

## Providence College

# *the alembic*

### alembic

*noun* ■ **alem·bic** ■ /əˈlembɪk/

an obsolete distilling apparatus. for our purposes, a figurative “distillation” of the collective talents of a literary community. just as an **alembic** distilled each season’s yield of grapes to produce fine wine, we also gather and distill the year’s yield of creativity, in hopes of producing a palatable artistic vinatge.

2016

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# ***THE ALEMBIC*** Spring 2016

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“One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.”

-Jack Kerouac





# A Story to Tell

Jeffrey Levy

Skipping stones on the Sandy River,  
Carefree boys test their arms.  
There is a shout, then another.  
Dead man in mountain water.  
That night, at the fire, a story to tell.

# Namesake

Branan Durbin

“My name is Espada,” you say.  
You are the sword.  
You are your father’s son,  
A reflection of him you love,  
your family,  
your blood.

Myself, my name is Durbin.  
White southerners,  
Irish descent,  
forgetful fathers.  
My name is Branan  
of Kenyon Branan,  
of Wales or Ireland—  
the story changes each time  
my father sits to tell it again.

I am also Dakota—and there  
you finally see my mother,  
at least, her mind.  
From her, you finally see  
my blood—my blood is Cabello,  
but Cabello because it is Perez,  
Perez because it is Marina,  
and Marina because I am of Angela,  
daughter of “Juan Portugesa”  
and a Taína woman  
whose name I don’t remember.

I am my mother’s daughter,  
half Newyoricán,

abutting the half  
that is the whole of my namesake.  
I am my grandmother's granddaughter,  
I am a child of my great-grandmother,  
but how far back can I go?  
How far back can I trace these veins  
who have no one name?  
These strong women  
built my bones, fill my blood  
and give me my voice.

I am not Durbin,  
but if I'm not,  
who are they?

*Written in response to Martín Espada's poem "My Name is Espada."*

# Hannah

Branan Durbin

I want to give you up,  
to offer you  
upon the altar of sacrifice,  
like Hannah leaving Samuel  
for the service of the Lord.

But, I had done just that, and yet  
I keep coming and picking you up again.  
I wonder if Hannah ever returned  
to the tent of the Lord,  
gently held her precious boy  
and dreamed of taking him back,  
of the life of perfect family, or even if  
she imagined God releasing her  
from her promise.

Despite the pull  
in my hopeful heart,  
I want to place you down—  
leave you once and for all  
at the feet of God.  
Although, I'm human,  
no Hannah or sign of holiness,  
so I know that in desiring  
to make this your last page—  
the last moment you call me to you—  
I will need more than a saint's resolve  
to make any promise to God.

# Zoraida

Branan Durbin

Laying alone in a dark, sterile hospital bed,  
the 1952 moon shining on your young face,  
your tiny rheumatic frame must have shivered.  
You're below five feet tall now,  
how small was a twelve-year-old you?

You've told me of your fear then,  
of the memory of your sister  
who had died the year before,  
only two years older with an enlarged heart,  
saying "Mommy's home" as your blustery mother  
blew in the front door  
from a fight with the neighbor.

You've told me of your defiance then,  
of sneaking out of bed  
to feed the rickety, weakened souls  
laying beside you day in and day out,  
unable to spoon themselves soup.  
(And you've told me of the love and toys  
their families would bring little you.)

No one, they say, comes out of trauma  
the same.  
After having spent a measly twenty-one years  
on the planet you have brought me to,  
I have seen this, felt this  
 firsthand, despite my own grief  
being nothing like solitude in a metal framed bed,  
surrounded by the smell and spirit of death  
during the early morning of your own life.

How did you do it?  
How did you go back home,  
grow up like any other kid  
and become a functioning woman?  
How did you wake up each morning of your life  
singing,  
ready to raise your five children  
and one alcoholic cousin  
again and again and again?  
This, you've never told me.

You've held me and warned me,  
"Don't let anyone steal your joy."  
But, Zoraida, what if no one has stolen it?  
What if I turn back and see it  
vanished, blackness where once was song?  
What if where it should be  
is nothing but a grayscale hospital bed,  
white sheets disarrayed and empty,  
the night outside blowing the curtains  
through an open window?

Zoraida, I want to ask you everything  
and learn the keys and workings of  
how to navigate this anguish-bound world.  
Teach me your song,  
even when you can't remember it yourself.

# The Surly Bonds of Earth

Devyn Price

The first time he asked her, she was sitting at her desk, pencil in hand. She wasn't writing anything, but she didn't turn to look at him when he walked through their front door. He sat and waited for her at the far end of the sofa and watched. He didn't know if she knew he was there, but he kept his eyes trained on her back and searched for any sign that she wasn't lost in her own head again.

She would never go for it.

He waited for a full twenty minutes before he slid to the other end of the sofa and put his feet up on the glass table.

"Shoes off the furniture."

He still couldn't see Andrea's face, but he thought that might be for the better. "I wanted to ask you something. You're gonna say no."

Andrea turned to face him. "If you already know my answer then why are you asking?" The corners of her lips turned up. "Unless you're not entirely certain. Then it's called exploration."

"I prefer to think of it as bravery."

She frowned and faced her desk again, probably already out of her element in this conversation. She never did too well with the emotional. Which was fine since he didn't do too well with analytical. Ian studied her back for a moment and tried to summon up some courage. He didn't know why he was afraid to ask. He did know he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Jump out of a plane with me." The words liberated themselves before he could stop them.

She swiveled her chair around and gave him a puzzled look fit for one of her crazy, brain-science experiments. When she didn't say it, he began to wonder. Lately she'd seemed out of it, not herself. The last few months he would walk in to find her staring at a blank laptop screen or out of the window.

Silence sparked between them and if he hadn't known any better, he might have thought she was considering it.

"No," she finally told him and turned back to her desk.

\*\*\*

Although she knew Ian wasn't listening, Andrea talked over tacos about adrenaline and dopamine. She explained during commercial breaks the statistics and probability involved in taking chances. She told him on movie night about human behavioral patterns and thrill seeking. She could tell he wasn't listening by the way his eyes stared, unfocused, at her neck and how he would nod at inappropriate junctures. Over pizza she told him: "It's strange that humans need to feel a sense of accomplishment to be happy, that we need to punctuate our lives with some significant event in order to start a new chapter."

When she looked at him, he was staring back at her, eyes shining.

\*\*\*

The next time he asked, he knew he would get her to say yes. Probably not this time, but she'd cave for him just like she always did. He couldn't quite put his finger on why, but it was there in her eyes, an almost alarmed look fused with distraction.

This time she asked him why.

He didn't have an answer. Maybe he could distract her by talking about feelings and all those other things that made her uncomfortable.

He told her about how he needed this in his life and how much better it makes you feel afterward. He didn't tell her that he wanted to help her or that he loved her or that he was scared. He didn't tell her about being lost in the dark in a hole he couldn't climb out of. He didn't tell her that he didn't know why, that he just had to. And he had to with her.



Still, she said no.

\*\*\*

Ian was action. Ian was a wild card. Ian was a constant reminder of the chaos Andrea tried so hard to keep at bay.

“Why me?” she asked. She understood that since they were no longer romantically attached, he could choose anyone else to jump with him.

He stumbled in his answer -- Ian, who always knew what to say, even when he was wrong. She heard him talking, but she was not listening.

If she was too quiet, she could feel her thoughts slipping away. There was a point when her mother lost her mind, and her mother's father before that. And now it was her turn. Andrea thought she was too young. She thought maybe the illness would skip over her. The irony was far too absurd to be real - a neuroscientist with a degenerative neurological disease.

She wondered if he knew. She was aware that he couldn't know the mistakes she would make in her work, in the article she wrote, words of which she would forget the meaning. She was certain that he would not even notice when she inevitably lost her funding. But she knew he could read people better than any computer. She wondered how well she was hiding. As he answered, she watched his lips move and thought about falling.

\*\*\*

The thing about Wyoming is that it's flat. But when Ian was young, he used to dream of mountains. He dreamed of his tiny suburban house on a tiny suburban street swallowed by enormous peaks. In his sleep, he would climb up and up to the highest summit, not so he could look down on the world, but so that he could jump.

Ian had tried drinking and he knew it only made things

worse. And that made him feel better about it. Maybe if he drank enough, he'd drown. He was already disappearing. Depression is a dark, ugly hole and it takes something huge, maybe even something stupid to claw your way out.

He had to die.

Not really, really die, but in that figurative sense where the old, going-nowhere Ian needed to blink out of existence forever so the new Ian could take flight.

He once read a poem by John Gillespie Magee and it went like this:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling  
mirth  
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of —

He was never good at the whole symbolism and imagery thing but sometimes he would think that he should slip these surly bonds and leave this whole rotting mess of life here. So he dreamed of his mountaintop and he dreamed of flying.

\*\*\*

The last few nights she had a recurring dream that she was blind. She'd find herself groping for something solid, something that would assure her that she wasn't drifting through oblivion. In most dreams, however, she would simply float in empty space. Her hands and her feet would find nothing on which to steady herself. For eternity, she would be damned to nothing but her own thoughts which were slowly slipping away from her.

She dreamed of her mother. When she was a child, Andrea was fascinated with the character of Kai who forgot his love for Gerda when he was struck with the shards of cold, mirrored glass.

Andrea had given her mother a glass snowflake necklace.

When her mother began to lose her memory, Andrea thought she was under the Snow Queen's evil spell. She gave her mother the necklace to fight off the spell, but the enchantment didn't work and she watched her mother fade.

Now, after nightmares of shattered glass, Andrea would wake to find herself in her own dark room. With what felt like some evil spell woven tightly in her chest and her body covered in sweat, she would will the tears not to come.

\*\*\*

The third time he asked, Ian had heard Andrea pacing the floor of her bedroom, muttering to herself and he knew that she hadn't slept for days. He didn't know why she was so worked up but he did know that this was why she was going to jump with him.

There were times when he thought he could do it alone, that he could forget about this whole Andrea thing and just jump. But he imagined reaching the ground, and then there'd be no one for miles around him and she'd be here, fading away.

She opened the door to her room and said, "Ian, do you ever think about death?"

He almost told her, "Yes. I do. All the fucking time." Instead he shook his head. She sighed and started to pace again. He knew she needed this as much as he did so he asked her again.

And it killed him inside when she said no.

\*\*\*

Hypothesis: Ian wanted to jump from an airplane because he was --- what? Feral? Ridiculous? Stupid? Someone who "lived in the moment?" Ian wanted to jump from an airplane because he was insane.

Observations: He never stuck to any routine. His room was a mess. He ate peanut butter straight out of the jar. When he

smiled, she couldn't think straight. When he laughed ---

Experiment: "Ian, do you want to jump from an airplane because you're insane?"

"What? Of course not."

Conclusion: Hypothesis false. No. Hypothesis partially true. More data needed.

Modified Hypothesis: One could neither define nor quantify Ian.

Observations: Everything he did.

Experiment: Every day for the three years since he moved in next door.

Conclusion: "Ian, jumping out of an airplane is irrational bordering on psychotic. I still don't understand why you want me to jump with you."

"Because you seem lost."

...

Conclusion: Incomplete.

\*\*\*

This was what it was all about: another audition, another rejection, another day of coming home smelling like burnt canola and ketchup. His mother had warned him about New York. Like everything else he jumped headlong into the chaos, drawn in by the lights and the danger.

But it wasn't dangerous. It was boring and it stank and this time last year he was wearing the same red and white striped shirt and stupid hat. And he spent every night alone. Outside, the sun was shining but it was a pale, grey shine through dust covered windows that made him want to close his eyes and slip into the shadows.

When he was a child, he would pretend to be the superheroes from the posters on his walls. He loved pretending he could overpower his enemies. He loved pretending he was savior of the people.

On the TV he could hear the voice of some woman on some commercial he had auditioned for and he wondered when it would be his turn to be someone else. He opened his eyes. This time when he jumped from his mountain, he would fly.

\*\*\*

When she was young, she was convinced of invincibility, like the heroes in the books she used to read. But each hero has a flaw, a chink in the armor. And there comes a time when one must accept fate or die trying to change it. She didn't yet know when she would lose everything, but here in the dark she could feel the inevitable.

She never told anyone - she never told him - why her mother died. Though there was no logic to it, she had hoped that by keeping it a secret, destiny would be held at bay, forced into the corner, small and alone. But destiny is guided by the hands of those willing to grasp onto it with white knuckles. So it was in the dark that she decided she would tell him yes.

\*\*\*

When she told him her answer, he soared higher than he had in a long time. She was in her pajamas, he was sitting on the sofa eating Pop-Tarts and watching an infomercial. It was still dark outside and she should have been sleeping. When she gave him his answer, he choked and jumped to his feet. He thought about wrapping his arms around her, but she wasn't smiling.

"This is for us," he told her because he couldn't think of anything else to say. She nodded and swallowed and looked him in the eye and he knew that he still loved her.

\*\*\*

She had to check with the coach that she had done every-

thing correctly. She was always meticulous at following instruction, but she didn't trust herself anymore. When she got the okay, she stood at the back of the plane and avoided eye-contact with Ian.

She had said yes, but she still wasn't convinced that she was going to go through with it. She imagined herself staying on the plane, watching Ian jump and her heart broke. She imagined the plane landing and her disappointment in herself. She imagined going back to her life and playing the same tune over and over again until she forgot the melody.

She swallowed and planted herself against the wall. Ian was talking to the pilot and she heard him laugh. In his laugh, she could see the future and she knew she was going to jump. It scared her and thrilled her more than she thought possible.

\*\*\*

The doors opened and a hot light momentarily blinded him. He looked over the edge and it was a little bit funny that there were clouds below him. When he looked back at Andrea, he saw that she was as far from the doors as possible, a look of panic on her face. He understood where she was coming from. His own heart was trying to escape and claw its way back to the warmth and the dark. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to tell her that everything would be alright. He wanted her to go first.

He walked over to Andrea and grabbed her hand. She looked down at their joined palms with questioning eyes. It's now or never, he told her, only he didn't say it out loud. The wind screamed through the cabin and their hair whipped their faces.

He looked her in the eyes and then he saw it. Through the cracks in the mirrored surface of green, he saw sadness, panic, fear, determination. He squeezed her hand and stepped forward. She turned her face to him and said something, but the words were carried away. Before he could ask her to repeat it, she was gone.

\*\*\*

Wind crashed in her ears and shot straight to her brain. She could feel pieces of herself being torn apart and thrown upward as she plummeted. She turned her body and saw Ian free-falling above her. His hair flew around his sun-speckled face.

Death. For better or for worse, death was a certainty. She gathered enough strength to swallow. She would miss him. She could admit that now. With the ground above and the bright sky below, Andrea laughed. Not even gravity could keep her on the ground where she belonged. No force in the universe had dominion over the heart. The spirit danced on forever and ever, even when the mind and body crumbled. She turned back toward the fast approaching earth and waited for eternity.

\*\*\*

He looked down at the growing, ruined land. Tears escaped and flew upward from his eyes. He blinked because he couldn't miss this, he couldn't miss any of it. Everything, his whole life had been leading up to this moment. Now that it was here he could see eternity stretched and curved, hovering just over the earth.

Below him Andrea's body seemed lifeless as she floated to the ground. He wondered if she was laughing or crying or scared or if she had passed out - please, God, say she hadn't passed out - the moment her feet left anything solid. She seemed so small against the red-gold desert and he thought that he must look tiny too, if there was anyone up there to see him.

