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Archives

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2009

Fall

The Vehicle

Fall 2009



Featuring

Lazarus by Dr. David Radavich
Dan Davis, 2009 Chapbook Author
James K. Johnson Award Winners

Credits

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Note From the Editor:

The word "Vehicle," in a literal sense, has many definitions. This semester, the definition that rings most true to me is, "A means of transmission or passage." As this is my last semester with Eastern Illinois University, this edition of *The Vehicle* is my farewell, my passage from one stage of life to another. Editing this edition of *The Vehicle* has been both challenging and rewarding, and can't I say that about my entire college experience? *The Vehicle* has become a symbol of transition. Over the last three years, I have watched this publication grow tremendously, and alongside, I have watched myself grow as well. I am thankful that I am able to end my time here by leaving one last mark on the literary publication.

This semester, I am not the only one to say goodbye. Dr. David Radavich is retiring after over 25 years of teaching at Eastern. David Radavich has had plays performed by theatre groups across the country, from Los Angeles' First Stage to New York's Love Creek Productions, and many theatre groups in between. Six of his plays have been produced Off-Off-Broadway. Radavich has also published poetry widely in journals and anthologies. He has acted in and directed a variety of plays and has given readings across North America as well as in Europe and the Middle East. Recipient of a number of poetry and drama prizes, Radavich was named an Illinois Distinguished Author in 1995 and the 2009 Distinguished Professor at Eastern Illinois University.

On the following page, you will find David Radavich's poem *Lazarus*. A big thanks to Dr. Radavich for all of his work here at Eastern and his continued support of both Sigma Tau Delta and *The Vehicle*. Thank you to everyone who has shown continued interest in our student literary journal. Again, it has been an honor to work on such a great publication. I look forward to see future editions of *The Vehicle*, as it is obvious the journal is on the rise.

—Lindsey Durbin, Editor-in-Chief, Fall 2009

LAZARUS

David Radavich

First he was alive and then dead and then	And here I am of chemotherapy the gift
alive again walking	walking out of my self
out of those corporeal bonds	hairless yet clothed
as if a butterfly had been summoned	and reconfigured as a fugitive specimen,
from its chrysalis by the teacher	blood new and scars swathed
exemplifying what can be done	into the night
with divinity	My own witness
Nothing short of a miracle made	in a time of doubting,
memorable in a text	miracle enough how life walks forward
chosen by councillors Who needed	as a teacher hand over hand
a warm witness	out beyond crowds

Alive

Rashelle McNair

In hollow squares
souls sphere out,
elongate.

Balloons
unable to realize
limits.

Train of Thoughts

Jeanette Saribekian

Chug-a-luggin' thoughts like smoke chunks out my ears:

The wheels are turning out some new ideas;
the exhaust of thoughts unspoken's got to go some-
where.

Up, up, they go -
melding with universal unconscious,
passing along from track to track,
until it reaches a braver mind --

A whistle sounds.

from its chestnuts
by the teacher

sumpilying
what can be done

with dignity

Nothing short
of a miracle made

memorable
ing too

chosen by councilors
Who needed

a warm witness

blood new
and scars whistled

into its night

My own witness

in a time
of doubting

miracle enough
how life works forward

ing teacher
hand over hand

out beyond crossroads

Biding the Tide

Marlee Lutz

A departure, the same lowly familiarity
of an unresolved longing
Ink laps against paper like a black tide racing to shore
Thoughts swimming through the air
hoping to become a cloud or star
A gull dies midflight
as the groaning sea of disappointment swells.

Air

Lauren Davidson

You are a radio,
you are an open door.
I am a faulty string,
of blue Christmas lights

"My Favorite Chords" by The Weakerthans

I'm sitting, sweating in my car. I'm thinking: I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be doing this. I should be at work. I should be in my apartment signing up for some singles dating site. I should be at the gym. I should be learning Finnish, or volunteering, or brushing up on the news, or literally any other activity that will result in me being more interesting, thus improving the state of said singles dating site profile. Anything, really, to further my cause of not being *this guy*; chomping at the bit, trying to talk myself out of walking up to her building when I know she's not there. So I remind myself that this isn't me. This is just something I have to do.

Something about sitting in this car in violent July sunshine draws up the memory of a story she once told me when I made the mistake of asking about exes. His name was Nick, she said. They were together less than a year when she broke it off.

"Why'd you end things?"

She shrugged. Was she nervous?

"I had to," she said. She then added, "Everybody deserves to be happy," after seeing my dissatisfied expression.

A little while after they'd broken up, she found him sitting in her car when she got off her shift. He was naked.

"Except for tube socks. He was sitting there, trying to leave me a little 'something to remember him by' on my windshield," and she'd laughed after that part, "I was like, Nick, what in fuck's name are you doing?"

In fuck's name. Well, I guess it's a better name to do bad things in than God's.

I sat trying to let the absurdity sink in.

"Well, what did he do then? Did he leave? Shit, Ang, did he hurt you? Did he...you know...finish?"

She coughed out part of her drink.

"God no. I think he lost that thing the minute he saw me. He just..he looked so..."

Staring hard at her knees, she weaved her fingers into mine. An attempt to calm me down, I think, which was pointless. I was reeling.

"What? What did he look like?"

"Like...ahh. Shit. You really don't want to hear this."

"I *have* to, now."

"Look, you're going to think I'm a bitch. But he wouldn't even look at me. Just sat there, crying."

What came across her face as she remembered this? I wonder. Sadness? Guilt, maybe? Could it have been annoyance?

"So then what? What'd you do?"

"I can't talk about this."

"Why?"

"It's too hard to think about it. Plus, hearing more would just upset you," and I realized she was about to cry.

"Try?"

You can imagine how it went from there. Back and forth, me demanding answers, her not budging. Said it wasn't right to talk about any further.

Said she felt terrible telling me what she already had.

All in the past I guess.

The sidewalk in front of her building is all too familiar. Mostly the Spanish coffee shop she lives above, where she took me one morning after I stayed over. All I wanted was a bagel, but she whined and insisted I try her vegetarian omelet, to which I deeply regretted giving in. She never picked up on that though. While I was gagging through the meal, she was busy chatting at length with the cashier girl about the jewelry on display and the high price of gasoline and the wonderful quality of tomatoes they used and how simply *awful* it was about Argentina, or Bolivia maybe. Wherever the something awful was happening, it didn't make a difference, 'cause I was still stuck by myself eating six bites of a 12-dollar too-spicy omelet that gave me heartburn.

I remind myself I'll never have to eat another vegetarian *anything*. So I make my way past the little shop and enter her building. I'm not worried about how I'm getting in. We live in New York City, but she never locks her apartment door.

"What's the point?" she'd say, as I pleaded with her. "Anyone who *really* wants to get in this place is gonna find a way."

"But there are *bad people* out there Ang; it's not just thieves anymore. Let me put in a nice security system, like at my place."

She gave me the 'Oh Dylan, you're hopeless' face.

"You worry too much, you know that?" She told me, her forehead pressed against mine.

I gave a defeated sigh, and she crawled onto my lap in her bright orange pajamas.

"You give me so much to worry about."

"I'll be *fine*, baby. I've bounced back from worse things than a silly old robber. I put up with you, don't I?"

She gave me that stupid, overly-innocent face she'd always give me when she was making a joke I wouldn't like, but I found myself laughing despite anyway. Kissing turned into undressing her and I internally marveled at her ability to worm out of *every* conversation she didn't want to have.

Well, she wasn't getting out of this interrogation. So without so much as a nervous glance down the hall to see if anyone was watching, I push her door open.

The first thing that hits me is the smell. Cinnamon and Febreze and litter box. As the last scent hits me, Pepé slinks around the corner. A sleek black cat with a long, white stripe down his back. He pads over to the floor under the arch between her kitchen and living room, and considers me with a quizzical look.

"Dylan?" His alert little face seems to ask, "What could *you* be doing here?"

"It hasn't been *that* long, Pepé." I remind him, sternly.

He raises his eyebrows and smirks.

I decide Pepé is a weird cat. My hands feel clammy, and I wonder what I should do first. I need to know a few things. I need to know them, one way or another. So I can sleep at night, and get up in the morning, and answer questions when people ask them without needing to be snapped out of a tormented daymare.

If she was fucking someone while we were together, fine. If she wasn't, fine. If she's fucking someone now, fine. If not, fine, fine FINE--I don't *care*. I just need to put this plague of obsessive paranoia to rest. It brings to mind that High Fidelity quote, "No woman in the history of the world is having better sex than sex you are

having with [other guy]... *in my head.*"

So I figure the computer is as good a place to start as any. No password log on, surprise surprise. So I start with her e-mail. It's mostly spam, updates from her mom, and correspondence with the slew of "couch-surfers", as they're called, that she constantly has staying at her apartment.

She's part of this online network of travelers willing to let people crash on their couch and sleep on the couches of strangers when they travel. Every week a new couple or group of friends would come through, and every week I had to feign enthusiasm for them. I'm lucky they're not here now, but they're more of a weekend thing anyway.

"My CS-ers are from Finland this week!" I remember her announcing, distinctly drunk, at a party, "They are amazing and wonderful, I *know* you'd love them; they're right up your alley. Let me get your number so you can come party with us!" was what she said to a girl she'd been talking to for about three and a half minutes while I tried to hide my distinct irritation.

I have to focus. The e-mail being clean means nothing. Angie could barely use her computer anyway. I sigh and shut it back off. From her bedroom door, Pepé is watching me. Waiting.

What does he know? What has Angie's cat been held privy to since our split? I wish her cell were here, that would tell me everything. As I glance around the living room, hoping she left it, I note the distinct lack of anything resembling my own impressive apartment's de-evolution to a rancid nest for beer and TV. There's no evidence here that anything in her life has changed whatsoever, actually. Even her plants are thriving. I swear every one of mine suffocated the week she left. Just

curled up and died.

I wince again. I can't let those thoughts take over. There is more to be seen, more possibilities for answers. I check the bathroom for what few basic questions it could answer: How many toothbrushes in the rack? Any pine-scented toiletries around to denote the presence of a male? Forgotten boxers?

I sniff some – what I'm guessing is – Dutch deodorant. It smells like earwax and dandelions, but I can't tell from the foreign packaging what gender it's aimed at. I have to take as a sign of it being forgotten by a couch surfer.

Part of me kept hoping that someday, one of her couch surfers would turn out to be a psycho. I mean, if I started letting people crash on my couch from all over the world, the first ones I let in would probably steal all of my TVs or drunkenly set the place on fire.

Instead, Angie's surfers clean for her. They play with her cat and teach her recipes. They leave her exotic bottles of wine. Her kitchen looks like a damn World Market, but there is no trace of a more permanent, male houseguest.

Only one room left to go of the tiny pad. A glance at the clock tells me I'm running out of time. The last thing on earth that I want is for her unexpectedly come home from work and catch me literally sniffing around her apartment. Seeing her in the flesh would probably do me in for good at this point.

With this in mind, I walk slowly across the apartment to the bedroom: where once was Mecca, now sits Hades. The bed is made. More evidence she hasn't fallen to pieces. I can't even remember the last time any room of my house looked so put together.

Without even thinking about it, I dive in. I take all the blankets and pillows in my fists with me. And I roll. And I breathe deep. And as she climbs up my nasal cavity and into my brain, I kick and cough and fuck up as much of the bedding as possible. I pull the stupid mattress sheet, whatever you call that thing, I rip it off, and I think of her reaction when she walks into her room, think of her face when she sees her bedding in shambles.

This image gives me more peace than I have felt in much too long, and suddenly I have no idea what I am looking for in coming here except to feel like *this*.

So I take one last deep breath and stand. I survey the room. I refuse to break anything; that would miss the point. So I start opening drawers, spilling things out. And as underwear and t-shirts and jewelry tumble to the floor, they do nothing compared to the drawer of pajamas that spills out a thousand sappy, soul-crushing memories onto me as I crumple into a ball on her floor.

Angie laughing. Angie singing some stupid song at the top of her lungs. Angie screaming at me, crying, begging for things I don't know how to give her. Angie stroking my face, telling me she loves me more than anything under the sun. And it feels like my throat is imploding with the weight of these thoughts.

And it's not fucking fair, that I should be sitting here, half a person surrounded by her memory. And it's not fair that I don't even know what I want: to fuck her or kill her or marry her. But I cannot for the life of me escape her.

