



 WKU®

Zephyrus 2013

# Zephyrus

2013



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**Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award**

Maggie Woodward  
"Watching Your Parents Dance"

**Browning Literary Club Poetry Award**

Bradley Englert  
"Shouting at Trains"

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

Ben Hussung  
"How to Be White in Bed-Stuy"

**Wanda Gatlin Essay Award**

Samara Skinner  
"Gravity Pull Me Down"

**Zephyrus Art Award**

Justin Comley  
"Plague Doctor"

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

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## **Butterfly Kiss**

Josh Beal

Dear Jem,  
The football team piled irises beneath your locker,  
hoping their aroma would mask the stench  
of suicide.  
Quarterback Nick forgot to scrub the fresco of dog shit  
from your Doctor Who folder when he stole  
the Note.  
“Black eyes will be the least of your problems,” it said.  
“Do us a solid: blow your brains out.”  
You did.  
I hope the gun sighed a prayer  
as you knocked the bullet back like Lunesta.



Justin Comley

**The Last Pier**

## Oatmeal Cookies

In the Style of Sharon Olds' "Crab"

Hannah Bertram

When I eat oatmeal cookies, moisten the brown  
crumbly confection on my tongue  
I think of my grandmother. She'd power walk  
into the kitchen, fidgety woman in a  
quiet house, she'd wait for me to come  
and help or not. She'd stand and stretch into the  
cabinets pulling down cocoa powder, spillable  
stuff, peanut butter, caramel-  
colored scoop to be bobbed for.  
I'd come in, and charge into the fridge  
snatching primary ingredients, setting the  
butter on one side, its mother milk on the other. She made me  
lots, because I loved it so much,  
but there was never enough, no-bake spoonfuls delicate like a  
certain grandmother I know. Rain droplets  
Christmas platter style had the look of perfect  
cow patties, quick oats  
white as undigested grains of straw, but the  
best part was the warmth, she'd serve me  
the remnant in the pan undisturbed,  
splattered guts of the batch--it was such a  
kick to speedily scrape that bowl,  
whiz my metal spoon along the side  
like a Nascar driver. She loved to feed me  
and all she gave me was fresh, she was willing to  
stand over stovetop, bubbles, steam, to go  
to the Mennonite store for foodstuffs,  
the way she had gone to the orphanage to  
get my father. I look back and  
see myself on her couch, eating, her  
gangly string-haired sow, the explosion of fine  
chocolate art, I look back further and

see her in her kitchen, pouring sugar, her  
veined hands poised--she is like a  
Keebler elf, mild, stirring the mixture  
thoughtfully, living out her life of care and wistfulness.



"GROWTH"

4/5

Hannah Holgate

Hannah Holgate

Growth

## Morte's Ride

Alyssa Davis

"I've always liked making this drive," declared Paul Pearce, "It's the most scenic route I've taken on the job so far. And the conversation, as you can imagine, is never boring."

At this last statement, he briefly snatched his eyes from the twisting road to steal a glance at his companion. Both Paul and his passenger were dressed in the finest suits, only Paul donning the hat of men of his trade.

Paul Pearce referred to himself as a "transportation specialist," the way secretaries tend to refer to themselves as "administrative professionals." But there's only so much you can do to church up the title of a man whose job consists only of driving a hearse.

The companion, one Frank Morte, smiled at Paul's comment, and adjusted himself in his seat. Morte had made the forty-five minute trip many times in his life, as their destination, Paisview, was his home town, but he had never made the trip in a suit this stuffy. This was his first ride in a hearse, and despite the fact that his loved ones hadn't deemed him a nervous fellow, he had unwillingly began a compulsory habit of checking the casket with every turn, bump, and valley in the road.

Paul caught his partner checking out the casket, and couldn't help the grin that played out on his lips. This was a habit in companions that he'd grown used to, as he'd had many, many ride-alongs in his extensive career as a transportation specialist.

"That's not going anywhere. Just enjoy the ride. That's what I always say. Roll down your window. Take in the air. It's a beautiful day to be enjoyed. It'd be a shame to waste it."

Frank did as he was told, with no argument. His fingers stroked the window trigger with a tinge of tenderness before he pressed the button. The window was stubborn in its spot for a brief moment before it began its descent, slowly allowing a thunderous bellow of wind to cascade through the open hole. The cool October air poured into the hearse, violating Frank's hair, and filling his welcoming lungs with the smell of crisp fall cleanliness, decaying leaves, and just the slightest hint of rain, a hint only noticeable through smell, as the sky was an unmistakable sapphire, only slightly tainted by few clouds.

It had been so stuffy in that damn hearse.

Paul allowed Frank to soak in the day before he began asking his passenger his standard questions. He had to entertain himself somehow, right? Besides, Paul had always been interested in people. Every story is different, and some are really worth hearing.

"How old are you, Frank?"

"Fifty-two."

"Married?"

"Yeah. Mary-ann. God, she's beautiful. Even at fifty, she's still the knock-out she was when we met thirty-one years ago."

"Kids?"

"Two. Got a son, Brett. He's the oldest. Real rebel, this one. He once lit our cat on fire because Bug, that's what I've always called Mary-ann, Bug wouldn't go buy him his He-Man Stretch-Arm, or whatever bullshit it was kids wanted in '88. Bug and I thought he was gonna be nothin' but trouble. He's surprised us, though. Got himself a good woman, and she set him straight. You know how women are."

Paul did know. He'd had many women ride alongside him on one of his long trips carrying bodies from city they'd lived in to the city they wanted to be buried in. Most were just like Frank, anxiously checking the casket. Rarely did they ever enjoy the ride.

"Last I knew, his woman is preggers, but that's just what Bug thinks because she waved off wine at dinner. You know women and their 'insight.'"

Paul knew very, very well.

"Then I got a daughter, Issa. My baby. Such a daddy's girl.

Whenever she made Bug mad, and Bug wanted me to spank her, I'd just hit my thigh and tell Issa to cry. I couldn't hurt her. She was just so little! She's still little. A dancer, too. She got a scholarship to Northwestern for ballet. This is her first year. I hope she's happy there. She deserves it."

Paul nodded appropriately and thought of his next question. The first few questions are just typical first date questions, existing only to fill the silence and make everyone just a little more comfortable. Next were the interesting questions.

"Tell me, Frank. What's your fondest memory?"

"Lord, Paul. Fifty-two years, and only one memory? Let me think about that one."

Frank tilted his head back on the head rest and closed his eyes. Paul looked over and watched the wind beat on Frank's face. He waited patiently as Frank attempted to fit fifty-two years into one perfect memory. Paul had high hopes for Frank. Most of his ride-alongs stated the usual fond memories. Getting married, having babies, falling in love. All good memories, yes, but so generic. Paul was ready for a little change from the ordinary.

"I love my wife and kids. Don't get me wrong. But there are certain moments in a man's life that go beyond a wife and kids. You know what I mean?"

Paul didn't really know, but he was intrigued. He nodded his head.

"When I was nineteen, my parents bought me this brand new, black, 1977 Pontiac Trans Am. This car was every boy's dream. I took it for a ride one day on some back roads behind my neighborhood. It was July, I had just graduated, and I just wanted to live that summer like it was my last, because in a way, it was. I wasn't going to college, so there would be no more summers for me. Anyway, I was going around a bend when I noticed a dead skunk in the middle of the road. Normally, I wouldn't have given a shit about a skunk, but I don't know. Today was different. I stopped my car, got out and looked at this skunk. It was lying right on the striped line, and I couldn't even tell what killed it. It looked so perfect, and was staring right at me. And I don't know, it just made me think. For once, in this stupid skunk's short, insignificant life, someone was giving a damn about it. And it wasn't even alive to appreciate it. I know it sounds sad, but I'll never forget that feeling, and I have never nor will ever feel it again."

Paul was shocked. He didn't see how a dead skunk could ever cause a man's life to come to a defining moment, but he appreciated that it could. He looked over at Frank and smiled. Frank returned the sentiment.

"It's probably a good thing it was dead. Bastard would've sprayed me had it been alive."

At this, the moment was broken with Paul's chuckle and Frank's powerful guffaw. Paul liked Frank. He really did. That's what made this such a sad trip.

The duo had finally arrived at Longfellow's Cemetery on the outskirts of Paisview. Paul cut the engine, got out of the car, and opened the back of the hearse. Frank remained inside. Six men were gathered at the back of the car, and they began to work the casket until it was free of the confines of the hearse.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Paul lamented, "What was his name again?"

"Frank Morte," one of the pallbearers answered.

"Frank," Paul repeated, as he got back in the car.

As Paul got back in the hearse, Frank shot him a worried look.

"I guess you know who I am," Paul said, "And you know why you're here."

"I know," Frank said, "Needie."

"Needie Taylor," Paul retorted, "I'm shocked she didn't make it in your fondest memory bank."

"You know damn well it was one time! You can't tell me a person has to suffer over one time!" Frank pleaded.

Outside Frank's window, the pair could hear the preacher laying into Frank's final moment above the surface of the earth.

*And now a reading from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall*



not be in want..."

"But that's my job, Frank. You know that. You knew that the second you came along for this ride."

Frank began to cry softly in the passenger seat. "...He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul..."

"You molested your daughter's best friend."

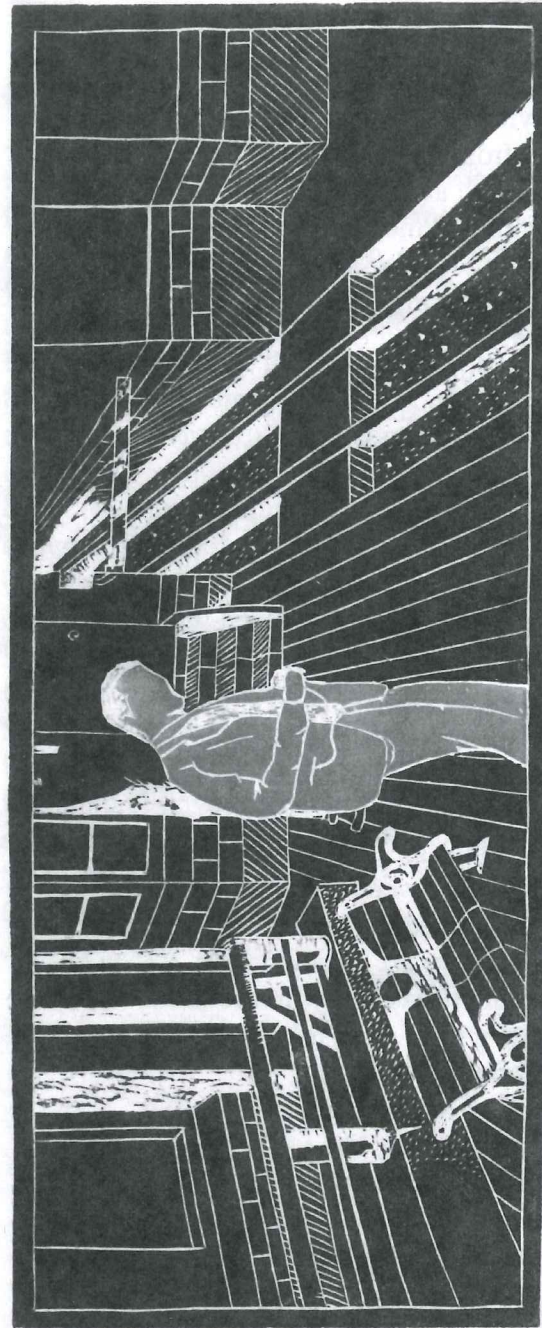
Frank's sobs became audible. "...He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and your staff, they comfort me..."