If there was someone watching, could they see a thousand tiny Ians, each one going somewhere different, each one falling down a different path? He took a long, deep breath and tried to guess which Ian he was.

The sun reflected back to him from the snow tipped peaks of the Appalachians and caught his eyes and his breath. He was falling. He was really falling and there was no one there to catch him. There never would be anyone around to catch him. There would never be anyone there to fix him. So much of his life had been spent waiting for something or someone to fall from the sky and tell him what to do so that everything would be magically better. And now it was him who was falling from the sky. He didn't know how to work magic, but he was learning how to fly.

\*\*\*

Nothing could be heard over the sound of rustling nylon and drumming blood in her ears. The sun shot prickles of light into her eyes when she finally freed herself from beneath the parachute. She scanned the horizon for Ian.

Then she heard him behind her, muffled cursing from beneath cloth. A grin crept up on her when she heard his breath, harsh and clear. Without seeing him, she could tell that he was standing and looking at her.

If she was dead, maybe Heaven existed after all. Or maybe it was the dopamine that made her feel like turning around and giving him a kiss. As she turned, he smiled. If memory served her well, that would be his happy smile. It was something she hadn't seen from him in quite a long time. When she saw it, she laughed. She had come with him and she had jumped. She shed her pack and ran toward him. Nothing had changed, but everything was different. She didn't have to be afraid, so she took his hand and walked into the light.



\*

Simon Perchik

Not yet finished melting :the sun  
–you can hear its sea struggling  
spilling over though each morning

it comes from behind now  
brushes against this cemetery gate  
that's still shining, floating past

–to this day you go home  
the back way –you don't see  
your reflection or the ground

face to face with shoreline  
–what you hear are waves :one hand  
reaching for another and in the dark

you let your fingers unfold end over end  
then close, gather in these fountains  
as if they belong one side then another

are nearly too much stone –here  
where this gate is filling its lungs  
and you tearing it in two.

# Three Steps

Greg Moglia

fiction

Poetry

photography

interviews

Steve's the waiter at the local diner  
Knows I have the spinach salad minus mushrooms  
Knows which friend takes light rye toast with her eggs

On our way out bags free cookies for the table  
Seventy-five years old handles the heavy plates with ease  
After three months the place reopens and so many new faces

But yes, here's Steve with a handshake and good luck wish  
*How's it going? Fine* he says and points to three new steps  
Three steps between the customers and his trip to the kitchen

He says *Three steps* and I watch  
The threat to the thin line he lives in, he's safe in  
Stretched just a bit he's tested this night

Going down with those plates he's ok  
But going up he reaches for the railing  
Seventy - five and he can't say it, won't say it

*Damn steps, three damn steps*

# Try to Get Away

Greg Moglia

I lay exhausted on the grass and the shortstop's sister, Susan  
comes by and says  
*You look too relaxed* and I look up at this cutie in summer shorts  
White blouse opened to the second button, too surprised to say  
anything  
And years away from any banter with a girl I stammer **What?**

Susan, hormones at an early roar says *What? I'll show you what*  
She settles in a straddle at my chest, locks my arms to the ground  
Challenges *Go ahead, try to get up*  
I too stunned to enter this girl-bold world...smile

*Go ahead try to get away. I can't*, I lie and with a laugh she rises  
And I knew for the first time what the flesh of a woman can do  
A game slid away and a game begins  
From the time Susan pulled away

I know it  
Starts with one  
Unsaid word  
**Stay**

# Commander

Greg Moglia

fiction

Poetry

photography

interviews

Mother in her hospital room with inoperable stomach cancer  
She set to go home for hospice care but the staff not quick  
enough for her  
She shouts at Dad and me... *I want out of here...* strips off her  
hospital gown

Naked to the waist screeches *Take me home, now*

Begins to rip at her tubes  
And Ron enters says firmly *Mother, cut it out...*  
*You're embarrassing the family*  
He takes her gown... covers her

In household matters mother always in charge  
Dad and I satisfied to sit about as the thinkers... the readers  
Short, chunky brother Ron, poor school grades, handy, but no  
one cares  
Knows he's got to fight to be taken seriously, to be seen

Like that time with 5<sup>th</sup> grade classmate Diane over history books  
in the den  
And Mother says *Diane, you have to go home – now*  
Then yells at Ron *No schoolgirl pregnancy in my house*  
Ron flares back at her *Mother, you're crazy... you're crazy*

Stomps off to his room  
With the years he waits and learns  
Until on this day  
Somehow he knows

# 1000 Tea & Topology

Ben Wright

The smoothly dim bulbs in 1000 Tea illuminate circular cushion seats and crisp angles of legless tables, and the trickle of the water feature melodizes the rhythms of ambient Indian drumming. A softly rung bell transiently alters the placid atmosphere to summon the hosts who take orders of tea. The Qimen Mao Feng, please – axiom, definition, foundational structure; a pencil is poised over a white-lined, lambent paper. The hosts bring the leaves and pot of boiling water, whispering, infuse this tea for twelve seconds –proposition, process, proof. Then, the brewed product pours into the cup steaming – content, truth, theorem – and onto the paper, the pencil spills the secrets that balance between the form of shapes and the music of movements.

# Herstein\* & More Caffeine

Ben Wright

We sit out reading in the starlight until the dew condensates. Or we settle under the sun for picnic dates; though when we go out at day we must find shade, else your paleness further fades. Oh, remember at our favorite bench by the reed and turtle pond, under the flowering willow, when you first showed me the theorems of Sylow? True, mobility is hard because your spine is surgically taped, but a table for two is fine anywhere with you: Italian restaurants, sharing a plate of spaghetti; the Coffee Exchange, studying proofs from the great Lagrange; or the library, silently giggling as my pencil tickles flirty notes across your pages. Little out-of-print blue book losing your cover, yes, bare yourself onto your lover. From one knee, *Topics in Algebra*, I propose to have a unity in matrimony with two rings from chapter three. And after we wed, I can stay up late, split you open between the covers, and do your recommended exercises in bed.

\**Topics in Algebra* by I. N. Herstein is the Holy Bible of abstract algebra. It devotes five out of seven chapters to study ring-structures. In particular, some *rings* may not have a multiple identity element, called a unity.

# Irrational Pi

Ben Wright

Lindsey gave up chocolate every Lent, so for our sixth grade mathematical celebration, she brought a homemade coconut-cream-and-crumble pie. Because our whole class was eating my store-bought chocolate, and because I had a crush, I wanted to be polite and ask for a slice of hers. Though confident girls usually do not associate with unassured nervous nerds. Who would go out with a guy whose best conversation is reciting 400 digits of pi? But in the spirit of irrationality, of pi, I summoned the courage to ask her for a bit of the cream-and-crumble to try. She blushed and cut me a bite, which I chewed in disgust. Although, I showed a smile which grew from joy to epiphany with each vile aftertaste of the coconut nectar and its oils: One must master self-direction, simple form and good style, for to the vector go the spoils\*.

\*From *The Line and the Dot*. A Euclidean vector describes both magnitude and direction.

# Bullet from Vicksburg

Ben Wright

*From the second that I was born, it seems I had a loaded gun,  
And then I shot, shot, shot a hole through everything I loved.  
- "Shots," Imagine Dragons*

With a drawl that hung in the humid Mississippi air, my grandfather, Pawpaw, offered – Bring this back North, an artifact from your birth city to remember the history you inherit – dropping a heavy, lead bullet into my open hands. Pawpaw collects bullets he finds on weekend walks; they stand like the Terracotta army in his glass display case, an array of dirt-stained, dried-earth figures of war. He walks through the field of Vicksburg, behind knots, hills, and trenches where soldiers dressed in gun-smoke grey once lay prone in battle. Young men, maybe no older than myself, ordered to steady, aim, and fire – not the healing, pure, Baptismal fire, but the cold, steel-on-cheek-gun-fire of Damnation, the numb licking-fire of warm blood trickling from a body losing sensation, the sieging fire that suffocates – ordered to fire their rifles at the pressuring row of the blazing blue. That one was cracked in the mold, thrown away, never shot, Pawpaw said, pointing to my hands. My palms started burning, then my heart, as if the cracked bullet fired through my chest, my veins, and ignited my whole body. Even this seed of hate was made with mercy. Compassion won the civil war of its soul. The bullet saved a life in its surrender to damaged nature; it was made better by being broken.



# Orion's Belt

Richie Smith

There were only two things Orion ever cared about, his fathers and his stars.

Now he only had one father and lived all year long in a cramped apartment overflowing with Daddy H's astrophysics journals, the worn couch smelling like curry.

Most of Orion's classmates played sports after school. Dad R. used to teach him baseball or football on weekends, but of course that ended over a year ago, when Dad R. died.

The only sport Daddy H. played with him was chess, a full hour after Orion finished his homework. Later at night, he often stayed awake while his father shuffled around the living room or leafed through the glistening pages of his journals. At times, he heard his father weep.

They spent Saturday mornings shopping at the farmer's market and the rest of the day either in the library or at a museum. Of course, the planetarium was his favorite. Maybe Daddy H. didn't teach him sports, but he taught Orion to understand the universe.

On Saturday night there was finally time to set up the telescope.

Orion entered their mildewed bathroom to pee while his frail father afraid of falling and more afraid of deep water, sat soaping himself in the empty bathtub.

"You sh-should knock before you enter a room, Orion—it's the proper thing to do."

"Sorry!"

Orion felt bad, but sometimes he was self-conscious around frail, stuttering Daddy H., maybe even embarrassed for calling him Daddy.

After urinating, he didn't flush to prevent his father from getting scorched by a surge in temperature of the dripping water.

“Daddy, did you see? It’s a clear night.”

“Even better, Orion, tonight’s a n-new moon.”

His father’s smile seemed so distant and lonely in that empty white tub. Daddy H. was a pale and distant moon of his own, so unlike Dad R. who was broad and muscular.

“Hand me my towel.”

Orion looked away as his father dried. Over the steamed medicine chest mirror he sketched the rings of Saturn.

“If we’re lucky, Orion, tonight, we’ll see some amazing things.”

When it was finally dark, they climbed the narrow staircase to the tar-papered roof, and his father set up the Celestron.

Daddy H.’s thin, pocked face always seemed strange when illuminated red from the tinted flashlight, like one of those muscle models in his science book.

Directly above was the constellation Orion knew best and, in the middle, the three stars of his belt.

“What you see, Daddy?”

“I’m looking into the past. At you, kiddo—Mr. w-warrior of the stars. Your turn.”

Orion peered into the scope at his namesake of a nebula—a wispy death gasp composed of leftover fabric from exploding stars; the ancient clothing of kids donated billions of years ago.

“Without the belt, can’t find your pants. Can’t find your sword. Can’t even find you—Orion.”

But the belt Orion was thinking about belonged to Dad R., his dead father.

“I know I had two fathers,” he said suddenly. “But are you the real one?”

There was silence between them, just whistling of the wind until Daddy H. began humming, pretending to be distracted by another distant galaxy.

“A lot of children have two fathers,” Daddy H. said finally, “but most are lucky to have even one.”

He thought of dead Dad R. and what was left of his family: Aunt Annie, cousins Thomas, Tara, and their hilltop museum of a home. He hadn't been back there for almost a year now, but it seemed like yesterday that he waited on the granite steps during dusk for his athletic father to return from a run. Orion had scanned the horizon through his binoculars for glimpses of Mercury until he saw Dad R. with his effortless stride, reaching into his leather sports belt for an energy bar.

The truth was, Orion saw bits of himself in both fathers: he had the impulsiveness and thick, sandy hair of Dad R., but also the lanky frailty of Daddy H.

"Hey, pal!" Dad R. called out with his deeply masculine voice. "How's my budding scientist?"

If Orion knew anything about his two fathers, it was that he needed to please Dad R. and that Daddy H. would always try to please him.

Everything in the universe had its own rules—light, gravity, the path of a meteor—and parents were no different. You watched from a distance, long enough to figure it all out—then again, there was a lot scientists didn't understand about the cosmos.

"Want to have a catch, Dad?"

"You're wasting your time, Rion."

"I can catch now. I swear. We play all the time in gym class."

Dad R. pointed at the binoculars. "No, I mean you're wasting all that time you spend with Daddy Himanshu staring into space."

It was funny that Orion's stargazing concerned Dad R., not his struggling to make friends in school, and even though Dad R. seemed like the one who certainly had the most friends, Orion felt ashamed to approach him about this.

"Daddy H. says the farther you look into space, the more you're looking into the past."

Dad R. gulped down his recovery drink. "In our

family, Rion, we find it more productive to look into the future. Otherwise, you waste your life, and before you know it, the people you never spent enough time loving—they're gone." His father pointed upward. "Like one of those shooting stars everyone sees except me."

The bang of loose cargo in a passing truck reverberated from the city street below. It startled Daddy H, and he pulled away from the eyepiece with a grimace.

"This is what astronomers have to contend with in cities! Light pollution. Noise pollution. You name it. Sometimes I wonder why I put up with this.

Daddy H. reached into his telescope bag.

"What's that?"

"A Hydrogen-Beta filter. Best for finding the Horsehead nebula."

Orion hesitated. "First tell me. Who was my real father?"

Daddy H. stiffened and turned to face the city skyline behind them.

"We were both your fathers," he said finally.

"Why didn't you live together? Christopher has two fathers and they live together."

"Christopher's fathers are gay. Dad R. and I--we were just very close friends."

There was silence between them, and when it was long and awkward enough, his father stared back into the scope—back into space.

"No. No. It's still not dark enough. If you can't see the Flame nebula, there's no sense looking for the Horsehead."

"Let me see," said Orion. The two of them seemed closest when they focused on objects thousands of light years away.

"Here's Alnitak. That's the first star in your belt."

All Orion saw was a fairly bright blue-white star.

"Do I have to go to swim class tomorrow?"

"Everybody needs to learn how to swim—except me.

That's why it's so important."

"I'm afraid."

"Maybe if you learn p-properly—like I never did—then you w-won't be afraid like I am."

"But I'm already afraid."

Dad R. knew how to swim. On summer mornings he swam in the ocean or the bay—until he was caught in a rip current and drowned.

After the funeral Aunt Annie kissed Orion on the head as if to dismiss him from her family.

"I think Rolph wanted you to have this," she said and handed over his father's worn sports belt like a dead rodent their dog might have dug up in the backyard.

Every night since, Orion rubbed the leather against his face for fading whiffs of Dad R.'s scent.

Though the scent faded over the next year, Orion's longing for his dead father only increased, along with his confusion about whose son he really was.

"Orion, come here, I want to show you something."

With an unexpected pivot, Daddy H. repositioned the tripod and focused instead on the jagged city skyline.

It was strange because it was the first time Orion recalled his father actually pointing the scope directly into the city lights. He did so, and spent quite some time, as if he knew exactly what he was looking for.

"There she is. Take a look, Orion. Tell me what you see."

Daddy H. gently stroked the back of Orion's neck as he focused on a dark smudge in a field of bleached blue. It was like a Voyager photo of a satellite dissolving over the surface of Neptune.

"What planet is that?"

"That's no planet."

"I don't see anything."

"On top of the building across."

Orion fine-tuned the nebulous shades refracting through

choppy liquid.

“I don’t understand. What am I supposed to see?”

“That’s a pool deck,” Daddy H. said excitedly. “Look inside the water.”

“You mean that person swimming?”

“Yes.” His father exhaled sharply. “That woman. She’s not just any person.”

