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### The Vehicle, Spring 2013

James Cox

Taryn De Vries

Maxwell Collins

Leann Kirchner

Valentina Cano

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## Authors

James Cox, Taryn De Vries, Maxwell Collins, Leann Kirchner, Valentina Cano, Fred Pollak, Gerry Mark Norton, Laura Adrian, David Lewitzky, Elizabeth Marlow, Ryan Shea, Jason Graff, Richard King Perkins II, Kyle Owens, Karlyn Turner, Riley Parish, Holly Day, Gregory Robert Peterson, Eliot Thompson, C. David Banyai, Rashelle Spear, H R. Green, Shelby Koehne, and Christopher Robinson

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# THE VEHICLE

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# THE VEHICLE

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*Vol. 54, Issue 1*  
*Spring 2013*  
*Eastern Illinois University*  
*English Department*

# THE VEHICLE

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THE VEHICLE

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*The Vehicle* is a student-run publication from Eastern Illinois University. *The Vehicle* has been publishing art, poetry, prose, and drama from Eastern students since 1959. After reorganization in 2011, the submissions have been opened to everyone from South Carolina to Siberia. *The Vehicle* prides itself on being a group of car enthusiasts who bond over good literature.

# THE VEHICLE STAFF

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

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*The Vehicle* has come a long way in the three years I've been working here. From an adviser-less limbo to an online and now print magazine, it has been an incredible journey. It's been stressful at times, hilarious at others, and, every once in a while, just downright strange. As a team, *The Vehicle* has put on poetry slams (before most people in Charleston, Illinois, knew what they were) and produced an online magazine. Now we're making the final shift and producing the first print edition in three years. This never could have become a reality without the help of some very special people.

First and foremost, I need to thank Associate Editor Shelby Koehne. She has done it all, from emceeing at our slams to printing out massive amounts of fliers for publicity. She has been the driving force of this magazine in the three years she has worked on it and there aren't enough thanks to give her.

Secondly, I owe a lot to the other members of the editorial staff. Hannah Green, David Busboom, and Ashley Holstrom have put a lot of their time and effort into *The Vehicle*, and without them we never could have started the engine. Hannah is responsible for our beautiful website ([www.thevehiclemagazine.com](http://www.thevehiclemagazine.com)). She knew exactly what to do when the rest of us were left in the dust. Ashley is our designer, and she really polished up our print magazine. David has been our odd job man, who is gearing up to take the wheel next semester.

We are very grateful to have had the support of the English faculty at Eastern Illinois University, including Julie Campbell, Linda Coleman, Olga Abella, David Raybin, Roxane Gay, Christopher Hanlon, Francine McGregor, Daiva Markelis, and Jeannie Ludlow.

The English department office staff have always supported us and been more than willing to do what they could. Thank you to Jean Toothman, Connie Thompson, and the rest of the office staff. We also need to give our thanks to Sigma Tau Delta for their financial and moral support.

Finally, I would like to appreciate someone who has guided us through the changes to the magazine and took responsibility for who we are and what we produce at *The Vehicle*. Our adviser, Dr. Lania Knight, picked us up off the roadside when we thought no one else would. Even with her busy schedule, she has found time to meet with us and support us through the stresses of redevelopment. We are very appreciative of her expertise and guidance.

We sincerely hope you enjoy our reentry to the world of print.

Nikki Reichert, Editor

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# ABOUT FACE!: A CONFEDERACY OF CLICHÉS

*Karen Neuberg*

Got bones to pick?  
Something yanking your chain?  
Coast to coast, the clock is ticking  
and what goes up, must come down —  
double whammy, dangling a carrot,  
spicing your life with variety —  
everything but the kitchen sink  
and useless as tits on a boar hog.

Fan the flames! Fall head over heels!  
Don't take a back seat — take it from me:  
the game is on the line — get a life.  
See which way the wind blows and get your second wind.  
Put your hands on the wheel, hit the road,  
read the fine print, raise the bar.  
It's in the cards — you'll be in the pink;  
so quit horsing around,

jump on the bandwagon,  
take the path of least resistance,  
keep your nose to the grindstone, your fingers crossed.  
Oh my goodness, you'll be off and running.  
Life, after all, can be a bowl of cherries.  
Nothing ventured, nothing gained — it's now or never!  
Make your move! Make waves!  
Make whoopee!

# HOPE

---

*James Cox*

*We are on air in three, two, ...*

*Interviewer: "Welcome back to Politics Now!, where we discuss the politics that really matter, now. Today we have a special guest: Senator Hope Bloom. Thank you for joining us on Politics Now!"*

*Hope Bloom: "Thanks for having me on the show, Sarah. It's a pleasure to be interviewed by such a distinguished individual."*

*Interviewer: "The pleasure is all mine. We're just happy that you could take time out of your busy schedule to join us today. Shall we get started? Well then, I've been following your multiple campaigns: Fair Pay For Migrating Canadians; your fight against exporting alternative energy to Asia; your rallies to prevent the annex of Mexico. You do so much; where do you get this unearthly oomph?"*

*Hope Bloom: "You see, I've always been an active member of my community. Ever since I was a little girl, obsessed with reading and charity, I always knew that I'd grow up to do big things and take on large projects. And what projects are better than those that help my fellow Americans?"*

*Interviewer: "A true inspiration, yet it seems you've also come across so many obstacles in your life. If you don't mind my being frank —"*

*Hope Bloom: "Not at all."*

*Interviewer: "How did you manage to make it this far without breaking down?"*

*Hope Bloom: "That is an excellent question. I don't quite know how to put it, but when I was young, I always felt protected. Not entitled or destined to succeed, I've worked hard to get where I am today, but like someone was looking out for me. Keeping me safe."*

\*\*\*

"He'll be right with you, fellas. Please wait here in the lobby."

The humidity was unbearable. Dank, dark, and hot. Sweltering hot. Hot enough to lend everything a reflective gloss of moist.

There were a few shady-looking characters in the lobby. Although they appeared shady because of the meager lighting, they also took on a sort of dodgy shadiness; a kind of organized, almost classy, shady. The kind of shady you'd expect to shoot up a bank with Tommy guns. They might as well have. He would associate with those types of people.

"He's ready to see you. Step right in."

As the door opened, a pillar of chilled smoke poured out of the office, lapping against the warm walls of the lobby before evaporating. They stepped through the portal into the next room. They could barely make out the grand gold-plated desk in the chamber. There was simply no way to see through all the frosty haze. He was there, no doubt; they could feel it.

"Hello, boys, sorry for the wait, it's been a busy day. Awful, hellish day. Well, don't just stand there, take a seat, by all means take a seat. Now, what merits this gathering?"

"A child struck her."

"A child struck her?"

"Yes, a small child, Billy Cronecks (gender: male, age: eight years, two months, and seven days; height: three feet four inches; weight: forty-nine pounds), approached Hope during recess and punched her."

"Hmm. Is she okay?"

"She is now, but we are worried about —"

"Excuse me for one second, gentlemen."

They could faintly see a hand reach across the desk. The appendage was clothed in white; it looked like the arm of a suit, probably tailored.

"Doris? Doris, would you be a doll and turn up the heat? I feel like I'm in a damn fridge... What? No, wait, repeat that? Yes please, repeat tha— No, Doris? No, I don't want you to buy a fridge; I said it feels like a fridge in here. Please turn up the heat. Sorry about that, gents. Please continue, so a small child hit her?"

"Yes, the boy struck her. We would like permission to take action."

"Why do you believe action is necessary?"

"We are worried for her mental health. She is still very young."

He didn't respond for a few seconds. The smoke made a kind of billowy hum. They could almost make out the sound of someone screaming in the distance. He responded.

"She needs to learn to fend for —"

A phone began to buzz.

"Excuse me."

He picked it up.

"Hello? Yes. Do it. Mmhhh. Mmhhh. Well then, convince her. Yes? Then what is the problem? Convince all of them. I don't give a damn, kill them all, send 'em all to hell if that's what it'll take."

His attention focused back on the present guests.

"No action is needed. My daughter needs to learn to fend for herself. I have faith that if anything happens to her that you will alert me again."

"As you desire."

"Very good. Keep an eye on Hope. She's worth more than the world."

# IN OR OUT

---

Taryn DeVries

## CHARACTERS

**MAN** indistinguishable age or social status, wears all black.

**KATHY** indistinguishable age and social status, wears black dress.

**Those who walk IN** match character descriptions in stage directions, wear clothes matching age and cause of death.

(JANE/BILLY/RON)

**Those who walk OUT** different genders according to name, all dressed in black, men in slacks and button-up shirts, women in dresses.

(JACK/LYDIA)

*Scene: Two doors with a stump in the middle. One door is labeled IN and the other is labeled OUT. The rest of the stage is black and dark with light only on the center, where the doors and the stump stand. A man dressed in all black enters the scene carrying a notebook and a pen and sits down on the stump. He sits there patiently for a minute, before a different man walks up to the door labeled OUT. Those who approach the OUT door enter from stage right, and those who walk in through the IN door exit stage left.*

**MAN:** Headed out?

**JACK:** Yes I am!

**MAN:** Name and permission form.

**JACK:** The name is Jack, and this is my second time out.

(JACK smiles and hands the MAN a form)

**MAN:** Looks like all is order here, you are free to go OUT.

**JACK:** Thank you, Sir, I will be seeing you!

(JACK passes through the OUT door)

**MAN:** (looks into the audience) Looks like today is going to be a long day.

(The IN door opens and a woman walks through. She is elderly, wearing a hospital gown)

**MAN:** Name, age, cause of death.

**JANE:** Jane Smith, 89, lung cancer that spread to my liver and heart.

**MAN:** Welcome to IN.

**JANE:** Where do I go from here?

**MAN:** Is this your first time?

**JANE:** Do people come here more than once?

**MAN:** Some do. What do you believe happens after you die?

**JANE:** I always thought there would be golden gates and singing angels.

**MAN:** Well then that's probably where you will go.

**JANE:** Don't you know for sure?

**MAN:** No. You need to move on now, Jane, you are holding up my line.

**JANE:** Oh, I'm sorry, thank you.

(JANE walks off to stage left. The MAN writes on his notepad. A woman walks up to the OUT door.)

**MAN:** Name and permission form.

**LYDIA:** Here you go!

**MAN:** Everything looks to be in...

**LYDIA:** ... Oh! I am just so excited! It feels like I have been waiting for this day for ages! And today I get to go OUT!

**MAN:** Yes, now please do. Go OUT.

*(LYDIA rushes out the door and exits. The IN door opens again and a small boy walks through. He is wearing overalls and a striped shirt that have tire marks across them, and he is carrying a leash.)*

**MAN:** Name, age, and cause of death.

**BILLY:** William James Cannon, but my friends call me Billy. I am seven years old, and I got hit by a car.

*(BILLY shows the tire marks on his clothes)*

**MAN:** I can see. Thank you, Billy, you can go on now.

**BILLY:** Will Lucky be there? He died too, I was taking him for a walk.

**MAN:** Probably.

**BILLY:** Oh boy! Good bye, Sir! Thank you!

*(BILLY runs off stage)*

**MAN:** I really hate when I get the single digits, there is just something wrong about a single digit.

*(A woman walks up toward the OUT door)*

**MAN:** Name and permission form.

**KATHY:** Kathy. *(hands over form)*

**MAN:** All is in order; you are free to go OUT.

**KATHY:** I don't know if I can.

**MAN:** Yes you can, just turn the knob and go OUT.

**KATHY:** I am scared, what is out there?

**MAN:** How am I supposed to know?

**KATHY:** Well, haven't you been OUT before?

**MAN:** No, if I were OUT, I couldn't be here doing my job.

**KATHY:** Well, you are the gatekeeper, didn't They tell you what is OUT?

**MAN:** I am the gatekeeper. I sit here and I take the names and permission forms of those who go OUT, and then I take the names, ages, and causes of death of those who come IN. I do not know what is OUT, because I have never been OUT. Once again, if I were OUT, then I could not be here to do my job.

**KATHY:** Haven't you ever wondered what is OUT? I mean, you sit by these doors, aren't you ever curious?

**MAN:** No. I sit on my stump. You are holding up the line. *(Looks out at audience and gestures)* Now either go OUT or stay here.

**KATHY:** If you don't mind, I think I'll stay here for a while. Do you mind if I sit with you?

**MAN:** *(pause to think)* You can sit here if you are silent and don't hold up the line.

*(IN door opens, a man walks through. He is middle aged, wearing a suit, and has visible rope burn around his neck.)*

**MAN:** Name, age, and cause of death.

**RON:** Ron, 47, hanging.

**MAN:** *(looks at notes)* Suicide?

**RON:** Does it matter?

**MAN:** Depends.

**RON:** Yes.

**MAN:** That's all, please move on.

**KATHY:** Wait! What do you mean, suicide?

**RON:** I ended my own life.

**KATHY:** But why? I heard that OUT was wonderful.

**RON:** Not for me. *(RON exits)*

**KATHY:** I don't understand, what is OUT?

**MAN:** I told you I don't know.

**KATHY:** Do you have many suicides? People choosing when to come IN?

**MAN:** A few.

**KATHY:** Oh this is horrible, I don't think I will go OUT.

**MAN:** That's ridiculous, you have to go OUT eventually. Now hush, the door is opening again.

*(enter soldier, a young man in formal U.S. Navy uniform)*

**MAN:** Name, age, cause of death.

**MICHAEL:** Michael, 26, died in battle.

**MAN:** Thank you, you may move on.

**KATHY:** Hold up, died in battle?

**MICHAEL:** Yes, I was fighting for my country and died while overseas at war.

**KATHY:** Oh, this OUT sounds horrible! War! I am so sorry!

**MICHAEL:** It was a privilege to die for something I believe in, and life is a beautiful thing.  
*(salutes MAN and tips hat to KATHY, exit)*

**KATHY:** Oh, now I am even more confused. I would be so alone out there, facing everything like war and whatever was horrible enough to make Ron take his own life.

**MAN:** You will not be alone, there are billions of people OUT. And you know, by sitting here you are stopping others from going OUT, right?

**KATHY:** Sorry, but I still haven't decided how I feel about OUT. Ron killed himself, Michael said it was a privilege, what other "causes of death" are there?

**MAN:** I am not sure why you are so concerned about coming back IN when you haven't even gone OUT yet.

**KATHY:** Please?

**MAN:** They come in all ages, single digits to triple digits, and for all different reasons. Some die in accidents, some take matters into their own hands, some come IN because someone else decided they should, some just have bodies that stop working. Whatever the cause, they all come IN.

**KATHY:** Do any come IN happy?

**MAN:** I guess so. I don't ask them how they feel about it.

**KATHY:** What happens when they come back IN?

**MAN:** I don't know.

**KATHY:** You never checked?

**MAN:** No. Not my business.

**KATHY:** Oh. Do those who come IN know where they are going?

**MAN:** That's not one of the questions on my sheet.

**KATHY:** Do they all go to the same place?

**MAN:** *(audible sigh)* All I know about IN is you end up where you believe you are going to



end up. So some ask if it will be the pearly gates and St. Peter, some say fire and brimstone, some I see again and again because they go IN and OUT multiple times, some think pets are waiting, some salvation. I don't know what is IN because you have to go OUT to get IN.

*(pause)*

**MAN:** You are starting to hold up the OUT line.

**KATHY:** Goodness. I guess I better make a decision, then.

**MAN:** I guess.

**KATHY:** Will you come with me?

**MAN:** What?

**KATHY:** Will you come OUT with me? I like you, and we could do it together. Then I wouldn't have to be alone out there, and we can figure out what is so wonderful about OUT. You said everyone comes back IN, so you would be back here eventually.

**MAN:** I do not go OUT. I sit here on my stump, that is my job. I take the names and permission forms of those who are going OUT, and then take the name, age, and cause of death of those who come IN. I do not ask what is OUT, or what is IN, because that is none of my business. This is my business.

**KATHY:** What's your name?

**MAN:** What?

**KATHY:** Your name? You do have one, don't you?

**MAN:** No, I don't. I was never given a form with a name for me.

**KATHY:** Well, I am going to call you Adam, then.

**MAN:** Adam?

**KATHY:** Yes, that seems like a good name. Now Adam, will you come with me?

*(Kathy opens the OUT door and stretches out her hands toward him, smiling. MAN stands and looks at her. The lights go out with MAN standing looking at the OUT door.)*

# THE IMAGINATION OF A CHILD

---

*Maxwell Collins*

*Dedicated to my sister, Callista*

the rusted swings chirp and screech  
like morning mockingbirds  
as I fall and fly  
with wind stealing my speech  
with wind tearing my eyes  
with wind whistling soft melodies in my ears  
my little sister gleams  
with a fitful burst of giggles and cries  
as I fall and fly  
into the orange sun-setting, Fall sky  
as I fall and fly  
among the clouds of white and gray  
among the engulfing clouds here to stay  
she says she cannot swing as high as me  
she says she's just not strong enough  
not strong enough to fall and fly  
so low and so high  
I hop off my swing  
land two feet on solid, bare ground  
I say hop on the swing and  
I'll let you see  
how high you can really swing  
she scampers over and hops on the swing  
I give her a push  
and a few more pushes after that  
she screams with glee that she can see  
the sun setting over the green trees grown so tall  
the trees flying so free and high  
when she's had enough  
she asks to stop and I slow her down  
she hops off the swing and  
she skedaddles away  
she yells she'll race me home  
I chase quickly after her  
but she's going the wrong way home  
I yell this way!  
she yells this way!  
I yell that way?

but she swerves and heads over to me  
we slow down  
she asks for a break from running  
I say okay  
then she giggles as if she knows a secret  
and she darts off on the way home  
she asks if I'm going to race her home  
she yells she's going to beat me back  
I tell her I will catch up to her soon  
I keep walking as I digest the day  
she arrives home first  
I arrive home last  
we both sit down at the dinner table  
and at the same time start to eat  
—Max! Max! can we go for a walk to the park? please!  
I look up at her  
her face full of a goofy smile  
and I give her an engulfing hug  
as if I were the white and gray clouds  
the clouds that were meant to stay  
but instead cried and faded away  
I have to leave and go far away  
she looks up at me as if I was the setting sun  
the sun hidden by a forest of trees  
the sun that could be seen if only  
if only she swung a little harder  
if only she fell and flew a little higher  
if only someone would give her a push  
but she knows I have to leave  
we all have to leave  
the dark night comes  
the night without clouds or stars  
it's bedtime soon  
bedtime is always too soon  
winter's frost sets in on the trees  
I cannot push her swing any longer  
the swing is so rusty and so worn  
I open the door to leave  
look back  
freeze  
and see  
her eyes are tinged with tears as if  
she's been falling and flying forever  
swinging in the sun-setting, Fall day  
her face is still full of that goofy smile  
that goofy smile now forever stained with reflective eyes

# HOW FREE TO BE A TREE

---

*Leann Kirchner*

Just one word, a phrase or two,  
Something simple, or something new.  
I left all my plight in a place far away.  
The clamor of the city and its mighty bray.  
In the silhouette of an old oak tree,  
Eagerly awaiting the winds of subtlety.  
**Change, it roars, and swirls** around me.  
It picks me up,  
I lose sight of the ground.  
I've forgotten my fear,  
My trunk no longer bound.  
There's too much to perceive up here.  
The sun-gleam blinds my eyes.  
What a spectacle of fright!  
Being projected through the atmosphere.  
The sun's shattered prisms, charming little plans,  
Tiny hints of daylight, falling on my hands.  
Like weary strangers on their way,  
Their colors become brighter every day.  
As they pass by, they proclaim their ode,  
And they kindly nod, and lighten my load.  
I give them a smile as I tie my shoe.  
I'm a little shy,  
But I don't let them get by,  
Not without a word or two.  
These branches, we call hands,  
Far from roots laced deep in the ground.  
They branch out to who they can—  
They grow. Softly; without a sound.

