

Zephyrus ²⁰⁰²

Zephyrus

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Editors

Managing Editor: Sam Stinson

Lisa Bricker

Laura Collins

Jeff Crady

William Ekhardt

B. J. Hatcher

Trish Lindsey Jagers

Matthew James Jones

Jeremy McChesney

Frank Muller

Antonia Oakes

The current staff apologizes for the inadvertent omission of **Danielle Mitchell** from the listing of editorial staff of the 2001 volume.

Art coordination and cover art:

Jeff Meyer

Title page art: Rosemary Swain

Online version: Sam Stinson

<<http://www.wku.edu/zephyrus>>

Faculty advisor: David LeNoir

Printing: Ikon

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Zephyrus Art Award

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Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

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The Hitchhiker

Trish Lindsey Jagers

Your smile says
you promise
to be good—
you, on the side of the road,
among crescent-shaped
shards of shattered windshields
from previous accidents;
here, even gravel sparks like diamonds
caught in a sun-bow,
and though we grab fistfuls,
only dust filters through,
leaves our palms as empty
as wishes,
I pass you, turn my head,
afraid you saw me
look;
the rearview mirror reminds me
that the promises you make
in the vernacular of a street-level stranger
must tiptoe around broken glass,
your pockets full of lead,
your thumb up,
hand closed
at all times.

Secrets of a Singapore Sling

Jennifer Cox

You ask and are asked
"What's in it?"
And you try to remember
What makes it pink . . .
Grenadine?
Cranberry?
Maybe both
You wish
You had written it down
The night you had
The perfect one
Because it's not
A common drink—
Sweet, but with a
Hint of gin—
Enough to make
You drink it
Too fast

A Different Shade of Purple

Trish Lindsey Jagers

I could look at her teeth
and tell how hard
she lived, how often
she chewed chains
of caution
by the way her tongue
never left her lips;
the way she twisted
her ring told me of her
solitude.
I understood this tongue
I never heard
speak. My speck of dust
could have blown from her
land. I could be her
child, this mother
of discontent,
and never know my soil
on which she now stands
shifting her feet.

Moving

Jeff Crady

It is returning,
like the fall in September.
Leaves bruise, fall,
make copper shaded quilts
over my front yard.
It comes in the wind,
as it stirs, gathers the yellow
leaves in piles along dirtied
street curbs.
I feel it, as I walk home,
the air cool, my hands
fisted together in the pocket
of my oversized, blue sweatshirt.
I think of how I called you today.
You had little to say,
your silence—a dull knife in my side.
I thought of Petrosky,
 “Oh God I feel like wailing . . .”
but I was silent,
simply said goodbye,
found myself here,
three steps beyond
the blue house with white shutters
where its dog sometimes lies
belly up in the bed of purple mums.
I start to think of a grocery list,
what I will eat for supper.

Ferry

Alex Taylor

Winter broke like birth-water, down in a sudden wash away of color. Fields went upturned, were made wet, laid open. In the damp gray there was the dying of worm-earth, bone spurs of the corn harvest. The land rose in a gathering of hills out of the bottoms, hungered mass and dark evergreen, a slow tongue of sky turning above rivers.

Halwell will stand on the ferry at dawn, the sky a bloodless twisting, a working of clock innards. He will watch the pattern of men on the shore. They are suffering something, he thinks, men too big to be anything other than what they were: dark. And the faces said that. Eyes set like chinking, mouths a powdered line, chins set with urchin quill whiskers, the long hair pushed under ball caps and orange toboggans.

At noon, they bring the bodies up from the river. Faces gray-blue, drowned, the fingers crooked, hair a dark and velvet drape. It was the girl, he could tell. The child was tied to her, its small hands clutching the rise of breast flesh. On their feet they wore breadsacks.

Halwell will see all of this. The men nervous and passing a bottle between them. He will see them take the breadsacks off the girl's feet and count her toes.

“She's got six,” he will whisper. “Six on each foot.”

On the shore, the men will suffer all of this. The coldness of the girl freshly dead, her eyes puffed, half open, the arms tangled around the smallness of the child. They will suffer the little things; sunlight caught like kite-string in a sycamore tree, the clouding of their breath, the sound of a car passing on a wet and distant highway, going the twelve miles into town. Halwell will watch them. Under his wrist, he will find his pulse and take deep, religious breaths.

Of course, he will live alone with his woman. Because they own the ferry, they have the sense of Spanish moss and river-life. They smell of mud-murk and cressy greens, keep a one-eyed tomcat named Enoch. Some say they have gills.

She sits talking at dusk, her name Darva, thumps cigarette ash into the green mouth of a ceramic frog. Her hips are boney, unused, hair cut short, a pale neck rising like a moonvine from the orange tank-top. In winter, she is barefoot, freshly painted toenails tapping the linoleum in the kitchen. She talks constantly of ninety-nine cent rummage sales, old woman who have never married, hair-spray and shampoo, her legs unshaven, uncrossed, the face caught in the inertia of

Noxema cream and bath-salts. She sits talking and her words turn out the pattern of his day.

"Pipes is froze up and liable to bust t'nite if it gets cold enough. Somebody'll have to get under the house with the electric blanket and thaw 'em out. I left the taps running last night but that didn't help none. They're froze up." Her cigarette festers on her lip like a cold sore.

For supper, she will pull two squirrels from the deep freezer, pour rain that she has collected in a milk jug into a pan, cut carrots and potatoes for a stew. Halwell will see the squirrels, pink carcasses thawing on the cabinet, showing blue veins, the life once lived. He will see a red flash of cayenne go into the pot.

"That pepper?" he asks.

She nods.

"You know I can't stand pepper. It gives me heartburn like I don't know what."

"Killed them squirrels two years ago and never did eat 'em. Now look." She holds a finger to one of the carcasses. "Freezer burn," she says. "Just you try and eat them squirrels with no pepper and see what kinda taste they got."

Halwell remembers the hunt. Snow and dark forest, Darva beside him, each of them cradling twelve gauges. She has always been better with a gun, Annie Oakley all over again, her eyes narrow, Old West weathered, the fingers itching, ready to skin leather. Once, she'd dropped a pair of quail at dawn with sleet blowing straight into her eyes. Those are her squirrels boiling in the pot, he knows.

"Some folks can't eat squirrel that's been froze two years, but I can't let it go to waste. Get you some magnesia tablets for that heartburn and you'll be fine."

All night long, he will smell the cooking of squirrel meat.

The river was this way; alone, going under crepuscular oaks that leaned close as ribcage. It was gray, had never known color. Some said it had no bottom, that catfish big as Volkswagens swam down there. Sometimes it gave up its dead, Jonah and Bible verse, Trojan rubbers and Kotex, driftwood on the shoals. Some said it was a sin to be found in such a place and would not go there.

Some came regardless.

To the snow-ruined banks, the earth lowered in shame. They built bonfires from old tire rubber and kerosene, drank Hot Damn and Flaming Jesus, fucked with the raw, cotton-mouthed urgency of animals that know nothing else. They cussed, fought broke-bottled,

came home glass-eyed, lips busted, grinning through the warm, wet taste of their own blood.

In these months it was easy to see. It was footprints on the ice, the way of some punk kid who'd gone out on frozen water and proved everything. Hey, these be some real bastards, wore neck-scruff and peach-fuzz. They licked the frozen river and tasted salt. Hey, these be some real cunt spelunkers, blind as peeled potato, hair well-greased, smelling of wood-smoke. Cigarettes, quick sex rushing grind-thighed, spent finally in a sputtering cough between the legs of some smear-faced slut. All kinds taken here. Twats with spray-paint pubic hair, shit-faced shrapnel. Whores with tits of alabaster, Abercrombie kids and white trash, dengue fever and malaria. Sluts, old fucks zonked out on Nazi crank, crystal meth, spilling bloodstream. Here there be rivers and valleys and all of it be rhythm.

Before, Halwell will have seen them. In town, maybe. Shopping with food-stamps, buying chili in a can and government cheese spread. The man is short, his left leg missing six inches below the knee, the stump a bright and fleshy pink. He uses a curtain rod for a crutch. His name is Levon. With him will be the girl, Mary. But she's not really a girl. More like a dog, an old bitch dog that Levon is sheltering for the winter. Hair a wild spurt, dark, the jowls thick cum-keggers. She will smell of rain-soggy walls, her face trickling down over skull-bone, the limbs moving in an awkward ink-spill jaberwok.

Whore, thinks Halwell. He knows her kind. The boy is hers, walking in diapers, a dull skim like milk curd floating over the eyes. She had the boy when she was barely fifteen. On the first Monday of every month, folks saw her at the local post office picking up her welfare check, reaping all that she had sewn. It was a common fact. The child's daddy had been a hair-lipped circus clown that Mary had met at the county fair. The child, everyone said, was conceived in a port-o-potty and was to receive remorse only from drunkards and old maids who knew no better.

Halwell has seen Levon on the ferry. Driving down the boat-ramp, he would let his pickup idle, lean against the bed, take long, lugubrious pisses in the snow.

"Need a ferry," he'd holler. Always, he has the smell of deep distance, of comings and goings, his beard set with bread crumbs, sprigs of pipe tobacco. Halwell can hear the stump leg shaking against the metal door of the truck like a distempered dog. The truck will be loaded with scrap metal; ball bearings and crooks of chicken wire, bales of steel fence and sheet tin, the smell of rust, iron let to ruin, becoming gangrenous and jag-toothed.

Levon will not talk. Halwell knows this business, has been here before. Levon stays quiet, his breath clouding in the truck, the cherry tip of a cigarette glowing on his lips. There are gauze bandages on his fingers, the skin cut and blistered by metalwork.

"Want whiskey?" Halwell asks.

Levon will not drink. His eyes are set on distant things, the granular haze beyond the river. He will shake his head, watch Halwell pull the fifth of Kentucky Tavern from a box of oil rags.

"It's the river, you know," says Halwell. "It dries a man out just like sawdust. Sops all your insides up. It's hard to think about getting thirsty round all this water, but that's what I am. Thirsty as all hell." He winces against the hard bite of fermented corn.

Levon will say nothing, pay his fare, and move on, the pickup's taillights going the long road out of the bottoms.

"It's the river," Halwell says to himself. He listens to the closeness of water moving under the ferry. His hands, small and white with cold, move over the bottle. In a man, he knew, sadness was a distilled likker, a vapor that haunted him in places where no other ghosts would go.

He knew how the river was; all this and all that all at once and thus then nothing, a babble of conjunctions and pronouns, auxiliary language and slurped tongue. He dreamt of waters. Their moving and slowing, the way they froze in deep winter, thawing in late February, runoff and rummage wet, a face in cold weather. He checks his pulse and does not sleep well. He thinks always of Levon.

Everyone knew about Levon Radcliffe. Polaroids of him were tacked up on every pay-lake bulletin board in three counties. He had a way of showing up in local newspapers holding big, near-record catfish, his face squat, wedge-like the untucked shirttail mouth never smiling. He was known for catching huge, bastard-ass fish, channel cats and bullhead trout on homemade stink-bait, his own recipe, dog meat soaked in grape Koolaid.

Folks wondered where the leg had gone.

Levon came from beef bouillon stock, men turned dark with Indian blood. When his kind got old, they disappeared into the woods with an eggshell's worth of water. They had ways of showing up dead; bullet to the brain on some dirty backroad, hanging by extension cord in the attic, drowning drunk in the river. They were coon-hunters mostly, traded for beagle hounds and .410 shotguns, haunted the high ridges in moonlight, their lanterns like ghosts, hellfire to someone watching faraway.

All of that had boiled away though; they called the dregs Levon. He did not hunt, was a pattern of tea leaves at the bottom of a cup. He worked odd jobs, did small engine repair on lawnmowers, weed-eaters, his fingers turned grease-blue like melted Crayola. He collected junk metal. Crooks of bed spring, sheet tin, chicken wire, rotor blades and bike gears. He dripped on bronze paint, corkscrewed a piston to a plank board for a nose, welded on a pair of U-joints for eyes and called it 'King Henry VIII'. It was folk art someone said, real honest motion and color, lights and shadow, a struggle and a sweat and pretty soon the yard of his trailer was brim-full with flattened saw chains and antennae wire and a magazine photographer from out of town came down to snap a few black and whites. Halwell drove past there sometimes, could see the metallic topiary rising up through the bromsage, Levon's prosthetic leg propped against the pickup bed. He never wore it, said it itched something awful, showed that pink, bald stump like a purple heart. He had no shame.

