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### The Vehicle, Fall 2010

Aaron White

Jamie Van Allen

Megan Marie Olson

Rashelle McNair

Kathy Decker

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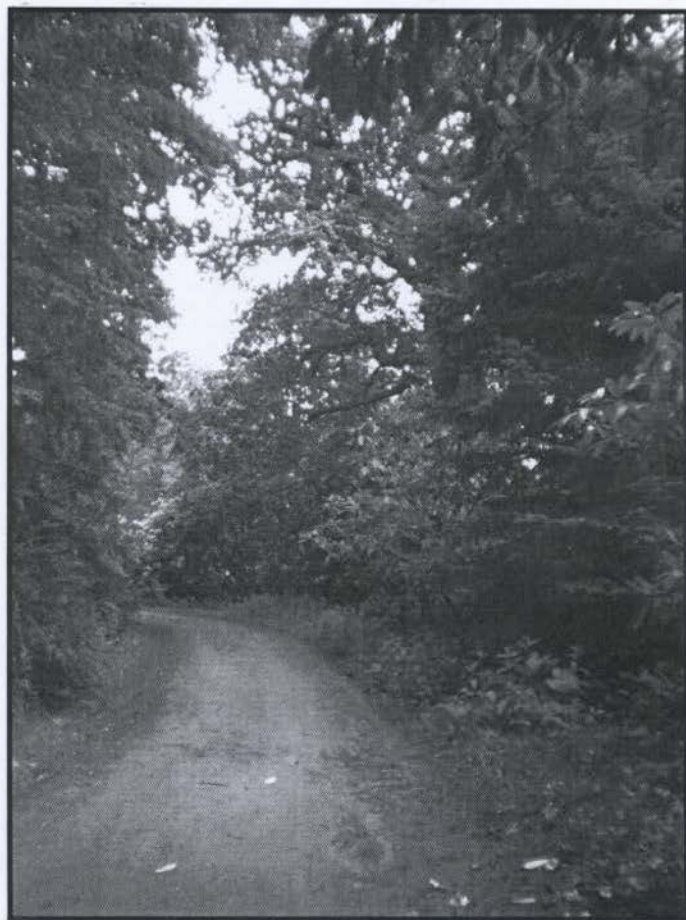
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2010

Fall

# *the Vehicle*



Fall 2010

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Correction: On page 46, please note that the author of *Antarctica* is Matthew Payea, not Michael Payea. The staff of *The Vehicle* apologizes for this error.



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# Fill Your Mouth With Berries

Aaron White

sly  
americans prowl through  
dumpsters behind chinese buffets and  
they pick at pieces of crusted chickenchowmein like  
fat feasting feline that have no welcome lap to call home and  
halfway across the world a young burnt boy basks in brown water held  
by a hardened brown bowl of earth as other children join and eagerly wade with  
makeshift straws hung about their brown necks to suck from the 3<sup>rd</sup> planet's pores and  
slowly but surely the sun seems to suffocate like a flame pinched with moistened fingers and  
collision-course comets become as threatening as the steady blue barrel of a hungry man's gun  
but the storm clouds begin to roll over and the moldy gray sky is a rich shade of blue once more  
while the ovary blossoms a single and quite unique fruit that is plump and innocent and sweet  
as an old pair of wrinkly raisin fingers pluck at the flesh of a tiny hand that reaches skyward  
patiently outstretched and ripe ruby red from the chill bite of a mid-september afternoon  
while halfway across the world little boys and little girls pick the earthen face clean  
of clear watery-juice harvested with buckets from sprouting stony wells  
while the sun rises and sets in pastels of purple-red hues  
the color of plump cheeks atop widening smiles  
inflated round with  
berries

# Relations

Jamie Van Allen

I saw the insecure conquistador mask that haunts a museum's display window, stares with its vacuous eyes at visitors who creep past it, and moans, *don't look at me . . . please, look at me.*

I saw the bank teller flinch when her knuckle brushed across a customer's palm but innately handle her cash drawer with an easy touch, the diner waitresses with flaccid skin hanging from their bones like wet, weighted laundry on a line.

I saw the sincerity in my mother's eyes when she warned me not to underestimate the power of the sun, the face of my grandmother—a road map folded over and left in the glove box too many times with an offhand comment from my grandfather, and the protest on my father's lips when I remarked that a life of activity does not suggest a life of purpose.

I saw the man sit at the bar and gaze into the mouth of his glass as if it were the mouth of his dead wife, the woman watch the door and wait for the reason why she put on a red dress to walk in, the old man sit in the corner and mistake the woman asking for a light to be his future lover, and the young couple in a darkened corner press their bodies against each other and gradually pull away.

I saw the caresses become more apologetic, the pressure of one hundred suns spread through my veins and test the strength and pliability of my limbs, the knowledge that you weren't content to lie next to me—awake or asleep, the hollow your body left on the right side of the mattress, and my inability to disturb that physical memory.

until weeks after you left.

I saw the bartender, bought a Red Stripe, felt the cold loneliness seep into my hands, watched people enter the bar and walk past me, felt their warmth brush against my shoulder, enjoyed the interaction, even if it was swift, and I glanced up from my drink and echoed the mask's restless song by thinking *don't look at me . . . please, look at me.*

# Exodus

Megan Marie Olson

I want to return to the stars,  
Fall into the waters of the sky,  
A haven where I would have  
Serenity at the close of my eyes.  
Saturn's child chalk rings would  
Hoola hoop around me,  
Welcoming me to a planet that  
Has too much gravity.  
Lighthearted, I would spring  
From cookie crumb asteroids  
To the tail chasing comets,  
Plunging into outer space ink.  
Cake frosting luminescence would  
Rake its greasy hands over my flesh,  
Lending me neon galaxy finger trails.  
To swim frog-wise through darkness,  
A speckled tadpole in murky sludge,  
I would slither in and out of stars,  
Mummifying them with slug slime.  
The earsplitting calls of ghostly voids  
Would chill the maze of my arteries.

My heart's four chambers would pump  
Diligently, stalwartly, until I implode  
As lava red as a premature volcano.  
My corrosive blood would stain  
Across the heavens, blemish, stigma.  
Chubby globules would eat suns,  
Lukewarm petals tarnishing moons,  
Rosy liquid devouring solar flares,  
Wasp sting dampness pilfering plasma.  
I would slumber in the Lucifer man's  
Voodoo arms, rocking me, stripping me.  
I would lay my head upon his fang  
Bitten shoulder, nuzzling vanilla cheek  
Into the valley between sand paper throat  
And masticate on verdant apple collar bone.  
Demon, he would suffocate me as he is,  
Invading me from navel to hip.  
I would die from his poisonous touch,  
From his vampire kisses, leech tongue,  
Licking and licking my peach core,  
Taming me with the best kind of sin.  
Tacked up with star pins, I would  
Surrender back to my rectification.  
I would be banned from the universe,  
Because I just had to devour it all,  
Digesting, obliterating, un-naming.

I want to return to the stars,  
But this crater spangled rock  
Anchors me to it with iron and lead.  
Just the wane light of an aging star  
Keeps the life in me from the dead.

# Single-File

Rashelle McNair

Switching left foot  
with right foot,  
looking at the glitter  
ceiling stretching pointedly  
flowers already smelling  
thick on the edge of decay,

wiping tears on sleeves  
tissues mingled with hair,  
staring at the wooden  
box inscribed satin  
yawning yearning  
to close,

they hug her  
and the kids  
to take a chunk  
of the emptiness  
from each embrace  
before they leave.



# Lamparas de Dios

Aaron White

Warm granules of sand crunch beneath our feet as we shift our weight awkwardly from naked heel to naked heel, trading the uncomfortable burn of the sand between each foot. We stand around her limp body that lies abhorrent on the ground like a ragdoll ravaged by the jowls of a dog. The white-hot Puerto Vallarta sun coats our backs a shade of pinkish-red like the exposed muscle tissue on her soft, left cheek. Her tight, red tank-top is pulled upward, just below the faint underside of her sweating breasts. The girl's brown bellybutton is brazenly exposed, overfilled with sand and spiny leaves and the brown-white yucca petals of the shaggy, flowered plant she fell upon from practically sixty-feet above. Slowly, like stray feathers, the large, green leaves of the towering palm tree that she collided with float down toward the crowd of people encircling her distressed figure. Some members of the mob hold rich, tan hands to their mouths to muffle astonished sighs. Locals standing amongst the gringo tourists use their fingers to follow an invisible path from their foreheads to their shoulders and back, mouthing prayers in Spanish as two of the four parasail instructors rush toward the crowd, the pair carrying a worn yellow surfboard for a stretcher. Her long legs are a map of even longer scratches from the shaggy trunk of the *yucca rostrata* she landed upon, still young in its four-foot stature. She quietly starts to convulse, her body twitching and making patterns in the sand underneath falling palm-leaves like a heavy, green rain.

\*\*\*

At the edge of Banderas Bay in downtown Puerto Vallarta stands an iron statue of a man atop a fiery seahorse with wild passion in its eyes. The monument is situated amongst tanning segments of cobbled brick along the Malecon walkway,

the path littered by stray syringes, cigarette-butts, and the occasional plastic playing-card with a picture of a woman, nude and touching her exposed breast, as the Red Queen of Hearts. The seahorse and the valiant rider, raised on their haunches as if entering into a fearsome battle, stand in a mass of spotted teal-green decay amidst the salty sea-air of the Pacific. The statue's base attracts crowding tourists in asinine clusters, digging through their fanny-packs for faded, disposable cameras. While they rummage, their little blond daughters stand in a pale, frozen fear next to a local blanket-merchant that twists a lock of their young and silken hair around his greasy index-finger.

Further down the walkway sits the church of *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, its court a plaza of cold, gray cement plant-boxes housing tall trees that shade the majority of the square and its stone benches. The light falls in circumspect rays through the bright-green leaves, casting scattered circles of white sunlight like beams from a focused spotlight, freckling the shaded ground. The thick air is moist and a slight breeze rolls listlessly off of the ocean in somersaults that comb my yellow hair over to one side. Near a dried, aging birdbath that stands out of an ancient, blackened stone, a skinny man in his mid-twenties is painfully heaving thick globs of what looks to be *salsa roja*. Standing in the shade, he clutches his right hand firmly onto the water-stained rock, a hand that has a long and broken pinkie-fingernail painted black. The man is doubled over and hocking chunks like chopped chili-peppers onto the paved ground that is littered in his already-spilled sick. In his left hand, he holds a cheap bottle of *tequila blanco*, distilled some miles away in a remote ghetto of Puerto Vallarta. His long, black hair is matted to his forehead in stringy clusters of sweat. Each strand of wavy hair that hangs down in front of his face moves back and forth due to every heaving breath that blows it away from the crusted corners of his brown mouth. The man brings himself to his feet and, with his exposed forearm, wipes away the remaining vomit from his face. He brings the bottle back to his lips and takes another long chug before bending over to heave again.

I step away from the puking local. His drunken, Mexican laughter is full of phlegm, suffusing the air that is already thick with hand-rolled tobacco smoke. I then set my gaze on a girl I'd been eyeing from far away. She's wearing a bright red tank-top so tight that it looks like she's missing skin. The cloth that adheres to her slender, brown figure sponges sweat into tiny ovals that cover the middle of her back. As she moves around the red pool of vomit toward the church entrance, she flips her head back slightly, just enough to move a long wave of black hair from her right shoulder to her left. Her lips are full and moist, and the gloss she wears catches the few rays of sunlight creeping their way through the rich, green leaves.

\*\*\*

The resort my family and I our staying in is located on Mismaloya Beach, famed location for the filming of *Night of the Iguana* and *Predator*. The land is a dense network of tropical forest, coupled by a sandy bank that stretches the entire length of the coast. Because I've just turned eighteen, I can drink in Mexico. I load up on sour margaritas and *Pacifico* as I watch the slow tide roll back and forth, soaking the heat of the autumn afternoon deep into my pores. The water is a tranquil opiate-blue that's clear enough to swim in, but dark enough to hide any spiny rocks or deep pools of murk that lie hidden on the Pacific seabed. The sterile-white sand of the resort is speckled with colorful shells and gringos that mingle like polygamist-creatures, dancing from woman to woman, man to man, churning and laughing and dripping as they suck at their rum and cokes like gilded water, the mass of them moving like a corpulent, breathing blob.

Because my pale skin starts to pulse like a burning heartbeat due to the strong sunlight, I decide to trudge my slender frame though the hot sand back to the hotel room, located across a maze of pink concrete plaza and plastic lawn-chairs. The afternoon breeze is almost coarse, carrying with it specks of sand that crunch between my teeth every time I open my mouth to catch a salty breath. By this time of day, the first of

many happy hours has begun, and my buzz begins to kick in as tourists devour the poolside bar. They mouth attempts at Spanish that they don't understand themselves, and the puzzled looks of the poolside's Spanish-speaking bartenders brings a smile to my tequila-stricken face.

At a table near the end of the plaza, situated by a four-star Mexican pizzeria, sits a frail man with dusty skin and a black ponytail braided down the length of his back. He dips a long pinkie-nail, painted stark-black, into a container of colorful acrylic paint. His face a sweaty complex of what seems drunken stupor, he lazily drags his long nail across the surface of a glossy, black-ceramic tile, the vibrant shades of pink and yellow coming together to form a colorful sunset that he describes in broken, slurred English as "the *real* fucking Poohairto Byyyarta." Next to him, on the fold-out table, is a neat grid of finished tiles. I can see that, due to the sloppiness of the newest tiles, he started to drink as soon as he began painting. Toward the end of the row of ceramic rests one that depicts an elderly Mexican man in a Texan ten-gallon that's lowered over his eyes. In a pair of beaten, brown boots, he rests his feet on the back of a sandy hound while he rocks in a chair next to a shaggy plant that looks like a small tree. From the spiny leaves of the tree bloom a beautiful, white flower that the artist describes to me as "*yucca*."

He looks up at me with porcelain eyes and opens his chapped, crusted lips long enough to mouth, "I'm gonna go pay for my sins. Wanna walk with me?"

I look around from left to right, wondering if he's talking to someone else. He continues to stare up at me with his blank and glassy eyes, his gaze never straying from my sun-burnt face.

"Your English isn't half bad," I reply just as drunkenly. "No offense..."

He chuckles while he pulls a dirty bottle of white tequila from under the table and takes a long swig, offering me

a sip that I turn down.

"I'm from *New Mehheeco*...My parents speak Spanisshhh only. I hardly use it anymore."

He stands up and we walk away from the resort, up the street, and toward a bus stop around the block. I remember my parents back at the hotel and how they're too drunk to remember their own names, let alone where I'm at. Looking on toward the man, I see that his mean drunk has caused him to sweat profusely through his yellowed, white shirt. He's cursing to himself, partly in English and partly in a language that I have a hard time distinguishing as purely Spanish. We get onto the bus with brown, plastic seats and a hot livestock smell, exiting some time later after a rough ride through the city. We step out onto the littered cobblestone and walk toward the church of *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, the sun beating down on our backs—the man continuing to drink from his bottle.

"You know," I say, "liquor makes you thirstier."

"What?" he asks. "That flower's important...yucca is from...ah...*agave*. We all drink *agave*...that's universal shit."

From farther down the brick toward the front of the plaza where we're standing, a red-shirted local struts her long, brown legs steadily toward us and the church, careful to avoid the crowds of old Mexican women and sweaty tourists.