So there isn't much choice in the matter when I collect myself and get back to my car, where I can drive myself back to my cave and smoke in the dark. I *almost* even make it back to the driver's seat, *almost* make it out with some real dignity, when I see it: the cologne my mother

had sent me. She's worried, of course. Wants me to "get back out there" because "there are more fish in the sea" and I'm a "real catch" and the other stuff a mom has to say to her son when some evil wench has hurt her baby boy.

I stare at the package on my backseat, the same brand and scent I've been getting since college. And it's as if a beam of light shines down on it, and what I have to do becomes so obvious, it feels like someone else opens my back door to retrieve it, like now I'm just carrying out the motions that were already set to occur.

Inside. Pepé recognizes my attitude. He scrambles to dive under the couch as I slam the door behind me.

Her plants are doing well. I rip off the plastic packaging with vigor, and spray their leaves and roots with overwhelming showers of the familiar, musky scent. I think of them slowly dying, losing their green luster and shriveling under the ferocity of chemical agents that comprise my signature smell. Then the kitchen. I want a cloud of cologne to burst out when she opens her fridge; I want every bite she takes to be tainted.

Next it's the couches, throw-blankets, the drapes and the carpet. I even wrestle Pepé out and douse his fur, ignoring his screeches and hisses and claws. Though he took off to hide again, I can feel his eyes on me still, somehow, as I move to her bedroom, drenching her pillows and sheets and closet and the contents of her drawers. I collect a few items to saturate, so I can hide them deep, deep in her closet: my tie, one of her bandannas, pajama shorts. So that eventually, even when she thinks it's over, and she thinks she's rid of me forever and hasn't thought about one thing I ever said or did or liked, she will *have* to think of me.

One more crippling time.

Aves

Samantha Flowers



Rotten Harvest

Jessyca Revilla

Oh miserable pen,

treacherous paper!

No sooner I attempt to put you to use,

the tools of my harvest,

the words decay.

All day long they grow,

bearing fruit ripe for the taking.

Carefully I water and weed, preparing this crop for harvesting.

But alas! No sooner I pluck the fruit from the vine,

it rots in my hand all brown and maggoty.

And yet, I force it down my throat, this rancid fruit,

believing in vain it may yet have some worth, some nourishment.

I digest it for a while...it may stay down...

then I vomit it out of my mouth.

I cannot stomach the putrid fruit, and yet,

I cannot part with it.

I'll sweep it under the rug, my own little secret.

Nostalgia OD

Justine Fitton

I ate it for breakfast in the cemeteries
St. Boniface Coffeys and Gibbons and Tracys
St. Malachy Gordons and Fittons and Murrays
St. Paul Udens and Roesslers and Bohlens

Grandpa Fitton: Bought farm
(1800 East Rantoul, IL)
built the magic white house
fell off a train
in 1907
(I wondered when I heard the train rumble at night
if it was the bad one.
If it would get us,
since we lived in the magic white house too)

Spinning through the headstones with Nora
on Memorial Day
Flower petals like raindrops
on the quiet beds

Justine Uden:
Born 1900, Ostfriesland
Died 1917, Gifford
(Opa's sister. My namesake. I used to think
When I could realize I'd die
That I would be 17 too)

Bringing a notepad
when I went with Nana and Papa
to cousin funerals:
Jack McHale, Norine McHale, Francine McHale, Loretta Malloy
writing down Nana's whispered stories
a litany of memories, mistakes, misgivings

I breathed it in through the walls of the magic white house
peeling the wallpaper back 100 years
to the fabric underneath
the wood sighed in relief
then gasped at its nakedness

I cried when we lost it.
The tangible proof of the blood.
For the way they all look at Daddy,
like he sank the Titanic
It must be hard to carry a century on your back.

THE TWANG OF ORANGES

J.T. Dawson

Beep. "Just the oranges," goes a familiar barbed wire twang. I have seen this woman many times before this summer, always slumped in the same battery powered wheel-chair, sometimes at the beginning of the day, and sometimes the end. Yet she always came through my lane. She had a white streak in her hair; I always wondered what it was from, how she got it, or if her mother had the same streak.

I always knew that voice. It sounded completely new to me, how each syllable ran into the other, but I didn't say anything. I just nodded, even if what she said made no sense. Apparently, that's how people spoke where she was from, wherever that was.

Since she first came through my lane, a regular Thursday in June, I cannot get it out of my mind: why oranges? It makes me crazy, but I still find myself wanting to ask her, "What the hell are the oranges for?" It's funny. I just want to go and hide all the oranges one day and see what she does. What would happen? How would she react? I would probably get fired, but maybe then she would tell me why she bought them..

By no means am I an experienced social profiler, psychologist, psychic, or medium, but I have been here at Hell-mart long enough to know that certain people always buy certain things. For example, fat people buy fatty foods (aisles one through four), healthy people buy healthy people foods (produce section), and young people buy crap that they do not need (everywhere else). It was a pattern that she did not fit. She bought oranges (not in aisles one through four).

It made no sense.

Perhaps that is because my grandfather loved oranges. They fit him, his hands, and the man he was. He would eat one for breakfast with his whole grain cereal, his juice, and sometimes even a hot cup of coffee. I remember one day while eating breakfast I watched the steam curl off the top of his mug and around my words to him:

"Why oranges?"

"Why not?" He said.

That stopped me. His hard features did not move. They never did. I watched his eyes, the age in them fall back to his coffee, while his fingers closed around the mug as if to catch something. I wondered what he meant by that, if there was some hidden meaning I was supposed to find. If there was I didn't. I never found out why he ate oranges all the time. My grandmother told me it was because his father ate them. She said that when my grandfather ate an orange it brought his father back to him, even if just for a moment. But how could an orange bring someone back? You tell me. I tried oranges for a while after he died; it was a stroke and he had one in his hand. They never brought him back to me. Not once.

Anyway, when I think of her and the oranges I imagine what she does with them. I just want to hire a private detective to follow her home and tell me what the oranges are for. I like to imagine her as an orange juggler in the circus, or a magician who makes oranges disappear in her hands. Perhaps it was her hands that caught me most: the way her fingers wrapped around an orange like bony weeds. I don't generally have thoughts like that about other things, only her and the oranges. Nothing else is really that interesting.

I would like to know, for instance, where she goes

with her oranges. What she uses them for and how many she has? I almost always imagine me walking in somewhere to find her building a dog out of oranges or some other pet. Maybe she needed something like that? Maybe she was lonely. Sometimes I imagine taking her chair away, letting her stand in aisles one through four like a shriveled peach, until at the end when she would beg for it back. Perhaps then she would tell me. The trouble with this again is that I would probably be fired. I wonder if she would give a damn.

It all becomes very complicated and exhausting to imagine, so I avoid her when she comes around. She usually manages to catch me off guard. I do, however, pay close attention to what other people buy now, and have gotten quite good at predicting what they buy and when they buy it. For example, a man dipped in his usual array of Confederate attire buys a case of cheap beer on Wednesdays. A skinny schoolteacher, or at least he looks like one, buys seven frozen dinners on Fridays. My boss buys Honey Buns on Mondays (aisles one through four). None of them buy oranges. I said then and I will say now that she belonged to none of these.

The orange woman was my first customer when I started working here. I still remember the day she puttered into my lane. It was a Wednesday. The light caught her watch as she put her oranges on my belt and my mind stuck there. Was time found under the peel of an orange? If I unraveled it, would minutes fall out? Why? I had to think of other things to blot out the question. Put it out of my brain.

I said, "How are you, ma'am?"

She did not answer. Did I say something wrong? I thought.

Beep. "Is that it?" I asked her.

She drove away without a word, turned the corner and disappeared. That was that.

Everyone says, "Don't ever question the customer." I thought that was sound advice, though it made no sense to me. I had trouble with faking a smile, even if it was the summer. It made my face hurt. It was unnatural. Unnecessary. What could be found in that smile? I did it because the cameras were always watching. I did it because I had to. It was my job, smiling. Customers are sometimes crazy people. Most of the ones I had were, anyway. *One item per bag, please. Can I get that back in one ten, a five, five ones and the rest in quarters? Just one-bag, thanks. No bags there, guy.* Anyway, god forbid I did it wrong. Their minds were delicate things.

I often thought about what my grandfather would say about these people, or what his father would say, though I never knew him. I wonder if they knew any other people who only bought oranges. I wonder if they knew her or she them. What did they find in an orange? Did they dream about oranges? I wonder if they, any one of them, ever asked themselves, "What the hell difference does an orange make?"

I thought that I knew him, my grandfather. Maybe I didn't.

Then one Wednesday, I didn't see her at all. I figured that she had taken up with another place when she did not come through my lane with her oranges. Perhaps she joined the circus. I wondered where she was. Where was she getting her oranges now? Was she ever going to come back? What did she do with all of the oranges? I want to know. I can handle it (ha, ha).

Lately, I find myself wishing that instead of oranges, it were Twinkies or doughnuts that she placed on my belt. That way when she came through my lane, the beep would fit her; fix her to aisles one through four. Normal. It made sense, *that* beep.

One day she came back. I wanted to ask her where she had been or why she had been gone so long. That was too obvious; to ask someone where they had been or what kept them. What did she know?

I have not liked or trusted the orange woman from the first moment she entered my lane. She was fixed to silence, almost like she belonged completely to it. Perhaps it was her lips. They looked hard against her face, softer than an orange. I wondered if they ever opened outside of the store, if they formed any other word. Maybe? I thought about talking to her once, on one of my breaks, but I did not. What was I going to say? My thoughts stopped at *hello*.

I thought I heard her say something once, something other than *oranges*. Perhaps she did or maybe she tried to in her own way, but again and again my thoughts quibbled her words. I didn't hear anything. But who was I to judge her for it. Who are we to judge?

I bided my time and waited for the day I was going to ask her about the oranges. I knew the day would come, and when it finally arrived, a Wednesday evening in July, I was nervous. *Beep*. "Just the oranges," she said as always with the same barbed wire twang. I explained to her that I wanted to ask her a question; that I was curious about something. Of course, she didn't answer. She just held out her two one-dollar bills for me to take, and after a few seconds of waiting, followed by nothing, I gave up. Who cares? I was never going to know. At that point I counted her change: two quarters, two dimes, a nickel, and three

pennies. She looked up at me and we caught eyes, surprise through a hard glance. She never did that. That is when I said it. I asked her:

"Why the oranges?"

She said, "Why not?"

I wondered what she thought of me then, a grown man, all alone, standing behind a counter, asking her why she bought what she bought. I looked down and caught myself staring into the mirror. I saw my grandfather. I imagined my words float through the store and curl around the cameras, slide through the automatic doors and sail away on the wind. Maybe someone would catch them and bring them back to me with an answer. She left that day and never returned.

Things went along like always until the next week when another woman came through my line with oranges. *Beep*. "Just the two oranges," she said through a familiar twang. I looked up at her. I wondered who she was, where she was from, and why she wanted oranges. I saw someone in her face. I wondered if she saw someone in mine. For the first few seconds I said nothing. What was I going to say when words hid from me?

"Have we met?" I said, "I feel like we have."

She handed me a folded piece of paper:

"You knew my mother," she told me. "She bought oranges here. She told me to give this to you." After that she left and I never saw her again. I opened the piece of paper, waited for the words to sink in:

To the man who asked, Why oranges?

My mother loved oranges. I put one by her stone everyday.

As I read the words I heard her voice in them. The way her words fell in on one another into something I usu-

ally did not understand. I imagined them, my grandfather, his father, and her, standing beneath an orange tree, picking them from beneath green leaves. They held them in their hands. What little was left of them I held in mine.

FIN.

Life Luminescence

Stephani Pescitelli

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Beyond Words

Ashley Wright

They say creativity
flows
through the fingertips
into the pen
onto the page.

It starts in the brain
electric bursts
but at what point
does energy become feeling
become words?

If I peel back
the skin of my arms
will I find the next burst
scrawled in raw flesh?

Or will I finally pour forth feeling
untainted by
written word?

Don't

Melinda Knight

Don't

Go to store alone
someone will
take you

Don't

get ears pierced
they will
rot away

Don't

play with fire
you will
pee your pants

Went

to store
came home
safe

Pierced

ears remain
attached to head

Played

with fire
pants still dry

Monopoly
Megan Mathy



Listen

Stephani Pescitelli

I fold myself into a crevice of cool river rock to witness morning. The constant hush of rapids coats the gorge with an active calm, the liquid crackle lingering like fog. Landslides of dry drizzle trickle down the gorge, the tiny rocks denting the air along the way down. Across the river, the soft dribble of a streamlet echoes the delicate drama of the rocks' descent. Whistles from the sky whiz in and out as the birds spit stacks of twitter and tweet from above. A sudden splash disturbs the slick flow below, and whispers of eager boys zip to follow the thrashing trout.

