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Mary Lieske

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Archives

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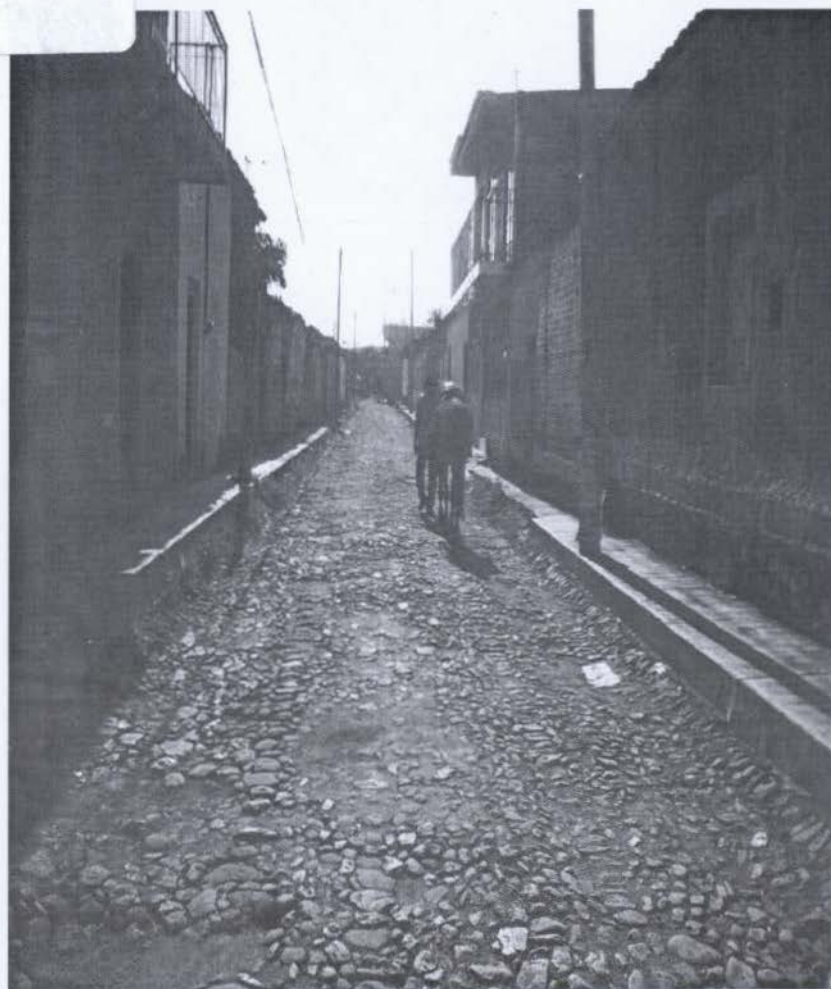
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Spring 2010

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Fall 2009-Spring 2010

Vehicle Awards

Best Overall (Winnie Davis Neely Award):

Kimberly Hunter-Perkins, *Fat Girl Thongs* (spring 2010)

Poetry:

1st Place: Sean Slattery, *Iris Contemplates A Barren Earth*
(spring 2010)

2nd Place: Ashton Temby, *My Compulsion* (spring 2010)

3rd Place: Mary Lieske, *Muse* (spring 2010)

Prose:

1st Place: Doug Urbanski, *Coming Home* (spring 2010)

2nd Place: Kimberly Hunter-Perkins, *Conversations with a
Sniper* (spring 2010)

3rd Place: Daniel Paquin, *Letters* (spring 2010)

Sunny Days

Ryan Pool

An early morning sky taken captive
by the orange fiery sphere mixes
brights with dulls— reds with blues,
that pierce my window awakening my eyes to

a room of creamy pastels encompassing
my mind with simple colors
that beam through the curtains
straight into my hazy vision.

A momentary glimpse outside
is beauty of its own, but cannot
override the masquerade of colors
dancing with opposite sexed colors

in an awkward waltz with sudden
shifts in tense—it's here
until it's there and then it's gone
until it's back again—but for how long?

The sun will fade, and I'll remain
awestruck by the common display
that leaves me in my room lost
in the simplicity of beauty.

Atlantis

Doug Urbanski

It'd be nice to say you sank
like a sea town shrouded
in dark mythical mystery.
We could posit theories
like scholars
about just what happened.

A pissed off god here,
a tectonic shift there—

Just so long as it's grand
and epic and bewildering,
I'd have no issue with your fate.

But let's be honest:

Poseidon didn't cast you under the waves
for not making favor with him on time
and the ever changing earth
didn't swallow you like a tasty morsel.

Any small-town historian
could go into the details:
where people were paid off
to move out of their homes
(closer to town I'm sure)
and let water flood the valley
like God pouring water
for forty days and nights.

But the human ties to the lake's bottom
are likely dead and buried
as the townships are dead and sunk,
though I'm sure they'd be glad
to see their land put to use:

A lake spilling over its bluffs expanding recklessly with no respect for ground.

Those sacrificial lambs weren't enough;
these waters are still hungry.

Garbage City

Kate Vandermeer

Scraps of bread,
Birthday cake,
And last night's supper.
The feast is plentiful
In the land of rubbish.

A foreigner drops
A paper bomb
Into the garbage metropolis,
Overflowing the once
Perfectly stacked towers.

The conurbation in ruins
All over the tiled sidewalk,
As pedestrians pass by
Noticing, but uninterested
In the city's mass destruction.

Fat Girl Thongs

Kim Hunter-Perkins

Fat Girl Thongs

They make them, you know.

With pink butterflies and rhinestone hearts.

In sizes unimaginable.

I watch the woman in the soft peach turtleneck
with too much mascara and jeans too tight
snag a pair, furtively tucking them between
a pastel shirt and a polka dot scarf.

She questions her right to leopard print and bows.

I smile, pulling pairs of turquoise and red,
piling silk and lace into a heap

I drop onto the counter,
a flamboyant pile of panties,
obscene little trophies I claim for us both.

Coming Home

Doug Urbanski

At about six o'clock that morning, Langley rang in to tell me that I was coming home. I was to pack up and board the soonest train out of Moscow headed to Norway and that my contact would have tickets. That was it. No hello-goodbye exchange, just the information they wanted to give me. The click of the receiver signaled the end of the conversation, and I simply followed suit.

Russian snow obscured most of my sight from inside the tiny apartment the agency provided for me, one no bigger than what most folks were allowed to call home, but that's how it was supposed to be: I was to keep up appearances of a simple, single Russian man who went about his daily routine without fail, and most of all, without question. Communication was minimal but necessary; I was to socialize with fellow tenants, such as my elderly neighbor Mrs. Fedotova, catch up on daily gossip, and watch my surroundings meticulously so as to remain vigilant when the Soviets start marching outside their borders.

I had placed the receiver back on its hook slowly, the months of paranoia catching up to me and convincing me momentarily that there was someone listening in on the entire conversation. Moments from now, secret police will break down my door and drag me off to the KGB holding cells where they'll torture me, maybe to get some information or maybe just to watch me squirm. But they never did it. In all forty-seven months of me living and learning Moscow's ins and outs, never once did I end up on the business end of a Soviet's TT-33 semi-automatic pistol. As far as I could tell, so far I'd remained invisible, unseen by Stalin's eyes, but nevertheless

something tugged at me, suggesting maybe I had slipped up somewhere. Maybe they did find me out but they were just waiting for the right moment.

These feelings were routine by now, the first thoughts in my head when waking up early in the morning. After a while, you grow used to them, but they're still there; they never leave you and they remind you of their omnipresence in all of your actions. Are you picking up your groceries in a Russian fashion? When you drink coffee, do you look American while doing so? When you speak to them in their own tongue, do you sound like a native or a tourist? Or a spy? I had been told by my teachers that my command of Russian was pitch-perfect and my accent was indiscernible from someone who's lived in Moscow for as long as someone such as Mrs. Fedetova, but even after these votes of confidence, you're never one-hundred percent positive about your own credibility because you yourself know that you're not one of them, you're only pretending.

The door to the hallway was deathly cold, as usual, since heating was a luxury unavailable to us, the revered proletariat. I opened the door only slightly enough to peek out and check if the shared water closet for the boarding house was occupied and, judging from its open door, I assumed it was not so I slipped on the shoes—old socks and all—and scampered down to wash myself as best I could with the nearly freezing water. The low temperature inspired many of us to make our time in the water closet as short as possible, and as such, our hygiene a lower priority. After all, I'd rather smell unpleasant than freeze to death, and since the rest of the people in the building subscribed to this same philosophy, I felt in good company.

My way back to my room was interrupted by delightful, old Mrs. Fedetova herself, making some sort of stew with whatever scraps she still had. This also was routine, as she was a stubborn woman with a heart of gold, always willing to share what little she had with her neighbors—especially the young ones—and would only take no for an answer if you could give a good enough reason, but no one could. So reluctantly I accepted her kindness, although I know it was one of the few joys I could give her.

Ivanna Fedetova, the proud widow of a man who fought in the Bolshevik Revolution and died for not only his wife but the rest of his oppressed brethren, and I wondered if he'd be proud to see what he'd accomplished, knowing that his death was a part of this higher purpose which brought them a dour present, but eventually it would all be okay, right? As far as Mrs. Fedetova was concerned, everything was okay; she proudly hung her husband's posthumous medals above the closest thing in her apartment to a mantle, next to an old photograph of her standing next to the proud Bolshevik, a young boy between the two of them. That boy, I came to find out, followed in his father's footsteps, and served protecting Mother Russia.

"Young Boris acted so much like his father," she said, stirring her concoction and offering up that smile that showed she was satisfied with her own child's death because she knew what purpose it served. "I would've liked so much to have been able to serve along side him, but they had no room for women my age on the battlefield. His cousin, though—Tanya, I think her name was...?—she was a sniper. She killed a great deal of fascists when she served, would've killed more too had that nasty German not thrown the grenade at her."

"Did Tanya die as well?" I asked hesitantly, fearful it would bring back sorrowful memories, but I remembered who I was talking to: an old woman who saw the war more as a time for her closest loved ones to take up arms against enemies of their divine ideology. I believed her when she said she'd gladly take up a rifle if her bones weren't so brittle.

"No, she lived," she said almost somberly, "but she lost a leg and her right eye in the process. I think that was her good eye." Mrs. Fedetova went back to stirring the broth and its warm aroma pervaded my nostrils, reminding me I was hungry and hadn't eaten in a few days. She reached for a bowl with some difficulty and poured me some of the stew, a larger portion for me than herself, and insisted I partake of it. Politely, I at least tried to negotiate a lesser portion, but her stubbornness persisted and I gave in. "Did you serve in the last war?"

I looked up from the stew. For a moment, I forgot everything: my fake name, my real name, English, Russian, where I even was, but then I remembered that this was not unusual for her to ask in her older age, as she had asked this several times before, and I had to merely explain to her that no, I was far too young.

She chuckled when I gave her the usual response, and just shook her head, slapping her forehead. "Where the times have gone, Boris?" she asked either her son or her husband, I'm still not positive.

I took my first taste of the soup, taking in the mostly-water mixture mainly because it was hot and had some protein in it, at least more than just pure water would, and it went down with ease. The portion I received was more than filling, mainly because the months I'd spent here led to signifi-

cant shrinkage of my stomach, nothing to the point of emaciation, but certainly allowed smaller quantities to fill me to satisfaction. I stood up, realizing what time it was.

"I'm sorry, but I must be leaving. I'm meeting a friend today and I don't wish to make her wait," I said. The corners of her mouth curled up wryly, as if I had just told her I was going to purchase the services of a prostitute, and I feigned offense; this was the desired effect, as I did not wish to make her think for a second that the woman was the only other American I knew in Russia.

I hugged the old woman and left the room, stopping in my room first to put on heavy clothing so as to better defend myself against the brutal Moscow cold, and stopped on the crisp layer of snow outside the building's stoop. Many of the pedestrians held their head down, dodging the wind or lost in their own troubles, or a combination of both, and I did my best to emulate them. This was what I learned during my time here; not that Ivan was getting ready to march across Europe and take everyone by storm, not that they were plotting with some evil device, but that folks here were about as miserable as the climate they lived in. When I first arrived, I found little to envy of them, and on my way out I was finding even less.

I walked past the government-owned shops, trudging through the deepening snow banks to a café I knew she would be at. I opened the door and inside, sure enough, there she sat, smoking a cigarette and drinking what was no doubt coffee with a good quantity of vodka in it. I took the seat before her, looking around at our surroundings. With the exception of the owner and a couple of regulars, she and I were alone.

"How are you this fine day?" I asked her, drawing her cup towards me.

