

Department: Oakwood



OAKWOOD

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*Oakwood is a South Dakota State University
production of creative arts and literature.*

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We would also like to extend sincere appreciation to literary advisor, Dr. Christine Stewart-Nuñez, and to design advisor, Professor Randy Clark. Copyright©2011, South Dakota State University. Unauthorized reproduction is strictly prohibited.

The First Annual Brookings
Book Company Award

First Place

"Mistaken" by Bonnie Moxnes

Second Place

"Geography of Sound" by Sarah Harris

Third Place

"Breastmilk Musings" by Sara Olivier

Honorable Mentions

"The Fish Activist" by Lauren Smith

"Friday Night, Grocery Store Parking
Lot" by Stephen Snyder

"Adventures with Ringo" by Jessica Slama

*The Brookings Book Company Award honors
outstanding works of fiction, poetry, and
creative non-fiction featured in Oakwood.*

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Adventures with Ringo

Jessica Slama

A peeping sun sets grass dew on fire. Our prairie
blazes as you and I sit behind the house. I grip
sides, catch white paint-chips in my palms.

I look down at my rose-hued cowboy boots,
click heels. Your black and gray-flecked ears perk
up with laughter floating from the emerald spire distant.

Muscles tighten your old man's
mottled coat, nose twitches,
near-blind blue eyes brilliant from bounding to
catch our brothers: courage, intellect, heart.

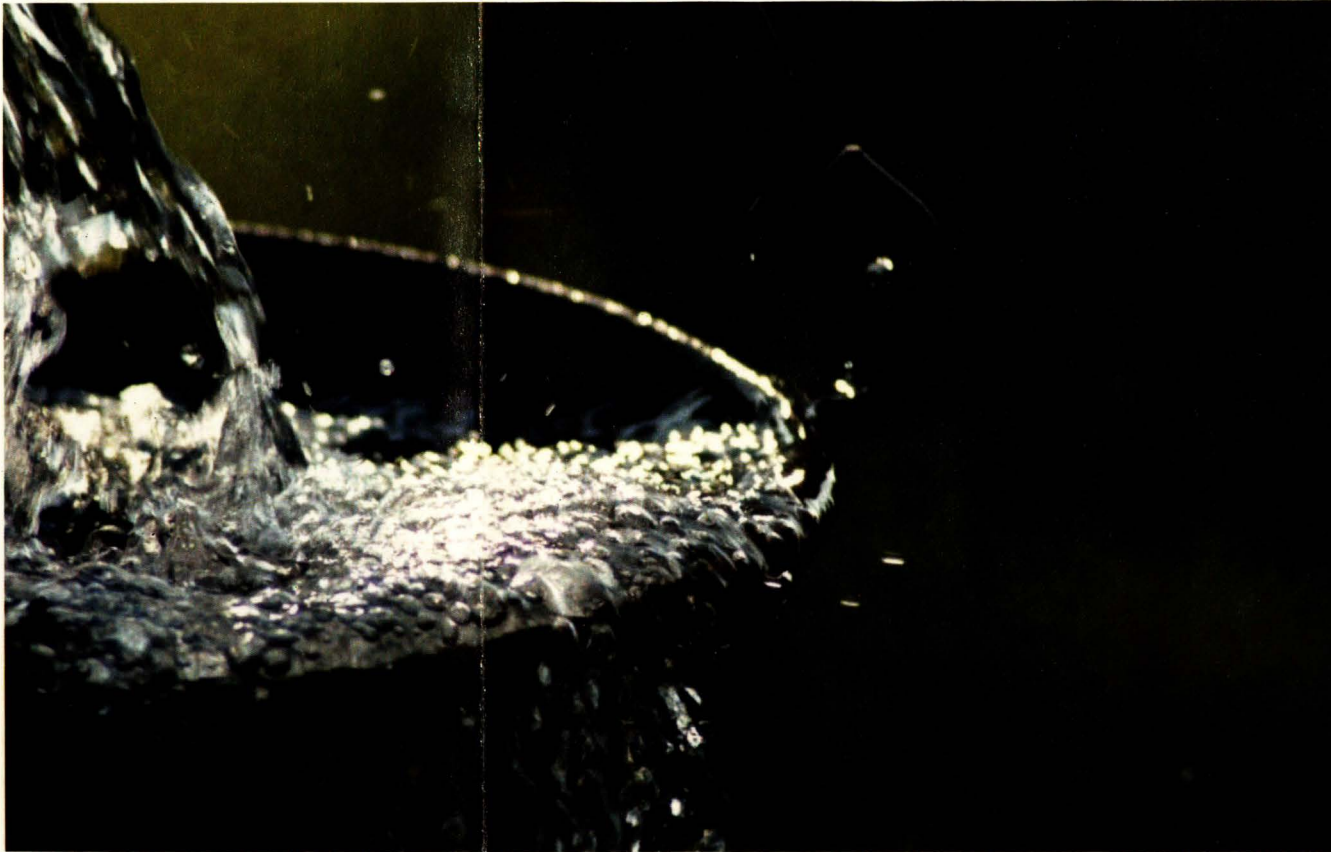
Grass bends as feet and padded-paws launch. I trip
on memory; dew giggles fade on mown grass. I sprint
to my partner's place and crunch grounded shingles.

I curl, shelter my frame, close eyes and click heels,
open to muddy tennis-shoes, a giant
crouching behind a dog-house. Only Dorothy.

Catch and Release

Sarah M. Harris

I killed a man in Nome. He showed me
his world stuffed into the confines
of tattered Levis and fishing boats. He cast
a net knotted by phantom spindles that stab
and retreat, puncture and fill gashes
with frayed twine. And with gnashing teeth, I bit down
hard, swallowed his barbed ambition, choked
on coarse fibers cutting blood rivers in once-open
airways. Beneath the surface, life grows
from within, expands to fit space available—
carp in a decorative pond.



Overflowing
Theresa Swedzinski
Photography

Wide Awake and Dreaming *Noelle Vainikka*

Belief in a dog is to turn a perfectly
fine amphibian into a prince.
Surprise, wake up to blue soft sounds
of muffled traffic and “Don’t Walk” signals,
neon commands lurking behind puffy lids.
Blood pounds through skin and tissue

following the drumbeats of a fast-paced
sprint through foggy dreams of
swallowed screams that make mud in my throat.
Thunderclouds cluster overhead, filled
with rain, cats and dogs, or playing cards.
Shuffle the deck and resume play to

the left of the dealer. Cool, then hot
as sweater comes off and socks wad up
on the floor. Kiss a frog and ruin
a classic fairy tale. Calloused hands of leather
grip thick ropes, knees hug the plank, back
and forth, swinging underneath the tree.



Hegelian Thesis
Marisa TenBrink
Photography/Photoshop

Midsummer Forest

Erin Ernst

Through the forest of Midsummer she walked
and looked around her at the inhabitants:
Bouncy Ball with her husband, Key Chain.
Little Joke Card and Cookie playing in their garden.
Mr. And Mrs. Ornament, oldest in town.
They sat around the fire, yelling
about the kids next door.

Farther on, Dummy Head was
bugging young Ring Holder
on the corner again. Ring Holder was screaming
a fit. She found her lane and walked
the short distance to her home
thinking of Midsummer Forest, home
to discarded objects. This forest gives them life,
and so the live it.

Pixie was the only one left in the forest
of its original inhabitants.
She was happy, but lonely.
She fell asleep then, dreaming of her life before.



Untitled
Beth DeJong
Photography

Chondromalacia *Jena Christianson*

Below my concrete knee lid,
toe-tip deep,
it prickles—
itches like a week-old
scab that wishes
to be stripped, but
will merely sweat
crimson micro-beads—
a collective pool of hot liquid
searing the overly-raw flesh.

The sturdy cadence
of my blood-bouncer
pulsates
beneath the reining rooftop—
like a lingering finger, crushed
by seventy pounds
of sheetmetal car door—
ticking
a timeless tempo
of brawny blaze.

Heaving micro-flames
lick the solid ceiling;
nibbling—
like a pair of rusty tweezers
scouring for a direction-deficient splinter—
upward, attempting
to escape
the unkind confines
of my flesh-jacket.



Hegelian Antithesis
Marisa TenBrink
Photography/Photoshop

Damnation *Evan Phillips*

"I've done some terrible things, have I told you that? *Terrible things.*" The voice that slithered out of the phone was deep and raspy. The man sounded like he was growling.

George Thatcher hunched over his desk. Sweat shone on his forehead and he switched the handset from one hand to the other, wiping his palm on the front of his pants. He didn't want to talk to this man, not one damn bit. John Stratton was as good as hung as far as George was concerned—it would actually be a relief when he swung there on the gallows, eyes rolling upwards and scleras staring out with lifeless white intensity. George shook his head as he looked over the man's file. There were pictures, muddy and gray, but even then he could see the blood and the twisted shapes that had once been called, lovingly, faces. A shudder shook his body and he almost dropped the handset. This bastard *deserved* the noose. And when John finally met his end George would be a happy man. No, that wasn't right—he'd be a *free* man. Well, that was until his poor health caught up with him six years later, in 1939, striking him dead outside the San Quentin prison.

"Yes, Mister Stratton. I am well aware of your misdeeds. But, I have some good news for you." He suddenly noticed how hot it was in his office—too hot. Dark patches spread under his huge lumbering arms. He switched the handset again, wiping the other palm on his pants.

"I don't want your good news, Georgie. I'm ready for the end. Been in here since the World War and I know that whatever good news you have won't get me out. The only thing sending me to the chair will do is take away any more time I spend in this trash of a prison."

"We've been over this, Mr. Stratton. Capital punishment in California has never utilized the electric chair. If convicted, you'll be hung. Which brings me to the reason that I telephoned you—that good news I was talking about. Whether you'd like to hear it or not. Prosecution is willing to hear your plea in court one last time. If anything, it will push back your date of execution. If the appeals work out I think I can, if not get you *out* of San Quentin, then at least to a mental institution where you might have some chance at redemption. Will you accept?" He hoped to God that Stratton responded with a no.

"Eat a dick, George. I know you're doing your job, but I just went and told you: I'm done playing these games. What good's it going to do to tell the same tired old story again? To tell them that I *still* don't feel a lick of remorse? Hah. And those mental institutions do some pretty nasty stuff to guys like me, you know. Think we deserve it. And I suppose, in a way, we do." He chuckled and let out a longing sigh, as if he had roused some distant memory. "I'd rather take my noose. But, I want you to know one thing, Georgie."

George licked his lips and opened his mouth to respond, but John began speaking again before he could make a peep. The muffled voice seemed to come from far away as his pulse knocked in his ears.

"I know what you think of me—how I'm such scum that ridding the world of a pest like me would be doing everyone a favor. I know that every night you pray to a God you don't believe in, and you ask Him to set you free from me. I know that you think my wife and daughters met their ends for the better because living with me would have been worse hell than dying together."

George made a choked noise.

"You see, I hear a lot of things in this place, George. A lot of things that would make a nice man like you, with his nice house and nice wife, go mad. That you call me about appeals makes me sick. I've been locked up too long to care anymore. So, in a way, you've won your freedom from me like I'll have won mine from this prison. And I suppose from a legal standpoint you could call yours a win, but I think otherwise. You know why? Because my death can't reverse theirs."

A series of clicks met George's ears, and then John Stratton was gone.

The day of execution was a bright and sunny November morning. John, shackled and cuffed, shuffled through the gray-green halls of San Quentin and swore to his escort, telling them that he should have every right to shave, and that they couldn't treat him like an animal before he met his end. "What would your god say to you," John asked, "when you deny a feeble old man his last request?"

The guard behind him perked up. "I ain't got a god."

A furry eyebrow rose high on John's head. "That so? I was under the impression that all men of law needed a god to worship because what better excuse is there to fall back on if you want to extend your will upon other men?" Thinking himself funny, John laughed, and his long gray beard jostled a brief dance. His hair hung dirty and long and disheveled; twigs and bits of food clung to clumps of it and squinting eyes peered out from behind, casting judgment on everything he passed.

Outside, the air smelled fresh compared to the dank prison. In the courtyard, looking bright and somehow lively, were the wooden gallows. There was a man up on a stool, tying the noose that had been lengthened specifically for John so that it would only break his neck rather than decapitate him or leave him strangling for several minutes. That thought of personalization made him smile and he found himself oddly aroused. A small throng of reporters with their flashbulb cameras milled around, but had turned his way as he was marched down the path and up the steps to the noose.

The prison chaplain stepped up and solemnly delivered the Last Rites as someone slipped the noose around John's neck. The prickly fibers of the rope tickled him and he huffed brief laughter. Below, a flashbulb went off. His wicked eyes flicked to the chaplain. "Why're you reading me that shit? Get your Catholic ass out of here—I know where I'm going. If it's not to your Hell, then it's somewhere quite like it. Hanging here will seem like a mercy compared to what will go down there, don't you think?"

The chaplain continued reading without seeming to hear any of what John said. Below, George stood amongst another throng of people. John recognized some as the men from the prosecution. John's eyes fixated upon George's and knew that bastard was grinning his ass off on the inside. Let him grin. He'll get his taste of death one day. They all will.

A voice perked up from behind him, asking him if he'd anything to say before he dropped. John's response was a low, bitter laughter.

And then he fell, making one last strangled noise as he reached the furthest descent. His legs twitched then stopped. Hair and beard that had flared upwards settled back upon Stratton's dead shoulders.

George Thatcher heaved a shuddered sigh filled with relief.

Far away from San Quentin, an old, drooping shanty sat alone on an endless prairie. Tonight, the only light came intermittently as clouds passed over the crescent of a first-quarter moon. Through the scudding clouds poured dim moonlight, revealing a man as he sauntered toward the shanty. His short hair lay about his head in a scraggly mess.

Light peeked through the shanty's cracks, showing a scant view of the interior, one that was barely big enough for two people, let alone the family that roomed there in a time long gone and nearly forgotten. This man knew who, though—he'd never forget this place. And as he stepped up to the door an image flashed into his mind. It was an image that he both recognized and found baffling. He saw this same shanty, but in its prime and with a coat of white paint that was only starting to peel. They put it up, he thought, unaware as to who "they" were. But he'd loved the shanty and loved the "they" who were with him very much—more than the booze and more than the drugs, though he loved those, too. Perhaps it was the latter that helped him paint this shanty and helped him cook dinner and made love to him. But, no, the image wasn't full of booze and drugs. It was full of—

His mind trailed as he touched the door, flittering away as the sun does when it sneaks behind thin clouds. Another image flashed into his mind, making him feel as if he should turn away from this shanty and that no good could ever come from something so...so *dead*. That word! That word caused him to perk up, but he didn't know why. Nothing that was dead was ever exciting. Pulling the rusty ring-handle and holding the door at arms length, he knew that nothing exciting lay within this dead place. His legs, however, thought differently. They had a mind of their own. The man wondered vaguely if the "they" who had lived with him in this shanty had been his legs, for he loved them, too.

The pungent smell of rotting flesh seeped up from the floorboards and wafted out to the man's nose. He didn't mind, however. He thought the smell was like flowers blooming in late spring.