"She was five years old, Frank."

Frank began to wail. "...You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows..."

"And for that, I'm afraid you're coming with me."

Paul started the engine, and a faint smell of sulfur filled the cabin of the hearse. "...Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."



Ethan Hodskins

2/16

Awaiting Life

## Shouting at Trains

Bradley Englert

“Even now in heaven there are  
angels carrying savage weapons,”  
was a quote from the Bible that  
I made up to yell at a man  
who was yelling at me, while  
a girl in a light blue dress  
crossed in front of my path  
and I immediately walked away  
from the dark-suited man and  
our petty argument about things  
that don’t so much matter to me  
now, as much as they will never  
matter to me, as much as they will  
only matter when I sit alone wondering  
about the girl in the light blue dress  
that walked by and made that awkward  
sort of eye contact that neither of you  
meant to make, but it happened anyway,  
and now you have to deal with it, dammit!

When I was walking away from the  
dark-suited, King James toting arguer,  
he shouted, “There were never angels  
among you, just men masquerading  
as gods.” But, I wasn’t listening  
to him anymore because my mind  
was made up, and I would follow  
this girl and finally say hello,  
like I had meant to every time  
I saw her around town, like i  
had meant to throw rocks at  
the local train with my best friend  
and yell, “Give me back my dad!”

At the top of our lungs until neither  
of us remembered why we were throwing  
round, brown pebbles at a slow-moving  
rusty and graffiti stained train, and then we  
would walk home together, sit in front of  
the TV and say, “We showed that train.”  
But neither of those things ever happened  
because I am habitually scared to move  
into unfamiliar territory. A captain sailing  
up and down the same river forever, and  
being told that he must now move to a  
different swath of river, but will be  
blind-folded, spun, and demeaned  
on a basic moral level, until he no  
longer knows how to be a captain.  
Until he no longer knows how  
to sail a boat or even swim.  
Until he’s standing on the shore  
watching the river ebb and flow  
and says to the man next to him,  
“One time, I sailed this river.  
One time, I was alive.”

## Bananas on Fire: The Virgin's Guide to Surviving Automatic Heat Death

Isiah Fish

It's one of those days when the Twilight soundtrack is skipping and I'm in the kitchen with my hand on the big hand of the clock and my head buried in the freezer because it's so hot outside the weatherman combusted on-air, and Sue, the anchorwoman

puked in horror--she couldn't take the smell of burning fresh--and passed out. Parents were outraged that their third-graders had to see such atrocities on prime-time, where's that bitch Barbara Walters when you need her? I hate her on that one show, with the four

other acclaimed ladies. They are always fighting and sometimes I wish they'd just all get bitten by vampires, but that would upset more parents of third-graders, and there would be a mob of angry parents in the streets yelling and littering and raising all kinds of hell

and some brave man would hold up his hand in a condescending manner and tell the mothers to get their asses back home, because third-graders aren't as prudish as one might think, nowadays they are out there having full on sex! It's not an uncommon occurrence

to catch a kid giving an innocent, sloppy blowjob during nap time. I remember when I was in kindergarten, a girl showed me her cotton-candy pink panties and whipped out what I thought was a dick but was just a big black marker so don't be surprised at the perversion

of today's youth. When I was a camp counselor at Hi-Ho last summer a girl named Alexa asked me how to give good head so I took a banana out of her Hannah Montana lunchbox and threw it across the field to show her that that's how far she should stay from penises for at least

twenty years. You know how they say your first time is so important? That's bullshit. Your first time is awkward, you'll probably bite it and the guy will say something like, "Hey that's not corn on the cob," and you'll be embarrassed but you'll finish and then he'll pop your cherry

in his smelly rec room on top of even smellier hockey practice gear and you'll realize there were no fireworks or champagne or romance but you'll look down and see everything is soaking wet and you'll feel like you're swimming in who you were, and you'll cautiously dive into who you're becoming.

## Getting Burned

Isiah Fish

From atop the bell tower, the pop of a firework  
a mile away is the flare of a girl whose bra  
I could never get undone quickly enough.  
I see her disapproving scowl in the way the  
lights burn into the troposphere.

I think of my brother the day he was shot,  
the way he ran his fingers through a lighter  
without getting burned, how I hated him  
for not teaching me his tricks.

His ghost was sighted hitchhiking to the edge  
of the square, where his brain drowned in a bullet's  
puncture. If I remember him too fondly,  
my head feels like the delicately callused hand  
of a mechanic. Once, I kissed him on the mouth  
and he shamed me for my hard-on. That night,  
dinner had never been so awkward.

From the bell tower, I finger a peppermint  
wrapper in my pocket,  
TV static on my thigh,  
salt and pepper on my fingers.

My brother stands in the cold  
like someone I've never met.

Like someone I see through  
smoke at a bonfire. I hear  
so many things flickering.

## Ma-mi-lap-in-a-ta-pei

Isiah Fish

Everyone exists in someone else's ribcage.  
You've heard the hardest part is letting go,  
but that's a big lie. I received a picture  
of a friend smiling from his jail cell.

I couldn't have been more disappointed  
when the song I thought should've played  
never played. At parties sometimes,  
I just stare at the punch like I've drowned  
before. The way someone touches you  
for the first time is the same way another  
person touches you for the first time.

I wouldn't mind being a sanctuary  
for you and your cat. If we could all  
sit at the table and make music

I'd be okay with not having a big Christmas.

Did you know there's a word for the look two  
people give each other when they both want to  
make a move but are equally afraid to?

It's called "mamihlapinatapei."

## Stockholm Syndrome

Isiah Fish

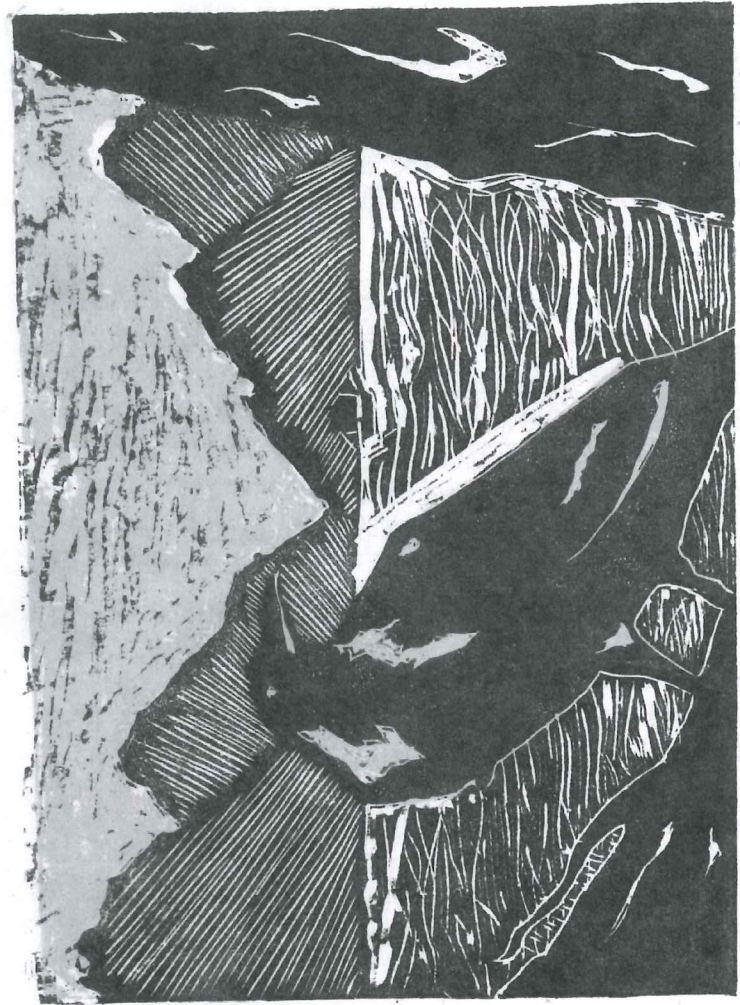
I'm not used to the palm trees. The trees  
that aren't palm hang like the gray hair of Babushka.  
Two vultures circle an alligator carcass near Oaktree village.  
The fields I pass on I-75 SB feel like mirrors to the west.

The Floridian cowboys capture through wildwoods with shark  
teeth anchored around their throats, ripping villages  
of swamp-moss saturated in sunlight. Their yellow hair  
blinds me, the nimble fingers of it tying red mangroves

around my eyelids, I only see the smells of their sweat  
and horses until their tongues invade my mouth  
and the sand of their spit tastes like tangerines and tobacco.  
My father once told me of a boy he knew who eventually

died after being locked in a closet, and I know how he felt  
because when one of the cowboys, the one with a line  
of freckles under his right eye, Navajo, pushed me down  
and rode off on his stallion, leaving his blood on my lip,

I'd never been so starved.



Two

Russell Gividen

## Elegy for Innocence

Maddey Gates

At twelve or thirteen--say thirteen,  
the green, blasphemous year when my legs  
were still close-hinged and my child-plump  
lips were sealed with thin layers of cellophane--  
I tripped one night over a forgotten  
file on the family computer and my eyes stretched  
as wide as bronzed thighs--the house watching  
over my shoulder for hours while I clicked and  
stared.

And later in the loft, a small yard sale TV screen  
blurred  
with black and white static bodies  
and yawned as wide as my lips  
while my parents split their grey sheets  
and my older brother curled beneath  
his comforter, glossy magazine pages crushed  
under his hand--out cat stalked  
cave crickets along the basement floor.

And at nine out in Bald Knob when  
a little girl took me onto her mother's bed,  
and a crazy quilt spread like wild daisies  
between our legs and she pressed  
a thin pillow between our wetted lips,  
then left while I played alone in her room  
until my mother came--two geldings and a mare  
racing her car along gravel drive.

