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2016

# Zephyrus

2016



**A publication of the English Department  
of Western Kentucky University  
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**Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award**

David Haydon  
"Tongue"

**Browning Literary Club Poetry Award**

Josh Daniel  
"Netflix & Chill"

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

Rachel Sudbeck  
"Seal Women"

**Wanda Gatlin Essay Award**

Dakota Phelps  
"Exsanguinated"

**Zephyrus Art Award**

Elizabeth Hoffman  
untitled

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

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Hyojin Paik

Still Life

## Are You a Listener?

Sara Ann Alexander

SIRT-1,  
the assertive one,  
looks like a sun with orbiting  
neuro-responsibility,  
stress resistance,  
and insulin sensitivity.  
Similarly, the sun hits my skin  
and it's back again:  
unwelcome warmth  
in the course—  
fingers turn blue  
while they trace routes of Neptune,  
now the furthest planet away,  
the only one Johann Galle did not see first.  
He projected his feelings  
on a plane,  
played with instruments,  
knowing the distance  
and other planets in the way.  
A stray orbit of Uranus told him  
to look in the telescope, then  
named the blue transgressor  
after the Roman God of the Sea.

Lesser known omens  
cling to cope  
and flits of hope  
drown and swallow  
harrowing pleas.  
SIRT-1 failed my energy,  
dimmed stars  
in my sky.  
Mitochondrial orbits

as big as a cell—  
the nuclear core bits a dysfunctional hell,  
enzyme function that cannot tell  
why the lie is better than  
stifled reality.  
I'm more like Maria  
than you could ever see,  
and I take my own great exceptions to ill hours.

Who else is out there?  
Shakespeare, you can leave  
unless you too are a listener—  
scour the sky until fate's here  
and we all die,  
that signature move of the poet  
or who he claimed to be.

**Breathe If You Know What I Mean**

Sara Ann Alexander

You won't build my house—  
Oak foundation erect  
as a church steeple,  
deceitful floors  
and swinging doors  
grained with every year;  
more years here than around my finger.

You won't plant acorns  
between my legs;  
rainstorm segues  
from her to me.  
Slumber in lumber  
is not a sleepy tree.

Party of three  
or partly free?  
Do you dare  
to compare us,  
the bundle and the temptress?

If I press  
or impress;  
dress, to undress  
You notice me, a lotus among  
Cherry  
blossoms, a caution

of unfaithful murk.  
Birch forests speak  
louder than we.

**One Time This Van Flipped and You Were My  
Gracious Inertia**

Sara Ann Alexander

Masks line the sullen road;  
Faces slowed to avoid collision and  
facts of roadside derision  
when brake and Jesus wheels  
take a Godspeed curbside appeal.

Raccoons litter the E lane, their  
stiffened limbs  
a tenor christened with regret  
collected when I hear your name,  
Levi, a spy for daunting ail,  
a haunting perfected  
where you thought you failed.  
I couldn't blame you

only me. When I couldn't see  
the blood in your eyes  
behind the mask  
when the bullet pulled  
you  
away  
and I can only find you as  
roadkill along I-65 and highway 41  
along the sullen trail home.

I am not alone,  
but a glutton  
to dream your sails  
unveil again.

## Facts

Josh Daniel

This world we live in  
lends itself to uncertainty.

I don't know  
(for instance)  
The distance between the earth  
and the moon

Nor do I know  
the names  
of the elements spread across  
the periodic table.

But I do know  
some things:

I know

there are  
110 edges  
around the rim  
of a quarter.

I know

the national animal  
of Scotland  
is a unicorn.

I know

in 1943  
a surprise volcano erupted  
in a cornfield  
in Mexico

And I know

beneath your layers of irony,  
and out past  
the gulf of my reticence,

Lies the fact  
of you and me.



## Netflix & Chill

Josh Daniel

I remember an episode of  
"The Office"

(I watch too much TV)

when Ryan

hooks up with Kelly  
on Valentine's Day,  
not realizing the repercussions  
until it was too late.

And whenever I witnessed this trope  
play out  
on other shows

(I watch too much TV)

I would think

"This never happens  
in real life."

So

Two years ago,  
when we hooked up for the first time  
on Valentine's Day

And you were Kelly  
and I was Ryan  
I should have predicted  
the fallout  
that came  
after you wanted more  
and I did not  
and I woke up  
late that night

to the discordant sounds of  
you  
drunk,  
outside,  
laughing and slapping slices of cheese  
on to my window.



Elizabeth Oates

**Pulsate**

### **Whiskey and Turntables**

Brittany Eldridge

Did you ever look at the stars?  
I had one named for you.

Yesterday you put whiskey on your pancakes  
and you fucked me on the dryer just so you could  
feel the vibration between my thighs.  
You asked me to dance so you could  
put on Jazz music

I saw a shooting star once.

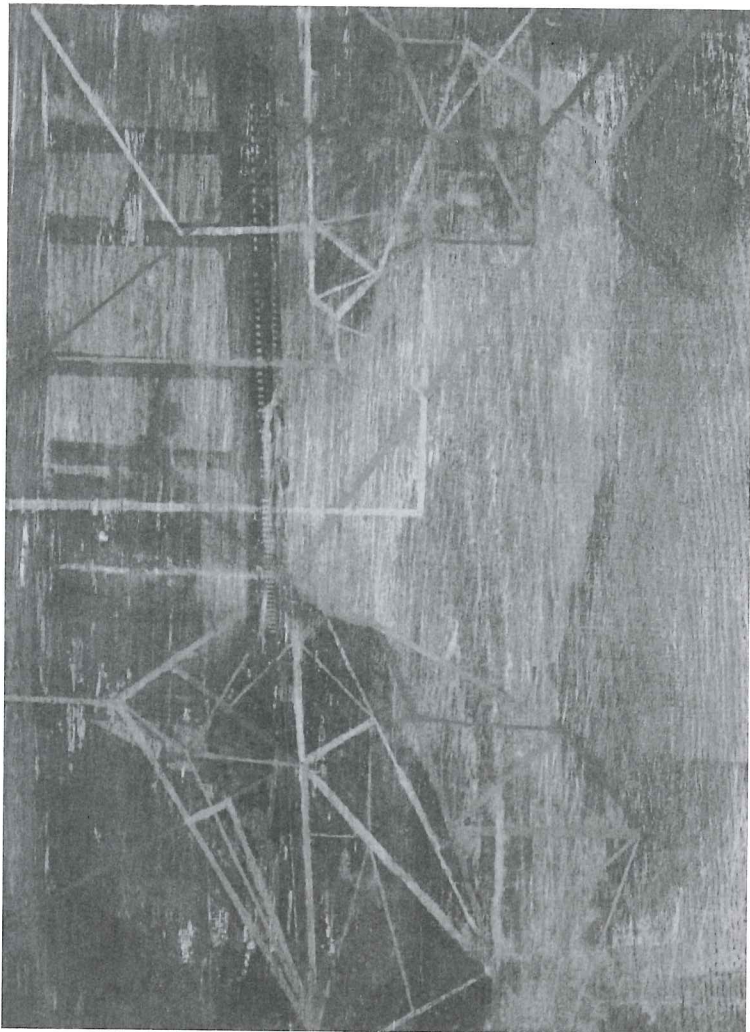
I called you Johnny Depp  
and you smiled at me.  
You put whiskey in your Cheerios  
because you said breakfast  
is the most important meal.  
You ran over our dog, Felix, today,  
and I just buried him in the cheerio box.

Did you see the lunar eclipse?

I found your note this morning  
and it said you weren't coming back.  
I'm only crying because the whiskey is gone.  
I'll just turn on some Jazz music.

Lauren Boone

Experimental Drawing



## Scavengers

David Haydon

They were scavengers, 49'ers, miners.

My grandfather tore his family  
from the Melvin Circle project  
to plant a garden.

A gold rush to Bloomfield Road  
where he could plant and pick squash.  
To a field where his daughters  
Picked flowers and his sons picked fights.

Pickers of the earth, searching,  
destroying for gold.

Our family farm is where  
my mother picked blackberries and  
I pricked my fingers and bled  
on their briars.

Homesteaders picked and chose land.  
They planted roots of home and family.

My sister's legs were the site  
of picked scabs. Her nails  
clawing, removing dead skin  
to watch them bleed  
and scab over again.

We are a land of pickers,  
a family of choosers.

## **Tongue**

David Haydon

I have a scar  
on the tip of my tongue  
from the pivoting blades  
of safety scissors  
slicing red flesh.  
Blood and spit combined,  
and a paper towel  
clotted them both.  
I told the nurse  
it was accidental.  
Maybe it was.  
Or maybe it was  
the middle child's desire  
to mute himself.  
A conscious decision  
to bleed out  
from inside the mouth.

## **Wishes**

David Haydon

An eyelash  
on index finger  
make a wish and blow  
Eyelash wishes.

Forty lashes kill a man,  
so they give him thirty-nine.  
A lash on bare skin  
to the back  
leg, arm, neck.  
A lash to ego and desire.  
Eating flesh and leaving  
open wounds behind.

I lash  
myself with each wish.

## All Is Uncertain

David Hormell

I closed my eyes and dreamt  
Frenetic thought with  
Floating geometry.  
Triangles, squares,  
Fluttering to a cardiac beat  
Somewhere.

In Japan, they have square watermelons.  
I think too much  
But little things like that  
Keep me happily distracted.

Twenty-five days ago I turned  
Twenty and all is uncertain.

My head is drenched in tragedy:

I think of Bobby Leach  
The first man to traverse  
Niagara Falls. In 1926  
He slipped on an orange peel  
And split his leg clean open.

In two months' time, he died.

Caught in these cold, frenetic thoughts  
I dreamt of thaw  
And I'm sure the Donner Party did too.

I'm frustrated, because I'm closer—  
Closer to dying, damn it, and I still haven't  
Written the next great American novel.

