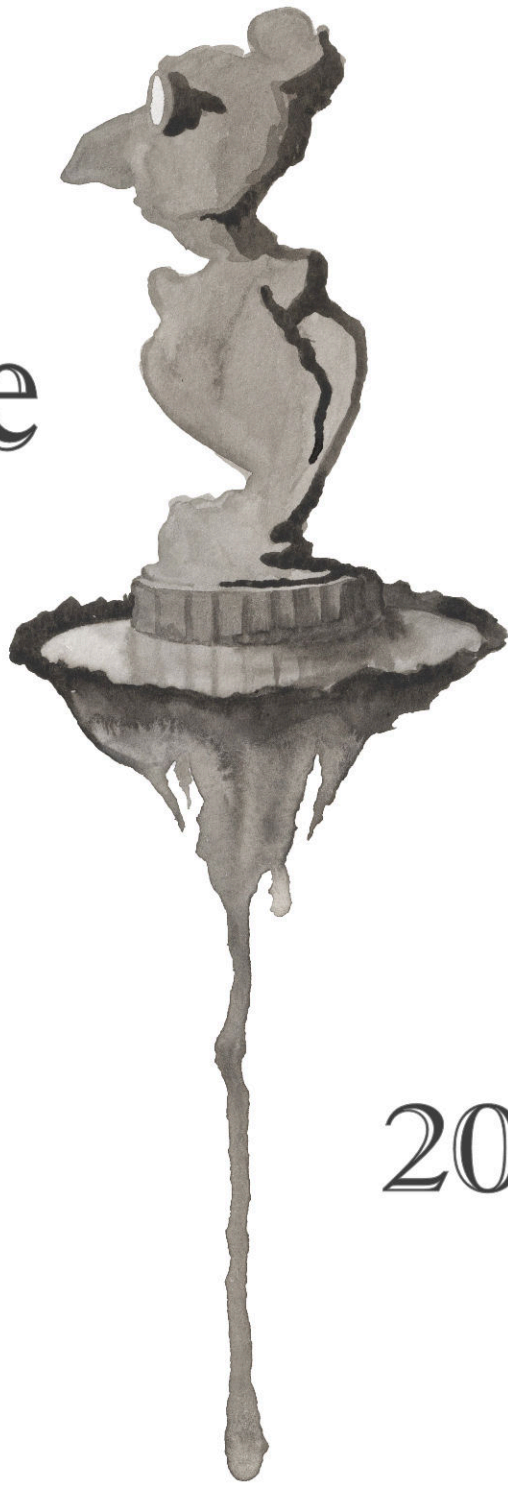


Exile



2012

EXILE

Spring 2012

Denison University's Literary and Art Magazine
Since 1955

You of the finer sense,
Broken against false knowledge,
You who can not know at first hand,
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:

Take thought:
I have weathered the storm,
I have beaten out my exile.

Ezra Pound

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Biblical Brooklyn

By Autumn Stiles

all I can remember is your tomb of a body,
broken and bloody like the Eucharist,
and our final days together.
how you sat silently at the table,
world-weary, enjoying the fish,
yet knowing that tomorrow
could be your last supper.

and how your father, who art in heaven,
gave you, his only begotten son,
to the 66th precinct of Brooklyn,
our Bethlehem,
so that you might sojourn the sins of man.

in our spring-soaked youth,
i would wash your feet as you combed my hair
and our happiness echoed in the shimmering
reflections that seemed to dance
across the water.

now I am skin and bones, flattened
from years of faithful bending at the knee.
resting on wooden benches, leaning on incense
as thick as the rosary beads now limp
in my hand, trying to grasp
the unraveling threads
of the religion I lost
when I lost you.

A Night Indoors

By Daniel Carlson

I sit alone in our living room watching *Night at the Opera*. Groucho Marx stands outside his cabin, giving his order to the steward. In time to the movie I say, "And eh, two fried eggs, two poached eggs, two scrambled eggs, and two medium boiled eggs."

Chico, on the other side of the cabin door adds, "and two hard boiled eggs."

Groucho and I add, "And two hard boiled eggs."

From his bed, Harpo honks a small horn, and we both remark, "Make that three hard boiled eggs," nodding towards the steward. I take my feet off the table and lean forwards, careful not to spill my beer in the darkness. We continue, "And eh, some roast beef: rare, medium, well done, and..."

I'm cut off by the door, and I stiffen for a moment, hand freezing as it reaches for the remote, before saying, "Make that three hard boiled eggs." My hand returns, leaving the remote where it lay.

There is shuffling from the front door, and the soft swishing noise of socks moving across hard wood floor. There is a click and the room lights up slightly. The hall light, probably.

We continue, "And eight pieces of French pastry."

"John, we need to talk," Beth's voice says from above me.

"And two hard boiled eggs."

"Please," she begs, "John... I got the papers. You just need to sign them." Her body moves into my line of vision and she places several sheets of paper on the table, where my legs were earlier. She is wearing slacks and a neat-looking sweater with a collar poking out from under it. Her hair is in a tight bun, because she hates the feeling of it on her back when she has to wear her heavy coat.

Or maybe it is because she knows I love it when she has her hair down.

"Make that three hard boiled eggs." I pause as she looks at me, her hands gripping the side of the couch, "And one duck egg." They squeeze tighter.

"Enough." She reaches beside me, grabbing the remote.

"Have you," Groucho's voice cuts off, "got any stewed prunes?"

She tosses the remote onto one of our chairs and waits, staring at me. The VCR is still running under the TV, even though the screen has darkened.

"John, don't make this harder than it needs to be. Do it for both of us."

I look up at her, meeting her stare with one of my own. No two looks could be more different. Her eyes are watery, though no tears have fallen yet, and her nose quivers. I can't help but still imagine her as a rabbit. Out of habit I look at her ears. She hasn't worn any earrings today, leaving three tiny little pock-marks in her left ear, two in her right.

My gaze is cold, my eyes dry and narrowed, my nose immobile. Tiny dots of stubble spot my lower face like freckles.

She pauses, then asks, "Good God, John, how much have you been drinking?"

I break my eyes from hers, hand reaching for the remote before remembering she threw it to the other chair.

Raising my head, I say, "I don't want to sign them Beth, and that's final."

She searches around me, trying to find something. The remote? An empty bottle? Some piece of crap she left behind? She leans over me to look on the other side and stops, nose wrinkling. "John, when was the last time showered?"

I snort and push her away from me. "Stop changing the subject."

She stumbles back, landing against the wall. Something in her eyes has changed.

"I won't sign them Beth. Do you understand me?" I rise from the couch, "I won't sign them! We can still work things out!"

She almost sobs, but manages to keep it back. "John, this is exactly why we have to do this. Look at yourself! I can't live my life babysitting you! Not anymore-"

"Beth," I coo, voice low, "Beth, things will be different, I will take care of my..."

She cuts me off, "No, don't tell me that. Not this time." Tears dribble down her face, "You never change, John, never. You say you understand what's wrong, and that you'll fix it, but you don't! Even after all that's happened, you just don't get it!"

"Honey..."

"Don't, just...don't," she says, sliding an inch down the wall. There was a pause, both of us breathing heavy, "I'm tired, John. I'm just... tired."

I say nothing, shame welling up within my chest. I remembered her saying that once or twice before now, though by her reckoning she'd said it too much. She'd said everything before, but each time I still thought things was different.

That I'd been different, better, if only by a little.

I fall back into our couch, its legs chipping against the floor as I land. She slides the rest of the way to the floor, face in her hands. I look around the room. The walls are empty, her posters moved to her new apartment. The corner is bare, Roderick's blanket and food bowls gone, existing only in memory and a few stray pieces of kibble. The shelf next to the TV is in shambles, the boxes of children's cartoons my mom gave us now in boxes. The Eeyore lamp that used to light up the room, and the end table it sat on, had been removed, leaving it shrouded in shadow when the TV was off.

Through the wall I hear Lou Dobbs ranting about immigration. Beth snuffles. With a click *Night at the Opera* stops playing, and begins to rewind. We sit in the room that is no longer ours, waiting in the dark for someone to make a move as *our* life falls apart.

"Please John," she says after a while, voice horse. "I know it's hard, but please... if you ever," she gulps, "I know you... do it for me, John."

"Please."

I look at her, my mind flashing through the past. Days spent smiling and watching TV. Nights spent talking about everything and nothing. Sitting in the back row of the school auditorium, watching each other instead of the play in front of us. Singing each other to sleep. My breath leaving by body as I saw her walk through the door and down the aisle. Laying side by side with my hand over her stomach. Our joint sobs when Maggie turned blue. Fruitless counseling. Thrown books. Ripped posters. Harsh words.

"Give me the pen."

A single tear threatens to fall from the lower edge of my eye, but I blink it away.

Minutes later I'm in my living room, watching the blank TV screen.

Cradle Drop

By Moriah Ellenborgren

I wonder if you're listening
As you close your eyes
And you begin to sway
Under the weight of your consciousness.
Or perhaps you're dreaming of a long-forgotten childhood:
Before checking accounts and mortgage payments,
The college courses you never finished,
And the diamond ring he gave you—
The one which needs to be reset.

As I gradually push harder on the gas pedal
And the car begins to gain speed,
I wonder if I ever stood
At the side of my crib
And stretched my arms toward you
As if to say, "I need you".
And I wonder,
With some hesitation,
If I would stretch my arms towards you now,
If I knew it would make you happy.

