

Zephyrus

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Jim Wayne and Mary Ellen Miller Poetry Award

Gabby Wilson

“Tropical Punch Lip Smacker (2008)”

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award

Maria Wells

“A Walk to Class *on the Hill*”

Ann Travelstead Fiction Award of the Ladies Literary Club

Elizabeth Roth

“Gold Leaf on a Cigarette Case”

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award

Daniel Ungs

“The Squid and the Whale”

Zephyrus Art Award

Abby Robinson

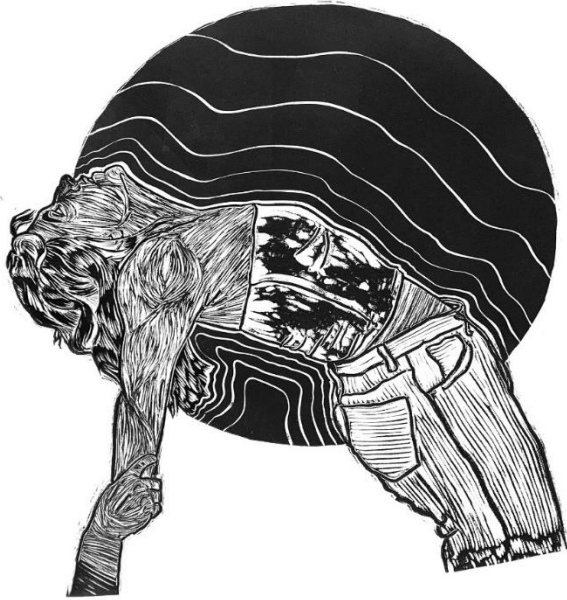
“Twin Flame”

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

Table of Contents

| | | |
|------------------|---|----|
| Kendall Gott | “The Sun is Burning” | 6 |
| Parker Anderson | “Dream Town: Memory Labyrinth” | 7 |
| Cassi Payne | “Eviscerate” | 10 |
| James K. Bundren | “Who I Was Before” | 11 |
| Faith Harris | “Love Language” | 13 |
| Olivia Marshall | “If You Had Asked the Mason Glass” | 15 |
| Emra Mehmedović | “Woman vs. Birth Control” | 18 |
| Alex Cox | “Peaches” | 21 |
| Cassandra Merena | “Botticelli’s <i>Birth of Venus</i> ” | 22 |
| Elizabeth Roth | “Gold Leaf on a Cigarette Case” | 24 |
| | “Roadkill” | 34 |
| Morgan Shane | “Mr. Potato Head” | 36 |
| Kayla Spears | “Lost on Different | 38 |

| | | |
|-----------------|--|----|
| | Paths” | |
| Hannah Rogers | “Say Eye” | 39 |
| Sarah Stevens | “Grecian Dysphoria” | 40 |
| Miriam Story | “Hamilton-Middletown Pike” | 42 |
| Daniel Ungs | “Decomposition” | 43 |
| | “The Squid and the Whale” | 55 |
| Maria Wells | “A Walk to Class <i>On the Hill</i> ” | 58 |
| Mandy Pierson | “Inscape” | 62 |
| Gabby Wilson | “If My Daughter Wants a Barbie, I Will Only See Parts” | 63 |
| | “Tropical Punch Lip Smacker (2008)” | 67 |
| Adam Woodward | “For Papa” | 70 |
| Weather Polston | “Lament of Adhnúall” | 72 |



Kendall Gott

The Sun Is Burning

Dream Town: Memory Labyrinth

Parker Anderson

This town has a lawn like each of your haircuts. Each style meticulously grown and trimmed off in ceaseless attempts to answer the question of who you are. You don't even know who's asking. You buzzed it down to not have to think about it. Grew shaggy pile-of-hay bangs that hung over your eyes to match your "smoking weed is sooo cool" phase. A pink comb over. A blue mop down to your shoulders, that was then bleached—which brought back the pink—bleached again (this time to the roots), then mowed down into a military Guy Fieri — a frosted tip buzzcut. They were all accompanied by a barrage of old jeans, sweatpants, and superhero t-shirts put on as a bulletproof glass air of *I don't give a shit*.

You run down streets to the point of delirium, knowing that the streets have what it takes to match you at every turn. As your mind and body wandered, you sometimes thought of a friend; every time, he somehow summoned himself and told you to run faster. You've been chased by dogs and muggers. Run past a burning building and an overturned baby stroller. You twice found a stray dog that you returned to the owner. You wondered if you were manifesting. There's a lawn you puked in 5 mornings in a row at the end of your route. 6 on your way to Waffle House at 2 AM.

Behind the bulletproof windows there's a sexual history of horror stories to rival Sir Christopher Lee. An RA who shoved you, still naked, back into the hall; a nice guy you liked, because he cuddled, watched anime, and then ghosted you; a cute date nothing happened with, a beautiful one you couldn't get it up for, the one you puked In-and-Out onion rings on, a down-low who didn't want to wake his roommates but kept whispering *I love you. I love you*; another who drove you down a

gravel road, longer than the one at the beginning of *The Evil Dead*, bent you over the backseat (ass out as the first snow of the winter started to fall) and scraped the back of your head with his wedding ring as he pushed your face into a booster seat; a Mexican micropenis, a Rocky Picture show, cross-dressed, motel, orgy where a queen—who ripped whip-its like Steve-o—passed out with her dick I your mouth.

The list could continue.

You often wonder what you came here for. To fall into debt for classes you half paid attention in? To write papers about books you didn't read? To have a series of FOMO and drug-fueled sexual encounters? To stay stuck in limbo between teen and real adult? To look out at a starless sky as you laid in a lonely twin mattress? To not read philosophy, but watch YouTube videos, and stare at blank walls as you spun in pseudo-intellectualism?

In the labyrinth there are dorms where you stared at white cinderblock walls, pacing in water bottle bong paranoia. Apartments where you would get too drunk, high, and nauseous to enjoy the party. The apartment where a co-worker gave you some THC wax that made you feel like your whole body was asleep. The one where you slept under the slope of the ceiling like Harry Potter and drank yourself into stupors to try and be like your roommates.

Truth was, you were always better at doing drugs alone. When you could sit and stare at a wall, or drink to the point of surprising yourself with stupid jokes. Hallucinogens were always your favorite. The friend that taught you to shoplift told you not to go looking into the mirror, guaranteeing you would. It was your favorite part. You saw your face melt, twist, and take on new angles and features you never would have guessed. You were covered in shifting light, the color of which you'd

never seen. Your cheekbones rounded and flattened.
Your jawline slimmed and squared with every glance.
Tell me, out of the corner of your eye, did you catch a
glimpse of who's asking?



Cassi Payne

Eviscerate

Who I Was Before

James K. Bundren

The king or the peon --
The lustful or the whore --
I know not -- yet there remains some
Shadow of who I was before.

It travels equally o'er paths
Antique, trodden by saints and knaves
Alike, the bare though no better --
They all leading to the same Cave ---
Though I still join it on its way
And once more stamp there my footprint
Lost ages ago to the play
Of wind and time -- hands of Nature --
Carrying Her dust o'er the earth
As between death and birth's labours --
Though in creation's levity
Yet neglecting still to obscure
Entirely dim identities --
Wrecked memories of past forms held.

Though even in antiquity
Was that way winding and unclear
I am grasped and guided by that
Surer phantom hand -- who for fear
Of its being lost forever
Marks me the bearer of the weight
Of remembrance -- an endeavour
Better meant for old men waiting
To die than youth which is striving
To live -- though there is a clearing

On that path where Demeter holds
With hands of marble and ivy
My reward -- as for those who tolled
To offer Thesmophoria.

For their piety they received
A time that could dream of the gods
Among men -- and of those bearing
Their image as more than facade --
My reward is to know their dreams
And to share their delight in them --
Though in waking hours I seem
To recall behind Demeter's
Motherly eye some grievous truth --
That her last son from lands sweeter
Will be exiled by the ages
And will only know his brothers
By the whisperings of sages
And shattered fragments in the dust.