Before dawn one day, Halwell is tying the rope lines on the ferry when he hears the truck. It's Levon again. The girl is with him this time, her boy small and wild-eyed between them, brown hair spilling into his eyes like maple syrup.

"Been awhile," says Halwell working the ferry's engine. Not long enough, he thinks.

"Had to make a grocery run. Ran out of bread and had to go to that twenty-four hour Wal-Mart they got up in Leitchfield. You know how that is," says the girl. Halwell nods, sees the open jar of wood glue in her hand, the yellow halo around her mouth and nose.

And then he hears something flop out on the water.

Whatever it was, it was big, rolled on the surface like a log, the skin flickering, metallic licks of light. Halwell saw the long snout full of teeth and a hiss of air. There was a heated flash, a great golden eye deep and frigid. Then nothing. Only a splash and ripple on the water.

"Alligator gar," says Levon. "Wonder what it's doing on the surface in this cold?"

"It was big, wasn't it?" says Halwell.

Levon nodded. "They go about a hunert pounds." His stump rattled against the truck door and he sneezed into his sleeve. "They bite, too. Eat anything. Tin cans, old tires, anything. It don't matter. I call 'em river goats."

Halwell ties the ferry ashore, sets the guard gate down, takes a dollar toll from Levon. As the truck is leaving, he sees where Levon's

hand is. Grinding deep between Mary's thighs, her face sluiced into a grimy smile, the boy wide awake under her arm.

"Trash like that don't give a damn." Darva thumps her cigarette and the green frog ashtray swallows the fallout. "They been raised that way, ain't never known nothing else."

She's colored her hair thinks Halwell. The ends have turned auburn, the gray threads accentuated into burnished silver.

"They don't know nothin' of God or Jesus. Probably never seen the inside of a church."

Halwell hears her talking, wonders what she does all day while he's on the ferry.

He thinks he knows.

For weeks she has smelled of metal. Of rust-work and blacksmithing, her fingers turned to dark tithes, blisters worn on the palms from steel-wool and bent tin. He has seen long winds of copper wire and spoke-line in her car, the tires caked with mud. There is no glue in the work-shed. The river has told him many things.

"Tell you about that girl Levon runs with," says Darva. "She comes from bad folks as far back as I remember. Her daddy used to fight dogs over in Brownsville and one of her aunts went to jail for putting strychnine in a well up near Unisport. Somebody said it broke her heart when everybody up there got on city water and she couldn't poison no more wells. That ain't all neither." Darva leans against the dishwasher, her arms folded, white as dove-corn. "Her mama was a crazy bitch. Used to pull out a wad of one dollar bills and smell them like they was a bunch of roses somebody had picked for her."

Halwell has heard none of this. He's got his pulse pinned down under wrist-skin. He's seeing Darva standing in the weed-choked yard of Levon's trailer, her mouth wet and red, watching him hammer out sheet metal for his latest masterpiece. He sees them lying down together on a piss-soaked sofa. He sees the face of Mary, gray and granular as distant rain. There is talk, deep in the empty belly of the river. He has heard there are hungry things down there that will eat anything.

Just after two a.m., the pipes burst. Halwell wakes and Darva is starring at him, one small tit creeping from her gown. They listen, together, for awhile, to the trickling of tap-water, the grinding of plumbing, the guttural duodenum of the house ruptured and bleeding.

"Didn't use the electric blanket, did you?" says Darva. Halwell sees her face, a quick fish flash of cigarette smoke, the eyes clean in their anger.

"I forgot."

"It's a mess under there now."

"Well, I can't help it any more than you can. It's my fault. I know that much."

"We'll need new pipes." He hears Darva squash her cigarette in the potted poinsettia they've kept beside the bed since Christmas. From the floor, there comes a cold, blue air and nerve gas, the shadows stirred into vague, humanoid shapes. He feels her lie down beside him, her breath a cruel crucifixion against his skin.

At daybreak, the river has frozen. Halwell has seen all of this before. The river taken with ice, the current, stopped under a faint seam of cold. Snow came and covered the water and there were animal track in the drifts, fox and coyote, paw patterns like Braille on the white ground. For hours, he sits alone on the ferry, hands clutching a dirty bottle, face a damp run of sinus and frost. He will listen to the traveling of geese, late birds moving south to warmer ways, water not yet taken with winter. He will listen to a gospel program on the a.m. radio. At noon, he eats a tuna sandwich that he packed himself in wax paper, white bread glinting like mirror shards through the dark trees.

Then, there will be a fluttering of crow wings, a drifting of tree mist, and she will be there.

Standing in the dry reeds, the sour face drooping like a rosin bag, she will be all of a sudden, eye storm spontaneous silent combustion on the river shoals. She will hold the boy at arm's length, his face a dirty confusion. They will wear bread-sacks on their feet.

"You runnin' the ferry today?" she asks.

Halwell wipes his hands together. "River's froze pretty solid. I think you could walk it and be all right. Save yourself the fare."

She shakes her head, pulls at the tangle of scarves and rag jackets. Her lips curl back like fingernail filament. "Nuh-huh. We want the ferry. We want the ride. The fare ain't no trouble. We got it." She lifts the front of her blouse and Halwell sees the tit, large and ocular, white, lopsided, the nipple a dark oak knot. She doesn't smile, but the boy does, standing thigh-high, his face a yellow morass, the eyes like cypress stumps, lurking through the swamp of his thoughts.

Halwell's at the shore quick, the ferry busting through the ice. He wipes his mouth, tastes the dirty, Carhartt sleeve. He can see the land rising up from the river, a gray fabric, a spindle of thread and boll-cotton, the earth escaping from the cold snaking of water.

"Been aching for a ferry ride. Levon ain't no fun no more. He just makes me sit at home all day. I swear I can't stand that sitting. Drives me crazy as a titter mouse." She talks, leads the boy onto the ferry. Her hair is dark as cistern water, tangled, going all ways at once,

a dry, black kudzu on her scalp. She scrapes at it with a thin, milk-colored paw.

"I can see how it'd get tiresome," says Halwell.

"You just don't know. That one-legged bastard goes to bed at eight of an evening and there I am. It don't do for a girl like me. Some women I guess could just sit and sit all the time and not never say nothing. That ain't how I am. I got real taste, real wants and needs. I'm kinda special see." Bending down, she lifted one of the bread-sacks from her feet. Her toes were pink, bruised magnolia, wriggling earth grubs and wood beetle. There were six of them.

"My mama said it was a gift and nothing to be ashamed of. Said it only happens to them girls that's got this certain light in 'em. She was always strange that way. Goin' on with a bunch a nonsense. She drowned herself in this river when I was kinda small, but I don't care none. Weren't nothing to me."

Halwell stares at the toes, the flesh cold, the nails ingrown, yellowed by fungus and foot-rot. He hears them scratching on the treaded steel of the ferry, sticking there like barnacles. He smells glue on her. Hard, horse-hoof kind, white paste and rubber cement, all things melded, made as one. He cuts the throttle on the ferry and they drift mid-river, the tug-lines holding them against the current.

"If you're cold," he says, "I got whiskey."

She takes the bottle, drinks bowlegged. She snorts, squints through the burn of distilled corn.

"Levon don't ever drink no more," she says. "Just tap-water and buttermilk. He's all dried out." She drank again, held the bottle close. Pushing the boy away, she wobbled on the ferry, her sea-legs uneasy as a newborn colt. "That Levon, he ain't nothing to me, y'hear? I'm just with him through the winter." Snot funneled down from her nose. She wiped it away with her thumb, the stagnant, sallow face looking down into the water.

"What happens come spring?" Halwell asks.

"Dunno. Maybe I'll get me a job somewhere's. I can do most anything. Cook. Clean. It don't matter. They pay good money at the rest-home for somebody to change bedpans and wipe ass every now and then."

She looked at the boy, his fingers a bright and hateful red. She took them in her hands and breathed over the knuckles, rubbing the heat of her lungs into the boy's skin. When she stood up and looked at Halwell, her face grinned. On his throat, he feels her tongue, blue eel electric, a flickering of candle-fire. He touches her on the hip, there, the bone of life.

"The boy..." he whispers.

"Him?" She shakes her head at the child. "It ain't nothing to him. He knows what this is about."

Halwell feels her tongue on his neck, smelled the raw, acrid breath. He saw the boy, small hands and fingers, the nose wet and running, the feet tied with bread-sacks. He's seen worse, thinks Halwell. He let his face fall into the girl's, felt her hand pulling at his groin. For weeks, he has been dry-heaving over this event, this certain moment in his life, the sickness and sorrow of all the years inundating the broken bottom-lands. He has seen Levon's stump in his dreams, the bald, pink flesh, has smelled the metal work in his woman's bones.

He looked over the contours of cold-blistered earth, hills harangued by wind and rain, trees rising like canon-cloud from the land. He saw the way it was. He understood. And, when he pushed the girl down under him, it was easy as the river, its tributaries and run-off going into every corner of the world and making there a small darkness before finally falling into the sea.

Cold days unfolded, one after another like a Chinese changing blind. The river thawed, then froze, then thawed again. Farmers drove miles to stand on its banks because it was a river and would tell many things, an almanac to be read and studied. They stood smoking, faces sheltered by the red glow of bourbon and burnt tobacco. Sometimes, they drank handfuls of the cold water, tasted the thatch and trouble, mountain snow make rain, an indigo tongue. They drank soup from thermoses, rode the ferry, and did not speak.

After he let the pipes freeze, Darva will have nothing to do with Halwell. She melts bowls of snow on the stove's back-burner and calls it his bath-water. He doesn't sleep in bed, finds a mattress of scrap paper and Pink Panther insulation in the cellar, listens to her voice leeching like roots down through the kitchen floor. He loses his pulse and doesn't sleep. He is haunted by the memory of a girl, her face dirty as road-shoulder.

Halwell will stand on the ferry and the watch the bodies come up from the river. He will see Levon on the bank, his stump turned rock-salt blue in the cold, leaning on a homemade crutch. He will see the lips moving furiously over the drowned girl and boy, talking to himself.

"Hell," Halwell whispers. "What's he care. They ain't no kin a his. Ain't nobody's kin. Just dirty river shits is all."

Halwell can feel the river under him. He will see the fields broken, the hills a gray swell, darkened by the lives there lived. There are strange faces on the shore, men sick with suffering. Strange faces in the reeds and cattails, eyes in the laurel hell and brush harbor. He has seen them before. The cold, blurred faces, emptied of all love and worth. They haunt his ferry like guilt, leave him breathless in the early morning. But, he does not worry much. He will find his pulse, a good and steady rhythm under the skin.

Pop
Alex Taylor

At the Phelps IGA Pop bought the lottery. The clerk had been young, hair pulled back in a ponytail, lips frosted, makeup covering the faint scars of acne. Smell of perfume, well-thumbed pages of tabloid magazines, white neon, white tile, an epiphany amongst the asparagus and bruised tomatoes.

Pop peeled bills off a dirty wad and heard her breathing.

"You ever win them things?" She nodded at the ticket, handed him his change. He took the coins, checked the years, made damn sure there were no Canadian pennies in there. Bad luck to scratch a ticket with a Canadian penny, he thought.

"Won five hunert las' year. Aim to get a thousan' before Christmas," he said. The clerk chewed her tongue, nodded. There was a fresh hickey under her left ear and Pop leaned close, squinting to see better. Nervous, she covered it with her hand.

"I never win," she said. Pop blinked, moved a palsied fist into his pocket, jingling change.

"Trick is," he whispered, "I always use an Indian-head nickel to do the scratchin'." He pulled a tarnished coin from his pocket, held it out in his palm. The clerk smiled, her white fingers rubbing the hickey. Pop stood holding the nickel, and, seeing that the girl wasn't going to say anything else, grunted and was gone...

Out into the nearing darkness, the sky smeared with star rosin. Rain was on the parking lot, the smell wet and ruined. Pop tapped his foot once, then twice in a puddle, pulled a cigarette from his pocket, and struck a match.

That was when he saw the boys.

Two of them stood close to the newspaper racks and Coke machines. Pop could hear them passing words in tightly wadded whispers. One of them was short and pudge-faced, the other tall and fair-skinned so that, together, they were a dish and spoon. And Pop could see how each, without the other, would be something less.

"Got cigarettes, Pop?" asked the tall one. His teeth were soft and swamp-gray, made no noise when they came together. Pop said nothing, handed them both a Canyon cigarette. He struck another match, listened to there hurried breathing, there faced settling against the sudden flame.