And at fifteen in his bedroom when  
Nels asked if I wanted to and I said yes  
I really wanted to and his grin  
was all crooked and terrified and wild  
and after, while he lay on the second of two twin beds  
combined, I winced as I walked down  
the steps to the bathroom--reminding  
myself to love what I saw in the mirror.

At a time, though the year escapes me, I held  
innocence alive and unscathed in my hands.  
Once she was an empty room, a newborn cat,  
a filly crashing through wildflowers and weeds.  
She was violet-tinged skin fresh and stretching  
from my mother's womb. I cradled her once, but  
today I write her elegy--murmuring  
*sorry, so sorry*, for my delay.

## Womb Sounds

Maddey Gates

This is not your body,  
it is a baby and that  
baby has miniature lips  
and it sips your amniotic  
womb juice like tea and it  
is very particular about its tea.  
This baby knows every-  
thing you do and when you  
and your boyfriend do  
the nasty it shrieks and raises  
its tiny fingers in fright,  
gurgling wildly through  
the fluids. This child deserves  
your care, respect, undying  
love, inability to buy diapers  
or lay off the Svedka or to keep  
its co-producer from straight dip-  
setting. You--lucky thing--are  
a quick, fertile garden, you are  
a vessel most masterfully built.

## If We Don't Run

Rachel Hoge

June 16, 2006

I loved Jane, I did. Even though she was psychotic. My daughter wants me to erase that part, but it's the truth and we all know it.

Abigail— that's my daughter— is twenty-two. I'm almost three times her age. If swollen feet and ankles don't make you feel old, watching your kids grow up will. This whole thing was her idea— she's getting her Masters in Psychology, and asked me to write in a journal so I can grieve. When she was little, Jane told her I was a writer. Best joke I ever heard.

To tell you the truth, I don't need this. I'm just doing it because Abigail's been really depressed lately, since her mother just died, so I try to make her happy. She moved back home last week, insisting I need company. It is nice to eat good meals again, to hear a voice that isn't my own. But making conversation isn't exactly a strength of mine. Jane didn't mind silence, at least towards the end. We'd sit in the kitchen and have coffee, the sounds of Jane's knitting needles clinking like fingernails against a wine glass. I have to admit, I miss that sound. Then I remember everything, and don't miss her anymore.

July 4, 2006

The sky at dusk was Jane's favorite. "Look at it, Terry," she used to say. "Look at that cotton ball sky." She watched *Gone With the Wind* to show Abigail the sunsets, brushing her hair after a bath and rolling curlers to her scalp. I always came home late, too tired to stay up and when I did, I fell asleep in the recliner. I started selling insurance when I was twenty, just after I decided that writing wouldn't pay the bills. I still wrote until I was sixty, deciding one day to put all my notebooks in a garbage bag and throw it out by the curb. A few years later, I found the bag in the attic. Jane swore she had no idea how it got there.

"Have you forgiven her?"

Abigail's voice takes me by surprise. We'd sat in silence for almost an hour, sitting in the rocking chairs on the porch.

"For what?" I asked. But I knew.

"For... how it happened."

"No," I said. "But Abigail... I spent a lot of time being angry. And it didn't help anything."

It's our first holiday alone. Jane and Abigail should be in the kitchen, making pies and chatting about college and boyfriends. I should be out on the patio in my only pair of shorts, sweating profusely and flipping burgers on the grill. We shouldn't have gone through the drive-thru, we should've tried celebrating still. But Abigail said it wasn't the same, so I

picked up some burgers and hoped she'd stop crying.

Tonight on the porch, I made an unfamiliar gesture and held Abigail's hand. We went back inside and she made coffee. I sat in the living room and looked at pictures of Jane. Pictures in frames, pictures in albums, pictures wedged in hardback books. There she is— from cradle to coffin, from birth to death— chemically coated paper all that remains of a life. Her eyes were green, sweet as a Granny Smith and slit like a snake. When I look at her now, all of her green eyes stare a hole through me and ask, "Forgive me yet?"

July 15, 2006

The affairs started twenty years ago.

Sara started out as my client. She was a manager at a gym and taught yoga classes. That was back in the 80s, before everyone bought yoga tapes and latex mats. Abigail leaves around books like *Your Best Yoga Body* and sometimes I thumb through the pages, wondering if Sara can still do downward dog like she used to. When I met her, I didn't know what yoga was but when she explained, proudly, "The Beatles do it," I dubbed her another hippie left over from the war. A few months later, our rates increased and to soften the blow, the manager suggested we invite our local clients to lunch. Sara walked in wearing tight dress slacks and made me laugh more than Jane ever had. She was recently divorced and lived out in the country with only possums and strays to keep her company. I fell into the relationship easily, coming back to her more every time, resembling the kittens that pawed at her front door and meowed for milk.

It only lasted for a few months— as long as her conscience would allow— so I can't remember what shade of brown her hair was or her mother's name... only the feeling of her petite legs full of muscle, her limbs elastic from years of forward bends and planks, pulling me closer, closer. She would say my name in my ear over and over again. I was so out of breath I could never reply.

Jane and I met in high school. We attended Hamilton, the only school in our small town north of Knoxville, Tennessee. It had a Piggly Wiggly, two restaurants, one church, and a post office. Jane dated a guy who played with me on the football team. She came to every game, her long skirt cinching her waist and black and gold ribbons tied in her hair. John, her then-boyfriend, played wide receiver and could run faster than anyone on the team, and I— like most players my size— was a lineman. John was tall and lanky; Jane wore his letterman jacket everywhere, even though it reached past her knees. She shared John's animosity to drugs and drinking, so while I was stealing my father's liquor they were at church, sitting close enough to see the preacher sweat. After a few foot-

ball practices John and I became friends, and when we weren't in class or practice we were at the Edge— a shoreline full of gravel and cigarette butts along the Clinch River. When it was warm Jane would slip off her shoes and stand in the water, waving at John while the bottom of her skirt soaked.

Half a mile down was the railroad tracks. The team captain, Weston, made the team do train dodges after every lost game. Weston had transferred from Oak Ridge two years previous, the star of their winning football team. When he moved to Hamilton he was suddenly stuck with the worst team in the district, and was determined to turn our losing streak around. I asked him once about the dodges. He smiled and said, "Fear is the best motivator."

I was one of the slowest runners, and dreaded the games we lost. We'd leave our friends at the Edge and walked to the tracks, waiting for the late night train to pull through. I always heard it first: the stretching rails, the low rumble, the horn. It was hardly visible in the dark. For years, I had dreams that a black beast was running towards me, spinning on wheels.

"What happens?" John asked, shivering without his jacket. It was probably wrapped around Jane, keeping her warm while she stood at the Edge, waiting for us to return.

I looked at John, my eyes strained. The horn grew louder. "What?" "What happens if we don't run?"

I shoved my hands in my pockets. It was a cold night for October— I could see my breath. I felt my eyebrows rise. "Then we don't play. You know that."

"I don't know, Terry. This just seems..." He shrugged his shoulders.

The train was close, the noise so loud it made me wince. We formed a horizontal line. "Go back if you want."

"Come with me, then."

"And quit the team? You're joking."

The piercing horn finished our conversation. My eyes were locked on Weston— he ran first and we followed. The outline of the train filled the sky. As it grew closer I stared at Weston, desperate to move. The train blared, the sound deafening. I saw Weston lift his leg, his elbows at his side. My body responded instantly, my feet unsteady as I launched them onto the tracks. My feet slipped against the steel rail and I tripped, hitting the second rail, my shoulder falling to the ground. I opened my eyes: I saw a small patch of grass, rocks, mud. I'd made it across.

When I looked up one of the linemen, Linny, was face down on the tracks, frozen in fear. John was behind him, tugging wildly on his uniform, shouting, "Move! Move!" Linny continued to clutch the rail, his eyes shut. John finally pried his fingers free, shoving his hands under Linny's side and pushing. Linny rolled into the gravel, his clothes covered in dirt.



John put his foot on the railing, ready to jump, when the train came by. If I close my eyes I can still feel the vibrations of the brakes, can still hear the screaming.

I'd never been to a funeral before. I borrowed my father's suit and polished my church shoes. Almost fifty years have passed, but I still think about John. Especially all the years I've looked at Jane. Sometimes I wonder if John's ghost stuck around, blowing out candles when Jane forgot, jingling our lost car keys. Loving her more than me even in death.

December 27, 2006

Abigail has a new boyfriend that's from Louisiana. She left to visit him three days ago, after we had a small Christmas dinner.

As soon as we sat down to eat, she said, "Come with me." It's at least the third time she's asked. "Jared's parents keep asking about you."

"I don't fly."

"We could drive?"

"It's eleven hours." I couldn't keep from sounding skeptical.

"You're young. Go, have a good time. Don't worry about me."

When she left, she kissed me on the cheek— something she hasn't done since she was little. It felt strange to have anyone kiss me, even my own daughter. I don't remember the last time I'd been kissed. After Sara, I had a string of relationships that ended as easily as they'd started. Lori was the last and the longest. She was a widow who taught kayaking at Girl Scout camps. Her hair was short and frizzy, slowly turning gray the longer that I knew her. She wasn't pretty, but after fifty, I cared less about sex and more about company. I spent weekend trips with Lori in Andersonville while she worked at Camp Tanasi. I was one of the only men allowed on site because I was Lori's boyfriend. When she wasn't teaching class we'd take walks around the woods, sometimes not speaking for hours. She taught me the difference between sycamores and willow oaks and showed me how to shoot an arrow. After years of teaching children, her voice was still kind.

She asked me once why I was unhappy in my marriage. They all did eventually, the women that I dated. They wanted justification. With Lori I almost told her everything— even about John. But some things I still can't bring myself to say out loud.

"Do you love her?" Lori asked.

My feet stopped. "That was never the problem."

Before Abigail left for Louisiana, she left me a present on the kitchen counter. She usually gets me wool socks or books about the Civil War. This time, it was a wooden frame. It has a picture inside of Jane and me when we were young. My hair is thick and brown, and my arms— more muscular than I remember— are wrapped around Jane's waist. Her hair is blonde and curled, her eyes glowing against her skin. This was the Christ-

mas of 1959: in six months Jane would graduate, in a year we'd be married. John had been dead for three years, but if I squint I can see a dark shadow behind us, growing taller the more I stare. Must be my imagination.

I never planned to fall in love with Jane. John's shoes were too big to fill, my feet were too small. My family was still recovering from our own tragedy. My little sister, Abigail— my daughter's namesake— died from polio when she was six. Two years later they released the vaccine. I was thirteen, and after Abigail died my father started drinking again. I was all my mother had— and I wasn't much, at that.