*-- In response to Thesmophoria by Francis Davis
Millet, 1894-1897, observed on display at the
Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo,
Utah.*

Love Language

Faith Harris

People always ask about
Physical touch and quality time
Maybe they just want to receive gifts
But sometimes, a word of affirmation
Is an act of service

Sometimes I don't have the time
To watch Netflix on our tiny iPad screen
Because I need to wash the tofu pan from dinner

Sometimes my love is
Silence
After a sigh
Or a harsh word

My love is accepting your kiss
When what I really wanted
Was to be told that you love me
And my love is realizing that in that moment
To you, they were the same
My love is not dictating to you
How I must be loved
But instead accepting your love
How you give

Because sometimes my mind
Is too exhausted for words
But my fingers are strong enough
To entangle yours
And sometimes your hands are too full

To hold me

The greatest love
Is not always exhilarating passion.
Sometimes the greatest love
Is making the grocery list
And the voice that whispers
Assurances in the dark

If You Had Asked the Mason Glass

Olivia Marshall

It must have been a Southern thing
to rest me on a chipping shelf; isolated, and charged
with bearing the weight of dusted books.
But it was comfortable, I suppose. Or at least,
more so than being Russian Dolled between mugs,
and
hoarded in humid cupboards after just being
washed.
So, I grew content with the sun and its heat,
which filtered through panes each morning to wake
you.

Glasses are meant for sweet potations, yet
I instead had too many thoughts to contain.
They bubbled just beneath my knurls most days,
but that night back in May they welled over.
If I could speak, I would've warned when I heard
his heel kick the door.
If you had asked, I would've shattered myself to
answer,
that his fingers flicked with tampered temper,
and his body thrummed with sheltered spite.

But for you, the world had blurred;
each rise in octave and flash of serpent tongue had
gone unseen.
You pargeted the cracks in his character with a
bonny plaster -
Desperate.
But I was never angry with you.

Loneliness is a powerful motivator, and I saw my
own desolation reflected
in each watery smile that grew when he returned.
Relief or regret - what you felt in those moments, I
didn't know.

(I'm convinced it was a medley of both)

I spent years on that shelf, an unwilling witness;
forced to listen
on nights when his groans of pleasure grew. Forced
to watch
your fear-laden limbs spur his arousal.
I heard each daunting thump and crack, the sounds
of leather belts caressing skin, and not for the first
time I
had wished for the Privilege of Speech.
But instead, only thoughts poured out of me,
puddling on the now tainted wood of your bedroom
floor.

My last evening trimming that cerulean shelf,
I felt the house shudder as he barged into our home.
You looked tired, and he bitter. With a piercing
glare,
he pulled your ragdoll frame from the mattress.
He was yelling so loud; I couldn't make out his
words. You didn't even bother to try.
Instead, you pleaded, scratching the violent rings
around your wrist.
And I swore his body flushed scarlet - quaking -
as he threw you towards me.

Your back hit the antique wood with a dull sound
that echoed, rattling
the shelves so hard I felt the books I upheld topple -
pushing me,
until I dove over the edge, right into the sea my
thoughts had created.
With a tinkling sound, at last, I caught your
attention.
Bloodshot eyes were forced to see themselves in my
pieces, glimpsing yet
another victim of his affliction. But even after all
you'd braved, you were still so...
Gentle,
cradling my jagged edges as you walked towards
the front door.

"Get out," you had said.
"I do not need you anymore."

Woman vs. Birth Control

Emra Mehmedović

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the main event! In this corner, we have Woman, weighing in at 150 pounds, coming in at 20 years-old, with a college degree within her grasp. She says she would like to be a mother one day but not any time soon. Poor girl still has a PhD to acquire. And in the other corner, we have Depo-Provera. Medical professionals like to call her medroxyprogesterone acetate, but “needle full of poison” is much more accurate. She’s a contraceptive injection, and her winning attack is the hormone progestin. Progestin keeps the lining of the uterus from building up, stops ovulation, and thickens cervical mucus which means no fertilization. However, she also has some other...unforeseen attacks. Who will win?
DING DING DING

ROUND 1: Spot-Check

The colorful wrappers of female toiletries are constantly spilling out of my trash. It’s fun lime, vibrant magenta, and lavish orange hues make menstruation look like a grand ole time. The wrappers make me think of candy, but this is anything but sweet.

Steaming tears spill down my cheeks, inevitably causing me to throw my fogged-up glasses across the bathroom. My fingers tremble as I hold the scarlet toilet paper. Despite the multiple plies, the blood seeps through with no regard. Drops of it break the surface of the water below me, everything is red. My fists rise and fall onto my thighs over and over again, the skin becoming blotchy. I am tired of this damn color.

I rip open yet another wrapper; this time it is cerulean. The color calms me for a moment as I apply the pristine white product onto my underwear. Within a

few hours, it will be soaked and defiled with red, and the thought of it brings another wave of rage through me. I flush. I sink to my knees. Each drop of blood brings on yet another heavy blow.

“Doctor, I’ve been bleeding for months,” I say, “is there anything-”

“There’s nothing I can do. After a year it should stop. Most people’s periods stop completely.”

A year has passed. I turn around and lower my pants to expose myself. With gloved fingers, she pinches my skin with precision and stabs the needle into my soft flesh. I can feel the poison rush through me, and all I see is red.

ROUND 2: Weigh-In

I first noticed it in my thighs. The wavy lines reminded me of lightning stretching across the sky. They stood out against my pale skin the same way that brilliant bolt stands out against the darkness of night. The lightning that has struck me scars my skin, indicating that my body has grown, that it has stretched, that I have gotten fat. As I grow bigger, so do the numbers on the scale. 126...131...154...

I begin to read nutrition facts like it’s my favorite novel. I buy up all the aspartame Walmart has to offer and sprinkle the potentially dangerous drug into my coffee, my tea, and my sugar-free almond milk (regular milk is much too fattening). The stuff gives me a headache and dehydrates me until I’m dry heaving in front of the toilet. They say it’s 200 times sweeter than sugar, but it sure doesn’t taste like it. The bold warning in all caps on the package doesn’t scare me as much as those rising numbers on the scale.

**“PHENYLKETONURICS - CONTAINS
PHENYLALANINE”**

ROUND 3: Total Knock Out

On top of the attacks of spotting and weight gain, Depo-Provera also worsens depression. Mirrors became enemies to avoid. I didn't want to see the acne scars, the stretch marks, the growing tummy that had to fight its way to fit behind my waistband.

The vibrant bottle of Prozac was like a beacon, but I'm afraid it's not enough. I'm tired.

OH! Ladies and gentlemen, looks like a K.O.

Depo-Provera has won this match and has shown no mercy to her opponent. Tune in next week when Woman is thrown into the ring with Nexplanon. Will she stand a chance? For her sake, let's hope so.



Alex Cox

Peaches

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*

Cassandra Merena

Venus stood
like a prima donna
her foot still in the shape of shell
attached by uncalloused skin
nearby a seagull has mistakenly
nipped open a cattail stalk
it chokes on the dilated cigar head
descending to water for re-birth
Venus clutches her breast – aware
this is her first act as witness
on the gestures of love

seafoam suds dissipate faster than
they can be licked off
she shivers from the ghost
wind's virgin tongue
one day Venus will speak and
waves will curl themselves backwards
to repeat her words
but for now, Florence will
take her in to brew the Divine
in poetry
so that she learns why humans
hold themselves accountable

Zephyr passes by a fennel garden
as his last act in the *Nascita di Venere*
he sends his message to the
sunbaked noses of Italy

that a miracle has blessed them
for three weeks the poor man's
mixed grain bread, prosecco, and
cheeses all taste like freshly
picked fennel
fat babies are born to
flutes that have not tired since
spring

Venus hums while Botticelli's fingers
wash tempera paints out of her hair

Gold Leaf on a Cigarette Case

Elizabeth Roth

“Cigarette?” She asks, keeping a death-grip on the mug of tea in her hands. Her legs are crossed protectively, the flowery dress covering her knees and making her look even more like a child. Pale skin stands out against the strawberry shades of the dress, and even more against the dark forest green of the high-backed chair. There are no cigarettes in sight. No cases, no ashtrays full of dead butts, no smoke-smell lingering in the upholstery, not since our mother quit.

“You smoke?” I reply, a faint smile on my face, which seems to make her clutch the cup tighter. The suit I’m wearing is too tight and too stiff, brought out for the most uncomfortable situations only. I would never wear comfortable clothes to a funeral. That’s disrespectful, even if the funeral wasn’t exactly for a respectable person.

“No,” she mumbles, her voice echoing in the cramped chamber of the mug as she brings it up to her lips. “I’ve just heard it was polite to ask.”

Right. Polite. Maybe in the 1950s. Not now, when my elder sister is sitting across from me, and our mother’s funeral was two hours ago. Lung cancer. Tragic. Our father’s was just five years before, and our youngest brother’s was a year after that. I think this suit is actually the one I bought for my brother’s funeral. That would explain why it’s too tight now.

Eliza and I hadn’t kept in contact. Mostly selfishness on my part, wishing to separate myself from a loss that I realized would be inevitable, even when we were so close when we were young. We had to be. Death does run in the family, after all.