"D'ya hear they found a dead man up near Hoss Creek? Drunk and fell in. It was in the shallows, too. Foot a water and that's all it took

to drown him." The tall boy talked, puffing his chest, proud that such a thing should happen and he would be there to tell it.

Pop smoothed the edges of his mustache.

He said nothing, felt the boys there, close to him. They saw his hands, corrugated, tough, dark. They stood closer as if Pop were about to share some hushed and blessed secret.

"Y'all 'r wanting whiskey, ain't you?" he asked, finally. Both boys nodded, as if to say amen, took quick, nervous drags from their cigarettes.

"He was a sonuvabitch," said Pop. "Had to been. Anybody that goes out drinking by hisself is nothing but a sonuvabitch." He spat, looked at the two boys. "Y'all ain't no better. Y'all sonsabitches too, ain't ya?"

Again the boys nodded. They worked their cigarettes; lip-pucker and crimson egg-oval, smoke and fingers, nicotine, tar-rosin. Cupped palms hiding orange glow. Might be something trapped there, between knuckle and nail. Might be some bug, like a firefly. Might be nothing at all, just color and light.

"You got any whiskey, Pop?" the tall one asked. Pop pulled breath in over aged enamel, pulled at his mustache.

"Not for you," he said. He left them slowly, drifting out over the parking lot.

They watched him go, spent their smokes quickly when he was gone, stomped the butts on the wet pavement.

"Sure is sore these days, ain't he?" said the tall boy. Beside him, the fat one breathed deep, smelling the rain.

"Shut up," he said. "You don't shut up and I'm liable to kick the shit outta you."

And at once they became a crescendo of thunder and eyes, a groveling of hooves. Guns in the clouds, fist-sized drops of rain. Water in the dirt, the earth, all legs akimbo, gone insect crazy. They were quiet, yet still showed the inward fury, like the face of a river freezing quick in winter.

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Pop came to the Wafflehouse and the rain came easy. He went out of it, into the spoiled lights, his red face curling like bacon in a skillet. Sitting down at the counter, he laid the lottery ticket in front of him, settled into the vinyl stool. He breathed.

Jukebox in the corner. AC/DC and Foghat, cost you a quarter for two songs and nobody wants to hear Hank Williams anymore. Hiss of grease on the griddle, dishes crashing together in machine-gun

laughter, kitchen kill-man battle-cry. White sulfur flash, dirty jokes told old man style, dimes on linoleum. Folks smiling, cussing.

Pop found the stranger real quick. He was boiled, turnip-faced man sitting in one of the back booths. He was a trucker and Pop cold smell the road on him. It clung to him like a bad tick, swell of diesel and cigarette sweat, ground under his eyelids. He was chewing a cigar stub, moved it like a tongue from one mouth corner to the other. There was a red splash of birthmark under his left eye and there was a good gathering around him. Waitresses and old men, knee-slap and drop-jaw crazy, listening to him talk.

"Cum in 'bout an hour ago. Been telling these shit-ass jokes ever since. Done some good trick though. Seen him swallow a lit cigarette." That was Elmer talking, leaning on the counter. Apron spattered, gray hair tucked back in a ponytail.

Pop grunted, scratched a number off the lottery ticket with his nickel.

"Said he's hauling peaches. Peaches all the from California," said Elmer.

"Don't smell like peaches," said Pop. He scratched another number and kept his poker face. "Gimme some eats."

The usual for Pop was hashbrowns and ages cup of coffee that tasted like cobbling leather. He ate the same thing year round, cud-chewing the food, working it against the soft rot of his teeth. Folks reckoned it good to see something that constant, that unchanging. Even if it was only the eating habits of one old man.

Pop was a shaman. Come to the Wafflehouse at least five nights a week with his lottery. Settle down upon his stool, waited until someone gave the signal.

"Tell us a new one, Pop," they'd say. And the story would move up slow from his gut, gathering speed until his warped fingers drummed out a rhythm on the white counter. The world fell a-jumbled, sprawling like hot grease on white skin, his tongue gauging the tempo. Not too slow, not too fast. Words of an old man, gris-gris and mojo rising from his flesh.

Waitresses went home with him sometimes and no one seemed to mind. They always left before morning, clothes wrinkled, faces bruised by Pop's damp, dog-sloppy kisses. He tipped. Sometimes. Always there though, scribbling at the lottery ticket, telling some oblong tale. Off and running, open like whore thighs. Interstate, Alabama mama amen. And the earth rolling in from all directions, coming in as clod dirt on the soles of some stranger's feet. Big, dry

earth coming heaves, hungry ground that makes you get down and pray.

"Heard tell of a man got rabies from a possum bite. Only thing was, his woman didn't know it. Then she went to kiss him one night and he bit her nose off."

And folks dropped jaws, looked at each other. Shook heads, drained smoke from cigarettes, felt the story left undone as shoelace. And they waited for the truth to come because that's what Pop was. Grape Kool-aid laced with cyanide, one thousand years removed, cigarette stuck like a breathing reed into the drowning lungs of the world.

"Only thing to do with a man like that I guess is to shoot him," Pop had said. And folks nodded, said amen, knew that it would be a sin to let a man like that go on living.

Elmer sat Pop's dinner down, pointed at the trucker.

"Told all kinds of stories," he said. "Said he was in prison. Won't say what for, but them tattoos on his arm look like jailhouse ink to me."

"Got even you fooled, huh?" said Pop.

Elmer wiped a few coffee-rings off the counter, looked at Pop. "Ain't nothing to get sore about," he said. "He'll be gone before too long. Truckers don't stay nowhere. You know that."

Pop pushed a forkful of hashbrowns into his mouth, the browned potatoes falling out over his chin, a few flakes sticking to his mustache. "The hell, I say. I can see how folks are right off. Knew that wife a mine was gonna leave the day I met her. Had this smell on her she was trying to hide with perfume. I smelt it though." He talked down into his dinner, his hand smoothing out the creases in the lottery ticket. He looked at the trucker, saw the splotched birthmark, the eyes all bloodshot. "Right away," he said, "I can tell how folks are."

Elmer wiped the counter down some more then leaned into the griddle, his apron a quick-dance smear of grease, spilled coffee and cake frosting. He looked at the finger-dirtied door, the glass wanting Windex, yet still clear enough to show the vastness that was beyond his place in the world. The highway and limitless inertia of traffic, soil moved by wind and water in a speak-easy shutter of sudden, unbridled language. He saw the moth-flame flicker of neon, the lights palsied, ready to give, one thousand years of industry spilling out into the modern age. Again, he looked at Pop.

"You know how I am?" he said.

Pop stopped his fork midway between plate and mouth, looked at Elmer. "How?"

"Lonesome."

And Pop didn't care to hear that, pretended not to, forking the food hungrily into this mouth. It was no good, he thought, for any man to talk that way. It did nothing but make folks wonder about him. Wonder if he was all right, not drunk or crazy or anything like that. It was downright selfish, Pop thought, chewing his food. For a man to say something like that meant he didn't care about nothing and nobody but himself.

Elmer disappeared back into the catacombs of the kitchen and after awhile, Pop heard the crashing of dishes, the sputtering of faucet water.

He stroked the edges of his mustache. He was thinking about the drunk they found up on Hall's Creek. Drowned. Dead. Out in the rain, the blood stopped, stagnant in his veins. Skin gray, fetid, pruned.

Coulda told him myself, thought Pop. If I'd knowed him, I would have too. I'd said to him how he was nothing but a no good sonuvabitch and would end up that way, drowned, drunk, all alone. I can tell, he thought. Right off I can tell how it'll be for folks.

He nursed his coffee, the taste bitter and stale. He took easy gulps, reckoned a man might tell time by the taste of turned coffee. In the back booth, the trucker's laughter boomed, rattled windows, shook doors. He was holding his hands together like a mantis. Around him, everything was smile-face, feel-good. Waitresses starting to flirt, waving hands, licking frost-painted lips, old men gulping cigarettes, huddling close to the warmth of this sudden stranger. Under his breath, Pop cursed. His fingers fell to the lottery ticket, traced the numbers, saw how they added up to nothing.

"Knew this one poor bastard," the trucker was saying, "wouldn't even stop to use the bathroom. Just shit and pissed all over hisself while he was driving. Guaranteed that was the nastiest fucker I ever seen. Got to his port though. On time, every time."

Pop caught glitches of his voice, white noise worked out of a.m. radio static, the sweat standing on his face like puddled rain. Big splotch of red under his eye, the mouth a constant gape and twitch.

Anger flashed like black powder. He saw a plump waitress cleaning the griddle, herding the grease in great, galvanized vats, smearing her face with thick, callused fingers. And there was the sound of old men gnawing toothpicks, of women laughing, faces wet and gleaming like fresh plaster. There was the locust-drone of white neon, linoleum, and urinal cakes, toiled bowl, ammonia, one pale spasm, a wet dream. Under the lights there was the working of laughter.

"Heard tell a something," said Pop. And he said it loud. Loud so that everyone could hear him and everything got all humbled and quiet. Loud so that the trucker looked at him, one eyes squinted down, high noon and horseradish all over his face. Loud so folks knew he had a story.

"They found this man up on Hall's Creek. Drowned, I reckon. Got drunk and drowned in the rain."

Folks were quiet, looked to trucker who quietly pushed the glasses further up onto the bridge of his nose, letting the dark birth-stain quiver under his eye.

"Who was it Pop?" one of the women finally asked, her voice quick and nervous. "Who fell in the river and drowned?"

Pop held the silence for a bit, rolled it like a piece of salt pork against his jaw. "I don't know his name," he said, finally. "But he musta been a sonuvabitch. Nobody but a sonuvabitch woulda died that way."

In his booth, the trucker leaned forward. "I been watching you all night," he said, scratching at his throat. "You been playing that same lottery ticket for the past two hours. Slow as Christmas, ain't you?"

All the folks were quiet now, waiting to see what would come of it all. Waitresses folded arms over small breasts, old men gnawed toothpicks, their murmuring a brief drizzle of spigot water.

Pop stuttered, fumbled with his cigarette pack. Ash fell onto stale bread-crust. He sniffed. The air was full of the trucker's scent. Hot musk of underarm, miles encrusted like reptilian scales on his kin. Hair wild, bristled back, hand-combed.

"You ain't gotta be fast when you're my age," Pop said, striking a match. The trucker grunted, stroked the stone-washed denim of his thigh. Pop could tell he was a soothsayer, full up with wisdom, the dregs of it falling like grease down his chin. He knew the working of highways and lot lizards, gears and diesel fuel, rain on the windshield, sleaze-grease motels where the shit really went down. Twenty-four-hour quick stop, big gulp of coffee, black as an Alabama blue-gum nigger. White-line fever, pills swallowed with a jerk of jaw-muscle. Go all night on blues, spend all day on reds and greens. Hey man, those are all the colors of Christmas.

Pop watched him straddle the floor, come walking over towards him. He sat down on the stool next to Pop. Smell of aged rain, stagnant and spoiled in the clouds.

"You ever win them things?" he asked, pointing at the ticket.

"Won five hunert last year. Aim to have at least that much come December."

The trucker nodded, siphoned breath over a row of hominy corn kernel teeth. He took up a forkful of Pop's hashbrowns, ate them easy and slow.

"Pop's a regular. He's been coming here every night for the last twenty years." That was Clara Dalton talking. She was prune-faced with blue, over-permed hair, smelled of licorice strips and horehound candy. A patch of peach fuzz lingered under her nose.

"That right?" asked the trucker.

Pop nodded, peeled two, dirty dollars from his wad of bills, laid them on the counter to pay for his supper. He burped under his breath, cupped his belly with both hands.

"Hell, I wouldn't know how to live that way. Coming to the same place every damn night. That'd drive me crazy," said the trucker. His face bobbed and eddied, the eyes circling in a buzzard cycle around the restaurant.

"Most people lack the patience." said Pop.

"Don't see how anyone could live that way," said the trucker, shaking his head.

Pop slid the lottery ticket into his pocket, teethed at the insult, his eyes squinting at the bitter taste. Then he started to drum his fingers. Syncopated drum rhythm, slow at first, then rising crescendo, crash and burn of fingertips on countertop. Horse-hide quiver, the clack of nails, split and dirty, flesh touching smear-grease and coffee-stain. Folks moved faces forward, making a crowd of shoulder, intent eyeballs. Lunge of open mouth, tug of hog teats. All leaning for succor on the breast of the story, how it'd be, the pleated thunder, the light and rain, then the dark thunder, folded like shirt-fabric over their lives, twisted up and stuffed like sawdust into the gut-belly empty they all had.