The Rise and Fall of Nick

Nickolas Alexander

Adrenaline pumped through my veins as another epic kickball match came to an end. My third grade teacher, Ms. Cone, called my class in from recess. She demanded that we lined up, like prisoners, against the outer brick wall of the school. While she tallied my classmates, a shout came from the middle of the line, "My name is more popular than yours!"

Everyone wanted to be popular or well liked, so any change in the popularity hierarchy was a big deal. I didn't understand the need for such a sudden outburst; nevertheless, the poison spread through the mouths of my third grade class, rapidly. Perhaps there were hurt feelings from the kickball game; maybe one of my male classmates was trying to impress a female. No matter what the reason for the conflict was, the feud ended up changing the fate for all third graders at Mark Twain Elementary.

Feelings of anxiety overwhelmed us all. The possibility of having an unpopular name abolished any excitement from the kickball match. Ms. Cone, clearly frustrated with the turn of events, attempted to diffuse the situation.

Her solution was simple, yet brutal. It started with a single student walking up to Ms. Cone, stating his or her name. Ms. Cone would roar 'POPULAR' or 'UNIQUE.' One by one students walked up to receive their sentence. What was it going to be: a life of popularity and happiness, or a life of disapproval and leprosy? Being detected with leprosy in elementary school is a serious diagnosis. No one wants to be your partner do to math problems,

you're last picked for kickball, and, worst of all, you have nobody to sit with at lunch. Your only companions are the empty table, and your chocolate milk.

Luckily for me, I had an edge on my peers. An inside man told me that *Nick* was a popular name. I had a feeling this was true, because every class I'd been in had at least one Nick; however, the more sentencing I witnessed, the more I began to doubt myself. I didn't even have to hear the verdicts anymore; I could just watch the reactions of my classmates. The "popular" kids sprinted into the classroom with big grins on their faces, while the "unique" kids put their heads down, dragged their feet, and accepted their future as lepers.

Waiting in line, I noticed my hands becoming clammy, and I really needed to pee. Tempted to run inside and use the restroom, I ran the risk of missing my opportunity for popularity; conversely, if I stayed, I ran the risk of pissing myself.

"Am I popular?" I asked Ms. Cone.

"Yes, Nick is a popular name," she replied.

Yes! My need to pee went away as I jumped into the air. I frolicked towards my classroom, excited to share the good news with all my new popular friends. I couldn't imagine what popularity would bring me.

After establishing myself as a resident stud at Mark Twain Elementary, I was relocated to Omaha, Nebraska from St. Louis, Missouri. I cursed my mother for accepting her promotion; however, I knew that my popular name would help me make lots friends.

Ms. Schall, my fifth grade teacher, assigned my class to research the background of our names. Not knowing the true meaning of my name made me uneasy. Luckily, my fears were put to sleep when I looked up the

meaning of Nick:

Nick - Greek origin, meaning: Victorious People.

Alexander - Greek origin, meaning: Man's defender, warrior.

Hell yes.

The following day, I walked to school with a swagger in my step. Upon arriving at my classroom, I could hear my classmates yammering about the meaning of their names. They sounded like a bunch of buffoons; they had no idea what I was about to reveal to them. I thought about contributing to the growing excitement in the classroom, but I maintained my composure: I had an ace up my sleeve, and I didn't want my classmates to know, yet.

Once class started, my classmates begged Ms. Schall to share the meanings of their names. Clearly, my classmates must have felt that their names would launch them into popularity. Reluctantly going against her teaching plans, Ms. Schall gave in to my classmates' pleas.

Around the circle we went, one at a time, my peers sharing the stories about their names; however, no excitement was generated. Disgusted with all of the futile attempts, I contemplated standing up on my chair and blurting out my research. I could already imagine the reactions on my classmates' faces: Their expressions would disclose absolute utter amazement as the clouds in the sky would part, a beam of light would shine upon me, followed by a chorus of gospel singers gathering around, and they would sing about how a knight, no, how a brave warrior had come to protect them from all evil!

Finally the time had come, and Ms. Schall looked towards me, "Nick, would you like to share the meaning of your name?" Ms. Schall asked with a lack of enthusi-

asm, as I'm sure she was sick of everyone's pathetic attempts to obtain popularity. Standing up from my desk I belted with pride, "Nick is Greek for victorious people, and Alexander is Greek for WARRIOR!"

My classmates stared at me.

What had happened? Nobody fell to their knees and shouted, "Hail the King." I looked around, puzzled. Did my classmates not notice the miracle of my name? Women should have swooned, and the men should have been waiting for me to give them orders! Well maybe I didn't expect to be king; however, I thought the girls in my class would have at least noticed the manliness of my name, which should have made me more desirable. As Ms. Schall continued around the circle, asking the meaning of everyone's name, I sat at my desk defeated, feeling like loser.

Responding to the name of *Nick* was middle school suicide. Sayings such as 'Nick is sick', 'Nick is a prick', 'Nick has no dick', and 'Nick licks dicks' destroyed any chance of popularity, or getting with the older girls in my school. The worst part, about middle school, was that boys became more perverted with age. So the saying, 'Nick has no dick' evolved into 'Nick has a little dick'. Speaking from a grown male perspective, I would much rather have a penis than no penis; however, at the age of thirteen, boys discover that size matters: I thank the centerfolds in *Playboy* for that tidbit of information. Therefore, one could imagine how my metaphorical little dick affected my middle school love life.

My middle school crush, Stephanie, had a locker next to mine. Whenever class was dismissed I would get wound up, because I had the opportunity to see my alluring locker neighbor. Stephanie was one of the most de-

sired girls in middle school. Her problem was that she had boobs before the rest of the girls, which made her more intimidating to talk to; however, I wasn't intimidated. Maybe I was stupid, maybe I didn't understand the social hierarchy of my school, but whatever it was it was exhilarating to have the attention of a girl of her magnitude.

I would race to my locker with the anticipation of a brief exchange of after school plans. Perhaps, I would build the courage to ask her out to the movies, or to do whatever sad things I did in middle school.

However, one of my male classmates walked by as I was talking to Stephanie, and he sang out, "Nick has a little dick!" Standing there in complete silence, I stared at her, waiting for her reaction. She looked into her locker, and gave out a slight giggle.

Fuck.

I didn't know what to do. I could have denied my asshole classmate, and told her that he was wrong. Problem was she would probably sense my insecurity; thus, believing what my classmate revealed. Yet, if I did nothing, she might think that what my classmate mentioned was true, and as the centerfolds in Playboy told me, 'Size matters.'

So, I did what any awkward middle school kid would do: I shut my locker, put my head down, and walked home. The victorious warrior's little dick had failed him.

Happy Hour

Stephen Garcia

I like my poems
How I like my drunken midgets
Short,
Vulgar,
And not nearly as funny as me

Carousel Nostalgia
Alycia Rockey



Untitled

Daniel Paquin

It's four new holes, two new industrials,
one in each ear, before you fully understand
that this is what you want, not her.

It's the first time, the nervous twitches,
the lazy sleep-talk afterwards, until you
realize, this won't be around much more.

It's that disastrous holiday, the one
you refuse to celebrate, all because
she picked that day to leave you behind.

It's that tree, the one you stopped underneath,
that time you lost yourself to her again.

But now, you picture wood rot,
breaking branches in a storm.

You see that tree

breaking,

falling,

crashing,

down towards fate.

Vibrant Sensation

Ashton Temby

Pale yellow falls
on cracked concrete.
Deep orange crinkles beneath my feet.
Color flutters,
and wind rushes round
inviting my hair to dance its waltz.
Walking through its tunnel,
I feel fall applaud itself.

Loss

Simyona Deanova

Loss--

1) noun: detriment, disadvantage, or deprivation from failure to keep, have, or get

2) Loss is having a boyfriend who never gives you his number, though you ask for it multiple times; it's that same boyfriend living three states away. It's him breaking up with you over instant messenger. It's watching a pet you love waste away to nothing and feeling guilty for not ending her pain when you had the chance. It's coming out to your grandparents in a letter and feeling as if it made no difference whatsoever; it's that feeling you get when the issue is never spoken of, almost like you never brought it up in the first place.

Loss is having your best friends move to Texas on you while you're out of town visiting with family. It's discovering you're not as free as you once thought you were; watching as other people get to vote on your rights. It's having to sit there while your own brother tries to psychoanalyze you and tell you that what you wear is an addiction instead of being part of who you are. It's having a dad and a brother who both pretend you're straight until you forcefully remind them otherwise. Loss is drifting farther and farther apart from your own father just because you decided to start embracing who you really are, and who you are makes him uncomfortable.

It's realizing that your body will never feel complete, regardless of whether or not you get surgery to change it. It's the feeling you get when everyone else is trying to tell you who you are or who you should be. It's realizing you no longer believe in your country; then

realizing you don't fully believe in any country. Loss is being called a trouble maker just because you don't conform to a stereotype. It's watching your favorite uncle die at age 50; never mind that he went peacefully. It's realizing that several people in your extended family may have been psychologically traumatized by someone they trusted when they were younger. It's losing the ability to trust your own family when one of your distant cousins causes you physical harm one night when no adults are around. Loss is the emptiness you feel when nothing makes sense anymore.

Shoes

Sarah Olson



Like Diamonds

Mark Rheume

I'm walking barefoot with my mom.

We walk, hand in hand, down the shoreline on a little grass path that borders clumps of bleached sand and rocks. Sometimes the verdant blades decide to slide between my toes and the wind decides to blur my untidy curls that wrap around my ears. Its salty fragrance soothes my nostrils, and I shiver against its cool draft. "Look, Jonathan!" she says to me, "Can you see the boat on the horizon?"

My toes flex, and I strain my neck to peek over the rocky pier, but its wet edges conceal the horizon. Her hand releases mine and joins the other to lift me off the ground. My small arms cling to her neck, and I squint through the clouds. "Where, where, where?"

"There, to the left!" she says, and she lifts a hand towards the whitecaps that thrust out of the water. I tell her I see it, and I'm not sure why. I see no boat, no sleek ivory hull slicing through the choppy waves, no brilliant white sail sitting atop its mast, arching in the wind. I only see waves and clouds, and I think she knows. She hoists me higher on her hip and begins to walk again.

The grass leads us through a few dunes, and a mist rolls off the waves, bathing us in tiny shards of saltwater. I nuzzle my golden head in her shoulder and let the sun glow on my neck. Mom walks out onto the sand towards the water. I ask if the sand is hot, and when she replies, "No," I slide from her arms and sink into the sand. We begin to

walk down the shore again, dipping our feet in the water whenever the waves reach close enough. I look up at my mom. "Does God go to the beach?"

"Well, God is the beach. And the sea. And the sky. And even the wind," she replies.

"But, I thought God was back home..."

"God is everywhere, Jon."

"Oh."

Now my toes stumble on wooden planks sunken in the sand. Down the shore two girls try to run into the waves. They lift their legs clumsily in the shallow waves. I watch the ocean push them back onto the beach, as if it doesn't want them there.

A piece of frosty green glass peeks at me from the rocks and seaweed. I fall to my knees and scoop the broken triangle up with my hands, brushing wet grains of sand from its blunt edges. Mom and I collect sea glass every morning, sifting through the sand and rocks to find the fragments of old bottles and glasses. I carefully slide it into my jacket pocket, where it clinks against the others. They are like diamonds to me.

We start to walk again, avoiding the hunks of seaweed that catch the sharp rocks and shells like great soggy nets. "So, I see God when I go to school?"

"Yes, and you see God at school, and even when you come home in the afternoon."

"But if I see God all the time, how come He never says 'Hi'?"

"Jonathan- close your eyes and listen and you can hear God all around you. Do you hear the ocean, and the waves crashing? Do you hear the wind rushing past your ears? What do you hear?"

Two eyelids cover the world, and I breathe deeply. "God sounds like an annoying seagull."

She sighs. "Well...yes, yes He does, Jon."

Scarecrow Sally on a Saturday Night

Daniel Davis

When Scarecrow Sally steps out on a Saturday night,
The earth shakes, the soul quakes,
The neon lights tremble in anticipation
Of her sultry summons.

The city breeze wraps around her.
She is an island, she is steadfast.
With her head high she'll face the world
That everyone knows she keeps
In the leopard-print purse slung across her shoulder.

