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The Project, 2007

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The Project



Spring 2007, Volume 2



The Project Mission Statement

The Project is a student produced literary magazine concentrating on representing a mass of culturally diverse and talented students who choose to submit. Our goal, as a literary magazine, is to represent the struggle of The "ongoing" Project and the passion, devotion, and merit of all who contribute.

Staff Policy and Submission Policies:

The Project is a student produced entity with participating staff members judging submissions for their content, artistic imagery, and literary significance. The Project staff holds the right to cut or edit any submission to the magazine.

The Project accepts submissions of any artistic format throughout the year, although there are deadlines bi-yearly for magazine production. When submitting during the school year, please either drop submissions by the Philosophy Office in Morton Hall, Room 332, or e-mail them to theproject2006@gmail.com. When school is not in session, simply e-mail submissions in an attachment with the following information in the body of the message: your name, address, phone number, and e-mail address, along with the date of the submission, the title of the piece, the date of creation, and either the genre (poetry, prose, drama, etc.) or medium (watercolor, pastel, mixed media, etc.). All legal matters are discussed on our submission forms which are available in MH 332 or through e-mail.

To contact us, please e-mail theproject2006@gmail.com or any member of our staff (addresses can be located on our staff page). Any written mail can be directed towards The Project and mailed to 163 Freedom Way, Madison, AL, 35758.

*The Project
Spring 2007
Volume 2*

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The Demon and the Keep
Andrew Gregg

The Beginning

The silent castle coldly stood Atop a gloomy hill.
And venture inside no one would, For fear of death's cold chill.
And yet one man did boldly go Into that haunted place
And what became of him none know, For none have seen his face.

The fort is old and grown with vines Amid the old pine trees.
And you can hear the crying pines With every gentle breeze.
And sometimes late at night they say Another sound or two
Can be heard when the winds are calm, The brave man's screams break through!

Nay, do not scoff nor roll your eyes, The tale I tell is true,
For I have seen the hell-fiend rise! And heard his howls issue.
I know the thing that holds him there And it has seen me, true.
That man, of escape made me 'ware lest I should die there too.

But wait, let me begin again To when I there first came.
The night was cold and black as sin. The thunder shook the rain.
The wind ghastly and powerful, The trees moaned their refrain.
The rain fell by the barrel full And nowhere did it drain.

My horse had trouble wading through, We made for higher ground.
The water to my stirrups grew! I feared that I might drown.
As we rode through that muddy bog, I thought I saw a hill.
And turned my horse just as a log flowed swiftly past my heel.

We struggled up the gentle slope And up a muddy bank.
And as our first true sign of hope Away the water shrank.
We swiftly came to a stone wall Whose gate had fallen down.
The rain, still steady did it fall And thunder echoed 'round.

Just then a brilliant flash of light Blinded me by surprise.
And in that breath a fearsome sight Was burned into my eyes.
A lonely fort from long ago Drawn black against the sky.
The lightning made and eerie glow That long subdued my eye.

My horse affrighted by the flash Began to buck and yell.
And from my horse, with echoed splash Into the mud I fell.
The claws of fear then dragged him off Screaming into the night,
And left me there to hack and cough Without my sense of sight.

The Approach

I fumbled 'round there in the mud Still dazed and soaking wet.
And then there came the taste of blood, My teeth I firmly set.
I spat that mix into the mire, And slowly gained my feet.
And forced my eyes open wider, Which was no little feat.

At first with darkness all around 'Twas naught I could make out.
But each time lighting struck the ground, Shapes danced and played about.
I slowly made my way uphill Towards that ancient keep.
Each step a sudden, deathly chill Warned of eternal sleep.

My sight came back, but by degrees 'Til at the base I stood,
Of that unholy, hollow keep Soaked both from sock to hood.
The rain continued to pour down Through the cold clammy air.
I thought to myself with a frown, Inside I'll better fare.

I stared a long time at the door, Debating on a knock;
At this sad keep on Flooded moor. O sleeping mound of rock!
And as my sight returned a pace, To my surprise I saw
A staring, sad and grotesque face With knocker in it's jaws!

The face, it seemed to moan aloud, Just like the crying pine.
The thunder made a wretched sound When the two did combine.
I reached my arm out once to knock, Just then the thunder peeled.
So loud and forceful was the shock My body shook and reeled!

I seized the cold, black iron ring And waited for a sound.
Then slowly raised the horrid thing And swiftly threw it down.
With that the door of hickory So slowly open swung.
Inside I peered, naught could I see. The rain fell hard and stung.

The Entryway

I stood within the monstrous frame Of that imposing door.
And lingered there, safe from the rain, But not yet to the floor.
Long I peered into that pitch, A nightmare dark as hell.
And thought I sensed, in darkness rich, A creature dark and fell.

And yet a thunderous lightning blast Not ten feet from me fell!
And through all land I'd rather pass Than through that stormy swell.
Then swiftly I, my courage grasped And passed into that hall.
And as I did I harshly gasped, As I heard footsteps fall!

Sorely tempted was I to flee Into that horrid storm.
But fear my legs held fast you see, From lighting's angry thorn.
I took one more step deep inside. The echoes were my own!
I drew a breath and slowly sighed, The door slammed swiftly home!

Cast deep into the darkest night With all my fears renewed,
I trembled now at loss of sight And pictured Satan's brood!
Which demon now would rend my soul With most unholy speed?
And had I known but where to go I'd have outrun the deed.

I slowly stepped back to the door And pulled with all my might.
And found it would open no more. But then I saw a light,
Reflecting off the aging wood. I slowly turned around.
Across the room a candle stood. My gaze moved to a sound!

Swift then I moved and reached the light And held it high aloft.
And peering deep into that night I heard a foot step soft.
The step it seemed came from behind. I quickly spun around.
I 'gan to think I'd lost my mind For no one was around.

And yet again I heard the step And this was from behind!
Then through a doorway light slow crept. A most heavenly sign!
The slow and even footsteps came And gently grew the light.
And then I saw the hellish frame That sole dwelled in this night.

Hollow cheeks and a pallid face, His black eyes burned with fire
Reflected by a candle's grace. His countenance was dire!
An ancient servant's garb he wore From times of far and old.
And though 'twas naught I could tell more He made my blood run cold.

The Servant

I stared a while then gasped aloud For I had held my breath,
When he the door-frame came around As calm and cold as death.
The creature spoke, "Come this way please" And that was all he said.
And with that frigid gaze he seized My eyes inside my head.

Mechanically he turned around And stepped back through the door.
The spell was broke! With sudden bound I ran across the floor.
But at the frame a time I paused Should I follow this thing?
And then, behind, with eager claws A demon seemed to spring!

I let a yelp fly from my lips, But no beast hunted me.
And yet my hairs all stood on tips, And my legs fain would flee.
My ghastly guide, he took no note And silently walked on.
A tightness grew within my throat. I found my voice was gone.

When at last I had found my speech I questioned of my guide.
"Whither goest we? Wilt thou teach?" At first old speech I tried.
"You need not be so formal sir," The phantom then replied.
"I take you now to my master." And I'd as lief have died.

What sort of man could live in this Most foul unholy place.
The man I followed "Silence!" hissed And anger ruled his face.
"Do not against the master speak! Or this his ancient home!"
"I did not mean," I said quite weak, "To incur such a tone."

"I merely meant your master seems To like his solitude."
"The master," said the horrid thing "Enjoys company too."
At an enormous arch we stopped. "The master waits within."
Ajar the iron-clad door he propped. Cautiously I peered in.

The Library

The room was lavished, rich with art From bygone centuries.
And though the dimness quailed my heart, My light put me at ease.
I pushed the door more open wide. I noted, with a pause
The room had a much longer side, And books covered the walls

I lit a brazier on the wall Held by a gargoyle's hand,
And made my way towards them all To there dumbfounded stand.
I was amazed at all those books Of great and noble birth.
And every one, but by it's looks Was older than the earth.

Greek plays and their philosophies, And rich Italian works.
The story of Androgynies, One on a noble Turk.
And there among these classics lay A book upon a stand
Covered with mould and strong decay, And I reached forth my hand.

The cover bent, but with my touch, And crumbled to the floor.
The ancient title lended much Then to boost my horror.
The script spelled out "De Inferno Del Dante Alighieri"
And then my heart was filled with woe. My pulse grew unsteady.

The door through which I'd entered shut! I quickly whipped around.
I strained all of my senses but I heard no other sound.
I slowly returned to the tray And much to my surprise,
The first cantos had dropped away. I scarce believed my eyes.

The page that it had opened to Looked crisp and clean and fresh.
The ink was clean and appeared new, The paper bright and fresh.
It read, "Per me si va nella Citta dolente." then,
The next line "Per me si va nell Eterno dolore." when

I'd studied Italian at Yale, We'd read this work part way.
Knowledge lifted up the veil Of "Eterno dolore"
Eternal pain, and "Dolente" I recalled as lament,
"Va nell," enter, and then "Per me" Means "through me" it is sent.

And then the words came to my mind And soon I knew too well,
These were the words that God inscribed Upon the gates of Hell!
A sound! I whirled to face about. A bookcase opened wide!
A hall, with red light pouring out, That flickered deep inside.

The Master

Gathering my gall I shouted, "Are you this home's master?"
A gust of wind all full of dread Did all the lights smother.
And then a chill went down my spine. The blood-red glow advanced.
A shadow like a demon's shined, And like a flame it danced.

I must admit my heart felt weak I wish I could have fled.
For now my future looked quite bleak. I thought I sensed the dead!
But then at last I saw a shape, And too the source of light.
A gentleman with cloak and cape! Red glass o'er lamplight bright!

The man was clad in fine array, With kind and noble face.
He then the red glass pulled away And pure light filled the place.
He lit the braziers on the wall And my heart slowly calmed.
He was handsome, clean cut, and tall, His voice a soothing balm.

"So sorry for the draft my friend, That passage leads outside."
He turned and moved a small book-end, The bookcase back did slide.
"You must forgive my being late, I went to take some air."
It was hard in my confused state To dismiss his voice fair.

He seemed a kind and gentle soul And made me feel at ease.
I could not shake my chill most cold From some wild, unseen breeze.
"Please sit down," he said, "If you would." And gestured to a chair.
Of it's red seat and ancient wood I'd not yet been aware.

"Did you enjoy my library?" His gesture swept the room.
There were statues, a tapestry Of a red crescent moon.
"You have many classics here, Of most intriguing choice."
But his response filled me with fear As did his change of voice.

The Fiend

"I collected each one myself From it's respective age."
"I've read each book upon each shelf." His voice was like a sage.
"No doubt is your collection vast." His chuckle left me cold.
"Each volume has an ancient past, I long for works of old."

For all his gentle talk you see, I could not shake the sense
That my cultured host planned for me Some dreadful violence.
He handed me a silver cup Of intricate design.
The shining vessel was filled up With rich and ancient wine.

"To the Masters and their classics," Declared my eager host,
"To their timelessness and magic." And then he drank his toast.
I raised my glass up to my lip And watched over the rim.
For caution I took but a sip And deemed it but a whim.

"Well," he said with kindly voice, "I think our chat is done."
"Let us abandon senseless noise, For words avail us none."
With that he pulled back on his hair And off his flesh mask came!
Laying his hideous skull bare With blood and Ichor stained!

"So glad you came," the demon said With hunger in his eyes.
"It's been a while since I last fed, Young flesh is such a prize!"
My vision blurred, my limbs lost strength. I faltered, then I fell.
And landed near unto the brink Of Dante's book on Hell.

"And even now my poison works Swiftly through your veins.
Your breathing shakes, the muscles jerk, The blood from your face drains.
I know you only took a sip, A drop or two can kill.
And after time the drug will strip Away your sense of will."

I dragged myself onto my feet With the aid of that old stand,
And saw a key tucked in quite neat Into that volume's band!
I snatched the key and turned around, "Thou art a beast from Hell!"
He chuckled low, a wretched sound! "This fact I know too well."

"But even beasts must feed, you see, From time to time on life."
And with that I gripped fast the key To save me from this strife.
I took the book and flung it well. The demon paid no mind.
Yet as I planned, the volume fell Upon the case behind.

The Fight

It struck the book-end which then fell. The case again did slide.
The room was smote with stormy swells From a strong gale outside.
A chuckle rose which froze my heart. "There's no hope for escape."
And all my soul strove to depart Into night's sable drape.

"Come, let us be reasonable." My vicious hose then sighed.
His step forward made me troubled I broke for the outside!
He made no move save to watch me Rush to that darkened hall.
I ran a pace but could not see... And then I 'gan to fall!

I bounced down many stony steps And hard I struck the ground!
And landed, near a corpse that slept, With great and sickly sound.
I rolled a while in agony And felt my grating bones
My shoulder's joint had broken free With pain I drove it home.

My head it ached, my ears they rang I writhed upon the ground.
Those shadowed stairs, an echo sang Of all my crashing sounds.
I fought to gain my hands and knees The drug still worked within.
My mind felt it was filled with bees A buzzing, noisome din.

I looked around but could not see Again I'd lost my sight
A pattern danced, appeared to me like snowy moonless nights
I fumbled round until my hand Felt something like a ball
Covered in thin and wispy strands A rug? An animal?

My sight adjusted slowly back I raised the fur to see.
A corpse lay there, and aged black Was staring up at me!
His horrid face affrighted me, And verily he stunk.
And soon it became clear to me, Deep from his glass he'd drunk.

The Flight

The passage stretched but few feet more Then opened to the air
The corpse was pointing through the door And I followed his stare.
I peered into that stormy throe And saw an arch of stone,
But sealed up very long ago With ivy overgrown.

I heard steps behind me come Near to the place I lay
The voice behind me left me numb "You can't get out that way."
And yet I crawled with all my might My strength and will, what strains!
But urged my soul to win the fight With venom in my veins.

The demon loath! He took his time, And seemed not yet to care.
Cared not I fled, lost in his crime, Neither how fast nor where.
A breath he took, and closed his eyes Tilting his head to sky.
The moonlight shone upon his guise And then opened his eye!

"Come now I think 'tis time to dine, And in the open air.
So long since I've feasted so fine In moonlight's subtle glare."
He gripped me hard by my collar, Like hunters do with hounds,
And held me up. I'd not fall far Were he to drop me down.

Feebly I flailed and stretched myself Towards the walled-up arch.
"You want to feel it for yourself?" He threw me with a lurch!
My head it struck the solid stone Dazed I leaned on the wall.
I ached in mind and soul and bone As pain washed over all.

While leaning on that stony face Something there did I find.
Between two aged rocks a space! The demon moved behind!
I drew the key out from my pouch, Made as if I cowered,
That key into the slot I couched Of that frame that towered.

The earth, it heaved and jerked around The inner arch-stones fell,
With my support I tumbled down. Then charged the beast from Hell!
I crawled with all the strength I had Then turned to see him chase.
Flames leapt up high, which drove him mad The archway filled with blaze!