"HEY ROSALIND!" the man yells toward her, "*el coño dulce!*"

She doesn't hear his advance from so far away, or she chooses to ignore it. I watch her wipe sweat from the back of her neck with a slender hand when the artist tugs at my shirt, hunched over and grabbing onto an adjacent birdbath so fiercely that he's broken his paintbrush-nail.

"She's some piece," he croaks. "She's at the reesort. I caught her *nub*—"

He starts to dry-heave before he finishes. "—name a few

days ago. I'd love to paint her, *hnnnnng*, naked."

The man vomits, off and on, for a few moments before finally edging away from the pool of stinking red at his feet, watching Rosalind's ass, in white cut-offs, move rhythmically into the entrance of the church. I handle the black tile that he's given to me from the depths of his pocket. Running my finger along the grooves of coagulated paint, I can almost feel the texture of the old man's leathery shepherders' vest and white yucca.

The artist gets his footing back and stands still for a moment before lighting a hand-rolled cigarette and telling me "it's my state flower."

He looks at me seriously, and in my transient ride between drunkenness and stark sobriety, I start to become uneasy.

"*Lamparas de Díos*, they're called...it means...*hrrp*...uh, 'lamps of the lord.'"

A puff of smoke from his stinking mouth travels toward me. He puts a sweaty palm on my shoulder, clutching onto my warm flesh as tight as that birdbath.

"Don't worry kid," he says. "You stare at chaos long enough, you'll find meaning somewhere."

\*\*\*

As I stand in the crowd lurched over her shaking body, she starts to scream. For a brief moment in time I feel her goose bumps rise on my own neck and the stiff, little white hairs that stand rigid enough to scratch. Most of the tourists have shrunk back to their wet towels hanging from the backs of white chairs, mouthing things like "Jesus Christ." Rosalind's black hair hangs in wavy coils, draped over brown-white skin as beautiful as a gilded Cleopatra. Like a fixture among the *Rotunda near the Sea*, she's petrified, lost in a moment of time that I imagine feels like an eternity for her. She shudders violently, her head yielding a stinking pool of red that continues to grow

and grow and *grow*, her movements shaking loose petals of skin that hang delicately from the blossoming bud of beauty in her face. As time continues to trickle thickly, slowly, her face seems to wither like a bell-cupped flower, dispelling blackened flakes of yucca seed from the plant that broke her fall. Surrounding her body are white petals, as if she's been placed on some makeshift funeral pyre. One of the lazily falling palm-leaves brushes my face slightly, and I shiver imagining it to be her delicate fingers. The smooth, glossy finish of her painted nails seems to caress my cheek, Rosalind whispering into my ear with hot breath "*mi amante.*"

I look into her frightened eyes as the parasail instructors lift her onto the beaten surfboard, the owner of the bar, just adjacent to her accident, yelling something indecipherable into a telephone. The crowd breaks away and I continue to stand in the same spot, kicking sand into the pool of blood and petals. I remember what she looked like earlier that day, after I saw her leave the church and followed her back to my resort and then to the beach, before she had parasailed, alone, and failed to pull the chord on her left, causing her to collide with the top of a palm tree. I saw her, just an hour before, run toward the ocean with an intense vigor, shedding her red tank-top and white cut-offs to reveal a mismatched bathing suit of black and white. She almost danced as she plunged into the blue-green water like rapture. Rosalind came up valiantly upon the white and foamy crest of a wave, like that stranger atop the iron seahorse, ready to plunge into battle as a lantern of God.

END

# *The Aesthetic Value of the Moon, by Candlelight*

*Kathy Decker*

Is the moon equally beautiful throughout her phases?

Or is she most lustrous when she's Full?

Full

of light, of strength, of audacity;

of tenderness, of wisdom, of seduction.

The moon's skin is softer,

her lips are wetter,

when she's Full.



# Fractals

Gabrielle Keigher

A simple, recursive definition

In math, a reduced-sized copy of the whole

In nature, a snowflake

## Day 5

*David Jackson*

Just a few words real quick

I saw something beautiful today

And I just want you to know you're beautiful

And no one should make you feel any less than that

I'm not even going to lie it brightened up my day

To the point I'm speechless I have not much else to say

Its not everyday you see a glow like that

The kind you can't even leave you'd be right back

Cause everything else is just darkness

And I know the concept is difficult to harness

But I guarantee you could make it through the carnage

Don't let people tell you, you must finish what you started

That's not always the case sometimes its best to let it be

Take some steps back and let yourself see

Let yourself breathe the fresh air

Because this is your life and no one can compare

So I suppose this is a message to let you know you're not alone

And that I state these words in the most caring of tones

# Learning Curve

Scott May

My father-in-law and I played golf moments after a funeral. It had been our plan all along; give our condolences, eat, make a quick change of clothes, grab our gear. An early Spring afternoon, the ground still wet, the air still cool, we had the course to ourselves. We decided to hit twice on all nine, fully taking advantage of the week day afternoon. After driving and joking and bettering our scores with the second whack, his by 8, mine by 9, we headed home.

We entered through the kitchen door, first removing our muddy shoes, then laughing and putting our hands on each other's shoulder. At the table sat four women representing three generations. They shared coffee, red eyes and pretzels. Their silence, and the held hand of the new widow, changed our composure. We retired to the living room and settled down without a word. Sitting in the shade darkened room, listening to muffled sounds of grief sighing from the kitchen, I began to wonder if he and I were sharing the same thought: how ostensible it is that women had been created second.

## *Esta Lloviendo*

*Heather Gerrish*

The rain in San Jose falls softly and if you aren't listening for it, you don't realize it's even there. Suddenly, in the silence, the thought comes to you that there is a constant rushing sound that may or may not have been present a few minutes ago. You investigate, opening the slatted windows and sacrifice a hand to the outside in the name of curiosity. Sure enough, it's rain.

The city has fallen quiet at the hush of the rain. Cars continue to hurry past, but the people who usually fill the sidewalks with their walking, standing, jogging, dancing are nowhere to be found.

A strained glance at the mountains shows you peaks softly obscured by water, and the sight is captivating. The soft breeze brings in the smell of the rain, and somehow is it pleasant, as though you are on that gentle peak in the distance instead of in the hazy, thriving city.

*Esta lloviendo*, the locals will say, "it is raining." But here, "raining" is too harsh a word for what takes place outside the window. It may be raining in New York City, but here, *esta lloviendo*.

# Rockton

*Katelyn Pfaff*

Winter was like magic to me, as it would have been to any kid.

I hated the mud puddles in spring that cratered my driveway like the moon; the ninety-degree weather and scorching sun annoyed me on my summer vacation; and fall, with its cooler nights and mountains of burning orange leaves, was only slightly better.

I suffered through all those months in silent desperation for the first snowfall of the season, the ring of carolers out on my front porch, and the waft of cinnamon molasses cookies bursting through the oven door, teasing my cold toes to race across the bare, wooden floors to snatch one while my mother wasn't looking. Each year I'd beg my parents to let me start celebrating earlier than the last: I hung garland on the polished banister, mistletoe on every door frame, stockings over our ancient fireplace, and a smile in every corner of the house. My grandma was the only one who felt the holiday spirit as much as I did, and I always relied on her to help raise everyone else's spirits. My dad would bring in a freshly cut pine from the cold, and, though every tree was the same height, each time I'd swear it was bigger than the previous year's. My brother would throw me up in the air and waltz me around the living room to Kenny G's oboe and Jim Brickman's piano. It's amazing how quickly a two-story house fills up with winter cheer with just these simple things. I'd wear my favorite red sweater as often as I could get away with until the year that the snags in the fabric became holes in the little Christmas trees and it looked more like a dingy red rag covered in green specks.

The town, too, seemed to burst with life as soon as

Thanksgiving passed and everyone threw out their leftovers—turkey bones appreciated by the birds, pumpkin scraps picked at by the raccoons. All this made me laugh; it happened so quickly, and as soon as it did everyone was a part of the festival of tree lights and shimmering icicles. The town was most beautiful at night when all the porch lights showed families sitting down to dinner and praying over their roasts and potatoes. Every store was decorated from floor to ceiling with pinecones and flashing lights, their finest toys and most dazzling jewelry displayed in their windows to be admired by friendly, familiar faces. Each night we could hear music coming from somewhere. Hot chocolate and marshmallows were served in all the grocery stores, complimentary to anyone with a twinkle of Christmas spirit in his eye. I spent a lot of time at my grandma's house during the season, which was closer to the town and all its wintry magic. If I were really good she would let me go outside early enough to see the horses draw up a family or two in a carriage that seemed to glow as it pranced down the street. After it left I would walk up to a hoof print left in the snow and gently touch it, trying to imagine the force and power of one of those hooves.

And the snow. On the nights it came down fast I felt as if someone had plopped a beautiful, porcelain snow globe down around me and I had become a glass caroler or plastic Santa Claus standing on the street corner patting children on the back and handing them each a piece of chocolate wrapped in emerald and ruby foil. I loved the feeling of being cold through my down coat. It was that force of nature that pushed me through the doorways of my favorite shops to huddle close with the boy down the street, and together we'd warm up and share a little of this magic with our neighbors or the postwoman or anyone else who had wanted to sing and laugh beneath a brilliantly decorated pine tree. I loved the way snow sparkled in dim streetlight, despite how childish it seems now. We were all somehow children at that time of year, and no one seemed to mind much.

Last March, my grandma died. I wonder how winter will be this year without her. It was my season, my wonder and amazement wrapped up in her love and warmth. I am realizing at this moment that she is the one person who made everything I love about winter so magical: the white-outs and blizzards, the music in the air, the presents under a lit Christmas tree. Her presence when I was a child had a much bigger impact on my love of the season than I recognized, and I fear all that glorious snow and all those brilliant lights won't reach me as they always have before, maybe not at all. She was genuine and she was old-fashioned, and her love seemed to come out of the sky with each snowflake. The town was hers before it was mine, and I never quite realized that until now. Without her, it has lost some of its wonder. All this magic that I had waited for so many months flowed from her front door and straight into my heart. I guess this year I will make a trip to the cemetery after the same two-story house has been strewn with layer upon layer of decoration, and I will lay a red flower in the snow and sing her a carol, hoping that I'll walk away with her in my heart.

# Facebroke

Darrin Gordon

I severed the strings of my fleshly reality,  
To worship a binary faith.  
Holding, touching, feeling is an abnormality,  
This corporeal existence now just chafes.

Society hungers for this gossamer gift,  
Children yearn to be caught in its net.  
This blue savior unknowingly authored a rift,  
Murdering the palpable, lacking regret.

The tangible becomes a graveyard,  
Comments can never breathe.  
This reaper plays the information vanguard,  
Physical transmission he shall bereave.

I try to escape, I break my fingers,  
But my addiction remains, the ghastly threat still lingers.



5:08 pm

*Nikki Reichert*

It is said that the eyes are the windows to the soul.

When I look into your eyes, it's not you I see.

It's me.

I can see my own shock at so intimate a gesture with someone who is so completely a stranger.

I can see my eyes widen and my breathing quicken, thoughts and heart racing together on an infinite highway.

I find myself focusing on questions; who am I? Why am I looking at you from behind these eyes rather than looking through the eyes that are yours?

Then, abruptly, it ends.

The connection is severed, and my insight goes with it.

My head clears and my heart slows.

I am left to wait for the next chance encounter with the windows to myself.

# *Fatal Distraction*

*Solomohn Ennis*

A full moon, approaching midnight, crisp air on a wild night. I am torn between the moments that separate night from day, sanity from insanity.

Everything is about timing. Everything happens in its own time, and in its own way. We are, all of us are, just mere movers of the thing. The thing that forces us and keeps us going, going, and going, moving, pushing, forcing and sometimes dragging ourselves through time.

I am watching her from this park bench. She is across the street at the bus stop. Girlfriend is waiting on the 987. I can tell she is young. She can't be any more than nineteen. She shouldn't be out here this late, not in my neighborhood. But I see this all the time. They come from wherever to here. I have seen so many of them so many times, from right here, from my prime spot in the park, on this very bench, underneath this evergreen.

Sometimes they even yell across to ask me if I've seen the bus. I look dead in their naive faces and act like I don't hear them. "Ma'am can you hear me?!", they shout. I answer by looking through'em. They give it a few seconds. I give them a few stares. Then, they hunch their shoulders, or flip a hand and go back underneath the bus shelter.

But this one, that's not what she did. She saw me, then looked away, not wanting to stare I suppose. Too bad for her. It doesn't matter to me, whatever she does doesn't matter to me, because I'm not gonna be ignored.

She snaps and pops pink bubblegum between her lips. Little bubbles burst and flatten at least sixty times a minute. Any other day, any other night, the popping wouldn't bother me so

intensely. I wouldn't care as much, but this one, she's extra. She's all gloss and no substance. I don't understand what he sees in her. There have been cuter ones.

*Snap, pop.* Uhhh, I want to deconstruct her flair, dismantle the snap of her gum, the twirl of her hair, the twinkles of the rhinestones on her nails.

She knows I hate her. Better: she knows I'm hating on her (as they say). She can feel my contempt. That's why she tries in vain to pull her puffy jacket down over those I-can't-believe-they're-so-tight-jeans. You know her type, all phat and no facts. Every time she snaps that gum. *Snap, pop.* I swear I want to take my flashlight and bash the metal tip into her head. Gash, gash, gash. Then use her blood to loosen her weave tracks—rip them out one by one, and re-glue them to her pretty, young face.

They never have a schedule. Girls like them never come out here unless invited. They come 'cause he says so. They cannot seem to resist the white of his teeth against the black of his Mercedes. Then, he eases up on 'em, licks his Usher Raymond lips, chews his gum slow and sexy, and smiles in their faces. That's his *modus operandi*. "Oh, you're so cute," they always say. I overheard him once bragging to his buddies. He said, "If I offer her a piece of gum after I swagger my stance—and she takes it—I know I'm in."

Then, they find out that his gentlemanly charms expire a few minutes before midnight (an hour before he believes my shift ends). And that's when they end up here, alone at the bus stop. Mr. So Fine and So Sexy does not provide ride nor walk. A kiss on the cheek and a fresh piece of bubblegum is all he gives, then he sends them on their way.

Earlier today, he made me get two packs of it when I went to the store. That's how I knew to leave work early tonight. He is so strange and predictable, gum and girls.

I got here in enough time to watch this one walk from

my house. *The homewrecker*. She walked to the bus stop slowly. I can tell she was perplexed, slowed by her stupidity and his harsh reality. Only three before her have ever missed the bus. It's 11:12. The next 987 doesn't come for another hour.

So, I walk with a limp around the corner to my parked car. I take off my navy beat-up, too large overcoat, gray wig, and wool hat. And I put on a satin, puff mid-length coat; throw on some high heel leather boots; adjust a cute cap over my bob; put my flashlight in my Louie tote and walk back.

I stroll to the bus stop humming "Knock You Down." She looks at me inquisitively. "What's up?" I ask her. She tells me I look vaguely familiar. "Well, I do live around here," I say, "maybe you've seen me on this bus."

She tells me this is her first time in the neighborhood and that she was visiting a friend. "I've never even heard of the 893 before today," she says. "How often does it run?"

I look at my watch and tell her, "At 11:28 it should be coming around the corner. It's our main bus. It runs downtown about every ten to fifteen minutes."

She starts popping that gum again. Now, I can smell it. It is that watermelon bubblicious. Every time she parts her lips and snaps that gum—it infuriates me. I put my hand in my bag and squeeze my flashlight.

She attempts small talk, "So what are you doing out here so late? If you don't mind me asking."