I slightly turn my head
So that I can see your heavy lids
And it reminds me of all those stories
You used to tell
About me crying
 And crying
 And crying.
And you recalled with a smile
How you would buckle me into my car seat
And start the motor
And by the third time around the block
Cheeks would be clammy, eyes dry.

I wonder if that's what we're doing now,
Wonder if I should have buckled you in tight
And maybe hummed some lullaby
Under my breath.
Because by the second mile your eyes have closed
And your thoughts have ceased
And your lips have relaxed.

I'm not sure when our roles switched.
Maybe when you reached the far end of your middle years
Or maybe when I began to plan for mine,
But it's my keys now dangling from the ignition

And you are my passenger
Fast asleep in your baby-blue sweater.

And as I turn the next corner, I say something
About how I could hear you sobbing last night
Alone in your room
On your big-girl bed.
And that I know this isn't what you wanted your life to be.
And then I whisper softly that "I'm sorry"
And I know then you haven't been listening
Because you do not make a move.

Cardinality

By Nicco Pandolfi

The wrought-iron horizon seems
As fixed as an old man's prejudices,
Yet it eludes our dogged pursuit daily,
Gradually shrinking into each tomorrow.
Still the American muse urges dreamers Westward,
Oh the purpose-driven beauty of the compass rose!
But when its petals fall,
She could have been pointing anywhere
For all we know, or care to remember,
And we find ourselves once more
Rudderless and uninspired.
If our wishes for others are horses
Easily broken and bridled,
Those we hold for ourselves are steeds
Of a more willful sort,
Mischievously waiting to be tamed,
Or not tamed, as a schooner's sails
Wait to be filled or left empty
By their fickle mistress, wind.
Or perhaps they lie dormant like jigs
In the memory of an old accordion,
Waiting to be squeezed out by sure, lively hands.

Babies in the Snow

By Abby Current

When our cat had kittens in winter, we didn't know she was pregnant. She adopted us a few months before, living under our porch until we admitted defeat and began feeding her, naming her, picking her up and even letting her inside sometimes. I petted her whenever I saw her, called her silly nicknames, but I didn't know the signs of cat pregnancy, and so when she got a little fatter I just thought that I'd been feeding her more than she was used to.

She mewled at the back door for twenty minutes in the cold night air before we let her inside. My mother saw the blood and put together a cardboard box and shreds of old hand towels within minutes. "She's going to be a mama kitty," she told me, and I transformed into a combination of nurse and proud mother, waiting with bitten lips and wringing hands for one kitten to emerge into the cardboard box to be licked clean by her mother. It wasn't until the next day that we found the other kitten our cat tried to bring into the warmth. He was tiny and curled in on himself like a scared child accidentally locked out of the house, stationed at the front door where she had tried first to get our attention.

The cat died long ago, and the kitten that survived went to a new home long before that, but I keep thinking now of that kitten in the snow. My mother comes over one morning, the annual admission of our mutual guilt and grief, and I ask her, "Do you remember when our cat had those kittens in December? When I was a kid?"

She takes a bite of the chocolate pie she brought, chews very slowly. "I remember."

"And one of them was fine, but one of them died outside before we knew she was having them." I run my hands over my swollen belly, barely beginning to bulge with a son.

My mother puts her hand over mine, and her other hand, almost out of my line of vision, flutters around her own stomach, flattened from the curve of children before I could speak. "We had that cat for a long time, didn't we? She was a good cat, very sweet. She never scratched your brother, even when he pulled her tail or picked her up by her legs." She chuckles low under her breath and lets go of my hand. "I think I knew that cat pretty well. She didn't blame us for what happened to her other kitten."

"She was just a cat, Mom."

"I know, but listen to me." She turns to stare out of the window, out to my front yard, but her eyes go unfocused, looking somewhere else. "She lost a baby. A little baby she didn't have time to know very well. We didn't see the signs she gave us early enough to save him, but one of them, one of them survived. She missed the baby she lost every day, I think, but she loved the one she got to keep." My mother takes a deep breath and stands up, baring her teeth in a smile that is too wide. "I think that cat loved those babies with all her heart. Both of them."

My eyes begin to cloud and I have to turn, stand, take our dishes to the sink. "His sister probably missed him very much. She...it was her fault."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I locked the door when he was outside." I choke on my words and lean against my sink, back curved, staring at the water sinking down the drain.

The chair screams on the tile as my mother stands up and pushes it back, and then she hugs me. When did I get taller than her, stronger than her? She can barely make her short, frail arms wrap around my taller shoulders.

We stand like that for a long time, mother and daughter, remembering the little baby who curled up in the snow outside our front door, left outside for hours before anyone knew he had been forgotten.

Chimaera

By Maggie Reagan

“As you’re pretty, so be wise;
wolves may lurk in every guise.”

-Charles Perrault, *Little Red Riding Hood*

“Absolutely not,” my sister shakes her head
as I step out of the changing room. “Try
this one instead, it’ll make your waist look
smaller and your boobs look bigger
and it’s a much better color for your eyes.”
The saleslady, in the corner, blows a lionlike
fringe of hair from her face in agreement
while I shed, like snakeskin, the old dress.

We were delighted, at first, when we heard
about the escaped animals in Muskingum County, hoping
to see a pack of wolves at dusk, running west
towards Montana and its fierce, far freedom,
or the giraffe climbing languidly uphill towards us,
the sun setting between her long legs.
She did not know to run from men with guns.

In the summer, my hair lightens to the color
of the Serengeti cape hare’s fur. My sister
has winged her catlike eyes with kohl,
and all of us adjusting our clothing,
tightening, buttoning, holding in.
All of this untaught. All of this
less grotesque than a girl’s body on its own.

The young policeman who brought her down
had stood face-to-face with a lion as well, the beast
trembling beneath the weight of this new, wide world
His hands confidant on the muzzle of the gun,
his own hair golden as kings in the light of a fading sun.

Afterwards, he tosses back
a pint with his friends at the dive bar
around the corner. When a small herd
of girls in short skirts walk by, he wolf-whistles
and grins. He nods towards a girl who absently tugs
at her hemline, looking over her shoulder.
To the men he says, Look at that—
legs like a fucking gazelle.

Treading Water

By Natalie Olivo

Eric took a deep breath and prepared to plunge into the cold waters of room 113. He slowly opened the door and ventured inside. His hand lingered on the handle in case he needed to surge back up for air. Room 113 was just like any other Luxury Suite in Evergreen Pines. The resident, one Lester Schuman, was just like any other wrinkled patient. Except this patient withheld Eric's allowance when he was cut from the baseball team. He had also been the coach. Lester could no longer pitch a curveball, but he could still interrogate better than a CIA specialist, even on his deathbed. Eric avoided eye contact with his father as he explained that Viv was in the Hamptons snagging a summer home and the boys were hitting the books at prep school.

"Everyone wishes they could've been here, Dad," Eric began, "but you know how it is."

"Suppose there's no point," Lester said. "Not much money in my will anyway."

The guilt seed was planted. Before it sprouted roots, Eric looked around the room that drained his income. Clear fluid dripped and collected at the bottom of an IV bag. Eric watched it trickle through the tiny tube and into Lester's veins. A typical nephropathy case, Lester's kidneys had stopped responding to dialysis. After increased renal failure, his kidneys would shut down completely. Then the rest of his organs would dim into darkness. He was given less than twenty-four hours. All they could do now was medicate him for the pain.

"Hey Shark, you just gonna stand there like an idiot or what?" Lester asked. His snarled expression matched his crumpled bed sheets. The old man would die with his arms crossed.

"I wish I could've gotten here sooner, Dad," Eric said, perching on the edge of an overstuffed couch.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... At least you popped by once before I finally croaked."

"Dad, you know Viv and I wanted you to live closer to us. They have better homes in New York anyway."

"Well you still beat Turtle here."

"Big surprise," Eric said.

There was nothing else to say. After a few minutes, Eric sighed to fill the silence. Even though his father no longer towered over him, Eric still couldn't make eye contact with Lester. In fact, it was even harder to look at the old man now that he was hooked up to all those IV cords.

"Looks like they take good care of you here," Eric said. He pretended to study a bucolic painting.

"Why, because they think I still want to look at farms after living near them for seventy years?"

Smacking flip flops shuffled into the room, followed by the heaving sag of a duffel bag. This sound usually made Eric's stomach sink, but this time he welcomed the distraction. Jesse was here. Eric tried not to stare at the metal piercings clamped into Jesse's cartilage. The kid probably already got his rebel validation from an entire airport of friendly Midwesterners gawking at his edgy L.A. aesthetic.

"Well I guess I *have* to die now," Lester sighed, throwing his arms up. "I know you can't plunk down money on a plane ticket for nothing, son."

"Nice to see you too, Dad."

Jesse closed his eyes. Eric guessed his brother wished he was back on the plane, soaring over the rocky red earth of the sunny Southwest. Their mother happily frolicked there with her replacement family. Somehow she'd managed to escape.

"Dad has a point, you know," Eric said, turning to his brother. "A career as a *performance artist* is so....unreliable. What if you didn't have the money to fly out and see Dad before he...you know..."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Jesse sighed, running his hands through his mopyy bleached hair.

Eric still expected some sort of parental discipline, but when he glanced at his father, he just saw newly formed bruises in his eyes. Lester couldn't chase Jesse up those stairs any longer, up that orange shag carpet of their childhood home. Lester couldn't even stand.