Enraged he screamed and lunged at me Headlong into that burst.
He roared in pain and agony That I'd escaped him first.
An earthen chasm opened wide, He sank into the ground.
And I lay cold and damp outside, Helpless upon the ground.

Night Swimming Russell Winn

As I leave Savannah on Highway 80, I pass the paper mill on the left. Similar to Butcher-town in Louisville, whose smell in the summer contributes to the marked rise of vegetarians, the International Paper Mill forces me to reconsider ever putting anything on paper. Even veganism seems wise: If eggs can smell that bad when they rot, they can't be good to begin with. While hydrogen sulfide may not be officially hazardous in low doses, it's disturbing how quickly it overpowers the sense of smell. Stay in the area overnight and, in the morning you wouldn't know that you stank.

The water takes on the same flavor. I never knew that plain water could taste sweet until I moved out of the Southeast. This is why all the tea is sweetened, and everyone drinks coke. Join the community for a short while and your taste buds forget what good water tastes like. The images of sulfur and eternal heat that street preachers invoke come alive to those living near a Southern paper mill. Only there, it's a dry heat.

Thankfully, I'm driving into the wind on my way East. Once I've reached the bridge onto Tybee Island, nothing but dampness comes through the windows and sunroof. It's strange having to run the wipers when it's not raining: The humidity never drops below ninety percent, even in the driest summer. Tybee means salt in the Native American Euchee language. Salt can purify and preserve, but it can also burn. I once heard that even people who cannot swim can float in the Dead Sea because of the high concentration of salt and minerals. The air on the island feels that way except, instead of supporting you, it crushes you. The saltiness of the wet air surrounds, envelops, encloses the night around you. During the day, the sun burns off some of the moisture; at night, it folds in on you.

Blue sky reaches out to the horizon and touches blue-green water. Moonlight washes away the vivid color of the day. White sand becomes light gray. Sky and water meld into pitch. I learn what it is to be color-blind like dad. At night the beach isn't about seeing and being seen. No seeing; no touching; no talking; no hearing other than the rush of the wind past your ears. Only smell and taste remain; even they fade in repetition.

Turning into the public parking lot a little too sharply, I flash back to driving lessons with dad as I hear his dreaded command, "Easy. EASY!" echo in my head. Officially, the beach closes at midnight, but the police never enforce this rule. I watch for the watchers anyway; at three hours after mid-night, it's better to go unnoticed. I need to be alone.

I park as far away from the streetlight as possible. "Night Swimming" by R.E.M. is fading into the background: "you I thought I knew you / you I cannot judge / you I thought you knew me / this one laughing quietly underneath my breath / night swimming / deserves a quiet night." I know, judging, being known, needing escape I close the door and step into the wind. It's always strong, especially at night; but tonight, it seems as if it has somewhere to go, and it's insistent on getting there early. Dad's shouting, "Hurry up, you're making us late!" is blown away. I hope the wind continues to do this work.

Alone.

I leave my shoes, wallet, shirt, and all but the door key in the trunk. No sense in tempting anyone to steal my last ten until the end of the month. If it weren't for the gas card, I couldn't be here and I'd likely starve. Dad shakes his head, "You need to learn to manage your money better, boy."

The asphalt is still warm, but the sand is cool. It's even cooler than the air—drier anyway. It's like someone left the air conditioning on with the door open. Somewhere, dad is shouting, "Close the door!" I realize the wind is letting me down. Thoughts keep intruding. I pick up

the pace to get to the wet sand so the wind will stop sandblasting my ankles, but it's difficult running on a surface that gives way under every step. I turn south so the wind's at my back. My hair streams out in front of me, pointing the way, forming blinders to everything around me. "Get a hair cut!" I head into the darkest part of the beach on its southern edge. This must be what a sensory deprivation chamber feels like. I can hear only the gentle breaking of the waves on the rocks. I can see only a few stars through the clouds. I can feel only the warm water splashing against my shins. I can smell only the brine in the air. I can taste only the salt on my lips.

I climb over the break, take off my shorts, and wade into the Atlantic. Isolated. Separated. Alone. Silent. Safe.

An hour and a half up I-16, the cancer is spreading. Three years ago it invaded his colon. They tried to isolate it. To separate it. To convince it to leave him alone and safe. It didn't work.

Within a year he was back at the hospital with a shortness of breath, silencing him. As if he were trapped under water, his lungs couldn't hold enough oxygen. The x-rays showed some spots: Little dark spots that seemed to be joining together in places. Forming communities. Staking claim to their territory. Climbing on up. They try again to isolate it and separate it.

A few weeks ago the left side of his body felt numb, and he had trouble walking. Stumbling into the neurologist's office, he sees an MRI of his brain. The communities have taken up residence there now. Overcrowding will soon be a problem. The population control techniques have failed, and there's no place left to be alone. There's no room left.

One month from now, during a night much like tonight, the growth would finally stop. Dad would simply stop breathing: merciful separation. Tonight though, breathing is still important to me; and as I float on my back underneath the clouds, I add a few extra ounces of saline to the sea.

I swim back to the breakers, pull on my shorts, and walk north toward the lot. I feel cold as the wind dries me. The wind and the surf drown out most sound, but then I notice a gull calling out the morning. The brine leaves my lips chapped and my tongue feeling swollen. My nose clears, and I smell the dry morning air blowing in from the west. My hair, no longer providing the blinders, flails about behind me. Color returns, and I can see the light of a red morning ahead. Mourning ahead.

Before I get into the car, I try and knock off as much of the white sand as possible, but my efforts are futile. I carry the beach back home with me: little communities, refusing to let go.

Today, twelve years later, I never go to the beach alone, and I haven't been to Tybee since that night. The night swimming is past, "replaced by everyday."² Laurel and I often go out at night for a walk on the beach, together. She never knew dad, but she was there for the funeral: drove down from Louisville just to be with me. That was when I knew.

Leaving the babies with her mom, we walk east on Orange Beach before midnight. I stop and look at the horizon where water and sky meet and merge into one. Laurel reaches out, takes my hand, and we merge as well. Laughing quietly underneath my breath, I whisper, "Good night." My community has found me, known me, and I am not alone. We walk back to the condo to check on the kids. The night air swirls around and between us. Safe.

Circle

Kristen Ruccio

My mothers are with me, always
holding me up like the rain
where I hear
past, present, future
in the sound of a gull
(come spirit)

my own mother
never happy with her reflection
always busy with others until
one day she realized she had become
only (and everything) finally at last
she saw herself in

her hands, brittle and worn down
cracked with the soil and
the puke, shit, snot, and blood it is always
her lot to clean and in this process
we
move the levers that move the world

We know.

we know what we have allowed
to go on for far too long.

still,
love makes the world
not the dull theories or the breaking
apart to understand what is longgone
by the time you have dissected and
raped its various parts

Here, in this moment
as my hand touches
hers and the epicanthic eyes
smile
we feed the gull together
and travel places you will likely never find

For that I am truly sorry
and my slave's mentality (FUCK YOU, FRIEDRICH) rests tonight
content, at last
to be me.

Fallen Soul Mallory Riggs

As the leaf falls slowly
And dances in the breeze,
I see your body going
Through life with ease.
Not a worry or complaint
Has entered my ear
From you, sweet friend,
For more than a year.
Yet once the leaf lands,
It is cracked and distressed,
So perhaps your soul
Has yet to confess.
It remains at peace—
No cracks, no sound—
Until it is released
And falls to the ground

Untitled Erin Reid

Sitting on pine needles
I miss the mountains of home
Dry weather giants
Rugged peaks too big for words
The mountains here
Sometimes do not please
So short and rolling
And soft and green
But right at this moment
The trees circle around
The undergrowth and bush
As if grown right here as
A sanctuary for me
And I appreciate
These eastern hills
With their closeness and embrace
They do not have the
Valor and awe
Of the West
But they make a better
Companion

Weep Not

Damien Field

When I am to be placed in the grave,
Weep not for me, my love.
For I am not gone, but merely asleep,
And awaiting our reunion above.

So say not goodbye, my dearest,
Instead say sweet dreams and goodnight.
The sun has set, the shadows having slowly crept,
And now it's time to turn off the light.

Have no worries, my beloved,
For we'll be together once more.
Heaven awaits us, and an eternity together,
For my love will never waiver, of that you can be sure.

August Lions

Brad Posey

tonight, the lions
are looking for satisfaction
anything that moves
blood, glamour, the blue guts
of a computer
Jesus and His hitmen
the tide waits
the crash is desired, longed for
wanted more than anything
temptation echoed through
a thousand chambers
the lions sleep
their whiskers shiver
miles away, the zebra dreams
looks up, eyes caught red

as if by cameras

Butterflies Suicide Lina Salah

Now I wonder
what drives butterflies closer to the light?
Is it the same old lie?

"Within Light lies the truth of the universe"
"Light is the comfort and Darkness is the torture"
"Light is a bliss and Darkness is a curse"

Now I wonder
Was not light what drove Icarus to his end
Waxy deceptive wings melted with "vanity" and "regret"
Leaving a myth of a Godly penalty
And a resonating CAUTION
Never try to become a GOD
Leave the sun and heavens
And clutch to the ground for
Ground is where you belong

Now I wonder
Isn't light the suicide of butterflies?
A suicide of Beauty and Hope?
A masked DEATH?
Beautiful yet cruel
Attractive yet fatal

Why do not people wonder?
What is left from butterflies?

Happiness? Fades away,
Hope? Crushes as the wings sway
Closer and closer to that shining magnet
Cries of satisfaction and joy fill the ether
then they turn into eternal pain

They ascend to disturb the surface of a shimmering
Piece of glass that once torn up the veins of a butterfly
Shimmering yet bloody!

Don't you know butterflies?

You are a bunch of colorful idiots
that voluntarily drown in the ambiguity of light and goodness
you seek the shadow of a rescuing rope
and you end up between the claws of a disguised snake
that mocks Light, Hope and the Truth!!

And makes an Icarus out of every ambitious fool!

Untitled

Samantha Farrington

You
Stand there still.
You are a lemon peel,
Sending your scent.
Half way across the world
It travels
Your sticky-sour aroma,
Spicing the Asians,
Sending tingles down the spine of Africa,
Tickling the nostrils of the Swedes and the French
With their noses turned up to catch the scent,
A catching, a tempting, a tasting scent
Reminding everyone of grandmother's lemon cookies
That she only served once a year
At summer-time tea in September
To remind you that autumn was a time to celebrate,
And that lemon-zing was just what you needed
To get you through the dreary week.
Everyone remembers
As you go wafting through
A lemon-zing
A scent to spice the dreary day

The Books My Mother Read

Joyce Ann Ashford aka Joyce Rambert
For Etoy Ashford

"You must read *Peony*, but it will make you cry,"
My mother said.
I read that book by and by.
Then I was hooked on *Pearl Buck*
and read
The Good Earth and *Dragon Seed*.
I guess I read all the books my mother told me to read.
"*Gone with the Wind* is a great book!"
she said one day,
so I read that book to see what Margaret Mitchell had to say.
there were other books my mother said I should not miss:
The Slave who Freed Haiti was on Mother's list.
reading books gave me empathy for God's people
throughout the world,
but Katherine Scherman's book on Haiti
made me proud to be an African-American girl.
I'm glad I read Mother's favorite books
and loved to learn all mankind
before my knowledge of injustice
crippled my heart and my mind

Caterpillar's Opium
Shelley Carroll

slip and fall I see three clocks, spinning round me in their box.
hickory dickory dock blind mice ran up the clock.
the room it stops I'm in a shoe, children cover me what do I do...keep in mind I tell no
tales...I believe in faeries and all is well.

The sword won't budge, I've tried it twice, but these apple tarts are very nice.

I swim through time the cats meow...oh, i think there goes the cow, and jack frost has
come too soon, what did he do with that moon?

The butcher, the baker, and the candle stick maker, took that damn egg off the wall,
It's a shame you see, for if it were up to me, I'd let the damn thing fall.

And there is no bo peep with all those sheep, and the black one with the boy
and there grows a stock looks fun to climb, pity, haven't got the time.

gingerbread makes such a mess, the muffin man did too. I got hungry on the way to
grandmas, what else could i do?

riding in a pumpkin's so much fun, but heels are such a bitch, they broke and the next thing
I knew, I landed in a ditch

but Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater had a merry time, with pumpkin pie and pumpkin bread
and pumpkin faerie wine

then Jack and Jill went up the hill...we know what happened next
but then, left out of the text,

Jill stomped the spider and with Miss Muffet beside her they carried the water away.

And in this place it's common knowledge that Jill and Miss Muffet are gay.

Domesticated Mad Dogs
Joyce Ann Ashford aka Joyce Rambert

Having the power to kidnap and torture people
doesn't make it right,
and when you turn a mad dog loose,
you can't control who he'll bite.

We ravage foreign countries
and expect freedom to reign at home.

Americans can be imprisoned without charges,
stalked, spied on, or killed wherever they roam.

More than 30,000 secret FBI letters circulate each year
robbing citizens of privacy each day.

With no courts to curtail abuses,

Mad dogs secretly snare innocent prey.

(A) BEING TOUCHED -or- "The Wine-Dark She"

Nathaniel Lindsey

People name their boats after women, it's said, because seafaring vessels are indecisive and emotional; headstrong, it's implied, in such a negative way so as not to contradict or interfere with that inherent lack of direction. Call it "folk misogyny." The kind of ass-backwards sentiment that's been grandfather-claused into our consciousness forever. We seem to see in it a vulgar charm; an honorary literary value despite-no, because of its failure to be an empirical truth.

The sea-now there's a woman. The woman: the fertile void from which all life issues forth. A warm, aqueous source of shelter from the sun for the innumerable species still in evolutionary gestation. Each and every time a living thing crawls ashore she knows a newer, crueller, emptier nest. Each beached whale is a still birth, each oil spill a mass abortion. When she rails, postpartum depression is all caterwauling squalls and feedback swells that shatter glaciers to snow. One-hundred-foot pillars of hydrogen dioxide, the eternal amphibious. Amorphous and clawed, they stroke, snatch and again submerge, swallowing helicopters but sparing herons. The ocean is the original gangster of the matriarchy. Nurture is a weapon.

A metaphor-turned-digression.

No, the definitions of "Woman" that are daily contrived are not the result of a refusal on her part to accept the convictions or mission statements of the Patrilineage, but of its response to her. No single member of the coarser-coated sex can reduce to one reliably, repetitively consummate action how he will respond to contact with even the woman for whom he has the most affection. The possible outcomes are too various for the Trustees to trust.