"Oh, I'm just on my way to work. The night shift, you know."

She gives a chuckle. "Yeah, I know the graveyard shift. I used to work at an all-night breakfast spot, and talk about the walking dead."

She laughs. Her purse falls down her arm, and knocks her phone from its holster. She kneels to pick it up and the purse

falls too. Inside is: Kleenex, condoms, a billfold and a book. It's a copy of *The Color Purple*. Her I.D. reads: Ariel Garner. She bends over further to gather her belongings and her pant leg comes up—she doesn't have on socks.

I take advantage of the opportunity, "Girl, I don't know about you, but I'm cold already." I rub my arms. "How long were you here before I got here?" She tells me, she's been at the stop about twenty-five minutes. I say to her, "Well, I hope this bus hurries. You've been out here long enough to have seen two buses by now."

She looks at me and mouths: two buses, then speaks up, "Maybe the bus you're talking about is just late," she says. "Maybe we just missed it, huh?"

I let my lips tremble a bit before I answer. "Uhh, yeah. But if you've already been waiting twenty something minutes, it might be one of those nights."

Her eyes widen. She gasps. Watermelons are all around us. "What do you mean, 'one of those nights'?", she asks, her anger lurking.

I give a full body shudder. "Well, like I said, usually, the darn thing runs every ten to fifteen, but ever so often it'll take up to forty-five minutes to an hour." I walk out into the street and look for the bus giving the words time to create icy, frustrating images.

"Agggghhh," she groans.

I say, "Yeah, girl, I hear ya. If it doesn't come in the next minute or so." I shake with cold. "I'm gon' have to drive!"

The freeze I've created starts in on her. She rubs her hands together.

"Brrrrr," I groan.

I give it a few more minutes. I rub my arms, pull my cap down over my ears, re-fit my gloves, and tighten my collar

around my neck. "Well, baby girl, looks like I'm gon' have to put it in drive. Messing around with this bus, I'll be done lost my job. OK?," I say with a half-laugh.

She giggles nervously.

I adjust my bag, balance it on my shoulder. "Well, you be careful out here. It's dangerous." I pause for added effect. "Humph. To be honest, I was glad to see you out here tonight. For real, 'cause any other time I wouldnt've even waited this long." I re-snap my tote. "'Cause, girl, these maniacs out here! Don't even get me started on the things I've heard, and have seen too."

I look around me this time before walking out into the street. I squint my eyes and look for the bus, then throw my hands up. I walk back underneath the bus shelter and watch her through the glass. The reflection shows her looking down at her own bag, then at her hand. She turns the solitaire she has on around into her palm, so that nothing but the band shows.

I give an exasperated sigh, look at my watch and say, "A'ight, I can't wait no longer. I better get going. It was nice meeting you. Be safe, OK." I walk away, clicking my heels against the ground in that special way to echo the silence. I hear her fidgeting. *I wonder what for?* It dawns on me—the phone. Trying to stop her before she makes a call, I yell, "Please forgive my rudeness. What if, since I'm driving downtown and you're going that way, I give you a ride?"

I walk back toward her quickly. She looks me up then down.

I give her a shudder. "Hey, really it's no bother, it's the least I can do for a sister, you know." I pull my bag closer to me. "Really, c'mon, 'cause for real, neither one of us need to be out here this late."

She looks down the street for the bus. It is nowhere in sight. "OK, then. It's really no bother?," she asks.

I say, "Girl, of course not. Let's go. I'm parked right around the corner. I just don't like to drive because of the gas, you know?"

"Well, I can give you some gas money," she says. "This is really nice of you. I have a son at home. I had no idea I'd be out this late. I had no idea I'd be on the bus."

I give her a knowing look. I feel bad for her son. "Well, you know worse things can and will happen," I say while opening the passenger side door for her.

"Yeah, but, Father in heaven, will it ever end?" She asks as she sits down.

I look at her, push the lock down and say, "Yeah, it does. Everything has to end." Then, I close the door.

We ride in silence. She pops her gum—the scent of fake, sugary, watermelons fills the air. I pull over. I put the car in park.

"What's up?," she asks. "Is everything OK?" Her gums are pink and clean. She sits in my passenger seat looking at me expectantly.

I look at her and say nothing.

I can tell her nervousness is escalating to fear. In her eyes is that look of being in too deep. I take her apart again. She is nobody. Her son is nobody. She just left my house, just left my home, just left my husband. I say to her, "You're a homewrecker."

She looks around. Her eyes make complete circles. She looks back and forth, then points in the direction from which we came. And stutters, "You mean—he—you—yall. Wait, wait, hold on, sister. I didn't know until I got there that he was—I mean is—married. I found out when I saw an empty pill bottle with his last name on it and a woman's first name. I asked him

about it, and when he didn't answer me, I knew. So I got my stuff and left. Matter' fact I left so fast, I left my socks in there."

I give her a cruel look. "You left your socks there?"

She almost slaps herself for divulging the detail. "Listen. I'm just trying to tell you I got out of there pronto when I found out. I don't fool around with nobody's husband. It's not who I am."

I just keep looking at her, not moving my face or my eyes. "Well, it's who you were tonight."

She gets upset. "Please understand me, had I known he was yours, or anybody else's husband, I wouldn't have even looked at him twice, forget about coming to see him."

"Stop lying. I know your type. You want a man, and it don't matter if he's married, or if his wife loves him—you just want what you want."

She reaches for the door. Pulls and jerks the handle. It doesn't open. She looks at the lock and notices it is pushed down inside the door's panel. She cannot get out.

She turns to me, "What is this? Why can't I get out?"

I say to her, "That's what you wanted, you wanted in, right?"

Her eyes are big and wet. Her hands are shaking. "Miss, let me out of this car, please." I don't move.

"Ma'am I did not know he was married. When I found out I left."

I take off my gloves, massage the calluses on my hand, and put'em back on.

"Wait, wait, hold up," she says pleading. "Lady, I'm not your problem. He is the one who's been lying. He's the one who is bringing people into yall's home. It's not me. He's your problem." She starts crying hysterically, "I didn't do anything!"



He lied to me! He lied to me!"

I grab her neck. She grabs at my hand. Her attempt at control fires a heat in my chest and makes me angry. I elbow her in the nose. Her cartilage makes a quick and squeaky popping sound. I snatch the keys from the ignition and throw them underneath my seat. She tries to go for them. I punch her.

Her eye absorbs the impact. Her fake lashes stick to my glove. She looks dizzy. She doesn't scream. She puts her hands over her face and moans mournfully.

The skin on her hands is brown, smooth, blemish-free, supple, even, and sparkling with glitter lotion. Her clear, hairless, shapely face is swelling. I punch her again. She is blank, motionless. I grab my tote, pull the flashlight out and throw the bag in the back seat. The bag's snap hits, bounces, and rings against my hammer. She jumps. I punch her again, grab my keys, and get out the car.

I pull her out of the car with little effort (she is small). I push her into the darkest part of the alley.

She coughs and slurs, "Why? Why? Sister, why? What you gon' do, kill me? He brought me to yo' house. What about my son? Oh, my son. That man is your problem. Your man is your problem. Why you taking this out on me?"

I respond by beating her. The hot, moist smell of her blood makes time move fast. Faster than my mind, but not my hands. I watch as I strike her again and again with the flashlight. She refuses to die. Again, I hit her. Bam, bam! She is still breathing. The center of her face looks extra pulpy and soft, so I pummel the handle of my flashlight into that soft spot and dig in. The blood spurts twice. Her breathing stops. I hit her once more then let her fall down. She falls near a jagged piece of glass. I slit both her wrists with it, for no other reason than to be further submerged in the moment.

I drag her over to the dumpster and throw her in. My

body tightens and all my energy and hatred is released in one long, intense breath.

I get my case of water and clothes out the car and return to the dumpster. I open the bottles and rinse myself off, put my uniform on, throw my bloody clothes in with her body, light it all up, and walk away. I get back in the car, clean up the spots, and ride.

I walk into the house. He is upstairs. He yells, "Wife, you're a little late tonight. I thought you'd be here forty-five minutes ago?"

I hear the washing machine filling with water. Febreze is in the air. "Yeah, husband, I know. I got a little distracted."

"Oh. Hmm...you've been mighty distracted lately. This'll be the fourth time you've come home late claiming distraction. You're not cheating on me are you, Dear?" he says smiling while running down the stairs—sheets, pillowcases, and towels in his hands.

"No, baby. You know me—turn Madame Butterfly on and I'm a million miles away." I say as I listen to him load the washer.

He comes back. The steam from the water has his white T-shirt sticking to him. He walks over to me, puts his mouth right up against mine then says, "I missed you, Mrs. Alex Eastwood-Draper," and embraces me. His lips are plush and sticky. His breath and mouth are sweet. He exhales, and me and *my* man share a misty kiss in our very own field of ripe, delicious watermelons.

# Train Tunnels

Ashton Temby

graffiti colors the  
in-betweens of England.

white, blue, red bubbled letters

leave signatures

of the youth

who have passed through

announcing Paul's presence

and Amelia's love for John.

## Variations

*Kathy Decker*

Is a leaf afraid of falling?

Does it spend each day clinging to its branch  
hoping for calm winds?

Does the thought of October consume it  
to the point that September seems ominous?

What is it a leaf fears most?

Turning orange and then brown after working for so long at  
becoming a vibrant green?

Shattering into dozens of fractured pieces after being stepped  
on by a child who only wants to hear it crunch under his feet?

Getting soggy and cemented to a sidewalk after a cold rain on a  
blustery November day?

Or is it just the descent to the ground  
that frightens it the most?

Does it fear the loss of control it will experience?

Or maybe that's what it looks forward to.

Maybe the fall is the best part.

Gently soaring - knowing its state is changing  
is perhaps the greatest part of being a leaf.

Want

*Rashelle McNair*

Got a full blood  
Golden Retriever this week  
instead of socks.

It chases its tail  
like a girl in love.

# Friendship

Scott May

I've never lived in a coastal town  
Nor have I spent many hours on a beach  
But I can imagine how one might mourn  
A ship lingering near the horizon  
Once it is no more

# Golden Land

Jacob Swanson

Only a fool can truly believe and see  
In a world where nothing's as it seems.  
Falling deeper within the realm of fantasy.  
Wake up from this golden land of dreams.

# *Last Night I Dreamt*

*Ashton Temby*

you were sober,  
lounging on my couch  
in the faded jeans you wear for weeks,  
flipping to page 108  
of *The Sun Also Rises*.

you had a blue burned CD  
of the next set of Beatles songs  
that were sure to inspire me

as you cracked your left ankle  
and your broken knuckle

I felt my lips curve into smile

you looked at me with long eyelashes  
and swooped up bangs

This morning  
your bangs cover  
your sagging eye



no books.

no music.

just an empty bottle

# *Noodle Nonsense*

*Gabrielle Keigher*

Early August, we open up on a small farm producing a major crop in northern Montana. The air is clear, the sun is out, and it has thus far been a good season. Harvest time is nearing but the crop is not quite ready yet. A slight breeze allows wheat to sway, releasing small grains into the atmosphere to be forever lost in the wind.

"Weeee!" It seems this noise comes from a piece of wheat that appears to be about half the size of many of the other strands of wheat in the large field. "Ma, when I'm all grown I wanna be a noodle."

"Shut your bran, son," a wheat husk not far from the smaller one, but definitely larger, said in response. "You have no control over what our creator does with us."

"But why not, Mama?" a whine from the wheat husk; merely a whisper in the wind, "I've heard such great things about noodles. Why, they can wiggle around all day without a car in the world. Mama, I can't wiggle," an attempt reveals only a greater amount of swaying from the small husk. "I imagine it'd be a wondrous thing though. I've heard they also get to take warm bubble baths, while all I get is cold showers. I could hang around other noodles and just have a good ol' noodle time!" If listened to closely, the excitement building up in this little guy could be heard. Nobody was listening close though; all that could hear was his mother and a few wheat husks around them that weren't engaged in their own conversations.

A groan from his mother with no desire to shoot down her child's dreams, "That sounds great, Wheaton, a beautiful dream. It's nice to fantasize, but not all of our dreams can come true. We are wheat, honey, and our destiny is predetermined.

We have no control over where we end up or what we end up as.

Our creator puts us here when the frost has left the ground and our beds are moist. As the days get warmer, we grow. As you have noticed, the days have not gotten warmer in awhile. In fact, soon enough temperatures will start to slowly drop. This means collection time is soon. When he feels the time is right, our creator will come with a large contraption to collect us all. You will never meet our creator face to face; we, unfortunately, don't receive that pleasure. Although, it is well known how he appears to us. He is a creature of similar complexion to us, but much broader in size. He is donned in dingy blue dress and dirt-colored things allow him to stomp on our earth freely. Dark whiskers cover his head and face, I'm sure they must tickle him or anyone he embraces -like the wind tickles your husk. Once we have all been collected, the creator will decide what to do with us and we have no matter in the choice." There was nothing more from little Wheaton after his mother's speech.

Days and weeks passed and the temperatures remained relatively the same; all the same, collection day was nearing. When it came, most husks were ready. The ones that were not had no choice, they were being collected whether they liked it or not. Little Wheaton enjoyed the process, not saying one word about his hopes of becoming a noodle. All the wheat he had been by was now shuffled in with all the other wheat from the farm.

After collected, the wheat was separated, cleaned, sold, and shipped off to different places. Wheaton felt as if he was being shuffled all over the place; never in his life had he been moved around so much. Even some of the strongest winds over his lifetime had never swayed him so much like he had moved after collection. Not long after this process, he was ground down into flour. Little, now even smaller, Wheaton did not quite understand this. This "flour" that he was now was

nothing like the flowers near his birthplace.

Much later the flour that Wheaton was turned into had eggs and water added to it. He went through a long process of stretching and going through machines to end up coming out as some hard long substance. He was put into plastic packaging with substances similar to him and a small silver package. The package was orange and white in color and had the label of "Ramen" on the outer side. Wheaton finally found his fate and if his face could be seen, it would be smiling.

After sitting on shelves for what seemed like longer than waiting for collection, Wheaton finally was able to experience a bubble bath. It was as wonderful as he had imagined. Put into a bowl and stirred with seasoning, Wheaton stared up at the creature ready to consume him. He was donned in dingy blue dress and whiskers covered his head and face. This reminded him much of his mother's description of their creator -the farmer.

"Look, Ma," a faint, inaudible whisper, "I'm a noodle."

## *Smallest Gesture*

*Scott May*

Sometimes the smallest gesture

Can heal wounds

As round as the Earth's orbit

Consuming years like a black hole

Sitting in the back yard

Dry and dangerous to the families' children

And because of that

When you find yourself

Sitting across the table from someone

Unwitting and unimaginative

Everything else seems to fall deeper and deeper,

Like the universe slowly disappearing

It becomes apparent at this moment

That there is little else to do

But sit and let time swallow up

So you can say

*I showed up to the family dinner every time and look what good it did*

At his funeral

# *Somebody's Hut In Mexico*

*Ginamarie Lobianco*

water dish

a rain patting song

A familiar bark for you to let in

With your choice of straw or bricks

A ring around the farm

the cement of a fetch-bone arm

sniffing the trail of a horse that never came

an awkward race

Indian names

must be like the traveling organ

the box they used to collect your voice in

another horseshoe promise broken

they rolled away on a cello's bargain

a spade

the loyalty of a dog which you got on a loan

a melody to fool the empty frame

after trying to turn a man into a home

# *Antarctica*

*Michael Payea*

There is nothing as sincere and absolute as the stretching wastelands that surrounded this place; an infinite and impenetrable white that reflected the sun's rays in blinding splinters of gold as it refused to yield its frozen state to the ensigns of that giant, fiery mass. I stood alone outside of our camp where canvas tents swung in the arctic breeze that unrelentingly buffeted any obstruction with the full wrath of the hemisphere. Daily we were reminded by those harsh and inhospitable forces that we were outsiders, intruders from foreign lands who should reconsider their stay in this most forsaken place. Daily we were told to go home, to leave in fear and humility at the sight of those silvery-white majesties, the frozen breath that escaped our lungs in ghastly plumes, and the bright, pale, lunar eye that watched through all those bitter nights in goddess-like grace.