On the corner she'll dance,
Beneath the streetlights and the headlights,
And she'll sing a song that speaks
To the inner child that we are all aware
Is madly in love with that sequin dress.

There is a cross around her neck,
And it sparkles, it shines,
It speaks of a time
Of cornfields and sunshine
And of front porch kisses
Beneath an orange harvest moon.

Oh how she dances and sings!
Everyone listens and loves her,
Everyone sings along in harmony.
The world is at peace,
She is at peace,
And she is home.

At the end of the night,
She will slip back to her apartment
And lie down to count the beams of light
That dance across the watermarks of her ceiling.
When she drifts off to sleep, she will picture the stars
As they fall across the sky above an old gravel road,
And she won't notice the tear
That trickles down softly to her pillowcase.

Moral Fixation

Bryan Rolfsen

The man watches her from afar. Hidden behind a solitary, century-old tree, he steals glances at the woman out on her nightly walk. Every evening around 8:30, just as the summer sun is setting, she walks down Locust Avenue.

Tonight she wears a knee-long black dress and a formal, purple hat with a plastic orchid adhered to the top. He wonders where she comes from – where she goes to – but he hasn't the gall to follow her.

In the distance, the silhouettes of the few buildings reaching into the sky give the impression of being cut out of an inimitable landscape of sweeping oranges and reds, dark purples, and vague greens.

Where is she going?

She always walks east to west with the air of being on a schedule. She does not walk briskly, but determinedly; she has a destination. He can just make out her face. It's not a beautiful face, but it is full of character. When the light hits her just right, he can identify a scar above her eye, its whiteness contrasted by the pink hue of her skin.

Perhaps it was a childhood accident: a fall from her bike, a kick from a horse, a cruel joke played by an older brother. Perhaps it was procured from the passionate hand of a sworn lover, though he has never seen the sparkle of a ring on her finger.

He guesses that she is in her late forties, maybe a widow, maybe a middle-aged spinster, maybe even happily married with secrets involving naked fingers.

He is drawn to her for reasons that he cannot quite pinpoint. Living alone, he yearns for the warm embrace

of a woman, but it is not sexual desire that compels him. Her mystery – her confident stride and punctuality – is what intrigues him. He keeps the secrets that he fabricates about her. It is thrilling for him to enter her life, however shortly, under the shroud of her ignorance.

Yet regardless of what he thinks he knows, he knows nothing.

And with that passing thought, he watches as her heel breaks in the middle of the road. He watches as she stumbles, barely catching herself with the palms of her hands. It reminds him of tripping over a fallen branch as a youth and scraping his elbow – he recalls the smell of hydrogen peroxide. Time suddenly slows as he watches an inattentive driver closing in on the crouched woman. The driver looks up one second too late, just in time to watch the woman be shot forward like a pinball into a luminescent jungle of headlights and bumpers. He is overcome by the harsh sound of metal on bone.

And yet, he doesn't spring into action. He simply watches as the driver erupts from the car, hysterical, yelling for help, dropping his phone while frantically dialing for an ambulance. From behind the tree, he can see the blood pooling under her body, leaking from her head and her abdomen. He knows that her chances of survival are slim to none, and even if the ambulance arrives quickly, she'll be living on borrowed time.

He silently leaves his post behind the tree and walks north, curiously unperturbed. He does not desire a more befitting emotion, but is stricken by a repetitive thought: "I did not know her".

The Farm

Ashley Wright

The dead till the sour earth in this cave
bent over, straining atrophied muscles
splintering brittle bones

In the cold, damp air
skin sloughs off bone
with every movement

Green phosphorus mushrooms light
row upon row of beans
they cannot use

My guide, the tiny overseer
smoothes her charcoal dress
with delicate white hands

And says that's the way
it's always been

Waimea Bay

Jarrod Taylor



Anything but.

Justine Fitton

sea-less, bar-stool sailor
sad-eyed
(water-logged ducts
red from the pressure
glossy with the unreleased)

cries woman wolf
(like a true blue stringent sipper)
but
This colossal build-up
is the
product of a persistent piecemeal process
not the brief work of
those oversexed, under(where?) temptresses

raises his frosted glass
("Oh Captain, my Morgan")
sings
"Be a simple kind of man"

Anything but.

Reflections in College Algebra

Nicole Reichert

The days I like best are wet and bordering on the line between warm and cool. The ground is spongy when you walk across the grass. You can smell the moisture in the air and you feel exhilarated when the light breeze teases pink into your cheeks. Those days remind me of the comforts of solitude. How one can sort out thoughts when alone. How you cannot do that with someone chattering incessantly in your ear. The sound of your own heart beating, or your lungs expanding and contracting as they draw in the chilled air, is much more comforting than any voice could ever be. A touch of a hand upon a hand is one thousand times more consoling than a too tight hug in which you are forced to stand still for a half of an hour.

Crash

Danielle Shirtino

skidding.
turn. squealing.
rushing. flashing. panic.
honking. screaming. gripping.
breaking. loud. obnoxious. nerve racking.
lights. metal scraping. crunching. crying. whining.
in one brief moment, calm takes over, no sound can be
heard, 1 second, 2 seconds then it's over.
breathing. yelling. wailing. fear. running footsteps.
horror. stuttering. cell phone. fuzziness.
rushed voice. dread. weeping.
PAIN. blinding.
darkness.

Weathering Satisfaction

Rashelle McNair

Rain shamelessly smacks,
follows pounding pace,
evaporates,
leaves me
wet,
denied,
rejected,
humiliated
in traces
of heated flesh.

Want
icy flakes that
kiss,
linger long
on warm skin,
breathe steam,
melt with the
internal intensity
of life streaming
down bare cheeks
into the fluid motion
of ecstasy.

Peacock "Plumage"

Alycia Rocky



Leash

Daniel Paquin

"I'm not gonna lie, Mike. I think you can do better." He tosses my article, *The Human Pet*, onto the desk in front of him. The manuscript bumps his name plaque. "PHILIP STEVENS: EDITOR-IN-CHIEF"

Phil rises from his chair and begins rounding the desk towards me. "I know you're still hurtin' from Rachael leaving you, but you need to move on."

"I know, I know." I move my eyes from his plaque to his face. The fluorescent lighting highlights his five-o'clock shadow.

"Look, what you've got here is a great start." Phil picks up the manuscript and flips through it. "It's detailed, thorough, but it's not up to par with your past work."

I've been at this magazine for five years. I started as a freelancer, but after my first two articles caused record sales and readers were writing in requesting more and asking who I was, Phil hired me full-time.

It didn't take long for me to make a name for myself. I have this knack for choosing taboo subjects on which to write. Subjects nobody else will touch. And I don't just write about them; I get involved.

A few years ago, I wrote an article on furrydom. For research, I attended Anthrocon, a huge deal, considering the heavy restrictions on media coverage at the event. I also attended a fur pile and witnessed "yiffing" firsthand. Now, I cringe every time I think about watching Barney as a child.

Shortly after that, I wrote on dendrophilism. I interviewed a couple that based most of their sex life around various uses of twigs. They even showed me a few tips and tricks to try on my own. Apparently, there are

ways to prevent wood from splintering before use.

Phil pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "All right, I tell ya what. Take some time off. You haven't taken a personal day since you started here."

"No." I close my eyes and shake my head.

"No what? What do you mean 'no'?"

"I'm not taking time off. I don't need to." I rise from my chair.

"Bullshit you don't. You need to get your head past Rachael and into the clear." Phil's ears redden as his voice rises.

"That's the last thing I need, Phil. To sit at home alone." I make my way to the office door. "Yeah, that'll help."

"Well, what the fuck are you gonna do then? I can't publish shit like this!" He throws my manuscript across the room.

I turn the knob and pull open the door. "I need to do more research." Phil throws up his hands in defeat as I close the door behind me.

A streetlight casts an eerie glow through the window of my apartment. I close the door behind me and lock all three locks. I stumble through the darkened labyrinth to my bedroom. I drop my backpack on the bed and plop down next to it. The only light in the room is coming from a small UV lamp that shines upon my Venus flytrap. The petals lie open in wait, revealing their bright red interiors, filling the area with the faint scent of nectar. The plant had been a gift from Rachael, the last before she left a month ago.

I rise from the bed and stagger back through the apartment to my office. I flip the switch, revealing an antique chair and a cluttered desk. I stare at the empty walls,

tracing the brighter rectangles that used to be covered by framed photographs. Rachael took them all with her when she left. Now the only thing on any of the walls is a small poster above my desk, the words "I Want To Believe" printed beneath a flying saucer.

I move towards the desk and begin to shuffle through the stacks of paper, looking for a small business card. I find it being used as a page marker in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, a book I only picked up again after Rachael left. I've had the book for three years and I still haven't finished it.

I pull out the card, losing my place in the novel in the process. The card has nothing more than a handwritten phone number and a name: Miss Cunningham. Over the past month, I've been interviewing Miss Cunningham about her involvement in the underground human-pet culture. Miss Cunningham is not her real name, of course, just one of many pseudonyms she's used through the years.

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket and dial the number. A female voice answers, "Hello?"

"Yes, Miss Cunningham, this is Michael Dorian."

"Ah, Mr. Dorian. I was wondering when you'd call. Reconsidering my offer?"

Twenty minutes later, I'm on the phone again, this time with Phil. His boisterousness forces me to hold the phone away from my ear. I can picture his ears glowing red as he talks.

"Are you sure about this, Mike? This is further than you've ever gone before."

"I know, Phil. I know. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"If you're sure..." He trails off for emphasis.

I hang up the phone and pocket it. I lock the door

and hope that my Venus flytrap will be all right without a meal for the next month.

The cab stops in front of a mansion, complete with a fountain of pissing angels. I hand the driver a fifty-dollar bill and step out. The cab drives off and I make my way towards the gate, which creaks and groans as it opens.

I ring the doorbell to the side of the double doors and wait. The sound of footsteps approaching the door is followed by the door opening inward, revealing a large, marble-tiled foyer. A small, gray-haired woman stands in the doorway.

"Ah, Mr. Dorian, do come in." Miss Cunningham beckons me inside and shuts the door behind me.

I move to the center of the foyer and turn to face Miss Cunningham. She smoothes out a few wrinkles in her dress. The wrinkles in her face remain untouched.

"Well, Mr. Dorian, shall I show you where you'll be staying?"

I nod and she leads me through the house towards the back yard, complete with a pool and another pissing angel fountain. Closer to the house, just off the back patio, a man in a suit is screwing together the last joint of a large, metal cage.

He straightens up as we approach, and nods to Miss Cunningham, excusing himself back into the house.

"This is where you'll live for the next month."

I round the cage, examining it from all angles. The network of bars looks the same on all sides, save for a small latch on the top that opens a door. A lock lies in the grass nearby.

"It looks, eh, comfortable," I manage to stammer. Beads of sweat form on my brow and I wipe them away with the back of my hand.

"Don't worry, Mr. Dorian. You'll get used to it." Miss Cunningham's words do little to ease the butterflies in my stomach. Even though I've spent the last month discussing the human-pet culture with her, trying to understand it as much as possible, I feel like throwing up at the sight of the cage.

Some would call it slavery; others call it comfort and contentment. Free from the stresses and possessions of society, human pets live just as any dog or cat would. They don't have to worry about what clothes to wear, or what they want to eat. Somebody else takes care of them. It's a voluntary letting go of those things that make us "human."

"Shall we go inside and discuss the contract?" A twinkle of excitement glimmers in her eyes.

In the kitchen a maid prepares dinner while I look over the contract, noting the conditions for my stay. No clothes. No talking. A collar is to be worn at all times. What I'm reading tells me, in so many words, that I'll be Miss Cunningham's dog for the next month in exchange for ten thousand dollars.

I sign and date the contract. I hand it across the table to Miss Cunningham. She checks my signature and smiles at me.

"We'll start tomorrow morning. That way you'll have one more night to prepare yourself." She folds the contract and motions to the maid. "Mary here will show you where you'll be staying tonight. I look forward to seeing you in the morning." With that, she walks out of the kitchen, leaving me staring at the door behind her.

I finish dinner in silence. Mary watches me over her shoulder as she leads me to a guest bedroom upstairs. I turn around to thank her, but an empty doorway accepts my gratitude.

I spend the rest of the night alone. I soak in a bath long enough for my fingers and toes to prune. Finally, well after midnight, I settle into bed, knowing that after tonight I won't have a blanket and pillows for some time.

