

# Zephyrus

2019



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of Western Kentucky University  
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**Editor’s note:** Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author’s work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

The 2019 *Zephyrus* is dedicated to the memory of  
**Prof. Mary Ellen Miller**



Professor Mary Ellen Miller served the English Department and Western Kentucky University for almost 55 years from 1963-2018, longer than any other professor on record.

Among her many contributions to the university, she served two productive terms as Faculty Regent, was a driving force in the creation of the Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies at WKU, and founded the Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing, an event honoring the influence of her late husband, a major Appalachian poet and member of the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame. The annual event celebrates creative writing in Kentucky and is now called the Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing.

Miller was a productive writer and editor. Her 2011 collection of poems *The Poet's Wife Speaks* won the Old Seventy Creek Press Poetry Prize. In 2014 she and Morris Allen Grubbs edited *Every Leaf A Mirror: A Jim Wayne Miller Reader*, which won a Weatherford Award as one of the best books on Appalachian culture for that year.

First and foremost, Professor Miller was an outstanding teacher of creative writing and literature, touching the lives of countless students over her tenure. As WKU Historian David Lee has commented, "Mary Ellen's work was marked by an unswerving commitment to good writing and good teaching in her half-century of service. Her students had the opportunity to work with a truly legendary figure."

## **Award Winners**

### **Jim Wayne and Mary Ellen Miller Poetry Award**

Samantha Williams  
“Why I Hate the Ocean”

### **Browning Literary Club Poetry Award**

Isabel Brinegar  
“A series about staying or not”

### **Ann Travelstead Fiction Award of the Ladies Literary Club**

Natalie Rose Turner  
“Modern Phantoms”

### **Wanda Gatlin Essay Award**

Nathan Mayes  
“Imagined Conflagrations”

### **Zephyrus Art Award**

Olivia Short  
“Newfoundland”

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

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Emily Geiman

**untitled**



## A Bedroom of Birds

Brian Wallace Baker

To save money for grad school, my wife and I move from Idaho to Washington to live with her parents for a few months, taking with us enough books to overflow two bookcases. It's hard to get an exact headcount because our books tend to migrate. One is on loan to my dad, 650 miles away, and one of his is on loan to me. Other books are tucked away in backpacks or Avery's purse, and one or two may linger in the car, the way they do occasionally after long trips.

Our books add color and texture to the scuffed white walls and old furniture of our new-to-us bedroom. The mustiness of their pages is redolent of gleaming hay particles that float in my dad's now-vacant chicken coop. Aside from haphazardly segregating genres, there isn't much order to how we toss the books onto shelves—there will be time to organize later—yet they seem comfortable in their new environment. They roost like sleepy hens at dusk, unoffended by the mismatching bookcases, which we appropriate from vacant bedrooms in the large, old house. One is tall and made of fiberboard encased in faux wood veneer; the other is short and coated with runny blue paint.

We take a break from unpacking to have lunch in the kitchen, where Avery's 18-year-old sister is watching a murder mystery. While eating homemade turkey burgers, we instinctively face the television, captivated by the show's canned characters, affected romance, and last-person-you-would-expect culprits. It's easy to forgive the formulaic melodrama and surrender our disbelief and attention to the allure of suspense. But we laugh when scenes venture too far into hyperbole, making a farce of law enforcement. I should be reading, I think in these moments, or writing or unpacking the boxes and suitcases that besiege our bedroom. But the show tightens its grip. I eat slowly so I can see how it ends. No one would argue that watching TV is better than reading, but we watch anyway while our books gather dust. The TV convinces me that I have worked hard and deserve a break. Another episode begins. Finally, Avery suggests finding something else to do, then leaves the room. I hesitate. I know she's right, but the TV has already

sunk in its teeth, injected its subduing venom. But something gives, and I move. My body moves before my mind is ready: eyes wrench themselves from the screen, legs wobble out of the kitchen and down the hall. My brain lingers momentarily in front of the TV, realizes it has been abandoned, then falls in line, dizzy from the abrupt separation. I regroup in the bedroom, surrounded by books.

I'm surprised by how many of our books have something to say about birds. There's Terry Tempest Williams, who measures her life in wingspans; Brian Doyle, who believes birds are "feathered stories" and "powerful poems"; Anthony Doerr, who describes birds as "blue-winged, trumpeting mysteries"; and Mary Oliver, who writes about the egret's "white fire" and the loveliness of snow geese, about the vulture's appetite for death and the invitation of wild geese, about the mystery of prayer and the holy, holy earth. Also present is a collection of E.B. White's essays. Mom read his book *The Trumpet of the Swan* to us kids years ago. Since then, there's something sacred about the rare moments I've seen swans sailing over southeast Idaho, large and gentle enough to bear "the Human Soul," if I may misquote Emily Dickinson. She's concealed in a slim anthology of American poetry, nestled among other poetry collections.

The room is dim. Nothing moves except settling dust. Muffled sounds of gunfire and sirens still broadcast from the kitchen, yet the room feels quiet, contemplative. From the shelves float the soft warblings of books. They're not talking to each other or to me. Just talking. I can almost understand their millions of collective words, almost read through their closed covers. But that isn't the way of books. You must coax one from the shelf, heft its tender warmth in your hands, and let it open its wings.



**Self Portrait [Media: Nausea, Smoke Break]**

Devin Beach

Innards turn over to search  
the cavernous hollow of the gut  
and find nothing but smoke that pulls  
at the acidic search party;  
moves them up toward the esophagus  
pushes through the pharynx, follows vomit that falls  
on grinded-down asphalt and soaks  
black pebbles in yellow bile while smoke settles  
a cigarette mist in the watery air hovering  
just above—the gut leaves the innards,  
floats back through factory doors.



JoyBeth Heberly

untitled

## **A series about staying or not**

Isabel Brinegar

I.

I'm standing in the ocean, talking to the crab, or you, or whoever is here listening. Except I'm not listening. I'm thinking about how happy I am to not be alone. But I know you or the crab or the waves will go back to your homes, return to your safe little spots you know, you care about. I'll keep standing here by the ocean even if the waves don't come back, even if the crabs stay tucked in the sand. Even when the world stills, chills then never speaks again.

II.

It's getting closer to the orange words you left in my notebook, I mean I am, or the time is, or whatever any of that means. I want to run away, but only until I start to miss this place. Then I'll come back. Home would have its big Styrofoam arms wide open and it would take me in them, squeaking against my hair. It would whisper in that raspy voice, "I knew you'd come back," kiss the top of my head. It would place me back on the conveyor belt, where it told me I belong. It hugs the next person in line. I squint but I can't see much past this.

III.

Babies come from staying in one place for too long. Babies come from uncertainty. Babies come from not knowing what to want but wanting to have something that's permanent. Babies come from insecurity. Babies come from when a mommy and a daddy love each other very

much. . . I came from Versailles, Kentucky. Do you think  
if I had the nerve to slingshot myself across the country, I  
would have the heart to come home? Mom, don't miss me. I  
promise I'll be back for Christmas. I hope I get to go soon.  
How many times can my legs bounce?  
before they bounce off,  
off the page

This is  
where  
time goes  
when you're  
not  
looking  
for it.

## Chest Pains

Anna Buri

3/22, 9:43 AM

██████████ came in complaining of a cacophony of awful chest pains. Says she's not consuming much salty or saturated foods. Sent her for an echocardiogram. – Dr. ██████████

4/5, 10:02 AM

██████████'s test diagnosed an enlarged heart. Discussed with her the debilitating pain this disease denotes and possible treatment. Prescribed morphine to ease the agony.

7/3, 8:27 AM

Follow up: says the drugs aren't doing enough. She explains that she's doing intensive altruism resistance training to try to reduce her heart size. Tell her no amount of callousing the cardiac muscles will reduce what she's born with.

She says the pain still creeps in at night, especially when she's falling asleep thinking about them all... the lifeless wire-haired dog in the road she hoped wasn't a pet (it was)... the little boy speckled with what she hoped were playground bruises (they weren't)... the women whom she thought would be fine driving home after three martinis (she was, but the other car wasn't)... all lined up in an awful series of shots like an ASPCA commercial... all needing a few extra moments of care that never came...