His boot clomped down, causing a rat in one corner to squeak. Wind gusted outside, and the shanty creaked loudly as it swayed on its weakening foundation. A bed—his bed, their bed—was nestled in one corner, wooden like the rest of the shanty yet not rotting and falling apart like the walls and ceiling and floor. Animal pelts were stretched across to serve as bed sheets with the topmost one crumpled over itself and exposing a fleshy color that reminded him of someone. She was asking him what he'd done. But he didn't know what he'd done and so pushed the thought aside. What interested him at this point was that bed. The man didn't remember getting out of it, but surely he had. How else would he be up and about? The greater question was why he was sleeping in it in the first place, and that was something his brain would not give him. Perhaps it was them who made him sleep there, his—

Near the center of the shanty was a rusted stove, its vent trailing into a gaping hole that no doubt poured rain inside when the weather served it. Cupboards sat nestled against the wall opposite the bed, lined with cracked and dusty china. Broken glass littered the floor in front of one. A dim shaft of light caused something on the bed to glint and the man knew that it was a violin and that he desperately needed to play it. Something would happen when he played that violin, something truly amazing. But a part of his mind told him not to, told him that the sound would call forth something unspeakable, told him to run away.

A dim shaft of light caused something on the bed to glint and the man knew that it was a violin and that he desperately needed to play it. Something would happen when he played that violin, something truly amazing. But a part of his mind told him not to, told him that the sound would call forth something unspeakable, told him to run away. That part was a damn coward. Even so, a pit of uncertainty welled in his gut, knotted and nauseating. He shook his head once as if from a shiver spasm and the pit dissolved. Across the room he took a seat next to the violin on the bed where, once upon a time, a young man had shown his daughters how to hold a violin very much like this one in their tiny hands—how to dance the bow across the strings so that they would produce a harmonious sound rather than a cacophonous one. This image appeared in the man's head, and he was unsure whether it was a memory or simply a thought. It *felt* like a memory, but he could never trust his brain anymore. It was almost as bad as the part of his mind that told him still to run away.

The straw mattress scrunched under his weight, and a rat that had made its home within squeaked loudly as it saw its roof inexplicably caving in. It scampered out of its hiding place and took a place beside the man upon the bed. Its eyes contained their own glow of a reddish hue, and its gnarled snout sniffed at the man's back. When he reached for the violin and raised it to its chin, the rat scuttled up his back and rested on a shoulder where it began bobbing its twisted snout at the air.

The man, however, seemed to not notice this as he sent an overture dancing through the air. His mind reeled with horrible things he couldn't quite name, but he knew he would see them and understand them in due time because he always would.

Shortly after the echoes of the song had faded and the creaks of the shanty once again became pronounced, a hand burst from the floor. With a white-hot intensity the hand glowed, as if bathed in angelic light. The man looked towards the hand as it clenched into a fist and cast its glow over his ruined face that was creased with not wrinkles, but fissures. His rough, leathery skin drooped in some places along his cheeks and chin in dark strips, as if someone or something had dug their nails or claws into him. Among the fissures were patches and grooves of soft pink scar tissue. Teeth appeared behind desiccated lips, discolored and rotting as much as the shanty, and eyes took on a sort of dreamy look. There was a dark red ring below his jaw, like a necklace.

The hand disappeared into the floor, causing the man's face to once again be engulfed in darkness. The man raised the violin to his chin and took a deep breath, pulling the putrescent odor of damp rotting things into his lungs. Another thud resounded against the floorboards. Dust puffed up and wood splinters rose into the air. The man began to play a serenade because he knew that this was what he was supposed to do. That he would play this song and see with his own eyes what terrible thing lived below this shanty. Terror gripped him, but it was a calm feeling.

Terror gripped him, but it was a calm feeling. The coward in him had ceased trying to convince him to run.

When the floorboards burst open, sending splinters and chunks of wood in all directions, he remembered where he was. And what would come out of that hole—that grave—would be something horrible and dead. Suddenly he wanted badly to jump up and out the door, but he found himself unable to move. The rat on his shoulder looked at him with malevolent orbs and squeaked.

When the first hand slammed down on the rim of the grave its white inner glow dimmed. Shortly after, two pairs of smaller hands grasped the rim before heads appeared, and then full bodies. They were standing before him. His wife. His daughters. Dead. He'd killed them all. *Them*, he thought, his mind reeling.

He knew them only because he knew what he did to them. Even at that time, boozed, drugged, and slightly mad, he knew. The smell of rot was suddenly sick and overpowering to his nose and chest.

His daughter, Abigail, forever age ten, stood on her mother's right, one hand held weakly in the shredded one of her mother's and the other hand gripping a doll's arm with no doll attached. Her face, at one point in time budding with the beauty that would become her as she matured, was a sunken wreck. Her nasal bone was shattered and pushed concave, making her face look like it was being sucked into a whirlpool. Blue eyes looked at him vacantly from their ruined sockets.

On her mother's left was six-year-old Annette whose broken arm somehow grasped the ruined music book filled with the songs that he'd been trying to teach her. Her face was an indistinguishable mess peppered with broken shards of glass. Were there eyes in that pulpy mass, they would have also stared, perhaps accusingly.

And then he looked to his wife, Sarah, bloodied, and with a broken bottle in one hand. She'd come into the house from somewhere—from the barn, likely, which he set ablaze later—and upon seeing what he'd done, turned mad with a rage. Finding nothing else, she'd grabbed a bottle from the table and shattered it as he'd done many times during bar brawls, and she'd come at him, meaning to do to him what he'd done to their daughters. But, he'd overpowered her and, in his fugue, had given her the lacerations she intended to lay upon him. Her hand that had tried defending blows was the shredded one grasping Abigail's. Through the blood and hanging strips of flesh, she glared at him.

The rat on his shoulder squeaked into his ear, and he was terrified.

This was his damning sin realized in full on a plane that was neither Heaven nor Hell but an in-between place. How many times he'd already witnessed his murder he did not know, but images—hundreds and thousands of them—flooded into his mind, very different but very *real*. In some, he found himself committing his murder right inside his cell at San Quentin even though that was impossible because his wife and daughters were already dead. In others, he found himself killing them as a child as his friends watched with vacant eyes. Those images of brutality felt so vivid that John thought his brain would shatter with madness. He killed them once! Only once! And the fact that he killed them, even once, caused his face to contort into despair. "I didn't mean it," he cried out, his gravelly voice now wet and crackling. "Christ, I'm *so damn sorry*." He dropped to his knees. "I can change, Sarah! Please—listen to me! I wasn't in my right mind! If I could take it back, I would!"

But the time for change had already passed and there would be no taking back what was done. For a man like John, that time had been lost on another plane along with his wife and girls.

Suddenly, three thunderous knocks sounded out against the door, rattling it in its crooked frame and shaking the walls of the shanty. As if in response, his wife and daughters puffed away into a fine white ash. The rat squeaked again. Orange light filtered through the cracks in the door before it exploded into burning chunks and another man stepped through the doorway. No, not a man, even though at first glance he might look like one. This was the creature that commanded all legions of Hell.

Its burning skin, curled white horns, black wings, and blue eyes that glowed like eldritch fire told him that. It was a thing that could take on many incarnations.

And this thing stepped into the shanty with its terrible feet that made sizzling, ember-ringed footprints as it walked. It stopped short of the hole and looked down into the grave with its hateful eyes that exuded such a heat that the temperature had already shot up several degrees. Then it looked at him, and a bitter-cold sensation fell over John's entire body with just that glance. "John Stratton," it said, its voice conversational and somehow soothing, "do you know how often you've relived *this* deed and those others that mark you as a sinner? Or, a better question, how long you've suffered here in these chains?"

John found he could say nothing. He wasn't wearing any chains.

"It's all right—sometimes even I lose count. Time has no meaning where I'm from, and soon it will have no meaning for you, as well. Because what I'm here to tell you is this: your soul is ready for its judgment. And I have an idea as to where you'll end up."

In a flash of heat and fire, the creature and the shanty disintegrated and John found himself poised above a pit that bubbled and burned with lapping purple flames. And here he *was* chained, hanging along a cliff that was far too hot for comfort, but not hot enough to be scalding against his now naked backside. The rat that had sat on his shoulder was still there, and it leapt onto his face and began eating away at his flesh. All he could do was hang there, stretched like Jesus on His cross.

One minute passed, but to John, it felt like years. Years hanging above a fiery pit with this rat on his face gnawing at his flesh and no matter how much it ate, the skin always seemed to replenish so that it could be eaten again. And again. And John wanted desperately to see the shanty once more, not caring about the horrors that he would see if he went there. It would be a reprieve, at least, even if it were one he'd seen a thousand times before.

But then the minute passed and the creature, in a whorl of fire, materialized in front of him, standing on air but standing nonetheless. The rat ran back to sit upon his shoulder.

From above descended a prismatic Light. It halted in front of his face, and John felt mad with wonder. The creature flinched back from the Light as if Its very presence was taxing.

And from this Light came an angelic voice, felt more than heard. *Sinner, what have you to say about your internment within this Hell? Do you find this punishment justified?*

John tried speaking, but a warm, pleasant feeling engulfed him, and he smiled dumbly at the Light.

You must answer me, sinner, for your fate rests upon it. My son gave you the potential for absolution, but it is your duty to believe. Even if on the earthly plane you have strayed from him, I have given you on this plane another chance. Will you believe?

John couldn't respond. He wanted to, wanted desperately to respond and to tell the Light that yes, yes he did believe, thank you very much!

But his mind was numb with Its wonder. Was it because he'd killed his family—was that why he couldn't respond? That his sins overpowered him? The creature, still flinching, wore a triumphant grin.

I need your answer, John; I cannot make it for you. Shall I take you up in my arms and show you Life? Or do you wish to burn in eternal Death?

Silence. Agonized silence.

So be it. The angelic voice felt pained as He said, *Satan, you've claimed another into your ranks. He relinquishes his soul to you, now, for you to do with what you will.*

The creature glared with its blue eyes as the Light ascended.

When It was gone John's rapture broke and he cried out for mercy.

"Mercy?" Satan shouted. The soothing, conversational tone of voice Satan had used before was replaced with unadulterated malignance. "Mercy for you, who is now condemned to die with me, alone and forever? Mercy for the man living so far from the Light that he cannot answer one simple question?" He chuckled. "My friend, I'll give you *no* mercy."

Satan, laughing, spread his wings.

The Cool Kids

Lauren Smith

Cool Kids stroll in on Friday nights—scuffed-up blades slung over their shoulders. They slap their parents' crumpled bills on the counter, tug off their Nike sneakers, tie on their blades.

Cool Kids doodle hearts and peace signs down their arms. Neon tattoos—green, pink, and yellow—intense under blacklight. One Cool Kid sports a glow stick like a fluorescent hippie headband.

Cool Kids whiz around the rink, sneak past younger kids, fly past slower kids, cut off weird kids. Sharp corners. Quick stops. Full-speed toward brick walls.

Cool Kids drink fifty-cent cups of Dr. Pepper, Mountain Dew, and Pepsi—mixed together to create one Cool Kids Concoction. They lounge in booths and sip it like wine.

Cool Kids shout "Love Shack" lyrics and kick off their blades. *So hurry up! And bring your jukebox money!* Now I memorize those lyrics, a Cool Kid after all these years.

Friday Night, Grocery Store Parking Lot
Stephen Snyder

I met her under a yellow light—
Transparent yellow in a diamond sky
and Elvis Presley playing on the radio.

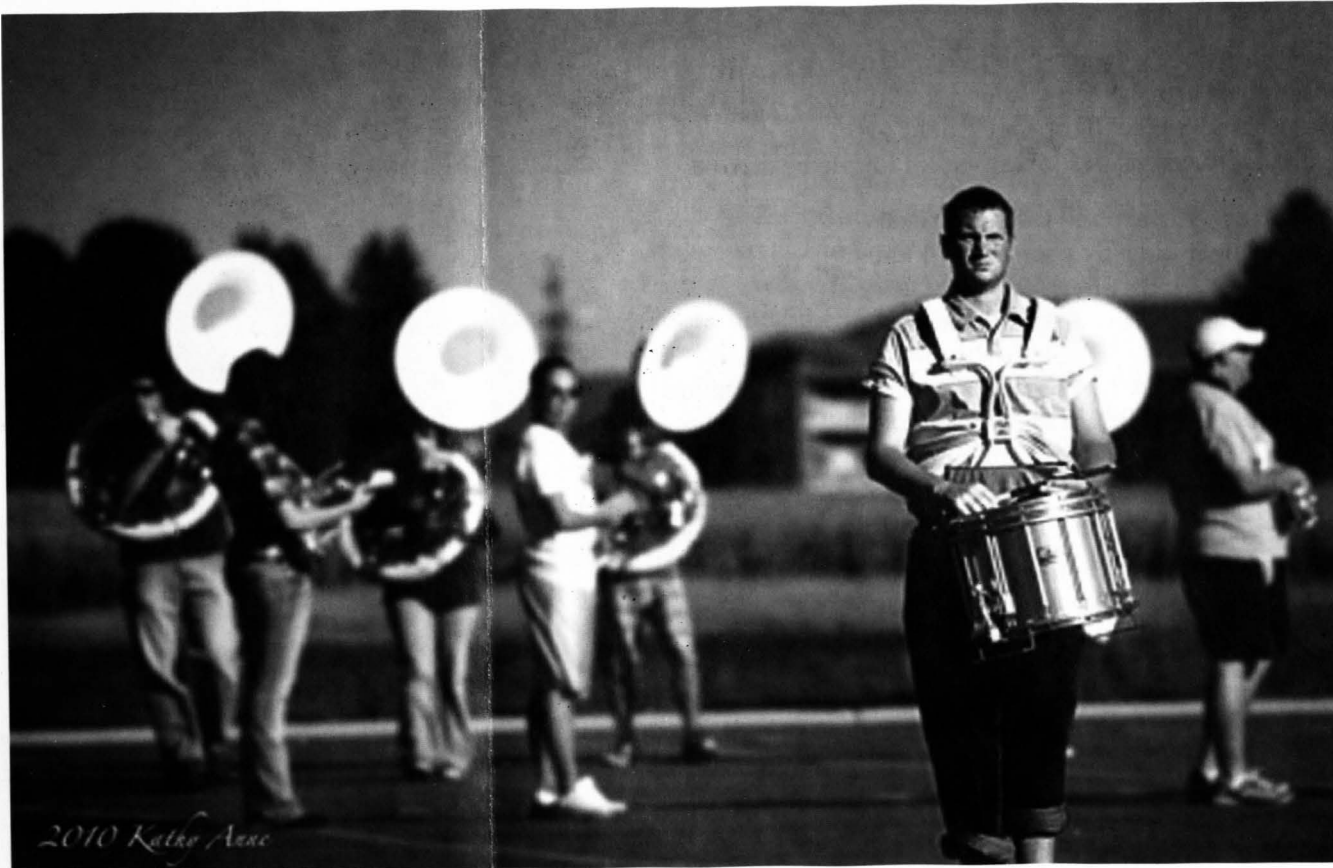
The crumbling pavement was filled with
oil-stained carts and pot holes shimmering
from the weight of too much rain.

I can't help falling in love with you.

A man's rock-n-roll voice and orbiting hips
spoke to me that night
like a child first learning the sound of words:
Beautiful. Ebony. Harmony. Cactus
Incandescent. Dearest.

My mind wandered through its forest,
oscillating between his grease-monkey look
and the image of her slender thighs
pulsating to the rhythm of an ancient drum.

In the moment she leaned in to kiss me,
I couldn't help but wonder if her scent
might change everything I thought possible.



Untitled
Kathryn Kroger
Photography

The Love Business

Suzie Vander Vorste

You always want to talk business
but not business like

the stock exchange
global banks
trading and exchange rates—

No—as in making love a business
based on financial security, him
paying for lobster and Chardonnay at dinner
being named “partner” at the firm
flying to Venice for vacation

To make sure I don’t get swept
off my feet by

mutual affection
physical attraction
a modern-day Casanova

Because irrational decisions made
on the foundation of romance will end with “him”
controlling my coffee dates
moving us to Seattle to isolate me
black eyes, divorce.