She’s beautiful, just like mom was. Jesus. I sound like one of those uncles at every family gathering that

asks the same questions and excuses himself to go drink in the driveway alone. I'm not supposed to be thinking the way forlorn parents do when their kids are leaving the nest for college. Thoughts about how she's grown, or how much sadder she looks now. I'm supposed to be... drinking in the driveway like one of those uncles.

The afternoon wanes and I nod off in the chair. When I wake up she is still there looking at me, cradling the empty cup to her chest. The sun is low enough in the sky that it shines through the window and blinds me for a moment. Her hair lights up like flame.

"Are you staying the night?" I ask. She startles at the sound of my voice. I can't help but think that she was sleeping too, in her own way.

"I think so."

"Dibs on the big bedroom," I say like we used to, when we visited again as children and still fought over things like the size of our rooms. When we were small, we all slept in the big bedroom, clutching each other for comfort. The other bedrooms laid unused and dusty, my father using one on the nights he was home as an office.

She smiles at me, but it is only the upward tilt of her lips, nothing more. Her legs shift and uncross. She stands and makes her way to the kitchen. I hear the mug clatter into the sink.

My eyes slide to the seat of the chair, and to my surprise, a compact cigarette case sits. Engraved in delicate lines across the gold is a rose. Rose, my mother's name. I stand and loosen my tie, unbuttoning the top buttons of my shirt to make room for the emotions that clog my throat and make it harder to breathe.

I frown at the shelf of trinkets and keepsakes that our mother was so obsessed with above the fireplace. Some things, like the flower pressing and photograph my

father gave her on their first date, have faded with age. Others, like the snow globe we got on our first big family vacation, have not been packed and pressed and moved around enough to show their age, except for the missing dome. The true object of my fascination is the ceramic angel. Its surface is milky white and shiny, its eyes closed and hands poised in eternal prayer, wings extended as though to take flight. I can remember a time when my mother wasn't obsessed with whatever power she thought this angel granted her. A time before her mom died. Before, she had been kind and filled with an internal light that my siblings and I had always wanted to be around. She would make us sugar cookies and tuck us into bed and help us with our little kid schoolwork. She never made us grasp upwards for her hand when we were afraid, she *knew*, and her hand would already be there, warm and safe. She was everything her own mother was not, which we only found out later when our father pulled out a scrapbook and judged us old enough to understand the particular madness that my grandmother had planted into mom.

Mom's mother was a haggard old woman, crooked and yellow in a wheelchair for as long as I had been alive. There is only one memory I have of her. Gnarled hands shaking up to put a cigarette to her lips, purple rings around sunken eyes making her look like the Grim Reaper. She didn't look at me but once, when I was leaving her house, arms crossed and eyes darting towards my siblings. She had laughed at me. Her teeth were almost black, and her gums were reaching to reclaim them, but she laughed like she was young and had her whole life ahead of her in that scratchy red voice of hers.

I don't think she ever had anything in front of her, my grandmother, and she didn't want to leave anything behind either. My dad told me she took my mom from

Texas when my mom was only thirteen, running from her husband or debt or just the state. Running is a relative term, too. She was wheelchair-bound even then at thirty, and my mom only told my dad in fits and bursts that her dad did it, that he was a bad man, and that she was glad to be out of Texas.

My dad met my mom in the grocery store right in front of the soup aisle. He said she was bone-thin, shaking like a leaf, and smiling like she didn't have a care in the world. She told him then, laughing in between sentences, that her mother needed help and pointed back into the aisle, where her mother was crawling after a few cans of soup, cussing around a lit cigarette. He helped grab the soup while she lifted her mother back into the wheelchair and asked her out on a date in the checkout line.

The rest was history, he liked to say, but that wasn't where the story ends. The rest came after we had already left the house, left her behind, and the girl he met in the soup aisle was gone.

He learned she had taken care of her mother her whole life and was happy to continue doing so until one of them died. He learned that she had become so codependent that she didn't realize her mother never called her by her name, only shouting at her 'light!' before pointing to a cigarette in her mouth. He learned she wanted to take music classes at the community college but was too poor or too afraid to even apply. After months of asking and offering to pay her way and offering to help her mother while she was in class, she agreed.

It was like wiping dirt off a windowpane.

When she was away from her mother, she shone and glistened. She laughed and there was only a little guilt behind her eyes. She went on dates and saw good movies and found music she loved to listen to and loved

to perform. My dad brought her out into the sun, and she realized she could not go back or risk giving herself up again, so when he proposed after she finished school she said yes. She moved away from the house with her mother screaming in her ear.

It was only a year later when Eliza was born, and my mom did not go back to that house until I was born five years later, to let her mother meet her grandchildren.

After that, she was drawn in again, but we kept her away as much as we could with our little child-hands and scraped knees and my dad with his warm hugs and deep laugh. My dad refused to let her move back, or even make weekly visits until Grayson was born. I was three almost four when I remember her cackling her goodbye at us from her stained and smelly wheelchair.

She died when I was ten or so, leaving nothing behind in her self-immolation besides a burnt-out husk of a house and the angel, resting neatly on the sidewalk facing the bones of the foundation. The firemen said the cause of the fire was a cigarette that had tumbled from the woman's hands and caught the curtains, that she was already dead, that she had probably passed in her sleep. My mother got this frown on her face, though, and I think she knew that woman would never go unless she went by her own hands because she had said that so many years before when she dragged my mom, thirteen and crying, into a truck and away from Texas.

She willed the angel to mom, that being the only thing left to will. After that, progressively, mom became a woman obsessed. She paid no mind to her children or her husband. She began to smoke the brand of cigarettes that her mother loved, "to feel closer to her." We knew there was something else though. Me and Grayson, especially. Dad was always at work and Eliza was a teenager at that point, often out of the house and glad to be away. We couldn't blame her of course. Who would?

Neither of them saw the way mom would grab the angel and cradle it like it was her own child. She would whisper and croon into its ear words we weren't allowed to hear.

Sometimes in the quiet moments between midnight and the morning, I would come downstairs to see her in her chair by the window, flicking the case open by the moonlight just to stare at the cigarettes inside. It didn't look wrong from a distance or if you were squinting, but the case wasn't gold. It was charred metal that had warped and dented and had only been partially fixed and then smothered with gold leaf and then inexpertly traced into. It was her mother's old case that her father had gifted her. Somewhere under all that leaf, there were her mother's initials, engraved.

It was all twisted up and ugly. But looking at it from the outside you wouldn't know it, all you could see was the rose.

Grayson and I would be the only ones privy to her particular brand of madness. At first, it wasn't so bad. She would forget little things. School projects or laundry. Then she might forget to greet us in the morning as we passed by her favorite armchair by the window, her eyes glazed over with thoughts we didn't have the capability to place. A small fire on the stove had to be put out when Eliza had come home to find me and Grayson in a corner, sobbing while clutching on to each other as our mother stood over us screaming that this was for the best. That we would be clean. That we could see her mother again. After that, our dad made a habit of picking dinner up on the way home.

The night before dad decided to take us away from the person mom had become was the night that probably killed my brother and my father down the line.

We don't know where mom was before she came home, only that she came home screaming. Grayson,

Eliza, and I were huddled together on the bed in the big bedroom that we shared on most nights, the worst nights, hoping in the way children do that the safety of our blanket would protect us. We heard crashing and glass breaking, which I later found out was the window overlooking the porch by the armchair and the snow globe of Paris that my mom had had since she was a little girl. After that, things were quiet downstairs. Half an hour, maybe longer, passed before we heard a wail carrying up the stairs. It made me want to crawl out of my skin, and it was at that point that Eliza began to cry. Grayson, shaking with what he had done, crawled off the bed and pulled the angel out from its hiding place in a box on the floor.

“I wanted to save her,” he whispered. I might have yelled at him had I not thought about doing the same thing. Next to me Eliza had pulled her face into a painful frown that meant she had thought it too.

I took the angel in my arms and Grayson and Eliza followed me out onto the stairs. Eliza reached out to me, her fingers ghosting along the back of my sleepshirt, but not holding me back.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped at the threshold between the living room and the hallway. Mom stood over the mantle, chest heaving with sobs and shaky hands ghosting over the spot where the angel had been. The glass on the floor shone in the moonlight, and I could see the pressed flower and picture laying strewn about on the floor. The night before, we could see her cradling the angel on the porch, the starlight combining with the streetlamps to make her hair glow. She had whispered to it and screamed at it. It was irreplaceable to her, precious, and *missing*. Her nails dug furiously into her scalp as she moved to root ruthlessly through the living room. Blankets and throw pillows were tossed aside in her frenzy. Breathless and pitiful gasps rose up

from her throat. The living room was left in shambles with wild sweeps of her arms.