Suggest a new and risky surgery as the last option. Heart removal. Begs for something, anything to be done. We scheduled the operation for a month from now.

8/4, 3:14 PM

Dr. [REDACTED] told me [REDACTED] 's heart was the most beautiful organ he had ever seen. Soft and glistening, quivering with every pulse, bright red like a STOP sign. "Shame it had caused such trouble."

11:58 PM

Operation was a success. [REDACTED] shows no hints of being in discomfort. Not the least bit. The only sign of the surgery is a four inch line stitched down her chest. I'm reminded of how astonishing science is and why I went into medicine.

Called [REDACTED] 's family to pick up the body. They're so pleased the surgery went well.

**Lady Earl Grey, like**  
Anna Buri

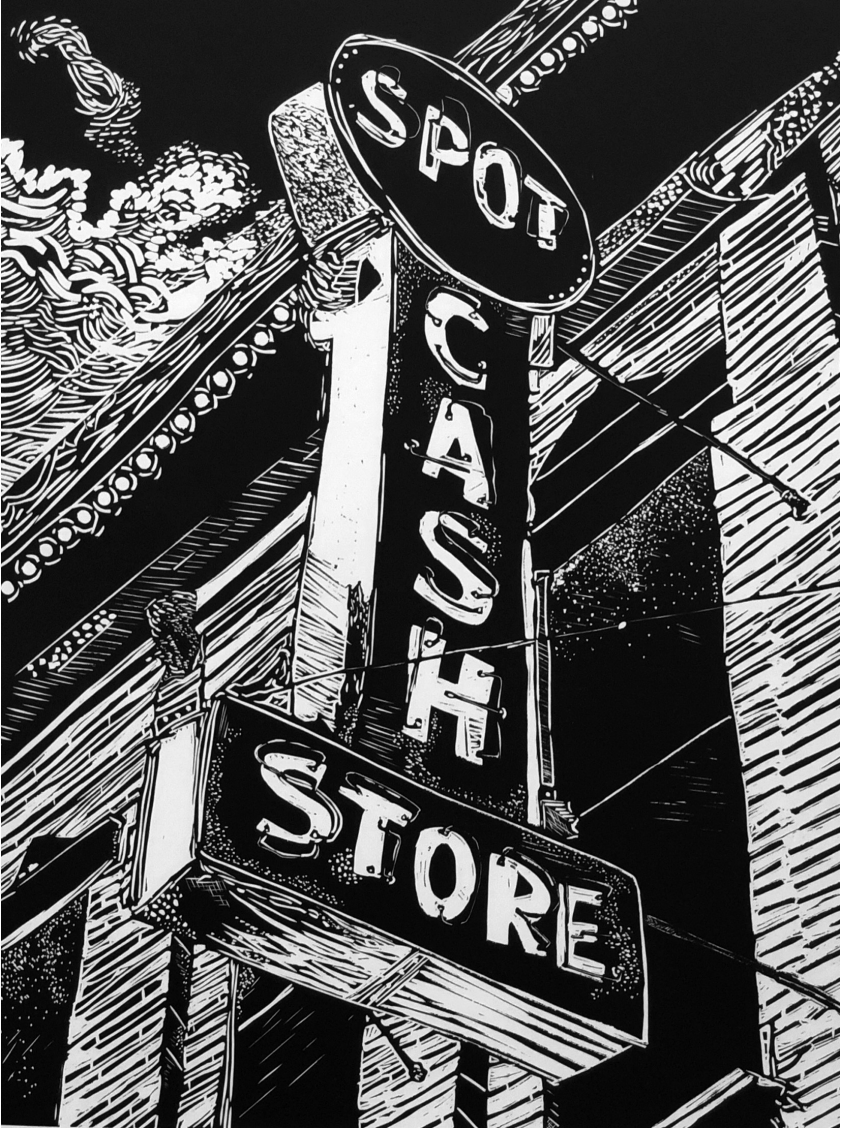
Lady Earl Grey, like  
sugary grass trimmings, like  
honey drizzled over  
a fresh golden hay bale,  
the sweetness sticking to  
my fingers,  
sun-bleached ball-cap,  
and tattered torn T-shirt;  
butterflies lap at this  
sweet salty sweaty residue  
with swirled tongues.  
A saffron sun licks and burns  
my ear tips as I climb  
atop a six foot round bale,  
pretending I'm Jackie Chan,  
pretending I can't fall.  
Dried stalks sweetly stab  
my forearms and shins  
as I straddle the rotund structure  
on all fours and slowly  
raise myself to get  
a better view.

The thinning Fall air  
manages to hold onto  
a thousand points of  
light as darkness swells and  
we look for our cat.  
Rumpelstiltskin's resource cleaves to  
my hair, trying to intertwine  
golden highlights with  
the copper ones that

the previous season's sun  
pinned to my head.  
Sarah and I climb several stories of

Hey, was that Oscar?  
We call and caterwaul for the cat,  
worried a coyote has already  
carved into his thick fur,  
changing his markings  
to deep crimson stripes.  
My head is pressed between  
two bales, straw pinching my cheeks  
with soft painful kisses.  
I glimpse Oscar strolling  
an ankle-twisting drop below me,  
navigating narrow niches,  
trilling and teasing my sister as  
I guide her to him.

As with any return from a barn,  
I smell of it,  
but instead of carrying home the  
earthy scent of manure, this time  
my clothes and hair evoke  
the rural cousins of earl grey.  
Aromatic Alfalfa and clover cling  
to me as if to spread the  
gospel of a good cup of tea to  
everyone I encounter.



Marlee Jones

Spot Cash

## American Ballet

Phi Chu

Dead gods still dream.

This much I know. Just watch how the dancers stream through time. They stand on what's considered darkness, an unyielding obsidian lake, and the surge of their minds palpitates, ripples the void.

This a nation that dreams, supposedly—the winds are often fraught. Still, the dancers spin like the wind would lift their pointe shoes from above the lake. One shoots me her eyes. There's a gleaming that passes between us, and for a moment I can hear the hum from behind those eyes, the lights shining bright from her own world. The others have it too, and together their minds swirl out from not just their eyes, but their fingers and lungs and hollows of collarbones— I feel the rippling enter my soul and I think, these must be the

visions of dead gods who dream in sync. That humming from behind the eyes— I'll live secure within the shape of that sound.

## **Girl with a Pearl Earring Turns Away (c. 1665)**

Phi Chu

From her shadowed world,  
the dark spits out a glow  
on blue and gold,  
and sanguine lips  
part just so—  
just enough space for light to grow.

From our shiny world,  
we praise her lighthouse eyes  
with our blinded own,  
closing centuries when they meet  
behind dismissive, pearly sighs:  
*Just fools dressed in a god's sunrise.*

**Violin**  
Phi Chu

I find myself silenced by sylvan wonder  
when I realize again, we're holding hands.  
The starkness of it laughs at me because I think  
poetry should always be tied to a crow's feet,  
or ride the air above a moth's wing or be etched  
into the inside of seashells. While watching the  
shoreline motion of your thumb against my hand,  
I wish to be made into a violin.

I want my ribs and hair fashioned into a bow;  
my skeleton massed and shaped into form,  
its edges carved along a swan's neck and its gaps  
filled with muscle. Veins will grow around it like ivy.  
My teeth will be tuners and pegs, my fingers curled  
into a scroll; tendons and ligaments stripped and  
stretched into strings; blood mixed as resin and varnish.  
The air above me will be charged with opalescent acoustics.

And when you raise and nestle my bones into your neck,  
your breath blooming across my veins as you touch the bow  
on the strings—maybe then, I would be able to properly tell you  
how much I love you.



Ethan Justice

Dirty Candy



## Fact-Finding

Hailey Hanks

The day after I was told my brother Matt froze to death, my mother said he was murdered—that his wallet was stolen and the forensic pathologist who examined his body found evidence of a head wound that might've knocked him unconscious, dooming him to hypothermia. My mind dredged up the last time I'd seen him two years earlier, when he'd driven up from Florida with his wife and newborn daughter. I met them at their one-star hotel, and we ate IHOP. He was bigger and brighter than I'd ever seen him, laughing and smoking and stopping at a gas station for a burrito packed in foil because he was too hungry to wait till we got to the restaurant. More importantly, he was sober as far as I could tell. I don't remember when I'd last seen him before that.