"If ever anything gets broke," said Pop, "I fix it. That's how I get money. Got a vacuum cleaner with a snapped belt? I'm your man. Shingles peeling off your roof? Busted pipes in winter? Don't matter none to me. I'll fix it all up for you. Used to kill rats some. Leave poison out by the dumpsters they'd give me a dollar a rat and on a good week I'd twenty-five or thirty. That ain't so bad." Pop's fingers ceased their drumming. He heard the trucker's breath; nasal twang like a loose banjo string, tuned down, dropped low.

"Handy man, huh?"

Pop nodded, watched as the trucker pulled a brass watch form his pocket and laid it on the counter.

"Fix that then."

Pop looked down at the watch. At first he didn't want to touch it, only wanted to let it lay there. Then, his fingers went slow moved over the dirty brass, worked the latch, held it to his ear and heard the well-oiled springs, the moving of sprocket gears, a thousand years of axle grease and fulcrum grind, deus ex machina.

"It ain't broke."

"Will be someday," said the trucker. "Best fix it now and get it over with."

Folks were wondering now, thinking about high noon, the shuck of gun leather, skin on iron, heat in the night sky. They were all cotton-mouthed, tongues swollen, the pale blue underbelly of thunder rising like a fresh bruise from the hills beyond the interstate. Pop brushed the yellow points of his mustache down against his jaw, saw how the trucker pushed out his bristled chin, offering it to him.

"Ain't you gonna fix it?"

Pop looked over the stark faces, heard the linoleum wrinkling from the heat. He saw how all the folks were, arms folded, breath funneled in short gasps.

"Had me a son once," he said. "Folks was always asking me when was I gonna fix him. They said he wasn't worth nothing and never would be. They all wanted me to fix him like it'd be there problem if he turned out bad. Like it'd be something they'd have to pray over and worry with. He used to do things. Stole a few cars. Shit like that. Then he killed that man over in Philpot. Shot him in the face because he wanted his blue-jeans. Goddam." Pop brought his hand to his face, rubbed at the dirty, soiled flesh, the skin turned to fissures and mountain crag, all gray stone and cobble rock.

The trucker said nothing, pushed his face down toward Pop so the old man could see all the worth of all the miles, the gums dark with rot, the teeth chipped and stained. The breath smelled of quick likker, backrooms, Cheetos, a quiet quiver of tongue and throat muscle.

"Yeah," said the trucker, "I been seeing your kind all my life. Always wining about your troubles, blaming them off on everybody else. Well, I believe these folks've had enough. Their ears is plum full, I mean, they done heard so much of your bullshit their eyes are turning brown. Nope. I don't think there's a one of 'em that'd mind if you walked out that door and never came back."

Pop looked at the crowd, saw how the faces all went down, studying about shoelace and floor-stains. Old men wadded their caps and the women pulled at their lashed. He smiled, knew always how it would be. This way. Things pulled down, quick as moonshade, the light changing all at once. He almost laughed.

"You go on then," said the trucker. "You go on and leave this place. These folks don't need no more of you. You go on out there and find another bunch of folks to fool with. These are mine now." The trucker's hands waved, brimstone and brick-flesh, fingers motioning over the long, open white of the Wafflehouse, waiting for Pop to leave.

When he found the highway again, Pop followed it down to the grassy spaces, the bottom country beyond the town where the earth grew cool and dark, as if blood had been spilled there. Out past the rug-fringe of town, neon moved away, trees come close in their want of rain, puckered, dry limbs letting out their blossoms like open hands and skirt-hem, waiting to catch some part of the rain. Pop followed these ways until he came to the creek.

The water was behind the town, kept to itself. It was the color of brass. Knee-deep with honest drought, it smelled of cress and fetid mud, the shoals a bunched spur of bone.

He sat on the bank. Out in the water, a sandbar rose, the granules red and full of shale stone. Ox-bow, hair-lip of standing creek water, the current like a washboard. The vodka was down in the creek, tied to a sycamore root, the waters keeping it cool. He found it there.

Hatefully, he drank. Then cursed, set the bottled between his legs. He heard the wind, not moving against him, but up through the bottoms, again ascending the rise of hills, up from slavery and creek water, out into the wider, open-wound world. He could hear rain, nervous in the clouds.

He drank again, almost laughed.

In his pocket, he found the lottery ticket. His fingers moved in arched diagonals, tracing the numbers he'd worked. He tore it up, one motion, let the creek have it, would say nothing. He rank only, the fierce ferment of Russian potatoes, kinking his intestines like garden hose.

"Trucker come all this way hauling peaches. Come clear from California, I reckon," he whispered.

He got sick then, on all fours, good and drunk, starring into the creek, starring at the worn lips, the sunken gray of hundred proof sonuvabitch. He pulled a finger over his gums, twisted his eyes, lay on his back in the wet bank thistle. When the rain finally came, it was as simple as breathing.

"Hell," he said. "Who don't like peaches?"

Dinner Time

Angela Weisser

A mulberry bush,
heavy with summer,
beckoned to our house in the trees.

Barefooted, we circled with pails in hand.
Eager, slender fingers plucked the black fruit
from the top "cause they're riper up there."

With more in our bellies than our buckets,
we scrambled back up on purple feet
and giggled through inky lips as
we prepared our meal with stained hands:
Grass stew and mulberries for dinner tonight.

To a 400 Page Pot-Boiler Brimming Full with Low Art

Chuck Williamson

It's one o'clock in the morn
and surprise, O Brothers & Sisters!—
here I lie half-reading drug-store dime-novels
exclusive with pristine punctilious
steely blue eyed hero with 13th century values
& ego flaring like Victorian sleaze
vs. one red-fisted killer with
a handbag full of bloodied teeth and a
moonlit junction pitting mathematical,
meandering malice stumbling over the rails
like tumbleweed in a romanticized vision of the west
storming all through Atlanta and Birmingham;
catching the bullet train,
switchblade as surrogate ticket,
first class:
and I cannot help but envy you,
dear book,
this
pulp fiction;
this punchinello of piss and wonky off-kilter
drab drab prose, and the fellowship,
the readership,
all lying ritualistically in the rye,
unanswered earwigs burrowing between the
song and dance.

Penis Envy

Lisa Bricker

If I had a penis,
I would not have written those cheerful letters:
“Dear Mom, I saw a grizzly today!”
“Dear Mom, had my first earthquake!”
I would have been on the boat home.

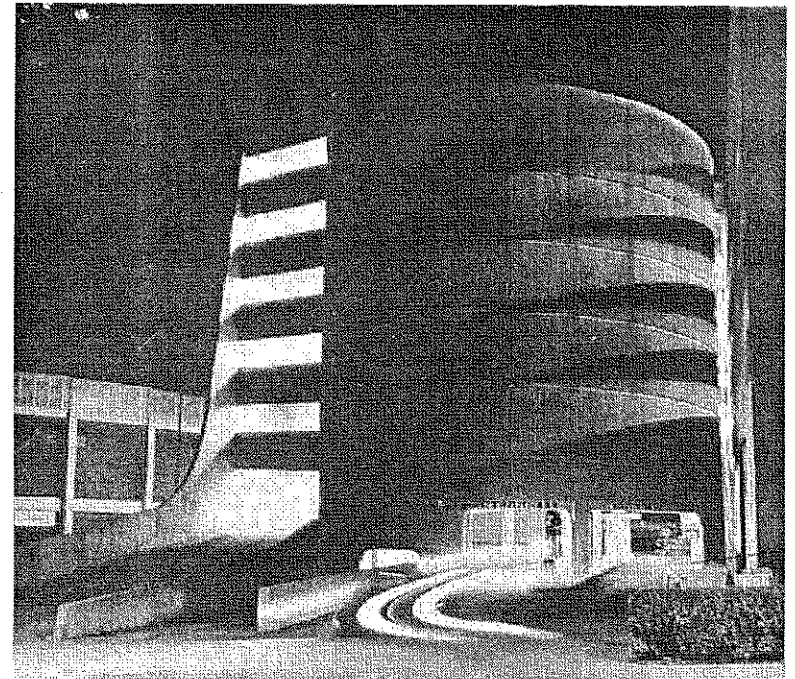
If I had a penis,
I would not have stood with a .357, watching the woods;
I would have been in the water with the men,
grabbing salmon by snotty gills.
And I would not have done the dishes after every meal
while they listened to Paul Harvey, drinking coffee.

If I had a penis,
I would not have heard:
“That soda will destroy your figure.”
I would never have used a wringer washer
and hung line after line of soaked, heavy clothes
while they sat reading back issues of Reader’s Digest.

If I had a penis,
She wouldn’t have been jealous that I was on the boat,
while she stayed on shore, cooking.
He would not have screamed abuse constantly
and I would not have been fighting tears
when I asked for WD-40 for my saltwater-gummed
knife.

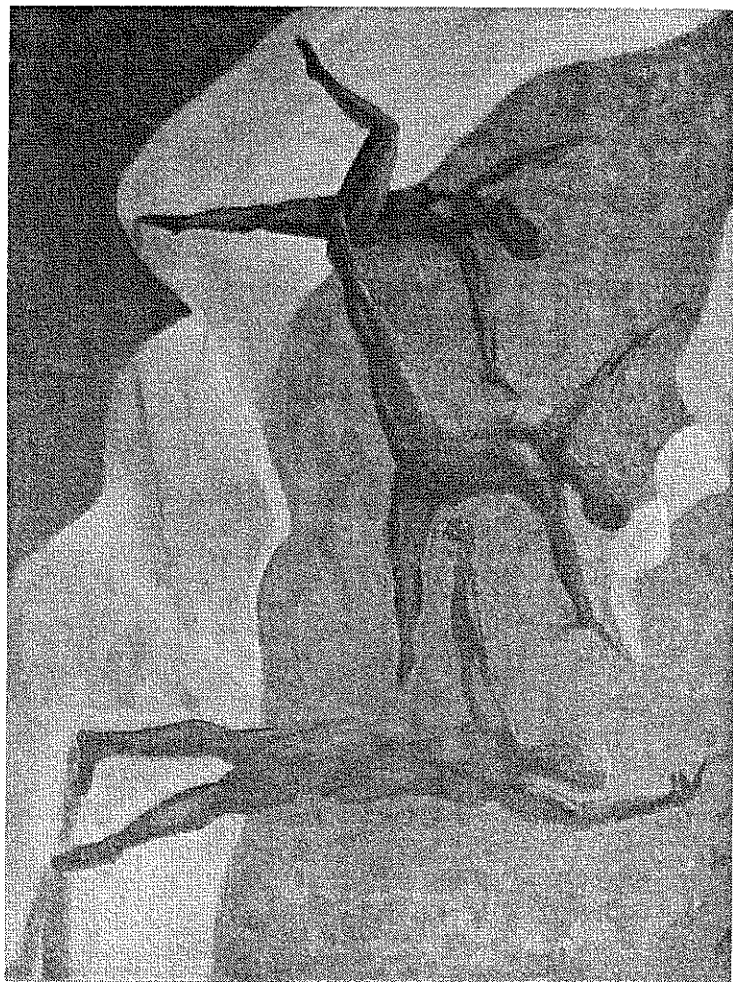
If I had a penis,
If I wasn’t taught to submit,
If I knew I wasn’t second-class,

I wouldn’t have seen the wolves.



