The Project, 2008

University of Alabama in Huntsville

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The Project Mission Statement

The Project is a student-produced literary magazine devoted to representing a mass of culturally diverse and talented students who choose to submit. Our goal, as a literary magazine, is to portray 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 Writing Center in Morton Hall, Room 228, 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 228 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.

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Fall 2008
Volume 5
### Poetry

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“Hurry up, Carter!” Mom shouts from downstairs. “Your friend Andrew’s here.”

“Shit,” I mutter, strictly examining myself in the closet’s full-length mirror, as if guilty of some heinous thing. Is it noticeable? I wonder.

I drag a pair of unwashed jeans from where they barely hang over a chair and pull them over my boxers, hoping to conceal the obvious tent in my shorts. Yep, I’m guilty.

I grab an old Vols shirt that drapes over me loosely, for good measure. I pull the sleeve up over my left arm and glance in the mirror. I need a tan.

Andrew is downstairs waiting. I tell myself to not do anything stupid.

“You can have a muffin if you want, honey,” Mom says. “I made too many.”

I block her out and repeat over and over to myself that I don’t have to screw this up.

Andrew is my only friend.

“Why so many muffins?” Andrew asks her.

I look around. There are muffins everywhere. Muffins on plates, muffins in fancily tied napkins, misshapen muffins in small piles on the linoleum floor. Those must be the ones there: no place, no peace, no place. night,” Mom says. “I don’t know what it is. I just felt like making muffins. I started before dawn, and I’ve just been baking all day.” She rubs the back of her neck. “It must seem ridiculous, so many muffins. You boys take some with you, if you want.”

Andrew smiles and grabs one of the plates.

“I think those are boysenberry,” she says. “You’ll like them. I’ll get some foil to put over them.”

“I’m kidnapping him tonight,” Andrew tells her. He laughs. “We’ll probably just end up crashing at Terry’s.”

Mom pauses for a moment. “Okay, then,” she says. “Have a good time.”

Normally I would be in bed by now. It’s Friday, though, and Terry’s brother is having a party. Terry’s brother goes to the technical college and is old enough to buy beer. He has a house with his girlfriend downtown. That’s where the party is, so Terry’s parents won’t know he’s drinking.

Terry is Andrew’s friend, not mine. He is loud and sort of dumb, but Andrew likes him. They’re both sixteen. Andrew is supposed to be a junior, but he failed tenth grade English, so he had to take it again. That’s how we met; he’s in my English class.

Mom doesn’t care what I do on Friday nights, since I don’t have school the next day. As long as I make A’s and B’s it’s alright with her. She made me a house key when I started hanging out with Andrew. I skipped the fourth grade, and I’m only fourteen, so Andrew always has to drive.

Sometimes I think Andrew’s only my friend because I let him copy my answers in class. I’d like to think he enjoys my company, but I think I annoy him sometimes because I don’t take poppers or spray graffiti on church buses, or anything like that. He invites
Andrew has the music turned up really loud in the car. I open his glove compartment and retrieve my cigarettes. I only smoke when I'm with him so Mom doesn't catch me.

"Bad habit, dude," he says, shaking his head. "It'll kill you."

I shrug and look out the window, lighting one.

"Will I know anyone there?" I ask.

"I don't know." He rips the foil from Mom's muffins and grabs one, taking a bite. "Fucking good," he says.

I reach for one but knock the plate over when Andrew suddenly slams on the brakes.

"Shit, sorry, dude," he says. "Didn't see the light change." The muffins are all in the floor. He says, "Take half of mine. It's good."

I take the part he's offered and bite into it. He's right; it's delicious. I close my eyes and become aroused. Andrew's eaten part of this muffin, and that turns me on for some reason.

"I need to get laid," he says.

My eyes quickly flick open.

"How about your mom?" he asks. "Your dad's been gone for years, and she doesn't have a boyfriend. I know she's not getting any. We could do it on the kitchen counter. Or in the shower."

"That's gross," I say.

He laughs. "I bet she likes younger men," he says. "I bet she likes anal, too."

God, I wish he wouldn't say those things, not about her. I love her too much for that.

"Just shut the fuck up," I say.

"Shit, Carter, I was only joking," he says.

I try to think of what I want to tell him, but the words escape me. "Whatever."

We see Terry's brother's girlfriend Jenny first. She waves her beer bottle at us when we pull up. She's smoking a joint with the other hand. She's sitting on the front porch with two guys with long hair and a woman who's only wearing a bra and panties. When he sees the woman Andrew elbows me hard in the side and grins.

"Hey, boys," Jenny says. "There's beer inside. Don't worry about drinking. Ned's a cop, and he doesn't give a shit." She gestures to one of the longhaired guys who gives us a half-assed salute before inhaling from the joint. He and the panties woman start cackling hysterically, and Jenny rolls her eyes, motioning us inside and telling us to 'go have a good time.'

"Shit, dude," Andrew says, laughing. "We're gonna get some tonight. You want the porch girl, or can I have her?" I hesitate, and he shrugs. "I'll take that as a don't care. Guess she's mine, then." He continues laughing. "I'm getting a beer."

He walks off and I know I won't see him again for a while. He'll start getting loaded and cutting up with people and hitting on girls. I'll drink awhile and probably find a place to pass out. Andrew says I'm a lightweight.

I had wanted to say something on the way over but couldn't. I wanted to tell him I really like him, more than a friend. It might have pissed him off at first, but he would've
gotten over it. I know he doesn't feel the same way; I just want to get it off my chest because it’s making me crazy.

I pop the lid from a cold Heineken and plop into a ratty plaid armchair. It must be older than I am. Two people are frenching on a sofa across the room; it’s almost pornographic. I have to cross my legs.

Andrew would say they’re on third base, nearing the home stretch. I once asked him if there was a place where he learned all the things he said, like from a website or something, or if he just made it all up. He laughed at me afterward.

The beer’s beginning to have an effect on me, and I like it. Everything feels sort of tingly and the vibe is definitely more upbeat. I know I can only have one or two more, though, because it’ll make me sick, and I don’t want Mom to see me hung over, or there’ll be ‘hell to pay’ in the morning.

Suddenly there’s a short woman on the armrest of my chair.

“Hey there, cutie,” she says, taking a swig. “I’m Rhonda.”

I don’t say anything.

“What? You don’t talk to older girls?” She grins at that, and I think she must be wasted.

“I know you,” she says. “Weren’t you at Dallas’ party Saturday?”

“Uh, yeah. Don’t you have a boyfriend, or something?”

“Shhh!” she whispers. Then conspiratorily she says, “Let’s keep that our little secret.”

“I think I need another beer,” I say.

“Wait, I know you! You’re in high school, right? You’re Aaron’s brother, whatsis name, Jerry?”

“Terry,” I say.

“Yeah, Terry. That’s your name.”

“I’ll be right back, Rhonda,” I say, with no intention of returning.

The panties woman has slipped a fuchsia tank top over her bra.

“There’s a hole in your eyebrow,” I say as she fishes a beer from the cooler.

She rubs her temple. “I pierced it a couple of months ago when I turned eighteen, I guess I was just being rebellious, or finding myself, or something. Anyway, it’s stupid now. I don’t wear it anymore.”

She sips from her bottle. “I’ve seen you at these things before. You’re young.”

I nod and drink more beer.

“You don’t talk much, do you? And you’re never with anyone. You’re always just watching people. I guess you’re friends with that guy you came with, but you seem like a wallflower mostly. That’s very cool, the quiet, introspective thing. You have a girlfriend, then?”