"You're seriously still doing that performance art crap?" said Lester. "Painting your entire body in silver and then rolling around on the sidewalk will land you in the psychiatric ward."

"It's more than that," muttered Jesse, crossing his arms like a pouting child. "Actually, I just finished up a performance that criticized corporate greed. We all dressed up in suits and then tied nooses around our necks and then ---"

"--- and then took the bus home and clipped coupons," Eric finished.

"Nothing wrong with clipping coupons," Lester shrugged. "In fact, you're a dumbass not to. You guys think the Chef Boyardee fairy placed dinner in front of you every night?"

Eric wanted to say something about the Evergreen Pines fairy placing Lester in the Luxury Suite, but he needed to be careful. Even though Jesse was an apathetic asshole most of the time, Lester always seemed to defend him at the last second, as if he were too clueless for his own good. Lester probably did this out of spite.

"What I meant, Dad, was that Jesse's over forty years old and he makes a living – well, tries to – by prancing around on subway benches."

"I know. It's almost as embarrassing as having a corporate whore for a son."

Eric remembered why he never visited. It was partly to maintain the equilibrium of apathy. Lester was also exhausting. He spent most of Eric's childhood lamenting those who dined from the silver platter. Jesse joined in on Lester's bitterness towards elitists, but Eric had to go ahead and become one. But why should Eric have to suffer for that? He saw his father's tired eyes every night when he came home from the can factory. Eric spent countless nights throwing a tennis ball against his wall to drown out the sound of his parents arguing about the mortgage.

So why should Lester get to make him feel so god damn bad for achieving everything society deprived their family of? Thanks to Eric, Lester finally had his chance to swagger around Evergreen Pines. And what did he do? He isolated himself in that room and waited to die. Eric wanted to rattle Lester's shoulders and shout "See! We finally made it, Dad! I worked hard so you could live your final years in a really nice place! Doesn't that count for *anything*?"

Eric watched the old man take jagged breaths. Did he withhold his approval of Evergreen Pines out of spite? Could he really be that stubborn?

"Well hello, Mr. Schuman! I see you have visitors!"

A tiny blonde nurse burst through the doorway. She was so pale; it was hard to tell where her white scrubs ended and her skin began.

"I've never seen them before in my life," Lester said. "You should probably call security."

The nurse forced an awkward chuckle, nervously glancing between Eric and Jesse. She seemed to be waiting for a sign that Lester was kidding.

"So you're the lucky one assigned to my father," Jesse grinned.

The nurse nodded, but her eyes stayed fixed on Jesse's flip flops as he sauntered up to her. Well, his footwear wasn't exactly hygienic.

"It's too bad," Jesse sighed. "What with his beguiling charm, I don't stand a chance..."

The nurse laughed, letting a few yellow wisps fall out of her tightly wound bun. Eric felt like an unwanted chaperone as the two giggled. Jesse changed women more often than he changed shirts, but did he really need to hit on the nurse assigned to his dying father? Although, Eric couldn't really blame him. The nurse looked like a delicate little bird as she fluttered around Lester, hurriedly fluffing his pillow and impatiently deflecting his snarky remarks.

"Um, miss?" Eric asked. "You might want to monitor my father's analgesic doses."

"You're a doctor?"

"No...stock broker."

"Well I can assure he's in good care here, sir."

Weren't women supposed to go for the powerful suits instead of the smug bohemians? Somehow Jesse had always managed to just drift through life like a candy wrapper caught in the wind. He was either very immune to Lester's pressure or very damaged by it. When they were kids, Lester always pitted his

sons against each other in competitions; who could chug his milk faster, comb his hair neater, tuck his sheets in tighter, jump higher, hold his breath longer. Eric suspected this was Lester's small way of feeling like he was still in the Navy. It didn't matter if they were brushing their teeth or racing in the Pinewood derby. Everything was competition. The more Eric won, the less Jesse cared, and the more Eric needed to win until the gap between them was so large, there was no way Jesse, or Lester, could ignore it.

"Shark!" Lester said. "Go to the vending machine and get me some real food. I'd ask Mr. Performance Artist here to do it, but I'm afraid he'd strike a pose and then just stand there for hours."

This sounded like a Jesse task. He was probably looking for an excuse to keep harassing that poor nurse anyway. Still, Eric was eager to take a break. As soon as he stepped outside, he felt like he had just surfaced after a long time under water. Eric was about halfway down the hall when suspicion made him pivot and turn around. He found himself slowly pushing open the door to Lester's room and peeking inside. This wasn't considered spying, since he did foot the entire bill for this place. Lester and Jesse were both turned away from him, but Eric could still hear their conversation. He couldn't ignore their voices even when he wanted to.

"Come here, Turtle." Lester beckoned.

Jesse's flip flops smacked on the tiles as they shuffled toward Lester's bed. "Yeah?" He asked, jamming his hands in his pockets. Was this a heart to heart? To Jesse?

"I don't want to die here. I want to die at Mason Field." Lester smoothed his sheets as if he had just commented on the weather.

"What?"

"You know, that meadow that overlooks Diamond Lake on the outskirts of town. Jesus, I know you haven't been home in twenty years, but you did grow up here."

"I know where the field is, Dad. I just don't get why you want to...die there..."

"What's it matter to you? Why can't you just grant a dying man his last wish? So even though you're the clueless one, I'm asking you," explained Lester. "Shark wouldn't go for it, so don't tell him. Now make yourself useful and bring over a wheelchair." Lester started to scoot out of the hospital bed. When Jesse didn't move, Lester yanked out all of his IV cords and slung two nearly transparent legs over the edge of the bed. Despite squeaks of protest, Jesse scrambled over and rolled a wheelchair up to the nightstand. Eric was afraid that if he said something now, Lester would slip and shatter on the floor. He could only watch as Jesse eased his father into the chair as if he weighed less than a rag doll.

This had gone too far. "What are you doing?" Eric asked, barging into the room.

"God damn," muttered Lester, collapsing his shoulders in defeat. "I knew you'd screw this up."

"Screw what up?!" Eric asked. He was afraid his calculated surprise gave him away, but Jesse explained the botched escape plans as if he actually had a chance of sneaking the old man out.

"I need to speak to you outside," Eric muttered, dragging his brother into the hallway.

"I know you live in your own little hippie world," he hissed, slamming the door to room 113. "But the rest of us follow *rules*. Rules that say you can't wheel gravely ill patients out of their rooms for one last joyride!"

A few Evergreen Pines residents drifted towards their doorways to catch the show, dragging their oxygen tanks with them.

"You've always been allergic to structure," Eric continued to rant. "Why bother fitting in when you can just hold a giant middle finger up to the world, right?"

Jesse slowly raised a hand from his crossed arms and tugged at his piercings. He seemed determined to pull at one silver gear until it ripped out of his ear, as if this was a more appealing sensation than Eric's lecture. Jesse was truly a perpetual teenager. Eric almost felt sorry for him.

"Listen," Jesse snapped, un-crossing his arms and standing to reveal his full height. Eric forgot how tall Jesse was when he didn't slump. And how skinny. "Don't make this about me and my lifestyle."

"You made it about you when truded in here wearing god damn flip flops. When are you gonna grow up, Jesse? You can't push a shopping cart through a forest and call it art."

"You just hate what I do because it's something you can't easily judge. You thrive on other people's perceptions. If the man rotting in this place doesn't give you his approval, at least everyone else should, right? Is that why you care so much about the arbitrary rules of god damn Evergreen Pines? God forbid you get in trouble for wheeling around your own father."

"I am paying for this place," Eric pointed out.

"That doesn't mean you know what's best for Dad."

"And you do? Wheeling him outta here is probably just avant-garde 'performance art' for you. And don't get started with your 'Don't Judge My Lifestyle' speech. You *enjoy* being the unappreciated, victimized bohemian while I'm the mean corporate bully."

The crowd that had gathered started to lose interest and to retreat to their rooms. Their hospital gowns swayed as they shuffled on their walkers, mumbling about how *The Price Is Right* was on soon.

"What do you want me to say?" Jesse finally asked, re-crossing his arms. "That you're richer than me? Better than me? Dad loves you more than me?"

"Huh," said Eric, placing a hand on his hip and leaning against the wall. "It almost seems like you actually do care what Dad and I think of you." A victorious fist slowly rose in his chest, validating years of mowing the lawn and dismantling the Chevy engine.

Jesse rolled his eyes and heavily shook his head, his shaggy layers fluttering like a kicked pile of leaves. "You don't get it, do you? Just because *you* are on this endless quest for Dad's approval, doesn't mean I am. Of course, if I was, I'd realize that actually visiting him would do a hell of a lot more good than becoming some automaton businessman."

The victorious fist crumbled and Eric felt his own fist shaking. He had to slap his hand against the wall to keep it from coiling around Jesse's throat. His fingers curled against the industrial paint. Suppressing his resentment towards Jesse was like trying to push a beach ball under water.

"Oh, what a convenient set-up!" Eric exclaimed. "Since *you* don't care about Dad's affection, you're allowed to be totally aloof, and at the same time, judge *me* for not visiting! And hey, why not judge me for making money while you're at it? I forgot it was trendy to be poor, man! Down with capitalism, right?!"

"For Crissakes, just tell me what will end this!" Jesse hollered, throwing his arms up. "What will get you to stop reminding me of how much of a failure I am?! Do you want an official certificate that says you're better than me? To hang next to your framed diplomas?"

"Jesse, that's not what this is about..."