Meanwhile (according to my mother)
“You are putting yourself up on a pedestal”
for keeping my Saturday nights dateless
waiting for Mr. Perfect-for-me
and his shiny white steed

Which ties my stomach in knots, I am
unable to invest my future in—

a secured “diamond” anniversary—
divorce lawyers splitting up my assets
or just banking on the single life.

The Glass Bowl

Tom Barron

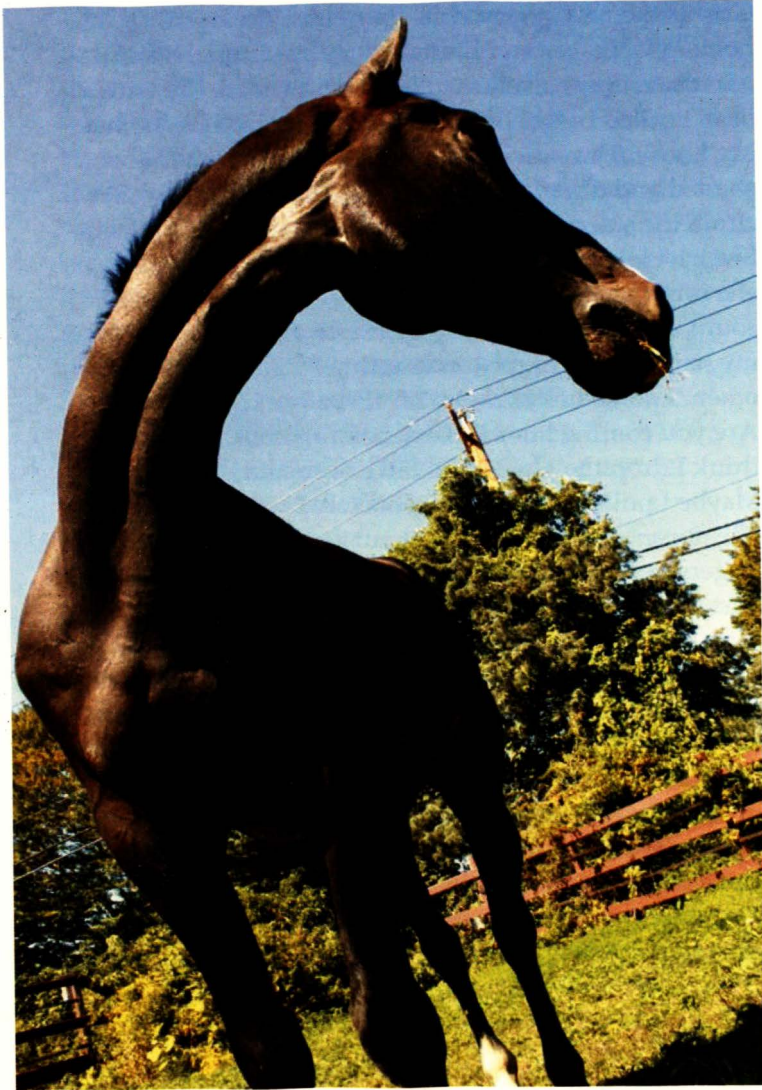
Before I really knew what in vitro fertilization was, I imagined a baby arriving in a Styrofoam box, without head, hands, or feet, defrosting it like a chicken in a glass bowl, stirring in a packet of our DNA, and, after nine months in a special incubator, we would finally have our baby. I even imagined a brochure with bright yellow letters and snappy titles: “Take Control of Your Reproduction!” and “All Distinguishing Features Removed!” Everyone at the support group said everything we wanted to hear. At every meeting, it was the same thing, over and over. It is going to happen for you guys, you’ll see! You could have a baby at any time – you just have to keep trying. It won’t be long until you’ll be hearing the pitter-patter of little feet in your home! I only wish the feet weren’t disembodied. Our baby floats in the glass bowl half full of water. My coffee turns to ice in my Styrofoam cup; I tip it upside down and let it shoot onto the floor and shatter. I’m spending a few weeks at a Best Western in St. Paul. Worn carpet and full-length windows in my first floor room overlook the pool area, the hallmarks of a high-dollar hotel. Fellow insurance professionals occupy the rooms on either side of me, sharing stale rolls and tasteless orange juice that preceded four hours of lecture by an “experienced professional.” We all look dead. This room smells as if it was burnt and only recently redone, the veneer of high gloss paint and freshly embalmed carpet holding back the ash and soot.

"Am I a typical American male?" I ask the person next to me at the long narrow table. I don't look at anyone as I say this, I only wait for an answer. By night, I take up smoking outside of the east entrance of the hotel. It opens into a gray concrete courtyard that separates the hotel from the warehouse next door. An old train car sits to the south, an abandoned prize, a failed attempt at a theme. I smoke beneath the exit sign or in the over-lit doorways of the new blue glass office building across the street. Each inhalation decays my brain, melts my neurons, and they drip down my esophagus and sizzle on the bed of molten coals around my stomach. My lungs curl up like dry leaves. My wife calls. "When are you coming home?" she asks. "Before Thanksgiving." I toss the last half of my cigarette on the ground, as if she knows. "I think before Thanksgiving." "I want us to try again." She sounds quieter and I can see her lips loose and fresh and our baby in the bowl. "You missed a couple of meetings now. Rob and Janet are pregnant." My head is decaying, crumbling like a mossy green log long forgotten on the forest floor. I can't speak or my dreams will leak out, or explode, smoke encroaching outward upon itself, rick, black and obvious. Like the burnt toast smell in your kitchen that won't go away; it hangs in my head like a stroke. Driving around St. Paul feels like hurtling downhill the whole way.

Plateaus of freeway after freeway, every descent a discovery of a new gray plateau and a million cars merging the same direction as it starts to snow. Exiting one freeway, heading south on another, riding my brakes to slow my descent as it starts to snow. The edge of the road looks jagged, as if it was broken off in chunks and scattered by a giant hand. I aim for the center of the road, but home doesn't come any closer and I'm driving faster. Do I keep passing the same truck? Grinding gears and a flat spot on one of the tires, slapping the road in a continuous cadence even the radio can't drown out. "Are you coming home?" She holds the phone with her right hand, the left tucked underneath her right elbow, head tipped toward her shoulder. She is in bed alone; she is on the couch with the dog; she is driving to her mother's. "I signed up for another class. Might as well get them all done while I'm here." I hold my cigarette with my lips and crush the empty pack in my hand. "I'll be home before Christmas, yeah definitely, for sure before Christmas." Home is where the heart is, the bowl, a woman arching her back and telling me Maybe this time it worked and I know you're scared. "Maybe we should see someone. About our options." Did she suggest this, or did I? I walked down four flights of stairs and slipped around the corner of the convention center, away from the crowd, to call her during one of my breaks.

"Christmas is only two more weeks away, can't we wait until after?" I press the phone to my ear, smashing the cartilage against my head in order to keep out the wind. I can't hear her response. Break time is over. Pizza delivered, a game is on and I shower with the bathroom door open. This is a business trip: a newspaper, the front desk clerk asking to see your credit card again, gratuitous self-nudity. I rip the curtains away from the towering windows and press my still steaming body against the double panes of glass. My belly stretches like a womb as I consume the pizza, and I don't want to brave the snow to replenish my supply of cigarettes. The TV is on and I fall asleep on the bed in front of it. At 2 a.m. the TV is loud and I have run out of dreams. Three days before Christmas, and the last session of the final class drones on while I make a list in my notebook of couples who have procreated since we've been married. I include celebrities that must have gotten pregnant by accident, like it is so easy you can just accidentally be pregnant. Released from class I don't smoke on the short walk to the hotel. The scent of over-chlorinated pool water permanently etched in my brain. Every door in the hotel is alike, broad and bland as I walk to my room. Unsure of hotel etiquette, I leave my pizza boxes stacked on the dresser. This is the dance of leaving, erasing every trace of yourself from a strange room. My car is a sleigh sliding across frozen prairie. Fields devoid of life and meaning, former plants merely the five o'clock shadow of stalks.

Gray is the new green. How long since I've been home? Coverages and limits, policy applications and life insurance worksheets dance in my head. My wife hasn't called in five days. She'll be surprised I'm home. My house. The siding is cold and white, each window shaded and dim. I leave my suitcase in the car and climb the stairs to our bed. I cannot look in the kitchen. She isn't here; she is on vacation; she is still at work; she is at the clinic. Can I sleep now? I fall asleep and count sperm. The phone rings me awake and I smack my hand on the nightstand reaching for it, a bad omen. I don't look at the caller ID before I answer it. "Are you coming home?" I ask before I know it is her. I think I drop the phone and fall asleep and she is here. Maybe I pulled my clothes off before I went to sleep. She doesn't say anything, but our room is dark and she lingers near the door, the remains of winter air blowing past her and over the bed. Forgiveness just an alternate form of punishment and I have to close my eyes. My hands and lips separate; she fills the void between them. I see sperm donors and surrogates and adoption, children that look like neither of us. She smells strange to me, and I smell like chlorine and attempts at covering smoke. She cries out; I cry out for our wasted efforts. A glass bowl, empty but for smooth and silent water, alone in the kitchen on the dark table. Her hands pull at me, stretching my skin until it feels like I will split. She puts on her robe, pauses at the door and says, "Maybe."



Untitled

Jenna Boscardin
Photography

Abandoned Farm
Catherine Schmidt

There is nothing here
 No space that speaks

No voices chiming in
 From cracked plastered walls
 Or gray glassless windows.

They come from the wind
 Softly caressing, haunting thoughts

People toiling and treading
 Laboring and dying
 Resting under the sod
 Upon which I walk.

She creaks, this old house
 She moves with the wind
 She aches for the yesterdays
 Of fresh paint and manicured yard

Her tenders left, passed away
 And so she faded
 White paint dulled to a bleached gray

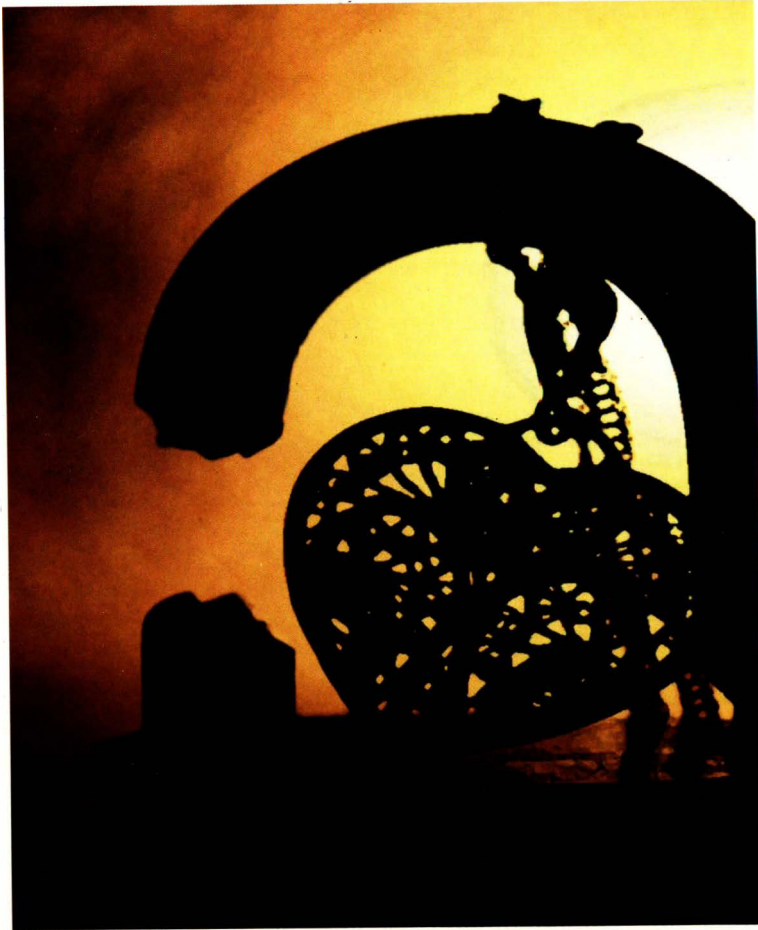
Caressed by the weather
 Loved by boys hunting,
 Tattooed with buckshot and .22's

She sways and someday will fall
 With the wind that loves her still
 She will find her tenders then,
 Finally joining them under the sod.

Elephants

Noelle Vainikka

Bare skin and promises
whisper across our tangled limbs,
twisting in Ralph Lauren sheets, the
two-thousand thread-count
variety because you're the rich
boy I was never supposed to be with.
The TV sheds light on my back. Where is
my shirt? I didn't plan this.
A Dixie cup filled with
peanut butter M&M's tips over
onto the rug. My toes hang off the
bed as I lean back into your chest, my
curves resting in your hands. Your
laptop blinks, chaperoning our movements
as you unzip your backpack, strewing
contents across the wrangled
sheet draping on the floor.
You, above me, ripping
something open. Just in case, you say.
No, no, I say. I want it but I won't.
Sweat mingles between us, I clasp
my hands around your head, twirling your hair
as you make your way down,
further, bruising my stomach
with firm, wet kisses. Yes, yes like that, I say.
I slide down and meet your mouth to stop
your trek across my ribs and rough scrape of your chin on
my soft skin. Your nail-bitten thumbs slide



Untitled
Jenna Boscardin
Photography

underneath delicate lace, guiding the fabric down, down
on my hips, to my ankles and we lay like that, breathing
in and out, in and out. And we sleep the night, naked parts
colliding in slumber, waking up
drowsy at noon. The dark dorm hallway
is vacant, two sharp turns to
the neon glow of the Exit sign, my heels like
firecrackers on the speckled tiles.
Clattering across our table, we share
Pink grapefruit Tic-Tacs in Speech 101,
how else will I meet cute freshmen girls
if I don't keep failing my generals,
you joke. You need to borrow some blankets
for a friend staying up on your loft bed.
Shoes off at the door, I step in
to measure your chest and waist
for a Ferris Bueller costume, and stay up late,
sewing seams over and over until perfect.
We thought we were perfect, like
Ben Gibbard's lyrics, the freckles
in our eyes aligning perfectly
when we kiss. When we kiss, I know
you're too good for me. When your
hand creeps up my skirt, I say
stop it, I'm driving and move your
persistent fingers to my thigh.
Those same groping fingers
press against my legs and chest, parked
outside the Lantern Lounge,
in your white Honda. Labor Day party on first-
and-ninth, will you come? No pressure, you say,
and I join the bean-bag tossing crowd,
you say, and I join the bean-bag tossing crowd,

rowdy on a tiny porch. Sit in my lap, you say
as you throw back another Keystone Light. What
would you be like without beer, I wonder. We escape
through the backyard as a cop patrols the street and
we climb in my car. Piggyback ride through Penis Park
by the Union; you don't think I can
lift 170 pounds of you, but I can. That first day
we walked the circumference of campus
you had me talking until dried spit gathered in
the corners of my mouth, and offering
to fix the rip in your red and blue plaid shirt.
Cosmo says it takes an average guy 15 seconds
to undo a bra, I smirk, as you struggle
with the clasp. I can't believe I just met
you two days ago we kept saying, and decided
we must have been mates in a previous
life, elephants we said, because elephants never forget.
We lie sprawled on red velour seats, reclined
in my Buick. Where did your hat go?
In the morning, I brush our blonde hairs
off the headrest. The semester is over, and
you disappear into the sidewalks of campus. I always
think I'll see you when I drive by your dorm.
You're never there. We'll pretend nothing
ever happened and that it's not awkward when
I finally meet you to collect my belongings.
We exchange an insincere "See ya" that really means
I'll never see you again if I can help it, and I
realize that elephants may never forget,
but humans will do it cordially. If I can help it, and
I realize that elephants may never forget,
but humans will do it cordially.