I shake my head. I must be getting really drunk because I say, “I’m getting over someone that doesn’t feel the same way I do.”

She nods her head and takes another sip of her beer. She wants to listen.

Andrew comes to the cooler for a refill. I immediately freeze and hope the panties woman keeps her mouth shut.

“Your friend’s cute,” she says to Andrew. “It’s too bad he’s gay.”
I really shouldn’t talk to people when I drink.

“What are you talking about?” Andrew says, grabbing me around the shoulder. “Carter here’s not a fag.”

“I’m definitely not gay,” I say, faking a laugh.

“Then why did you say you were in love with him?” she says, pointing her beer at Andrew.

I’m not thinking as clearly as usual, and I guess I hesitate too much on the response.

“Dude, what the fuck?” Andrew says, backing off.

“I... umm...” But the words aren’t coming.

“What the fuck ever, man,” he says, blowing us off.

The woman pushes a strand of hair from her eyes. “Let’s go,” she says. “These people are stupid.”

“I guess you’re Carter,” she says as I follow her, stumbling slightly. “I’m Jill.”

“Where are we going?” I don’t know why I’m following this woman. “Why did you say that to him?” I ask.

“Because he’s a dick.”

“No, he’s not. I like him,” I say.

“No, you don’t. You’re just in love with him. There’s a difference.”

Outside Jill unlocks the trunk of her sedan, pulls out some green sweatpants, and shimmies into them.

We shuffle into the car, and Jill lights a cigarette. “Hope you don’t mind,” she says. “Want one?” she asks, rolling down her window and starting the ignition.

“If you insist,” I say, taking and lighting it. I exhale and shake my head. I am suddenly angry. “What’s wrong with you? None of that was your business. Everything that happens to me from now on, I’m blaming on you, you stupid cunt.”

There is a long silence that eventually lulls me to sleep. My dreams are always clear. This time it’s about Jill, who tries to seduce me by offering me what Andrew calls a ‘special brownies’. He says they’re made with ‘pot butter’, which apparently doesn’t require much preparation.

In the dream, Jill has stopped the car and is on top of me, licking my forehead. She stuffs one of the brownies into my mouth, and it tastes delicious. It reminds me of Mom’s muffins. Then I see Mom in the kitchen, pulling another tray of muffins out of the oven, and my father is suddenly there. He puts a hand on her shoulder and starts fucking her on the kitchen counter. He starts shoving all the muffins off the counter and then pushes Mom away. Andrew is on the floor, and he starts going at it with Mom on the linoleum. My father watches, rooting for them to come, eating a muffin. Then they’re all doing it together in the shower, and Andrew turns and calls me a ‘fucking fag’ before twisting the showerhead in my direction.

I wake up when Jill squirts me in the face with a neon green water pistol. I am suddenly very alert.

She tosses the gun into the backseat. “I was getting bored.” After a moment she says, “I’m gay, too.”
She's on our trip with girlfriend Amelia and I want to have a kid, but we need a stud.

"Obviously," I say.

"I like you, Carter. You seem intelligent, and you’re somewhat nice, and you’re gay."

"Does that matter?" I ask.

"Yes. We want a gay guy, that way the baby will be more likely to be gay, like us."

"It doesn’t work like that," I say.

"Shut up, Carter," she says.

Nobody says anything until she pulls the car under a large elm by the lake. It’s dark there.

"I want you to fuck me, here in the car," she says.

I tell her ‘no’.

"Nobody has to know," she says. "You’ll be the anonymous sperm donor, our mystery stud. I won’t even tell Amelia, if you don’t want."

"No," I say again.

"I could rape you," she says. "You’re just a prissy fag."

I don’t say anything. I’m nervous now. I think of Mom and Andrew and Jill, and I start to cry.

When I stop crying, we remain silent and still for what must be hours. Then Jill leans over and kisses my cheek before resting her head on my shoulder.

"Amelia’s gonna be pissed that I missed this opportunity."

I search for my words carefully. I’ve thought about this for several minutes now. Do you have a cup?" I ask.

"Why?" she says.

I know I’m only saying this because I’m still a little buzzed, but I decide to go through with it anyway.

"I’m going to jack off in a cup and let you have the sperm."

After a moment she shrugs. "Suits me." She opens the passenger door and crawls over me, wiggling her ass.

"Does that turn you on?" she asks after she’s out.

"No," I say. "Do you have a cup?"

She rummages through the trunk and returns with a red plastic tumbler.

"We need to go to Wal-Mart," she says, getting in the driver’s seat.

"Why?"

"I need to get one of those syringes, the kind without the needle. I’ve researched this stuff, just in case things went down this way. They call it the ‘turkey baster method’, but it’s better to use a syringe."

I am silent the entire way to Wal-Mart. I never imagined these things would happen. Jill’s legs are spread wide against the dashboard. Her seat is reclined to the floor. I wonder if she can see the used syringe she discarded back there.

I light one of her cigarettes. She does also.

"You can’t do that anymore," I say. "It’s bad for the fetus."
“This will be my last one, then,” she says, exhaling. “I needed an excuse to quit, anyway.”

“I want to go home,” I say.

“No. I need to wait at least thirty minutes, to make sure your little swimmers have a chance to get in there.” She says, “I’ll name it Carter.”

“I don’t care what you call it.” Then, “What if it’s a girl?”

“I think it’s a unisex name.” She says, “After this, you can still have sex with me. You know, just to be sure.”

I pause then tell her I want to go home.

After a while she readjusts her seat. “The moon is beautiful tonight,” she says as she starts the car. “Are you going to talk to your friend again?” she asks as she’s driving.

I shrug.

“Give him time. He’ll come around. Maybe not the way you’d like him to, but he’ll come around, mark my words. I think I’ll have one last cigarette,” she says.

“Why did you do all of this?” I ask her.

She stares ahead for several minutes, and I think she hasn’t heard me. Then she says, “I don’t know. The sex thing was spur of the moment, I guess. Call it all bad judgment?”

I think about the evening and start crying again.

Jill doesn’t stop the car.

“I’m hungry,” Jill says. We’re stopped in my driveway behind a car I’ve never seen.

“Mom baked before we left,” I say.

We approach the door, and I grab her shirt. “Don’t make noise,” I say. “I’m not sure who’s here.”

Inside we can hear groans from upstairs. Mom must be with the guy in the car.

“It smells great in here,” Jill whispers, finding the kitchen. She flips on a light, and there are the muffins, everywhere.

“My father always liked muffins,” I say after a moment.

Jill shrugs. “Must be an aphrodisiac. Who’d have thought?”

Jill gets a grocery sack and fills it with muffins. She gives me a hug before she leaves, thanking me for my ‘gift’, ‘the gift of life’ she calls it.

“Amelia and Carter and I will never forget it,” she says.

When she’s gone I pick a large cranberry-orange muffin with lots of powdered sugar on top. I sit on the sofa and eat it. It is too sweet and partially stale. It is not as delicious as I once thought. I won’t have any more of these muffins. I might be finished with muffins forever.

I go to the kitchen and find a black trash bag. I dump all of the muffins into it. Blueberry muffins, cornbread muffins, double chocolate chip mini muffins. All of them shit now. They are past their prime. They are not good to me, or to anyone.