I cried at the news, but I'd already been missing him for a long time.

*I feel very proud to be your brother,* he wrote in his last letter to me.

In an old photo, he does a pushup in his football jersey while I sit on his back smiling.

He lived only three full days into the New Year. A few weeks earlier, I'd been in Vermont on my honeymoon. I'd just completed all my applications for graduate school and married the woman who inhabits my heart. Our trip was magic—Christmas lights strung all around Woodstock, a giant gingerbread house in the lobby of our inn, amazing food delivered with impeccable service, wine, and strolls through incessant glittering snow to get to the library. A dream. Each day, we commented on how unbelievably perfect everything was.

So I should have seen Matt coming—or going. There is that pattern in film and television when there is a particularly tender moment between lovers or the protagonist feels everything is right on track. Maybe a relationship has just been mended or a villain defeated. Because I am an attentive viewer, painfully attached to character, when this moment occurs a dense dome of dread winds its way into my stomach. I know, intuitively, that someone is about to die.

At the top of the letter, he drew my name in graffiti letters with a spray can next to it.

In another photo, we scuba dive in the deep end of our underground pool.

I took bereavement leave from my job working for the State of Tennessee so that I could pace and make phone calls. My first was to my other brother to tell him the news. Then my grandmother. The rest of the family. Matt was my half brother, the first son of my mother. An addict herself, we had not spoken to her in years. I was the only person she called. Later, she said she regretted telling me.

All of these calls were practice for the hardest one—the call to Matt’s wife, the mother of his two young children, who had not heard from him in months. Matt had relapsed, and none of us knew where he’d gone. On the phone my mother had asked me not to tell his wife because she wouldn’t care. But, of course, she did. She sobbed on the phone until the line went dead.

Meanwhile, my mother called several times a day to change her story about what happened. Murder accident murder accident. I tried to keep my family updated, but the constant back and forth and playing the middleman exhausted me. Drugs had warped my mother’s definition of truth long ago, but I needed to know what happened to him. My wife, who is stronger and smarter than I, located the detective who had found Matt’s body—frozen into an icicle only thirty minutes from my house, as it turns out—and asked him for the facts. They were: that there was no suspicion of foul play but they were awaiting the toxicology report because he’d been found with a pill bottle next to him, that my mother admitted to the police—never to me—that she had kicked Matt out of the house prior to this incident, and that he was found in an abandoned house with no doors or windows. A friend and fellow homeless individual said there was a shelter with a heater nearby, but Matt refused to go there with him.

Next to the spray can, he drew a monkey swinging from a vine and an alligator swimming beneath. A sad caterpillar sitting on a mushroom, which I got tattooed on me.

We sit together in a racecar at Disney World, his hands on the wheel, eyes masked by sunglasses.

I thought knowing the facts would clear everything up, but it didn’t. I still know nothing. I don’t know if he refused the heated shelter because he wanted to die. I don’t know if my mother’s mind concocted the murder narrative to absolve herself of guilt for

putting him out on the street. I don't know if Matt died thinking I didn't care about him. I don't know if I want to.

My other brother and I talked on the phone about the information the detective provided. Neither of us could get the image of Matt frozen out of our heads because that, to us, was different than simply being hypothermic. My brother hoped that the pill bottle meant he was completely out of it and died in some state of bliss or unawareness. I hope so, too, but I could not and cannot be comforted. As I prepared for another fusillade of calls, this time with the funeral home, my knowledge of facts was useless. I combed through a box of old family photos and read over his letter to me, which I cannot remember responding to.

*I'm going to change my major to teach English to college students, Matt wrote. It might sound silly but I feel like Jesus has called me to teach.* My chest aches when I read this now. Like my dumb heart is dying and trying to crack and crawl its way out at the same time. Fuck facts. The fact is that soon I'll be teaching English to college students, and while I have no Jesus, I do feel called—whatever that cliché term means—to teach. And the fact is that I could have read that letter and reached out, maybe connected over that mutual desire to educate. The fact is I could have tried harder and loved him better and maybe he wouldn't be sitting in my laundry room, burnt to dust and bone fragments in a funeral home bag because I don't know what to do with him. I never did.

At the bottom of the letter, he drew a heart with “xo” on both sides. *I love & miss you a lot & I'll call you as soon as I can.*

In my favorite photo, all three of us stand on roller skates in the driveway making silly faces. There are flamingoes on my pants.



Bryson Lacasse

untitled

## Cricky

Lauren Haynes

Teakwood, the sea turtle swinging from my rearview mirror. A million dreams in seven songs, and you, my brother, sitting next to me. I drove now, now that you had scrapped your mustang for a close-encounter with a fence post. You tolerated my playlists and maybe even liked them. Probably not liked them. But liked that I drove you so you could bury your secrets in the Blue Ridge Mountains, flavor the rural skies (except for that part where we got to the farm that was trialing human excrement, human waste baking in the fields as fowl a scent can be). You sat thee, next to me, your ginger hair—yes it was ginger, and yes, you hated it—glimmering like embers in the sun. You had our mother’s hair.

That was one of the first things they did when they got you. They shaved your head. Stuck a pair of glasses on your face. You said you looked like a Ukrainian terrorist. You did.

My Olds Mobile Cutlass, like your Mustang, is gone now. Not because I smashed it into a tree but because I moved on. And so did you.

You were learning Pashtu. I was learning Russian. And I studied hard. Everyone mistook me for a person of Russian descent. That’s how I met my boyfriend, looking Russian. You, looking like a Ukrainian terrorist and speaking Pashtu, you didn’t attract anybody from your likeness. You met a girl though out there, Allison. And she was beautiful. But she was Christian. And you, for all your life, hated the god our mother made us worship in the halls of that dank-scented Catholic Church. Your relationship ended like your Mustang.

I wonder how many times you came back to cruise in my car, to go on that ride down Kinderhook Road, the window cracked even though the stinkbugs would crawl in. I wonder if you ever visited Wolftown Hood to breath the smoke of a barbeque, to flavor an apple butter up on that plane. I wonder if when you knocked out my teeth with that crystal ball, you did it because you saw the future, and you knew it was painful. You showed me pain first. But not last. And you endured your own pain, torture, they suspended you to the wall. You did not break. You never broke.

And for all the pain you felt, all the injustice of your life, you would never know mine. And we would both still write. You, poetry that would make Mark Twain sound like Rebecca Black, and me, fiction that was so absurd that it was no wonder I exclusively lived in the world in my head. I don’t know how I built that world,

but I remember when. And I'm sure you know. You built your own world too, to survive. And when you escaped the military, you grew out your beard. Red beard. Your resemblance to our mother not only physical. The fights that had happened, that fights that would come—you both hating the reflection in the mirror.

I attribute my five root canals to you. Even as a child, you had a warrior's instinct. You'd always been in the military, always fighting, always under the thumb of oppression. Until now. You are back in your Mustang, outlining roads that look like the future, tossing your ambitions to me like cigarette butts out the window. The military taught you to smoke, to drink, to be someone else, some evolution of yourself somehow more yourself than when you started. I am proud of the person you have become, but I fear the person you may be. Because you are powerful, my brother. And you ache. You never go to church, and you always—always—make your own playlist.

## **Ode to My Father**

Emily Houston

Time wraps a blanket around my shoulders  
but I struggle to get warm  
in its threaded embrace.  
I would rather be wrapped up  
in the polluted rivers,  
entangled in weeping willow branches  
by the riverbank, toes embedded in mud.  
I wondered for years how you could leave  
when all along I have been doing the same,  
pulling up roots I mistook for weeds  
until I lost all my tethers and tried  
to force torn roots back into the dirt,  
tried to sink myself into that river,  
hoping that the water would weigh my lungs down,  
keep me under, but my body always  
floats back up, unanchored to the land,  
desperate to let the river run its course  
and sweep me off to where you exist, too.

## **Trenta-Sei of an Appalachian Winter**

Emily Houston

Winter is even more bitter in mountains.  
It whispers of early deaths on melting roads  
without beds of lilac to soften.  
My heart is somewhere under the snow,  
and without a hand to hold here,  
I forget how to banish my fears.