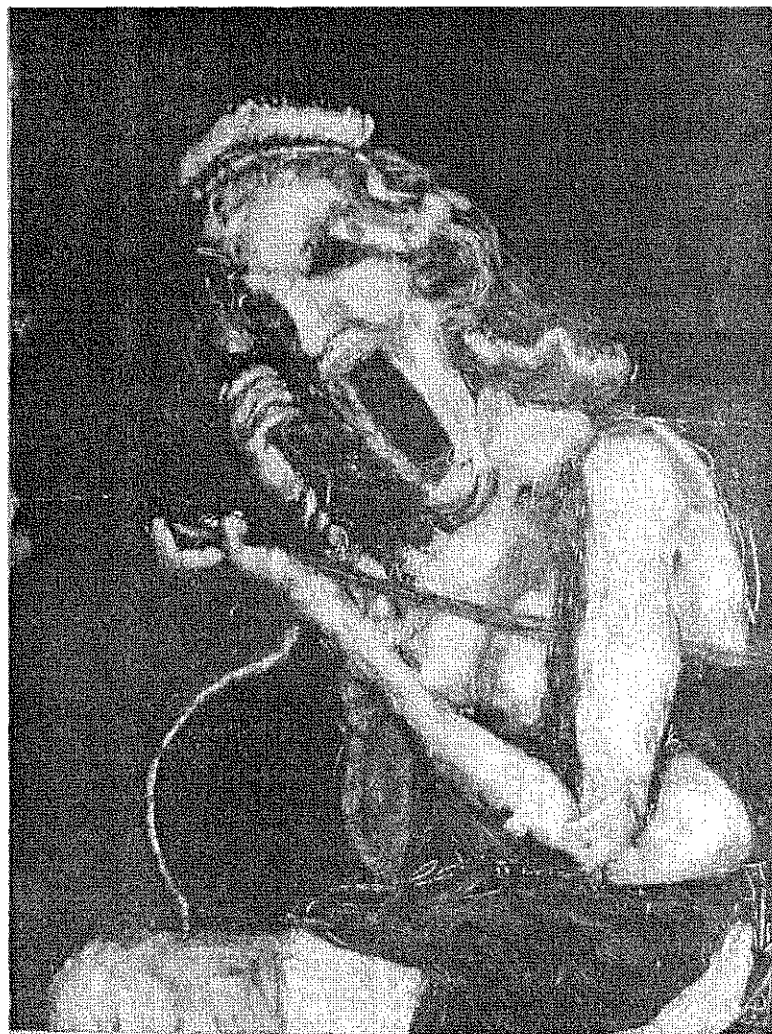
Parking Structure at Night

Joshua R. Edwards



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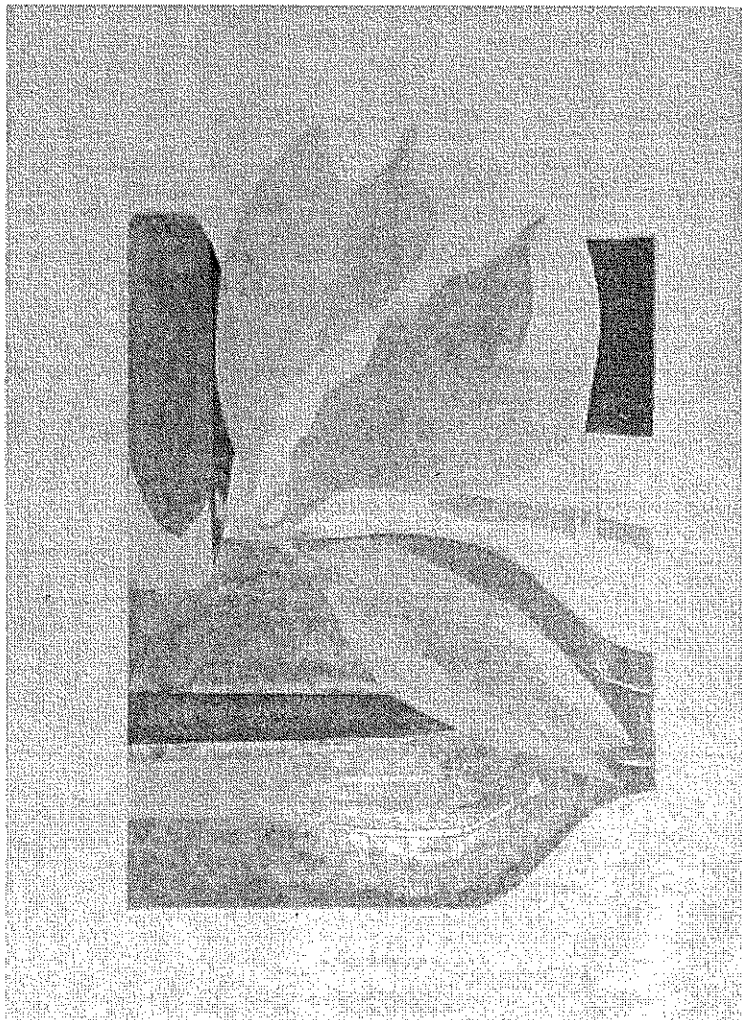
Renee Grise



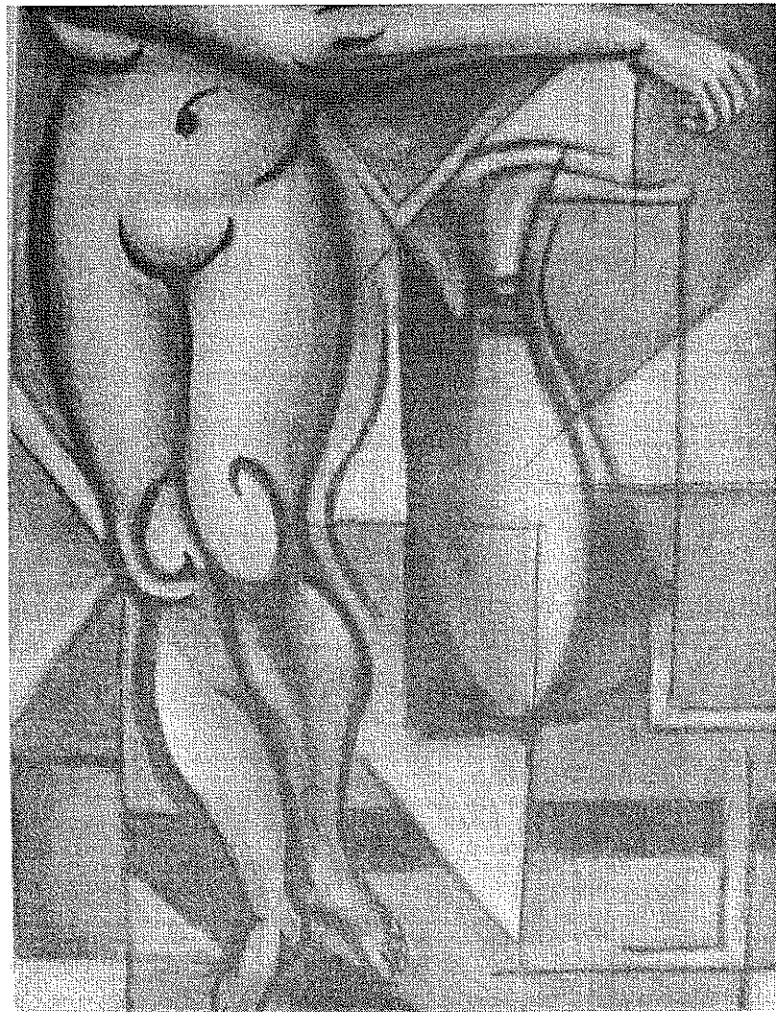
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Renee Grise



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Kelly McKibben

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Marie Barsalou



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Marie Barsalou

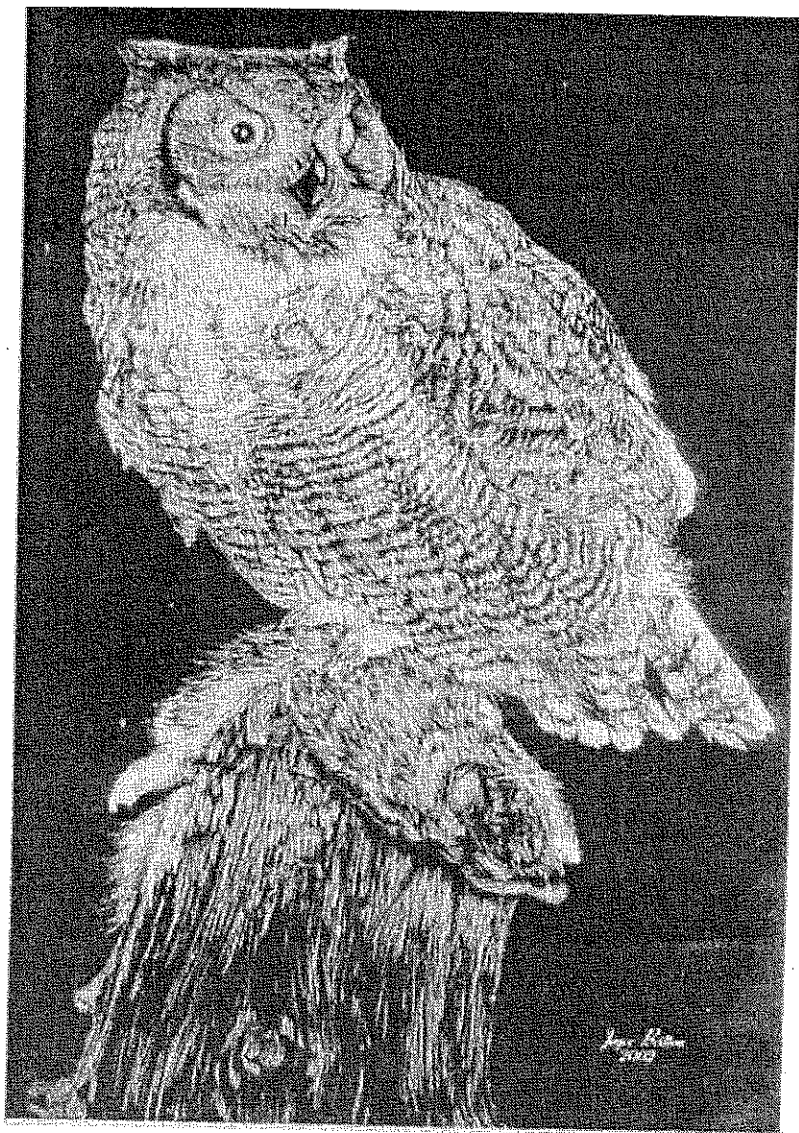
38



Untitled

Antonio Menendez

39



Prey

Joyce Britton

40



Kelly McKibben

Untitled

41

Bonfire at Midnight

Lisa Bricker

A sphere of flame;
an open mouth with pepper-crazed tongues.
Darkness laps at the edges of light.
Looking into the fire, I can't see anything
but my hands spread for warmth;
palms burning, backs numb.
From the silence of time spent outside,
one quiet snap of a twig.
A pale face appears, bodyless, from the blackness
 opposite,
like a magnesium flare to unshaded eyes.
The face recedes,
but two hands, spread like mine, remain.

cave fever Zacchaeus Compson

When they told me about "cave fever" I passed it off as a cultural fluke of the area. I mean, you know it's not true, those stereotypes about the hills of Kentucky: the hillbilly intellect, the moonshine, the inbreeding. But those thick southern accents don't help any. And so my first time to Mammoth Cave—including the seven miles of tourist attractions circumventing the park—like Hillbilly Hound's Fun Park, Big Mike's Rock Shop and Golgotha Mini Golf—was a time of skepticism, especially when the guide of my first cave tour was a lazy-tongued, laughing man with a jolly gut who had the annoying habit of calling a cave "tour" a "ter."

I found myself back a few months later working as a guide, and though much of the bias had faded, skepticism remained. A summer with John McKay changed things. The ideal park ranger—from the kind, genteel mannerisms that engaged both women and children with the first, southern smile to his tall stature, smooth, prominent jaw line, and passionate eyes—McKay had dedicated his life to the service of seven National Parks across the country, including Glacier, Acadia, and Kentucky's beloved Mammoth Cave. When he was not in the cave, McKay was taking care of birds of prey; the last time I saw him, he released a hawk and an owl. Free. And yet he would never leave.

Rooming with this forty-six year old bachelor made me realize an alternate course of life. One of passion and dignity, but one with few comforts afforded by a traditional lifestyle: John had no family, no possessions, and no home. Save for a scrapbook of memories he stored underneath an unmade bed and 53,000 acres surrounding his cluttered, two-room apartment, John McKay was alone. Alone in a world of overcrowding and homelessness and hunger. Alone.

Something about the loneliness McKay endured to live his passion helped me understand cave fever. At first I thought I had it. Like the black slave guide, Steven Bishop, who gave tours his whole life and earned enough in tips to buy his freedom, but remained a guide to discover over 25 miles of passages using a fickle whale oil lantern

often held between the teeth. Or Floyd Collins, who single-handedly removed thousands of pounds of limestone from Onyx Cave and later explored the amorphous bowels of Sand Cave, becoming pinned by a falling rock and surviving 15 days before dying of hypothermia as his friends and family watched. But people like this have something more. Something only hinted at, in the eyes, in the face. Something that makes a forty-six year old man belly-crawl down a passage called the Fallopian Tube and squeeze out the Birth Canal each week for ten years as twenty-year-olds watch the sweat steam off his fevered face, lips taugt, grunting, emerging from the womb again and again—never growing old.