I leave the house and take a walk, so I can find a dumpster for the rubbish muffins. I want to call Andrew and tell him about Mom and the Muffin Man upstairs, because I don’t have anybody else. I don’t think he’ll want to talk about it, though. I cannot think of anything else to do, and I want to cry. I close my eyes and run.
The Dozen Selves
Veronica Ferreira

I am woman. Everything I think is a womanly thought; everything I feel is a womanly emotion. I struggle to fit your idea of womanhood while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am daughter. I am obedient and loyal. I am honest and I always wear clean underwear in case I get in a car accident. I would not jump off a bridge just because my friends are doing it. I struggle to be what you want me to be while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am wife. I am loyal and devoted. I uphold your masculinity while maintaining my femininity. I place your happiness above my own and hope you do the same. I struggle to fulfill your dreams while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am student. I study sociology, history, and philosophy in a feeble attempt to understand the world in which we live. I use what I learn to better understand myself. I delve into corruption, power struggles, and a thousand “isms.” I struggle to consume all of the information I can and not explode, while still attempting to forge my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am descendant. I come from poor farmers who defended the Confederacy. I come from poor coal miners who emigrated from England. I come from a POW in Korea, a factory worker from Virginia, and a chicken farmer from Ohio. I struggle to be proud of where I came from yet to acknowledge the failings of my ancestors, while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am ethnicity and race. I am a white girl. I am Western European. I am part of the privileged, the dominant. I must recognize the advantages I receive for simply having less pigment than others. I feel guilty for being privileged at the hands of something I cannot control. I struggle to destroy your image of the “white girl” and the hierarchy of race while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am employee. I am worker. I succumb to your time table. I am obedient and loyal. I struggle to be what you want while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am citizen. I am a loyal subject. I submit to your norms to gain your approval. I vote in the hopes that you might actually represent me. I fight to avoid disillusionment. I struggle to be what you think I should be while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.
I am consumer. I am a cog in the capitalist machine. I buy everything I can and convince myself that I actually need it. I buy a larger home to store all of the goods you tell me I need. I struggle to be the ideal demographic while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am statistic. I am a number; I am your calculation. I submit to your monitoring of my every characteristic. I am your little box; check as many as apply. I am more satisfied, less satisfied, or “other.” I struggle to fit your categories while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am American. I am the brave, the patriot, the hand over the heart. I attempt to believe in the ideals you say embody me, even when you fail to live up to them. I am freedom; I am democracy; I am in the pursuit of happiness and the American dream. I struggle to fit your definition while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

I am mother. I devote my life to your happiness so that you will feel strong enough to leave me behind. I attempt to learn from the mistakes of my other selves, and to teach you to avoid the same path. I cry when you cry; I hurt when you hurt. I am firm and unyielding when it kills me inside so that you will learn. I am your nurse, your teacher, your role model, your pillow, your punching bag. I am your source of happiness, comfort, stability, and resentment. I struggle to be your hero and your rock while forging my own identity. I am exhausted.

Where is the individual? Where am I whole? I am broken, I am pieces, I am a dozen selves; a dozen voices, all struggling to be heard, while I attempt to forge my own identity. I am exhausted.
"Y'all want some tomatoes?" Granddaddy asked Mom and me. We were sitting out on the patio talking to Non one breezy summer afternoon. "I got a bunch that are ready," he continued heading off toward his store of tomatoes not waiting for a response.

We got up and followed him to a huge old maple tree on the side of his yard, between the house and his garden. Underneath its pleasant shade, he had set up two saw horses and set a thin, square board on top of them to provide a flat surface for his tomatoes to ripen after he had picked them off the vine.

Mom was probably thinking about how many tomatoes he’d already given us and how many had rotted because there was no way our family could consume that many tomatoes. At least she liked them, though; I had always hated them. I tried, but the taste was just not appealing to me. And worse that that was the icky jelly that comes oozing out of the middle, leaving a messy trail like a slug. Despite my protests about eating tomatoes, somehow I always got the job of preparing them. I hated feeling the texture as the fuzzy flesh and clammy jelly gushed through my fingers. To avoid the yucky goo as long as possible, I quickly learned the art of pealing a tomato in one long strand without breaking the exterior of the flesh so the jelly would stay locked up inside.

"Lemme just get a sack," he said and went into the little barn. (We always had to distinguish between the “little barn” and the “big barn.”) He rummaged around in a bag full of bags until he found one he thought most appropriate and then began meticulously placing the tomatoes in it.

"Thanks, Granddaddy. ‘Preciate it.” That night, we had sliced tomatoes along with a spread of vegetables from our own garden. As always, Non and Granddaddy had sliced tomatoes too. A meal just wasn’t complete in their house if the list of items on Non’s menu didn’t end with “and sliced tomato and tea.”

In the family and beyond it, Granddaddy was famous for those tomatoes. He had a talent for choosing the right plant and making it grow. He always kept it firmly but carefully tied up, making sure the vine didn’t lay on the ground and cause the tomatoes to rot under their own shade. Checking them multiple times a day, he also made sure he picked them when they were the perfect color, almost as if the ones ready for picking flashed golden in his eyes as he glanced their way. After making the rounds to each plant with his dull metal bucket, he brought it to that sawhorse table under the maple, laid the tomatoes stem down, and waited for them to ripen.

Although those tomatoes, which we all got sick and tired of by the end of the season, were a particular prize, Granddaddy grew all sorts of vegetables in his garden. He had row after row and “patch” after “patch” of garden, and each corner seemed to smile and flourish under his care and enthusiasm.

Sometimes at my own home on the other corner of the farm. I would complain loud and long about how tired I was of hoeing our garden. “When I was growing up,” Mom
would always begin, “I had to hoe rows that were three times that long. Daddy—your granddaddy—had huge gardens...like from here,” pausing to demonstrate, “to here.” I went back to hoeing not exactly convinced that the job was easy just because the rows weren’t as long as Granddaddy’s used to be.

Even when I was little and Mom’s daddy was already becoming an old man, he still had expansive gardens. I wanted to avoid working them if at all possible, but I did enjoy following him around and listening to him talk about each different plant and what we should be looking for. It got tiresome fairly quickly...more quickly than it should’ve I’m sure, but I was little and would rather be swinging or playing or talking to someone else. I didn’t really understand the value of what Granddaddy was trying to teach me.

“Get out o’ there,” he’d yell suddenly at Butch, interrupting his own lesson. Butch, Granddaddy’s old border collie, was around for so many years that he seemed as much a part of our home as the pond or the woods or the land itself. He had trotted into the garden—as he often did—so Granddaddy yelled at him to leave—as he often did. The ritual seemed to connect them in some way.

Sometimes I’d silently watch this routine and keep following Granddaddy as he continued up the rows. Sometimes I’d use the break in the narration to playfully run out of the garden and kick one of Butch’s toys so he would chase after it, “helping” Granddaddy get him out of the garden but also providing me with a means of escape to do something more fun while I left Granddaddy to continue his work alone.

One summer Granddaddy didn’t have a garden. The whole family was somewhat relieved and pleased because we all thought he needed to stop working so hard and let himself retire. He’d been technically retired from his welding career at Chrysler as long as I’d known him, but when I was little, I didn’t really understand the concept of Granddaddy being “retired” because as far as I could see he was always working.

Still, after repeated requests from everyone for him to stop gardening, partly for his own health and partly because my worn out grandmother always felt obligated to eat, can, or freeze every single healthy vegetable that came out of that garden rather than waste it, he finally stopped. One day in May that year, well into the season during which seeds should already be safely tucked within the earth and beginning to sprout, I was walking into Non and Granddaddy’s yard from the field, feeling that something was very wrong with the picture in front of me. Grass and hay were all I saw. No ploughed-up square of land with neatly ordered rows. No pea patch started in the distance. No watermelon vines anywhere waiting for the day when we would go pick out a few, bring them up to the patio, plop them on a picnic table covered with old newspapers, slice them open, pour on the salt, and eat. Instead, there was just grass and hay.