It whispers of early deaths on melting roads.  
Outsiders don't understand the ways we've fallen,  
but I know how the rivers used to flow.  
Now, even the trees have grown brown and solemn.  
My heart burns with desire to be near,  
but when I am, the world becomes unclear.

Without beds of lilac to soften,  
I drift back to the ground slowly,  
waiting for the day this place is forgotten.  
The earth tells me there is no point in my growth,  
but I try to let blossoms burst from my ears,  
even though I'll be incomplete for years.

My heart is somewhere under the snow  
where it waits, growing sodden,  
and I listen to the soft caws of a crow.  
I used to only hear the mumble of robins,  
but now even they avoid the tears,  
and I learn to exist in a different sphere.

And without a hand to hold here,  
nothing can stop me as I sink lower.  
Winter has never been so severe,  
and ice grows where rivers once flowed.



I used to be able to persevere  
when the mountains felt more sincere.

I forget how to banish my fears,  
and let them grow, uncounted.  
All I have left is a wasted frontier,  
with all its hopes fallen,  
and change is rarely a volunteer.  
Please let me disappear.

## **Here Lies the Aspiring Author**

Alex Huntsman

Here lies the aspiring author, whose words lie with him, unspoken on his tongue. They rest fitfully in his mind, buried alive in a coffin of flesh and bone.

He is survived by the mountains of unfinished works, ideas, and stories he left behind, never to be continued. The end of one story, the untimely end of all the rest.

His last unspoken words, proved to be his undoing. He has no famous last words, because he wasn't sure how to say them. Here lies the aspiring author, who swallowed his words until he choked on them.

**Rake the Springtime Across My Sheets**  
Ivy Irihamye

Rake the springtime across my sheets;  
spill sweet honeysuckle nectar on my pillow;  
call the hummingbirds back home.  
Spread sunlight, warm and rich  
as coconut, across my skin.  
Face tipped and palms facing up  
for the calming and jolting touch of rain.

Guide the summer into my shoulders.  
Let it blanket me with brisk heat,  
humming its way down my back,  
Singing across my bare arms  
And legs and face.  
It knows I am unused to being unprotected  
and welcomes me kindly into its warmth.

I am here.

**even good boys steal blankets sometimes**

Mara Lowhorn

This is what we talk about when we talk about us.

There and this and only.

Just.

The weekend our parents don't know about.

Rumblings of banana pancakes,

foiled plans of crawling through the vegetable garden.

Tiptoeing only because the floor is cold.

Bath water that turns

green

and us wrinkly.

Arms like parentheses,

closing in

and explaining the unsaid.

Everything's nuclear,

and we don't know these people.

Sit next to me.

It started that way—

flush thighs

and fumbling

and three months of

just.

Red-rimmed apologies

forgiven in the backseat.

Jokes smothered

in sorghum,

sticky like hands brushing

against back pockets.

An older woman

and a guy with glasses.

The proof is in the handprints—

movies about who we used to be,  
streets that tell your lips to roam.  
And a sign that tells us  
this place is for the birds.

## To the Girl I Hope to Name Saoirse

Nathan Mayes

My baby is alive

in my dreams.

She is just a thought,

a bloodied tampon, a used condom—

she is nothing

more than imagination and images

of what could have been

more than bathroom trash.

The garbage throughout the house

meets in the toter by the garage,

my empty child meets the larvae

I found in the vanilla latte left on the back porch.

She sees how they were cared for,

swaddled in mold atop beds of beige foam

with a cloud of flies babysitting them.

They never had a chance to be birthed

through the hole in the cup created by a slug

when he ate the paper casing in attempt to satiate

himself with the pseudo-amniotic fluid covering the maggots.

I threw them away, poured out their vanilla-scented lives

because their paper-cup-womb oozed a translucent liquid

the consistency of snot and it distracted from the beauty

of fresh cut grass and white squirrels sprinting across the yard.

I promise I won't throw you away—

not when you're real. Your mom will carry you

like insects in a cup, and I will watch you

like the swarm of flies monitoring the dead  
slug I inadvertently killed by throwing away  
the food I gave him.

I won't let you mold.  
I'll let you grow until you're bigger than me,  
until you can read this poem and think I'm strange,  
until I'm a larva to your humanity, until  
you are more alive than my dreams.



Bronwyn Liddle

But He Never Hit You



## Imagined Conflagrations

Nathan Mayes

I found a mattress in the weed field next to my house when I was nine. Old and stained with grass, rain, piss, and things I didn't yet understand, it slept in the middle of the field among blackened wood. I used to think the charred remains were from a housefire, but I was—and still am—unsure. I would imagine a family living in the house: a father, mother, two brothers, two sisters, and a middle child. A middle child who would never stay in his family's three-bedroom double-wide trailer but instead roamed in fields and imagination.

The mattress lived in a field between two double-wides. One was my family's and the other was Billy's family's. Billy and I were those type of friends you have only because you live next to each other. He was a grade younger than me, and we never really talked at school. After school, though, we'd go out and explore the small woods behind our houses. We made a hideout right at the end of the summer before I turned ten and school started back. A couple weeks after being in classes again, Billy and I dragged the mattress to our hideout. As we pulled it through mud, keeping a lookout for our parents, I told him about the family that lived in the now ashed house, presented them as tangible fact evidenced by mattress stains resting under our palms—that wouldn't get washed before dinner. He asked what temperature a human body burns at. Fourteen-hundred to eighteen-hundred degrees Fahrenheit, but I didn't know that to share it. Instead, I told him they made it out.

“If they made it out, then why did they bring a mattress back there?”

He had a point. If the family had oxidized the inferno then surely the mattress would have, too. At the very least, the mysterious moistures would've evaporated out of the cotton fibers and polyurethane foam. It was still damp.

We sat on the mattress and played War with a deck of Batman-themed playing cards. I slapped down a Batman king, he a Robin jack. I swept the cards out of the space between us and added them to my pile. Mosquitos hovered around us, enthralled in our game, in our flesh. One landed on the dorsal side of my hand and

stuck her bloodthirsty nose deep in my flesh, slurping blood and injecting saliva that wouldn't itch until my capillaries dilated with released histamine. I pinched the skin around her, causing her to be stuck as she drank me. I squeezed my epidermis, and she drank and drank and drank—and popped. I didn't know if the blood on my hand belonged to me or her. I wiped it off on the mattress.

The imagined family must have left the burning house and came back with a new bed since they lost their other one. It couldn't have been all of them, though. They would've needed more than one full-sized mattress. So someone came back alone. Alone like I was when I realized Billy went home and not to write with his piss somewhere in the woods away from our mattress. I pushed home through chigger plants, scratched at the freckle drawn below my middle-finger knuckle.

I tried to tell my mom about the family while she cooked dinner that night. She nodded her head, told me I had such a big imagination. I didn't want to hear that. I wanted her to say that I was right—that someone, some boy had made it out of the fire. She didn't. She told me I made it up, which to me meant that no one escaped. They were all disintegrated into imagined ash. Not even the middle child survived.

I cried for him. I cried for the boy my age that I wanted to have made it out of his double-wide. I cried for him because he cremated instead of escaped. He never made it out. He never got to return to his childhood carrying a mattress soiled with learning, experiences, mistakes. He never got to be.

My mosquito bite burned.

## My Body as Paris

Jessica McCormick

My wildness is urban Parisian streets so foreign I could never get used to them. The wild language being thrown from mouth to mouth spewed around me faster than lightning. I didn't try to understand because for once I felt strange, and sometimes it's good to feel strange. I'd catch whiffs of familiar words like the aroma of freshly-brewed *café au lait* in the air. This wildness was keeping me sane and whole, and my hunger as being sated.

My hunger was sated by *pain au chocolate* and *religieuses*, tiny pastries in the shape of nuns. I bit into my nun and relished her religion, tasting her insides, sweet disciple. Next to me, Notre Dame sang the hour anew, and new crowds of tourists washed inside her. Religion is female, wild and bloody. We are bloody and understanding to a fault, and we have to find our wilderness else we turn to goo, a bready nun.