It would be redundant to say that the phalli cast long shadows, but under precisely those narrow ellipses of shade, the sandbox empire hums-drones deafeningly-teems-with ambition and all its infection; the quest for pristine fortune already identifiable to those not contaminated as inflammatory ruin. There is no safe storage in the simple-machine photomosaic hive that comprises an engine of such purpose-void and affected complexity as our own for radioactivity of such magnitude, of such a disastrous potential to interfere with our eat-own-and-kill agenda as feminine persuasion. Feminine aussuaging. Psychological devastation.

This elixir would bring about the Irreversible Collapse.

And so we tell our soldiers, our sailors, our sons: Tragic martyrdoms trail the goddess-copies, even if some have unusually long leashes. These fertile fields invariably facilitate ravenous brush fires, their windblown wheat sprigs are actually live wires. The fair that stand statuesque, or skilled in verse or seduction endure countless of these infernos and emerge anew each time, lushness not only intact but augmented, baptized in vicious explosions of interest-compounded, obnoxiously vibrant abundance.

The cacophony of Melissa-Jeannette has a symmetry identifiable by plain sight. Depletion defines deserts, but hers is a menagerie at capacity with fruit trees and birds of paradise. Their songs war with each other and I can't hear myself think. Lucid brain activity can be gladly put on hold for street musicians, especially of the feathered, winged variety. She is a region of dunes where the sand is plied like polymer clay. Equal parts two-percent milk and free-trade-certified honey and you can reverse the devastating effects of the agricultural revolution, the terra-firma gang rape of cotton farming, even an abusive childhood. You can bring your capacity for love back from the dead.

The Legend of the Heart of Stone

Nicole Stanik

I pulled my car into the parking lot of an old diner; the only one for what seemed like hundreds of miles. I walked into the dilapidated establishment and ordered a cup of coffee from the gruff looking man behind the counter.

While drinking the coffee, I reviewed some notes from an interview I just came from, as usual nothing interesting. Bored with my notes I struck up a conversation with the man who had served the coffee. His name was Ike and Ike loved to talk. In my typical reporter fashion I asked Ike questions about himself and about the diner.

"I've owned this here diner for... lessee, goin' on forty some odd years now. Bought it in nineteen and sixty-four."

Ike then proceeded to tell me of both the interesting characters and the famous people that had come into the diner or stayed at the motel.

"What motel?" I queried. I did not recall seeing a motel when I drove up.

"The one that used to be behind the diner. It burned down 'bout twenty or so years ago..." Ike said as he got this far off look in his eyes, "soon after she came through here. There's a poem someone wrote about her and the night she came into town. If I recall correctly it goes something like this:

Once upon a time,
a very long time ago
in a place only few have been
there was a heart of stone.

It belongs to someone
only few have ever known,
the woman with the raven hair.
This is how the legend began...

It was a cold and rainy night
nuthin' could be seen for miles
'cept an old diner just off the road.
Well she walked in, soaked to the skin
and ordered "a hot cup of joe".
Then he walked by and heaved a sigh
as he smelled the perfumed air.

Gently he touched her cold wet hair
as he asked her her name.
Her only reply was a gentle smile
she spread across her pretty but wicked face.

Now, after hours of talkin'
they both started walkin'
to the old motel in the back.
They spent the night together
which is needless to say,
but here is the best part yet...

As the sun rose, she put on her clothes.
With a devilish look in her eyes
she walked out the door never to look back
and this is the reason why:

When the sheriff came
no one could explain
the man who lay dead with no heart.
He had been a fool as many do
and she took advantage of that.

Well, that's how the legend goes
however no one really knows
why she stole his heart that night.
So, fellows be 'ware of the woman with the raven hair
and a heart of stone she wears around her neck."

"Interesting poem Ike."

"Yeah, and it's true too. Ya know, no offense here, but you kinda remind me of her. Your black hair, the way you smile and all... sorry, that was way before your time I'm talkin' like a silly old man."

My initial reply was a gentle smile. "No offense taken. I better get going, I have a long trip ahead." I stated throwing a couple of dollars on the counter. "Thanks Ike for the coffee and the story. Goodbye."

"Yup, bye now."

With my goodbyes said I walked out of the doors of the diner never looking back, clutching the heart of stone I wore around my neck.

Like Sour Apples with Spicy Apricot Soup Samantha Farrington

We are such a strangeness
You and I, fitting together to make a piece of art
The kind that makes them stop and stare
Not saying "how perfect," "how beautiful"
No, they say, "look at the ducks, swimming behind"
"See the one with the twisted bill"
And we peak our eyes out of the frame
And giggle a bit, and hold hands fast
So as not to get stuck

We are as much a part of the wall as the picture
Blending into the background with dull grays and pinks
And shining in bright greens of life and newness.
We will make the world see a new kind of love
The kind that doesn't have to be perfect, but has to be unique

We fit together like a sieve
Like sand in the mountain snows
And like tulips on the table in the fall.

You make me think of Danish pies
And yellow suburban houses
And fine grains of pepper that make the elderly sneeze in their wheelchairs
And we will visit them, and bring them roses, every one

And we will stand together on the shore and you will whistle to the gulls
And I will lay out the checkered blanket for us to jump on and make our
blue footprints
And then we will hang it on the wall and show our grandchildren in years
to come

You make me think of green plaid
And yellow cottages in the woods

You are nothing like me
With shining eyes, and thin face, and a gray sports coat with your jeans
And me the quiet one, with round cheeks, and studies, and too many
thoughts and nothing to show for it
But together we are a picture, that's for sure

And our minds are just alike
We sit and talk for hours
About nothing in particular, but everything at once
And soybeans, and turtles, and Iowa
And where we want to go, and the life we could have...together

We are everything that isn't perfect
And we like it that way
And there are no expectations...nothing to make this last...and everything to
make it fail
But we believe anyways
And dream of Forever.

That's why we make a picture on the wall
Abstract with no ducks
And it makes them say
"look at their feathers...look at that one's bill that is all twisted out of
shape....look at the ducks! They're all swimming backwards!"

But we swim for a purpose
Backwards in the water
To make art
Art that makes us think of sour apples and spicy apricot soup

But no ducks

Memory

Aileen Stellingwerf

Memories... of days long past, of moments I wish could last for eternity. I wish they wouldn't
fade away with change - but new things are yet to be...

Little things, seemingly insignificant to the outside eye, remain behind. A smile, a hand in
mine, a glimmer in your eye, a presence walking beside me.

With open hands I hold these things, knowing they are not mine to keep - except to treasure
somewhere deep... only in a memory.

Dreamer

Alexandre Fortier-Galarneau

Squishy footsteps casually walk across a worn treadmill. It's his usual. Treadmill number three. It's not far from the window. He watches over the city and its people like the great big eye behind the magnifying glass. Visions of grandeur flash through his mind. He sees himself floating above the burning carcass of the city, picking through the last survivors for a final victim. A hero clad in bright spandex and cape arrives to stop him, and he swats him away like a fly with a single thought. His power is great. He is the magnificent Phobus. The timer on the treadmill suddenly stops, and he is lunged across the gym floor. Lying there, flat on his stomach, he waits for the sea of laughter. Instead, he's welcomed by a tidal wave of searing pain. The barbed wire wrapped around his full-body spandex costume has cut into his chest and stomach, and he's bleeding all over the gray carpet floor.

Samuel Berring is a systems-technician for Biodyne Corporation. He also works part-time at a local comic book store. Samuel loves comic books. He always has, and always will. The paramedics ask for his personal information. When he produces only the name "Phobus," they fumble through his pockets to find a wallet. "Samuel Berring, 27 years old." The paramedics inside the ambulance go through their usual routine like clockwork. Samuel simply stares. It isn't until they rip his costume open that he reacts. The needle stings a little, but he's soon as calm as a well-cooked cow. The paramedics exchange a few jokes about the costume before he passes out from the pain. He wakes up two hours later, all stitched up, and his costume gone. Leather restraints surround his wrists and feet. He can hear the doctors outside talking. It's nothing but mumbling through the door, but he picks out the words "suicidal" and "few more days." The doctor comes in with a rather large needle, and he's out again for a few hours.

It isn't until he passes several personality tests that they let him go home. A secretary calls, asking the usual questions as to why he possibly could have missed work today. His explanation doesn't shock her. It doesn't even interest her. Even the telephone has more emotion than she does. Samuel hangs up and walks over to a pile of boxes behind his couch. His apartment is a comfortable little nook of a comfortable building. It isn't too neat, or too dirty. The boxes behind the couch are filled with comic books dating all the way back to his early childhood. His personal favorite is "X-Men, The Uncanny." He sorts through a small pile of "Spawn" issues before choosing the twelfth. July of 1993. It's the one where he realizes who his murderer was. The back cover has an ad for Wizard Magazine.

The following day, Samuel stops by the scrap yard on his way to work. The gates are open as always, and he sneaks in. He feels like a rogue, sneaking about a dark dungeon. The piles of junk suddenly fade into mountains of gold and rubies. Charred skeletons litter the pathways between the mounds of treasure. He hears a roar from the north. A great red dragon has awakened from his slumber. Sam grabs a radiator before speeding out of the junk yard. It sits inside of the basket mounted to the front of his bicycle as he rides to work. It's all suit-and-tie from here on. No dragons or super-powers allowed.

Work is just about the same every day for Samuel. He sits behind his cubicle, typing away at who-knows-what. His co-workers tend to avoid him. Social skills aren't his forte. He prefers it that way. Idiotic mongrels don't do well with his working environment. It's not like he could talk to them if he wanted to. All they talk about is who's fucked whose secretary. Samuel Berring hasn't been with someone of the opposite sex since high-school. He doesn't like to talk about that either. Several people are forced to interact with him every once in a while. As soon as they have computer problems, they come to him. As soon as the system goes down, they scream at him. It's a love-hate relationship. On his way home from work, Samuel stops by the scrap-yard again. He steals a few more car parts and an old blender be

fore dashing away. He feels a certain rush from it. Each theft brings him closer to his ultimate goal.

The internet is good for a lot more things than porn and sexual predators. For example, one could very easily find the plans to an "Ash-powered Photon-Emitting Brain Amplifier" on the internet. There is no such thing as an "Ash-powered Photon-Emitting Brain Amplifier," but Samuel does not want to know that. Every time a building burns down, or an old apartment building is demolished, Samuel is there. Every time an ash-tray is found missing, Samuel is guilty. Every time an old, forgotten piece of trash goes missing from the local junk yard, Samuel is never far. Aside from his blood-red spandex costume wrapped in barbed-wire, "Phobus" isn't much of a super-villain. Mild theft and delusional behavior is all he's really guilty of. Every day, Samuel Berring dies a little on the inside, slowly becoming the imaginary entity known as "Phobus."

Months pass, and Samuel Berring is fading away. At work, he doesn't even answer to his name anymore. The people who run the gym have filed a restraining order against him. He's even lost his job at the comic store for slashing a customer with barbed wire from his costume, which he had been told to remove. Before long, he is arrested for stealing from the junkyard. December comes, and Samuel Berring is no more.

It's February, and Phobus is nearly ready. He hasn't come to work in at least a few weeks. The last time he did, he was kicked out by security because of his costume. Before they forcibly threw him out on the street, he screamed, "You will rue the day when you mocked the great Phobus!" Needless to say, they filed a restraining order as well. Valentine's day would be the day.

Squishy footsteps force their way through a crowd of suits. Black suits, blue suits, suits with skirts barely there. The marble floor reflects a giant statue of the world hovering above the lobby. The words "Biodyne is the future" are painted on the floor. The same words are erect above the heads of the lobbyists. Heads turn as Phobus walks calmly through the lobby. The security guards recognize the grotesque costume. The barbed-wire is a bit more rusted than before, but it's the same nonetheless. He stares at them intently, seeing them grovel before him in his mind. He stretches out a hand towards a pack of them near the elevators, and sends them flying into the walls. In his mind, his plan to use the "Ash-powered Photon-Emitting Brain Amplifier" to give himself super-powers has worked miraculously. He lifts the security guards into the air and pommels them into the ground. He beats them to a bloody pulp with a single thought. He sends the giant corporate statue crashing into the perfectly polished marble floor. He is Phobus, and he is magnificent.

In reality, the guards are staring at him with a confused look. They're not sure whether they should call for backup or the mental asylum. One of them, either very brave or very stupid, walks closer to him. In his mind, the bodies of the guards and lobbyists scatter the floor in a bloody mess. The doors fling open, and a man clad in brightly-colored Spandex hovers inside. Phobus walks towards the hero with a determined pace. He looks down before slashing at his throat with the barbed wire on his wrists. The cut is deep, and blood splatters everywhere. Phobus is showered with the man's dark blood, but soon his own blood joins the fray. Sixteen shots are fired from the standard-issue revolvers of the private security guards, each penetrating him in a different place. The visions fade to reveal a dead security guard lying in a pool of dark blood. Someone's already called 911, and the cavalry of ambulances and police cars is heard roaring through the streets. Phobus is lying on the cold, marble floor of the Biodyne Lobby. Blood trickles down the barbed-wire and drips onto the shining marble. He looks down at his own miserable failure and sees himself in the marble. He does not see a blood-red spandex mask. He does not see red-tinted blast goggles, or an evil grin. He sees a 27-year old systems-technician who loved comic books. He sees the only true victim of the terrible "Phobus."

Journey

Damien Field

When did you become one of those people,
You know the sort: they wish you well to your face,
But cheer when you stumble, hoping you fall.

There was a time when you made my day complete,
Without a word you spoke volumes to me,
Showing me that in you, I had a kindred soul.

In an all too cliché sort of way, you've made your point;
Maybe you really were just like so many before and since,
But I can still smile knowing that life always works out.

You see me falter in my path, again and again,
And to you that's a sign that it's over, and I'm done;
I know rather that the process has yet to end.

I celebrate the journey that's commenced, rather than
ended;
Enjoy completely what is the journey, not a destination,
And look forward anew to seeing everything with wonder.

From Nothing

by Christian Bonnell

```
if(you.loves_deep_thought() && (you.is_geek() || you.is_crazy(straight::up)))  
{  
    you.mind.open();  
    you.read( "
```

I have always wondered why I love writing so much. Program code, prose, poetry, it doesn't seem to matter what I am writing. Each kind brings me joy, sometimes with subtle, sometimes with drastic differences in flavor. There is just something about sitting down to a blank page and creating something ex nihilo that satisfies a deep inner need, that seems to transcend mere intellect. The words just seem to flow from some unexplored part of my soul. When I write code, I am creating my own microcosm, defining its rules, and constructing things in that little world. I am like a child playing with his erector set while Daddy is constructing a car in the workshop. With prose, I am both describing God's creation and participating in the act of creation with Him. I love Him, and it brings me joy when I can copy what he has created into a stream of words, conveying my sense of wonder at what he has made; especially when that stream of words grows into a creation in its own right. When I write poetry, I address the emotions He invokes in me more directly, with only subtle pointers to the reality which conjures those emotions.