## Antarctica.

"Adam?"

I turned at the familiar voice and saw Terrence Carrido, the expedition's chief maintenance officer, making his morning rounds.

"What are you doing out here alone?" he asked with a skeptical look on his face as his eyes ran me over. I looked back out to the wastes for a moment in silence and felt the sole source of warmth permeate into my hands from the bitter, black liquid I carried in a ceramic mug.

"Just wakin' up" I said turning back with a bit of a grin. He looked me over once more and then went back to whatever he was doing, satisfied I was still sane.

We'd lost a few already to the frozen tundra's corrupting stare and since then everyone was on lookout. It

started innocently enough, with some poor soul getting up in the middle of the night and sitting up in their beds, eyes widened and ears alert waiting for whatever had awoken them to stir in the silent night again. Sometimes they would actually get up and pace around the tent or stare off into the distance from the small entrance...waiting. It wasn't until Rick Cavalier that we started taking it seriously. He'd left his tent in nothing but his sleepware and begun walking in the dead of night, the cold biting all the way but at the same time...perhaps...leading him. Who knows why he did it or what he saw out there in those torrents of spinning and fluttering white. The next morning we recovered him a mile outside of camp; he now sleeps in a much smaller pine tent awaiting his final trip home.

Since then, anyone acting strange or unusual was immediately brought to the psychiatrist we'd brought in tow, Dr. Fredrick Lerringer. When there was finally someone to open up to about it, all sorts of stories began flooding in. Some said they'd heard voices, ghostly sounds that ushered them out into the cold night; others said they'd seen things, shadows that moved without an object to cast them or silhouettes that would suddenly get up and walk away from their owner, as if granted autonomy by the chilling winds. The rumors spread fast and soon the whole camp was alive with superstition and fear. Fear that we were not alone here, that those seemingly desolate, white plains were actually the home to some vindictive apparition whom we had offended by our presence.

"Mindless, pathetic and shameful...how can you sleep calling yourself men of a modern age?" Randolph Lexin III would reprimand if he ever heard such talk of ghosts and ghouls. No one ever questioned his lecture and often would feel a pang of shame, put in their place by a man of superior wits.

Later that week, me and two others found Randolph sitting cross-legged, arms folded, and nodding vigorously as he spoke in a language no one could understand to an audience no one could see... as to whether either existed, though, I feel is



a metaphysical argument. Since then no one has tried to rob this place of its supernatural stature, fearing its retributive wrath.

It had always been my grandfather's wish to see this place but it seemed the opportunity was destined to pass over him. Being the owner of a large fortune and many successful enterprises it seemed like he should have had all the chance in the world to come here but, by things I still didn't fully understand, he had become grounded. The glory and triumph he had acquired in this world had not released him as it should but instead, somehow, become invisible chains whose nagging bracers were a constant reminder that he could never leave the civilized world. It was because of this inability that, since the birth of his first child, he was determined to instill his wish onto one of them and thus live it vicariously. Why the task had passed over my father, my uncles, and my brothers to land upon me is a question I often wondered.

"It would seem that black sheep are born with hooves more suited for travel..." my co-worker Douglas had said as we positioned a large drill above the ice. "Perhaps an evolutionary trait..."

I hadn't said anything then but only remembered in stark vividness the crowded mass of my family seeing me off for this voyage. As I boarded the plane I couldn't help but wonder in macabre humor if their hands were more pushing then waving, their faces more relieved then mourning. As we flew toward over the white-capped waves of the ancient ocean and the first sight of this isolated continent I now call home came into view, the weight of my lot suddenly drew over me in full force. There was nothing out here...nothing except me.

My job on the expedition was simple enough in theory but the cold added an unsightly angle of difficulty, sometimes making even the task of getting dressed worthy of a breath. Move this here, turn this there, hold that steady, knock that over, find that, lose this...it was a routine of orders whose

meaning and intent I was rarely informed off.

I did so without a word of protest or anguish, part of my devoted attempt at trying to lose myself in the monotony of thoughtless motion. And so I was, like an automaton acting out the faculties of the living as an elaborate practical joke, for when the flesh was removed there was nothing there but gears and cogs and springs. But, as much as I tried to live out that role and watched as my co-workers often did successfully, for some reason the scientists and professors of the expedition refused to let me fall to such a state.

“Have you ever considered learning the science of Thermodynamics?” Dr. Mangerroot had propositioned me one day as I was busy clearing the snow off of one of his machines. “There’s something about the exchange and states of energy that just makes you feel as if everything in the world makes sense. I believe anyone in their right state of mind should take it up, at least as a hobby”

“And what if you’re not in your right state of mind?”

“Plenty of those already practicing, best leave any more openings to the sane”

In such a way, while only bits and pieces at a time, was the great genius and brilliance of those men imparted upon me in much the same way you might pass on a bit of common sense to a child. It was just as well, for to them I really only was a child, grown only in stature but still blind and ignorant to the myriad of happenings in the world around me.

“The universe is constantly moving toward disorder, entropy we call it. What seems strange though is that we never really see any net change if we look at the world around us; everything more or less stays the same. But the one change that passes over us, perhaps because of our unavoidable bias, is the most entropic thing of all and has been increasing since the day it was introduced.”

“What is that?” I had asked Dr. Mangerrot in terrific

apprehension as if I was about to see the unraveling of a great magic trick.

“Why...life of course. The most spontaneous and disordered process of all is life...and it is always growing”

At midday everyone at the camp would eat lunch in the same mess hall so that the cook would only have to serve once. The tradition that had come about by almost a natural force was for the group to diffuse into the workers and the thinkers, thus placing an invisible yet sound-permeable barrier between the two groups as we occasionally peered in curiosity at the other side, wondering what secrets in foreign tongues were being conversed. At least...that's how it should have been, but as I said I'd been given some special privilege by no volition of my own, and was now seated regularly with the enlightened side of the room while my co-workers eyed me suspiciously as an intellectual defector.

“Yes but while that's all right in theory it's only a matter of exactly how fast the universe is expanding” a man who I'd not met spoke in a seer's tone while the others of the table nodded in a general agreement.

“Expanding?” I ventured and the eyes of table became focused on me as they concurred to give me another lecture.

“Yes, of course” the same man spoke.

“But...what exactly is it expanding into?” There was a hushed silence as all heads appeared to downturn as if an obscene taboo had just been casually uttered. A man next to me with a bright white beard leaned in close, his lips near my ear.

“That is something...that we don't talk about”

When the day came to a close and night was falling on the camp, I would slip out alone and stare upwards into that great expanse above me, ornamented with so many distant, dying fires whose coursing energy we were only now feeling. There

is an insignificance that you can't help but feel in doing such, looking out onto the infinity that spreads out above in such a breadth of emptiness that by some phenomenon it echoes out an undeniable pulse of strength and vitality; as if somewhere out there the heart of eternity is beating in steadied tempo, a coursing wave that spans the universe, and yours is but an infinitesimal addition to the sound.

When I see such things I think I understand why my grandfather wanted so badly to come here, to see nothingness. There's a freedom here, a deep releasing feeling that can only be had amidst the wastes and empty spaces that surround us.

In my hometown there was a famous painter who would always make two copies of any work he made, but instead of simply reprinting them, drew each from scratch with the same painstaking effort. Then, when he would hold an exhibition, he would place them both on either end of a stage and before all attending set one of them to flame. When asked why he did this he answered only thus:

"To truly appreciate something's beauty you must see how fragile it really is, see how easy it can be destroyed, set to ash, never to be remade again"

It seemed odd but he was right for after the first performance every single exhibition was packed as the crowd waited anxiously to see the brilliant masterpiece succumb to the flames. Because there was something so very remarkable about seeing such a mindless act of destruction, to see all the order and structure removed from existence right before their eyes.

Out here I have done the same. I burnt my old home, my old ways, my old life...I let it all turn to soot and dust and disappear in the fleeting wind. But as I watched it go I couldn't help feeling liberated, that in seeing all I'd worked for and all I'd built lost in the cleansing wind of nothingness I was reborn...I was free. Is that all that my grandfather had wanted? To be rid of all those burdens and guilt and social contracts he'd built up over the years?

I wonder it now as I stare into the abyssal night, the darkness taken hold of everything in sight even going so far as to claim the hand that rests in front of my face. I can't help but think of that apparition we all feared, that in the pits of black there is some archaic force staring back at me now, his eyes hidden in the shroud but still piercing in their presence. And out of some strange humor he deems to test a mortal such as me with the single question we all wonder:

"What is the meaning of life?" he sets forth on bitter winds and falling snow.

And as I stare back, a grin replacing the empty expression on my face, I answer in confidence...

"Easy...the meaning of life is of course..." I pause for effect.

"simply to live..."

# *Some Things You Just Can't Tap Dance Around*

*Clint Walker*

I tried for about a year to write a poem alluding to Christine Chubbuck.

She was a reporter, and one of the only people to ever commit suicide on live television.

I also tried for hours to find footage of her passing. But her family owns the master tape.

I *did* locate nearly ten minutes of *They Eat Scum*, which will most likely never be on DVD either.

I also found interviews with people who knew her, and biographical details that I'm sure some women would find sexist: She was a virgin well into her 20s. Her ovaries did not function

and she harbored an unrequited love for the sportscaster. She made him a cake for his birthday

only to find out, when she brought it in to the studio, that he was already dating a co-worker.

The image of Christine in her kitchen the night before, stirring ingredients in a metal bowl

with a big spoon, and with flecks of flour across her cheeks, or

even buying the ingredients

after work that evening, is too much to bear. I wonder if she managed to at least give it to him.

Or did she take it home and stare at it, sitting there on her counter, untouched and uneaten.

I've done things like that. I drove all over town just to buy a work acquaintance

one of those Easy Buttons for her desk, because I could see how stressed she was.

She left it behind on the day she screamed at the boss and walked out forever.

I think that's why I would have called my poem, "The Cake Christine Made."

*James K. Johnson*  
*Creative Writing*  
*Award Winners*

This Spring, two writers were chosen for the James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award, named in honor of the retired dean of the College of Arts and Humanities. Jennifer Hinds and John Klyczek were both honored with a cash prize and the opportunity to read their works aloud for their readers.

One the following pages are their winning entries, preceded by a short biography about each author.



*John Klyczek:*

"I am a twenty-six-year-old graduate assistant in the English Department, currently teaching ENG 1001. My MA concentration is creative writing: fiction. My hometown is South Chicago Heights, IL. In 2008, I wrote, recorded, and produced—both instrumentally and lyrically—my first self-titled hip-hop album as John the Baptist: [www.myspace.com/534270666](http://www.myspace.com/534270666). As a Christian, I have concentrated my spirituality on social activism, coordinating the Robinson Correctional Center Prison Ministry as an undergraduate as well as teaching English in Port-de-Paix, Haiti and building free housing for an impoverished family in Juarez, Mexico. I hold certification in *tae kwon do*, *muay thai*, *kali*, and *hap ki do*, and have competed in mixed martial arts, *muay thai*, and full-contact kickboxing. Upon earning my degree, I plan to teach English at a community college."

# God is Gracious

John Klyczek

... and I'm a piece of shit.

I stole my mother's oxycontin.

While she wheezed and gurgled on her deathbed.

john (Oxford English Dictionary):

d. (With lower-case initial.) A lavatory, water-closet. *slang*  
(chiefly U.S.).

John Innes (compost), one of a group of composts . . .

She would snuggle up against her stuffed animals as I would tuck her in. After that, I'd shut her bedroom door only halfway because she was claustrophobic. Throughout her childhood, her brother used to lock her in a closet for hours on end where he would do things to her at intervals until their mother returned from work—she never knew her father. Hence, she would hyperventilate, panic attack whenever she found herself in an enclosed area. If she woke up before me—which she almost always did—there would be nothing I could do to not startle her. Whether I quietly called out, “Mom,” whether I softly tapped the razorblade scars on her arm, whether I gently rapped on the threshold to the kitchen where she spent her mornings washing dishes or looking over her “to-do” list; she would scream, half-hushed with a gasp as if a predator had leapt out from a dark shadow. There was no peace in her life. There was no calm. No warmth or security. Only her Pooh Bear, her Tigger, and the rest of the cuddlies from the Hundred Acre Woods—I've always been a fuck up. Maybe that's why she spent most of her life trying to make other people happy. To comfort them, make life easier. Maybe that's why she was the only one who would respond to the letters her brother sent from prison as he awaited .

lethal injection for chopping up his wife and discarding her garbage-bagged remains in a swamp.

Once she was asleep, I would sneak off to her medicine cabinet. I would place the tiny, round beige-orange pill on my tongue and suck on the 40mg dose of oxycontin, removing the cream-colored time-release coating. After spitting it into a Kleenex, wiping off the remnants of the time-release coating, I'd set the now-white narcotic in between two tablespoons. Carefully, I'd press them together, rubbing them side to side, crushing the tablet between the concave side of one spoon and the convex side of the other, slowly, so that it wouldn't shatter and scatter, ejected from the sides of the spoons onto the cigarette-burn-riddled carpet where it would be lost amongst the singed fibers. Then I'd empty the large granules onto a large shard from a broken mirror averting my eyes from my reflection, after which I'd remove my driver's license from my wallet and use its edge to dice the clumped-up grains into a fine powder. Sweeping the pile of ground painkiller into a thin line about half the width of a pencil, I'd open my wallet again, exchanging my license for a dollar bill, which I'd roll tightly into a straw. Still avoiding my mirror-image, I would nose dive toward the neatly filed prescription drug with the rolled-up dollar-straw inserted in my left nostril, my right nostril pressed shut with my right index finger.

*The world becomes quiet, dark, innocuous, as if I am submerged in warm waters, flowing beneath reality.*

I'd spark a Basic or a Maverick Special or some

other generic-brand cigarette like incense in dedication to a medicinal sacrament, to Holy Communion, to Transcendence. Placing the blue, black, and grey ashtray on the dusty, tattered cushion next to me, I would sit back heavy, sinking into the old, grey sofa, the cherry from my square resting safely on the ashtray.

*Lost Time Lapsed.*

Something stirs my altered consciousness from a foggy slumber that snuck up on me in a blank moment, in a hazy quilt. My body would jerk as if startled yet my thoughts remained sedated, my heartbeat mute, almost static. I'd glance at my cigarette, now a long cylinder of ash half-connected to the yellow-orange butt balanced delicately between my index and middle fingers. I'd put the butt in the ashtray and proceed to languidly scratch the little tickly itches crawling all over my body: neck, chest, armpits, scalp, crotch, behind the knees, small of the back. I'd scratch. Therapeutically. Like so many massages. I'd scratch, pleasure; relief, release. I'd scratch, light another square, inhale the thick grey-black smoke, exhale, rest the hot end in the ashtray, drift away, dark, silent; a place between sleep and unconsciousness.