“Mom?” I was almost too afraid to speak. The word came out of my closing throat like a death sentence. I thought she would tear me apart with her teeth like a lion. She might have, had she not seen the angel clutched in my grubby fingers, my hands covering the blank eyes.

Her face contorted, eyebrows raising and mouth opening into a soundless yawn of fury, eyes bright with tears and bloodshot from where she screamed so hard her blood vessels burst. I placed the angel on the floor, facing her, hoping its forever-prayer would save me. I backed away as slowly as I dared and hurried up the stairs into the waiting arms of my siblings when she made no move to stop me. She pounded forward once I was gone, and we could hear her drop to the floor to meet it.

“My baby, *my baby*,” she whispered frantically. I couldn’t remember the last time she had held me like that, rocked me back and forth, humming a nonsense tune so I could feel the vibrations in her chest.

When dad came home the next morning from a business trip, us sitting on the steps and our mother nowhere to be seen, he dropped his suitcase with a bone-deep sigh. It sounded painful. He looked to the living room, without a whisper taking in the broken glass and the torn cushions, then he turned to us and asked us very quietly to go pack our things into what bags we had.

From that point on we lived with dad in a small apartment that he managed to finagle from his work. A senior bonus, he said. We didn’t know enough to question whether or not that was true. Now I think he might have had help from his parents, who disapproved of our general existence and especially of our mother, but couldn’t help feeling sorry for their only son.

Years passed and we visited mom occasionally, always under dad's supervision. He didn't let her out of his sight for as long as we were there. We were told to stop sleeping in the same bedroom.

There were some good days. Some days where she would offer to take us to the park, where we could roll up our pants and dip our legs in the fountain. Other days we could hear her screaming when we reached the porch, and we all turned around and got in the car again.

When I was twenty, dad died of a heart attack while driving home from work. Eliza told us not to blame ourselves, but I know Grayson did, and I know I hold a fair bit of guilt this many years later. The stress of managing three children he previously only had to interact with on holidays. The stress of working so much to pay for the house and the apartment and the children and my mom. Being able to share none of his burden because we were all looking to him to share ours. Ultimately, that's what killed him.

We moved out of the apartment after that, Grayson crashing with a friend's family because neither Eliza or I made enough money to pay for anything more than the cost of our tuition, and even then Eliza was swimming in debt and I was drowning in it. Grayson left a note when he killed himself, telling us it wasn't our fault, but he could feel the crazy crawling at his brain. He said that he wanted to see Dad again, and that we were welcome to join him. We asked his friend if he had seen any of these signs in Grayson and his friend said Grayson had moved out a week after moving in. No one knew where he went, only that he showed up to Eliza's apartment for dinner every night and never said anything was wrong.

Grayson's death, his suicide, even now gives me this constant feeling of heartburn deep in my chest where I can't touch it or get burned. I caught Eliza looking at me a lot out of the corner of her eye today, and I can't help

but think she was reminded of Grayson. We always looked so similar.

The mantle now has warped with age, even though the snow globe and pressing are still there. I heft the angel in my hand. It feels heavier than it should. I look up the stairs to where Eliza disappeared and go outside, carrying the angel in the crook of my elbow. The sun has set enough to where the world is bathed in a soft blue glow, the moon appearing as a shade in the sky above. I look up to our childhood bedroom window to find Eliza staring at me, an empty look of sadness on her face. Mine probably wears the same expression. I weigh the angel in my grip one more time, sending a prayer of my own for my family, brought down by this angel and what it meant to my mother. Then I send it flying into the brick wall of the house where it shatters into dust and a million tiny white pieces. The grass at the base of the house is dry and snaps under the weight of the angel dust falling over it. I think, oddly, that it looks like snow from a snow globe, or maybe ash that's burned too hot and has faded into nothing. The action brings me no relief. Not in any way that matters. I go inside, back to the chair and the case and toss the case into the fireplace. I light a match and watch with a smile on my face as the gold leaf pools off, and the case warps and shrivels and drips over the coals. I have to relight the fire with a whole case of matches before the metal of the case has completely smeared and caked in clumps at the bottom of the fireplace. I stand from where I had been sitting, mesmerized, and go up the stairs, taking off the stiff jacket and tossing the tie in the garbage on my way up.

Roadkill

Elizabeth Roth

My girlfriend says that armadillos frighten her. The potential for leprosy aside, their hugeness. The way they take up the whole road until they are a smear on the side of it. Their eyes beady, fingers too-defined. Tails only dexterous enough that they barely pass as another appendage rather than a skinned protrusion of the spinal cord.

I have never made roadkill of an armadillo, but the road to my house has many tanned skins of them, picked over and wormy. The Tennessee fields crawl with dry mealy critters. Vultures and turkeys hungry companions to the bodies on the road. I wonder what it must be like. To hit an armadillo. Wheel cresting over and collapsing on the body of an animal that neither of you noted the existence of before your wheel was a half-centimeter away from its jutting bones. It's curious to me that cars seem to hit the armadillo exactly in the middle, where its eyes can pop out and its little teeth can hang white to the sky. Feet splayed outwards while its guts spray around it in an impressionist painting. After the husks have been carried away by whatever animal or wind chose to take them, the armadillos leave black smudges on the asphalt. Weeks of on-and-off rain erase these traces too, and there's nothing left until another gets hit.

When I was first starting to drive I thought I ran over a bunny, once. I screamed the way home and checked for a smear the next day. Finding none, I am choosing to believe the bunny was too fast, faster than an armadillo would be, at least. After running over several cans, a rubber carcass of a tire, and too many speed bumps to count, I'm not sure you can take just one pass at an armadillo. You must have to get it at least with both wheels. Two passes to make a pancake. Straight shot.

What would my girlfriend say if I told her I also took several passes at my arms to make them feel like the armadillos? If I said I had a list of excuses lined up through adolescence to make up for the damage my fingers wrought? Would she treat them as if they were wormy leprosy bodies on the side of the road?

No, probably not.

She would probably insist that I put lotion on them. Lay them to rest under sleeves on dry days to shelter them from the dry air. Knead restorative lotion into them once in the morning and once at night. She would give me a long hug on days when the skin was zebra-striped with red, and a long hug on days when it wasn't. She would hold my hands to keep them from scratching and picking at the skin that has long since crusted over and healed.

But she has no idea that I have treated my arms like too many roadkill armadillos. I toss them to the side of the road with skid marks and a splat of a body. Feeling is flattened. My eyes turn upwards and I bare my little white teeth to the sky.

Mr. Potato Head

Morgan Shane

Hearing the heightening of someone's voice
The emotionless face smiling, condescendingly
Sometimes not even speaking to me about my diagnosis.
Looking over my shoulder to my parents
Because you value a "normal" person's opinion more
So wrapped up in stereotypes
Perpetuated by Rain Man and What's Eating Gilbert
Grape
All wearing my disability as a costume
Being able to take it off when the day at set ended
Being able to rearrange themselves to act like me for
money
You see them do that, and think I can do the same
Just because I talk like you and act like you
They get applauded and praised for my traits
While I get judged and dehumanized
Taking me apart and rearranging my being to fit your
expectations
Saying disability like it's a dirty word
Doing everything you can to avoid saying Autistic
The second I say two words, my entire being changes in
your eyes

I transform from an adult to a child almost instantly
Frantically rearranging me
Desperate to feel comfortable
Rearranging the children yet to come
Not letting me donate eggs because the last thing we
would want is anyone else like me
Donating time, energy, and money to swindlers' "cures"
Not vaccinating your kids, making them risk their safety
for your hate
Rearranging everybody like me to be a burden
The cause of countless failed marriages
"I work faster than cancer, diabetes, and pediatric AIDS
combined"
All to be told "You don't look autistic"
Trying to distance me from my brainwork
All the while excluding me from your reindeer games
Because I'm your Mr. Potato Head doll
Eye contact, quiet hands, giving life to my voice, liking
things the way you do,
Mix and match, take your pick, my identity is yours to
toy with