There is nothing quite like the feeling I get when a thought comes upon me in full force. My laptop suddenly becomes the most seductive thing I have ever encountered, and my mind is unable to do anything else until I finally give in and plunge my consciousness into depths of what will soon become an essay or a sonnet. I still am unsure whether I take hold of the thought, or the thought takes hold of me, to be worked in, out, up, down, over, sideways, and under, but all the while I am simply lost in the ecstasy of it all. Glory to glory, beauty

to beauty, each experience is something new. When I finally come up for air, three hours and 2500 words later, my whole being is exhausted. I need say nothing, only lay back and bask in the pleasure and the afterglow of this creative work.

And, there are few things quite as intoxicating as watching your program unfold before your eyes. My creations never work the first time. But after spending hours thinking, planning, experimenting, writing, debugging, writing, debugging, fuming, debugging, writing, and debugging some more, I can stuff my finished world inside a .exe, click the mouse, and it comes to be. For me, writing code is a religious experience. God created a world and redeemed it, I create a world and debug it. And when I run my working program for the first time I feel just a small bit of the joy that God Himself felt when He said "Let there be light," and there WAS light! Or as I might say,

```
light* Sun; //Day 1
light* Moon; //Day 1
expanse Sky(water.Above() / water.Below()); //Day 2
planet* Earth = new World(); //Day 3
Earth->Populate(plants); //Day 3
Earth->Plants->Reproduce(); //Day 3
Sun = new GreaterLight(); //Day 4
Moon = new LesserNight(); //Day 4
//And it continues...
```

Creation is in His nature, and I want to be like Daddy. Call it imitation of my Father, if you will. And as it has been said, imitation is the highest form of praise.

```
");
you.mind.close();
you.process();
}
else{
```

This Dance Aileen Stellingwerf

Let me leave this behind,
Make this emotion flow through me
And pass, like the mysterious night,
When morning dawns I'll be free.
The music of the night still plays
Memories haunt, still enchanting
In the starlight, under the moon's
rays
As if in a dream, we are dancing.
Swept away in passion
Lost in warm embrace
The world no longer surrounds us
Only you and me remain.
Let me let you go.
This night is just a memory.
As we dance in the starlit glow,
Tell my heart it is just a dream.

The Pearl Leash Brad Posey

she rises like a beast from rest
stretches her long legs and saunters
across the room wearing nothing
but her shoes

she paints herself by the window
like a flower, like a tigress
like nothing that i've ever
seen before

the smell of her hair, like all the
sweet and rotting fruit, her skin
like some new continent and her eyes
the color of rain, full of bluebirds
and menace and galaxies and oceans
and republics and taos

she sports her hips like a gunslinger
with fireworks in her belly, as close
as a kiss, as far away as Portugal
drunk on rum and pouting at hurricanes

and she looks at me and i look at her
and we are the only ones

she plays the muse and lets me keep her
one a pearl leash, wound around her throat
across her back, her ass to my mouth
pierced and buzzed
like a bee to my tongue

April Comes Marisa Ikstrums

April comes.

Sashaying past March in stilettos decked with flowers

She brings with her the promise of spring,

The heady perfume of earth and grass after a sudden rain

And the possibility of redemption.

April insists that the darkness be left behind with winter in March,

That eyes stay forward towards warmer weather.

The seeds planted last fall in the soil carefully tended through winter

Will bloom suddenly—just when the dream of them had been lost.

Because this is April.

This is the season of growth—and growth will come, by choice or no,

Because women who sashay in stilettos decked with flowers

Simply don't accept excuses.

Certified Laughter Therapist Erin Reid

In my next life
I am going to be
A certified laughter therapist
One came to my job once
That's how I know
I want to be trained in
The expert skill of happiness
Prompting guffaw
And teasing twitters
I do love to laugh
And if I just had the
Right credential
I could be a respected professional
Anyway, that's my next life
In this one I
Push a mean file
And type killer correspondence
And put on secret shows
With my puppet nun
To the bemusement
And amusement
Of my (academic) colleagues

Latent Untruth
Kesia Hammonds

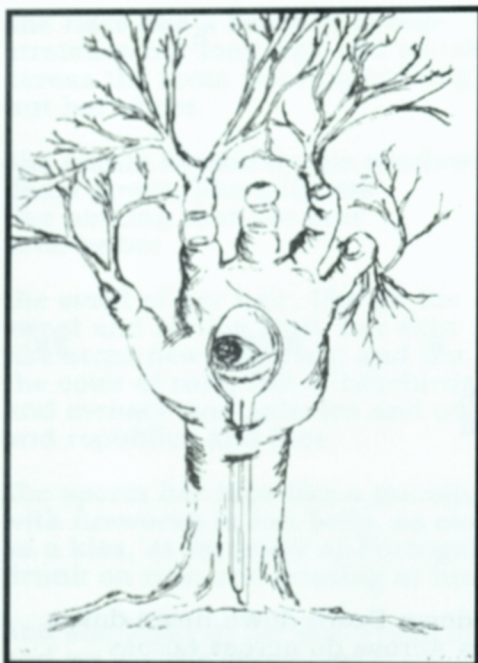
So now she's lost
Again That harrowing
Silence Threw
me
An echo
Reverberates, leaving footprints in
Layers
From her
Al epi w ego i idios a myalo ys
she watches the moon with
utmost of patience, nestled
inside of her while
she wanes away
For
HER
I remember she
Pulls the savory color
Down down down down down Down down down down down Down down down down
Across wn across down Across across across across Across do across across
My my o my my my across my my os my my down my md my my ey my my my acr my
Eyes my eyes eyd o eyes do w eye m eyes eyem y acr eyes eye my y ey oss eyes d eyes

forget the grey
time m
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away

The Human Race
Alejandro Pena

Where are we going?
We were all small children
Some now
are gone
...But never forgotten
Some squeeze
when people leave the restroom
I drop my kids at the pool
within earshot.
I will never run and hide
for fear
is a demon who will whisper
sweet things
Spi-LASH!
My courage wears brown.

Art Gallery



Surrealist Self Portrait by Nicole Stanik



Joe Mama Doing Something by Alejandro Pena

Callas by Amy Dobbs



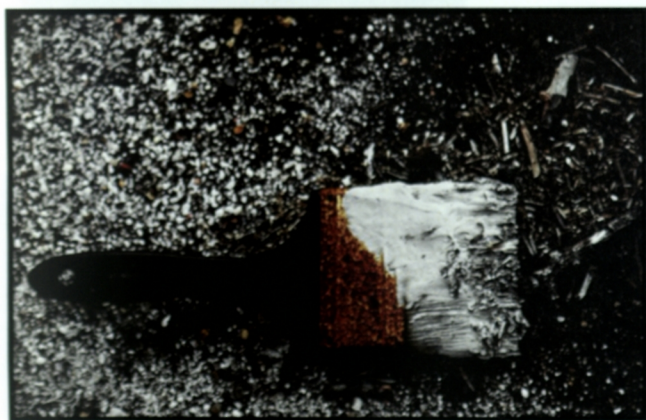
Mountian Field by Aileen Stellingwerf



Stairs by Amy Dobbs



Moonlight Bay Poppies by
Michael A. Perry



Dry by Andrew Hall



Cerulean Blue by Aileen
Stellingwerf



The White Tree by Amy Dobbs



Still Motion by Emily



Mystery by Andrew



Bridge Candles by Andrew Hall

Carnie

Nathaniel Lindsey

Countless predatory eyes burned countless paths to the elevator walkway any time Deborah Slakely would bring a new class to the floor.

The incubation period of at least a month was essential; teambuilding, training and all of the corporate culture nonsense had to be drilled into the heads of the homemakers, burn-outs and erstwhile college students so that when they finally stepped to their cubicles, photo-ID badges in hand, they could feel at least somewhat superior to the drones at the car wash across the street or the adjacent Taco Bell. After all, this was a position in which a high school diploma was necessary.

Arlen Raquelle, my surly brother in free-agent virility and relatively obscure musical interests had been (for weeks now) scouring the ranks of those now ascending to the second floor of the call center with me. Two stood out in the sea of cellulite and faded tattoos. The first, a tall girl, had that quiet, critical scrutiny about her that immediately deterred me. Girls like that have told me that I'm tragically earnest. But then, that was a long time ago. I think the resentment has purged me of a lot of that in recent years.

The second, when subject to a gross generalization based on scant observation from a considerable distance, was a much more compact version of the first. Same shiny, blue-black hair, same wonderbread complexion, just a head or so shorter. Features proportionately less drawn. A receptive smile that blotted out everything in its path in sharp, obnoxious contrast to the bland apathy of our pseudo-corporate surroundings.

Receptive is a good word. While the first ("Toby," for reference purposes) seemed, with her gait and expression, to be screaming for onlookers to simultaneously keep their distance and attend to her every whim, this next step down in the Russian nesting doll succession seemed to be pelting you with the sheer simplicity of her direct approach.

I watched with increasing engagement as she, like the other newbies, briskly tread row after row, looking for a competent agent to observe and eavesdrop on. Nesting, they call it.

She finally took a seat with a pencil-thin Louis Vuitton type, maybe on the cusp of twenty, scanning through a copy of *In Touch* magazine. This should be interesting. The new girl had all the direct signs of someone who had been to a few basement shows in her high school years, and I would be surprised if at least a smattering of her many piercings hadn't been self-inflicted or done by a friend with a safety pin and a Bic lighter.

My relatively consistent flow of customer calls, as well as the two-row proximity separating me from the girls, kept me from being privy to the meat of their interaction. From the looks of things, however, the exchange was progressing much smoother than I had anticipated. There was something in her patient attentiveness, her unassuming reception to whatever the overly tanned, hoop-earring adorned girl was saying (I bitterly--and unfairly--assume it's never terribly engaging with that sort) that struck me as oddly familiar.

To reiterate, it was the behavior that concerned me, not that she herself reminded me of any particular person, though one would think that witnessing such a display would call to mind images of Jesus, Buddha, the Dalai Lama and so on. No, mine was a feeling far more ominous. Only several months later would I realize that her demeanor was trying to call to my mind that of a hippie; that indiscriminate, vacant acceptance of all that is--for better or worse--in the name of maintaining good vibrations. For the time being, I was not concerned with the glaring fact that these two, the airhead fashionista and the diminutive crust-punk should be acting like the sworn natural enemies they are. I was too busy falling under the spell of the new girl's diplomacy. It didn't hurt that the closer view of her that I was afforded at this point revealed a subtle yet enticing set of curves and the increased potency of that blinding smile at close range.

We had already made eye contact a few times by the time the queen of Fifth Avenue had consolidated her impressive desktop spread into her handbag and bid her student adieu for the evening. It was strange, one of those telling mutual acknowledgments of visual cues. I've got to wonder how she picked up any at all on that particular day, however.

See, up until about two days before, I'd had a choppy, violent tangle of dark brown hair that came down to my chin in the front and terminated at ominously varied lengths elsewhere as a result of earlier, ill-fated experiments, and I was done with it. I walked to the SuperCuts down the street from my apartment complex and begged them emancipate me from the bondage of what were now quickly becoming tresses.

I walked out with a shampoo shark. You know, the Express for Men/gay European dance club gel-fin thing. A faux-hawk. Anyway. Back to two days later, I had rolled out of bed (as per usual) with just enough time to do the bare minimum of shower, shave, and clothe myself before heading out the door with a handful of cold taquitos from the previous evening. My saving grace (or so I thought) was that I had stayed up to do a mountain of laundry the night before, so some well-placed wardrobe selection had the potential to overpower any visual signs of hygienic or dietary self-neglect.

With this in mind, I show up on the production floor twenty minutes later in camo shorts and this threadbare olive-green thrift store t-shirt bearing the single-color breast-pocket insignia of what, with the help of Google, I found to be an aerial refueling squadron of Marines out of New York. The fuzzy, newly abbreviated condition of my hair, far from being properly sculpted, completed an incredibly convincing portrait of a young man who just got back from a personal victory-lap tour in Afghanistan. You know, all questions of physique aside. I don't usually see these things until I have a specific reason to be self conscious.

Trust me though, any one of those elements would have looked badass on it's own in a wardrobe; the shorts with a black or heather gray t-shirt, the shirt with an equally well-worn pair of jeans, or the hair. Well, the military implications of the hair could have (and should have) been easily subverted with a hair product of some sort. But no matter.

I waved her over and she sat down beside me, offering her spring-loaded hand in salutation, that huge smile still plastered on her face.

"Hi, I'm Susannah!" A greeting intonated with the knee-jerk expediency of a foreign exchange student eager to make fast friends. Now possessing the same urgent purpose, if not quite the same instantly summonable charisma useful in executing such initiatives, I genially offered her three hearty pumps of my hand. My now-hyperactive logic informed me mid-shake that I quite possibly may have subverted any potential sensual subtlety in the interaction that ensued with what was now, unmistakably, a model job-interview handshake.

Into the fold then. With the calls having died down considerably in the onset of the late afternoon, the conversation had breathing room to go all the generic places it inevitably would go. People used to talk about families, pets, and favorite colors as if these were the staples of a person's vital information—vital, at least, to anyone with any potential romantic interest in that person. We now do the band list. Information staggeringly less vital, in all honesty. We now namedrop authors, filmmakers, actors, and artists in a nearly purge-like fashion before getting around to things like currently and/or previously pursued college majors, religious affiliation or the lack thereof, and even marital status. As if, conversely, those things were the dregs of personal information, only subject to inquiry if the individual in question had never read *House of Leaves* or admitted to not being able to tell the difference between David Lynch and David Fincher.

But within the confinements bestowed upon us by these cultural paradigm shifts, we fared well all things considered, finding the points of convergence that each other's body modifications and composure had lead us to expect. She was a nineteen-year-old vegan from Portland, Oregon with a love for quasi-folkish indie rock and a rather peculiar method of breathing that consisted of sucking air through her clenched teeth at intervals that were less than rhythmic, sentence structure and inflection be damned.

Later research indicated that Portland is widely noted vegan Mecca of sorts, and, by a perhaps not-so-unrelated turn, the fabled breeding ground for an impressive number of notable folk musicians. As for the odd respiratory habits, Susannah would later disclose that she had nursed a heroin habit while living in the Pacific northwest that was nothing short of epic. The connection between the two was never verbally confirmed, nor did I possess the tactlessness to actually inquire about such a thing. However, I imagine smack has the potential to fuck up your ventilation if anything does.

I could be wrong, though. There is always that possibility.

In the cubicle that day, however, before I had the means or the inclination to dig to such depths, I had only about fifteen minutes to scratch the surface.

About midway through the band-list portion of our conversation, she casually pulled a gallon-sized ziploc bag half-filled with a leafy, brownish-crimson fodder out of her satchel. A small envelope of rolling papers followed, and she proceeded, inevitably, to roll herself a cigarette. Her concentration on what I was saying didn't seem at all interrupted by this activity.