*Lost Time Lapsed.*

My clouded senses reemerge again; my cigarette consumed, extinguished. I'd scratch.

Repeat repeat.

*Lost Time Lapsed.*

Repeat repeat repeat.

**(Oxford English Dictionary):**

**John-a-nods**, one who is nodding, or not quite awake;

“You who dwell in the dust,  
wake up”—Isaiah 26:19

God is love.

Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will  
have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this  
world we are like him.

There is no fear in love.

But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with  
punishment.

The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because He first loved us.

If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar.

For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen,  
cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

And He has given us this commandment:

**Whoever loves God must love his brother—1 John 4:16-21**

I was a missionary in Haiti.

I taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade English at a small non-denominational Chris-  
tian school.

The building was more mortar than stone. The mortar was  
more sand than lime. The sand was more gravel than grains.

The Universe is There.

The Door is There.

Knock and It shall be opened.

To a select few.

There was a mural at the Entrance. Chalked stainglass stone:  
Little Africans in diaspora running home into the arms of two  
generic white missionaries: the freckle-faced kid on the old Fa-  
rina box and maybe a mousketeerette .

"Christ will Come Again," they said one day, and again.

The Little Ones beam. Bright smiles. Jaundiced eyes yellow  
like clouds on the tropical sun.

There is Grace. There is Faith.

"Are you excited for summer vacation?" I asked.

"No," they said. "We want to stay in school. We want to learn.  
We want to know. We want to be missionaries like you."

A ceramic statuette of Toussaint L'Ouverture stood somewhere  
behind me.

\* \* \*

**(Oxford English Dictionary):**

b. Also used as a representative proper name for a foot-  
man, butler, waiter, messenger, or the like, and in other ways

After class let out, I worked construction on an addition to the  
school.

I wheelbarrowed stones from a heap that was once a building,  
dumped them in a trench to be filled with cement; I ran with  
the wheelbarrow, shredded muscles pushing to labor as much as  
possible before dusk.

The Haitians took their time. How much do they have?

They laughed at my sweating in the sweltering Caribbean sun,  
my huffing puffing the thick humidity.

"You big," said Sydney grinning.  
Was I embarrassed or ashamed? Or something in between?

*Yeah, I eat four big ass fu* "Whas your name?" asked Sydney.

"John"

"Johne Cina," said Sydney smiling, flexing his lanky biceps beneath the same faded red t-shirt he wore everyday.

We mixed concrete together: me, Sydney, Etienne, and Robert (pronounced *Robare*).

We mixed it with a hose and shovels on the pavement that would be the floor of the addition; the Haitians mixed barefoot on the scalding concrete.

"Johne," said Robert.

He pulled an amulet forth from under the frayed collar of his faded blue t-shirt: an expressionless skull enclosed by variously colored beads.

"Voo'Doo," said Robert.

I feigned an animated terror.

Robert smiled.

"Is Good," he said.

He held it out to me, still around his neck; I touched it, and a speckle of cement splashed in my eye.

I blinked and staggered and blinked.

"Wasch your ice, Johne," said Robert bringing me the hose.

I tried to rinse my eyes myself, but I couldn't get the right angle; I handed the hose to Robert, and he tilted my head back, washing my eyes.

When I could see again, I showed Robert Mars tattooed on my right wrist, the Sun tattooed on my left wrist; I held them up to the open blue sky and said, "Voo'Doo: The Stars," pointing

everywhere above the horizon.

*cking meals a day*, I thought to myself.

\* \* \*

All the missionaries ate dinner together at the head pastor's house.

Jet black Haitian women in brightly colored headscarves prepared and served us feasts on the extended, gated patio; they cleaned up after us, cleared the plates covered in half-eaten foods.

The people in the street could smell, could taste the aromas. A UN jeep spat the dirt-rubble road into a gritty mist as it rolled through the street; the people in the street could smell, could taste the rock-smoke, the dirt.

Were their mouths watering across the street in the orphanage too?

I went there one day.

At the entrance was a stone-faced man slumped in a feeble wooden chair, hugging an old rifle.

Inside, the children trampled barefoot about a decrepit playground strewn with metal scrap, plastic, and glass shards; some teenagers kicked a deflated soccer ball in the corner.

A two-year-old tugged my generic red running shorts as if trying to scale me like a mountain or mount me like an elephant.

I scooped him up from under his armpits, my fingers lacing neatly between his protruding ribs as if they were factory-made handles; I seated him piggyback on my shoulders, his empty-bloated Buddha belly breathing shallow against my neck, growling.

We run, we Fly.

We make a landing, to refuel.



I took a drink from my plastic cantina.  
And every child in the foster home mobbed me; collectively,  
individually.

"Water! Water!" they shouted climbing over one another  
clawing at my thermos.

I relinquished the bottle to the first hand to touch it; the Little  
One attempted to drink while the Others pushed and pulled  
and reached and grabbed causing him to spill the water on his  
chin and his torn and holey t-shirt that read "Jesus Loves Me"  
written in bumpy globs of glittered fabric paint.

One of the teenagers intervened, took the water bottle from the  
frenzy of dehydrated adolescents, gave it back to me, gesturing  
that I put it back in my bag before a prepubescent riot ensued.

\* \* \*

I left the orphanage with teardrops blurring and burning my  
eyes.

I wanted to collect gallons of them like Living Water in  
whatever discarded jugs, cans, bottles, and jars I could scavenge  
from the litter-ridden beaches; I wanted to sob like A Well that  
never Runs Dry, to turn wine into water that quenches once for  
all Forever.

\* \* \*

On my way to the Church for evening group prayer, I came  
across an elderly woman with a severe case of rickets; she  
gestured a request for my thermos—I remember what Pastor  
Franck said the day I arrived at Sonlight Academy:

"They'll ask you for whatever they think they can get. Any  
chance they get. But don't give them any handouts, even if it's  
just some pocket change or something you were going to throw  
away. The Haitians think white people are all rich, and they  
expect that we all have money to just throw around. I'm sure  
you'll all want to give away everything you don't need, but we  
don't want to feed the idea that we're all here to just give

handouts. I mean, we don't want them to depend on us.”  
So I gave it to her, even though I knew Pastor Franck would  
throw a fucking shit fit.

*It's a fucking plastic bottle and an ounce of fucking water, I thought.*

\* \* \*

I was the first to return to the Church.

On the flat concrete roof, I sat lotus between exposed rebar  
reading *Getting Haiti Right this Time: The U.S. and the Coup.*

French: Jean

Jean Bertrand Aristide

The others arrived and spread themselves out across the roof  
reading Bible verses in their private little corners.

Families slept under the grey-yellow moon on neighboring  
roofs to escape the trapped condensed oven-like heat inside  
their houses; they lay covered head to toe under white sheets to  
shield themselves from mosquitoes.

After group prayer, we all sang contemporary praise songs; I was  
silent, looking at the moon.

“This is our last night in Haiti,” said Elise, her pale white skin  
glowing with the moon. “And . . . I guess I wonder . . . I just . .  
. I mean what can we do to help them once we're back home?”

Quiet.

There is something in my head.

Then one girl proclaimed, “We can Pray.” And the silence was  
broken.

Yes, I thought. *We can Pray. We can go home and Pray. And we  
can eat supersize McDonald's and drink aspartame-sweetened zero-  
calorie soda and watch Jersey Shore and play video games and pierce  
our eyebrows and talk shit on Facebook and buy new shoes and wave  
a star-spangled fucking banner.*

*And yes, I thought, the Haitians too can Pray. And Pray and Pray.  
And pray.*

Oxford English Dictionary:

a. A masculine Christian name, that of John the Baptist: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you of the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire"

—Matthew 3:1-2; 5-10

Oxford English Dictionary:

5. **St. John's**, in composition. **St. John's berry**, the barberry. **St. John's bread**, the fruit of the carob-tree (see CAROB 1); also the tree itself. **St. John's grass** = *St. John's-wort*. **St. John's seal**, the plant Solomon's Seal. **St. John's-wort**, the common English name for plants of the genus HYPERICUM.

What's the Good News? How do I produce Good Fruit  
Like photosynthesis? Am I the Light and the Truth?  
Am I the Faith that moves mountains that the builders refuse?  
Am I the son of Chun Tzu like Confucian sifus?  
They crucified me with a bourgie necktie like a noose;  
but I resurrect my dead body from the depths of the tomb,  
ideologically reborn like I re-entered the womb.  
Where is the salt to bless my festering wounds?

Oxford English Dictionary:

e. In full, *John Chinaman*. A Chinaman; the Chinese

collectively. *depreciatory*.

## Heaven-Heaven: (Ch'ien)



### *The Creative*

*Heaven repeats itself. Continuous action of higher powers as well as of the superior being.*

*Follow the chosen path with calm unfaltering steps. Act thus in harmony with the powerful, creative primeval principle, and success is assured.*

TV off. Stereo off. Computer off. The university apartment is 10x7 square feet, not including the bathroom and bedroom, the latter of which is barely large enough for a twin-sized bed.

Brown rice, lentils, chickpeas. Plain. I rinse them with warm water. Hushed rush of the faucet. It is quiet. I place the beans in my pressure cooker. Whispered whistle of seeping steam. Quiet.

Cheap Aristocrat gin.

### Oxford English Dictionary:

*John Collins, a Collins (see COLLINS2) made with a base of gin or whisky:*

I fill a little Japanese teacup; about a double-shot, maybe triple. It is warm, cozy, from my stomach to my fingers, toes, face. I chase it with a swig of cheap Livingston Cellars rhine wine straight from the bottle; I swish it before I swallow. It is dry; bittersweet. This is my Tea Ceremony. I am quiet.

The phone rings: it's a telemarketer. I initiate a conversation about Ben Bernanke, Goldman Sachs, The Federal

Reserve, the banker bailout, The World Bank, The IMF. She hangs up the phone. Quiet.

I turn the TV on: *Anderson 360 covers the Haiti earthquake relief effort.*

*Via skipe, Anderson Cooper interviews a Dr. Moreau-looking old white man who has just arrived safely back home in Florida after being rescued from the rubble of the Hotel Montana.*

I thought they said all the airports were shut down.

I cut onions; tears. I dice ginger, taste a sliver: bleach-sweet. Turmeric, salt, coriander, black pepper, cumin, ground chili pepper, cardamom.

*A jet-black shirtless Haitian man is waving a UN-issued nutrition bar, warning people not to eat them.*

*"It is a bad ting," he shouts.*

*The camera angle switches suddenly.*

*A reporter from Anderson's crew holds a foodbar from too far away for me to read the wrapper and explains that the man is confused between the packaged-on date and the expiration date.*

I chop jalapenos and habaneras. I lick the juices from the knife; clean. Delayed searing, lingering; runny nose. Tears.

*Hundreds of injured survivors lay incapacitated in the dust under a red medical tent like a war zone.*

*"We've just received word that UN troops apparently commandeered the only three doctors on site here. The Peace Keepers would not say where they were taking them or why."*

I turn the TV off, throw back another gulp of gin behind my tongue, chase it with chugs of pungent, fizzy wine. Quiet.

I soak my hands in a 2-gallon Ball canning jar of my homemade *dit dat jow*. I square myself with my *muk jong* and drop into a *yi chi kim jang ma*. I extend my *wu sao* touching the dummy's right arm with a *jam sao*. I *lop sao, wan jern* into Yip Man's 116-move set: *bong sao; tan sao, wan jern; gong sao; gong sao; tan sao, wan jern; gong sao; hun sao, jik jern.*

Exhale \_\_\_\_\_

The dark-cherry-stained wood cl-cluenk cl-clunks like a bamboo windchime. Musical. Like Earth and Wind; a small fire crackling. Cl-cluenk cl-clunk rhythmical like an indigenous percussion section in Time with my Breathe, in harmony with my Mind. Universal. Free.

Inhale—————

Lost Time Lapsed.

My palms are hotpink, my calcium-bulbous knuckles aching, my forearms bruised, one of my wrist bones chipped hot. I dunk my hands in the *dit dat jaw* again.

Gin. Wine. Ex-  
hale\_\_\_\_\_

The pressure cooker simmers down. I dump in the spices and vegetables, stir it altogether. Quiet.

**Oxford English Dictionary:**

**John-a-dreams**, a dreamy fellow; one occupied in idle meditation;

\* \* \*

It is Late. It is Silent, Empty. The initial bubbly-warm high from the alcohol has diminuendoed into a stagnant, cloudy depression that slumps my shoulders leaden like a glcoma.

It is Dark. Only the spectral glow of computer porn like a full moon.

**Oxford English Dictionary:**

f. A ponce; the client of a prostitute. *slang* (orig. U.S.).

The gallery categories are always twisted: BDSM, Bukkake, Pissing, Puking. I click on the Brunettes category, but even the few simple guy-girl clips I can find are extreme, abusive, violent: hair pulling, choking, slapping, spanking, pounding; one guy steps on the girl's face while he fucks her doggystyle.

I click on the Lesbians category and watch a blonde and an Asian make out in their panties; I jerk off into a paper towel and throw my seed in the garbage.

**Oxford English Dictionary:**

g. Abbrev. of *John Thomas (b)*: . . . (e.g. . . . *john* 'penis'..).

. . . **John-hold-my-staff**

My body sinks heavy into itself; my spirit folds into itself like origami inside a *matryoshka* nesting doll.

There is an eight-year-old sandwich bag filled with crumbling Hershey's kisses sitting on my scratched, wooden coffee table next to a glass-framed "Footprints" poem printed on the backdrop of a red sand beach. The bag is tied shut with a blue ribbon laced through a card that reads "Class of 2002." I turn the card over:

To: John

. . . "A ROSE ONLY BECOMES BEAUTIFUL AND BLESSES OTHERS WHEN IT OPENS UP & BLOOMS. ITS GREATEST TRAGEDY IS TO STAY IN A TIGHT CLOSED BUD NEVER FULFILLING ITS FULL POTENTIAL!"

I'LL MISS YOU

*Melissa*

Our first kiss: my first kiss.

**Oxford English Dictionary:**

2. A plant: old name for a variety of pink; usually SWEET JOHN, q.v. *Obs.*

There is a New Balance shoebox on the bottom shelf of my coffee table. Inside is an old ice-blue cardboard folder containing my *Life: The Book of Life*. The last letter she wrote me is there, still inside the scratch-&-sniff, lavender-

scented aromatherapy envelope in which she handed it to me, Brown Eyes welled up with tear drops sparkling star-bright like the setting sun against The Water:

*"Some people come into our lives & quickly go. Some stay for a while and leave footprints on our hearts & we are never, ever the same."*

*John, I know a lot has happened, and not all of it has been good. I just want you to know some things. First of all, I want you to know how much you have affected my life. I have learned so much about life from you, and I have learned to appreciate it more because of you. I have the deepest, deepest, respect for you and your beliefs. I also have a lot of faith in you, and know you can succeed in anything. Please realize this and live up to all you're capable of.*

*Thanks you for everything you've done, and know I appreciate it all.*

*I'm sorry for everything I've done to hurt you, that was never my intention.*

*Please don't change for anyone, ever. You're a great person just the way you are.*

*Last but certainly not least, I'm so proud of you for quitting all the drugs & other harmful things. I never told you what*



*I thought of it because I wanted you to change for yourself, and not me. I hope you know there are many other things you can do to escape.*

*Well, sadly, it's time to say goodbye, but I will always remember & miss you.*

*Love always,*

*Good luck!*

*Melissa*

I scratch the envelope.

