

# THE SHINNERY REVIEW

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# ACT I

## Scene I

The curtains open and a low drumbeat starts, thudding through the audience like a secret. Spotlights gleam across the black, polished stage, bouncing off the bright metal scaffolding that sits downstage right. Finally, the spotlight lands on a small, slender figure, with a beak and black eyes. His feathers are like soldiers, crisp and clean in even little lines, pure and ethereal.

He does not notice the audience, instead focused on the ruby red heart he has clutched to his chest as though it's precious. To him, it is. It pulses in his hand, flaring even brighter red before fading again. He stares at it, perplexed.

A figure, a tall man with broad shoulders, in all black with a vivid mask appears from stage left, arms spread wide in a sweeping gesture, making a grand, albeit silent entrance, as though he is expected. The audience goes unnoticed by him as well. He pauses as the heart pulses in birdman's hands again, and watches with unconcealed want.

He's a thief, a crook, but not of earthly things like jewels and riches, but instead he is a heart snatcher. He steals hope, faith, and life, has done so for as long as time has existed. Hearts are fragile things, turning to dust beneath his boots.

The masked man follows as birdman creeps away, his heart fluttering red in the shadows like a beacon. Suddenly, the light stops as birdman hides his heart away, vowing it won't be tarnished or damaged.

The heart snatcher takes a step and freezes as a board squeaks. Birdman takes flight. The drum beats louder, faster.

The thief lunges for the box birdman had tucked the heart in. He stuffs the pulsing organ into his inner coat pocket before taking chase, feet slamming on the flimsy floor to the scaffolding, up and up and up until they meet at the top.

Birdman stands proud, knowing there is nowhere to run, that he has been found. The masked man smiles a sinister smile before drawing out the heart, waving it around like the victor he is. Birdman looks startled, but as the heart pulses in the other's warm hand, he takes a step back in horror. There's nowhere for him to step, however and he tumbles backward off his perch. The audience gasps and someone screams as he plummets towards the floor, wings flapping uselessly as his feathers tear free, leaving birdman in just white robes that flap wildly, casting shadows all around him. He lands upon on the stage soundlessly, crumpled in a miserable pile of fallen feathers and awkward limbs. His melancholy caws are full of his heartbreak and fear as the masked man laughs and examines the heart like it's a prize. It gives one last cry; a brilliant flash of crimson, brighter than all the ones before it, then it goes dark, completely black. Birdman slumps over and the music swells as the heart snatcher drops the heart, smile growing larger and more evil.

He meets birdman's eyes before bringing his foot down to crush it.

Birdman gives a startled, pained caw before clutching his chest and going limp. The music falls silent as the curtains closes.

## Scene II

The next time the curtains open, the scene has completely changed. The set is now a street, with towering buildings along the back of the stage with a sidewalk in front of the smooth, unbroken line of standing structures, with men in suits and women in long, fancy dresses and elaborately curled hair, bustling to and fro.

The masked man walks in from stage left, a beautiful woman with rolling blonde waves, dressed in a fine purple dress, holding his arm. They laugh together as a small girl, in the heart snatcher's arms, claps and smiles. She's just a child, with round cheeks and a tooth missing in the front of her elated smile. She looks like a perfect mix of the masked man and the beautiful woman, with blonde hair like sunshine and green eyes like prospering grass. She giggles with a childish innocence and pulls his mask off, revealing a handsome face with a strong jaw and green eyes just like his daughter's. They stroll leisurely across center stage when the music starts again. It's low, full of despair and something more menacing, growing slightly louder when birdman appears from the wings. The masked man and his bride are too wound up in themselves to notice him trailing them.

He's completely changed. His feathers are black and gray like smoldered ashes, ruffled and in disarray. He carries a jar of red rust that pulses with the occasional light, the exact same way his heart did before. This time, he sees the audience and gives a mocking bow before continuing after the heart snatcher. His steps are full of purpose as he follows them offstage. The music swells in a crescendo as the lights go dark and a woman's scream rises from the darkness, soaring over the music, loud and resonating, mingling with a child's scream. Everything is silent for a moment; the music fading with the dying's last screams. A man's anguished cry breaks the silence followed closely by a single drum beat that rocks the air.

Birdman streaks across the stage, leaving only a trail of gray and black feathers as they fly free from him in his transformation. He's becoming a phoenix, with brilliant orange and red plumage. The jar slides from his grasp and shatters at his feet, but instead of the fine red dust that been it, it's a heart, his heart, made whole again by reaping his revenge. Yet, because of the taint, it has a large black spot right in the middle of it. It lays in the middle of a pile of feathers, not pulsing but instead growing progressively brighter until everything was bathed in a brilliant scarlet that seeps under the curtain even as it swishes closed.

Alyxandria Fletcher

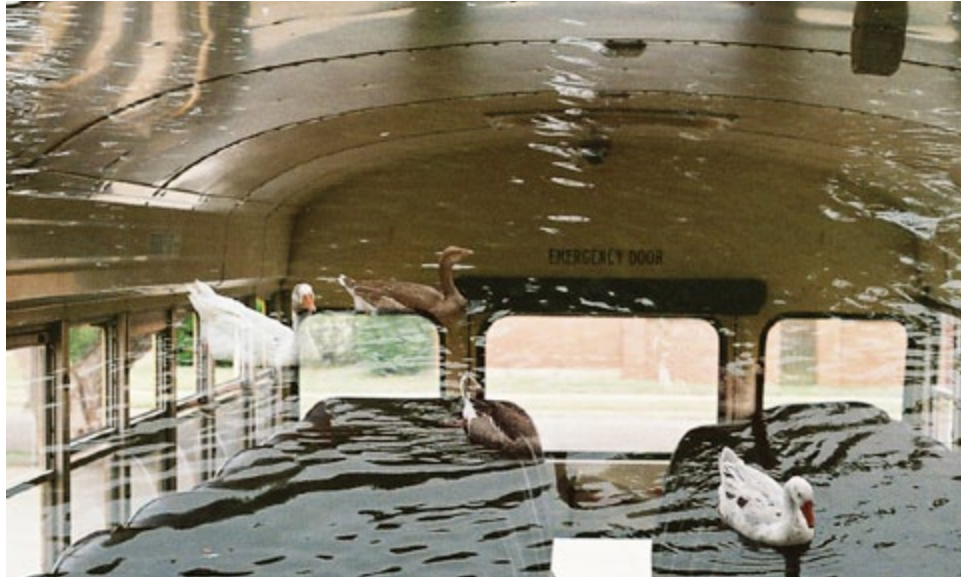
## AFTER THE ACCIDENT

Take out the stitches and  
conceal your scars.  
Don't wear the sling.  
Insist on dressing yourself:  
button the blouse,  
inch into jeans  
and struggle into shoes.  
Don't let them see you wince.  
Type with one hand  
and microwave cold pizza.

Go back to class.  
Smile brightly.  
Refuse to mourn.

Pretend you don't need painkillers.

Adrian Patenaude



*All Aboard*  
Lauren Noack

## ALTRUISM

A mission trip to the slums of Peru!  
For the purpose of sharing our Christian worldview,  
To teach the message of a radical Jew.  
There will be a t-shirt.

Before we embark you will all need some training,  
So interacting with locals will not be so straining.  
Hopefully their customs will not be constraining.  
There will be a t-shirt.

Their customs, indeed, may seem quite bizarre,  
As different from here as from Ulaanbaatar  
Their toiletries will, at best, be subpar.  
There will be a t-shirt.

When packing for the trip you will find it prudential  
To include all those items you might deem essential  
Finding a convenience store would be Providential.  
There will be a t-shirt.

The Godless natives of this foreign land  
Do not know the Lord, do not understand,  
Why we would come offering a guiding hand.  
There will be a t-shirt.

Our selflessness will change their heart,  
Though they'll be skeptical at the start.  
They'll change their tune before we depart.  
There will be a t-shirt.

Of course, think to remember the reason we're going,  
Take note of the One whose good news we're sowing  
The One whose grace and love we'll be showing.  
There will be a t-shirt.

He who came down from Heaven for the lesser man's sake  
 Who boldly told rejects they weren't a mistake  
 Who sat with the sinners to talk and partake  
 Who freed the oppressed, their bondage to break  
 Who spat in the mud so a blind man could wake  
 Who for those with no voice He came and He spake  
 Who managed a hierarchical system to break  
 Who took the "greatest" and "least" and proceeded to shake  
 Who told the religious they were nothing but fake  
 Who once and for all crushed the head of the snake

What size did you want your t-shirt?

Kalyn Prince



*Backstage*  
 Hannah Bruce



## BANGKOK

the city of angels, residence of the Emerald Buddha, impregnable city (unlike Ayutthaya),  
endowed with nine precious gems——

my muggy modern metropolis by the ancient Jao Praya,

with its gunky klongs flowing behind buildings, beside streets, breeding mosquitos,

with its well-tended potted plants—miniature gardens growing on every square foot of  
concrete,

street vendors stir-frying right on the sidewalk,  
setting up red rusted stools and unstable tables  
inches from the curb,

IMAX theaters, soi dogs, and aquariums in the basements of swanky malls,

SkyTrain gliding above clotted traffic (two-toned taxis in red-blue, yellow-green, even hot  
pink—hemmed in by tuk-tuks, motorcycles and that one guy—with his poodle—on a  
beat-up bicycle),

dingy sunlight (the great city) or muggy moonlight (the happy city),  
the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated god——

drowning me in brown, suffocating smog.

Adrian Patenaude



*Best of Both Worlds*  
Sergio Hernandez

## BETHANY, DELAWARE

Dogs hobble and drool  
as their owners trouble them with Frisbees  
toddlers wail at the failure of their sandcastle  
against the force of the salty waves  
and I bury my head in the sand begging for quiet mercy

the sun sears my skin  
my body an ocean of its own  
saturated in salt and sea  
I wade away from the shore  
to quiet the drum in my ears

the waves weigh against my chest  
guarding the secrets of the deep  
“Go back,” they say  
for nature tends to resist the hands of men  
but what good are men at listening

the sea swallows my shoulders  
until slowly I sink, submit  
I swoon in the stillness  
my lungs are angry anchors  
thrusting me to the surface

I beg the deep to keep me  
enveloped in her quiet mystery  
to learn the beautiful kind of blue  
but my anchors turn to balloons  
and I’m slung back to the drums, the drool

Brandy Rains

## BRETHREN

It’s August, but a June bug,  
black almond on legs,  
scuttles across the stage.  
We rush out to squash it.

Unthinking, I snuff out a pixel-sized bug,  
a life-force crawling on my computer screen.  
I conceal the body in a tissue grave  
and sanitize my hands.

On the news is a funeral of bees,  
an accidental homicide with insecticide.  
I recoil at squirming cockroaches  
like a beggar without fingers.

Buddha said a human soul  
dwells in a cloud of mosquitoes.  
Distracted, we swat  
at ancient brothers.

Adrian Patenaude

## BUBBLEGUM LAMPSHADES

all you have to do  
to make poetry  
is combine two things that would never be combined

Kalyn Prince



*Chaz*  
Lauren Noack



*Clairvoyance*  
Erik Ringle

## CORDOVA, *excerpt*

Listening to Wyatt, I can't help but get the impression that he's arrived at some distant milestone of further understanding through his experience that I have not yet reached. I see it in the glitter of his eyes and hear it in his voice that he knows something that I don't. But it's not an understanding that he would be able to distinctly identify or articulate. Because it's deeper than that. Down into the marrow of his bones. How can anyone explain what the marrow knows?

One thing that Wyatt was able to articulate to me was this: Alaskans seem to be an especially utilitarian people. First they provide for themselves, but then they do what they can for those in their community. They're united. Living and operating with the I got your back motto.

He speaks so smoothly and effortlessly. I cling to his words as they slide out of his lips. His words are like a treasure box of memories and experiences. In all of the most appropriate places, he strategically places dramatic pauses in his narration. Perhaps simply to take a breath. Perhaps for emphasis. I will never know. But it is natural and real and genuine. And that's what I am drawn to in a person—authenticity. It suddenly strikes me: perhaps, through Wyatt's account, I can exist vicariously and discover whatever it is he's so fortunately accidentally stumbled upon.

"I woke up. I realized I was by myself in Alaska with no one to talk to. I knew no one. It all just hit me at once, and then I puked everything that was in my system. All the fluids. Anything I had eaten the day before. It was miserable. I didn't know anyone, and I didn't have a job. This is me, starting from scratch."

In one particular photograph that Wyatt shows me from McKinley Lake Trail in Chugach National Forest, there's a little stream passing through the dense trees and moss-covered forest floor. The earth slopes downward towards the stream as if it's welcoming its passage. Fallen trees and branches are beginning to decompose as the moss devours them. The trees are bare of branches and leaves until about six feet up—where small branches with patches of green needles begin. The image is vivid and alive with shades of bright yellow and jade green and dark brown and the blue reflection on the stream.

After a miserable awakening, Wyatt explored Hippy Cove to occupy himself. And he found a small, rugged, wooden shack. He recognized it from a photograph Will had shown him. It was called the Bird House. "It was crazy because I had seen a picture of it before and then I saw it in real life." He called out hello upon entering the vintage building to alert any unsuspecting inhabitants of his intrusion, but no one was inside. Wyatt experienced a feeling similar to Déjà vu because he had seen several photographs of the Bird House before from his brother. But he had never actually been there. "One of those surreal moments. You walk in there and start piecing together your mental image

that you're collecting in the present with the image you've seen in the past," he says. The Bird House is a one-room building with a kitchen area, a living room area, and a loft above the kitchen for the bed. Old clothing and expired cereal were scattered across the room. A wood-burning stove occupied the center of the Bird House. It appeared to be used for central heating and cooking. More recently, it looked like a propane stove was installed as a more reliable instrument for cooking and heating. There was also a sink that collected rain water. Also—there was no electricity. Books and cassette tapes and stickers and maps and posters and postcards and other artifacts lined the walls. Books like *Mexico* by James A. Michener, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, and *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. He says he read Michener later on when he took it out on a fishing job with him. His eyes glimmer with reminiscence—he says, "All the walls were decked out in Grateful Dead stickers and Deadhead stuff. Textbook hippie things from the 70s." There was even a guitar plastered to the wall. While examining Wyatt's photos of the Bird House, I can hardly determine the color of the walls because almost every inch of wall space is covered with stuff. He explains how he felt naturally comfortable in that environment. "I didn't know anyone that lived there, but I knew this was a place you could go."

The way Wyatt describes his feelings towards the Bird House gives me the impression that he developed some type of solidarity with the people of Alaska and Alaskan culture in general through his connection and understanding of the Bird House. The Bird House seemed to function as a place of refuge for newcomers to seek consolation. As long as the foreigners were respectful towards the natives, they would eventually be welcomed and rewarded with shelter and friendliness.

After surveying the Bird House, Wyatt passed out on a recliner chair inside for three hours due to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion.

Wyatt says the Bird House is really ecofriendly and off the grid. I guess it would only make sense for the Bird House to be ecofriendly and off the grid if it's located in a place called Hippie Cove. He says, "It's in Hippie Cove. So it's what you would image real hippies living in, in a modern day area."

After napping in the Bird House, Wyatt explored Cordova some more on his own. He walked down to the docks and started asking people if they needed a deckhand—Hey, I'm Jesse. I'm from Texas. I'm looking for work out here. Do you need a deckhand? He didn't know anything about the fishing industry. "I'm feeling so stupid because I'm asking these questions. From there I wanted to learn about the industry—What do they do?—so I'd have to ask another question." At least he had already learned some key vocabulary terms from his brother, so he didn't seem completely clueless to the fishermen. Through questioning, Wyatt began to understand what the commercial fishing industry was about and how it worked.