This was commendable, because I had at that point launched into an all-out extolment of the virtues of some of the lesser known D.C. bands. A daunting tirade to listen to, I've no doubt, unless, of course you've either attended college on the mid-Atlantic seaboard, or lived there for upwards of a year with a lot of free time on your hands.

Guess which category I fall in to?

Anyway, I cut my monologue on Dischord Records, post-Fugazi, short to stare wide-eyed at the bag.

"Dude, it's tobacco."

"I know, but still..." I hadn't actually known. Gotta save face when you can.

"Arlen's got a pack of Camels on his desk. How is this any different?"

Normally the fact that you just don't roll cigarettes in an office setting would have supplied me with a sufficient retort. However, this particular call center has been called "Club Convergys" for more than one verifiably good reason. She now had a point.

For reasons still unbeknownst to me, I strained to peer over the cubicle wall at Jason's desk, confirming her accusation and, it is worth a mention, noticing that Stephanie had pulled up a chair beside him. The warm, dark charm his pessimism always seemed to manifest when he was around the fairer sex seemed to be working quite well.

It reminded me of the textbook definition of antisocial. Not the listless, reclusive teenager definition that was so trendy in the early nineties, but that of the cold, calculating, destructive motherfucker with a razor-sharp case of sociopathy. To just hear him talk (bitterly, most of the time,) about girls as an abstract concept, you wouldn't think he could spit game like this.

She was knitting as she listened intently. Knitting. I contemplated breaking my dialogue with Susannah and walking over to him to ask him how he couldn't love a girl like that, "You know, being a Bush supporter and all?" Tact and better judgment intervened. Besides, I no longer had a dialogue to break. A tinny blast of simulated jungle noises that I can only assume was her phone broke my voyeuristic vigil. As I turned to lower myself back into my seat, she bolted for the breakroom to take the call.

I rose again, standing at full mast this time to stretch. Just another one of the sparse distribution of prairie dog heads poking up through the beige, steel-framed canopy of the tops of the cubicles. I turned slowly to do the full 360-degree scan of the service floor, locating Susannah (on my second leisurely pass) talking to Ida McIntire, apparently her newly designated supervisor, and Porter Lang, Deborah's partner in crime in the training department. These two massive human beings nearly obscured our young heroine, peering down at her with studious amusement.

What the fuck did I miss?

Ida, a bulbous, bespectacled woman in her early thirties, had such a lengthy tenure at Convergys, that one didn't know whether to pity her or admire her tenacity. Porter was an equally large, if somewhat more well-distributed young man in his late twenties whose laid-back demeanor, across-the-board musical tastes, and impressive fashion sense made him a favorite with new hires and a natural choice for the training position he had held for upwards of three years at that time. He was laughing now. Ida just raised an eyebrow in an expression that straddled the line between disapproval and disbelief.

Susannah sprinted back to my cubicle and again offered me the hand and the end of her rigid arm, the very projectile weapon of amiability. "Off so soon?" I was trying like hell to mask the pitiful swell of disappointment I felt at watching her gather up all her little conversational card tricks and put them back in her bag. My lament came out all the more whiny and

pathetic for it.

"Yeah, man! I'm joining the carnival! I just got off the phone with this guy I know in Aberdeen..."

I did a double-take, glancing back at Porter and Ida. Porter nodded at me incredulously, understanding and answering the question of my glare with a sympathetic affirmative. He was seated now, fighting his laughter for oxygen. Ida stood instead, staring off at some representative she was listening in on with her headphones, and ignoring me as usual.

When I turned back to the desk again, my sprightly circus girl was gone. A familiar beep in my headset snapped me back to a place where this sort of thing never happens.

"Good evening, Sir! Thank you so much for calling..."

Her Body, Jerusalem Brad Posey

it's a red letter day
and a leaving train
the woods are full
of horse's eyes
and the cats are hanging
from the rafters
like old plants

she's coming home
from New Orleans
i've got flowers
in the bedroom
and ice cream
in the freezer

all the way home
i followed the blackbird wires
thinking how glad i was
that autumn was here

i hope she'll lay down
beside me tonight
and curve into me like a wave
and not mind my spilt milk
hands
that stutter over her
like new language, that stutter
over her, as if her skin
were scripture, as if
her body were Jerusalem

Watch Tower Ellen Parker

While you were away
it was hard
not to say
how much I truly miss you...

Words cannot describe
the emptiness I
Felt without you
by my side.

Waking every morning
longing for your touch,
smile, thoughts,
Kisses, hugs, just...

Wanting to be with
you if only
for a moment

Wishing you would
come back to me
hoping you are safe,
believing in us,
and
loving you more than
you'll ever know!

Inheritance

Lawrence Henry

My name is Dirge, and my reality is your worst nightmare. Back in my old hometown of Jasper, Arkansas, there was an incident involving the outbreak of a virus that transformed living creatures into monsters of incredible power. I was picked up by an organization, claiming to be the CIA, after narrowly escaping with less than a dollar to my name, not to mention some cuts and bruises. I was chosen and trained for a mission to find and rescue any and all survivors of this tragedy. The towns' been quarantined for quite some time now to prevent the spread of infection, but unfortunately it's still leaking through somehow, creating countless monsters. We have yet to find a way to wipe them out. Each of the beasts I've seen were seven feet tall, with razor-sharp teeth and claws, fly-style wings, and antennae. There have been rumors of something bigger, but I don't believe them. They've traced the source of the virus back to the underground research facility that had been deserted since the days of Project: S.W.A.R.M., or Secret Weapons Activation Research Motion; my father, Steven Fuller, told me about how he had saved humanity from the original monsters, which were a lot weaker, until they started killing, which made them grow to be horrendous looking creatures. As I thought of my father, my mind drifted back to my parents' dinner party, where my nightmares took shape.

I had walked into the dining room and was summoned to a far corner of the room by an old man of about sixty years. The man was old, but had an odd glow in his eyes and a devilish grin on his wrinkled face. He put a cold round object into my hand, started laughing hoarsely, and snatched it right back. He looked as though he was about to say something when he suddenly went pale. I followed his triumphant yet fearful gaze down to his hand, which was releasing a brown fluid. His hand stretched and opened, revealing a small flask that had shattered in his hand, allowing his blood and a greenish liquid to mingle. He screamed with a vitality I'd never known was possible. The man's feeble fingers grew into long, sharp, powerful looking claws. His eyes bulged and multiplied as some antennae and four fly wings grew into place. I ran. I ran as hard and as fast as I could towards the garage, hearing shouts from the dining room as the people were being massacred. I hopped on my motorcycle as soon as I got into the garage, and as it roared to life, I noticed my mother and father getting into the Mercedes.

I followed them as we drove through the city until my parents stopped at what looked like an abandoned military complex. There was a broken maximum-security gate, which swung wide on its hinges. A few slightly obscured bloodstains, chipped paint, and cracked concrete stood out. That was when I realized it was the research facility my father had told me so much about. As we walked toward a stone building, I heard a blood-curdling scream from high above me. I looked up to see a glistening drop of blood falling from the sky. We bolted into the dark, damp building, more bloody streaks. Here and there I saw ragged chunks of red and purple flesh, a severed foot with the shoe and blood-soaked sock still on, torn lab coats and t-shirts, the effects of true carnage.

We moved cautiously into a ruined lab, where there were more chunks of human flesh, only larger here. In a corner of the lab I saw a mutilated body, the eyes and mouth still open and wide with fear, as though he had seen the devil himself. One eye was just a bloody sphere hanging on a thin cord from the lacerated socket. An arm and a leg were missing from the rest of his body. "What could have happened here?" I asked silently to myself. My father looked at me and said, "Well, we might be able to figure out what the hell that thing was." My mother just stood in the center of the room as though turned to stone. My father and I went into a small, dark office in the corner of the lab. On the far wall there was what looked like just another streak of blood. The room light flicked on, and on the wall, there was the dead body, head limp with a slack jaw. It was one of my father's old classmates from high school, who must've still been young when he died, because he had a youthful build. He was connected to the wall by a massive, three-fingered hand with claws, which in turn was connected to a large disfigured body, caked in blood. On the wall next to the body there hung a picture of a man and a child, no doubt the boy and his father. The boy's blood was plastered to the wall, floor, and ceiling, as though he'd lost a fight with a steamroller. The phones on the two desks started ringing. Both my father and I answered. "Hello Steven," said a gruff voice, "did you miss me? I hope you didn't think that

prison was going to stop my research did you?" "Just who the hell are you, any way?" said my father, obviously annoyed, "Oh, you don't remember me? I'm Grady O'Donnell, leader of the project. I see you brought your family to die with you. I'm going to enjoy watching you all die." The man laughed sickeningly and hung up. My father searched the office, grabbing any and every sharp object he could. I looked in one drawer and found a .38 caliber magnum, along with some ammo.

My father went back into the lab while I checked the gun to make sure it was loaded. In a deafening scream, the flying monster that had been following us the whole time, fell on my parents in an inhuman crunch. I was breathless as the creature started eating them. It then looked up and in a gravelly voice, it sounded like it said, "You're next!" fear gripped my chest and tears clouded my eyes. I aimed the gun at its head, and in a pitiful scream closed my eyes and squeezed the trigger until the gun was empty. When my vision finally became clear, I just stared at the headless corpse, numerous holes in other places of the now mutilated carcass. The phone took me out of my trance. I picked it up and the voice I'd heard earlier said, "Did you have fun, Dirge? I sure did." My anger took over, "When I find you, you bastard, one of us won't live to see the next day." "Ha! Ha! Ha! You're right, Dirge, but the question for now is, which of us? You've seen what I can do, and you know I could kill you at any time. For now, however, I'll let you go. Let's see if you can get out of the complex alive."

Angrily, I ran towards an open door, finding there a small gruesome creature that looked as though it could be a second cousin to Frankenstein. The creature began to breathe heavily as I entered the hallway of the lab. I raised the gun up and got a clear shot, but another gunshot rang out before I could pull the trigger of the Magnum. As I turned around, I noticed that the man who shot before I could was wearing some kind of high tech battle suit; it shined red in the low light of the hallway. "Hey, kid, come with me." Said the mysterious man. "Well...what are you waiting for, another one?" I thought a moment longer and then began to follow him. He walked so quickly that I had to almost run just to stay five feet behind him. "Wh-who are you?" I said with a quizzical look on my face, "and another thing. Why are you here?" the man remained silent until we came to a door with a keypad on it. He pressed the numbers too quickly for anything to be able to see the pass code; no matter what angle you looked at it from. With a slight hiss, the door slid open, and we were in what looked like a soldiers' barracks, and there were huge guns on the back wall. He went over to another wall that I hadn't noticed before, where he began to take off the armor. When his helmet came off, I was surprised to see that he wasn't much older than me. He had tanned skin, and short-cut hair. "The names' Keith," he said, "Keith Aikens. I was recruited here during my elementary school years and trained to be a cold-hearted killer. They called it The Silencer Program, or something like that." My father had once told me about the silencers. Only individuals with exceptional skill and mental stability were accepted. This must have been one of them. "I woke up when I heard the crash of that monster in there. I finally got to you when you were about to go into one of their traps." "Traps?" I said, not realizing that these things actually had some form of transcendent thought. We heard a rough, gravelly voice outside of the door, "Oh, Dirge. Come out, come out, wherever you are." Keith threw an extra suit of the armor to me. "We gotta get outta here, man." Said Keith, slinging some weapons onto his armor. "You must be Dirge, huh? I wonder why it wants you so bad." "What are you talking about? Wasn't that a person?" "At one time, possibly. But now he's a monster. Hurry up and grab that Pacifier over there." "The what?" "The silver assault rifle on the wall with all the buttons on it." Said Keith, exasperated, "Oh!" I picked up the rifle and swung the strap over my shoulder. I also picked up the Magnum from the bed I'd laid it on, and strapped it into the holster on the side of my thigh. The suit started off feeling a few sizes too big for me, but then it shrunk until it fit me just right. The helmet, with a t-shaped pane of black bulletproofed glass on what I deduced to be the front. I slipped it on and tightened the straps. "Let's do this..." I muttered under my breath. Apparently, however, Keith heard me, because he whispered harshly, "Listen, Dirge, my unit was the best of the best, and that thing still ripped the team to shreds. What are you thinking, you idiot? Do you have a death wish, or something?" his words reverberated through my ears as I remembered how my father and mother were killed by the flying creature, and then

the voice ... that voice ... I couldn't contain my anger any longer, looked toward him through the visor display, a transparent green, and my lips probably moved less than a strand of hair, as I let the word tumble out of my mouth, "Yes." And with that, Keith got behind me, yanked the helmet off of my head and then everything went black as I heard both his fist hitting the back of my head, and a weak, indescribably broken knock at the huge iron door. The spots in front of my eyes were so consistent that I was in pain just from opening my eyelids.

A slight red flash, followed by a tremendous burst of white light came into view just before I felt a sensation as though I were floating. I looked around and understood nothing. The room was a blur, nothing but a big gray blur. As I moved my head some more, I started hearing a monotonous whirring type sound. I also start seeing different shades of pink and brown. Along with the pink and brown, I also saw blue and black things in the shape of human beings. They were sitting all around me. I began to panic and reached for my Magnum, but only caught my thigh in the same jeans I had been wearing all along. I wondered what had happened to the armor I had been wearing. As my vision cleared, I noticed that I was sprawled across a hospital bed somewhere inside a large padded space.

I looked around some more, and behind me, I saw Keith, still in his armor, but with his helmet off and the suit I had been wearing draped on his lap. As I tried to get up, a nurse so ugly, I'd be more willing to go into surgery with one of the creatures that were trying to kill me, held me down on the table, and told me not to move. The space shifted, and I felt a slight jolt as it touched down on something. I finally realized that it was an airplane I was in. As soon as that mangy nurse released me from the bed, I moved as quickly as my legs would carry me to get off of the jet. Once outside, one of the suits spoke, "Mornin' son. You had one hell of a night, didn't you?" once again, my anger began to well up as this man, no, this overgrown, pompous, two-legged buffalo spoke his nonsense with his deep, sure voice, "The name's Sean Brodus, kid, and I'm an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency." "Well," I said, "I hope you're not the best they have. You don't inspire a lot of confidence." The man laughed and walked on towards the building.

The suits led me into a room where they held what they called a debriefing. They were clearly talking about what had gone on in the city. There was a lot of talk about me, though. Keith was there, too. From what he said, I noticed that he knew more than he had told me. He had seen everything. I recalled what he told me before about getting to the scene after the fact. Pretty soon, the questions turned towards me. "Alright...Dirge, is it?" said a rather cute woman, "what set of events caused you to go into the aforementioned facility?" I told her what had happened up until the time I received the last phone call from Grady O' Donnell. "Thank you," she said, "Now. Why do you think this person wanted you and your parents dead?" I responded, "Because my father turned him in for illegal practices." She seemed satisfied with my answer. Then the Sean Brodus guy started telling me about different opportunities to join the CIA in order to locate and rescue other survivors. Needless to say, I accepted his offer, mainly because I didn't have any other kind of future planned.