"Bullshit!" He said. "Proving that you're better than me and that Dad loves you more is *exactly* what this is about! Here, if that's what it'll take to kill your condescending lectures, I'll write out a certificate right now. Got a pen? I don't have any paper, but maybe we could use the back of Dad's medical charts. Too avant-garde though? Maybe your income check could also double as your official certificate?"

"Kinda like how your clipped coupons are little certificates proving you're a self-righteous starving artist who doesn't need Dad's love!"

A cold hand on Eric's shoulder startled him. He turned around to see a plump woman with a deep frown. "Excuse me, but would you two mind taking your disagreement outside? There are other residents to consider. We like to keep Evergreen Pines a positive environment."

Eric felt like a child as the nurse escorted him and Jesse outside. The two brothers now stood in courtyard groomed to resemble a Zen garden, part of the Luxury Suite package. A babbling creek with a stone bridge and patches of raked pebbles made the garden look like a movie set dropped in the middle of a nursing home – in the Midwest, no less. A few residents muddled along arbitrarily placed bonsai trees. The artificial serenity of the place made it feel faker than a theme park's attempt to mimic the Far East. Eric started to understand why Lester hated Evergreen Pines, why he wanted to die at Mason Field instead. Zen gardens didn't even have evergreens.

"I can't believe we're wasting Dad's final hours bitching like this," Eric found himself saying, apparently having decompressed a bit.

"I'm sure if we got along he'd think he was already dead," Jesse half-laughed.

An old man in a bathrobe appeared to be lost as he wandered into a sand garden. He dragged his oxygen tank behind him, oblivious to how it smudged the neatly raked lines. The tank bumped against a rock and jerked the man backward.

"Except this place sure isn't Heaven," Eric sighed.

"Not really," agreed Jesse. "Although, you're still trying to act like a saint."

There was no wall to slap out here. Eric squeezed his fists and let his nails dig into his palms. "How is that?" He asked through clenched teeth.

"You're just going on about how we can't wheel Dad out; now we're wasting his final hours, blah blah blah."

"And that's me trying to be a saint and not just genuinely caring about Dad?"

Jesse shrugged, avoiding eye contact with Eric. "I just feel like if he'd asked *you* to take him to Mason Field, if *you* got to be the hero, you'd be pushing Dad towards Diamond Lake right now."

"Well I have to say, I'm a bit surprised he asked you," Eric admitted, rubbing the back of his neck while twisting his head away from Jesse.

"Which you found out through *spying*."

"That really is just like you though," Eric said, almost laughing with frustration. "You don't do shit for the old man, then you swoop in and try to grant his dying wish. Now he'll die thinking you're the Good Son, despite the last forty years. In the end, all you had to do for his affection was try to sneak him out to a god damn field."

In the back of Eric's brain, the guilt seed cracked open. This time it sprung roots that twisted around all of his neurons. He could no longer ignore the fact that Lester was just another sword to parlay at Jesse. Lester was their father, for better or worse, and he was dying. The roots loosened their grip on Eric, but they didn't let go. They wouldn't let go until Eric went back into Room 113 and said good-bye to his father. But he didn't know how to do that. He didn't even know how to talk to Jesse in the Zen garden.

Jesse planted himself on one of the simple stone benches. He slipped his feet out of his flip flops and pressed them against the cold path. "I thought you were on his side," he said. "But I guess not. He spent all of our childhood hating The Man, and then you became The Man. Not like I'm doing much better by dangling upside down from a barn rafter in a giant plastic light bulb." Jesse paused and slid his feet back in his flip flops. "I guess we'll never get his approval, whether we wheel him out to the fucking field or not."

Eric slowly stepped towards the bench. Jesse scooted over to make room for him. After Eric joined him, the two brothers sat in silence for a while. Eric knew that even though they had temporarily ducked out of the ring, they would never stop fighting. But maybe, for now, they could rest together on this barren plateau of emotional drought.

"You know," Eric finally said. "Maybe we did get his approval in a way. I mean, if he knew..."

"Knew what?" Jesse asked, abruptly standing up.

"You know what I'm talking about." Eric paused. "Do you think he knew?"

Jesse sighed and twisted one of the metal spikes in his cartilage. "Yeah," he finally said. "I think the old man knew all along that we were matches." He paused and jammed his hands into his empty pockets.

"He would," Eric scoffed. "He *would* find a way to make us not hate him after all the hell he put us through." He paused, trying to interpret Jesse's stoic slump. Perhaps some guilt roots were coiling around him as well.

"I dunno," said Jesse. "Maybe he refused our kidneys out of spite. Or maybe he didn't want to appear vulnerable. Didn't want us to have a card to hold over him. Honestly, I always thought if he took one of our kidneys, it would've been mine." Jesse furrowed his brow, preparing to imitate Lester's crusty grumblings. "At least you're good for something, son."

Eric shook his head. "You don't get it, Jess. I was always the one who he pushed, and I was still never good enough. But you....he just let you be free."

Jesse said nothing, but just turned around so his back was facing Eric. After a few moments, Eric rose from the bench and once again joined his brother. As Eric watched the sun sink below a red pagoda, he realized Lester wouldn't get to see his last sunset. Of course, he had missed so many when he worked at the

factory, one more wouldn't really make a difference. Missing the twinkling evening, or more minor things like his family, was never what seemed to bother Lester. Bills and bosses were what kept him pacing in the basement late at night.

"Mason Field..." Jesse sighed, placing a hand on Eric's shoulder. Eric tried not to flinch under Jesse's stiff grip. He wondered how long they would have to stand like this. "You know, it wouldn't be the end of the world if we just took him."

"I know."

"For him. Not for us, I mean."

Lester's pain meds seemed to be kicking in. Spoonfuls of opiates had to be the only explanation for his sleepy Buddha grin and general lack of insults. Something had to bother Lester again so that he could go as Lester, not as some serene, doped up goon. Surely the boys would do something to irritate him as they transported him to Mason Field.

Eric crept towards the bed and Jesse quickly followed. The men hoisted Lester into the wheelchair, along with all the times they didn't visit, all the days they didn't call. Despite all their excuses for ignoring Lester, the burden of neglect weighed down on their shoulders. The smell of stale peppermint and hand sanitizer clung to the walls as they navigated past gurneys and biohazard waste bins. Sunlight tumbled through the windows and coated Lester in a hesitant halo, but he didn't seem to notice.

"You actually taking me to Mason Field?" Lester coughed, fighting through the painkiller fog.

"Shh!" hissed Eric. "No one can know."

"Hey! Where are you going?!"

As if on cue, all natural sunlight evaporated from the hallway. Eric and Jesse spun around to see the nurse padding towards them. Her white scrubs burned against the flickering fluorescents. The men looked at each other, then at Lester, and then started to run. Eric's white knuckles gripped the wheelchair handles as he plowed down the hallway. He struggled to navigate the bulky wheels around a tight corner. Jesse burst a few feet ahead and slung open the lobby doors. They almost made it into fresh air, but the nurse was still trotting after them, calling for security. Jesse ushered Eric and Lester through the doors and then slammed them shut, guarding them like a scrawny shield.

"Open these doors this instant!" She hissed.

"Sorry," shrugged Jesse. "I'd hoped things could've worked out between us."

Mason Field was smaller than Eric remembered. Lester was smaller too. They pushed him through thick knots of grass to the field's edge. True to its name, Diamond Lake glistened under the setting sun that bled swirls of gold and pink into the violet horizon. Eric never imagined Lester would die in a place so poetic. Of course, he never imagined Lester would die at all. They parked the wheelchair in a patch of wildflowers. Swaying stems twisted up into the wheel's spokes.

Staring into the glassy lake, Eric was taken back to that cold Midwestern morning when he and Jesse were just gangly kids, shivering on the dock. Lester always talked about how his own father pushed him in the water to teach him how to swim, and now it was their turn. He stalked behind them like a drill sergeant, and then suddenly hollered "jump!" The boys flung themselves into the lake before Lester could yell at them again. Icy shards of water stabbed at Eric, momentarily distracting him from the fact that he couldn't swim. His throat burned as he flailed his arms, vaguely aware of his father looming on the dock, hollering at him to tread water. He was sinking. As he drifted towards the muddy bottom, Eric was convinced that the last thing he would ever see was the sunlight dappling through the water's surface as it fell further and further away. Eric wanted to surrender, to float and just be free, but he couldn't.

By the end of the day, Lester coached Eric different strokes as he sliced through the water like an Olympian. Jesse gave up after vaguely grasping the doggy paddle. He preferred to dig tiny pools in the mud under the dock. In one of his rare moments of affection, Lester dubbed Eric "Shark" and Jesse "Turtle," and that was that.

"I hate my job," Eric blurted, kicking at a clump of weeds. "Sometimes when I'm sitting at my desk, I just want to pitch myself through the glass window. I just want to soar through the sky like dead weight."

"I actually did jump through a glass window for a performance once," Jesse said. "It wasn't symbolic. It was painful."

"Will you boys quit competing already?" Lester grunted, briefly lapsing into lucidity. "Stop trying to steal my thunder. Your lives *both* suck. There."

Eric and Jesse couldn't help but grin. It was the first time their father had acknowledged them as equals. Perhaps Lester only admitted it now because he was so close to the end. After all, even when he refused both his sons' kidneys, he never said a word about it. As all three of them watched the sky deepen with darkness, Eric knew that it was too late to connect. But maybe just knowing that was enough. Maybe now he could stop treading water and just float.

