiece. The grain was all that was left, as the rest had been planted before losing coms with their sponsors in Thenas, the capital city of the new planet. None of it grew, of course. Without communication to the city they had no fertilizer, no earth-dampeners, no ion tablets, nothing. The sound of the morning broadcast buzzed across the relays outside, each causing a light “crack!” followed by a faint electric hum as they carried the message into the distance.

Clive came back in to join her at the table. Eliza tried to sound hopeful, expectant.

“Any word?” she asked. He shook his head and sat down.

“Oh, Eliza, you know what I’ve been telling you,” he sighed as he
reached over the table to scrape half a teaspoon of his grain into her bowl.

“Clive. You need it just as much as I do.”

“I’ve told you, this atmosphere is less hostile to men. Besides, you haven’t been feeling well.”

Knowing it was a futile argument, she watched him pour the manufactured food product into her bowl. They sat silently as they savored each tiny mouthful. It had been so bland before, but now they took their time and if the grain had not been cloned, they may have been able to taste the subtle differences between each tiny piece.

After eating, Eliza stared at the empty bowl for a moment while Clive stood up and walked to the suit rack to gear up.

“You’ll have to scrape the field today. I’m going to check the towers.”

“It’s already been a month?”

“Hard to believe, huh?”

A message was supposed to be transmitted monthly across the relays, to inform each colony of shipment updates and news from the city. In about two hours, it would inform each colony of shipment updates and news from the city. The last four months of transmissions had just repeated though, as if nobody had updated the system. It was a standard transmission—an update on the other settlements, a few new pieces of information regarding dampening techniques—nothing extraordinary at all. Every month it had been exactly the same. And every day, Clive’s report was the same. Ever the dutiful colonizer, Clive would update his report every day, filling out their remaining rations, power supply, and other information that the company would want to know.

These test transmission days were the only breaks in the monotony of Clive’s routine. Instead of scraping the barren fields, he checked the nearby towers to make sure they were operational and that messages hadn’t been getting rejected due to atmospheric conditions. Eliza would take to the field.

She followed closely behind him as he hopped in to the solar buggy and set out west. He could only check the first dozen towers despite the battery in the buggy, as nightfall would bring the sandstorms that would completely sweep the little cart away. Perhaps it wasn’t even worth it. As he drove off, Eliza turned to look at the farm. It was a disturbingly pathetic sight; the dirt troughs that could barely be called a field were their only hope for survival if communication wasn’t made soon.

Mounting the crop-tumbler, she rolled across the land as the quiet vehicle slowly ground the earth and pushed seeds deep beneath the soil. The process had to be repeated every day, for without water, the soil would blow away at night, along with the previous seeds. One twenty minute shower could dampen the dirt and feed the plants, but without ion tabs only dust would fall.

As the sun crossed the sky, casting diffused shadows through the sepia clouds, Eliza let her mind think of other worlds. She thought of Earth,
the home world, Antioch, where she was born, and Ezra, where she had first met Clive in a little nightclub. He rarely got off the farm, and his dancing showed it, but she decided to talk to him anyway.

Her parents had never been what you would call socially elite anyway, and she had grown up in their humble complex on Antioch. It wasn’t the worst apartment block in the city, but it left a lot to be desired. The residents were mostly maintenance engineers, like her parents, spending their waking life overseeing the work of machines. It was no wonder Eliza had gone looking for a job off-world.

Was it worth it? Everyone dies anyway. Maybe living a short life but seeing a new world was worth it. Or should she have stayed at home and lived a long and comfortable life without surprise? Of all the questions she asked herself, one always came to her mind, despite her attempts to discard it.

Were she and Clive alone on the planet? It didn’t necessarily make a difference, but for some reason, she was drawn to the question. When they had landed in Thenas, and been flown by drop ship to their settlement location, the capital had been fully established. A mere storm wouldn’t have destroyed the communication lines for more than a day or two. The company would certainly have kept everything functioning properly. It had spent eight trillion credits on the planet, after all.

There wouldn’t be any reason to attack the hub, either. At this point in development, the planet wasn’t generating any income. Outside of the resources which were shipped in, there wasn’t a single thing of real value. So if the hub hadn’t been destroyed by a natural disaster, and hadn’t been attacked, what had happened? Eliza’s brow wrinkled into a wince as she considered the implications.