In a week I was trained and ready for action. Keith gave me the armor back and apologized for the bump on the head. "Alright team, let's do this!" said the squad leader, a man named John Chamberlain. Everyone referred to him as 'dead meat' for some unexplained reason. The five person squad included me, Keith, John, a young woman named Lori Fellows, and, to my surprise, Sean Brodus. We began to gear up, Keith and I in our silenced armor, everyone else in riot gear. The first place we were going to search was the complex. "Damn," said Keith, "why won't they listen to me?" I almost thought he'd start crying right in front of me. After gearing up, we went to the helicopter. The trip went faster than I had first expected.

"Grave Watch, this is HQ, do you copy?" this was the start of the first transmission made with the base, "HQ, this is Grave Watch." "Grave Watch, what is your status?" "In position, looks quiet." "Roger that, Grave Watch. Any info?" "That is a negative, HQ. Standby...w-w-w-what was that? What the hell? Shoot it, shoot it!" "Grave Watch, what's going on out there? Grave Watch, respond. Grave Watch, respond. Do you copy? I repeat, do you copy?" The room grew silent as the only response they had gotten from John Chamberlain's squad turned to screams and, suddenly, only static.

"Keith, what was that thing?" asked John. "It doesn't have a name, sir." Johns' breathing grew heavy from the wound on his chest, while Lori, our lovely medic, patched him up. We were in the silencer barracks, where Keith had brought me before. Sean, who had the radio, kept trying to fix it after the creature had slashed it. "I can't get this fucking piece of shit to work." He stated in utter frustration. I stood in silence, watching his futile efforts turn into frustration. "Keith," I said, "how'd you get us out of here the last time?" the look I saw in his eyes behind the glass of the helmet changed from confidence to fear. He pointed to a far corner where a keypad on the wall and an opened trapdoor were. "Where does that lead?" "An office on the other side of the lab, why?" the trapdoor closed and he finally understood. The monster knew the pass codes of the facility. It was smarter than we originally thought it would be. Sean noticed, "What are you suggesting, Dirge?" I answered him surely, "the same way we got out is the same way that thing can get in here. The trapdoor slid open silently again, and that gravelly voice filled my ears, "Can the little men come out to play?"

"Excuse me sir, but you ought to hear this," said a soldier at a monitoring station in what was called HQ. "What is it, sergeant?" "I just received a transmission from Grave Watch's radio." "And?" "It sounded like an extra person, but I can't be sure." "Why not, soldier, what are you not sure about?" "The extra voice was...hold on, I'm getting something else."

"HQ, this is Grave Watch, requesting immediate extraction. I repeat, Grave Watch requesting immediate extraction! The bullets, grenades, and everything else we dished out did nothing but slow this thing down and piss it off!" "Grave Watch, this is HQ, what is your status?" "One man down, three wounded, and ammo is running low." "Hold tight, Grave Watch, and head to LZ-2. Once there, rendezvous with Big Bird." "Roger that, HQ, how long till Big Bird's arrival?" "Big Bird is lifting off, E.T.A. 3 minutes. Get your asses out of there now."

"Dirge, Keith, keep us covered." Said John, helping Lori carry Sean Brodus' limp body down the hall. The monster was coming quickly now, but Keith and I managed to hold it off long enough for me to get the one clear thought to use my magnum. I slung the rifle over my shoulder and tossed a grenade at the monster as it opened wide for its telltale scream. The grenade lodged and Keith and I followed the others. That's when I noticed it didn't go off. "Man, I hate duds." I said as the monster coughed it out onto the ground. I drew my magnum and readied it. Keith fired at the grenade and the explosion put a few bloody cuts into the monster's legs and belly. As it stepped forward through the flame and smoke, I aimed slowly, carefully. I remembered my parents and the anger welled up once again. The monster began to run, and I unloaded the magnum bullets into its face, tearing off little chunks here and there. It screamed again and fell to the floor. We ran.

The sound of the helicopter filled me, and for the first time since my parents' deaths, I shed a tear or two. I think we were all relieved that they'd come. We scrambled onto the helicopter, dragging Sean along, his limp, bleeding body.

"What in the sam-hell happened out there, boy? I thought you said you could handle the assignment?" said the general as he tore into Chamberlain. "You told me your team was ready, and I believed you. Do you know why, soldier? Because I know you're good, you're damn good, but apparently you can't pick your battles worth shit!" Keith walked in, "Permission to speak freely, sir?" he said, in his usual monotone voice, "Granted, son. What do you want?" "Sir," Keith began slowly, "the mistake was on me for not informing the squad leader of the enemy's capabilities." According to what I heard, Keith's pseudo-confession either pleased the general, or completely enraged him to the point of violence, because he dismissed them with a gruff voice.

Back in the room with the rest of the team, minus Sean, who died shortly after the attack, we all began to wind down and recuperate our strength. The general walked in, followed by another man, and said, "Keith, Dirge, Lori, come with me." We walked with him and the other man back to his office. As soon as the door was shut, the general started, "Listen up, you three, this here is Curtis Slater, and he'll be joining your squad." Keith cocked his head, "why didn't you tell Captain Chamberlain as well?" the general rose a curious eyebrow. "Captain John Chamberlain submitted his letter of resignation last week, and we just got to it today. The other new member of your team hasn't arrived yet, but I expect you to use every chance

you get training, understood?" "Yes, sir!" came the now all too familiar cry. Just then one of the suits walked in with a young girl behind him, "General Blackwood, this is the new recruit, Kathryn Marlowe. She is supposed to come to you, right?" the general nodded and dismissed the suit. "In case you all didn't guess, Kathryn is your new teammate. Also, Keith, I want you to take position as the new squad leader." "But, general," said Slater, whining, "he can't be old-ern' fifteen! How he get squad leader?" "Because I said he is, dammit, now shut up and follow orders like you're supposed to." For a moment I thought I saw a tear in Slater's eye, but I was following too closely behind him to find out if they came down his face.

In the gym, Curtis came to where the rest of us were from where he was watching in the doorway. "So, Keith, what's so special about you that would make General Blackwood choose you to be squad leader, anyhow?" he asked with his very country accent, Keith looked up, "I've dealt with these monsters before on several occasions and can plan our tactics better than anyone else. Oh, I almost forgot to mention that I was part of the security cartel for the company that created them." "Sooo," said Slater, "If you guys were so fuckin' good, where is the rest of your last team." Lori and Kathryn looked up from where they were doing pushups, and I stopped hitting the training dummy to see what Keith would do, "They were all cowards and died in their fear." Said Keith, becoming annoyed. Curtis laughed, "I think I know why they was afraid, too. 'Cause they wuddn't strong-willed like me." I decided to get into it, "Ah, shut up ya damn faggot, and wait 'till you get in a fight with one of those things. Then talk your shit." Curtis snapped, "Who asked you anythin', huh? What's this gotta do wit' you, huh? Wuddn't nobody talkin' to you." I laughed, "The weakest dog barks the loudest, you silly waste of nut, so shut your mouth and you might get to keep it." He swung a hard right towards my head, so I dodged behind him and threw him to the floor, by kicking him once in his back. I laughed again and went back to my training dummy and kept practicing with it. "Man, I hate this shit! Why ev'rbody always gotta be bettern' me, huh? What'chou gotta prove, anyway, you bastard." Said Curtis as he stood, still dazed from the blow. Keith, who sometime during the incident found out how to laugh regained his composure and said, "Alright, boys and girls, the party's over, let's get to work."

After we were back in the room, everyone except for Keith was sore and tired from the workout, and found themselves asleep within minutes, I'm not sure when I dozed but the next thing I knew, I was feeling some warm, thick fluid resting on my stomach. I felt it, and realized it was blood. I stood up, and a little ran freely from a wound in my stomach. On the wall next to my bunk was a note that read, 'Who's got the last laugh now, faggot?' I walked over to where Curtis laid, pretending to sleep and threw him to the floor. "What th' hell, man?" he screamed, waking up everyone else, I picked him up by his neck, "The next time you decide to stab someone, asshole, don't sign your work." I then shoved the note into his mouth and punched him a few good times in his abdomen, making him lose his breath and cough the note onto the floor. I wiped some blood from my bed and smeared it across his face, pale with fear and in a cold sweat. The general ran in and demanded an explanation. He didn't really get one, seeing as how I was still kicking the crap out of Curtis' side. Keith held the general back and suggested we both see a medic first. My vision began to fade as my face hit the floor.

Once again the painful light glared in my eyes as I awoke. General Blackwood was at the next bed with Curtis, who was still unconscious. He turned around and said, "What, happened, son. What were you two doing?" I looked at him, "answer me, boy." "I woke up with a stab wound and a note from Curtis Slater, so I decided to hurt him a little. Isn't it better if he learns from his cockiness here rather than in combat?" the general nodded in agreement, "You didn't do the right thing, I hope you know. You and Slater are still being sent on the mission, however."

We rejoined the squad in the gym, and immediately I began my routine of fifty laps around, two hundred pushups in two minutes, and fighting the practice dummy. Curtis just moped around until he finally decided to join the others who were doing sit-ups. He glanced hotly at me a few times, until General Blackwood came in. "Listen up, people, you'll be shipping out to the S.W.A.R.M. Laboratories research facility in two days, so no messin' around. I'm gonna need all of you ready for combat by then. Keith spoke up, "General, you don't understand!

That place is infested, we'll be wiped out!" But the general turned and walked away.

"Here, take these, train with them a bit," said the general as he handed each one of us what looked like a very large shotgun, but felt like an assault rifle. "This is the newest experimental weapon, put to use by S.W.A.R.M.'s security division. Keith will teach you what you need to know." Keith stood behind us on the target range, "Let's get started," he said, "we only have one day to train on these, so make it count. First, look on the left side of the gun. That lever engages the shock absorbers in your new armor, to keep the gun from literally ripping your arm off while you fire it. The lever right behind it puts a bullet in the chamber. Pull those now." There was a uniform click as we pulled the levers. Each of us had the silencer armor on. "Now, I want each of you to aim at your target, which just so happens to be those concentric circles on top of galvanized impact diamond." Again there was a click as the guns were pointed. "Single shot. Fire!" We witnessed with wide eyes as the one bullet basically shattered the diamond cases, which in fact were rather thick chunks. That's when training ended, due to the fact that the defense budget couldn't afford more diamond for the targets.

The helicopter came down and we began hopping off. Curtis and I went ahead through the large doors that I had entered with my parents. The others followed. The stench of death and decay was unbearable, and we had to turn on the filters in our masks just to keep from vomiting. The pieces and chunks that were there before were gone, along with the blood, almost as though they hadn't existed. There were also other things I hadn't noticed the first time I'd come. Such as the reception desk and the many office doors around the large room. We checked each room and found nothing. As we walked further down one hall, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head and saw a man's head peeking out from under a desk. I motioned to Keith and we went in. The man was dead. From the stains around him, it looked as if he'd killed himself. But there was no gun, and no wound. But in his hand he was clutching an envelope containing some papers. I took the envelope out of his lifeless hand. We left; continuing down the hall until we came to a door marked 'LAB ACCESS'. As we entered the lab, I saw my parents, ripped open by the monsters. My mind raced, replaying their death hundreds of times over. Once again, I heard the voice of the monster, calling my name. I fell to my knees, clutching at my hair, however becoming frustrated because of the helmet blocking me from my insanity. My voice rang through the lab as that horrible day kept showing itself on the forefront of my mind. Suddenly, violently, as a river of boiling blood rushed through my veins, I rose, with a wild look in my eyes. The others by this time were trying to find out what was wrong with me. Keith was the only other person that knew, and he wasn't telling, either.

We finished our sweep without incident and headed for the landing zone. As we walked out of the building, we heard the monsters' scream. Lori and Kathryn hopped in the chopper to wait just as Keith had ordered them to. Five of the winged creatures showed up and the helicopter lifted off. "Where the hell are they going?" cried Curtis, welling up with fear. Keith told him to run, but he was frozen. Instead of leaving him, Keith and I fired our powerful new guns. But with each monster we dropped, the remaining ones got stronger and more resistant to the guns. We retreated, mainly because Keith and I had run out of ammo, and Curtis had a death-grip on his gun, but was still too afraid to move, much less shoot. We grabbed him and started running, but as soon as we turned the corner we realized that we were only holding his bloody arms. He'd been ripped away during the flight. I tossed a grenade into the monsters' mouth as it approached. All I saw was smoke billowing out of its mouth and nostrils, then it spoke, "I've had enough of our little game Dirge. You will now die at my hands!" The monster then roared with rage and began to change its shape. The wings fell off, the face got uglier, and its two legs somehow became six. "Keith, run! Get away while you still can!" I yelled, as I began unloading the clip from Curtis' gun into the monster's face. Its head became an angry mess of colors, the white parts being the worst. I heard Keith scream as my vision once again faded to black.

BARBARA
EMAIL

and me
Ruth Johnson

Welcome, Ruth!

You have 1 unread message:
Inbox(1)

I smile and eagerly move the mouse until the arrow rests over Inbox(1), punch the button, and wait for my message to appear. Then, there it is as always—a message from CURRETTE@aol.com.

Subject: breathe in little grasshopper

I laugh, knowing that her reminder to breathe would assuage the tension I've felt since my last complaint-filled email to her. I click on it and start reading:

Get something cool and take a breather for a little while. Then attack, attack, attack.

I dream of the days when we can go have coffee and chat. I'm so busy that everything is going on around me, but I'm not doing anything.

I felt no surprise when I did feel better after reading her message; I did take a break, and I did attack my term paper.

Those "coffee and chat" days she mentioned are very few. Barbara and I are so busy that we rarely get to see each other, but we continue our relationship through cyberspace, constantly keeping up with daily news that we couldn't share otherwise, reading each other's complaints, and sending each other some words of encouragement.

We met a couple of semesters ago, working on a group project for a literature class. Because we were anxious about doing well, we spent hours planning, but in the end, we still ended up with a B. Not a particularly terrible grade, but if you know Barbara and me, you would not be surprised that we were upset. Due to the presentational charisma of my partner, he and I received slightly higher individual grades than Barbara and the rest of the group. Feeling badly about the uneven results, I sent her an apology, but her generous response was

Never feel badly about doing well. I'm proud of you kiddo. Be proud of yourself. I am proud to say you were my fearless leader. Done! Done! Done!

This was the first time she called me kiddo. Coming from someone else, the nickname might have made my youthful defenses bristle, but from her it made me smile. She always had a pep talk on hand to calm my frantic spirit; she was my fearless leader.