Inhale-----

*Heaven-Water: (Hsu)*



*Waiting*

*The rising force of heaven is facing danger in the form of rain clouds.*

*Gather strength calmly and wait for fate to be fulfilled. Do not worry and take everything as it comes. If one does not deceive oneself, the path is clearly visible. Strengthen body and spirit. Perseverance*



## Jennifer Híndes

Jennifer is a Junior at Eastern Illinois University. She once, while still being a small child, thought having sex with a man was when a penis and a boob touched. After growing up and realizing the struggles of living in a hyper-sexualized world that hides female bodily endeavors, she found her voice. Okay, so part of her still thinks that poetry is the elite party with tea and white dresses to which she showed up to in jeans a t-shirt with a black cup of coffee, but she's trying.

# *To My Ever Growing Chest*

*(Which did not cost me 30,000*

*dollars)*

*Jennifer Hindes*

I do not appreciate your saggy,  
pointing downward,  
defeated,  
selves.

I do not welcome the stares,  
the jokes,  
the giggles,  
the boob taps,  
nor the way you wobble when I walk.  
In fact, I hate the way I have to hold your  
voluptuous handfuls of breast  
down the stairs.

I do not like the stigma that goes with  
Double Ds, Big Knockers, Jugs,  
or lady melons.

I detest the freckle just to the left of your right nipple.

I look forward to your aching,  
swelling,  
plumping,  
pregnant pumping moments.

I'm absolutely giddy for my children  
to create helmets,  
slingshots,  
and space masks,  
all out of my bras.

Indeed chest I look forward to a life together,  
and hope you stay in a place close to my heart.

# *God's Scapegoat*

*Jennifer Hindes*

Mr. I make everything perfect, didn't.

My urethra is too short,  
burning while I pee.

My yellow stream sprinkled with  
pink little pieces of my bladder,  
easily infected, flared, irritated,  
uncomfortable.

My vagina is too small.

My children will grow to sizes too large  
to fit my cozy space.

My hips are set wide, but not wide enough  
to stop the infamous first birth scream.  
Splitting open in repent.

My clitoris is set too far back.

Under the hood and glorious.

My G spot is hidden like  
grandma's house  
over the river, through the woods  
to the left and  
right there.

Eve oh Eve. It is not your fault  
for all the flaws of females.

Do not believe that Man when he points to you.

The apple just gave one hell of an excuse.

## Rape (Noun, Verb)

*Jennifer Hinderes*

Sauntering in with a smile, offering you a beer,  
to which you gracefully -  
declined.

Did he talk to your friends  
and introduce you to his?  
Did your friends whisper,  
Where have you been hiding him?

Did your friends see the way he kindly tucked the  
sweat stricken hair behind your ear.  
Leaning in whispering,  
I could use a girl like you.

Your friends see his triceps, his abs  
they giggle and say, Girl Get You Some.

On your walk to his place you think

When was the last time you did,  
Get you Some.



## *Featured Artist:*

*Ashton Temby*

*The Vehicle* is a journal for the fine arts, and while the majority of our pieces consist of either prose or poetry writings, artwork is also very important to our journal. For this issue, we have decided to focus on one artist in particular: Ashton Temby, a senior English major who enjoys taking photographs in her free time.

On the following pages is a brief interview with Ashton, followed by several samples of her photography.

**The Vehicle:** How long have you been interested in photography? Do you remember when and why you first began this hobby?

**Ashton:** I started taking photos when I was in high school working on the newspaper staff. I began shooting action shots at sport events and realized it was something I really enjoyed. Ever since then I've been experimenting.

**The Vehicle:** What types of subjects do you most like to photograph? Do you normally work with objects of nature, such as these?

**Ashton:** I enjoy working with nature because it provides many options for me. I can take something average looking and create something beautiful with different lighting and angles, and when I'm photographing something that is already beautiful, I can capture it in a new way that maybe hasn't been seen before. You can do this with any subject, but nothing in nature is static, so there is always something unique in the photo.

**The Vehicle:** Can you tell us a little about these photos? Where were they taken, and what was the inspiration behind them?

**Ashton:** All of these photos were taken in England. The country has so much to offer, so I didn't have to look for anything to photograph. Things simply jumped out at me. I would see something I thought would look good in a frame and I tried to pull out specific details so I could remember what England was really like.

## *The Road*

*Ashton Temby*



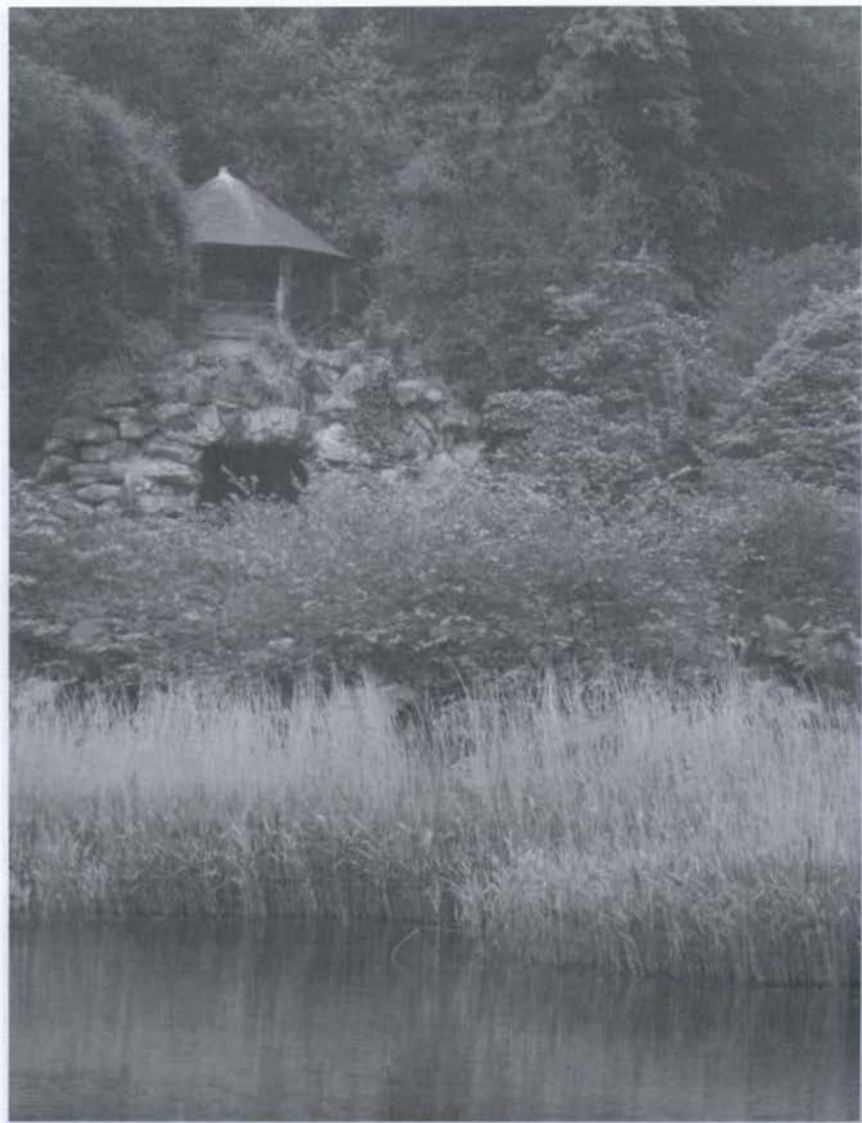
*Graphic Gardens*

*Ashton Temby*



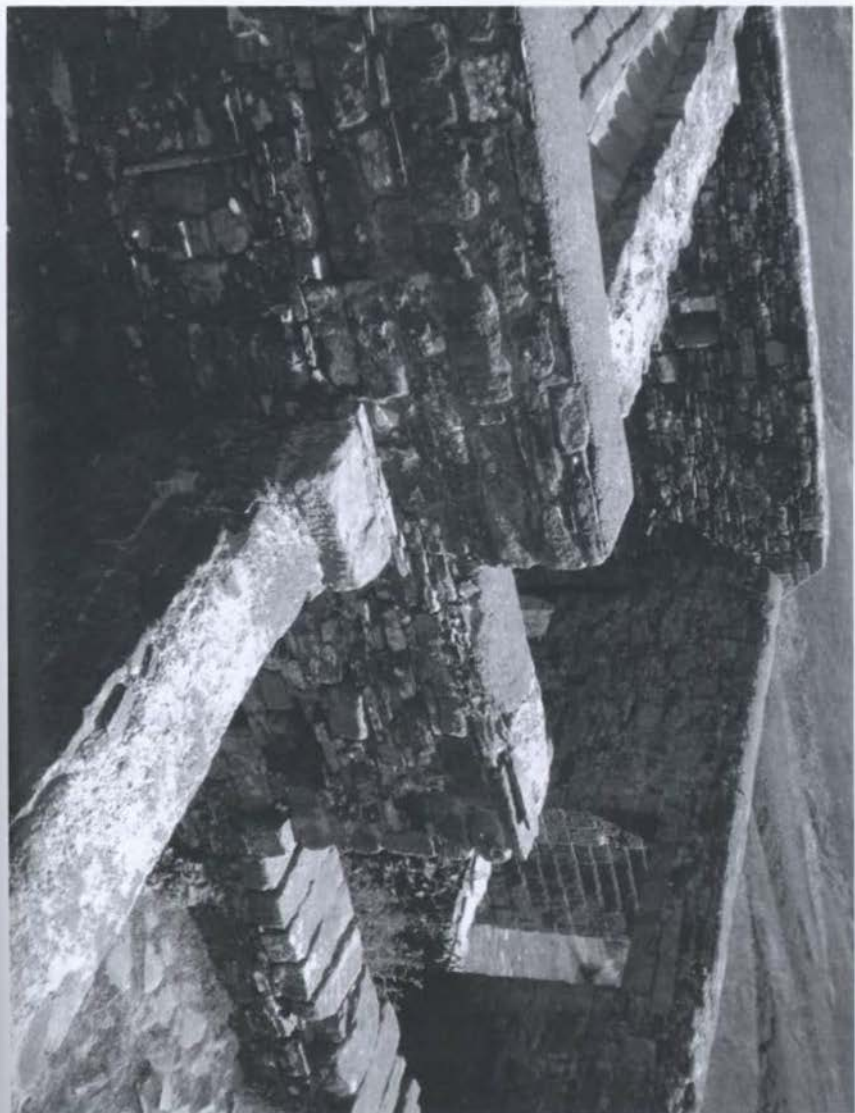
*Hide Away*

*Ashton Temby*



# Wuthering Heights

Ashton Temby



## Editor's Pick:

*The Shooter* by Patrick Hall

Each semester, the editors of *The Vehicle* publish writings in the hopes of creating a journal that is comprised of diverse and quality pieces. One piece from this issue that stands out as particularly captivating and well-written is Patrick Hall's prose piece *The Shooter*.

On the following pages is a brief interview with Patrick regarding his writing of the story, followed by the piece itself.

**The Vehicle:** Your bio that you submitted for Vehicle says that you've been writing "children's stories, song lyrics, and poems" for years now, and last year you won Louise Murray Award for your story. It is very unusual for you to write a piece such as "The Shooter" that is fiction for an older audience?

**Pat:** I began consistently writing poems and song lyrics in 1991 following my first wife's death. They were all directed towards an adult audience and dealt with grief, loss, and a plethora of other such joyful subjects. Fortunately, my life has improved since then.

**The Vehicle:** What was your inspiration to write such a piece?

**Pat:** I have always heard that one should write what one knows. Although I haven't been in the same situation, the story definitely contains biographical elements.

**The Vehicle:** Can you tell me about how your past experiences have gone into the writing of this story?

**Pat:** I was in law enforcement for over twenty years and knew officers who were involved in shootings. I saw how it affected them and tried to impart that to the reader. I also wanted to show that police officers are not coldhearted killers, or bullies with a badge. The main character, Mike, cares about the people he protects and the incident tears him apart.

**The Vehicle:** Buddhism plays a small yet significant role in the story. Do you have any personal connections to Buddhism?

**Pat:** I have always been fascinated by Asian culture. I feel that there is a balance in Asian philosophy, an affinity with the natural cycle of life. I hope that there's a similar balance in the



story. I included the poem in an attempt to show Mike's awakening and capitulation to the transience, and balance, of life.

Each volume of the *AVANTAGE* is created by the author, creating a journal that is comprised of diverse and quality pieces. One piece from this issue is particularly captivating and well-written. It is titled "The Shooter".

The *Vehicle* can tell me about how you put together. On the following pages is a brief interview with the author, Mike, about the piece.

The *Vehicle* has been a small yet significant role in the story. Do you have any personal connections to Buddhism? Part I have never been inspired by Asian culture. I feel that there is a balance in Asian philosophy, an affinity with the natural cycle of life. I hope that there's a similar balance in the

# *The Shooter*

*Patrick Hall*

## 1. The Incident

The big V-twin engine of the Harley-Davidson rumbled like thunder as Mike Reynolds maneuvered it through the twists and turns, gently shifting his weight to lean the bike through the corners. The day was perfect for riding, warm with a slight breeze that kept Mike from baking inside his leather jacket and caressed his scalp through his long brown hair. The sun streamed down through the trees to dapple the roadway with shadows. The ride up to Yosemite had been beautiful. There had been little traffic; being a Wednesday most people were at their jobs. Mike was free to enjoy the wind in his hair, the sun on his face and the countryside flowing by without having to worry about inconsiderate or unwary drivers. Except for the dull, nagging, headache at the base of his skull, everything was perfect. He had always longed to see the legendary redwoods of Yosemite and his heart thrilled with the prospect as he had entered the park. He rolled down the road at the leisurely speed limit set by the park service, reflecting on how he had gotten there.

Nine months earlier Mike had been on another ride. Enjoying the day from the back of his Harley was one of the passions of his life. It allowed him to clear his mind and the overpowering tension from his job as a police officer seemed to dissipate with the miles. He had backed his 1964 Harley-Davidson Panhead into the curb of the Stop and Save and gone in for a Coke. In his black dew rag, leather jacket and jeans he looked like any other biker out for a ride on a beautiful sunny Saturday.

The line at the Stop and Save was longer than usual and Mike

it, sobbing piteously. Someone shoved a cup into his hand and Mike gulped it down, his hands shaking and chest heaving.

"It wasn't supposed to happen, Rod. I just reacted. Someone started shooting and I did what we're trained to do." Mike stared into space, still seeing the cashier's head explode. "Three rounds downrange, just like we're taught and then the perp dropped and he was just . . . there. The cashier was just there."

"I know, Mike" Rod said solicitously. He looked up as an officer carefully marked the position of the shopkeeper's gun on the floor beside the body. The perpetrator's B.B. gun lay on the floor in front of the counter. *Idiot*, Rod thought, shaking his head. *He brought a toy to a gunfight.*

"Officer Reynolds?" a man in a dark grey suit looked disdainfully down on the two officers. Mike looked up into the hard black lenses that covered the man's eyes.

"Are you Internal Affairs?" Mike asked, dejectedly, amazed that the Suit had gotten there so fast.

"Yeah. What happened here?" the Suit asked.

"Someone got shot." Rod declared, standing up and moving between Mike and the IA suit.

"There are procedures to follow, officer. I suggest you cooperate."