"Fine," she answered as I took a sip, confirming my suspicions. She too had an advanced learning of the Russian language, but I don't think hers was as developed as mine; she arrived in Moscow a year or so after I had, and before that my contact was a man on his way out. Still, she wore her social camouflage well, and what few words she chose to say in Russian she said them with exceptional annunciation and, at times, seductiveness.

"Shall we take a walk?"

She took a moment to answer, likely because she was finishing her coffee and she was struggling to think of what to say, when finally she came up with a nod. We stood up simultaneously and made our way outside the door, ladies first, where when we met the unforgiving cold we clustered together for warmth and disguise. Public affection, though a rarity, was not extinct as far as I could tell so our disguise was momentarily that of a young couple strolling to the park.

The park, an open and vastly empty place, was the regular meeting place for me and the contact and today it was to be our final rendezvous. We sat on the park bench still glazed with snow and looked momentarily at each other, leaning in.

"So, I hear you're headed home," she whispered in English.

"And I hear you're my ticket out."

"I've *got* your ticket out," she responded, grinning. But the smile did not last long. I knew she didn't look forward to today, as she'd be lonely at least for a while, at least until

they sent someone new or brought her home as well, but judging by the standard cycle, she still had a while yet. "Did you know you were leaving this soon?"

"Nope. They never mentioned it." And I had never asked, at least in the last few months. I had noticed that my concern for U.S. affairs had dropped significantly but not to the point, that I could tell, that I'd be defecting any time soon. "What about you, huh? Did they say anything to you?"

"No." It was such a simple word—so commonly used in the U.S.A., and when she used it here in Russia, my heart skipped a beat. It was these moments I enjoyed here, brief lapses where I could regain my American identity and not keep on the mask, and I sensed she too enjoyed our time together. We had no romantic feelings, or at least if we did, they'd be borne simply from the fact that she and I were two capitalist pigs in a den of communist lions, but at least we knew that if it all went to hell, we wouldn't be alone.

"What's the time on the ticket?" I asked her, hoping to break the lull in our English conversation. She pulled a slip of paper from her inner pocket and looked at them closely.

"The train leaves today at one, and assuming it makes it to the harbor on time, you'll take a boat called the *Aurora* to Norway. When you get there, you'll meet another contact—Bromley, I think his name is."

"Will he be waiting for me?"

"Hopefully. Langley didn't tell me much else."

I simply nodded slowly and looked at her. I knew this would be the last time I'd see her, and she knew it as well, so I pulled her in close, intending to kiss her on the cheek. She must have had a premonition of this because she turned her

head so her lips met mine. It was brief, but electric. We smiled at each other and parted ways, and as I walked away I prayed my replacement arrived soon, or that she made it home shortly after me; we were all each other had and I shuddered at the idea of her being by herself with these people.

I walked back to the apartment, both pleased and sorrowful simultaneously; joyful I was going home, away from bitter Moscow, and disappointed that I was leaving her behind. Entering the building, I caught wind of the smell of Mrs. Fedetova's soup, and for a second I thought, hell, I'll miss her too. She heard my footsteps and peeked out, and I couldn't help but look warmly upon that wrinkled relic who'd seen both Russia's pre- and post-revolution's world and was nothing but pleased with the latter. The world she so loved was hardly what I considered lovable, but this was her home and she thanked the Party every single day of her life that they overthrew the tsar and made it what it was now. Maybe in a few years it'd reach that level of perfection they'd promised, although according to the Party it was perfect, but the only way they'd see that is for us to be wiped off the map.

I began packing, as quickly as I could, but thankfully it didn't take much; I only needed my two passports—my real and fake ones—and as much money as I could carry, with a small wardrobe of clothes, enough to make the journey back to the U.S. I heard slow footsteps creep up to my doorway and behind me stood my neighbor, curiously amused by my busywork. "My, my, you're in a hurry." I thought for a moment and pumped out the excuse I could come up with.

"I'm seeing my grandmother in Leningrad. She's fallen ill."

"Of course she will." The phone rang, which was un-

usual as the only persons who had my number were Langley and my other contact, but they'd never call at this time. This perplexed me to the point of stopping in my packing, and I just stared at the phone in confusion. Thinking she was doing me a favor, Mrs. Fedetova picked up the phone.

"*Pryvet?*" she answered. Her eyes widened. She was greeted by a strange language, and immediately she hung up. She looked at me, and simply asked, "Alexei?"

A lump grew in my throat with astonishing speed and I choked up. I could say nothing to her, the fearful and accusative stare beaming from her eyes. I saw that everything I had told her in the past few months were becoming null and void in a mere matter of seconds and there was no hope out of this, and there was no way of knowing how this would end. But I had an idea of how. Badly.

She picked up the phone, telling the operator she needed the police and out of some strange operative instinct, I pulled the phone from the wall. She let out a wail that only made the panic rise. Her shout evolved into an air raid siren, and for a moment I was no longer in the ratty old apartment, I believed momentarily that I was outside, looking out to a horizon no longer like Moscow's dingy line of factories and preserved remains from tsarist Russia, and more like Washington's bustling landscape of alabaster structures and a giant white spire. The imager was suddenly interrupted when I was blinded by a flash. My sight returned in time to see a cloud, a smoking tree of destruction blossoming the ground growing at a frightening rate. My imagination convinced me that this is the precise consequence if she called the police.

I shut the door.

When it was done, I picked up my suitcase and careful-

ly stepped over the lifeless mass on the ground, and I washed my hands with the cold water. I walked into her apartment and called the police myself, telling them there had been an accident. I could've told them there was a murder, but what would've been the point? They wouldn't have investigated, especially not some aging Party supporter who would've expired soon anyway. After all, theirs was a perfect society.

Contemplation
Nicholas Gifford



Merciless

Rosalia Pecora

Venom oozes from your
vindictive mouth

Slowly makes its way down,
forms around the corners
of your sneaky lips

Phrases like poison arrows
shoot at me, leave me
numb
speechless
lifeless.

You stand over me,
ready to strike again
at any moment.

Chemistry

Mary Lieske

He taught bonds and symbols and balance,
showing a world of chemistry in harmony,
marking how hydrogen and oxygen met.
We worried over exams and homework,
connecting states of matter with states of mind,
passing notes to pass the time.

The familiar dance of chalk across the board,
laughing with assurance that all was well.
The room bright,
the hall loud,
seniors loitering in the halls.
The voice on the PA sure,
met with disbelief;
confusion and horror told us
it could not be true.

We waited for him to dust off his chalky hands, explain,
give reasons for the application of heat and force
making atoms bond together in chains
forcing those bonds to break.
We questioned him through the second crash,
the third and fourth announcements,
the fifth, the phone calls,
about the answers on page thirty-four,
if the test was multiple choice,
if it was real.

We took up pens and pencils,
arranged textbooks and notebooks,
passed hurried notes,
and studied chemistry.

He-Who-Stopped-Talking

Justin Sudkamp

Through the haze of a dozen or so cigarettes,
The cacophony of friends, and a few beers,
The music crept on inebriated air.

It fluttered onto my neck, sidled its way
Up and brushed the edges of my ears.

Now he's here. Over by the door in his
Black leather jacket with the tan strip
Across the back and that damn smile.

The man who gave me a burned copy of a CD.
The CD that kept me more company. That man.

I make my way away from him, to the windows.
The edges are sealed in concrete, no opening.
Wind sweeps rain against them, fighting the music.

His reflection grows as he makes his way to me.
Placing my hands against the cold glass I push.

Hoping the pane will pop free. To fall and scatter
Against the rain slick sidewalk. The fragments
Hidden by the sparkling grass. Another can step on them.

His fingers come to rest on the front edges of my hips.
His lips separate to let roll his apologies.

I can taste and smell the musical memories now
As his arms contract and pull me in; as
Words come slow to my ear. Someone ups the volume.

I make them skip the rest.
I do not wish him heard.

In Which Iris Contemplates a Barren Earth

Sean Slattery

As I lie lost in rapture, I contemplate the coming days.

What days of dust have seen this world, what days of rust
have yet to dawn.

There can be nothing made, for all the makers have departed;
yet I am here and I am one.

Thus the future shall be of the clay of the moulding of mine
own hands.

If though, I choose to stand in watchful silence
and let the cinders incline to will.

What world will these endings make?

Shall I watch the daybreak over aeons unremembered?

Shall I see the sun a distant spark, a faint red heart where
once a fire?

Are my memories but delusions of some ancient want?

No, better to have a world fallen than a world unknown.

The ways which we have made, no more; though the shapings
in the dust still linger.

And as that dust does linger, so do we.

Mankind is in all that it does, and remains in all that it has
seen.

Such that, when alien hands do cup the soil
and tasteless lips do drink the seas of dreams

and eyes formed in the light of other stars do stand in the age
of our own

They shall speak of us, and they shall say,

"Though they have passed into histories
they still remain in all that they have seen
for though nothing remains of their being
their being remains in the nothing that is here
for if we trod upon ground such formed
in spires and peaks and twisted planes
we might in joyous belief proclaim this world as strange and
new,
but our eyes see paths once traveled and turned
for the level ground is ground once trod.
Of God and nature, in all makings and unmakings, ever make;
but only those who once would freely will,
can in their makings and unmakings, unmake."

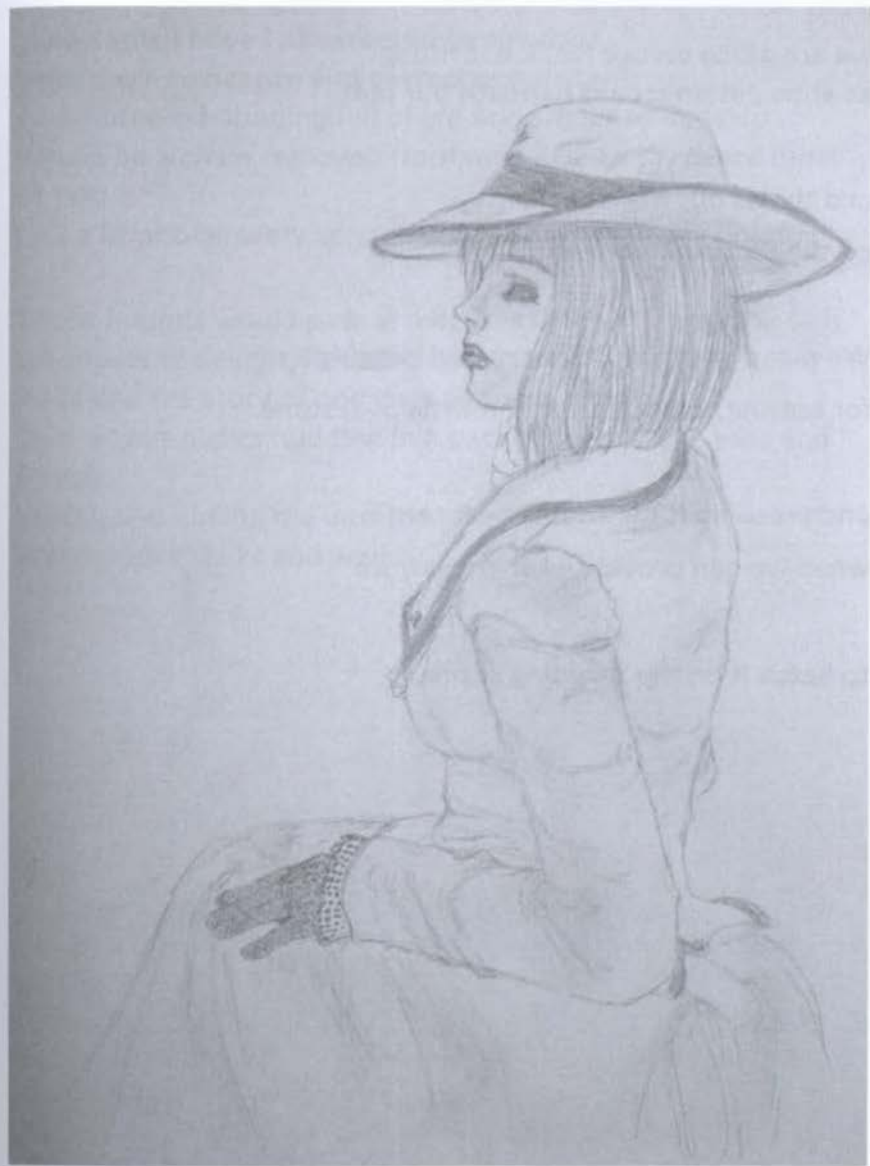
They shall enter in our doorways at the beckoning of silence
They shall pick at our flowered paths, no longer traveled
They shall marvel at our haughty flights
and say, too:

"They had no need, and yet they did.
What god is this that we have found?
What greatness is this that we do mourn?
What minds are these that painted clouds across the sky?
How wrought with grandeur is a kind
that deign to judge the world unjudged!"