# CROWS

The crows are back.  
Two of them  
and they look like your eyes,  
opaque and dry.  
Charcoal in flight.  
You must have sent them,  
avatars of words you refuse to say,  
words that have morphed into  
smoke-filled cries.  
Sound echoing through black feathers.  
It is always the same.  
Me, watching for your eyes.

**Valentina Cano**

# OLD WEST PHOTOS

---

*Fred Pollack*

Boulders balance like gymnasts  
on boulders, boulders lean  
against cliffs, and the surveyor  
atop a boulder  
atop a cliff gives no scale whatever  
to the desert and mountains beyond.

The chief has surrendered, to save  
his hundred followers and their hundred children.  
He has submitted  
to the army, the reservation,  
and whisky. Sometime later  
someone dresses him in buckskin,  
hands him a rifle, stands him before  
painted mountains and a papier-mâché  
stump. Look fierce.  
I can look fierce, thinks the chief.  
The crags are there, the arroyos deeper than ever.  
Wasi'chu will not see  
that what was basalt is now limestone, mud.

The sheriff, girdled,  
overslung with metal  
and leather, looks  
like the hero of a medieval  
epic, and almost as stupid.

Then there are twenty pages  
of guns attended, nursed,  
by groups. Cowboys, bankers.  
A Protective Association.  
Women have the air of women  
among men without women. Pinkertons  
have bowlers. Striking miners,  
Wobblies may or may not have  
some expression beyond the norm.  
Which the grain of the photos,  
the grime of faces and clothes set  
in stone.

# LAVA LAMP

---

*Fred Pollack*

The cliché is stuck in his apartment,  
I'm not sure why. Flu, backstrain –  
one of those nebulous illnesses  
of youth, less complaint  
than congealed, refused, impossible reflection.  
He is on neither drugs nor religion;  
not even his iPod,  
not even the television is on,  
I don't know why not. And now I don't know  
what to do with him. What is  
personality, anyway? A smell.  
The girl he is thinking of,  
mint and salt. His father,  
that starchy sweat germane to long commutes.  
Himself: sour laundry  
in piles, something wrong with the drain.  
Tomorrow he'll start work  
or try to, at Walmart,  
in phone sales – someplace  
far from the vector lately, faintly proclaimed  
at community college, which for him  
seemed also a lateral move ... How difficult  
such facts are to work with  
in poetry, even in fiction now!  
When a collective narrative  
is absent, or mystified, co-opted,  
there is a pile-up of fragments,  
and a corresponding cutback  
in sympathy ... Of all the electric and electronic  
gadgets in the cliché apartment  
(a traffic noise affirms  
the irrelevance of setting), only  
his lava lamp is on,  
shorn of all meaning –  
stoner paraphernalia, '70s retro ...  
nothing. The blobs are persimmon,  
the fluid red.  
One long-cohering blob  
goes up, up, up, and sinks, starts up,

and splits. The glow seems to come from nowhere.  
Should I make him a reader?  
It would be so arbitrary  
a device, a *psyche ex machina* –  
yet intellectuality often appears  
from nowhere ... Perhaps he is merely  
worrying, still, about his sexual orientation.  
That would be a narrative  
to include him, explain  
his presence in the apartment  
in silence, his feeling  
that he deserves to be there,  
or not even there ...  
no. The girl is real enough,  
if only in a magazine.  
I'll make him a reader,  
the apogee of the blob  
reminding him of that moment in Bidart's  
poem, where St. Augustine and his mother,  
St. Monica, are discussing  
God's love, and the dialectic of their talk  
reaches, for a moment,  
for only a moment, the divine – symbolizing  
for poor Bidart, the impossibility  
of women ... But why should he have read that,  
or anything? I'm abandoning him:  
trivializing, accepting.  
He has smoked a little weed to mellow out.  
The television is on. He is part  
of his world, however worried, however marginalized.  
The phone rings. Dude, what're you up to?  
Dude, I'm just sitting here s  
taring into my lava lamp.  
There is no greater loneliness. Dude,  
the man with a lava lamp is never alone.



# MORT MOT

*Gerry Mark Norton*

Mort Mot

because You expect me to be as petty  
as you. You interpret my words as  
you understand them (for which I admit  
I can't blame you).

You have so much to say but I have  
nothing. I have nothing to say  
to you. There is nothing to say. OK,

then. This is where we are, right here.  
Love evacuated last century or so. Last  
decade of mine at least. It's a fine  
vine. There are no pleats to unknot. I try,

you must believe me. I want it over  
with. I wish a lot but wriggle from the net.  
OK, I will say it: I feel nothing for you.

Truly. My love for you is dead. It  
is gone. Isn't that terrible? But it is  
unemotional and plain and true. There is  
nothing more. Impossible to salvage are

dead things.

*Laura Adrian*

The winds are wild and the winds are free.  
 They cannot simply be.  
 The breeze blows soft from here to there,  
 Travels, never minding where.  
 From here it flies with softest wing  
 To there with softest breath, to fling  
 A sigh.

If I could travel where it goes  
 If I could be the wind that blows  
 In the snapping, billowing sails of a sea-tossed ship—

If I could carry the clouds away  
 To make the sun shine every day  
 Brighter than gold and rubies in the crown of an ancient king—

If I could rumple your wind-tossed hair  
 And lightly kiss your face so fair  
 And spray the sea upon the beach in shimmering waves of light—

Or hold a kite high in the air,  
 And, without an earthly care,  
 Paint ripples into the peaks of golden dunes of sand—

If I could carry the laughter of mirth  
 Mine would be life of infinite worth.

The winds blow soft from here to there,  
 Never minding when or where.  
 They cannot simply be.  
 The wind is simply...  
 Free.

# FINDING MY MONKEY

---

*David Lewitzky*

*After Leah Goldberg*

The leavings of the years have lumped up my pretty face  
Graveyard lime's leached out my wavy hair  
I was such a handsome guy once  
And once you loved me furiously

Didn't you? I think you did

Well, Hertel Alley's still my spot  
Been working it for years  
Got my barrel organ, got my tin cup  
Lost my monkey, kept his cap

Monkey, monkey! Who's got my monkey

Buffalo's old shacks, rusted ghosts of Chevrolets  
Still make me weep. My eyes still shine  
I'm skipping out, going to look for yesterday  
Turn my back on the deepening shade

I'll beat feet again, find my way again

Won't you wait for me  
I'll be on the corner  
Where I used to be  
We'll be powerful and beautiful again

When I find my monkey

# SLOW DRAG

---

*David Lewitzky*

*After Calvin Hernton*

Slow drag to a slow blues

Hold on to each other by the cheeks of the ass

Sway Be easy

Kiss: Touch tongues languidly

Like the hungry flower Like the drunken bee

Press Grind crotches

Be the melody The harmony.

Dream Make love dancing

Like the swimmer in the sea

Feel contact Feel rough bone

Feel the dampness Feel the heat.

Take your pleasure Be masterly

Give comfort Be at peace

\*\*\*

Red crabs after me

Gonna pinch me Gonna burn me

Got the burnt-out rocket blues

The radiated blues

No more slow drag

Got the worn-out motor blues

Red crab's calling me

From the bottom of the sea

Oh Lord

# POLITICAL SCIENCE

---

*Elizabeth Marlow*

Beakers and burners and  
she was a squirrel in a  
past life, she is rumored  
to have thought...  
I mean, my God!  
She only married Abraham  
because she had a feeling  
he might become our  
future president. She  
then spent a year and a  
half splitting atoms and  
hairs, carefully or thoroughly  
dreaming up their house  
divided. The once debutante  
and the prairie poet  
appear under the politically  
maddening microscope and  
lose their lives and minds,  
tonight at ten on your  
local PBS station, with  
thanks to viewers like you.

# ...WERE PUNCTUATED BY...

*Elizabeth Marlow*

My  
love like a  
telegram

Stop.

My  
love like a  
telegram

Stop.

My  
love like a  
telegram

Stop.

My  
love like a  
telegram

intimacy punctuated by  
seriousness, joblessness,  
sleeplessness, people in  
relationships talking  
tirelessly on relationships

Stop.

# ST. EPT I

---

*Elizabeth Marlow*

The green tiles  
The peach tiles  
The window seats  
The seventh floor  
Of the hospital where my Grandmother died.  
Stacks of generic coloring sheets  
Next to bins of crayons  
Atop the ancient, tuneless piano  
Provided to keep us from killing ourselves.  
When they finally gave me back my clothes,  
I wore the same T-shirt for six days straight.  
April 21, 2010

# THE STEAMBOAT CAPTAIN

---

*Elizabeth Marlow*

Mark Twain had a word in  
His blood, and a letter in his  
Moustache.

So set up the lather brush and blade  
To let the letters collect in the sink  
A E I O U  
Before they tumble down the drain forever  
"The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Modern Plumbing"

So bring out the leeches to suck  
The words out of his veins  
The And Livie Fortune Steam  
Pale from the withdrawal of words  
"Bloodletting on the Mississippi"

Mark Twain had a word  
And it cut him down in his end  
Dead brother and son  
Dead daughter and ruin  
"A Connecticut Yankee in Rough Waters"



# PRETTY EYES

Ryan Shea

She keeps her pretty eyes ahead; her  
neck along a track.  
Maybe the sidewalk or the air.

Pretty eyes making perfect lines,  
keeping wide and steady,  
yet so soft they couldnt possibly have anything to do.

Bet even pretty eyes slip, sometimes  
they are beside themselves, before  
snapping into place.

So kept, the pretty eyes.

# THE WORLD IS ROUND

---

*Ryan Shea*

The streets are filled to the brim, people can't seem to see their hands straight, somehow traffic continues crawling, and something tells me the world is round.

What's electricity have to do with it? you ask. What's the square root of an onion? then see if it's any different. Play telephone on ice with every last blade of grass — go live in a shoe — find some pieces for the puzzle.

Ever met a young path? In all my years as Chef, I never could put my finger on it. Realizing science always finds a way to outscience itself. And that there isn't solely figment of imagination. Or else the world is a machine. And believe me, I've felt it, the world is round.

# END SONGS

---

*Jason Graff*

Jesse stood at his mother's side. His eyes, sad and grey as the heartbroken moon, made George feel not exactly guilty, but complicit, somehow, in what had happened. Mark's laptop with its "MEAT IS MURDER" sticker peeling from the cover was just beyond his reach. George leaned forward and brought it close, slowly, not certain he'd be allowed to do what Mark had asked of him.

"I should get started," George said.

"I'd be more comfortable if Terry did this," Tina said, referring to her older brother. "Sorry, I just would be."

"I know," George said, opening the laptop slowly. "But there's a reason Mark specified I should be the one to go over his stuff. We spent hours talking about his work and I know which pieces he'd want included in any," here he paused to swallow the word posthumous, "publications. Is it all on here? Everything he's been working on for the last year."

"There's a notebook, too. I don't know much about what's in it," she said. "I guess you want to see that too?"

"He did stipulate that I was to be in charge of all the recent unpublished work." George guessed correctly that the computer's password was 'jesse.' "After I've gone over it, you can have Terry look at it too, I guess, if that will make you feel better about it. Let's just try and honor Mark's wishes as best we can."

"I'll get you the notebook," she said, and led Jesse away by the hand.

The boy walked backwards up the stairs, staring at George the whole time. The kid was not making things easier, but then he really couldn't. He'd lost his father only ten days before. George knew from experience a shock like that would never really wear off.

Not much of what George read was new to him. It looked as though Mark had stopped writing long before he died. According to the last saved dates, it didn't appear he'd edited anything in a while, either. George recognized most of the titles. *Father Crime* stood out. The titular antihero was a priest who, along with being a beloved community figure, also headed up a criminal gang. It had been Mark's biggest success, published in a widely read anthology of crime stories. Fresh out of grad school, it'd seemed like the beginning of something for Mark.

"Here it is," Tina said, sneaking up from behind and putting a Moleskine notebook down

on the couch next to him.

"Is this it?" George asked.

"As far as I know," she said.

Jesse stood at the arm of the couch. His expression hadn't changed, still looking at George as though he couldn't be there. The kid was so eerily quiet that George wanted to shake the kid from his trance, but at that moment, wasn't sure how. When he shifted a little to lean toward the boy, Jesse took off like a skittish rabbit back up the stairs. Tina followed, her steps much more sluggish.

George finished reading *Father Crime*. The ending was more preposterous than he remembered, with the priest plotting to force the parishioner who knew his secrets to drink from a poisoned chalice. George enjoyed the twist of the priest being fooled into drinking the poison. It was kind of ending one could count on from Mark, full of morbid justice. He always believed in taking the long route to a happy ending.

George skimmed a couple of the other stories, but the notebook sitting just out of reach was too much of a distraction. No doubt it was the reason his dead friend had stipulated he go over all of the work he'd done in the past year. George was simply one of the few people that could read Mark's handwriting.

The two had started exchanging bits of writing within the first day of their MFA program at Burbank College in upstate New York. It was called a low-residency program in which all of the students came to campus at the beginning of each semester, then worked from home. The small incubation period meant that friendships gained depth quickly with like-minded writers breaking off to form their own little groups. Mark and George had bonded the morning of the arrival over coffee and a shared interest in the work of Jean-Patrick Manchette, a largely forgotten French crime author.

Their talk of discovering him as undergrads allowed the conversation to shift easily to more personal subjects. Each disclosed things that more long-standing friends didn't know or maybe wouldn't understand. Not dark family secrets, but the breadth and scope of their personal ambitions. There was less to risk in sharing that kind of information with someone whom you wouldn't have to see more than a couple of times a year. If Manchette had provided the foundation for their bond, finding that each had no other close friends with even the most modest literary leanings cemented it. By the lunch break in between the opening writing workshops, they'd exchanged work for the first time.

That was when George got his first blast of incendiary Mark, who wrote as though he'd been stewing in a seething cauldron of the moltenest, blackest, most fear-drenched emotions imaginable. He ranted against the government, agribusiness, greed, all with a bloody cunning using the most strafing adjectives and adverbs at hand. George found it bracing, if a little immature. He couldn't have known then that the day was soon coming when Mark would find his voice and soon outpace not only George, but all of their classmates.

The verse in the notebook he was now reading proved a return to that early, more barbaric style. There was so much anger on display, it was shocking even for George. The rants against the evils of the world had turned even more personal, though, revealing disturbing thoughts that read a certain way could be said to at least obliquely presage Mark's demise.

The style was even more pummeling than he remembered, and George would have given up, if halfway through there hadn't been a dramatic transformation. George noticed it first in the handwriting itself. Gone was the mad, large looping style that allowed for only a few hastily scrawled words on each page. In its place was something more condensed, more controlled and legible.

"In a final gesture of grace, I shredded the manuscript meticulously, cutting into roughly even-sized little bits of confetti. It would never be as good as *Acid Shandy*. I'd drained the well, there was nothing of worth left inside. My next thought was that I should become a barber or a butcher, any job really where the blood on my hands would be someone else's."

At first, George thought what he was reading was a memoir, a snapshot taken at the moment when Mark's final break began. He wondered if Tina had read it, which would explain her initial reluctance to let George have a peek. For a time, all of the details, as far as George knew them, matched up with Mark's life as he flashed back to his childhood. He wrote of his mom who had raised him on her own. Her love of crime fiction, which she passed on to him and that had inspired him to write. By the time Mark came to discuss the writing of *Acid Shandy* (which was the title of the first novel he'd completed), the narrative took a turn toward the fictive.

His time at Burbank, during which Mark had written the first draft of the novel, had been edited out. The four years it had taken to write it was reduced to one. And rather than being rejected by every agent and publisher he approached, the manuscript was accepted by the first agent he sent it to, Gabrielle Nunez. English was her second language, which she learned by reading Elmore Leonard, a fact that immediately drew her to Mark's work. They formed a partnership that soon turned into a passionate affair.

In Mark's retelling of his life, *Acid Shandy* then went on to inspire a number of books George knew Mark had read and admired. Those writers contacted Mark, begging him for advice. Mark lifted what personal information he could find about those authors to better fabricate interactions between him and what could be described as his professional fan club. Mark painted himself the sage, dispensing advice to writers who, in reality, were much more accomplished than he was.