Time was passing by quickly. One week. Then two weeks. Wyatt still didn't have a fishing job. He did find a day job at the dry docks though. The dry docks are where boats are pulled out of the water for maintenance. Wyatt met a guy named Conner, about

his age or younger, from Washington. Conner was also seeking fishing jobs, and he told Wyatt, "I got hellas offers." Wyatt had no offers. Conner told Wyatt about a painting job at the dry docks. Wyatt took the job, but he says he got screwed over because he only made \$6.00 per hour for manual labor. He only did the job for three days.

He was getting discouraged. Although he was beginning to become acquainted with Cordova and its inhabitants, he was burning through money fast. Wyatt's diminishing funds were his main concern. Most of his money was being spent on groceries.

"After two weeks, I got my first nibble." It was from Rod, Will's previous captain. On May 26th, Rod texted Wyatt about a job offer. The following is their conversation:

Rod: Jesse, did you get hooked up with a job yet?

Wyatt: Not yet! Scored a day job and have been walking the docks everyday.

Rod: I was going to mention Mike Smith is not much of a seiner...And Gabriel out of Seward is a good guy if he is the one I'm thinking of. Boat name?

Wyatt: Jimmy Gabriel never mentioned his boat name. Called him to accept his offer the day after he and I spoke, but he had filled his crew at that point.

Rod: I need a crewman for this next black cod trip...Which would take you away from job hunting, but might put a few dollars in your pocket.

Wyatt: I would love the opportunity to go out and learn and get some good work in.

Rod: Ok. I will track you down tomorrow morning around 9AM. Just check your phone.

Lauren Noack

## DREAMS I'VE HAD

Her honey hair spreads across emerald blades of Bermuda grass as fading sunlight tints heavy drops of sprinkler water metallic gold. We are singing a chorus of giggles as we lie in the front lawn, closing down the long summer day. From the corner of my eye I can see her missing bottom tooth when she shrieks my name. Emily! Em, look at the chalk sisters I drew! Emily! My sun-bleached bangs are stuck to my forehead where my melting blue raspberry Popsicle met my eyebrow when we were running around the cul-de-sac, but I don't mind. Like always, though, the sun passes behind the tall, pointed eave above our red front door and Sister runs inside when Momma calls for us. Only then do I realize I am actually a bird, I realize I can't resist the urge to fly away, and I realize that no matter how hard I try to reverse the direction of my flapping wings, I cannot return to the lush yard with the spouting sprinkler head and laughing Sister. I fly away, away, away.

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Husband is stroking my ponytailed hair and kissing my gleaming forehead. We are both entirely silent, awestruck at the beautiful being swaddled in my arms. It's a boy, the nurse says over and over. "His name is Atticus, then, after our favorite book character. Atticus Finch is the man who brought us together, you know, because we can both talk about books for hours. Atticus. Atticus! He already sounds so smart, right Em?" The mess of blankets in my arms wriggles and I realize the bright light above me is silver, sterilized. I am on an operating table. The force inside the blankets is strong, impossibly strong, and I am holding onto the bucking blanket with all my strength. Husband backs away, putting his hands up in surrender. Then. Then Atticus bursts from the blankets, a flurry of red feathers. Atticus' short, sharp beak is parted, poised in question, and his wings blur in frenzied flight. Atticus hovers above Husband and me, staring at, staring into Husband and me.

"He knows about the one we lost."

Atticus flies away, away, away.

Emily Moses

## ESTHER

Her kingdom was at hand; faithful subjects gathered around her like bees around a field of springtime flowers, hoping for something, anything from her clenched fists. She danced around the barnyard court, dazzling her ministers with spins and twirls, her dark brown hair flowing freely with the wind; all the while golden jewels falling from her hands, a feast for royalty. The chickens rushed to her, stepping over each other to approach her majesty, savoring the generous bounty. The goats, bearded and proud, saw pride fall away in her presence. They too were overcome by her radiance and partook of her royal offering. All paid homage as she continued to dance, enraptured by her beauty. "Esther!" Came the cry of her mother. As quickly as had been cast, the spell was broken and the bright colors of her pageantry gave way to grey. The world again became still. "It looks as if rain is near, come inside Esther." The command came as an order of surrender. Esther looked around, waiting for her knights to rush to her defense, the soldiers who had only minutes before eaten at her table. Traitors! Cowards! Stripped of her power, she marched towards the house as a defiant queen-in-exile. Such was the tradition of her people. Whether Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome, she knew well the stories of her ancestors, of her namesake. However, Queen Esther of elder days saved her people from destruction while Esther Moreau failed to save even herself from parental oppression. "Come Esther, help me with the bread before your father returns." Esther took one last wistful look at her court, the barnyard with its citizens carrying out the business of the day. "But then again, she thought, what exactly is the business of a chicken?" Her father used to practice law but what do chickens practice? "Is egg laying a sport in which ones gains recognition? How dreadfully dull, the life of chickens," she concluded. "They aren't even good dancers," she added as she entered the house.

The hall was dark, and the only light came from the last door on the left, the kitchen. Esther walked along this tunnel trying not to think about the beasts that might be lying in wait, suddenly willing to trade her crown for that golden protection seemingly miles away. "So many tragic fairy tales begin with a child walking alone through the dark forest," she thought. How must little children in fairy tales feel when confronted with such blackness? Why do so many creatures of the dark make sport of ensnaring the children in the stories? "No," she told herself, "I'm too old to be scared of fairy tale monsters." Such was the occupation of five year olds, not young adults at the age of six such as herself. However, could she be sure of the supposed non-existence of such monsters? "Why take the chance?" She suddenly concluded as a creak behind her spurred her on. She walked faster until at last, she was quit of the darkness. Esther basked in the warm glow of the kitchen and even the queen-in-exile forgot her chains when confronted with the aroma of rising bread. "But wait," she wondered as she approached the table where her mother

was at work kneading dough, “could this be a trap?” Was the warm kitchen an illusion to draw in children like Hansel and Gretel? But using this particular fairy tale as an example, that would make her mother a witch. “Surely not!” She thought to herself. Nonetheless, she could not help but steal quick glances at her mother for signs of witch-like behavior. Such is the mind of a six year old when contemplating the subject of fairy tales. As Esther assumed her new, less stately position of bread-kneader her mother spoke to her. She spoke of events far away, of armies and war, of mighty France fallen to German guns, but to Esther the words blended with the dough, up and over, up and over. The young hands moved quickly, this was not their first loaf of bread to knead. Her mother’s voice continued to sound but the dough, seemingly enchanted by the rhythmic kneading, transfixed Esther. Up and over, pound, up and over, pound. She was in an orchestra, percussion to accompany her mother’s melody. “How delightful it must be to play in an orchestra,” she thought to herself. “If I can dance, would that make me a good percussionist?” She wondered. “I think I would like the drums, they look so much fun.” The dough, when squashed flat, even looked like a drumhead. Up and over, pound, up and over, pound, the rhythm pulsed through her like an African tribal dance. Was she worshipping the gods of the harvest? A rain dance perhaps? Up and over, pound. She felt the rain; it must be a rain dance. “Esther, that’s enough dear.” The concert ended, the rain stopped and Esther reluctantly placed her dough on the bread pan, which was soon engulfed in the heat of the oven. “How do ovens make things grow?” She often wondered. “What would it do to me? Would I grow?”

Her father would be home soon. M. Moreau had practiced law in the local city of Angers until the Germans came, the “boche” he would call them. “How strange!” Esther would always wonder thus; are all Germans blockheads? That would be rather unfortunate. She had never met a German but to Esther, it wouldn’t do at all to belong to a nation of blockheads. Now, for reasons unknown to Esther her father worked odd jobs for old friends, making what he could to support his small family. Esther, who regarded this as “grown up business”, preferred to keep to her animal kingdom and her dolls, her second court held when weather did not allow the former to gather.

The bread prepared, her mother began to make supper. Was her mother a witch? She must have had some magic powers because she always knew what Esther wanted to eat without having to ask. What her mother didn’t know or maybe she did, was that Esther had magic powers too. She could turn invisible and run off when she wanted to be alone with her imagination. Her mother turned her back, now was the time! Seizing her chance Esther ran up the staircase to her room, free from her loving captor. She entered her room and immediately made for her trunk, her treasure chest. She opened the heavy lid and was overcome by the smell of old wood; the aged yet sweet wave engulfed her senses. Surely this wood came from a magical forest, it had a dull yet noticeable aura that seemed to speak ancient incantations in her ears. “Magic must truly run deep in our family,” she thought. Here was to be found treasures of all kinds. Precious

stones, drawings, and old bits of jewelry were blanketed among brightly colored dresses, shining shoes, and hats of all sizes. None of this mattered to Esther however, not today. She plunged her hands into the trove of belongings for two objects. After fighting through the currents of fabric and material her hands clasped what they sought, two dolls, her friends Jacques and Amélie. Jacques was a fine man, with broad shoulders and a stern yet kind expression forever etched on his figure. He was Esther’s king, her husband and ruler of their kingdom. They had been on many adventures together and he had saved her life more than once from foul creatures, including a dragon. Amélie was beautiful with her long hair and rose-colored cheeks. She was daughter of the royal family and a paragon of love and virtue, the likes of which were etched onto her pristine face. This was a mother and daughter inseparable. “I wish I had more children,” she sighed, “I don’t want Amélie to be lonely. In fact, the two of them must get terribly lonely in that chest all day, if only chores wouldn’t get in the way of family. Such a travesty, family should always come before work,” she concluded. Thus assembled, the court discussed topics ranging from the weather to the proper way to kill a dragon. “Such interesting topics today,” Esther thought absentmindedly, lost in the conversation, a crystalline example of amaranthine youth. King Jacques was in rare form and recounted with delight the harrowing journey to the castle of his beloved prisoner-queen while Esther and Amélie listened with rapt attention. He had told this story on numerous occasions but the climax brought Esther the same excitement on every recounting; the slaying of the dragon that held her prisoner. “There I was...” said Jacques. Esther heard the tale again, drinking in every detail, savoring every morsel. She had indeed been a princess locked in a tower, though she could not remember how she got there. It trifled her not, such was the tale of all princesses locked in towers. Or was it? Was there ever a princess that knew exactly why she had been locked up in her tower prison? “That wouldn’t do at all,” She thought while listening to the story. Would anyone lock a princess in a tower for fun? “Preposterous!” She thought to herself. “Everyone knows that princesses are locked in towers to await princes so that they can marry and live happily ever after. Anything to the contrary simply makes no sense.” His tale, at last, came to an end. The listeners applauded and gave due accolade to the king on his heroic accomplishment. After all, its not every day one sits in the presence of a dragon slayer. Sometime later, the court was in the midst of discussing their favorite times of the year when a noise from downstairs drew Esther away from her conversation, her father had finally arrived. “Court is dismissed!” She exclaimed. “Adieu Jacques!” Adieu Amélie!” With this fond farewell to her friends, she placed them back in the chest and then ran downstairs to greet her father.

M. Moreau was a man of average height with broad shoulders and strong arms. His face was beset with spectacles, windows into his deep brown eyes. These presided over a round nose and a thin, dark mustache that crowned a smiling mouth. On a regular day, he would sport his usual attire, perfectly polished shoes, a hat and a suit, distinguished only by a bright yellow star on the right sleeve. Esther had been curious about the star,



“Juif” it said plainly. “Why must we let other people know we are Jews?” Thought Esther. “Are they confused? Couldn’t they simply ask? The star had never particularly bothered Esther. At least until it was sewn onto the front and back of her favorite dresses. “Why?” She had cried upon its discovery. It didn’t even match her dress! What would the other girls think? After two months of wearing it however, the shock had worn off, though she still resented the stares given her by the people of Angers. David’s star however, was far from her mind as she ran down the stairs and she soon could see her father’s hat on the hanger beside the door. Assured of his coming she raced into the parlor, his usual stop upon his arrival. The room was brightly lit and full of beautiful furniture. The furniture, however, had recently begun to sadden Esther. “Is this what it’s like to grow up?” She would ask. “Do they waste their days away in town going who knows where to bring furniture and food back to the house?” How sad. Life is a paradox at its core; apparently the dangerous occupations must be left to the children, the dragon slayers and the explorers of dark forests. Tonight however, the furniture seemed invisible to her, she only saw the man standing by the fireplace mantel. He was about to light his favorite pipe when she ran to him and threw her arms around his waist. Laughing, he put the pipe back on the mantle, picked her up in his arms and then started to dance. Spinning, sweeping, twirling, and laughing, father and daughter danced. The lights around the room began to blur and time itself seemed to slow its pace as Esther spun around and around. Tears of laughter fell freely as she danced until, at last, the pair collapsed on the floor. Esther closed her eyes and felt as if she was flying high above Paris, the envious Eiffel Tower beneath her. She could see people walking below like ants on the Champs-Élysées. “How dull it must look from down there,” she exclaimed, “the view is much better from up here.” She sighed, “If only everyone could fly like this...” When she opened her eyes, her father was standing over her, still smiling. “How has my princess been today?” He asked. Esther told him everything and rendered no detail too small for recounting. In truth, six year olds would make excellent secretaries, so her father thought. They remember every infinitesimal detail from their day whereas grown ups can oft forget the end of a sentence. From the barnyard to Jacques’s story about the dragon she spoke, remembering to mention the chickens’ sore want of dancing, the possibility that her mother, may or may not be a witch, and the conversation between Jacques, Amélie, and herself. “And then, we were talking about our favorite times of the year when you came home papa.” She finished. “Oh?” He chuckled, “Which one is your favorite?” She thought for a moment. Jacques had said that his favorite time of year was winter, the beauty of the snow covered landscape offset only by roaring fires and hot wine. Amélie had said that, though winter was agreeable enough, she preferred spring and the accompanying renaissance of life. Esther couldn’t choose either of these seasons, it wouldn’t be proper. Now she had a choice to make: autumn or summer? Would it be summer’s warmth or autumn’s colors? “Summer.” She said after a brief moment of reflection. “I get to stay outside longer in the sum-

mer.” Her father laughed as he started to move towards the kitchen, which was exuding a delightful aroma of baked bread and vegetables. Esther followed him; the smell making her realized how hungry she was. As she entered the kitchen, the wonderful smells and the warmth of the oven engulfed her. The aromas assaulted her stomach, which growled back in retort. “I still haven’t decided if she is a witch or not” said Esther looking at her mother. “How would I know? Aha! The food would be poisoned. I’ll let papa take a bite first, just to be safe,” she concluded. She took her place at the table, awaiting the possibly poisoned, yet delightfully smelling meal while her parents talked in low voices, of troubles unfit for a young girl of 6. She did not notice the conversation, nor the worried look of her mother. Yet had she noticed, what would have come of it? Would she understand? Should they worry her? They would not. Let her dream. Let her dance. Let her wander through the forests and slay her dragons, let her be happy. Finally, her parents sat. Her mother was placing a steaming piece of bread on Esther’s plate when there came a booming knock on the front door.

Esther, seemingly oblivious tore into the piece of bread with ravenous hunger forgetting all else. “Its too good to be poisoned” she thought happily. “Mama isn’t a witch after all.” The booming knock came again, only louder this time. Her mother looked at her father nervously; a look that was quickly returned. The hour had come. Should they tell her? No, let her eat. M. Moreau excused himself from the table and went to the front door. Like a prisoner being told to open his cell, he opened the front door and found exactly what he was expecting, a nightmare, four to be exact. The men stood in the entryway, each wore clothes as black as coal, the suits matched their expressions. “May I help you gentlemen?” Said M. Moreau with all of the dignity and respect that a cornered field mouse can give to a triumphant cat. “By order of the Third Reich, you and your family will report to the train station at Angers for relocation.” You have twenty minutes to make ready, you are each allowed one suitcase.” Not waiting for a reply, the men turned and walked out of the house. M. Moreau stood motionless for a brief moment, but in that moment could feel the weight of three lifetimes pressed onto his shoulders. “Mme. Moreau will understand, at least she should, but should she have to? What about Esther? Dear girl, how can I explain? Why should I have to? Will she understand? No, I cannot, she mustn’t lose hope” he decided. “The Germans are simply moving us until the war is over.” This was the tale told to Esther, the tale she believed. “Will I meet a German?” She wondered. “I’m still curious to see if they are blockheads, that would be a sight!” It was with this blissful dream she waited for her mother and father to pack. “Pack clothes! Don’t forget hygiene! Did you pack any food? Should I bring books? Questions poured through the air like rain, drenching Esther with their noise. Was it the rain dance that brought this? Indeed, the rain had been called and the flood was coming.