My insides full, I said *merci* to the waiter, paid him in colorful money, and ambled toward the Seine, the river Seine that spoke to me the first day I arrived. It said, *Vous êtes enfin là*. You're finally here. I replied, *Je sais*. I know. I thought that Paris was much wilder when you're alone. I thought that I might enjoy having someone to eat nuns with. I thought that poetry would make more sense here. I thought that, I thought that, I thought that. . . .

My French was rocky, but I made it. Parisians only want you to try. I tried to fit in, to make my hair less blonde, to make my shoes less American. No matter how hard I tried, I could not disappear, and I got increasingly aggravated at myself for being unchangeable. The French women swooped by, hair in perfectly classic chignons, trench coats that fit just right, and bodies that must not have eaten as much bread as I had today. I trailed behind them and tried to inhale their aura. It did not catch.

My Paris was greasy yet shone, confusing yet simplistic, impossible yet a dream. It encompassed everything I wanted to be, all wildflowers and gnarled branches. I pretended my bones were replaced with bones from the Catacombs. My voice was suddenly fluent and told tales of my travels to places I had never been. The blood in my heart was actually the Seine, gushing water in the heart of the city.

My body was becoming Paris. My hair was French pasta, cooked *al dente* with as much cheese as you desire. My head was a gargoyle on top of the Notre Dame cathedral, stony eyes that kept watch on only what they could see. My ears only heard accordion music from buskers in front of Sacré-Coeur. My fingers were the fingers of Claude Monet, of Paul Cézanne, of Edgar Degas. My legs were the base of the Eiffel Tower. I stood up straight and basked in my newfound wildness.

## **If I Could Paint the Sun**

Jessica McCormick

If I could paint the sun, she would  
be naked like in childhood.  
Just look at her, gentle curve of her.  
The days go by, galactic blur.

To paint the sun, I'd need supplies  
that don't exist; she hides in skies.  
As she falls down, her words will slur.  
Her days go by, galactic blur.

Keep still, I say, but she is gone.  
I paint her spine, the break of dawn.  
I try recalling where her lines were.  
My days go by, galactic blur.

The moon peeks out, soon mountain-high.  
My brush just aches for still nights gone by.  
My paint runs dry. I sit and stir.  
And days go by, galactic blur.

**Saudade On a Cold Night (or, To My Far-Away Love)**  
Christian O'Connor

I miss you the way  
I watch a fire burn out.

During the cold day,  
I gather the kindling,  
the obsolete newspaper  
articles that I never  
bothered to read,  
and then I set matches to  
it, flinching as I strike each  
one, remembering the sting  
of a burn on my fingertips  
the first time I tried.  
The fire rises, roars  
out its firm melody of  
twisting and swaying.  
It spouts forth warmth  
and heat. It entrances me,  
pulls me in, drapes me with  
a wreath of ease and safety.

But by night, the logs are ash;  
the fireplace full of mounds of  
useless, unburning grey. And I  
wonder if I'll be warm again.

This is how I feel your absence,  
your distance. I miss the warmth  
from when you whispered in my ear,  
the way you stepped and swayed,  
the lightness you made me have.  
I miss the weight of you, which was  
constantly pressed against me

or pulling me around in a  
flame's dance.

I've returned from my summer  
escape with you and now wait  
out the winter here, but like  
a shadow at the edge of my sight  
I am haunted by the lack  
of your sweet light.

I know I'll see you again,  
but the moment the fire begins  
to dwindle, a creeping cold  
and a damp darkness tiptoe  
up behind me. They tap on my  
shoulders and trace my limbs.  
They run their claws down my  
exposed neck as I stiffen and shiver.  
The night is long indeed.

But tomorrow I'll gather more  
firewood, ignite the kindling,  
and wait for you again.  
As always.

## **Surrealist Airport**

Celeste N. Rehmel

Groggy excitement floats  
along sidewalks, drags  
boxes of bricks so they  
may be planted somewhere  
new, become a part  
of architecture so far  
from home.

Jet lag longs  
to take root between  
bricks from London, Suffolk,  
Nottingham, Dublin,  
Kentucky.  
Jet lag wants to grow,  
bloom from the lack  
of sleep into the sensation  
of dreaming while walking,  
standing on a moving  
sidewalk of melatonin  
swirled with adrenaline.

Wide eyes and dark-circled energy  
tug weight they cannot  
wait to leave behind, to grow  
memories in between. Allow  
wonder to cling to alleyways  
and turn coffee stains  
into tinkling Bluebell laughter,  
grainy flight announcement  
into climbing Ivy.

Plants root into mortar  
between bricks, part of you



that you'll mason to  
facades of museums, on patios  
of stumble-upon cafes,  
in walls of historical  
homes. Water jet lag with  
adrenaline to shroud cities  
in greenery and petals.



Paige Miller

Swarm 001

## The Small Death of Childhood

Caroline Sutphin

*At 7:15 AM, he shoots Ryan Clark and Emily Hilscher and goes back to his dorm to reload.*

“Give her this note first thing, Heath,” my mom said while writing out a letter to Heath’s para about his testing conditions. His eyes were barely open as he scooped eggs into a gaping mouth.

“What are you going to do when you get to school?” Mom asked, trying to force the eye contact he wasn’t quite capable of.

“I’m going to...”

“Give Miss Smith this note.”

“Yes.” Fourth grade had proven difficult for Heath.

I dribbled butter on my Cocoa Puffs shirt and had to change into the poodle one before catching the bus. Mom pulled on her jacket with the little Virginia Tech pin on the lapel and headed to work.

My sister Laura was a county away, still asleep in her lofted dorm bed, stress dreaming about the engineering classes she was failing.

*At 9:05 AM, he chains the exits to Norris Hall from the inside.*

I did multiplication tables, trying to beat Jonah Taylor to Mrs. Stanley’s desk with a completed sheet. I could see his pencil out of the corner of my eye, dancing across the page.

Laura woke up to emails about someone being shot and decided to skip class. Skipping class was always a good idea, especially on a Monday.

*At 9:42 AM, he starts firing again.*

Mrs. Stanley drilled the infinitely more complicated division tables. The rest of the class was falling asleep, but Jonah and I sat at attention.

Laura talked to her roommate about last weekend’s AGR party and the beer-sloshed brother who hit on her.

*At 9:50 AM, the campus is put on lockdown, as it stays into the evening.*

My mom stuck her head out of the office and asked if they saw the email about a gunman on campus. They locked the doors and went back to work, thinking nervously of jealous boyfriends with hunting rifles.

*At 9:51 AM, he put a bullet in his head, joining his thirty victims.*

*At 12:15 PM, President Steger informs campus that at least 21 are dead. So many people try to make calls at once, it becomes difficult to get a call out.*

Mrs. Stanley and the other teachers whispered at lunch, dainty hands to dainty mouths. They looked at me, preoccupied with my chicken sandwich, a top-five school lunch. Jonah Taylor shot peas out of his nose.

Everyone in my mom's office stopped working.

Laura and her roommate stopped talking.

*At 1:15 PM, Dr. Cathy Sutphin, Virginia Tech employee, contacts Laura Sutphin and finds that she is in her dorm safe, but with some friends unaccounted for.*

I was writing an essay about my favorite animal of the moment, the Bengal tiger. My head filled with visions of the 600 lb beasts stalking through India as Mrs. Stanley looked on.

Laura cried for the first time when she heard Mom's voice. They were only one building away from each other, but neither were allowed to leave their rooms.

*At 2:00 PM, Dr. Cathy Sutphin calls Critzer Elementary and requests to speak with fifth grade teacher Mrs. Stanley.*

The phone rang in Mrs. Stanley's little office. She answered it and was gone for a little too long. Whispering picked up in the class. Jonah Taylor threw a paper ball. Mrs. Stanley stuck her head back in and said the call was for me. She was crying, and I felt very small.

My mom told me something really bad has happened at Virginia Tech. There was a shooting. She was okay, and Laura was okay, and she'd come home as soon as the lockdown was lifted. I looked up at the water-stained ceiling and tried not to cry, tried not to be afraid.

"Ask the bus driver to not play the radio on the way home. And don't let Heath watch any TV. I don't want him to be scared until I can talk to him. Can you do that, Caroline?" I could. I tried harder not to cry. Heath couldn't know that I had cried, that I had been afraid.