I am, however, gently comforted by the fact  
That banging your head against the wall  
Burns 150 calories an hour.

## You Met Me at a Strange Time

David Hormell

My mother called in the middle of the night and  
said Nancy died so I kept to myself that  
spring and my liver took a beating and my heart  
developed a chasm where she used to fit

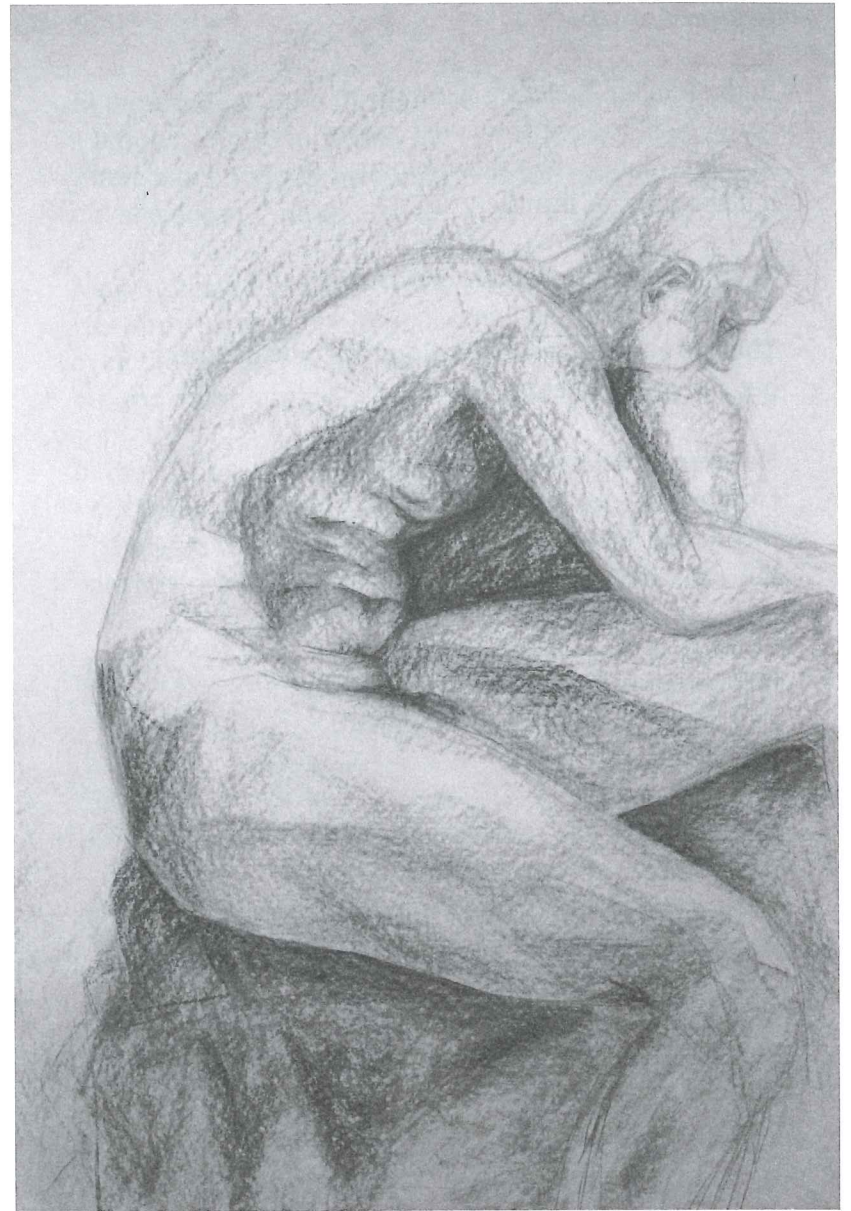
in Ohio—where the asphalt by the mailboxes was  
stained with blood, evidence of when Joe had a stroke  
and hit head and since then he's been taking it easy and  
refuses to drink coffee or talk to his father.

Naïve me, I assumed from an early age that  
all of these people were infinite  
because they knew me and I had several  
near-death experiences:

there was the time I didn't buckle my seatbelt or  
the time I rode my bike without my brain  
bucket or the time I fell down a steep  
hill—I was invincible at age five.

It felt as if my world was beginning to end  
but I didn't talk about it because  
I favor distance and feeling numb and that's why  
I wrote that poem about self-harm in third person and

I made the mistake of depending on another  
person for my happiness and I became  
unhappy and she was the second person  
to call me emotionless in a six month span.



Jianna Mirabelli

untitled

## **Kitchen**

Bryson Keltner

In the kitchen there's a woman—  
her glasses fogged from soap steam.  
My legs dangle over the cabinets,  
but she doesn't mind.

Store-bought biscuits are a sin,  
so I roll out the real ones.  
There's more flour on the floor than the counter,  
but she doesn't mind.

Her fried chicken is perfection.  
Gravy goes good with everything.  
She's pouring more sweet than tea,  
but she doesn't mind.

Pecan pies flavor the house.  
Her recipe is better than everyone else's.  
People say they're almost magical,  
but she doesn't mind.

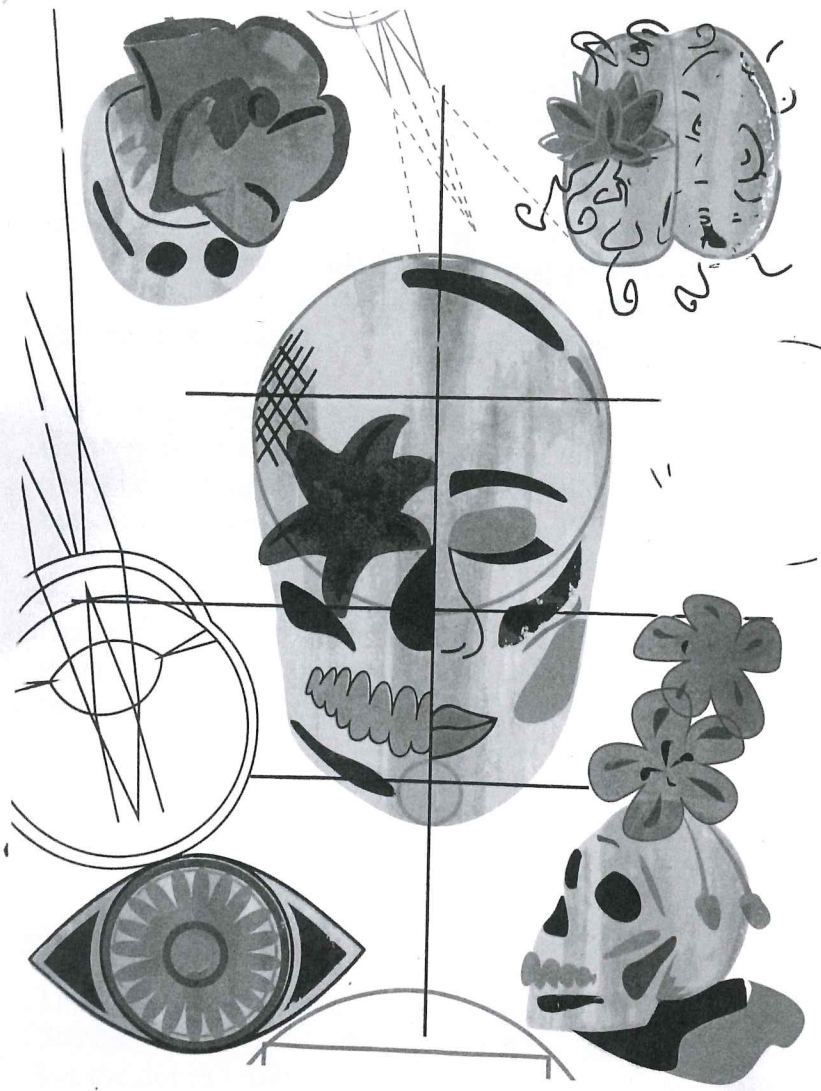
In the kitchen she freezes corn,  
but she'll never have to shuck it herself  
because I'm a little bigger now,  
but she doesn't mind.

In the kitchen she cooks a favorite.  
I am home from dorm kitchens.  
She has to make the biscuits on her own,  
but she doesn't mind.

In the kitchen you will find  
a blood pressure monitor.  
There's not quite as much sugar in the tea,  
but she doesn't mind.

Making magic is a little harder.  
Her strawberry jam still graces biscuits  
even though they're frozen now,  
but she doesn't mind.

In the kitchen, she's sitting down.  
I am coking for her instead.  
The magic will never be as good as hers,  
but she doesn't mind.



Gabby Kempter

untitled

**Disguise**  
Blake Logsdon

*"Most of the appearance of mirth in the world is not mirth, it is art. The wounded spirit is not seen, but walks under a disguise." –Robert South*

Rum drips off the frostbitten lips  
of the collapsed St. Nicholas,  
lying prostrate in the Christmas snow.

A crazed hound rips into a young girl's body.  
The blood seeps into freshly-cut grass, and  
memories that will never erase,  
stain her summer dress.  
The animal's hidden animosity,  
concealed by a friendly face.

The undersized Napoleon  
Takes great nations under his reign—  
A moment of godlike success.  
His eyes refuse cowardice,  
a soul dedicated to conquest.