It felt like somebody had died, but Granddaddy was nowhere near ready to die. After giving in to his children’s protestations that summer, he defiantly planted a garden the next year. He didn’t care about his health because he knew he would die someday. I heard from Non later that Granddaddy had said as long as he could he would keep going out, working some part of the farm everyday because if he had his choice, he wanted to die outside with his shoes on.
Early this past summer, Mom and I found Granddaddy tending his young garden one day when we went over for a visit. It was so early that no tomatoes even had the chance to form yet, but Granddaddy asked us if we needed any tomato plants. We paused for a moment, smiling. Then Mom told him that we had already planted some in our garden, and I finally told him that I didn’t like tomatoes. We all laughed as he drained another watering can onto one of those blasted plants.
Listen
Joseph Blackwell

Listen!
Can you hear it?
Shush!
Listen.
Can you hear it?
That sound.
It's really faint.
It's gone.
No, wait.
There it is again.
I can hear it.
You can't hear it?
Not at all?
Well it's there.
I can hear it.
I'm not crazy.
No, you're an idiot.
Listen!
It's getting closer.
It sounds like voices.
Lots of them, shouting.
No, they're not shouting.
More like singing.
Or maybe just shouting.
No, definitely singing.
I tell you I'm not crazy!
How many times do I have to say it?
I can hear it!
Why can't you?
Now be quiet.
I'm trying to listen.
There must be thousands of them!
All singing at once.
Wait.
That sounds more like crying than singing.
You know, wailing, gnashing of teeth?
Oh grow up.
Knock that smirk off your face.

I'm not crazy.
There's something there.
Yeah, laugh it up.
I'm not kidding.
And I'm not crazy.
You want me to prove it?
Well I'm sorry.
I can't prove it.
But you can't prove I am!
Don't have to?
What's that supposed to mean?
Wait!
Shush!
Listen!
Words!
I can hear words!
They're not imaginary, thank you very much.
Here, I'll write it down for you.
Yes, that's what they're saying.
I am absolutely not crazy!
They're just saying that, over and over.
All of them.
Just a few more minutes.
I wonder what it means.
I wonder what it means.
Look, man, don't try to explain it away.
I know what I can hear.
Can't you hear them?
By now they're practically yelling they're so loud.
How can you not hear them?
I can.
I still can.
Play Me in a Minor Key Tonight
Allen Berry

Play me in a minor key tonight.
Dress me in a suit of rain.
Paint me with the colors of midnight,
hues of ocean and evening sky.

Play me in a minor key tonight.
Sing me down darkened streets,
accompaniment of Corvid calls
and Raven’s cries from the rookery.

Play me in a minor key tonight.
Ebony keys unsung in Tin Pan Alley
swaying like smoke curling round
streetlight shadows like a lover’s embrace.

Play me in a minor key tonight.
A song as dark as whisky, cold as
solitude, intangible as three a.m.,
gone as yesterdays down a storm drain.
On Travel
Betty Bolté

I grabbed the handle of my battered, flowered suitcase from the rumbling belt as my cell phone rang. I slipped my purse strap back onto my shoulder as my husband’s voice flowed from the Bluetooth ear piece into my ear.

“On my way,” I said. Nat always called when I landed, as if he had psychic abilities to know exactly when the plane was on the ground.

“Where are you now?”

“Baggage claim, heading for the shuttle.” My damn strap slipped off my raincoat yet again, and I dragged it back up. The automatic doors ground open as I approached, rain blowing in from outside. A jet engine roared overhead, carrying travelers away from Huntsville. The cleansing scent of rain evoked thoughts of spring despite the January chill. Thankfully, the parking lot shuttle was approaching as I walked out.

“I left you a note,” Nat said.

“Where?” A chill that had nothing to do with the cold rain spread through me as I climbed the steps to the shuttle backwards, hauling my suitcase up the steps one at a time, my briefcase perched on top. The driver looked through me rather than at me as I reached the top step and found a seat near the front. A couple of other people hurried onboard before the door snicked closed.

“On the passenger seat. You can’t miss it.” Nat chuckled, a rich chocolatey sound. I shivered in response, remembering private moments that included chocolate and strawberries. Those moments, though, had been a long time ago, before I started working full time again.

“What’s it say?” The shuttle lurched forward, pressing me against the cold vinyl seat.

I feared that he had finally given up on me and my quirks, my bad habits, my lack of attention towards him. Knowing that I had given up on my first husband for similar reasons did nothing to ease my mind. He’d put his job ahead of us. Looking back, it was obvious to me how immature I had been, wanting my husband to be with me every moment. The problem arose because he worked shifts with the police department. Every third week we would spend together like what I considered “normal” married couples did. Waking at the same time. Eating dinner together. Sleeping together. The rest of the time he was at work when I was eating dinner or sleeping. Alone.

Nat chuckled again, deep and rich. “Open it, and you’ll know. I’ll see you when you get home.”

“Give me an hour or so. I’ve got to stop at the office first.”

“Tonight?” I could hear the surprise in his voice.

“Only for a minute. Promise.” The shuttle wound its way through the parking lot. The street lights provided a background for the rain drops flashing past like tiny shooting stars. I gathered my bags as the shuttle drew nearer to my car.

“Yeah. Well, call me when you start for home then, okay?” The chocolate had left now,
reverting to the harder, cautious voice he adopted when I was on travel for NASA.
“I won’t be long.”

The shuttle stopped at my row; I picked up my briefcase and dragged my suitcase off behind me. Dropping the suitcase to the ground, I pulled up my hood and wheeled the case through the rain to my silver BMW. Nat hadn’t wanted me to buy the car, saying it was too expensive, but I had found a decent used one. Then he agreed that it was reasonable. I decided to splurge, relying on my own salary to make the payments. That was a great feeling, too. To know that I had some money to call my own, rather than relying upon Nat’s concurrence for each item I purchased. Not that I didn’t discuss it with him, but I knew it was ultimately my own decision. As my salary had increased over the years, I wondered how he would react if my salary were to surpass his. I’d heard of women whose husbands couldn’t tolerate not having the bigger salary and they either ended up divorced or she stopped working to massage the man’s ego. I love my job too much to give it up for something as superficial as a man’s ego. But I love him, too.

After stowing my suitcase in the trunk, I put my briefcase on the backseat, slid behind the wheel, and closed the door against the suddenly gusting wind that drove the rain inside with me. I slipped my hood off, fluffing my hair with one hand as I slid the key in the ignition. The car purred to life. That’s when I remembered to look at the passenger seat.

A white business envelope lay there, gleaming in the light from the parking lot. “Vanessa” was scrawled across the outside. It looked like it held more than one piece of paper, a puffed little pillow of hidden message. I didn’t want to read the contents. I feared the papers inside would say he wanted out of the marriage. Threads of lyrics rambled through my head, claiming impossible promises. Stuff like never spending a night without him, or “I can’t breathe without you” so how will I survive? I damn well would survive it, if that were necessary. Was it my fault that my job had morphed into a type of desirable monster that dragged me from city to city across the country for most of the month?

The wipers slapped into motion, water cascading from view with each swipe. I took a deep breath to calm myself. It wouldn’t do any good to start crying in the rain. I grinned through my tears at the cliché. I focused on driving, the engine nearly silent as I drove out of the parking lot. I would wait to read the note until I got to the office. Then I’d have better light to read it.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up to the security gate, showed my badge, and then proceeded on to my building. The rain never let up. Drought relief was important, but did it have to recall Noah’s flood?