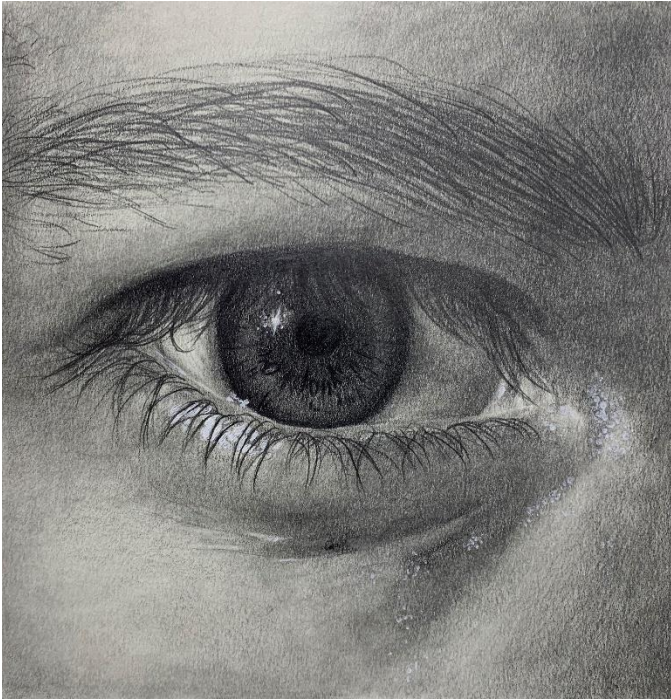
Lost on Different Paths

Kayla Spears

My twin spends our final day of teenhood
in a cloudy Cincinnati apartment,
with oily coworkers she doesn't like
and a boyfriend who squeezes her thigh,
doing shots of fireball and vodka
burning her throat

I spend our final day of teenhood
alone in my bedroom at 10 pm
watching *Law & Order* with a glass
of water and a splash of existential crisis
Blank-faced as I watch the badass cop
with a leather jacket and bad boy haircut
turn away a man without stability

I wonder if I should stay awake until midnight
or sleep through my christening of adulthood
My friend and pet rat sleep walls away
while I strum the Hank Williams' tune
let's turn back the years and go back to yesterday
but my audience is in dirty Cincinnati,
slurring her own name



Hannah Rogers

Say Eye

Grecian Dysphoria

Sarah Stevens

My body is a temple to false gods:
A heart that breathes
Lungs that beat
My eyes are my prophecies and
Like the Sibyl
I pay for looking inward
When I look outward --
My skin crawls off my shoulders
When I look in the mirror.
Some monster has taken my shape --
Some God has given me
A distorted form --
I started out flesh and ended up feathers
Some would say that's better
But is it, really
If I am Phaeton, too close to the sky
If I am Icarus, whose feathers are false
If I am a creature who loves the sea
And the smell of earthy rain
And the clay that I was made of?

My body is a temple to false gods
But I am my own idol
And I can desecrate my temple
However I want.
Knowing this,
and myself,
And the world,
I take Atlas by the throat

Watch the globe tip from his hands
And take it upon myself
To catch it.
It's no more than a warm palmful
Compared to me.
I take myself
and my world
and shape them
With hands that no longer shake.

Hamilton-Middletown Pike

Miriam Story

Uncle Dan was one of the last men to smoke a
tobacco pipe
Aunt Dorothy, one of the last women to cook on a
wood stove
He hissed and puffed and coughed and then
resumed his thousand-yard stare while
Her melodic whistle cut through the indoor smog,
as she peeled potatoes at the sink

Every once in a while, I chanced a glance at Nana
Who was never able to fake a smile
And to the dog that only moved
When I wasn't around

Fried potatoes and biscuits and gravy
Lined up in mismatched dishes, floral Corelle
On a plastic table cloth that matched my jeans
And when Uncle Dan prayed, I never closed my
eyes all the way

In the belly of the three-story house, we ate
Dinner that they called supper
And talked about God and Sunday service like a
Norman Rockwell family
That looked like American Gothic

Decomposition

Daniel Ungs

I see a man some nights. He has a doll-like stiffness to him. Joints move in a slow, methodical manner, similar to a puppet. Dark liquid leaks from his scalp and his nose has shifted to the left side of his bruised face.

There's a slimy abyss where his teeth once sat. His right eye is swollen shut, but the left one is open; it's Arctic blue. The veiny pupil is submerged in dark red liquid, similar to the top of his slim head. When he hovers over my bed or lingers in the corner of my room, I roll over and close my eyes. Tightness within my eyelids spreads through the rest of my reddened face. I know he can hear my raspy breaths. A smell that can only be described as the concoction of natural death and rubbing alcohol wanders closer by the second. Hushed murmurs – like static in a storm – tickles the outside of my earlobe. Tossing the covers from my shaky body, I flick on a bedside lamp preparing to face the mangled being – I'm alone.

His presence has become more prominent as time has gone on. I don't remember when I first saw him, nor can I recall what he first looked like. But I do know that he's become less recognizable with time. Less human. He's now an abstract rendition of the boney silhouette I saw at first. Some nights, I lie awake. Waiting. Watching a spider weave an intricate web.

“I had that dream again.” I say, staring into my own reflection, while Ann – my girlfriend of three years – pokes around her mouth with a vibrating toothbrush.

“Which one?” She asks over the mechanical whirring. White foam drips from her chapped lips.

“The one I told you about before. About the man. The one in my room.” I don't know how to explain to her

that these aren't just recurring dreams. My own lucidity is never in question when I feel his butchered teeth behind my resting ears. "It just, feels so real. Like I'm awake. I don't know how to explain it. I don't know." She stares blankly into the mirror before exiling a mouthful of bubbly paste into the ceramic sink.

"Maybe you should see someone, Walker."

Swallowed by an oversized Kate Bush t-shirt, Ann turns towards me and pats my shoulder. Her messy brown bun bobs atop her head with each confident step as she heads into the bedroom. I'm left with my own ugly reflection. Purple coloration under my eyelid is an unwanted gift from sleepless nights. Deep in my pupil, I feel like I can see him dancing.

The next morning while pouring herself a cup of tea, Ann asks if I had any weird dreams. I told her no. She sits beside me on the lime green sofa before placing the steaming mug atop a pink coaster.

"Are you scared? When you have the dream, I mean. The one you told me about yesterday." Her sudden interest in a conversation we had the evening before startles me. I hesitate before answering, mainly because I've never really discussed the details out loud before.

"I guess so." She watches me intently as I sit up, "There's just this weird, like, familiarity with this man – this figure. The guy in the dream. And it doesn't feel like a dream, it feels like I'm wide awake when he's there. I feel like I could reach out and touch him, but I can't. I'm too scared to move. My body locks up and I wait for him to grab me, but he never does. Or he hasn't yet. I don't really know if he will." Avoiding eye contact and physical touch during moments of vulnerability has been a consistent trait of mine since I can remember. Soft, gentle fingers caress my own hard, callused ones. I pull back. Ann tries to explain my fears away with

suggestions of sleep paralysis or subconscious anxiety. Calming wind from a rickety ceiling fan nuzzles my agitated nose. I zone out as she explains one of her own dreams.

On the drive back to my own apartment, I look over at other drivers and try to picture his rigid face. But I can't. I know the major details, like the coldness in his sunken pupil and the unevenness of his jagged shoulders – but the whole picture never seems to come together. It's like when I'm thinking of a word and it's on the tip of my aching tongue, but it's locked away elsewhere. Trapped in a box, padlocked in the back of my wrinkled brain. Monotonous buzzing pulls me out of the controlling trance just as I reach a yellow – now red – light. Mom's photograph displayed on the screen of my cracked iPhone, I answer. Without introduction, she immediately goes on a rant about my brother's behavior. Eyes locked on the road, I watch as drops of rain fall from the overcast sky and splatter onto the dirty, tinted windshield. At the end of the call, she invites Ann and I over for dinner, I tell her we can make it tomorrow as I put the car in park.

Rain pattering against my window soothes me into that awkward juxtaposition of dream and life. Just as I feel fuzzy, warm darkness begin to massage my strained eyelids, I hear it. A faint creaking rattles my subconscious. Frozen in place, I wait for more movement. Heavy silence crushes my chest. The bedroom door barely opens, then quietly shuts. Slow, heavy footsteps make their way from the entrance to the center of my room. Sweating profusely from the heat of the faintly stained comforter, I tremble. Enough light seeps in from below the door to make out the bottom of rotting feet floating above the carpet. Liquid oozes from his chipped toenails and drips onto the floor. The sound

of wood giving way under his levitating torso is unnatural. Bones scraping against bones, he moves closer. I fight the intoxicating smell with all my strength and shake free.