## College: The Whole Thing

Emily Christine Lowe

**Your opinion doesn't matter in elementary school either. It matters in college. College is just your opinion. Just you raising your hand and being like, "I think Emily Dickenson's a lesbian," and they're like "partial credit." And that's like a whole thing.**  
—John Mulaney, *The Comeback Kid*

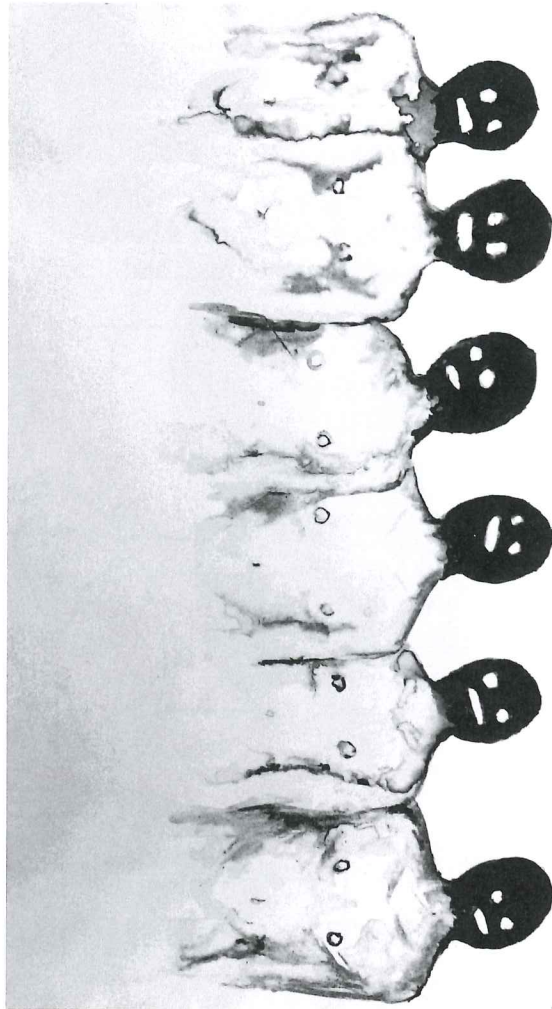
College is just you being treated like a twenty-two-year-old kindergarten, your opinion won't matter. Your teacher won't care that you have anxiety disorder and it took you the first seventeen minutes of class just to talk yourself into raising your hand, she won't flat out tell you you're wrong, but she'll tell you you're wrong. You won't talk again for the next three class periods. You'll try to, but you'll talk yourself out of it. *Remember what happened last time. The whole class thinks you're crazy.* Sometimes you'll never be right for a professor, and that's like a whole thing.

College is just Netflix, with the intermittent break for homework. Twenty-seven hours of NCIS. Five hours of sleep. Two hours of that literature homework you really should have read by now. Five minutes to decide if you can make it one more day without a shower. Twenty-three hours of Grey's anatomy. Even sex comes with Netflix. Netflix and chill. And that's like a whole thing.

College is just cramming. You have six days to study for a test, you tell yourself you need to start, but it's back to good old Netflix. You actually pry yourself away from Netflix enough to go to sleep and go to class. It's sixteen hours before the test. You won't sleep at all. You'll cry into your cup of coffee, trip down a flight of stairs, and somehow manage to pull a B out of your ass. And that's like a whole thing.

College just isn't worth it. Your dad managed just fine without it, in fact he makes more than your mom, who has a master's degree. Your dad works with a lot of men, and even a few women, who make more than your mom. None of them finished college. Men especially don't have to go to college to make money. "But you're a woman" they remind you. And that's like a whole thing.

You lay curled up in bed scrolling through your Facebook feed. Some dimwit you still call your friend explains that "There body is they're own." A friend texts and asks if you want to go out tonight. The local bar has shots on sale because it's Tuesday. Your thumb responds that you have homework and you return to your scrolling. For a few minutes you get into a heated debate about whether or not David Avocado Wolfe is actually a reliable source, because someone who graduated with your mother is one of his disciples, and you wonder why you ever accepted the woman's friend re-



Christina Scott

untitled

quest in the first place. You lay in bed the rest of the night, scrolling through Facebook and not finishing your homework. That's like its own thing, too.

## Exsanguinated Dakota Phelps

*"The art of living well and the art of dying well are one" –Epicurus*

I was twenty-one when I hacked apart dead pigs in a meat shop. Blissfully alone, I was locked inside of a refrigerated room to carefully carve a pork loin into perfect one-inch thick aiguillettes. Wiping away the accumulating blood and juices and connective tissues before plating and wrapping the slices for sale, I was able to let my mind become utterly void of any thought or concern. I just did my work and tried to do it right. I'd carve and squeeze and slice, and when I'd completely eviscerated the meat, I'd tear out the remaining sinews of pig from the plastic packaging's pooling puddle of acidulated water. Pigs and humans share something like 98% of the genetic information that is responsible for the development of our skin cells.

\*

It was a year and a half later when I saw the similarities between pig skin and human skin myself. Using a razor to unzip the delicately thin canvas of skin covering my forearm felt comfortingly similar to the resistance and friction felt when opening up a plastic-wrapped pork loin. Blissfully alone, sitting against the beige wall on my bathroom floor, I could dip my arm into the nearly overflowing too-hot water of the bathtub, wipe away the bloody juices, and be right back in that meat shop, mind devoid of thought or concern. When the laceration was deep enough, I could reach inside and feel that familiar satisfaction as, having eviscerated flesh and tendon, I tore at vein and nerve.

\*

Attention to detail is critical when handling pork loins. They have an irritating tendency to slip out of their plastic-wrapping when first opened. To avoid that problem, I found hooking my fingers into the flesh on the side of the loin opposite that of the opening in the plastic to be a useful gripping technique. When carving up the loin, I found that by placing the index finger of my dominant hand against the spine of the blade approximately two and a half inches from the bolster lip, I was able to ensure more surgically precise incisions.

\*

Attention to detail is also critical in order to successfully execute one's suicide. Especially when one's concentration is as jeopardized as mine was. As to why I did it, I will say only that my circumstances seemed to demand it. So I endeavored to do it right. Having read about the symptoms of exsanguination, I begrudgingly approached my task with the same diligent preparedness that I had learned in that meat shop. The water in the tub needed to be just cool enough to prevent unnecessary burns, and just warm

enough to induce a sort of coagulopathy. For that, I had a thermometer handy. To regulate fluctuations in body temperature, a box fan faced me and a blanket lay beneath me. To assist with post-incision subcutaneous navigation, a diagram of the interior wrist was taped to the toilet in front of where I sat, and to combat thirst I had prepared a pitcher of water. For carving I had an apparatus fashioned from an Exacto knife and three Gillete Fusion blades. For waiting, a pack of Fortuna Menthol 100's.

\*

At the end of the day I would drive home from that meat shop, arms covered in muscle and guts, and I would begrudgingly force myself to take a shower. I remember how muculent the pig's plasma would be, and how long it would take to get off of my skin, and how I didn't really mind because the hot water felt so good after spending the day locked in a refrigerator. I would climb out of the shower, into my bed, and sleep like a baby, perfectly exhausted from a day of hard work. The next morning my alarm would start beeping, and I'd wake up ready to take on the day.

\*

After opening my arm, severing my ulnar nerve to reduce sensory input from the ulnar region, and breaking my artery with a quick tug, I relaxed my arm into the perspicuous water and watched it become clouded as a red balloon inflated out of my wound. I watched as that balloon grew and grew, until finally enough of my blood had been expelled that the air tasted like pennies, and the bathtub was a sanguinary chalice. I closed my eyes, sighed out all my worries, and gratefully waited to be consumed by closed unconsciousness. The next morning, beeping from the machine next to my bed woke me up as the nurse came in to check my stitches.

I was afraid.

## Blessed Are the Hippies

Haley Quinton

I met Jesus  
in a urine-soaked alley  
behind a bar last night.  
He wore blue jeans  
and looked Middle Eastern.  
I'd always been told  
to look for a white guy  
with flowing hair  
and a beauty pageant sash,  
but I knew it was him.

He told me to beware  
the leaven of the Pharisees.  
I didn't know what leaven was,  
but even I knew enough  
to stay away from Pharisees.

Then he said that the meek  
shall inherit the earth,  
and I liked the sound of that.  
"Meek" made me think  
of gentle and loving,  
and I'd always felt pretty meek.

Then Jesus patted my shoulder,  
looked me in the eye,  
and said, "Peace, bro."  
I think he meant  
"blessed are the peacemakers,"  
but I couldn't be sure.

**Essential Oils are Wrong**  
(after Michael Robbins)  
Haley Quinton

I want to believe  
the truth that's out there  
shall set you free,  
but I've seen the writing on the wall that says the cake is  
a lie.  
Well, then, let them eat the lie  
and forever rely  
on the livers they wear  
on their sleeves.

I had a dream  
you dreamed  
a little dream of me,  
or maybe just of Jeannie,  
in black and white  
before the Technicolor tones,  
and anyway, as Conrad says, we live as we dream—  
alone.

**The Mermaid Who Was Stuck in a Human's Body**  
Haley Quinton

Adelaide, the youngest Carter child, thought she was a mermaid.  
Regina, her mother, blamed herself for showing her The Little Mermaid when she was still "Too young."

Penny, Ada's much older sister, rolled her eyes at this.

"There's no such thing as too young for The Little Mermaid, Mother," Penny said.

Robert, Ada's father, didn't care one way or another what species Ada thought she was, as long as she wasn't causing him any trouble.

"She'll grow out of it," Robert said over his newspaper between bites of breakfast cereal.

Penny indulged Ada's behavior. She signed her up for swimming lessons at the Y when Ada was five years old. Ada, being a mermaid, didn't need the swimming lessons, but they gave her the chance to go swimming all year round.

Penny sat in the bleachers, the air hot and damp and smelling of chlorine, listening to the sound of her sister and the other children splashing around the pool. Ada was a much better swimmer than the other kids, though they were still too young to realize it. Their parents, however, were very aware. Ada was never invited to their birthday parties.

Penny flirted with Benji the lifeguard during the lessons, so bringing Ada wasn't entirely selfless.

Regina began speaking seriously about taking Ada to a psychiatrist shortly after Ada's eighth birthday. She thought Ada dropped the whole "I'm a mermaid" thing, at least until Ada's teacher called her in for a conference.