What if it had experienced a lack of communication itself with Ezra, its import hub? What would stop the office on Ezra from communicating outside of its breakdown in communication with Anthem, and so on? Was anybody else still alive? Did Thenas still exist at all? Did Earth?

The sun finally began to slide beyond the horizon. Eliza’s eyes were wide; her heart pounded angrily against her chest. The sound of the buggy approaching raised her heart to her throat and she leapt from the crop-tumbler, running toward the faint image briefly, until her weary body forced her to her knees.

She looked up and tried to focus her eyes on the buggy but the clouds it kicked up shrouded its body from view. Was it moving quicker than usual? Had Clive discovered a malfunction? A message in one of the towers?!

He pulled up quickly, hopping out to see what was wrong with Eliza, who had pushed herself beyond exhaustion.

“Eliza? Hey, look at me. Are you alright?”

She raised her eyes, looking for an expression of excitement or hope, but Clive’s face showed the same gaunt emptiness it had shown every day of the last four months. She collapsed in his lap, sobbing dry tears into his suit.
He held her for half an hour or so, as the sun went down and the dust picked up, and they both thought of staying there, until the darkness came to carry them away. But they were drawn to the house, where they removed their suits and sat silently to eat their meager rations.

Before retreating to bed, Clive looked deeply into his wife’s eyes. He leaned in and kissed her forehead gently. His mouth moved... an attempt to speak. But no words came out. He slowly got up and maneuvered his spindly body into the darkness of the bedroom.

Eliza stood up and carried the dishes to the counter. She would clean them tomorrow. God knew she had time. Standing in the bedroom door, looking at her sleeping husband, she had a thought. Crossing the main room, Eliza stepped through the metal hatch connecting the main house to the coms station. Surrounded by the hum of the electronics, she sat down at the keyboard and thought deeply about what to say.

Should she send a dutiful report? Should she express anger about being abandoned? Should she express her fear? Her fingers rested on the keys and she typed the first thing that came to mind. As she sent the message, she heard the cracking sound, followed by the buzz she had heard every morning. But this time it was her message being carried around the planet.

She crept back to the bedroom, crawled in to bed, and pulled the covers over her, as protection from the night. Sliding her hand across her husband’s boney chest, her question was carried away to a city which might not be populated, and transmitted across a gap in space to be accompanied only by light and dust to another planet which may no longer exist. As the dust scraped against the window once again, and as her husband breathed slowly against the sheets, Eliza was calm. Her question was out there, to be answered.

“Is anybody out there?”
I spend the next three minutes
washing my hands,
counting slowly in my head
until the bubbles slide down the drain.
I count to two hundred,
just in case I went too fast.

There is only one line,
and I want to cry.
I am empty inside,
and my eyes fill up with guilt.

Somewhere, there is a woman
crying over her own single line,
tossing another failed test
on top of the full wastebasket.
Tonight, in the kitchen,
she will measure and level,
double check her temperatures,
time everything down to the second—
a creation she can control,
a bandage for the wound
in her husband’s eyes.

And here I am, alone
with that one pink line.
I hide the test in the bottom
of my own wastebasket,
bury it under my relief.
Tonight, I will buy a pair
of tiny shoes I don’t need
and send them to a barefoot
child I’ve never met.
This much I can give.
On the city sidewalk, there’s a cellphone with a cracked screen. And while no image can be seen, the celebratory chimes of a virtual game ring forth, showcasing victory and good fortune to its owner.

Nearby, a woman lies facedown, one arm beneath her, and the other outstretched, limp and motionless, but for a twitching hand. From a thin, deep wound in the top of her head, blood trickles. Slowly, it has made its way out from her hairline and down her cheek, mixing with her silent tears. People cluster around—panicking, shouting for help, checking her pulse... it’s faint and growing fainter.

Her time is running out.

Rushing to the scene, a police officer nudges past a homeless man, and though your natural inclination may tell you to zoom in on the officer (who, in most occasions, may be the hero of the day), I implore you to resist this urge. Instead, refocus on the homeless man: he’s standing there, in plain view, lit up with the same sunlight as everyone else, yet, still in the shadows, invisible to the world. With the hint of a smile on his face, he observes and takes in the scene with a stride of secret understanding. Now let your mind’s camera pan down from his face, over his prickly unshaven neck, his filthy, sweat-laden shirt, to his left wrist, where his calm hand turns the dial of his golden watch back twenty-nine seconds.