At seven o’clock on a Friday night it was easy to pull into a spot close to the door. Most sane people left by four on weekends. Gingerly, I picked up the envelope and slid it into my purse. I pulled up my hood in preparation for facing the onslaught of rain. Getting out, I grabbed my briefcase, pressing the lock button on my car remote as I hurried to the grey building, glistening from the rain. The worry lingered in my mind as I rode the elevator up to the fifth floor and my office. Setting my purse and briefcase on the desk, I removed the analysis documentation from the briefcase and secured it in a filing cabinet. Only then did I allow myself to focus on the note.
What did Nat need to say to me in writing? Did he want a divorce after all? He made no secret of the fact that he didn’t like being home alone so often. I didn’t like it either, but the development phase of the new Ares launch vehicle project was too fluid to allow me to oversee it from my office. As assistant to the Ares Chief Engineer, I had to travel to where the work was performed to ensure that the engineering issues and guidance were being communicated to the right folks. I had tried to make Nat understand that. Perhaps I hadn’t succeeded as well as I thought.

Open the damn letter; then you’ll know and you can stop worrying about it, my conscience cried out. The envelope stared innocently at me from my open purse on the desk. A simple effort would reveal the message from my husband of twenty-odd years. I pulled the envelope out of my purse and stared back at it. It felt light yet weighty. Portentous. I should open it, I knew that. Yet somehow I couldn’t. I slipped it back into my purse as my cell phone buzzed again.

“Where are you?”

“Greg?” I was startled to hear my boss’ tenor voice in my ear rather than Nat’s baritone.

“Something wrong?”

“No, but where are you?”

“The office.”

“Fire up your PC and send me that presentation on thrust oscillation that the team has been working, will ya?”

“Okay, give me a minute.” I shrugged out of my coat and punched the On button of my PC. “What’s going on?”

“That pseudo-reporter is pestering the Administrator for more information, despite having just made the request for the original information. Griffin wants to see the latest info.”

My eyes scanned the directory, searching for the right folder that contained the information Greg needed. “On the way,” I said, hitting Send.

“Why are you in the office this late on a Friday? You should be home by now.”

“Where are you?”

“Touché. I’m about to head home. You should do the same.”

“Aye-aye, boss.”

We chatted for another moment then ended the call. He was right, I was spending too much time at the office. At least from Nat’s point of view. Hell, if I were the spouse left behind, alone at home, I’d probably complain, too. Grabbing my purse and briefcase, I tried to ignore the glaring white envelope rebuking me for ignoring it. It was silly, really. This fear was my own. Of course he loved me.

Setting down my stuff, I pulled the envelope out of my purse and slid a finger under the tucked in flap. Taking a deep breath, I pulled the flap out and fingered the paper.

“Hey, I didn’t expect to see you tonight.” Philisha leaned on the doorway to my office, her long black hair pulled up in an intricate braid. She pointed a red tipped finger at me and smiled. “You should be home with your hubby.”

I crammed the envelope into my purse before she asked about it. “I’m on my way
"Good. You've been gone a lot lately." She raised her eyebrows at me when she saw the briefcase. "Don't take work home, though. Spend the time with Nat."

She was speaking from experience, having just finalized her own divorce for similar reasons. The only difference had been that she wasn't traveling so much as just busy at the office, working many nights and weekends. One night she came home to an empty house with a note from him on the kitchen table wishing her well with her job and her life. I gazed at her a moment, and struggled to smile. "See you Monday, then."

"Yeah – now go." She handed my briefcase to me and guided me to the elevator.

Once more in the car, I called Nat. "I'm leaving now. I'll see you in twenty."

"Great."

He sounded cautious still, as if unsure I was telling him the truth. Annoyance sizzled inside me momentarily, but I suppressed it from my voice. "Really, I'll be home as fast as this damn storm will let me."

"I'll make the martinis, then."

"With two olives?"

"Of course."

I turned up the radio, trying to will the country ballads to soothe my fears away. It couldn't be too bad if he was chilling martinis for our ritual Friday night cocktail. Granted, they would be later than usual, but it was our tradition to relax and chat over them on weekends. I sighed, recalling how the tradition began the first night we'd met. He'd walked into the resort bar where I was killing time before going to my condo that Friday night. Alone. I missed my stewardess friend, who at the last minute wasn't able to join me because she had to fly to Maui. Tough break for her. Isolation was not my preferred state of being, so the nightlife at the bar provided entertainment I couldn't find on the TV. Nat had strolled in and sat down a few stools away from me. He turned his dark eyes to me and smiled, his smile in sharp contrast to the bronze skin of his face. His black curly hair made him look boyish, despite the strain of the shirt across his muscular shoulders. He looked like he might be from one of the Caribbean islands, perhaps Jamaica or the Bahamas. He'd asked if I wanted a second round, not knowing I was on my third glass of wine already. I didn't hesitate. Something about him clamored for me to lay my hand on his arm, to feel his strength and warmth beneath my hand. "Make it a martini," I had said. He told me later that he could tell I wanted to be closer, but hesitated to be so bold. He came to me, then, closing the space between us. We spent much of the week together, hiking, playing tennis, and amazingly enough, talking.

Glancing at my purse on the seat, I noticed the crumpled envelope had become damp on the walk from the building. I pulled it from the purse and smoothed it out and then laid it on the seat to dry. I shifted into drive and headed home. Longing for my husband's touch summoned tears to my eyes. Although I worked mostly with men, spending the majority of my days in the office and offsite at other facilities with them, they held no fascination for me. The engineers and managers were just people I worked with.

Nat of course could not know that. God, I hoped he didn't think I was having some
of affair with them. He loved me. I knew he did. Had he missed me and now wanted to spend time with me? Or was he going to let me down gently, as was his nature? He had been such a wonderful dad to our two kids, now grown and off to college. Always listening when they talked, guiding when they needed it. We were the epitome of empty-nesters, but I had grown bored and restless at home. After eighteen years raising our twins, I needed to reassure myself that I could do more than wipe noses and help with homework.

The envelope glared at me from the passenger seat as I waited for a red light to change to green. I tried to ignore its eerie whiteness in the darkness of the night. Rain dotted the windshield, the wipers intermittently clearing the glass but not my vision. I glanced at the pale envelope. The rain drop shadows created dripping shadows that looked like tears on the envelope which glowed eerily beside me, the shadows imitating the silent tears now creeping from my eyes.

The rain crescendoed on the roof, drowning out the DJ’s banter. I wiped my hand across my eyes, erasing the tear stains as best I could. I turned up the radio again as the weather report came on, announcing a severe thunderstorm approaching.

“God, just get me home.” I hated driving at night, let alone on a rainy night. The plane had been late coming in because of the rougher weather we had to go around between D.C. and Huntsville. The last three days had been spent helping Greg answer questions about thrust oscillation, a normal occurrence in solid rocket motors, which somehow had been made into a media issue when in fact it was expected. Now we just had to decide how best to adjust the design to mitigate or eliminate the effect on the launch vehicle.