Little Lady Sits

Sarah Hadwiger

At the bottom of the World
Nick Corvino



At the Bottom of the World

Nick Canaday

we are alone on our ice floe, drifting
as anticipation creaks beneath our feet

and thaws our frigid certainty
on the dim pink horizon.

We plead with the driving snow, begging
for searing cold to freeze our little oval stone

and preserve it for another winter
when we can provide enough warmth

to hatch it on the receding shore.

Dogma: Mush!

Scott May

When I die I hope I am greeted by my dogs,
With their innocence and perfect senerity.
To find them bounding full of life and smiles as dogs do
Would be a chain removed from my neck, an immense burst
of glee
Like a door of anxiety scratched for 87 years finally opening.

Those hounds would paw at me, greet me with wagging tails,
whimpers of delight, licks and love bites,
All telling the story of dog days of summer to come,
Cold winter nights huddled in a pack of warm tails, toes and
snouts.
Pulling and pulling me into the afterlife of
Walks walks walks and walks.

Thief

Mary Lieske

I fenced a hilltop, your land,
called it mine.

I cursed the ground
you walk, nothing
would grow.

I pawned from your barn
the horse you loved.

I blamed you for
trouble with dogs,
cried for help.

I danced with your wife
under moonlight;
she left you.

I asked devils to
burn your house; they
said you had none.

I led your sheep astray,
sold for pennies.

I begged for
forgiveness.

I stole your
pardon.

Mood

Alycia Rockey



Dodo

Dan Davis

Rick walked out into his backyard and there it was.

He held the garbage bag in one hand, the weight of last night's burnt casserole straining against the fabric. It was another of Lauren's failures, and when she called later that afternoon he would tell her he'd eaten it all, and she'd cook the same thing in a couple weeks, and he would go through the motions again.

With the sound of the game on in the background—the Bears were down again, but when were they not—he nudged the backdoor open, propping it with his foot. From there, the garbage bin was just a couple feet away, and he could throw the bag in and step back into the house and not miss a beat. It was too damn muggy to linger.

Except he did linger. He stood there and stared.

It was a dodo bird. He knew that right away, because he remembered seeing cartoon drawings of them in grade school. "D" for "Dodo." It was a little over three feet tall, kind of bulky but not fat. Its wings were small, tucked against its side like wilted arms. Its plumage, various shades of light and medium grays, glistened in the afternoon sun, and the bird turned its head to stare at him, its large eyes open and curious.

Rick couldn't move. The bird bobbed its head, its beak opening slightly. Its muscular legs, a dull yellow, seemed to want to take a step forward, but the bird, perhaps cautious of humans after having become extinct, stood still. Instead, it winked at him, the burnt orange eye conveying some senti-

ment, some shared knowledge that caused Rick to let his breath out in relief. The bird ducked its head, as if understanding, but didn't move any closer or further away.

Rick looked around, being careful not to move his head. His yard was separated from the others by a decorative chain-link fence, and he could tell that none of his neighbors were out. He briefly wondered where the bird had come from—the nearest forest was a couple miles away, but of course that only mattered if dodos were forest birds, and who knew that—but then brought his mind back to the fact that no one else was watching the bird but him.

His camera phone was on the kitchen counter. Rick slowly set the garbage bag down on the patio, wincing as something shifted within the bag. The bird watched him, almost patiently, and it winked again, and though he figured there was no significant meaning in it, he winked back just in case.

He eased into the house, wishing he could keep the back door open. It went into place with a soft click, and he watched through the window as the bird took a small step forward, still watching him, then another. Maybe it would come all the way up to the house.

Rick turned around and stepped from the bird's view. Then he ran to the counter and grabbed his phone, opening it to the camera. He ran back to the door, peaking through the window; the backyard was empty. He threw open the door and stepped out, thinking maybe he'd just overlooked the bird—but he could see it, in his neighbor's yard. It looked back at him and squawked once, then took off, running faster than he would've thought possible, and by the time he'd brought his phone up, the bird had disappeared around the side of the house.

Rick looked through the viewfinder on his phone for a moment, then flipped it closed and slid it into his pocket. He stood there, watching where he'd last seen the bird, then picked up the garbage, put it in the bin, and went back inside. An hour later, when Lauren called to check up on him, he didn't mention the bird, nor the discarded casserole. He smiled and laughed at one of his wife's bland jokes, then hung up the phone and watched the rest of the game.

Forgetting

Rashelle McNair

My love
is a pinball
shot
into the long
neck of a bottle,

blossoming bubbles,

bottoming out
against a wall
of thick glass,

dying in
watered down
fire fizzling
slithering through veins

until sun breaks my
view to pieces
on a dirty pillow.

Muse

Mary Lieske

little creature at my side
born of night and light.
don't know where he came from.
hides in shadows
makes faces at my work.
jumps in my bed
keeps me from sleep.
once – at least –
invaded my dreams
so I could see.

little creature has a face
that would scare my friends.
does not like to see me
laugh and talk with them.
little creature yells *mine*
and *I do not like to share.*

little creature,
light that hides,
wisdom old as trees,
curiosity younger
than freshly fallen snow
shows the winding path.

Four Ducks in a Row

Megan Mathy



The Poet in the Pedestrian

Scott May

What poet said "there is no better time than now?" Was he a fool? Had he never thought about taking a nap, waking and then grabbing Now by the throat to shake him up a bit?

Probably not. He was the sort of fellow all the ladies knew. He was the man that everyone wished they could be but hated to witness. He ran while we sat and itched. He sang while we whispered and drank. He shook Now by the neck while we wiped our brow and tugged at our collars.

But no one hates to watch the poet more than I. No one hates to hear him sing or enjoy his talents more than I do. Because I know it is inside of me. The flirty rage, the speed of certainty, the power of the metronome, and the glory of romance sit on my bead spread and nags me like an alarm clock. I know I am made of the same ingredients as the poet but I have not been brave enough to avoid the naps.

If today I threw off those heavy blankets and said, "There Is No Better Time Than Now," with true certainty, a true "man's" beating heart and hard convex chest, I would fail to convince myself. For I am well aware of my pedestrianism, and my longing to be a poet.

My Compulsion

Ashton Temby

minutes pass,
my hands move toward the steady flow.
i stare at the stainless steel hell
that rules my life now.

i inch just enough
for my hands to be sprinkled wet

fear shoves my hands away.

i reach for the soap
and pump three times

sixty seconds
to cleanse every cell.

shaking now,
my hands crawl to the water
that is too close to the steel

warm water forces the soap to drip
but then cold metal stings the back of my hand

envisioning the crawling viruses,
i stiffen.

tears,
minutes pass
my hands try to move toward the steady flow
i stare at the stainless steel hell
that rules my life now...

GOVERNMENT: **illegal activity** lacks spirit.

Everything you need to know

finds support

Unpaid furloughs very real possibility facing **MOTHERS**

hope destroyed in fire



Only critical comments ignorant



because everything just wasn't enough.

Budget cuts end tradition

Stay safe from **CLASSIFIED Illusions**

Emotions run high at our home, too
NO WORRIES murdered family

H1N1 dies humble achiever

Help me understand The 'recipe for a **Death penalty**

Students raise money for **New** **Springtime** eating disorder



What's going on?

Toxic Rain

Jacob Swanson

She crawled over the dull, glowing beads of glass out into the heavy rain, breathing hard and clutching her burning insides; her hair swayed lifelessly in front of her face and droplets of reddish water dripping from their heavy ends told her she was in worse shape than she thought. Not only did it signal her bad condition, but her eyesight was blurred, consistent with her memory. She couldn't remember a thing.

She pulled herself from the wreckage, glancing in all directions. There was nothing but the cold rain and the perverse winds. In the distance she was able to see a flashing light, but it was too far off. It was all she could see.

A flash of pain and she fell to her knees. She stared directly at the ground, trying to overcome the pain. Her eyes averted and swelled up with tears. Her daughter was dead.

She screamed, sharing her pain with the world. She couldn't take it; looking at her lifeless daughter sent back a memory: by avoiding a silhouette, she hydroplaned into the highway's railing. If it weren't for that, then perhaps she'd be dead, too.

The woman mourned, and the flashing light throbbed. She felt sick. She stood up. Soon, several emergency vehicles arrived, but the officers paid her no mind. She simply watched, throbbing. First came the body of her daughter, then came the body of herself.

Memory

Kate Vandermeer

The sun trickles in
Through my partially open curtain,
Illuminating the dark stain on the carpet
From when we decided
To create our own masterpieces.
Using our bare hands.
Painting images
With our set of cheap colored liquids,
You made purple hearts
While I imprinted orange hands,
All the while forgetting
We never laid down the newspapers.

Killmercialize Me

Greg Peterson

Ponder me no more
in your bustling age of darkness
while you choke with rigid hands
the remains of my existence,
using the trickle of marrow
to fuel your plastic lamps of decadence.

Arm all the children of Earth
with the shield of Achilles,
mass produced and laser printed
on tee shirts and lunch boxes,
protecting vacant souls
from the seduction of myth.

Stretch me so thin across your digital screens
that you rupture my ageless skin,
then gather my fragments for burial
by the stables of unicorns
whose mystery you've domesticated
rendering them impotent studs.

What's your greatest fear?

Justine Fitton

Numbers: Time. Distance. Measurement. The way they manifest themselves in your life and slowly take it away. Happiness divided by expectation equals reality.

Sometimes you're not sure how or why it hits you. You just know that one minute you were dancing like an Indian princess, and now you're on the ground. Shot down by something that came out of your peripheral. You can't say you didn't see it coming. That would be a lie. You watched it approach with the realization and the horror that it came from somewhere or someone you never expected, and there was absolutely nothing you could do to stop it.

If you weren't so afraid, that would be nice. If the depths of you didn't lie mysterious and un-plotted, possibly secretly murderous of the body they inhabit. It's the knowing that you're afraid of. You're more afraid of knowing than you are of the unknown. Let the depths kill you, silently, from within. You don't want to know. You wrap yourself in denial, and you're aware that right now you would wrap yourself in anything, to warm this icy blood. You realize that ultimately, you are alone. You're going to be alone. You'll need to get used to it. You'd better cut your dependence ties before it's too late. Before they cut you. You know your capabilities, but more than that, you know how dark and ugly you can be.

Usually we just end up pledging our time, don't we? Angry is a strong word, but maybe the scariest things are done with a

deliberant intention that anger doesn't allow. Maybe it's anger that has cooled and hardened from its initial molten unpredictability. Like a stone that grew out of a fluid feeling. I'm too tired to be angry. I wonder how many times I can say the same thing before it starts to taste stale in my own mouth.

The Birds

Megan Mathy



Pen

Jake Smith

I am the ballpoint peak
Of Mount Helicon.

I am Ambassador
To Aonian maids.

I could have
Written Shakespeare,

But your name isn't William,
Is it?

March of the Bugs

Megan Mathy



Grass

Kate Vandermeer

Long, thin blades
Protruding from the coffee-colored earth
Slice through the air
Like the cutting edge
Of a newly sharpened knife.

Tiny forests reaching for the sky—
Higher, and higher still—
Despite frequent attempts
To hinder nature's growth.

Seemingly inconsequential
With little to no potential—
Yet vital to the survival
Of each and every one of us.

Daily we walk across the
Inch-high fields,
Never appreciating the beauty
Of this petite jungle.

Everlasting.
Through shades and cycles
Of life and death—
Never to be noticed as
The source of energy and vitality.

Soul Voice

Holly Thomas

Known by my name, a façade in clear sight only runs skin deep. Skin does not last forever, but I do. I can be torn and bent, but I do not burn or break. She is I, but I am not she. I am much more, I am what you can not always see, what you can not always hear, what you can not always smell, what you can not always taste, but you can always feel me. I am in the air that you breathe; I am in the wind you embrace. I watch the hair on your arms stand straight up when I move up your body. I am the stare from her eyes that creeps in your skin. I am her voice you hear when you are alone in thought. There are times I fade, but I am here. Here for you to find, here for you to touch, here for you to wake up.

I watch you, a wallflower by fault. I define your every move in ways Mr. Webster could not. I sense your animal instincts. Humans are animals. I am not. It is ironic how people try so hard to distinguish themselves from animals. How fickle fated can be. I see right through them. I see right through her. We have animal characteristics and behaviors. From the hair that covers her body to the nails on her fingers and toes, she resembles nothing more than an animal, a spitting image of a four-legged creature standing on two. To find me, you must go deeper. Like I said, I am not an animal. I am her soul.