"Damn straight there are procedures! For instance, he has the right to representation before answering your questions." Rod shouted at the man. "He's off-duty and this isn't the time or place for this shit." Hearing the raised voices, the uniformed officers present stopped what they were doing and turned to face Rod and the IA Suit. The room instantly assumed the atmosphere of a freezer. The Suit felt the change and reconsidered his position.

"Very well." the Suit said and, leaning over Rod's

shoulder, spoke to Mike. "Officer Reynolds, you are hereby notified that you are on paid suspension pending investigation of this incident. You have the right to consult an attorney and to have an attorney present during questioning. You are advised that anything you say can and may be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand these rights, Officer Reynolds?"

Mike Reynolds grunted an acknowledgement.

"You will be notified in writing of the date of the official hearing. Please surrender your weapon." The IA man held out his hand for the Colt Officer's model Mike carried off-duty.

Mike drew the Colt from its holster, ejected the magazine and the round in the chamber and handed all three to the Suit. Feeling naked and vulnerable, he dropped his head into his hands as his entire body appeared to melt into the chair.

The IA man watched Mike for a few seconds, then, taking Rod aside, he said, "I'd get your friend to a shrink, ASAP." Undaunted by the look of resentment in Rod Packer's eyes, he continued. "It's standard department policy and, for the record, it helps. I know; it happened to me six years ago."

Surprised, Rod relaxed and nodded his head. "Yeah, okay. Anyone you can recommend?"

"Robertson, over on Delaware Avenue is good." The IA man offered. "Get him someone good. I know Mike's reputation; he's a good officer and worth it."

Rod noticed that the IA man smiled reassuringly before walking away. Rod walked back and patted Mike's shoulder. "C'mon, bro', let's get you out of here." He lifted Mike to his feet and walked him out the door to Rod's squad car. He helped Mike in and fastened the seatbelt for him. Mike was deep in shock and unresponsive, staring vacantly at the floor. Rod hustled over to one of the ambulances and asked an EMT to take a look at Mike. After asking him a couple of questions

and receiving no reply, the EMT suggested getting Mike to the ER. He told Rod that Mike was in shock and asked if Rod wanted them to transport. Rod said he'd do it. He thanked the man before getting behind the wheel of the squad car. On the way to the hospital Mike didn't move. He stared out through the windshield with his jaw slack and didn't utter a sound.

## 2. The Hearing

Two months later Mike was seated beside his attorney waiting to hear the verdict. The IA man had given his evidence, as had the Coroner and the few witnesses the Attorney General had been able to turn up. Mike hadn't paid much attention to the hearing. Whatever punishment they decided on was fine with him. He was firmly convinced that he deserved what he got. His attorney had presented their arguments well, but Mike didn't care. He had already convicted and sentenced himself. He believed he had taken the life of an innocent and, therefore, deserved the maximum penalty they could give.

Mike sat numbly at the defendant's table, thinking about the last few weeks. Every time he closed his eyes to sleep, he saw the shopkeeper's head detonate in a crimson mist. He and his wife, Sara, had stopped talking and he knew it was his fault. She had tried to be compassionate, but that only made him feel worse. She didn't realize that Mike didn't want compassion and understanding, he wanted to be punished; he wanted to pay for his crime. He stopped bathing, refused everyone's help, and drank constantly. After several weeks, Sara had had enough and, after a tremendous argument, she finally moved in with her mother. Mike moved Jim Beam in and spent most of his time with him. If it hadn't been for Rod Packer literally dragging him out of bed, he would never have gotten up to face this mandatory hearing.

"Officer Reynolds?"

Mike looked around and saw that everyone else in the room was standing. With immense effort, Mike got unsteadily

to his feet, also.

"Officer Reynolds, after hearing the evidence presented, it is our decision that the shooting that occurred at the Stop and Save on April twelfth of this year was justifiable. It is lamentable that the shopkeeper lost his life, but this court finds the death an unfortunate accident that the officer could not have foreseen. Officer Reynolds is therefore absolved of any culpability in this matter and may return to duty forthwith. This court is hereby adjourned."

Mike's attorney slapped him on the shoulder, said, "Congratulations. Good luck." He then fled from the room as if it were on fire. Rod Packer walked up to Mike, who hadn't moved, and shook his hand. Noticing Mike's vacant expression, Rod put an arm around his friend and led him from the room. Outside the building, Rod asked Mike where he wanted to go.

"Any bars open around here?" Mike asked.

"Come on, Mike, haven't you had enough to drink this week?" Rod asked sardonically.

"I'm off the hook, man. I want to celebrate. Don't you think I should celebrate?"

"Why don't we get something to eat first? Doesn't that sound better, Mike? When was the last time you ate?" Rod asked in a conciliatory tone, taking Mike's arm.

"Let me go, damn it!" Mike jerked his arm out of Rod's grasp. "I want to party and I'm going to party!" Mike stepped backwards and nearly fell down the steps of the courthouse before catching the handrail.

"Shit! Why'd you go and push me for? I didn't do anything to you." He screamed at Rod.

"Damn it, Mike! You did it to yourself. Why not go with me and get something to eat before you kill yourself?" Rod was instantly sorry he'd said it. Mike's face went from blissfully drunk to murderous in a split second.

"What the fuck do you care?" Mike shouted. "Maybe I should just die and make everything right. An eye for an eye, I shot him now I die." Mike smiled drunkenly at the accidental rhyme. "You didn't never shoot no one so you don't know. I did, now I'm fucked. Lousy bastard!"

Mike shook his fist at the sky. "LOUSY BASTARD! Why'd he have to die?" Mike dropped to his knees and mimicked performing CPR. "Come on, you bastard, don't you die on me. You won't die on me, asshole, wake up. WAKE UP!" Mike collapsed on the steps, his head lolling from side to side as he continued to mumble exhortations.

Several hours later, Mike woke up on a gurney in the ER. His vomit-covered clothes were in a clear plastic bag on the floor in a corner of the room. His palms were scuffed; he had bruises on his knees and a knot on his forehead. His throat was sore and his mouth tasted like an army of elephants had marched through it. His head fell back into the softness of the pillows.

"Good Morning, Mr. Reynolds. How are we feeling today?" the man in the white lab coat asked a little too exuberantly. Mike saw that the man's name tag said "Dr. T. D. Swanson."

"Hi, Doc. What the hell happened?"

"You were brought in with a B.A.C. over 0.35. If it hadn't been for your buddy you'd probably be dead now. I'm required to ask; were you trying to kill yourself? Do you feel suicidal now?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Good. We spent too much time and energy trying to keep you alive." Dr. Swanson's smile lit up the room.

"What'd you do to me?" Mike groaned.

"A wonderfully nasty little thing called activated charcoal. We cleaned out your stomach and got some IV fluids into

you. How long have you been drinking like that? Dr. Swanson's brows knotted and his eyes grew hard.

"Couple o' weeks," Mike answered deceptively.

"Were you drinking beer or the hard stuff?" Dr. Swanson asked, concerned.

"Both," Mike replied.

"I see. Mr. Reynolds, you have the beginning of a serious problem. We want to make certain you get the help you need before it's too late. You don't have any ulcers yet, but if you keep drinking like that you soon will. I'd lay off the booze if I were you." The doctor's suggestion was a command.

"Yeah," Mike replied unenthusiastically.

"Do it. If you don't, you'll kill yourself," Dr. Swanson warned. "I can recommend a good psychiatrist if you want help."

Mike assumed a stony visage, suddenly hating this doctor and his helpful advice.

"By the way, you have a hell of a punch. One of our orderlies has a bruised jaw thanks to you. It took five of us to hold you down before we got the restraints on."

"Sorry about that. How long do I have to stay here?" Mike asked anxiously.

"I think we'll keep you here overnight and, if all goes well, we'll send you home tomorrow. Now, try to get some rest and we'll move you to a room upstairs." Dr. Swanson flashed his iridescent smile again and headed out the door.

The next afternoon Rod Packer was standing at the foot of the hospital bed waiting when Mike opened his eyes.

"Let's go, troop. Get your clothes on. Ass in Seat in two minutes." Rod's unsuccessful impersonation of a drill instructor did not bring the expected smile. "Come on, man, get your



ass out of bed and let's get going."

Mike rolled lazily out of bed and slid into the clean clothes Rod had dropped on the rumped white sheets.

"Where're we going?"

"I talked to the Chief and he's put you back on the schedule starting a week from Monday. You're on vacation until then. He's..."

"What day is it, now?" Mike grumbled.

"It's Wednesday. The Chief said he can't wait to get you back on the street. He says this town's gone to shit since you've been off." Rod smiled broadly, encouraging Mike to do the same. All Mike did was grunt.

"They finally got the new bikes in, they're Kawasaki's, not Harley's, but I think you'll like them." Rod casually added,

"They're faster than the old bikes. They set one aside for you, want you to break it in right."

Mike pulled his boots on, grunted again, and said, "Let's go."

### 3. Homecoming

One week later, on Monday, Mike hit the streets on his new department Kawasaki. Rod was right, it was faster than his old Harley, but the seat wasn't as comfortable, yet. He ran some radar along the interstate, answered a few minor calls, took some reports and went home at the end of the day. It was the first time he had been home since his hearing. He had been staying at Rod's house since he got out of the hospital. "No sense sitting in an empty house when we have plenty of room," Rod told him. Mike knew Rod was just trying to keep an eye on him.

Mike hadn't had a drink in over a week and tonight he really wanted one. He entered the house and walked from the mud room into the kitchen and opened the 'fridge. It was as

barren as Death Valley. Someone, probably Rod's wife, Karen, had apparently cleaned the thing out. There wasn't even any mold or grease stains in it. Mike went into the living room. It was immaculate, sterile, as was the bathroom, the downstairs bedroom and the dining room. Everything, from the dishes in the cupboard to the towels in the bathroom, had been arranged with mathematical precision. Mike's wife, Sara, had always managed to keep the house clean, but this bordered on obsession. Mike returned to the living room and noticed that the light on the answering machine was flashing. He hit the button and heard Rod's voice, "Hope you don't mind, but the wife insisted." Mike heard Karen protest laughingly in the background. "She thought it would be the Christian thing to do. Besides, it looked like a hog wallow. See you soon."

Mike walked out of the sterilized house that no longer seemed like his home, drove to the liquor store for some beer, checked into a hotel off highway 80, ordered some pizza and watched TV until he passed out.

When Mike made it in to work the next day he had a monstrous headache, a bad case of cottonmouth, and bloodshot eyes that broadcast the whole story. Some of the guys took one look, shook their heads and laughed. Rod and the Chief knew it was more serious than just a hangover. Rod cornered Mike before he could get to his bike and hit the streets.

"Have a rough night?" he asked. "Karen and I tried to call you, but no one answered. Were you out all night?"

Mike didn't want to face Rod and answer his questions. His head was killing him and he just wanted to get on the streets

"Look," Rod began, "You know we love having you at the house. It's really no trouble if you want to stay a few more weeks, until you get yourself together. You've been through a lot and it would be good for you."

It was the "it would be good for you" that clinched it.

Mike was tired of everyone telling him what would be good for him so he turned on Rod, looked him straight in the eye and said, "No." as coldly and emphatically as he could. Then he threw a leg over his bike, fired it up and hit the streets.

Around noon the Chief called Mike into his office and asked if Mike needed anything. When Mike told him no, the Chief said, "Damn it, Mike, you've been through a rough time. You're a damned good officer and I don't want to lose you.

Why don't you go see a shrink, or try AA. You need to get your head and your ass wired together or the world's going to take a giant dump on you." Mike listened abstractedly. "Look, Mike, we've known each other since the academy and we've been through some hairy shit together. I don't want to see a friend get steamrolled like this if I can stop it. Get some professional help. Go see Robertson on Delaware Avenue, that's an order. Now get the hell out of my office." Mike walked out and closed the door, cursing the "nosey old bastard" and refusing to admit he had a problem.

Mike did his job, and kept doing his job, for the next few weeks, but it wasn't the same. More than once he found himself ignoring traffic violations he would have eagerly stopped previously. He also avoided convenience stores like the plague. Every night he headed back to the hotel, avoiding his house, avoiding his wife, avoiding his memories, trying to avoid what he perceived as his guilt.

After a few weeks he was nearly broke. He had been reduced to relying on the small amount in his savings. His hotel and liquor bills had sucked up most of his pay. He neglected the bills that came to his home; he hadn't even checked his mailbox. Sara and his creditors had begun to leave phone messages, but he wasn't there to hear them. Eventually, the answering machine ran out of memory. The only time he had gone back to the house was to get his Panhead and tools. Rod had ridden the bike from the Stop and Save to Mike's house after the incident and parked

it in the garage.

The '64 Harley was Mike's pride and joy and he treated it accordingly. He had rebuilt the engine so often he could do it in his sleep. When he was in the well-broken-in saddle with the wind in his hair and his feet on the highway pegs, he was free. It was as close to a religious experience as he had ever had. When he was on his bike with the open road ahead of him he didn't need anything else, no beer, no whiskey, nothing. One day, after the usual bullshit at work, Mike got on his Harley and headed towards the hotel on I-80, but this time he just kept going. The sound of his exhaust echoed off the sides of the semi-trailers he passed and anesthetized his mind to what he had left behind. He rolled on the throttle and the asphalt disappeared rapidly behind him.

The pavement rolled by in an unending stream. Mike cruised through the night, the cool air and rumble of the engine numbing his mind just as the thin leather seat numbed his ass. After crossing Missouri in the dark, Mike stopped at a cheap hotel in Kansas and slept all day. He woke up at dusk starving and walked to a Denny's where he ate a Grand Slam Breakfast, paying with his Visa. He couldn't find a liquor store so he went back to the hotel and slept until nine the next morning when a nightmare about the Stop and Save jolted him awake. He crawled into the shower, scrubbed of the road grit, dressed in the same dirty clothes, checked out of the hotel, jumped on his bike and hit the road, heading west. By the time he hit Gorham, Kansas he was out of gas, nearly out of money, and suffering the DTs. He parked in front of the first bar he could find and spent a few forgotten hours with his old friend, Jim Beam.

#### 4. Resurrection

Mike felt the heat of the sun on his face and rolled over in an attempt to escape it. His knee connected hard with a dumpster sending a resounding "bong" down the alley.

“Well, it’s about suppertime, so, I thought I’d get you out of this crap long enough to clean up and eat. You do a good job.

I knew you were a natural bull-shitter when I saw you.” Again, Don’s smile lit up his face but, this time, Mike couldn’t help but laugh. He knew he’d found a true friend. They walked up to the house and washed up for supper.

## 5. Correspondence

*Letter to Rodney Packer*

*August 27<sup>th</sup>*

*Gorham, Kansas*

*Rod,*

*I know it’s been awhile since you heard from me. Hope everything is well with you. I had to get the hell out of there. Every place I went had too many bad memories, so I got on my bike and headed west. By the time I got here I was out of beer and money so I stopped. I scrounged around town for a week trying to beg enough money to move on, but no luck. Every time I got a few coins together I hit the bars and you can guess the rest.*

*One morning I was sleeping it off in an alley and this old farmer walks up to me. He says, “Son, you look like shit. How do you feel?” I complimented him on his powers of observation and said I felt like shit, too. He laughed and said, “How would you like a job?” So I asked him what kind of job? He says, “Shoveling bullshit. You look like an expert on bullshit.” What could I say? I needed some money so I told him I’d do it. As I was bent over picking myself up, he kicked me square in the ass. I must have flown 10 feet and hit a brick wall. I spun around on the old guy ready to tear him a new one when he looks me in the eye and says, “No one that works for me drinks. You want the job, you stay sober. Got it? Now, wash up and let’s go get some breakfast.” I was mad as hell, but hungry, too, so I let him buy me breakfast. Over steak and eggs he started telling me his life story. Turns out he’s a ‘Nam vet who had a lot of trouble when he came back, PTSD and the like, so now he helps out the local drunks and*

homeless by putting them to work on his farm. It's a huge place that his dad left him.