A dusty, brown basketball pushes through a torn, faded net. I toss the ball back to Alex, my younger brother. Long curly hair bounces against his pale forehead with each dribble. The cool autumn breeze alters the shot, causing the ball to ricochet off the rim and roll into an overgrown field. I go to retrieve it. Dead, yellow grass crunches under my scuffed white Reeboks. Small bugs scurry away. A large beetle sits arrogantly atop the disheveled ball. I kick at the insect a few times before bending over to grab the basketball. I stand frozen, engulfed by the stillness of nature. I used to run through the tall green grass in the summer with my old dog Bingo – he's buried here, somewhere. “What are you doing?” Alex's impatient voice grabs me by the collar and pulls me from the trance, “Just grab the ball, you're gonna have spiders crawling all over you.”

“Where'd we bury Bingo? It was out here right?” I project the ball into my brother's chest with a sharp, underhand shovel pass.

“I don't know. Ask Mom.” Alex takes some getting used to. When we haven't spoken in a while, he's cold and distant. Usually after a few hours he warms up. He's gotten into the habit of skipping school, Mom wants me to talk to him. I'm not sure if I'll be any help.

“You don't really remember Bingo, do you?” I step back onto the concrete and Alex passes the ball. I brick the shot.

“I remember him, he was mean.” There's an agitated sharpness in his blue eyes when I disagree with his comment, “He wasn't mean to you cause he liked you. You knew him longer. He was old and mean when I

knew him, he bit my hand.” I laugh, but his icy exterior remains intact. We talk until grey clouds contort into covered stars. My mind remains in the field.

Spread around an old spruce wood table, Mom, Alex, and I wait for Ann to arrive. When she does, I go outside to greet her. The air has turned brisk and stale. Crescent moon hides behind ashy clouds. Ann's short blue dress – decorated by a yellow floral pattern – comes down just enough to reveal a hardly noticeable pink birthmark below her collarbone, I always think it's a bruise. She stands on the tip of her toes in order to wrap her gentle arms around my goosebump covered neck.

Dinner goes well. There was this immovable awkwardness that lingered around for longer than welcome. Alex and I talked mostly about basketball, while Ann and Mom discussed work. Ann was just hired as a receptionist for some local therapist; Mom jokes that she needs to get me a job.

“Bingo is out in that field right? That's where we buried him?” Alex slowly nods his head while waiting for Mom's confirmation.

“I think so.” She looks into the air with a finger over her mouth while chewing, “I can't remember if we buried him in the field or in the yard. I think the field. You probably would know better than I though.” Ann asks for a refresher on what kind of dog he was. Alex says a mean one, I say a boxer mix. Mom explains to Ann that Bingo was in a lot of pain during his last few years and became cranky when he was sore. She went on to mention – in detail – the puffy tumors that clung to his leg, and the unforgettable pus that oozed from them. Dinner is over.

The voices of Mike Breen and Reggie Miller can be heard from the television while we sit on the floor playing Trivial Pursuit. Contrasted by the yellow walls, a

black picture frame sits proudly atop a white mantle. Younger me in a rain jacket can be seen standing on the back of a caboose. Red and puffy is my face. Mom says I was extra whiny that day. Obviously, I don't remember. In the top right corner, a thin veiny hand can be seen reaching towards me. It belongs to Dad. He walked out on us when I entered middle school. The day that he left, a relieving calm washed over me. His cold, arrogant eyes could no longer pierce my neglected skin. I didn't have to fear the smell of lingering booze on his rancid breath or the sound of heavy work boots in the narrow hallway. This weight was lifted. If I passed him on the street today, I wouldn't bat an eye. Maybe I wouldn't even recognize him.

Warm water embraces my face. I pick at scabs poking through the scruff on my chin before exiting a claustrophobic bathroom decorated with childhood artwork. Passing my childhood bedroom, I'm consumed by nostalgia of my youth. I flick on the light to reveal barren walls, broken cobwebs, and an unmade bed. Urine stains coat the dusty mattress. When I leave the room and reenter the winding maze of peeling wallpaper, I become nauseous. That aching in my lungs and trembling in my legs reappears. I inhale dust as I become a suffering mouth breather. Flailing hands – broken at the wrist – reach out from around the corner. Skin is peeled back revealing arteries, bones, and larva. Uneven shoulders writhe out from behind the wall. The sunken head of The Carcass sits between the jagged edges. A toothless smile reveals a rotting tongue split down the left side. I close my eyes. Tight. Waiting for this to end, and it does. When I regain awareness, the being is gone. The rest of the night is spent in the living room. My mom tells a story she views as hysterical about a stoned coworker. I'm distant.

Later that night I have a terrible dream – one that I do remember, and will remember. A pool of sweat canvasses my body. I rummage through a collection of clear bottles before ultimately deciding on a glass of water. Sitting at a marble counter, I wipe away a layer of dust. In the dream, I was in the field. At first the grass was tall and green. Small rodents scurried over my bare toes and vibrant birds flew past my head. A large arachnid climbed up my leg before I knocked it away. The field was endless, but I felt trapped. Boxed in. Some unseeable force seemed to be squeezing my body. The color slowly began to fade. Flowers wilted. Clouds drifted. Tiny mammals sunk into the dying Earth. The grey sky projected a red haze that burned my eyes. Dirt began to overturn. Sinking into the wretched soil, I struggled to stay conscious. Air eluded me. Moldy bones crawled from beneath the mud and poked jagged holes in my skin. I could see them crawling around like maggots in a fresh corpse. I was underground. Pressure from Earth's mass crushed me. The stringy veins in the white of my eyes bulged and burst. The blood from my eyes leaked through the soil and flooded the field. Clawing my way to the top, I felt a release. There he was. His face was the most human it's ever been and I sensed a familiarity in his disapproving eyes. The Carcass then started the process of decomposition once again and I felt the personification of my own fear. This is when I woke up.

Ann tries to hook me up with the therapist she just started working for, “You should make an appointment with Rachel, I think she's really nice. Maybe you can get a free session through me.” I’m silent. “Listen Walker, I know you're not someone who likes being open with mental health and trauma -”

“What are you talking about?” Before she can maneuver around the awkwardness of confrontation, I interject.

“I just – I’m worried about you. Your mother is worried about you,” She runs her hand through my greasy hair. Anger building, I shake my head violently and pull away, “At dinner the other night she asked me if you were doing drugs, and of course I told her no because I don’t think that you -”

“Think? You don’t think?”

She inhales, closes her eyes, and opens them before breathing out, “I know you’re not doing drugs, I mean I hope you’re still taking those antidepressants, but I know you’re not doing drugs, Walker. I misspoke.” A dangerous statement seems to be sitting on the tip of her tongue, hanging there for dear life, “You just look like you haven’t been sleeping, and you keep telling me about these weird dreams, I just really want to know that you’re okay. So does your family, of course.” Her hand once again finds a way to smother mine, I pull away in frustration.

Her frail body rests beside my own in the dark room. I think it’s around two in the morning. Yelling from the apartment next to mine is the only sound present in the still night. Shaking the static from my sore legs and tripping over a singular dumbbell, I waddle into the bathroom. My head is in that state where eyes are droopy and peripheral vision is hazy, but I just can’t sleep. I search for an orange bottle that still holds a small white tablet. Shaking them one by one, I hear nothing. The trash can begins to overflow with pitched bottles. The faint rattling sound of a singular pill finally calms my nerves. But as I tear into the cap, I’m shocked to find nothing inside. Astounded, I shake it again. This time, the deafening sound of hundreds of tiny capsules

bouncing around inside the confined space echoes through the room. A dizzying trance swallows my tweaking body and I crumble into a spiderweb filled corner.

Two loud thwacking sounds reverberate through the apartment. A third one follows seconds later, my heart drops. They're coming from the bedroom. Scrambling through the doorway, the distance between the conjoined rooms seems to elongate. My legs grow tired as I try to break the destructive cycle, I eventually do. Ann sits up in bed. Her features are distorted. Traits identical to those of The Carcass have replaced her own unique ones that I've fallen in love with. I open my mouth to scream, but a dryness in my constricting throat prevents any sound from escaping.

I'm able to make out the outline of Ann's rounded cheekbones once my eyes adjust to the darkness. Small brown freckles dance across her sleeping nose. Until the sun comes up, I watch over her. Insects bounce against the closed window. A pumpkin scented candle she lit the night before still hangs in the air and plucks at my nostrils. When she finally wakes up and wraps her arms around me, I pretend to be asleep. Over a cup of coffee and a cream-cheese bagel, I ask for Rachel's number.

The appointment goes well; we talk mainly about Ann. A square black and white photograph trapped in a pastel blue frame controls my attention for the most part. Likely noticing my admiration of the retro image, Rachel explains that it was a picture of her and her father before he passed away. Her face is like a copy-and-paste version of his. I thought about my own father, and how Alex shared his likeness – from what I can recall. She concludes the hour-long session with a short melodramatic lecture about the expression of grief.