Orion zoomed in on the gliding capped figure in a black swimsuit, the same way he learned to focus on Andromeda.

“She’s very special to you. May even seem familiar.”

Orion refocused to try and make sense of the ebbing image.

But Daddy H. was ecstatic; more excited, it seemed, than when they watched the transit of Venus together a few years before.

“It’s amazing,” his father had cried out.

All Orion saw back then was a black dot over the sun; nothing more, it seemed, than the blemish on the skin of an orange. But to Daddy H., that black dot was like a goddess of love—moving, for a very limited time, over a fiery world.

“Son, I think it’s time you met your mother.”

\*\*\*

The night air is heavy with the impatient anticipation that follows summer humidity, and the roof deck way larger than Orion imagined—marble, shining, and solid as the surface of a Jovian moon. Its edges yield to an ominous crevasse where the pool seems to fall off the edge of the building.

Through two lounge chairs, he watches her slide through water like a leathery mosquito: knees pointed, arms churning. She hums and buzzes.

After a dozen or so laps, longer than seems possible for a human to swim, she climbs from the pool, clothed in a sleek black suit and matching cap, something a sci-fi heroine would wear under a spacesuit.

He emerges from behind the chairs, and she turns as if

expecting him.

“Hi, Orry.”

Her smile’s weak and apologetic—phonier than Aunt Annie’s.

“Look how tall you got.”

The reek of chlorine frightens him.

“Nice night for a swim,” she smiles. It’s the brightest smile Orion’s ever seen.

“There’s a bit of a nip when you come out,” she says, “but not in the water. Sorry you didn’t bring your suit. I told your dad I could teach you if you wanted.”

She removes the cap to free long strands of yellow hair, tilting her head to expel water.

“I know I can’t replace what you’ve lost, Orry, but I can say that before you were born I provided a place for you to develop.” She rubs her belly and groans like Daddy H.

“It’s getting quite chilly up here in this wet suit. If you don’t mind, Orry can you help me into my robe?”

She begins to roll down the black gauzy material. Orion turns his head and opens the terry cloth robe, holding it out awkwardly as she approaches. He smells flowery perfume mixed with chlorine; glimpses vaguely triangular breasts.

“That’s it,” she whispers, “way too close now. “Thanks, Orry. So much better.”

He steps back, but whenever he does, she steps forward.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Orry. Your Daddy Himanshu loves you very much.”

Orion nods. None of this feels right.

“He may spend the evenings looking at stars, but from the first day he owned a telescope, he was really looking for you.”

Orion tries to think of Daddy H, but can’t stop thinking of Dad R. dressed in his nice plaid suit, hands crossed in front, crammed inside the coffin.

“I want to apologize to you,” she says, “for not being there when you were young. I’m sorry about your Dad Rolph.

Who would have thought such a thing could happen to a really accomplished swimmer? I'm also sorry I got mixed up with the two of them in their rather sinister plot."

She pulls him over to sit on a lounge chair and purses her thin lips.

"I know no one's ever explained any of this to you. I'm really sorry."

Orion had met her for barely a minute and already there was so much she was sorry about.

It was a science experiment, more or less," she says, shaking her head in disbelief, "designed for your lonely Daddy H. Everyone knew he was unlikely to ever meet someone, let alone marry and have a child. So his handsome, jockish roommate agreed to participate in a sympathy project.

"Somehow, over a gospel brunch featuring three Bloody Marys, he more or less convinced me to be inseminated so the oddball roommates could share a child." There's the hint of a nostalgic smile. "They both donated sperm so none of us would actually know who the true father was."

"I'm sorry, Orry, but the two of them spent less time planning this harebrained scheme than they did renting their refrigerator, and at least they had a deposit on that."

There's that groan again, the one she shares with Daddy H. She reaches out for him.

Orion retreats, looking up at the sky to reorient himself—to confirm the constellations are still where they should be. He feels the bent house key in his dead father's belt.

"Don't get me wrong, Orry, both your fathers always loved you. I have to admit, I tried really hard not to love you myself. I just didn't think I could handle it. The truth is—there's a certain love a mother has for a child, even if she never speaks to him, something instinctive—au naturel. I don't know, maybe it's because I always loved both your fathers, but I couldn't choose one—so I chose none."

She stands next to him now, with pleading arms.



Orion's never been hugged by a woman, so he stands and backs away.

"Orry, I'm so sorry you only have one father left." She wipes a tear from her eye. "You're really such an amazing boy—I've watched you grow, just as you and your father watched me. Maybe you were far and maybe it wasn't through a telescope, but believe me, I could still see you everyday crossing the street, getting on the school bus, doing all the things little boys do."

She wipes her tiny nose with a tissue from her robe. Her eyes wander across the city lights in the direction of Daddy H.'s telescope.

It's her sadness that finally draws Orion closer to her. He's reminded of the attraction between two objects, what Daddy H. always described as gravitational force.

"But you know nothing about me," he says suddenly, his own words surprising him.

The woman who calls herself his mother, retreats toward the pool, closer to the edge of the building before she turns and faces him.

"I've always loved you, Orry, really I did. But, I tried to keep my distance because I didn't think I could handle being your parent—you already had two fathers."

"But not any more," he says and like a satellite drawn to its mother planet he begins to approach her.

The closer Orion gets, the more the woman backs away, as if suddenly she's the one frightened of him—of his height, of his darker skin.

They stare at each other, quite close to the flat end of the roof.

"For so long, Orry, I always wanted to be in your life."

One thing Orion knows is even if he doesn't believe this woman, he does believe in remnants of the past; in a certain spirit of the night: a smoky, interstellar dust that reaches out over eons and inserts itself into his atomic core, and to where he could ever dream to travel in a lifetime.

“Here you are,” he says pointing at himself. “Now what?”  
She shrugs.

They stare and after a few seconds, they both laugh.

“Hey--what am I supposed to call you?”

She squints at him suspiciously. “Let’s start with Belinda—  
okay?”

“Hey, Belinda, look what I got!” Orion reaches under his  
jacket, unstraps his dead father’s belt and holds the leather pouch  
up for her to see.

She opens her eyes with obvious recognition and suddenly  
retreats again, this time very close to the edge of the building.

Orion opens his arms and reaches for Belinda, the woman  
who calls herself his mother--but before she has the chance to  
either hug him or to jump, and before Orion has a chance to fall  
into the pool and drown like his dead father, there’s a distant flash  
of light--faint and falling, a low magnitude shooting star.

It’s a signal from either Dad R. or Daddy H.

A signal of light from the past, racing through Orion’s  
future.

# Science Fails

D. Jeanne Wilson

Not even Newton,  
Himself,  
could have explained  
color to me.  
Talk of white light,  
broken light,  
absence of light,  
has little to say about  
blue morning glories  
against a white fence, or  
explain how brown  
seeds transmute into  
a green lawn  
complete  
with yellow butterflies.

# Silence Like a Sharp Wind

D. Jeanne Wilson

“Remember the peace that  
can be found in silence”  
Desiderata said,  
but I will have my say.  
I will tell of how it is  
when laughter disappears  
and even argumentative  
words would be welcome,  
and of how the quiet house  
forces you outside to  
stand alone, shivering  
while the absence  
of his tractor’s purr  
pierces like a sharp wind.

# In the Round

T.K. Lee

The beige recliner by the sliding glass door.  
I sit beside you in the rocking chair.  
There aren't many words spoken, or  
you motion for water, or are you pointing into the air?  
I wait for the whimper.

The side table, crowded with bottles of pills.  
The oxygen tank as normal as the floor lamp.  
I keep the curtains open because the wild turkeys still  
come from the woods each morning. Your skin stays damp.  
I can't hold your whole hand.

I can't hold—your whole hand  
makes the effort, so I rub your fingers and leave it at that.  
There are many things we will leave this way: man  
and boy. Father and son. The air in the room is flat.  
It makes dying simpler.

Your bangs, strings, have grown frayed.  
I brush them out of your face. What matters  
now is to lie to you. So. I spend many hours, a waste,  
telling you that the impatiens are blooming. The clematis.  
The squash, tomato plants.

When/ another long morning is suddenly noon  
When/ the eyelids flutter—those desperate wings  
beat against a mortal jar—When/ the lips open to loosen  
moans caught on the teeth; When/ the fingers, damp things,  
gesture for a lament...

Then. No more sponge baths, or catheters, or cancelled plans.

I melt. I melt there in the living room and make a mess.  
The pills won't have to be counted again.  
I won't have to clean up the urine, the feces.  
I'm the last accident.

I lean back in the rocking chair; a moment after  
I brush my bangs back, pull a curl from my hot forehead.  
I honestly can't decide if I should cry or laugh or  
call an ambulance. I take a deep breath, instead.  
Death has a selfish bent.

# Cleanliness

T.K. Lee

## I

He never learned  
to dance. He learned  
to vacuum.

An only child, an only mother.

He slept in her purse.  
He worked in her skillet.  
When she gave her legs  
to cancer one Thanksgiving,

he carried her, a courtesy,  
then  
to the cemetery,  
came home and  
started to vacuum.

I saw this.  
The only grandchild.  
I saw everything.

## II

Me  
a mother left  
me,  
I sat so often

to watch him dancing,

holding the cord,  
 the hem of a skirt,  
 a curtsy,  
 to the Price is Right.

How gentle his hand,  
 guiding, careful steps  
 across the carpet

so tender,  
 it felt impolite  
 to stare, but the couch did  
 and the recliner did  
 and the hearth did  
 and the coffee table did  
 and I did, so often,  
 as they waltzed  
 around  
 he hummed for his mother.  
 (I missed mine).

And how  
 they danced down  
 the hall  
 in time to All My Children.

### III

I brought my own once  
 sat them in a row  
 along the same couch  
 while he did his pas de deux  
 but barefoot now  
 how they laughed,  
 how he smiled



until

(it wasn't funny)

until I saw him stumble--  
no humming now

the cord had pulled tight  
as they side-stepped the corner,  
the plug pulled from the outlet,  
I put my hand on the closest child,  
made him stop.

“Sh,” I said.

(This is the part where the swan dies)

and  
hidden from us  
he'd gone

(in the living room)

and  
we heard nothing  
but applause  
from the people on  
the Wheel of Fortune.

# frogism

T.K. Lee

fiction

poetry

photography

interviews

when we were fat  
but never full  
& eleven years old  
with cartoons  
& jelly  
& biscuits  
& sugar  
& molasses  
& butter  
after Saturdays that  
were just as fat  
& never full  
with rain  
the frogs  
would pop up  
& sit  
on top of rocks  
in the drippings  
& we would  
in our sugar high  
drag the shovels  
from the mower shed  
& sneak up  
on the frogs  
& beat them  
flat until the  
metal had gone  
through the frog  
& was only  
hitting rock  
it'd be that

certain racket  
that drove  
Momma mad  
but she'd say  
oh boys are  
being boys  
& that Christmas  
is when Daddy  
bought us guns.

# Melon Ponderings

Stephen R. Roberts

I write this while a melon lounges twelve inches  
from my left wrist next to an unhinged saltshaker.

The fruit is about the size of a small human head.  
This legitimizes possibilities of fruitful thinking.

The surface is covered in fissures, patterns of lust,  
nerve endings, wild neurons bent on acts of frenzy.

The stem-end stares slightly skyward, considering  
options, wishing clouds were somewhere in the kitchen.

A mood of thoughtfulness resonates solemnly over  
the counter, deviously radiating cantaloupe dreams.

Hallucinations need to be considered and negotiated.  
But the fruit seems irritable in its position of meditation.

It considers a set of carving knives not four feet away,  
as the sun hones its blades against our softening windows.

# Metal Owls

Stephen R. Roberts

A pair of metal owls  
watch from between  
two clocks ticking.  
The ceiling fan turns  
breeze along the edges.  
Feathers do not ruffle.  
Eyes, unblinking  
and dusty, concentrate  
only on the imaginary  
mouse moving through  
long grasses, tight quarters.  
Something rusted  
quivers in the dark.  
Wings explode a silence.  
The wink of an eye  
bleeds dread, paralysis.  
A music brims over  
the room in talons  
from a tenacious sky.  
Heads, in disbelief,  
turn all the way around.

# Undressing the Morning

Stephen R. Roberts

I'm thinking about love-socks.  
What it means to have them,  
when the shoes are gone,  
when the feet are lonely.

I'm pondering the intrinsic  
value of pantaloons  
without really knowing  
what they are, if not two-legged  
anachronisms out of time.

I'm wondering if my shirt  
should be button-down,  
wrinkle-free, wide-collared,  
striped, or none of the above  
but enticingly dirty,  
smelling of body-drudge.

I'm raking my mind over  
rogue tides and old underwear  
into estuaries of brackish thought.  
The smell of fish entrails saturates  
like hippie incense and souvenirs  
from the back-waters of Woodstock.  
I dress, then undress in a navel-gazing haze.

# Riptide

Anna Munroe

“Don’t date boys like your father,” my mother used to say to me, with the same disdain in which she’d forbid me to smoke or pierce my nose or get a tattoo. She’d gulp her coffee down black—she used to take cream and sugar—and her olive-skinned face, fresh with new lines, would scrunch momentarily into a grimace. My aunt, if she were there to overhear, as she usually was, would snort with laughter in her usual brazen manner and go search the fridge.

I felt differently at first than my mother, because I remembered differently than my mother. I remembered the way my father used to take his coffee in the morning, how every sip I asked for was rejected while she was hovering, but the delicious permission I was occasionally granted once she floated off to dust the shelves in the perpetually empty living room or flood the bathroom with the scent of Pine-Sol. In the mornings he liked silence, the raw kind of silence that accompanies early rays of creamy sunlight pouring through the blinds, uncorrupted by the chatter of the day. I was the exception, if I whispered. He had headaches in the morning, sometimes so blinding that he’d squeeze his eyes shut and I’d want to close mine too so I wouldn’t see him in pain. I was never granted any words of reassurance, but was certain that there was something special about his coffee that made the headache go away, and breathed the same sigh of relief he did after he took a gulp.

I remember the time he didn’t put cream in his mug, but something else, and how he told me it added flavor and I was certain that it was great, whatever it was, and that my mother materialized full of venom and snatched me up, deposited me in my room, and left me there for the rest of the day with the stuffed animals for company. I pressed my ear to the floor, thick with beige carpet that I’d stained blood red when I’d snuck a juice

pouch up there one day, and let the fabric itch my un-pierced ear in a desperate attempt to hear their voices. Silence.

I remember sliding peas around on my plate because I didn't like the way they tasted and that they were green—grass was green, you couldn't eat that, why did I have to eat peas—and that they were simply impossible to scoop with the massive spoon I insisted on using like a grown-up, admiring my reflection in. The way my mother's silverware screeched on her plate as she attempted to cut the dry chicken cutlet on her plate, channeling some unlabeled aggression into the piece of meat, made goose bumps crawl up my arms. Dinner was quiet most nights, except for the rustling of my father's newspaper—I was skeptical as to whether or not he was actually reading, considering the listless way in which his eyes quickly and carelessly scanned the page—and my mother's brief admonitions regarding my untouched vegetables.

"I don't care, I don't *want* my vitamins! And I'm fine with getting fat!" I blurted out one night as I unexpectedly slid from my chair, dumped my lukewarm plate of food in the sink, and grabbed the package of chips ahoy to go hoard them in my ugly, too-pink room. At seven years old, my rebellious side was blooming early.