Seasonal Apathy

Jena Christianson

Old dried up dirt
nudging
the bright blue sky;
What happened to your rich green
locks?
Where do you hide your bleach-blonde bristles
that tickle the sharp horizon?
Why do you lack your white,
sparkle-blanket?
Which season calls for baldness?



Portraits of People: Jenners

Amanda Rosse

Digital Painting

No Flowers November

Catherine Grandorff

Forget-me-nots fail to grow
after lakeside summer secrets spilled
onto sunburnt ears and laughing crab grass

pierced our soles. We exchanged
heavy-lidded promises
that we'd write stretching long letters.

But forget-me-nots fail to grow
though I waited by yawning mailbox,
its red flag a flaking metal tongue,

thirsting for a droplet of paper hello.
On spacious satin November afternoons,
wide prairie eyes resigned that

forget-me-nots fail to grow.
For now I know we cannot
write summer longer

than the seasons had planned.
But in winter death, memory blooms
forget-me-nots.



Untitled
Kalli Duis
Photography

Geography of Sound

Sarah M. Harris

Your feathered voice, sweet
cloud vapor, slips through desert,
mountains, prairie-sky.

Three girls: Sierra,
Sequoia, Lark, scream into
blasts of wind

that heave slight voices
against sharp points
of joshua tree, aspen,

sweetgrass. They flutter,
swallowed whole by redrock, moss
and mire, scatter

pieces of you far
from young ears' yearning.

Old 16 Run

Catherine Schmidt

It begins
as a rush, and I settle in,
stretching, as a cat awakening.
Sinuous muscles bunching,
digging in, I breathe, gulp,
try to calm my heart
which leaps against the bars of my ribcage.
Smash the throttle,
hurtle towards the destination—
an unmarked line in infamy—
faster, chasing the satellite's tail.
Eyes on the lines
that flow into a white ribbon
urging me forward into the black,
outrunning the light.
He crosses and dashes
in semblance of panicked deer
pushing each other on
and I, in fear of the collision, glance away.
Dogs barking against their master,
I am betrayed and upended,
rolling once, twice, three times
on a roller coaster that crashes to a halt.
In defeat I hang,
straining against my harness,
upside down, sweating, and laughing.
I am alive, awaiting release.

Dream-Dancing

Suzie Vander Vorste

She wants to have the same dream again—
held in her father's sinewy arms, safe and sound,
far away from this ice-cold November rain.

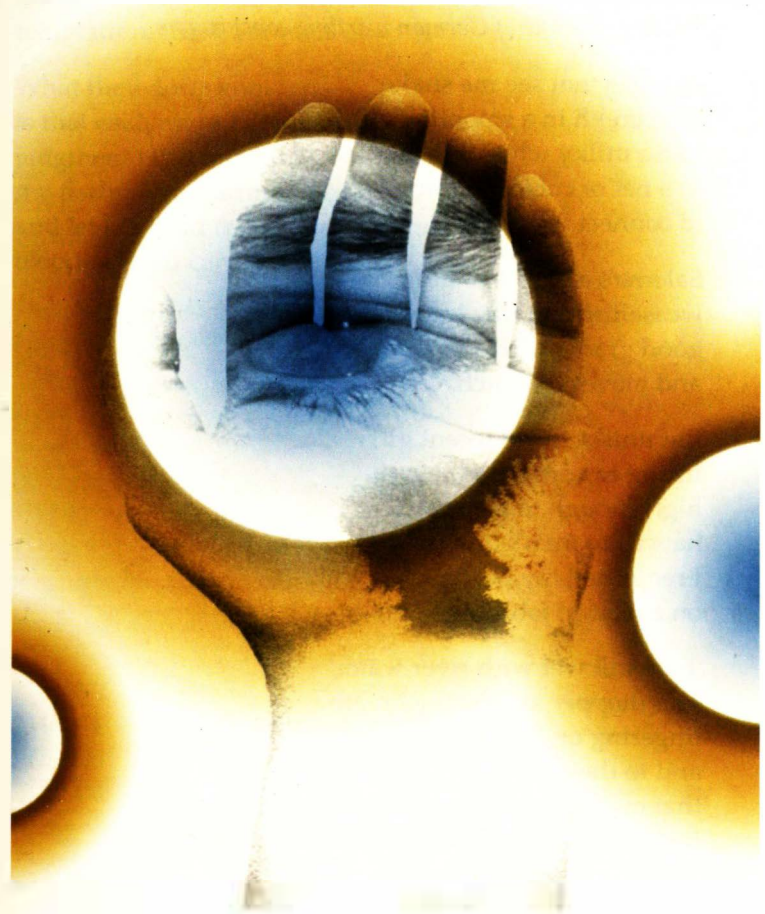
Chords echo through smoky air, the refrain
of "Wish You Were Here" in the background.
She wants to have the same dream again.

Burying her face into her pillowcase, tears stain,
burn a rash on her face as she listens to the pound
of her windows hit by November rain.

Content with standing on his shoes, she didn't complain
as they danced across the floor, twirling around.
She wants to have the same dream again.

Clutching her coat to her body, she tries to explain
God's reasoning. His body covered by a dirt-mound,
soaked by the pouring November rain.

She struggles to smile in front of friends, to maintain
an appearance of control, even as memories abound;
she wants to have the same dream again,
relief from this unrelenting November rain.



Untitled
Beth DeJong
Photography/Photoshop

Maud's Dissent Sara Olivier

In 1918, Noel Pemberton Billing published "The Cult of the Clitoris" which implied that dancer Maud Allan, then appearing in her "Vision of Salome," was a lesbian associate of German wartime conspirators.

Did they not see me snake
my yerekh in a smooth eight
like a milky white fish tangled
in a net of rubies dipping
to connect my curves?

Salome's allure was mine;
weaseling our way into the King's
good graces with a smooth body
and moves to match.

But unlike most decent girls
lifting cancan skirts
high enough to kick black
hats from men's brows,
I requested my head
on a platter; John the Baptist,

hair still wet with river water,
grasshopper and honey breath
lingering on his mouth,
and to their horrified delight, I kissed
that mannequin's lips with pleasure.
Half the kingdom could have been ours,

Salome. But you craved revenge,
and I let a woman love me.
Once, they called my name
from the train platform,
now they fear I'll spread sinful
affection the way my body did
temptation, thick, for men.

What they don't know
is that each night I conquered
judgment with the dance, released
my fistful of a madman's beard,
and let his head fall to the pseudo-
blood-stained carpet.

Cheap Plastic

Jena Christianson

"How many more minutes?" I couldn't hear her words, but I could feel them.

"About two and a half. Danni, calm down." I thought about how it must hurt hopping up and down on those unnecessarily tall, zebra-patterned pumps, blonde waves bouncing, French tips flashing wildly as her hands flapped like bird wings broken at the elbows.

"Ah! I know. I know. I'm fine." She was talking to the toilet, reassuring it. Music pounded through the walls of the unfamiliar piece-of-shit basement bathroom.

"Hurry UP!" accompanied incessant banging and her nose was at the door.

"SOMEONE'S IN HERE, GO PISS IN THE GRASS!" I burst into a spew of laughter I had been holding back all day.

I thought I would lose it when she told me she was taking it at the party due to time restraints and safety—just in case. I thought I would lose it when the rectangle of embarrassment toppled into view on the conveyer belt and found the cashier's fingers while Danni's face flashed redder than that time she fell asleep in the tanning bed. It's funny how it comes down to this: Freemont High's pretty little virgin cheerleader squatting elegantly over a crusted toilet, peeing on a four-dollar pregnancy test. Deep down I hoped it was positive; she deserved the punishment. She needed the discipline. Funny how a few years of college can change everything. That's all I wanted now—change.

Donni wore a green dress to prom. Bright, elegant, flowing. Her blonde locks curled down her perfect curves.

"I can't believe I'm going with John! Can you believe I'm going with John!" I rolled my eyes into my mascara brush. Of course you're going with the quarterback.

"I can't believe it's prom tonight! Aren't you excited, Mandy?" She was hanging on my shoulders with that fantasy-glaze in her baby blues.

"Ecstatic." Out of the corner of my eye I saw those blue star lights orbit over in the mirror. The doorbell echoed throughout my house and I squelched the mascara brush back into its home, tripping over my heels a little on the way to the door. As I flung it open, my face wilted. He looked like he was about 25. Sandy brown hair, caramel brown eyes, nervous-excited grin.

"Mandy, is it Tom?" sailed from an upstairs bedroom.

"Are you Tom?" I said, monotone, while he stood there in the door way, moving his hands into his pockets then right back out again as if he couldn't remember what they were for. His forced closed-lip smile matched perfectly with his overly-friendly nod.

"Just tell him to come upstairs," my mom said, her voice traveling effortlessly from the room she shared with my father.

"So you're Mom's still cheating, huh?" Danni said, dousing a lock of hair in sticky spray. It's funny how much easier it is to talk about the untalkable while your hands and eyes are completely wrapped in makeup and hair products.

"Yeah. I don't understand how she can do it to him. He still has no idea." I swiped some lip gloss over my already-lip-glossed lips.

"Your poor Dad. Doesn't she feel awful? I could never do that to anyone." Putting the lip gloss down softly on the bathroom countertop, I turned to Danni and used two fingers to sift a misplaced strand of yellow hair into place.

"I know. Can we talk about something else? It's prom tonight Danni!" I said overly excited, squeaking my voice sarcastically, reflecting an open-mouthed smile through the mirror.

"Oh shut it," she whipped the hand towel at me trying to keep a straight face. "I know you're just as excited as I am. You look gorgeous!"

My date was 5'4". Three inches shorter than me; five with my heels. He wasn't bad looking; nice guy, kind of odd. He opened the door for me, escorted me, danced with me; then left me an hour early to get blitzed at some party. I didn't care; Danni and I had discovered alcohol for the first time that summer and we planned on doing the same.

"Feels sooo good to be back in regular clothes," I said pulling on my hoodie.

"Mandy you had fun, just admit it!" Danni rolled her dress carefully into her book bag and turned to the plastic vodka bottle she had unloaded from it.

"Do you think John will ask me to date him? He's not taking my virginity tonight." I poured a fifth of our gallon of orange juice down the drain and let out a

"Ha. At an after prom party? He's not even gonna try tonight, Danni. He's not that type of guy." She bit her lip in a smile and shrunk a little, giddily.

"Ah I know, it's just so amazing, you know? Who would have thought: me and John!" Everyone. You're a skinny, blonde cheerleader with glowing blue eyes and big jugs.

"Shut up! It's not funny, Mandy!" I should get an award for holding it in so long.

"Two more minutes and it will be" I said, sitting on the countertop, legs crossed over the sink, tipping my beer back.

"This is the longest three minutes of my life. I don't know what I would do. I don't know who the father would be. Mandy, I would lose John!" Good. You don't deserve John. She clung to me in pathetic exasperation.

"I understand you're a little stressed right now, but please God, please...don't spill my beer." I laughed as she leapt off me, scoffing and began pacing in the three feet of ash-ridden floor. She stopped and stared at it, too far to read the window.

"The second line's not showing up, is—AH! Don't really look!" This went from funny to annoying real quickly. "I'm not looking, I'm not looking," I said turning around and twirling my eyes up at the holey ceiling. "Guys, other people gotta use the toilet, would you speed it up?" calm and collected—house owner. I laughed again. "Sorry, almost done!" she shouted, politely this time, over the music. I glanced at the little white stick balancing innocently on the back of the toilet. Come on—little blue plus sign! She'll never stop unless you're positive.

The taste of carpet and stale beer; I am freezing cold. My cheek aches—it is sticking to...where am I? Oh shit. The room is spinning; spinning as I attempt collectively to open my eyes and sit up. I hold my head to keep it connected to my body. Objects float into view as if from another realm, a far-off land, a true reality to mock the one in which I sit. The empty couch I must have missed, beer can strewn coffee table, splotched carpet sporting my new addition of spittle sopped into a dark spot with a splash of crimson inches east. The morning sunlight chars my corneas in an unfamiliar manner. What did I do last night? Finally flashes in a full sentence through my thoughts previously flooded with grunts and broken swearwords. Stupid freshmen; we should never leave the dorms. Alright, pull it together. Good things: I am wearing clothes; I have my phone— "Mandy?" Oh thank God. I'm not alone in this living room of a foreign world. He was tall and athletic—attractive. An alien, but he knew my name and I assumed I was expected to know his but didn't bother pretending.

"Hi. Who are you?" His laugh was more unnatural than Living Room Land.

"Looks like you had a great night." His sardonic smile made me very aware of the fact that I was still sitting there on the floor, blood-crusts face, after-party hair. He flopped onto the couch grinning arrogance, laughing self-satisfaction. I would have never noticed the beer had the crack of the tab not blasted through the room.

"Thirsty?" I gagged. He laughed.

"I love freshmen." "Uhh where's the bathroom?"

I was violently vomiting the contents of last night into a rather shiny white toilet when

"Mandy? Unlock it, it's Danni!" After the painful trip to the hand-screwed door lock, I returned to the floor to embrace my porcelain friend.

"Thank God I found you! I fucked up! God I fucked up!" Ugh—my face is in a toilet, must we talk about your problems right now? I tilted my pounding head to see her tugging at her tangled hair; how does it still manage to look cute like that? She was wearing a Willard Tigers basketball t-shirt and boxers that hung erroneously off her tiny hips.

"I slept with Zach!" She had whispered it. She laughed manically as tears rolled down onto the white shirt leaving hot pink splotches where her bra soaked through. I dropped my head onto the seat—hard. Whore. "Who the hell is Zach?" I heard her slide down the wall onto to the floor.

"He told you where the toilet was. Jesus, it smells awful in here." Oh yeah, half-digested beer, vodka, and stomach acid usually smells like roses.

I pushed my hair behind my ears, forehead still pounding into the seat, eyes closed, legs curled uncomfortably sideways on the dirty floor.

"Charming fellow." She sniffled, ignoring my sarcasm.

"Yeah, this is his house. He's a junior. He can show us where all the good parties are, Mandy." I moaned. Is this what college tastes like? Our first week here and there's a hole in my memory and my best friend cheats on her perfect boyfriend.

"What about John?" A football game was playing in the next room; another beer cracked open and a chip bag rustled. She exhaled.

"I don't know. He lives so far away. He'll never find out." Vodka and beer tasted so much better on the way down my throat than on the way up. But I couldn't imagine what Danni was tasting.

"Danni...don't you think he deserves to know?" You have to tell him. You can't turn into a dirty, cheating, liar. Not you. Not my best friend. Those blue pools stared blankly forward at nothing; she swallowed hard—"he never has to know."

Jumping, jumping, jumping—stillness.

She re-reassured the toilet: "I'm not pregnant. I know I'm not. Just a waste of four bucks. Ah but what if I am!" Then you'll have to change. "I just can't lose John, I can't!" I whipped out our cheap, unflavored vodka bottle and took a pull.

"Mandy! We're in a crisis here!"

"Yeah, if you get knocked up who the hell's gonna blackout with me every Friday night?" I cracked open a new one. By your third year in college, you're a tank.

"Will you stop acting like this is funny!" Oh but it's hilarious. Just wait 'til we play Who's Your Daddy? She went back to flapping around in a mini-circle and I spit out my mouthful of chaser-beer.

"Seriously! Come on! How much—" "One minute and fifteen seconds, princess, better call the doctor and schedule an ultrasound!" She tried to kill me with those glittery blue eyes.

I leapt as the door to our dorm room flung open. When John laughed his teeth sparkled off the shitty fluorescent lighting.

"Scare ya?" His black hair was flecked with snow, cheeks flushed from the cold.

"Where's Danni?" I leaned back in my desk chair, flipping my Facebook shut.