Mom invites me over for dinner. Erratic rain showers dampen my mood during the drive. A funnel of twisted trees wraps around the one lane backroad and scratches the roof of my car. Damage to the vehicle itself doesn't concern me, but the agitating scraping sound sure as hell does. Usually dust pollutes the open air when I pull into the gravel driveway, but it's been so wet. So dreary. So grey.

Excusing myself from dinner, I enter the bathroom in search of tranquility. A handful of ibuprofen and a face full of warm water calms my nerves for the time being. Once again, I find myself entranced by the memories of my former bedroom. I don't bother to flip on the light, bleak sun beams leak in through the window. The bedroom never really had a consistent layout – I was always reorganizing. The bed has been in about the same spot since middle school, but an excess of used furniture and posters representing contradicting eras define the space I once called my own. Brown stains freckle the floor. Even now, I feel like I can still hear the shouting matches between my parents in the room over. Rebellious rap music covered the sound of my disheveled father limping down the hallway.

The yellow field traps me. Rain has stopped for the time being, the ground is still soft and wet. Specks of brown mud damage the exterior of my white shoes, but I continue towards the tree line. During the hike, I glance over my shoulder and watch as the farmhouse fades into the horizon. Under a large naked tree, I sit. An uncomfortable wetness develops on my backside. The bottoms of my shoes are now caked in mud, and even the cuffs of my blue jeans have collected a layer of sticky dirt. I have the urge to bury my hands in the soil and dig. I resist.

Time eludes me. The sun is gone. The moon shines bright. A large brown spider creeps onto my lap, I jump into the air and slap my thighs. I pace around, cursing to myself. Shivering from the cold. Thinking of the times I spent in both the childhood home, desecrated now by bad memory, and the open field.

Back of my sweater sliding down a different tree, I sit and take in the stillness of the night. That same wretched spider crawls around about a yard away. On the horizon, I see someone walking towards me across the field. I assume it's Alex, until I notice the mangled stature. Coiling up above his head, shoulder blades protrude into the sky like gargoyle wings. Floating, The Carcass makes his way towards me at a snail's pace. The yellow grass below his feet blackens then sinks into the soil. He's too far for me to acknowledge the stony eyes or the shifted jaw. The bludgeoned cheek or the spirited odor. Drowning in the mud, I scream. I yell. Tonal ringing reverberates through the field as he stumbles towards me. I accept the grasping of the Earth and allow it to pull me beneath the surface. Digging deeper and deeper, I find myself trapped in a tomb of bones. Suddenly, it's over. I'm on the surface. Rain smacks against my dirty face. Still seated in the black mud, I raise my face towards the dark, wet sky.

The drive home is lonely. Lightning briefly illuminates the dull sky. Trees with jagged faces and pointed arms hide in the darkness. My apartment smells of rotten perishables. Sick to my stomach, I lug myself to bed and take two small pink tablets. The cracks in my white popcorn ceiling fade away and I'm left watching the remnants of a spider's home spin along the fan blade. I never bother to change out of my muddy clothing.

I see a man some nights. He has a doll-like stiffness to him. Covered feet smack the floor in a wild, erratic manner. Booze lingers on his swollen tongue and icy eyes peer through the crack in my bedroom door. He's thin and frail, but unafraid. Each heavy step smothers my chest. Terrified, I shake profusely beneath my neutral covers. An iron weight sits situated between my pecs. Hands tight. I wait for the knob to turn. For the stench to invade my room. For the shadow to prance across my wooden headboard. For the incoherent murmurs to dive into my open ears and pull tears from my burning eyelids. His rugged hand strokes my resting shoulder. Eyes open. Flinging the covers from my torso, I slam the iron dumbbell into his right cheek. A horrifying smacking sound bounces from wall to wall. Warm, metallic liquid spews from his crooked head and drenches my teary face. I land a second, harder blow in the same spot causing his damaged body to collapse to the formerly tan floor. I hover over him, gripping the stained dumbbell. He gasps for air through a puddle of thick wetness exuding from his concave cheek. Lifting the hefty weapon high above my throbbing head, I take one last look at the wretched being. Smugness leaks from his blue eyes and is replaced by an expression I've known far too well for far too long: fear.

The Squid and The Whale

Daniel Unga

(I) Unknown World.

The Museum of Natural History has been open since the late eighteen-hundreds. The sperm whale and giant squid exhibit was added nearly one-hundred years later in renovations, and is one of the least visited dioramas in the museum. Due to the absence of light and gloominess of the room it inhabits, many people believed the exhibit was empty - until further examination. Suddenly, the room isn't barren. Hooked tentacles. Desperate scratches. Fearful eyes. A glass barrier protects from the dangers of the open ocean.

(II) Early Childhood.

Distracted mothers parade around young children in fancy strollers. The calming sound of moving water hushes the chatter – like rain in the night. An ominous dimness – not darkness – fills the impossibly high ceiling. An orderly chaos bustles through the room full of manmade marine life models. In the back left corner. On the bottom floor. Passed toothy reef sharks and friendly sea turtles, fuzzy polar bears and giant spider crabs: the squid and the whale. Two unfairly sized monsters duel in a constricting enclosure. Their eyes seem to focus on me, the toddler in the buggy with the New York beanie. I cry. I cry so hard that mom takes me home. Back to the Park Slope brownstone. In bed, the two beasts enter my dreams and spout unintelligible nonsense.

(III) Barrier.

In 2003, The Museum of Natural History removed the glass barrier separating the squid and the whale diorama from the outside world - seemingly emphasizing the

space's ominous nature. The glass reflected all light trying to peek into the abyss. Ocean depths are open to the public now. There's no force-field protecting curious bystanders from the creatures that lurk there.

(IV) Adolescence.

Enthusiasm pilots my growing body and hurls me ahead. Abandoning that fear of stranger judgement, I'm met with chilling familiarity. Looped recordings of gentle currents whisper in my ear. Beady eyes from mounted creatures track my movement. Deja Vu. A life size blue whale diorama hangs from the roof and shadows those beneath its white belly. Someday it may fall and squish undercover tourists and bored locals into carpeted floor. Or maybe it will float away, into the sky. Over the notorious Manhattan skyscrapers. A heaviness anchors feet to the floor. A ghostly intimacy lies ahead. The squid and the whale. The pair still conjoined in a gruesome dance between life and death. Mom dangles that foolish childhood phobia over my head like blackmail. I tell her I don't remember. But I do and I feel like they remember me. The maleficent beast's one saucer eye beckons to me. Serpent-like appendages reach out, threatening to drag me into a gaping mouth.

(V) The Squid and The Whale.

Jesse Eisenberg escapes his brownstone home in the middle of Park Slope. A fear he can't explain haunts those stairs in a crowded museum. He faces it. Accepts it. Lives with it. Manifests this fear into something he can cope with, relate to. Noah Baumbach made a movie about me. Divorce isn't the root of my disdain, nor is the crumbling of my family. But that film just has to be about me - a boy afraid of the squid and the whale. If I walk up to that diorama and reach into the unknown like

Jesse Eisenberg did in 2005, I fear it might still pull me in.

(VI) Early Adulthood.

Justice isn't established through photographs. I want to go back. To New York. To the Museum of Natural History. The ocean room. The hypnotic echo that is running water and the careful cool that is gentle dimness. The squid. The whale. See them in person. I wonder if I'll still be afraid. If the two monstrous beasts will still talk to me. If fear will still linger in the corner of that room with the hungry leviathans. With the horrifying scars on gray flesh. The abysmal emptiness in dark pupils. Will I be able to fight this time? Or will I cower as I did all those years ago? Maybe I'll see the creatures as what they are – animals in need of survival. Or maybe I'll go to New York. Walk through the maze of constructed dinosaur bones. Wax historical figures. Stuffed savannah animals. Float across a sea of dangerous marine life, and wind up face-to-face with something I so reluctantly remember. Maybe I'll see it as what it is: a plastic exhibit.

A Walk to Class *On the Hill*

Maria Wells

The sidewalk is crowded today and I
am crowded too.

I decided the other day
to make sure everyone knows
they are noticed,
so I smile.

But everyone is too cool
or afraid
to look me in the eye.

I was never afraid
to swim,.

I was four the first time
I jumped in the Atlantic.
Never scared to ride roller coasters
with my hands in the sky
and so, I do
because it makes me feel
like a superhero.

Ever since I was old enough to think
there was a fear that kept me
in my basement.