I listen to what you say; to hear the words you choose to use. I take pleasure in deconstructing the complexity of your spoken thoughts and translate your message into the simplest of words. People say what they say for only so many reasons. There is always an underlying motive it is human nature.

She looks at things differently than most of you, I've noticed. The simple fact that the leaves change color in the fall excites her. She studies the sky, intently hoping to always

know how to find her way. She knows the way, but she doubts herself. She always has a Plan B.

She doesn't just doubt herself, but mankind in general. You can see the disappointment in her eyes and in the sincerity and honesty in her words. There are times like these where she realizes she likes herself and its okay to be me. She takes notice of the good, of her good, and I shine. This bond causes an irresistible aura you have complimented her on before.

She breathes in and memories of times before surface. The air smells of another day and possibly another place. My sense of smell interrupts the present and I relive a moment of the past. I smell and taste the different moments in her life, my sixth sense.

I can not touch, only she can. I can touch you in only a way that you will let me. You have to let me. However, I can find my own way into you. I have found ways to break barriers and tear down walls built to keep me out. My determination, intrigue and passion are stronger than your barricades, your games. I find a way in, but I can only touch you if you let me, if you ask.

I know when she hears me; I know when she chooses not to. I wish I could be all that she wanted all the time. It isn't realistic though. She lets other things come between us, her need for acceptance, success and reassurance. I'm inside her and my screams are silenced by her human nature. So I watch her make the same mistakes again. I cry for her as the elbows give in and her head falls from her hands to the floor. The real her, is me. If only she let me shine through more often. There is only so much I can do. The rest is up to her.

She comes off to them as a free spirit, but I'm held back more than they know. She bites her tongue most of the time I try to speak. But when you can hear her silence from across the room, I am speaking to her. You can see her nervous hab-

its and unconscious twitches at work as she's deciding who to be, her or me.

I hurt for her especially when she cries. The tears roll off her cheek and I feel each and every one of them. They fall from her eyes and leave a cold trail down her face. Whatever happens to tears when they fall off? They abandon her as she might think I have. I haven't though; I love her. I try to comfort her and let her know I am here and she will be fine.

When she is alone, she feels my presence most. The awkward silence cannot talk long before she speaks to me. During these times we discuss and analyze everything that's bothering her. I try to answer questions she is too afraid to ask. There are times when she cannot sleep, thinking her dreams are so far. So I sing her lullabies about the big plans in store for her; they rock her goodnight. I want her to know there is a purpose for her life, even when all hope is gone at the moment.

I care for her. I look after her, but there is only so much I can do. She is me, but I am not her. I am the one that lies deep within her thoughts, the gleam of light you see from her reflection. I am the rush that makes your heart beat both fast and slow at the same time. I am the emotion that leaves you feeling both happy and sad, when you can't figure out why. I am in the shadows with a front row seat, trying to find a way into you and trying be there for her.

Character Creation

Mary Lieske

Lines blur without ink—
pages I see with eyes closed.
Words whisper dark dreams
my hand refuses to write.

Images surge forward
overwhelming
demanding
discarded when they taste
foul on my tongue.

Memories of haunted pasts,
white expanse of happiness,
lives not my own
bring tears to my eyes.

The page blurs
untouched
and someone dies
without ever being born.

Mexico Work Experience
Kate Vandermeer



Ring Around The

Kim Hunter-Perkins

I have been ten times her three but I spin in giddy circles until
we fall to the grass laughing. And I forget there is a dandelion
behind my ear.

The Great Cursive Scare

Jake Smith

It was absolutely necessary.
They told us so.
It was what would be expected.

Stay below the dotted line.
Don't back slant.
Pages of flawless, curly Q's.

I have perfect form.
I should have practiced
Times New Roman.

Conversations with a Sniper

Kim Hunter-Perkins

California, Verizon Wireless, to here

He is glib on the phone.

"Call me dude. Officially."

What he means is he no longer holds rank. He is merely mister, a polite sir at the grocery counter. Indistinguishable.

"Okay, *dude*." She is the friend who once was, who hasn't heard his voice in so long that she is surprised she remembers its cadences. Still, it slips into familiar as though there were not miles of time between his voice and hers.

"I'll be home. Soon," he says, making this into ordinary, as though sand and gunpowder were not embedded into his once boy-smooth skin.

She murmurs appropriate.

Her mind swells with the remembrance of crooked smiles. And of other things.

Bahrain, transatlantic, to here

The phone rings. 2 am. He forgets that day is night on the other side of the world. It wouldn't matter if he remembered; there is too much need for familiar. When she picks up the phone, he sighs. Perhaps it is relief. Or dread. He isn't sure if he should say anything at all.

He tries to think of the green-blue Mediterranean, but debris mars calm surfaces. An airliner went down in a hailstorm of fire and gravity. They gave him and his, a call. And a box of garbage bags.

"For the pieces," he says, between the exhaled air of a cigarette and the long pause it takes to bring his drink from his hand to his lips. He wants to scream *that is not my fucking job*, but of course it is. His job is to follow directions. But he is accustomed to the luxury of distance.

She lets him talk, stares at the ceiling, trying to find anything to say. Of course, there is nothing. She laughs at his jokes and pretends she can't hear the sound of his sobs, as he chases them down with another can of lukewarm beer.

The Floating Conversation

She thinks of gravel.

The rocks are minute, littered with larger and smaller stuff; pebbles and glass and dirt. Her knees can feel the texture beneath her jeans, like a distant white noise.

She is here because he is beautiful. And breaking.

There is a new tattoo, and the sun is still yellow and bright, its rays luminescent against the tight muscles of his skin. She licked it once, twice in the bar. She licks it again. They are both moving towards obliteration.

He is distracted by the man in the black t-shirt who has followed them, curiosity and drink overruling. He is aware of him, like a thick cloud over the edge of the moon. Too aware. He can picture a target at the center of his brow.

Nope. *Fuck him*. Let him watch, like Parisians eat cake.

She thinks of the way his head tips back against the brick, his throat reflecting the bare light of the moon; of how his flesh feels against her own, a hot, living thing, barely contained. She thinks this is not who they are to each other, but slides her hand around the back of his thigh anyway, while her tongue traces a path downward.

He will say this is all incidental. Meaningless. Eventually, so will she.

He pulls her head closer, his eyes meeting the stranger-eyes that are meeting his own.

Defying.

Kabul. Basra. Untraceable satellite to here.

The phone. 3 am.

He does not forget that night is day. He just doesn't give a damn.

He makes this call.

Once.

She thinks of dominoes, toppling in a chain reaction that surpasses imagination; an endless series of falling pieces, brushing against the next, only to fall. Again and again.

The revelation of what he has become is almost too much for her. Even with his half lies and sterile words, she is not a stupid girl.

But, then, that is why he called. Her.

Her mind swims with the idea of sound traveling four hundred-some yards and her breath exhaling as he squeezes. She imagines him in every tree, behind every window that reflects puffy blue sky. Secretly, she calls him as the bringer of death. She hates him a little for it.

Once, he gave her a bullet, a token of his skill. Suddenly, she imagines it trembling in her jewelry box, the one shot that hasn't found its way home.

She thinks she hears the sound of tears, as they sit at the top

of his throat, choking.

Really, he is trying not to vomit.

He can't stop thinking of lining melons on a fence post.

And firecrackers.

The spray of sticky juices raining from the sky like sweet, red rain.

After a while, the silence is too long between them, and he hangs up the phone.

Here, unlimited in-network, to here

"It's fucking, fucking cold."

She answers the phone and he doesn't bother with hello. She laughs. Now, he is bravado and brazen, a burst of something exotic in the otherwise ordinary day.

To him, she is of home.

He is not what he was and won't be again. There are vital pieces missing; his hand shakes, just enough to shift everything to the left of center.

He tells her he is a man who had a job fixing typewriters, and fixed them. Remorseless.

She pretends this is funny.

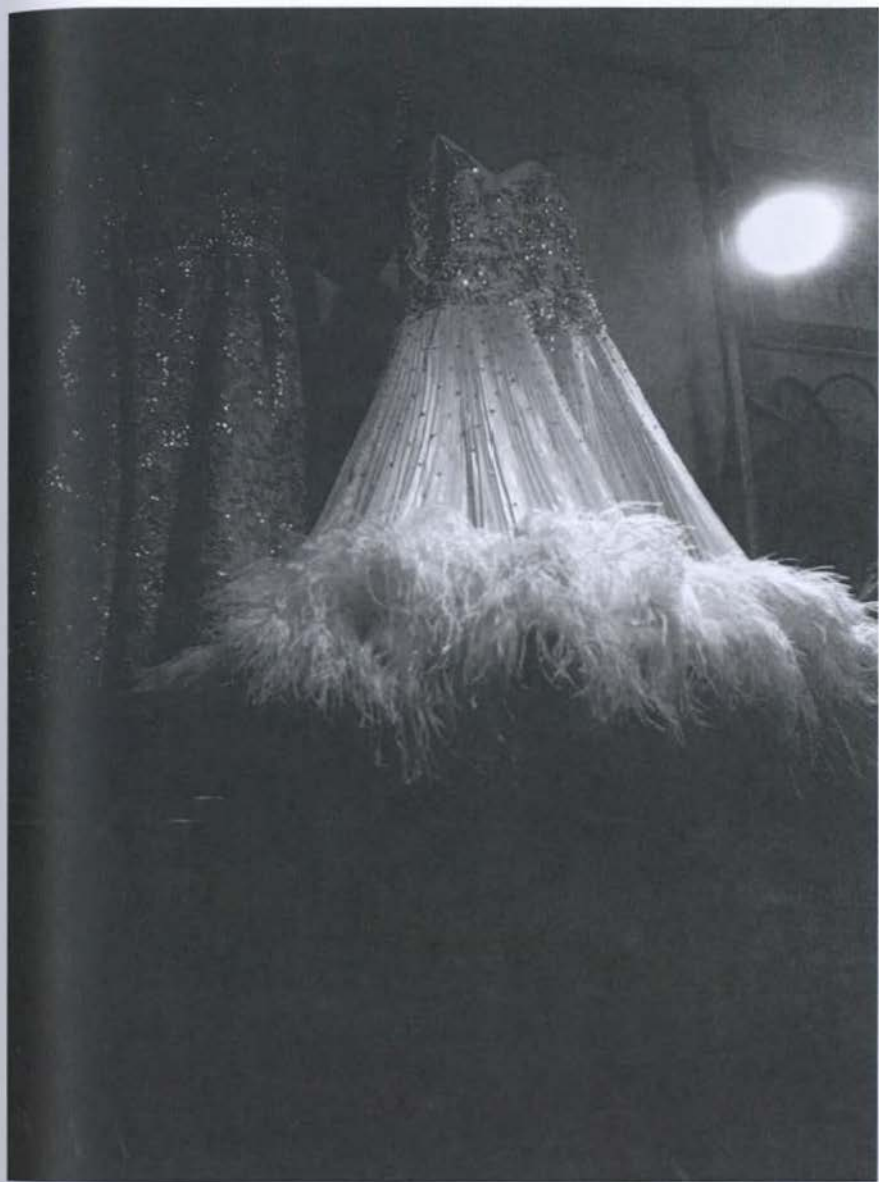
"You're an idiot," she says. "For coming home in January."

He laughs. Yes, he is an idiot.

"Just wanted to let he know, I'm here," he says, letting the cold seep into his fingers, his lips, his ankle bones. She is polite, says "see you soon," though she isn't certain that she really wants to see him at all. Everything is the same. And different. They disconnect the invisible line that traverses this vast, grey horizon.

It stretches into nothing. Into everything.

Feather and Jewels
Alycia Rockey



Opiate

Doug Urbanski

Karl was only half-right;
bet he never got a hit
of the American Dream.

It got overseas
by word of mouth
and everybody
and his damn brother
rowed across the sea
just to get a taste.

Everybody's strung out
in the gutter, shivering.
'Cause they want more
but they can't pay for it.

There are some that OD
on the American Dream.
That shit hits their veins
and they can't stop but it's okay
because they've got the money
and are willing to pay.

For us the lowly
lottery tickets provide
that momentary high
but it ain't enough
to even touch
the American Dream.

**What Happens To Little Girls Who Are Too Weak To Stand
Up For Themselves Even When They Shouldn't Have To.**

Jennifer O'Neil

Pain. Lots of it.

Physical pain.

Emotional agony.

Mental torture.

Feeling like she's unloved, unwanted, stupid.

Confusion. So much that even the abuser fails to understand.

Love. Hate. Indifference.

Close bonds, distance. Faraway, dreamy thoughts of freedom.

Anger.

Fear. Of the unknown. Of the known.

Especially of the known.