"I think she's at the library, thought you couldn't come down this weekend?"

"Change of plans, can't miss my girlfriend's twentieth now can I?" He tossed his suitcase into her closet and shook off his coat. We were sophomores this year. I had lived in this little box they call a dorm room with her for the past year and a half. Danni was not at the library.

"Hmm 'spose I'll just chill here awhile 'til she gets back." I thought about warning her; Danni had been sleeping with Zach for eight months now. Well, not really sleeping with him—she usually left before doing any sleeping.

"Did she get my flowers today? I mailed some; I'd have thought they'd be here by now." Those green eyes questioned the room.

"I'm not sure." They're in the closet. I tipped my chair back, head upside down, and looked over at him as his gaze landed on the giant bowl of freshly cut pineapple marinating in vodka on top of the mini-fridge.

"Her birthday supper," I smiled.

"You girls and your cheap vodka."

"It's the best!" I said hopping up and plucking a large chunk from the bowl.

"Try it." He raised an eyebrow at me, laughing.

"I think that's a little too much hard liquor for four in the afternoon." I shrugged and dropped it from an unnecessarily high altitude so it plopped dramatically into my mouth. It burned down my throat.

"Did you know eating pineapple makes your jizz taste better?" I teased, watching his teeth shine again.

"Mandy, you're sick."

"Just sayin'." I bit into a second piece, cringing slightly as vodka ran down my chin.

"Alright, give me one." Smirking victoriously, I selected an exceptionally saturated chunk from the bottom of the bowl and took a few steps over to where he was sprawled on his back on the futon. He closed his eyes and crinkled his nose, unhinging his jaw like a hungry, hungry hippo. I just held it there—dangled it over his open teeth and squeezed so a string of vodka trickled onto his tongue. He rolled off the futon out of the stream and onto the floor.

"Dick! Give it!" I screamed in delight holding it over my head as he reached up at my hand and grabbed my waist forcing me down. A short wrestling match later, he was on top of me—pinning me down with his entire body—clutching my wrist. I could feel his tight grip humoring my weak arm, letting me hold it away just a few seconds longer.

His grass-green eyes caught my chocolate browns and my smile relaxed; time stood still as I studied the flecks of blue swimming in the emerald pools of his irises like bright koi fish suspended in a vegetation-ridden fountain. He jerked, suddenly, relinquishing his grip and standing up, straightening his clothes. He coughed a little, facing away.

"Mandy...I'm with Danni..." It flashed in my head: *She's cheating on you.*

"I know." I just laid there—frozen.

"She's your best friend." *SHE'S CHEATING ON YOU!*

"I know." I wanted to say it so bad. He scratched the back of his neck and grabbed his suitcase down, facing the opposite wall. The door swung open. Danni's giddy grin vanished as her unpolished lips parted in shock momentarily before she caught herself.

"JOHN! Oh my God!" I popped the pineapple in my mouth, hopped in my chair and spun around to face the wall. Danni jumped on him, more than likely hoping he wouldn't notice her disheveled sex-hair or sweated-down eyeliner.

"I can't believe you came today!"

"He's not the only one that came today." It was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

But Danni was quick—"Oh gosh, the girls in the room next to us are a little loose, if you know what I mean, and they don't hide it much." Oh, classy save, Danni.

But he just smiled into her bright, innocent eyes, "welcome to dorm life." It sounded like an MTV special; Dorm life: You're Girlfriend's Cheating on You.

I snatched the stick off the toilet back, ignoring her panic-spasm from my reaching at the precious, all-knowing staff.

"You're not pregnant." Disappointment rushed over me. Holding the plastic neck, I thrust the bottle out towards her but she seized the stick. The skin on her face loosened as her chest and shoulders sank a foot. I've never seen "relief" defined so precisely. It's a wakeup call. Things will be different. Excitement replaced relief; Danni shook off the nerves and tucked the nasty test in the inside pocket of her monster purse. She ripped the vodka bottle from my hand and cringed a mouthful down.

"WHO THE HELL IS STILL IN THERE!?" She choke-laughed, screwing the cap back on and tumbled out the door beaming broadly, me at her heels.

Her tongue was down his throat. She didn't know who he was, but she was meeting his tonsils. They were right there in front of the beer pong table going at it in the middle of everything.

"Danni!" She broke free and thrust her drink up in the air.

"MANDY! We won beer pong!" Congratulations. Your reward: possibly contracting herpes.

"I wanna talk." I pulled her back into the bathroom that had just become vacant. I grabbed her shoulders, forcing eye contact.

"Danni, you just took a pregnancy test an hour ago. No idea who the father would be. You've been with John almost three years. Did this change anything?" I watched the sobriety come over her; we'd never talked about this before. Her blue gaze studied my brown one then broke off along with her arms and she began digging in her purse.

"Yeah: always use condoms. Now stop being dramatic; I'm not pregnant. And it's Friday, let's celebrate!" Her tipsiness returned on the last word as she swiped lip gloss over her smile and fluffed her hair in the mirror. Watching her preen herself carelessly, batting those sparkling eyes, tousling that blonde hair, I felt as if there was a big hole in the middle of my chest.

"Happy not pregnancy, Danni" I mumbled, prickling the remains of our plastic bottle down my throat. I gagged momentarily and tossed it into the corner behind the toilet.

After the rain

Amy Gage

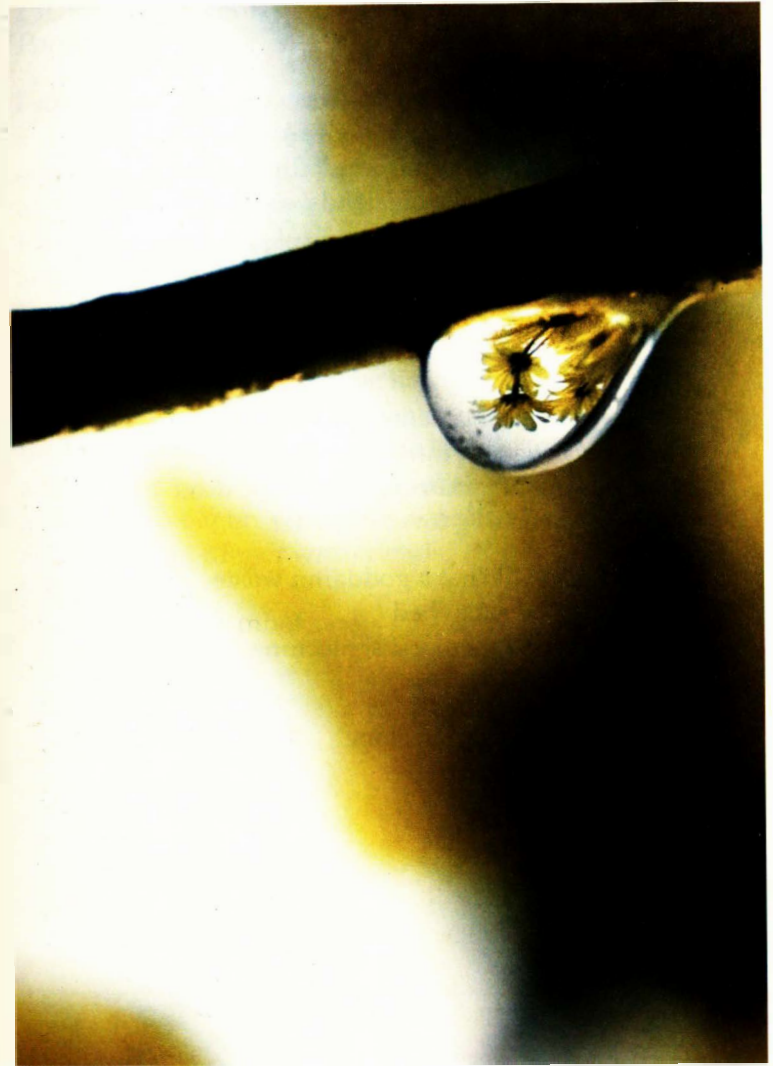
He slips through my hand
like the string of a balloon floating
off to heaven. I reach to the sky
and scream.

How can I go about my life without your smile?

The sky opens up
and rain pours
like tears running
down my cheeks.

I hear his laugh contagious and free.
Feel his kiss: a butterfly's wings.
See his eyes twinkling like stars.

Peace warms me, resembling a kiss from the sun.
I am free.



Untitled
Amira Abu-Sharkh
Photography

Memorial

Catherine Grandorff

You spilled a half full water glass
when Reagan proclaimed "we've kicked
this damn Vietnam syndrome," flinched from
mine-laced flashbacks of friends' severed limbs.

Glistening medals with your etched name
mirror heavyhearted hazel eyes.

A haunted wound
reopened with words

and rainy-day monuments.

Such a shame visitors think
about the weather, skimming over the dead
names, then rushing toward shelter.

You grumbled, "What a goddamn waste
of money." You scratched
the eagle shaped memory, screeching
on your weakened bicep.

Raindrops trickle down stone
scar-shaped obsidian.

Names tattoo
my frozen face.

How far does my indifference go?

Patricia Murrill

I struggle to keep my gaze averted
as I wait for the light to change
on this busy exit ramp,
all the while telling myself that there are places
for your kind of people to go get real help
and that giving you money will only perpetuate the problem.
You continue to hold your sign with pleading eyes
to be noticed, to be seen, as a human being.
As the denied guilt eats at the lining in my stomach
and I am almost tempted to turn my head to glimpse at you,
the light changes. I hit the gas pedal
and I, unaware, let out a sigh of relief
and let my thoughts wander to errands
at the mall and dinner with friends,
forgetting you,
like the countless other cars.



The Start of Something New
Brittany Canales
Photography



Stand Alone
Brittany Canales
Photography

The Fish Activist

Lauren Smith

My first fish turned belly-up after ten months. I considered this an accomplishment because all my life, people had told me that fish were a waste of time, and they died after a few weeks. Still, I had begged my parents all throughout my childhood for the same colorful aquariums my friends had.

“Who’s going to take care of it after you get bored of cleaning its bowl?” my parents would ask me.

I was an A-student, the only deli employee who willingly washed the never-ending stack of dishes, and I always let my parents know where I was going and who else would be there; yet, my family insisted I wasn’t responsible enough to sprinkle a few flakes and clean out a bowl occasionally. They grimaced whenever I brought it up, as if fish were no better than cockroaches.

“What’s the point?” they would say. “You put all that work into them, and all they do is sit in a bowl for a few weeks and die.”

But it wasn’t just fish I was after. I begged for any pet: cats, dogs, dwarf hamsters, fish, ferrets, horses, birds, lab rats. My family finally gave in to my incessant begging and adopted two yapping Papillons and the laziest cat in America, but I still couldn’t leave Wal-Mart without admiring the colorful Bettas, and all the plastic castles, fake seaweed, and silly *No fishing!* signs that could decorate their bowls.

When college move-in day arrived, signs around Young Hall stated firmly: *NO PETS ALLOWED. ONLY FISH.*

It was the perfect opportunity to prove my doubters wrong. While our peers were celebrating their newfound freedom with Bud Light, my roommate and I were celebrating ours by buying fish. Apparently, our fellow students had also been deprived of fish as children because the male Bettas had already been snatched from the shelves. I was stuck with a female, which—to be honest—resembled the minnows I would try to catch at the bait shop as a child more than any rainbow-colored, flare-finned Betta I had ever seen. She was completely colorless—just a dark gray blob wiggling around in the tiny tub of water, with short, almost nonexistent fins. Her eyes stuck out the sides of her head as if they had been glued on as an afterthought, and her mouth gaped open like she was chomping on bubble gum all the time.

She definitely wasn’t the fish I had dreamed of, but I simply couldn’t wait a week for more male Bettas to arrive. I wanted that fish in my dorm room immediately, so I could name it something epic and post pictures of it on Facebook. Besides, according to my family, she would be ready for the toilet after a couple of weeks, and then I’d be able to come back and get my dream fish. This would just be the practice round.

“She’s not pretty enough to be Belle,” I decided, ditching my plan of naming my fish after *Beauty and the Beast* characters. “She’ll be Millie.”

My family started betting on how long I could “actually keep that thing alive,” so I practically brought her home in a bonnet and car seat. After some extensive Googling, I poured her into a small, plant-less bowl with warm, distilled water, which I changed and cleaned at least every other week, if not more. I sprinkled generous amounts of orange flakes in her bowl every day, so much that she actually got a little plump in the beginning. Whenever I drove to my parents’ house for a long weekend, I would buckle her up in the passenger seat and cushion her in with my fleece blanket. I even made room for her bowl at the corner of my desk, so I could talk to her whenever I got bored of studying my French vocab.

“*LE poisson?* Which Frenchie decided that all fish are male?” I’d complain to her. “My fishy is a lady. *LA poisson.* Isn’t that right, Millie-baby?”

We played games, too. The thrill of a pet fish typically dies after the owner realizes their new pet doesn’t cuddle, fetch, purr, or catch mice, but loving a fish requires a different mindset, and a different kind of interaction. I liked to tap, chink, and flick her bowl with my fingernails like we had our own Morse code, and she’d rub her nose against the other side of the glass. We also loved hide-and-seek. She would wander under her porcelain castle, and then I would quickly pick it up, leaving her twitching and squirming at the bottom of the empty bowl. But my personal favorite was tag, where I would chase her down with my fingers and poke her.

“You’re so cruel!” my mom cried the first time she saw me do it.

“How would you like to be stuck in a tiny bowl for your entire life?” I would ask her every time, giggling as Millie darted from one side of her bowl to the other. “I’m giving her some excitement so she doesn’t die of boredom.”

As Millie survived the month-long lifespan of *two* of my roommate’s fish, I knew I was a champion fish owner. The key to avoiding the Flush of Death was love, but this was foreign to others. While I was cooing, “Hey, Millie,” and tapping her bowl, Candice, my roommate, was complaining, “My Fish is annoying me. All it does is blow bubbles.” Being a devout NASCAR fan, she had initially named her red Betta “Kasey Kahne,” but by the next day, she “didn’t know,” and by the next day, she “didn’t care,” and by the next day, it became simply known as “My Fish.”

“My Fish isn’t eating.”

“My Fish’s bowl is disgusting.”

“Did you clean My Fish’s bowl for me?”

And then there were people like my high school boyfriend, Keven, a licensed fish-killer. His family lived in the country, and we would walk through the cornfields until we reached a small stream surrounded by trees. A slab of concrete acted as a bridge, and we would sit there with our feet swinging over the water and talk for hours, until we looked like Chicken Pox victims from the mosquito bites.

“What’s this for?” I asked one evening upon finding an old pitchfork nestled in the tall grass.

“Check this out,” he grinned, and he dropped my hand and rushed to the pitchfork.

Whenever Keven got excited about something, his eyes would widen and glisten like Bambi, and his usually pouty lips would spring into a boyish smile. Watching him pick up the spiky pitchfork and hold it over the river was like seeing a toddler point a gun at his pet Yorkie. I knew things were about to turn bloody.

This was a side of him I always avoided. I had seen dozens of pictures of dead pheasants lined up on the bed of a pick-up, or his proud smile beside a collapsed deer, with blood matting the fur around its mouth. I had seen the collection of goose calls dangling from the rear-view mirror of his truck, the Canada Goose decoys frozen in different poses, the rack from the 12-point buck in the garage. And despite my aversion, he still tried to convince me to go out to his deer stand with him, insisting it would be “fun” and “peaceful.”

“What is peaceful about *murder*?” I would argue.

The rusted fangs of the pitchfork lingered over the water, mercilessly waiting for its prey. I insisted that I didn’t want to see him kill anything, but he kept glancing over his shoulder at me and saying, “You gotta see this! Just watch!”