I saw Jane crying one day after school. She was leaning against a marble column, curled up in the shadow of a tree. I shouldn't have gone over there, but part of me thought: *here's your chance to get it right, Terry.* I'd failed my family— Abigail had died, my mother was withering— but Jane still had red cheeks and wore ribbons in her hair. I put my arm around her shoulder and she cried, and for months that's all we did. Sometimes we'd walk the Edge, flicking ashes as we walked.

"How do you cope?" she asked me once. She was wearing her mother's dress— light blue, loose cotton. She always did look good in blue.

The question caught me off guard. I was sixteen, a football player. No one worried about how I was handling it. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

I smiled, my lips crooked. "It's kind of embarrassing."

"Tell me, Terry," she said, her elbow knocking mine. "Come on."

"Well, I write..."

"What do you write?"

"Poems, mostly. They're— well..." I bent over and picked up a rock, examining its edges. "Not very good. Or very happy." I shrugged. "Just something I do."

The sun hung low behind her, making me squint.

"Go on," I said, smiling. "Laugh."

She shook her head. "I think it's wonderful."

For months we talked like this, always about John. Everyone else was tired of talking about it, tired of feeling sad. But I could still see John in my head, his body shaking from the cold, his voice begging me not to run.

January 23, 2007

Today is our wedding anniversary.

We got married in a small chapel, just the two of us; Jane was wearing a suede blue dress and pearls from her mother. We rented a cabin in Gatlinburg for the weekend, the Tennessee wind slipping through cracks in the plaster. From the kitchen you could see the mountains, the

tops more green than white and covered in ice.

I left our bags at the door and scooped Jane into my arms. "Terry!" Her feet thrashed, her arms struggled. She hated being picked up.

I held her tighter, trying not to laugh. "Just a few more seconds." I let her feet drop once we crossed the threshold. Jane turned on the lights and opened the curtains. We drank wine right from the bottle, smoked till the porch was littered with ashes. Jane must've smoked a whole pack of Winstons that night, the flames illuminating the dark. I spent the night reassuring her—*yes, it might hurt a bit but no, I won't push you. I'll be gentle.* She wasn't convinced, and when I finally saw the silhouette of her bare shoulders, the slope of legs, the taste of her mouth—peppermints and nicotine—I wasn't convinced, either.

I'd had sex with girls before Jane—usually parked along the Edge, our skin sticking to the leather seats of my Chrysler, hurrying to make curfew. But after Jane I regretted them all. There are certain things that seem permanent, and though I now know that love and life both die, in that moment it seemed to me that they were endless.

Jane turned around. She was shivering, but not from the cold. Her skin was practically burning. I leaned towards her. "Everything okay?"

"I'm sorry." Her cheeks were wet. "I'm sorry, Terry, I am."

"What's wrong?"

"This... it's just..."

"Are you okay? Did I do anything—"

"No, it was fine. You were fine."

"Just fine?"

"Listen to me, John—"

Her hand flew over her mouth, her eyes wide. "Terry—"

I stood up, grabbing my clothes from the hardwood floor.

"You regret it, don't you? Marrying me?"

She buried the sheet around her like a cocoon, and didn't answer.

"I asked a thousand times. 'Are you ready for this?' 'Are you sure you've moved on?'"

"We didn't break up, Terry." I'd never heard her sound so small. "He was taken."

"I was there, remember?"

"And you had the chance to save him—"

"Go on, say it."

"—and you didn't."

"So it's my fault?"

"No." She cradled her head in her hands. "I've pictured this day a thousand times, since I was a girl—the ceremony, the dress." She lifted her head and looked at me. "And then, I pictured it..."

"With John."

"It doesn't mean I don't love you."

"You can't love us both."

After that we stayed busy. In the morning we followed trails into the mountain, only stopping to eat sandwiches; at night, we got cabs into the city and spent hours at movie theaters, flashing light projecting on our skin. On the drive back home Jane filled the car with chatter, subjects like curtain fixtures and weather suddenly seeming important. I nodded when appropriate, laughed when she expected it. She had a way of saying nothing when she talked and everything when she didn't.

February 8, 2007

It's hard to believe, but tomorrow I'll be sixty-seven. Abigail made a German chocolate cake, Jane's recipe. Every couple ingredients she narrowed her eyes and brought the notebook to me, hoping I could better decipher my wife's handwriting. Later, I decided to make breakfast for dinner—French toast, scrambled eggs, bacon—one of Abigail's favorite meals. Jane usually made the French toast; my version was soggy and overly-egged. We compensated quality by drowning it in syrup.

"Is there anyone you want to invite tomorrow?" Abigail asked. Her boyfriend, Jared, was flying in tomorrow afternoon and staying for the weekend. Jane has family I would've liked to see, but they're scattered across the States. I have no living siblings, no other family. I shook my head.

"Come on, Dad." She reached across the table for the butter. "No one?"

I looked up, frustrated. Abigail knew I spent Christmas alone. "Why would I?"

"Because, there's always been... someone, I mean."

It never occurred to me that Abigail knew about the affairs. I showered constantly, they never called the house.

"How long have you known?"

She looked down at her plate. "Doesn't matter. Do I need to get more food?"

"No." It'd been over ten years since Lori, but I couldn't stop heat from rising to my skin. "There's no one, you know. There hasn't been in a long time."

"Okay."

"I mean that."

"It's not my business."

"It wasn't my fault, Abigail. Your mother..."

"She was sick, I know."

"She was. But that didn't give me a right to do... what I did."

"I'm confused, Dad. Are you arguing for or against yourself?"

"I don't know."

She looked at me, her face cold. "I think cheating is wrong."

"So is suicide."

"She was sick."

"She was sad because she wanted to be."

"Depression is a disorder—"

"I know what they teach you in college, I know what her shrink shoved down her throat—it's *everyone's* fault but their own. Your mother ate that up. But no one put the pills in her hand. No one made her swallow them. Let her take responsibility for once."

Abigail threw her napkin down on the table and walked away.

February 9, 2007

I couldn't sleep at all last night, so I went up to the attic to find my old notebooks. I hadn't been there in years, hadn't seen the notebooks even longer—but there they were, placed carefully in a box, faded sharpie reading, "Terry's Writing." I leaned against the steps and read for hours, reliving the collapse of my family, the train hitting John. The years I almost lost Jane. I sat and wept.

When I closed my eyes I was twenty-five again, walking into the bathroom, seeing new blood stains on the tile. Then I was thirty and leaning over the kitchen counter, trying to cut an apple with a butter knife because we couldn't keep anything sharp in the house. Years before, I'd held Jane's hand when the doctor looked at us, his speech rehearsed, and said, "Like we discussed before, fertility treatments are unfortunately not a guarantee..." When we adopted Abigail, Jane held her tiny swathed body and smiled. She told me things would be different now.

But there were still days she wouldn't eat, wouldn't leave bed. There were nights I came home late and Abigail was still awake, without a bath or finished homework, watching television. And once Abigail went to college there were only bad days, with shrinks and journals and pills flushed, not swallowed. When Abigail visited Jane made an effort to shower and dress, to cook and smile. Even though I knew it was an act, a checklist of life she had no interest in living, those were the days I lived for. Abigail would reenact a funny anecdote from college and when Jane laughed she was sixteen again, on our first date. We were on a ride at the county fair, Jane's hair twirling, our hands turning the spinner of the cramped carnival ride.

"Terry!" she said, laughing. "Slow down!"

My hands stopped immediately, my vision clearing as we slowed.

"You actually stopped," she said, surprised.

"For you I'd do anything." I intended it as a joke, just another line I'd used on dates. But suddenly I meant it. I was sticky from heat and

cotton candy but I pulled her close anyways, kissing her for the first time.

When I close my eyes now, my life is in Polaroids: Jane and I are teenagers, standing in front of her fireplace, going to prom. Our wedding day: she's wearing her blue dress, the one she picked carefully but threw on the cabin floor, suddenly unimportant. My thirtieth birthday, when Jane bought me a typewriter. "For your bestseller," she said. Endless albums of Abigail, from the adoption day to her standing in a cap and gown, holding her degree.

Then the undocumented moments, the things we tried forgetting: Jane at ninety-eight pounds, the day she was admitted. The backless gown she wore, the bandages on her wrists. The years she slept in bed while I slept with other women, both of us pretending we weren't guilty.

A few minutes ago, Abigail apologized for last night's argument. I didn't tell her that it was never her fault, that I'd loved Jane since that day at the fair and loved her still. That sometimes when I drive through railroad tracks I imagine her and John walking along the gravel, waving to me as I pass. That I only slept with other women because I wanted Jane to fight for me, because I missed sleeping beside someone who wanted me there.

Instead, I said, "Don't worry about it." She led me into the kitchen and brought out my birthday cake. I stared at the burning candles, the dripping wax. I took a deep breath and watched the flames fade.

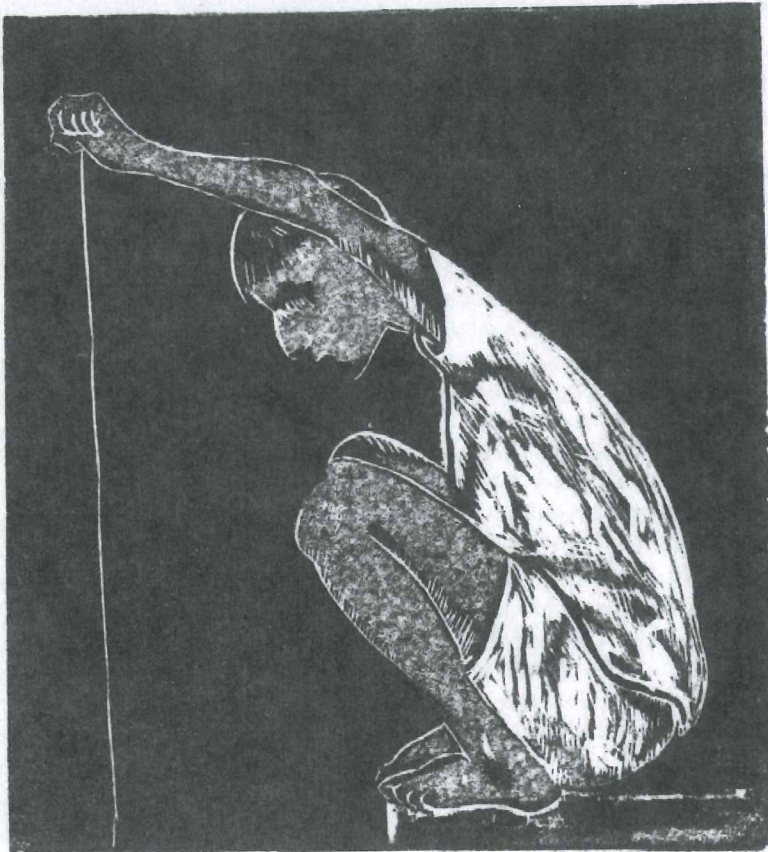
## How to Be White in Bed-Stuy

For Junot Diaz

Ben Hussung

“Bedford-Stuyvesant, the livest one, my borough is thorough.”