When the project was complete, our hours of on-line planning turned into hours of on-line messaging about anything and everything, partly because we enjoyed each others messages so much, partly because while we never seemed to have time for a social life, we definitely had a few moments in each day to send emails.

Often, our messages have a sad or tense tone because we vent to each other about all our stress and trouble. During the same, rather hectic semester during which we met, I sent Barbara a message about an unproductive weekend: Subject: confession. As usual my little epistle contained a ridiculously exaggerated summation of my end-of-the-semester trials, but,

again, as usual, sending my "confession" to Barbara made me feel much better. I suppose the writer in me always feels a little more satisfied when frustrated emotions are captured on paper where they can die of loneliness in their printed prison and the puritanical student in me feels better about procrastinating once I confess my fault. To my declaration of guilt, Barbara replied

Shame on you!! Feel better? Okay, I did mine but it is definitely a B, possibly a B+ paper. . . .

I stressed over it. Spazzed over it. Cried, cursed, and flailed myself over it. No more.

I am GLAD you had a break. You deserved it and you needed it. Ruth, you work harder than most people I know. You help mountains of students at the center with an open heart, smile on your face, and precise advice.

All will get done. I have such confidence in you. You reek of excellence. It is who you are. Now, go get 'em, tiger. Grrrrrrrr.

As always, she made me feel like a paragon of excellence. I try to repay her by reading her complaints and responding with similar consoling words, but I always have a nagging feeling that I'm still in debt. In truth, a number of stressful events happened that semester, but I didn't truly feel the weight or pain of any of it. At times, I wondered if my senses were just stunted for some reason or if I was growing numb, but then I realized I wasn't feeling the stress because I was constantly letting it out to Barbara. Pleasant thought!

Along with constantly letting out our complaints to each other, we also kept each other abreast of our joys and fun daily activities, so when a class of mine took a really interesting personality test, I had to send the link to Barbara. She replied with her results in blue and her reactions in red:

short test

ENFJ - "Persuader". Outstanding leader of groups. Can be aggressive at helping others to be the best that they can be.

Don't know if this is good or bad

word test

ESTJ - "Administrator". Much in touch with the external environment. Very responsible. Pillar of strength.

Not a clue

word choice

ESTJ - "Administrator". Much in touch with the external environment. Very responsible. Pillar of strength.

happened again

Perfect description! The "Persuader" fits her exactly. It's ironic that she considered me the "fearless leader" of our group project because she was definitely a leader to me then and now, always encouraging me to be my best. "Administrator" fits her too. She excels at organizing and categorizing. During one of those rare moments when we could actually spare time in our busy schedules to have lunch, she told me that she even color coded her family's laundry with a certain color basket and hangers for each member.

In awe of her management skills, when a new semester began, I bravely vowed to emulate her behavior and conquer the chaos with organization. Sadly, but not surprisingly, my plans failed. I still wasn't neat and organized but seemed determined to bury myself in masses of uncategorized paper and then panic when I couldn't find what I needed.

When I mentioned my vow of imitation to her, complimenting her unfailing energy and organization, she responded with

Hey, I always think I am the slagger and you are the one with the amazing energy level. You get more done in a short time than anyone I know. You juggle tons of things effortlessly and always with a cheerful smile on your face and a shrug of your shoulders. I'm just trying to keep up, Lamb Chop.

The more I reread our emails, the more I realize that we envy each other for the same reasons. I envy her optimism and work ethic; she envies my optimism and work ethic. Funny how that happens. I guess we just don't have confidence in our own abilities. Maybe that's why we need to remind each other so often, and she certainly does that here.

With the nicknames she gives me—like kiddo and Lamb Chop—her almost unfailing optimism, and her natural flair for comedy, she usually keeps me laughing, but occasionally, her hilarious messages contain deep, serious thoughts. One such moment came with a simple chain letter—the ONE WORD GAME. We simply had to describe each other in one word. Barbara described me with

sage

One venerated for experience, judgment, and wisdom.

adj. sager, sagest

1. Having or exhibiting wisdom and calm judgment.
2. Proceeding from or marked by wisdom and calm judgment: sage advice.
3. Archaic Serious; solemn.

There is more to you than you know.

Sometimes her comments, like the one in purple, give me chills. This one in particular gave me a fleeting glimpse of Barbara's thoughtful side. In truth, I don't think any human being in the world fully understands the worth of any other. Maybe that's because we never completely know each other. Maybe it's because none of us ever really achieve our full worth, and the glimpses we witness of our own value and that of others is just a flash of our ideal selves. Occasionally, such flashes flicker across our emails. Mostly, our correspondence is prefaced and concluded with jibber jabber. Sometimes that's really all it is, but in between the lines—more or less explicitly—we comment on important, interesting ideas and share a bit of our souls.

Barbara has a kind soul. A soul that criticizes anything that she believes is unjust. A soul that encourages people who need her.

When I feel like my writing is trash, she sends me something like

I loved the piece you gave me. . . . You have a gift, kiddo. A special, rare gift that doesn't come often. Your writing is beautiful, Rosebud.

When I feel overwhelmed by work at the writing center, she writes,

You are in demand because you are wonderful.

When I complain about a jumbled up, mess of a class, which gives me a headache every day, she notes,

YOU are going to make a wonderful teacher because you think like one automatically. "Hmmm. How could I teach that better?" You mind is constantly in motion.

When I sympathize with but can't care for someone who cares for me, she reassures,

It isn't your fault that you weren't attracted to him. . . . NEVER settle. NEVER. Love is out there waiting until you're ready.

Whenever I feel worried or overwhelmed, I find my laptop—Mom calls it my security blanket. I type CURRETTE@aol.com in the To: box, pour out all my woes, and press send.
Message Sent

I wait for her response.

Editor's Note: Unfortunately due to software problems, the exact layout of this submission has been altered. For the original version, please contact us at theproject2006@gmail.com.

Locked In Lizzie Rocket

If any writer were to ask me, "Rocket, what advice would you give to any aspiring writer?" In return I would respond, "Are you corrupt, dear? If you're not, you should be. Only the corrupt and mentally misguided can write well. Also, the world is evil, there are no real promises, and it should all be over soon." That is the advice I would give to every aspiring writer. . .

The children come flocking in as Jesús and I position ourselves. Jesús takes care of the little ones, which is everyone else's occupation, but I sit amiss. Though Jesús argues me to join the festivities, I take his previous job. He is supposed to "guard" the way across from the fellowship hall. I sit alone in a chair, staying out of the group. The children are loud at play, but I sit quietly and resiliently with only a notepad. The games will be played, then food will be served, worship will take place for about ten minutes, and finally the stations will be set up to have the children play. However, this might be awhile. A little blonde girl runs from the kitchen and is hanging off of the railing above the stairs. I jump up, with my knees cracking, and walk over to see the blonde wonder. She is hanging like a monkey and looking up at me curiously. She also gives me the look of "What the fuck?" and walks into the kitchen. Screams and cheers erupt from a heartbeat away. The beautiful women stay and cook in the kitchen, or they just stand away to gossip about their husbands and kids. The children and Doug, the youth minister, scream and cheer as loudly as their lungs can muster. You can pop the excitement with a needle. I see from about twenty feet away, a group of boys bouncing around a balloon. They seem to just be using their legs to do it. This is what we humans have come to. That is all it takes. An orange balloon being bounced around to excite the masses. This is also called sports, in most areas of the world.

The hours roll by rudely. The children, they won't quit. Screaming, running, playing, and the consumption of sugary sweets keeps them wild. It isn't until the wee hours, 2:30 A.M.,

that the children finally retire. Jesús and myself scramble into a random room. Jesús pulls out his laptop, and the two of us daze into the face of it as we glare into the eyes of Uma Thurman and John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*. Blaring through my mind stare the thought of our generation. Our generation, the recycled generation, has done nothing of real importance. All we've done is create a plethora of technology. A plethora of suicide. To kill ourselves is apparently our goal, our one real and true importance. The sewage of Beverly Hills has plagued and is slowly destroying our nation. The Founding Fathers would be pissed. Christopher Columbus, the prick, would have turned away from the newly discovered piece of earth, had he known about our generation's sins. . .

Lights inside the church burrow underneath the door as Jesús and I snack on saturated fats and cheddar-baked whale crackers. As we sit dazed and not at all confused, I speak. We are both drained of emotions, mental stability, and nutrition. I say as I peek at the time, "You are no truer person than at 3:30 A.M. You can tell no lies, or even argue with anybody. The person you are at 3:30 A.M. is the person you will be for the rest of your life. . ."

If you were to tell me, "Rocket, you're too goddamned bubbly," I would respond, "Yeah, I am."

Jesús agrees. If you said, "Jesús, you're a fat ass," he would respond, "Yeah, well, it is true." We laugh for a brief moment, then I crack my knees yet again on the way to the bathroom. I see Doug's wife, dazed, walking through the large heavy doors, and she smiles at me. I smile back and continue on my short journey.

After one last trip to brush my pearly whites, Jesús says, "I need some sleep." I agree. I set my phone to go off at 7:40 A.M. The both of us retire to some slender hours of sleep at 4:17 A.M. However, it is Jesús that clocks out. My brain stays racing. Thoughts and the shadows of adults keep me waking. My thoughts are of no real importance, or else I would be able to logically recall them.

I awake around 7:30ish, to the sound of pitter-patter. The children, they have risen. Five hours earlier, they had just settled to slumber. Honestly! I thought. The children, those saturated, sugary fats. I groan and find Jesús doing the same. He rolls over and asks the time. "Almost 7:40," I reply.

"Good, good," he says.

I say while he fishes for his glasses, "We've got to get out of here." He agrees. More than twelve hours at a church lock-in is far too much for two intellectuals to rightfully stand. I propose that we quickly get our stuff together and make a run for it. Jesús answers, "Yes, let's."

We gather our things and slip out the door. A boy in Spider Man pajamas runs past Jesús and says, "Nice hair." He thanks him, and the both of us hightail it to his truck. The cold air breaks into our lungs as the two of us skip into Jesús' truck. We even spot two other people trying to escape an ironic stay in Hell.

Riding back to Jesús' grandparents' place, my mind begins to slowly pace itself to the song "Insect Eyes" by Devendra Banhart. The perfect road song on a morning that has no other meaning or place of worthiness. When the hours are slim and the morning light is blinding, then you listen to "Insect Eyes."

Again, my mind spins into a philosophic rant on my existence in America. America doesn't need another big-boobed blonde to ruin the day. Instead it needs a caregiver, a mistaken child born today, not the yesterday of the 1940s. I would have rather caught the tail end of the Great Depression, instead of the end of our disresponsible society. Our generation is one of a degenerate slue of young people, the future graduates of America, the accidents of the failures of the twentieth century.

Life in America is like Pandora's box. The secret was announced when the box was opened, and like our mischievous Pandora, all that was left inside that lonely box for us was hope.

My Silence

Rebekah Haddock

A syrupy silence.
I drown in it thickly
like a butterfly caught in amber.
A silence I can sink into,
and which covers me,
and preserves me
in the state I wish to keep.

So many different kinds
of silence,
and none of them feels the same:

A silence which echoes
and thunders round my head.
A silence which grows, and grows
and knows me, knows me.
This silence knows me.

My silence spreads
like mercury;
It slithers; it shimmers;
it smoothly smothers.
It drips, drips, drips
and drips until I overflow,
and I am so full, but still want-
ing.
Lacking. Missing. Lost.

The sharper silence,
the one that cuts.
The silent blade
that slashes through my peace
and causes me to bleed.

A restless silence.
An angry silence.
The screaming silence.
The shattering silence.
The lonely silence.
The silence I beat with my fists.

I feel the silence.
The paralyzing silence.
The anæsthetizing silence.
A desensitizing silence.
A sweet silence.
My silence.
The one thing that is truly mine,
and the one thing you could not
take away.

Old Mr. Putnam

Nick Wilbourn

Old Mr. Putnam
In his antiques shop
Playing with his bubble wrap
Making it go pop
Sitting patiently, waiting
For someone to come in
Closes up on Sundays
So that he doesn't sin

Old Mr. Putnam
Driving the school bus
Up until the day when
Someone made a fuss
A rude little Negro girl
Who liked to scream and shout
Up until the day when
The driver kicked her out

Old Mr. Putnam
Fired on the spot
They called him a racist
Though he certainly was not
A veteran of the sixties
A liberal all his days
Deceived by those he'd fought with
To change the world's ways

Old Mr. Putnam
Growing old alone
All his love is gone now
His heart has turned to stone
Sitting in his antiques shop
Letting days go by
Patiently waiting for
The moment he will die

Uniphonic Strobe for Mother Moonless, Maybe? Douglas Trent

never ask the moonless mother how a valiant yell turns blue
or why evergreen definitions violently shatter the wind chime children
splintering audacity
stranding the turbulent rues
I mean wouldn't she just laugh
and have us believe that we're all animate abortions?
now that she's been shanked by the edge of her own beam
choked to death on the ocean's backwash
when the lion was devoured by the lark
this stable condition that she appears in tonight
is not a pleasant cycle of true colors shining
but a humiliating display of spiritual lobotomy
a strepped disguise of protection
suspended durance

can you feel the pain of her generation falling behind
are you too old to imagine
or too young to know
what being with her must have felt like
when she was so full of cumulous prosperity?

One dream discharged night
I heard a segregation of two monaural-mouths' misunderstanding
and it left me prone to pluck the potentials of her nativity
shattered my orchestration of comfortable definition
something sounding so quick
panning melodies unlaced by toggled reception
resonance precipitating the air
fogging my mind
with bright flash tones
allowing me only a glimpse
of a silhouette of a life on the blink
of someone that had passed many times before
someone who hoped that I could never tell the difference
between her inventions and misconceptions
through her tangled grasses their wild guesses gnashed
each taking a chary chance and both having their way

The first melody called Amoery caught my ears
and blared blind currents onto her flaccid status
to the all the spectrums of the atmosphere
he rang out amplified propitious shaded whims
accompanied by inescapable echoes of Memamour, his twin
who extrapolated his own version of Amoery's tones
by running around a route
that he found from both sides:

	{{{maybe she once weaved the world together}}}
	{{{with spools of thread}}}
No...	{{{unraveled mysteries}}}
	{{{to make freedom quilts}}}
This	{{{yeah, with Calico parachutes she lllaaped!}}}
	{{{her feet off the ground}}}
	{{{in the blink of an eye}}}

Family

Is	{{{she went from Curry to the Cahaba}}}	
	{{{to the warm beds of Kalihari}}}	Sown
So	{{{on to the courteous abode of Abu}}}	
	{{{where she danced her way past monotony}}}	But
Tattered	{{{into electricity with the well wishes of Darshna}}}	Torn

supplanted flurries and amplified florescence
 fell retrospectively onto her ground
 But only an accumulation of highlights
 Illuminating around her indifference
 Exposed her slick shaved reputation
 Where implants had been inserted into her fertile soil
 From her wind chapped lips gust a bulimic response
 Toward these complimentary bonds
 An upheaval resembling maniacal amusement
 And repelling resentment
 re-arranged the recording of her history
 in belittlement Memamour retracted
 replying to the beaming light his brother had cast
 upon her
 While Amoery questioned in turn:

	{{{come on man, really	
	{{{seems like all I see is some washed up origin}}}	Well
	{{{with no reason left to live	
Who	{{{warped with pocks and stretch marks}}}	What
	{{{struggling to recover from the poison of penetration}}}	Kinship
Knows?	{{{a numb mind}}}	
	{{{wet pussy}}}	
	{{{but still I won't dare ask}}}	Is
	{{{because although we've never put a hand on her}}}	
	{{{it seems we've blackened her eyes shut}}}	
	{{{and raped the piss out of her}}}	Found
Maybe	{{{so just kick her to the curb	
You?	{{{and pray for euthanasia}}}	In
	{{{even in the arms of immunity}}}	Her
	{{{she's only a settlement for less}}}	
Maybe	{{{from yesterday's ambition}}}	
Me?	{{{never actualized}}}	Strands?