I remember the soft knock on the door later that evening, as I lay sprawled on the itchy carpet, in a sea of magazine clippings, furiously composing some hybrid form of artwork. A scarlet marker, the kind that smelled like cherry and usually left a red dot pooled in the indentation beneath my nose and above my upper lip after too much sniffing, had burst, leaving me with what looked like bloody hands, more carpet stains, and a rage parallel to only that of a warrior snubbed in battle. The knock told me it was my father, as my mother was convinced I was still too young for such formalities, and I composed myself quickly to welcome him.

He was entirely unaware as to what had prompted my outburst at the dinner table, or any of my outbursts those days. He was unaware of the way in which the girls in class 7C mocked



me for my crush on Tommy and for the amount of crumbs I left littered on the table after snack time and the way in which I still stumbled on the big words when reading aloud in class and for that time I left with the lavatory pass for more than five minutes. He was unaware of the way in which the letters got scrambled when I squinted at the page and the time I was so nervous to bring my meticulously assembled rainforest display to the science fair that I'd gone to the nurse feigning ill and all she'd given me was an ice-pack and that I'd seen him crying two nights ago in the big squashy chair in the living room where he used to read to me on his lap.

He sat down next to me, ignoring the inky carpet, a man too big and brawny for this pink little endearing room that he had no part in designing. He didn't say a word, but reached over me for the sketchpad that lay abandoned on my other side, the one he'd bought me for my birthday because coloring books didn't encourage the right kind of creativity. With a pen and a big, scrunched, red face, bristly with salt-and-pepper facial hair, he began to work. I looked away, as if I were intruding on some momentous, masterful occurrence, and began to readjust my own creation. Within the half hour he was finished and, leaving me with nothing but a quiet ruffling of my dark brown mop of curls, left the room. Turning the paper over I saw a black and white illustration of Winnie the Pooh and Piglet, and I quickly released it, rushing to the bathroom to furiously scrub the still wet marker from my fingers, afraid of the corruptive power of the substance to ruin my cherished gift.

We spent summers down the shore, and after a week I'd always returned with the tan-lines my mother worked so hard to keep at bay, gravely concerned about my gentle skin under the hot, supreme power of the shore sun. A mid-August afternoon, my favorite kind, when the water was like a thrill ride and was warm enough to dive right into the foamy white break of a wave without the fear of an ice-cold chill snatching the breath from your lungs, was the afternoon that she went back to the house

and left me with him for the rest of the day. That was the day he forgot to reapply and I was burnt so badly my face became tight, shiny, and lobster-like and eventually flaked and peeled away.

They'd warned us about the riptide, so naturally we ignored it. An undertow was common in this part, particularly after rainstorms, and added a forbidden rush to playing in the surf. He'd hardly looked away for a minute, distracted by something in the cloud of his thoughts, but a minute was all the rumbling water needed to snatch me greedily by one of my ankles. For a moment there was nothing but blackness and tumbling, even though I hated being upside down, and a sickening churning sensation that stung my mouth and eyes with sand and salt. As my arms flailed, powerless between the force of the ocean, I didn't register the soon to be searing pain spiking up my leg. All I registered was that, when I finally broke the surface, I couldn't stand nor could I tread water and that my father was a tiny, frantic dot on the shore.

I was blinded by panic, unable to sense another thing until finally I was still, dripping, sprawled out on the sizzling heat of the sand once more, and the sun's rays were enough to force my eyes open and shut again. My father was dry, he hadn't gone in to get me, but a couple stood next to him, damp silhouettes against the clear sky. My mind burned scarlet, from the sun and from the pain and I heard muffled voices but didn't care to process what they were saying. I did care, however, that when I was finally propped up and was urged to look and properly take in my surroundings, that there was more red, bright red everywhere, streaming from a jagged line on the white canvas of my leg and forming a trail of bold droplets on the beige sand. I fainted again and was plunged into darkness, a darkness that, even once I awoke, seemed to persist for the rest of the month as I was kept tucked away from the world and my parents bickered loudly enough this time for me to hear without even pressing my ear to the floor.

“For the love of God, we can't keep living like this!”

“I make one mistake—I screwed up, I know—and you’re ready to quit. You’re always ready to quit, trying to toss me out.”

“*One* mistake? You can’t call this, your behavior, one *fucking mistake*.”

“We have someone else to think about in this situation!”

“That’s precisely why you have to go.”

The phrase “fucking mistake” burning in my mind, as if it had been shouted at me, I clamped a pillow down over my assaulted ears.

The rest of the year and my young life were full of mornings that held a different kind of silence. Although I spent those days with Arthur on the new television set propped on the counter, coloring books, and a chatty nanny, as my mother escaped to work both jobs, they felt quieter than they ever had before and were painfully devoid of the scent of coffee and cinnamon oatmeal.

As I turned sixteen, my mother was freely interjecting comments riddled with bitterness into our daily conversation to encourage an intense distrust of anyone or anything male, and was still over-cleaning our house, despite the labors of her new job and the fact that we’d had a cleaning service for three years now, to use up her nervous energy. She did not date. She became an enthusiast of recipes deemed “clean” and hurried home from the grocery store with arms full of produce and grains with names I couldn’t pronounce. My aunt, one of her younger sisters who’d left her husband after she caught him with his secretary, often slept on the couch that doubled as a bed in the den, and took me shopping to buy me things my mother I was convinced I didn’t need and were usually lacy in some sort of way.

I could wear those kinds of things now, despite my mother’s protests about jeans that were too tight and shirts “better suited for the lingerie department.” My aunt assured me that she’d dressed the same as a kid and I needn’t take her crap, that she too had had to find ways to compensate for her A-cups. I lined my eyes in smoky black, experimentally, and covered the

stubborn acne that came with the burden of being young, turning my face orange with foundation only once or twice.

They don't tell you how much sixteen sucks. If they do, you don't really understand until you *feel* it and it feels horrible. When you're faced with boys and bodies and being told that you're not good enough and finally coming to terms with the fact that you're not good enough and going to throw your lunch up in the bathroom every day because bulimia doesn't happen to real people and you're not anorexic if you're not skinny. My mother never heard the retching at home, because the bathroom I confined myself to was in the uppermost corner of our house and the fan was loud and rattling and she'd most likely downed a glass of Pinot Noir at that point, the most she'd ever consumed, to take the inescapable edge off of her day.

When my aunt found me, slumped on the side of my very own porcelain throne in defeat, the night's pasta dinner floating whole in the bowl, she looked down sadly at me with bloodshot blue eyes and turned quickly to leave, aware that she'd imposed on a private moment of teenage vulnerability.

"She's sick," I heard one of them mutter, tones rife with concern, a day later. They were entirely unaware that I'd failed to heed my mother's perfectly reasonable advice, to never date boys like my father; that I'd found myself standing alone outside a Pizza Hut for three hours on the Wednesday of the week prior, and had felt droplets of rain stinging my pale skin and re-curling my aggressively flat-ironed hair; that he'd told me it was love and had given me my first swig of whiskey out of a slightly crumpled Poland Spring water bottle and that, although it had stung my tender throat, there was something exquisite about it because it was wrong; that I'd given what I'd been told was all a lady can give to him and he'd asked another girl to the dance.

Tommy had aged well, unlike myself, and had made me endless promises. They were the promises I used to hear my father whisper to my mother, in the days before he brought the paper to the dinner table and played music instead of the

television for background noise, when he'd take her hand for no reason and hold it as tightly as he held her gaze. Tommy too had told me I was beautiful—"Don't lie," I blushed—and held my hand in the private darkness of crowded movie theatres and basement parties. He had a car, an old, used, dented red thing that had been his father's. I'd wait at the front door casually, evading my mother's interrogation,

"Who is he? He *drives*? Be back by ten." I assured her he was just a friend, that others would be joining us.

When he arrived I would run, frantic but feigning cool, to the car and we'd drive somewhere that was really truly the middle of nowhere and he'd climb into the back and pull me into him and I'd forget about how repulsive I was because I didn't repel him.

"Remember, I love you," I recalled my father slurring tenderly one night after dessert, whiskery face pressed to my mother's ear as she folded her arms across her body, pretending that she was still angry. That's what Tommy had said, as he'd held my young, vulnerable body close and did what he pleased.

Cross-legged on the cold tile floor I trembled. Purges were exhausting and often left a burning in my chest that faded away after some moments of breathing. This time, however, as I could hear the conversation between my mother and her sister rising, the burning rose too and my breath came in short, sharp gasps. The outbursts I'd smothered suddenly threatened my stability and I could feel the panic rushing over me in a dense wave. About to be turned on my head, I heard the creaking turn of the doorknob and, with a lurch of my unsettled stomach, realized I hadn't locked it this time.

She never knocked, and if she had I'd have venomously told her to get lost. She entered uninvited and with one look, crumpled next to me. Without poison, without a defense or biting comment I slid across the tile and buried myself in her, allowing arms that were stronger than I remembered to envelope me, to stroke my head maternally.

“I know,” her voice told me with unusual softness. Her lips pressed into my hair and I heard her breathe in, holding the scent of my shampoo, and out. She knew, I believed that.

Once again there was silence as she pulled me to safety. I let her hug me and sobbed into the constant rise and fall of her chest.

# Shadows

Anna Munroe

Halfway through her third cup of boxed red wine, a comfortable blush had settled on Caitlin Watson's fair-skinned cheeks and her lips were stained the deep shade of scarlet that she loved. Her impulsive roommate, Valerie Garcia, had been in and out of her room four times already, popping her wine-filled balloon of silence, trying to figure out what to wear to the bar they had spontaneously decided to go to. Val had settled on something black and skimpy, with Caitlin's approval of course.

A warm glow was spreading throughout her body and she could feel her pulse synchronizing with the bass coming from the living room. Her eyes were sloppily lined in the darkest eye-pencil she could find and she wore a loose shift dress, deep burgundy like the color of the drink in her glass. Everything she wore was loose. Loose and flowing like the things she saw lithe-limbed models posing in, or pretending not to pose in while actually posing, on glowing computer screens as she browsed through fashion blogs.

Drink sloshing a bit from her long-stemmed glass, Caitlin rose from her chair and made to leave the room. She steadied herself with a bony hand placed firmly on the side of the doorway.

Valerie was pouring shots in the living room, perched delicately on the table, one long leg draped over the other with effortless poise. Dark and wild, she wore a wicked smile and red lipstick. She poured with grace, as if preparing a glass of champagne for a wedding toast, her penciled eyebrows both arched and furrowed in deep concentration.

"Hey, *Lightweight*, do you feel daring?" She catcalled, looking up and leaping from the table as her best friend entered.

At lunch last week Valerie had jokingly called Caitlin by her high school nickname, resurrecting a long since abandoned

habit.

“Lightweight, you’re a workaholic. We still love you.” Val grinned, grazing like she normally did, picking apart the sandwich she’d ordered, licking dressing off of her polished fingers. Years had passed and she hadn’t changed pace, she was still the girl Caitlin knew when they were fifteen that somehow figured out ways to get into college parties and was unafraid of jumping fences in the cricket-filled darkness of suburban midnight, pulling Caitlin behind her, fingers laced with hers in a vice-grip.

Bangles dangling from her tan forearm, Valerie now extended the hard-to-refuse offer of vodka. She was still pulling Caitlin along, hadn’t yet reached the inevitable demise Caitlin referred to as “growing up.”

An overflowing shot glass was placed in Caitlin’s hand, the smell wafting from the clear, devilish cylinder enough to make her wince. The wine had yet to ease the tremor in her hand, but the night had already begun.

“Let’s mix it up, shall we?” Valerie had suggested, despite Caitlin’s reservations. A new scene, bartenders that did not know Valerie’s usual, men she hadn’t slept with. Caitlin hunched over slightly onto the sticky wooden surface of the bar, staring deeply into the blood orange abyss of her drink. She did not feel like dancing, not like Val did, not with men that moved like dark shapeless shadows in the cramped room. Seedy strangers occupied the spaces that she’d like to have seen filled by familiar faces.

“You’re not having fun,” Val slurred, materializing beside her, “You never have fun.” It stung, and Caitlin found herself delaying the necessity of responding by taking a deep swig. Of course, she wasn’t the fun friend. The liquor swam inside her stomach and her head. She squinted to capture Valerie’s fading features and the shadow that joined them. It was a deep voiced shadow, telling her to loosen up. *Loosen up, Lightweight.* Caitlin placed her drink down with a muffled clink on the wood, folding her arms in a pout, and wobbled slightly.



“Careful, gorgeous,” another shadow at her side wrapped his arm around her, warm hand big enough to cover her entire bony cold shoulder. Was it just too dark for her to see what he looked like? Or was it her own vision failing her? She caught a whiff of his breath, cigarette smoke and whiskey, and cringed.

“Don’t call me gorgeous.” A drunken lisp clipped the end of her *gorgeous*. In an effort to turn away from him and Val, who was saying something she neglected to hear and was beaming and laughing at the shadow-man’s apparent humor, Caitlin spun to face the bar and the glistening rows of bottles behind it. Purple lights glinted off of the shiny surfaces and blurred together as she knocked back the last of the fruity drink, grimacing. It tasted strange, foreign to her taste buds.

Caitlin supposed they had taken a cab at some point. How else would they have gotten from point A to point B? Her thoughts were no longer coming clearly, no longer coming at all, and her mind was a blank, black cloud. She was numb except for the slightest feeling of fear creeping up on her like a disease, becoming a slow panic. Sickness crawled through her, threatening to split her apart. She hadn’t the faintest idea why she was panicking, or what she was afraid of, until she was thrown down onto a lumpy couch. The darkness refused to lift and she couldn’t tell if the nausea wreaking havoc inside of her was due to the drink, or a drug, or the unshakable certainty that she was somewhere dangerous.

A million miles away from her body, she tried to force herself to inhale and exhale. It smelled of must and weed and unwashed feet. And vodka, everything smelled like vodka, it was pulsing through her veins. A dim light flicked on in the corner, and the shadows were back. Two men, maybe three, were in the room, shifting about.

“Valerie.” Her voice was weak; it wasn’t hers.

“Quiet, love,” a deeper voice murmured. He was speaking, lowering himself on top of her. She heard a feeble, feminine groan across the room.

“Val—” Her mouth was clamped shut. As she floated away from the light and from consciousness, she saw clouds of smoke filling the room. Valerie was somewhere, somewhere in the drug-saturated murk, at the whim of the shadow men.

Caitlin felt herself drowning in the darkness and the nausea and the terror, a rag doll in a pair of hands far too big and rough to be handling her. These hands weren’t friendly or gentle, nor were they going to give a damn about her and what she wanted. They did not give a shit that her garbled words were really trying to say things like “help me” and “stop” and “where am I?” and that her best friend was unconscious on the other chair, breathing slowly and weakly. These hands conquered, they corrupted. They were rough, they had slapped, they had groped. Brutes, bastards, they covered her mouth and snuffed out the bit of fight she had left. Back into the darkness she went.

The rest of the winter passed quietly, easing into spring and then summer without a trace of warmth.

Rays of waning sunlight, poking in through the blinds she had forcefully closed in a fit of anger, fell on Caitlin’s face with uncomfortable heat. The sound of her deep breathing was hardly enough to fully muffle her parents’ conversation and the laugh track of a late afternoon sitcom on the television. Somewhere, people were laughing and meaning it.