"I want you to read this," Mrs. Robinson said, passing a piece of loose-leaf notebook paper to Regina. The classroom had the salty, sticky smell of young children, and the walls were brightly plastered with primary-colored posters. Regina took the notebook paper and skimmed over what was a (quite good, in her opinion) story about the adventures of a mermaid.

"So what seems to be the problem?" asked Regina after finishing the thrilling conclusion where the mermaid had successfully chased off a shark with her bare hands, single-handedly saving her family.

"Mrs. Carter, this was supposed to be a personal narrative."

Regina went home and told her husband about it while Ada was playing in the backyard. Penny, who at this time had started college but still came home some weekends, rolled her eyes.

"Ada's fine, mother. So she wants to be a mermaid. What's it hurting?"

Robert didn't care one way or another, as long as Ada wasn't causing

him any trouble.

Regina told Ada she was taking her to see Dr. Schmidt after Ada turned twelve. Ada was slowly but surely losing friends. None of the other seventh graders wanted to be friends with the weird girl who told everyone she was a mermaid.

Ada told her she wouldn't talk to Dr. Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt, after all, was a human doctor, and Ada was a mermaid.

Penny, at this time graduated from college and living at home again since the recession had taken away her career dreams, worried that this whole thing was her fault for encouraging Ada for too long.

"Can't you just not tell the other kids that you think you're a mermaid, Ada?" Penny asked her. They lounged on Ada's bed, Penny painting Ada's toenails.

"But I am a mermaid," said Ada.

"You're not," Penny said.

"I am," Ada said. "I want my big toe done in purple, please."

Robert didn't mind his daughter's newfound social exile much, because at least boys would stay away from her if she were unpopular. He remembered what he was like as a teenager, and he didn't want anyone like that around his little girl.

Ada spent her sixteenth birthday party in the pool at the Y alone. Regina still blamed herself for showing her *The Little Mermaid*. Penny blamed herself for getting Ada the swimming lessons. Robert was now a bit concerned, though still relieved that his daughter's unpopularity spared him from the boys.

Ada floated in the deep end with her face under the water, listening to the sound of the blood in her veins. It sounded like ocean waves.

"No one ever asks me what I think," Ada, eighteen, said to Tommy, who was sucking on her neck. She tasted of saltwater.

"What do you think, baby?"

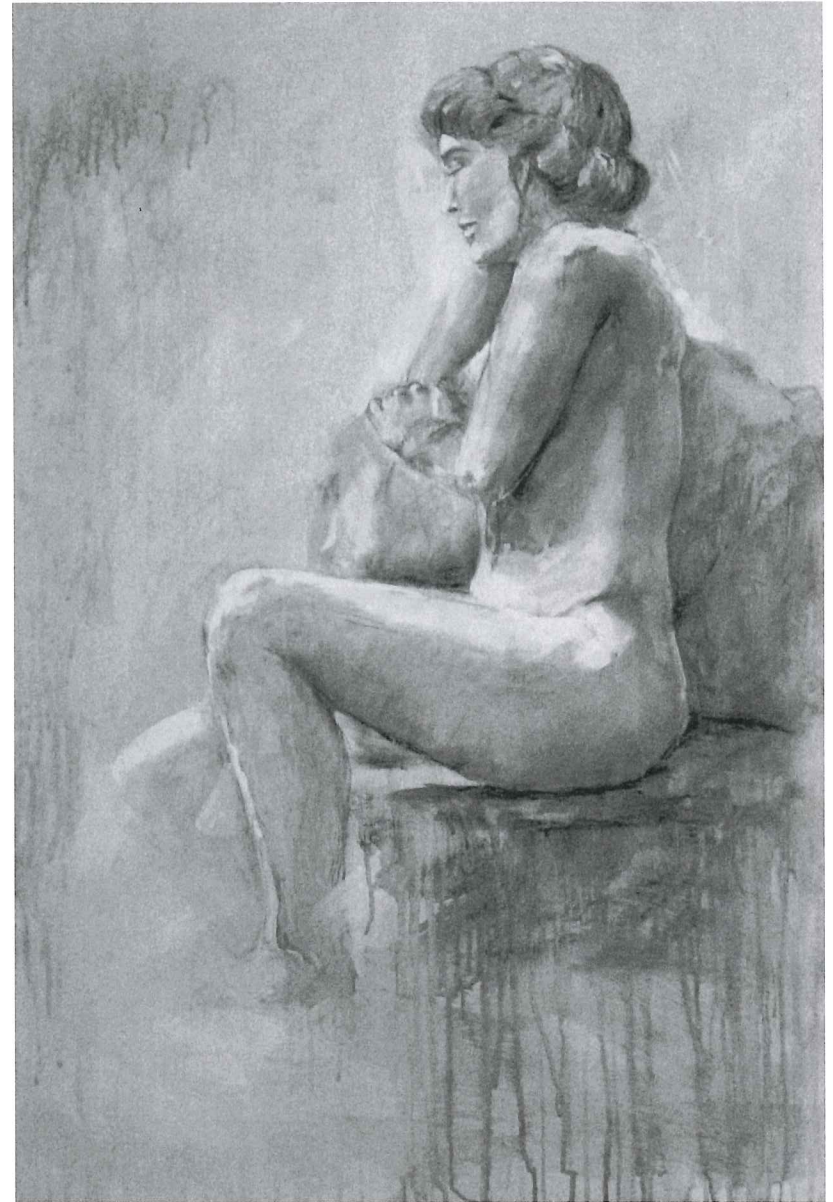
But Ada knew Tommy didn't care what she thought any more than anyone else did. Robert was at home reading the newspaper while eating cereal, still confident that no one would touch his daughter. Tommy's hand crept up Ada's thigh.

"I'm a mermaid," said Ada.

"Yeah, you said that," Tommy said.

"Do you know what mermaids do to sailor boys?" "What"? Tommy leered at her.

"Drown them."



Sarah Jannush

Fading Away



Emily Volger

untitled

### Choices

Natalie Marguerite Rickman

The life inside me  
was barely beating  
when I decided  
to suffocate it.  
I put four  
misoprostol pills  
in my vagina  
and cut my own  
cord to motherhood,  
stamped out  
my legacy.

Choice.

It's like childbirth  
my mother said,  
I had a miscarriage once,  
I had you two years later,  
labor pains are the same,  
she said  
you're in for a doozy  
she said.  
Its been fourteen days  
and death still creeps  
out of me  
and worse than the pads  
constantly lining  
my blood stained panties,  
is the death smell I can't escape,  
copper and vomit  
floating like gas  
at my pants zipper.

Choice.

I shower every day,  
rub my asshole and thighs  
with a patchouli soup  
to try and cover up  
the hellish smell.  
It rides over e  
like a man  
in a dark hooded cloak,  
like a death man.  
I day dream about babies  
but that's always been true  
even before I murdered  
my child.

Choice.

I dream of nursery walls  
lines with photos of me  
and my sister  
and mother  
and father  
as babies.  
My suckling child  
will know family.  
I try to picture myself  
in this apartment  
with a child.  
It could work for years  
if we shared a bed  
which we would  
share a bed.  
Choice.

I can't help but wonder about  
the mother  
I would be.  
I have long since imagined,  
a beaming smile,  
a baby on my hip,  
I practically wrote this death  
in to my life.  
I dreamed about it too hard.  
Choices are easier in dreams.  
Now I write the word  
one hundred times,  
reflect on its meaning  
and it seems foreign to me.

Choice.

I am twenty three  
and I want to earn  
my masters degree.  
I work at a frozen yogurt shop,  
and make ten dollars an hour,  
my income is disposed almost  
as soon as I clock out.

Choice.

What choice did I have?  
What kind of life would we lead?  
Death still swims in me,  
that's no longer a choice.  
Will parts of it swim forever  
like parts of a child swim forever  
in their mother's womb?

Choice.

I mull it over,  
sip my coffee.  
The word is completely foreign.  
Twenty days after  
the anniversary  
or roe vs wade  
and I don't feel entitled  
to choosing  
even though I am white,  
mostly straight,  
even though  
when the doctor called  
I made an appointment  
with a clinic  
in Louisville  
almost immediately.

It didn't take twenty minutes  
for me to decide.  
It didn't take twenty minutes  
for me to choose.

## Names

Natalie Marguerite Rickman

*There are names I will not name my children.*

I.  
I'm twenty-three in two months.  
I'm driving home at ten in the evening  
from working a six hour shift.  
The air is humid and cold  
and I'm taking long drags  
of well deserved nicotine.  
I walk in the giant door  
of my one bedroom apartment.  
I live alone  
but not by choice.  
I have a French sounding name  
but I'm from the bluegrass state—  
Marguerite, like my mother.  
My t-shirt is wet from washing dishes  
for the last hour and my hands  
are starting to dry out from sanitizer.  
I throw the shirt on the rug  
and sit in my bed naked.  
The French are so casual about being naked.  
Let's not talk about living alone.

*There are names I will not name my children.*

II.  
There was a loud growl  
of a Jeep Rubicon in our drive way  
for eight months the year  
I was fifteen.  
For eight months my father  
went more bald every time



I walked out of his door  
with perfume under my shirt  
and eyeliner in globs on my lids.  
Chris, in the Jeep,  
he was a wrestler,  
he had a wrestlers neck  
and a wrestlers grip.  
He took my virginity in a hot tub  
and called me a trooper.  
We had sex ten more times  
and he moved to Virginia.  
My father grew lines  
on his expanding forehead  
for six months  
while he listened to me cry  
on the other side of my bedroom door.  
We never talked about it.

*There are names I will not name my children.*

III.