I awake in the morning and find that my toothbrush and the clothes have disappeared. Instead, a collar now rests on my bedside table. After only a few minutes, there is a knock on my door.

"Come in," I say.

Mary enters, a leash in her hand and a look of anger on her face. She steps towards the bed and points a finger in my face.

"Bad boy. Bad." She snatches up the collar and clasps it around my neck.

She latches the leash to the collar and pulls me out of bed. I stand in my boxers next to the bed. Seeing my morning erection, Mary laughs. "I've often wondered if it would be considered bestiality or not."

I laugh, but Mary cuts short her laughter. Her upper lip begins to curl and I stop laughing as well.

"Take them off," she says, indicating my last remnant of clothing.

I strip down the rest of the way and toss my boxers onto the bed.

"Down," she commands.

I obey and get down on my hands and knees.

Mary pulls a bone-shaped dog biscuit out of her apron pocket and feeds it to me. "Good boy." She ruffles my hair just above my ears. "Now, let's go outside."

Mary leads me down the hall towards the staircase. My knees bruise on contact with the hardwood floor.

At the top of the stairs, I hesitate. Mary pulls on

the leash. "Come."

I cower at the top of the steps, but Mary's pulling on the leash urges me to try to match her pace. I trip down the first few steps, my knees sliding against the carpet, but I make it the rest of the way down, no problem.

Once outside, Mary hands the leash to Miss Cunningham and retreats back into the house. Miss Cunningham leads me into the grass. The dew feels good on my newly opened flesh.

"Does Michael need to go to the bathroom?" Miss Cunningham talks at me like I assume she'd talk at a baby.

I begin to tell her yes, but catch myself when I see her face harden. Instead, I shake my head and bark. The sound is feeble in my ears. Miss Cunningham walks me around the backyard, waiting for me to go. There are several instances where I feel as if I'm about to piss in her perfectly groomed grass, but as soon as she sees me about to go, Miss Cunningham stops and watches and I can't go anymore.

After maybe half an hour, the man in the suit from the night before, the butler I assume, steps out onto the back patio and rings a bell.

"Ah, breakfast time. Come along, Michael."

On the way back towards the house, I piss myself. The warm liquid feels good as it streams down my legs.

Just short of the patio, Miss Cunningham stops and turns to face me, her nose held higher in the air than normal. She leans close as she sniffs me.

"Bad boy." She shoves my head as far toward my piss-covered legs as it will go and hits me on the backside with a rolled up newspaper. "No. Bad boy."

We spend the day lounging by the pool. Miss Cunningham reclines in a chair under an umbrella, reading

Cats and Dogs Are People Too! I lie next to her on the ground, shifting every few minutes to remain comfortable.

At sunset, Miss Cunningham picks up my leash and stands. "Come on, Michael. One last walk before bed."

She walks me through the back yard. Fireflies dance through the air, signaling their availability to each other. Miss Cunningham laughs as I chase the ones closest to me, stopping when their glow fades or when I reach the end of my leash.

"Did you go?" she asks.

I bark a sound that I've become more proud of through the day. I drag my bottom across the grass, glad that I went camping a lot as a child and have experience wiping with vegetation.

Miss Cunningham leads me to the cage, which has been moved inside, and opens the door. She tells me to get inside and she locks the door behind me. The metal bars and marble floor are frigid against my naked flesh, but they warm up during the few minutes it takes me to find a comfortable position.

"Goodnight, Michael." Miss Cunningham turns off the lights on her way out of the room.

I lie on the floor in the cage, thinking about the day and the rest of the month that lies ahead before I begin to drift into sleep.

Right before I close my eyes for the night, I realize today was the first day since Rachael left that I didn't think of her.

The days blend into one another. I no longer care about what time it is or what day of the week it is. None of that matters now. When Miss Cunningham is home, I lie by her side. When she's away, I'm watched over by

Mary or Jim, the butler. When she gets home, I run to her and she showers me with praise and she tells me how much she loves me.

The bars of the cage no longer make me feel sick to my stomach. I look forward to being put in the cage for a good night's sleep. The cage is my home, my domain. I don't miss wearing clothes or eating with forks and knives. I don't miss my job or my shitty, empty apartment.

Outside, the back yard is my playground. Jim plays fetch with me daily. It feels good to run off the leash, the wind whipping across my body, the tears streaming from my eyes. I have several bushes that I've claimed as my own and I run to them every time I have to go to the bathroom.

Every few days, Miss Cunningham has guests over, and they bring their dogs as well. I play tug-o-war with them, my teeth clinched around the knot on one end of the rope. Miss Cunningham and her guests watch from the patio, laughing as we run around the yard. Afterwards, she calls me a good boy and scratches behind my ears.

At the end of every day, right before I climb into my cage for the night, Miss Cunningham kisses me on the top of the head and ruffles my hair. "You're such a good boy, Michael. The best I've ever had."

I wake in my cage, stretching as much as I can inside the bars. The sun streams through the windows, illuminating the foyer around me. I peer around the room looking for my food and water bowl. Instead, I find a chair. A pile of clothes rests on the chair and a bag sits on the floor next to it.

I hear footsteps coming down the stairs and Miss

Cunningham appears and crosses the foyer towards my cage. She pulls out a ring of keys as she draws near. I bark excitedly, but she ignores me. Instead, she unlocks the cage and opens the door. I rise out of the cage and stretch, my muscles aching from being hunched over for so long.

"Well, your month is up, Michael. Here are your things." Miss Cunningham's voice seems strained. She motions towards the clothes and bag. "You'll find that all of your finances have been taken care of during your stay here."

With that, she heads back up the stairs, never once pausing to look behind her. I step out of the cage and stand on two feet instead of four. Everything looks so different from this high up. I begin to lose my balance, but Mary appears from another room to catch me before I fall. She helps me get dressed when I need it, laughing softly as I attempt to tie my shoes.

"Goodbye, Mr. Dorian." Mary shuts the door behind her, leaving me alone on the front porch.

A cab honks from the street. The driver stands half in and half out of his car. "You comin' or what?" he calls.

I shut the door to my apartment behind me. A pile of envelopes sits on the floor at my feet. I scoop them up and look through them. Bills, all of which have already been taken care of for me. I drop them back on the floor.

I can see a small, red light blinking at me from across the room. I drop my bag on the way towards the answering machine. I stare at the machine before pushing the button.

"Hey, Mike, it's Phil. Give me a call when you get home. I'm excited to hear how your, uh, trip went. Can't wait for the article."

The sound of Phil hanging up echoes through my apartment.

Next message.

"Michael," Rachael's voice breaks a little and I can picture her crying as she speaks into her phone. "I tried your cell phone, but it wasn't on. I want you back. I miss you so much. Please call me."

Next message.

"Michael, why won't you call me? I just need to hear the sound of your voice."

Next message.

The messages from Rachael continue to play in the background as I walk to my bedroom, picking up my bag off the floor on the way. I turn on the light in my room, revealing a small, cramped space barely big enough to contain my bed and a dresser.

I shuffle towards my Venus flytrap and am greeted not by the sweet scent of nectar, but by the smell of death. The flytrap's petals are curled in on themselves and all of its leaves lie strewn atop the dresser beneath it, dried and lifeless.

I dump the contents of the bag from Miss Cunningham on the bed. Among rolls of bills, a small glint of metal catches my eye. Rooting through the money, I find a leash.

My leash.

Attached is a small note in Miss Cunningham's handwriting. It says only one word: *Anytime.*

Clutching the leash, I head back into the living room. The sound of Rachael's voice is still echoing through the apartment, only now she sobs more than speaks.

"Michael, please. Call me."

Next message.

"Michael, this is Phil. I really need your article. I need to go over it before we print it. Call me back."

I pull my cell phone, unused for the past month, and turn it on. It beeps, confirming that Rachael did try my cell. Thirty-seven times. I skip listening to her voice-mails and dial the number.

The Performance

Melinda Knight

Martin M-130's stretch tight
over steel frets on a rosewood neck.
Lustrous, black, attached by a cord
to a Fender Acoustasonic,
the Dion signature bleeds full mellow tones.

Closer to Fine, sliding fingers
up and down the sleek neck,
softly caressing the warm wood
and cold steel.

The Microphone smells of sweet Merlot,
Reisling and Cabernet, mixed
during nights of mingling
mouth to mesh.

I lend voice to the songs of others,
to the songs of myself, while
becoming lost in my own world,
singing for unseen crowds
found only in my head.

A Third Grade Essay

Mark Rheäume

"I hate third graders. I hate essays. I really hate third grade essays." Some kid at the mall said this once. In this essay, I will explain three reasons why I hate third grade essays. They are boring, they are poorly written, and I hate them.

First, third grade essays are boring. In addition, they use poor transitions at the beginnings of their paragraphs. Sometimes, they are very redundant. They also have redundancies sometimes. They usually involve lame topics, like, for instance, a very ironic view on how much they hate third grade essays, written in the style of third grader. That is why I think that third grade essays are boring.

Occasionally, third grade essays go off into tangents. A tangent is when a writer digresses suddenly from one course of action or thought and turns to another. This is why some people say things like, "...But I digress."

Secondly, the word "secondly" sounds stupid. Also, I think third grade essays are written poorly. A third grade essay usually contains bad punctuation and spelling? They break every grammar rule they contain run-on sentences. And fragments. They are filled with weak verbs. Most third graders don't even know what verbs be. That is why I think third grade essays are poorly written.

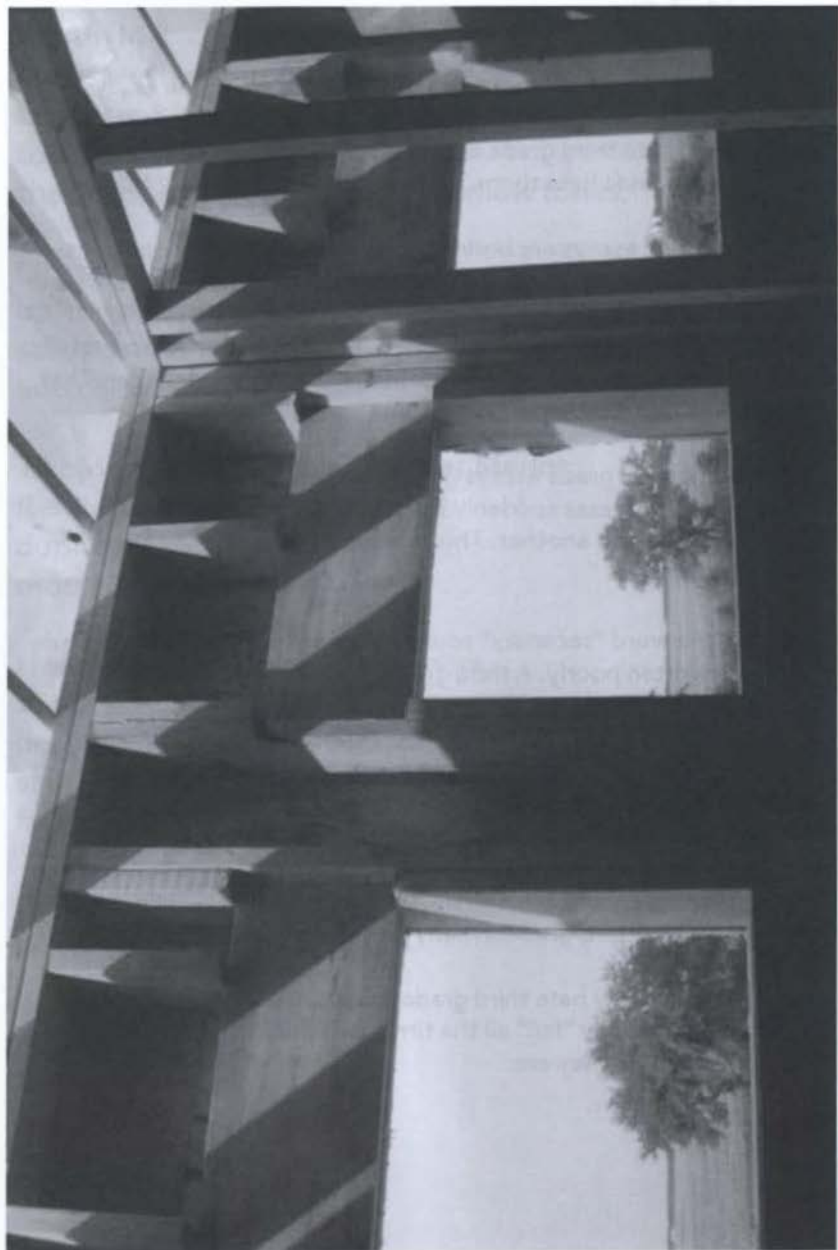
Finally, I hate third graders. Maybe it's because everyone still acts like a third grader every once in a while. Or every twice in a while. Sometimes we act like third graders many times in a while. I'm not sure.