A loop of lovers' flares
 played her to rest
 with wonder and doubt
 concurrent correlations
 going awry
 fading faults
 also dimmed the celestial stares
 wrapped in chords of expression
 she was only something we would hear in contrast
 As the stars in my eyes turned away
 I stumbled blindly through the noise
 Until out in the distance
 I only heard an erasure of a heartbeat
 A blackout in redemption
 a menopause in faith.

Silent Footfalls in a Meadow

Alejandro Pena

My feet fall.
Silently.
In a meadow of snow,
Fall. Fall. Fall.
Like a pair of relentless plungers
clearing Satan's toilet, that's
eternally clogged with stubborn logs of sin
The footfalls sound like the
mittens clapped
by the grubby hands of children,
applauding deaf people singing opera
The footfalls sound like those mittens,
not deaf opera.

Green

Mallory Riggs

It makes up the trees
And flows through my eyes.
It hides in the winter
As the leaves die.
It brightens the turtle
And holds up the flowers.
It builds in the summer
After all the spring showers.
Green.

The Seamstress

Nick Wilbourn

At dawn she sits with her needle erect
Fixing the problems she may detect
She sews up these pants, this shirt, and that tie
Feverishly working as the hours drift by
Though for hours and hours she's spun and she's spun
She won't take a break, no, not even one
Not even when she's tired and jaded
Doing the work so many evaded
She works without ceasing because one day she knows
There'll come a day when no one has holes in their clothes

Don't Go Away

Candice Burch

I wake up everyday
Trying to find the words to say
How much I need you
The days are flying by
And I still wonder why
You can't tell me you love me too

Please don't go away
I need you now and then
I've wondered where you've been
I can't take this anymore
Why are you making this so hard?
Please just tell me how you feel
And we can make us real
And we can fly away
And come back another day

To you it may not seem that I want you to be with me
I don't know why but these feelings I can't hide
I'd never thought I'd ever fall for you
Please tell me you want this to be true
Don't leave me standing here
Watching you disappear
Why can't I get you out of my head
Without you I feel dead
Yeah I feel dead

Please don't go away
I need you now and then
I've wondered where you've been
I can't take this anymore
Why are you making this so hard?
Please just tell me how you feel
And we can make us real
And we can fly away
And come back another day

I want you so much
To feel your soft touch
To kiss you on your face
To be in the warmth of your embrace
Look into my eyes
And tell me that you aren't surprised
And we can fly away
I need to leave this place

Hands Russell Winn

I shake. Or rather, more precisely, my hands shake. It seems to me that they always have, but maybe that's not true. At first, the shaking was like white noise: you know it's there, but it doesn't get in the way. Noticing what has always been is difficult. Sure, my shirt usually had food stains on it but not noticeably more than my friend's. Everyone lives in dirty clothes when they're six.

I didn't notice first: Mom and Dad did. Mom says, "Calm down, Rusty. Everything's OK." Dad just says, "Easy," as if I'm supposed to understand what he means. They hope that their reassuring words will be enough to stop the tremble. Instead it focuses my mind on the problem. I have a problem that's unsettling to others. I'm making them nervous. As I think about it, I shake a little more.

After talking with some people at work, Dad loads me in the station wagon and takes me to a cinder-block, windowless building that's been painted the same color as my army men. He says, "Don't worry, they're just going to run some tests." I hadn't been worrying before. He parks in a dusty parking lot; we get out and walk in. I want dad to hold my hand, but I'm not sure how to ask; so I climb the three cement stairs reaching up to the metal pipe handrail. At the door, he hands me off to the people inside.

Everyone smiles, but I'm not. Everyone says, "Now, don't be nervous," but I'm not fooled. I'm here for tests, and tests mean something is wrong. The woman says, "Rusty, I want you to stack some blocks for me." She's joking . . . blocks? What kind of test is this?

"Stack as many as you can in ten seconds, starting now." She presses a stop watch. Why is she doing this? I'm not stupid. Anyone can stack blocks. I begin to stack them, but the ticking is transferred from the watch directly into my hands. One stack of blocks stands; one falls.

After a really long time filled with stacking, drawing, writing, shaping, folding and crossing under the merciless stopwatch and the woman's watchful eye, she says, "We're through." I notice that I'm sweating. She gets up, sticks her head out the door to call Dad back in. Mom and Teresa come in, too; he left me here to go get them. We all sit down around the table that I've been shaking over for her report. Finally, I'm going to find out what's wrong with me. I'm clenching my hands into fists to keep them steady.

"Rusty has poor hand-eye coordination." She turns to explain to me, "What this means is that you can see what you want to do, but you have trouble making your hands do it."

I think, "That's it? I went through all these tests for that? I've known that forever."

For the first time in my life, I realize that adults don't know everything.

"We think that if he builds models it will improve."

I almost laugh out loud. I don't build models. I hate building models. The decals are the worst. I can never position them right. I am not going to "improve my hand-eye coordination" that way. When he looks at me, Dad knows it too. I've had a new baseball glove for a month now, but no one but me thinks about that. It's never a good time. On the way home, Mom makes Dad stop at Woolworth. She whispers to Dad, "I'm going to get Rusty a present." Maybe today isn't going to be so bad after all. She comes walking out half an hour later with a big smile and a big red box under her arm. She gives me a copy of "Operation."

Milton Bradley had found a new and exciting way to torture me—it said so right on the box. Here's a game whose entire purpose is to make your hands shake, as if my hands don't do this enough on their own. I quickly become everyone's favorite patsy. Even my little sister could beat me. It isn't long before I punch Cavity Sam in his bright red nose.

I find other ways of improving my hand-eye coordination instead. I've been taking piano lessons for the past year and a half now, and I actually enjoy it. It's surprising how nice it is to feel my fingers doing what I want them to do. Knowing that my fingers are exactly where I think they are is an experience I've rarely had. So long as I can keep it to myself, I'm creating. I should have known it wouldn't last. At the end of my lesson, Mrs. Hampton hands me a piece of paper announcing our "Fall Recital."

"What's this?" I ask.

"You're going to play in the Fall Recital this year," she tells me. "I want you to play Fur Elise for your family."

"But I've already done that. They hear it all the time."

"This time you'll do it at the Foy Recital Hall, and other of my students will be there too."

Years later I would become convinced that recitals serve little constructive purpose. They are simply hours of time designed with the intent of making everyone involved wish they were somewhere else. I actually enjoyed playing once.

"Oh, you need to start memorizing your piece," Mrs. Hampton adds as an afterthought. And here I was convinced that the experience could not be any less enjoyable.

The night comes, and I've played Beethoven's Fur Elise until the runs are embedded in my nightmares: Small little demons chasing me up and down, finally catching me on the fourth bar where the right hand seems to get stuck between the e and d#. I'm sitting on the fourth row listening to everyone else's performances, wishing I could disappear. The hall is HUGE, and there are way too many people here tonight. My turn in the program comes, and I walk onto the stage. Once I begin, I'm surprised at how calm I am. My hands know what to do, and I zone out for a minute.

About half way though, I realize that I am repeating a section. I'm betrayed again. "Oh shit, oh shit, OH, SHIT!" I panic. My internal war over what to do begins to show up in my hands; and I know, as I struggle to keep my fingers on the right keys, that I'm never going to be able to finish—time to give up. I lift my hands away from the keys (at least I still have that much control), stand, and shake my way off stage.

A day passes and I don't die. Things begin to calm down for a while. Random people still come up to me suggesting that I not be so nervous—patting me on the back saying "It's going to be all right." Or, "Don't be so nervous, I won't bite!" It seems funny to me; I'm not the one that's nervous.

One day, Dad comes home with a Commodore PET computer, and I discover that there are things that my hands will allow me to do even if performance isn't one of them. After I had worn out the "A," "K," and "L" keys playing Space Invaders for the 937, 329th time, I decide to try my hand at writing my own Space Invaders story. If Arthur C. Clarke could do it in my favorite book that year, *Childhood's End*, I think, "So can I." I write about a boy who holds off the invading bug-gies with his computer (through a program he creates—great artist steal) and his dog. Although I am a two-finger typist, I write it on the computer. It just seems right. I let my neighbor read it. He thinks it's stupid, but I like it anyway. The shaking seems to get a little better. The only one who consistently comments on it now is a man who had spent nearly all of the eighty-five years he had been on this planet working with his hands: My father's father.

Grandpa always seems to have something in his hands. In the garden, he's holding a spade or a potato he's dug up. In his workshop, his hands are covered with wood shavings from a new piece of furniture he's carving. In the kitchen, he holds the cast iron frying pan that his grandfather had given him. His hands aren't perfect. The nail on his left thumb is bent in the middle to form a perfect right angle. It's like a little tent is pitched on the back of his thumb. I asked him about it once, and he said he had broken it when he was a little boy. Now he uses it to help him decide where the next row of green beans should be planted. "It's never failed me, as I'm sure you'll see at dinner tonight." He's proud of his hands . . . even their faults.

What is surprising to me is that even when I openly stare at his hands as he whittles, they do not tremble, they do not shimmy, they do not shake. Mine tremble at the mere thought of undergoing this level of scrutiny. And that's the problem. Grandpa refuses to accept that his only flesh and blood, thirteen year old grandson, the last male Winn to carry on the bloodline, could have so glaring a defect. He knows just what to do. Off we go, with my dad in tow, to the one doctor that could cure any ill, mend any wound, resolve any problem, and address any defect: the chiropractor. I think, "Great, more tests." Then again, there's no way this will be as nerve-wracking as the visit to the army green building as a child.

"Well Doctor, his hands shake. What can you do?" my Grandfather asks.

"Let's do a full workup. Now, Rusty is it, I should warn you, once we finish this you will be extremely tired. I'd imagine that on the way home you'll likely drop right off."

"It's a good thing you're not driving yet!" he adds. He thinks he's being funny

And so the exam begins under the watchful eyes of my father and his father. The doctor twists. He pulls. He straightens. He bends. He prods. He massages. He stretches. Then he watches as he makes me do all these things to myself. An hour later, he arrives at the informed diagnosis: "Well, there's definitely something wrong."

With my father and grandpa looking on in the exam room, he tells me to pull down my shorts and lie face down on the table. My mind screams, "What the hell does this have to do with my hands." My eyes plead with dad, but he defers to his father who simply says, "Do what the Doctor says." So I lie down and reveal my tighty whities. The Doctor begins to hold court.

"You see this?" he says, pointing to my bottom. "Something's just not right here."

He tells me to pull up my shorts. Without turning over, I wiggle them up over my hips. He continues to expound on the problems facing my rear.

"You see, his right cheek is well rounded, as it should be. That's not the problem." His hand doesn't tremble as he makes an inverted cupping sign. "It's his left cheek I'm worried about, it's seems to flatten out." His hand does the same . . . flat as a board. "I'd recommend that he come in for a workup on a weekly basis so we can see what we can do about that."

For the first time in my life, I realize that Doctors don't know everything.

My dad has finally had enough, and he tells me to go wait in the car. As I'm running out, the Doctor reminds me with a laugh that I'll likely spend the rest of the day in a coma. I will not. When the TV station finally quits broadcasting at 4:00 AM, dad comes in the living room to tell me to go to bed. The next day, I overhear dad telling grandpa that my hands don't matter. "He's fine, dad." I feel fine, too.

Needing one more PE credit, I take up Archery in college. Pass/Fail classes are notoriously easy. Usually all that's required is showing up. Somehow I think my teacher would prefer if I didn't. Every time I walk onto the range and pick up a bow, there is something close to terror in his eyes. It's the last day of class, and I haven't missed a single day yet. What I have missed is the bull's eye. Every time. It's as if the target is jumping to one side refusing to capture the arrow I fling at it. I take one more shot. I've been reading Zen and the Art of Archery for an Eastern Philosophy class I'm taking this quarter. I've read it nine times, and I have become one with the book. What I cannot become one with are my hands, this bow, this arrow, or that target. They are all other to me. I try once more, clearing my mind, relaxing my hands, simply breathing. I close my eyes and see the arrow and the target becoming one. The line follows back to me, capturing me too. I open my eyes; and in as smooth a motion as I've managed all quarter, I draw the bow down from the heavens. There is release; there is flight; there is contact. I hit the bull's eye for the first and last time. It wasn't a center shot, but it would do. Occasionally, my hands are calm.

Toward the end of my tenure as a pastor at Campbellsburg Baptist Church, I begin to work with one of the members, Tom Prather, who doesn't like me very much. To him I am, "one of those college-educated liberals that are ruining the world." He's right, I am. He doesn't understand how anyone who has read anything with the word Zen in the title could have made it through the hiring process. We have little in common.

I receive a call one night that he had to take his wife to the hospital. Her cancer is spreading quickly. By the time the doctors discovered it, it has spread throughout her body. She isn't coming home again. Laurel and I are there the night Doris Prather dies. Tom stands over her and weeps. I notice that his hands are shaking; the stress of the previous months of battling the cancer has made his Parkinson's much worse. His hands tremble all the time now. Before he had done a good job of hiding it from everyone, but now he simply can't. His hands, his arms, his body begin to shake, partially from his disease—partially from hers. He's trying to hide it—trying to hold in his feelings. I know what it is like to try to hold steady. I know the attempt would only make it worse. There comes a point where the trembling cannot be stilled alone. I reach out with my own trembling hand and take his in mine. In that moment, there is no distance between us. We stand together. We shake.

1. R.E.M. "Night Swimming." *Automatic for the People*. Georgia, 6 October 1992.

2. Ibid.

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