With a sudden jerk of his arms, his weapon stabbed the river. Water splashed up like blood to his ankles.

He’s just kidding, I thought. He wouldn’t actually do this. Not in front of me. He’ll pull it up empty. No big deal.

But he raised his wriggling, thrashing prize up in the air as if he were carrying the Olympic torch. At the end of the sharp spears was a large, glittering, *innocent* fish.

“Keven!” I shrieked.

He brought the pitchfork down to eye level, admiring his catch like I admired a chunk of chocolate cake before biting it off the fork. My boyfriend was a *murderer*. He used that pitchfork like most boys used an Xbox controller.

I could see the tall grass shaking where he had deposited his stabbed fish. I gasped for air, but the oxygen caught in my throat and left me lightheaded. I barely noticed Keven taking multiple stabs at the water now. I rushed to the flopping carp’s side, who stared up at me with pleading eyes, as if I was the nurse rushing onto the battlefield of dying soldiers. If I didn’t save him, who would? Watery blood trailed from the two piercings in his skin. His gills gaped for air, and with each failed breath, he looked more desperate.

What have you done?! the carp screamed to me. I imagined his little carp family at home, forever awaiting his arrival. His wife would never again touch his gem-like skin or admire the flicker of his tail when he swam out of the room. His kids would never again be able to share a game of Marco Polo with their daddy. Or perhaps they weren’t even born yet! They would never meet. An entire life. Without a dad. The wife would be left to raise them alone, to teach them how to swim, how to manage a home, how to distinguish dinner from bait. Dad-less. Because of my murderer boyfriend.

“Keven!” I cried. “He’s *suffering*!”

He abandoned his pursuit of the second victim and came to see why I was freaking out. At last, the stress and guilt was off my shoulders.

He swam around lazily and buried his head in the rocks when he was bored. Unlike Millie, he was a bit finicky, and I thought he was a manorexic at first, but he eventually started eating. He had terrible hygiene, though. He polluted the water quickly and always left a layer of foam at the top.

"Shouldn't you clean his bowl?" my mom asked, scrunching her nose at the tiny, filmy bubbles. I had left him at my parents' house for a week, and by the next Saturday, his bowl looked more like a swamp.

"He's fine," I insisted.

"Poor thing."

What my mom was forgetting was that I was the master of fish-raising. I knew from raising Millie that I could skip a week or two of cleaning the bowl, and the fish would be fine. I had more important things to do, like try new pasta recipes, play *Sims*, and watch *Say Yes to the Dress* marathons. I still tapped his bowl occasionally to see him flutter his gorgeous fins, and I liked to set his bowl near windows so the sunlight would intensify his shimmering red skin. Twice a day I fed him, and occasionally I would spare him a "Hey, Mil—I mean, Fiyero!"

A couple months later, I came home from class to find him acting strange. His head was buried in the rocks, which wasn't unusual, but his scales looked dark and pallid. I tapped my finger against the bowl. Nothing. I tapped harder. Nothing. I pounded the glass, and finally his fins started flapping again.

"Good boy." I fed him and walked away.

Later that evening, I was doing my Shakespeare homework on my bed when my brother came to the door and said simply, "Your fish is totally dead. FYI."

"Damn fish," I muttered. "Waste of money." I got up, dumped him in the toilet, and flushed him down.



Untitled
Kalli Duis
Printmaking

The Habitual Snacker

Lauren Smith

If I could eat popcorn and pretzels all day long,
maybe I'd be free of this constant craving—
the need to pluck, bite, chew, taste,
like smokers huddled behind grocery stores, sucking cigarette

Maybe I'd be free of this constant craving
if oranges weren't infused with sweet, tangy nicotine.
Because what's the difference between smokers and snackers?
Neither can let go of that taste, that finger-to-tongue transactio

Maybe the chemicals camped inside those toxic cigarettes
are the same pesticides sprayed on my corn, peas, and broccoli
that make the neurons of my brain tell me, *More! Eat more!*
and force the smoker to devour deadly sticks like french fries.

Maybe that's why fashion models smoke, to swap
that longing, that obsession, that never-ending need
to feed their lips and busy their fingers,
to swap the calories with char-grilled lungs.

Little Blue Dash

Jena Christianson

Little blue dash:
hazy, sapphire minus sign peeking
out of a foggy window on a violet-tipped staff,
hiding in the dusty corner of the
cracked cupboard suspended over

the toilet; germ-infested porcelain, plunging
out of hoary, stain-speckled tile,
crouching alongside the rusty sink choking on
flesh-colored, waterlogged

soggy cigarette butts; half-putrefied, ash-filled paper, tossed
into lewd-red, beer pong cups,
slouching on the ash-ridden basement floor littered with
crinkled Keystone cans, broken beer bottles, and

shattered glass; biting, transparent spears piercing
out of a splintered, wooden window frame,
escorting last night's gray atmosphere into the
chilly, tempestuous outside, black cloud fusing with

black cloud; incongruent arrays of hell-shadow engulfing
the entirety of the ever-stretching sky,
failing to conceal a tiny ribbon of sapphire peeking at the
far-flung horizon—a little blue dash, little blue dash.



Untitled
Beth DeJong
Drawing

Regret
Megan Schiferl

Time
dying in a box
clicky. clacky. clock
Time
tied together with faith
and fears
gathering dust as time speeds on.
Racing through languid love's first kiss
of sweet savoring, delicious ache
of freedom.
White numbers on a black face
looking slightly odd, out of place.
Gross, misshapen decisions form
the framework of this life;
Leaning into the warm 'C' of his body
Letting his thumb stroke your knuckle.
He was drawing pictures of what might have been.
Time is changing -always moving-
Never
still
moving slower means dying faster.



Untitled
Kathryn Kroger
Photography

Haint Blue

Allison Crisler

Your ghost sucks mosquitoes in through shimmering lips, so I slather paint on the porch ceiling: the color of sky seen through a dandelion wisp. It reeks, reptilian, earthy and sour. I drag the brush, push deep into the beadboard furrows so that the syrupy blue might not drip on our stilled swing.

I'll haul our bed out tomorrow, stop burying my face in the ruts of your body's grooves, quit breathing the vinegar sweat in the mattress, the gasoline-sharp scent of your fear, toss out those sheets that twined around your nightmares like nooses, because today

I saw your hand at that window. Your fingers flickered like film with missing frames: in, out, there, gone. I heard them trace the frosted pane, the whine like the last nub of chalk under a thumbprint. I paint faster, banish your phantom, orphan myself of your memory, the way you rejected mine when you jumped.

Neon Enlightenment

Jacob Logue

On a walk, trudging the neon lit pavement,
Going to the place where words white out all other dreams.
I expect solace only to find little comfort here.
Maybe my time will be well spent conversing with you.
I try to keep awake but I can't—
There is a burning in my throat that won't come out.
I need your help to fix this doubt.
Where did an hour go
Einstein might be right about relativity, but if he is.
Who are you?
Who is he?
Why am I here?
Where are we really?
Everyone talks about dreams, you know what I mean?
The things that float in your head when you sleep.
And when they don't come true, some weep.
The fantasies that we all wish to live are figments of the brain
when it recycles memories in the night.
No wonder everything isn't as it seems.
No potential utopia here.
Just us.



Untitled
Kathryn Kroger
Photography

Angels Among Us *Amy Gage*

The paramedic was working feverishly on his small body. It is so hard to believe that only a short while before he was an impish 18 month old full of life and mischief. His bright blue eyes sparkled like the stars on a breezy summer night. As I held his precious small hand in mine, I begged God to let him live to meet his new brother that was wiggling in my stomach. It was a reminder of the two extremes. Life and death. My pleas were interrupted by the paramedic's communication with the small town hospital. "Have the helicopter waiting. ETA 5 minutes out." At that moment I feared the worst. My son was going to die.

We were celebrating the last camping expedition of the season. My family and I were enjoying the last weekend before school was to start. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining and the proverbial birds were singing. My husband Matt and I were counting our blessing for this wonderful day.

That afternoon started out like any other. Ally, our oldest at eight years old, was pulling her younger siblings around in the wagon. Ashleigh 6, Ayden four and Anderson 18 months were squealing with delight. All of them were begging to stay. "Just one more night" they all pleaded. Although their sentiment was shared by all, we knew we needed to get home.

The day was filled with swimming and playing. Before we knew it lunch time had arrived. We shared a wonderful meal complete with watermelon for dessert (always a Gage family favorite). With lunch almost finished, I busied myself in the camper. With so much to do before breaking camp, I got right to work. My husband and his parents had taken on the outside responsibilities. This included the daunting task of chasing all the children. I remember looking out the window at this picturesque scene and feeling so lucky. Papa was cleaning up camp, grandma was cutting up chunks of watermelon and daddy was reminding the kids that in order to get the red and juicy treat they also had jobs to do.

Having been distracted long enough, I got back to my mundane task of cleaning out the refrigerator. I was jealous that my husband was outside with the fun job, while I was stuck inside. My feelings of envy were broken up by my husband's voice. With an urgency I had never heard from him he said, "AMY, WE NEED YOU NOW"! He was choking on the rind of a watermelon. I remember him looking at me with terror in his eyes. He was begging for me to help him. I was oddly calm at first. I paused momentarily, assessing the situation. I kept thinking "Heimlich or Back-Blows" I knew at a certain age Back-Blows were no longer effective, and couldn't remember when that was. I grabbed him from my husband deciding the Heimlich maneuver was most appropriate for his size. My training as a nurse in no way prepared me for what happened next.

I watched the fight leave his eyes, as he went limp in my arms. At that point I panicked. Desperate for help we began screaming for someone to call 911. Upon hearing our chaos, a nearby camper responded to our calls. He introduced himself as the Fire Chief from Lesterville Iowa. He quickly took Anderson from my arms and began to work on him. I numbly watched on feeling as if my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I found it difficult to even breathe. After what felt like an eternity, but was only several seconds, the object was removed and he took a breath. Relieved, I crumpled to the ground with my breathing baby in my arms. I cried. My relief was short lived. "Where is the ambulance," I kept shrieking. His color was still blue tinged and he was unresponsive. I barely noticed the audience that had gathered to watch. I was acutely aware of the pounding of his heart against my chest and the warmth of his body against my skin. "Please let this be a good sign" I prayed. I begged him to hang on. "The ambulance is on the way" I kept telling him. I cradled my fourth born in my arms. I prayed, pleaded, and bargained with God. Let him be ok and I will do anything you want me to. At last the paramedics arrived. Seeing the severity of his condition, we were quickly on our way. The paramedic continued to assess his condition in the ambulance. I could sense that he was very concerned. I continued to plead with Anderson to stay with us. I held his hand and kissed his face. He remained unresponsive, completely unaware of the battle we were fighting with his body. Beads of sweat clung to his nose.

Beads of sweat clung to his nose. I wiped them away with my hand. The paramedic began preparing me for the worst. He explained that the neurological exams he had been performing on my son were not promising, and that he felt the need for us to be transferred to Sioux Falls. The thought of a helicopter ride made me realize that I had no idea where we were or where we were going. "Time is of the essence, the helicopter will be waiting for you at the hospital," he said.

What happened next was nothing short of a miracle. We were only a few moments away from the hospital and the paramedic decided to check Anderson's blood sugar. This requires a needle to poke his finger for a blood sample. Anderson's cry filled the ambulance. I joined his tears of pain with tears of immense joy.

From that moment on, Anderson's condition gradually improved. By the time we arrived at Avera McKennan Hospital, he was able to recognize his favorite character, Elmo. "He's going to be ok," I told my husband when he arrived in the ER. The Emergency room doctor told us we were lucky, and he said there should be no long term physical damage. By the time we left the hospital, he was complaining of being hungry!

Angels take on many different forms. They don't have to be celestial beings from above. We met many earth angels on that memorable day.

The fire chief who saved our son's life might be the most obvious, but I remember the lovely couple who helped distract my children, and the nurse who comforted my family while we were waiting for the ambulance. In addition, I also think about the paramedic who, after the ordeal tracked us down to give Anderson a toy ambulance. I am forever grateful that we were allowed to keep our little angel. He is now about to turn three and I am reminded daily of his purpose in this world.



Flood 2010
Brittany Canales
Photography

Our Leaves
Alan Chau

To feel your breeze
your whisper to my ears,
reminding me of the memories
we make and hold.
Today the air drifts across my skin
with a different feel.
With leaves falling to the white infinite plain
that now hides your name
I now can only wait for your breeze once again
with new leaves.
But my leaves, our leaves, still stay on this ground
that you can never see again.

Isadora Duncan Refuses Rodin
Sara Olivier

No frozen shape for me, Rodin? Perhaps you did not
move past the quick black sketch to cast it in plaster
because I refused your hot hands in Paris
when I danced for you alone. (Your passion did
not end as mine does with a modest bow. You fool,
I only desired to show you true beauty;
how my soul's expression broods
deepuntil I gently release it with
an opening arm,
curve of the spine,
flexing knees—
but you were transfixed by my figuré,
not the movement,
in its thin, chaste tunic. As the dance mounted
and spread through my limbs, you rushed
to me and began
pressing your thick palms
into my neck, hips, and bare thighs—
you kneaded me. Your great beard grazing
my nerve-dimpled skin; my clay flesh
molding beneath your caress until I felt I would
melt into a bronze pool on the studio floor Or,
you finally realized
your quest to paralyze me
absurd. As stony muscle and bone—
you can never have me.



Pieta
Kent Tornow
Painting

Empress *Jessica Slama*

The butterfly wings were bedecked by sapphires
in the sunlight, floating before perching on my mind,
taking me to the plaza.

Love-struck teenagers roll, bump, clunk
stone grooves with skate wheels while, jasmine
tickles my nose.

Palm fingers wave to stars reaching Earth. Calamari,
raw, squelches my tongue, as fingers graze bare-wood
table and catch salty splinters.

Española Belen laughs bubbles into café
con leche, and I trip over words; esta noche
refleja estrellas brillantes.

The Empress flutters dreams past my pupils,
departs my mind, little gray brain cells,
deposits glitter dreams in the daylight.

Ode à la Cuisine

Lauren Smith

Social eating
was never my cup of chamomile
tea; my peers pity me,
alone
at a table. Chatting and cutting
each other off, they take tiny, mindless
bites—too polite to *eat*.

But I want breakfast on a pillow-top bed:
stacks of blueberry pancakes—drowning
in syrup that drips from my lips.
No napkins, no shame,
no table manners necessary. Just crispy,
sizzling bacon, and mounds
of scrambled eggs.
No one
beside me but a warm plate in my lap.

I'd love a sunny summer picnic
with a thick, grilled cheeseburger,
and a brimming bowl
of fruit not meant to share.
I lie beneath clouds shaped like plump grape clusters
and indulge in ruby
watermelon chunks, strawberry halves,
apple slices, and sweet pineapple.

I'll take a candlelit dinner
in the back corner table. I close my eyes

and revel in Penne Alfredo, tangy
but savory, dusted with grated
Parmesan and ground black pepper.
Conversation
is a hassle.

I'll sit in the back of the theater
for the latest Nicholas Sparks sapfest.
Bittersweet
chocolate sticks to my teeth. No hand
to hold, but a tart
cherry Icee and my own tub of buttery popcorn
at my greedy fingertips.

Breastmilk Musings

Sara Olivier

Wrote most of the following essay while simultaneously breastfeeding her son.

As my husband drove lullaby loops around the parking lot to keep just few-weeks-old Henry, who would be hungry again soon, fast asleep in his car seat, I searched the mall for a nursing bra. Sick of the cheap, flimsy crap I purchased at local shopping centers, I questioned department store clerks, scanned lingerie sections, darted from one aisle to the next. I was desperate for something comfortable and convenient, but my fervent prayers were eclipsed by too many unbearable brassieres and “no we don’t have those here” while my breasts were running on borrowed time.