Lightning shattered the darkness as the traffic light switched to green and I pressed the gas pedal. I pondered why I couldn’t open the envelope while I had been sitting there in the parking lot and yet again at the office. Was I afraid of it, really? It wouldn’t surprise me that he was unhappy. Once our kids had grown up, though, I needed something to do, to make me feel like I mattered again. So I cleaned the dust and cobwebs off my bachelors’ degree in structural engineering by returning to college, and two years later graduated with a master’s degree and a job offer from NASA. Then the Ares Project started, and I was tapped to be the Chief Engineer’s assistant to facilitate internal communication among the design engineers. I was proud of my responsibilities, and they were satisfied with my performance. I felt valued and useful again.

Nat had been happy that we had a second income, especially with our children still in college. But as the months went by, I had sensed he resented the extent of my travel, which often carried me away from home for a week at a time. Sometimes I took him with me, if his job allowed him to be absent for a while, but that wasn’t often.

My cell phone buzzed. Turning down the radio, I pressed the answer button. “Hey hon.” A tractor trailer passed me and sent a wave against my windshield. I increased the speed of the wipers.

“Where are you now?” His voice purred in my ear, chocolatey again, warming me.

“I should be there in ten.”

“Martinis are ready.” The deep rumble of his chuckle flowed through me, and I smiled. I hadn’t realized how much I craved him until I heard his voice against the boom and
flash of the thunderstorm brewing around me. It had only been three days this time, but now it felt as though I had only just returned to reality. I glanced at the envelope again, knowing I should have opened it already. Maybe it was a surprise, a good one, the weekend getaway to Gatlinburg I’d longed for, perhaps, and he thought I knew and had the martinis ready to celebrate. The thought suggested that I find a place to stop the car and read the paper inside, but I had already told him I’d be home soon. What if it were bad news, though? Would he make martinis if so, my nagging inner voice argued. I needed time to think, to sort this out, to open the envelope.

“I – I need to stop at the Shell and put gas in the car.” It was partly true, I only had a half tank.

“Now?” The chocolate had hardened again.

“It’ll just take a minute and then I’ll be home. Really.” The yellow Shell sign glowed up ahead, a welcome sight.

He took a long breath and let it out slowly in my ear. “It’s getting late, you know.”

That was code for he was getting annoyed. “Understood. See you soon.”

I pulled into the station and shut off the car. LeAnn Rimes crooned over the radio, echoing my earlier thoughts. I felt she was speaking to me, making me think about what my life would really be like if Nat walked away from me. “If I had to live without you, what kind of life would that be?” she asked me. I could feel my life without my soulmate become a never-ending expanse of loneliness, stretching forever. I’d never find another man who would understand me the same ways that Nat did. “I need you in my arms, need you to hold, you’re my world, my heart, my soul.” How is it that she could understand my feelings so succinctly?

Sure I could survive without Nat. I’d keep breathing. Working. Eating. Crying. Did I want to, though? Is that why I went through the pain of birthing twins – to give up on their dad when our goals shifted away from their old paths? Is that why we worked through all of the challenges of remodeling the old farmhouse into something nicer, of enduring the childhood illnesses of the children with chicken pox and sniffles? Did I really want to find out whether I could live without Nat, the man I’ve loved and cherished for twenty years? Is that what he wanted?

I grabbed up the envelope and stared at it as LeAnn sang my thoughts and feelings. My fingers ripped the end of the envelope open, sliding the carefully folded paper from within.

Nat had written on the outside five simple words: “Please come, be with me.”

The paper trembled in my hands as I unfolded it and read it. It was an itinerary for a trip for two to Italy.

Relief raced through me. My heart pounded in my chest. I leaned my head back against the seat, staring unseeing at the rain beating against the windshield. Thank God.

Hell with gas! I turned the car on and pulled quickly out of the gas station, fishtailing on the wet road. Glancing in my rearview mirror, I saw the stunned looks that chased me home. I sped down the road, tears once again sliding down my face. The rain shadows mirrored my tears on the itinerary, this time tears of relief.
I pulled into the driveway, my eyes scanning the house for lights. The front door opened as the headlights struck the door, and Nat’s trim silhouette appeared in the backlit opening. Turning off the car, I opened the door and slid out. He walked down the stairs, carrying his huge golfing umbrella as he approached me. LeAnn had it backwards. I couldn’t breathe with him so near, reaching out to me.

“Nat.”

“You’re getting wet.” He pulled me to him, under the shelter of the umbrella, into the warmth and strength of his embrace.

“I love you.”

He kissed me. “Does that mean you’ll go?”

I looked up at him, the darkness of his eyes reflecting the glisten of the rain on the pavement behind me. Drops of rain collected and fell from the edges of the umbrella, splashing cold drops up onto my slacks. I didn’t care. All I cared about was being with Nat at that moment. Being safe in his arms was the next best thing to knowing that he still loved me and would never leave.

I nodded and hugged him tighter. He tugged me along with him back up the steps into the golden lamplit glow of our home.
Past Life Emptiness
Douglas Trent

A closeness that not many share
I felt next to you
when we passed
away from each other
leaving that plaguy line

strangers
shopping at a memorabilia booth
wearing cheap hand me downs
but waiting
to buy
banners.
beads.
buttons.

I stood behind you for the longest time
until we shared a momentary glance
it seemed for a second
we recognized familiar sparks
that emitted from us
some forgotten relation

and I could have sworn
that once I’d lied beside you many times
your lips glistened when we kissed
your eyes sprinkled glitter across my hands
when I combed the isle of your carnation paradise
millions of multi colored macaws
must have
forgotten about
flocking
to mounds of clay
and fled to our fingers
each time we locked hands
up until the day our souls parted

your brows raised with a smile
just a friendly gesture
when we made
that quick exchange of glimpses
focus with me!
on life
love
and laughter
again

It wanted to cry
but all your seasons
wouldn’t have recognized
a love so long
extinct

you moved on up to the window
and bought your non-refundable merchandise
so suddenly you left without a care
and I felt I owed you an apology
for staring so hard at your person
next in line
I moved up
making the fat, sweaty hood
running the booth
impatient
for not knowing what I wanted to get
or even look at

so I just left in a phlegmatic daze
while the show continued to play
(like we’re there...)
just another time to believe
in the mysteries of astrology
a different day incompletely
A Rainstorm
Joseph Blackwell

A raindrop falls
Upon my head
A thunderclap
Awakes the dead

The fellest note
That one can hear
When one is trapped
Inside a tear

You whisper words
To me alone
Verbatim sounds
All drowned in tone

I listen close
The rain returns
The night is dark
The lightning burns

My thoughts emerge
Please stay with me
The rain that falls
Is just a dream

The white spears strike
The drums ring out
They look for us
Amid the rout

A shell is cracked
I cannot stand
You love the wet
I see dry land
Art Gallery

Wrapped Tendril by Kate Blake

Myakka Tree by Abby Brown

Savannah Scene by Amy Dobbs
The Song of the Bird that Saw it All
Raghuram S Godavarthi

Oft I flew in the sultry breeze,
the spoilt city spreading its arms to snare me and my kin
and oft I escaped many a flying shard of death
Until chance brought me upon a broken window,
through which to enter what seemed safe habitation
and joy of joys, a nice high pedestal for me to roost
Now my distant kin could come and visit
now they could marvel at this sinking city

Oft I wonder who walks here barefoot, bare bodied even
is it not one of the creatures that the city seems to breed from itself
sprung from stone and concrete seem they
and much affected by shine and garbage seem they
their saving grace being these habitations - for themselves and us!
and this creature, in particular, seems to be more jungle bred, not unlike my kin
seems to rip and tear at its food, and makes these strange noises
noises that send me flying away until safety finds her calm