He works us sunup to sundown but feeds us well and we get paid for it, too. He has two rules: no drinking, no drugs. If he catches us in the bars or doping we're fired or arrested. It was tough at first, but I'm starting to get clean again and I like the work. I'm so tired at the end of the day that I can't keep my eyes open. The nightmares come back sometimes, but it's getting better.

I left my car at the hotel. If it's still there, pick it up for me and sell it. You can send the money to the address on the envelope. It's "lights out" so I'll stop here. Take care and say "Hi" to the rest of the guys.

Mike

Letter to Rodney Packer

October 10<sup>b</sup>

Gorham, Kansas

Rod,

Sorry it's been so long since I wrote, but I've been really busy here. I got the money from the car, thanks. I used it to get my bike out of pawn; did I tell you I had to pawn my bike? That was at my low point, before Don came along and offered me this job.

The farm job has been going well, but I'm getting itchy feet again. Don has been great; he really helped me get my head and ass wired together. The work has been good for me, too. I've been working with the horses here and really getting my head flushed out. You have to pay attention to what you're doing around here or things can go south quickly. One of the new guys was dicking around the other day and got caught in an auger. It nearly killed him, but we pulled him out. Anyway, I've saved some money and next week I'm hitting the road. Don says he understands, but told me I have a place to stay anytime I'm in the area. He and his wife are great people; I'm going to miss them.

*I'll write back as soon as I can. Meanwhile, watch your back and say "Hello" to everyone on the department.*

*Mike*

*Letter to Rodney Packer*

*October 23<sup>rd</sup>*

*Bovina, TX*

*Rod,*

*Thought I'd head south rather than west because of the snow in the Rockies. I always wanted to see Texas anyway and ran out of gas in Bovina. Main Street is pretty barren, some of the shops are boarded up, but the people here are friendly. This time of year the daytime temperature can hit 70 degrees, but it gets damned cold at night. I like the open spaces; it helps me clear my head. I'm working part-time at a grain company to get some cash for the next leg of my travels. I'm thinking of heading to Santa Fe but haven't got the money yet.*

*Working in the city you don't see or appreciate the beauty of the natural world. This is such a beautiful country; it's tragic that so few people get to experience it. Here on the High Plains you can see for miles and it changes your perspective; you really get a sense of where you fit in the world. Don turned me on to Basho and some of the other Japanese poets when I was staying with them, something he picked up when he was overseas. I've been trying to see the natural beauty and impermanence of this world the way they did. Some nights I just ride out into the countryside, away from the lights, and look up at the stars. It's so peaceful and the sky is so huge it makes you feel insignificant. It also makes me realize how unimportant the things we get stressed out about are. One day we'll all be gone but the stars will continue to shine in that great black void. It won't matter that I'm not here to see it.*

*Hope all is well with you. Say "Hi" to everyone. If you see my wife, tell her I'm sorry for the way things turned out. She can keep or sell the house, whichever she wants.*

*Mike*

*Letter to Rodney Packer*

*November 12<sup>th</sup>*

*Fort Sumner, NM*

*Rod,*

*Broke down here in Fort Sumner, the place where Billy the Kid was shot by Pat Garret. A local saw me working on my bike on the side of the road and gave me a ride into town. He dropped me off at a rundown garage and gave me his number. He said he had an RV I could sleep in while I worked on my bike. It really surprises me how friendly and helpful people are west of the Mississippi. Maybe they're that way east of the Mississippi, too, but I never got the chance to find out. By the way, thanks for everything you and Karen tried to do for me. Hope you can forgive me for being so thick.*

*The weather here is nice; temps are in the 50's and 60's, but cold at night. I should be here a couple of days waiting for parts then I'm heading to Barstow. I'll write more later.*

*Mike*

*Letter to Rodney Packer*

*November 22*

*Fort Sumner, NM*

*Rod,*

*Happy Thanksgiving! Hope you're gnawing on a turkey leg and watching the game. I'm still here in Fort Sumner. Bill, the guy that picked me up when I broke down on the side of the road, invited me to his parent's house for turkey and dressing. This place is full of great people. His folks treated me just like I was family and it made me miss you guys. What a dick I was.*

*Word got around town that I could handle a wrench and everyone started asking me to work on their stuff. Now I have a lot of business and no time to get into trouble. I'm working out of that old garage I wrote you about. I wonder what they're going to do when I*



*move on.*

*You'll be glad to know that I'm still on the wagon. Not a drop since I left Kansas. I feel happier than I've ever been. I still have the occasional nightmare, but don't blame myself anymore. I'm sorry for the man and his family, but I know I did all I could to save him.*

*Say "hello" to all the guys and tell Sara I signed the divorce papers and mailed them back. She can have it all, with my love. I don't need it anymore.*

*Mike*

*Letter to Rodney Packer*

*April 25<sup>th</sup>*

*Gallup, NM*

*Rod,*

*Hope you had a nice Christmas. Sorry, it's been so long but I was embarrassed to write. I fucked up, man.*

*New Year's Eve I went out drinking with Bill. It had been so long since I'd had a drink I thought I could handle it. Bill got pretty tight and, when some drunk at the bar made a comment about his wife, Bill started knocking the shit out of him. Then the guy's biker friends came in and jumped on Bill. One guy pulled a knife and I split his melon with a pool cue. He's hooked up to a respirator now. I ended up doing 90 days in the local jail with his buddies. I'd worked on some of their bikes, so everything was cool. They told me if they had known it was me they would have told the guy, a proby, to shut the hell up. Bill spent a few days in the hospital but he's okay. After I was released I decided it was time to go, so I'm heading up through Vegas to California. I'll write you when I get there.*

*Take care of yourself and say "hi" to everyone.*

*Mike*

Letter to Rodney Packer

May 19<sup>th</sup>

Fresno, CA

Rod,

*I finally made it to California. I came up through Vegas, then over to Bakersfield and now I'm in Fresno. The bike is running great and tomorrow I'm going to head to Yosemite. It's certainly been a "long strange trip," to quote the Dead. I've finally found my center. I've been to the mountains and seen the ocean and know now that, in the vast span of time and space, I have no significance and that's okay. We live our lives and face our tribulations and, in the end, we end up being changed more by the world than we change anything in the world.*

*Sorry for getting so philosophical, there. I'll be heading back to start my life over after I hit Yosemite. I have to see those huge Redwoods before I come home.*

## 6. Last Call

As Mike came around a bend in the road he saw it, a magnificent redwood whose branches appeared to reach hundreds of feet into the cloudless blue sky. He pulled to the side of the road, killed the engine and leaned the bike onto its well-worn, chromed kickstand. Getting off the bike he stretched elaborately before approaching the base of the tree on foot. Without the noise of the motorcycle to screen them, the sounds of the forest consumed Mike and he reveled in them. Birds filled the air with song and the wildflowers infused it with heavenly scents.

*Except for this damned headache, Mike thought, I could be standing in heaven.* He walked leisurely around the base of the tree, marveling at its girth and texture, an act that took him several minutes. Then he sat down heavily, leaned against the trunk, and closed his eyes in an attempt to rid himself of the increasing pain at the base of his skull.

"Rodney Packer?" the voice on the phone was apprehensive.

"Yes, this is he. Who's this?" the caller's anxiety was infectious.

"This is Robert Aldridge, Mr. Packer. I'm a ranger with the National Park Service. Do you know a Michael Reynolds?" Ranger Aldridge asked.

"Yes. Is he all right?" Alarm bells were ringing in Rod's head. In his mind there were more red flags flying than on a May Day parade.

"Well, no, Mr. Packer. We found him sitting beneath a redwood tree here in Yosemite. The coroner says he had a subarachnoid hemorrhage, a brain aneurysm. His Harley was parked beside the road. It appears he just got off the bike, walked to the tree, sat down and expired. All he had on him was his driver's license, ten dollars, a business card with your name on it, and a slip of paper."

"A slip of paper," Rod said, shocked by the news. "Was anything written on it?"

"Yeah, that's what's so curious about the whole thing. Was he a Buddhist or something, Mr. Packer?"

"Mike a Buddhist? Hell, no. Why?"

"Well, the paper says: *April wind at dawn, White blossoms fill the air, cold dust settles.* My wife, who's Japanese, suggested that it might be a Buddhist death poem. Does that make any sense to you, Mr. Packer? Mr. Packer? Mr. Packer, are you there?"

The telephone receiver hung unattended from its cord. Rod Packer had collapsed into the chair beside the telephone stand, his head in his hands, shamelessly venting the sorrow that had been building inside him since the Stop and Save incident. Mike was gone. He had found peace at last. The dust from the Stop and Save had finally settled.

## Chapbook 2010:

*The Book of Broken Things* by

Kim Hunter-Perkins

Kim Hunter-Perkins, winner of the “Best Overall” category for her poem, “Fat Girl Thongs” in last year's Vehicle awards, has had her own chapbook published this semester.

On the following pages are two of Kim's poems, “Her Funny Little Sermons” and “Notes From the Other Woman”, which were chosen for publication in this issue of *The Vehicle*. To read more of Kim's writings, check out her chapbook, *The Book of Broken Things*.

# *Her Funny Little Sermons*

*Kim Hunter-Perkins*

she offers words,  
fortune cookie papers  
unfurling and,  
for a moment,  
she is  
not older,  
not grayer,  
not hovering  
on the edge of  
extinction

until  
someone giggles  
and she is  
indelible  
no more

# Notes from the Other Woman; Beginning

Kim Hunter-Perkins

He was cooking a pot of mushrooms  
for a weak tea  
which made him stingy.  
Or stupid.

There are so many firsts;  
this man,  
the one that ate Drano at three,  
whose lip curled into his face  
like a radioactive flower,  
whose wife sat with me  
knowing, not wanting  
to know how much  
he was noticing.

This man,  
was the first.

Other people's husbands, wives  
seem to notice

entirely  
altogether  
too  
often.

Me.

If they were to make a movie from a poem  
surely I would be made into  
a debauchery of fungus  
and unattractive men.

The truth turns differently.

That time, I ran.

That time.

## *About the Contributors*

**Aaron White:** "I am a senior English student who loves reading, writing, and watching films. Besides my wonderful fiancée Tiffany, my two favorite people in the world are Akira Kurosawa and Chuck Palahniuk. I have a dog named Gatsby and a cat named Spartacus. I dislike ignorant people that think a crosswalk will stop me from hitting them. Seriously, EIU students...I'm in a vehicle. Wise up."

**Jamie Van Allen:** Jamie received her Bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2008, and she is currently working towards her Master's degree in English/Literary Studies at Eastern Illinois University. She may or may not be writing a book of poetry entitled "Disappointment" about disappointment.

**Megan Marie Olson:** "I grew up in a ridiculously small town where there was more corn than people. I have been writing since I was 5 or 6 years old. I am constantly revising my creations and battling with writer's block. I hope to finish my Bachelor's degree and maybe someday make a big impact on a person with my writing. I think touching someone else's life is the sign of true success for any poet or author."

**Kathy Decker:** Kathy Decker is an English teacher at Champaign Central High School, currently working on her MA degree in English.

**David Jackson:** "I love to write. I write poetry, prose, and lyrics. I also play guitar and am in two musical acts back home."



**Heather Gerrish:** Heather is a second-year English major with plans to teach middle or secondary school grammar and composition. She has a minor in Spanish, which she nearly completed by spending a semester abroad in San Jose, Costa Rica, where she wrote her Vehicle submission. She likes Jones Soda, Facebook, and creeping on those who pass by her window, as well as spending quality time with Walter, her pet chinchilla.

**Katelyn Pfaff:** "I strongly believe that in order to be happy, you have to accept the fact that at times you will be unhappy. As long as you accept this, happiness comes naturally. And happiness, along with patience, makes the world go round."

**Nikki Reichert:** "I'm a sophomore in the English program, and writing stories or poems about what is on my mind helps me clear my thoughts and concentrate. I hope you enjoy reading what I love to write!"

**Michael Payea:** "I live in a house."

**Darrin Gordon:** "I'm an English major. I consider myself a free thinker. I think being stubborn is a waste of intelligence. Living should be the only purpose in life."

**Ginamarie Lobianco:** Ginamarie is a graduate student who operates little dipper ink.

**Rashelle McNair:** Rashelle is a first-year graduate student. She owns a hedgehog and likes to write in her sparse spare time.

**Clint Walker:** "I am currently a graduate assistant and am

working on my thesis in English/Creative Writing here at Eastern.”

**Kim Hunter-Perkins:** Kim is a graduate student in English who someday may or may not again be gainfully employed.

**Solomohn Ennis:** Solomohn is the publisher of Black Freighter Productions, and a Family and Consumer Sciences grad student at EIU. Her love of literature and human behavior led her toward the field of FCS, because of FCS’s primary purpose—the family. Sol’s goals are to study, support, and improve the lives of people, their relationships, and their environments. Upon graduation, Solomohn will pursue her Ph.D. in social work with an emphasis on bibliotherapy, sexual abusers, the sexually abused, and sexual trauma. Solomohn’s professional plans include becoming a bibliotherapist and expanding BFP’s therapeutic titles.

**Scott May:** Scott May is an N.P.R. addict. He believes Facebook is parallel social interaction not at all different from parallel play in children. He was bullied by books in his adolescence and is still precautious of them.

**Jacob Swanson:** “I’m a sophomore Philosophy/Psychology major and a Creative Writing/Pre-Law Studies minor. I enjoy playing Mario, writing creatively, running, and causing headaches.”

**Gabrielle Keigher:** “Elle for short, I’m a freshman majoring in elementary education with a concentration in math. I hope to declare a minor in creative writing later on. Drawn from the weeds, I’m a child of the moon. I victim of the dark, I’ve grown accustomed to the creatures in the night. I’ve married my mother’s sins and willingly adopted my father’s disease. I avoid

foul language and engage in risky behavior. Forever a kid at heart, I'm finding my way to mediocre fame."

**Ashton Temby:** Ashton is a senior who hopes to graduate in the spring. She aspires to become an editor for a book publisher and wants to creatively write on the side.

**Patrick Hall:** Patrick Hall has been writing children's stories, song lyrics, and poems for several years. AN English major and Sigma Tau Delta member at EIU, Patrick won the Louise Murray Award for Children's Literature in the Spring of 2010 for excerpts from his unpublished work "Kai Lai and the Dragon Prince".

## *About the Editors*

**Lisa Myers:** Lisa wishes to live a simple life of God, books, hope, and laughter. She absolutely adores being an English major and all that it entails, because to her there are few things better than reading and writing all the time. She's spent her whole life living less than 60 miles from Chicago, but she can definitely appreciate the beauty of downstate Illinois, as well. She is very pleased with this edition of *The Vehicle*, and hopes that you are, too!

**Ben Tillery:** Ben is a junior English major from a small place called Olney about an hour south of Charleston. He is currently working his way through St. Augustine's Confessions but prefers Kerouac and Twain. He would like to someday find literally any job involving his own writing and his own office. He misses the summer sun and the lake at night and everyone that tagged along.

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“Writing, I think, is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice: Once in reality, and once in that mirror which waits always before or behind.”

—*Catherine Drinker Bowen*