Burning Your Bridge

Jeff Crady

but like the arsonist
who finds remorse,
hands shiver next to his side—
the little stick ago between
his finger and thumb,
unable to flick it onto the
pile of crumbled leaves and
suffocated grass. It burns
down to his skin, he rubs it out
under the toe of his loafer,
breath lingers in small domes
before him,
as he stares through the dark
across to the other side.

Insecticide

Crystal Fodrey

I like to squish ants
Flat under my feet.

I like to fry worms
On a hot metal sheet.

I like to swat flies
In swift graceful blows.

I like to spray bees
With a green garden hose.

I like to crush spiders
Beneath unabridged books.

I like to zap moths
Cause I don't like their looks.

I like to kill bugs.
What I say is true.

I like to kill bugs.
They remind me of you.

Ring of Fire

Sam Ford

For reasons that would likely be inconceivable to any rational human being, he wanted to blame the whole matter on his hand. That is the only logical explanation as to why Phillip Langley was sitting in a straight-backed chair, scouring the detail of each finger in the dim halogen illumination, sliding his wedding ring up his finger, then down; up his finger, then down. A stuffy fog had hovered on Phillip, about 3:17 a.m. by the red digits on the bedroom clock. He had to creep carefully to discern the numbers, afraid that each creak of the bed would awaken his wife from her deep sleep. Sullenly, he had sat in this stupor, watching as the fog first began to fill the outer horizon, remaining in this stoic state as the obstruction grew, until the room was consumed by this heavy mass that obstructed even the proverbial "hand in front of the face." By the time he had gathered the courage to creep again and was able to discern the digits from the haze, the time was 3:42 a.m. In an effort to seek refuge, he had slipped out of bed and carefully made a path through the fog.

Such circumstances led to Phillip Langley sitting in his stiff study chair, scrutinizing each digit—flesh, bone, and nail. He continued his focus particularly on the wedding band, the up-and-down rhythmic motions only mechanical. Langley's mind was on a night, not unlike this night, seven months ago. That night had found him in this same chair, with the same rhythmic motions...up and down, up and down...the same dull lighting, the same keen senses that caused him to instinctively flinch at every outside noise. The scene was much the same, but now he veiled the same emotions that had once caused him to act.

His immeasurable virtue (for, although Phillip Langley was humble, he realized that he was a man firmly founded on strong moral ground) was his downfall, as he had slowly descended into this cauldron of self-loathing that gnawed at his virtuous record. Yes, it was his high standards of conduct he held himself to that had caused this concealed punishment.

Like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Phillip Langley took his crime with him to bed at night. He showered with it in the mornings and carried it in his briefcase to work and even managed to meet with it in his dreams. Earlier that very morning, Phillip Langley had entered his bathroom to shave and looked into the mirror, only to see the reflection of Lester Burnham. He resented the comparison.

Phillip Langley was no Lester Burnham. Physically, he bore no resemblance to Kevin Spacey. He had found American Beauty to be a sick representation of America. Aside from that, Lester Burnham possessed no morals, felt no reprehension for what he had done, showed no will to learn responsibility. Lester Burnham was a coward. Phillip Langley was not.

Continuing to ponder on these matters, Phillip continued to sulk in the chair until he made a startling conclusion. That night, seven months ago, he had observed the ring of inflamed skin concealed by his wedding band. Had the finger been able to withstand the friction between it and the ring, had it refused to forfeit to the sweat and strain, he would have never gotten into this situation. With this epiphany, he jerked his chair close to the computer desk, knocking over a cup in the process and spilling its contents—a brew of decaffeinated tea that could likely trace its origin to sometime the week before—onto the floor. Entirely focused on his mission, Langley placed the chair over the stain, seemingly oblivious to what he had just done.

The sudden illumination from the computer screen attacked Phillip's vision, forcing him into convulsive blinking to adapt to the situation. His mind filled with memories—memories that he could not help but repeatedly conjure—and he smiled at the irony of the situation.

"Dear Self," began Phillip Langley as he typed on the computer screen. He almost erased the beginning, apparently having second thoughts, but ultimately decided to continue.

I find it hard to share my grief with anyone else, seeing that I am the strength of this family. Being their strength, I find it even more difficult to lend humanity to myself, for the admittance of weakness would, in itself, be a letdown to those that look up to me, most notably Julia and Benjamin, my children. Of course, my wife Helen loves me very much and depends on me as well.

Yet, as I think about the occurrences in my life over the past few months, I cannot help but share it with someone, which naturally leads to this letter. I have been guilty of a crime, a crime that could have had dire consequences, had I not seen the thorny trail I was being led down. Being the sole possessor of knowledge of my crime, I find the burden of shouldering the responsibility increasingly difficult. Therefore, I will attempt to recount the events that occurred, in an effort to release myself from this senseless grief that disrupts my life.

Julia, wearing a black shirt that revealed way too much of her stomach and pants that hung to her hips much like honey to the comb, attempted to leave the house that night with some underage young ruffian, a child with a man's proportion of testosterone. I refused to

let her go. Benjamin taunted her for the rest of the night, and I could literally sense her anger at me as she stalked around the kitchen and up the stairs toward her room, picking up the phone and dialing a friend. Julia spent most of her free time on her phone line, a present for her last birthday that gave me freedom as much as it did her. My wife, Helen, had not yet returned from work. Late nights were common for my wife.

Internet was a new term for me, and my children had taught me how to use the "browsers" only weeks before. I had created both a personal and an alternate account, which allowed me on the Internet in peace when doing my research. But I knew little about this Web stuff.

My e-mail box was its usual sweet tooth cupboard, a collection of junk that could rot the sharpest of minds. Viagra advertisements, investment promotions, and pornography. Three or four of the messages urged me to "see women taking it hard from all positions," "visit the palace of pussy," and "watch as young underage girls lick your..." As I sifted through the e-mails for deletion, I kept wondering, "Lick your..." Lick your what? Out of sheer curiosity, I clicked this "link."

I am a decent man, so I will not even record some of the things written and pictured on this Web site. I felt nasty just for viewing these pictures, obviously of ladies much younger than I who were engaging in all sorts of physical activities. Why do young women use the Internet as a way to explore sexuality? Do they not realize that there are sexually perverse men at their computers, waiting to use them as objects to fantasize with?"

Out of curiosity, I decided to search out a woman. A "CHAT" button beckoned me to click, revealing chat rooms of "Sexual Pleasure" and "Girls Who Want It," among many others. I clicked it. Just to investigate the type of women who are in these places.

"Girls Who Want It." I felt like a cow in the marketplace. Yet, there I was in the chat room, reading as each nasty phrase was succeeded by another more explicit.

I remember something peculiar about that moment. As I entered the room, I began humming an old song, but a song I have always loathed. "When I was just a baby, my mama told me, 'Son, always be a good boy. Don't ever play with guns. But I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die.'" I became a little angry with myself for remembering this, a ballad of a man who admitted reveling in his own crime. I don't know why I remembered the song. I hate Johnny Cash.

"...I'd do it for money..." I saw run across the screen. Feeling a little displaced in that company, I was about to leave the chat room when one of the many faceless names sent a message to me.

"You want to cyber?"

Cyber what? So I asked her just that, to which she replied:

"Cyber Sex."

I had never even thought such a thing was possible, but I was curious as to what it was. I asked the young lady to explain, and she began to provide a few details. Realizing that she was about to include me in something I knew I should have no part of, I quickly disconnected and forgot about the incident.

The next day's work reeked of monotony. Endless rows of rhythmic typing, a synchronized buzz orchestrated by a myriad of monochromatic suits, acolytes of an apathetic tyrant. All I could envision was the thought of getting home, a prize I deemed well-worth a day's suffering. However, my prize appeared fruitless, as there was no one there when I reached my doorstep.

Benjamin was undoubtedly at soccer practice, Julia was doing God knows what, and Helen had another day of overtime. After enduring the silence for a few minutes, I decided to finish up some of the research I had intended to do last night. When I went to check my mail, I saw that the girl had written me. A rather simple message indeed: "Why'd you run? I know what you wanted." I turned the statement over a few times, examining it like a jeweler does his gold, and then began the task of e-mailing her back.

I asked the girl how old she was, what town she was from, and why she was so insistent on contacting me. As I continued my e-mail, I heard the front door open, so I sent the e-mail and went into the living room, where I found that Julia had picked Benjamin up from soccer practice. Julia was wearing a V-cut pink sweater with the word "Sweet" on it, disregarding any attempt at paternal advising.

I offered to make Julia and Benjamin supper. When Helen came in that night at 9:30, I greeted her with a hug and a kiss. She said she was ready to go to bed, so we wished the children good night and went into our bedroom, albeit with different intentions. I had not seen much of Helen in the past few weeks, and I expressed to her my desire to be intimate with her, but her day had been too stressful.

When a man feels alienated from his family, problems can arise. My children were not dependant upon me, and my wife was too busy for me. My goal, to get through work so I could come home to a family, was becoming an ideal instead of a reality. As soon as Helen went to sleep, I found my hand slowly reaching out to guide me from

the bed. I found myself at the computer, checking my e-mail. And there she was.

We began talking. I read as she said that she was from here in town. I read that she was nineteen years old. I read as she described a few things about her body. My need began to overcome me. Desire, which had lain dormant, began to dominate. My mind was saying "NO!" and crying out in that dark and ill-lit study, but my hand...my passion dictated otherwise.

When a man is caught between reason and deep desire, he finds himself in a battle, confused about which side to take....

The letter-writing stopped for a minute. He remembered, begrudgingly, feeling at home that night. This girl was his Penelope, and this was their Ithaca. Nervously, Phillip Langley began moving that ring again, sliding it up and down, up and down. He remembered the motion that night, up-and-down, up-and-down...And he pondered on how much loathing he should have for it, how guilty he should feel about it.

I succumbed. And, afterward, I found myself e-mailing her, asking her to meet me the following afternoon at Robinson's, a little-known diner on the other side of town, a good distance from my home and my work, and for us to draw little attention to our meeting. With that, I signed offline and slipped back into bed with my wife, unsure of what I had done and why I had done it.

Nothing really comes to my mind about that next day. I don't know what I was thinking, or if I was thinking, or what happened at work, or if anything happened at work. When quitting time came, I was at the door and into the car, ready to head for Robinson's. The only vivid memory I have is the sound that greeted me when I turned on the radio that day.

"A man walks down the street.
He says why am I short of attention;
Got a short little span of attention.
And wo my nights are so long.
Where's my wife and family?
What if I die here?
Who'll be my role model,
Now that my role-model is
Gone. Gone.
He ducked back down the alley
With some roly-poly little bat-faced girl.

My fucking Reveille.

I reached my destination. I remember sitting in the car, thinking about my children...thinking about Helen...wondering what had gotten me here. I knew better. Men like me were the beacons of the world. It was a foggy day, and in my confusion, I even forgot to put on the change of clothes I had brought along. I just climbed out of the car and entered the building, trying to halt my steps with each fleeting moment.

She had told me that she would be wearing a baseball cap and that she would be sitting toward the back of the restaurant. I saw her figure, her back to me, sitting at the table. I examined her for quite awhile, from afar, summoning the nerve to approach her...

Phillip Langley paused for a second, pondering. He remembered his careful consideration of this young woman's body, how the curves already seemed so familiar to him, taking only seconds of admiration to commit to memory. He remembered the feelings that this brought to his memory, but those were feelings that he swallowed back down, stubbornly unwilling to regurgitate them in his mind.

Phillip had approached the young girl after staring at her for several seconds. Now, he recalled watching with great wonder, waiting for her to turn and reveal her complete beauty. He reluctantly remembered his excitement, hanging on her every move, desiring to be one with her, one with the beautiful innocence and the passion which flowed from her every movement. But his carnal fantasies gave way to reality.

The gallant Langley, defender of morality, had found himself face-to-face with the Knight of the Mirrors that day, finally able to see the true reflection. And he was given the chance to unravel the layers of sanctimony. For there was the girl, the beautiful girl of his fantasies, his daughter.

In confusion, a plethora of thoughts had consumed Phillip Langley's mind. His own perversion, the reaction of his daughter, his obligations of protecting his family from evil, and something far deeper...something that he refused to acknowledge.