Of the pain, the confusion, the embarrassment.

The words. Those hateful, screaming words.

Memories. The kind that no child should ever have.

Longing. For life. For acceptance.

For peace. For sleep.

For a tan that does not come from a leather belt.

For unbroken, unbruised, unblackened skin.

Blood, belts, loaded guns.

Hot electrical cords flung at her bare legs.

Being drenched in ice water outside in winter.

But she is not ruined.

She is not hopeless.

She is weak.

But she grows stronger every day.

The Forgotten

Megan Mathy



Letters

Daniel Paquin

It's just a stuffed doll, Raggedy Ann to be specific, but I've always been creeped out by dolls, especially dolls like this. "Look, Dierdra, I know it was a gift from your folks, but do you have to sleep with it every night?" I already know the answer, but I can't stop myself trying all the same.

After the funeral – after the dirt, not quite six feet worth, had been shoveled back in – a box showed up on our front steps. It was addressed to both of us, but it contained only two things: a letter from her late parents and a Raggedy Ann doll, still brand new from the looks of it.

The letter itself had been addressed only to Dierdra and she wanted to read it by herself the first time, which I understood. I made myself a cup of tea while she read on the couch. Each plunge of the tea bag into the hot water brought forth a fresh sob from the next room and by the time I put the cup to my lips all I tasted were her tears tinged with memories of my own parents' funeral.

I never read that first letter. Dierdra never told me why I wasn't allowed to or even what it said. The doll became a permanent part of my wife; she never let the thing out of her sight and Raggedy Ann never let my wife out of hers.

It's been less than a week and another box identical to the first has shown up on our doorstep. Inside, another letter, addressed to me, and another doll, Raggedy Andy this time. I recognize Dierdra's mother's script, and my hand shakes, trembles as I hold the sealed envelope.

"I'll leave you alone." Dierdra's lips brush my cheek and she's gone.

Raggedy Andy lays sprawled on the kitchen table, his eyes on the ceiling. I stuff him back in the box and pull out a

chair, dropping the letter on the table. Tea sounds great right now.

My mother used to say "A watched pot never boils." It's not really true, but since my eyes keep moving towards the letter every time I don't watch the water, watching the motionless liquid is preferable. I close my eyes and put my face over the pot as steam rises. Ever since the move – ever since my parents' funeral – my tea kettle, specifically designed for the purpose of boiling water for tea and other hot beverages, has been missing. I never got around to buying a new one. Instead, I just use a regular old pot to boil my water. Dierdra doesn't like tea, so she could care less.

The rising steam coats my face, mixing with the cold sweat filming my brow. Through my eyelids I can see the letter sitting on the table. Under the table, that doll, its beaded glass eyes staring out at nothing.

My parents had died under suspicious circumstances four years ago. It had been snowing the entire week. Something about faulty brake lines on their car. My father always was a reckless driver. My mother's pleas for him to slow down as he passed the semis parked along the side of the road. My father always had the car checked each year, routine maintenance and all. The salt and snowplows could only do so much, and even then you had to stay behind them to benefit. My father couldn't see the road anymore. The snowplow didn't see their car, sideways, upside down. Not with all that snow. The driver, he didn't, couldn't hear my mother's screams. My unconscious father couldn't comfort her. Couldn't whisper that he loved her that one last time. We had a closed casket funeral.

The tea's tinged with tears and sweat. I peel open the envelope. Inside, a single piece of paper, Dierdra's mother's handwriting. *Dear Jeremy*. I can't read any further. I refuse to.

Something in me awakens, begins to rage. I didn't even like Dierdra's parents. And they sure as hell hadn't liked me. They had tried to talk her out of marrying me in the first place.

Was their death supposed to make me care? Does death have that power, the ability to cure old wounds? No. No it doesn't. The thing inside me, whatever it is, disagrees. The tea sears my throat, half the cup in one gulp. The pain feels good, real, and the tears that now blur my eyes are from that pain. The letter's still clutched in my hand. The next line, *For the sake of Dierdra, I hope you'll read this letter and follow the instructions.* The thing inside me is curious. *Read more, it says. Keep going.*

But I can't. I won't. I want no part of this. Dierdra's parents are dead and in the ground. They're not here to bother us, me anymore. No more calls at three in the morning because her mother had a nightmare. Never mind that I was the only person that died in her mother's dream, as long as Dierdra was safe the world would exist another day.

I hastily fold the letter again and stuff it back in the envelope. I down the rest of my tea, by now less searing than lukewarm. I rise, the chair sliding out behind me, the letter resting, waiting for me on the table. The thing inside me begs, *Please, don't go. Read the letter.* I deposit my cup in the sink, run my hands through my hair, and exhale a deep sigh. The letter's still there when I turn around. The doll, Raggedy Andy, peeks out from the box under the table. I pass both without a second glance and leave the kitchen.

When I was a kid I'd pretend to be an astronaut on a one-man mission in space. Nobody else could play this game, not that I'd let them if anyone had wanted. I'd spend my time alone and silent, wrapped in my own mind. My folks never questioned why I preferred this game to those that the other

kids played, and I never gave them a reason to. I floated my way through life, weightless and carefree, ignoring the fact that astronauts have a limited air supply simply because I didn't.

Only later did I realize that I did and it had run out. From that moment – when the words “I do” crossed my lips – I've missed that game. Almost seven years later and I'm still waiting to breathe again.

Crossing the threshold into the living room, I find Dierdra asleep on the couch with that doll, Raggedy Ann, clutched to her chest. It sickens me the way that doll's eyes scrutinize me, judge me, declare me unfit from within my own wife's embrace. The thing inside me paces, clearly unhappy with my decision to not read the letter. I cross the room and pull a blanket out of the closet. I spread it over Dierdra and bend down to kiss her cheek. It's been a tough week for her. She needs the rest.

Dierdra's hold on the doll shifts onto the blanket. The doll slackens, slips from her arms only enough to allow me to slowly pull it from her grasp. With my help, Raggedy Ann escapes my wife's arms only to find herself trapped within my hands. Along the way – almost as if trying to rouse Dierdra from her slumber – the doll drops a letter. The letter Dierdra received almost a week ago. The thing inside me's curiosity grows. *Pick it up*, it says.

I bend to pick it up, to rob the doll of its last chance of escape, to rob Dierdra of her last private communication with her late father. The thing inside me's happiness spills over, fills me with dread. *Read it*, it says. *Read your letter. Then read hers.*

Back in the kitchen, the two letters wait placidly on the table. I have my back to them, once again watching water. My throat still throbs from my last cup of tea, but I can't face

them. Not just yet. The dolls, Raggedy Ann and Andy, peer out from their shared box under the table. I feel their eyes on my back, moving over me, through me, communicating with the thing inside me, all three telling me, *Read them. Read the letters. Read them now.*

The fighting had started after I buried my parents, after we moved, after my tea kettle had gone missing. She wanted her parents to move in, to live with us. She wanted to see them all the time. I wanted nothing of her parents, not without my own. We fought about loneliness, emptiness. She was scared of it. I wanted it, wanted to breathe again.

There was never any official truce between us. We just slowly quit. Quit fighting. Quit being what Dierdra's parents wanted us to be. To this day, I still wonder why we're still together. What part of me actually wanted her around in the first place.

The thing inside me says, *I did. I wanted her around.*

The burner's red with heat but the water doesn't boil. The letters, both of them, mine and Dierdra's, wait to be read. I stare at them, mentally picture the words scrawled across the single page contained within each envelope. Without thinking, without taking my eyes off those envelopes, I remove the pot from the burner and turn off the stove. Tea isn't what I need right now.

I sit down at the table, both letters in front of me. Which one? *Yours first. Then hers.* I pull the letter addressed to me out of the envelope and unfold it. My hands no longer shake, no longer tremble. It's dated the day before we got the call, before we knew Dierdra's parents had been found in bed, hand in hand. No signs of trauma. They looked at rest in their caskets.

Dear Jeremy,

For the sake of Dierdra, I hope you'll read this letter and follow the instructions. I know we never exactly saw eye to eye, but we must put that behind us now. Dierdra's happiness is what's important and what's at stake. We wanted her letter and her doll to arrive first, to prepare her for what must be done, so I apologize for keeping you in the dark. What you must do in order to save your marriage is simple. It will take much less effort on your part than what Dierdra had to do. Never mind that now. All you should be concerned with is whether or not you truly, deeply care about my Dierdra. Ask yourself, do you love her?

The thing inside me replies, *Yes, of course.*

I'm assuming that you do, or else you'd have left her by now. To show Dierdra how much you care, how much you love her, you only need to do one thing. There should have been a doll in the box we sent you. From now on, keep it with you at all times. And I do mean at all times. Most importantly, you must take the doll to bed with you every night. I'm sure Dierdra's been doing the same, so you can expect no comments from her about your behavior. Please, Jeremy, for the sake of my daughter's happiness, do this one little thing.

*Your mother-in-law,
Forever more,
Sicilia*

I reread the letter once, twice more. The doll? Why the doll? With my foot, I slide the box out from under that table. I can see the light glint off of the four beaded glass eyes staring out from between the box flaps. I open the box and pull out the dolls, one in each hand. Raggedy Ann and Andy, their identical stitched smiles, their red yarn hair.

A sharp intake of air behind me. I instinctively clutch the dolls to my chest. Dierdra stands just in the kitchen, prying sleep glue from her eyes. "How long have I been asleep?" she asks through a yawn.

I glance at the clock, then out the window. The stars twinkle outside; the moon, full and bright, hangs on the distant horizon. When did it become night? The thing inside me says, *Most of the day*, only this time its words actually escape my mouth. I hear them inside and out.

Dierdra crosses the kitchen to the stove, takes the pot, dumps out the old water, and begins filling it with water from the tap. I can tell from how long the tap runs that she's put in far too much for just one cup of tea. She puts the pot back on the burner, pulls two cups down from the cupboard, two tea-bags from the box.

"I thought you didn't like tea?" I say, these words my own.

She turns and chuckles, "To be honest, I've never really tried it."

I rise from my chair, carefully placing the dolls on the table, join her at the stove and wrap my arms around her. *Well, no time like the present*. Not my words. The thing inside me smiles; my face mirrors its expression and I smile at Dierdra.

She glances around me to the table, where the letters and dolls lie. "Did you read your letter?" I peer into her eyes and see the same curiosity there that the thing inside me had

when the letter first arrived.

"Yeah, I did."

Dierdra smiles up at me and, standing on her tippy toes, kisses the stubble on my cheek. "So you understand then?"

Of course I understand, the thing inside replies for me.

"Good," Dierdra says, snuggling herself against my chest. We watch the water boil in silence and Dierdra has her very first cup of tea at the table with me, the letters, and Raggedy Ann and Andy. Turns out she actually enjoys tea and says we'll go get a new tea kettle tomorrow.

Later that night Dierdra leads me by the hand to our bedroom, Raggedy Ann in her other hand and Raggedy Andy in mine. The dolls watch from the bedside tables as we make love for the first time since I can remember. When we're done – when everything seems once again right with the world – Dierdra, still sweating and naked, brings Raggedy Ann into the bed, under the covers, and falls asleep curled against my bare chest.

I watch her slumber for some time, silently stroking her hair. Without waking her I make myself comfortable and prepare for sleep. The thing inside reminds me, *Don't forget*. I grab Raggedy Andy and pull him into bed, placing him alongside Raggedy Ann between myself and Dierdra. The thing inside me, its smile has never been bigger.

The next morning I awake with Dierdra next to me. It's a moment before I realize that something feels wrong, something's not right, but I feel Dierdra squeeze my hand and I let it slip from my mind. Her hand is clasped in mine, and mine in hers, with such force, with such love that we'll never let go of each other again. I know this and I smile.

It'll be some time before anyone discovers us. Before the unanswered calls cause someone to come to the house.

Before their unanswered knocks cause them to call the police. Before the police show up at the door. Before their unanswered knocks causes them to slowly enter the house, calling our names as they search room to room. Before they find us still in bed, hand in hand, shielded by two lifeless bodies. No signs of trauma. Before they wrap the bodies in black plastic and cart them off to the morgue, leaving us behind on the bed.

Not that I care about any of this. As long as I have my Dierdra, as long as I can stare into her beaded glass eyes, see her carefully stitched smile, stroke her red yarn hair. Our hands, stitched together with the most powerful love, will never be separated. And I couldn't be happier.

James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award Winners

This Spring, 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. Kim Hunter-Perkins and Clint Walker will both be honored with a cash prize and the opportunity to read their works on April 8 in the Tarble Fine Arts Atrium, at 4pm.

You will find their winning entries on the following pages, preceded by a short biography about each author and their writing.