Its Halloween and I have globs  
of eyeliner on my lids.  
I am a 60's English super model.  
I am the first person alive  
or dead to ever have their heart broken.  
I have red teeth from drinking dark wine  
and lines on my mouth  
from well deserved nicotine.  
I'm standing in the doorway  
watching you through your zebra  
mask, watch Courtlin through your mask.  
She stands shoulder to shoulder  
with me while I try to talk to you.  
I look up at her, six feet tall  
in six inch heels.

I ask, but she wont excuse us.  
Women are so territorial.  
She is dressed like a cat  
if cats wore lingerie,  
with three sixes on her face.  
You walk away together  
and she holds your hand  
on the sidewalk  
and I cry about it  
for the next ten days.  
We haven't spoken since.

*There are names I will not name my children.*

IV.

My uncle Matthew was in prison  
for eight years, his daughter  
was ten when he got locked up.  
Twenty years later and she still  
can't brush her teeth.  
Sexual trauma fucks people up.  
Of course most of her teeth are gone now  
from years of avoiding her hollow space.  
She smiles a gummy grin,  
her skin has always been pale  
and covered in moles.  
She pulls all her hair out,  
I say *pulls* because it's constant.  
She wears a blonde wig  
but the wig is made to have dark roots.  
Christmas is unbearable,  
everyone hugs him  
and keeps a close eye  
on the babies running free  
around whatever house we are in.  
I want to scream and hit him.  
I can almost feel him sliding into my gut,

like the trauma is mine,  
like I want to brush my teeth.  
His gaze is enough to creep me.  
My family never talks about it.

*There are names I will not name my children.*

V.

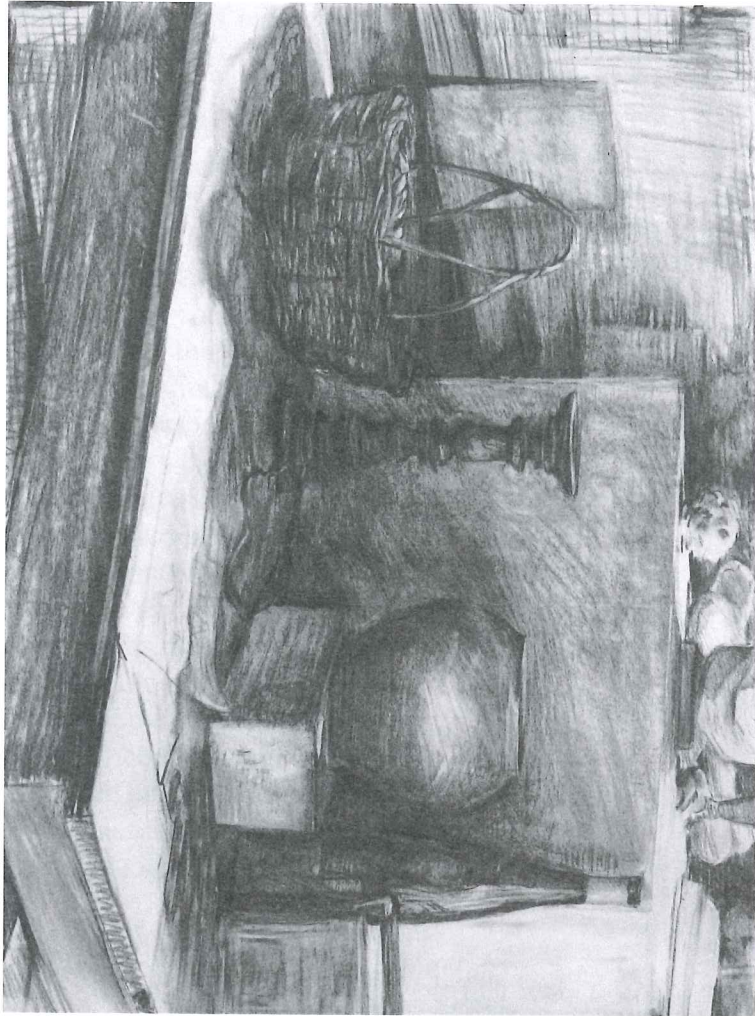
When I was eight I missed  
the first two weeks of school.  
My parents took me on vacation  
to the south of Florida.  
I was two weeks behind  
the rest of the class  
for the rest of the year.  
My teacher, Kimberly,  
I can't even remember her last name,  
yelled at me while I was cleaning  
my eraser head on the carpet  
and I smashed my little noggin  
on the corner of the table.  
I started to cry eight-year-old tears,  
the pain was real  
but I was too old to gush.  
She asked me what two times two  
was and I couldn't answer.  
She asked all the other children  
in our class to come to her wedding.  
We never talked much.

VI.

*I will name my child Green; she will always be budding.*

She will have the fierceness  
of a giant forest  
and stand tall,

her leaves reaching high  
in to the wind.  
She will be liquid,  
a nature that can freeze  
or flow or become mist;  
she is fiercely changing.  
I will carry her with me  
on my hip long after she  
is old enough to walk.  
I will hold her close to me,  
parts of her swimming in me  
from the moment she is born  
out of love or hate.  
However she is born,  
whatever season she sprouts in,  
she will always be Green,  
she will always be budding.  
Our conversations  
will be endless, we will talk  
and swim in changing water,  
we will bud and watch the trees bud  
in every season.



## A Thing That Should Be Beautiful

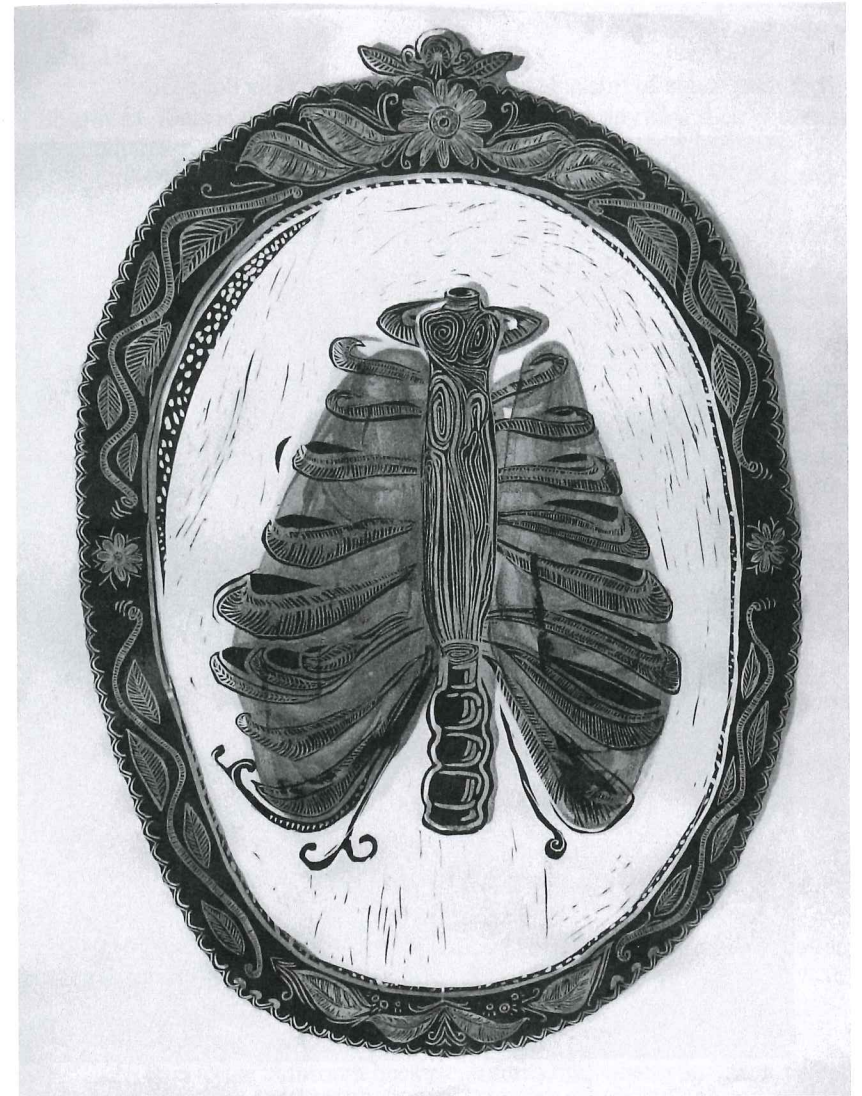
Erin Slaughter

“There is a temptation to eulogize that which I do not understand and to think of a sister as a thing that should be beautiful. A thing that does not bleed at night. Whose horrors are lesser than or equal to my own. As if I could know my own.”