He thought quickly, reacting in a way befitting his role. He was not being dishonest; he was merely protecting his daughter.

"Julia, I read the e-mail, and you're not meeting anyone here," he had said. "You need to come home."

Phillip recalled the events that followed, as his daughter was quarantined for her wrong-doing. After all, Phillip Langley had raised

her better than that. He pondered on that notion for quite awhile, before focusing back on the screen.

A just man cannot be expected to never make mistakes, but he should just be expected to adapt.

He then deleted the letter and sat in the room, thinking over the whole situation. He thought about his daughter Julia and smiled. Then, he readjusted his wedding band, careful to cover his burning flesh. Everything felt better now.

Phillip Langley slowly crept back into his bed next to his unresponsive wife, no one the wiser.

An Idea Briefly Visited Our Writing Workshop

Trish Lindsey Jagers

We saw you
arrive late,
leave early,
carrying pearls
cold as river stones
in your pockets.
You walked in
like everything should go on
with or without you; then you left us
in awe of your presence; your absence now
like a spirit of fragrance
that haunts our empty room.
You were there, once,
and we wait behind you—
wait for some curved moment;
our flattened still-life
begs for the raised movement of paint—
inert as wood, private as a flame,
breathless as ashes.

The Cutting Lesson

Trish Lindsey Jagers

Seventy-two years old,
Gran'dad leads me through six-foot stalks;
one at a time, he grabs them at the heart.
Over his arms, muscles rise like bruises.
The tobacco knife flings white Kentucky sun
into my eyes; in one slice,
he severs the stalk "at the root";
life blood leaks, hot and milky.
Tobacco lice grit the leaves,
fall like sand. I take the plant from him,
force the steel spike through its body;
the air mists with its sticky ghost.
He squints into the tunnel of the sun—
distant as the water cooler at the end
of the row. Sixty more rows form solemn lines
like the bowed heads outside a soup kitchen.
"One day, you will run this farm," he says
as I spit winged grit from my teeth
and search my twenty-eight-year-old body
for the strength to spike one more.

The Truth About Professional Sports

Josh James

America is perpetually in the market for a new hero, a heavily-promoted human symbol to which we can all thoroughly attach our egos. In this burdensome land of fast food franchises, Gas X, voice mail, and windshield wipers for your headlights, the citizenry crave role models to guide them through such a daunting world of peril. Thus, every once in a while, we elect to deify a celebrity because, as we all know, they're simply better people. In the U.S., the deserved honor is usually bestowed upon that-- the most treasured of treasures, the Olympian ideal, the alliance of all that is good-- the athlete. Who better than the athlete to galvanize the spirit of Americans and unite us in unflinching adoration?

Their ranks spawned some of the greatest specimens of mankind, men like Jimmy the Greek, Pete Rose, Daryl Strawberry, Ray Lewis, and everyone's favorite motivation speaker, Bobby Knight. Filled with nothing but an altruistic love of the game, these brave players and coaches show us what it means to be human every time they stagger onto the field, providing enough memorable moments and tears to last a lifetime.

By teaching kids about the value of brute strength and individualism, athletes provide us a moral center in these increasingly ambiguous times. These courageous fighters, sometimes working for under 2.5 million a year (plus corporate endorsement contracts), are world famous for their dedication to racial equality, tolerance, non-violence, and the National Organization for Women. Just ask famed Equal Rights crusader O.J. Simpson.

Football, a morality play about the importance of imperialism, claims some of the greatest minds of the 20th century, a fact clearly evidenced by the sophisticated behavior of its promoters. The sports industry itself exists as an idyllic paragon of honor and bipartisanship. The game itself brings together large oily men, who struggle in an intense battle over territory, reenacting the colonists' triumphant defeat of the bloodhungry savages of North America. Two perennial favorites, technology and aggression, merge to create a spectacular combat scene wherein players vie for domination and an egg-shaped inflated piece of leather. Obviously, any thinking person realizes the outcome of such a war far outweighs the importance of international politics or world crises, and therefore warrants its own ticker on MSNBC. The game also teaches our children the invaluable lesson that conflicts must always end with a loser and a winner; rarely is any fight resolved with calm,

reasoned discussion or compromise.

The players, known for their poetic insights into the human condition, will oftentimes offer inspiring interviews and press conferences where they frequently stun the academic community with their articulate, witty repartee. Their love of sports is only overshadowed by their relentless support for higher test standards, literacy programs, and their unrelenting quest to raise the bar of excellence in colleges and institutions of higher learning all around this grand country.

Athletes not only remind us of the significance of a functional court system; they also allow us a much-needed distraction from the problems of this weary world. When out in the parking lot tipping over an SUV or lighting fire to a police squad car, fans get to unwind, relax, and reorganize priorities. That visceral release of pent-up testosteronal rage benefits everyone. What better way to announce to the world you're a mentally healthy, employable individual than by airbrushing your naked body Wildcat blue and standing in sub-Arctic temperatures while howling like a *Braveheart* extra passing an electrified kidney stone? It shows you possess the kind of fervent dedication and loyalty Fortune-500 companies are after.

Quiet and contemplative, athletes themselves prefer a solitary, meditative existence to one of flash and ticker-tape parades. Inspired by the words of Henry David Thoreau, football players have a reputation for soft-spoken truisms and observations about nature. Photographs tend to reveal their pensive side, showing players huddled together-- no doubt reading one another their favorite passages from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* or debating the relevance of an ontological argument in modern theology. John Rocker, baseball player and noted philosopher, even managed to unite the diverse community of New York by offering a passionate dissertation on ethnicity and bridging the cultural divide, garnering him kudos from organizations like G.L.A.D. and Amnesty International.

And let's not forget the capitalistic end of the field. Sports programs across the nation rake in millions of dollars every year, which they oftentimes use to boost underfunded arts programs and bolster the budgets of such rich departments as Music, Literature, Drama, and Philosophy. A characteristically modest group, athletes shy away from any praise for this. Most admit a great book or painting is all the reward they need.

Professional sports like football and basketball serve to unify a struggling country in these dark times. Naysayers like Noam Chomsky should pack up and leave if it doesn't suit their elitist tastes. Sports are

America's chosen entertainment; we hunger for the sting of the bleachers on a hot Summer afternoon, the unmistakable scent of a ballpark frank, the illustrious chords of "Take Me Out To the Ball Game," the string of profanity wafting from the dugout, the multiple restraining orders, the white stuff on Daryl Strawberry's nose. All American fun. Be proud of our boys. They run themselves rugged, give it 110% (whatever the hell that means), run headfirst into each other causing countless concussions, and all for one distinguished purpose, one all-encompassing cosmic goal, one imperative, universal mission of missions.

Anybody have a line on what that might be?

An Essay on Existentialism

Donna Lemaster

They taste bad, fingernails. They feel good in my mouth freshly bitten off, as if I've accomplished something meaningful. But the taste . . . once I spit them out of my mouth, my tongue coils in a fit of bitter aftertaste. I suppose that's all of the dirt that gets trapped under them every time I touch anything. I know fingernails are disgusting. I know they carry germs and disease. I know I shouldn't bite them, but I do anyway. It's like an addiction. I have to bite them, it feels good and I don't know why.

I like it when the skin underneath hits the air as if for the first time ever. Sometimes I bite them so close that my fingertips are tender for the next few days. I always promise to let them grow long, yet each time they are even remotely grown out I bite them all off again as if I gain some kind of relief in doing so.

I used to tell myself that I only bite my nails when I'm nervous. Then I added when I'm angry too. Sometimes when I'm sad. If the weather is bad. I kept exaggerating the reasons, adding new emotions until I eventually realized that I don't need a reason. I just bite them. I suppose if I were going to make up a reason for biting them now, it would be . . . nervousness, or anxiety. Perhaps, fear. Any emotion, really, that goes along well with knowing you are about to fail a test.

Explain the philosophy of existentialism according to Kierkegaard. Use several examples of this philosophy from Kafka's Metamorphosis. Use complete sentences. Your answer should be in essay form.

What? Who is Kierkegaard? What is existentialism? Is this about that book where the guy turns into some kind of bug?

I need to repaint my toenails; they look pitiful. My feet are dirty too. I wish I hadn't worn flip-flops today, but at least I did bring my umbrella. If I painted my fingernails, would I still bite them? Probably. I really should have shaved my legs today, too. I can feel the prickliness when I cross them over one another.

I'm just sort of dangling my pen in the air over my test paper, not writing anything. The girl next to me is going to run out of ink if she doesn't stop. She hasn't quit since we got the tests; I haven't started. Let's see . . .

Existentialism adopts concepts of human existence such as alienation and isolation . . .

Did I bring my keys with me or am I going to be locked out of my room when I get back? I wish I weren't having a bad hair day, but isn't everyday a bad hair day? Maybe I should try getting up earlier and actually fixing my hair some day. I think I read somewhere, though, that men are supposedly more affected than women are by having bad hair days.

Gregor died in this book didn't he? I think his dad killed him with an apple. How does that relate to existentialism? Wait, have I even remembered what existentialism is yet?

I need to call Dad today and tell him to deposit some money so I can buy more groceries. I want a big fat chocolate cake, and Doritos. Nacho. If I write a check today and Dad deposits the money tomorrow, will the check bounce?

The ceiling tile just above my head is hanging lower than all of the others. It can't have been from a leak; we're on the first floor. If it fell on my head right now, would I still have to finish my test? I'm sure I look intelligent with my head sticking straight in the air.

Almost everyone has finished and left class and here I sit with three other people like I belong in the remedial reading course or something. I read the book; I know what it's about. Gregor is a bug. Gregor's family hates him. Gregor's boss hates him. Poor Gregor feels isolated. Gregor's dad kills him. So, why do I have to write an essay about it?

Gregor wakes up one morning to find himself as a bug—not a particularly pleasing event in which to awaken. Gregor is quickly and utterly alienated by his family and office manager . . .

Did I unplug my iron this morning? Could that burn the whole dorm down if it got too hot? If it did burn down, could they find out it was my fault? What would they do to me? Would I get fined or would I get arrested? It would be a fun story to tell if I got arrested for leaving an iron plugged in—I've never been arrested before.

I wonder if I'll get mail today. I never do, I don't know why today would be any different. I always check the box and I always get nothing. It embarrasses me when I stick my key in and pull the door open to an empty mailbox when people are standing around. It makes me feel unloved. Which then makes me feel even worse because I know it's ridiculous to feel unloved just because of a chronically empty mailbox.

Everyone gets mail from their *mommy*. I don't. I know she loves me, she just doesn't send mail. I haven't gotten a package since the fall of my freshman year. I always get excited when I see that little

blue slip of paper in the box, and I always pull it out to find my roommate's name on it. Very uplifting.

As a result of Gregor's transformation, his family resorts to a life of little communication . . .

I always get excited when I see flowers at the desk, too. Even if I've checked my mail a dozen times already, I'll check it again just to see if they're mine. They never are and they never will be.

I wonder who invented ink pens. They got rich quick whomever it was. What is ink, really?

Kafka never really says what kind of bug Gregor was. He doesn't even write how large or small he was. I wonder what I would do if my brother turned into a giant bug. If I wrote a book about a guy turning into a bug, I would say how big he was. But . . . I'm never going to write a book about a bug so it doesn't matter.

Now I'm the only one left in the room. Being the last one finished is worse than being first! Now I feel like the professor is staring at me, looking down on me because I am taking so long. I can't concentrate on this essay because she's staring.

She probably knows that I have no idea what I am doing. I bet she thinks I'm dumb. I wonder if my grade will be affected by being the last because she could leave if I would just get finished.

I would have been out of class early like everyone else if I knew what I was doing. But I don't, so here I sit still trying to figure out when we talked about Kierkegaard and why I don't know what existentialism is. Just a couple of minutes left, I may as well turn in the test. I've written a page in essay form and I used complete sentences; I'm just not sure if I have actually answered the question or not.

Doesn't anyone write books with happy endings anymore? Why can't all the characters just get what they want? I'm sure Gregor didn't want to turn into an ugly bug and then die with an apple in his back. Everyone I ask that question to says happy endings aren't "realistic." So, I'm sure everyone knows somebody who has turned into a bug.

My essay needs an ending before I turn it in. I wish I cared, or paid attention, or something.

We may never awake as bugs, but each of us has been alienated. Eventually we all have to reject the responsibilities in our lives. We will be forced to take obligation for the moral decisions we have made. Inevitably, our actions will define our own lives.

I wish I had more fingernails to bite off.