Twenty minutes later, Esther found herself in the back of a truck surrounded by her family. Papa, Mama, Jacques, Amélie, all were accounted for. The mechanical carriage leapt forward and off they went. “Is this what they felt?” Esther wondered. “Is this



what the kings and queens of old experienced when they took carriage rides in the countryside? I'm sure it wasn't this noisy," she thought as she turned disapprovingly towards the front of the truck, "but the feel, the moving air. She was a princess after all, could she not enjoy a carriage ride like her forebears? "Does she not know?" Her mother thought, casting a glance at her daughter. How could she not know? She is like a lamb before the shearing, before the slaughter. "How innocence has blessed her. Please Lord, let her keep it, until whatever end." The trucks stopped, they had reached the train station. Cattle cars were arranged along the track but no passenger cars could be seen. Esther looked around with delight. "I've never been on a train before!" She thought happily. "Who knows where those tracks could take us? Far away places began to fill her mind. She saw mountains and lakes, castles of long ago, dark forests and stretching deserts. "But where?" She wondered. "Where will we go?" She turned and saw other people standing at the station as well. "Who are they? Are we all going together? I wonder how big the train will be? "Everybody on the train!" Came a loud voice from behind her. "Which train?" She asked her mother. Her mother stood, pale as snow despite the July heat. "That train," she said pointing at the cattle cars. "But where are the windows?" Esther asked. "Surely there should be windows." Thought Esther. "Why must we travel in those? They look as if they were made for animals!" She exclaimed. Pushing and shoving they moved towards the cars, herded like pack animals with their bags and luggage. "Hurry up now!" Came the sound of the loud voice. "Get in there!" "How must animals feel? Thought Esther indignantly. "Is this what they go through when we put them on trains?" Pushing and shoving they were herded into the great cars, the insatiable beasts. She latched onto her mother, the anchor in the storm of animals, being herded into their pens. Twenty, thirty, forty, no more! Forty people pushed into one train car meant for a few animals? "Why?" Esther wondered as she was pressed against the back of the car, the rough wood like sandpaper on her neck. "Ouch!" She cried. "Please stop!" The plea was lost in the sea of noise, the torrent of animals. The rain had been called and the flood was at hand. Black. The door had been closed, along with the light. "Let us out!" "Please help us!" The cries began to escalate, forming a choir of fear, a chorale of anguish. She was lost in the darkness among the anthem of tears. She grasped her mother's hand, held tight as if she would fall into nothingness should she release. The beast slowly began to move, spurred on by an invisible force, neither in front nor behind them. It started out slow, and then built speed. The cries of the passengers faded, their sorrow reduced to moaning and silent weeping. "What have I done?" Esther wondered tearfully. "Where is this monster taking us?" "Please let us out..." her plea faded, was lost in the black. Seconds became minutes, minutes became hours and all the while she remembered. She remembered dancing with the animals, baking bread, talking with her friends who were now faithfully at her side. "Oh Jacques," she said with a cracked whisper. "If only you could save me again, I don't know how to kill dragons." The air became foul, the floor soaked with urine. Her dress was soiled, as were her socks and once bright shoes. The stench was offset only by the roaring of

empty bellies, having long ago eaten what little had been brought. "How long?" Cried Esther. "How long must we sit here?" Tears fell like rain, staining what good was left of her dress, particularly the badge; the badge that simply read "Juif". "Please God, save us," She whispered. Night and day began to blend and the intense heat from both caused the already putrid air to fester. Sometimes the beast would stop, other times it would run, but it was always black, always hot. Now, it was silence, no one wept, none cried. Silence, interrupted only by the movements of the beast. Her hair was soaked with sweat. Or was it urine? Did it matter? Did anything matter anymore?

Light. The door opened at last, the great beast opened its maw. She could barely stand, locked at the knees. The light burned, was harsh to the eyes of those imprisoned. One by one, they spilled out of the car, gasping for the fresh air that met them. "Leave your luggage and personal belongings on the train!" Came a distant command. "Line up on the platform there, now!" The voice was harsh but unidentifiable, lost in the scrambling, hurried line. "Where are we?" Esther wondered as she looked around her. Barbed wire hung everywhere, fields of twisted metal. Hiding behind the field of wire was a sea of wooden houses, each identical, each forbidding. She turned back to the crowd, now two crowds. One was to her left, one to her right. She found herself facing a tall man, a German, identified by a bright red swastika on his arm. "So that's what a German looks like," she thought mindlessly. He did not have a block for a head but then again, she didn't look very hard at his face, only his hand, which told her to join the crowd to his left. Her mother shortly followed her but where was her father? She looked around, left, right, "where is he?" She asked her mother. Should I tell her? "Her mother pondered as she looked at her daughter's questioning face." Why should I have to? Would she understand? Why should she have to? She was about to speak when the German man turned around. "Welcome to Auschwitz II-Birkenau." He said sharply. "You will all be put to work shortly for your own benefit and safety. Before that however, you will all report to the shower houses for a mandatory washing. A hot meal will follow and then you will be shown to your dormitories. Follow the sergeant please, he will take you there." The man stopped talking but his words were met with relief. Esther remembered her soiled clothes and her hunger; neither had been addressed in an age. "Did you hear that mama?" She asked happily as they walked along the barbed wire. "A shower and a hot meal! I can't believe that papa is missing this." Her mother smiled, though it was a sad smile. Her prayer had been answered. "Thank you Lord." She mouthed as she lifted her head to the grey sky. They approached a clearing of trees, tall trees, and green trees. She saw 4 houses with colorful flowerbeds and big chimneys. "How delightful!" She thought. She could only dream of the pleasures awaiting them inside, warm water and a bowl of soup perhaps. She looked up at the chimney, and then asked her mother "do you think they use it in winter? It looks so tall, it must be a big fireplace." They approached a door that led into what looked like the basement. "Due to possible disease, please remove all clothing and place them in a pile on the ground here." Said the sergeant loudly. Esther was only too

willing to comply. Before long, several hundred people, a multitude of young, old, men, women, and children stood naked in the clearing. “Please enter the building and walk as far back as you can to ensure that everyone can access the water.” The sergeant said again in his loud voice. Pushing and shoving, everyone was herded into the basement. Esther held onto her mother’s hand eager for the fresh water that awaited them. Tighter and tighter, pushing and shoving, they were packed like animals into a pen. The door closed. Esther turned to her mother and smiled, still awaiting the blessed shower, the rain she had called for days ago. Above them, vents were opened. Instead of water, little pellets rained down on them, coming like locusts. The vents shut. Then came the screams. Screaming, everyone was screaming but not breathing. Who could breathe? Screaming, crying, anguish, death. Everywhere, they were dying. Parents held their children, and children held their parents, none could escape. Esther turned to her mother one last time. There was no anger, no fury, only sadness. She closed her eyes and remembered. Remembered the animals, baking bread, talking to her friends, and dancing with her father. She was flying now, flying over Paris again. Then, she was gone. Her mother, looked at her still form amidst the screaming remnants. “Should I have told her?” She wondered. “Should I have warned her?” As her vision blurred and turned to grey, she clasped her daughter’s hand. “No. She’s dancing now. She’s slaying dragons. And no one ever has to tell her to stop.”

Wiley Anderson



*Explosion of Emotions*  
Sergio Hernandez



*Faces in Motion*  
Matt Varner

## THE FAMILY NAME

Standing in the doorway  
full battle rattle:  
dress blues, worn boots  
knapsack, saggy eyes,  
muffled bed-head

I can't help but think  
you look so much like our father  
whether drunk on American spirit  
or alcohol I'll never know

but the difference between you and him  
is that you can't sleep  
because of what you saw in Iraq  
and he can't sleep

because of what he did at home  
and the warzone he made of our bedroom  
the grenades he hurled at Mom  
that made you into a soldier

before you polished  
your first pair of boots  
and stepped into the sands  
of the eastern hemisphere.

Brandy Rains

## FIGHT, FLIGHT, FIXATION

I sat, naively unbewildered by his presence. Friends. Dad made a friend. I met him in the mutuality of melted butter, as our hands, in unison, grasped blindly at salted kernels of air. He was odd, out of place, unthreatening, and insignificant. I did not grant him the expectation of a second visit. Of course that, as with most things, was not for me to decide.

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Chaos, of the most sought after kind, was a regular guest in our kitchen. It was a clamor of bowls and mugs, stubbed toes and reaching arms, scoldings and embrace. It was this excitement that preceded any of Dad's story-telling events, which were not a rare occasion in those days. He read aloud the night's feature, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. We were enthralled, not by the story, but by the creamy tone of his voice that poured over us and filled the room. He became each new character, and we played the adoring audience. Within the unforgiving clutch of each of our anxious hands were our family popcorn bowls, individually inscribed with our names—Dad, Mom, Sister, Me—hand-painted with a small, matching, caricature. However, as the paintings wore beneath the continual caress of our palms, only the color of the bowl was left to denote ownership. When the inside base of the bowl became visible once again, we promptly sought reinforcements from headquarters, the large and central family popcorn bowl, which featured a sketch of the entire family. I think I often saw us in this form, huddled closely beneath the rim of the bowl, constant and happy—the popcorn bowl family. Perhaps, in moments, we deluded ourselves with this notion, acting the part: Smiles thinly painted on, flat, free of substance.

Sister and I bickered, often, but this was normal, and Mother and Father countered our distaste for each other with consistent date nights, which I relished. Date nights meant a lenient babysitter, date nights meant pizza, and somehow I knew that date nights meant love. My parents' nights out began to increase in number, and frequency, so much so that, out of some depth of insecurity, it inspired jealous in me. I envied my own idyllic assumptions about their extravagant night on the town. In a Shakespearean fashion, “sweets grown common lose their dear delight,” and through abundance and comparison, my pizza became bland, and the babysitter was no longer an adequate substitute for mother's subduing goodnight hug and father's bedtime stories.

Occupied by the notion of absolute contentment on my parents' behalf, and distracted by my own resentment, I was unsuspecting when Mother and Father called us to the bedroom one evening and announced their pending divorce. Clothed in irony's finest gown, their marital counseling sessions had been masked by the glamour of a supposed

romantic evening. In a futile effort to attend to the wound she had longed not to inflict, Mother reassured us, “Nothing is going to change, your dad and I will just live in separate houses,” a degradation of the situation too ignorant to ignore.

Sister cried violently, but that was the extent to which she signified her sadness. She turned instead to anger, which has always solaced me as an easier emotion than sadness which, unlike the empowerment of rage, seems always just beyond the grasp of ones' control.

Sister sat on the right side of the bed, Mother and Father facing her on the end, and I, tucked neatly into the left corner, plucking determinedly at the tassels of an innocent pillow, the victim of my “emotional release.”

They say that in threatening situations the body evokes a fight or flight reaction, that the hypothalamus activates two systems: the sympathetic nervous system and the adrenal-cortical system and together these trigger the appropriate response. Instead, in dire circumstances, I respond with fixation. Fight, Flight, Fixation. It is a variation of flight I suppose, a digression perhaps. Rather than evading the imminent threat by means of desperate dash, I remain static, like hunted prey, hoping my attacker, ignorant of my presence, will return to its origin, leaving no consequence in its place.

At the time, I suppose my parents might not have abandoned, entirely, the hope of working through the deficiencies of their relationship, which I was told hovered around “growing apart,” a term I immediately failed to understand, and, in retrospect, deem an offensive generalization applicable to a multitude of diagnoses. Perhaps they simply weren't finished fighting over who would be granted the house and who would be forced to replace the last stabilizing element of their domestic lives. But regardless of reason, we continued to reside under the same roof until the divorce approached finalization. Father bought a new convertible, an Eclipse Spyder, which he dusted religiously before ever exposing her to the expanse of road beyond the garage. In the freedom of the sun, her black coat shone like the glint of night, which, at the time, seemed to define our souls. When he did venture beyond the garage, he returned with a tattoo. At first I was convinced that Father had indulged in a pack of Fun Stripe gum and was now proudly touting one of Yipe's classic lick-and-stick tattoos, as I had often done. It was not until I attempted to scratch it from his left breast that I was persuaded of its permanence, and he, I'm sure, was persuaded of my defiance.

One night, in the midst of the separation, attempted reconciliation, and mid-life crisis that was confined to shared space, the voices of Mother and Father rang out above the cabinets of the kitchen and sauntered down the halls, taunting me with their brashness. I stood in the hallway and listened—fixated. It is there that my sister found me, scooped me into her arms and shuffled us down the stairs. She read me a book in an attempt to distract me from the clashing of thrown words that landed just above our heads. I tried to pretend that it was the sound of the dishwasher, hungry-grumbling, in the night, which I had relied upon to drown out the world every night as I went to sleep. It wasn't.

Soon after, Dad moved out, and with the dissemination of our parent's relationship, came the division of our time. He landed just across town, in an apartment complex, with a window view of our once-family-favorite Chinese buffet. It, too, soon changed owners. The apartment was a humble space: two bedrooms, kitchen, living room—the essentials. I had never lived anywhere so small, and it suited me. At that point, I avoided large things. Large things could topple me. There was a safety in the smallness, for I had with it, everything in common.

It was not long until Mother, too, moved out of the house. I was not sad to see it go, to leave behind the newly formed memories that resided there—the old, more welcoming times having then been forgotten, but I wished to be. I ran my fingers across the etched ladder of heights in the wall in my parent's bathroom; it was my final attempt to feel something. I had seen this in movies—when the family tragically says goodbye to their childhood home, only, of course, to move to a more “suitable” mansion, they always revisited the height of their previous ages—as if reminding themselves of how many inches they had lived there. I felt nothing. I yearned for the nostalgia associated with love; yearned to revere the wall that revealed to me that I had once been small in stature, as well as spirit; yearned for the years that the wall belonged to a home, not merely a house; for the time when height was stunted and joy was not.

I did my best to force a reluctant tear from my eye, aiming only to convince the bathroom mirror and myself, but the superficial goodbye was unnecessary and short lived. Once Mother moved out, Father promptly reclaimed his territory.

She moved into a miniscule apartment, hidden within the depths of my Grandfather's avocado grove, where she spent her days managing crews of sun-tainted men. It was an interim residence, a temporary roof during the process of building my mother's dream home, which, as with most dreams, never came to fruition. The two-bedroom apartment sat on the lap of a kumquat packing shed. As machines pulsed out thousands of energetic bite-size oranges, the apartment floor pulsed with it. In juvenile times I had spent countless hours making that shed my fortress as my mother processed hand-callusing bins of fruit. I bounced, mimicking the kumquats departing the chute, on a past-its-prime trampoline that had been set up in my honor, or rather, for my distraction. Its elastic fibers did not bend beneath the fickle distribution of my weight, but instead cracked, and each shift in the tectonic plates sent an engulfing cloud of dust clinging to my once-white Winnie the Pooh sweatshirt. But this was my playground, not my home, and I treated it as such—making only occasional visits.

I devoted most of my time to solitary confinement within my new bedroom. While my sister had been granted a space adequate to contain the emotions that flowed freely by means of puberty and the distress of divorce; I, the reserved child, apt to the bottling of anything that might resemble sentiment, shared the second room with my mother. Our commune held one king-size bed that met the slanted walls on either side. These walls, forming the apex of the roof just above our heads, grew lovingly together as

they rose in height. Because of this arrangement, there remained a cubby of open space just below the edge of my side of the bed. It was this space that was my sanctuary. It was a corner of the universe carved out solely for my repose, which quickly became my greatest indulgence. In my cavern, I was not entirely visible from the bed, undetectable from the door, granting me the greatest desire of my age, invisibility. It was there that my fixation was most effective; the world could not see me and, most importantly, I was blind to it as well. I existed within the cracks of those walls, fulfilled by the comfort of childish nick knacks and nothing more.