—*Sister*, Alicia Jo Rabins

1. I was named for roots and nostalgia, a country whose tongue is knife and earth. My sister’s name is bread broken and given, first my father’s and then my mother’s. Body and blood.
2. Our mother taught us songs to spell our names. They sounded suspiciously like jingles from cereal commercials.
3. You called me Sissy. I called you Bissy. We caught frogs in Grandma’s back yard and named them after each other.
4. You were small and loud and bright, like a city filtered through a keyhole.
5. On the afternoon of my sister’s wedding, we are drinking mimosas from paper cups in a stranger’s kitchen. In an hour, she will get married in a stranger’s living room. The doors and shutters are closed, and bodies are rustling outside. She is wearing white. My dress is black lace.
6. When she went to rehab, we found her toy box filled with cans of Budweiser and Four Loco, her backpacks stuffed with aluminum and glass. Behind her dresser: eyeshadows stolen from Sephora, and a \$1200 camera stolen from my mother.
7. I was sitting in my car in the Wendy’s parking lot when she called and told me she was pregnant. She was freshly eighteen and dating her boyfriend for three months. I said: Holy shit, Jesus Christ. She said: I’m going to keep it. We hung up the phone and I cried.
8. When she came back from rehab, her hair was short and in her face was a gnarled swamp, the kind I’ve only seen in the eyes of evangelicals. She painted her walls blue and my mom bought her brand new furniture. I locked my bedroom door at night.
9. At our father’s funeral we made everyone leave the room. We dared each other to inch closer to the casket, into the yellow light.
10. Remember when we played house? When you were “Ma’am” and I was “Sir” and dolls were children? When the rooster crowed we’d sit up from the carpet, wipe the fake sleep from the corners of our eyelids? And the rooster sounded like a villain in the basement of a haunted mansion?
11. Items at my sister’s wedding: Three Christmas trees. Two strings of

- pearls my mother wore at her wedding. A picture of my dead father on the fireplace mantle.
12. You were always the beautiful one.
  13. In a dirty Dollar General, my sister tells me the baby's name will be Gracelyn, and for days afterwards, my heart echoes: Gracie.
  14. When we were young I promised you that once older and able, I would buy you a kitten. Now I have a cat, and you have two bloodhounds. You have a daughter, and I have only these stories.
  15. When she was pregnant I met her for lunch to convince her that she shouldn't disown our mother. She said our mom was weak, she didn't trust her with her child, didn't care. In the restaurant bathroom, she lifted her shirt and said: Feel, the baby's kicking.
  16. My father called her the son he always wanted.
  17. When my niece was born, my mom only saw her granddaughter through the pictures on my phone. The neighbor's wife had a baby girl and my mother cried every day.
  18. The story goes: when you were a toddler you bit me so hard and often you caused welts, drew blood. Mom took us to the doctor, and the doctor said you would only stop if I bit you back. I began to cry and said: But I could never hurt my little sister.
  19. The story goes: I told you that you would fly if you jumped from the top of the swing-set, but you fell and broke your arm. When I saw the cast, glorious purple and waterproof, I practiced jumping from the fence every day.
  20. You were always the beautiful one and you knew it.
  21. Stephanie is a shame that lives in my blood, like my father does; the shame of family members awful and loved and not loved well enough. The difference is in breath, in pulse. The difference is that she's alive, and there is no eulogy for the living.
  22. My sister is an item on a to-do list, a trip to the post office, a story still moving, dancing, shifting like smoke.
  23. I call you to ask if you remember what we called the sticks we used to beat our father with when he screamed at our mother, and you were too young, you don't remember, but I know it's not your fault.



Karly Manuel

untitled

## How to Work the Night Shift

Rachel Sudbeck

### Step 1:

Get a job working the night shift as some sort of concession to your insomnia. Reason that, if you are not going to sleep anyway, then you might as well get *paid* for not sleeping.

Tell yourself that this counts as taking control, rather than giving up.

### Step 2:

At training the first thing your manger will tell you is, "It doesn't matter what you do here, so long as the laundry gets done and the breakfast gets out."

Learn to fold a fitted sheet. The day shift will always leave these for you because they're hardest. Turn the lobby tv to the Hallmark channel (perfect background noise) every night, and set your laptop up in the laundry room with a pirated episode of Game of thrones. Stand by your bin of fitted sheets and tuck and curl and fold them until you are dancing and turning with each motion. Listen to the Lannisters have sex graphically as HBO will allow.

It doesn't matter what you do, as long as the laundry gets done.

### Step 3:

Ignore the text from your brother asking if you are going to church in the morning. The idea is patently absurd, because in the morning you will be far too busy staring at the ceiling, trying to sleep, and not sleeping, and not even getting paid for it.

Stand at the desk. Try to stay awake.

Stand at the desk. Try to sleep.

Wish that you had at least tried to keep up the church thing when you came to school.

But none of this matters, because the laundry is done and breakfast doesn't need to be out for another two hours.

### Step 4:

Run to the bathroom because, it turns out, when you haven't slept in two days it wreaks hell with your digestion. Dry heave into the toilet while the broken ceiling light flashes staccato into the back of your skull.

Run audit. Count your drawer again and again because your hands don't work and your mind can't keep track.

Start making breakfast at 3:30, right when the Hallmark channel



switches from reruns of Frasier to reruns of I Love Lucy.

It would take maybe five minutes to put out breakfast if you didn't have to brew coffee. Chew on a bagel and try to drink a cup for yourself.

Dry heave again.

Now that breakfast is out, however, nothing you do matters.

Step 5:

Take out the trash. Put on your jacket because it is cold and the sun is only just rising. Someone found cocaine in your trash can once. Today you find a large store of moonshine. You can't see it, but you can smell it, and the trash bag is heavy with liquid. You have to heft it over your shoulder in order to get it to the ancient dumpster between your hotel and the Cracker Barrel next door.

The bag will split, because of course it will.

Allow the glass to burst on the ground behind you and allow the moonshine to burn against your shoes and pants and the small of your back. Hold your breath against the sick sweetness.

Think that you are tired.

Think that you are going to throw up.

Think that if you do throw up it won't matter because the laundry is done and the breakfast is out.

Step 6:

Wait behind the desk and concentrate on not smelling like moonshine. It's already 6:45 by the time a customer wanders down for breakfast, and if you can avoid talking to him for another fifteen minutes then you will be free to go home and crawl into bed and not sleep.

At 6:50 though, two men will walk in, and the older one (the father) will say with a thick accent, "I'm sorry, but it's very cold outside, and we were wondering if we could pray somewhere here?"

Your Customer Service persona will take over, and your voice will be pitched slightly higher as you say, "Of course sir, do you need privacy to do so?"

They will, because the one man who is eating breakfast is staring as he smacks his cereal.

Let them into the back office. Customers aren't supposed to go there but it doesn't matter what you do. Leave the door cracked open a little and count the drawer again.

Listen. Let the drawer close while the rolling lyrics of a foreign prayer waft under the door and wash over you. It is 7:10. The morning person is late. It doesn't matter.

When they leave the young man will thank you bashfully without the accent of his father. The older man will say, "I want you to know that we

appreciate this very much. It means so much to find such kindness."

Customer service Persona will be silent long enough for you to say, "I promise, it's no problem."

He will say, with a strange emphasis, "But it really does make such a difference."

Step 7:

At 7:15 the morning person will wander in.

Go home.

Sleep.

## I've Been Moseying Downwards for Long Enough

Rachel Sudbeck

The Gods say  
"true art is born of suffering."  
And I say  
thanks *mom*,  
but I am fifty pounds of cellulite,  
and a hundred pounds of gumption,  
so I'm a smidge too much  
for stage and screen.  
So Kurt Cobain can come  
however he wants,  
and Oedipus can stick it to anyone  
but the man.

The Greek chorus is gathered  
in my high school auditorium,  
and with the metronome pounding  
their three part harmonies soar  
and they sing  
"You are a fuck up and you are fucking up  
and *what* do you intend to do after graduation?"  
And I say  
I'm not in this for your catabasis,  
and I can't say if Kanye will agree,  
but Orpheus had the best comeback tour  
of all time.

The muses swim  
into the lines of my notebook and say  
"here we are now,  
entertain us."  
And I say  
sorry bruh, but I was never very god at the guitar,  
so for the time being,  
here's Wonderwall.

## Seal Women

Rachel Sudbeck

I never used to think that kids were very cute, but Preston is the genuine article. The girl is all doe eyes and chestnut curls, and band-aid knees and gap teeth.

"Have I told you about selkies?" I've been tucking her in these past couple weeks, since her dad started working the late shift.

"No."

I lean in, like I'm telling her a secret. "At night, seals roll themselves up onto the sand and take off their skin." I get all my best stories by clicking around the folktales section of Wikipedia.

"Oh gross!" She's delighted.

"Yeah, but do you know what's under there?"

"Guts and stuff?"

I shake my head. "Nope. Beautiful women. Like, perfect women. Drop dead gorgeous women. They just peel off their seal skins and fold them up like a coat."

"Seals aren't *girls*."

"Well have you ever looked inside a seal? Hm? Have you ever dissected one? How do you know they aren't all secretly sexy ladies?"

Her mouth is wide open. That's what's great about kids. As soon as you make it sound like something *could* be true, it is.

"And," I say, "if a guy can grab one of her seal skins before sunrise, then she'll marry him and they'll have a bunch of babies."

And this is what I love about Preston, because as soon as I tell her that she says, "Why do they leave the water then?"

"So they can go dancing." I'm not certain on this point, but it sounds like a good enough Fairy tale reason.

"Where do they dance?"

"At the club."

She rolls her eyes. "Seals do not" she rolls her eyes again, for extra emphasis, "go to clubs."

I resist the urge to make a joke about clubbing seals. "How do you know? Have you ever been to the ocean?" I'm only asking this because I know she hasn't. She shakes her head.

"Well if you go at night you'll see their footprints. Flipper to stiletto, shimmying across the sand."

She wrinkles her nose. "They do all that just to dance?"

"There's no music under the sea." I mimic like I'm underwater, I gurgle and bubble and kiss her on the forehead. "And they want to catch up on tv."

"Is it worth it?" She's laughing.

"Oh. Probably. Probably they think it's worth it." I tuck her stuffed bear in next to her, so that there's a girl head and a bear head, staring up at me side by side from under the blanket. "A husband and some babies aren't the worst thing on earth."

\*\*\*

The women in my family are all built like seals, all round in the middle but coming down to dainty little points in the hands and feet.

My mom used to go swimming at the Y on Tuesday nights to try to burn some of the fat. Sometimes I'd come with her, drape myself across one of the pool chairs, and shout encouraging things at her while she swam, lap to lap, over and over again. My cheerleading would echo around in the chlorine air and the other swimmers, if there were any, would either look at me like I was annoying or like I was adorable. I thought she deserved some encouragement for all that back and forth. A pool without a slide seemed exhausting.

Maybe ages later she'd emerge, wring out her hair, and start chasing me around the locker room, demanding a hug.

"No, you'll get me *wet*," I'd scream, running around the lockers, loving avoiding her. The game was always over once she had to pause to snap at the elastic around the ass of her swimsuit. She was always bruised back then; her thighs and arms brushed with blue and purple, stark against the white locker room, all of the other women ignoring it.