Kim Hunter-Perkins

Kim has won the Spring 2010 James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award for her four poems, "The Book of Broken Things", "The Book of Tresses", "The Book of Ugly Things", and "The Book of the Dead".

Kim is a graduate student in English with an emphasis on literary studies. She is currently obsessed with nineteenth century political rhetoric, writing prose poems and poetry prose, and her hair.

"For this collection of "The Book of" poems, I drew upon an assignment in the English 5020 class that focused on a somewhat uncommon form of poetry called the *zuihitsu*, a style that dates to ancient Japan, and, more specifically, a concept called a "pillow book," which is a collection of thoughts or observations, much like a journal. The style can be random and fragmented in thought, but usually has sections that are thematic. The style is often narrative as well, bridging the divide between prose and poetry. After having success with the first assignment, "The Book of Broken Things," I felt that the style was a way of capturing the way our minds act and react, the way we hold memories, and our thought processes that can be so very non-linear. While each poem is separate, themes link them together, as well, especially that over-arching and ever-present reminder of one's own mortality."

The Book of Broken Things

a zuihitsu

The marine. The professor. The man in the Hawaiian shirt.
The lawyer. The crazy plumber. The girl you slept with because you couldn't have *her*.

*

Boys. Girls. Sex is easy. What isn't easy is to be less. Or more. Younger. Needier. Smarter than the person who you just rolled out of bed and now must face over coffee with nothing to say except thanks and how 'bout those Astros? Sex is like that sometimes.

*

Four curtain rods. Two plates. The picture frame I hurled into the front yard in a fit of rage.

*

I have a black tattoo on the back of my neck that I got to spite her. She noticed, complimented, but the words didn't quite reach her eyes. She knew that it was an ending of something. I knew it was a beginning, too. We weren't lovers. And yet we still could break each other.

*

I would stick my head in the oven, only it has been done, and done better.

*

There is always a first. In moonlight and white sheets, this one's breasts shone small and lush like plums and the first hints of darkness. I watched as her wife's cat glared at me, as I brushed my lips against the top of her thigh. She was all things forbidden. She smelled like violets. She still does.

*

I dated a girl who, later, parked her car on the train tracks. Not to die. Because she was drunk. The train hit the car and

she tried to drive it anyway. She was certifiable, but fantastic in the sack. That is all that remains; crazy and orgasmic. Not the worst way to be remembered; there are worse things to forget.

*

You have to wonder what the difference is between *the ones* and the others. You laid on the floor for hours when he told you that he was getting married, which was not as long as you did when she moved her stuff away. But it was enough. Perhaps it is just that. We only have the energy to fall in love enough. Everyone else is chatter.

*

Desirable things:

Sanctimonious pricks.

Girls with no hips and thick black tattoos.

Arrogant and brilliant bastards.

The way a hand trails over the curve of hip *just so*.

Violets.

Pain.

*

She asks you to choose, tonight, whether you want to fuck him or her. You choose him, because you are stupid. It becomes cyclical. She asks you to choose and you choose.

Wrong. Every time.

*

There are things you do when you're twenty. You go to the movies because that's all there is to do. When he smiles, whispers in your ear, you don't care who is watching. And later, when you hear about yourself on a call in radio show, you will laugh. You will remember the movie for long after, and the sweet weight of his fingers tangled in the back of your hair.

*

This cracked cup of antique buttons with the threads still on.

*

Each time we kissed, it was after one of us had vomited. I was seventeen, drunk on Mad Dog and the possibility of her. When she dropped her lips to mine, there were twenty-three seconds wherein we could have been. She stopped, and there was nothing else. The second time, I joked that it was payback. She straddled my hips and possibility slipped between the spaces where our bodies weren't touching. She tasted of vodka. She always tasted the same.

*

I fell asleep on the lap of the boy with the bright green eyes, whose baseball cap shielded his face from seeing everything but down. He was eighteen. We watched a Muppet movie before I took his virginity. Then we crashed into each other again and again and again.

*

I have regrets. I slept hundreds of nights next to a woman. I should have loved her more.

*

The moment without reason. You let him pull you behind the movie theater. Rocks and glass bite your knees as you kiss a trail from tattoo to the top button of jeans. His body is muscle and something hard glosses his surfaces. Uncle Sam pays him to shoot people for a living. He tastes like brandy and scotch and something just a little bit sweet.

*

The toaster that burns the toast; the coffee pot with the lid missing.

*

The day she told me I was arrogant, power-hungry, I hated her; it was the first time I knew hate. Not because I of what she said. Because of what it meant.

*

There is the one you don't talk about. She took a cab to your doorstep and brought her own beer. She was uninvited. After, you had to drive her home. Her smoke lingered in your hair for hours and, eventually, her teeth marks faded from purple to something closer to gray.

*

The dog that she left behind died in the summer, and flies swarmed like angry, black snow.

*

The last time we *were* he pulled me from the street, putting his body between me and the traffic, holding me close. I couldn't remember the walk home. I could remember, even later, the way our bodies fell into familiar, the cadences of history revisited. When the phone rang, he said she was no one important, just another girl. She wasn't. But I was.

*

I was wrong, she wasn't that which finishes me. How stupid that sounds, anyway.

*

My sunglasses, after hitting a car at speeds unknown. Three ribs. My arm.

*

I haven't spoken to her for five years. I still don't know what to say.

The Book of Tresses

My hair falls out in handfuls because I was hit by a car which makes no sense but they assure me it's normal. Whoever they are. Whatever normal is.

It catches on things. Sweaters. Chair backs. The metal grates that should protect the drains from such assault.

When I was ten, my aunt cut it all off until I looked like a fat boy with the beginnings of breasts. She had hair bleached and permed until it was a whitish cloud that floated over her head like a halo.

I have no skill with little girl hair. So there is this permanent crookedness when I attempt anything beyond a brushing. Always, a staticky effervescence remains.

I couldn't get a comb through it when it started to come out so I put it into pigtails and cut it with the kitchen shears. The strands still fall into tangles. Only shorter, more bitter ones.

The woman I loved went to JCPenney's to change from the acceptable length of the feminine to cropped above the nape. She wore it like a man. For the first time, for then and thereafter, she was possessed. Of herself.

The colors:

Brown.

With a white-blondé streak in the front.

With blondé highlights, all over.

A burgundy-purple-y red.

Seafoam blue.

Rapidly gray.

My husband's ex-wife used to make him shave his head; when I met him it was barely aware of its own existence. His daughter wants him to shave it again. I refuse. I prefer something I can hold on to.

When my aunt died, hers was gone, all but stray strands that clung onto her flesh as she did to life. Precariously.

After, my mom had to brush it for me. She would pull the comb through again and again until it was smooth enough for braiding. She would pretend it wasn't dirty, still harboring traces of airbag dust and blood.

Strands. Bunches. Nests. And sometimes smooth shiny sections that catch the sunlight like copper.

It took five hours to comb the nits and dead lice from my little girl's hair. She didn't complain. Her real mom had shampooed it twice but they came back. I combed until I could answer, when she asked if they were gone, truthfully.

Long and curly tangles. Ponytails. Swirled and pinned into a bun.

I wear pigtails because I want to pretend I'm not inching closer towards death. Towards the dying.

The Book of Ugly Things

They hung pints of blood, one after another, and the smell of chemicals merged with red into my thick, sanguine dreams.

Sunglasses, spattered with blood and cracked from the force of acceleration meeting brake.

There was a hole in my leg, four inches by five. No skin left to close, so it stayed open until they could Frankenstein a piece from elsewhere and sew it back together again.

An arm, hanging inside its skin, the bones bent and splintered like broken green twigs.

There is adrenaline and indomitable will that keeps you pushing and pushing until you hit an inevitable wall.

The little white raised dots left over, months later, from where the needle poked the stitches through.

There is a ringing inside your ears, inside your head, that resonates for minutes, hours, days from the impact of metal on metal, from the little explosions of glass and plastic and bones. It is a high pitched sound, like a bell, a siren. Like the sound of the end of something. Perhaps the world.

Scar tissue. Under the skin, like polyps, subcutaneous boils.

There is no glue or tape or screw or pin for a rib. Once it's broken, the slightest shift of motion will take it out of place until it pinches from the inside, out. Each breath is an opportunity. For pain.

Staples. Holding flesh together.

Everything made me vomit. Vicodin, Percocet. Even the morphine drip in the hospital was unbearable. What I could keep down, didn't work. And, if I took too many, my body forgot how to breathe. So I had to make my mind remember. Out. In. And again. And again.

To be able to see the inside of oneself, thick red tissues shining under lights they were never meant to see.

When you can't move your arms beyond a certain rotation, there are things you cannot do. There is no dignity. Nor do you care.

The platitudes. Blessed. Fortunate. Lucky.

The Book of the Dead

There is a parade of them. Someone's mother. Someone's father. Five people from your high school class though you aren't all that old. Cancer. Murder. A shot gun to the head. Endless.

Flies. Upside down on the window sill like crunchy, brown leaves.

When they called his family, the answer was, *call when he's dead*, so I took my turns, an hour at a time, sitting next to him because no one should die alone. He took days to wind down, his breaths coming slowly, and slower. Until the stop. Death is cold in a casket. When they've just died, there is warmth still. And it lingers. A while.

They told us that people die at night, so that shift was the worst. The first was my favorite, a tiny mouse of a woman who simply went to sleep. We washed her face and hands, and smoothed her hair like a child's.

All of them that came before. The greats. The grands. All of them.

When my grandfather died, they called a code blue. I looked at my dad, said, he's dead. My dad said, yep. And that was that.

My grandmother spoke to dead people. When her sister died, she looked at her son and said, *go check on her—she's dead*. She lived somewhere else. And she was. On the floor. Gone.

The dogs. The little one, the black one, the furry one.
And the cat that got hit by a truck.

There was no grace for my aunt when she went. Hair gone,
shit in a bag through a hole in her gut. She was angry.
Who could blame her.

There is a parade for them. The ones that die far away in dirt
and sand and blood. People stand on the road, their hats in
their hands. Not because they knew them. Because they are
remembering. Loss.

The car behind the garage. Three batteries. The people
we once were.

Clint Walker

Clint has won the Spring 2010 James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award for his short story, "L/R."

"'L/R' was an experiment on my part in just staying out my own way and letting a story tell itself for a change. Sometimes I really do feel that the characters I put in my stories are fully autonomous creations, and they're going to do what they're going to do whether I like it or not, so it felt kind of nice to tone down my usual narrative impulses and be more of a reporter than a writer.

Story wise, lots of my little obsessions are lurking around in this story, but overall I think that I wanted to capture a particular kind of neurosis that can prevent you from enjoying something because you're too busy worrying about what it's going to be like when what you're enjoying so much is gone.

I was lucky in that I really only had to do a tiny bit of revising, which mostly consisted of removing some ill-conceived 'experimental' narrative moments, and tuning up a character who was coming off slightly more insufferable than I originally intended. I say lucky because the worst part about writing is actually doing the writing itself, so spending countless more hours trying to plug leaky holes isn't incredibly appealing to me, even though the process is usually always worth it for the most part.

'The Lister,' by the way, is a real place. It's not quite like it exists in this story though. It's actually worse, as it's not to be found in a field somewhere, but in a town right here in the central Illinois area. You may actually live next to it and not even know it."

"So, left or right?"

The car, plain and grimy, slowed in the crunchy gravel at a lonely T – intersection. The headlights lanced twin beams through the chilly night air. Swirls of dust pirouetted within each one.

"Mmm, technically it's your call. I know this area better than you do, so for the game to work you need to get us started."

"I just pick a direction?"

"Yup. Actually, you should probably pick the first few, at least until we get our sense of direction all confused."

"O.k. then."

She turned the car to the right and slowly advanced down the country road. From the corner of his eye he watched her drum her fingers on the steering wheel. She wore gloves she knitted herself. When the fingers on them started to fray over the course of the previous winter, she just tore them off. To him, the green tint of the dash lights made her fingers protruding from yarny glove stumps look like pale pieces of delicious crab meat emerging from the shell of cracked legs.

They drove on, empty fields of dusty clod yawning out on both sides. Large hunks of machinery could be spotted here and there. Some sat in the chill underneath halos of lone lamps attached to weathered poles planted next to rusted bins, while others remained in shadows, the moonlight glinting off frosted canopies of spreading rust and smeared glass.

"So how does this work again?"

"Every time we hit an intersection, one of us just decides whether or not to go left or right."

"And the point...?"

"...is to get just lost enough that you don't quite know where you are, even though you know you aren't really lost."

"Lost is lost, isn't it?"

"The way we used to look at it, you can't really get lost in the Channel 3 viewing area. Eventually you'll hit a town and once you do, then you'll have your bearings enough to get home."