--The Notorious B.I.G.



Cae Normanha

Muleke

Wake up to a hot morning. Turn off the buzzing fan next to your bed, which isn't even really a bed—just a mattress sprawled out on the floor of your studio apartment. You have to turn it off because if you use too much electricity the landlady will call you and give you all kinds of crap. Drag yourself out of bed and into the shower, the steady squeak of the linoleum floor following you. You probably won't have hot water, but don't worry. That's normal. You're in Bed-Stuy, not the freaking Upper East Side. Be careful not to wash your hair in the shower. It has to be just greasy enough so that you can swoosh it in the front while still maintaining the whole “I don't care how I look” vibe. Get out of the shower and slip into your skinny jeans. Put on a V-neck and step into your Clark's. Make sure they're a little scuffed up, though, because you definitely don't want to look like you have money—not here.

This is Bed-Stuy: home of Biggie Smalls and O.D.B., Jay-Z and Spike Lee. Locals call it “The Zoo,” and it sits right in the middle of the north side of Brooklyn. Back in the day, taxi drivers wouldn't come within a mile of it. Some people say the gangs would just sit on top of buildings on Fulton Street, picking off white dudes like fish in a bowl. Things have gotten a little better. At least the NYPD patrols here now, and even though the only ones they send are rookies, they still make you feel a bit safer.

You moved here from Alabama because you found a cheap apartment on Franklin Avenue, and it was only an hour train ride away from your internship at the Sony Recording Studio in Manhattan. You read on the Internet that a lot of hipsters were moving into the run-down parts of Brooklyn. You even noticed it had a couple coffee shops—the kind that serve goat cheese paninis and always have road bikes chained to the sign out front.

Your parents helped you move in, and your mom cried every time she brought a load in from the car and saw the cracked walls and sagging floor, not to mention the drunk guys sitting on the stoop. You just kept telling her, “Mom, it'll be fine. I promise” even though you were actually thinking, *What am I getting myself into?* Your dad just tensed up, like he thought everyone with skin darker than a latte had a gun and a dime bag. He kept saying, “I knew I should've taught you to shoot.” You didn't tell them you'd be walking down Fulton alone every night.

Go to your mini-fridge and pull out some yogurt. Grab the granola and mix it all in a recycled jar. You can't afford organic, but Trader Joe's is close enough. Grab your backpack and head out the door, stopping to make sure it shuts all the way—the new particleboard door doesn't fit the old frame anymore. Walk down the four flights of stairs, shifting all your weight to the left because the stairs haven't aged well. They droop to the right, pulling in toward the downward spiral—probably against some code, but most people in Bed-Stuy wouldn't give a crap even if they knew what a building code was.

Open the black gate at the bottom of the steps and walk outside, taking in the smell of last night's booze and this morning's joint. Pull it shut and make sure—and I mean seriously do not forget—to lock it. If you think the earful you get for using too much electricity is bad, just wait until she finds out “white boy” left the door unlocked.

Stop on the front stoop to talk to the boys. They're not really “boys”—just a bunch of washed-up old black men, like the Corner Men, who tell time by which beer they're on.

Just give them a head nod and say, “What's up, guys?”

If you're lucky, they'll say, “What's up, man?” followed by, “You got money for a drink?”

If you're unlucky, they'll all stop talking, stare into your blue eyes, and then look at each other like, *Get out of our neighborhood, white boy.*

You hope one day you'll actually have a conversation with them. Maybe they'll tell you about how they all knew Biggie when he was a kid or how O.D.B. was their homeboy. Tex, the one with the cowboy boots who used to play back-up guitar for B.B. King, might even offer you a hit off his Black and Mild. But that probably won't happen.

Walk up Franklin Avenue, past the public library they're shutting down, and turn left onto Fulton Street. Smile at the kids jumping up and down, running through an open fire hydrant. You'll have three big blocks to traverse to get to Nostrand Avenue, where your train stop is. Go past the West African restaurant and the Rastafarians selling flags and crack pipes. Ignore the stares and whispers.

“He live here?” one of them will ask, pausing between hits off a joint.

“No,” another will say. “Must be from Bay Ridge or something—Forest Park, maybe.”

“Well, what's he doing here?”

“I don't know. Raising our rent and bringing in white business we don't need. Just like they all do.”

Keep moving.

It won't be until you pass the hardware store that you'll see them.

Six young men will be standing on the sidewalk, leaning against the crumbling brick, their red bandanas on their arms or heads, flitting back and forth in the breeze.

“Hey, white boy,” one will say with confidence.

Keep your eyes down and your hands in your pockets. Don't let the worry in your eyes give away the speeding beat of your heart.

Keep moving.

“What?” another will say, squinting his eyes as his pitch rises.

“You too good to talk to us?”

Do not look up. You'll think acknowledging them will make it better. Like, if you could just speak to them—make them feel like they're worth something to you—they'd understand and adopt you as brother. Don't be stupid. They don't want you. They want to degrade you, just like “your people” degraded “their people.”

Keep moving.

“Alright, then,” the first will shout, turning toward you as you walk farther away. “I see. Keep walking, white boy.”

When you arrive at the station and find the A train, let the calm white and blue of its interior soothe your soul. Sit there as your heart quiets and breathe in the cool, air-conditioned air. Close your eyes and put in your ear buds. Let Newton Faulkner and Bon Iver take you to a mindless place, one where you don't have to worry about anything except sound. A couple stops closer to Manhattan, a girl with pale white skin and red hair will step onto the train, beginning the slow redistribution of color in your car. Her brown, polka-dot sundress will flow over her body like the East River as she sits down opposite you. Let your eyes tiptoe up and stop on hers. She'll return the favor. And for just one second, your muscles will loosen, and you'll feel at ease.

When you get to work, sit at the computer in your four-foot cubicle and try your best to suck up to the producers. When they ask you where you live, say, “Brooklyn,” and try to keep the conversation moving along. If they ask you wherein, don't lie. Just say, “Bedford-Stuyvesant” in as northern an accent as you can muster and let them gawk about how dangerous yet hip it is that you live there. Don't let them in on the fact you have the crap scared out of you every time you step off the stoop.

During your lunch break, walk down the street to the little hole-in-the-wall record store and sift through the vinyls. Pick up the first one you see with a band you don't recognize and buy it. When you get back to work, take the long way to your desk so that you can stop by the cubicle of another intern, Sasha, whose chocolate skin is the prettiest you've seen.

Say, “Hey, Sasha. How's it going?”

“Oh hey, it's good,” she'll say. “Just finishing up this paperwork.”

"Yeah, that's the life, right?"

"I guess," she'll say. "So you really live in Bed-Stuy, huh?"

"Yep, it's not that bad." You'll be thinking, *Don't worry. I don't blame you.*

"Well, try not to get yourself killed in there," she'll say. "I wouldn't live there if somebody paid me."

"I'll do my best." Walk back to your desk with a chuckle. *You'd definitely fare better than me.*

After work, get drinks with the other interns. Let the thick liquid seep into your body and make you forget where you are. Talk about life back home—the sweet tea and farmland—and your dream of owning your own studio in Nashville. Lie about how many times you've won awards, and make up stories about that skiing trip in the French Alps and that time you met Zooey Deschanel. Drink your favorite—PBR—but not too much. You don't want to be the token crazy on the night train. When they ask if you just want to crash at their places for the night, say, "No, thanks" and feign confidence with a smirk, assuring them you have no worries.

When you step onto the A train home, squeeze in between all the sweaty drunks and cling to the bar overhead. Keep your balance as the train jostles back and forth, rushing past stops—it'll be on the late night schedule by then. As people get off one by one and two by two, inch toward a seat and wait for the fat guy in the Led Zeppelin t-shirt to get up and trudge home. Sit. Watch as the demographics gradually change as you near the heart of Brooklyn. Pull out your phone and call your mom.

"Hey, honey," she'll say. "Everything alright?"

Say, "Yeah, Mom. Everything's fine" even though you'll really be thinking, *I hate New York. I hate this.* "Just sitting on the train headed back to the apartment."

"Hey, babe," she'll yell at your dad in the background. "Guess who's on the phone." Look down quickly as you catch the eyes of the black man sitting across from you, his dark eyes staring intently into yours.

"Hey, Dad." Your mom gives him the phone. "How's work?"

"Oh, it's fine," he'll say. "What about you?"

"Oh, it's great, Dad. Really great." *I'm about to walk down Fulton alone at night.*

"That's great, son," he'll say. "I'm glad it's working out for you up there."

"Are you safe?" your mom will ask.

"Yeah, Mom. Of course." *No, Mom, I live in a freaking zoo.*

Glance up to find the man still looking at you. Eyes back down.

When the train slows at Nostrand Avenue, say, "Well, this is my

stop. I'd better go." Get up and start to walk toward the door, making sure the man doesn't follow you.

"Alright, honey," she'll say for herself and your dad. "Be safe. We love you."

"Yeah, mom. Talk to you later."

If there's one place in New York City where you don't want to be after dark, it's the corner of Nostrand and Fulton. The first week you lived in Bed-Stuy, you heard the old guys on your stoop talking about how some dude there got shot twice in the chest just for stepping out of the car and looking at somebody funny. A couple days later, they were talking about a drug deal gone bad.

"Some young punk pushing coke in another dude's territory," Tex said. "He just up and shot him in the face."

"Where were the police?" you asked. They all looked at each other for half a second. Then they burst into laughter, bending over and nearly spilling their Colt 45.

"Police?" Tex asked. "Where you think you at, boy? Fort Knox or something?"

Keep moving.

Forget all that and try your best to look calm. Hold your backpack by one strap, put the other hand in your pocket, wrapped tightly around your keys—your last line of defense—and angle your face downward as you walk—not all the way to the ground but just enough so that it won't seem like you're looking around for somebody. Walk quickly—with purpose—but not too fast. You don't want to give off fear. Silently recite that verse you learned in Sunday school: *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

The dark brown brick will have taken on a new light by then, muddled blacks and blues dancing across their cold faces. Shadows strewn all over the tan sidewalks, the long blocks will seem to lengthen as you make progress. Ahead of you, there'll be an overhang with a sign on it jutting out toward the street. "SLAVES," it'll read in red and blue spray paint, the letters curling and overlapping one another like an intricate tattoo. The darkness underneath the sign will be deep, and it'll play with your mind, forming tall hooded figures. *You're fine*, you'll think. *Nobody's under there.* Your hands will begin to shake, keys rattling in your pocket, and your heartbeat will quicken.