My plea to mom,
*Not because the thunder
will hurt me,
but that it might make tornados.
And dad had Discovery Channel on and
I heard
that they can hurt.*

I heard
the screams of terror
in a video taken just a sidewalk over,
at The Registry.
The train that whistled as I stood
beside its tracks.

If I had seen its face
would I have been
even more scared?
Maybe not. I'll never know so why

dwell on these things.
Debris left in trees months later
and suddenly
flying doesn't sound fun anymore.
The evidence is etched in the valley
and it makes me weary

when innocent people die
an alarm inside rings,
presses, frightens my conscious
awake to remind me

everyone I pass by
on my way to class or in the store
or at work,
everyone in the future and
in my past
is a person
and they all think
like me.

About their grades or
their interview
or their baby
or their coffee is getting cold or
they feel like they're getting old and
about their boyfriend or girlfriend or
a lost love—the power
of loss keeps them
in dumbstruck wonder,
do they ever think of me?
the lost love in wonder about
what they are having for lunch
and the worker at Panda Express decides
I gotta pick up an extra shift this weekend.
And the weekend full of people
going places or
staying home.
Homes.

Destroyed.
With people inside, all with
their own dreams and hopes and fears
and just like that
gone.
there is a brokenness,
it sweeps me under its current
and holds me there.

Suddenly the ocean is too vast
to casually jump in.
It is a monster called grief
that exemplifies fear and
loosens each individual's sadness.

All of our tears just
lost in its storm,
unable to identify from the rest.
I hear the thunder again
and the crack of lightning.
Anxiety has no basement
to hide in.
Everything is lost.
And,
whatever is left
is left.



Mandy Pierson

Inscap

**If My Daughter Wants a Barbie, I Will Only See
Parts**

Gabby Wilson

arlis perry was found in a church
unveiled from the waist down,
an ice pick lodged in its own demised crack in her
skull with
a three-foot candle shoved up her altar
another placed in the middle of her bosom
police thought it was a hate crime, a cult,
people who put cow heads on and watch gnat's
fester
but he was a lone empty bourbon bottle of a man
a boy playing a man in his daddy's old boots kind
of man

a man who hates god
a man who hates women
a man who hates god and women and himself
the holy trinity

i haven't been to church since i prayed my last hail
mary on a rosary
my nana swears got blessed by the pope
after the priest said
amen
love thy neighbor
we welcome you with open arms
please, for the love of god, stop
they should stop comparing the wine to blood

in 1972 a dog brought its owner a decaying arm
from what was supposed to be a pee break during
their
morning walk
the arm belonged to sweet sixteen jeannette
depalma
who was found in the woods near a cliff
traces of handprints still bruised on her neck
with branches and leaves swarmed around her
that the police saw crosses, satanic symbols, and
mulched tongues in
police thought it was a hate crime, a cult,
people who danced in naked circles with snake
tongues, transfixed by fire

but jeannette's story has no ending, yet
no one has ever been able to fill those handprints
and her mother sits patiently by the window wishing
for a sighting
of her daughter's stark middle part
her black ink hair dripping onto the sidewalk
or that one day she'll shake someone's hand and
feel déjà vu
feel her daughter in their palm and never stop
shaking
she is still just a whisper in the night waiting to be
put to rest
when i go on walks, i wear bright colors
an exotic bird attempting another day of living
fiddling my canary yellow whistle between shallow
breaths and thimble fingertips
silent, listening, always
hugging my belongings to me

try to walk like a man, present myself as a standing
bear with a cub nearby
scared of local birdwatchers and their binoculars
that never miss the
fluttering of wings
i have no song, i do not sing

michelle martinko was a supposed beauty queen
too in love with pink to ever be seen as a stick of
dynamite
but when she tried fighting off her killer so hard that
he
ended up injuring himself, she only then was seen
as explosive
she was stabbed 29 times in her parent's car in a
mall parking lot in brisk 1979
and the man that tried to cradle her afterwards
wasn't found until 40 years later
with a turkey neck and eyes that drooped heavily of
senility
spitting *not guilty*
onto michelle's mother's face as she sat patiently,
observantly
as the jury pounded *guilty* into his healed stab
wound

he had a family, a wife
daughters
i wonder if he kissed them with gasoline lips or if
they always feared him
but never knew why
if his wife would attempt to finger outline his scar
too scared to ask how he got it

michelle's boyfriend never fully recovered from
losing her,
eyes rolling back when he sees a woman in a black
dress that
says *hello* in too familiar of a drawl
maybe he would've married her, had children
daughters
if only she had been seen as goddamn dynamite

i want to be dynamite
a woman that bites
a girl that runs away
i am these women
but they are not me
why do we never get to stay whole?

Tropical Punch Lip Smacker (2008)

Gabby Wilson

nostalgia is the melancholia sweet purr of the
roaming stray cat lingering by my window
vaguely nameless, breakfast at tiffany's attachment,
calling me *mother*
and seeing if i'll turn around
i waltz towards her, elongating fingers meeting her
sandpaper kisses
my eyelashes landing lazily on the high beams of
my cheeks,

i long for the bubblegum pink affairs
of childhood bedrooms hiccupping over the
bubbling flashes of lively witch cackle
and pig snort laughter, popcorn kernels wedged in
flashy braces, buttered fingertips
poking at *you're so pretty* and *god, i wish i was you*

we would sticky lip gloss kiss our celebrity crushes
pictures from ripped page magazines
drool over the boy from fifth period with sea glass
eyes, gush over the hands
of the boy with a crooked smile
giddy and tween drunk on the idea of soulmates,
forever, dating

a rom com would be playing, maybe jennifer
aniston or julia roberts
possibly matthew mcconaughey or hugh grant
and we'd study their mannerisms

how to flip your hair just right, pout your lips
perfectly, sway your hips hypnotizingly
imagining ourselves older, past wearing animal
print pajamas, beyond Coca-Cola Lip Smackers

fashion shows that involved the whole closet on the
floor,
stuffing training bras, imagining
poking at undeveloped skin, giggling at each other,
small hands touching the parts of ourselves we
don't know we'll soon hate

hairbrush singing off key
running running running around
energy that never settles, only falling asleep when
an adult warns us
that it's 2am and we are so loud,
too loud

how ritualistic, ceremonial
those sleepovers were
we were small goddesses worshipping each other
in love with love, star-eyed and beautiful
weren't we so beautiful?
blanketed in our naivety, curiosity, undeniably
young
mystifyingly happy
i wish this for my daughter, daughters
whomever i turn around to when i hear *mother*

blinking back at this night sky of a creature,
mewling in remembrance

i feed her, scratch her cozily behind the ears
and rubber band snap myself back into the now
the younger, crooked teeth wire glasses girl of me
just a cloud in the chill summer night

leaving my late-night visitor by the open window
i wrap myself in leopard print pajamas
apply my tropical punch Lip Smacker liberally
feeling naïve, experienced
childish, adult
putting on a rom com
maybe jennifer aniston, possibly hugh grant
wondering who will call me *mother*
wondering why those sleepovers ever had to end

“For Papa”

Adam Woodward

“Grey Hair is a crown of splendor:
It is attained in the way of righteousness”
- Proverbs 16:31

He lay in his dark room alone.
My mother said he called for me.
He seemed to me a wise, old mage -
someone who had slipped through time’s cracks
to somehow end up in my life.
My mom couldn’t remember when
his hair wasn’t silvery grey.
His pigment left in his twenties
before any of us were born.
I remember hearing him
confess to my grandmother,
“I know you’re supposed to love all
your children the same, but I can’t -
I love Adam the most.”
He would often call me his child
although I wasn’t -
not biologically.
I went to see him and he told
me he wanted to see Adam.
He no longer recognized me,
even though he remembered me.
He told me he wanted to see,
“Little Adam,” me as a child.
When I became a teenager,
I paid less mind to his wisdom.
I needed to “forge my own path.”
All that meant was chase after girls

and act irresponsibly.
My credit score plummeted -
I was placed under arrest twice.
He once told my future wife,
“Of all my kids and grandkids,
Adam disappoints me the most.”
He became ill on Thanksgiving
shortly after a falling out.
I told him that he was greedy.
He said I’d never hurt him so bad.
His kidneys became infected -
he developed dementia.
I had never apologized.
That fight still plays out in my mind.

I’ve heard that as humans regress
we go back to the time in life
when we were at our happiest.
I hope that wherever he is
he knows that I am there with him.
Christmas morning 1989 -
Little Adam and his Papa,
our whole lives are ahead of us.



Weather Polston

Lament of Adhnúall