"And you used to do this for fun?"

He winced. It was dark. She couldn't see it.

"When we were all in high school, we did. I haven't done this in a long time. It's kind of nice to try it again with someone who doesn't know this area though. Makes it new again."

"Hmm."

The windshield started to fog up. She fiddled with the defrost control, trying to find the proper setting to fix the problem.

"Geez. Where I'm from it's either hot or it's cold. We don't have in-betweens like you do here."

"Good point, I suppose. Speaking of that, just how did you spend your teenage years? You don't really talk about that kind of stuff much."

"Yes, I do. I talk about it all the time."

"No, you talk about home. You don't talk about growing up there as a kid."

"Well, if we're talking post-license, and if I remember right, most of the time I was getting drunk out on the beach every night."

"I did that occasionally, too."

"I think it might have been a bit different for me. Some stretches of the beach are so quiet and secluded you can just camp all night out there as long as you have a couple of blankets and a piece of driftwood to lie up next to."

"And that's what you did for fun? Here, what you call camping, we call vagrancy."

"Well, I got laid too. Does that count?"

"I guess."

He turned his head and stared blankly out the passenger-side glass. Dead dirt in grids everywhere. He held the hunk of plastic in cold fingers, waiting.

"What's the camera for?"

"If we play long enough we're bound to find something strange to take a picture of."

"Like, strange how?"

"Hitler's Bicycle strange."

"Hitler's Bicycle?"

"Yeah. When I was in high school we ended up driving so far out we didn't think we were ever going to find a town. Eventually, we ended up in some little village where we found this pole that..."

Her phone went off. He broke his anecdote off at the stem.

"Hey, what's up?...oh yeah?...no, you go ahead...me?...no, no, I'm not home...where?...actually, I'm not sure...left, I think...south of town...no, I'm with Cliff...no, with *Cliff*...no (small chuckle), not at all...sounds great, see you then...later, babe. Bye."

The phone went back into her plushy jacket and she said nothing further. He fiddled with her air-freshener which he had unclipped off of the sun visor. He thought it looked like a robot's head.

"So, what's Erin up to?"

"Nothing. She and Revok went to the pumpkin patch again, can you believe it? They just can't get enough of that fucking haystack maze."

"How many times have they been?"

"How many times have they been?"

"About three now. She thinks it's kitschy."

"Hmm. Did you tell her it's not the best idea to be in a haystack maze with a lit cigarette?"

"Oh, you saw that?"

"Yeah. I was waiting near the exit for the rest of you guys and she came staggering out with a Newport dangling from her fingers."

"Oh my God, you didn't say anything to her, did you?"

"Of course I did. I told her that was kind of a stupid thing to do and she just laughed at me."

"Yeah, that sounds like Erin."

She turned left. The pavement became loosely packed gravel.

"Wow, are we even on a road anymore?"

"We'll find out. Just keep going."

She pushed the accelerator and the car lurched forward, kicked-up gravel pinging off the floorboards under their feet.

"What was that laugh all about?"

"What?"

"You said my name and you laughed. What's the story on that?"

"The story? Oh. Erin was just kidding around. She just joked if you asked me out on a date or something. You know her. Always a laugh."

"Yeah, she's a real riot."

He looked back out his window again. She turned right at another intersection without instruction. A small bridge took them over a gully of cold fetid water that ran across the surrounding fields like a muddy vein.

"Did...did Erin ask you to do something with her tonight?"

"Oh...uh...well, she mentioned something after I got your email."

"You could have gone with her, if you wanted to."

"C'mon, Cliff. I wasn't going to break my plans with you. Anyway, this is fun. Besides, I like seeing all your local color. Maybe someday you'll finally get on a plane and fly out and see where I'm from."

"I can't imagine it's all that different. One place is the same as any other, isn't it?"

"In some ways, I suppose. It's more like there's just things I have back home that you don't have here."

"Like places that don't all close at ten, that kind of thing?"

"No, it's not that. It's more in the little things. Stuff you don't notice. Like, did I tell you I got lost on the way back from your apartment the other night?"

"I told you, just follow 32 all the way..."

"Your directions weren't the problem, Cliff. You practically drew me a map to scale. I just got kind of distracted by that whole row of fast food restaurants you've got there on the main street."

"Oh, on the old drag?"

"Yeah. That's cute you still call it that, by the way. I mean, what year is this again?"

"I got it. We're small town folk. What happened on your way back?"

"I got distracted by that big plastic chicken outside that one restaurant, the big red one..."

"Aldo Pepper's Bird Barn."

"Yeah, that one. Well, I must have hung a left or something and next thing I knew it, it was like, bang, the town just stopped. All it took was one turn and I went from buildings and lights and streets and everything else to nothing."

"Nothing."

"That's the kind of thing you don't notice because you've always lived here, I guess. How everything's going and going than then it just stops."

"No, I notice."

The gravel gave way to two ruts in the cold dirt, a long strip of dead grass between them. The car started gently rocking from side to side as it traversed over the uneven ground, the suspension creaking with each list from left to right.

"Um, should I keep going or turn around?"

"We're fine. A lot of these country roads, the ones that go in-between the fields, are kind of like access roads for the tractors. We'll hit pavement in a minute or two, I'm sure."

No pavement. Nowhere. She reached up and scratched her head through her knitted cap as she squinted.

"How do you know when it's over?"

"What?"

"Your game. How do you know when we're done? When we hit a town?"

"Oh. Yes, that's pretty much the gist of it."

"And how are you supposed to find a town if you don't know where you are?"

"You look up in the sky to try to see the orange glow. That's the light from a town reflecting off the clouds. You just drive towards that and there you are."

"You have towns out here big enough to glow like that?"

"Yeah. That's why you do this in the fall. It's cloudy. It doesn't have to be a big town to see it. And if you're lucky, even if it's a small town, they'll have a Moto Mart or something where you can get some candy for the drive home."

"Hmm."

"One time, some friends I was in a garage band with

were out here and we reached some little town called Diona. It was only four houses and some storage sheds and even then they had *two* Moto Marts.

"Wow. Two. That's really something."

The grassy strip running down the center of their path disappeared. The car rolled down a narrow stretch of pure, clotted dirt. If it wasn't for the small, weedy gutters running down their left and right, they would've been driving through one of the harvested fields themselves. Her eyes darted around as they drove farther and farther off the grid. She was about to look for a place to turn around, and about to say that she was, when he finally got up the courage instead.

"So...have you decided if you're coming back next semester or not?"

She sighed, a long plume of white air boiling from her parted lips.

"I don't know. It's not looking like it."

He heard faint notes of a familiar song through the cross fade on the radio. It was meat and potatoes.

He wanted the game to be over. It was stupid.

He wanted it to go on forever. Last chance.

"When did you decide this?"

"I haven't really made any kind of a decision yet. I've just been talking to Erin about it lately, and I'm starting to realize that maybe it's best for me if I went home. At least for a while."

"Erin's the person you asked about this?"

"Yes. Who else would I talk to?"

"I just find it odd that the advice she'd give you is to leave. I'd think she'd want you to stay. Chances are, if you go home, I don't think you'll come back."

"She knows the problems I've been having. I know it's not like it's been the worst time of my life or anything. Since

I've been here I've met her, and you and I have started hanging out, but how long am I supposed to keep..."

"Well, I mean, you could always..."

"Cliff. It's not working for me here. This town...this whole place, I..."

"This place *what?*"

"It's just...you can't see it because you..."

The car came to a halt atop the quiet earth.

"What the hell is that?"

The headlights streamed forward, splaying light on a large, dilapidated two-story farmhouse. The windows and doors were all boarded up except for the middle window on the second floor, which appeared only as a rectangular void. The railing that ran along the long front porch was shattered, the many spindlings jutting out at odd angles like broken teeth.

Her mouth hung open in disbelief.

"Wow...that's *real* creepy."

"See," he said, excitedly. "I *told* you we'd find something."

"Should we even be here right now?"

Her yarn hand prepared to put the car in reverse as he watched slender fingers wrap around the stainless steel of the transmission lever.

"No, no. It's abandoned. This is the kind of thing we look for when we do this. C'mon, let's get a look."

"Maybe you're right. Let's just make it quick."

Leaving the car running, they emerged into the cold air. He approached the front of the house first, leaving her standing nervously by her car. They could see the wood was weathered and splintered from long exposure to the elements. Earthy, hairy vines that emerged from the ground knotted and twisted around much of the framework.

A pitted and chipped sign was nailed to the front door. Something had been spray painted on it with white Krylon, but it was illegible now. He stepped closer to it to see that a small label was stuck dead square in the center of the faded sign, the kind produced from a label-gun that forms stickable strips of black adhesive tape with the raised letters punched through from behind.

"Does the sign say anything?" she said, as she approached, while still cautiously avoiding stepping onto the porch.

"Well, there's a little label still stuck to it."

"What does it say?"

"The Lister."

"The what?"

"Here, look. *The Lister.*"

She finally stepped onto the cracked framework of the front porch. First one step, then another. The boards creaked under the weight of each footfall.

She missed stepping on an upturned rusty nail by one inch.

"Lister? What in the world does that mean?"

"Not sure. Maybe that's the name of the house."

"Or whoever put the sticker up."

She impulsively rocked back and forth on her heels, looking over each shoulder, and still seeing nothing but dirt and irregular poles. Distant pinpricks of distant lamps from distant farmhouses speckled the horizon.

"All right, Cliff. I think we've had our fun now. I don't like how brand new that label looks. Someone just put that here recently."

"Wow, that's paranoid. I really don't think whoever stuck that there is still lurking around."

"Regardless, something about this isn't right. Let's just

leave.”

“C’mon. Just take one quick look all the way around and we’ll go.”

“Geez.”

She followed him, reluctantly at first, but eventually jogging ahead of him out of impatience as they both skirted around the house’s perimeter. They approached what passed for a back yard: a square of matted, dead field grass with a lone, ragged tree embedded in the dirt, its naked branches frozen at irregular angles like seized fingers, motionless in the chilly air.

He saw the look on her face as she padded ahead of him. She was looking at the house with her eyes wide, her mouth open. He silently thanked the house for saving the evening when suddenly he saw her expression drain as she turned the corner into the back yard.

He followed her, and turned the corner himself to see that the back of the house had three nooses, tied from haggard rope, hanging from the awning over the back entrance. They swayed gently in the night. The walls were spray painted with a horrid epithet, letters three feet tall. Two words were misspelled but the message was clear regardless. It applied directly to her.

She expelled a long sigh, crestfallen.

“That’s just *perfect*.”

“Wow, that’s uh...that’s....”

“And *this* is the kind of weird you wanted to show me?”

“I didn’t know this would be here, honestly.”

“Well, aren’t you going to take a picture?”

He fumbled awkwardly with his hands in his pockets.

“Actually, I think I left it in the car. I could....”

“You know, that’s probably for the best.”

She started to absentmindedly knife her left toe into the grass. They spent seconds trying to look at anything except the house, but there was nothing between them *but* the house.

"Look, Cliff. Let's just go. I think I've had enough weirdness for tonight."

"Yeah, sure. Look, I'm sorry. That's not I what I thought would..."

"It's alright. You don't have to explain. I just want to go now."

They made their way back into the car, where she turned a long arc in The Lister's front yard before returning down the dirt path that reverted back to grassy ruts, then gravel, and then pavement once more. At the first intersection, she turned right without prompt.

She pulled the cell phone from one of her many padded pockets and placed a call. He could hear it ring many times, so he knew it went to voice-mail.

"Hey, Erin. It's me. Call me when you get this. I don't know when we'll be back in town because frankly, I don't even know where town is right now, but I'm on my way. So if you still want to do something, we can. O.k., bye love." Another turn. Left this time. Again, totally unprompted. He knew she was trying to reverse their path going strictly on memory. But it was no use. She had played the game too well. He looked at her as she scanned the blank horizon, trying to memorize the contours of her face. He wanted to always remember the last person to ever play this game with him.

"I guess the game's over, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think we've gotten lost enough."

In the darkness, her voice softened as she spoke again.

"You want to tag along? I mean, after we get back?"

"No, that's all right. You guys go ahead."

Suddenly, no topic seemed correct between them anymore. She checked the time on her cell phone, blue light casting everywhere.

"I'm sure you'll catch up to her in time, Lisa. I didn't keep you out that long."

"Cliff...I just wanted to see what time it was, that's all."

He turned away and watched the white line that ran down the edge of the country road they were on. Crumpled beer cans with unrecognizable logos flashed by in irregular intervals.