Oft I see into the far away sky, where three suns have flown end to end
since I came to this nest, and seldom too does the naked creature walk
giving vent to its lungs beneath my swaying, jittery three-limbed pedestal
causing me anxiety that grows lesser with the growing knowledge that it is harmless
and also, importantly, it knows not how to fly, lacking all sort of plumage
or so I think, and as if to prove me wrong, here comes it, waving a huge wing
and this false arm of wood, that is similar to one shape of death suffered by my kin

I fear to come down from my pedestal, and yet my curiosity drives me to see
what this strange and naked creature does, walking to and fro the broken window
whence flew I into this habitation, and oh! oh! he has flung the arm mightily into
the wood below the window, and oh and oh, he has driven it further in with another,
mightier metal arm
and now he binds the wing to the wood, and pulls and pulls
until the bind makes even me choke,
and oh - it has flown! I am undone!
it flies, this creature, though it flaps not any wings
down it goes, even as I rush out the window to see,
and barely do I fly aside as it shoots up again
up and up into the shimmering sky, cloaked in shiny bits
then the noise, the ripping noise, that seems like a thousand eggs hatching at once then the wooden arm starts flying too! All my nightmares come true at once! and then, a mighty shriek, the creature falls screaming back to earth oh flap your wings you foolish one! else you are surely doomed! grab quickly that giant wing, and flap it as mightily as you can! but no, the wing has taken flight by itself, and the creature takes a mighty fall his scream makes me lose my head and nearly do I fall as well alas the creature, he knew not how to fly, I cry his tale to all I know, and they know not what to say except to bid me return fast to the jungles, lest more such creatures take open flight and make of me, an easy prey
Pretty Bird
Michael Barnes

It was so warm.
That was how the little bird felt right then, as he sat happily on the shoulder of his pet human boy. He whistled contently “Pretty Bird”, over and over again trying his best to get his pet’s attention. That was the way the little bird treated the boy and the boy’s mother, he always wanted to play. He also, most especially, wanted their attention, for he was the center of their lives. Or at least that’s how he felt! It must be true, because the bird had trained his pets to let him sing on their shoulders, get him food and water and even clean his metal bar house (where was his little house?). He would allow them to scratch his head and bathe him. When he was ready to sleep, he would go to his little metal house and allow them to place a cover over it, so that it would be perfectly dark (Just as he liked it). It was true that he was the most important thing in their lives. Then again, humans were very hard to read.

He loved how warm it was in the house.
He also loved to fly. He loved the freedom. He loved the air between his feathers and the heights he could reach. He would go higher outside if his pets did not keep stopping him. That’s one thing he would have to train out of them. Though, he remembered that they were just humans and they only understood so much. If they could fly, then they would not try and stop him. Though, maybe they were afraid he would leave them, if he went outside. That of course was not true, which was something he kept telling them. Though, they did not understand him (as always). Again, they were only human.

Eventually, he would train them just right.
He bobbed his head and whistled again, “Pretty Bird. Pretty Bird. Pretty Bird.” The little golden crest on his head stood up, and he flapped his wings. “Pretty Bird. Pretty Bird.” Though, his pets did not respond this time. He went quiet and cocked his head, and wondered why they would not look at him. He crept up to his pet boy’s neck and began preening his pet’s hair. His pet had to stay clean after all and usually, after that, he would get his head scratched. They took care of each other, just like it should be.

It was so warm.
Too bad his pets were not so attentive today. He could not understand why, either. They were so focused on something else. In fact they seemed a little sad. What could they be so worried about? When he thought about it, he knew that that was why they needed him. He could bring a smile to their faces. He watched them look out the window repeatedly, and he listened to their weird human sounds. What was the matter, he wondered. What could keep them from noticing him?
“I’m worried,” The boy said to his mother. He looked out the window again and again.
“I know.” The mother said, just as concerned.
“It’s too cold outside.”
“I know.”
“Well,” The boy went on, “He can’t stay out there.”
“There’s nothing we can do.”
“I’m going out again,” The boy exclaimed.
“No,” The mother said, “It’s too cold and its too dark, you’ll never find him tonight.”
“But if we wait ‘til daylight, he’ll die.”
“We won’t find him.” The mother said, “It’s too dark and its too cold. Besides he’s already been out there one night.”

The boy went quiet, and looked out the window at an empty cage. Its little door remained open, waiting for something to enter. “But, he’ll die.”

Die? What does that mean, the little bird wondered. He also thought about how warm it was on his pet’s shoulder. Not like it was outside last night! It was so very cold that night and he was so happy to find his way back to his pet’s shoulder. Even if his pet didn’t look at him.

“I miss him,” The boy said with tears in his eyes, “I wish he was on my shoulder, instead of being out there in the cold.”

“Maybe, he’ll come back.” The mother said. She was every bit as sad as her son.

The little bird whistled happily, his pet finally looked at him again. Now, he would sing to his pet and make those tears vanish. That was why he would always remain by his pet, so he would never be sad again.

“Pretty Bird” the little bird whistled, again. He then puffed up his feathers and closed his eyes to sleep. How could he not? He finally got looked at after an entire day of trying, so now he could rest and start again tomorrow.

He was happy and warm and he always would be, so long as he stayed with his pet boy.

Together forever, he thought, warm and happy. Finally, he went to sleep, but not before whistling one last time to let his pet know he loved him.

“Pretty Bird.”

In Memory of Those that we have each lost far too soon in life.

The End
Words
Sheila Holt Lee

Amazingly...
Many words
 can say so little
and
few words
 can say so much.
Is comprehension
...possible
from a mind
that makes no sense
to one who
does not comprehend?
Thoughts...make words,
or words
make thoughts...
Answers
to mysteries
lying in the depths
of minds
of those who are
afraid to speak,
only willing to
let go
of mumbo jumbo.
Perception...
however opposing,
arising from deeds
as memories
...unfold
answers in minds’
...hold,
so as comprehension
of words spoken
when a thinker
of thoughts
‘startles another’
...through

mumbo jumbo
when the irrational
becomes rational
or the rational
becomes irrational
when willing to let go
from minds’ depth
those fleeting thoughts
with power
to imagine
moments into days
and...days into years
given birth

when overcoming
...ridicule and fears,
to play with words
from minds’ depth
holding secrets
so tightly kept,
is to resolve that
which waits
to be understood
if those who...could
would,
or those who...would
could.

Wild Streak by Michael Barnes
Flood
Abby Brown

I sunk into the cobalt seat of my mom's Buick.

Waves of sapphire thrashing

with each pothole. Callously crashed the waves
gushing in past lips and teeth and heart

engulfing

and drowning.

Thick, sweet tears mixed with the salty sting of the water,

ephemeral

drops

diluted into a sorrowful sea.

Waters receded carrying the remnants

of my sadness.

The car rumbled and bounced onto the patchwork of cement and gravel behind the church.
The Cycle
Rebecca Savage-Owens

Mamma met a man, and he promised her strength; hope; love.

He promised her, and she married him because she believed.

She married him, and he made her willing—to put her life in his hands, to worship him, to pack twin peach-faced sons on a bus and send them to serve Uncle Sam while we stayed there to serve him he thought it best.

Mamma married a man, or so it seemed.

She married him and he loved her for a minute, a second, never.

She gave him her hand and he took everything. He took her trust; her hopes; her dignity.

Then he took the hands she had given him and put a pill in one and a bottle in the other and said, “Take this down,” and, “Drink that up.” So she did—and we watched.
She took a pill when he beat her;  
she belted one down when he battered us.  
She took a pill when she looked in the mirror  
at cut lips and an eye swollen shut;  
she gulped when my face mirrored hers.  
She took a pill when he went away;  
she swallowed hard when he came back.  
Then one day, she took a drink and a pill,  
buckled her babies in a car,  
and meant to drive off a bridge  
she thought it best.