We switched on Sundays between these two sanctuaries, flailing back and forth between the two realities of our new present.

On a Father-Daughter designated Saturday morning, I woke to the savory monotony of the weekend. Expecting no more than a day devoted to cartoons. Sister, too, woke and rose, and our humble family of three converged over our weekend breakfast delicacy, Coco Puffs. Bite-sized doses of processed chocolate, boxed and made a socially acceptable source of morning nutrients—childhood dreams come true. It was amidst this feast that Father announced that he wanted us to meet his new friend that afternoon. He'd mentioned him intermittently throughout the preceding weeks, dripping his name nonchalantly into the conversation, and despite my hesitation to extend a welcome to anything that might distract from the salvaging of our subtly surviving family, I was glad that Father was making new friends.

We arrived at the rusty diner, Tom's 22, later that afternoon. To fathom that there were twenty-two of these franchisements, (excluding number thirteen, of course, because apparently Tom was a superstitious fellow) each monetarily successful, took some effort. Somehow the desolation of the vacant floor seemed less inviting, and instinctually, we secured ourselves within the safety of two walls provided by a welcoming corner booth.

We were the only customers present, or at least that is how I recall it now. We sat, engaged in superfluous conversation, full of hackneyed introductions. At eight-years-old, your resume of interesting facts is unsettlingly sparse. After feigning interest in our ages and our elementary preoccupations, Father's friend encouraged us to guess at his age—a dangerous game to play with children, who see the world in an array of nonsensical numbers and colors that suit their disposition on any given day. Sister, eleven years old and beginning to grasp the concept of logical thought, contemplated this rationally.

“If Dad is thirty-eight and usually associates exclusively with older company... forty-one!” she shouted in delight, which he immediately did not share. His response was startled and offended. And thinly veiled.

It was my turn, and I was determined to evoke a more pleasing reaction. In order to ensure this, I utilized the profound strategies of every eight-year-old girl—dispose of all judgment and rely entirely upon gut intuition.

“Umm, I don't know.” Shrugging innocently in an attempt to procure some

sympathy in case my foolproof method proved rather unreliable. “Twenty-Nine?” “Yes!” He congratulated me with a high five and a, now clearly warranted, insulted glance in Sister's direction.

The new Lord of the Rings movie had just been released and Father saw in it the opportunity for a coalescence of our varied ages and interests. I sat beside the friend, Father on the opposite side, and Sister clinging on the end. At opportune moments throughout the film, the friend took to latching his hands upon my shoulders and directing a muffled scream into my ear with every intention, and every reality, of causing me to jump in my seat. After every success he was overtaken by laughter at his own unimpressive feat. I, unable to conceal my startled discomfort, channeled it into an amused chuckle, insincere, and inconsistent in tone.

After the movie we lingered lightly and then eagerly said our goodbyes. The family of three returned to our apartment and Father rewarded our refrain from socially crippling antics by suggesting a dip in the neighborhood hot tub.

The late afternoon sun expelled upon us her day's best and final rays as Father relaxed against the steps. I splashed excitedly—taunting Sister, who tried to maintain a facade of satisfaction, soaking in the water, too mature to take part in my childish antics. Unconvinced by her portrayal, I probed her anyway.

“You like Jeremy, you like Jeremy!” I sang at an irritating decibel.

Jeremy was a friend of hers, a male friend, and so, by nature a subject of intrigue. Secretly, my inquisition was rooted in my own fascination with the boy, not hers.

“Jeremy is younger than me! Gross! I do not!”

“So, Father's Friend is younger than him..”

“Yeah, but Father doesn't like him like that”

“Do you Dad?”

As the silence persisted, my interrogation increased in urgency.

“He doesn't!” Sister shrieked shrilly, the words stumbling from her mouth, desperate to fill the uncertain emptiness that hung in the air, failing to mask the hint of unintentional insecurity in her tone.

Nervous laughter.

I waded across the water, its light resistance imploring me to stop.

I perched myself upon Father's lap.

I was overcome with anxiety, but would have been unable to assert its origin. I could feel sister's choked anticipation, Father's discomfort, and I knew that I too should displace myself from the indulgent peacefulness we had been enjoying.

Mute, a tear cascaded down my father's cheek. I hugged him closer. Tighter, as the afternoon grew colder. The sun itself, aware of the tension in the air, retreated to the security of dusk. Dusk became night.

The following scene exists for me in spurts, fleeting moments, falling in and out of my conscious mind.

Shivering, both of us lodged upon his lap, Father suggested we return to the apartment.

I walked past a man on the stairs; I wondered if he knew.

In the meek silence of the apartment, Sister poured the well of her tears generously upon his shirt. Fixation, my consolation, sheltered me from the immediate blow. Sister's sobs, erratic and hysteric; Father's tears heavy, stern, if stern a cry could be. The emotion seemed to pool around him—not a puddle on the ground, but puddles, of repression released, hung in the air all around him. Consuming him. Devouring him.

This was one of only three times I have seen my father weep. Once at my grandmother's hospital bed, and again at my sister's wedding, but somehow this cry could compensate for a lifetime of unindulged sadness.

He cried for us—for our confusion, and our pain, all that he never wanted to subject us to. He cried for life—the frailty of her circumstances. And he cried for Mother—for the love they had lost, the love she had lost and he perhaps longed to lose. In the midst of his new life, the stalks of which grew up around him, obstructing the vision of his former self, he could not ignore the marsh beneath his feet that hugged at his ankles and pulled him into momentary yearning for the solid ground of his past, dry and desolate, but firm.

The concept of homosexuality—the fundamentals of its design, the foundations of the longstanding debate for and against, are lost on an eight-year-old mind, and I cannot say that I grasped desperately to attain understanding. I felt something of its insecurity and its fear, its inability to reside inconspicuously in the world around it, and in that my curiosity was sated. For curiosity had a danger in it, this I had discovered soon enough. Father, my father, was gay.

He did his best to explain the revelation, which had only recently presented itself to him. On some level, he believed he always knew, always suffered a certain and disregarded inclination. But Mother. He had loved her. Did love her. And in that he had overcome any predisposed orientation. Maybe if she too had been consumed by this all-conquering devotion, he would have happily shared his life with her. On some level, perhaps she always knew.

When our eyes at last suffered drought, we abandoned the endless questions and their unobtainable answers, the futile immersion into our own self-pity. We exchanged bathing suits, still damp, for pajamas and huddled on the living room floor in front of the TV, no longer the popcorn bowl family—the inequities of life having smudged our sterile sketch. We surrendered temporary control over our present, sleepless, speechless night; our broken, reckless lives.

## THE FOOL

I drove the stakes deep  
For the sand was loose  
I crafted every tree into a perfect  
Fortress of domesticity  
I was ready.

The sky vomited  
A gust of wind that reeked of pain  
The fortress was  
And then was not  
I was spared.

I delved deeper  
The sand accepted the stronger stakes  
With no resistance  
The titanic fortress built  
I was ready.

The clouds rallied  
To fashion a sword of ice  
It split the wood from top to bottom  
Sand swallowed stakes like a circus swordsman  
I was spared.

The stakes were higher  
So I drove them deeper still  
The wood was stronger  
The roots an anchor  
I was ready.

The water formed a wall  
And shattered itself  
The broken pieces  
Tore the wood and stirred the sand  
I was naked and bleeding.

The man on the rock said  
“What the hell buddy?”  
So I  
Went out  
To get  
Stronger wood.

James Churchill



*Foreboding*  
Lauren Noack

## JONESBORO

Somewhere in Arkansas on some farm road  
is the creaky yellow house my mom was raised in.  
A place where green trees spread their feet  
and from season to season their hair changes colors  
much like their female owners.  
Where dirt is as red as it tastes  
hot, wet, brimstone  
beating the sweat out of you and the bible right into you.  
Where overalls are usually over very little  
and Papa still tries to impress Grandma  
after fifty-one years.  
Where blackberries from Grandma's backyard garden  
are better than any Piggly Wiggly's  
and Lord have mercy when she bakes them into a cobbler.  
Where the children's' feet turn black  
from the miles they run through the green  
and the flowering brush.  
Where the strawberries spread their seeds  
to show their face next summer  
to a new baby cousin  
or just another hot southern season.  
Mom says she will never go back  
but I still see strawberry seeds in her teeth  
and her blackberry stained lips.

Brandy Rains



## L-A-C-E-Y

It's his shoe lace that is making me so angry, the way one side of the bow is bigger, the way one lace dips beyond the rubber sole, almost touching the floor but not quite, the way his slacks wrinkle, wrinkle, wrinkle, wrinkle all the way up his leg which habitually crosses over the other, his hip pressing into the bed sheet, my bed sheet, creating even more wrinkles encroaching on that tiny stain where just a bit of coffee splattered as the man had sat, careless, filthy man, who doesn't tie his tie very well at all, who has a flaky patch of dry skin on his neck, who has an annoying habit of scratching his eyebrow-

STOP.

Four, three, two, one.

Three, two, one.

Two, one.

One.

Why four? Why count down from four? Four is perfect. Four sides, four corners to a perfect square. Four sides to a crisp, clean piece of paper. Four legs to a table, a chair. Four letters in so many words like love.

Love.

I love her, but I can't love her. She is disgusting, chaotic, the very definition of inconsistency but that four-letter word lights up in my mind, a neon sign whenever I think of her, casting everything behind it - everything squalid, sullied, soiled, sick - in darkness so that only that four-letter word and her face are left.

But she is dirty, dirty, dirty. I can't touch her, but I want to.

"Mr. Greyson?"

"Grey."

"I apologize. Mr. Grey?"

I squeeze my eyes tight enough so I can feel the skin around them fold over itself, just to know they really are really, really, really shut.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, ex-

"Mr. Grey." Firmer this time.

Start over.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

"Yes?"

"You were saying?"

"I was saying? What was I saying?"

"Something about Miss Lacy?"

"She's dirty."

"Yes."

"Dirty, dirty."

"She's schizophrenic."

"Dirty."

"As are many with her same problem."

"Why?"

"Just another symptom," the man shrugs only once so I shrug three times more to make up for his stupidity. "About Miss Lacy-"

"I need to shower."

"You've already taken two."

"Four. Four showers."

"Alright." He stands, only worsening the wrinkles, only one shoe lace touching the ground. He scratches his eyebrow, eyebrow, eyebrow, eyebrow. "We'll meet again tomorrow, yes?"

"In your office."

"Last week you told me to meet in here because I didn't have four pencils and my desk lamp flickered."

"Your office. Please."

He glanced back to the bed, then back to me, squinting, sighing, dropping his shoulders.

"Alright. My office. Tomorrow."

\*\*\*

It's the next day, and the man's desk lamp is flickering again. I wonder why I thought his office would be any better. I try to remind myself of the wrinkles he put on my bed sheet and the germs he spread on my floor to make this office feel safer, but it doesn't do squat, squat, squat, squat.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Grey."

"Afternoon." Four nods of my head.

"How was exposure and response prevention?"

The little crease right where my nose connects to my face twitches. I still had not been allowed to shower since the white-coats exposed me to germs. And that damn crossword puzzle. I'd been forced to fill out every word without erasing the ones that were not multiples of four.

Torture.

"That good? Hmm." He retrieves the wire-rimmed glasses from his desk, places them on his nose as he picks up the manila file with my photo paper-clipped to the front. "I thought we'd start where we left off yesterday, with Miss Lacy."

I stare at the man, at his brown eyebrows flecked with grey that nearly protrude past his glasses. He looks down to where I am scratching violently at my forearm.

"She touched me," I whisper, ceasing to scratch but still feeling the germs crawling over

my skin.

Come with me, she'd said, putting her hand on my arm, begging me to join her in some unseen world. When I blinked and felt only her touch, heard only her voice, I wanted to go. Something in the middle of my chest urged me forward, to join her in the world she chose only to share with a few. But then I opened my eyes and saw her unwashed hair and her yellowing fingernails and I couldn't. I couldn't go. So I ran.

"And you feel dirty."

"Dirty, dirty, dirty," I say, again being left to complete what he left unfinished.

"But you like her."

"She is perfect."

"Yesterday you said she was dirty."

"She is."

"But she's perfect, too?"

"Mmm, mmhmm."

"Tell me how that is so," he says, leaning back, removing his glasses and lacing his fingers together. Filthy fingers.

"Her name. Four letters. L-A-C-Y. It's perfect."

His bushy eyebrows reach toward each other.

"There are other people here with four letters in their name."

"Not like her."

"Hmm." He leans forward now, resting his elbows on the large desk.

Too close.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

"I wonder, Mr. Grey--"

"Wonder, wonder, wonder."

"If you would still like her if she had five letters in her name?"

A muscle below my shoulder blade jerks upward.

"Five? No, no, five is no good."

"So you say, but what if I told you her name was Lacey with an E before the Y? That would be five letters, but she would still be the Lacy you know."

"No, no, no, no," I turn right, then left with every utterance of the word. "Then she would not be perfect."

"But would you still like her?"

STOP.

Four, three, two, one.

Three, two, one.

Two, one.

One.

"No."

"I would venture to say you would, Mr. Grey. I get the feeling that this isn't about

obsession."

"I'm OCD."

"You have OCD, but that does not mean every bit of your existence is tainted with your disorder, does it? You are still capable of love."

My body is rigid as I stare at a fleck on the man's lip.

"I need to shower." I am scratching my arm again.

\*\*\*

The man has changed the lightbulb in his lamp and now it is steady. Still, there are only three pencils on his desk and one is slightly out of line with the others. As he grabs my file from the cabinet, I reach over his nameplate and put the pencil back in line. This is a mistake. I rub my finger against my starched and ironed pants.

"Mr. Grey?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes?"

"You kept scratching your arm after you left yesterday, didn't you?"

I cease my rubbing and look to my forearm. The skin is raw, covered in long surface scrapes from my elbow to my wrist, broken and scabbed in some places and in others, open and pink from tearing off the scabs in the shower. I nod four times.

The man sits, tapping my file on his desk twice and I cannot keep my head from its agitated tilt because I have no file to complete the sequence with.

"Did you see Lacey with an E today?" He asks, sitting down in his big spinning chair that matches the size of his desk which matches the size of his ego.

"There is no such person."

"Yes, there is."

"No. No E."

"I'm afraid that's incorrect. What I told you yesterday is very true. Have you ever seen her name written down?"

"Of course."

"When?"

I know my vacant stare betrays me. I have never seen her name. Had I mistakenly assumed her name was spelled with four letters?

"So you haven't."

"No."

"Then I have to tell you that it is, in fact, five letters."

"I don't believe you."

His lips squeeze tight and he stares at me for a moment before his hair line shoots up and he stands, his chair rolling back into the greenish wall behind him, just missing the filing cabinet.

"Just a moment." He walks to the door, opens it and leans out, leaving a toe on

the carpet to prop it open. He reaches beyond the wall and I cannot see what he is doing.

“Ah, here,” he returns, shutting the door behind him and handing me a photograph, a tiny hole in the top where it had been thumbtacked to the bulletin board outside his office, where all the nice, heart-warming pictures are put on display so visitors can be easily manipulated into thinking this place is safe, happy, inviting.

Just below the pinhole is Lacy.

My heart stings and tightens when I look at her picture. She does not look dirty. She looks immaculate. Miss Lacy stares with no emotion as she usually does unless she is talking to her invisible friends, when she cowers in fear, covers her ears or laughs without reason, but not in this picture. All evidence of her chaotic nature and her poor hygiene is gone. What’s left is the perfect Miss Lacy with no E, her round blue eyes staring at me, her thin blonde hair messy but clean, her plain face and slight figure unmoving. She does not look like the women on the magazines or the billboards outside this facility. She is not beautiful by the standards of those monkeys. She is plain, but perfect.