Swatch Watch

By Julianne Hyer

The only warm day we spent strolling streets of Vienna,
Weaving our way through Austrian noise,
Our foreign shoes meeting well-worn pavement,
We ventured to the new, the modern avenues
Lined with tall glass test tubes
Experimenting with the limits of consumerism.
It was there,
Amidst elevators rocketing up and down
Where Mom and I were drawn in
Enticed by the Jellybean colored watches
The bright artificial flavors of fashion
Pulling the eye and
Grabbing the wallet.

I wear it now,
A black Swatch watch,
Inexpensive because it's a child's watch
(I praise my Barbie wrists!)
Every time I glance at it
I think of hard cobblestone alleys,
Foaming cups of cappuccino,
Frozen bones at the steeple of Stephansdom,
An ex-boyfriend who had the flu—

It was an anxious pay phone call from the French aerodrome
(I remember standing on the breezy Prague balcony,
soaking up the Czech culture,
when my phone fatefully rang.)
An unexpected call followed by frantic emails to his mom.
It was all a mad scrambling to get him from Paris to Vienna.
I spent half my time after that exploring the ancient beauty of Austria,
Mom, Dad and I with our guidebooks, our orange backpack
And, of course, our constant craving for Viennese pastries.
And I spent the other half nursing that boy back to American health.

It was that terrible last hurrah of a senior year fling,
The dying, laborious breath of a high school relationship.
Both of us desperately clinging,
To something certainly not worth saving.
Both of us knowing, unhappily attempting to accept
The impending logical end.

After that plane touched down,
After I stopped looking for the written beauty of Prague's West Slavic
And after I stopped listening for the strong syllables of Vienna's German,
I stretched my cramped small body,

Untwisted and unfolded myself from those blue cushions
And took a step away from everything.

I remember walking off the plane
And turning this watch back six hours;
My weary feet back on U.S. soil
A bittersweet return to "home."
A home, not so much a home,
But instead a graveyard
Littered with unburied decaying skeletons of pasts—
Friendships in accelerated entropy,
Love facing a firing squad,
And parents at the cemetery gate with flowers
Heads bowed, praying for continued connection.

For Bosnia

By Mimi Mendes de Leon

The grey cloud came first. It was sudden, just as she was bending over, her long braid falling over her shoulder. The cloud blossomed out of the cobblestones, starting small, the size of a wheel, and spreading across the storefront. The thick smoke choked our small main street, blocking from our view the grimy 'Closed' signs that had been hanging in the doors.

The store windows would not be covered in dust anymore. Shards of glass flew in and out of the grey, their jagged edges spinning and spinning. Smaller flecks glittered amidst the cloud, highlighted by the flames that grew behind it. They caught the light of the fire just as the water had sparkled in the bowl she had brought out for the dog. The blue ceramic fragments of the bowl had been split too small to be seen, but her red speckled flesh dotted the explosion. The bits of her charged toward us, mixed in with the mangled fur of the dog and the pebbles from the street. Her body did not arch gracefully in the air, as we had seen in the films. There was no frantic leap out of the flames, no dive forward toward safety—just traces of our friend rolling along the cloud's mushrooming surface.

The rumble that came with the flames and shrieks lifted us up and left us there, in the air, to fend for ourselves. The noise hit our ears like the grumbles of our stomachs after the soldiers came. It was the same sound our fathers made when we were late hiding in the woods; the same sound her dog had made as it limped after a rat; the same sound that sent waves straight into our chests and refused to leave.

But, it was the sole of her shoe that we remember. The sole of her pretty brown sandal, which we all had envied, came floating down off the mushroom and bounced off the cobblestones toward our place in the woods. The same rubber that, moments before, had supported her small frame as she bent forward to give the dog water. It came to a halt, just there past the forest line, within reach. The black rubber still bubbled with bits of leather. The imprint of her foot on the sole headed toward the growing flames.

How to Keep from Freezing

By A. Tangredi

The dandelions on fire under the sun,
Bright like bursting bulbs, blinding in their
final moments. Electricity creeps
through the ground, the forest floor set aflame.
In spring, the snow all melts away, leaves seeds
naked, parted from their resins. This is
what I'm used to, this is what has changed: we
watch the lightning from a distance,
we sleep like embers in the bed, always
cold, always piling on blankets, hoping
to ignite, waiting to dig beneath them
and find the warmth, for light to prick the dark
from our fingers against the wool. I read
somewhere that two objects never truly
touch, bound by themselves to an infinite
distance – this is fact. But, love -
why should that stop us from trying?

Bodies and Bread

By Autumn Stiles

the fans wobbled drunkenly
as July's rays rioted and ricocheted,
clashed and clanged off of the
silverware assimilated for Americans.

we faced each other, searching
for familiar words like menu items,
finding none and wondering
if we would eat this anticipated
meal in scorching silence
punctuated only by sips of water.

summer's separation had made us
parched for each other's company.
but we hardly quenched our thirst,
choosing instead to fill the
void of silence with food.

we ate with our hands as
you devoured pinchfuls of patna
and fumbled gracefully with
the crispy cloud of gold-greased bread
the man placed before you.

you handled the bread like
you handled my body months ago;
eager, yet earnest, delicately tearing
through airy pockets of dough,
and I realized we would never
talk with such effortless grace.

for bodies and bread
speak a simpler language,
of hunger and of need.
ignorant to the powerful
stinging and soothing
of words and their meanings,
and the unimaginable strength
it takes to say "I love you."

The Depth of a Song

By Christie Maillet

A song breaks into a million gasps
The moment you touch its vocal chords,
The slick disc sounding like down pillows and silk tresses,
Creeping down your throat as you sink into fragments of sleep.
You run your fingers down the smoothed edges of its face
And envelop your arms around its last refrain,
Broken pieces falling into a pile of mirrors.

The jagged riffs and rounded voices encompass
Shining, intricate bands of data, songs bound by a neck
Of solid fibers, as the bridge twirls around your finger
Like the curl of a wave, cracking like the peal of a scream.
The shards of aluminum flash moments of light,
Reflecting into the eyes of the chorus, strings rippling,
And guttural keens bounce off the remnants of crushed narratives,
Thrown away in a symbolic crash, regaining air in the last accord.

First Kiss

By Sam Heyman

There was a week
At the beginning of school
When I went to a club with friends,
And a friend of a friend and I—

Kissed.

It was his first, but not mine
He was lucky, though,
Not because I was
The poet laureate of kissing
or even because
I was good at it at all,
But because, unlike mine,
His was one that could lead to love.

It wasn't done drunkenly
against the wall
of some senior's sweaty apartment.

It wasn't stolen nervously,
In an air-conditioned hallway
To the distant hums of a school dance.

It wasn't paid for, or expected,
like a gift from someone
who said *No, I wanted to*. No,

It was in the middle

Of a crowded dance floor
Full of people who'd forgotten
How to dance
The moment they learned
How to kiss
And it was a kiss we both
Wanted to remember.

Five Hundred Miles to Freedom

By Shawn Whites

Driving your father's pickup truck, your head turned to see how far we'd come, the empty road splitting the barren blue desert sand behind us, five hundred miles to freedom. You smile like I have never seen you smile before—and this time I think it's real—as the wind swirls your blonde hair and the dark shadows of the landscape move fast outside the window like a shutter-film, placing you against it in slow motion.

Do you see the fireworks in the distance as they climb above the dark limestone hills, kaleidoscopic, the remnants falling to the horizon like candy sprinkles? Do you hear their explosions echo in the vacuum of the empty night, like popcorn popping inside a microwave? Inside the truck the cassette tape plays a hollow electric guitar as a man's voice echoes and with each note, higher, higher, I watch your eyes close and you dance, your head moving sinuously in circles, your feet tap-tapping on the floor, until you become invisible.

We're driving fast at ninety miles per hour and the fireworks get closer but I don't know where they're coming from, we haven't passed through a town since we got into this desert and that was hours ago. I watch them like I used to watch them on the fourth of July back home in Indiana where you and I used to sit on that old white bed sheet in the middle of the high school football field, the stadium lights turned off. We'll never see that field again, though, never going back to that town, and as I begin to float away into a memory you grab my thigh and then point out the windshield and say, *Do you see? Is that ...* and I say, *Maybe it's a fair? I don't know, maybe it's not real. It can't be.* You ask, *Can we stop?* And I look down at the duffle bag that hides a stack of crumpled bills, \$2,695 to be exact—both of our savings combined minus the couple hundred that we'd already spent on bread, gas, and water to get this far—and you look at me and say, *Please?* But the way your eyes stare at me, I can't say no, so I tell you, *If it's more than \$10 we can't go in,* and you must think it's not because now I feel your lips pressed against my cheek.

When I pull the truck over into a parking lot of sand and gravel there are only four cars. I don't want to spend any of the money so I tell you, *They must be closed,* but you say, *All the lights are on, and the music, can't you hear the music?* So I say, *Alright,* and we walk up to a booth that reads tickets but there is no one inside. I put my hand in the pocket of my jeans and feel a few dollar bills but you grab me and say, *Wes, there is no one here, let's just go inside,* and we do.

A carnival, but not like back home, because the few people we see here are all brown, nothing like we've ever seen before, and you tug my shoulder and whisper into my ear, *Look how dark they are, I think they're Native Americans.* I've only seen them in history books, never in real life, so I say, *I think you're right,* and we continue walking as we smile at them not knowing what to do, and they smile back—I can tell this makes you happy.