At the next intersection, he noticed she seemed to hesitate, and for a moment he wondered if she had decided to pity him and keep playing. He'd take it. He was about to say "right" when she turned left and pointed her car toward the nearest glow in the sky. She hit the accelerator, not knowing she wasn't heading to a town at all, but the Groden County haystack maze, which was by that point, completely ablaze.

Faculty Spotlight: Professor Jason Brown

Professor Brown is a faculty member with the English Department here at Eastern. His writings have been published multiple times, and most recently he has published a poetry chapbook entitled *Blue Collar Fathers*.

Professor Brown was kind enough to conduct an interview with us regarding his own work with *The Vehicle*, his recent writing projects, and more. Following the interview, you will find two of his poems, "Intersection" and "Bioluminescence", both of which first appeared in *The Spoon River Poetry Review*.

The Vehicle: Can you share a little about your undergraduate experience with *The Vehicle*?

Jason Brown: My first year at EIU, editors from *The Vehicle* published my first poem that I'd written six months before while working in a factory. And as a young writer who knew nothing about what to do after finishing a poem, that publication not only validated my writing at the time but also validated what I was writing about.

The Vehicle: Do you remember what first inspired you to become a writer?

Jason: No. Just the opposite. I remember the obstacles. Creative writing was not considered a worthy profession to pursue—at least not to the people I grew up with. I think I first blossomed as a writer when I surrounded myself with other writers and artists who cared about the same things.

The Vehicle: Are you working on anything currently? If so, what is it about?

Jason: I've been working on a novel for about two and a half years, but I should finish by year's end. It's a historical novel that fictionalizes the infamous two weeks during September 1944 when Mattoon, Illinois, came under attack from a "mad gasser" who sprayed sweet smelling gas into windows. The novel recounts the townspeople's reaction to these puzzling attacks that have been blamed on everything from mass hysteria to a highly intelligent and reclusive chemist—as well as Nazis and aliens and the Government.

The Vehicle: Can you tell me about your poetry chapbook, *Blue Collar Fathers*? Why blue-collar fathers?

Jason: I have immense respect for men (and women) who complete physical labor everyday, day after day, for a lifetime. I couldn't do it.

The Vehicle: Have you worked hard labor, then?

Jason: I've done my share—Cleaning toilets. Bending metal. Making bras. Weed eating cemeteries. Shagging newspapers. Baling hay. Roofing. Flooring. Painting, painting, painting—but not for a lifetime. A lifetime of physical labor wears on you, and the ones who can do it, I think, deserve recognition.

The Vehicle: Your work seems to have strong connections to the Midwest, specifically Illinois. Do you consider yourself a Midwestern writer?

Jason: I do. I was born, raised, and educated in Illinois, and

though this region is often ignored in discussions about distinctive regional literature, I am trying to change that. For example, I just finished editing, with EIU faculty member Jay Prefontaine, a new anthology, *New Stories from the Midwest* (Ohio University Press), which is slated for a winter 2010/2011 publication. The anthology will present twenty of the best published short stories written by Midwestern writers or about the Midwestern United States. The goal is to demonstrate how the quality of fiction from and about the Midwest rivals that of any other region.

The Vehicle: Who are some of your favorite writers? Do you feel that any of them have had an influence on the way you write?

Jason: Conan O'Brien once said that he didn't do much research on other comedians and talk shows before he started his late-night show. He compared too much influence to driving on a bridge with concrete on both sides—stare to one side too long, you will naturally steer that way. I found that insight applicable to writing as well. I don't imitate other writers on purpose. I let my subconscious take care of that. What I try to do is consume as many great pieces of literature as I can then keep them in a database in my head. Then when I come across a problem I can't solve in my writing, I flip through the database for something that may help. So I don't really have favorite writers as much as I have favorite books, short stories, and poems. I can fall in love with a writer after reading one story then fall back out after the next. The other answer to this question is: my favorite authors are my friends who write, because I know them personally. I know the struggles and triumphs most of them have gone through. That influence is priceless to my writing and me.

The Vehicle: If you could recommend only one book to be read by your students, which book would it be and why?

Jason: If you forced me to recommend one book—which I would never want to do—I would talk to students individually and discuss his or her personal preferences. I'd find out what inspires, entertains, and emotionally engages them. Then I'd find the best book I could to fit each personality.

The Vehicle: What's the best advice that you were ever given regarding writing?

Jason: I don't think any one piece of advice has made me a better writer, but the amalgamation of advice over the years from several writers, editors, friends, and books has helped my writing immensely.

The Vehicle: Can you share some advice of your own with the aspiring writers out there?

Jason: I subscribe to the basic advice: read as much good writing as you can. Besides reading, the best things I've learned about writing I've learned from sitting down every night and writing, putting words to paper, pushing through problems, playing with techniques, rewriting and rewriting and rewriting. Putting the hours in may not guarantee you will be a great writer, but it will guarantee that you'll produce work.

Intersection

The sun had faded the stop sign pink,
and on windy days, the thin metal quivered
on a wooden pole,

an unsteady wave goodbye

at the line of vehicles in my father's rearview mirror
entering the north side of town after work, one
stop-and-go at a time,

and for fifteen years my father turned right,
away from our house, to visit my grandfather,

who didn't even peek over his newspaper
folded apart with open arms
when we walked through the living room
without knocking.

My father's coffee cup sat across the table,
already full, steam curling above its lip.

They divided the paper and drank

without talk,

a long silence about working the railroad yards
(one retired, one about to) each with pliers
in brown leather cases hooked on their belts,
welding scars like smashed strawberries
on their forearms.

I never joined them at the table.

A week later, I couldn't stop

staring into my grandfather's casket,
his hands cold and calloused on his chest,
a right-over-left handshake with himself,
his index fingers stained yellow
from unfiltered tobacco
smoked on the back patio.

I gently squeezed his earlobe
and his face turned into my father,

who stood before me and the pink lily wreaths.
I wrapped my arms around him from behind
and squeezed.

He patted my shoulder
like patting himself on the back.

We grandsons slid the casket in and out
of the black-slick hearse, into the grave,
as if we were just moving furniture around,

and I thought about my father, the pink stop sign
and how the next day he had to drive home from work,
the turn he would take.

Bioluminescence

First, the shiny knife tip slit holes
in the gold metal lids twisted tight
on our Mason jars, friction of blade
and metal melding into my memory.

Then the block's streetlights kicked on,
hummed electricity. Insects flocked to
the bulbs' warming glow of soft white
across her old sandbox and swing set,
the neighborhood serene, except
for the dog barking at the dark
of the new moon coming into heat.

Barefoot through plump uncut grass,
we cupped lighting bugs in our palms—
light-green libidos blinking as cold
as our own chemical reactions—
and trapped them in our Mason jars
like ancient Chinese lanterns.

Later that night, shadows hid
between our homes, painted her bedroom
window black, until she tapped
her fingernails against the glass jar on her sill.
The lightning bugs blinked awake
like a solar system craving for heat
and the gravitational pull of a star.

About the Contributors:

Nick Canaday: Nick is a sophomore English major seeking certification in secondary education. He loves reading, Spanish, and cats.

Daniel Paquin: Daniel is a first year graduate student in Literary Studies with Creative Writing Emphasis. Unknown to everyone except the doctor who delivered him, at birth Daniel was endowed with six fingers on each hand and prehensile tail. After recovering from the shock of this knowledge, Daniel's mother, who prefers to remain nameless in all matters pertaining to her son, ordered the doctor to remove these "extra little bits". Aside from the tendency to make awkward comments in conversation, Daniel actually enjoys writing good stories that push people beyond their comfortable norm. His as-of-yet unnamed thesis will consist of thirteen short stories exploring the "dark" side of humanity that resides only in the corners of everyone's deepest unconscious. Freud would be so proud.

Jake Smith: November 9, 1989. It was warmer than usual for late autumn and there was talk of rain. The winds were high and the clouds gathered above a small town in northern Illinois. At the height of the storm, a beam of light broke through the dark and a beautiful young man descended to the leafy amber ground. That man was not Jake Smith, but Jake hopes you enjoy the poems anyway.

Rashelle McNair: "I'm a senior at EIU, I am a hypochondriac and I love hamsters. I am graduating in May, but I've really enjoyed my experience as an undergraduate at Eastern. Looking forward to the bumpy road of life, and writing my way

through it.”

Holly Thomas: Holly is a journalist and lifestyle writer with published short stories and essays in genres such as Creative Non-Fiction, Memoirs, Historical Fiction, and Political Conspiracy. She is a Political Science graduate student at Eastern focused on global governance, blood diamonds and rape warfare.

Ryan Pool: “My name is Ryan Pool, and I am an English major at EIU. I enjoy almost every outdoor activity, and try to surround myself with nature as much as possible, which is sometimes hard being that I live on the North side of Chicago. I am an avid snowboarder, and like to write about the subtle beauties of Mother Nature and scenic landscapes. My favorite poet would have to be Leonard Cohen.”

Greg Peterson: “I am a senior Philosophy major working on a second major in English.”

Ben Tillery: “I’m 19, from a small town named Olney about an hour south of here. I miss the summer and the night and what they’ve always meant.”

Ashton Temby: “I am a junior English major with minors in Creative Writing and Professional Writing. I am also a member of Alpha Phi. I plan to become a fiction editor and hope to have finished my first novel by the time I graduate.”

Jennifer O’Neil: “I am a second year grad student finishing my creative writing thesis and graduating in May. I plan to visit Ireland this summer and may very well stay there if I can find a good Ph.D. program.”

Dan Davis: Dan is a graduate student born and raised in Charleston. He also did his undergrad work at Eastern. Apparently he likes it here.

Sean Slattery: Sean is a geology major who writes occasionally in his spare time.

Sarah Hadwiger: "Hi, my name is Sara Hadwiger. Currently I am an EIU student majoring in Chemistry and Education. I realize that is a bit odd for this contest, but I love drawing more than I care to admit. Before any Math class starts I whip out my pencil and start sketching whoever and whatever. I love to draw many fantasy scenes, lots of little narrative doodles to help me understand the notes that I am taking, as well as action packed adventure comics."

Kate Vandermeer: "I really just love creation in any form--music, writing, art--it's all wonderful."

Nicholas Gifford: "I am interested as an artist and writer to explore the depths incongruous combinations and the ascetics of the world. I try to convey my thought and ideas through the mediums of language and art. I am mainly interested and influenced by surrealist poets and artists. One of my main themes in my work is to extract the subconscious mind and thought and channel it into symbolic meaning. I wish to show beauty through my eyes and burn it in the eyes of others."

Jacob Swanson: "I am a sophomore majoring in Philosophy and Psychology, but if I had my choice, I would try and learn everything ever. I enjoy reading, writing, running and dreaming! I'm striving to be a writer in the future, and if that won't work out, then I want to be a farmer or a teacher. I also really

like weird and creepy things and dinosaurs.”

Kim Hunter-Perkins: Kim is an English graduate student who used to hope to get a job. Now, well, that is another story.

Mary Lieske: Mary is a graduate student currently working on a thesis involving medieval transformation tales. She received her undergraduate degree from Kent State University, and calls Cincinnati, Ohio home.

Scott May: Scott is an average white male, born in a the not too big or too small town of St. Louis MO. He is of middle age and has made a slightly better than average grade point average and maintains a similar I.Q. score. He has at least one other sibling. His parents are divorced. Scott May is a poor golfer.

Justine Fitton: "Some people never go crazy. What truly horrible lives they must live." -Charles Bukowski

Doug Urbanski: Doug is currently a Junior majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. Primarily a prose writer who focuses on fiction but occasionally dabbles in poetry.

Rosalia Pecora: "It's my last semester here as an undergrad, and I'm taking it easy like a Sunday morning. I live life vicariously through famous quotes and song lyrics. Albert Einstein once said, "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds." I'm a great spirit, and I feel that my poetry reflects that. If it doesn't, then I blame your mediocre mind."



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About the Editors:

Josh Boykin: Josh is a senior creative writer from Rockford, Illinois, with a strong belief in the powers of free-thought, determination, and Batman. Currently writing a weekly video game column online and spending his little free time fending off his thesis, he hopes to one day write full-time in a way that will allow him to live in a heated, lit home of his own. He enjoys video games, light shows, depressing movies, and fruit snacks.

Lisa Myers: Lisa secretly wants to be a producer with a hit show on Broadway, but she's had to settle for being an English major with aspirations to become a book editor. She has an amazing God, family, and friends, all of whom she loves very much. She is a hard-core optimist who hails from the southwest suburbs of Chicago, and her favorite things include Jesus, British literature, chocolate, the color blue, grammar, classical music, chai, and England.

“You must write for yourself, above all. That is your only hope of creating something beautiful.”

—Gustave Flaubert