“Turn it over,” the man says.

I do, and written in the man’s handwriting is her name.

Lacey Radcliff.

Five letters in Lacey. Eight letters in Radcliff. Eight is a multiple of four but eight plus five is thirteen which is one of the most imperfect numbers in existence. It cannot be divided by anything other than itself and one, which is horrendous. The number should not exist but it does and it is embedded into her very existence. By speaking her name, I am speaking the number thirteen which is a dirty, dirty, dirty, dirty word and one I swore I would never utter, never write down, never fill out on thirteen-up or thirteen-down in the crosswords but here it is, the name of this angelic being and I can’t do anything about it.

My throat tightens.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

“So,” the man has an awkward crease above the left corner of his mouth. “What do you feel about Miss Lacey, now?”

I try to think, but any thoughts I have are hiding in the corner of my mind and I cannot make sense of them. I look back to the picture, then back to the man, back to the picture, back to the man and shake my head four times.

“I don’t know what that gesture means, Mr. Grey. You’ll have to use words.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know how you feel?”

“No.”

“Are you still drawn to Miss Lacey with an E, even though her name is no longer perfect?”

“I-“

“You are, aren’t you?” The man leans forward, his eyes wide, his grey-flecked eyebrows pushing far up into his forehead.

I see in his expression that he is fascinated by me. I am a case that he must solve, not a patient he cares about. He is eager to solve the puzzle.

The man catches himself, sits up and laces his dirty fingers together again. “You have feelings for her, but she no longer fits your mold of what is perfect. Am I right?” The last part is forced. He assumes he is right, but must ask me questions, not give me answers. I am onto this routine of his.

“She is dirty.”

“But?”

“My heart hurts.”

“You love her.”

“My heart hurts. I need to shower.”

\*\*\*

“Mr. Grey, you need to calm down.”

I am on my thirty-eighth round of inhales and exhales. Thirty-nine, forty.

STOP.

I smooth my pants against my thighs from my place in the corner of the man’s office.

“Please, sit,” the man gestures to the chair before his desk. He is standing, surely readying himself to jump at me if I decide to scratch my face off or jump out the window, which are both likely. The dust covering the windowsill is the only thing stopping me.

“Please,” he begs again.

I take a step, feeling my sole press into the too-plush carpet, a dirty orange monstrosity. Another step, another and another, the last of which I have to awkwardly stretch my leg to make sure I reach the chair in four. I drop into the chair.

The man sighs, straightens his vest and follows suit, propping his elbows on the table and pressing his lips against his laced fingers. Filthy.

“Alright, Mr. Greyson-”

“GREY!”

“Mr. Grey, let’s try that again. What were you about to say before you lost control?”

I shake my head the usual way.

“Should I ask the question again?”

The fold beneath my eye tenses.

“Do you love Lacey?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love Lacey with an E?”

“I can’t.”

“But they’re the same woman.”

“No.”

He rubs a dirty hand across his forehead, surely thinking of how to best deal with the crazy person in front of him.

But I’m not crazy. At least, he always told me I wasn’t. I checked myself in here. OCD is different than Schizophrenia and delusions and whatever psychopaths have, but they didn’t keep psychopaths here. This place is for the half-crazies who could probably function in society if their families were willing to help, or the recently-diagnosed crazies like Lacy-now-Lacey, who need some medicine and exposure and response therapy, and crazies like me who aren’t really crazy but just can’t let go.

People with my problem often think they’re going crazy, he said the day I checked myself in. I didn’t need to stay, he said. I’m not crazy, he said, but the look in his eyes says differently.

“Here, why don’t we try something,” he opens his desk and takes out the picture of Lacey with an E. He’d kept it there. He reaches across the desk and hands it to me and I take it.

“Do you love the woman in that picture?”

“I think so.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know what love feels like.”

“It’s different than obsession.”

“I’m OCD.”

But what’s wrong with perfection?

“You have OCD. Like I said the other day-“

““That does not mean every bit of your existence is tainted with your disorder. You are still capable of love.”” Yes, I know what he said. Those words have been repeating themselves in my mind ever since. Every time I see Miss Lacy-now-Lacey, every time I go to bed, every time I get in the shower, every time I leave a therapy session, every time I eat, four times each, they play through my mind.

I am capable of love.

But what is love if not obsession and how can I possibly disconnect the two when obsession is what makes me who I am, what rules my life?

“I am obsessed with her.”

“I don’t believe you are. If you were, the obsession would have disappeared when you learned her name had thirteen-“

“NO,” my upper half bends to meet my thighs, and my forearms tense as I dig my nails into the crevices behind my ears.

“-Letters.”

Four, three, two, one.

Three, two, one.

Two, one.

One.

I straighten, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale and pull my fingers away from my skull. There is blood beneath my nails and a sharp stinging behind my ears.

“Sorry. Five letters. Her name has five letters, and if you were obsessed with her, with her name,” he shrugs, I shrug three times, “then you would have ceased to be obsessed once you realized your error. Is this not true?”

“So, so, so, so-“

“So...?”

“I love her?”

“Do you? Do you love Lacey Radcliff?”

“I can’t help it.”

“So you do.”

“I do.”

“Say it.”

“I love Lacey with an E, Radcliff.”

“Yes.”

“But I cannot do anything about it.”

A puff of frustrated air jumps from his mouth. “Why?”

“Because,” inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, “though you say I am capable of love, you are wrong when you say not every part of me is tainted with my disorder. Because even though I love Lacey with an E, Radcliff, I cannot touch her, cannot let her touch me, can barely speak to her because still, even my love is tainted with my disorder, and a love tainted by obsession and the ability to be close to someone is a horrible love to have because all it leads to is pain, pain, pain, pain.”

“But-“

“I need to shower.”

Maggie Marshall

## LESSONS FROM GRADE SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSES

Always start with the readers.

Give them positive comments and busy work.

Teach them MLA style.

Tell them their beloved childhood stories are “immature,”  
especially fiction and fantasy.

Show them “concrete detail, commentary  
commentary, concluding sentence!”

and explain that that’s real writing – real maturity.

Take them to the graves of their childish stories.

Make them read the 12-point, double-spaced, 1-inch margin,  
Times New Roman  
epitaph.

Do not trust them

with their own novels and poetry,

but do give them assurance that attention-getter, bridge, thesis  
is the map to the scholarly pinnacle of this world,

and that grades rival in importance

freedom, expression and creativity.

Remember that, on a Tuesday night twenty years from now

at the kitchen table, a son or daughter will likely ask them for help on an essay.

If your teaching has stuck, they’ll turn from their accounting,

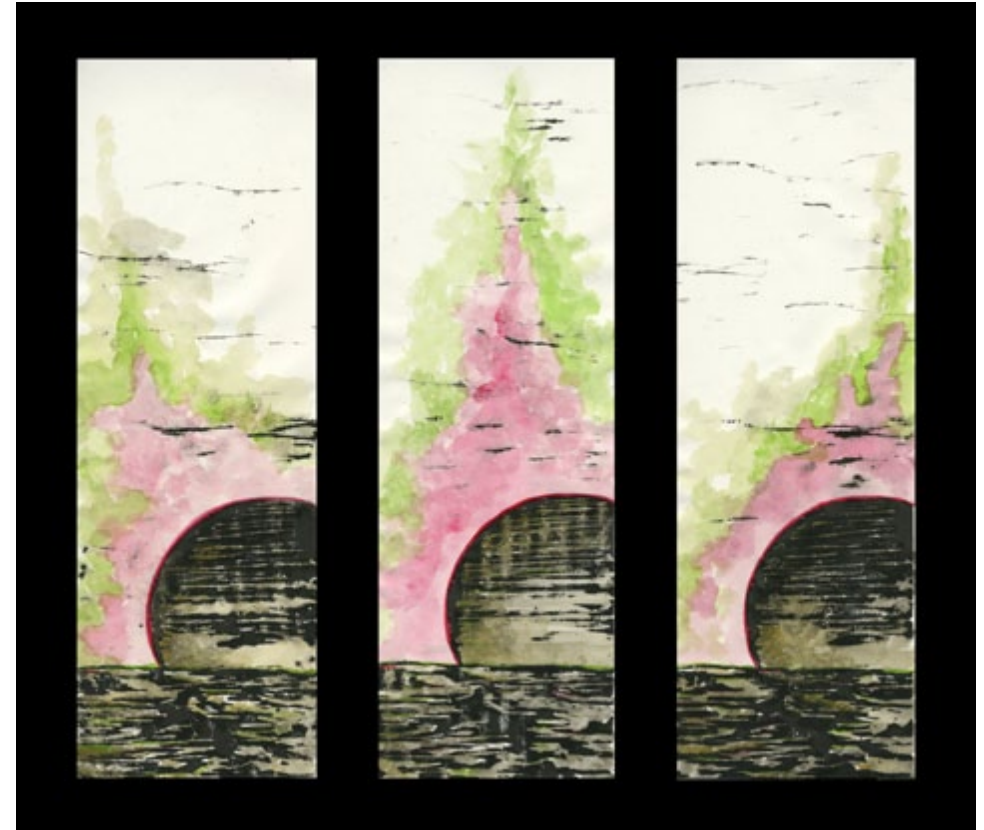
or their cubicle work they had to take home,

and offer automatic 8-sentence-format based critique.

And with that, they will have passed

your final exam.

Zach Carstens



*Obverse Observation*  
Sergio Hernandez



*Occupy Barcelona*  
Maggie McAlister

## PEACH

The slices were tender  
on the roof of my mouth.  
Rough at the center and dripping  
sweet nectar down my chin  
and onto the tile.  
I left your house.  
I tip-toed,  
still barefoot,  
furiously worrying:  
please don't be mad that  
I ate one of the ripest peaches  
in your orchard.  
They were so tempting  
and I was so hungry.  
I was starving.  
I still am.

Lexi French

## PLASTIC STARS

Sometimes, beyond plastic stars  
that glow above the bed,  
he sees a limber frame  
barely supporting sky,  
    so close  
to tumble down here,  
    the stars losing faith and jumping.

He places a palm on the glass pane  
and sees his reflection,  
    wading in enigma,  
the whole wide world sticking out his side.

It did a number on him,  
the phantom in the mirror  
    rippling out  
like a newborn fly swat into a clear pool.

Fostered out of him like psychosis,  
seeing snakes and sullen things creeping,  
    or worse,  
facing the wall for hours with skeleton eyes.

There's nothing to contribute  
to this world of madness,  
dopy messages s a g g i n g  
    like lazy wire  
strung in curves across an angle.

He went so far out,  
    so far  
to discover wind  
only blows squares across your face.

And all he desired was a mountain home with a yard of purslane.

To be lost in the forest, and I don't mean a patch of trees;  
I mean a spread of oaks and hills for miles, with little veins of water  
bubbling down steep ravines.  
He sought solitary wind and moaning cracks cut in rock.

But wandering, searching, squeezing in,  
flashlight dimming as the ceiling bent away,  
he went caving and never looked back,  
and remembered how the cave water echoed  
as it dripped into stillness floating at his feet.

Above-  
    on a hill set against a sky of winking stars-  
square wind sweeps oak leaves swift from the crest.

Eril Ringle





*Please Clarify*  
Erik Ringle

## RIPPED

“Here come the Fatties.”

I glanced past the treadmills at the double door entrance and sure enough, there were four of them. If I had to guess I’d put them in the Mom category. I was sure I’d never seen them before. Each of them wore a (Y)OUR Fitness T-shirt that the gym gave out for free whenever people joined. After swiping her card the wrong way at the front desk, the first mom began walking into the gym like a house cat stepping into the jungle for the first time. Oh, bless their artery-clogged hearts, they’re new.

“Look Emma,” I said, “we got ourselves some newbies.”

“Oh God, it’s like watching a toddler discover the world,” she laughed. “Let’s go over to the mats so we can see this, Nora. It’s three o’clock anyway.”

Three o’clock at our local gym, (Y)OUR Fitness (Let YOUR fitness be OUR fitness!), was amateur hour. There were roughly two categories of people that were three o’clock regulars: Oldies and Moms. Both of them typically fell into the larger, overall category of Fatties, although I usually liked to call them by their subclass name since there were so many of them.

We passed a pair Oldies and were forced to watch them ride stationary bicycles as we started crunches. Watching some old dude try to ride a bicycle as hard as he can for 15 minutes before realizing that he hasn’t turned on the program yet, does wonders for the abs. The trainers got used to Emma and I laughing on the mats long ago, and I’m pretty sure they think we’re telling each other jokes. They don’t even bother asking us to be quiet any more; except for Travis who is constantly shushing us and giving us concerned looks. I think he’s worried that we’re driving away business.

The old lady with glasses looks so pleased with herself as she rides her own giant bicycle. Probably because like so many other Oldies, she has fallen victim to the delusion that riding a bicycle with mild resistance does wonders for you. I mean, it’s technically better than standing still or sitting. But it is the easiest (and laziest) workout machine on the planet. I’ve learned from observation that there are only three machines that Oldies use. Coming in at a close second after the completely useless bike is the treadmill. There were already three of them on treadmills wearing really intense expressions. I’m not sure how they were breaking a sweat as they walked at their normal slow pace on those things, but they did. Then again, the only old people in gyms are the ones whose doctors make them go because of too much chicken fried steak, so it makes sense. The only other machines used by the Oldies are the Stairmasters. It is both agonizing and alarming to watch this in progress. I guess they’ve accepted the fact that if they can’t keep up with the constant stairs they’ll just fall off and die. Either that or they’ll have a heart attack while using it. To this day, I have never seen an Oldie on any other machine other than their sacred trio.



“Hold my feet for sit-ups?”

“Okay.”

“Is your family still annoying you about it?” Emma asked

“What? Oh, kind of.” I said, “Since it’s summer they want to make sure that I ‘stay involved in other things’. I told my mom that I’m volunteering at the library and that shut her up about it.”

“Good,” she said, “because we—oh my God they’re doing the Food Run!”

I looked over and three of the Moms from earlier, with their (Y)OUR Fitness shirts stretched tight across their boobs and pot bellies, had picked ellipticals next to each other in front a TV.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “By the way you have five more.”

“I know,” she said as she quickly finished. “And yes they are. I’m going to go get water and then we’ll switch.”

No less than 10 seconds later she was back from secretly spying on the Moms, grinning like a little kid. I rolled my eyes at her but couldn’t help laughing as I crossed my arms in an X, telling her to keep count for me.

The Food Run was a surprisingly common occurrence. After we gave it a name we started seeing it constantly. It started with a Fatty, usually a Mom or a Mom group. They would start using cardio machines in front of TVs turned to either the Cooking Channel or the Food Network. They’d get on their machines, watching Barefoot Contessa or Rachael Ray fix the perfect food for a dinner party. After about 10 minutes they would get visibly hungry and start running faster on the ellipticals. Around 25 minutes in, they would be working out as hard as any other healthy person without even realizing it. Examining them closely, you could tell that they thought if they ran hard enough, the machine would take them physically forward and they would be able to eat the saffron risotto and taste that pumpkin roulade with ginger buttercream. They were all just like my mom, fascinated with ridiculously expensive and fatty meals. Depending on how desperate their faces and their runs were, after they left we would play the game How Many Minutes ‘Til Cheesecake? It’s pretty self-explanatory, but we would try to guess how many minutes into their drive home it would be before they stopped and bought some disgusting dessert.

I stopped laughing when I noticed the fourth Mom working out one elliptical away from the others. Unlike the rest, she wasn’t staring at the TV with a bright-eyed hungry stare. She was listening to ear buds and was already running in a rhythm.