They were worried. Of course they were. They were always worrying about something in their lives: the bills, the contents of the milk carton, the neighbor’s dog leaving droppings on their neatly trimmed lawn, if the cleaning women were properly dusting the mantle, Caitlin’s stability, and so on. Worry lines had been distinctly carved into Mrs. Watson’s forehead, having greatly worsened since last December. Her mother had been a dime piece too in her twenties, Caitlin had heard. That’s where she got her beauty. What had happened? Age, naturally. And a complicated daughter, more complicated than she’d ever been when she was young, when the most offensive thing a kid could do was fail to clean her room or break a dish or color on

the kitchen table or yank someone's ponytail on the playground.

Caitlin had pulled her door shut, but could still hear them talking. For the love of all that was holy, couldn't they use some discretion? Or, perhaps, they wanted her to hear them, to know their concern. To feel their concern instead of feeling nothing.

Her focus was spinning. She wiped her runny nose with her knuckle that still held faint purplish traces from when she had impulsively punched the slick tile of a shower wall. Her head was full of faces and voices louder than her parents and the sitcom combined. They were relentless, reminding her of the past. Everyone was concerned.

She rolled over onto her back on the bed linens she had had since she was young. The color pink felt so ironic. Pink was the color for a little girl who played with dolls that also wore pink dresses and had perfect white smiles and did not blink or ever feel unhappy, a color for a little girl who tied bows in her hair and wore floral dresses and patent leather shoes even when it wasn't Easter; it was the color of the three little pigs and the dress Cinderella wore before it was torn from her body into shreds. Val had loathed the color pink.

She heard a dull thud as a book she'd been reading fell off of her bed, but made no effort to roll over and pick it up. Faint, yellow-green stars were the first thing she saw when she stared up, the glow in the dark kind she had excitedly bought with her mother and plastered to the ceiling after a sleepover at Valerie's house ten years ago in an attempt to be as cool as she was. Their glow had faded, and it was daytime. Now, they were useless, and did nothing but mingle with the other stars she saw every time she stood up too quickly and got a head rush.

*Get up, go downstairs.* She tried to will some energy into herself, but it felt impossible. There were two options in this moment. One: go downstairs and pretend to be cheerful and ordinary; two: continue laying here, surrounded by fading bits of childhood, in her own personal pity party.

"Sweatpants again?" Mr. Watson teased gently, as his

daughter arrived on the landing. Always teasing, as if jokes were the best way to fix a broken girl. She had made up her mind, with much effort, to go downstairs and try to “participate” for a little while. Participation was exhausting. She continued down the last few steps, folded her arms across her bony sternum, fingers clutching at the fabric shrouding her sharp shoulders, and scowled.

“I’m making pasta,” Mrs. Watson quickly announced before she could reply to the jab at her grungy wardrobe, causing Caitlin to catch herself on the last step and double back. Family dinner, participation.

“I’m not that hungry,” she croaked, rubbing her stomach in a feeble attempt to convey something, she didn’t know what, “Actually, I think I’m going out.”

“Stay, eat with us,” her mother practically begged, her eyes swimming with maternal concern. A gulf and a few more stairs spanned the distance between them as Caitlin surveyed the desperate woman.

“The girls have been nagging me, Mom. I can’t be lazy and stay home forever. In fact, I should probably go put on some real pants.” She threw in a little half-laugh, for her mother’s sake.

“Its hot today, mid-eighties. You’ve got some nice pairs of shorts you can wear instead.”

“I’ll be cold,” she insisted, and spun on her toes, retreating up the stairs, “I’m always cold.”

On a typical August evening, Caitlin’s old friends could be found sipping poorly mixed vodka sodas and swatting mosquitoes around a fire. The drinks were strong, strong like the ones Val would make—“I flunked bartending class, doesn’t mean I didn’t learn anything.” The liquor was quick, and it washed over her like a hot shower, numbing the senses, reassuring her with a poisonous caress that she wasn’t doing anything wrong. *She’d want you to move on.* This was moving on, was it not?

She watched the bag of Jet Puffed being passed around the circle, never coming too close. Her friends had finally formed

the habit of never passing them over to her, all too used to hearing the reply of “no thanks, I’m good.” She hadn’t tasted the sweet, summery joy of a s’more since last year, when Val had finally returned from her semester in Italy, gleefully quoting lines from *The Sandlot* with a mouth full of sticky marshmallow, chocolate, and graham cracker.

“I haven’t had anything yet. How can I have some more of nothing?” She’d ask, and her friend would hoot with laughter.

“You’re killing me, Smalls.”

The atmosphere teemed with youthful frenzy as they relived old summers, accompanied by noisy crickets and unreasonably bright fireflies. She wished she felt as alive as they did; she longed to feel a kick of energy instead of the weight perpetual lethargy.

Her quickening pulse outran her sluggish thoughts and pounded in her ears. Her companion, the faithful vodka soda, was bringing a violent head rush. She had had one too many, she could tell. She denied it, of course, just as she denied everything. Deny, deny, deny. *I’m okay, I’m fine, really. Moving on.* She leaned back against the plastic, sticky back of the white lawn chair, feeling slightly as if she were strapped into a roller coaster cart.

She could feel her face growing rosy. She heard her own voice as if it were a million miles away, she was back in the dark room with shadows that took the shape of strangers and her friend crumpled in the corner.

“You okay, Cait?” a voice asked, snapping her to the present. It was deep, male. An acquaintance from high school that had turned up purely to mooch off of the free booze.

“Fine, tired.” *Fuck off.*

“Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“You drove here?”

“I’m parked close by, come on.” His hand was big enough to fit around her upper arm, to guide her waist. She could hear Valerie’s encouragement, feel her nudge, see her wink. She rose slowly and staggered with him away from the glow of the fire

across the cool lawn. Her flip-flops slid slightly on the damp grass, but he held her upright so she could hardly perceive her own stumble. This was participating, being taken to the backseat of his car and feeling nothing but pretending, crying out, to feel everything.

A number of sleepless nights were sweeping September towards her. It didn't just loom in the distance, like the Monday of the year, but was in fact hurtling towards her, gone rogue. Nightmares littered the hours of sleep that she did get, confused, full of warped faces, of hands covering her mouth until she suffocated, of her own attempts to claw her way to freedom. In the nightmares, she was the one who didn't return to consciousness. They threw her in the ground, where it was damp and so cold even the dead could feel it, and piled dirt on top of her. It filled her mouth, thick like cake, and her lungs and her ears. The voices above ground were muffled, every vowel and consonant becoming one, constant, amorphous sound.

Underground she could not scream; the dead did not scream. They waited and listened to the living people talk until they left to enjoy a luncheon somewhere, a post-funeral party to commemorate the loss of a loved one by giving everyone a free meal. She was alone underground, starved for oxygen. She'd awake in cold sweats and spend the rest of the dark hours with her headphones in, staring at the faintly glowing stars plastered to the ceiling.

It was at night that the real memories came back to her, although not as vivid as the dreams; the floodgates opened and the stars became the unnamed faces that had haunted her since last December. By the time morning dawned, peeping its eager face through the blinds in an attempt to draw her from her bitter cocoon, she was more tired than she'd been when she climbed into bed, and a phone call to Val was impossible.

She awoke in a room littered with winter clothes and plastic Bed, Bath, and Beyond shopping bags. Life was supposed to go on, she was supposed to divide and organize the pieces

of her soul and stuff them into plastic boxes along with jumbo-sized bottles of shampoo and multivitamins and breakfast bars. Two days, that was how long she had until participation was to be thrust upon her, a mandatory assignment. She'd take those pieces of herself, the parts of her life deemed necessary and important enough that she couldn't leave them behind, and cram them into the trunk of her Volvo and move to her apartment. She was to have new roommates and a new existence.

A shadow appeared in the doorway, obscuring the sunlight that poured into the room, and Caitlin, who sat slumped on the floor amongst piles of clothing she was trying to designate as "bring," "leave behind," and "maybe," snapped to attention before her mother could even clear her throat.

"How's everything going in here?"

"It's going."

Entering cautiously, her mother moved over to the side of Caitlin's bed, and crouched to pick up the book that had fallen to the side days ago.

"You've been reading this again?"

Caitlin did not answer. She'd forgotten about the book. It had been a gift from Valerie, who hated to read but knew Caitlin loved to, who had seen the author at a signing for one of his newer novels while on a business trip with her father in Europe, who knew that her best friend would simply lose her mind if she had a signed copy of her favorite novel.

Last December, in the wake of everything, Caitlin taken every picture and trace of her friend and tucked it carefully away into a box with her name on it, stuffing it in the back of her closet in a fit of grief, including the book. She wasn't sure of what impulse had caused her to go looking for it.

Hidden away in the box were years of friendship, along with the diary she'd been given by her parents after the Watson family trip to the therapist but never written in, as if keeping it all out of sight would make the guilt go away. Stacks of photos, birthday presents, anything that made the memory of that

compelling, mischievous smile burn more than it already did, had to be removed from sight. As if ignoring and denying what had happened would somehow relieve her of the sickening truth that she was the one who had made it out, would make her forget that she had been there when Valerie had been drugged and her heart had stopped beating and Caitlin cried out “somebody help her!” but nobody had.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Bullshit. The shadows lingered.

There was a soft whirr as her mother skimmed through the pages with her hand.

“I tried the other day,” Caitlin offered up, “To read it, I mean.”

It had been too much. The story of loss and guilt. The knowledge that someone was never coming back.

“Keep trying.”

Caitlin rose from the heaps of laundry and bags and retrieved the book from her mother, refusing eye contact. Her hands lacked their familiar tremor as she gripped it, allowing little moist thumbprints to linger on the glossy surface of the cover. The tightening sensation began in her chest and moved to constrict her throat, but there were no tears.

“Somebody help her!” Caitlin shouted, the alcohol still pulsing through her veins, threatening to yank her back into the dark. Her words were thick and sluggish. She didn’t know how long she’d been crying, nor did she know where the torn chunks of her loose burgundy shift dress were or when the copper taste of blood had begun to flood her mouth. The shadow men were gone; it was simply her and Val alone on a rain-dampened side street a few blocks from campus, lights flickering apathetically overhead and the smell of late night trash filling her nostrils and her lungs. Kneeling down on skinned knees in desperation and fatigue, Caitlin shook her friend, shook her with every bit of fight she had left, but Valerie was not breathing.





**MARKS** Elizabeth Silvia



**OPEN** Elizabeth Silvia



**LE PAINTRE** Elizabeth Silvia



**SEASIDE TREE** Alexandra Harbour



I HOPE YOU ENJOY MY ART Alexandra Harbour



**MOONRISE** Alexandra Harbour



**CITY STREET** Alexandra Harbour



**MORNINGS IN THE CABIN** Alexandra Harbour



**SPLASH** Alexandra Harbour



**MIRROR IMAGE** Emily Sinclair



**TRI-FACE** Emily Sinclair

# Leda to the Swan

Donna L. Emerson

Let's get it straight:  
you knocked me down.  
My breast against yours  
leads to my teeth. I bite.

Terrified fingers  
reach to claw and tear.  
Thighs are not loosen'd  
by pleasure. Men taking liberties

with women---the myth of *seize her---*  
*call it for her pleasure* begins.

My thighs are ready to run,  
stamp, break what feathers I can,  
screaming *Fire*. Your beak  
can be broken.

Painted as if in a swoon, I'm  
play acting—I feign amnesia  
to get it over with.

Only Cy Twombly got it right.  
Behind his crayon scratches  
on canvas, under the snarl  
of feathers, the red oil,  
lies a dead swan.

fiction

poetry

photography

interviews

# Tuscon Votive Lights

Sheryl L. Nelms

sapphires  
and rubies

glitter around Mary's feet

purged  
souls  
float free

ransomed  
by fire

and  
spent  
quarters



# Vernal Equinox in Azle, Texas

Sheryl L. Nelms

morning  
hangs

like an orb  
spider  
web

draped  
with dew

nothing  
comes

nothing  
goes

# The Funeral at Mingus, Texas

Sheryl L. Nelms

they said  
Bobbie Lou

paid for them to do it  
her way at the cemetery

blue tarp  
roof

live band

and her  
right there

in her pink coffin  
on the stand

over the grave

while they  
line danced  
did the Cotton-Eyed Joe

and swigged

cases  
of Pearl  
and Corona

that she bought before she died

then tossed  
their empties

into the hole  
before they  
lowered

her away

# Twin

Daniel Isabel

Ben keeps his sheets so neat he never sleeps in them. Corners firmly tucked, to ensure we can't slip in. I often wonder the necessity of two pillows when no one uses either.

*My bed is set so loosely it's difficult to look at.*

When we used to sleep at Dad's House, I cared more about appearance too. "Thanks for making the bed, Daniel. It looks so comfortable now!" That wasn't meant for you. What's the point of making beds if others sleep in them first?

I wish I took better care of nice things like Ben. Maybe then I wouldn't need them either. I saw he bought fresh shoe polish today. I just worry what that means about his feet.

# Over Easy

Daniel Isabel

Soapy eggs bathe haphazardly before me. Thrown to and fro on the plate like unkempt laundry before a wash. You look at me, I look at you. We look at the eggs.

But, by far, the home fries are the most decedent varnish to this dish. Charred to shit. Not much to speak of when eaten, but plentifully provided at least. “I thought I might see a movie today.” “You know I can’t.” Right.

No decaf refill necessary. No additional portions of jam. The butter on this toast is fucking dry. Cold. Promising to add flavor but hardening, dead stiff instead.

But at least you ate your fill. The smeared debris of this meeting bleeding across the ceramic platter. Congealing mess of bacon and muddled ketchup. I’m glad you got what you were hoping for.

As for dessert? Couldn’t possibly. “I’d better get going.” “But— it isn’t even finished.” “Oh. No. It is.”

What’s the matter? They’re only wet eggs.

# Again

Elisabeth Murawski

It's my companion's home town,  
bleached by the sun,  
robbed of all color and life.  
*It's so pretty*, I lie.

I need to master this  
compulsion to please.  
The weak spire of a church  
pokes the sky: *why why why*.

My mind was elsewhere  
when I said it. On green  
slopes in a lovely mist.  
The west of Ireland  
warming a heart that's been  
cold too long,  
hiding behind the body  
of a dead soldier.

# Specs

Elisabeth Murawski

I felt bad, failing  
his tests, the gray-haired  
optometrist in Klaus

Department Store. Suddenly,  
in junior year,  
I couldn't read the board.

Near-sighted, he said,  
while I picked out frames  
from a rack, pale blue

harlequins. In a week,  
walking home with Mama,  
new glasses on my nose,

I stopped to gawk  
at the giant clock on top  
of the Stewart Warner tower.

It's been there all along,  
Mama laughed. With her naked eye,  
she could see far.

The clock's solemn face  
and black numerals  
were visible for miles.

I felt small as the ants  
on the sidewalk  
running from her shoes.