In conclusion, I really hate third grade essays. Also, I'm not too crazy about people who say "fail" all the time, and think they're really funny. I don't think they are.

The end, I think.

Building a House
Stephani Pescitelli

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Seminar

Daniel Davis

Thoughts, feelings, theories, frustrations.
Constructed scenes, deconstructed sympathies.
Strangled articulations of an overwrought performance
That is played to a forgetful audience
Who has heard it all before and is willing
To put up with it all again out of sheer boredom.

The protagonist wields a gilded sword
Studded with fire-kissed rubies and intricate designs
Of dragons and mountains and for some reason water.
He faces the insidious villain and boldly declares:
"It is time," or "The end is come,"
And emphasizes his point with a masterful stroke
From that beautiful, god-like sword.
A heroic battle ensues, full of symbols
Of love, hate, Jesus, Buddha, homosexuality, masculine supremacy,
Egyptian theology, Freudian assumptions, down-home cooking, and birds.
The hero wins, of course, through pure will and muscle,
But a flaw is revealed, one small crucial flaw
That undermines the whole damn thing.

And so here we are, at the end of the road
That Frost once failed to take.
Maybe we should have taken the other one,
But we didn't, Goddammit,
So accept it and stop grumbling.
At least we didn't go back the way we came.

Nature's Mood Swings

Jeanette Saribekian

I've been seduced by the smells of a sweeter season on the horizon.
Cruel to tease me,
only to cover me blind with a blanket of snow.

Come close, Sun,
melt frustrating flakes from my sight.

Open wide, morning glory,
'cause in my mind, it's springtime.
the birds are fluttering happy winds all 'round me --

And I'm tired of being bitten back to reality by Cold.

From the Vacation
Samantha Flowers



talk to me under her breaths / she them up and stoned

Shell

Megan Mathy



I Lost My Keys

Justine Fitton

I keep thinking about the day of her funeral.

I was used to funerals. Ray and Mary Ellen dressed me up and took me all the time. So many old relatives, a generation that slowly filtered out. I'd wear my black velvet dress with white empire waist flowers. Maria would curl my hair. Maybe black pants and sweaters when I got older. I loved them, the traditions and rigidities of these Catholic funerals. The wake, the mass, the burial, the reception. I loved walking in with Ray and Mary Ellen. I felt like royalty. They were such celebrities. Always near the front of the procession, being approached by oodles of family members, even when it wasn't their "immediate" loss.

I learned early on that there was a certain attention that came with losing someone. Whenever I heard that phrase, I thought it sounded like the person had lost keys or something. But everyone wanted to be close to the person who lost The Keys. In fact, if you could lay any claim to The Keys whatsoever, ("I took a road trip across the wine country with The Keys in 1972") you were worthy of love, sympathy, attention.

The first few pews in the church were always reserved for "The Family". The body was a prop in my mind, almost beside the point. When we went through the reception lines at the wakes, I was fascinated by "The Family". I wanted to learn their names, their ages, their extended families, quirky stories about them. Mary Ellen was golden in that department. She would murmur all the details to me under her breath as I ate them up and stored

them away for my notebooks later. ("Jimmy's never been the same since World War II...Agnes has been in love with Michael for years")

McHale funerals were my favorite. Katherine Tracy McHale, Mary Ellen's little sister, had 14 children, 11 of them girls, with names like Francine, Justine, Norine, Jeanine, Antonine, Christine, Saline, etc. Daddy and Uncle Matt joked that if they'd had any more girls they would have had to dip into names like Listerine or Gasoline. Francine died when she was only 4 years old. She fell down a pit at the grain elevator when her Daddy, Jack, was bringing in a load. She got out of the truck while he was inside. Mary Ellen said that Katherine never forgave him for that. For letting Francine die. I always thought of it whenever I saw them, even though it had happened years and years ago. I always thought Jack looked sad and Katherine looked bitter. When I was little I would pray to Francine like she was my own personal little girl saint. At the end of my prayer I would ask her to make Katherine forgive Jack. I wonder if she ever did.

Norine died when she was in her early thirties of breast cancer. She was Jeanine's twin. I always wanted a sister twin who looked just like me, like Norine and Jeanine. But wouldn't it just be unbearable to have a twin and lose her? It must be excruciating. Ray and Mary Ellen took me out of school for that one. Mom didn't like any of it. She thought it was morbid for me to go to all of these funerals of people I didn't know very well. I think my notebooks of factoids scared her, along with my prayers to dead people. Daddy said it was good for me to experience my extended family, to know where I came from.

It got different though, when Harry died, I'd say. Ray's older brother. My great uncle. Harry lived on the farm between our house and Ray and Mary Ellen's house. I used to think he was the mailman. Every day he dressed in all navy blue and brought the paper over, since we just had one subscription for all three houses. I didn't like him very much though. He scared me. He loved Jacob, but he didn't have much time for Nora and I. Probably because we were girls. I think we reminded him of our mother. I remember once when I was 7 or so, wearing shorts, sitting in Mary Ellen's kitchen. He looked down at me with ill disguised disgust and said, "She's going to have her mother's legs. Thick, German thighs". I've never really felt comfortable in shorts since then actually.

When Harry died, I suddenly found myself in "The Family" position with Daddy, Mom, Ray and Mary Ellen, Nora and Jacob, just because Harry didn't have any children. But I felt no claim to The Keys. I spent most of the day with my cousin Chris, outside the Knights of Columbus, playing on the jungle gym.

Harry's death was a turning point though, the beginning of the end. When we found out about all the debts Harry had been sitting on while he kept the books, while Daddy and Ray did the farming.

Mary Ellen's funeral was the same as all the others, but exceedingly different. It was only a year or so after Ray's, but I don't remember much about Ray's. I remember the wake, sort of. He was wearing his turquoise that he always put on when he and Mary Ellen went out, after he had splashed with Old Spice. I remember that I couldn't cry. I felt like I should be crying, but I couldn't. I tried to

recite a litany of good memories in my head to get the tears flowing, but all that came were bad ones. The knots in my stomach when I walked by his rocking chair, trying not to make a wrong move so he wouldn't yell at me. The day he called Mom a stupid bitch when she asked him not to mix the spraying chemicals so close to the house, where we played outside. The day in third grade when Tom was supposed to pick Kelly and I up because she was coming over for a sleepover, but Ray came instead and refused to take Kelly home with us. Saying, "Goddamnit I'm not a fucking cab service!" I couldn't think of any good ones. Maybe when he gave me rides on the three wheeler when I was little. He liked me when I was little. I didn't know why Mom was crying too, until she said, "He's the only one you ever knew". She wasn't crying for him. She was crying for Opa, her Daddy.

I didn't cry at Mary Ellen's wake either. I felt like if I started, I'd never stop. I built a dam of make-up and hair-spray, and prayed that the flood gates wouldn't open. It was the summer after my freshman year of high school. I was tall, thinner than I ever had been, or probably ever will be again. I was dolled up and wearing high heels. I looked confident, I guess, if you can look confident when your insides are churning like a cotton candy machine. The McHale girls gushed over me. Told me I'd gotten so beautiful, that my eyes looked just like Mary Ellen's. But all of a sudden I couldn't breathe and my head felt like it weighed hundreds of pounds. I hadn't eaten in 3 days, since the last time I talked to Mary Ellen, but I asked Maria if she had any Advil in her purse anyway. I took 3 and left the wake early. I could feel my stomach bleeding. It felt right, like there should be something physically wrong in my gut. Stephen Brockway picked me up in his silver

Dodge Ram. I couldn't drive yet. We had dated for a month or so my freshman year. I broke up with him, but he still liked me and I used it to my advantage. He asked if I wanted to drive around and talk. I said, "No. Take me home". So he did. I ate a strawberry Italian ice and laid in Mom and Daddy's bed watching *Gone With the Wind*. It was our favorite movie, Mary Ellen and me. But about the time Vivien Leigh says, "Oh Pa, you talk like an Irishman", I ran to the bathroom and puked up that little bit of Italian ice. I dry heaved and laid on the bathroom floor for 3 hours, looking at the blue and white tile that Mary Ellen must have picked out when she and Ray had the house built. But I didn't cry.

No one came home until late that night. I knew they would be at Ray and Mary Ellen's across the farm. The Aunts would be drinking coffee and avoiding the cake. Martha would laugh that throaty, practiced laugh, a cross between Princess Di and Jackie O, and say, "If I start eating it, I won't stop!" As if she'd ever start eating anything. Beth would be crying. Saying she had a dream about a dove or something, so she knew Mary Ellen had made it to heaven. Mom would be serving the men food. The Aunts would make a fruitless offer to help, but mom would decline. If she said yes, they would just change the subject or begin another memory lane story with a fresh round of tears. Tom and Nora would be playing outside with the little boys. Daddy would slip out when he didn't think anyone would notice and go out to the cemetery. If I had been there he might have taken me with him. But I didn't get up off the floor. I knew the drill and I was tired. I was already so tired.

The morning after the wake, at the funeral, I saw Andy

Meyer go through the communion line, which I found strange. He was a junior at St. Thomas More, and I had gone to prom with him. But it was summer. I hadn't told anyone from school that Mary Ellen had died. He must have read it in the paper or something. I never really asked. Mom and Daddy thought it was so nice that he came. I thought it was creepy and completely uncalled for. I was angry. I was glad to have an emotion in my body. I latched onto the anger like a raft.

At the burial they came out, the tears. And I couldn't stop. When they started lowering the coffin into the ground I lost the control and the dam broke. It wasn't a loud, hysterical sort of crying. Just a solid, silent, consistent flow. When he saw that I was crying, Andy Meyer tried to put his arms around me. Even though I was angry, I didn't have the guts to tell him to fuck off. I brushed his arms away with a passive aggressiveness that was all I could muster.. I just wanted to be close to Bernadette, Mary Ellen's other little sister. She looked and talked so much like Mary Ellen. I didn't know her very well. She lived in Connecticut and her visits weren't exactly frequent. But I had to be hugging her in that moment, when I let myself cry. Andy followed me and kept trying with his damn "comforting" arms, and I'll never forget Bernadette, with what can only be described as a Mary Ellen grace, saying to Andy, "Darling, would you mind helping my husband Jerry into the car over there? The black Lincoln? He won't admit that he needs help, but bending into that little door is just so difficult. Thank you". And she just hugged me, for maybe a few minutes. It was what I needed.

At the reception, I sat with my cousins, Amy and Maggie. They talked endlessly about their memories of Mary Ellen.

I didn't feel inclined to join in the conversation. I was supremely hungry all of a sudden, ripping into the mashed potatoes and gravy with a vengeance. Andy Meyer came up again. Told me he was leaving. I tried to muster my own Mary Ellen grace and thank him for coming. All my cousins thought he was my boyfriend. I didn't have the energy to correct them, to even complain about what I considered Andy's supreme creepiness.

When I got home, I wanted to walk across the farm, down the new straight sidewalk Dad laid down, that turned into the old, crooked, uneven rock that led to Ray and Mary Ellen's and tell Mary Ellen how creepy Andy was, just like I'd walked over and told her that I'd gotten asked to prom by a junior! Just like I'd told her that I'd had my first kiss, that I'd gotten an A on my algebra test, that I'd found a biography on L.M. Montgomery at Barnes and Noble. I wanted to have milk and cookies, just the two of us sitting at the big round table in the afternoons, when she wore her flowery Hawaiian housecoats and I was still wearing my school uniform, before the men came in from the field and the big round table filled up. I wanted to hear stories about when she was little and her brothers Billy and Jimmy used to tease her. I wanted to look through the photo albums in her trunk and listen to all the stories again. I wanted to hear about when she went to California and worked for a bank before she married Ray. Watch *Gone With the Wind*, *An Affair to Remember*, *Roman Holiday*, or *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

But I went home and Mary Ellen wasn't there. I had lost my keys. And no amount of love, sympathy, or attention from people who didn't really matter in the end, was going to change it.