The closer he came to the truth, the darker the fiction became. He turned his son's birth into a point of real, if entirely narcissistic, drama. Jesse's first few months with acid reflux were no doubt difficult, but nothing compared to the heart condition his father had now given him. In the midst of it all, came a viscous feud with Tina that may or may not have happened. It was about Mark's needing to grow up and be a man for his son while Jesse was in surgery. At least, he let his son live.

"We each took one of his hands and didn't look at one another but at him. He was to be the focus now. We would share Jesse because, though we wanted to, we couldn't completely let go of each other. His living had made the severing of our bond impossible."

George put down the notebook when he sensed Jesse had returned to look at him some more with those wounded eyes of his. Keeping still, George tried not to make a sound. He was in the spirit to be observed, of letting Jesse see how much of the world was still going on.

"Is that my daddy's?" Jesse asked finally, perhaps realizing that George could play the quiet game almost as well as he could.

"It is."

"What are you doing with it?"

"I'm reading it because your daddy asked me to," George said.

They fell into another protracted silence. The boy could stand so still and so quiet that he seemed to almost vanish. George rolled off the couch and kneeled on the floor to better be at the boy's level.

"I lost my daddy when I was about your age," George said. "How old are you Jesse?"

"Six," he said.

"I was seven when my daddy died, so I know no one else really knows how alone you feel."

At that, Jesse left again, but not in so much of a rush. He took his time, making sure to turn around and look back at George every couple of steps. Each time he stopped, it looked as though he was about to say something, but then swallowed his words.

After George's father had died, he was prompted by a psychologist with the somewhat unfortunate name of Dr. Knell to find creative outlets for his feelings. She'd told him to try drawing about it, so George made a comic book in which his dad was the king of a faraway planet called Nem and had to leave Earth to return to his job as a space ruler. George and his mother would soon go there to join him and they'd be a family again.

He wondered what stories Jesse was making up about his dad and how much Tina had told him. Did he know it was a suicide? Would he even know what a suicide was? How does a kid deal with that? George's father had passed naturally, and yet he'd tortured himself with thoughts as to how he must have caused the stroke for years afterward. Even as an adult, if he wanted to punish himself, he'd turn his mind to any moment he could recall in which he might've caused his father stress.

While the grad school years had been excised out of literary superstar Mark Livinstone's

faux memoir, a memorable afternoon they'd shared together during their last week at the residency was allowed to survive. Though in this version, the adventure started off not in a dorm room as it really had, but at a vacation house in the Vermont countryside that Mark's agent had given him use of. They wandered the woods just as they did on that day. It was only the third time in his life that George had ever used marijuana and the only time he'd thoroughly enjoyed the effects:

"...then he wandered ahead of me on the trail where the sun turned the pine needle-covered ground a shimmering copper. I watched him pick up a fallen branch, then swinging it like a nine-iron, launching a pine cone in the direction of a tree. It smacked against the trunk, splintering into tiny seedlings. When I caught up with him, I jokingly gave him some stick about respecting the environment, to which he replied with a gleaming smile, 'I just invented a new sport. I call it Ewok Golf.'

We spent that afternoon playing his new game. Every moment seemed on the precipice of a new possibility for childlike joy. We never wanted to leave and had I not had a deadline to meet, we may have spent all weekend playing like kids, coming up with new games, making the wilderness our own."

Mark had cut the day short, probably to avoid explaining how it had really ended. They were sitting on either side of a tree, their backs pressed against it, and Mark got choked up as he talked about his mental struggles and worried that all of the acid he'd done as an undergraduate had ruined his brain. George sloughed it off at the time, putting down to good, old-fashioned, weed-induced paranoia, thinking that of all his friends, Mark surely had the finest and soundest mind.

Mark did George the further honor of greatly exaggerating his success in the alternate history, as well. His never-published novel *Endsong*, about the short life of a subway-busking guitar player, was raised to the level of cult classic. According to the memoirs, Tina loved it and kept pushing Mark to get it published. Finally, over a night of pillow talk with his agent with whom he had also concocted a passionate love affair, he encouraged her to step out for his friend.

As he read on, George was dismayed that Mark would turn that honor into a problem. Tina became more and more a source of resentment for him, a bigger fan of George's work even as the fame of *Acid Shandy* turned Mark into a practically canonical figure. As he read, George began to consider how deceitfully Mark presented his wife. True, she had begged him to quit writing constantly after his first breakdown, an event the false memoir completely and conveniently omitted. Only in that reimagined history could she be cast in such an unflattering light, only in a fictional account of Mark's world could she be made to seem so selfish. He made it appear she wanted him to quit writing so as to make him a more conventional husband and father, draining him of the life blood that only writing provided.

Of course, without any mention at all about the truth regarding his mental state, Mark's role in his marriage came off quite a bit differently, allowing the dominant theme of literary heroism to persist. For the first time, George thought of how unfair he'd personally been

to Tina. He'd always thought of her as well-meaning but meddling, trying to turn Mark into something that he was not. The more he read, the more recognized Mark's lies and evasions, the more he considered how hard being his wife must've been. Mark's talent for conjuring despair began to feel cruel.

"She was less a wife to convince than a barrier to be negotiated. I would tell her what she wanted to hear to save time, full stop. We no longer could pretend at the truth and had ceased, since Jesse's birth, to operate as husband and wife on any other basis than the most technical."

Needing a break from all of the unpleasant air that the lack of reality seemed to be pumping into the writing, George went upstairs to the kitchen and helped himself to a bottle of water. He was surprised to find his watchmen there beneath the kitchen table as though he'd been lying in wait for him.

"What are you doing under there?" George asked, cracking the bottle of water.

"How did your daddy die?" Jesse asked.

"He had a problem with his heart and it made him have a massive stroke," George said, pulling out a kitchen chair to provide an escape route. Then, sensing it could be a long discussion, he sat down.

"What's a stroke?"

"It happens when the blood stops flowing to your brain. It happens to older people," George said, trying to make it as simple for Jesse as he remembered it had been made for him.

"Is that what happened to my daddy?" he asked.

"I don't know," George said, his eyes narrowing in feigned confusion.

"I think it's a secret," the boy said in a whisper that sounded full of hurt confusion, "that everyone is keeping from me. I wish someone would just tell me."

"Jesse, what do you think happened?"

"I don't know," he mumbled.

George reached down, picked up the boy and put him on his knee. Jesse went rigid at first, but soon relaxed. He lightly placed his hands on the boy's shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

"When my daddy died, I was confused. I tried thinking about what it meant and what I could have done to make him still be alive." George said. "And you know what I found



out?"

"What?"

"That there is nothing kids can do that have much effect in the adult world. If there was, they'd be a lot happier."

"But I want to know what happened to my daddy. Why did he die?" Jesse said, and started to cry.

George could only whisper "I know" over and over again and let Jesse bury his face in his chest. He rocked the boy in his arms as he did so, feeling the desperation in that little body pressed close to his. Once Jesse was done crying, he wrestled his way out of George's arms and raced out of the kitchen.

"No running in the house," Tina yelled when he nearly knocked her down. "Find anything good in that notebook?" she asked George on her way by him to the kitchen sink.

"Not really." George gave a sigh of disappointment at what he'd found, certain she'd understand.

"I didn't think so. He..." she paused as she rinsed out some glasses and place them in the top rack of the dishwasher, "wasn't working much toward the end."

George gave a noncommittal grunt of agreement and got up from the chair. She came toward him and he froze, his hand holding the back of the chair. They tried to smile at one another, but it wasn't a gesture they had much experience passing to one another.

"So George, you been writing anything lately?" she asked in a way that felt both genuinely curious and accusatory.

"Every day."

"Really? What are you working on?"

"Just finished a brochure about Borneo," he chuckled. "I'm a freelancer now. Writing about places I've never been to for a couple of travel companies."

"At least you're getting paid to write, right?"

"It's not so bad," he said, taking a sip. "How about you, how are you doing?"

"You know..." she said, trailed by half a whimper. "Jesse keeps me sane. I heard you talking to him earlier. Thanks. I don't know what to say to him. I forgot you lost your dad, too."

"No problem," George said. "I don't know if it did much good."

"Like I said, I don't know what to say to him," she said, examining her hands that were raw and pink from scrubbing the dishes. "So you didn't read anything good? He never let me read his notebook."

"In that?" George asked. "Just bits of stuff, nothing important. You haven't looked at it?"

"His note was the last thing I'll ever read by him. A conclusion I came to the minute I finished it," she said.

"I didn't know there was a note."

"There was; I burned it," she said as though daring him to be bold or insensitive enough to ask why.

George made another noncommittal grunt and took a last sip from the bottle of water. It had been as many words as he and Tina had ever shared. She'd been the wife of one of his best friends for more than a decade, longer than he'd known Mark. It had always felt like she'd been married to a different Mark, from a part of his life George didn't know and honestly didn't care to know. But there she was now, along with her son as the only part of Mark's real life to survive.

She put her hand on the back of the chair only a few inches from his. When George reached out for it, he was surprised how easily she let him take it. They looked each other in the eyes sharing a look so pure in its anguish that they didn't need to say anything more. Unlike Jesse, she didn't want to hear any more explanations. She'd heard enough. A few moments later George left, never to see either of them again.

# THE SENSITIVE YOUTH GROWS UP

---

*Richard King Perkins II*

Twenty years later, returning to the bus station in Cody,  
I see the same old woman with no teeth  
still crying on the same faded-out bench.

I put my arm around her, remind her of who I was,  
that we were once in similar circumstances —  
and had both fallen victim to the kind of camaraderie  
which only the valueless and neglected can share.

Without hesitation, I give her cigarettes like I should have  
two decades ago, and money, knowing that in a few days  
everything will be gone and she'll still be  
the same windswept creature people turn from in shame.

I half-wish I could stay here, be her true friend,  
but I'm more than half-glad I can't.  
I remind myself that I have responsibilities,  
a worthwhile life to return to, although the urge to beg  
passing strangers for pocket change is nearly crippling.

I still keep a diary and I'll write in it tonight  
about the old woman with no teeth who was once my friend,  
and maybe by next month, she'll become the subject of a  
prophetic waking dream with a conclusion surprising to no one.

I've really thought it through and I'm sure this is best way  
I can use my delicate gift to ease both her suffering and mine,  
a permanent forgetting — the most sensitive road taken  
so that each of us can begin moving on.

# COLORS AND LIGHT

---

*Kyle Owens*

A screeching whistle blistered out into the leans of sky as a line of sunburned railroad cars journeyed out of the mouth of shadows and into the bright rush of sun that dewed the bridge overpass before striding back into the opposing dark shine of hills and burying itself away into the soil and stone's hollow wound.

Bright green mountains monarched the distance as the noon day sky fostered forth the remains of a summer day. Crowds gathered about the sidewalk in front of rows of houses painted white and pitched black atop their idle metal stove pipes.

"It was the end of the day when Hell walked in. We were heading back to base camp after another exhausting day of having to — you know, just deal with it all. I was in the front passenger seat and Dewey was driving and Jacoby and Mullins was in the backseat. Mullins was talking about the sunset and how beautiful it was and Jacoby was looking at a picture of his girlfriend back in Tennessee. He was looking at her picture all the time."

Reds, whites, and blues patterned everything in flames of flow. Standing shadows fell on the concrete. Children sat on father's shoulders eating apples dipped in syrup and nuts and hands were sticky with sweet cotton candy that only moments before had been piled high on a slender stick.

"Then it happened. This huge explosion just shot all through us. The vehicle lifted straight up into the air and filled with this thick, black smoke. I couldn't breathe and these hot, red flames shot up around my face and there was shrapnel from the vehicle parts that was arrowing out into every direction. It was like being in a firefight right there inside the vehicle. I still can't get over the sound it made. It was the most intense sound I've ever heard in my life. It just filled every fiber of your being with intense pain."

Random words spilled down flesh. Fingers pointed at the coming folios of mass that ventured down the vacant street in sequence and order. Stilted men with painted faces pace the front. A fire engine pulled by thick, black horses interested the mind. Mimics in powdered wigs blazoned the air with ringing bells. A young girl adorned the back of a convertible,

gowned, beautiful in red with a tiled crown. Uniformed youths, marching with clinched fists of brass, summoned the citizens senses in drama's gaze. Flashbulbs cindered the air. Gentle waves of acquaintances smiled into eyes and ventured back from an embarrassed grin.

"I woke up in the hospital and I knew instantly something was different. It took every ounce of will power I had to lift those covers up. When I did I saw the stump of my leg all bandaged up. It was like I was looking at someone else's body. I couldn't believe it was real. Then I let the covers back down and stared up at the ceiling. I was the only one who survived. I don't understand that. They had dreams, too. People depended on them to come back home. They needed them to stay alive. I don't understand why I was allowed to live. I just lied there in a black haze trying to understand everything. Then I thought of my wife and two kids and wondered if they would still — you know — accept me because all of Daddy wasn't coming home."

Oracular echoes of the procession's final festive march brought the peopled souls to an arrangement of images that stood a meadow. Meat in buns and games of tradition took their place among the participant's duty to the common.

"That was an insult to them. They didn't have any trouble accepting me. I don't know why I thought that, but I did. My wife shows me no pity, either. She still expects me to take out the garbage and all, or she'll let me have it. The kids are fascinated by my artificial leg. I guess it almost makes me look like the bionic man or something."

Night dressed warm over the fields where the honored lay. Eyes fired heavenward, caressing the crystal mirror of branching stars. Faces awed forward against the air as colors and light explode within a box of thunder like a waiting rain that had finally come home to relieve people from the dry salvages of despair.

"The way I look at it now is that Iraq took my leg and I got to come home to my wife and kids. To me, that's a fair trade."

The majesty of holiday's harvest veiled a final quiet inside the meadow's run of sloping greens as the assemblage left the dreams of night behind for the hard instance of tomorrow's day.

# RE-TARD

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*Karlyn Thayer*

The mental capacity of a Down syndrome person ranges from near-normal to severely retarded. There is no standard behavior.

The day the man with sunglasses came, I thought he was going to shoot us with guns, but no. He wanted my sister Tanya because she's so pretty. So he made her go out to get in the car and she cried and said, "Like, please, please don't take me," but he had the guns, and if you ever saw anything, you know about guns. Tanya tried to scratch him, but he hit her and made a big red mark on her face. He tore her shirt, which was her work shirt. It's black with diamond buttons, which I'm not allowed to touch.

And so he was going to take Tanya in his car, but my mom went running out screaming. So I headed out to the car because I'm part of the family, even if I'm not pretty like them, being a Down baby, only not a baby anymore. He wouldn't let me get in the car and he said, "What am I going to do with your mom and your brother? They can name my face," but Tanya said, "No, not Dale. He don't know nothin'."

That guy said, "Yeah, he's just a fat re-tard," which I'd heard before, and Mom always said to say I was not a re-tard, I was a Down baby, but they got in the car and my mom jumped partly in the car to grab that guy's hair and he closed the window. The car drove away with my mom dragging out of it. Her arm was stuck in the window and she had to run to keep up with the car and she was screaming and screaming. I didn't know what I should do. When I try to help my mom, she always curses me out. And then I couldn't even see the car. I saw one of Mom's shoes down the road and I went and got it. I hoped she wouldn't be mad.

I watched the road for awhile, for them to come back, but they didn't. I went in the house and the science fiction channel was showing a pretty good movie with like Godzilla, so I watched that for a while and I went to the door a couple of times to see if they were coming back. Then I got kind of hungry and I can have fruit in the afternoon, but not a cookie, so I got a banana and watched some more TV. Once Tanya asked, "How do you tell the difference between Godzilla and God?" I said I didn't know. She said, "Godzilla is real because you can see him." And then Mom said to Tanya, "Jesus, Tanya, don't fuck with his head. Dale's got enough troubles." I guess that's right. I still don't know which one is real. But I do know not to talk about Godzilla at church. They will kick you right out of there.

I felt pretty bad when it started to get dark outside and they still were gone. I wondered if I should make a supper for us, but Mom doesn't like me using the stove when she's not here, so I got two ice cream bars out of the freezer and I ate them and I was careful to wash my hands after because Mom screams if I get chocolate around. Some of those little chocolate

bits fell in my lap and on the couch, but I picked them up. Lucky.

At six, our favorite show came on, Wheel of Fortune. We all cheer when someone wins a car. But this night, this girl won a car and I didn't feel like cheering by myself. So I didn't cheer. But I was like, when are they going to get home? Vanna was wearing a red dress all the way down.

The phone rang so I said hello and this lady goes, "Sorry, wrong number," but then I'm thinking right of that phone and thinking of what Mom told me. This phone was black and when I looked on it, I thought good, because the numbers nine-one-one were right on there, on a sticker, so I pushed nine-one-one and this other lady goes, "What's your emergency?"

I couldn't think of what it was. Well, I knew what it was. I knew it was about them being away in a car, but I couldn't make the words right. I got confused and the lady keeps yelling at me to tell my emergency, so after awhile I have to hang up. I couldn't think of how to say about Tanya and my mom. But at least I didn't get chocolate on the phone this time.

After a while I heard some banging on the door and I thought hooray, they must be home, but it turned out it was a police guy, and he goes, "Did you call about a problem?" But I couldn't figure out how he could find me, unless the phone made a map, which I don't think it does. I asked him, "Does your phone make a map?" So he goes, "Is anyone else here?" and I'm like, "No." And he goes, "Mind if I look around?" I didn't care. I opened the door for him and he came in and walked all around and looked in the bedrooms and bathroom and I kind of followed him. He looked real nice in the face. So he turns around and says, "Where're the other people who live here?"

I think I know what to say, so I go, "A man with sunglasses took them in the car." He looked nice in the face for a time and then he said, "Did someone get taken against their will?" I didn't know what that meant. Mom always said, "If you don't know what to say, keep your friggin' mouth shut."

Then he goes, "Could we sit down?" and we went in the other room and he went and turned off the TV and he goes, "What's your name?" I kind of smiled since that was such an easy one. I said, "Dale Crowley," and he writes on some paper — writes my name, I guess.

"How old are you?"

I go, "Sixteen and a half. For my birthday, I get to go for pizza. Anywhere I want. I'll probably go to Pizza Hut. You can get breadsticks while you're waiting for your pizza."