Look at the neon lights of the Ferris wheel glowing like a Christmas tree set against a dark black sky; listen to the clanging sounds of the carousel turning its rustic wooden horses, the pipe organ blowing chimes like train whistles, the cymbals like tin pots dropped upon a kitchen floor. Do you smell the funnel cakes and the steam from the fried red peppers? Do you feel the thin air out here struggling to hold us down, almost like you could float away any minute? We walk straight to the Ferris wheel because I want to be romantic and take you to the top of the world, and when we ride you quickly fall asleep on my shoulder as we move like a clock hand slowly turning time.

As you're asleep I stare up at the moon, who looks much lonelier than us, and who is so luminously white like a jewel from all the stars reflecting off of each other that she looks like one big eye in the sky—the only eye to watch over us now—just like it's watching over the land below. I began talking to the moon, because, you know, when you disappear like this I need someone to talk back, and the moon talks back, and I know, as the craters seem to move to form a smile as if acknowledging what I say.

But it's getting late and the Ferris wheel bulbs are shutting of one by one so I nudge you and say, *We better go.* As we're walking almost everyone who was here has left, and I catch your eyes peering over to

the red trailer to your left that holds stuffed animals on the wall. I know that your dad never took you to the fair, never did a nice thing for you, and I wish your mother was still alive because she would've saved you from him, but that's why I'm here, that's why we left, and though I can't do much for you I want to do all that I can so I lead your hand with me towards the stand and you say, *Where are we going?* I lead you along to the little man behind the counter with a thick black moustache and thin green eyes whose white shirt still sticks to his skin from the hot desert day. He asks in slow English, *What are you two kids doing out here so late, all alone in the desert?* I turn to you and kiss your forehead and tell the man, *Just chasing a dream.* The man smiles, nods his head, and says as he waves his hands, pointing up to the sky, *Ah, you see this... this is a magical land we're on, and we believe if you close your eyes and think hard enough, your dream will find you,* and I nod, knowing that we are almost there, maybe another day, and I point up at the stuffed animals and turn to you, *Which one do you want?* And you tell me, *No, we don't have much money Wes,* but I turn to the man and say, *I'll take the brown bear,* and he looks at me real deep like he is looking through me and grabs a white buffalo from the very top instead, and it's kinda ugly, not as good looking as the bears and the horses. He hands it to me and says, *Here, this is the white buffalo, the sacred animal of my people, it will bring you closer to your dream,* and I turn to you and your cheeks are red and you've got your hand on your mouth, laughing, and I ask you, *What do you think?* And you say, *It's cute, I like it,* so I give the man \$5 and put it in your hands as we walk towards the truck. *Thank you, I love it,* you say, and I can tell you are happy.

But as we get closer to the gates you slow down and begin to walk towards the bathrooms. *What is it?* I ask and you tell me, *It's a family.* A family of four, a mother and father with two young children, a girl and a boy, tucked underneath their arms, bodies pressed against each other for warmth through the cold desert night, leaning up against the entrance to the restrooms. All of their eyes are closed in sleep, and the young girl—whose head is rested on her father's round belly—moves gracefully up and down each time her father snores. All they have is a blanket to cover up the children and I watch you bend down to look at them, no expression on your face, and I can tell that this makes you sad. *What do you think they're doing here?* You ask, and I say, *They don't have any place else to go.* I say, *Let's go, there's nothing we can do.*

Once in the truck the first thing I do is check that duffle bag and all the money is there so we get back onto the road where you ask, *Are we gonna die? Are we gonna end up like that Wes? Homeless in the cold?* And I laugh and say, *No, no, we're just being born. We're going to live forever,* and you clutch my hand and smile. *It's like being a kid all over again, isn't it? Not knowing what it all means, where we're gonna end up,* and you say, *I guess it's better than home.* Now you hold the white buffalo to your head and use it as a pillow, and after a few minutes you fall asleep, but there is something special about watching you sleep—peaceful like a child as if no one could do you any harm—so I let you disappear again, but now I want to stop the truck and drift away with you.

After a while I pull over to pee on the side of the road and as I'm standing there I hear the crunch of footsteps behind me upon gravel where they aren't supposed to be. I don't know why but I expect to turn around and see your father standing there—Mr. Rissinger in his camouflage hat and coffee stained twill shirt, a shotgun in his hands, coming after us to steal you from me and do what he's always done to you with his fist and the things he never should have made you do, blaming you for your mother's death. I start remembering the look on his face when I woke him up from his drunken slumber and told him that I was taking his daughter, that we'd never be back again, and then I told him I was taking his truck, too, and he'd never see that again either. He was too drunk and stupid to understand what I was saying though, so we packed our bags and got the hell out of that place, a one-stoplight town where there are no hopes and no dreams. It was the best feeling in the world—seeing him come out the front door screaming and stumbling as he watched us drive off forever. But when I turn around it's only you, crouched holding your jeans down to your knees with the remnants of the last green desert leaf in your hands, and you laugh and say, *I've never done this before,* and I say, *Done what before? Peed like this,* you say, *Out in the open,* and I tell you, *Don't worry, there ain't no one watching out here.*

We get back on the road and you start talking about all the things that we're going to do, how we're going to get a place, both get jobs, and watch the sunset on the ocean. *I've never been to the ocean,* you say, and I tell you, *We're going to live on the ocean,* and you put your head on my lap as I drive and stroke your

hair and turn the music up loud. Soon my headlights are drawn like a magnet to the green square sign that stands alone in the desert to reassure us that there is life out there somewhere, that we are on the right road to our dream, as it says Los Angeles, five hundred miles to freedom.

Temptation

By Ammon Hollister

I'll be your booze, LSD, Ecstasy
When all you need is sleep.
I will crawl through your veins
And pick holes in your unconscious mind
So you don't know if you're asleep or awake.
I'll scratch and bite the sinews of your sanity
Until your retinas are bleeding for mercy.
But as I persuade you to lick rusted nails for my amusement
I'll caress your tongue
So even though your taste buds are scraping off,
You'll taste my cool, cloudy cotton candy.
I'll give you the fuckin' trip of your life, man,
To Atlantis, El Dorado and Pompeii.
You'll go down in red, gold and heat
Like a passenger on the sinking Lusitania,
Skin flaking away from bone
Before you find release beneath sweet dark waves.

The Conspiracy in Your Smile

By Caroline Clutterbuck

Your eyes are dark and damp and humid
like a dive into the marsh,
I come out heavy,
wet,
disoriented,
stinking of your stare.

In a deserted fairground, full of wind,
full of white, you appear,
surrounded by... by...

A beat pulses in my ear.

The murder of crows,
they're at your feet,
picking at your toes.
Some flutter and flock
to make a nest in your hair,
but you remain stoic,
standing there.
A bleach-stained dress.
Haunting cheekbones.
Your smile is a sneer.

There's something greater at work here;
you must mean something to me.
Even though I've solved your murder,
you are the darkest mystery.

I'll need to name you something,
to label, to contain.
I'll leave you, cramped, contorted.
I'll file you away.

How would you like to be
a symbol of conspiracy?

In the dream I had last night,
your nails scratched at the pavement
and when you could not crack the ground,
I awoke
to a silent house
and clean hands.

Sore Subject

By Nicco Pandolfi

Your hands are works of scar cartography,
contours carved by years of wind and salt,
souvenirs of the rough caress of the sea.
Your blade does its work dance,
barely keeping up with your deft dips
and rolls as silver tears silver
and separates flesh from its frame.
Steel taps bone, keeping erratic time
like the senile cuckoo clock that hangs
in a sun-forgotten corner of the Crow's Nest
back home in Portland.
Funny how the homespun barmaid
slipped from your sure hands
after decades of practice at catching alewives.
Looking up from your graceful filet,
you cast a stern glance at my idling fingers
and grumble that the fire won't make itself.

Why Claire Left

By Meghan Callahan

I remember it was springtime. The green shoots of tulips peeked out from the last snow of the season, daring nature to prevent them from budding. All that life lurking right there, under the surface. Hardy. Funny how it's the beautiful things that never quite die, like there's just too much life left in them to fade out.

Something I've never told anyone is how I didn't even like her at first. Her lipstick was a shade too bright, and smeared into the corners of her smile where laughter had left wrinkles. I don't usually notice little things like that, but Claire was always smiling. She made it impossible to stop looking at the details. It was like you had to pick her apart because the effect of the whole thing was too much for the eyes to take in. She was staring into the sun, she was light coming off of water, and she was a shooting star and oil spilled in the street and the edges of broken glass glinting all at once. But for some reason all I could see was that lipstick slash, the imperfections marring the mouth that was younger once, framed by flyaway gray hair.

Claire wouldn't let anyone call her "Mrs." anything, or even "Ms." She insisted, with a kind but unyielding determination, that everyone just call her by her first name. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I could tell you her last name, if I ever knew it at all. I was seventeen when she started coming into the gas station where I worked every Tuesday and Thursday after soccer practice.

Her purchases never differed, regardless of sales or new brands. She got three tins of cat food with the peel-off lids (tuna flavored, and she didn't own a can opener), a glass bottle of root beer, and a pack of cinnamon gum, which she would leave for me.

"Hello young man," Claire would say, smiling in that radiant, lipstick smeared way, "and how are you today?"

"Just fine, thank you," I would always answer, pulling my hands out of my pockets and trying to stand up straighter because she'd treated me to a lecture on posture once. Often as not I'd have something in my mouth---a toothpick, a jawbreaker, a paperclip I'd bent out of shape with my teeth---a bad habit I'd picked up from the other guys on the team. I remember a fascination with mouths in high school, the tricks lips and tongues could pull after so many years of useless eating and speaking.