He smiles again as the group of witnesses disperse, moving backwards, obeying his watch and rewinding through time, resuming their daily lives, clueless as to what they have just witnessed. The woman’s body rises, stiff as a falling tree, back to a stand. The blood on her face retreats as the blood on the sidewalk un-splatters, every last drop back into the hole it all squirted out from. A mixture of pain and confusion uncrosses her face. Her body twitches, stiffens. There’s a soft, crisp thud, and then something digs back out of her scalp and her body unstiffens.

Conscious thoughts resume.

She wonders what’s taking her husband so long to come out of the building, and then her focus is on her smart phone. She’s watching, waiting, anticipating that she’ll win the game she’s playing. Coin Dozer. It’s her favorite.
Now, let your eyes go back to that mysterious object: zoom in as it lifts back into the sky. You and I are the only witnesses, so this is imperative. No one, not the food vendors, not the businessmen, not the tourists, window cleaners, or even the birds, notices this object elevating ever higher, rising, or reverse-falling... back up the side of the skyscraper.

No one, that is, until it is back to the top, back to the safety railing of the observation deck one-thousand three-hundred and eighty-eight feet high, where a little girl’s curious eyes refocus on it. And, not knowing time is in reverse, this little girl watches the penny come back until it’s in her hand again. She is whispering, “I wish my daddy would buy me the most-bestest pony ever.” But backwards, in some garbled, inarticulate manner that is far too problematic to replicate.

Now stop the rewind, and let it all play out.

A thought crosses the little girl’s mind. She’s thinking that the only thing better than finding a lucky penny on the sidewalk, is throwing that same lucky penny off the United States’ tallest building as if it were her very own personal wishing well. So, she wishes for a pony—one with a pink, polka-dotted neck-tie—and then gives the penny a casual flick of the wrist.

Far, far below, a homeless man asks a woman playing a game on her smartphone for spare change. With a dismissive wave of her hand, she tells him to scat. He asks again, cupping his hands together. This time, irritated, she scrunches her face in disgust and hurries away. He smiles at this, looks at his golden watch, takes a step back, and after a penny clinks to the sidewalk and comes to a rest, he picks it up and places it in his pocket.
kim bennett received a BFA from Stephens College and is working toward an MA. Bennett, who has been published in Harbinger, enjoys writing about human rights and plans to inspire others to accept all differences. She has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a genetic disorder, and her work is dedicated to those with invisible illnesses.

michael bezushko is a Secondary Education major. His writing is inspired by traveling and film. Starting his career in TV production, Bezushko began writing screenplays and short stories—many of which are sci-fi—inspired by events he witnessed during his travels. He hopes to one day be a screenwriter.

megan bishop is a senior majoring in Anthropology. Writing is one of Bishop’s favorite hobbies, and she especially enjoys writing poetry because of its transportive abilities. “Lluvia” is a coming-of-age story highlighting the transition from innocence to experience.

ryan chrisco has been writing for years, but this is his first publication. His writing focuses on creating new worlds and realizing ideas in a fictional setting. Chrisco hopes to someday be able to write for a living. He will graduate in May with his MS in Computer Science.

steven clark graduated from UMSL in 1980 with a BA in English. The Green Path, his first novel, was published by Black Oak Media. Walrus Press will release his second novel, The St. Louisans, next year. Clark’s stories have been published in Black Oak Presents and Mozark Press.

c.r. curry lives two lives: one as a recluse, squeezing in writing time after 13-hour overnight shifts, and the other as a single father eagerly trying to appease his children and prove his heroic prowess by smashing in Bowser’s teeth with a plunger to save the princess... yet again.

jessica eikmann is an English major who aspires to be an editor at a publishing house. She primarily writes poetry, but also dabbles in nonfiction. Eikmann draws her inspiration from Greek mythology, slam poetry, indie rock and folk, modernist novels, and, of course, the pervasive allure of madness.

mike gamache will be graduating in May with an English degree. As a big fan of metal, he draws most of his inspiration from heavy music and is almost always listening to it when writing. Although he mainly writes short stories, Gamache is currently writing his first book, Heart Sync.

stacy gorse has a Creative Writing Certificate from UMSL and will be graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English in May of 2014. She doesn’t
like reading books or watching movies, and she thinks coffee is gross; however, she assures you that you are the weird one—not her.