I hung up, and Mrs. Stanley asked me to not tell the other students what the call was about. I could do that, too. So I sat for the last hour of school with a really bad secret that everyone would know when they got home, worrying about Heath and Laura and Mom, not caring so much about multiplication tables

or Bengal tigers or Jonah Taylor anymore.

My childhood did not end all at once, with one vicious swipe of reality. In a week, I was probably back to playing with dolls and thinking about Jonah Taylor. But my innocence suffered a small death, a chip off the world I thought I was living in. For that afternoon, I did not feel like a child.

Something really bad had happened at Virginia Tech. Something really really bad.

## Abecedarian on Blue

Natalie Rose Turner

All my windows are open on the off chance you  
billow in one night, like a moth held  
captive by its impulse for light. In your case the light is some  
dumb Netflix special I rewatch  
every other weekend. If only love were as easy as  
forgetting to lock the door or taking a wrong turn or  
getting a tattoo of your ex's name in cursive on your right  
hand on a Tuesday night. Sure,

I'm watching Forensic Files but really I'm  
just trying to pass my loneliest hours at top-speed,  
killing time in 24-minute intervals. Easy enough, but I'm still a  
loser, with or without procrastination.

Many nights I calmed myself saying  
no longer would your image be confined to my head.  
Out there is a "you," like a real human who  
pours into human-shaped holes and doesn't  
question me, doesn't have to. Someone out there who's  
really real with hair, a face, a body. In truth, you're like a  
star: more invisible the closer my eye gets to you. So,

tomorrow, in my manic state, I will go  
under a bridge and have your name inked onto my other side, over my  
veins so violently that random people will  
wonder if I were struck by lightning. In this world, these are my  
x-rated scars of you, my only evidence of you, my stupid version of  
you, and the one I will cling to if I ever end up without Netflix, at the  
zenith of my loserhood, my loneliness, my useless stance on pain.

## Modern Phantoms

Natalie Rose Turner

Jared wore blue: a thick navy jacket that went down to his knees, dark jeans, a plain shirt, and a long scarf, worn Parisian. Or at least, he told you it was Parisian. You believed him. Even now, you believe him.

His car pulled up in the parking lot. When you saw him, you thought of decorating an apartment together, or browsing a pet store. Shopping for household goods, debating whether you need a blender. Convincing him you need a blender. When you thought of your lease running out in May, just next month, you considered his apartment your only real option. Your friends didn't have room, your sister was married, and your parents were less than stylish options. After all, their decision to stop bolstering your rent money was the reason you had to leave the apartment in the first place. Shouldn't you be at least a little bitter? "If I'm paying for you to have a home, I'd rather have you home," your mom had said. But Jared had been around for a year now. He made sense. Compelling him to pop the roommate question had become your pet project.

"You excited to see the fish?" he asked when you open your door. His accent was hard to place, but he wasn't from Nashville like you.

You said something generic in the affirmative. But you forgot your jacket. While you rushed to get it, he stood there, lips pursed, eyes wandering. He'd seen the scattered fluff your dog Lancelot tore from an old stuffed animal, one you had kept on your desk. Now its head sat by the kitchen counter, one beady eye dangling by a thread. Jared turned away. From inside the apartment, his figure was a silhouette, like something from a French New Wave film, like he was missing only a cigarette.

You returned with your jacket. He was holding out his hand, single eyebrow raised, dark patches on the pale skin beneath his eyes. He drew you out into a world of autumn overcast. It still took you a few blinks to adjust to the light. Your dog barked behind you and you broke away from Jared to say goodbye to little Lancelot and lock the door, strategically positioning your foot to prevent an escape. A little thunder groaned in the background.

"Care for a southern storm?" Jared asked.

You put your keys in your purse. "Not until we get down there. I want to be stuck inside an aquarium, not the side of the

road cowering in a ditch.”

Jared scoffed and held his keys up. “I don’t cower.” He held the door open for you and returned to the driver side.

When you got into his blue-green 1999 Altima, he exhaled loudly and smiled, watching you fiddle with the passenger seatbelt. It wasn’t a devilish smile, not the kind your mom hated. You felt like you were blessed to have access to a level of warmth from him. On campus he was known to be kind of an ass. You couldn’t help but feel proud for attracting him.

He reached over you and popped open his glove box, revealing a set of CDs lodged into the compartment. Pink Floyd, Santana, Tool, all perfectly wedged between two folded towels with maybe a total of 10 other discs. “What’s your pick today?” he asked. The devilish smile crept in.

You laughed and smiled back, flipping through the titles. Celtic Woman, Fleetwood Mac, some others you’d already listened to with him. No doubt he curated the diverse collection to impress. Your finger stopped on an album with Chinese characters on the side. Before you could pull it out, Jared caught your hand and brought it back to the console. “Oh, not *that* one,” he said.

Eye contact. That killed you. The devilish smile bloomed deeper now. You wanted to wake up to it every morning. He leaned toward you until you had to close your eyes, expecting contact—and then his lips continued to your ear. “Let’s set the GPS instead,” he said, *pianissimo*.

“Jackass,” you said, already pulling out your phone. But he hit you with a surprise kiss while Apple Maps distracted you.

“It won’t be a long trip,” he said, putting the Chinese CD in. “We’ll fly on down there.”

It was and you didn’t. After about an hour, the car jolted in time with a large boom from the passenger side. An ominous rhythmic flapping soon followed, slowing as Jared let off the gas pedal and pulled over to the shoulder of I-65. You didn’t say a word. In the corner of your eye, you saw Jared’s fingers shaking slightly on the steering wheel before he slipped one hand over the console to turn the music down. Once the car was motionless and silent, he muttered something about “damn construction” on the roads, unbuckled, and got out of the car.

From the passenger seat, you watched his shadow pass over the hood. You learned enough about the state of his front passenger tire from his crossed arms and low eyebrows. It must’ve



been hopeless. Still he crouched, disappearing like a character in a lousy puppet show. "It's flat as fuck," he said on the other side of the glass. "Fuck." Moments later he stood and huffed back to the driver's seat to pop the trunk by reaching somewhere under the wheel, and then he sped to the rear of the car. His slamming door clanked against the metal of his seatbelt, caught at the close. He didn't fix it.

The Altima shook when Jared opened the trunk. You unbuckled and entered the crisp autumn air, locking the door behind you. At least the sky had cleared up, you thought. Standing on the side of the interstate while people passed by felt somehow rebellious, like trespassing. It took a while for your ears to adjust to the ambient drone of cars. Your partner stood puzzling over his popped trunk. When you joined him you saw it was completely empty. No clothes, no junk, and no jack.

You leaned against the back of the car. "Usually they're under the—"

"I know. I know. It's empty." He stared into the trunk before exhaling and pacing away with a quiet curse. You eyed him until he pulled out his phone and started typing. Peeking under the trunk mat revealed a distinct lack of spare tire, but there was a tiny scissor jack where the spare should've been, along with a fair sprinkling of crinkled leaves and dust. If a jack had been there, you wouldn't have known how to use it. Scissor jacks could be dangerous, right? You remembered your dad saying something like that. "Don't use it if you don't know how to use it" kind of thing. "Just call me" kind of thing.

Jared was talking on the phone. Roadside assistance, you assumed. While he dealt with some kind of automated answering machine, you turned around and leaned against the Altima, watching cars. One of those huge coal-rolling trucks sped by in the right lane (no blinkers) to pass some poor guy in a Kia Soul who going only 15 miles over the speed limit. You coughed and swatted at the black cloud he'd left behind. Jared was looking at you now, waving his arm and saying something, but the truck was still too loud. "My insurance card," you finally heard. "In the console, get it."

You hopped from your spot and returned to your door. It didn't open. "Your keys," you said, but he was saying something on the phone. "Your keys."

He nodded his head once and fished in the pocket of his coat. And then the other pocket. And then the pocket of his jeans.

And then he stormed over to your side of the car and pressed his face against the glass. “God. Dammit,” he said. “Fucking—did you lock it?”

You turned your head and saw his keys hanging from ignition. A pit was forming in your stomach. “Do you—“

“Hang on, hang on, hang on.” He was speaking to the representative on the phone. Turning to you he continued. “My dad’s the only one with a spare key. We can’t call him. We have to pick it. Can’t believe this...”