Jimmy Bliss
Cynthia Darst

A tattooed hand,
thick-veined, tanned
moves down the neck
of a Moon mandolin
while ringed fingers
with claw-like picks
pop the strings
in a Bluegrass lick
that breaks through the amp
electric crisp
on a Tuesday afternoon.

Fall
Kevin Shields

A yellow feathered song
Serenades
The mighty oak.

A lonesome leaf
Trembles
In the withering grass.

An acorn dashes
Across a power line,
Guided by eager teeth
And squirrel paws.

The sun falls faster
These days,
Crickets are spoiled
With early sunset.

The Split Daisy
L. Christian Parrish

Iris was just thirteen years old when she realized she'd been given something special. While facing a computer against the back wall of her geometry class, she peered out the window. With her fingers, she twisted her hair and watched the breezes sweep over a small section of the courtyard that was filled with wild flowers; she thought they were daisies. She placed her finger against the glass, holding it on one particular, yellow flower. It was unlike the rest and she didn't want to lose it. After Iris's class ended, she rushed out into the courtyard to find her bloom. Its stem was broken. It didn't resist the wind like the others, causing its petals to brush against the grass; when a strong gust swept over the courtyard, the flower swung in all directions. Iris thought someone's foot had shaved it, or a wandering dog had bumped it with its heavy nose. Iris wished she could imitate the flower. She wished she could touch it and become yellow, orange, green and split. It was then, at the age of thirteen Iris found her gift. She *could* copy the flower. By dreaming about it, by looking at its balance, by touching it, her hand began to take on the same characteristics of the daisy. Her fingers became yellow petals and her wrist weakened, having turned green and thin. She walked around most of the day holding on to the flower. She was able to take it with her without having to pull the original from the soil, without having to leave a bare spot. Iris didn't show it to anyone—it was her new secret.

When Iris turned seventeen, her gift performed more naturally. Makeup, hair treatment, honeysuckle scented shampoo, all these things were still in her bathroom, but they were her sister's, Demi. Even the deodorant was her sister's. Iris didn't need them any longer. She could create an appearance as well as smell. She could get ready for school by only glancing at the mirror. Her little sister would easily spend an hour. Iris's only concern was clothing. She could copy anything, but it would be her body that would take on the shape, smell, and color of the object she desired. She could curl her blonde hair with the simple twist of one strand, but she couldn't create a dress without it looking like a body suit. Clothing wrinkled, and pleats separated; her body couldn't mock these inconsistencies. Iris didn't mind. She loved to shop. It was a chance for her to wander among crowds as someone new. She could buy bright floral dresses like Demi wore, and then change her appearance, walk into another store with straight black hair and try on leather skirts. She bought all of these clothes, as well. Her father loved her. Iris loved to date.

Iris's father, Doug, wasn't gifted. He watched television mostly. He ate ham and cheddar sandwiches for dinner and crawled into bed early. His daughters were never sure about what he did during the day. They knew he woke up before them and left in a hurry. They knew he brought home presents from different places, and sometimes called in the afternoon to let them know he wouldn't be coming home until the following morning. Iris liked those calls. Doug didn't. He had solutions to any problem and wore mostly suits. His ties were never pastel. They were instead, clever. He wasn't. He rushed out of the house every morning the same way, year after year, wearing clever ties, solving problems.

Iris's sister, Demi, thought nights were strange. Light switches in the living room and Iris's room were triggered at the same time. Doug switched his off after the weather man was through, just to sit awhile longer in the flickering black and white light. Iris pretended to fall asleep. Demi knew she was pretending because she could always hear her later, moving and whispering. Often, after the moving and whispering, Demi heard her sister leave the house—it woke her.

* * *

The grass was cool when Iris leapt from her bedroom window late one night. It had rained. Iris loved wet grass; it made the yard bearable. She always ran across the lawn at night barefooted, until she was clear of the house. On dry grass, the blades irritated her toes, reminding her of the first time she watched her feet and the lawn blend into one. She had seen her calves only, and dry grass for feet. The boys laughed after she fell. But it was cool this evening, and *she* laughed, while rubbing her wet, slick toes against each other.

"Hurry, cutie," the boys whispered. Iris didn't like being called cutie. She climbed into the back seat of their car and asked the same question she had asked every night when sneaking out, "so what's your names?" The boys used to laugh at this too, but lately, they just grinned at each other and refused to answer. Iris didn't ask twice; the wind from the passenger's window was all she cared to feel.

Iris's favorite boyfriend was Dennis. She had introduced herself to him three different times as three different girls, and they were all her sexiest choices. The car stopped in the park and Iris pulled her hair away from her eyes (which were green that evening), and wondered if Dennis would be there wearing his dirty jeans and black shoes. If he was, it would be a second date with Jessica. Jessica was Iris's imitation of a sweet girl. She wore dresses and leather sandals. Her hair was straight and blonde. She carried a purse stuffed with a scarf that matched her eyes. She had a scarf for every color but black.

Jessica headed directly toward the swing set. Just like a car, a swing summoned the wind too. Dennis was already there swinging without her.

"Hello Jessica . . . hop on."

She gripped the galvanized chains with both hands and plopped down. Her seat was wet, and the water soaked right through her dress. There was no hope in saving her panties. They absorbed the rest. She would have to change them once more.

"Are you wet, sweetie?"

Jessica smiled, "yeah."

Dennis stopped his pace and looked to her lips, "I didn't want to be the only one."

Dennis began to swing again, he knew they wouldn't run off just yet. She liked to do this first. Jessica thought about Carla. She wondered how Dennis was feeling swinging with her now after he had spent the night with Carla the day before. She decided she wouldn't tell him she knew. Instead, she decided to wait and meet Dennis again, as Carla. Carla was tough and blunt. She had black hair and wore the short leather skirts Iris kept in the back of her bottom drawer. *She* would be the one to shock him with the news about his affairs with three different girls. Jessica could wait. Dennis and Jessica didn't run off that evening. She was tired and had left the house late. He didn't complain. She was kind enough to leave him with a kiss.

* * *

Iris smelled the coffee her father fixed every morning. She always finished the pot Doug left her. Demi would sit at the table with her milk and make faces at her sister for drinking it. Iris ignored her mostly, but one morning she thought she would give her a taste of her talent. When Demi crunched her eyebrows and squinted her eyes, Iris mocked her. Demi squeezed her cheeks together and poked her tongue out between her lips, and Iris mocked her. Iris looked at her brown eyebrows, small mouth, naturally curled hair, and lastly her youthful eyes. Demi had gotten taller. She was nearly as tall as Iris. Her breasts were close to the same size as hers. Demi had matured overnight. Iris was sure she would be able to squeeze into her dresses. Iris's figure was fuller, nevertheless, she would look much like her sister, and *just* like her if she was to transform.

Doug was home the night after Iris had her revelation. She went through Demi's closet to look for a dress she remembered her sister having twirled in days before. After she slipped it on over her bare body, she jumped into Demi's bed. Demi was confused when she saw her sister in *her* bed with the lights out, but she was often confused

at night. When the living room was filled with black and white shadows, Doug found his way to his daughter's room. He didn't speak at first. He climbed under the covers with her, grabbed her thigh and smiled.

"Did you wash tonight?"

She didn't answer.

"Is this a dress you're wearing?"

She didn't answer.

"Something different."

She didn't answer.

"Are you try—"

She kissed Doug first, held her father close; it would be the last night Iris would have to sleep with him.

Iris didn't go out that evening. She stayed home and watched everyone. Demi slept in Iris's room. Doug fell asleep with Demi. He hadn't slept in any other bed but his, except the first time he had made love to his daughter. Iris sat at the kitchen table the rest of the night. She held onto Demi's appearance until morning. Doug woke up late, fixed a pot of coffee and kissed his daughter. He managed to do all these things without saying a word.

* * *

Blue . . . green . . . pink neon lights signaled sales on her right and left. Banners screamed at her. Little girls in black stretch-pants and white button down shirts named Amy all had a pitch. Iris wasn't sure which store to stop at first. Demi loved natural colors. She liked belly shirts on warm days. She wore tight jeans and soft yellow blouses in the evening. These were enough ideas for Iris to get started on her sister's wardrobe. While shopping, her attention turned to a table of scarves. There were light colors and deep colors neatly folded and placed in rows as if they had been deprived of the wind. Iris saw two that she would have been more than happy to free, but that would be part of her attire—not Demi's. Besides, Iris was going out in black this particular night. She would be strong, unwilling, and direct. She would be Carla.

After shopping, Iris prepared for her date. Iris loved leather. She had a feeling Dennis liked it too, partly because it was a signal. He knew Carla loved sex, and her clothing was nothing more than a clue for him. She couldn't help but smile when thinking about it as she looked into the mirror and slowly changed her features. Her eyes were first. They were always first. As she stared at them, black creases became cracks that split what was once light blue. The cracks widened with each blink while her eyes became darker . . . darker, until all that

was blue had been enveloped. Her hair was second. If there were curls, she would straighten them. That night, all she had to do was change each strand black. Because she wasn't in a hurry, Iris only changed ten strands at a time. She watched them bruise choosing a different group each time. Her facial features were the most creative part. Carla had a small nose and large red lips. Her face was full, leaving a less defined cheek bone. Iris never bothered with her ears. They heard what she needed them to hear. Her eye lashes were last. They would be as black as her hair before she was finished.

* * *

Dennis waited for Carla in the park. Once she arrived, she didn't walk slowly while holding her scarf above her head like a kite, something Jessica might have done. She didn't tease him by taking time to swing first. Instead, she yanked his arm and pulled his lips to hers. She kissed him for some time before he could say what he had been wanting to say for weeks. He pushed Carla's shoulder slightly so that he would have a moment to breathe.

"Iris, I think I'm might be in love with you . . . but there is something we need to talk about."

Carla extended her fingers, lengthened her nails with a simple thought and clawed Dennis's hand, "Iris! Who the fuck are you talking to?"

Dennis held his cut hand, her nails drove deep, "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry, Carla. Please listen for a second."

Carla attacked him once more, this time across the face, "You can forget about it."

Carla drove home with the windows down. The air was damp and hot. Despite the fact her windows were down and she was driving over the speed limit, there wasn't a breeze. Sweat collected below her bangs. She refused to turn on the car's cool air. Before pulling into the driveway, she thought the wind might pick up again, but that thought was replaced by another. Her father was home.

After Iris walked into the kitchen, she looked toward her bedroom before looking at her father. She wished she had a door of her own. Iris was quick to change her appearance before entering, but there was nothing she could do about her clothes.

"It looks like another slutty night . . . huh?"

Iris didn't say anything.

"You know you're sweating. You know I don't like that."

Iris decided she would turn her eyes red. She had been practicing this for some time.

"Why don't you drop in on Demi tonight? You love *her*, don't you?"

Doug stood, gripping his coffee, "Where are you? You don't have a sister, there are only two bedrooms in this house and you should think about heading to yours."

"What are you talking about, *Doug*?"

"I'm saying . . . you're calling it a night, and do me a favor while you're in there too . . . wash and put on some deodorant!"

Iris felt her eyes turn a different color. She was sure they were yellow. They must have been, because all she could do was concentrate on Doug's yellow, coffee mug . . . a mug Demi had given him for Fathers' Day. Iris was jealous of that mug because Demi had picked the same color of *her* courtyard daisy.

Why I Haven't Written You a Poem

Donna Lemaster

Because words
are only bunched letters.
Because metaphors
and similes
are like viewing the stars
through a pair
of sunglasses. Because
three word lines
and end rhymes
can't personify.

Lula's Hands

Donna Lemaster

Barely born in 1912
when the Titanic sank,
deep in dirt digging for potatoes
throughout the Depression.
They kneaded dough for dumplings
during Hitler's reign,
smacked the butts of misbehaved children
when the hippies smoked pot
and feminists burned bras.
They washed dishes in sulfur water
when Reagan was shot,
and gave up on gardening
while Florida couldn't decide the presidential election.
The stirred simmered beefstew
as the towers fell.
Today, they hold the remote steady
tuned in to Benny Hinn
on the Trinity Broadcast Network.

The Scar

Laura Collins

on my stomach
I called Fusia,
which cracked in the
corners when it
stretched to smile
over a balcony
or an open car door,
once made my belly
leak like a stapled
tomato. This
morning, in the
gray shadow behind
my closet door, I
found it white
biscuit dough,
drawn from
hip to hip,
pulled tight as a
fawn skin drum,
or an ear drum,
listening for signs
of life.