# One-and-Done

John Azrak

The phalanx of flat screens encircling the bar room for this “Elite Eight” match-up bears down on you, an onslaught of plasmic school colors. Kentucky’s electric royal blue uniforms make your eyes sizzle and the clashing cymbals of the competing school’s bands do not bode well for your recent spate of migraines. Your suitemates (“whatever’s up with you Annie, you’re coming with us”) scatter at the tip-off and you head for a corner far from the raucous, beer-swilling, chest-thumping Michigan crowd, jostled front and back, an elbow to the ribs making you grimace amidst a chorus of “Kentucky sucks,” though an ear piercing “student athletes, my ass!” tickles you before a rolling, foot-stomping “one-and-done” comes in waves, its meaning lost on you but not the tremor in the floor boards that shoots up your calves. You pause, catch your breath, wedged between two guys in yellow dreadlock wigs and black mascara, bold **M**’s stenciled on their cheeks, one passing a shot glass (your sports ken wouldn’t fill it) under your nose for perusal and you shake your pulsing head before you slink away, glance up at a screen where Wolverine players do a celebratory mid-air hip bump, silky white shorts billowing like beach capris, then spot a slim opening at the fringes of the crowd, squeeze through until your back is up against the wall where it’s been since you told your family that you were in love with a girl, that you had found yourself—at last!—that your love was real, not some self-indulgent flight of fancy, *Ob God no*, not a curiosity, Mother, a union of souls, kindred spirits, like you and Dad, my own kind of Catholic, Hanna’s so totally beautiful and talented you wouldn’t believe, she sings like an angel, one of the leads in *Les Miz* as a freshman! You chipped away, like the ice on countless windshields this winter of winters until a partial clearing, your parents half-heartedly agreeing to have Hanna visit on spring break and you



forego the planned stay over, drive in a white-knuckled rush the three hours back to campus to tell Hanna who made you tea, who took your cold hand and squeezed it tightly between her knees, who said, yes, wonderful, I'd love that, meet them and all, but I need to tell you, Annie, her voice catching in her throat, heat spreading across your chest beneath your thermal, pressure building at your temples, I've decided I'm leaving school, not you, never you Annie, it's me, I want to get to New York this summer, auditions, open mikes, wherever I can go up against real competition, no matter the odds to see what I'm made of, college can't show me that, my dear Annie, school will still be here, I can always come back, your broken heart wanting but not able, then or now, to cry foul.

# And Then Again

Daniel Langton

We all know, there is an ebb  
that you can feel, a false dawn  
when there is nothing to gain;  
locked doors, the unlikely rain,  
lost birds, the nesting tree gone,  
the leaf in the spider's web.

What if we had never met?  
I would have failed the exam,  
held back, not finished the poem,  
burned out, never had a home,  
wouldn't have given a damn,  
wiggling in a self-made net.

A dark place when I met you,  
now I do what poets do.

# Wait and See

Daniel Langton

Just now she is paying for a ticket  
to a romantic movie with Tom Cruise.  
She isn't with Tom Cruise, she is alone  
with torment and her hopes and her stub.  
She will sit on the aisle with a thicket  
of clothes and bulky bags that she will use  
to keep anyone from whispering, "Joan,  
may I sit there?" and so avert a snub.

Joan, dear, take heart, a year or two, or five,  
it doesn't matter, we will meet at tea  
or on a ship, or at a country dance  
and I will say, "It's great to be alive  
and you will smile and come away with me  
and when it ends, be glad you took the chance.

# The Expectation of Happiness

Daniel Langton

The first time in a meadow  
before I knew what meadow meant  
as Mario Parinello  
waited. The next was when I went  
to take a walk on Mission Street  
and saw the distant hillock mounds  
and found that sweet need not be sweet  
and learning things did not need sounds.

I have the pleasures day by day  
of students, reading books, of Eve,  
yet those two moments are as deep  
as life can grant, have been the way  
I find my way, can take my leave,  
the way old sharks must dream of sleep.

# Wheat Beige + Tepee Brown Trim

Geo. Staley

Back in '77, a young painter/wallpaper guy  
the one who often asked if English teachers turn on  
told me the walls of a bathroom needed to be perfect:  
when people sit on the toilet, he said,  
they look around and see  
wallpaper patterns not lied up  
uneven brush strokes  
all the mistakes  
“Defects that reflect on me.”

Self-serving pothead prattle, I thought,  
until  
I recently painted the exterior of our house  
and ended with the intricate two-color trim around the front door  
  
the spot folks would wait to be let in  
the spot they would stand examining my work.

# An Afternoon Nap

Lee Sennish

The fish do a figure eight  
In a shallow, and then wait.

They shine, jewels on the wall  
of the cathedral in Orvieto.

I meet a woman more real  
than a real woman,

We enjoy risotto and pinot noir  
before hearing the dreadful news.

Ignore the longing in the bark  
of the neighbor's dog.

Wait while I stuff this cloud  
back into its drawer.

I want to hear the song  
singing on my plate.

# Solstice

Lee Sennish

You have taken the bowl of summer  
into the dark, stolen it  
while I was praising the lilies.  
I ransomed the long days  
to get the children back.

You have not taken them  
to a better place. From the black box  
they flutter out, white on white.

# Daphne

Lee Sennish

Finding you that day resplendent  
in your gorgeous red gown,  
a kewpie doll, all ruffles,  
I knew I was the wrong person.  
This was a scene for your ex-husband  
and I didn't know CPR.  
The cops made sure I hadn't killed you.  
110 pills the coroner said. Your parents  
gave me your TV, shipped your body off  
to Nebraska where the black olive trees  
spring up along the little streams,  
their leaves the only sound,  
but it carries, this being the prairie.



# When I Saw You Again

Becky Kennedy

so much the sound then of  
sunlight passing: when I  
saw you again you were  
on the other side of  
evening, the trees made of  
birds and darkness and you  
holding up the light that  
falls from the traces of  
all things rescued from time  
or the apparition  
of time and the lamps of  
lilacs and the dark grass  
and night closing in like  
a hand in the wind that  
had nothing to do with  
death though you were in it

# Transfer

Andrey Gritsman

Photo: bombed-out Frankfurt,  
backdrop on the Bier Halle wall,  
black-and-white photo  
on the new gravestone,  
the sky is a still bottom.  
No B-52 in the zone  
of blown-up sunset

Random stop. Transfer  
on the way from the past  
to faraway future: what's left  
of the family tree—foliage  
of the letters, shadowless  
wooden bench overgrown  
with ivy somewhere where  
nobody waits anymore.

This place is a smoky field  
with hidden smell of death and soot,  
now clean concrete.  
We didn't stay here long,  
just a transfer. We are also only  
black dots on white sheet  
of the landscape. On the Bier Halle wall:  
black-and-white photo—  
blown-up Frankfurt.

# From Geniuses

*after Carla Carlson*

Kimberly Nunes

I rolled and hauled river stones scattered around the yard  
to build a fireplace, a haven for wood, and a Sally Holmes rose to  
climb it,

like two mingling lovers, now burning, now clinging. And just as I  
have learned  
from geniuses, I must learn from what is too heavy to lift. So I  
hired a man

to build it like Rumford would, shallow and tall, and told him,  
“the hearthstone  
goes there, the striped stones on end, the dark grays under here.”

Now, evenings spent gazing into the fiery mouth, and the  
neighbor’s chickens clucking  
behind the fence, I acknowledge the world will teach you—

And the pleasure of startling when mesmerized. The first time I  
mistook the full moon, rising over the fireplace in my garden, for  
a streetlamp.

# Fugue

Kimberly Nunes

A Great Blue Heron glides in to land  
near a pool of water.  
Prehistoric and giant—ethereal, yet, fully present  
in this world,  
she makes no sound.

Her repose: set in such territory  
of rucked hills, waxen oaks with Spanish moss streaming  
in searing daylight. She does not move.

We make reticent eye contact, Heron and I,  
and I know then  
with one flap she'll push off— tuck gangly legs and livid wings  
onto the length of her body  
and angle away—

Now, I am mesmerized  
by the sun, under which I'm burning  
to be still, to be put under by a spell.

# A Cousin by Marriage, He Can't Stop

Paul Watsky

himself sharing: *Every atom*  
*has its own consciousness*

(as per some book he's  
read), therefore, he pos-

its, we harbor an im-  
mortal soul endowed with

physical weight, albeit  
slight, and dutifully he further

shares that I should read that  
book of his and grow sim-

ilarly enlightened, ident-  
ical to him, whose fear, even

among the open  
boxes of take-

out Thai, I smell, hear  
in his hectoring: a large

man, M.D., hence author-  
ized to preach me what

the body's atoms  
think, how meeting at a cross-

roads they debate, how

when dead-

locked summon soul from her hammock  
to mediate, demand she tally

votes, before coherently  
the body strides into whatever food

court, or off which-  
ever ledge.

# Uncaptioned

Paul Watsky

It's 7:45 when I re-  
zip the tent, carrying  
  
my pee jar and a water  
bottle for rinsing it at  
  
the outhouse; ten yards a-  
long hear, then  
  
see a small buck about  
to cross my path. We  
  
freeze—beside the  
meadow. Under a gray  
  
sky. It's mid-  
July, his two points in  
  
velvet, and what  
should he fear from this old  
  
fat man with a re-  
purposed pickle  
  
jar of urine, a cheap  
Nalgene bottle, note-  
  
book, softback tome of  
ecopoetry. He resumes  
  
his journey, climbs  
the timbered slope.

# The Fall

Dawyn Henriquez

“Hi,” some random bitch said. I think it was directed at me. From my peripheral I take in every detail. Hair dyed blonde. Frayed at the end: damaged. Dyed once, twice, four times in the last year: doesn’t like the way she looks? Is extremely indecisive. Wearing expensive clothing. Tag still on shirt: new clothes. No other tags on other articles of clothing: not poor just forgetful—a slob? Makeup is done well: definitely doesn’t like the way she looks. Fingernails... ew. I detest girls that take the time to paint their nails once and then decide to let the job deteriorate. Stubs of red at her cuticles: definitely a slob, most likely has a messy room. Forgetful, well-off slob, who doesn’t like her looks, is indecisive, and will jump at a chance to get plastic surgery because of her self-esteem issues. That took me too long, almost four seconds. I’m losing my touch.

She shoved a prom queen flyer at me. “Vote for me. Trust me I’m the best choice,” she says as I look over the flyer in disgust. Her phony smile pisses me off. No, I think to myself, you pretentious sycophant. *You* don’t even think you’re pretty enough. Why should I?

“No thanks. Raise your self-esteem and clean yourself and your room every once in a while and *maybe* I’ll consider it. K?, bumpkin?”

She looks at me with such shock that I almost explode into laughter right in her face. I have to hold my composure; this’ll be the best part. I crumple her flyer; across the cafeteria is a trash can. I throw the paper at the head of a kid next to it. I throw it at a curve so it bounces off the side of the kid’s head at a one-eighty degree loop. It goes into the trash can, of course. I walk away before it does but I know it does. I could’ve thrown the crumpled flyer on the floor but that’s littering, I’m not a monster.

I’m known for being a jerk by the common folk of this



establishment. Yet if it wasn't for me, the great Augustus, they would all take pleasure in the company of others obliviously. Ignorance is not bliss; it is giving up one's right to the truth. I have single handedly exposed most, if not all, of the phonies in this school.

A few days pass and just as I predicted the girl with disgusting fingernails won prom queen. The idiots in this institution don't know the tell-tale signs of a slob. If I had to sum up private school in a few words it would be high-society bullshit. I'm pretty sure I only got into this school to fill some under-privileged kids quota. Yet they told me I got in because of my intellect. Well, *maybe* but they ended up killing two birds with one stone when it came to me.

They gave me a scholarship named after some rich guy's son and expected me to be ok with them calling me by the scholarship name. "*There goes John Blake.*" They'd say even though that was the name of some rich kid who was probably wasting his trust fund on whores and drugs in the Hamptons. They'd say it with pity because they know I'm poor, and yes, that's what they *used* to say because I dished out more dirty looks than a disapproving parent on report card night. I didn't want to be seen as a prized showcase puppy that needed to be fawned over and pitied, so I yanked on this asshole narcissist facade, and well, it stuck-- I was being honest for once and it felt good.

I don't need friends anyway, that's way too much pressure. That means I'd have to let them into my life, what would that accomplish? Then my private life would get out to the rest of the idiots in this school. My goddamn private life: a drunk for a father who lost his job as a cop years ago because of his drinking, a mother who's beautiful and aged beyond her years because of the stress of maintaining a household, causing her to barely be around, and then my little brother, who's semi-autistic and doesn't acknowledge the existence of new people. No, I rather not have friends; fuck that, too much pressure.

I remember the last time my home life even became a

relevant topic in school: the day after I fought dad sophomore year during vacation and he clocked the living shit out of me and cut into my cheekbone. I went back to school a couple weeks after with a crescent shaped cut on my cheek made by the ring on my father's hand. The ring is a family heirloom, passed down through three generations of Riley men and currently worn by the latest patriarchal descendant: a pussy by the name of Julius Riley-- dear old dad. The ring is simple enough: thick silver band, set with a lapis lazuli stone, and inscribed on the band itself is the family name of Riley. It isn't a big deal, a nice simple ring; it hurts like a bitch getting that thing across the face however. I was sixteen at the time. When I came to school with a bruised face and the cut everyone assumed the worst and coincidentally the truth: I got beaten up by my father. I told everyone I had just gotten into a fight, that it was no big deal. No one really believed me of course; most of those kids knew how well I fought from their own experiences and didn't believe anyone there or around our age could possibly do that to me-- so naturally the assumption would be my father.

"You should've seen the other guy," I'd say, spitting out the cliché my mom implored me to use so that dear old dad wouldn't get in any trouble. Woman is lucky I love her to death.

What really happened was that I got back to the house and found that piece of shit drunk, trying to rape her-- again. My brother was standing on the stoop of the steps, watching, a look of horror in his little eight-year-old eyes. I went a little over the rail and grabbed the man off mom and punched him hard enough to knock him over. At that point I'd already reached at least six feet, so I towered over that idiot. I started going at it, punching him while he was down. I could hear my brother crying in the background, mom yelling for me to stop, but I couldn't. Mom pulled me up off him; I turned around to face her for a second, looked back and found a fist awaiting my return in that direction. The left side of my face exploded into agonizing pain and that was it, knocked out. I have to hand it to the fucker, he gives a

mean jab.

I involuntarily accepted the Riley family heirloom as a permanent crescent shaped scar on my cheek. So why don't I bother making friends at this institution or in general? Well if you don't know by now then I don't know what to tell you.

I think about leaving school before walking into my next class but figure "*hey, fuck senioritis.*" I walk in, take my seat at the back of the class as per usual and finish what the teacher's lesson plan requires of us in the first fifteen minutes. "*Goddamn, that took me way too long, what's with me today?*" I look around and see everyone else is still doing the warm ups: fucking amateurs. I start to write, nothing in particular at first, but then it becomes too good to let go:

*"My name is my pride. Augustus Riley, a name with a royal insinuation. I don't know how my father came across it. The drunken lunatic has never read a single book and won't bother to do so. I would've thought my mother, a woman that was on her way to college before being impregnated by Satan, would have thought up the regal name. Yet somehow my father, the man who is one drink away from having a negative number amount of brain cells, gave me the name that describes what I am. What am I you idiots might ask, I am great. Obviously that's the case as I am standing before all of you now."*

"Perfect," I say to no one in particular as I jot down the last of what has become my valedictorian speech. The school practically handed me the title, probably another subtle way of raising their under-privileged kids' quota. "*Come to Saunter's Private Academy where some of our poorest students get the best of grades,*" I think, laughing at my own ingenious joke.

"Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of the class, Mr. Riley?" The teacher spits in my direction. Mori Gibson, a destitute man who teaches history and insists on being called *Dr.* Gibson, coming to the end of his tenure at a school he despises just as much as I do; he's realized he has done nothing significant in his life. There's slight discoloration at the base of his right ring finger: divorced. Unhappy personal life. Bags under

eyes, they are slightly red: either partied hard last night or-

“Back to work! Damn excrementum,” he yells out suddenly. It had only been a second. He knows I was just analyzing him. It’s only natural he does, he’d be a bigger goddamn moron if he didn’t know when I was analyzing him by now.