And he goes, "Who lives with you?" and I say, "My mom and Tanya. She's my sister," and then we talk about them for a time, their right names and how old do I think they are and did they go to work? I figured what to say: "Tanya goes to work."

“Where?”

I kind of couldn't remember, though. “It's this place where they have a fake monkey in the window that looks real.”

“Chimpy's Bar and Grill?”

“Do they have a fake monkey?”

“Yeah, they do. So your sister works there?”

“He tore her work shirt and she's going to have to pay for it herself. It's black with diamonds. She gets lousy tips. She used to get better tips before we moved out of Denver. A tip is money she gets to put in her pocket to keep. She's so lucky!”

“Is she there now? At Chimpey's?”

I got pissed because I told him already. “I told you. A sunglasses man took them in the car.”

And he says, “Sorry.” And I say, “We moved here when school was out.”

“Where did you live before?” I wasn't mad anymore. I did really smile this time because Mom made me say it so many times: “Twenty-one-thirty-one West Hardy, Denver.” He writes on his paper and says, “Why are you smiling?” and I go, “Because I got it right!” He smiled, too.

I was sad we moved because I liked school. Mostly I didn't learn in school. I played with my friend Marlon at the school. We beat each other up for fun. We did that a lot and almost no one got hurt. Our other best game was tripping. Like I would wait around a corner and when Marlon came by, I'd stick out my foot and trip him and he'd fall and sometimes he got stitches in his chin because of it, but it was both. He tripped me. We both laughed a lot and I felt sad to leave school because I had a friend, Marlon. But Mom said we could save some rent money, so right after school was out, we left that night.

Then the police guy uses his best face and says, “Where did your mom go?”

I kind of got mad again because I already told him about the man. So he goes, “Did they want to go in the car?” I knew that one. I shook my head and said, “No, they were crying not to go in the car. Tanya was like, ‘You son-bitch, you son-bitch, you son-bitch.’ Mom was dragging out the window with her arm. I didn't know what to do.”

He kind of leaned forward and said, “When did this happen? When did they go in the car?”

I tried to think. I can't read the round clocks, just the number clocks. Mom says I don't try. But let me ask you this: Why does time on a round clock go in a circle? I don't think time



goes in a circle. It goes in a line. I was like, "Um, I guess it was after lunch."

"And your mom was dragging?"

I showed him her shoe that I'd found in the road. "Her arm was stuck in the window. I don't think she liked it."

He kind of rubbed his face and he said, "Okay, Dale, this is real important. Can you remember the kind of car the man drove?"

"You mean like a Chevy?"

"Right, like a Chevy." This was a hard one. I thought as much as I could, but Mom said the Japs ruined the cars so they all looked the same. Mom said, "Show me a cheap falling-apart Jap car and I'll show you a car with a stupid religious bumper sticker." Then Mom laughed and said, "Jesus is coming — look busy!"

I said, "It might have been a Chevy."

He used his nice face. That was really nice because a lot of people want me to hurry all the time and they make me mad. He said, "Do you remember what color it was? The car?" I thought again. The car was old. It had some paint here and some paint there. "It wasn't a color."

He goes, "Do you remember anything about the car?"

I did. "It was a real junk car. It was kind of all bashed in on a lot of places. Like once when Tanya got mad at her boyfriend and bashed her bowling ball on his car. I laughed and laughed." I laughed again, remembering.

"I don't suppose you saw the license plate."

"Oh, yes I did. It was Colorado, because I saw the mountains on it."

He looked up from his paper. "Dale, what number was on the license plate?"

I tried to think, but I couldn't. I'd been looking at the mountains, not the number. I don't know who could look at two things at the same time. Maybe science guys. I kind of felt like crying because I couldn't get any of the car answers right.

I asked, "Could it be nine-one-one?"

"Can you see all right without your glasses?"

"I have to be careful not to lose my glasses. Once I lost my glasses and Mom was really mad. Do I think money grows on trees?"

He stood up and he goes, "I'm Deputy Fenwick." I go, "Please to meet you," and I stood up and held out my hand and he shook hands. He said, "I need to go out to the car. Will you be all right here?" and I asked if I could turn on the TV again, and he said yes. But they just had news shows on. I hate that. Bang, bang, bang, bombs and all that shit. People dead with blood.

Deputy Fenwick came back inside. He said, "Sure are a lot of empty whiskey bottles in the trash."

I guess he meant Mom's bottles. I felt pretty good. "We always put out all our trash. We're not junky people. We knew this lady that had a junky yard in Denver. Mom said we'd never be that low."

Deputy Fenwick laughed, so I laughed, and then he said, "Listen, do you have any other family? Or anyone who takes care of you?"

We don't have any family. Mom told me, "Your father was a nitwit. Why I ever slept with him, I don't know."

I told Deputy Fenwick, "Once I had a day with Miss Sprague when they went to a doctor thing. She lives in the fence house." I pointed, to show I know my directions. North. Miss Sprague has a big old chain fence with mean signs, because she doesn't like anybody. One sign on her gate says, "Touch this gate under fear of death." She doesn't have any teeth so she never smiles. She's got a dark house all over.

But she borrows cigarettes from Mom and Tanya when she runs out, and they borrow from her and sometimes they talk like friends.

Deputy Fenwick says, "Okay, we're going to see if Miss Sprague can look after you for a while. I've called for some backup and we'll see what we can do about finding your folks."

He was going to look for them! "I want to go with you and look for them," I said, but he goes, "You have to be a special-trained deputy. Here. I'm going to give you one of my cards so you can call me and we'll stay in touch, okay?" He gave me a white card and I looked at it. I wanted to be a special-trained deputy. I'd have little white cards and give them to everyone who wants a clue. "And listen," he said. "You can call me Jim."

I wanted to be a deputy and give out cards and say, "You can call me Jim."

Pretty soon some other police cars came and Jim talked to the police, and then he had me get in his car and we went over to Miss Sprague's. Miss Sprague is mostly skinny and wrinkled and she wears an old housedress that Mom says she must've dug out of Mamie Eisenhower's rag box, and she has this white hair she forgot to comb, ever. She put her hand over her mouth because Jim has a real nice face that makes you want to look nice, too. He said, "Are you Miss Sprague?" and she squinted her eyes and nodded, and he said, "It appears that Mrs. Crowley and Tanya may have been kidnapped."

"My land," she said behind her hand. "I seen the lights. I wondered what was going on over there."

"Any idea who might've wanted to kidnap them?"

"Kidnap! Oh, no." Then she looked around and said, "Well..." She came up close. "It could have been that Small Fish, I bet. I seen him roaring around here in his car, acting like his car's his dickie. You show me a boy with a loud engine and I'll show you a boy with a little dick. Any good he had in him, it dribbled out long ago."

Right then I thought of Tanya saying Small Fish was a son-bitch.

"Does Small Fish have another name?"

"I imagine he does, but Small Fish is all she ever called him. See, he picked her up at the bar where she works and they went out once, but then she'd had enough of him. She said he was rude and crude. Only then she couldn't get rid of him, see. He stalked her. Small Fish. He's an evil one. A little guy, but strong and wily. Crooked teeth and stringy hair."

I didn't think Miss Sprague should be talking about teeth and hair, but maybe that could be a clue for a special-trained deputy.

"Can you describe the car?"

"Big Pontiac, half-primered."

"Okay," Jim said. "We'll go to Chimpy's and see if anyone knows his real name. Can you keep an eye on Dale for a time?"

She wanted to look at Jim's face, but she had to look at me. "How long of a time?"

"I could keep by myself," I told them. So far, I hadn't wrecked anything.

"They gonna look for clues at your house," she said to me. "You'd be in the way." She kind of patted her ratty old hair. "I guess I could boil you a hot dog." I go, "Okay," because I was pretty hungry, and Jim left in his car.

After I ate the hot dog, Miss Sprague said it was time to go to sleep. At my house, we just go to bed when we want to, but she said she had to get up early. I don't know what for. Not to fix her hair. So I was supposed to sleep on her couch with a blanket and pillow, but not with the TV on. After a while I got up and left because I thought maybe Mom and Tanya had come home and they'd be worried about me.

I walked home. I didn't get lost. The moon was real big. The police had wrapped yellow plastic ribbons all over the house. Wow! It was just like a crime scene. But the house was all dark and the doors were locked. I couldn't even get my jacket, which pissed me off because

I was cold. All I was wearing was shorts and my red Faith Hill T-shirt, but I couldn't get in and it was my house and my jacket, but that's the police for you. A lot of time, they don't know whose side they're on.

So all I could think to do was go after Mom and Tanya, and I started walking along the highway toward the mountains, where they'd gone with that guy, Small Fish. I used to be scared of the dark, but I'm not any more. Once I told Mom I was scared of the dark and she said, "Don't be stupid. Dark is the same shit you see in the light." So I walked along there for a long time and I didn't see any cars and after I walked, I came to some more yellow plastic ribbon tied to the fence. I didn't know why they'd put yellow ribbon on a fence unless someone went to war there. And then I thought about Mom's other shoe, but why would Mom's shoe be there? Then I didn't know what to do. I didn't want Mom to curse me out again for doing the wrong thing. Again.

I walked some more and then this big SUV came along, silver, and loud music, and it passed me and stopped and backed up. All the windows and doors opened and the music was really loud and the inside of the SUV was smoky real bad. At first, I thought it was on fire and they wanted me to help put out the fire, but no. There was about five guys and two girls and they were all laughing, and you don't laugh at fire, but I didn't think they were laughing at me because they didn't even know me. One of the guys said, "Hey, dude, you want a ride?" By then I was really cold, so I said, "Okay."

The one guy had really long hair and a mustache and a kind of squished-up black cowboy hat and dark glasses. He said, "I'm Zach. Who're you?"

"I'm Dale," I said, and Zach made a horse whinny sound and they all laughed some more and the music came back on.

"Where you headed?" Zach yelled.

"I have to find my sister. She got kidnapped."

"No kidding. How old's your sister?"

"She's twenty-three or twenty-four."

"Oh, so she's not like an Amber alert." I didn't say anything, so he said, "Who kidnapped her?"

I go, "This guy Small Fish."

They thought Small Fish's name was really funny, so they laughed and laughed and laughed some more. And then they offered me a cigarette that they were all sharing, but I don't smoke. Mom and Tanya both smoke, but they won't let me. "I can't hardly keep myself in cigarettes," Mom said. "You want to smoke, get a job."

At least it was warm in the SUV and we went along and I watched out the window for Mom and Tanya, but I didn't see them and after a while I went to sleep and then I woke up and it was morning and everyone was getting out at the Loaf 'n Jug store. I wanted to buy something to eat, but I didn't have any money.

"Do you know where you are?" Zach asked, and I said, "No," and he said, "Georgetown. You know where that is?" I said, "Is my mom here?" and he laughed and said, "You're a funny dude. You want to stick with us? We're going west, maybe over to Utah."

I couldn't figure out how to find my mom, but I thought maybe I should stay there in case she was looking for me and she wouldn't know to look in Utah. So I said I guessed I'd stay, and Zach and all the others got a bunch of stuff out of the Loaf 'n Jug — a lot of orange juice and donuts and stuff — and got in the SUV and drove away. "Be cool, dude," Zach said.

I stayed at the Loaf 'n Jug for a while until the manager guy told me to leave, so then I walked along to the café up the street and went in there. It was noisy and happy and smelled good. I saw a plate where some people had left some pieces of toast, so I didn't think they'd care if I ate it, so I did. And I saw some money on the table, but I knew that was tip money, so I didn't touch that, no. People walked all around me, talking and clinking and bumping into each other. Tanya told me once about how to be a busboy, so I picked up plates and stuff and carried them to the back, and this lady with yellow hair goes, "Who're you?" and I said, "I'm a busboy," so she looked at me real funny and said, "Where's Kenny?" I just shrugged and then she told me where to put the plates and stuff, and I kept doing that and any time there was food left on the plates, I could eat it and nobody cared.

After a while some people left, and the yellow-hair lady and the other ladies started laughing and teasing me, but I didn't care. They gave me money out of their pockets. I had a job. Because Kenny was supposed to be there. They laughed and laughed and all day they gave me money, and then when they saw me eating off the plates, they fixed me a hamburger with fries. The yellow-hair lady was named Rachel and she said, "Do you have a name?" and I go, "Yes," and she goes, "Well, what is it?" and I said, "You can call me Jim," and she goes, "Okay, Jim. Huey, that's our boss, he don't need to know about this hamburger, okay?"

I said okay, but I still kept eating some of the left-over food if it looked good. We worked until real late and then we cleaned up and turned out the lights. Rachel said, "You're a good worker, Jim. We'll see you in the morning. We open at six, but we show up about five-thirty to get things started." She said, "You be all right?" One of the other ladies yelled, "Rachel! Come on!" So I said "Yeah."

And then they all left. I didn't know what to do, so I went back to Loaf 'n Jug and this time I had money and I bought some nachos and a Coke and donuts, but the Loaf 'n Jug guy didn't like me so I had to leave. I went back to the café and sat on the sidewalk by the front door. I finished eating and put all my trash in a trash place, and sat down by the front door again to wait for morning, but it was pretty cold and I had to rub my arms to keep warm.

After a long time a police car drove by and then drove around the block, I guess, and came back. This police guy gets out with a flashlight, so I stood up. He goes, "What're you doing here?" and I go, "Waiting for morning. I work here."

"You work here?"

"Yes. Ask Rachel."

"You have any eye-dee?"

I knew what that meant because Tanya talked about eye-dee from work at the monkey place, and I took out the white card and gave it to him. "You can call me Jim," I said.

He shined the flashlight on the card and looked at me, and he said, "I'm a little confused. Do you work as a deputy for Jefferson County or do you work here at the café? And why aren't you in uniform?"

"I don't know," I said, and he goes, "Let's take a ride down to the station, okay?"

I was just as glad to get in the warm car. "I have a jacket," I told him, "but it's locked up in my house."

We got to the police place and it was warm there, too, lucky. He got me a Coke and I got to sit by his desk and play with these little wacky balls while he used the phone. He said on the phone, "This is Officer Slater, Georgetown Police. I'm trying to reach Deputy Jim Fenwick." Then he goes, "Can you patch me through?" I didn't know what that meant, but he said, "Yeah, Jim Fenwick? I've got a fellow here who had your card in his pocket. He's wearing a T-shirt and shorts and he's a — uh — maybe —" He listened. Then he looked at me and he said, "Dale?" and I smiled and he went, "Yeah, it's him." I played with the wacky balls and after a while he hung up and said to me, "Well, he cussed a lot, but he's coming to get you."

"He is?"

"It's gonna take him a few hours. How about you take a nap back in one of the cells? I won't lock the door, but I'll give you a blanket." So that was a good deal and I went half to sleep, but then he got a phone call and had to leave, and this lady came to answer the phone. She had red hair sticking up and black lines around her eyes. But man, she could answer the phone! She'd pick it up and listen and then write down stuff real fast. She could write with a cigarette in her mouth and smoke going in her eyes. Her name was Vickie and she told me dirty jokes between phone calls.

I told her I had a job at the café working with Rachel, and she said she and Rachel went to school together, and I told her about my friend Marlon at my school and how we used to trip each other. She goes, "You miss your bud, huh?"

And then the phone rang and she said, "Police station," and then she said, "No, I told you I was on call tonight." And then she said, "Well, I'm sorry, Eddie Earl, but they need me here. Get something out of the fridge." She hung up and shook her head. "What a ..."

"Son-bitch?"

"Yeah, what a son-bitch."

About five minutes later, that son-bitch Eddie Earl came in carrying a whiskey bottle, all red face and wrinkled-up clothes, and he started yelling at Vickie that she was a whore and she was making it with the police guy and they were cursing each other out and then he started hitting her. I didn't like to see that and I thought maybe I should do something. But I didn't know what to do except call the police, which was our own-selves.

I knew Vickie might be mad if I tried to help her, like Mom, but she was crying pretty much when he slammed her against a wall, so I went out of my little room and I was going to hit him with a chair, but he turned around and hit me in the face and I fell down and Vickie fell down, and she was passed out on the floor with blood coming out of her nose and her ears. And then I had blood coming out of my nose, and it kind of scared me. I was afraid I might run out of blood.

But then Eddie Earl left, and then the police came back and started yelling, "Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ!" and he called a doctor and he put me back in the room and locked the door. He thought I hit Vickie, but I didn't. I go, "I could give you some DNA," and he goes, "What?" On TV, you always give DNA to prove you didn't do anything bad. I said, "DNA. I have some on my mouth." He goes, "Shut up."

After some people came to take Vickie to the hospital, he gave me some paper towels and said to clean myself up.

So when Jim came in the morning, the police was going to make me stay there, but then Vickie woke up and told them it wasn't me, so I left with Jim and we went to have breakfast at the same place I had a job, but Jim wouldn't let me go to work, even when Rachel said she'd put me on the payroll. He told me to get what I wanted for breakfast, so I got eggs and bacon and pancakes, and Jim said, "Did anyone ever tell you you're a pain in the butt?" and I said, "Sure!"

After we ate, Jim said, "Dale, I have some bad news for you. It's about your mother."

"She lost her shoes."

"Yeah, you remember how she was being dragged by the car?" I go, "Yeah," and he goes, "Well, she didn't make it."

I asked what happened and he said Small Fish left her on the highway. "You know, her health wasn't very good with her drinking and smoking. She had a heart attack. I'm sorry to

tell you she died.”

“Well,” I said, “she’s my mom.”

“I know that, but she died. Do you know what that means?”

“I guess.”

“It means she’s not coming back.”

I kind of felt bad, then, because we had a dog once that died, but not of a heart attack.

“So I’m going to have to drive you back to Miss Sprague’s, at least for now.”

I go, “Tanya can take care of me.” And he goes, “We’ll have to wait and see,” and we went out and got in the car. “I could take care of my own self,” I said. “I have a job.” And he said, “Yes, but you don’t have a place to live or even a jacket.” “No!” I said. “I do have a jacket. I can prove it!”