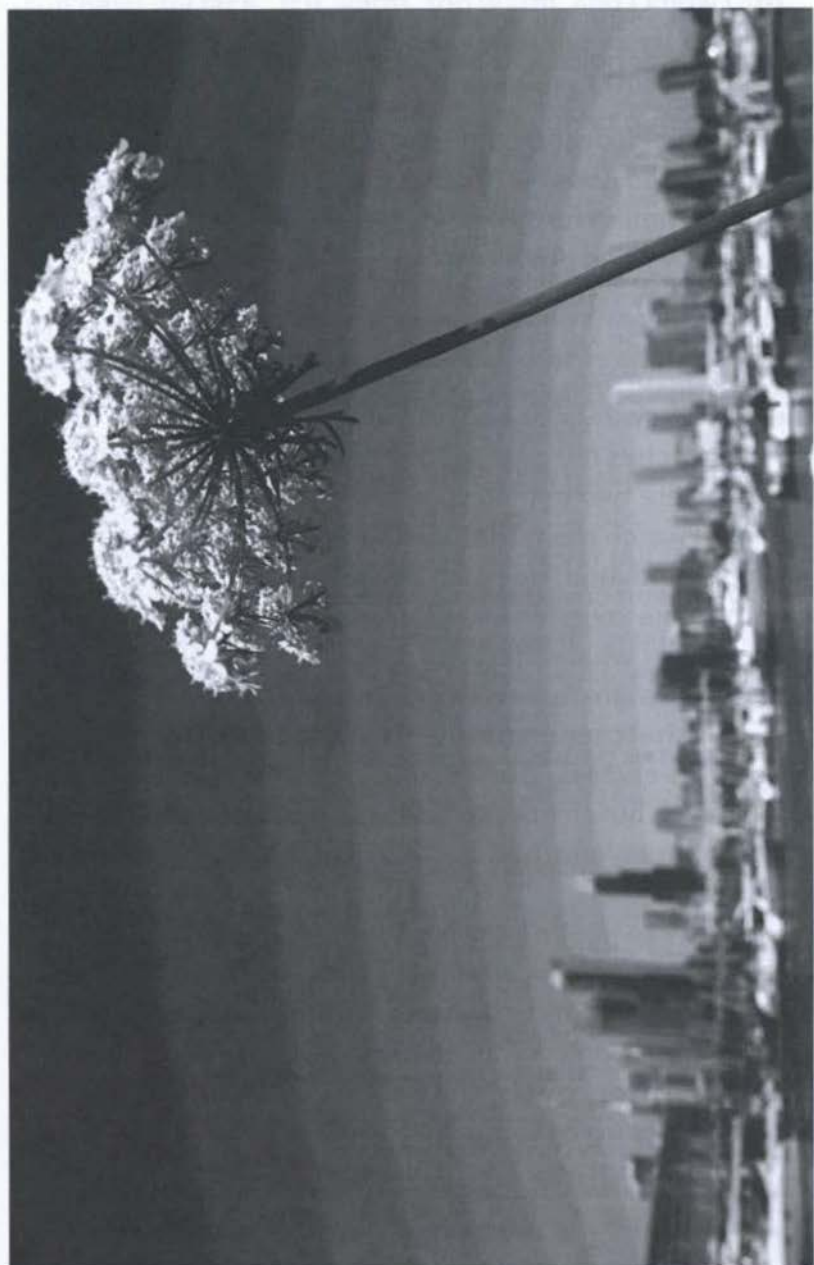
Amaterasu

Marlee Lutz

Clouds roll in on the breeze
Trees lean, the cattails sway beside the pond
As the sky darkens, the winged seek shelter
disguised in the nearest underbrush.
Faces pressed against glass
safe and sound at home
The first summer rain
falls against the landscape
and blurs out the horizon

But there you are, dancing
What everyone avoids, you embrace
Drenched in happiness
you feel your youngest then
As the water settles in your eyes
shining bright and blue
pieces of the sky illuminate your face
and when the sun returns
He looks to you for inspiration.

Chicago Canopy
Alycia Rockey



Be Careful, They Bite

Daniel Davis

The surf is cold, but I wade further into it, letting the water soothe my burned skin. The sun follows me, but the water holds it at bay long enough for me to get some relief.

An old, overweight man is the only person nearby. He smiles and nods his head at me. I do the same, then begin swimming further out, where I have to tread water. It keeps my mind busy.

To my right, a father throws his son from his shoulders. The kid sails a good three feet before splashing into the ocean, giggling. I watch jealously, resisting the urge to swim over and hit the father. I turn away before he catches my gaze, and instead stare back at the shore, where two tanned co-eds are showing off their bodies. I watch them shamelessly as they walk along the shore, just beyond the reach of the water. If I were twenty years younger and more out-going, I think, and then wonder what difference it would make. I turn around and stare out at the ocean.

It stretches endlessly. That's the thing about the ocean—it's endless. Some thousands of miles away is Africa, I know, but the ocean doesn't end there. It spreads north to Greenland, and south to Antarctica, but it doesn't end there, either.

I try to float on my back for a while, but end up treading water again. It's for the best. My arms and legs are getting tired, and maybe they'll stop working altogether, and I won't complain much as I sink down. Someone will save me, surely; the beach is crowded enough so that no one is going to drown today, not even if they want to, which I'm not sure I do. I just want to float, but I can't

seem to. Even floating aimlessly takes work these days.

I close my eyes and tilt my head back, letting the sun have my face. It is warm, too warm, and I know I am going to go into work on Monday with the worst burn since my boyhood, but I don't turn away. I smile, pretending as though my teeth are white enough to reflect the sun back into space, so bright that if anyone is orbiting above they can see me smiling up at them. I wave, for good measure.

The breeze is warm, and I turn into it, opening my eyes. Two seagulls fly overhead, making a racket. I follow them. A group of adolescent boys closer to shore make guns out of their hands and shoot at the birds. The gulls evade the barrage of bullets and fly north.

I look up at the clouds and try to make shapes from them, but they are too formless, too abstract. A rabbit melts into a cactus, and I have never put the two together before and can't quite understand how they're together now. It's amusing in a way, and I begin to laugh, and from the corner of my eye I see a teenage girl giving me an awkward look, which only makes me laugh harder. She swims back to join her friends, glancing at me over her shoulder. I watch her swim, give her a reason to look at me like that.

I close my eyes again, imagining that the ocean floor is miles below my feet, not merely a yard or two. I pretend that there is a whole world down there—not just fish and whales and stingrays, but people, mermaids, aquatic men with tridents and fish tales. There is a ruler down there, a king, who has ruled since time immemorial. He is wise, but he is short-tempered, and he sees me, treading water above his holy land, and he is furious. He plots his revenge, while I, unsuspecting, watch mothers playing with their children. I try to discern this king's

name, but I cannot, for I have no idea what a fish-man king's name would be. I cannot even begin to imagine it.

"Careful."

I open my eyes and turn around. The old, overweight man is treading water behind me, but he is not looking at me, he is looking past me. I turn back around and see something bobbing in the water, something translucent, the sunlight reflecting off and through it in shades of lavender and blue.

"Be careful," the man says again. "They bite."

"What is it?" I say, not sure if I am speaking to the man or to the thing in the water.

"Box jellyfish," he says. "Very poisonous."

I do not back away from it; I stay where I am, watching, more interested than wary.

"Around Australia, they can kill you," the man says. "Here, it just hurts like hell. I have some vinegar in my bag, just in case."

I nod, not sure if he can tell from this angle that I am agreeing, and not sure I really care, either.

"Good thing the tide's going out," he says.

I nod again and slip under the water, trying to see the tentacles. I can't, however, and so I surface again, spitting out water, my hair soaking wet now, hanging down in my eyes. Thinking of the man behind me, I am grateful to still have hair.

"Best be careful," the man says again. "Their bite hurts."

"I think they sting you," I say.

"Huh?"

I turn my back on the jellyfish—not so I can see the man better, but so I can have my back to the creature.

"They sting. They don't bite."

The man looks at me for a moment, then grins and shrugs.

"When it hurts that bad, what's the difference?"

I stare at him, and I guess he takes it for a look of confusion, because he gives me an embarrassed grin and swims off. I watch him go, thinking how badly he needs the sun. The sun, and a larger pair of swim trunks.

I turn back to the jellyfish and watch the tide carry it further out to sea. I wish I could float that easily, free and careless, nothing but the water supporting me. But I can't, and so I watch until the jellyfish disappears into the sun and water, and I think about how the man is right, after all, but how ironic it is that even his being right doesn't make much of a difference, either.

While sitting on an egg from the refrigerator
in a nest made from an Afghan,
I saw ball bearings rolling
into pendulums swinging
in isodromes
and counterbalances
all working in conjunction with pulleys and string
whenever I turned on the television,
until dad threw it down the stairs
and I saw the Godless mess of wires and curiosity
that defied everything I had ever known about machinery
or hatching a miniature version of myself.

James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award Winners

This Fall, two winners were chosen for the James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award, named in honor of the retired dean of the College of Arts and Humanities. Matthew J. Schumake and Jennifer O'Neil will both be honored with a cash prize and the opportunity to read their works in a reading at the Doudna Black Box Theatre on December 9, 2009, at 4:30pm.

You will find a short biography of each author and their winning entries on the following pages.

Matthew J. Schumake is a senior at EIU and expects to graduate in spring 2010. This semester he is studying poetry with Dr. Nonaka. Matthew says of his work, "I have always enjoyed writing, but I hadn't really ventured into poetry until taking her class. I always enjoyed the room that is allowed in prose to express things thoroughly, and poetry had seemed rather intimidating until now. [These poems] are among the first in that voyage. I hope you enjoy them."

Matthew has won the Fall 2009 James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award for his poems "Cartoon Heads Will Roll," "Tweedledee," and "An Army of Maggots Rejoices."

Cartoon Heads Will Roll

While sitting on an egg from the refrigerator
in a nest made from an afghan,
I saw ball bearings rolling
into pendulums swinging
into dominoes
and counterbalances
all working in conjunction with pulleys and string
whenever I turned on the television,
until dad threw it down the stairs
and I saw the Godless mass of wires and circuitry
that defied everything I had ever known about machinery
or hatching a miniature version of my self.

Tweedledee

In Charleston, it rains
on Sunday afternoons.
They play jazz on the radio, and
my goldfish just swim for miles.

On days like these,
I smoke cigarettes in the bathtub
and I laugh.

It makes me think of when
you tried to do it, and
the smoke just lingered, heavy
in a cloud around your head.
I know you had a terrible time,
but those are the things I remember most.

And hell,
I don't know what you'd call it—
maybe love,
but on days like these,
I just wish that you'd call and tell me
to get the bird out of your bathroom
or finish the painting I've been doing on your door.

My conversations with portraits of Frida Khalo
are a lot less fun now without you
counting her eyebrows
with a Brooklyn accent,
One!

I don't know how I'll get along
without you here to tell me
that I've been dipping my brushes in wine,
but you laughed at me too, then.

I guess I'll be fine,
but my goldfish—well,
they miss you terribly.

An Army of Maggots Rejoices

If all of the rotten banana peels
are just dead birds,

and all of the wind-tossed garbage bags
are just lonely kittens
convulsing in the gutter,

will there be any room in heaven,
after what the lawnmower has done
to all of the tiny tufts of leaves
that were just baby bunnies—eager
to try out their brand-new eyes?

Jennifer O'Neil is a second-year graduate student in English with a creative writing emphasis who will soon be writing her graduate thesis in fiction and memoir. Her goal is to eventually earn a Ph.D. and teach English at the university level. Jennifer is also the President of Writer's Ink, the student creative writing organization at EIU.

Jennifer has won the Fall 2009 James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award for her creative nonfiction essay "Fear."