Keep moving.

As you get closer, you'll realize your eyes were just messing with you, and your heart will calm, its beat slowing. Slacken your grip on your keys and lift your head a bit, letting your eyes wander away from your shoes. Let out a long breath and pick up the pace. *Just two more blocks.*

The loud boom will surprise you as wood meets flesh and bone. You'll lose your balance and begin to fall forward, time moving more slowly as you inch toward the ground. The blood on the back of your head will feel warm as your face hits the concrete. Don't worry. They won't shoot you. They'll surround you, one of them brandishing a two by four. Try to pick yourself up, placing the palms of your hands against the cold ground and pushing down. They'll kick you in the stomach until you roll over on your back. Cover your face and bring your knees to your chest, protecting your torso like you learned wrestling your dad. One of them will straddle you and begin beating your face—left, right, left, right—its metered rhythm thumping into your skull. Let your head move with each stroke of his fist and grab at his arms with flailing hands until some of the others hold those down, too. When he gets off of you, turn over on your side and cover your face again.

Say, "Please."

"What, white boy?" one of them will say amidst their cackling. "You going to talk to us now?"

"Yeah," another will say. "I thought you was too good for us?"

The first will stoop down, putting his face right next to yours. The only thing keeping your eyes from meeting will be the bloodied hands in front of your face.

"Let me tell you something, cracker," he'll say. "You don't belong here. This is our place."

He'll give you one more blow from his two by four and then lead the others down the block, strutting away into some back alley to smoke a victory joint.

Lie there. You won't be able to get up. You'll have a couple cracked ribs, a broken nose, and maybe even a fractured cheekbone. Let the blood dripping down your face fall onto the concrete and trickle down the sidewalk as you fade. Wish that Mookie had been there to throw a trashcan through a window and pull their attention away from you. Dream of Alabama—the green grass and full, starry skies—and how your dad really should have taught you how to shoot.

A rookie cop will stroll by, like they do every hour or so. She'll find you lying there, crumpled up like a used brown sack. She'll call an ambulance and they'll whisk you away—some hospital in a better part of town. When you regain consciousness the next morning, the cop will be there to find out what happened. Tell her everything. She'll scribble in a notebook and assure you they'll do all they can. Even though she knows exactly who did it and there's nothing she can do about it—not in Bed-Stuy—it makes you feel a little better.

Lie there. Stare at the white ceiling and let the previous day roll

through your mind like a slow song. Think about Tex and the boys. Think about the buzzing fan in your apartment and the kids playing in the fire hydrant. Think about the little record store down the street from the studio and the late nights with the other interns. Think about Sasha and her chocolate skin.

Then think about the red bandanas and that cruel word, "Cracker." *They don't want me here. They want to beat me—to bring me down lower than they are.*

Think about your dream—your studio in Nashville.

Sit up. Pull the cream blanket down to your knees and stare out the window to your left, where the East River drifts under the Williamsburg Bridge.

*They don't want me here, but I want to be here.*

Ask if you can make a phone call. Dial your mom's cell.

"Honey, we're already at the airport," she'll say. "Thank God you're alive. We're going to take you home. I can't believe I let my baby live with those animals. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Mom. I'm fine," then pause and take a deep, full breath.

"But I'm staying here."

**Are You There, Dixieland? It's Me, Margie.**

Tracy Jo Ingram

The slow clocks in my house  
chafe against  
the natural speed  
of my rushing thighs.  
The anthem of my life  
ever-hastening  
in the opposite direction  
of lounge chairs,  
sloe gin fizzing,  
outstretched tree limbs,  
wide brimmed hats,  
barefeet spilled from  
sides of hammocks,  
an easy game of croquet,  
the call of robins.

My cogs are wound  
barreling endlessly towards  
the year 2035, four small hands  
tugging at my sides, my own  
left to brush Cheerios  
from the crevices of plastic  
placemats, a space doubling as my office--  
pacifiers dangling from one thumb,  
ink dribbling down the edges of my palm. . . .  
All I remember is my want to roll  
onto my stomach and slumber, snooze  
to the crooning of crickets,  
rattle my tonsils to the sounds  
of Kentucky Copperheads, the whispers  
of an Appalachian breeze, the rise  
and fall of Ohio River rancid.

I want to be Southern  
honey slow, clanging  
charmingly like the suspended  
ice in my glass of sweat tea.  
I want my mason jars to be  
swamped with lightning bugs,  
mint juleps, a life nestled  
on a porch, and away  
from streetlamps.

I'll fly away Ol' Glory,  
away from calculators, the bibs,  
the brooms, the pharmacies,  
heels, cable boxes, the iAnything,  
apron springs, glowing screens,  
lattes, marble edifices, insurance cards,  
SSN numbers, cell phone towers, call centers,  
X-rays, dental tools, gas stations,  
seedless grapes, caged dogs, the text messages:

TTYL. I'm headed to Dixieland.



## Ode to the Internet Memorial

For Anthony Flaherty

Tracy Jo Ingram

My third acquaintance of the year  
has committed suicide.

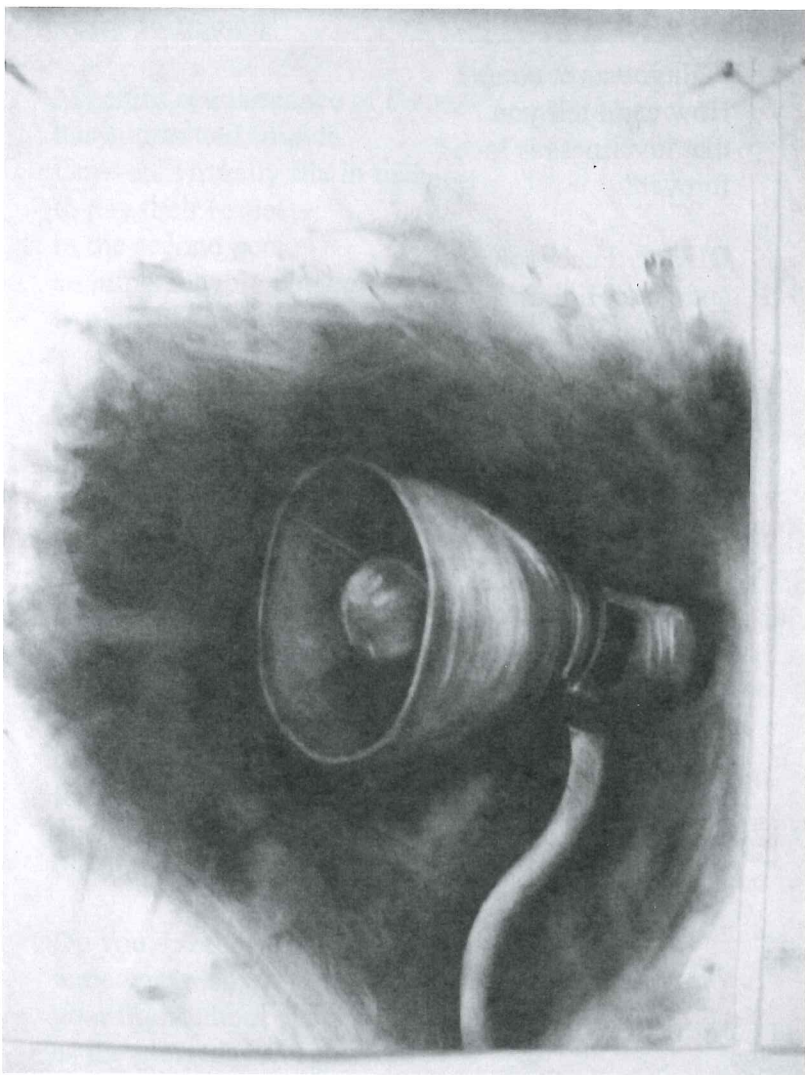
Grievers virtually file in line  
to pay their respects,  
in the second person,  
so impersonably personal,  
to a profile page:

Anthony,  
tell us, do you get WiFi  
there in heaven? Doth  
thou see our keyboards  
sitting *shiva*, hear our  
emoticons emoting,  
their comma-stream of tears  
like bended knees,  
the collective repentance  
wailing "if we could've  
only known," our searching  
for the password  
that would've lifted  
the blue?

Do you see the world  
wide web resuscitate  
your high school years  
as the glory days? Tales  
of your constant  
"yes, ma'ams,"  
your sure to be seat  
in the Senate,  
your grandpa

nightgowns at camp?  
How can I tell you  
that loveliness is loved  
forever?

O! Holy Facebook,  
and your Highest  
Archbishop Zuckerberg,  
thank you  
for the space  
to virtually keen,  
to roadweb memorialize,  
to make the bitter  
Certificate of Death  
a communal celebration;  
Thanks be to the outlet  
that shallows the grave,  
when the coldness,  
the true miles of  
darkness,  
like the vastness of the internet,  
holds no answers.



Jacqueline Byrne

Desk lamp

## How to Smile: A Guide in Ten Easy Steps

Meg Kennedy

1. *Declare yourself steadfastly angry.* Do this as soon as you enter college, maybe even before. Do it because of your vague sense of being wronged. Call this feminism. You will not truly understand what the term means at first. Intro to Women's Studies should probably be the first class you register for at the University. Allow it to shake your world and find yourself unable to watch television quietly like a normal person any longer because of the sheer injustice of it all. See now that you were not born reaching for the Barbie doll instead of the Tonka truck and understand why your mother always told you to smile, that you were prettier when you smiled, that it was polite for a young girl to do so.

2. *Begin to understand your anger and notice the difference between smiling and not smiling.* Do this especially when you are at smoky, humid house parties, with crowds small enough to recognize faces but large enough to make you feel alone. Consider how you really feel, standing in a row against the back wall among women who are and are not your friends. Think about how you really feel about the eyes that rove their way over your face then glide down to your feet and back up, as you lean passively against the plaster like a painted doll. How are you feeling? Angry? Disgusted? A little hurt? When you arrange the look on your face and speak accordingly to these sentiments (perhaps with a grimace?), notice how people react. You may note that they seem a little less willing to understand what you are saying. Your words may suddenly become terribly uninteresting and difficult to hear above the bass line of the music. They think you are a little too serious when you, for the third time, refuse with a straight face the anonymous shot glass and the hand slipping on your waist. They find you too serious and may even fear you a little, so they much prefer it when you stretch your lips, covered in organic tinted beeswax, across your teeth that were straightened with metal bars and clamps and undulate your voice into the cadences of thoughtless understanding.