I kind of shut up for awhile and looked at trees. I hoped to see a mountain goat, which I saw only once in my life. Then we heard this crackly sound and it was Jim’s police radio, and a police voice said, “Suspect’s car seen going north on highway 72 toward Blackhawk.” Jim looked at me and then he said in the radio, “Was suspect alone?” The radio said, “It’s believed the suspect has one female in the car, but that’s not confirmed.” Jim said ten-four. He looked at me again with his best face. He said, “Dale, I want you to promise me something.” I said, “What?” and he said, “If I take you along when I go after Small Fish, you have to promise to do exactly what I say and no more. That means if I tell you to stay in the car, you stay in the car.”

“I’m in the car.”

“I mean later. If you can’t promise, then I can’t take you with me.” So I promised. I felt pretty good. We were going to save Tanya. “You need to be prepared,” Jim said. “This could be bad. This Small Fish, he’s a bad dude. He hurt a woman before. He was in prison for hurting her, and then he got out and that’s when he met your sister. He’s not a nice man.”

“What happened to the other lady?”

“He stabbed her and threw her into an icy river.”

“Tanya wouldn’t like that.”

“No.”

We drove higher in the mountains. I didn’t know where we were, but Jim had a little lady



voice that came out of the car and told him where he should turn. I thought about that. "It's not a little person in there," I said. "It's a GPS," Jim said, which I didn't know what it was, but he put on his flashing lights, but not his siren. We went really fast. Of course we both had our seatbelts buckled. So we went zipping along really fast, but the little voice always knew where we were, and it was kind of scary on the mountains because of cliffs. We kept driving up, up, up with more cliffs. After a while, the road was just gravel and the tires made rocks behind.

Then we got to this place where a bunch of police cars parked, and Small Fish's car. Jim told me to stay in the car — "I'm not kidding, Dale" — but I could listen out the window. The police said Small Fish ran out of road and he took Tanya and made her run into the forest. Jim and all the police went into the forest. I felt bad because I wanted to see Tanya and I didn't want her to be stabbed and thrown in an icy river. But I had promised Jim, so I stayed in the car for a long time.

But nothing happened and after a while, after a long, long time, I had to pee, and I didn't think Jim would care if I got out of the car to pee. So I did, and then I saw a little path along the cliff and I went for a little walk to see if I could see anything like a wolf or a mountain goat, but I couldn't. But I kept walking along that cliff because it was kind of fun to look down at rocks and stuff, and then I heard some gunshots and shouts, and I looked and that Small Fish was running along the cliff back toward his car, toward me.

Small Fish was watching his feet so he didn't see me. He was running with his gun. I was pretty scared. I got behind this tree and when Small Fish came, I stuck out my foot and tripped him, just like I used to do with Marlon at school. He stumbled and I kind of shoved him and he went over the edge of the cliff, all the way down. He fell right on rocks. You don't want to hear that sound.

After that, some police came down the trail and looked at Small Fish and they looked at me and they said I shouldn't have done what I did because I could've got hurt, but no one was too sad or too mad. It wasn't anything like once I spilled bacon grease in the kitchen and boy, Mom really cursed me out. It wasn't like that.

Then Jim and another police came down the trail with Tanya between them. They helped her walk and I was so happy for a second but I looked at her and she was all beat up and cut up and red marks on her and limping. She was so lucky, though. She got to wear a deputy jacket!

When she got to me, she looked at me for a second, but she didn't say anything. She went walking very sad. But Jim kind of patted my shoulder and we all went down and the police called on their radios. Tanya sat in Jim's car with her mean face. I wanted to tell her about my job at the café, but not her mean face.

Jim had me sit in a car, not his. "She'll be all right," he said. I'm like, "Why is she mad?" Jim goes, "She needs some time to calm down. He — Small Fish — he would've killed her, and she knew it."

"Like he stabbed that other woman and threw her in an icy river."

"Yeah. Tanya's a fighter, though. She saw us coming and she distracted him. She taunted him, and we got up close, but he took off running. He would've got away if you hadn't stopped him."

"I tripped him!"

"Yeah, you did. The thing is, your sister's upset. She's had a lot going on the last couple days. She talked about moving away, out of state."

"Where would she go? I want to stay with Tanya."

"Yeah. I don't know. I don't know how she feels. You need to give her some time, okay?"

I thought about that. I said, "I could go back and get my job with Rachel, I guess."

"We'll worry about that later," he said.

Jim went and got in his car and talked to her, I guess. I sat in the other police car because I still didn't have a jacket. The police gave me coffee in a gray plastic cup. It was good. I said to the police, "You know how to make pine coffee?" He said, "How?" I picked up a toothpick off the floor and put it in my coffee. "That's pine coffee," I said. He laughed.

Then some police cars left and Jim stood up and made a motion with his arm for me to go over there, to his car, and I did, and Tanya looked at me and tried to make a little smile but some tears came down her face and she said, "Get in the car, bro. We're going home."

So I did.

# WHERE IS WALDO?

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*Riley Parish*

Where is Waldo, really?  
Never found, yet not trying to hide  
Journeying from place to place freely  
His renown remains worldwide  
Never found, yet not trying to hide  
Determining his paths without deliberation  
His renown remains worldwide  
The journey is his destination  
Determining his paths without deliberation  
It's precisely why he can't be found  
The journey is his destination  
A blur of exotic sights and sounds  
Precisely why he can't be found  
Is little concern in Waldo's mind  
A blur of exotic sights and sounds  
This is what Waldo wants us to find  
Little concern in Waldo's mind  
To withhold him from embracing the unknown  
This is what Waldo wants us to find:  
A careful eye to explore what is shown  
To withhold him from embracing the unknown  
Would be to pull the wind from a sail  
Only a careful eye that explores what is shown  
Sees the search for Waldo is to no avail  
Pull the wind from the sails  
Let him journey from place to place freely  
The search for Waldo is to no avail  
Where is Waldo, really?

# BENEATH SHIFTING SANDS

---

*Holly Day*

so many stones caressed by so many feet, strewn  
in this same exact pattern for so many years.  
Two thousand years split beneath the thick wheels of an  
armored truck. sand turns to glass and burns red and then black then  
gray ash, the splintered remains of ancient  
minaret spires whose complete ruin is so blatant

there is nothing to unearth. Satellites pick up  
ancient trade routes, abandoned oases, holy  
sites, the smoky debris left by airplanes disrupt  
the glorious remnants of those that came before.

# A CONVERSATION WITH MIKE KARBOS

## *Talking Shop*

# A CONVERSATION WITH MIKE KARDOS

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Mike Kardos is the author of the novel *The Three-Day Affair* and the award-winning story collection *One Last Good Time*. His short stories have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Crazy-horse*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Blackbird*, *Pleiades*, *PRISM international*, and many other magazines and anthologies, and were cited as notable stories in the 2009, 2010, and 2012 editions of *Best American Short Stories*. Michael grew up on the Jersey Shore, received a degree in music from Princeton University, and played the drums professionally for a number of years. He has an M.F.A. in fiction from The Ohio State University and a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri. He lives in Starkville, Mississippi, where he is an assistant professor of English and co-director of the creative writing program at Mississippi State University.

On Thursday, February 21, 2013, Mike Kardos was interviewed via Skype by Eastern Illinois students taking the "English 5020: Graduate Workshop in Fiction" course, taught by Dr. Lania Knight. Hannah Green transcribed the group interview, and what follows are excerpts (no spoilers!).

**Mike Kardos:** Hey everybody. What class is this exactly?

**Lania Knight:** This is an MA program in English. We have several people who are going to graduate this spring and our class in particular is a novel-writing class. We're reading Jane Smiley's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel* and we're reading your book and a few other novels. What we're going to do is have each person introduce themselves and then ask you a question.

**MK:** Okay. Fantastic.

**LK:** So who wants to go first?

**Stephanie Guyer:** I'll go.

**LK:** Go for it.

**SG:** All right. Okay, so my name's Stephanie.

**MK:** Hey Stephanie.

**SG:** I'm a second-year grad assistant at Eastern, but my focus is in rhetoric and composition, and I haven't written fiction in a long time. I turned in my first draft of twenty pages

of my novel today, and last night I had this crazy idea. I was like, okay, I need to change this from third person to first person.

While writing a novel, do you have a process that you go through that you choose what point of view you're writing in? Because I just switched completely and thought, oh, this might be better this way and I didn't know if you had any kind of process for when you're writing?

**MK:** Yeah, I think in a way those choices that you're making now, they're going to affect what you do for the next couple years of your life. So, in a way, this is the perfect time to try to think — with just twenty pages. I'm working on something now where I've got, I don't know, eighty or ninety pages, and it dawned on me at that point that it really ought to be in present tense. And it was only because I just started one of the chapters and read it in present tense and it was so clearly the right way to do it. But now, I'm kind of going back and switching it. I just think that you have to feel it out. You know now is the right time to do it. For [*The Three Day Affair*], it had to be in first person because it's essentially a confession, and so it kind of had to be that way. I think some of the point of view decisions in that book weren't so much third versus first, but when to reveal information. You know?

**SG:** Okay.

**MK:** So when to reveal and how much and where, you know. So those are kind of the considerations that I had to think about a lot, but I think I knew right away that that would be in first person.

**SG:** Okay, very cool.

**Craig Banyai:** Can I follow up with mine? My name is Craig and I finish next fall. My emphasis is in creative writing and I'm really concentrating now on voice and first person. We were talking earlier about the audience for the voice and in this case it seems a little unclear as to who he (narrator of *The Three-Day Affair*) was confessing to. Did you give that any kind of thought? Is this a general confession or did you have something in mind?

**MK:** Yeah, it's funny, I remember specifically being in grad school and having discussions about first person and who is the audience. An apostrophe is like an address to a specific person in literature, and it contains this idea that there is an implied actual listener to what you're saying. Is it a first-person spoken narrative like *Catcher in the Rye*? Or is it a first-person written narrative like *Gatsby*? And I thought about that a lot at the start of this novel, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I didn't care. Because I think, ultimately, decisions about who the confession was for kind of faded away, and I just wanted it to be a first-person voice. I think this gets back to the idea that literary confessions are almost always self-justifications. They're not really confessions at all. *Lolita* is not a confession, even though it seems like it is. It's really "I'm going to confess now" and then it's three hundred pages of self-justification. So I think really he's confessing it to get it off of his chest, not to the person he's confessing it to. [...]

**Chris Robison:** Hi, my name is Chris, I'll be finishing in the fall. You just referenced *Gatsby*, and *Gatsby* is in your novel, and since the characters seem to be at that age when they're turning thirty, I was wondering if *Gatsby* was a conscious decision or just slipped in?

**MK:** Well, I like that novel a whole lot, and I think there's something about that three-part structure that I like. It's June, July, August. Have you guys read Michael Chabon's novel *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*? It was his first novel, the year before *Wonder Boys*, and it's not a great novel, but it's a good novel. It's fairly consciously a retelling of *Gatsby* and it takes place over June, July, August. In an interview, I heard him talking about that and he said that, especially for a first novel, having that three-part structure really helped. So in that regard it's not a coincidence that it takes place over three days, and not two days or four days. Having Friday, Saturday, and Sunday gave me some structure. Um, as far as other sorts of *Gatsby*-isms, I don't know if, you know, I had any intention to try write a sentence that would ever sound like a Fitzgerald sentence. But I think there was something about the tightness of it, but I really like short novels, and I like long ones too, but that certainly was one of them. Kent Harref writes really great short novels, and I was always amazed how he could do that. You know *Carrie* is a really great short novel by Stephen King, who wrote thousand-page books. It's an amazingly well put-together short novel. I think part of the reason I did this was to not overwhelm myself, and it had to do with a structural thing more than anything else.

**Tim Gurnig:** Hi, I'm Tim. I was wondering the same thing, like what were your influences when writing this? When I first read this, I was kind of reminded of Tom Perrotta because of the whole New Jersey suburbs, musician, Ivy league stuff. So I was wondering if you were influenced by him at all and who else you were influenced by?

**MK:** Yeah, I read a ton of Tom Perrotta, and he blurbed my story collection in the nicest way. I basically, one day, when I knew it was going to come out, I sent him an email and I was like "Hi, you don't know who I am but my book is coming out with like the smallest press in the world, any chance you want to blurb it?" and he goes "All right." And it was just "Hey I'm from Jersey, you're from Jersey, what do you think?" And he did, he blurbed it for me. So yeah, I've read all of his books and I do like them, and he does that thing where he's writing literary stuff, but it's really easy to get into. I do like his style a lot.

As far as other influences, the thing about this novel that is worth mentioning is that I did not set out to write a crime novel. I just set out to write a novel, a novel novel. And it so happened that what kicked it off was this weird little quasi-kidnapping thing, but all along, as I was working on it, it was about four friends who get themselves into some really bad shit. And it's their hubris and their good education that's convinced them that they're good guys, and they try to "good guy" the problem away. You know, like "Oh we'll just talk it through and it'll work out fine," and that gets them deeper and deeper into it. But it wasn't really until the novel was done and my agent was sending it out that we had a discussion about who to send it out to. She sent it to a few literary editors and a few crime editors and it just so happened that Mysterious Press, which is the crime imprint for Grove Atlantic, ended up making an offer. But, you know, in a different world it could come out looking different. The font on the cover could've been much smaller, or it could have been in lower case. So it got pushed and marketed that way, and I'm actually kind of glad, because it



means that some people have found a book that, you know, I wouldn't bump into at AWP. I think it found a different audience than I'd have been able to find otherwise, but so as far as influences which I know was the questions, Tom Perrotta, Nick Hornby, certainly writers like Tobias Wolf, Tim O'Brien. I don't know if you guys have read the Richard Gates novel *Revolutionary Road*? I guess they made it as a movie, too. The novel is still awful and tragic, but it's a great novel. It's wonderful and tragic and that kind of got in my head too. Those are the ones that come to mind.

**TG:** Thank you.

**Aaron White:** Hi, my name is Aaron. When you decided that it was going to be a crime novel by the end of it, how did you go about structuring events? It does get kind of complicated by the end of it. I mean did you just lay it out in an outline form?

**MK:** Yeah, I had about a four- or five-page outline. The big decision upfront was if this was going to be a set up or not. Is this going to be a con? Or is this going to be a legitimate freak-out kidnapping thing? So, that I had to know up front, of course. But otherwise I just had to lay it out and figure out where it needed to go into back-story and where it needed to come back into the present. That had to do more with pacing than with anything else. The one thing I didn't really know in my outline was where it was going to end. Initially, I thought it was going to end with the girl turning it around on the guys and her being one of them. Sort of as ambitious as the rest of them. And I thought that was going to be the end. Then I was pretty far along in the drafting process — more that seventy percent of the way through — when I realized there was a lot more to do after they released her. And to me that's the most fun part of the book. Certainly in writing it, because it was all surprises to me as I was working on it. But as far as whether it was a crime novel or not, honestly, once the editor took it he gave me very, very small edits. But again it was really way after it was done that that crime label got put on it.

**AW:** Okay, thank you.

**Emily Bowers:** Okay, so my question kind of spins off of that. My name is Emily. So, along the outline idea, I noticed that you used a lot of well-crafted hooks, first line hooks, especially in the prologue and the first chapter and throughout. Some of them seem like they were written ahead of time, and going back and expanding on them from there. How did you decide on those hooks?

**MK:** The first chapter took more revision and more work than any other chapter by a factor of ten. The prologue was very easily written in one night and really didn't change much from there. The prologue was what really got me interested in the story in the first place, and it was the only thing that came that fast. But the first chapter, which is the longest chapter, the gist of it was there at the beginning, but this is not unique to this book for a chapter. You've got to get all the balls in the yard quickly, and you need to give back-story and set the plot in motion, and there's just so much to do. The thing that I was worried about was that there's a lot that happens. A lot of things going on not directly related to plot. You know he's working in a studio, and then Nolan comes over and there's garden-

ing, and they're talking about him running for office, and then they go to dinner and there's just all this business that goes on and there's not really any plot until near the end of the chapter when the crime happens. So I tried to pepper it a little bit with things that would keep you reading at least through that first chapter. So the late night phone call from Jeffery that opens in that chapter, where there's this drunken moment where he almost cancels his trip, that came very late in the writing process. The idea of showing that things are kind of off, and then there's that moment on the golf range where he says my wife is cheating on me. These things give the reader a couple of gifts along the way. That took a lot of revision more than anything else.

**EB:** Okay, thank you.

**Gretchen Smith:** Hi, I'm Gretchen. So, I was just wondering, I'm working on my thesis this semester so I had to write my prospectus last semester. I didn't know if when you were writing you were just trying to write a novel or if you were trying to fill a certain niche or opening in the genre?

**MK:** The short answer is no, Gretchen. I think when you spend a few years working on something the hardest thing is staying excited about it. I probably have eight or ten beginning pages of novels on my hard drive. I think it's a horse race. I start a couple of things and see what I'm still excited to be working on once it gets past story length. As far as a niche or something like that, I'm not a good enough writer to be able to work that way. To be able to go "Oh, the world needs a realistic Mississippi vampire-urban-paranormal." I mean I'm not good enough to do that. All I can do is write a story that I'm excited to write and work on it that way. I also think if you start chasing openings, three years down the line there's not going to be that opening anymore. Three years down the line there's going to be something else. So if you start your vampire novel today, that's great but probably in three years it's going to be... I don't know what it's going to be, leprechauns or something else. So yeah, it was just what I was excited to work on, and I really like those books that just fall in between. You know, is it literary? Is it genre? I just kind of like those. Have you guys read this novel *A City of Thieves*? Dude, read that novel. It's awesome. Benioff I think. I don't even want to tell you what it's about, you'll read it in a day or two. It's just really fun and well structured; it'll break your heart. It's genuinely funny. It's just a great novel.

I play the drums and I'd see bands and there are certain musicians that inspire me to go home and practice really hard. And there are some musicians who are so good they make me want to go home and set my instruments on fire. That's just one of those novels that seem so easy, but it's worth reading. It's really good.

**Heather Wohltman:** Hi, I'm Heather. I really appreciate in your novel how each of the characters, even the minor ones, really seems to play a role in the plot. I was wondering if you started out knowing what each character would do for the plot?