Fear

- 1) Noun: a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined; the feeling or condition of being afraid
- 2) Fear is trudging 17 miles through the woods at age 15 wearing nothing but jean shorts, a t-shirt, and flip flops when it's 23 degrees outside because you're sure that this time she really will shoot you. Fear is hiding in your high school gym after school and pleading with your fellow students who all hate you not to tell her where you are because you know it's gonna be really bad this time. It's calling the cops on her when she puts a loaded gun to your forehead when you're 12 and watching in disbelief as they buy her lies because she shows them her own badge. Fear is lying in bed pretending to be asleep and praying that, just this one time, she'll actually let you sleep through the night, be it restless or not. It's not knowing if you're going to have enough money for groceries this month. It's trying to convince yourself that this time next year you'll have a boyfriend whom you love rather than a bodybag and a funeral to attend. It's realizing all too late

that all four of your tires were slashed in a very bad neighborhood at 1am and being thankful that you were stupid enough to drive on them anyway. It's being blamed for the stroke your father had when you know damn well that it was because she caused his blood pressure to spike, probably by yelling at you for something you didn't do. It's sleeping in a strange house and being convinced that because a light came on upstairs when no one was up there all day, there's an axe murderer in the house. It's the irrational fear of amputation and vowing that if it ever happens to you, you'll end your own life because you don't want to live in an incomplete body. It's climbing on top of the doghouse and screaming like a little girl because, well you *are* a little girl, and because there is what you deem to be a "huge" snake mere feet away from you. It's dropping straight down from 50 feet in the air and just knowing that you're going to die, even though you're strapped into a secure seat, and then wanting to do it again. And again. And again. It's blocking out certain memories, or at least pretending to, because they trigger irrational fear. It's being diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder and knowing exactly where they stemmed from. It's opening up to people, no matter how long you've know them, because you just know they're either going to feel sorry for you or want nothing to do with you. It's riding a horse named after the god of war who clearly does not *want* you to be riding him. Fear is realizing that within a year you'll be completely on your own in the world and you have no idea what your plan is yet because suddenly, after five years of college, you're not so confident about your intended path anymore. It's seeing how fragile life is and hoping you don't lose anyone else anytime soon. It's not knowing if your father, whom you haven't talked to in

over seven years because he and his wife disowned you, is even still alive. It's anticipating what your mother is going to say when you tell her you can't come home for Thanksgiving this year because you have to work. It's being chased by a rooster that does *not* want you to clean out his pen and *will* draw blood to prove it. It's being told by your step-mother that if you don't beat the shit out of a girl at school who picked a fight with you, you're going to have the shit beat out of you when you get home. It's being bred to fight, (everyone but *her*, of course), when all you really wanna do is play basketball and read. It's dreading going to school because she made your own dad shave your head on Christmas Day when you were 15 and now you have to wear hats that school officials of course won't let you wear, and you're so hated by your classmates that they inform you that they really hope it's because you have cancer. It's her pulling you out of the boxing ring during a match the day one of your "friends" tells her you're getting a C in math and being beaten till you can't breathe, and then having to explain to everyone at school the next day that the busted lip and black eye you show up with are from the boxing match, even though everyone knows they're not.

Chapbook Winner

Daniel Davis

Daniel Davis is a first year graduate student studying English with a Creative Writing Emphasis. He is the winner of the 2009 Chapbook competition. Students who won awards for their publications in the Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 editions of *The Vehicle* were eligible to compete for their own publication, produced by Sigma Tau Delta. Daniel's work stood out among the many brilliant submissions in the competition. His work can be found on pages 45, 72, and 84 of this edition of *The Vehicle*. Daniel was gracious enough to answer our questions about his writing process and tell us about his favorite reads.

The Vehicle :Who or what inspires your writing?

Daniel : I guess I get most of my ideas from the age-old question: "What if..." Sometimes this is because of a movie I'm watching, or a book I'm reading, where some bit of dialogue or something sets my mind on a whole other course. Sometimes it comes from conversations I overhear. Most often, it's just something that pops unannounced into my troubled imagination, sometimes in a dream, most often in the normal course of the day. A light bulb will go off (or, in a more accurate metaphor, explode), and I'll say: "Hey, wouldn't this make a great story..." Then I write it, and pray it turns out as good as I think it will.

The Vehicle: How would you explain your writing process?

Daniel: I just write. Sometimes I start with a phrase, an idea, or a title; sometimes I just start and see where the

hell I go with it. I always write for myself, though, first and foremost; screw other people's opinions, if I don't enjoy it at least a little bit, I won't keep it. However, I do greatly value other people's opinions (I've often been convinced to like pieces I otherwise despised), and I absolutely love it when somebody sees something in my stories that I didn't intend or see for myself.

The Vehicle: Is writing one of your long-term goals?

Daniel: Hell yes! I've been creating stories before I could even write; I'm not about to stop now! But seriously: yes, it is a long-term goal. If I can be a successful writer, fantastic. If I can make creative writing part of whatever occupation I fall into, fantastic. If I can go through a series of dead-end jobs while continuously writing on the side, fantastic. Please note that these options appear in descending order of preference.

The Vehicle: How would you describe your writing style?

Daniel: In a word: realistic. I think reality is important; whether you're writing about your grandmother's banana pie, or topless animatronic superwomen flying around on unicorns, you have to keep it real. Suspension of disbelief only goes so far; I try to stay true to the story, even if that means going places I never wanted to go with it.

As far as "theme" or "tone" would go, my stories tend to be dark. Like, holy crap someone's gonna die in a not nice way. And probably someone you like or care for. I've been forced to label my writing in the past, and I've used the phrases "dark fiction" and "literary horror" pretty much interchangeably, but neither of those really covers

it. And that's not to say my stories are all super-depressing; I'd like to think some are upbeat, even empowering (please?). But yes, I am definitely more interested in the dark side of life, and I think a lot of people are too, whether they like admitting it.

The Vehicle: Name three books you recommend reading.

Daniel:

1) *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* by Cormac McCarthy. It's dense, complicated, bloody, emotional, and the character of the Judge is one of the greatest literary villains of all time. Basically, it's one of those novels you either love or hate. I love it. So does Tommy Lee Jones, which is all the endorsement you need.

2) *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. This is perhaps the only book I was introduced to in class that ever truly stuck with me. I read it over Thanksgiving Break my freshman year, when I was bed-ridden. It took me places. I mean that in a good way.

3) *Collected Stories* by Raymond Carver. It's got all of his short stories, even the original drafts of some of them. Seriously, with only two stories, Carver turned my perception of the short story upside down. Reading him is so wonderful, it's almost painful.

The Vehicle: Who are some of your favorite authors?

Daniel: My favorite authors, in no particular order: Stephen King; Cormac McCarthy; Dean Koontz (his older work); Richard Matheson; Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child; Hemingway (short stories); William Faulkner; Ray-

mond Carver; Alan Moore; Yann Martel; Bentley Little; Mickey Spillane; Ambrose Bierce; Edgar Allan Poe; F. Paul Wilson; and of course the *Goosebumps* series by R.L. Stine, which can probably be blamed for making me into the twisted son of a gun I am today. I also read a lot of nonfiction, about anything that interests me, though the two non-fiction authors I actually follow are Simon Winchester and Erik Larson. (Yeah, I have diverse reading habits.)

The Vehicle: What are you reading now?

Daniel: I'm currently reading *The Crossing* by Cormac McCarthy. Here's a partial look at some authors whose books are currently stacked atop my dresser, waiting to be read: Faulkner; Gabriel Garcia Marquez; Raymond Carver; Joyce Carol Oates; Dashiell Hammett; Philip K. Dick; Shakespeare; E.M. Forster; *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (complete with hieroglyphs!); Toni Morrison; Sophocles; W. Somerset Maugham; *The U.S. Armed Forces Survival Guide*; Louis L'Amour; and *I Am America (And So Can You)* by Stephen Colbert. Plus a whole lot of others. I'm gonna be busy for a while.

Contributors

Jeanette Saribekian: I was born on the north side of Chicago in 1986. Born to one of the most cultured cities, if not in the world, certainly the United States, it was easy to be inspired – by life, by nature, by trial, errors, and lessons learned. Somewhere along the line, I was inspired to become a teacher and that's what I'm striving for here at Eastern Illinois University. I'm a super senior with a major in English, a minor in Medieval Studies, and a passion for everything Art.

Marlee Lutz: I'm currently a junior majoring in English and I work part-time for a non-profit organization, which I enjoy. Between classes, work, and homework, I find time to play drums, cruise in my old Ford Falcon, and take long walks around Charleston with my good friends. So far, my favorite classes here have been the creative writing ones, particularly poetry. I can never resist eating deviled eggs or broccoli cheese casserole.

Stephani Pescitelli: I am a senior Environmental Biology student here at Eastern and I work as a Peer-Advisor in the Office of Study Abroad. I plan to continue my traveling experiences after I graduate and am also interested in pursuing opportunities and career options that would allow me to develop my writing skills. I love science, but it is useless until it is communicated effectively! My current research involves growing edible mushrooms on office paper waste, and in addition to this research I am also interested in any project that seeks creative solutions to social and environmental problems.

Lauren Elizabeth Davidson: I'm from Lake Bluff, a north-shore suburb. I'm going to be a high-school English teacher.

Beats, bears, Battlestar Galactica.

Bryan Rolfsen: I am a senior biological sciences major, yet I have an undying love for fiction. My time is generally spent jamming with my band, Howard, getting my groove on in the Chuck, keeping up with that ever-growing tsunami of scientific learning, or working. I've been writing of my own volition since my early teen years. Nowadays most of my creative literary ideas are compressed into lyric form, but every now and then I catch the prose bug.

Melinda Knight: I came to central Illinois from Alabama in 2003. A paramedic for 20 years, I decided to rethink my professional goals and enter Eastern Illinois University. My current major is English. I credit my knowledge not only to the great professors in the English Department, but to the late Joann Tidwell and Don Jones, both of which were my high school English Teachers. I live in Charleston Illinois with my partner of 7 years and our daughter, not to mention our plethora of pets. I am an avid Alabama football fan.

Nickolas Alexander: I'm from Omaha, NE. I first started writing in January of 2009. I plan on graduating in Spring 2010, and furthering my education in Graduate School. I enjoy reading, cooking, and playing soccer.

Stephen E. Garcia: I am 22 and a Scorpio. I like jogging, playing piano, and I love my silly girl very much... she is my muse, after all.

Rashelle McNair: I am a senior, studying for a degree in English with Creative Writing and Medieval Interdisciplinary Minors. I love to read and write: without these two loves, I wouldn't be me.

Danielle Shirtino: I am a twenty old year old English Major from Coal City, Illinois. This is my first semester at EIU, as I am a transfer student from Joliet Junior College. I hope to acquire my teaching certificate and teach at the high school level. In my spare time, I love to dance and to catch up on whatever reading I am interested in at the time.

Steven Cox (Simyona Deanova): Though I dabble in many things, I am above all else a genre writer. I have often received criticism for this, but I fully believe in writing what suits you best. The fact that I have received criticism merely tells me I still have a ways to go in making my work stand on its own. Fortunately, I enjoy a challenge. In the words of Kingsley Amis, "If you can't annoy someone, there's little point in writing."

Mark Rheaume: I am a sophomore Music Performance Major at EIU. In my free time, I enjoy writing and taking showers, and occasionally both at the same time.

Matthew J. Schumake: I am an English Major with a minor in Professional and Creative Writing. After graduation, I plan on moving to Kodiak Island with my goldfish, Marco and Polo, where we will listen to Dr. Dog Records and raise plants that are genetically modified to resist genetic modification.

Ashton Temby: I am a junior, English Major with Creative and Professional Writing Minors. I am a member of Alpha Phi.

Ashley Wright: I am a senior English Major with minors in Professional Writing and Creative Writing. I am the President of English Club, Secretary of Writer's Ink, and a member of Sigma Tau Delta and Harry Potter Club. I plan to be an editor and hope to publish fantasy books someday.

Daniel Paquin: I am a senior English major with Creative Writing Minor. I will begin the Master's program in Literary Studies with Creative Writing Emphasis here at EIU in Spring 2010. Having been born in an abandoned Carl's Jr. just south of Phoenix, Arizona, I spent much of my early childhood telling stories to road-weary armadillos. This pastime led to my ridiculous sense of humor and my lack of a general sense of the difference between reality and fantasy. My favorite past time involves hiding in the bushes at water parks, near the fake rock-speakers, and unscrewing the joints of waterslides. I have also started working on my first full-length novel and first screenplay.

J.T. Dawson: I really don't know what to say about myself, as my life really has not yet been put down into words. I never really thought about doing that. I guess if I had to put down something it would read: I grew up. I traveled. Then there was college. I fell in love once. I became a writer. Here I am.

Nicole Reichert: My name is Nicole, but I prefer to be called Nikki. I am a freshman here at EIU and I am currently working on an English Major with a minor in Spanish. I love to write creatively in my extra time and I usually write about whatever I am exposed to.

Daniel Davis: I am a graduate student with a creative writing emphasis. I also did my undergrad work at Eastern. I consider writing to be an addiction; I've tried to stop, I really have, but I just can't!

Justine Fitton: I am a joyful 21+1 year old girl with a lot of questions and not a lot of answers. I only sleep in the dark, and I only sing when I know the words, which is usually, if not possibly, always. I may or may not be in love with you.

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"Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals."

—Don DeLillo