“Look at her,” I gasped to Emma as I came up, “she—“

“You’re almost done,” she interrupted. “Remember we need 100 real sit-ups, no cheating.”

I looked over at the Mom as I quickly finished. She was still going at it, full speed, her dark ponytail bouncing as she ran. Eventually, she could be like the Hot Moms during rush hour if she worked hard enough.

“What were you saying again?” Emma asked over at the leg machines a few minutes later.

“That Mom over by the others.” I said. “Look at her, she won’t be coming here at three o’clock for long.”

Emma set her gaze on the dark-haired Mom with a straight face before bursting into laughter. “Seriously Nora? That fatty? She’s definitely with the rest of them.”

“But she seems so committed right now.”

“Exactly. Right now. I’ll tell you what’s happening right now. She just got a membership to finally lose all that baby weight she’s been carrying around. She’ll come here a few times before she realizes that hiring a sitter is a pain. Then she’ll go back to raising those chubby carbon copies of herself. Because remember,” she raised her eyebrows at me, “YOUR fitness is OUR fitness.”

She was right, I thought, as we moved on from legs to arms. We saw it time and time again. The ones who started working out just because they saw the movie Supersize Me and got scared. People like that join a gym thinking that their effort to get their fat butts off the couch is enough. Some of them were even regulars, running on the treadmill for 30 minutes, but then going home and eating junk for hours afterward. There was no hope for the fatties, the three o’clocks. And to think any other way was stupid.

“Nora?”

“What?” I asked. Emma nodded toward the double doors closing slowly. “Oh, um... 30 I guess.”

“30?” Emma smirked. I give them 12.”

\*\*\*

“Here come the Workaholics.”

“Is it six already? Grab two machines!”

We weaved through the abdominal machines and dashed to the ellipticals. Soon we would be surrounded and every machine taken.

“Thank God,” Emma said loudly as she fiddled with her resistance settings. “I was not about to be stuck with the one that squeaks every time my left foot moves.”

We had pretty good seats tonight, considering the chaos that always came with the Workaholics. Just like the Fatties, they were a general class of people, but more complex. Over half of them were normal people who worked out after their jobs, and I couldn’t care less about them. It was finding the select few, the extraordinary subclasses, that made it worthwhile. Most afternoons, the Fatties never use any machines other than cardio, so we move around, while watching them. The Workaholics are much different. They’re everywhere since there’s so many of them. But the best seats in the house are always the ellipticals in the center of the gym.

“He’s not here yet, is he?” I asked about our new favorite.

“Nah,” she said, glancing around, “but I already see a Fashionista doing arms.”  
 “Nice,” I said, craning my neck to peek around the bicycles. The Fashionistas had an age range from about high school to 35 years old. This one looked like a senior in high school, about our age, wearing a bright blue racerback tank with grey yoga pants. Her short blonde hair was in a ponytail behind a pink headband. Fashionistas were interesting, partly because of how bright their clothes were, but mostly because of the way they acted. After every set they did, they would look from side to side to see if anyone was watching them, and then fix their ponytail. Every. Single. Set. I always thought that they must be disappointed that there was only one mirror covering a wall in (Y)OUR Fitness.

“There are Hot Moms everywhere tonight,” I said. “What’s the deal?”

“Maybe because it’s Thursday and they’re trying to look good for the weekend.” Emma said. “I just don’t get how they can work out so fast and be done in like half an hour. I mean, geez. I know they have kids to go home to but how can they tone—”

“Zombie!” I practically yelled, causing some Hot Moms in the vicinity to give me a disapproving glare. The one on my right looked me up and down in disgust. “There’s one over there on a legs machine!”

“Whoa,” she said. “How long has it been since we saw one?”

“Not sure,” I said as I stared at the guy to see if he would break eye contact with the TV. “It’s been at least a month.” The man shifted but stayed glued to the baseball game on the screen. Occasionally, we’d call Zombie then discover it was only just a temporary one; a guy who just wanted to check the weather or the score of a game. But this one looked like the real deal. Emma and I had decided a while ago that to be a true Zombie, someone had to ask them to move so they could use the machine the Zombie was sitting on. It wouldn’t be long now. Already a normal workout guy was jealously eyeing the machine from a few feet away.

“I don’t think he’s going to show.” I said.

“Damn,” Emma said, thoroughly disgruntled. “He made my day the other night. I can’t believe we’d never noticed him before! I’m just so sick—” she took a swig of water—“of the usual Workaholics down there. Especially the Pretty Boys.”

I scanned the crowd of guys lifting weights, spotting several already and feeling disappointed. The Pretty Boys were similar to the Fashionistas, except they were even more narcissistic. They would just stand in front of the mirror wall, lifting weights while making love to themselves with their own eyes. It was pretty hilarious, since at any given time there were at least three Pretty Boys working out during the six o’clock rush. Also, there were the less common Roid Guys. I’ve only ever seen a few, but they usually come during the rush. They’re the real ripped types who look like they’re body builders taking steroids. All I know is that they scare the crap out of me with their giant bodies.

We thought we had the Workaholics split up into their appropriate categories until Tuesday. After I pointed him out, he had Emma and I transfixed. We decided to dub him Roid Boy, fascinated by the fact that we found someone we couldn’t quite classify.

He was big and muscle-y, like the other Roid Guys. But he didn’t just stand there beefing himself up like the others. He came out of the men’s locker room, got some weights from the rack, and then set them down. Then he walked around talking to a couple of guys before going back and putting up the weights he never used. Then he got different weights, did the same thing with them, and then had half a dozen conversations. Emma and I watched with fascination as we saw Roid Boy do zero weight lifting in the span of 45 minutes.

“He probably only comes here on Tuesdays. He probably goes to a different one to actually work out.” I said.

“Guess so. But I think I just found someone to lift our spirits.” Emma said as she nodded toward a girl entering the double doors. “Can you believe it? She’s probably only in her twenties but my God, look at those love handles. She’s like a pre-mom. We could make a new Fatties category just for her! Nora, what’s up?”

“I—” the girl started moving toward the locker room, pulling out her phone. “Sorry I have to pee real fast.”

“But all your minutes on the machine will be erased...”

“It’s okay, I’ll start over. Just keep it saved for me.” I walked in what I hoped was a casual way, toward the room marked Ladies as quickly as I could.

I went straight to the lockers section: all empty. I spun around and caught her heading out of the sink area.

“What are you doing here Anna?” I demanded.

“Nora!” After hugging me she held me away at arms length looking me up and down.

“Stop it.” I said, pushing her arms away. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a dentist appointment this morning so I couldn’t work out at my regular time.” Anna said. “Listen Mom’s been calling me a lot about you lately and—”

“Mom’s just paranoid, you know how she is.” I said.

“Yeah, I know she can be. Listen, let’s just go out for dinner and talk about some stuff.” She made the move to walk out of the locker room before I yanked her back.

“No! She can’t s— I don’t think we need to go. Let’s... let’s just talk in here and then I need to finish my workout.”

“Fine then, in here,” she sighed, leading me toward the sink area. “I went to the library today Nora and you were supposed to be there. You were here weren’t you? Listen, I also talked to Travis, that one trainer. He said that you’re here every single day. I think you might need to ease off. You know, maybe not come in on the weekends or something.”

She didn’t get it, any of it. She wouldn’t understand the way we made things fun. She never noticed all those people I was trying to avoid becoming.

“It’s my schedule,” I argued, “my routine is the only thing that keeps me sane.”

“No Nora,” she gently took me by the shoulders and turned me around to face

the mirror, “this is what your routine is doing to you.”

I looked in the mirror. I saw me. Normal me. Anna’s pudgy fingers were on my shoulders, and her body took up most of the mirror. Her face creased with worry looked a little funny with the hint of her double chin. Glancing down I could see that Emma was right: her love handles were huge.

Rebecca Voran



*Ramble*  
Sergio Hernandez

## RUNNING FROM WOLVES

she pierces her ears with studded holes  
after another soiled trenchcoat slithers out at sunrise  
she likes the feeling of being filled  
and every gap deserves a gem

she slaps black lacquer  
on the windows of her fingers  
she can't bear a room with a view  
and open doors only let the cold in

she sews her lips together as she chews  
and never flashes white with a smile  
she's heard chewing reveals secrets  
and she wouldn't dare drop them with her fork

she peers from behind her blonde curtain  
and protects the pearl of her eyes  
curtains erase the windows of her room  
and she knows pearls are underpriced

her skin is white brick  
and she slathers the mortar on like batter  
she knows what becomes of houses made of straw  
so until the sun turns black she labors and plasters, brick by brick.

Brandy Rains



*River Road*  
Lauren Noack



*Sandy*  
Lauren Noack

## SLITHERING

on stone  
up the thick black rock  
of the bank of the lake  
the venomous ones

do as they please. At night  
children dream and feel the coiling  
around every nook of their legs  
squeezing until the veins run dry

they are creatures to be feared  
but I greeted them as friends  
in the doorway of girlhood  
I held tea parties in Mom's garden

snake scales and dead azaleas  
my only company. I tossed them  
on twigs in the backyard with my brother  
as we watched them flop and fall

for our Saturday entertainment.  
Their beady eyes remind  
me that I, too, was raised in the dirt  
our scales and skin

alike. Invisible shackles  
bind them to the muck of the earth  
always moving, searching  
for something, these gypsy reptiles.

Brandy Rains

## SOAP II

I smell of Irish Spring soap tonight.  
 For years, I would smell that green,  
 marbled bar of solidified suds  
 in secrecy, ashamed of missing you  
 and embarrassed of the way something  
 as singular as the scent of fresh  
 pine, musk, and peppermint  
 all combined into a malleable brick  
 could affect me.  
 I wrote poems about that fragrance.  
 I stole boxes of your soap from houses  
 where I found it under the sink  
 because I was too afraid to  
 buy it myself because  
 that would make me crazy...  
 So I stole a box away, in my purse,  
 and hid it under my own bathroom sink  
 for a year or two, maybe more.  
 Tonight, I bathed in an unfamiliar tub,  
 and used a bar of green, marbled soap  
 that wasn't mine and it wasn't yours.  
 I rubbed it all over every curve of my body,  
 and cupped it in my hands near my face,  
 intoxicated by the scent as it mingled with  
 the waves of steam in the air.  
 The perfume seeped into my skin  
 and consumed me.  
 I left the bathroom, but it followed me  
 to the bed.  
 Now, I am lying here in crimson sheets  
 with someone I love,  
 and we both smell like you.  
 We are breathing in and out,  
 inhaling that unctuous scent,  
 and exhaling whispers of  
 a love lost,

which now join the collection  
 of other similar, inconsequential breaths  
 released into the universe.

Lexi French

## SOUR

One afternoon in July, when the torrid air left everyone feeling weighed down, Grandmother died, alone, in a pool of her own blood on a soft blacktop road.

She was driving to town to visit the nice liquor store that also sells meats, cheeses, and chocolates and had decided to take the detour that cuts behind a dead field of corn because she could speed on that road—cops weren't keen on it yet. I imagine she was pleased when she found the dusty shortcut recently repaved with a new matte black dressing, and, because she was drunk, I imagine she said something ugly to the effect of, Hell yes, you're goddamn right this road is repaved. Just for me! The world spun around her when she was sloshed. The flaming sun in the dry sky kept the new blacktop soft, and the asphalt covering an improperly filled pothole had dipped back into its concave bowl. When Grandmother hit the pothole, the police think she was driving somewhere around ninety miles per hour.

A pothole like this 'un wouldn't cause a wreck like that one, there, 'less she been speedin' pretty bad. The policeman on duty was chubby, polite, and acquainted with the bitch. She was known for hurtling recklessly through town, among other things.

Some truck driver found Grandmother a few hours after her soul had flown, and, apparently, the stink had already set in. I imagine her blood actually boiling on the blacktop, and the thought makes me giggle because she would always pick fights with my mom at the holidays. You know I like to get my blood boilin', Margaret. I don't mean any harm, she'd say after she had caused enough damage.

Her sea-foam green Jaguar with tires worn thin had flipped one, two, three times and landed in the corn field thirty feet from the road, right side up. A perfect ten, Grandmother might've said, as she did when something was unexpectedly nice. Because she was drunk, and because she was reckless, and because she was irresponsible, but mostly because she was drunk, Grandmother hadn't been wearing her seatbelt and launched through the windshield. She landed seventy feet away from the pothole in a contortionist's pose, legs perfectly split with her torso twisted all the way around at the waist. Her bony arms were pinned under her torso, crossed in the same way she used to stand, drunk and furious, at holiday gatherings. It was hard for the police to tell whether she was fatally wounded when she launched through the windshield, shards of glass ripping her mid-section open, or if she died when the back of her head smashed and shattered on the concrete, spilling the sour contents of her skull onto the fresh, new blacktop. It doesn't matter what exactly killed her, really, it just matters that she's dead.

Emily Moses

## STAINS

smudges of coffee shrug  
smugly on the outskirts  
of once-white shirts and cherished  
pages of favorite books

tablecloths, tainted by the tart  
cranberry sauce of a festive feast  
last November, now shrink  
in junk drawers under kitchen counters  
where they take no advantage of their claim to fame

the brilliant stain that brings us shame  
a testament to our gluttony  
worn into clothes and into homes

we scrub and scratch and bleach  
and patch away the mementos  
of our mishaps

but I relish the richness  
in remnants that grip the fibers  
of favorite moments  
and won't let me forget  
the unrelenting vibrance  
of all that I have indulged

Emily Eastman



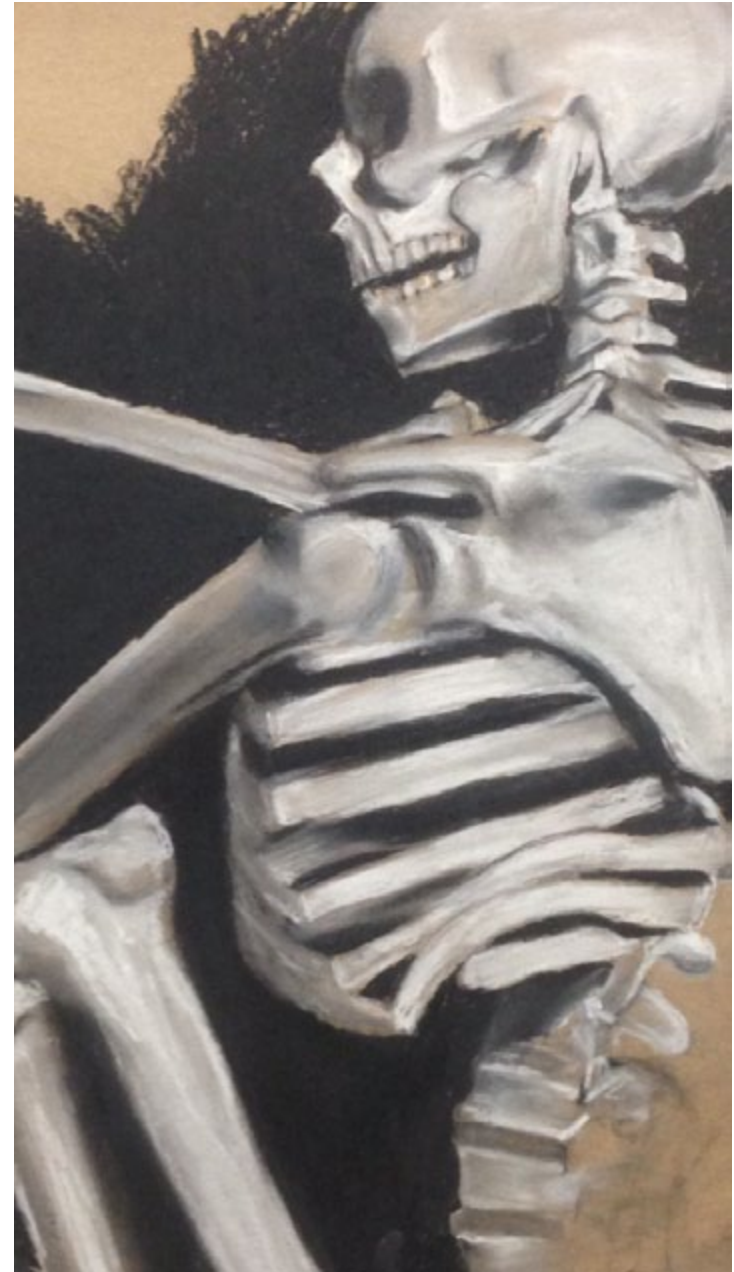
## STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Post-wedding lethargy like a dense fog over the courtyard  
 The guests' muffled voices piercing through matrimonial gray to reach us  
 in snatches like glaring sunbeams.  
 Thousands of dollars of flowers  
 and decorations cheering up the walls will be gone by tomorrow.