I did this once before, when I first met him. I struck up a friendship with the man when I first came here. That was before I adopted my personality-- I wasn’t really able to make friends at first, something I actually wanted to do. Then I met Gibson, a man with a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology: a fancier term for history of cultures. He was married and happy. We had in depth discussions on a variety of topics, had lunch just about every day, and shared personal anecdotes-- all the typical friendly bullshit. I began to look up to him after a couple of months, almost considered him a fatherly figure so it was much to my surprise when he turned out to be a jackass.

One day I was on my way to his office for lunch, just another typical day. Before opening the door I heard him talking on the other side, from the lack of responses during his pauses I could tell it was over the phone:

*“Yeah honey, I’ll be home for dinner tonight.”*

Pause.

*“No, no, it’s fine. I’m not inviting that kid to dinner, no need for that.”*

Pause.

*“What do you mean why not? I already have to waste my lunch period and office hours dealing with the boy. I don’t want to bring him to my home too.”*

Pause.

*“Shit, Karen I’m already his goddamn teacher, friend, and basically his therapist. I don’t want to be his father too; I have enough of him every day. He’s not... how do I say this without sounding like an ass... ummm, he’s not... he’s just not right, that’s all I can say on the matter really. Anyway, I’ll let you go, see you later honey.”*

Pause.

“Yeab, love you too.”

That was the moment I realized I was nothing more than a charity case for just about everyone in this goddamn place. I have no one here, no support from anyone, not even the teachers. That’s when I decided I’d fuck with Gibson’s life a bit, I let him think everything was ok for a few more months, and I analyzed every shred of his life I could from the distance he kept me at. Poor idiot thought he was going to take me under his wing when in reality I was scrutinizing his entire way of life. When his wife came in one day it was clear to me that she was having an affair and from the way she was walking I deduced it was a satisfying one. I couldn’t necessarily keep that information to myself either, when I get even I do a complete job, otherwise what would be the point? Right? So I found out where his wife went for her illicit affair-- the rich part of town in a pretty decked out mansion. It looked like a place that bastard John Blake would probably spend his time. They’d go out to extravagant dinners quite often and acted pretty goddamn familiar in public, so on one of their dates I just called Gibson up and asked him to meet me. That jackass almost got there in the brink of time because his wife and her lover were getting ready to leave. Lucky for me Mrs. Gibson’s lover was one of those greedy kissers who wanted as much as he could get. Old Mori caught them in the act and the rest is, well, history. With that I had Gibson realize his goddamn life was all a sham. After that incident Gibson hated me with his entire being. I don’t entirely know why, if anything I did him a favor out of the kindness of my heart, but he didn’t really see it that way I guess.

Wait, what did he call me? That word, it’s Latin, just like my name. He knows just as I do the idiots in this class don’t know the language. Damn it, I barely do because I only took one semester of it sophomore year. But *Dr.* Gibson knows I know. The phony has the audacity to call me an excrementum: a shit. After I did so much for him, after I helped him realize the fact that his entire life was a fallacy. Goddamn ingrate. I pack up my stuff and leave. I’m taking my ass back to my house.

One stench ridden bus ride later I'm at my place. Walking up the steps I prepare myself for the usual annoyances: my brother making airplane noises as loud as he fucking can, the TV volume on full blast as the screen watches my father snore up a storm of his own unique sound. Walking into the damn place is always like being welcomed into an orchestra of grievances that only warrants the questions of "what the hell?" or my all time favorite "can you guys keep the damn noise down?" walking up to the door I hear nothing for once. My key sliding into the lock is all the sound I hear until the screeching hinges follow suit. It's quite, how peaceful... wait it's too quiet; my brother is *always* usually making noises. Kid lives in his own little world. The house is riddled with bottles as always. But there's something off about it all. It becomes clear in half a second something is wrong. Bottle of Bacardi half-finished on the living room coffee table, surrounded by a bunch of similar bottles, all empty: an interruption. Fridge open, telling from the temperature in the room it's been open for some time: another interruption. I walk towards the fridge slowly. Small spots of blood are on the door. It's been three seconds. I'm taking too long. I can't process anything properly. The information is incoherent. I can't waste time. What happened? What happened? What happened?! I feel the gears in my head turning. The pieces finally fitting together.

My father is a greedy alcoholic. He never leaves a bottle alone unless he's sucked out every drop of alcohol. My brother, semi-autistic, is in his own little world ninety percent of the time, he doesn't listen all that well. My father is careless; he never fed us when we were younger. My brother and I had to wait for mom to get home from work; I ended up learning how to cook after a while. My brother tends to open the fridge and stand there, looking, contemplating, looking, and contemplating. He doesn't know what he wants to eat; dad notices the fridge open too long. Yells from the sofa, bottle in hand. He doesn't get a response so he gets angry and when he gets angry he...

I run upstairs to my brother's bedroom and open the

door. The open window displays my brother's view of the yard as well as the sunset in the horizon like a goddamn desktop computer wallpaper. The sky is a dark red, tinting it with a bruise of varying colors. He's in bed, blanket on him from head to toe as if he's a covered up corpse. I pull the blanket away to reveal him asleep... No, he's not asleep he's unconscious. The right side of his face is the color of a ripe apple. His right eye is swollen shut. The blood coming out of his nose is pooling into his left ear in a flourishing pond. The crimson liquid in his ear is spilling over in a gushing stream onto his pillow, which is drenched in blood and stained with mucus. His breathing is shallow. "Goddamn it! Goddamn it!" I yell as I run downstairs to the landline.

"911 what is your?"

"I need an ambulance now! He's not breathing I think his heart stopped," I say frantically as I put the phone down so they can trace the call. The cops have been here before; I've called 911 on more than one occasion. I have eight minutes, my plan is set. I run upstairs again. Blood pulses in my ears. My heart pounds with the fury of a thousand tolling bells.

I burst into my parents' room. He's a heavy goddamn sleeper, always has been. I know where he keeps the gun. Bedside bureau, middle drawer. I grab it, check the clip: full. Safety: off. He's in bed, head under the covers. I point the gun a little over his head. I get ready, finger on the trigger. I'll just wake him, scare him. I stand there, deciding how to best put the fear of my strength into him. I'm tensing; my finger on the trigger hurts. It's been six minutes. "*It's now or never!*" I go for the trigger one last time, now!

"What are you doing?" a deep gravelly voice asks me from the doorway. In my shock my strained finger pulls the trigger just as my shaking arms lowered. BANG. I look to see Satan, my father, at the doorway as the sound from the gun going off echoes in my head as I expect it'll keep doing so for eternity. I look back at the bed to see the figure under the white sheets gushing blood from what I can only guess is the head. I know

exactly who I shot the moment the gun went off, I regret my very existence the second I realize who it is I have killed. I hear the clink of bottles on wood as my father drops the liquor he has just gotten.

I pull the blanket back to reveal a full head of brunette hair. My mother's hair. A soft stream of beautiful brown, black, with some strands of silver, interlaced with brain matter and a gushing lake of blood that will forever stain those pure white sheets. She stayed home today. "*I miscalculated!*" I created a theory before looking at all the facts. I think back and in my anger didn't realize that there was more information I had yet process. I look at the side of my mother's face where a large bruise has started to form. He had beaten her too; she was the one who had the fridge open. She was preparing food for my brother. My brother got in the way and he got beaten too.

My father runs at me while I still have the gun. We begin to fight for it. Moving towards the door with every step. The gun goes back and forth. It's pointed at him, at me, at him, at me. This goes on for another second. The horrid smell of alcohol permeating off him is smothering me. We're near the stairs now. The gun's thunder echoes through my head once more. Lightning has struck. The reverberation from the gun leaves me partially deaf as an annoying ass pinging sound takes over my entire sense of hearing. Satan looks me dead in the eye, scared for his life. "*Scared? Why is he scared? I shot him didn't I?*" The pinging in my ear isn't going away, I can't focus. "*Why can't I focus? What's happening?*" I look down and the gun is poised up against my chest.

He shot me. I'm dying. "*You have one second before you tumble down these stairs,*" a voice says in my head. "*Make them count; you can survive if you fall just right. You'll survive this.*" I saw this coming. I called that ambulance for either my father or myself. As it turns out I'm the one who won't be breathing soon. The only thing I didn't see coming was my mother. And that's the only thing that'll change the outcome of my fall, I won't survive this. As I fall I pull a picture frame off the wall. It falls gently over my face. A



skinny face: malnourished? Poor? Dark circles under bright blue eyes: lack of sleep? No, too many energy drinks: consciously avoids falling asleep often. Cut under the cheekbone: result of abuse. Sensitive and poor individual, who's overly emotional, and is constantly abused. The picture frame passes over my head and I hear a crash. CRACK, my skull says greeting the step it just landed on. My neck joins the conversation with a few small creaks of its own. As I see the world going black it decides to show me one last trick, a change in orientation as my body flips over in an involuntary somersault. *"How nice. Gravity has been reversed. I shouldn't be able to see my arm at this angle, right?"* It all ends as a rib on my left connects with the stoop of the staircase. Another crack evacuates the rest of the air in me. The cough I release comes with blood from a most likely punctured lung.

"Oh no oh no oh no" he says at the top of the stairs. *"What's that sound? Silence?"* My heart just stopped. Eight minutes have passed now. I can hear the ambulance and cops coming.

I killed my mother. My hard working mother. I hope they can't save me. All this because I wanted to try to be a hero. This was about me the entire time; it wasn't to avenge my brother being beaten at all. I'm not going to fight Death, if anything I welcome the fucker with open arms. My brain is dying, ten minutes is all it takes and it's all over.

Silence.

I'm being picked up. The paramedics most likely. They won't have much luck in reviving me. I've given up. I'm working against them. Just a few more minutes to the end: brain death.

*"What's going to happen to your brother?"* The question escapes the recesses of my mind. *"They'll blame your father for your mother's death, he's a drunk. What will your brother do? No mother, no father, no brother. Unless you take his custody."*

*"I'm the only one who understands that kid."* I think back into the void.

*"Exactly. So fight."*

Pitch darkness gives way to a bit of ominous light

surrounding me. I'm in a tunnel. It's shaking wildly: earthquake.

"Augustus?" I look back to see my mother. "Come here Augustus." I want to say sorry so badly. I want her in my arms. I-

"No August! Come here! Save me!" My brother's voice comes from the opposite side of the tunnel as I am walking towards mom. Cracks run throughout the cavern towards him. I didn't save him before. I can stop him from getting hurt again. I run after him and catch him just as the tunnel falls into white light.

I open my eyes to a team of doctors. A defibrillator over my chest. I close my eyes within a second but the silence inside me is put to rest as my heart begins to beat once more, filling my body with its orchestral drum.

I open my eyes again... there's something in my throat. I start pulling at the tube with my left hand, I can't move my right. Goddamn hospitals have cruel and unusual punishments. The tube slides out with a disgusting slurping sound. My mouth is dry; I hear beeping alarms and the chatter of machines. A nurse comes in, summoned by the whirring of the medical equipment.

"The situation is handled," a weary male voice says beside me. There was obvious irritation in the voice prompting the nurse to close the door as quick as she opened. I look over without moving my braced neck, to see an older man dressed as if a senile grandma picked out his clothes: Blazer over t-shirt and jeans. There's a female doctor next to him. She looks familiar: she's dealt with me before, when my father broke my arm when I was eleven. He had to have his stomach pumped because of alcohol poisoning that same night. She connected the dots and confronted me about it, all I did was deny it, but she was smart enough to be able to tell, and probably still is. The second I recognized her I remembered him as well. He's supposed to be some famous doctor, looks insane though. She was just a resident back then who worked under the old man who's sitting next to her. She's still here, after all this time, still working for the same lunatic looking doctor. The old man has a cane in his hand, he

must be a- “Hey kid, don’t stare too hard, you make it obvious,” he says interrupting my analyzation as if knowing what I was doing.

“I’m leaving, if you found it hard not to stare at me, you’ll find her irresistible,” he says pointing a thumb at her as he skillfully gets up with the strength of one leg and hobbles away, cane in tow.

“You’re lucky to have survived,” she says. “I won’t get into anything technical about your injuries at the moment since you just woke up from a two-week coma. Don’t try to speak either-- this’ll be quick.”

She’s in her mid-thirties. Hair short and unruly: doesn’t care how she looks? She probably works too hard to deal with it. Cheap plain clothing under white coat. But she’s a doctor she doesn’t have a problem with money: definitely doesn’t care how she looks and is actually committed to the practice rather than reeking the monetary benefits. Fingernails with stubs of purple at the cuticles: not a slob just works too hard to get to it. All in all, a busy hard working doctor who cares about her patients.

“You’re an idiot. You know that?” she asks, its clear the question is rhetorical but the way she pauses and stares at me makes one doubt. Me doubting myself? Well, shit, that’s new. “If someone has a gun you don’t go off wrestling them for it, that’s how you die. When someone has a gun pointed at you you sit your ass down and do what they want so that they don’t kill you. Or is it that you want to die?” she asks. I can see the anger seething under her eyes, this almost seems personal to her. She’s been paused for awhile now. “You can answer now.”

*“Oh, really? Shit, I had no idea princess.”*

“Yeah, I do want to die but that’s not an option is it?” I ask spitting as much rhetorical emphasis as I possibly can. She kind of pisses me off. “I have too much riding on this goddamn life to go to whatever special hell is reserved for me. So, for now, yeah I’ll live, because I’m needed alive but that’s it. And on that note I wouldn’t call what I do living exactly, I merely exist.”

Pause. She's choosing her next few words carefully, I can tell. She doesn't want to set me off again.

"I'm sorry about your mother and brother," she says as she leaves the room. Her harsh approach just confirmed my own thoughts about me being an idiot for having done what I did. I shouldn't have even gone for that goddamn gun when I did. The room itself is sparsely furnished, a chair here and there that are generic and unmemorable. A TV above me on the wall opposite the foot of the bed. Under the TV is a mirror catching some of the fleeting sunlight of the afternoon.

In the mirror I see myself: the top of my head is bandaged, so is my abdomen, my right arm is in a cast, and my neck is in a brace. Most of the damage is internal I'm guessing. There's a strand of golden hair on my hospital gown-- it's mine. Doctors shaved my head? Most likely. The strand slips out of my fingers and falls. I follow it with my eyes as it descends towards my right arm. I look down at my cast and see it signed. In green is Daniel: my brother's name in the crummiest and most child like penmanship I've seen of his. Tears streak down my face. I took away his mother and his father. Am I monster after all?

# Thanking Photographers and Painters for Poems

Ray Hadley

I'd like to thank the painters for so many women  
in long dresses holding baskets of flowers walking  
the cliffs above the sea.

I couldn't have said it better myself, and thank you  
Still-life painters For the reflection of window panes  
In all golden delicious apples, the knife, and the piece  
of cheese, for the pheasant hanging on the wall.  
Thank you for the pale, green shade you used for  
the feathers.

And thank you for making me touch them to see  
if they were real. Thank you for the chocolate cake  
its slice on the plate.

I'd like to thank photographers for suspension bridges.  
I almost forgot, and for the old woman in the park  
feeding pigeons. On rainy days you've given us pictures  
of people walking in the rain and providing us with  
the picture of the "umbrella." and a mirror image  
of the umbrella in the sidewalk.