When my father told me she'd left I pictured her getting sucked down the drain of the pool, everybody ignoring that too.

\*\*\*

"Okay, here's one. A woman is lying dead in her bed. She was murdered, but there are no marks on her body. The only other thing in the room is a pair of scissors. How was she killed?"

Leni's on her phone, the screen glinting off her face, making the sweat on her forehead glow blue.

I'm naked, panting, sprawled next to her across her mattress. "Is this some kind of threat?"

"No, you asked me for a riddle earlier and I couldn't think of one."

Her band had just finished a set, and she's leaned across the bar while I was cleaning dishes and asked if I wanted to go home with her. I'd told her to ask me a question that was a little hard to answer.

"I'm not sure that that's how pillow talk works."

"Well at least I'm not telling you about seal mermaids or whatever. Seal sirens?"

"You know sirens were actually bird women?" I've read this particular Wikipedia article.

"No shit?" Leni settles in across from me, looks me right in the eyes, like she's interested. And she does look like a bird too, all willow

bones and hooked nose, all long neck and sharp shoulders.

"Mm-hmm. They just live by the ocean. Like seagulls or something."

She laughs, like it's funny. "Have you ever even been to the ocean?" She's only asking because she knows I haven't. I shake my head.

"Well, blow off that guy you're shacking up with and I'll take you. It's worth seeing." I snort. "No, I'm being serious. I'll take you." She props herself up on an elbow. "You'll have to pick a side soon anyway. Things get too serious and that little girl is gonna start having expectations."

"Hm." I nod a little, and she starts walking her fingers up my ass. That's something I love about Leni. I told her I hate my but once, and ever since she's made it a point to love it enough for the both of us.

She sings, under her breath, "Darling please, hold me tight, grab me by the cellulite." She leans in and kisses my left asscheek, with all the ceremony of a knight kissing the back of a princess' hand. She settles back in across from me and we lay there for a second, staring at each other. Silent. For a second I think that the ocean can't be that much better.

"So where's this girl's mom anyway?"

"She just left."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

\*\*\*

Preston's father is always telling her how beautiful she is, and I can't say why it annoys me. Every morning he hands her a compliment with breakfast. When I ask him why he just shrugs and says, "I read somewhere that you should do that with girls, so they don't grow up like, needing validation."

What I want to tell him is that he's beautiful. That I was never mad at my mom for leaving, just for not taking me with her. That if my mom had left me with a father like him, maybe things would have turned out different. Maybe I wouldn't have grown up to be the type of woman who sticks around just so that she won't be the type of woman who leaves.

He's at one end of the kitchen, I'm at the other. He's smiling. "But you're one to talk. All she'll talk about anymore is that weird seal story you told her."

I'm washing some dishes. My hands have gone all puffy and wrinkled, like an old woman's. "Oh shit, she doesn't even know how it ends."

"Hm?" He's come up behind me, all close, all casual, his breath fogging against the back of my hair. I keep washing.

"Yeah. These seal women, they always find their skin. Their husband forgets to lock it up or one of their kids finds it in the attic or something, but they always do. And as soon as she gets it she tears off her clothes and she runs down to the ocean—she'll run across a country if she has too—



and she dives in and disappears forever." He's backed away a little, he's leaning against the counter. "And her husband can't get her to come back, which makes sense because he's been like, raping her. But even if her kids go down and cry and scream and drown themselves trying to get her to come back up, she won't. She's gone forever. Just like that."

"Shit." We aren't looking at each other, but his hands look tense on the counter. "That's kind of fucked up."

"I know," I say, and pull the plug.

## Tsukumogami Rachel Sudbeck

Objects can gain life. We know this. We know about the blanket that still smells like someone after twenty washings, or the lamp that turns itself on when we're out of the house, or the doll that used to hug us back. It's as easy for an object to gain a soul as it is for a person.

Which is to say, it's close to impossible, but it happens.

The average mountain holds a thousand experiences. Even the smallest ones have seen children get lost or legs get crushed or lovers fall apart under starry skies. The average mountain has been kissed and broken and carved and created thousands of times over.

Nobody remembers the first time they woke up and knew that they were a person. It's an inexplicable and terrifying and quiet experience. If a mountain starts to carve out a consciousness then it is no less surprising or impossible. It's hard enough to believe that something as small as a human could contain a universe rattling around inside them.

And if a mountain starts to experience the sheer gravity, the whole significance of its own existence, then it's no surprise that it might feel how any of us have felt, and it might wish that it were simpler, and softer, and smaller. And it might collapse under the weight of a thousand years pressing downward and it might emerge from its own rubble in something resembling a human shape. Perhaps a bit more condensed, perhaps a bit stranger about the eyes, but no bigger than your average grocery store clerk or bicyclist.

A world can become bigger and smaller at the same time. The base of a tree is a whole different experience than the top. The earth from a thousand feet up seems full of space. It's only close to the ground that you notice how cluttered it is. How full it is. When a mountain becomes a person they feel cramped and small and a thousand times bigger than they used to be. They discover their own softness. They discover motion.

There's no real trick for recognizing a mountain-turned-man. You can find them in how their spines are ramrod straight or their backs are curved and arched. Their skin can be cragged or smooth, dimpled or thin. Their eyes come in browns and greens and the sick blue of stagnant water. You might think the air is thinner around them. You might be expecting more than they give you.

Scientists measure the height of mountains by planting a radio at the top and timing how long it takes a signal to reach them. This is how we measure experience too, by seeing how long it takes for a word to reach someone's eyes. Not every mountain is the same. There are no instructions to being a person.

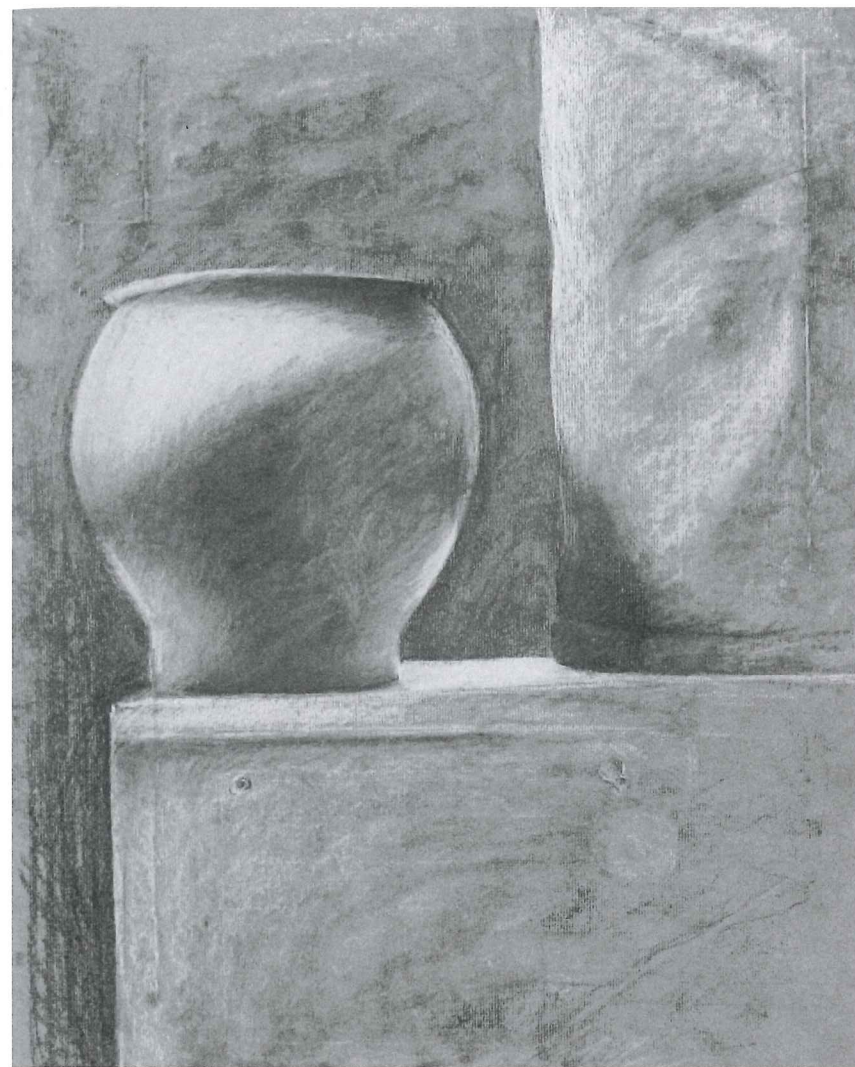
If you were to crack one open they would come away in layers like

a geode. Their voices are capped with snow. They cough up diamonds that leave their throat raw and they scratch at the gold that rises up under their skin. Their hips curve like valleys and their smiles carve fissures into their cheeks. They might or might not seem like they're being viewed from a distance.

There aren't a lot of them, but maybe you've walked in on one of their support groups when you were looking for the bathroom at the community center. Maybe you saw a balding overweight man and a petite girl with freckles and a boy who was more leg than anything else and a dark woman whispering something to her baby. Maybe when you opened the door they all stared at you, stock still, the girl holding an oreo, the man holding some punch, all of them more solid than you've ever seen a person. Maybe once you'd apologized and closed the door you got the impression of a whole world, a whole existence that only emerges when you aren't looking at it. That's how some people feel after hiking, anyway.

Maybe you've held someone and felt like you were holding something a thousand times bigger. Maybe a kiss felt heavier than it should have. Maybe you were sketching someone's figure but ended up with a landscape and hands raw with charcoal. We can be next to people and find ourselves feeling very small. We can look in someone's eyes and feel how inconsequential we are, how wide the world is. We can feel our aching limbs and know that we have conquered something immeasurable. We can take our picture at the edge of the cliff and feel like we have experienced something incredible.