**MK:** That's a really good question. I think I generally knew who was going to do what throughout the story. I think, certainly as I worked on the story, they became better defined, but I think I did kind of know at least from the outline stage what they would do. One of

the benefits of having most of the story take place in a recording studio is that you don't have to deal with too many characters. So it is a very small number of characters. It's very hard for me to write group scenes. I don't know if you guys find the same thing? It's much easier for me to write scenes with two or three people than crowd scenes.

**Kelly Nicholson:** I'm Kelly, and I was wondering how did you decide to incorporate your flashbacks in the way you did? Because, at first, it looked like you could have two different stories within one book.

**MK:** Um, you all know, of course, that flashbacks are a risk. Flashbacks are bad because they take the reader out of the story and make them once removed from the plot. And there are legitimate reasons to be wary of the flashback, but it seemed like this novel was so tied into that idea of "the past is not dead." This idea that the past was so important that I knew I wanted the flashback. The other reason was that because the present was trapped inside a recording studio, it needed to breathe in another location. There needed to be something with outdoors and larger places, so the Princeton campus seemed like a good juxtaposition to the recording studio. With the flashbacks themselves, I think part of its pacing. Otherwise it's too fast, the action required some slowing down. Ironically, the problem with flashbacks is that it slows your book down, but I needed to slow it down. And then, as far as where to put them, I needed the flashback scenes to build to something. They needed to add plot, they needed to add stuff, so that there was no scene where, when you get to the end of the book, there was no "Oh, well why did we need that flashback there?"

*The opportunity for new writers to speak to published authors is always a valuable experience, and I was able to listen to and transcribe this interview with Mike Kardos. Perhaps the value is increased in a novel-writing class where the prospect of hundreds of pages can seem like an unreachable goal. It helps to know that those published greats struggle with both the big and small problems students face when embarking on their first novel. As a class we would like thank for Kardos providing valuable insight and encouragement for us to keep working on our novels.*

- Hannah Green

**Craig Banyai** is a second-year graduate student focusing on creative writing.

**Emily Bowers** is a first-year graduate assistant at Eastern with a focus on creative writing.

**Hannah Green** is a second-year graduate assistant at Eastern with a focus on creative writing.

**Stephanie Guyer** is a second-year graduate assistant at Eastern with a focus in composition and rhetoric.

**Tim Gurnig** is an undergraduate English major at Eastern.

**Dr. Lania Knight** is an assistant professor in English at Eastern.

**Kelly Nicholson** is an undergraduate English major at Eastern.

**Chris Robison** is a second-year graduate student focusing on creative writing.

**Gretchen Smith** is a second-year graduate assistant at Eastern with a focus in creative writing.

**Aaron White** is a first-year graduate assistant at Eastern with a focus on creative writing.

**Heather Wohltman** is a first-year graduate assistant at Eastern with a focus on creative writing.



# PAPER CUTS

---

*Gregory Robert Peterson*

Hold me firmly  
with your oily fingers,  
taking careful time to grip  
my sturdy leather skin.

Showing my silent peers  
that You chose Me.

Give me your undivided attention  
as I arouse your imagination  
with a cerebral whisper.

Scour my body with hungry eyes,  
feasting on the ideas  
buried in my paper spine.

Though all too quickly  
you'll make me retire;  
passively waiting in a purgatory of oak, nails,  
and paper.

If I'm lucky  
you'll carry with you  
a memory  
of what We've uncovered.

# PAPER-MACHE POETRY

---

*Gregory Robert Peterson*

Crafting sugary sentences,  
eloquently twirling words  
like spaghetti noodles  
with your blue Bic pen.  
Seduce our attention through  
the journey of your syntax.

Creating sweet fog-like intimacy,  
lead our eyes with the hunger  
for ear nourishing words.  
We submit ourselves  
to the thrills of your diction.

But if One pulls with curious eyes  
a single fabric  
of this representation;  
decadent shell peels, revealing  
a hollow core.

*James K. Johnson  
Award winner*

The James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award is given annually to the author of the best work of creative writing.

# James K. Johnson Award winners

The James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award is given biannually to two Eastern students enrolled in creative writing courses.

# VALVE

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*Christopher Robinson,  
Fall 2011  
James K. Johnson winner*

"It's your aorta valve," the doctor says. "The valve is dilated, and instead of closing, it stays partially open, allowing the blood to flow back into your heart. We'll have to replace the valve right away. You'll die if we don't."

The doctor is a handsome man, impeccably dressed in an expensive-looking black suit and yellow silk tie. He is about forty, dark hair combed straight back from his tall forehead. If he weren't a doctor you could easily mistake him for a successful businessman, or, perhaps, a mafia chieftain. He's going to make me an offer I can't refuse, I tell myself. I'd laugh if the situation weren't so fucking terrible.

My girlfriend is sitting beside me. She's wearing a thick, blue sweater, jeans and black boots. When I look at her, I can see the concern in her green eyes. I don't want to worry her about anything and I feel a bit guilty. I reach over and smooth her hair; she looks at me and smiles. The smile helps me feel better, but only a little.

We sit in the doctor's tastefully decorated office, his mahogany desk, the dark paneling, his pictures of flowers on the walls, and listen to what he has to say about my looming death.

To help explain how he will save me, the doctor lifts from his desk a model of the valve he will use to replace the one God gave me. He holds it up for me to see. The valve is mechanical, made of plastic, with small stainless steel hinged flaps that, when my heart pumps the blood through, will open and then will close, keeping the blood from flowing back in. The valve looks like something you might find on your car's engine, something that might regulate fuel or the flow of water. I wonder how something so mundane can possibly save my life.

We schedule the surgery and I think about blood — fucked-up inherited blood, blood that passed along the genes that gave me brown eyes and is at the same time conspiring to kill me when I'm only twenty-seven years old. But what are you supposed to do when your own body is a traitor to itself? Line it up against the wall and shoot it? I don't want to have the surgery and I feel like a coward. You'll die if we don't. Fuck it.

Skip the blindfold, but I will take the goddamned cigarette.

Days later, they wheel me down the hall and into the operating room. I am naked but the blankets are warm. Earlier, the nurses had pierced my veins with needles to get the IV go-



ing. They now give me something to make me sleep. That is all I really know for sure.

Since I lay deep in the black sleep of anesthesia, I can only imagine what is happening to me. I imagine the bone saw, the thin whine of its tiny electric motor, the spinning whirl and buzz of its beyond-sharp steel blade. I imagine the sound of the blade meeting my sternum, grinding through the bone, cutting a path to my heart. I imagine the feel of the cold water the surgeons use to shock and stop my heart so they can operate. I imagine myself and how I am, naked and cut open, the inside of me exposed to total strangers.

It's ridiculous to think about modesty in a time like this, and I tell myself to stop acting foolishly.

My body is at the mercy of science and the skill of those who know how to use it. They cut, slice, and sew for nearly six hours. They regulate everything about me with machines, including my breath. Before the surgery, I had bathed, and the nurses had given me an enema. I am clean on the outside as well as the in. Still, I am cut open, and I know that I am a mess.

How could I have agreed to this, this blood letting, this savage use of saws? How am I allowing this to happen? You'll die if you don't. That is what the doctor told me in his office a few days ago. You'll die if we don't. Those words from the doctor have more meaning than anything Shakespeare ever wrote. But maybe I am only dreaming. Maybe I am home, in my bed, with the cat sleeping on my pillow.

I awake, hours later, in the recovery room, to the sound of the voices of the people who love me. They call to me. Their voices sound far away, wavy, as if I hear them from beneath dark water. They call to me and I struggle to follow their voices and the path they make to the surface. They keep calling and I hear them and rise.

I open my eyes, see a bright light overhead, and for a moment I think I am dead. Unable to move with my arms strapped down, I panic. Surely this is hell and I will spend eternity strapped down while demons operate on me while I'm awake and screaming. Again, I hear the voices of my family, but because the anesthesia is a dense fog in my brain, I cannot find where they are. They call again and I find them, and, for a while, I am calm and tell myself that I am alive.

Doctors and nurses stand around my bed and check my vitals. I have a breathing tube down my throat and I can't speak or swallow. My mouth is dry, as if the anesthesia has sucked all the moisture from my body. The nurse has given me a pencil and a notepad and I write — WATER. Instead, the nurse gives me a few pitiful ice chips. I wonder if I were to reach out and choke the nurse if she would understand what I am feeling. Instead, I am the one who is choking and panic begins to set in. I can't speak, which means that I also can't scream. I keep telling myself this isn't hell and I am indeed alive and this will soon be over. I tell myself that I will soon be home, drinking water.

Besides the breathing tube down my throat, I have two other long tubes, each one jutting out from each side of my stomach. These tubes carry waste from my stomach and into containers on the floor by my bed. The tubes look like plastic intestines, and I feel as if I have been turned inside out, again exposed, for all to see what I don't want them to.

I also don't want people to see me because I feel ugly. Over the preceding weeks before the surgery, I have lost a lot of weight. I'm 6' 3" and I now weigh only about 135 pounds. I am tall, gaunt, with a bandaged scar down my chest. Frankenstein's monster? I wonder if people will run in fear at the sight of me.

The doctors tell me that I have lost so much weight because my heart was, for months, beating as if I were always jogging. "Your heart," they say, "had to overwork to pump out the blood that your valve was allowing to flow back in. And so your body shed weight, like ballast, to help lighten the load." When they doctors leave, I lift the sheet covering me. Though it is ugly, I must admire my body and the steps it took to save me.

Teams of doctors visit me. Many of them are students here at the I. U. Medical Center. They want to learn, and I am more than happy to oblige them. Still, the doctors are cold and clinical. I wonder if they even know that I am in the room, or if I am merely a subject for them to study, for them to wonder about, to write papers about. I wonder if they see the person inside and not just the specimen lying on the bed.

Though I am in bed, I get little sleep. Because of the valve, I have to take blood-thinning medication and so the nurses are in at all hours, poking me with needles, taking blood. They are always nice and try not to hurt me. The needles hurt anyway.

As the days pass, they remove the tubes in my stomach. Still, I cannot get out of bed to shower and I must use a bedpan. I feel helpless and my mood starts to turn dark. Stress moves in and I watch it circle like a hungry lion. Everyone here — my parents, girlfriend, the nurses — tries to help. But it's no good. I have lost my patience. I want to leave this place of needles and blood. I want to go home where I can get out of bed to shower. I want to use my own bathroom. I want to not shit in a bedpan. I start snapping at those here to support me. They try to help, but I don't want them to. But I do want them to. The contradiction makes me an asshole, but my mood is such that I'll be damned if I apologize for it.

I am in the hospital two weeks. I gain weight, grow stronger. The doctors are pleased with my recovery and send me home. Before I leave, they give me a prescription for Coumadin — blood thinner. It is a medicine I will take for the rest of my life.

At home, I start to feel normal again. Here are the things I haven't seen in two weeks — my dog greeting me at the door, my cat asleep on the back of the sofa, my bedroom and comfy bed, and my bathroom. After putting my bags away, I sit on the sofa and turn on the TV. I have a soda and it's easy to pretend I have never been gone.

Before bed, I head to the bathroom to take a shower. After I undress, I look at the scar down the center of my chest in the mirror. The scar, pencil thin and dark puffy red, is also

part of the normality of my life. The scar is now as much a part of me as brown is the color of my eyes.

It's strange, this scar, a paradox, telling of the frailty of the human condition, as well as its toughness. After all, I survived having my chest cracked open, and my aorta valve replaced. It's not fair that I hate the scar. That unfairness, it's enough to make me want to write a poem about it.

He thinks I'm ugly,  
ugly like the flat mouth  
of a carved pumpkin,  
and so he keeps me  
hidden beneath his shirt.  
But I am not ugly. I am here  
because he is alive.  
If I am like the mouth of a pumpkin,  
then the light that shines  
through me is the beating of his heart.  
I ride his skin triumphant  
and no matter what he says  
I know that I am beautiful.

I don't listen to what the scar says to me. When I get out of the hot shower, I glance in the mirror, and I am thankful for the steam.

That night, in bed, I lie next my girlfriend. She looks at me and there is sympathy in her green eyes. She lays her head on my chest.

"I can hear the valve clicking," she says. "It's like you have a clock inside you. You're like that croc that ate Captain Hook's hand."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, in *Peter Pan*?"

"Oh, yeah," I say. "I forgot about that movie. Gee, now I'll never be able to sneak up on anybody."

"You'll never be a ninja."

"Figures."

She laughs, lifts my shirt, and traces the length of the scar with her finger. "It's beautiful," she says.

I hold her close, and for a while, I am willing to believe her.

# DEAR MOTHER

---

*Eliot Thompson,  
Fall 2011  
James K. Johnson winner*

You raised me in a chapel of ease,  
raised to please,  
raised for and from love.  
You birthed me  
and I was yours to keep.

You were the tree  
and I the leaf,  
eternally dependent  
from bud to branch  
sucking the nutrients  
out of your breast.

Together we were one  
and the same.  
When I went to school  
so did you.  
When you went to work  
so did I.  
We were magnets  
of the same attraction  
together for breakfast  
together for play  
together at sleep.

You taught me  
that I, and by extension  
you, am all that matters,  
that all adults were pedophiles,  
other boys criminals, and girls  
only diseased whores.

You taught me to slit their throats  
with dull knives, to  
take no prisoners  
because life is a war,  
I am a patriot,  
and you are my country.

# WHY ARE THERE BARS ON THE WINDOWS?

---

*Eliot Thompson,  
Fall 2011*

*James K. Johnson winner*

Why are there bars on the windows?

And why are we sitting here  
in a circle?

I don't like circles  
because they go on forever  
like wreaths at Lent.

Did you know that, that  
circles are infinite?

Doesn't that bother you?  
It makes me feel kinda anxious.  
Like I-I-

I don't want to be in here-I  
want to be outside and  
walk in the woods

(because it's spring time  
and the flowers smell nice)

play tennis,

(Doubles, singles,  
against a machine,

I don't care!

Maybe, I can play  
with girls in those  
short tennis skirts,  
like the ones those  
Catholic girls wear  
but)

I shouldn't say that,  
should I.  
It's dirty to think like that.  
I'm a bad person. . .

read a book,

Where was I?  
Oh, and

or my sister?

I want to get away  
from everybody  
you, him, me.

Why?

I don't like the way  
he looks at me.

He's smoking.

I don't like smoke.  
Where there's smoke,  
there's fire.

And his eyes,  
his eyes are dark

like the bars on the windows.

Let me out!  
Please.  
At least open the windows  
to let the air in,  
to let the light in.

Because the white walls  
and white floors  
with white nurses  
in white dresses  
look gray,  
soiled.

I want to live.

But you won't do it,  
not because you think  
I'm crazy,  
but because  
you're afraid.

# TO BE A SCHOLAR

---

*Eliot Thompson,  
Fall 2011  
James K. Johnson winner*

Filling out a college application  
I'm stuck on one of the questions  
that asks for my predetermined label.

Am I Hispanic or Latino?

Well, I'm not really sure  
of my relationship to Spain.  
I think I prefer the term Wetback,  
it's less derogatory, in the long run.

How would I describe  
my racial background?

Apparently, I have to be  
more than Hispanic or Latino.  
So I look at my arms and legs  
and normally I'd say white  
but this summer I got quite a tan.  
Does this make me Asian now?  
And if I'm Mexican  
doesn't that make me  
a racial bastard?  
Is my Native American tribe  
Aztec?

After deliberating for a good half hour  
I print out the unfinished form,  
walk out into the cool, comforting night  
and take my lighter to it  
watching it blaze  
like a Nazi book-burning,  
watching blind moths  
make a fuss of it all.

I've decided not to go to college  
because I want to be open-minded,  
so I think I'm going to take up a trade  
like carpentry.

# OCCIDENTAL

*Eliot Thompson,  
Fall 2011  
James K. Johnson winner*

Sing and rejoice, fortune is smiling on you.  
You will make a fortune with a friend.

You will do well to expand your business.  
Your present plans are going to succeed.

Keep your plans secret for now.  
Good news will come to you from far away.

Find release from your cares, have a good time.  
Start a new project at work – or start a new job altogether.

Your lucky numbers are 7, 21, 44.



# FALLING IS FOR THE CLUMSY

---

*Eliot Thompson,  
Fall 2011*

*James K. Johnson winner*

I'm organized, rational, thoughtful.  
Shirts by color and length,  
hands washed before and after every meal,  
warm letters addressed for every occasion.  
Last minute plans are made a week prior,  
homework completed in a timely fashion,  
holding the door is second nature.

I'm organized, rational, thoughtful.  
You match everyday, even  
when you don't, even  
when you crinkle the paper, looking  
for the crossword.  
You like violin and coffee,  
philosophy and Chinese food,  
Steinbeck and Colbert.  
You don't seek me out when  
I pray to all the gods, just  
to see your face, ignoring  
my obvious fascination  
for everything you.

I'm organized and  
thoughtful, rational until,  
I mean even, I think, when  
you walk into the room, the elephant  
being mine alone. Look  
at me! Talk to me! But  
you look to me, talk  
at me, especially  
when you aren't, especially when

you can't even see me, lighting  
myself on fire like a calmly deranged Buddhist  
monk in the middle of the street  
in front of your apartment  
protesting myself,  
when you're not even there to see me.

I'm not falling into love; falling  
is for the clumsy.

# SCARY MONSTERS

---

*David Banyai,  
Spring 2012*

*James K. Johnson winner*

When the phone rings, I am picturing Kimmy, a brunette at school who is always good for a casual roll in the sheets. I quickly waddle across the house and trip over the dog to answer the phone. (Not very dignified, but not completely unfamiliar.) On about the fifth or sixth ring, I pick up.

"Hello."

"Is Del there?"

I recognize the voice immediately.

"You got him. Hey Rick, what's up?"

Rick is the closest thing to what some people may call a best friend. He is not really reliable enough to be called a true friend, since he suffers from a debilitating case of narcissism. Still, he is fun to be around, smart, and always seems to call me when he needs something.

"You got anything planned tonight? I have a favor to ask."