Jake Hughes is an aspiring writer, filmmaker, and artist. Inspired by the lyrics of Justin Pierre and Pete Wentz, he began writing poetry and lyrics at fourteen, briefly trying to be a hipster before deciding he didn’t have the necessary patience. Hughes likes just about anything that doesn’t require talking about himself.

Regina James is living out her life’s purpose, which is "to repair, renew, and reposition the human spirit." She lives an urban missionary in St. Louis and East St. Louis. A senior majoring in Psychology, James writes, sings, and paints to feed her spirit.

As a child, Afton Joiner had ambitions of becoming a fashion designer. She is now a junior majoring in Studio Arts. A collection of her work was presented at Gallery FAB at UMSL. Joiner values the mentorship of the instructors and credits her progress to their counseling.

Heather Kaufman is a McKendree graduate now pursuing her MA in Composition Studies. She is an Associate Editor at Concordia Publishing House. Her publishing credits include The Montage and The McKendree Review, among others. Oddly, Kaufman does her best writing in the shower, where it’s horribly inconvenient to write anything down.

Kirk has been published in Litmag twice before, and thrice in the Mid Rivers Review. He also wrote and published a novel, The Candle and the Cup, now available for purchase on Amazon. But he’d be the first to tell you it’s no good.

Kaetlin Lafargue is a freshman majoring in Biotechnology. She hopes to be a pharmaceutical saleswoman. She loves to travel, is scuba diving certified, and has been diving twice. Lafargue’s photo was taken while eating sandwiches with her family in her grandfather’s hometown.

Nick LaFoy is a UMSL alum currently working as an Experiential Coordinator at Moosylvania. His photograph, “Mexico City,” was featured on the cover of Litmag 2013. LaFoy enjoys writing, drawing, learning new instruments, and planning his November wedding with Carly, his fiancée. He hopes to one day publish a graphic novel.

Emily Lewis recently relocated to St. Louis to study English. She has traveled abroad independently, volunteering and working odd jobs. She wants to be a flight attendant, teacher, photojournalist, and lion tamer. For now, Lewis enjoys cruising in her Oldsmobile, snapping photos of the neighborhood, and singing R&B jams. And bacon.

Arthur Maurer is an English major and former student at Truman State, where he was published in Windfall. He draws inspiration from Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ezra Pound, and Charles Bukowski. In addition to poetry, Maurer also writes short fiction and hopes to succeed in both areas.
conner w. h. meyer loves old movies and wishes he had said something when that teenager put a bottle of tequila down his pants and walked out of the store.

mike renez nash is majoring in Studio Arts. He aspires to perform curatorial exhibition duties working in a gallery. Personal interests include the culture of the 1980s and filmography. Nash’s work consists of experimental color use, textures, brush strokes, and light/dark settings.

alexis nugent is not an avid photographer by any means; life with two young sons keeps her busy. Though, it’s when she’s behind the camera—capturing life’s greatest moments—that she feels most at ease. Nugent has been dabbling in photography for 13 years, focusing on landscapes and architecture.

maximilian tsimerman received his BS in Secondary Ed., English last year. He tutors middle and high school students and strives to earn his Master’s soon. Tsimerman’s poetry and graphic novels have been published in local literary magazines and comic book anthologies. He enjoys writing, drawing, painting, and glass work.

jason vasser lives and writes in St. Louis, where he is an MFA student and assistant editor of Natural Bridge. His work has appeared in The Sphinx, Prairie Gold: An Anthology of America’s Heartland, Belleverie, and others.

hope votaw is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Psychology. She is earning an Honors Certificate through the Pierre Laclede Honors College, as well as a Professional Writing Certificate. Votaw plans to attend law school once she graduates. She is new to poetry, and she is a first-time submitter.

wrairneau willis is the mother of three vagina pirates. She is a stellar mom, evidenced by the fact that all three of her children are still alive, unlike the plants that she continues to kill with her love. She continues to allow her husband to live... for now.

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