3. *Channel your rage and start refusing to smile any longer.* Allow people to believe that you are serious and find that you are, in fact, quite so. Incorporate this into your understanding of who you are. Make it central. You will use your newfound anger and seriousness to save the world from the unthinkers, the go-with-the-flow-ers. Join many righteous groups on campus dedicated to selling grilled cheese to end world hunger, discovering your leadership style, and campaigning for justice for unknown women across the seas. Stop eating meat, except for country ham, and call yourself a Conscious

Meat-Eater. Break the rules that a young woman like you is supposed to follow—but not too many. Call upon your network of other comfortable rule-breakers to attend readings of the *Vagina Monologues* and watch films like *For Colored Girls* and talk about sexual violence with disgust and a sprinkle of fear, but with an air of comfort because you know how to recognize it. Feel exempt because you refuse to do the courting and the bowing and the smiling to finagle through the men in suits at the fancy awards dinner. Preferably, this attitude should extend through all aspects of your social life—even when you go out dancing downtown with your friends, encouraging you to punch someone in the place between his ear and the corner of his mouth when he inserts his hand in the place between your legs as you move to the beats. Believe firmly in your self-worth as it is rooted in the utter seriousness and intentionality of your life and your strict refusal to bend to the usual, the traditional, your mother's edict to smile.

4. *Pride yourself on your radicalism, you non-smiler you.* You will feel as though you have arrived at self-actualization, as though you have accomplished this list in only four steps, like the righteous, serious, thoughtful person you are. You will be wrong. Ignore that your radicalism, until now, has been only theoretical. Move into practice and accept an invitation to attend a widely-known, super-radical, thickly-drugged music festival as a volunteer activist. Sit at a table in the shade of a white booth with many pamphlets. Wear a labeled t-shirt in a different color from all the other festival-goers, but only during your shifts. Feel assured in your untouchability and superiority as you speak with gravity about preserving the American countryside to young men who peer at you through a haze of summer heat, flying dust, alcohol, weed, ecstasy, etc. Ignore these young men when they saunter up to stand at your side, looking at your principled profile and calling you Baby, Sugar, and Bitch. You know these are not your names, these ancient, controlling words. You have heard these words used as tools and weapons before. Remind yourself, if you need to, that you know better than to simper and smile, than to give in to get away.

5. *Remember to not smile, to be unique!* When you have a shift alone at the festival, starting at midnight, sit at the center of the table, with only the Christmas lights tucked in around the tent poles for company. Maintain your composed expression, whether your insides agree with your outsides or not. Wait for a dazed young man with a crew cut and a drunken swagger to approach you. He will pull up a chair next to you, very close. Continue being serious and true, for a while, talking about farmland and his recent return from Afghanistan as he fingers the dog-tags dangling from his neck. Keep your focus until he begins to scrape the legs of his folding chair across the inches of dirt separating him and you.

6. *Sit quietly.* As he grows closer, you may find that your mouth only hesitatingly delivers sound. Keep your lips together and agree when he begins to shake his head and squint his eyes at thoughts of the war he saw and must go back to in two weeks. Only flinch slightly when he brandishes a plastic water gun, spinning on his index finger. You will find your rage trickling down into the pit of your stomach, curling there with a new name.

7. *Turn off your brain and begin nodding passively.* Once you can feel his breath against your ear, hotter even than the day's heat, listen while he lectures on how some guys out there try to lure beautiful girls like you back to their tents and leave them there come daylight. Nod when he tells you to beware of them. Avoid his eyes when he tells you he has his own mission. Scoot away gently when he hooks his fingers into your belt loops and wraps his arm across the width of your chair.

8. *Thank him for the experience.* Keep thanking him as you shift away, as he insists that you have pretty eyes that tease him and give him looks. One of your friends will finally arrive late for her shift, grinning at the sight of you at the table, making a friend. Maintain that you must stay, that you have to work, when he grips your arm and tries to ease you in the direction of his tent.

9. *Pull your lips back and show all your teeth.* Remain rooted to your seat while he finally stands, looking down at the crown of your bowed head. Smile widely and understandingly when he tells you to be careful and safe, again, from that lechery out there. Your friend will lightly warn him to guard himself against lechery as well. He will assure you, again, that he has his own mission. Wipe your eyes with one small hand when he shoots water from the toy gun he is holding at his hip. Run your palm across your chin and hold it over your mouth as he laughs, I got you pregnant! Play along. Soon he will stumble away. Rise, shaking, from the table to gather your colorful pamphlets. Forget to remove your special shirt as you leave.

10. *Grimace to yourself in congratulations.* Do this approximately ten months later, when you are ripping weeds from your organic strawberry patch. You will have smiled many times since then—to feel the heft of a tip in your hand after you cut someone's hair, to wrap your fingers around the label of a free beer at the bar, to catch the eye of a taxi driver on the street. Recall the event and curl your lip. After all, you have succeeded in smiling, despite your misgivings in the beginning. Tear at the weeds harder, especially the ones you secretly think are beautiful and delicate.

## A Baptist Girl's Prayer for Shabbat

Meg Kennedy

I pray that you know  
my hands pushing in the water,  
soaping from seven times seven plastic cups  
the dregs of illegal university wine,  
soaking mismatched plates  
with *matzo* and chocolate cake smeared on them,  
are my way of lighting the candles  
to remember  
and remind myself  
that just because I grew up to believe in Jesus,  
I wasn't the one who did the *Kristallnacht*.  
And I wouldn't.

Observe that my hesitation  
to take the torn bite of steaming *challah* from your  
hand  
was not because I feared your strangeness,  
but because I was afraid I'd turn into a pillar of salt  
because the only bread I ever took for God  
was a yeast roll slathered in butter  
in the fellowship hall.

So my fingers count the tines on the forks,  
sudsing,  
each one a hail to you  
who made the food *with eager hands*.  
I will stand at the sink,  
in the way of my mothers  
and the mothers of many others,  
*clothed in strength and dignity*,  
enjoying the satisfaction of a meal well eaten  
and a meal respected  
and a meal that meant something.

Because usually,  
when the Friday sun sets  
'til Saturday's three stars wink at me,  
I know I'm not serving any god  
other than myself.

So I wash  
in gratitude  
in enjoyment  
*in laughter at the days and meals to come*.  
I pray that when you see my hands,  
scraping the cranberry sauce into the trashcan,  
you will be able  
*to distinguish holiness from the everyday*.

**Some Things about My Mamaw**  
Meg Kennedy

There were things I knew,  
like that Mamaw had a painting  
in her foyer--  
pronounced *foy yay*--  
of Jesus in the clouds  
with tiny baby angels  
and beams of sunlight breaking through  
to illuminate his face.

There were things I didn't know,  
like that painting was a gift  
from Harold,  
who was in the house  
in the very *foy yay*,  
who might have known Jesus,  
who might have known Mamaw,  
in the biblical sense.

There were things I knew,  
like that when Mamaw died,  
when my grandfather was long gone,  
Momma burned the painting.  
But whenever it's cloudy outside  
and beams of sun break through  
I still look to see  
if they're falling on some Jesus somewhere.

There were things I didn't know,  
like that Harold wasn't my grandfather,  
that my grandfather was in his room  
while they were in the *foy yay*,  
but that my Mamaw asked my grandfather  
to hang the picture anyway  
in the *foy yay*  
and he did.

## Harvesting & Curing Tobacco

Kyle Marshall

*My head cocked toward the sky,  
I cannot get off the ground,  
& you, passing over again*  
James Tate - "The Lost Pilot"

O Helios riders of chariots  
do not bring today.  
O O father & sons early breakfast  
give me strength.  
O September's morning sun  
bless the work we must do.

I:

Lowly lugs layered  
in muck spattered with

dirt & footprints. We  
discard you. Your obituary

said: is survived by  
two sons & a nice plow.

II:

The stalks reach for the sky  
as we hold our blunt knives

to their necks. Condensation  
drips down onto my hands.

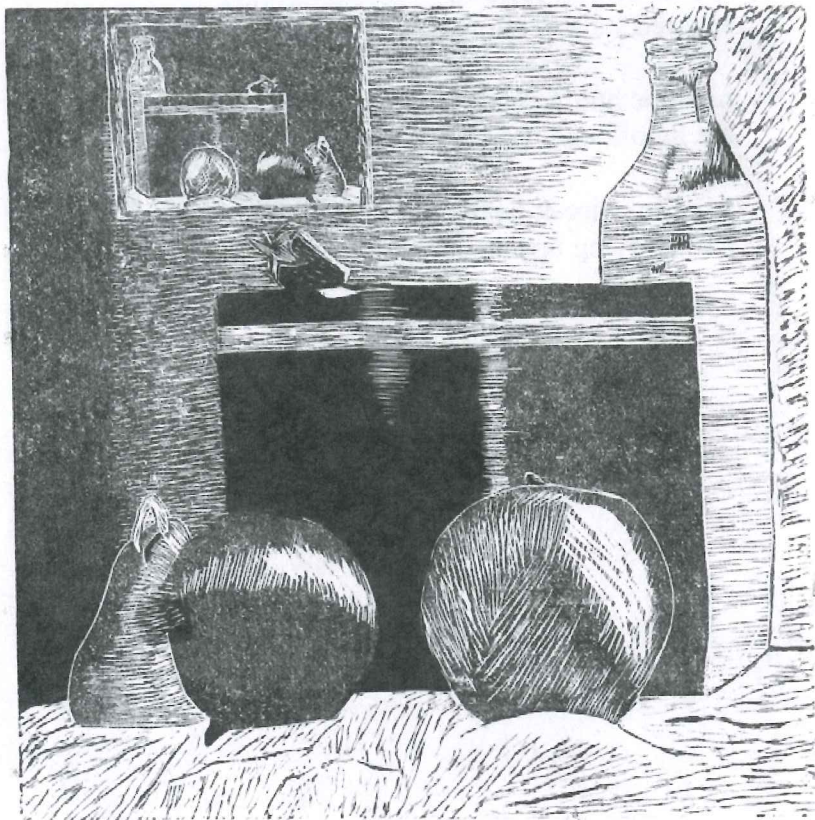
Chopping reveals the innards  
& they excrete ammonia.

III:

A trail of dew follows  
speared stalk. Yellow

nicotine hue. Leaves removed  
are humiliated. Forever away from earth

hung by wire & heavy pole  
curing dying upside down drying.



Jessica Reel

Shadow

**Where I'm From, Really**  
Timothy Phelps

Where I'm from,  
mothers stand

alone

hiding behind their palms,  
shoulders shaking,  
their mothers and marriages  
dying together.