Thanks for the great close-up of a grasshopper's eye.,  
a shout-out to Diane Arbus for stout woman in curlers,  
and Ansel Adams, what would we do without colored  
rocks under water by snowy mountains,

And to others, too numerous to mention, the light  
in the city and the reflection of light off the windows  
of skyscrapers. and I think you know who you are. I'd like

to thank the person who photographed the swimmers beneath the railroad bridge in Pennsylvania. I've used that one a lot.

Thank you for all the lovely homes above the sea and especially for the pictures of old men sitting at glass tables in outdoor cafes.. Who Is that? Andre Breton? Apollinaire? or a woman in a long, white coat. who's been coming here for years.

# Possum Retreat

Thomas Lequin

I've seen you every night  
under the tangerine tree,  
eating what God has provided.

I walk by, noticing your snake-like tail  
and cute little face. You stop eating  
and look at me. You say,  
“You’ve been playing possum with God too long.”

I continue walking, taking your words to heart—  
words that ring true.  
Now I walk this sunny morning  
in God’s brightness past the tangerine tree.  
There is no possum.

# Interview with George Saunders

Conducted By Jose Martinez

fiction  
poetry  
photography

George Saunders is perhaps one of the most celebrated short story writers of his time. Blending sharp, witty satire with darkly eccentric but believable visions of America today, his work has appeared in publications that include *The New Yorker* and *Harp-er's Magazine*, and his awards include four National Magazine Awards for Fiction and a PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the art of the short story. In 2006, he was made both a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Fellow, and his most recent book, *Tenth of December: Stories*, was named one of the ten best books of the year by *The New York Times Book Review*.

interviews

A professor at Syracuse University, George took time in-between the tour of the re-release of *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* to answer a few questions for us.

**JM: Besides already pointed out influences like Kurt Vonne-gut, are there artists from other fields (poetry, screenwriters, painters, essayists, graphic designers etc.) that you feel have *more* heavily influenced your work?**

**GS:** Probably music is the biggest influence, especially albums of the 1970s - the format, the way they were sort of curated and told a larger over-story. These days I love Wilco, Sleater-Kinney, Regina Spektor and some new “classical” composers, like John Adams and Thomas Ades. In painting I’m inspired by Inka Essenhigh, and of course movies are a big influence - I love all of Monty Python, but also *Bicycle Thieves* and *Grapes of Wrath*....

**JM: A book like *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* is the most noteworthy of departures compared to what you usually**



**work on. What are some refreshing lessons you learned while working on the book that your audience got to experience in your work post-*Frip*?**

**GS:** I think mostly just that it was the first time I'd ever considered trying what we might call a "happy" ending - since it was for kids. And that got me thinking about how goodness is represented in fiction - and the possibility of doing a sort of auto-swerve to the "Life is horrible" default - the notion that fiction can also be about representing the resources we have for enduring it and making it better...and that all definitely played into subsequent work, especially *Tenth of December*.

**JM:** In a very recent discussion in the NY Times Magazine with Jennifer Egan, you let it be known that you were working on a novel, and it reminded me of the Gawker piece that argued that what was "missing" from your bibliography was a novel. Do you feel you that the subjects that you have touched upon in your short fiction have better suited in that form versus writing them in novel form?

**GS:** Yes - I mean, the story finds its right form and I always try to be as efficient as possible. What I found kind of amusing about that piece was the implied notion that a writer "decides" what to write. My feeling is, you write what you can bring alive - and the piece itself will tell you how long it wants to be.

**JM:** On the subject of the novel itself, do you feel that its subject of the past is one that could *only* work in novel form? Or does there lie the possibility of it turning into a short story?

**GS:** I don't think it has anything to do with it being in the past, no. It's just...the nature of that particular story. If I could have done it in a short story form, I would have. It just is sort of a

short story but on a larger frame. Again, the point, in my view, is not to dawdle, or cling to some preconceived notion of what you “want” to write - but find what length makes things most intense and undeniable.

**JM: And on a final, unrelated note, what is some pretty obvious advice that you feel new writers aren’t told enough nowadays?**

**GS:** Well, no doubt, young writers get a LOT of advice these days - but I guess the one thing I’d underscore is that this is not a rational endeavor - I think there’s a limit to how much we can “decide” our way towards solutions to our writing problems. So much of it is intuitive and ad hoc - and I think it’s sort of liberating to say that, and be ok with it - it’s, of course, an intellectual pursuit, but it’s also a form of entertainment that has mystery at its core...and the one way to find one’s problems AND one’s solutions is to put the time in.

## MEET THE EDITORS

**Colleen G. Gardner** is a senior studying English and Asian Studies at Providence College who has spent three years living in the basement of the library selling her soul to the *Alembic*. Her poetry received first place in the 2014 and 2016 Providence College Creative Writing Contests. Despite losing her phone or ID on a daily basis, Colleen is a feminist warrior who has been described alternately as “impressively well-versed and active in today’s most relevant issues” and “like a baby snake who has already used her venom.” She is also very prone to broken feet. #Dore3rdFloor4ever.

**John P. Connolly** has a normal number of toes for a human. He will not graduate from Providence College in May 2016, but he is a senior. He studies English Literature and sometimes German at the school. John does not know where he comes from originally, but he is certain that it is probably a quiet place, like Connecticut, or maybe Eastern Russia. He would also like to add that if not in the library, he may be found staying under the alias ‘Mr. Bones’ in room 513 of Biltmore Hotel in Providence.

**George Samuel Copley** is a graduating English and economics double major at Providence College, although that doesn’t tell you much. Composing and performing music are public professions while writing is a private avocation. Botany is a newly discovered personal pleasure, although the recent desire to chop down a tree reflects a larger existential irony. When solitude becomes too claustrophobic, an emphasis on community and solidarity is pursued – much to the pleasure of his fellow editors.

**Anna C. Dumais** is a senior at Providence College majoring in English and American Studies. She is from a small town in northern Rhode Island with a notable “heroine” problem, she has nice handwriting, and she lowkey hates men. She would like

to proudly take responsibility for starting the tradition of senior editors jumping in the campus koi pond, and for insisting that the office needed a corkboard. She'd like to thank Bruce Springsteen and those large bottles of Barefoot Riesling for getting her through college, and her fellow editors for being the coolest people ever and putting up with her (that includes you, George Copley).

**Samantha Westmoreland** is a senior at Providence College in utter denial about her upcoming graduation in May. A Creative Writing and Business student by trade and ice cream connoisseur by choice, Samantha hopes to transform these skills into a viable career. If that fails, she plans to pursue a position in publishing. As the resident mother, she will undoubtedly be taking care of her crazy fellow editors even after the book is completed.

**Megan E. Manning** is a sophomore English major who hails from Oregon and enjoys thrift shopping and unique coffee shops more than any east coaster could. In her free time she enjoys reading, laughing at herself and online shopping. The top items on her bucket list are to visit Russia, publish a book, and become a princess.

**Haley Virginia Wolfe** is a freshman pursuing an English major. Hailing from Amish country in Lancaster, PA, she wanted to come to Providence not only for the strong Dominican presence on campus, but also because she has only been to the beach twice in her life and wanted to be near the water. Her accomplishments include passing three horse and buggies in a row on the road, completing multiple TV series on Netflix, having the most awesome full name in the Alembic, and building a great bond with her fellow editors. Though she has not written too frequently in recent history, she still enjoys it but looks forward more to reading the impressive compositions of her friends and these authors.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**John Azraks's** poetry and fiction have appeared in *Poetry East*, *The Santa Clara Review*, *Coe Review*, *Passages North*, *Oyez Review*, *West Branch*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Artful Dodge*, *The Sonora Review*, and *The Alembic*. He was a finalist for the *Glimmer Train's* short fiction award.

**Branan Durbin** is a graduating senior at Providence College getting her Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and Theology. Her poem "Burning" appeared in the 2015 issue of the *Alembic* and she is the editor of the Portfolio section for poetry and prose in Providence College's student-run newspaper, *The Cowl*. She is inspired by the Patapsco Valley near her hometown of Catonsville, Maryland, as well as by the city of Providence, the strength of her grandmother Zoraida Perez Cabello and many other family members, and by manifestations and signs of God's providence and love, from sunlight to St. Dominic.

**Donna Emerson** is a recently retired college instructor. Some of her publications include *Assisi*, *Broad River Review*, and *California Quarterly*. She has received numerous prizes and awards including those distributed by the Labrinth Society (2005), California State Poetry Society (2008), Tiny Lights (flash prizes, 2007, 2010). Her work can also be seen in anthologies such as *Echoes* (2012).

**Andrey Gritsman** is a native of Moscow who immigrated to the United States in 1981, received an MFA in poetry from Vermont College, and now runs the Intercultural Poetry Series at the Cornelia Street Café in New York City. Gritsman is a physician, poet, and essayist, who has received the 2009 Pushcart Prize Honorable Mention, and published five volumes of poetry in Russian, as well as English-language poems in over sixty literary journals.

**Ray Hadley** has published two chapbooks: *Smoking Mt. Shasta* and *Children's Games*. He is working on two other chapbooks, as well as a major book of poetry. He was the recipient of a Pushcart Prize nomination. He

is currently poetry editor at *Edge*, and he owns Keynote, a bookstore in Southern Lake Tahoe.

**Alexandra Harbour** is a junior at Providence College studying biology and secondary education. She spends her free time hiking, running, and anything else outside. You can often find her listening to music too loudly, drinking coffee too fast, and taking way too many pictures.

**Dawyn Henriquez** is from a small town in Massachusetts named Lawrence but as a kid he never had a set place to live. Lawrence is just the last place his family has settled in for the longest period of time. For awhile when he was younger he considered himself to be a skilled artist, dabbling in drawing until one fateful day in the middle of seventh grade when he realized he couldn't tell the stories he wanted to through just drawing and, so, he began to write. He has been writing ever since and reading just the same. Through writing he has learned how to cope with most if not all of life's struggles: heartbreak, familial death, and even the occasional dispute with a friend. And, through writing, he feels that he will come across the person he is meant to be some day; he will become his true self, by shedding away the person he is at these early points in his life, through words

**Daniel Isabel** is a native of Providence whose ardent political views include Northern secession, the elimination of the Judiciary, and nullification. In his private life Daniel camps and fights the power of the 'Big Beer Industry' while reading comic books. Keep the faith!

**Becky Kennedy** is a linguist and college professor. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in journals, a chapbook, and on *Verse Daily*.

**Daniel Langton's** work has appeared in *Poetry*, *the Paris Review*, *the Atlantic Monthly*, *the Iowa Review*, *the TLS*, and other similar publications. His *Quernica* won the Devins Award and the London Prize. His *Selected Poems* will appear this year.

**T.K. Lee** is a visiting writer in the MFA Creative Writing program at the Mississippi University for Women, and received an MFA in playwriting from Spalding University and a master's degree in English from Mississippi State University. Lee has been published in *Quail Bell Press*, *Belle Rève Journal*, *Jabberwok Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Literary House Review*, and *Analecta*, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize in short fiction.

**Thomas Lequin** is a priest, Maine Master Guide, hunter, fisherman, and farmer. His poems have appeared in *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *The Anglican Theological Review*, *Echoes*, *The Whirlwind Review*, *The Daily Bulldog*, *Church World*, *A Parallel Uni-Verse*, etc., and an anthology coming out in October 2016, the proceeds of which will benefit an animal shelter in Maine.

**Jeffrey Levy** received his bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and his MFA from the University of California. He has more than fifty years of experience in theater, including directing, managing, acting, and playwriting. His play "Shotgun Willis" was part of the collection *24 Hours AM* published by Dramatists Play Service, and he served as the Executive Direction of California's Teen-Age Drama Workshop. He currently teaches and mentors at Waldorf Schools and works as a freelance theater director.

**Greg Moglia's** work has appeared in over two hundred journals in the U.S., Canada, England, India, Australia, Sweden, and Austria, as well as five anthologies. He is a seven-time winner of an Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award sponsored by the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College. He lives in Huntington, N.Y.

**Elisabeth Murawski** is the author of *Zorba's Daughter*, which won the 2010 May Swenson Poetry Award, *Moon and Mercury*, and two chapbooks. She was a Hawthornden Fellow in 2008, and her publications include *The Yale Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *FIELD*, et al.

**Sheryl L. Nelms** is from Marysville, Kansas. She graduated from South Dakota State University. She has had over 5,000 articles, stories

and poems published, including fourteen individual collections of her poems. She is a three time Pushcart Prize nominee.

**Kimberly Nunes** is a native of Northern California and holds a bachelor's degree in French, as well as three master's degrees that span business to fine art. Through her writing, she explores nature and landscape, womanhood, and "these spirits who inhabit our spaces". Kimberly manages her investments in farm crops and business, and supports healthcare philanthropy.

**Suzanne O'Connell's** recently published work can be found in *Forge*, *Atlanta Review*, *Crack The Spine*, *The Louisville Review*, *Found Poetry Review*, *Pamplemousse*, and *Burningword Literary Journal*, among others. She lives in Los Angeles and was a nominee for a 2015 Best Of The Net award.

**Simon Perchik** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com).

**Devyn Price** is graduating from the University of Houston's undergraduate creative writing program this year, and researching MFA programs for next year. Price serves as an editorial intern at *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*.

**Stephen R. Roberts** collects books, gargoyles, poetic lariats, and various other obstacles that fit into his basic perceptions of a chaotic and twisted world. He has been published in *The Alembic*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Borderlands*, *Willow Springs*, *Karamu*, *Water-Stone*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, and many others. His two most recent of five chapbooks are *Rhubarb Desoto* and *Small Fire Speaking In the Rain*. His full length collection, *Almost Music From Between Places*, is available from Chatter House Press.



**Lee Sennish** is a poet and psychotherapist living in Valley Cottage, New York. Her poems have been published in *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Blue Door Quarterly*, *Scholastic Magazine*, and *The Forum*. She is a finalist for the 2015 Slapering Hol Press Sanger-Stewart Chapbook Contest.

**Emily Sinclair** is currently an undeclared freshman at Providence College. She has been doing photography for six years now and has done work with National Geographic. While with National Geographic, she lived in Peru for a month shooting the people and geography of the country. Emily is from Sherborn, Massachusetts and lives there with her parents, sister, and two dogs.

**Richie Smith** is a writer, performer, and physician, whose goal is to explore the nexus between the art and science of medicine and the tragicomedy of the human condition. His work has appeared in ducts.org, 580 Split, The Briar Cliff Review, Confrontation, The Dos Passos Review, Eleven Eleven, Forge, G.W. Review, Quiddity, and other publications. He is currently completing his first novel, a satire about healthcare. Website: richiesmithwriter.com

**Geo. Staley** has had three chapbooks of poems published: *Where Orphans Live*, *Ready for Any Nuance*, and *Arc of the Ear*. He has retired from twenty-five years of teaching writing and literature at Portland Community College. He had also taught in New England, Appalachia, and on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation.

**Paul Watsky** attended New York University for his undergraduate degree and University of California Berkeley and the State University of New York for graduate work. He has edited the *Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche* for two years, and his work has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Euphony Journal*. He has published a full length poetry collection, *Telling the Difference*, in 2010, and an online chapbook of baseball poems titled *Extra Innings*.

**D. Jeanne Wilson** works from her mountaintop home in rural Appalachia after many years of enjoying the poetry of others. Her writing has appeared in *Tower Journal*, *St. Anthony Messenger*, *Stickman Review*, *Seeking the Swan*, and elsewhere.

**Ben Wright** is a senior studying mathematics at Providence College. More than anything, he loves his cats, his trampoline, and the city of Budapest.