“Pick it? With what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t your dad work in Nashville? We could just call him. He’s pretty close. It’s not a big deal.”

Jared thrust his arm down, phone gripped in his hand. His blue eyes burned. “I’m not fucking calling him.”

You stepped back. Something hurt, something indistinct. “Okay,” you said. “Just...call a locksmith. Tell them you need a locksmith.”

He kept staring at you. When he finally looked away, your shoulders relaxed.

“Shit,” he said. He rubbed his palm across his face before lifting the phone back up to his ear. His face was winter. “I think I need a locksmith.”

You looked back inside the Altima. Instead of wondering how easy it would have been to slide a mangled coat hanger all the way down to the switch, you wondered how you’d been turned into a stranger for a moment. Looking at the interior made you remember something important, but you took a few moments to breathe. “Wait,” you finally said. “Cancel that order.”

Jared followed you to the other side of the car, where you pointed down to his limp seatbelt hanging out at the bottom. His eyes said “maybe!” He tried the door with his free hand and it opened.

“Thank fucking God,” he said, reaching for his keys first. “I’ve never been so happy to have a shitty car.” He started digging through the console for his insurance card. You meandered back to the other side of the car. For a while, he relayed information to the representative. The car helped dull some of the sounds of the interstate behind you. And the sound of Jared on the phone. By the time he finished and joined you, you still hadn’t managed to get rid of that image—Jared with all love for you rooted from his eyes. He settled at your side against the car, maybe a half foot

away.

"It's going to be a while," he said. "Like an hour, maybe."

"Geez."

"Not too bad. With you." Could you believe it? He elbowed your side. "Want to sit in the car?"

You twisted your lips. "I'm cool out here. It's kind of a nice view."

He nodded and relaxed his posture. "You ever get a flat before?"

"Nope."

"Me neither. Until now."

"Hmm." Every now and then you could hear a cow when the stream of cars lulled. You wished you could return to a time when Jared's eyes had never scared you.

"So, what's the whole deal with your lease, then?" Jared asked.

It was both the first and last thing you wanted to talk about. You felt a chill and turned to look at him. "It runs out next month. I don't really know where I'm going yet." You didn't want to drop too heavy a hint. Plus, you felt a little like a whiny kid. "My parents were helping me out. They wanted me to have a place where I didn't have to deal with trashy roommates like I did when I lived on campus, so they set me up with a place just slightly out of my budget." You eyed his pale hand flat on the pavement. "Isn't your dad kind of doing the same thing?"

Jared shuddered, like he needed to dispel a bad image.

"My dad isn't helping me out. He's kicking me out."

You cocked your head. This was the note.

"The only reason he didn't leave me on the streets when I turned eighteen is because he knows it'd make him look bad. That's all he cares about. You know that, don't you?"

"I didn't know. I just thought he helped you out with rent every now and then or something."

He shook his head. "He controls my life. One wrong move and I have no car, no apartment. He'd probably call my boss, just to make it harder on me. Stop paying for school." He paused. You could hear crickets. "Maybe it doesn't matter. I mean God, do you really think I want to be a lawyer? The more I learn about laws the more I want to break them. Maybe I don't care here. Maybe he can burn in Hell for all I care. Maybe all lawyers can burn in Hell."

You brought your knees to your chest. It was getting cold.

You regretted telling him you wanted to wait outside. “He’s an asshole,” you said with apprehension, “but don’t you think in some ways he’s at least trying to take care of you?”

“Horseshit.” He shifted his position on the asphalt. “He’s only taking care of himself. He doesn’t care to know a damn thing about me unless it’ll impact his reputation.”

“I think that’s kind of a fucked up thing to say.”

“A fucked up thing to say. Haven’t you met him?”

“Well yeah, but—”

“Yeah?” He looked at you, cheeks red, eyes slightly crazy.

You looked away. “It’s just...some of the things you say remind me of my dad.”

No reaction came from Jared, not a question or a grunt.

You wanted something. More crickets were waking, fewer cars passing by. The country landscape itself started to look like a big patch of nothing on the horizon instead of the pastoral view of the past half hour.

You held your legs tighter to your chest. “He doesn’t really talk to me too much, I guess,” you said. “Like I don’t really see him often. But he makes sure I’m safe, you know? That I’m taken care of. That I have what I need.”

“Then why can’t you stay in your apartment?”

You pursed your lips. “That’s something he and my mom—”

“That’s not him taking care of you, that’s his money taking care of you. Maybe he doesn’t—”

“He’s just not very affectionate. He’s there when it matters. You know, like he doesn’t know how to show his emotions, or something.”

“Maybe he doesn’t give a damn. Maybe he’s a scumbag, too.”

It hit you. “Well maybe I love him?” Your voice shook at the end so it sounded like a question. Eyes shut tight, you expected tears.

“Don’t talk about my dad,” Jared said. “You don’t know the worst of him like I do. Just don’t fucking talk about him.”

“Okay,” you said. And the two of you sat. You didn’t feel right about holding his hand or leaning on his shoulder. After a line of cars sped past, the silence got to you. “I’m sorry. I’m just stressed. With my lease running out...” Two cars swished by in rapid succession.

“If you love your dad so much, why don’t you just go live

with him?”

“I just didn’t want to—”

“If he’s offering.”

You paused, reconfiguring your argument. “I mean, would you want to live with your dad?”

“No.”

“Then shouldn’t you be happy he’s just paying for you to live somewhere else?”

“No!”

Tires screeched in the distance. Someone honked. For a while, neither of you spoke. Without turning your head, you saw his hands clasp and unclasping, fingers holding nothing, grabbing for something.

Your stomach hurt. You knew then you’d run this conversation through your head for the next couple of hours, of days. You were already running it through, making changes. You are running through it now. You should’ve stayed cool, stayed silent. Let him be angry. Keep your piece for later. Save it for the inevitable stop you’d make at McDonalds on the way home, when you had food and decent lighting, even if you still smelled like dried leaves. Flat tires bring out the worst in everyone. Including you, right? Including Jared.

“We’re not making it to Chattanooga today,” he said. His voice was deep, legato.

You exhaled in time with the conversation. “I know.”

Ten minutes passed in near silence. Jared held his head in his hands, face down, like he had a bad headache. You tried playing with your phone but it only slowed the tempo. Every pair of headlights that passed made you look up and lean over, but no one stopped.

The two of you continued marking time to the tune of silence. You thought of your dad. What was he doing those days? Something out of town. Construction, you thought, somewhere close to Murfreesboro. Maybe even close to you now. Would he have come to rescue you if you’d called? Which love was less of a lie? The love of someone who loves with his wallet, or the love of someone whose tenderness disappears when you’re sitting on the side of a road?

A car with a subwoofer sped past you. The pop melody’s fall to the Doppler Effect reminded you of the day’s progression. The trip started out normal, cheerful even. Prospects were good. And then once you got past a certain point on the road, the pitch

bent down and down until it was unrecognizable. And then gone.

After more time passed, Jared whipped his hands back to the car and pushed himself off the ground. "I'm so sick of waiting." He paced to the back of the Altima, and then to the driver's side, where he stood chest towards oncoming traffic. When you looked at him through the car windows, he was again a silhouette to you, a broad-shouldered, scarf-laden figure without defined edges. He was missing a cigarette. Someone honked at him. He held up his arm, ready to yell. The cars looked like they were getting so close, close enough to hit him. A truck moved from the left to the right lane and then farther, passenger-side wheels dipping into the shoulder, turning towards him. They hit the rumble strips hard. And then the vehicle slowed to a stop.

It took the professional less than ten minutes to fix the tire. Jared thanked him with uninterested politeness. After the man left, you got in the car and rejoined traffic.

You wondered if Jared had ever looked at you with the same intensity he gave the road that night, searching for a place to turn around illegally. You didn't tell him to just wait for the next exit. You just watched his fingers grip the wheel. His back wasn't touching the seat and his arms were bent. "I'm sorry we can't see the fish today," you said. "And for fighting."

"It's okay," he said, relaxing a little. His voice sounded beautiful again. His face still looked severe. "In relationships you have to have the fight. And then you know. The fight will tell you."