Here it comes. Last time these words were spoken, Rick needed a chauffeur to pick him up because he got shit-faced at an underage party. A party, I may add, that I had not been invited to. It was the night I was dubbed "the great ally." Rick has many friends, so being distinguished from the rest as an ally was pretty close to a compliment.

"What do you need?"

"Listen, I know you have a way with women," he is opening with flattery, it is cheap and another bad sign. "Well, I met this guy and he has this ex who is always hanging around. Could you come into the city with us and distract her so I can spend time with him?"

I love going into the city and he knows it. We both talked many times how we planned to move to the city after graduating. He has a fondness for New York. I have teased him, a gay writer in Greenwich Village is extremely cliché. My preference has always been Philadelphia. Unlike Rick, I prefer cities that do not smell like piss in the summer time.

"Sure, I'll be over and we'll leave from your house." I hang up the phone. Shit, did I just agree to a double date? Double Shit, I think I green lighted a blind double date. This is guy

rule number seventy-three, never agree to a blind date. I throw on a clean black undershirt and grab my cheap leather jacket and after taking a moment in front of the mirror to muss up the hair a little, I am out the door and in my car.

About ten minutes later, I am in Rick 's driveway. The three of them are waiting for me. Rick is standing shoulder-to-elbow next to some guy. Rick is not overweight, but he does hold many of the other defining characteristics of a typical "bear." In short, he is hairy and likes pretty boys. The strange newcomer standing next to Rick looks angelic, tall (real tall), blonde hair (real blonde) and a body that could earn him a quick buck in gay porn. Hovering close by like a pissed off hawk is an attractive girl in a button-down blouse (buttoned all the way up), tight tapered jeans and tennis shoes. She is also blonde, but showing signs of a need for a touch-up. She would be smoking if she were only smiling. I am relieved. She is not dressed in dating attire and is not wearing any makeup. This is going to be casual.

Introductions are brief. "Del, Donny, Donny, Del, Del, Jenny, Jenny, Del."

I interrupt before he has a chance to do the whole Rocky, Janet, Janet, Dr. Scott routine. Rick is a big fan of Rocky Horror and such greetings always lead to that particularly tiresome bit.

"Cool, nice to meet you. Rick has told me absolutely nothing about you."

The three of us laugh. Jenny just grinds her teeth and continues a raptor-like stare directed toward Rick.

"Who's driving?" Before the words leave my mouth three car doors slam. Rick and Donny are in the back and Jenny is in the driver's seat. To no one in particular, "I got shotgun."

She drives fast on the back country roads, with one eye on the road and the other looking in the rear view mirror. Periodically I slam my foot down on the passenger invisible brake and brace against the door. No one seems to notice the assertive driving except me and I start imagining myself sailing in slow motion through the windshield and kissing a tree at 80 miles per hour. After we hit 422, the reckless driving is less noticeable.

I avoid subjects like "how'd you guys meet" and "you guys make an interesting couple." (If I anticipate a ride back, it is best to be cautious in my conversation choice.) Rick lights up a joint and we pass it around the car. Jenny refuses the toke. I can respect that. Of course, I have no such reservations.

"So, there is this guy and he decides to throw it all away and move to Alaska. Now, he has never been to Alaska, but he heard it is an untouched, beautiful part of the country, so he is resolved to go. He sells everything he owns and moves north. He gets to the state's border and there is the official-looking guy standing there. He says to the official, excuse me sir, I am moving to this state and I want to be the best damn Alaskan I can be." I take another hit. "What do I need to do to be called an Alaskan? Well, the official looks at him and says - Sir! There are just three things you need to do. First, drink this gallon of whiskey. Drink

it fast and don't blink an eye. Second, you must kill a polar bear with your bare hands and finally you must make love to an Eskimo woman." The joint comes around to me once more. "The man takes the whiskey and, son of a bitch, he drinks it down in one gulp. He is swaying and lipping. So, where do I find this polar bear? The official points at a stony path. Just follow this path until you come to a cave. You will find him in the cave. The wannabe Alaskan stumbles up the path and is gone for six hours! When he comes back he is covered in scratches and gore. His clothing is shredded and bloody. He comes up to the official," Another hit, I hold the smoke longer this time. "He comes up to the official and says," I exhale, "so, where is this Eskimo chick you want me to kill?"

The joke kills and we laugh our asses off. I look over at Jenny. She is smiling, exerting effort not to laugh. The girl is pretty when she smiles. Why would a girl want to tag along on a date with her openly gay ex boyfriend? She takes a deep breath. Her breasts momentarily stretch out her blouse. What man (gay or otherwise) in his right mind would cast aside a piece of ass like this? What is wrong with her?

We turn off of 422 and exit onto the Schuylkill expressway. We follow the river into the city. The lights from Boathouse Row reflect off the water. Just down from Boathouse Row, the art museum is lit up like a refurbished Parthenon. The Rocky statue was moved down to the Spectrum, but it is hard not to expect it to still be on display at the top of the museum steps. Jenny turns off on the Vine Street exit and after the first underpass, we start looking for a parking spot. All of us want to hit South Street, but parking there on a Friday night is not the best idea, so we agree to walk the extra blocks.

"If we get separated let's meet at Tower Books." I look at Jenny. I am fairly certain getting separated is not on her itinerary. Her soft smile has long evaporated and is once again replaced by a clenched jaw and predatory gaze.

Rick and Donny are a few feet ahead of us. I came to have a good time and my promise did not include trailing behind two guys on a date like lonely puppy. We are about to pass Zipperhead, I say, "Screw them Jenny. Come on." Grabbing her arm we go into Zipperhead. Her resolve is momentary, but she concedes still craning her neck to follow the two men as they walk through the crowd. Her anger melts into worry, which significantly improves her personality. Exene is screaming "Breathless" over the store's cheap ass speakers. We look out of place among the pierced purple haired freaks, but the nice thing about punks is that they don't give a shit about anything but their own angst. Browsing the racks of leather-studded mini-skirts seems to mellow Jenny. She holds up a Sex Pistols shirt and lays it across her chest, "What do you think?"

I raise an eyebrow and say suspiciously, "Do you even know who that band is?" She flashes me a grin and flips me off. I am developing a new appreciation for this girl.

We leave Zipperhead without buying anything. Donny and Rick are long gone. "Trust me, they don't even know we ditched them." I smile. "You like Italian ice?" We hit Rita's for Italian Ice and a slice. As we walk, sharing our mango- and pina-colada ice, she starts venting about Donny.

They were engaged in high school until he came out after graduation. For three years he carried her books, sat next to her on the bleachers at football games, holding hands and confessing his unending love to her. Until he (with a significant amount of begging on his part) accepted the gift that only a young girl can offer. She blames herself and insists there was something wrong with her.

“That’s bullshit, Jenny. If he’s gay, he was gay before he even met you. If you ask me, he is a prick for stringing you on. He probably deprived you of a great senior year.”

We walk quietly. She is looking forward, pretty much avoiding any additional conversation. I start laughing.

“What’s so funny?” she asks.

I look at her and say, “sounds to me like Donny is a self-absorbed ass hole. Knowing Rick the way I do, I give them two, maybe three — Ooh, cookies!” I pull her into the crowded cookie shop and we leave with a bag of hot melty chocolate treats.

We walk with our cookies down New Market and she tells me about her school. She is going to Albright College which is on the same boulevard as a preschool, elementary, middle and senior high school. You can quite literally spend your entire educational history on one street. The girl needs a friend. I pretend to be interested, but to be honest, I am imagining myself licking melted chocolate off of her cheek. I hand her napkin instead.

By the time we hit Chestnut Street, she is holding my arm. I don’t mind. Walking down a quiet city street with a pretty girl is considerably more fun than what was originally planned for the evening. She talks less about Donny and more about herself. The adage “out of sight, out of mind” seems appropriate. We step around a homeless couple sitting on a steam grate. Seeing a homeless “couple” is a pretty rare sight even in the city. Homeless people always appear solitary. The man is a big, black, grizzled, smelly brute with more layers on than can be possibly comfortable on a summer night. She is a dim-looking white girl, maybe in her mid twenties. From the way she is sitting, you can see she is not wearing any underpants and is possibly a natural blonde. We turn off the dark street and meander down Sansom Street. The block is lit by the neon signs from the adult book stores. Suddenly, Jenny pulls me into a brightly lit store. This is not where I expected to wind up this evening. She is obviously testing me, but what she doesn’t know is that while I may be easy to surprise, I am damn near impossible to shock. I shrug, “Why the Hell not?”

Bowie’s “Scary Monsters” is blaring over the stores speakers.

“I love this song, and how strangely appropriate.”

Life-size inflatable dolls hang from the ceiling like pinatas. Sex toys line the shelves.

“Shit, I have seen Ikea furniture come in smaller boxes.” Jenny laughs. There are about five other customers in the store with no one guarding the register. I ask Jenny if she thinks they

have a return policy.

She smacks my arm, "Eww, that's gross."

I thumb through the movies, Jane Bond 0069, I saw this on 30 mm three months ago. There is a lot of Traci Lords. She is more cute than slutty. Watching her is like watching your sixteen-year-old babysitter fuck. (Now that I think of it, I probably would have enjoyed watching my sixteen-year-old babysitter fuck.) Jenny is not far away, thumbing through tapes like there were records in a second hand shop.

The back of the store has video booths for patrons who need to get their "porn on" right away.

"Let's check them out."

Jenny is still testing my freak tolerance.

"Well first of all, ick. Second, they only allow one person in at a time (don't ask me how I know this little fact) and third, oh why the fuck not?"

She looks surprised.

"Here, give me some quarters."

She thrusts them into the slot and we both disappear into the booth. The film was grainy and black and white. A bunch of guys stood in a circle racing to climax. Any possibility of arousal from me just flew out the door.

When we exit the booth, I ask, "Was it everything you ever dreamed of?"

She looks disappointed. "That was stupid. It was just a bunch of guys standing in a circle jerking off. You have any more quarters?"

I laugh. Which probably is a mistake. So, I fish out more change. "Knock yourself out, princess."

The second movie was vintage '70s porn. The girl had excessive hair and the man looked a little overweight with a Keith Partridge haircut. I could feel the heat off of Jenny's body as she sat on my lap. I shifted my body slightly so as not to embarrass either one of us.

"I am ready to go. Did you want to buy anything?" Jenny looks flush. "No, I'm good. We need to get going anyway. It's getting late. Donny and Rick are probably waiting on us." She frowns at the sound of the names. "Come on." I take her hand and lead her out of the store. When we are outside we are still holding hands.

After a couple of blocks Jenny complains about her tired feet.

"Hop on. I will give you a piggy back." She does a small vault and wraps her legs around my waist.

"Had I known this was a possibility, I would have bought a riding crop back at the store." I reach behind my back and pinch her bottom. "Flirt." She has a cute scream. I lean back and she wraps her arms around my neck to compensate. It is amazing how often that move seems to work.

I carry her most of the way until we stop at a pharmacy for a Tastykake and Sprite. On the way to the bookstore she stops, faces me and gives me a quick little kiss. "Thanks, I had a nice time." Her lips taste like Butterscotch Krimpet.

I resolved to ask her out properly. "Me, too."

It is after 1:30, but there are still a few customers in the store. We look around the store and finally find Rick and Donny snogging among a bunch of religious books. "Are you guys trying to get God to go Old Testament on your asses?" Rick looks up and flips me off with a smile. For years I thought flipping someone off was meant as an insult. Tonight, I get the impression it is just another way of saying "I love you."

Jenny did not take the sight of them kissing well. With one kiss, the evening flushed down the crapper. On the way to the car we walk quickly and far in front of Rick and Donny. Jenny has a painful death grip on my arm. At least she isn't throwing a tantrum. Upon reaching the car, she jams the keys into my hands and says loudly, "I am too upset to drive." I unlock the car and Donny and Jenny quickly climb in. Rick hangs back just long enough to mouth "Thank you." I smile and flip him off. He laughs and we both get in the car.

I never like driving other people's cars. It makes me uncomfortable to be handed so much unsolicited responsibility. After adjusting the seat, fiddling with the mirrors and other stall tactics, I start the car and we leave the city the way we arrived, from Vine Street to the expressway. Jenny sits on her side of the bench looking out the window. I reach over and pat her hand gently. She rewards me with a smile then turns on the radio. WYSP is featuring Bowie and they start belting out "Scary Monsters."

"Christ, is it his freakin' birthday or something?" Jenny chuckles. "I'm tired. Do you mind if I lie down?"

She lies down in the front seat and lays her head in my lap. It is nice. I stroke her hair and think about her riding on my back through the side streets of Philadelphia. The car is quiet except for Bowie droning about the super freaks. Other cars pass and lights from oncoming traffic illuminate the cab. Black trees and rocks blur as we barrel west on the expressway. I will never understand what she hoped to gain by torturing herself by tagging behind her ex-lover as he moves from one guy to the next. Maybe she thought by driving him around he might appreciate her and hopefully fall back into her arms. With so much invested in her first relationship, would another guy ever measure up to her expectations? There is movement from Jenny and cool air washes over my groin, followed by the warm wetness



of a gentle kiss. Oh, shit! A surprising panic come over me. I am not thinking great; I can't believe this is happening. My thoughts are focused on the dangers of the expressway. This is dangerous. I am going to crash this car and they'll find me mangled with my pants down. Do Donny and Rick have any idea this is going on? Oh my God! What if they are doing the same thing?

Suddenly the evening has evolved into a Penthouse Forum moment and before I realize it, the car is cooking at 95 mph and I am passing airplanes. This girl has succeeded in shocking me to my core! She must have sensed her victory over me because she sat up and placed her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes.

I pull the car into the driveway and adjust my pants before we enter the house. Rick's parents are home and asleep. It is about 2:30 a.m. and even the crickets are silent. We walk up the stairs and Donny and Rick quickly disappear into Rick's bedroom. My assumptions of Donny being a prick are confirmed. The bastard expects his ex-fiancée to hang around while he has sex with his boyfriend. I am about to go ape-shit when I feel Jenny's hand in mine. We sit down together on the couch and I start to apologize for Donny's behavior. (I hate apologizing for the stupid things other men do.) I'm cut short by her kiss. I taste myself on her tongue. The thought of her making a man turn gay is absolute bullshit.

Kissing leads to petting and petting leads to the floor. (Mrs. H would kill me if I stained her sofa.) Fumbling with her blouse leads to a lacy demi bra. She is amazingly natural, one breast larger than the other, but each perfectly shaped. I love variety. She uses her nails on my skin and it leaves me drunk. There is the taste of salt, the sticky feel of sweat on her lower back, and the smell of spent baby powder. We trade positions and she finishes what she started in the car. Prolonging the pleasure is painful and there seems to be no alternative but to release. She clamps gently and rocks slowly to the rhythm of my body. When I am still, she lays on top of me. One hand is over my heart, resting on the damp black shirt. The other hand is gently delivering caresses.

She says, "Next time warn me before you do that."

I am embarrassed by my lack of control, but I know there will be a next time. I tell her to get dressed.

"Why?" she pouts as though she were being rejected again.

I smile. "Trust me, they won't even know we ditched them."

# I CALLED MY GRANDMOTHER DOLLY

---

*Rashelle Spear,  
Spring 2012*

*James K. Johnson winner*

because my baby tongue couldn't  
return the darlin'  
she wrapped me in.

When I knew her,  
she was a narrow face  
on a twig body  
perfumed with smoke,  
rooted in the sagging couch,  
legs crossed,  
sighing over Oprah.

I wish I could have met her  
when she was called Sammy  
and made my grandpa  
wear the false teeth he vomited,  
with Wild Turkey,  
over the side of the rotted deck rail,  
where the dog named Dog  
made them his chew toy,

the woman who fed kitchen-floor pizza  
to that whiskey-scented husband  
but saved the good slices  
for her kids.

In one yellowed polaroid photo,  
she is an olive-skinned dancer  
in a clean, silver-trimmed cocktail dress,  
right hip cocked  
in a frozen shimmy,  
arms bent at the elbows.

I keep her in that moment  
when her half-closed eyes look like mine.

# TENDER FLESH

---

*H R Green,  
Fall 2012*

*James K. Johnson winner*

I love bruises. They hold a certain authority.

I envy people who bruise easily. A painless bump can leave a blue mark, and harder impacts can create a multicolored smudge that's blue and black and brown. Some people are prone to bruising, so much so that a knock on their arm will leave a purple welt like a forgotten tattoo. A decent bruise will fade slowly, changing colors as the memories of what caused it grow faint.

As a writer, I covet bruises. When I see bruises on strangers, I stand a little closer, linger a little longer. I try to read the truth printed on their skin, try to judge their pain by the color of the bruise and the look in their eyes.

I see a mother in a grocery store, her handbag in one hand and a child in the other. It's only when she picks up her son and places him in the cart that, as her sleeves ride up her slender arms, I see the navy bruises on her wrists. I follow her through the store, trying to be discreet, trying to get a closer look. I sneak up behind her in the cereal aisle and, as she reaches for a box of Cheerios, I get a better view. Fresh blues merge with older tans and mustard-yellows. She nods a timid greeting, but I avoid eye contact and walk away. As I ditch my empty basket in the candy aisle, I wonder just how hard her husband grabs her arms. Does she cry out as the bones in her wrists grind together, or does she stifle her sobs for fear of waking the child?

I'm at a restaurant that I can't afford. Partway through the evening a waiter named Mike places my meal on the table and I see his bruised knuckles. The peaks and valleys on his left hand are mottled slate blue and gray. I look at his face for the first time since I ordered my drink and notice a small cut above his eyebrow. It's half an inch long and dried to thin, black crust. But, in the dim light, I see a small, fresh drop of blood hanging off the tip of the gash where he's cracked the scab as he washed for work. I wonder if he follows the first rule of *Fight Club*.