"You ruin your teeth with those things," Claire always scolded, and without fail she'd pull down a pack of the cinnamon and slide it to me. "Try this instead, why don't you. This is the flavor my husband liked."

I'd thank her as I rang up her order, bagging it in paper (never plastic) and off she would toddle, leaning heavily on her three-legged cane, with the faint scent of something cottony and clean lingering behind her. Best estimates of the neighborhood put her at around seventy-five, but looking back now I don't believe it. My vision of time may be skewed, with my own children grown and gone, but I would be willing to swear she wasn't a day over sixty. Her shopping trips became a comfortable routine with us, something I'd look forward to the same way I looked forward to the end of my shift. The only other place Claire was known to visit regularly was the library six streets down off of Fourth and Main, and then only for children's story hour on Wednesdays. I was the one who saw her most frequently, and I felt important because of this, benevolent, even. Bagging her items was a good deed.

I worked at the gas station for three years, but Claire is the only customer I remember with anything resembling clarity. The moment of my life that stands out most was that spring evening, with the setting sun streaming through the glass door and making even the grimy tile seem phosphorescent. I can still see the way she sagged against the counter when I close my eyes, her too-bright pink painted mouth distorted in a silent gasp of pain. By the time I'd gotten out from behind the cash register she was on the ground. The paramedics were there in twelve minutes, but I would find that out much later. I don't remember dialing 911. I don't even remember the CPR. When I had a chance to see my reflection in the

mirror later (an hour? several? was it even that evening?) the only mark that it had occurred was the lipstick smudge at the corner of my mouth, like a vivid scar.

The diamond wedding ring on her hand dug into my palm, and I remember thinking that I'd never before realized thin her fingers were, or the web of veins running underneath her tissue-paper thin skin. Stacy Evans' dad had to peel my fingers off one by one, slowly.

At the funeral, we learned there had never been any cats. Whenever I picture those hands, aged and trembling a little as she carefully counted out precise change, I picture the peel-tops of the cat food (tuna flavor) and the large diamond left by someone who'd passed into memory long before her heart shivered to a stop underneath me.

And I never did become that soccer star I'd dreamed about, and lately some memories have gone hazy, coated with the spider web strands of age. But I've never forgotten Claire and her gray, flyaway hair and the cotton scent of her perfume.

And the only gum I ever chew is cinnamon flavored.

Ode to Arden

By Aaron Bennett

Once, we played in the woods
using those brittle branches as broadswords.
But we always came home with poison ivy
and had to take baths filled with oatmeal.
We made promises to lie on the blanket of cool grass
in my backyard and watch the sky transform
like those action figures we used to love.
The branches broke, the ivy grew, the grass dried
and our toys dismembered.

In the summers we used to throw rocks
at hornets nests and laughed as the swarm
chased us into the laps of our mothers
who made smoothies with too much ice.
You climbed a tall tree once to kill their queen
but fell from that high place and made
a crunching sound.
They stung you 127 times before they grew tired
and flew back home.
The ice melted, the hornets multiplied
and your scars remained.

During the gray afternoons of early December, we walked across
the frozen pond where wild blackberries like to grow.
The ice was brittle and when I fell through,
my legs went numb and you pulled me home
in your red plastic wagon.
We played on the cheap pine roofs of half constructed homes
and in the bronze fields of barley that belonged
to the trigger happy Farmer who smelled of his yield.
I don't like talking about what happened after that.
The pond became a cesspool, the blackberries shriveled,
and the homes were sold at a loss.

At night we sat on my porch
and spoke of cartoons, aliens, and that cute girl in class
I swore would marry me.
We used to dream in color
but soon realized that sepia was the proper hue
and woke up.
Of course, the cartoons cancelled, the aliens never came,
and the girl found someone better.

Duty

By Daniel Carlson

Crushing rain throws itself at him
Whirling gales rise over his head
Covering old eyes with a cupped hand
He searches the shadows, straining,
Struggling to locate a child's shape
He shines his torch to tree roots
Trudging over mud and newborn rivers
Light reflects off red cotton cloth
And he bends down over her form
Soaking and slick and sickly white skin
Hair pasted flat against her head
He heaves her over his shoulder
And turns back, out of the basin
Pale lights bounce further along
A frantic father rushes forward
Rips his child from the man who
Politely ignores his tears
Overridden with the rain

Snapshot

By Lindsey Clark

A snapshot is all I have left. I have a part of the puzzle, but am missing all the other pieces. My memories fade in and out, and sometimes I'm not sure if I'm remembering what actually happened or just what I saw in pictures.

She was old, ancient in fact. Great Aunt Annie was a relic from the mysterious past. Her face was a map of peaks and valleys that never seemed to end. While her fine hair framed her weathered face and almost matched her skin giving her a translucent glow. That was all that could be noticed from away in the kitchen, yet once you entered the den, everything changed. Her piercing eyes, little brown balls of fire, would track every movement, gesture, and glance. My mom, aunts, uncles, and various family members would urge us forward. The children were the sacrifices to the beast that summoned them to her cave in the mountains.

She sits on her throne and waits for people to come to her. You would think her small frame would be overpowered by the majestic chair, yet it only serves to embrace the power she has. It's in the corner, out of the way, not the center of attention, yet she commands the attention of every being in the room. Her fierceness is only contrasted by the world behind her that seems untouched. The lush green forest carpeted the hills that made indents in the horizon. Looking past the pool that seemed to be carved out of the ground, there is the magnificent basin of green fertility that her windows look out over. The blazing sky is a concoction of the most vivid pinks, purples, and reds. So alive it seems it will set afire the soft hills it so delicately grazes.

Scene two; the kitchen is a flurry of hands and motion, white coats fluttering from the sink to stove, to out the swinging door. I watch someone frost a chocolate mousse cake with perfect petals and hope that the cake is for us. Another white coat is taking hors d'oeuvres out of the oven and arranging them in a petal pattern on the platter. I stare as another server appears out of nowhere and whisks the plate away while balancing another plate piled high with spanakopitas. She dances out of the kitchen so effortlessly. She looks the exact opposite of the concentrated cake decorator who is wielding the icing with such determination that I doubt a bomb going off would distract her. I feel a squeeze on my shoulder, and I feel as though my heart will jump out of my chest; I've been caught. Yet when I look up, a rosy cheeked woman is offering me a piece of freshly baked French bread. A nod is all I can manage. My heart stops its mad beating and I take the treat. It burns in my hand, but I don't drop it. A quick slip and it's in my mouth, the flaky goodness melts into deliciousness.

My memory rolls into the next scene, drenched in heat and sunshine. The world around is a blur of colors, then I break the surface and am surrounded by a cool relief. I dance with the water, amazed at how it pushes me to the surface without the slightest effort. There is an explosion of sound once I leave the underworld that seems to have no gravity. Toddlers screaming and parents chasing after them, there is a swirl of activity that surrounds the pool. No one sees Oliver, the black and white speckled cocker spaniel, meander over to the pool deck. I watch Oliver seize his chance, and lunge into the water. He doggie paddles the length of the pool with the nobility of a king, then walks right out using the steps in the shallow end, as if he did it all the time. And with one big shake, he heads back to the yard, leaving only a trail of wet paw prints.

Then the final scene. The grass is soft and damp with the morning's dew. I am standing in front of the freshly cut earth. My hand disappears inside my mom's and my right hand grips my cousin's. I'm trying to find a way to figure this out. No more summer visits to the pool in the mountains? We are given flowers to throw into the grave. I step forward hand in hand with Kate and we stare into the rectangular hole where our attic adventures and summers of fun will be for the rest of time.

The last thing I remember is throwing the rose, turning to leave and all the time resisting the urge to go back and save my flower. The one I had lost forever.

The reel snaps, nothing more. Blackness fills the screen.

Ode to an M&M:

By Steph Maniaci

My fiancé left me
the day before
our one-year anniversary,

but first he gave me
a package of M&Ms
as a parting gift.

At my splintered grey
table, I slide the blue
ones into a pile

because blue
is his favorite;
they leave

stains on my
fingertips, so I will
eat them first.

*They lived together
in a tree house,
said the M&M of its parents,*

*naked beneath a blanket
in a vanilla orchids' forest,
gloried in Mexican rainfalls.*

But you're filed in a
paper shroud,
deprived of

camaraderie by a
sugarpaste shell—
ready to avenge

life via kamikaze
mission in the
tubules under my skin.

You will slip down
my gullet, & like an ex-
lover leave skid

marks of blue to sign your hate
as you break

down in my bile

The Animal Bride: Variations on a Theme

By Abby Current

1.

Maybe you were a beast of thorns and thick, drowning blossoms.
I, caught in cold castle chains, cannot be bought
With luxury and fineness, poetry or downturned eyes.
Demanding love will fail — no, coax me with your dying breath.
Persuade me, trick me, whatever it takes
To scrape away fangs and coarse fur, to reach
The prince who bows to me beneath your thick skin.

2.

Maybe I was a swan maiden, all white and feathered down.
You sang such a sweetness that I crooned, throat-deep,
And you trembled at the tremor of the sound.
We sang back and forth and all I know
Is that I will leave you still. All vows will I lay aside,
And still I lure you closer and closer
To my hollow heart of pinions and feathers and softness.

3.