You sat back while he pulled into one of those "authorized vehicle only" areas and waited for an opening in northbound traffic. Finding one didn't take very long. He sat all the way back in his seat and rubbed his eyes with his right arm on the steering wheel. You started to wonder what the fight had told him.

"We can see the fish some other time," he said. No music. A lie?

No, you thought. A kindness.

You knew then that he would someday take you home and walk you to the door. He would watch with his lips twisting while you fumbled with your keys. He'd frown when your dog started barking. He would wait while you used your foot to block Lance-lot from running into the night as you say your goodbye. Maybe he would hug you. Maybe he would even kiss you. And then he would turn around and walk straight back to his car without a

word. And then he would back out of your driveway and your life forever.

And then you knew it didn't matter if you stopped at McDonalds on the way back or if another tire blew out before the next exit. It didn't matter if you tried for the aquarium another day or settled for a coffee shop downtown. It didn't matter if you lived with your dad or if he lived with his dad. He was taking you home. Better now than ten years later.

**they caught him by the dust of his shoes**  
Natalie Rose Turner

his boots have lips—  
spit back rock and soil—

sit in an old rocking chair  
and tell the story

years ago  
man set ear to earth

and listened for rain  
but earth kept closed

now earth speaks even when  
man doesn't want her to



## To a Heaven in My Head

Natalie Rose Turner

Grandma Flo,

I was young when we lost you, too young to remember pain or even the love that came before it.

The Haas siblings, your children, tell me stories. My own mother remembers being five years old with you, marching down Nashville streets, chanting, “Black and white together! Black and white together!” This chant I remember. I remember because I remember when she told me what it really meant—she’d been singing it for years before I was old enough to actually know about the Civil Rights Movement.

I guess it should not have surprised me that the government investigated Grandpa Joe during the Red Scare. But what about you? You, who used music to understand all things, who fought your own church for the right to make yourself valuable there? You, who stayed with a brilliant man, an angry drunk, a supposed communist? Grandpa Joe was many things, but I have only heard stories of his theories and beliefs. You were the one marching. You were the one singing. Maybe he was the notes on the page, but you were the music, loud, loving, and everlasting.

I think you would like to know that all of your daughters sing, and their music is beautiful.

And I think it would disappoint you to hear your grandchildren will fight many of the same battles you did.

“Black and white together.”

You wept when Kennedy died—the first Catholic president. My mother’s first memories are of you sitting before the television with all the noise, the suffering. Did she ever tell you her first kiss was with a Black boy in 1<sup>st</sup> grade? She still remembers his name, first and last. Just the other day she said, with no prompting, “You know, lately I’ve been finding Black men so attractive. Is that weird?”

“Black and white together.”

What is weird, I thought, is that she felt compelled to say something like that at all, like sixty years after the marches she still had to explain herself (to her own daughter, no less) for recognizing handsome Black men. Like she gets bonus points for calling a Black man *hot*, like she is doing a service. Over the years I think my mother has grown further away from those marches, lost sight of what compelled them. Undoubtedly, she has missed

the point. Maybe she always did. But you?

“Black and white together.”

Maybe I never got to know you, but I somehow know you, devoted Catholic, mother of many, lover of cats. Surely you were not marching for the white-friendly vision of Blackness to prevail, the vision of Blackness that would sit and look pretty, assimilate without kinks into “white” society, forget America never really was a “white” society. Right? And yet you clung to the Catholic Church even when the men in charge sought to expel you, humiliate you—

Mom never tells me the details. But I know there are letters. I’m afraid to read them. In some ways, I’m afraid to know you. Which version of you is the real one? The one in my head, or something else entirely?

“Black and white together.”

James Baldwin was a Black man. James Baldwin was once a child preacher. He once believed. He sought refuge. In youth, the church kept him away from what he perceived as worse distractions. But it didn’t take high profile assassinations to push him away, to disillusion him. For him, the church was just another fact of life in racist America, a point of stagnation, a place where Black people were allowed to exist in a way that still made white society feel safe and unthreatened.

For you, the church was real. The church wasn’t a phony haven for those who had no other place to run. It wasn’t the lesser of two or more evils. What you taught you truly believed, even as you aged, even as you saw your Catholic president assassinated, the leader of the SCLC assassinated, many others assassinated.

“Black and white together.”

When I was growing up, Mom would tell me God is love. I don’t know if she got it from you. Not everything gets passed down through words. But even with the Bible in hand, you could not look at violence and call it God’s work.

And though you were a white woman, I know you suffered. The institution you loved the most pushed you away at every chance, despite your sincerity, your song. And though you might have fought against the racist evils of the world, you never really *had* to experience them yourself. Is that why you could smile in photographs, to the very end?

I think both you and Baldwin can be right about religion. Baldwin was sort of an optimist. A bitter optimist, a begrudging one. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, he wrote that if

America were willing to accept the truth—that it is not, nor has it ever been, a white nation—and accept its real self, it could flourish in a way no other nation could. The raw potential realized, the creativity and innovation tapped. The hard battles already fought. “Black and white together.”

And I don’t know if you could ever articulate your deepest beliefs. I have none of your pen-to-paper ideas about racism. I don’t know if you read Baldwin or saw America “as we are,” like he thought we should. Where did your moral outrage come from? If it didn’t come from your own pain, whose was it?

Black and white together. You and Baldwin and your churches, your oppressions. If I am drawing parallels now, perhaps you drew them in the 1960s. Sometimes the simplest answer is empathy.

What did you see in the Civil Rights Movement?

I think, maybe, love. I think, maybe, the music.

[Insert title here]

## A Contemporary Lament

Carder Venable

Where are You, O Muse that once roamed this Earth?  
Where is Your ancient Rhyme; where is Your mirth?  
You whose sweet Song Orpheus idly sang  
And with its fine Tune Earth's primal bells rang.

[Insert transition here]

But now—

[Begin free verse here]

A ghostly echo of the will to create  
Is all that now resides on this plain of cannon.  
We can now see everything.  
There is nothing new,

[Change up the left alignment. This is the Contemporary  
period for God's sake!]

Nothing that breaks its flat ground,  
No mountaintops or valleys to disrupt the useless vision:  
A vision that stretches far,

[Insert rhetorical question here]

But at what cost?  
Everything before; everything after  
We know; we expect

[Resume rhyme scheme here]

While Calliope-inspired Homer gives  
Life to dead trees, where the ageless Word lives,  
We put words on dead paper with dead ink,  
And with these beginnings we have no

[Insert a word that rhymes with ink here]  
link.

[Insert—

I stare at the screen,  
Which breathes with artificial life,  
Eyes straining in the spectral blue light.  
As—behind me—Dawn's rose fingers  
fade softly  
into night.

## Why I Hate the Ocean

Samantha Williams

When I learned about the irukandji jellyfish,  
the way its sting infects a person not just with agony  
but a sense of doom,  
I thought about your buttermilk teeth and the joint pinched  
    between your lips,  
smirking at me like you would in  
your mugshots twenty years later,  
pink-webbed eyes, tangled hair and dark beard  
looking for all the world like Charles Manson  
upon his arrest on December 13, 1971.  
I second-guessed the wisdom of reentering your line of sight

even as I recalled kissing you under the truck  
at the drive-in movies,  
axle grease on my arms.

The tentacles of the irukandji  
are pearled with beads of light,  
tugged through the water.  
Tempted fish capture the poisoned bait  
and are digested into nutrients,  
disintegrating within the irukandji's clear bell.  
My land-mammal instincts tell me that digestion should  
    never be seen,  
and this is just one of the reasons  
I hate the ocean and everything in it.  
The dirt is home to me,  
the dirt in the garden where you plucked peppers,  
a toddler in a diaper and red, rubber boots  
on the TV in your mother's living room.

Toxicologist Jamie Seymour, who has been stung for the  
    eleventh time,

and his research partner, Teresa Carrette, return to the surface.  
They writhe and vomit,  
their skin flushed, hearts humming.  
They describe their symptoms in Australian accents through  
clenched teeth,  
analytical even in the face of death, flooded with  
venom that makes you give up,  
that makes you forget the night we spent  
in damp grass, looking up  
at the stars that lured us like pearled tentacles,  
makes you wish you were  
still down there,  
in the clear water like vodka in a Mason jar,  
still down there,  
drowning.



Sunny Shepard

**She Never Stays**