This is when our magic spreads its warm colors –  
 violin, violin, viola, cello – with every note, every chord,  
 every swelling crescendo and resolving dissonance,  
 we cleanse the post-wedding cocktail hour with our glow.  
 The beauty of music, breathing together, fingers flying and vibrating,  
 notes springing into life,  
 notes singing in runs and triads and accidentals  
 about warm and attainable gardens and about starlight dances.

A hand grabs my music stand; there's a swirling glass in another nearby,  
 "Y'all know any Led Zeppelin?"  
 Our music has slowed and quieted, what can we say?  
 Of course not?  
 How dare you?  
 He is shouldered out of the way by the bride's flustered mother –  
 who apologizes and offers us our check.  
 We've stopped playing, we raise our instruments to resume,  
 the distracted intruders having moved on.  
 We play on, they talk on and laugh on,  
 and our magic conjures visions  
 of harmonious, rainbow constellations that sweep the courtyard  
 while the flowers wilt around us in the afternoon sun.

Zach Carstens



*Skeleton IV*  
 Matt Varner



## TWO

Their words struggled,  
 hoisting their weight through the repetitive  
 reintroduction of lips,  
 Clattering to the floor  
 in broken heaps

One lingering kiss,  
 long,  
 sweetly interrupted

Until, the subduing silence  
 of heavy breath  
 spreads its spindles  
 spider-like across the room

Cutting through the smoke of cigarettes  
 that smells of saturdays  
 Climbing over the bitter blood  
 of bitten lips  
 Settling between pulsing hips

Cutting through immobile night  
 cutting through regret

Emily Eastman

## THE VILLAGE

you led me by the hand to  
 the eighth or ninth or twenty-sixth floor  
 of your dorm building, I can't recall which.  
 the door to your RA's vacant room  
 for the summer was locked,  
 so you opened it with  
 your parents credit card.  
 the room was stale.  
 black sewage water clogged  
 the toilet, sink, and tub.  
 grime clung to the window panes.  
 the building across from us stared.  
 you kissed me urgently  
 as you pulled me onto a bare mattress  
 on the floor, which was  
 awkwardly crammed into the closet  
 because of its lack of windows.  
 the jean shorts that I accidentally dyed pink  
 had so many buttons.  
 when you had undone all of them  
 you looked at me  
 and then at what I had done to myself  
 (the tattoo, the navel piercing)  
 and then back at me  
 and said,  
 "You're so bohemian,"  
 in the most admirable way  
 that I never wanted to be ordinary again

Lexi French

## VIRGIN, *excerpt*

I have been waking up in the middle of the night, tears gluing my closed eyelids together, regularly now. But tonight I awaken sitting straight up, clutching my stomach with dry eyes. The cramping started almost exactly when the doctor at the free clinic told me it would, two days ago, and that is when the natural abortion began. The euphemism is miscarriage, but my body is aborting the foreign object, so I call it what it is. The doctor also told me I needed to go to the Emergency Room and have a Dilation and Curettage because my body wasn't supposed to house foreign objects the way it had been, but I told her I wasn't going to do that. "I have classes to go to," I told her. She warned me that a natural abortion would be painful and she apologized for not having medicine to give me and she hugged me on my way out and she called me yesterday and she left a voicemail when I didn't answer and she told me she hopes I am okay and that if I need anything I can call her back. I won't ever call her back.

My stomach feels heavy; my head is hazy. Throwing damp sheets from my sweaty legs I untangle myself from my bed and stumble to my bathroom. My pajama pants are sticky and have applied themselves to my shaking legs. I peel the flannel shorts downward and think, Off, I need everything off.

The dropping feeling in my core begins with a sharp pain under my belly button and I can hear splashing as my body empties itself into the toilet that used to be clean. My roommate's bedroom is three feet away, sharing the wall I am facing in my bathroom, so I stuff the cream hand towel hanging to my left into my mouth and scream as my heart shatters. Everything in my body, my soul, is leaving in a rush. I am lightheaded, empty, terrified.

The searing pain sends heavy drops of saltwater from my eyes, streaming in thick pathways and soaking my face, my shirt, my knees, my bathroom floor. My darkest, dearest secret is resolving itself; my body is freeing me from the consequences of reckless love. This terrible hatred, this terrible love is pouring from me as my body cleanses itself.

Another slosh, another dizzying drop of flesh, blood, warmth, and matter exits my body and I am cavernous, deserted. I hunch over, chest to knees, and clutch my belly under my shirt, raking red lines across my tightening tummy in rhythm with the pulsing of my body. With every contraction in my core, fresh tears stream for a thousand different things: the baby I will never meet, the babies I will meet, the pain ripping through my body, the shriveled and dry remains of my heart, the enormity of the secret I have kept, the shadow this secret will cast on every day after today.

I think again of how the birth of my first child should be. A chubby pink baby with dark blue eyes and tufts of feathered hair sticking every which way whimpers as it adjusts to the harsh light outside my womb. The baby would look at me and coo, and although I know its vision isn't developed enough to recognize me yet, an iron bond would

fuse our hearts together. I would rest awhile as the nurses clean the baby and a few days later I would take the baby home. I am allowed to love this baby. I am allowed to keep this baby.

The acute pains in the depths of my body have subsided into aching waves and I remember the doctor said the bleeding could last a few days, or even a few weeks. I crawl to the shower across the cold tile floor and notice I am leaving a crimson trail, but have spent too much emotion to worry about filth in this moment. I stand on my knees as scalding water washes my body, surging onto my pale chest and tinting my raw skin magenta. Blood rushes from between my legs and pools around the drain and I sob quietly, worried about waking one of my roommates. I mourn everything.

Finally, I muster the courage to leave the bathroom. If only I could fly away. Instead, I wrap myself in a scratchy towel and tiptoe back into the real world. Leaving, I never want to return to that pink bathroom. Fifteen flushes of the toilet couldn't erase the involuntary murder, the palpable death of my unborn child, but I am past taking interest in cleanliness. Nobody else uses my bathroom; my secret is safe. I can deal with this when I am ready, or I can fly away. I pull on a pair of unsexy underwear and find an old t-shirt to try to sleep in.

Eyeing my bed-nest, I am wary. I trusted the safety and warmth of that bed, yet that is where this all began. I had nightmares in that bed. I lost my baby in that bed. Another contraction in my stomach doubles me over in pain. Why, why isn't this over?

I focus. I fixate on the left-to-right grain of the hardwood floor beneath me. My eyes follow back and forth across the wood until the grains are under my claws. My claws?

Oh, finally.

The soft texture of the flesh on my feet has been replaced with something rougher, more tough, and my toes are spread wide. Straightening, I feel the flesh on my arms, my stomach, my torso pucker and, with infinite satisfying releases of internal pressure, white feathers surface and cover my body. Beak gaping, I marvel at the revelation that is this perfect transformation. The purity of my plumage is beautiful.

Finally.

A flushed sunrise streaked with the deep indigo of the lingering night greets me as I move to my windowsill. Instead of muted padding, I hear sharp clicking as I cross my bedroom. My feathers bristle at the biting breeze as I push the paned window open, but when I hop onto the threshold there is no doubt in my mind of what I want. No hesitation.

A dream couldn't be better than this.

A small jump, the flutter of virgin wings, and I fly away, away, away.



*Transient*  
Matt Varner

## WHEN YOU SEE ME

do strands of soldiers  
march down your arm  
filing into rank  
over freckles, over scars,

stiffening straight and poised,  
prepared for battle  
when the ground shudders

beneath their feet  
from under the follicles  
of your hair?

Emily Eastman

## WOMEN AREN'T THE ONLY BASHFUL ONES

he wraps himself in the thin white sheets  
as if I've never seen him bare before  
as if I've never seen the freckle on his hip  
the hair streaming  
from the dip in his chest  
the mole that hides in the depths  
of his bellybutton

as if I've never discovered  
that his skin is the softest  
in the southern crevice of his spine  
or that the hair marching  
up his shin disappears  
when it reaches his thighs

go then, I tell him.  
unwrap yourself from your cocoon  
and let me see you again  
let me feel with my fingers  
what my eyes have memorized

Brandy Rains



*When Elegance Echoes*  
Sergio Hernandez

## 1909 ABILENE WAY MCKINNEY, TX 75070

The airy popping of bubble wrap and the muted ripping of newspaper has comprised the soundtrack for our home in the last week and my silver boom box has been packed for a few days, so the Backstreet Boys haven't had the chance to sing comfort into my small lemon bedroom. Gently placing important knick knacks and tacky-backed pictures and colored paperclips and rogue buttons and secret encoded notes and a pink shoe lace and three blue berries from the bush in my best friend's front yard across the street into the last brown cardboard box, I finally finish packing the last of myself away.

2003

Our dark green 2001 Chevrolet Suburban slowly drags to a halt in front of the house. The new house. The overworked air conditioning system in the car spits and whistles as Daddy turns the key counterclockwise to relieve the poor vehicle of its exertion. We sit in dense silence: Momma, Daddy, Sister, Brother, me. The moving truck idles in our driveway, dripping dark oil on the white-grey concrete slowly, drip, drop, drip. Finally Momma reaches for the door handle, grips it with purpose, and after a moment of hesitation she pulls and opens her door, inviting the sultry heat into our artificially cooled sanctuary.

We pile out of the car in practiced fashion and stand, dubious, in front of the mountainous house. It looks nothing like our old house. Our old house has the most perpetually beautiful Bradford Pear tree I have ever seen, deeply rooted directly in front of the bay window I sat next to in order to catch afternoon light every day the summer I learned how to read. The decades old tree was my favorite calendar, blooming crisp white in the spring, waving perfect green flags through the summer, and finally donning a red and orange knit blanket in autumn that falls to the manicured lawn in the winter. The new house, the Abilene Way house, sits on a small hill with a bare yard yellowed by the August heat. The only tree in the yard is skinny, malnourished, and naked. I hate it. I won't be able to climb into the mystery of this tree like I could climb into my old Bradford Pear.

We choose to consecrate our spaces in different ways as the moving men stumble into the house, pioneering the space and dropping our furniture impetuously in the empty rooms.

Momma is in the bare flowerbeds planting vibrant pink rosebushes, trailing sweet potato vine, blooming white crepe myrtle shrubs, and conservatively blushing petunias, splashing bright personality onto the blank canvas that is our brand new home. The soil between her fingers feels good, she tells me. I imagine what she means is the deepening of

roots feels good. We have been living virtually homeless for the past two months, rushing across the Metroplex between the homes of relatives stuffed to the brim with love and conflict, and dingy motels too cheap to offer an ounce of clean smelling shampoo. Yeah, I think she likes the roots, the genesis of it all.

Daddy is on top of the roof. The minute the moving men pulled his tall ladder out of the truck Daddy propped it on the broad backside of the house and climbed tentatively upward. With a mathematician's exactness he plans how he will adorn our home with twinkling lights in a few months, surveying the sharp angles and deep inclines. The dangerous height of our new two-story roof is of no concern to him, and the very fact he now owns a home with a treacherously tall roof is enough to make his pride swell. He is standing up there, hands on his hips and feet shoulder-width apart, soaking in the liquid orange sunset and the hubris of a Greek hero. My Hercules.

Sister is using blue sticky tack to decorate every inch of her bedroom walls with garish crayon masterpieces, drawn with love by the third grade classmates she left behind. She already has so many friends, and never has any trouble making more; a trip to the park typically yields half a dozen faithful new comrades. She is humming an untroubled Disney tune as she prettifies the room, and she hasn't yet thought to complain about the discarded playmates miles behind us.

Brother is hitting baseballs off a clunky black tee in the backyard, chasing after each one with the same intensity and focus he would if he were playing in an actual game. At six years old there are still a lot of things he deems worthy of fear, and this move that has managed to shatter his kindergarten world is still a constant source of anxiety. But with a bat and ball in his hands it is easy for him to feel content. They say kids bounce back quickly.

I have chosen a different way to approach my designated hallowed ground.

I lay on my floor feeling like the skinniest beached starfish there ever was. The new sandy brown carpet scratches the back of my legs and I am wishing it were real sand. The freshly painted white ceiling fan whirs above, baptizing me with cool air. I stare at the ceiling, allowing my eyes to trek across the unfamiliar expanse. I am putting myself in a trance, exploring the clay colored dimples in the freshly spread texture. Eventually I fall asleep and dream of the private best friend club I left behind, of the perfect shade of light yellow my bedroom walls used to be painted, of the Bradford Pear tree in our old front yard.

2005

I am Daddy's girl. Daddy comes to all my games, rubs my sore shoulders after I practice for hours, and provides more supporting encouragement than all the Olympic moms combined. He is the one who encouraged me to play baseball with the boys when I was four. He is the one who coached all my volleyball, basketball, and softball teams growing up. He is the one who brought me to the Ballpark in Arlington to watch Pudge

(Fudge, as I called him) Rodriguez and, later, Gabe the Babe Kapler play, fingering wispy cotton candy until it has completely melted, sickly sweet on my tongue. It is no surprise, then, that as the hot summer sun sends cascading shadows through the slats in our backyard fence, that Daddy is the one inviting me to enjoy strawberries and sweet tea in our fan-blown game room to watch summer baseball on the television.

Our ritual is simple. Every night after dinner I climb the carpeted stairs and busy myself with whatever Mary Higgins Clark mystery novel I can find, lounging on my orange comforter with a fat and full belly. I eventually hear Daddy's heavy footsteps ascending the stairs, clomp, stomp, clomp, and I know it is time to lazily roll off my bed, carefully stick my lucky green bookmark between the pages of my book, and meander into the game room.

The prickly static of our old model television coming alive is contagious; my tummy buzzes as we settle into our favorite routine. I flop lengthwise onto the loveseat, my gangly legs aslant, too long for the furniture, and Daddy props his feet on the ottoman a few feet away. My sweet tea sweats next to his, sans coaster, on Momma's brown antique table; two imperfect, side by side circles are permanently stained into the history of the furniture.

2007

Curtis turns right onto Eldorado. My palms are sweating. If he grabs my hand he will definitely notice. I can't just wipe them on my jeans because he will see me do it; I know he will see and I will never have my first kiss. I don't know what to do.

Curtis turns right onto Orchid. My pulse increases. What is he going to do when we get to my house? This is my first date. Ever. I don't know what to do.

Curtis turns left onto Maverick. The windshield wipers on his old blue truck are working hard, making too much noise, and saving me from the pain of trying to make conversation with someone I adore. I don't know what to do.

Curtis turns right onto Cockrill. Surely I will pass out in the next thirty seconds before he pulls into my driveway. God, if you're up there, please just let me faint. I don't know what to do.

Curtis turns left onto Abilene Way and almost immediately he turns right, into my driveway. Our heads bob like cheap toys at the ballpark as he works his way over the rogue bit of curb that has sneaked its way too far inward.

We sit.

"I had a nice time, Curtis. Thanks for dinner. I'll see you in a few days at church?" I am fumbling for the door handle, lucky the words that are coming out of my mouth are audible. "You don't have to walk me to the door because it is raining. I promise." But before I even have the words out of my mouth, Curtis is out of the truck, walking around to my side.