Maybe we were selkies both, creatures of will and wild.
We fumbled through fishermen and wept into the sea
But we kept going back to our own traps,
To the poisoned bait, to the sleeping draughts,
Dreaming all the while that somehow we truly loved.

Trees Pantoum

By Julianne Hyer

The trees are shedding their skin.
Shaking the crackling flame-colored flakes from their limbs.
The trees are showing their bones.
Exposing their tough and tender selves.

Shaking the crackling flame-colored flakes from their limbs,
They dance and sway in the whistling wind.
Exposing their tough and tender selves,
Once again to the cold embrace of winter.

They dance and sway in the whistling wind,
Their crumpled fallen prayers rustle at my feet.
Once again to the cold embrace of winter
They defiantly dig in their roots to hardened ground.

Their crumpled fallen prayers rustle at my feet,
As I look up, past their outstretched arms to the grey above.
They have defiantly dug in their roots to the hardened ground,
Prideful and strong, they face the swirling ice.

As I look up, past their outstretched arms to the grey above,
I see a sky so different from the blue warm bliss of my home.
Prideful and strong, they face the swirling ice
With so much more tenacity than I could ever muster.

I see a sky so different from the blue warm bliss of my home.
The trees have bravely shed their skin.
With so much more tenacity than I could ever muster.
The trees are bravely showing their bones.

Life Support

By Ammon Hollister

Gears and cogs grind my bones
between their metal teeth,
and drag me into an apparatus
which strikes sparks in my kerosene blood.
A steam shriek is all I can release
as I feel myself breaking inside
this accidental entrapment.

I hate you. And all the sweet words
you whisper to me beneath our sheets,
your breath the only source of oxygen
when the sweat from our bodies
clogs my throat. But the bellows of your chest
still fuels my furnace with each exhale
as I cling to your body and echo the three words
I've wrapped around my waist like a chain.

Necropolis

By Maggie Reagan

The day after you tell me you don't love me
I clean dead flies from below the windowsill.
All night, they rioted against the glass,
such swift, sharp lives spent straining
against that barrier, and now I sweep their shells
into a world they could not reach alone.

Once when it was raining outside,
you tucked the edge of a blanket
up around my shoulders as you passed

and now, as you walk away from me,
I'm wishing the wetness on my face
was nothing more than rain. I have not seen
an emptiness like this since the Merenid Tombs:
hammered doorways opening only onto sky,
strands of sun winding through the walls
as if to raise the wild dead, and nothing
but the corners of buildings left standing, centuries
old and crumbling, grass tufting along edges.

When there is lightning at night, when I am folded
into darkness and the sound of rain on the roof,
I still think of you.

In Ohio it's the first of November, and no souls
I can see rise from the earth
but a mist steams from the pavement, looping loosely,
like dead things dancing. Dust settles
softly below the window. I bend, touching,
then pull back, the particles, like light, clinging
too closely to my fingertips. In the empty hallway,
the ghost of your footsteps toll like church bells
as I brush the dust from my fingers and stand.

Contributors

Beth Bailey ('12) is an English – Creative Writing major, editor-in-chief of *Exile*, intern for Mixer Publishing, and fierce beater for the Denison Death Eaters. When not attempting to finish her senior writing project, you can find her curled up with a cup of coffee reading *A Game of Thrones* on her nook.

Aaron Bennett ('13) is majoring in Philosophy and minoring in Music Performance and Creative Writing. He would like to believe that his writing is influenced by the spontaneity of a Charlie Parker solo mixed with the emotionally charged prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald, but is clearly delusional.

Meghan Callahan ('14) is a Creative Writing major with a double minor in Art History and Theatre. She is a member of Burpee's Seedy Theatrical Company and D.I.T.A. and serves on the editorial boards of both *Exile* and *Articulate*. Her passions include the written word, laughing, drinking tea, and sunflowers.

Daniel Carlson ('14) was born and raised in Cleveland Heights Ohio, where he took part in creative writing-type activities for many years before joining DU. He is a Religion/English double major hoping to graduate in 2014 and maybe even find a job by 2020. His other interests include reading, anime, and board games.

Lindsey Clark ('15) is a first year student at Denison and is originally from New York. She lived in California for two years and returns annually to surf. She is an officer in Habitat for Humanity and a member of Kappa Alpha Theta.

Caroline Clutterbuck ('15) is a first year maybe-art major. She likes grapefruit, cats, and imagination. She thinks poetry is difficult, but pretty fun to write, in a stomach-churning, I-never-want-anyone-to-read-this sort of way. And yet here we are.

Abby Current ('14) is a Creative Writing and Education double major from Leesburg, Ohio. Having resigned herself to a life of debt, she plans to write and teach high school English post-Denison so at least she'll be doing what she loves. She's been writing about ghosts and fairies since she was small and doesn't plan on stopping anytime soon.

Moriah Ellenbogen ('14) is a sophomore from Olney, MD. She is majoring in Philosophy and minoring in Psychology; she is the co-president of Hillel, an editor for *Episteme*, and a research assistant for the Women's Studies Department. Moriah enjoys spending time with her two dogs, road trips, listening to her iPod at outrageously high volumes, and—*obviously*—writing poetry.

Sarah Fiete ('12) is an English (Creative Writing) major from Dublin, Ohio, with minors in Music Composition and Theatre. When she is not at rehearsal, she enjoys working at The Bandersnatch and participating in Fencing Club, Tae Kwon Club, and *Exile*.

Debbie Gillum ('14) is an English and Communication major from Columbus, Ohio. She is the Forum Editor of The Denisonian and Treasurer of both Denison Christian Community and Denison Quidditch Team. She enjoys horseback riding, reading magazines, and eating warm chocolate chip cookies.

Jonathan Halper ('14) is a sophomore Creative Writing major and History minor from the picturesque town of Chagrin Falls, Ohio. He's written two novels and is working on his third. He also received his black belt in Tae Kwon Do in December 2009, and participates in both Tae Kwon Do and Writer's Club on campus.

Sam Heyman ('14) is a sophomore Creative Writing major, minoring in Spanish and concentrating in Queer Studies. His interests include videogames, writing fiction of all kinds and over-committing himself to student organizations. Sam is active in Theatre, Campus Governance and is the current President of the Denison Writer's Club.

Ammon Hollister ('12) is a senior Theatre major, Philosophy minor from Cincinnati, Ohio. She has been in many writing programs and workshops and was published in her high school's literary magazine. She is very excited to have her work in *Exile*.

Julianne Hyer ('14) is from Nashville, TN and is majoring in Sociology/Anthropology with a minor in Educational Studies. She loves reading, theatre and playing Ultimate Frisbee. And she would like to give a special thanks to Professor Mike Croley for all his great advice.

Christie Maillet ('12) is a senior Communication major and English Literature minor from Irvington, New York. She has been avidly writing since 6th grade and was published in her high school's literary magazine, Voices, all four years. She is also passionate about music and DJs on 91.1 WDUB "The Doobie."

Steph Maniaci ('12) is a senior Studio Arts BFA major from Mentor, Ohio. She is inspired by the work of Lee Ann Roripaugh, Kim Addonizio, and Sharon Olds. Steph plans to work for a year and then attend graduate school for MFAs in Studio Arts and Creative Writing.

Mimi Mendes de Leon ('14) is a sophomore Creative Writing and Religious Studies double major at Denison University. She is currently studying religions in Ghana for the spring of 2012. On campus, Mimi is involved as a WDUB DJ, chair of DCA: New Beginnings, as well as a member of Delta Gamma and the Yoga Club. Mimi hopes to continue writing as both a passion and a mission.

Natalie Olivo ('13), a native of Pittsburgh, PA, is an English major with a Creative Writing concentration and History minor. She is an editor for *The Denisonian* and an online reporter for University Communications. After graduation, Natalie hopes to work in the publishing industry.

Nicco Pandolfi ('12) hails from Pittsburgh, PA, the Paris of Appalachia. His primary academic interest is environmental history and he wrote a senior thesis project on historical shifts in seed production in American agriculture. He is fascinated by maps, alternative building methods, and the power of human narrative.

Maggie Reagan ('12) is a reluctant senior in desperate search of a life goal—or, failing that, a job. When not writing ~~Harry Potter fanfiction~~ poetry, she spends most of her time in a book, with horses, and watching country music videos.

Ellen Rosebrough ('13) is an English Literature and Theatre double major from St. Louis, MO. At Denison, she is involved with Burpee's Seedy Theatrical Co., DUwop and Residential Education. She also serves as an officer in D.I.T.A. and is an editor-in-chief of *Exile*.

Allison Scarlott ('15) is a freshman at Denison University. She plays on the Women Varsity Soccer Team and is a member of the Delta Gamma Fraternity. Allison is majoring in Creative Writing and Political Science. She aspires to be an author one day.

Autumn Stiles ('14) was bred on the East Coast and nourished on the bread and butter of Penguin books thanks to her mother's job, and believes in literature above all things. If she could, she would have a tea party with Oscar Wilde, the Fitzgeralds, Toni Morrison, Blake, Joseph Campbell, Coleridge, Marquez,

Lemony Snicket, and a multitude of other characters who exist only in the minds of bibliophiles like Autumn.

Amanda Tangredi ('12) is a senior Spanish major and English minor. She looks forward to doing something after graduation, whatever that "something" might be.

Shawn Whites ('13) is a Creative Writing major with a minor in Philosophy. He plans to attend law school and would still like to write fiction in his spare time.

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