Where I'm from,  
sons don't know how to console grown women,  
so they just walk away  
and let them sob

alone.



Justin Comley

Plague Doctor

## Gravity Pull Me Down

Samara Skinner

The tires of the Subaru bit into the gravel, making a slow descent down the 40° angle driveway. Kentucky trees towered around the car, and I briefly glimpsed the house on the next hill through a giant swatch cut out of the forest. You could follow that powerline trail for miles before encountering another house.

My mother clenched her jaw, and the skin around her eyes seemed to grow thinner. The nervous energy she had taken on since the divorce caused her to wring her hands around the wheel. "I don't know what to do with you," she whispered. The weight she had lost had managed to make her voice flat along with the rest of her former swells.

I flexed my hands as I stared out the window, pretending my imaginary friends hid in the bushes just out of reach, their skin smeared in tribal warpaint, ready to come to my rescue if I signaled them. "Why don't you ground me?" The sneer curled away from my lips like smoke.

It choked my mother and she coughed through her laugh. "Ground you from what? Reading?" The car spit a rock at the window and it glanced off. I pushed my backpack farther away into the floorboards with my sneaker and hunched down in the passenger seat.

At the bottom of the hill, the river in the ravine had dried up and seed pods on the trees were starting to come out. I'd be collecting them by the weekend. My imaginary friends looked out at me from rotten knot-holes and low slung rock formations. They waited to whisk me away.

"Mom . . . I do other stuff. . . I watch movies."

The engine revved in preparation for dashing out of the ravine, a running start always needed to make it, and sometimes we didn't. Sometimes the car would slide on the gravel at the steepest point and begin to roll backward as though being dragged to the underworld. I swear I had seen fire in the depths of some of those valley caves. Little pygmy things dancing around it that weren't of my tree village.

"Why do you *always* have to argue with me?" The wheels spun and the car lurched forward, dragging and clawing its way upward. My mother ground her molars like the gravel, and continued on providing far-fetched examples of the lengths I would go to in order to be contrary, but I had tuned her out. I was wondering how we didn't end up toppling end over end back down, the car plummeting off the side along the path of the telephone wires--if we were lucky--like the tractor had done right before my mother stopped taking care of the property.

Her hair floated around her as we escaped gravity for a moment, blasting off and away into another realm. The painted horse skull greeted



us on its post as the car heaved itself over the ridge. Chickens pecked around the herb garden planted within giant tractor tires. The barn-lumber sides of the house had grown dark absorbing the moisture in the air.

My mother talked in languages that I didn't care to translate. A howling creature expressing feelings I had no ear for. When we rolled underneath the lean-to car port I was already sending orders to my hordes in the woods. By the time I got out of the car they were implementing my telepathic desires. By the time I shut the door my mother was releasing her grip from the wheel, taking a shallow breath to steady herself.

My camouflage forest surrounded me while the shadow of reality crept up on silent haunches. Soon it would pin me to the ground, blotting out the vision of my fantasy world, leaving only a weight that would keep me from getting out of bed in the morning. My hand signaled to the illusory others, dirt in my fingernails, feet twitching because they knew how to slap the ground, the earth spinning underneath my limbs, tethered to the trees and splashing through creeks.

But I watched her stiffly carry in groceries, the way her back hunched under the weight, the way her hair defied gravity. I saw the lines life was carving in her skin and the folds that stress had tugged into her frame, and I realized that my imaginary tactics were the only things I had holding me up.

## Balloon Boy Samara Skinner

Your hugs charge me,  
sending static rippling through each nerve.  
Misplaced arms tangle around at odd angles.  
I grab at all of you, craving your oxygen against my throat,  
knowing that to let go will leave me vibrating,  
and your embrace holds me steady for just this lasting  
moment.

Your body taut with the first traces of labor,  
life not yet having the chance to leave you distended,  
not enough broken romances to rupture your heart.  
And when those others leave you sailing away from them,  
I will catch your deflated soul  
and press it to my lips  
to fill with life again.



"Autumn I"

2/5

Ashley Hurt

Ashley Hurt

Autumn I

## Speech Therapy

Rachel Sudbeck

They make you recite things  
Like Sally Sells Something  
Only  
Thally Thells Thomething  
And try to explain the mechanics of sound.  
Th tongues go between teeth  
S tongues just barely pass between them  
Just let a little hiss of breath escape  
Don't dwell on it  
The letter lasts for less than a second  
Pretend you're a snake  
Pretend you're a balloon  
Pretend you're just a puff of air  
Dissipating into the clouds of steam  
Escaping from deep-set volcanoes  
Beneath soft cerulean seas  
Where swordfish swim in silvery circles  
And the soft-set sulfur snakes off  
In smoky streams.  
Look at this diagram  
Read from this story  
These are the exact mathematics  
And processes  
Behind the letter S  
But for God's sake don't dwell on it  
Don't let your mouth get twisted into knots  
All over one letter.



Jessica Booth

Fish

## The Secrets of a Beer Stain

Rebecca Thieman

We used to stay up until four a.m. doing homework on your long beige sofa with the broken spring in the middle and the matching loveseat with the beer stain on the right arm from where your roommate fell asleep with a Sam Adams nestled to his chest, the bottle's neck tucked under his chin like a small child he was breathing in the scent of.

You once fell asleep six feet above my head while I wrote a paper on abnormal psychology. Somewhere between borderline and compulsion I stole a glance at your face to see what stillness looked like and imagined my index finger tracing the lines of your lips thinking if I was close enough I could catch the dreams you breathed away.

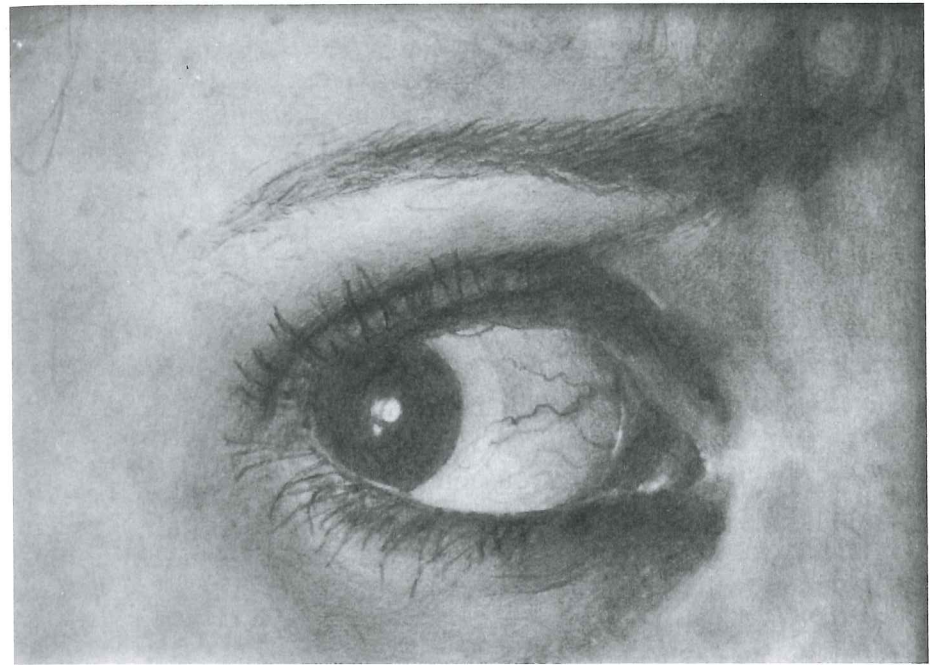
In the winter we stumbled upon poetry and shared our findings in messages never acknowledging their presence out loud for fear our voices would crumble their meaning, not in art but in the passing between us. Though sometimes a shared poem is nothing more than appreciation not love but still I thought the words hid a deeper meaning when I read them in the way I imagined you would.

Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night and wish you were beside me. I think about the beer stain on your loveseat and I know we are the same. Two spots in the backdrop. If I wrote you a letter it would be one sentence and I would read it out loud so that it couldn't be taken back or torn up or unnoticed. It would be one line and I would say it with my eyes wide open.

## Late Night Hell

Robert Walker

I woke up to my neck twisted and coiled  
like black headphones in blue jeans pockets.  
The map of my bed covered in little Dorito soldiers  
on a hunt for the chip bag.  
The clouds that sneak through my window are  
dirty children that sit in the sky  
waiting to use the bathroom.  
Clothes are strung out like crack heads on my carpets' lap.  
My closet is a drunk that vomits Nikes on my virgin tile floor.  
My TV sits so high on the glossy oak dresser,  
that it's starting to believe it's God.  
The smell of dead pizza walks past the crying crazy bread  
my head, full of Medusa's snakes, falls back into my bed  
and my eyes, like banks, close early.



Moriah Dixon

Arachnophobia

## Watching Your Parents Dance

Maggie Woodward

Perched like crows crooning on your old wooden fence,  
we watched your parents waltz  
and tried not to get splinters in our sweaty palms--  
sweaty because that Mississippi night  
felt like being inside a dryer full of damp clothes.  
That night the chipped white fence your father built  
swayed in the wind's hot breath,  
and even though we were just sitting, watching  
it felt like we were waiting--  
for the days of skinned red knees,  
mosquito-bitten legs and dirt-stained jeans,  
to become nights of dancing like your parents,  
seeing each other in darkened rooms,  
yellowed by the glint of candles  
dripping wax on the nightstand.  
Me: donning a dress like your mother's,  
that breathed its own breath,  
inhaling and exhaling as I spun on your arm--  
You: throwing your coat on the bed,  
loosening your tie,  
looking at me like it was for the first time

But you knew me in old, too-big T-shirts,  
stained with paint and youth,  
torn from climbing trees.  
I knew you with purple popsicle-stained lips in the summer,  
worn-out, hand-me-down work boots in the winter.  
You knew me before we realized my girlness and your boyness  
meant we weren't supposed to sit on fences together  
or swim in the shallow creek  
when the sun sucked all the sweat from our bodies  
or lie under the oak tree  
whose branches sliced up the full moon

or slow dance to the jazz music  
leaking out an open window.  
So that night when your sweaty hand crept over to mine,  
wrapped its fingers around my own  
and squeezed--  
I looked at you for the first time.

**Virginia, 1997**

Maggie Woodward

my papa made fried chicken for breakfast--  
in old home videos the table is set, the  
red-checkered cloth heaping with the handiwork  
of my eighty-something grandfather who  
hobbled from oven to griddle to stove  
several times while my sister and I looked up  
from our chairs at the camera with grease-grins,  
licking the oil from our fingers and picking  
every piece of meat off the bone.