We can shrink ourselves down by degrees. There is nothing wrong with being smaller than we were.

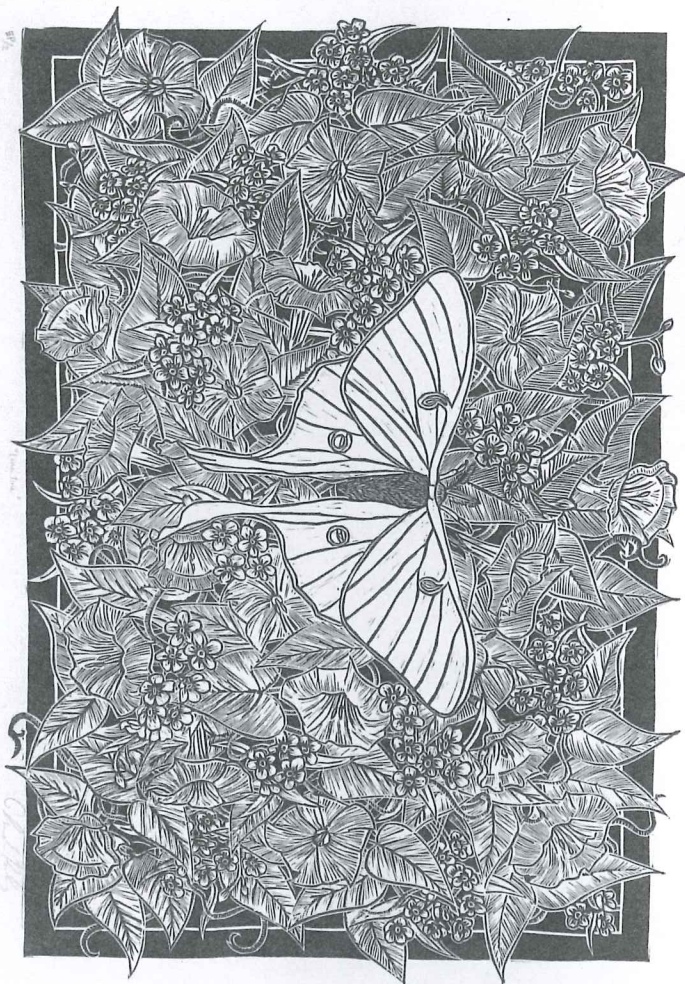


Sarah Jasper

untitled

Alexandra Brumley

untitled



**f. warden**

Natalie Turner

You are the last pack of Oreos on the shelf before nuclear apocalypse. You are the sensation of a smile lingering on lonely lips, back turned, fingers coiled around an alien zygote that may one day grow up to be called "satisfaction." You are the empty victory, the triumphant roar of early man to a rolling storm. You are the glass against my face in a car without air conditioning. You are the final blow of a sparring match that lasts three hours, blood and iron, bated breath. You are my last words etched underneath my tongue sixty-six years in advance.

You'll be the one to hear them, too.

**Blessed / Happy: A Continuation**  
Meredith Wadlington

I can hear them in the driveway,  
from the porch.  
They are parked in their car,  
fighting.  
Maybe about nothing.

*cigarette ashes gather  
library fines are issued  
the Jehovah's Witness leaves a pamphlet  
we tie our shoes  
we wash our hands*

I AM TIRED OF FIGHTING  
I AM TIRED OF BEING AT ODDS WITH YOU  
I CAN'T LIVE LIKE THIS  
I LOVE YOU  
I, I,  
I

*Billy Joel plays on a jukebox  
Nordstrom catalogs yellow  
the wino makes a collect call  
the president stated  
the board voted*

He is yelling,  
it sounds like,  
with all he can muster.  
I cannot distinguish her cries  
from the laughing of our neighbors' children.  
They are soft;  
they reverberate with fear.

*travelers fiddle for cash  
a father points the way  
Walmart greeters sticker hands  
children throw penny wishes  
children drink cold milk*

Soon I learn that the topic regards chores.  
I sip my coffee, thinking that  
if only we would do our dishes as soon as we finished supper,  
these two human beings  
in love  
might not be screaming in the driveway.  
I CANNOT CONTINUE TO LIVE LIKE THIS

*a record skips in Chinatown  
an athlete signs a baseball  
the Pope kisses babies  
the sink overflows  
we stuff our mouths*

I read another page and pretend not to hear  
the silent, violent crashing  
of a thing so good

*a mother paces a waiting room  
a son feels his lover's goosebumps  
a troupe of assassins order coffee  
apples roll off the counter  
loggers fell a grove*

I LOVE YOU  
WHY DON'T YOU BELIEVE ME?

## Monday Evenings After Jeopardy

Lena Ziegler

There is an old man outside, digging through our garbage. He comes by every Monday evening after Jeopardy, though I don't think the two are related. His fingers poke through fingerless gloves as he unties, so carefully, the remnants of discarded days tossed curbside for county employees to haul away from the picturesque homes, on this picturesque street, in this neighborhood where the only people picking through garbage are jaded ex-spouses seeking court-ordered revenge. He is alone in his garbage gleaning, exhaling white clouds and muttering to himself. I wonder if he would mutter to someone else, if anyone else might listen. I would. Instead, every Monday evening I watch him. Like a habit.

They speak softly behind closed doors, but my mother's voice carries through the space beneath their bedroom door and the floorboards. They don't know I know. But they discuss the situation of the old man digging through our garbage, who knows which bedroom window is mine because I wave to him from it. He waves back and I wish I could dig through his garbage and capture the sad remainder of his days, aerating his loneliness so it could dissolve in the winter air like the clouds of his breath that vanish so quickly, it's a wonder they were ever there at all.

I'm not allowed to talk to him. *He chose the life*, my father says, sipping tea through pursed lips. I wonder how he knows this. He lifts the teabag from his mug, places it in the cradling dip of the spoon's surface, and squeezes the fluid from it, strangling the bag with its own string. He drops its mangled remains in the garbage can below the kitchen sink and I imagine the old man finding it next week in our garbage can outside, curbside from this discarded conversation, from another discarded day. My parents do that with years. My father does that with people. I follow him to the living room. He has taken a seat on the couch with my mother. *But he deserves more than this life*, I say. I glance back through the window and the old man grins at me. My father sips his tea and pretends to forget—Monday evenings after Jeopardy, my Grandpa waves hello.

## My Barbies Fucked Like Animals

Lena Ziegler

I learned about sex, when my best friend Rhiannon placed my sister's Jordan Knight doll on top of my Hollywood Barbie and told me that's what they were doing.

"They're having sex," she said, an old expert of erotica.

"What does that mean?" I asked, prophetic of the lifetime I'd spend asking that very question.

"He lies on top of her, then they fall asleep," she replied. *Obviously*.

"Does he *have* to be on top?" I asked. She thought about this.

"No. They can be on their sides too."

\*\*\*

My Barbies fucked like animals. Not just the New Kids on the Block dolls, which were the early 90s upgrade to Ken, but everyone else too. Stuffed animals. Ninja turtle action figures. Each other. It was all normal to me. Because if sex was only lying on top, or lying next to another body, then why did it matter who you did it with? From what I could tell, it didn't.

Sex served no purpose in the storylines of the contrived little lives I created. It was just something they did, because they could. Because I felt like making them do it. I was a pre-school porn director, who could throw away plot and authentic human behavior in favor of plastic bodies rubbing against each other for a good five minutes before collapsing.

\*\*\*

Middle school and I was still playing with Barbies and still making them fuck. I switched schools a few times, but when I finally arrived at Rice Elementary in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and met Dayna, a tall, blond and radiant 11-year-old who was also a new student, I had found my partner in smut.

Dayna played with Barbies too, only she had easily twice as many as I had, with different hair colors, skin colors, and even some with soft flexible stomachs (still lean of course, but much more lifelike). She even had some real Ken dolls, mixed in with the N'Sync and Backstreet Boys editions. Whereas I grew up with just two boys to rotate between all the girls, Dayna grew up with enough boys that every girl had one all to herself, and could even choose the one she liked the most. This did not feel reflective of middle school.

We picked Barbies to play ourselves – the thinnest, most beautiful ones, with long shiny hair and hooker makeup. This is who we *really* were. We dressed them in bikini tops and booty shorts and made them give lap dances to the Ken dolls, while playing Ludacris's "Area Codes." We'd grind their bodies together, as if to start a fire. We never did.

\*\*\*

In 8<sup>h</sup> grade Dayna and I started to grow apart. We had stopped playing with Barbies when sex became a topic we preferred to discuss rather than act out with toys. I became friends with Stephanie, another new student who looked more like me – chubby, pimply, glasses and uncertainty. Dayna became a cheerleader.

Stephanie was Southern, sweet and shy, and didn't know the first thing about sex or blow jobs, of which Mattel had made me an expert. I schooled her in all things

"You just put the guy's penis in your mouth," I said, oral sex aficionado.

"Why?" She asked, blushing.

"Because they like it," I replied. *Obviously.*

"What do girls like?" She asked. I thought about this.

"I have no idea."

\*\*\*

I first had sex with Chuck, who immediately after taking my virginity asked if I had ever tried Pro-activ. We were married and divorced four years later.

Then I had sex with bodies. Multiple, faceless bodies, not attached to names. Even though I knew what girls liked and what I liked by that point, it didn't appear anyone else did. I realized Rhiannon was right. Sex sometimes is a man lying on top of you until you both fall asleep.

I was 22. He had me on my stomach and I couldn't move. It was combat. He had a warhead missile. I had words he said he couldn't hear, for the sound of himself exploding. I wet my pillow with streaks of mascara. He said I made him feel bad. I said I was sorry. The battle continued. He fell asleep beside me. I couldn't sleep at all.

A body lying on top of you so you can't move isn't sex, it's something else. But no one ever told me that, and that's something, no one likes to talk about.