Which is why I was surprised to find one displayed amidst old, tractor axles, a Model K portable grease gun, Smith motor wheel stands, and an enormous 65 horsepower Case Steam Traction Engine (built in 1915) on a recent visit to the South Dakota Agricultural Heritage Museum. A no-nonsense piece, this bra, or “Improved Breast-Shield” as the plaque states, was patented in 1899 by Ebenezer Murray of Deadwood. The stitching on the cups seemed reminiscent of the style used for primitive softballs or basketballs, and the matching beige buttons that unhinged two small flaps to reveal the nipples made it more contraption than casual undergarment.

Ebenezer may have understood the importance of easy access, but he completely overlooked comfort in his attempt to create a “shield serving to prevent the breasts from sagging, enabling the milk ducts to retain their proper position.” This led me to question Ebenezer’s motives. It is difficult for me to picture a loving husband, whose only concern is to provide his wife with something practical in a small Midwestern town infamous for its casino gambling, dubious gold miners, and ruthless, gun-slinging outlaws such as Wild Bill Hickok. It makes me feel free to speculate that this brassiere was intended to preserve the goods on saloon girls left to raise infants fathered by charming yet rather undependable desperadoes. Regardless of intent, though, we should probably praise Ebenezer for giving attention to a product market that has, since his time, suffered serious neglect according to my recent experience.

Because the truth is, inventions created to help breastfeeding mothers are far outweighed by those for the formula-fed baby. About fifty years before Ebenezer’s lactation-led epiphany, Elijah Pratt patented the India-rubber nipple for baby bottles. And later, in 1867, after realizing that the common practice of mixing specific percentages of cow’s milk, cream, water, and sugar resulted in scurvy and rickets, German chemist Justus von Liebig fabricated Liebig’s Soluble Food for Babies.

In the footsteps of his success, a landslide of formulas and products followed. Now we have Enfamil, Nestle Good Start, Similac, Bright Beginnings, Nature's One, Materna Premium, up & up, Vermont Organics, just to name a few, which come in the varying formulated formulas of milk-based, soy-based, lactose-free, hypoallergenic, ready-to-feed, all according to age. Beyond the basic nipple and bottle combo we have formula mixing pitchers, bottle warmers, sterilizers, and storage organizers in an array of sizes, colors, and shapes. In fact, the advertising for this particular market was so successful, that by 1950 over half of the babies in the United States were raised on formula.

And, even though their use ran contrary to the guidance of popular household manuals published at the time, formula brands still raked it in. Home and Health, one such book for the domestic wife of yesteryear (1907 to be exact), contained instructions for infant care amongst other articles detailing how to sweep the floor correctly, clean your teeth, decorate the family room, and even pop a pimple.

This extensive compendium of scientific domestication "prepared and edited by a competent committee of home-makers and physicians" began "The Baby" chapter with a black and white illustration of a nurturing mother holding an infant to her bosom. And, shortly after the text warns us that "from the responsibilities of this stewardship there is no release but death" (yikes), it declares that "those babies thrive best which are nursed at their mother's breast."

This may, perhaps, be the only line in Home and Health that can still ring true today. But it wasn't until 1981 that anyone took any real measures to curb the rampant advertising of formula companies.

Uneasy about seeing the trend of mothers who preferred formula to breastmilk continue, the World Health Organization felt compelled to create an International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes to ensure that breastfeeding was not discouraged by such advertising. However, the damage was already done in many third-world countries where companies promoted their brand as the healthier, Western way to feed babies. Nestle, for example, had supplied many illiterate, impoverished mothers with free samples at hospitals they funded in developing countries. Then, after these women took their babies home, where the water to mix the formula with wasn't always sanitary, they ran out and couldn't afford more of the product. When they tried to breastfeed their child, they found their breastmilk supply was diminished and that their confused, bottle-fed child would no longer nurse at the breast anyway. The horrifying result of this tragic cycle were the deaths of millions of infants until a world-wide boycott was launched against Nestle in 1977, and the WHO later stepped in with their aforementioned advertising ethics. However, the code cannot be legally enforced, and some countries follow it more closely than others. When I gave birth to Henry, the nurses provided me with a case of already mixed, in the bottle and ready-to-go Similac, free of charge.

Since I have been home, I have received free samples of Enfamil in the mail along with my receipt from the grocery store--coupons for more baby formula. While I was stressed to find a decent nursing bra, I didn't even have to try to find an alternative way to feed my baby; the formula companies already knew my address and wanted to "help."

I would be lying if I said that these free "gifts" weren't enticing, especially since my son had difficulty latching on in the very beginning. Also, a bad bout of the flu nearly dried me up for several distressing days, and the week I had plugged milk ducts caused me to tear up, cry out, and bite my lip in pain every time Henry nursed. Some days, I felt as though the only act I did accomplish was meeting the demands of what seemed an ever-starving tyrant. So, I am no longer surprised that formula companies manage to make a ton of cash selling an inferior product to mothers who already have the far superior one for free. Breastfeeding takes commitment. I was lucky enough to have the strong support of my friends and husband, who suffers from allergies and asthma. Among the countless health benefits, breastmilk also helps lower an infant's risk of developing those maladies, something that he is particularly excited about. In fact, baffled scientists still cannot create anything identical to breastmilk, because they cannot even decipher its complete makeup. And another little tidbit on the bonuses of breastfeeding for mommy--I have lost nearly forty pounds from simply nursing my baby.

And another little tidbit on the bonuses of breastfeeding for mommy--I have lost nearly forty pounds from simply nursing my baby. Since Henry was born, I haven't had a spare moment to run to the gym and workout no matter how much I'd like to. For these reasons, and the simple fact that it made me feel incredibly close to my new little one, I continued to work at. After all, I wanted to provide my baby with the best possible source of nutrition I could: me. But I had an even larger hurdle than a decent-fitting bra or the lure of formula advertising to jump.

When I first started breastfeeding, I hid in the bedroom amongst a fortress of feather pillows. Whenever we had visitors over, as soon as Henry pressed his lips out into a little duck mouth and snorted for my milk I whisked him away, too embarrassed to have anyone watch him perform the most natural, normal activity every single person on the planet participates in--eating. It's important for me to state that my family and friends, once again, were nothing but supportive of my breastfeeding Henry. Even my father asked me, as I carried a hungry Henry from the room, why I didn't just feed him right there. They weren't uncomfortable, I was uncomfortable, and it took a Girls Gone Wild commercial to help me understand why.

At 2:30 or 3:30 or whenever in the early morning, I would sit down on the couch to nurse Henry and turn on the television to help me stay awake. On one particular night, an interesting advertisement made me quite alert.

On the screen before me, young, tan girls pulled their tank tops up to flash the camera as pink stars and bubble-letters that said “hot” hovered over their nipples. They were selling a video of the Top 50 best breasts for twenty bucks. I watched the girls smile drunkenly, giggle, roll around on hotel beds, dance in the shower, and teasingly disrobe. The focus always on their perky boobs. So, naturally I looked down. And, instead of pink stars, a baby boy censored mine with his busy mouth. Tiny fat hands clutched my swollen skin, and tiny fingers unknowingly traced the stretch-mark lines my body made for him. I tried to remember their more spirited, pre-pregnancy shape and sighed. As the girls on screen gladly flaunted theirs in a lurid celebration, I hid alone in a dark room to nurse.

On this same channel in December, I remembered watching a news segment about a woman who was told to leave a shopping center because she was breastfeeding her four week old. I imagined the scene: her daughter begins screaming in the electronics section as her husband hunts for a bargain on a flatscreen. The baby is hungry. So, she lifts the little one from her car seat, lifts her bulky sweater up discreetly, unhooks her nursing bra, and pulls baby to her. A few minutes later, two security guards approach with a “Ma’am, that’s illegal, now we’re going to have to ask you to leave.” She refuses to stop feeding her baby, so they call the cops, onlookers gawk at the developing spectacle, and mother and father leave with bright pink faces and a screaming, ravenous baby.

Afterwards, the two security guards unwind from all the stress at a Hooters.

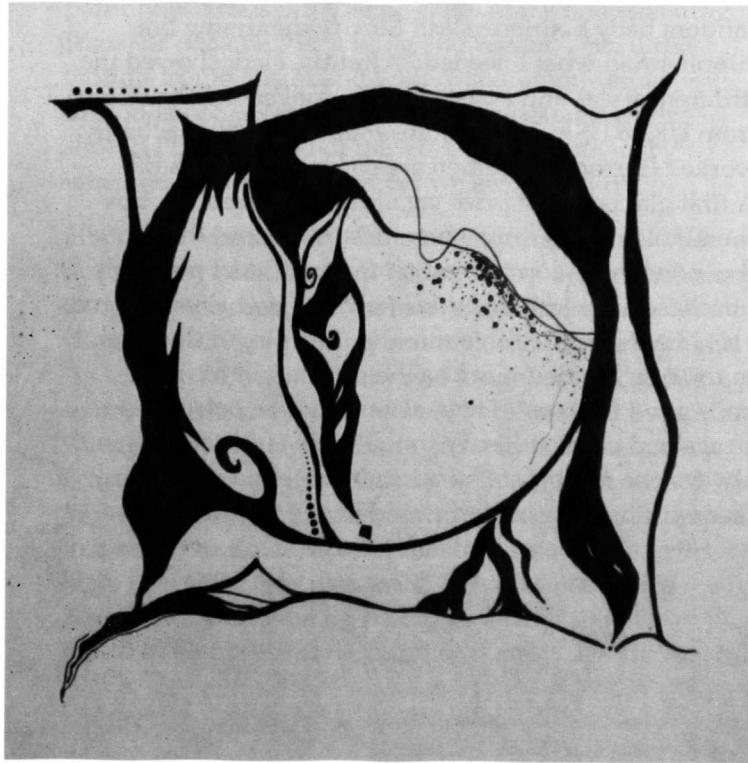
Naturally, I became curious about the legal issue where I live and discovered that the state of South Dakota has created legislation that protects breastfeeding mothers; our lawmakers felt it necessary to defend a mother’s right to nurse even when it is already legal. If you take a look at South Dakota’s list of definitions for the codified laws you will find a detailed explanation of a “Prohibited sexual act,” and it includes an incredible list of “deviant” sexual acts including masochism, sadism, incest, abuse, and a number of other things I had to look up in the dictionary. Finally, at the tail end of this foul catalog it states, “the term does not include a mother’s breast-feeding of her baby.” Seriously, we need to make it clear that breastfeeding is not on the same level as all of those other clearly sexual behaviors? Our state had to clarify that breastfeeding is NOT a sexually deviant act? Our culture has become so hyper-sexualized that they cannot even view breastfeeding as something that isn’t indecent, because they can only view breasts as sexual objects. *Oh. Shit. I am one of “those” people.* But I’m a proud nonconformist. I’m a hip, subversive, English grad-student who votes for liberals, claims she’s a feminist, advocates for the underdog, and criticizes “the media.” *And now, a total boob (please smile, the pun is intended).* This realization gave me a painful, albeit metaphorical, smack upside the head. I have let my hypocritical, breast-obsessed culture dictate where I feed my baby. So now what?

Well, I'm currently working on ditching the prejudice society has prescribed for me and my breasts. Especially after finding out that, for the first time in my existence, I have been more prudish than the Catholic Church. In June 2008, after four hundred years of hiding all art that depicted the holy virgin as she nursed her baby boy, the Pope decided that it was about time to give them a little breathing room and uncover all of those beautiful and historic paintings. The earthly, semi-nude Mary breastfeeding Jesus, he declared, is "loving and tender." So, if the world's iconic virgin and widely accepted Mother of God is not ashamed of her unmentionables, why should I be ashamed of mine? I will feed my baby when he is hungry...wherever we are. I will try.

First, I fed him in calm, hospital waiting rooms. Then, a not-so-busy beauty salon. My proudest accomplishment to date?—the mall. No more circling the parking lot for us. I put Henry in a sling and took him inside with me. As soon as he became hungry, I found a comfortable sofa in a little low-traffic niche where another woman was quietly feeding her baby girl with a bottle. After I discreetly covered us both up with a thin blanket, I looked up to see a new line of spring clothing displayed in a store window. Most of the tops, cleavage bearing. Ugh, *I am still a little more prudish than Mother Mary. Well at least Henry isn't*, I thought, as he grabbed a fistful of blanket and tried to tug it away. *I'm trying.*

I looked across at the other woman and caught her stare. I smiled. She quickly turned away, a pink hue blooming on her cheeks.

Later that day, I finally found the Cadillac of nursing bras. After months of trying on more than I could count and almost giving up hope, I located a highly recommended store that was "just for moms" sandwiched between a gas station and an oxygen bar. Weird I know, but this second-hand maternity slash random baby boutique slash European nursing bra supplier had what I needed. After the clerk showed me different styles and assisted me in converting the sizes from UK to USA, I came across something that actually worked (European women are so lucky aren't they?). A first glance at the price tag almost deterred me, but then I told myself, buy it, you deserve it, and think of all the money you don't spend on formula. As I made my purchase, the clerk asked me how old my baby was, and I told her Henry is three months. She placed the receipt in the bag, handed it across the counter with a smile and "good for you." Later, as I unhooked one of the straps and cradled Henry in the same familiar motion I always use just before he nurses, he looked up into my face with his lazy blue eyes and began to softly hum.



Untitled
Beth DeJong
Drawing

Egg
Bonnie Moxnes

"Be careful"

I wrung my hands as
we all hovered around the woven nest of twigs
that rested by our feet.

Jenny pushed me aside look,

"The mama bird won't come back if we touch it."

Ross bent down,
scooped up one of the three eggs.

He cradled the cerulean seed in his hand,

"It's warm," like it was his own
and anything above a whisper would
wake it.

It felt like we were
stealing a child from a car.

"Put it back. Put it back."

Ross carried the speckled baby-blue orb—
a world in his palm
rolling about like a marble.

"I want to see it,"

Jenny juttet her cupped her hands forward.

Without a thought, a word
he rolled the fragile life down.

Jenny let out a shriek like he was

tossing a writhing snake into her palms.

Jenny's hands could have only felt the warmth
of the little egg for a second before they snapped away.

In slow motion

I watched it dance on the air

at the mercy of gravity.
The delicate shell split,
bleed membrane across the pavement.
A pink twitching embryo
with closed blackened orbs
and stubby limbs
splayed out for the world to see—
though it shouldn't be—
little life born into a little death.

Ghost in the Machine

Allison Crisler

I heard she died last night and smiled, relieved
that now we could consign her ghost to ground,
sew shut her eyes. Before, she'd stared at me
(as I caressed her needle-studded hand)
as if she were alone, a moon too full
to see the stars. Her heart: a quake onscreen,
a poltergeist of beeps that rose and fell,
a bellows pushing tides of blood between
her withered feet and hollowed brain. It kept
her floating here so long. I wish I could
submerge her, sink her spectre like a ship,
a wreck beneath the clockwork of my head--
I can't forget her searchlight eyes, now closed:
a looping phantom calling sailors home.



Untitled
Christa Leuning
Photography

Mistaken *Bonnie Moxnes*

"I'm serious, Zeke," Norris pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, "I don't want to hear anymore about this."

"Ah'm tellin' ya!" Zeke was seventy-something and steadily digging his grave. His hair was a thin swirl of white and gray over his face in a scraggly beard and patches at the top of his head. Norris knew Zeke's habits. Zeke frequented Diane's Diner, drank heavily, angered easily, and knew most of the small township's police force by name. Today was different; Norris hadn't dragged him out of a booth at Diane's. Instead, Zeke had rushed Norris as he entered into the station. Hanna shrugged her shoulders in a silent apology as Zeke started to froth out gibberish about a woman—no, a dog, well, he didn't know. Something was in his basement and Zeke wanted him to investigate, but each desperate word burned Norris's eyes with the stink of whiskey.