I am blushing bright red, but I know he can't see anything because the porch

light in front of the house has been out for weeks. I will have to thank Daddy for forgetting, later. Curtis does reach for my hand, but by now the pattering rain has drenched both of us so the intertwining of our fingers is doubly slippery.

We walk slowly up the steps leading to my front porch, and I notice he is hanging back slightly, one step behind me. I turn around to see if something is wrong and he catches my cheek with his large, calloused palm. I am standing on a short step, and the extra six inches allow me to see Curtis at eye-level. A thousand raindrops fall between us before he speaks and, despite the intelligence I find so attractive in him, he stutters, "Hey um, Emily, can I kiss you, maybe? If you'd like?"

I don't remember saying yes, but I do remember the way his thick curly hair was limp, plastered in clumps to his face in the downpour, the soft, slick way his mouth grazed mine ever so briefly, the dizzy sweetness of my first kiss.

My eyes are still closed, for I do not want the enchantment of this moment to ever end, so I press my forehead into his shoulder, absorbing every raindrop memory I can amass. I turn my head to face the front door he intends to deliver me safely to and, to my complete and utter horror, see Sister peeking through Momma's white plantation shutters, wide-eyed and mouth gaping. We make eye contact and she clamors off, escaping into the depths of our home, probably racing to find Momma and Daddy to share the news. Leave it to Sister to ruin the best moment of my life.

The pleasant butterflies that have been dancing sweet, joyful choreography through my body turn immediately into flapping insects crashing into the walls of my being, demanding to escape. My stomach drops and I catch my breath; the humiliation I feel is devastating, debilitating. I can never approach the dark cherry door, let alone pass through into the air-conditioned fold of darkness where my family most likely awaits me, craving details of my evening.

"Emily, it's close to my curfew and I'd love to stay here longer, but if I don't make it home in time I won't be allowed to take you on another date next weekend." Curtis winks at me, but all I can do is manage a grin that likely looks more like a grimace. He kisses my cheek, but the rain washes it away immediately. I step up onto the porch and watch as Curtis half-jogs to his truck, shakes the rain out of his hair before climbing in, and backs into the street, this time avoiding the inconvenient bit of curb. I wave as he drives off, but through the raindrops I cannot tell if he can see me.

I inhale; I collect all the wet, fresh air I can possibly contain in my lungs and hold it for a long moment. Before exhaling, I let myself get a little light headed, feeling the excited tingle on my skin that is about to be ruined when I have to share this sweetly innocent secret with my family. I grasp the silver handle, push downward on the lever with my thumb, and put my weight against the cherry door.

Inside, the cool air cuts straight to my bones. Soaking wet, I slosh upstairs to change clothes. I am five steps away from the top of the staircase, then six steps from the landing to my bedroom, where, finally, I will be safe in my sanctuary.

“Em? Dewdrop? Is that you? How was your date?” Daddy calls up the stairs. I freeze. Do I want to share this? I can hear Sister fumbling around in her room and I realize my secret has found refuge in the depths of our sisterhood.

“Yeah, Daddy, it’s me. I am home, and the date was fun. I ate a burrito. I will see you in the morning!” I whisper down, hoping my answer will be sufficient. I can feel a small chasm edge its way between us as I hold the secret closer to my heart and further from my father.

I climb the last five steps to the landing, but instead of walking six steps to my bedroom door I walk four in the other direction and peek into Sister’s room.

2009

Bright white lights line the roof of our house, aligned flawlessly and secured with globs of hot glue. A luscious green wreath hangs on our sturdy front door, visibly welcoming anyone passing along the street. Three wooden gingerbread children stand, hand in hand, at the apex of the small hill our house sits on. The girl on the far left is wearing a red bow, representing Sister, Brother is the little boy in the middle, and my gingerbread kid is wearing a green bow on her cookie head.

The familiarity of the Christmas holidays is comfortable, easily masking the existing tensions that make non-holiday interactions with our extended family so unbearable. At Christmas we can settle into ourselves, sip on a warm drink and let all be merry and bright. My mother’s family is coming over tonight and, for the first time in a long time, I am actually excited to see everybody.

Sister, Brother, and I have been scrubbing the house all day. Daddy threw my bedroom door open this morning before eight o’clock, tore the white duvet cover away from my bed-nest, and bellowed “Zip-a-dee-doo-dah” through the upstairs, upsetting my sweet slumber in good nature. Sister sneezes, again and again, as she dusts the Venetian blinds in the living room for the first time since last Christmas. We giggle, as if her achooing is a secret joke, but really we are just trying to carve out some fun in this dismal morning routine. We do this every year, and, even though we moan and carp when Momma hands out our assignments, we know it is possible to have fun in the process of cleansing our home.

When the house is finally sanitized to Momma’s standards, the three of us bound up the stairs, pushing and tripping, laughing and wheezing, trying to be the first to the shower. Hot water doesn’t last forever, you know.

Gramma, Poppa, Grandfather George, pregnant Aunt Jocey, Uncle Ruben, Uncle Adam, Aunt Amy, Uncle Denny, Uncle Mike, Skyler, Evan, Ian, baby Evelyn, baby Vivian Elizabeth, and seven dogs show up half an hour late and, to Momma’s dismay, mostly without the side dishes they promised to bring. Gramma has held up her end of the Christmas bargain like always, and places her signature dish on the counter, attracting us like bees to sugar. Gramma’s Famous Corn is the best version of a vegetable I have

ever consumed, soaked in enough butter and salt to mask any semblance of nutrition.

The warmth of everyone’s happiness is smothering in a nice kind of way, and the clinking of forks and knives on Momma’s white china plates is my new favorite Christmas song. We sit at the table long after the food is gone, gluttonous victors with our pants unbuttoned, before Gramma mentions she brought her new karaoke machine.

Oh.

Karaoke.

And just like that, the magic of the holidays disappears. The awkward family ritual of listening to each other sing halfhearted Top 100 hits from years past looms ahead, a vacuum that sucks all the felicity out of Momma’s red dining room. We eventually migrate to the glowing living room where Poppa Dennis has already set up the shiny new machine, the black monster with a sick blue face. Each of us dutifully takes our assigned seats on the plush, plaid couches and wait for the show to begin.

The only two people who enjoy singing karaoke in this family are my aunt Jocey and Poppa Dennis. They would perform for us, belting power ballads and crooning sorrowful country tunes for hours, if we allowed it. Everyone else gets bullied into participating, and suffers through the heckling demands for a more passionate performance. My most recent mistake was attempting to please the insatiable crowd with Queen’s hit “Bohemian Rhapsody”, an embarrassment from which I won’t soon recover.

Somewhere between Poppa Dennis’ beaming explanation of how to use the new toy and my third helping of sweet, rich chocolate pie, cousin Ian has volunteered to go first. The disappointment in Poppa Dennis’ eyes is hard to miss, for he wanted to be the one to perform first, but he still allows Ian his song of choice. The music starts up and we all clap; Michael Jackson’s “Smooth Criminal”.

Ian’s bright blue eyes are wide and excited as he mentally prepares for the words to begin appearing on the screen. “As he came into the window, it was the sound of a...”

Ian freezes. Has he ever heard this song? How does he not know the word ‘crescendo’? My grandfather finally whispers the word to him, but Ian is already far behind the urgent music. Ian is stumbling through the fast-paced lyrics and the bright red blush on his cheeks marries the warmth of the fireplace, coloring my cousin an obscene, glowing deep red.

Brother is snickering. Skyler and Evan, Ian’s older brothers, are heckling. My parents make eye contact across the cozy living room, chuckling despite their best efforts not to make fun. We are all contributing to the humiliation Ian is experiencing.

“Annie, are you OK? So, are you OK, Annie?”

By now the room is bursting at the seams with suppressed cackling, and Ian won’t even look at us. Finally, after the longest minute and a half of Ian’s life, he slowly turns around, slips his thumb upward against the shaft of the slender black microphone, and places the godforsaken equipment gently on top of the black machine. He pivots on his heel and, staring intently at his feet, walks quickly through our open concept living

room to the kitchen, and out the back door. We can see his shadow pacing the length of the back porch through the blinds.

The living room is unbearably heavy with Ian's absence; the air is thick enough to choke on. Nobody can find words to break the silence. Apologies flash across our faces as we look around, bearing our guilt, but the intended recipient of our apologies is in the backyard, gulping fresh air and trying to gather the shards of his fragile pre-teen dignity before he returns to us.

The soft glow of our Christmas tree feels inappropriate. The glossy wrapped presents underneath the tree suddenly look ugly and I don't want to unwrap any of them. The background music of "Smooth Criminal" is still booming through the karaoke machine and a quiet, distorted version of Michael Jackson is whispering the lyrics to Ian although he is not there.

"Turn that damn thing off, Dennis!" my grandmother finally breaks the silence. She struggles to stand up but accepts no assistance. She begins to gather the dirty dessert plates from the surface of the wooden trunk my mother found at an antique store to use as a coffee table, allowing the nice blue plates to clank together, crashing, cracking.

Everything is disconnected in this moment, everything is searing into my brain: the way Ian's father is sitting, staring at the picture perfect family portrait we display on the mantle, sipping his seventh beer; the oscillating shade of yellow on the wall behind our Christmas tree as the lights alternately dim and grow brighter; the way the deep red and dark green plaid pattern of Momma's couches, accented with gold, perfectly matches the Christmas season; the bittersweet smell of the last pecan pie wafts from the oven to the living room, tempting us with the promise of a happier moment, soon.

2011

I turn right onto Orchid, hand over hand like the Driver's Ed teacher showed me in that freezing classroom years back, and a wave of nostalgia smashes into my car. Unexpected, deadly. The kids playing in the street have the same names, wear the same clothes, fight over the same bike. My old boyfriend's dad's truck still sits in front of the house on the left, and I cringe remembering the night he clutched his chest after dinner and the morning he woke up in the hospital. The stop sign at the end of Orchid is still crooked – why hasn't anybody straightened that thing out? Turning left onto Maverick I remember my first kiss, my sweating palms, and the cool raindrops on my bare shoulders. For the past year I have called a small town in west Texas home, because moving away to college means you do things like hurt your parents' feelings by saying, without exact words, that you hate the home you were raised in. When I roll into my new college town, though, I feel no specific ache and my excitement is two-dimensional, selfish, and half-baked.

Returning to the home I grew up in, then, shouldn't paralyze me the way it does. I shouldn't be terrified of the subtle differences between the home I left nine months ago and the place I am returning to now – it's the same house, it's the same family – but I am.

Terrified. What if I grew too much, and the home I missed so much while away at school didn't grow enough? What if I am too changed, too unlike the girl I was before?

I turn left onto Abilene Way, hand over hand, and prod the gas pedal with one final push to send my Jeep into its spot, nested safely in the curve of concrete at the bottom of the hill that crests in the middle of our lawn. My picture perfect neighbors are playing outside with their two beautiful children – two kids I spent countless hours babysitting while their parents sneaked into the city for time alone. Everything about this exact moment has happened before. Maybe I was coming home from school, maybe I was coming home from a trip; it doesn't matter. I have come home before.

2013

Skimpy bathing suits, grungy rock bands, fogged ski masks, and proud plane ticket stubs crowd the feed of every venue of social media I use. It seems like everyone I know is participating in typical spring break activities: drinking cheap alcohol on the dirty beaches of south Texas, gliding down white slopes in Colorado, swaying to the beat at some music festival somewhere. I sit under a flapping umbrella, holding down a stack of clean napkins with my elbow as I scroll through Facebook on my cell phone, waiting for Momma to bring spicy nachos and onion burgers to the table I am saving for us.

This weekend crawled by with satisfying sluggishness, allowing my family and me to savor the nuances of our hometown that we have been missing. Yesterday I visited Patina Green, an overpriced sandwich shop burrowed deep in the old fashioned square of Downtown McKinney. I purchased all the dark chocolate cinnamon sugar truffles they had plus three milk chocolate whiskey truffles for my a friend. I ate every single candy in the seventeen minutes it took to drive back to the hotel; gluttonous, morose. Before my parents moved to Abilene last August I could pop into Patina Green for a handful of truffles whenever I wanted; a small treat for my high school boyfriend, then a small treat for me when we broke up, a celebratory confection after graduation, a goodbye sweet before I moved away.

Today was spent wandering through McKinney's farmer's market with my family. Our lackadaisical dance consisted of solos drifting through the different aisles with choreographed congregation every so often at our favorite snack stands. This particular rendezvous acts as a greasy lunch for Momma and me: two onion burgers dripping with caramelized onions and Mystery Spice, as the sign reads, plus an order of spicy cheese nachos for us to share, and a gallon of fresh squeezed lemonade flavored with sugar long past its saturation. We eat in silence because words wouldn't be sufficient to convey the evanescence of the routine we are returning to, and they definitely wouldn't be able to cover the deep sadness of the realization this is no longer a routine.

The afternoon concludes with showers in a hotel room and frenzied preparation for the family friendly activities of our evening. Sister, Brother, and I fight over the shower and, like always, I am the one bathing in icy water. As we pile into Momma's black car we



argue about where to eat dinner.

“I want to eat at Babe’s Chicken!”

“Well, Uncle Julio’s is my favorite!”

“Kids, we will eat McDonald’s if you don’t stop arguing right this minute. I have a surprise for you before we eat, anyway.” Momma sighs in mock resignation, but in the rearview mirror I see a smirk sneak onto her cheek, proof that the nostalgia of driving the streets of our old town with bickering kids in the backseat is the right kind of exasperating.

I know every street on our side of town backwards and forwards, in daylight and after dusk. I know each hackneyed neighborhood name, every restaurant, and which stoplights have cameras recording traffic violations. The streetlights glow a familiar tangerine as we pass, and suddenly the surprise is obvious. We are going to visit our old home.

I haven’t been brave enough to drive by 1909 Abilene Way since Sunday, September 2, 2012, when I used the button programmed in my car to close the garage door for the last time. I drove out of our subdivision with nameless urgency that day, knowing it would be the last time I glance backwards at the stark white stone face of the home I grew up in for a long time.

The memorized turns and curves of our neighborhood make me dizzy tonight, and the hushed silence of the car is heavy. Finally, Daddy turns left from Cockrill onto Abilene Way and pulls to the stretch of grass opposite 1909 Abilene Way, putting the car into park.

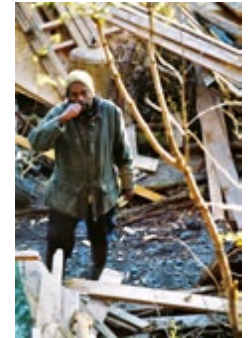
Two blinking lights wink alternately through the leafy green boxwood bushes Daddy planted years ago. Red, then blue, red, then blue. The grass hasn’t been cut in God-only-knows how long and prickly weeds have managed to campaign across the yard, conquering the flawless lawn Brother spent countless hours tending to. A strand of white lights hangs with ugly, noncommittal attitude from the ledge above the garage door which, although there are no cars in sight, has been left a dark, gaping contusion in the pristine face of our old white house. The mismatched Christmas decorations look as if they know how unbecoming their very presence is in this month of March, and the sadness with which they stain the curb appeal of 1909 Abilene Way, McKinney, TX functions as both an insult and an apology.

My family and I stare in shock as inappropriate upbeat eighties beats play quietly on the radio in our car. We aren’t supposed to be here.

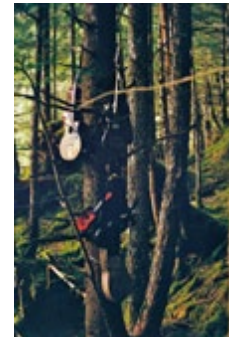
Emily Moses



10:14 P.M. May 13, 2013



11:52 A.M. May 22, 2013



2:30 P.M. August 17, 2013



3:00 P.M. June 9, 2013

Wyatt Morgan