I'm at a cocktail party with Jan, a friend from work. I've known her for years and have seen her drunker than she is now, but not often. Jan is wearing a low-cut black dress and red shoes; she sports a brown-black shiner on her left eye. Jan's sloshing her drink on a new coworker, her arm draped over the poor girl, pinning her to the sofa cushions. The girl is too new to know that she won't offend anyone if she stands up and lets Jan fall off the couch — we've all done it before. As Jan starts to cry, the girl's body becomes less defensive. She places her arm around Jan and pets her hand, then helps Jan to the bathroom. As the

new girl waits outside (she's too new to hold Jan's hair back), I hear her whisper to Bob-the-copy-guy that Jan's husband hits her. I remember seeing Jan smack herself in the face in the throes of a panic attack. The welt that grew on her cheek was soon followed by a black eye. Then I remember that Jan is the most miserable friend I have, but the one with the happiest marriage. She's always played the victim, always scrambled for sympathy. I know that if Jan's husband did beat her, she'd finally have a reason to start hating him and stop despising herself.

I see bruises on the insides of arms that vary in color and size with a dark pinprick in the middle. Blood tests, injections, IVs, heroin. Bruises on the inside of a lip where clenched teeth pinch the skin. Blood creeps beneath the moist, pink flesh until the black blister pops and coats the teeth with a taste of fear. Bruises that seep beneath the sides of a Band-Aid on a child's skinned knee, those cartoon characters somehow easing the pain until they're yanked off at bath time, only to be replaced before bed with a kiss goodnight.

I see bruises the color of spoiling plums. They shine on taut, swollen flesh, both enticing and revolting. I see sutures poking out of stained skin surrounding a deep laceration. Grated skin flaking off a red, scraped elbow. Bruises that stretch across chests from left shoulder to right ribs. Bodies the color of bruises that wash up on riverbanks and shores. Bruises of accidents.

Then there are the bruises of sex and lust and passion. I've come home with Suzie after curfew and the scarf she's wearing doesn't cover the hickey that's creeping up her neck. As she blushes, the light blue bruise is overrun by a flush of red and it turns the pale shade of purple that comes from sticky fumbblings in the back seat of a car. Her father clenches his fists and grinds his teeth as her mother stares at memories of flames passed.

I follow a couple into an adult store and watch them lean hip-to-hip as they browse through DVDs. His hand touches the small of her back, circling around her spine in widening motions. I'm transfixed as I watch her shirt lift a little higher, revealing crisscrossed bruises on pale white skin. She whispers in his ear, he presses his hand hard against her back and she turns her wince into an embrace.

And, as the lines on that woman's back turn her skin to patchwork, I see bruises that leave patterns. Perfect circles imprinted on thighs where cleats have tried to break through skin. Ninety-degree angles from the corners of coffee tables, door jambs and belt buckles. And then the bruises on the buttocks of a child, rounded but tapering to a line where a mother, after too many hours cooped up in a house filled with dishes and laundry and dust, lost her temper with her wooden spoon in hand. I've seen a bruise where, when I looked close enough, I saw tiny lettering imprinted on a woman's breast by her boyfriend's championship ring, reminding them both that once there had been dreams.

I seldom bruise. I've played contact sports and paintball. I've fallen both up and down stairs. I've jumped off walls. Crashed bicycles. Tripped over chairs. I've cracked my head on a rock, had stitches in my forehead and popped my kneecap out of place so that it sat on the side of my leg like a growth. I've had one wisdom tooth pulled in the dentist's chair and

the other three in surgery, but had little to show for either except a semi-swollen cheek and a bruise the color of weak black tea.

The writer in me craves bruises. Bruises on knees and fists and shins and thighs. Bruises on faces and arms and asses and feet. Bruises on TV, Google, YouTube, and Facebook. Bruises in family photo albums, in medical reports, in scrapbooks. Bruises in sealed evidence boxes. Once seen, I cannot unsee. I lust after the stories skin has to tell. I try to read the truth imprinted on flesh. I try to judge the pain by the color of the bruise and the look in their eyes, but I know that as those colors fade their memories will grow dim. It is my job as a writer to steal those stories so they cannot forget.

When I see a bruise on a stranger, I linger a little longer, I stand a little closer.

# FAKING IT

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*Shelby Koehne,  
Fall 2012*

*James K. Johnson winner*

I'm struggling to feel sexually empowered while making small-talk with my best friend's new beau at the personal lubricant display case. We're both acting like this situation is perfectly normal, like all friends carpool to the adult store on a Thursday night, assist each other with purchases, and go out for dinner at Chili's afterward.

"You think you'll go with silicon or water-based?" he asks me, picking up a bottle labeled "Liquid Sex."

I remind myself that I have needs and desires, there's nothing wrong with having them, and he should respect that. This is fine. I'm not uncomfortable.

"Probably water-based," I tell him. "Easier clean-up."

I instantly regret my words, sure that I've led him to believe I'm the Jackson Pollack of masturbating. I watch his face, waiting for the look of disgust to twist his features, anticipating at least a raised eyebrow.

Nothing happens. It's cool.

"Where's Heather?" I ask him, hoping he'll leave me alone long to go look for his girlfriend. He shrugs.

I tell him I'm going to go check out the vibrators and don't stick around for his reaction.

I've been around penises before, but the wall of dildos is daunting. There are any number of lengths, girths, shapes, materials, and colors available. The categories they'd been separated into, intended to be helpful, make me even more wary of letting my gaze wander. I spend too much time in the "Couples" section before I realize I'm sifting through a selection of double-sided dildos and strap-on woodies. I back away from the wall, scanning the room to ensure that no one's seen me standing here. I make eye contact with a young guy standing in line for the viewing booth. We exchange words via our panicked expressions.

Me: I'm not gay; I'm just lost.

Him: I'm not a pervert. I don't have an Internet connection at home.

I make a lap around the store trying not to look at anything, but there's so much to see.

I wind up back at the wall of vibrators, no less bewildered than I was just a few minutes earlier. I don't know what I'm in the market for — I'm new to this game. Does wanting a seahorse tickler to stimulate your clitoris mean something different than having a butterfly do the job? I don't have an answer, but I'm sure that the people around me will judge my libido based on my purchase. I need to get this right.

I'm tempted to grab the first average-looking thing I can find and make a dash to the check-out counter, but I am faced with two obstacles. First, there is nothing that appears average to me. Every disembodied "penis" hanging before me looks alien, unlike anything I'd learned about in health class (and thanks to that textbook, I could now confidently diagnose gonorrhea). Next, my friend Liz has joined me — Liz, the epitome of experimentation and sexual freedom. She asks me what purchases I'm considering.

"None of them," I want to tell her.

"All of them," I also want to tell her.

Instead, I shrug and she asks me what I like. She's trying to be helpful, but she's asked me such a loaded question. Again, I shrug.

She starts talking about clitoral versus G-spot stimulation, throwing out statistics about how seventy-five percent of women don't orgasm from vaginal penetration alone. She pulls a box down off the rack and tells me how the object she's holding is going to make my toes curl.

"This one's got a couple different speeds, which is nice when one's just not doing it for you," she tells me. "The jelly coating is as close to the real thing as you're going to get. These beads here in the center will rotate and massage the walls of your vagina, so you'll be getting stimulation from all angles. Best of all, this little guy right here will tease the clitoral hood every time the device is thrust inward." She points to a miniature rabbit figure mounted to the side of the dildo.

After hearing this, I'm convinced my ears are bleeding, but I feign composure. I have no reason to doubt her, but I take the box from Liz and, following my natural consumer sensibilities, look for more product information on the back. The package reiterates everything Liz has just told me in six different languages.

"You should work here," I tell her.

She takes my words as a cue to show me some more options and as she's doing so, my best friend, Heather, and her boyfriend stroll up alongside us. I'm suddenly ashamed of the bright purple jumper in my hands. I want to throw it at Heather for bringing him along, or maybe at him for agreeing to come along.

Mostly I'm mortified because, in this instant, I realize that my companions are all here for the promise of good story, and I'm just pretending that's why I'm here.



I can count the number of times I've had sex on both hands. I only need two fingers to represent the number of partners I've had, and I have to ball up my fist whenever I'm asked how many of those times I experienced any semblance of an orgasm.

I wasn't having bad sex; I just wasn't being honest.

In the beginning, it was a matter of inexperience, learning how to navigate a body other than my own. I had so many distractions. Focusing on my own pleasure didn't seem like an option. I was happy to be kissed tenderly and held tightly. When he asked if I'd enjoyed it, I told him the truth when I told him, "Yes."

I got closer and closer with every try. Even in failure, I was pleased with my progress. I took my small victories and encouraged him with a white lie so I could still fall asleep in his arms.

I was almost there once. Just once.

It was the last time we were together. Our breathing was in sync, our chests rising and falling in unison. My nerves were electrified; every touch was intensified, though I'd begun to feel numb. I put my mouth to his ear and whispered, "I'm coming," just as Cosmo had told me to.

And then it was over. Two hands pushed my hips out and away from his body, damming the current flowing between us. I kneeled on the bed as I watched him sink his face into a pillow as every muscle in his body tensed. When he finally relaxed, he rolled over and put a hand to his brow, exhaling. He sat up and moved to kiss me.

"Why did you do that?" I asked before his lips could reach mine.

"Do what?"

"You cut me off."

He looked at me quizzically. "I was scared to finish inside you."

"You're wearing a condom."

"I've never stayed in before; why does it matter this time?"

He asked the question in earnest. That boy sat on the edge of the bed and stared at me with his face all scrunched up trying so hard — so very hard — to understand why I was slipping my underwear back on and groping around in the piles of his dirty laundry on the floor to find my shirt instead of nestling into the crook of his arm. He stared and he stared, saying nothing, just blinking. I wanted to flick his furrowed brow until his eyes grew wide with understanding, shame, or anything — anything — but the perplexity they already held.

"It just matters now," I told him, climbing back into the bed. He covered me in his comforter and held me until he thought I was asleep.

The next morning I kissed him goodbye and by the end of that week I boarded a plane to London. I was studying abroad for a semester and wouldn't be back for four months. I knew that four months away from the person I loved meant four months of abstinence. The person I loved, however, either didn't know that or didn't love me.

For fifteen weeks I roamed the grounds of an English manor house, making mental notes of everywhere I wished I were having sex — hidden passageways, remote gardens, library stacks, the conservatory, in front of the fireplace in the dining room. For 104 days I fantasized about the second I'd be reunited with my lover. I slept with an arm and leg slung over an oversized pillow as if it were his body, and was disappointed every morning when it hadn't miraculously morphed into his head, chest, arms, and legs overnight. I craved his touch and needed his warmth. The anticipation of sex was more awful than its absence.

When he told me he'd been with someone else while I'd been away, I didn't break down. I don't think I said anything. From looking at me, no one would have ever suspected how battered and bruised my insides were. I only knew because I couldn't finish my Taco Bell. I gave up on the burrito halfway through, partly for fear that I couldn't keep it down, but I think that, mostly, I just wanted to abandon something too.

"You want this?" I asked him, gesturing to the remainder of my meal. He raised an eyebrow but accepted my offer.

After swallowing a mouthful of beans, rice, and cheese, he asked me, "Why are you ripping up the lid on your cup?"

The plastic from the lid, shredded into tiny triangles, littered my lap and the floor of his car. "It's just something I do," I said.

What I should have said is, "Because we're together for the first time in months and our clothes are still on; because I drove two hours to see you and you probably had your hands on another girl as I was en route; because I'm stuck in your car and have to look at you not looking at me; because I love you but I hate you, I hate you, *I hate you.*"

At the very least, I should have cried.

Instead, I went for a walk with him around our university's campus. I didn't want to go, but he asked me to walk with him, and so I did. I so wanted to credit him for his decency, but I knew our civility was a lie. Neither of us was the person we appeared to be: he was a prick and I was a basket case.

We held our composure even when it was put to the ultimate test. We met a blonde making her way across campus as our walk was coming to an end. I recognized her face from the profile picture of a girl who'd been posting to his Facebook wall more and more frequently

in the past few weeks. He smiled shyly at her as she brushed past me. She waved; I waved back.

"Was that her?" I asked him before she'd made it out of earshot.

"Yeah," he sighed. "That's her."

We walked in silence back to my car. Before I left, he opened his arms and asked for a hug. I obliged because I knew that's what people were supposed to do when they parted on good terms.

It made sense to me to bear the hurt, to hide it away — to lie about it. My weakness was best kept a secret. It thought it best to mask the pain and suffer in silence then, just as it seems fitting that I conceal my shame and discomfort in a room full of sex toys and people who know how to feel pleasure.

When I'm fine, I'm only pretending.

I'm at the register with a bottle of lube, a vibrator, and a four-pack of AA batteries because I don't want to fake it anymore.

# CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

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**Laura Adrian** completed her A.F.A. in music performance at Parkland College and transferred to EIU in the fall of 2012. She is nearing the completion of her bachelor's degree in vocal performance. Although music is her primary pursuit at the moment, writing may be said to be her first love, as she discovered a passion for the written word while writing plays at the age of twelve. Since then, there has always been something bookish brewing and figurative ink all over her hands.

**C. David Banyai** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

**Brittany Busboom** lives in Champaign, Illinois, and is currently pursuing a business administration degree at Parkland College. Her interests include cooking, watching movies, attending concerts, and taking photographs.

**Valentina Cano** is a student of classical singing who spends free time either writing or reading. Her works have appeared in *Exercise Bowler*, *Blinking Cursor*, *Cartier Street Press*, *Berg Gasse 19*, *Precious Metals*, *A Handful of Dust*, *The Scarlet Sound*, *The Corner Club Press*, *Death Rattle*, and *Golden Sparrow Literary Review*, among many others.

**Maxwell Collins** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

**James Cox** is an undergraduate at Miami University of Ohio currently majoring in creative writing, interactive media studies, and mass communications with a focus on production. He writes stories, film scripts, and creates games.

**Holly Day** is a housewife and mother of two living in Minnesota who teaches needlepoint classes in the Minneapolis school district. Her poetry has recently appeared in *The Worcester Review*, *Broken Pencil*, and *Slipstream*, and she is the recipient of the 2011 Sam Ragan Poetry Prize from Barton College. Her most recent published book is *Notenlesen für Dummies Das Pocketbuch*, while her novel, *The Trouble With Clare*, is due out from Hydra Publications in 2013.

**Tayrn Devries** is a junior English education major at Eastern Illinois University who likes to spend her free time working on creative writing.

**Jason Graff** is a poet and fiction writer whose prose can be found in *Independent Ink*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *Thunderclap!*, *Nazar Look*, *Bloodroot Literary Magazine*, as well as upcoming issues of *Per Contra* and *The Holly and Ivy Journal*. His poetry appears in *Meat for Tea*, *Split Rock Review*, *Ol'Chanty*, *The Delinquent*, *BrickRhetoric*, *Clockwise Cat*, and *zingology*.

**H R Green** is a South African fiction writer and sometimes poet. Her writing has appeared both in print and online, including publications in *Dark Moon Digest* and *69 Flavors*

of *Paranoia*. She has forthcoming work in *[PANK]*. She currently working toward a master's degree in creative writing at Eastern Illinois University.

**Leeann Kirchner** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

**Shelby Koehne** is a senior English major at Eastern Illinois University. She plans to pursue an M.F.A. in creative writing after graduation.

**David Lewitzky** is a 72-year-old retired social worker/family therapist living out his sedentary life in the moribund but funky rust belt city of Buffalo, New York. He has recent work in *Nimrod*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Tidal Basin Review*, and *Roanoke Review*, among others. He has work forthcoming in *Passages North*, *Future Cycle*, and *Clarion*, among others.

**Elizabeth Marlow** is a senior English major at Eastern Illinois University. She loves the challenge of giving a new, sometimes ridiculous voice to prominent historical figures from the United States. She also enjoys trying to express very complicated personal events in a manner that is as succinct and dead-pan as possible, while remaining poignant. Elizabeth plans on receiving her master's and PhD. degrees in English and is looking forward to teaching, traveling, playing, and becoming a pilgrim in Spain.

**Karen Neuberg** lives in Brooklyn, New York, and West Hurley, New York. Her poems have appeared in numerous publications including *Big City Lit*, *Coe Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Louisville Review*, *SLAB*, and *Superstition Review*, among others. Her chapbook, *Detailed Still*, was published by Poets Wear Prada Press.

**Gerry Mark Norton** has self-released one book of poems, *Sick Roses*, and two music albums, *A Momentary Lapse in Lethargy and Feasting, Dancing & Revelry*. He has been published in *Quail Bell*, *Misfits' Miscellany*, and *Eskimo Pie*, and has work forthcoming in *The Rusty Nail*, *Circa*, *Eunoia*, *Red Ochre Literature*, and *Danse Macabre*. He lives in Truro, England.

**Gregory Robert Peterson** is a Midwestern writer who enjoys playing with ideas as well as words.

**Kyle Owens** lives in the Appalachian Mountains and his work has appeared in *Burnt Bridge*, *Zouch Magazine*, *Bent Masses*, *Indigo Rising UK*, *Books to Go Now*, *Forthwith Lit*, and his screenplay "Ventura Heights" is scheduled to go into production in 2012 and will be starring Julianne Davis (*Eyes Wide Shut*) and be directed by Graham Theakston (*The Politician's Wife*).

**Riley Parish** is a junior at Eastern Illinois University, majoring in communication studies and music performance. She plays cello in the EIU Symphony Orchestra and is a member of the Charleston Olympic Weightlifting Team. While Riley enjoys writing poetry, she hopes to have a career in directing films or composing soundtracks for movies.

**Richard King Perkins II** is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He has a wife, Vickie, and a daughter, Sage. His work has appeared in hundreds

of publications including *Prime Mincer*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Fox Cry*, *Prairie Winds*, and *The Red Cedar Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Bluestem*, *The Meadow*, and *The William and Mary Review*.

**Fred Pollack** is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *THE ADVENTURE* and *HAPPINESS*, both published by *Story Line Press*, and has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Die Gazette* (Munich), *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Representations*, *Magma* (UK), *Bateau*, *Chiron Review*, etc.

**Christopher Robinson** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

**Ryan Shea** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

**Rashelle Spear** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

**Karlynn Thayer** raises, races, and rides horses in southeastern Colorado, near the Santa Fe Trail and the Arkansas River. She works as a grammar and writing instructor for *Writer's Digest* magazine, and operates her own editing and writing instruction service.

**Eliot Thompson** is a student at Eastern Illinois University.

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