"And I'm telling you, go home and sleep it off or you'll be sleeping it off in the drunk tank, you hear me?" Norris pointed a finger toward Zeke.

Zeke glanced between Norris and Hanna desperately trying to gleam a glimmer of belief in either of them, "Ah ain't foolin'...Ya gotta believe me, Sheriff!"

"I don't have to believe a damn thing you say, Zeke. You stink of booze, your buttons are off on your shirt, and your shoes are mismatched. Go home."

Like a scolded dog, Zeke sulked out of the small police station. Norris shook his head and turned his back on him. Hanna let out a nervous laugh that made her round cheeks jiggle, "That was a new one."

"He's probably just getting bored with the regular routine. Damn it, I wish he would get his shit together."

"Where does he get that stuff?" Her smile scrunched up her eyes, "What did he say? Something in his basement?"

"Who knows? He should be put in a home," Norris said, scowling back at the door where Zeke had exited.

Hanna raised her meaty arms in exasperation, "The man ain't got nobody anymore! He probably just wants someone to talk to. His wife died... when? Two? Three years ago? You can't blame him for wanting some kind of contact."

"He could start calling credit card companies or Social Security like a normal old coot. Or at least stop drinking," Norris smirked as he leaned against Hanna's desk which was cluttered with paperwork, pictures of her kids, and her current bodice-ripper, *Nectar of the Sea*.

"Maybe we should at least send out Animal Control. Maybe there's a stray cat down there or something."

Norris eyed her, "Hanna, you and I both know it's complete bullshit."

"Well, just what he was saying...loud screaming, like a woman? It sounds like a cat, but you know Zeke, he was probably too drunk to properly hear it, right?" Hanna licked her lips, "Maybe I should call Dale? Just to be on the safe side."

"Whatever," Norris grumbled, "Your call."

Zeke knew his chances of convincing Dale to leave would be slim. While he slouched at his kitchen table and contemplated the phone call he received earlier that morning, a bottle of whiskey leaned comfortably in his hand. He was staring at the basement door across from him like an unwanted guest. He knew behind that that dead-bolted door, down the creaking stairs, the creature was downstairs in-waiting. He took a long swig of the whiskey. It burned its way down his throat before it settled in his gut like liquid anxiety. He wished Frannie were here. She could have thought up a better plan besides raving like a loon to the police only to get some young fool to come down here with a goddamn net. Frannie would have been able to bring reason into Norris, but Zeke didn't have a chance. I'll get it. I'll take care of it and Dale won't have to deal with it.

Standing with purpose, Zeke headed to his freezer and pulled out several pounds of freezer burnt hamburger. He had survived on Diane's Diner for his meals since Frannie's passing.

Diane had kept a tab for him, but he hadn't paid her in months. With five pounds of meat piled precariously in his arms, Zeke jiggled the locks on the door and kicked it open. He looked down into the darkness below and he saw nothing. It might have been sleeping, but he hoped by some miracle the little bastard was dead.

Package by package, Zeke ripped open each of the plastic wrappings and flung the frozen hunks of ground beef down to the bottom of the steps. Each time, he could hear it clatter and slide across the unfinished cement floor. Once he was finished, he sat at the top of the steps with his whiskey bottle in hand and a shotgun lying across his lap. Minutes passed and nothing stirred in the basement. No yowls, no hisses, no wails. Zeke took a short shot from his bottle, thinking to himself with a half-cocked grin that he may have knocked the little shit unconscious with frozen chunk of 93% lean ground beef.

His grin faded as four separate clicks dragged across the cement floor toward the closest piece of meat. It wouldn't come into the light. Zeke raised up his gun, pointing it down toward the soft noise. Zeke only saw a set of luminous eyes staring up at him from the darkened basement. While he couldn't make out any details, he could hear the thing. He heard an excited wet-sounding sigh. A slender, pinkish tendril slithered toward the ground beef and coiled around it.

Against the mucus coating of the tongue, Zeke could make out thin purple veins pulsing. Eyeing the distance from the eyes to where the tongue came into view, Zeke audibly swallowed. The tongue was a few feet long, at least.

Zeke kept the shotgun leveled toward the thing, but he couldn't bring himself to fire it; dumbstruck by horror. What in the hell was that? What kind of animal could possibly have ... that? A shuddering, almost giddy, whimper sounded out as the meat was pulled into the darkness. Zeke could detect the soft sound of flesh peeling away and the sudden loud crack of teeth onto the frozen meat chunk snapped him back into reality. It was eating. Who knows if dead, cold meat would be something it would be satisfied with. Zeke got up to his feet and slammed the door behind him. He clicked the bolt into place with trembling fingers. He felt his armpits had dampened and a thin sheen of sweat had coated his face.

"S-Shit," he breathed as he stared at the door. Zeke was half convinced the beast would charge right at it and chew through wood to get to him.

"Zeeerrrrkkkkkkkkkeeeeee?" a feminine voice wailed after him from the basement. Distorted and horridly familiar, the tone tugged at his memories. Zeke felt an urge to go back down to the basement at that moment, though he could not fully rationalize why. The creature brayed its twisted call again. It was beckoning him, trying to call Zeke by name to return down into the basement.

Zeke found his hand on the knob, when he heard his front door creak open.

"Zeke! Hey, old timer," Dale shouted from the front door then let himself in, "You here?" Zeke's body jolted with surprised. His head jerked toward Dale's voice. He had lost track of time and now Dale was already here with his little animal noose and a bright, determined look in his eyes.

Norris couldn't believe it. He stared down at the carnage at the bottom of the steps. Blood coated the floor and splattered on the wall like a grisly work of art. Gory pieces and fragments of bone littered the floor, and nothing he could recognize as Dale besides a familiar looking navy blue jacket lying near the bottom of the steps splattered with blood. "Dale" was neatly embroidered over the left breast pocket in white thread.

"Zeke! You miserable old shit!" Norris stomped back up the steps, "Where's Dale?" "Yer lookin' at what's left of 'im," Zeke looked desolate. Dark circles hung around his wrinkles eyes like cobwebs, "It got 'im."

Norris slammed the door behind him as he glowered at Zeke, who was already nursing a new bottle of Jack, "Yeah? And what got him? I didn't see shit down there. "

"Jus' Dale, amright?"

"And what did that? Did you do that?"

Zeke spit up the mouthful of Jack and it dribbled down his gray unkempt beard, "What 'n the hell are you talkin' about?! A' course, Ah din't! It was that thing, din't ya see it?"

Norris eyed the old man, doubting his sanity. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, "We'll get this mess cleaned up and I'll see if I can get some kind of specialist in here this week. Figure out what going on down there. And so help me God, old man, if I even hear a mouse-fart about you leaving town, I lock you up so fast it will make your damn head spin."

"Yessir," The old man nodded, screwing on the cap of his Jack.

Complacent, thought Norris with a grim stare, that was a first.

Zeke lay in bed and gaped up at his browning ceiling. His weathered hand rested on the empty space of mattress beside him. His fingers smoothed the sheets. The motion didn't bring the same amount of comfort as it did when Frannie's stomach had inhabited that space. She was gone and misery ate at his stomach like a cancer.

Norris hadn't found anything, even after a second and third tour of Zeke's basement accompanied by a few of his officers. Each search turned up nothing. Norris had Leonard from the morgue the next town over come by and pick up the remains and analyze what was left of Dale's body. Leonard couldn't make what happened to Dale. It wasn't anything Zeke could have done unless he had a wood chipper tucked away in his basement. Dale's cause of death still remained unknown.

Rolling to his side, he reached down for a half-empty bottle of whiskey he kept there. He took a quick swig and set it back down. The usual comfort his alcohol brought failed him. Anxiety and depression gnawed on his thoughts with no signs of relief. Norris made it clear to Zeke he wasn't off the hook. Dale was killed in his basement. Nothing pointed to Zeke as the murderer, but nothing cleared him either. Resting the bottle against his chest, Zeke knew wasn't going to be going anywhere. Why'd Norris have to be such an asshole? Where would I even go? Didn't have any family to speak of. No kids. No friends outside of town or, in it for that matter. Too damn old to live on the lam.

"No, sir," Zeke breathed out loud to himself. Would be only a matter of time before Norris showed up here with cuffs and a cold look. Would that be so bad? Zeke thought as he drummed his fingers against the bottle of whiskey. What about that thing? You can't just leave that to do what it wants! Eatin' folks as it pleases. That's just downright cruel. It ain't right. Zeke brain buzzed from the alcohol. Grunting, he sat up in bed.

He found himself as he did many nights that week; Zeke sat himself on top of the steps leading down to the basement.

There was a lingering stench of rotted meat from either Dale or bits of hamburger he might have missed while he was cleaning up earlier. He flicked on the lights. At the bottom of the steps, a large blob of browned blood had settled into the concrete. It made him wonder if he could ever get the murky red color out, or if the stain would grow larger with another victim's blood. It was an unsettling thought, but he brushed his fears away. Don't have time to bother with that shit now.

After grabbing his shotgun from the kitchen table, Zeke crept down the steps toward the basement. It looked completely alien to him during the nocturnal hours. Like spilt ink, shadows stretched across the floor mostly obscuring the miscellaneous tools and shelves he had set up. The smell worsened as he descended. The decaying stink of dried blood and rotten meat wafted up to Zeke's nostrils. Zeke rested a hand against his belly to settle his churning stomach.

His mind went back to earlier that week. Dale was alive and toward the basement, whistling a tune. Zeke tried bargaining, threatening, shouting to keep him away. Nothing worked. Nothing kept that man from doing his job, especially when it started to make that wretched mewling noise. The creature was clever. It had lured Dale down to the basement by sounding like a basket of wounded kittens, all pathetically warbling. Whatever Dale had thought was down there before; he ignored Zeke's pleas with a hard look in his eyes and bolted down the steps.

Zeke had been too afraid to follow after Dale. Too petrified in fear to race down the steps to help him when he heard the first bone snap. He shut and locked the door behind Dale. He had started in on the whiskey, hoping it would drown out the shrieks and the sound of wet cracking bone. It didn't. He hadn't even gotten halfway through it when the screams were blessedly cut short.

Zeke swallowed back his shame, staring down at the crimson-brown spot at his feet. Dale would be the last victim or Zeke would be next. A shudder crawled up his spine and shook his senses. What was the point of sulking around the basement? The basement wasn't big and for a creature like that, it's probably watching me. It had to have known what Zeke was down there for with a gun in his hands.

Sure as hell not down here to play, Zeke thought as a grim smile eked over his lips. He felt a sense of determination rise up in his gut as he ventured into the darkness. Even when panic started to snap at his heels, Zeke continued forward. Being away from the warmth and illumination of the dangling naked bulb, Zeke felt the cold around him. The darkness was like a vice around his body and choked the air from his lungs. He knew the unknown monstrosity lay in wait somewhere in the basement. It was a matter of time before a set of coral-colored eyes would brighten the shadows and he would take his shot.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Zeke heard the soft clicking of nails on concrete. His head snapped toward the sound coming behind him. Like two glowing lanterns, Zeke could see the faint glow of the creature's eyes as they bobbed in the motion of its movement. The glow faded as it approached the light under the naked bulb.

It looked like a dog. Its legs bent in a similar shape to that of a canine. Its face was structured to a familiar, pointed snout. It had no fur, no visible ears...but it was covered in an ashen-colored flesh with spattered with dark veins like it had swathed itself in the skin of the dead. Its eyes were bulbous and stuck out of the sides of its head. There were four jagged lines on its face that originating from a malformed circular recession at the front portion of its head. The pale, pinkish tendril snaked its way out of its alien mouth, coiling slowly tasting the air.

Zeke was sure it was lapping up the fear that poured off of his body. The creature's head tilted to the left, as if it were a dog confused by its master. A low gurgle bubbled in its throat as it watched him. Zeke raised his gun and continued to back away from it. Without looking behind him, Zeke toppled over one of the metal tool racks, knocking over several metal coffee cans filled with screws.

The creature hissed violently, reacting to the sudden clatter of sound. Its head split apart at the jagged markings on its face. The face flowered outward into four abhorrent, cadaverous-blue petals. Each petal of flesh was covered in rows of hooked teeth. Its tentacle-like tongue whipped out in front of it, lashing toward Zeke as an unholy groan gurgled to life in its maw.

Despite this display of aggression, the otherworldly abomination did not rush him. Instead it sat on its haunches as the petal-head wilted back into a dog-like face. Its eyes scanned over Zeke as if waiting for him to make the first attack. The two stared for a moment; they both stared at each other; both animal and man attempting to make sense of the other. Suddenly, it retracted its tongue, puckered its lips, and tried to speak.

"Zeeeeeeke?" The creature warbled to him, tilting its head.

Zeke felt his jaw drop. It was that same voice he heard the day Dale was killed. The horribly familiar feminine tone, Frannie. The son of a bitch sounded just like Frannie.

He hefted his shotgun, and leveled it at the beast that kept repeating his name in the twisted tone of his deceased wife's voice. Its tone and clarity becoming more defined with each call until the voice was undeniably Frannie's, "Zeke...?"

The creature started to emit some kind of green gas from tiny holes in its pale skin into the air that made Zeke's vision blur. The image of the grotesque dog started to bleed into one of his wife on her hands and knees. The idea of Frannie like that was preposterous at her age, but seeing her before his very eyes made his heart ache. Her snow-white hair was up in pink curlers. She was dressed in a faded floral nightgown she always wore when she crawled into bed beside him. Matching slippers. He could even smell the fake flowery perfume she used to wear as it snaked into his nostrils and drove away the stench of death. A sweet smile was painted over her pale lips, one that promised comfort and serenity back into his life.

"Zeke," Frannie cooed at him as she crawled toward him, "I love you, honeybunny. What's wrong?"

Zeke's hands shook as his eyes focused in Frannie blue eyes, She's dead, you idiot. This ain't Frannie.

"I'm not dead, sticky-bun," She placed a warm hand against his scruffy cheek, "And you know it's not your fault," her voice cracked with overwhelmed emotion; her eyes sparkled with tears, "I-I love you."

Tears boiled over Zeke's eyes and rolled down his cheek as he glared into the cerulean eyes of his wife. He shoved the shotgun square in her chest. Frannie's eyes widened and fear invaded her smile lines, "W-What are you doing? Zeke! Zeke, it's me!"

He pulled the trigger and the gun punched hard into his shoulder. Before she could choke out another word, Frannie shrieked. The creature tumbled backwards, thick green jelly oozed from the massive chest wound caused by the shot. The scream brought more tears to his eyes, like an ethereal cord that connected him and his wife was abruptly severed; like he had murdered Frannie and not the repulsive abomination that lay twitching before him. The reverberation of Frannie's cry coming from the twitching mass of flesh made Zeke's hand tremble enough for his shotgun to clatter to the ground. Quivering with convulsions, the creature wheezed once and ceased to move. Zeke swallowed to bring any kind of moisture to his dry throat. Brushing his cheek where Frannie had touched him, he felt a viscous layer of warm goo. Disgusted, he wiped his hand on his pants, and reached for the gun.

Zeke stared down at the dead beast as he stumbled to his feet. His legs felt rubbery from the constant rushes of adrenaline. Regaining his balance, his eyes narrowed at the mass of twisted, cooling flesh at his feet. He hawked a wad of brownish spittle down at the creature's dead frame, fired the remaining round into its body, made his way up the stairs for a cup of coffee.



Untitled
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