But she couldn’t die, so she just stopped living.  
And we watched, and we learned.

We watched her drink for the pain in her body;  
we watched her take pills for the pain in her soul.  
And we learned how to handle life.

And she drank and took pills every day thereafter  
until he left her shell  
because he had used her all up inside.  
He left her living a dead life with dead dreams  
and no soul at all  
just a drink and a pill  
and two babies who had grown up  
watching and learning.

The phone rings, and its Mamma, crying.  
*Her baby boy has beaten her*  
*and taken her check again.*  
*She wants me to help her make him stop.*  
*She wants me to help her find her soul*  
*But I CAN’T, CAN’T, CAN’T*  
*be on the phone right now.*  
*I have my keep to earn or hell to pay.*  
The door slams shut.  
*I jump and gasp and drop the phone.*  
Oh, God, dinner’s not ready, and he’s gonna be mad.  
Then into the room walks the man my mamma married, wearing my husband’s skin.
Mama
Sarah Gorman

I. 2008

Last time I saw her she was 90 pounds. Her eyes were not the same. They were angry, animal, piercing. I imagined a hook inserted between them attached to a heavy rusted chain, yanked forward and down. Her glare seemed guided by something.

“Sarah, you’ve got to change your name.”

“I like my name; you gave it to me,” I tried to remind her of a time that wasn’t now.

“Sarah, I am concerned for your SAFEty,” a forceful whisper, her fingernails dug into my forearm.

II. Excerpt from a Letter for Dependency Override for Financial Aid Purposes

“Mary Suzanne Gorman, Sarah’s mother, suffers from severe mental illness... she was unmedicated for many years leading to numerous involuntary hospitalizations culminating in a Court Order in 1999 requiring that she be involuntarily medicated.”

III. 2006

Her hair was bleached blonde and cut to her ears. Behind her eyes was a hurt doe, trapped. Steel teeth tearing through leg flesh. Immediately, they reflected overmedication, drowsy blankness. I could tell their old shine was struggling to show, if even only because I was home. “Come give your mama a kiss,” she pulled me onto her lap. I hugged her around her neck and closed my eyes. She smelled like my mom. She spoke optimistically about going back to school for nursing. She told me I had to come over to the house to pick up the baby stuff she’d gathered for me. I couldn’t tell her I wasn’t expecting.

IV. Like Mother, like Daughter?

I’m having what I call a haunted day. I’m extra sensitive to background noise and the taste of food. I’m jumpy. I go outside to drown in the sound of night. The insect song surrounds and encompasses, a symphony to silence the cat eating her dry food, the loud crowd on the television, the repetitive ticking the ceiling fan makes when it shakes back and forth. I sit on the cement steps. I am all too aware of the vastness of the space around me, which is everything but me. I look to the left. I wait for a dancer in a black unitard, full body covered— even face— to slowly wind from the dark trunk of the neighbors’ tree-sized Bonsai. It doesn’t happen. The cat sniffs my foot and a train sounds, causing something to half-spring from my chest (it has the force and urgency of spring but not the speed). What ever it was that pushed out retracted with slow suction. It’s back in my chest. I look to the left again at the lawns on the block. Symmetrical placement of trees in rows makes a tree tunnel. There is nothing large creeping towards me across the lawns, pulling itself by the arms, fingernails caked with mud.
I don't know what I'm thinking about. The word molasses. It can be drawn out slowed down and pulled.

I make connections between sounds behind doors and shadows by my feet. Sometimes a flicker and sometimes a pull but it is all sucking in towards my middle. I put my hand over my belly button and think of my mother.

V. 2000

I woke up in darkness and turned over. My mom was sleeping silently next to me in my twin bed. She had not disturbed me when she came in. I recall in slumber her touching my cheek, she whispered, "My Juliet." I'd thought it was a dream. She probably couldn't sleep. I turned back over and slept. I was 15, but I let her stay.

VI. Summer 1999

We spent the majority of our time in the hot stuffy house. The windows and doors remained closed. The lights went out, and we went to stay with my Uncle. My mother was hospitalized, involuntary.

VII. Circa 1996

Mom painted a portrait of Matt and me. Our freckled faces next to one another, on a field of blue. Sunflowers. "My babies," She said. I was amazed at how perfectly she had replicated us.

VIII. (very) Circa 1982

In Buffalo, Mary Suzanne had been living with a man named Billy. He was an alcoholic and he worshipped Satan. Billy took away her oxygen, and she left to heal behind a beaded curtain at an antique shop. Her tongue was black, her eyes bled and she had hand-shaped bruises around her neck.

IX. 1971

She went to Ireland for a month. She rented a bicycle and rode around the countryside. While riding, she met a man in the forest. He was sitting on a rock. He told her he was a warlock.

X. 1970, 19 years old

Mary Suzanne’s mother, Sarah Magdelene died. Things changed.
Unrequited
Victoria Rich

I have seen reality
and felt the texture of things between my fingers
I laid my cheek against a face once
a particular face

sitting in classrooms all day
pinpoked by windows
I learned about concrete history
things that had been written and recorded
things we pass down to each other

I stood while everything
had movement
somethings fall, somethings become scratched
but sheltered hidden pieces never become art

through the night, so long into the morning
I kept my eyes open and he slept
he was real and near me and close to me
and nothing else was there
he slept soundlessly---it was a particular him

And his presence shaped my thoughts and plans
he gave them possibility and direction and concreteness
he was real and he was really here
unlike you

I've never seen you breathe but
I would trade textures and the closeness--the reality of him
for the distance and the fantasy of you.
Embellishing
Nick Wilbourn

there they are
those people on the wall
we
will never be like them
perfect
or maybe
we will be like them
not perfect
some of us are
on the floor
they
step on us
some
of us are on
the ceiling
they can’t
see
us
floating above
the ones
of us
on the wall
are hidden
behind them...
they...
we can
see
them there
bright
attractive
blind
deceptive
ornamenting
that fucking wall
somewhere in my commonplace
in this overcast sky
with this sun simplified, shines
spins and pinwheels
burns and illuminates us
leaves me standing here
Just off to the side is
me

the sun rolled backward
I tumble, head over heels
down these hills I've been climbing
I can't rip pages from the book for you
if I could, maybe you'd take
your glasses and a dictionary
a monocle and a thesaurus
a mind-reader, a scroll and pen

and plagiarize my Grief Book a little
so you'd understand me more than the usual
spaced out casual way

I only want to be me

and your voice makes me want to move closer
to your island, onto your seven continents, within your universe
but I still float on a disjointed piece of ice
I don't want to lose me

Read it
there's a place big enough for all of us
every room is lit
Grimy awkward word usage
just two aluminum cans of French-style green beans
Bring your interpreter, I dare you
as I fill this house with pictures of your favorite places
and you fill these walls with nothing of me

don't just bookmark it again, don't toss it in a bucket
the ink is partly faded and the ink is sometimes fresh
your fingerprints will be covered in black
Followed

Sarah Gorman

I felt like there was a large hunchbacked bird with a white scarf of feathers (a buzzard?) following me when I was walking through the market this morning. I picked up an apple to inspect it—I’m very particular about my apples—and I saw something limp-hop behind the avocados. He was following me. Was he following me?

He’s waiting for me to drop dead, I know it, I know he is.

I’m feeling very sick today and I saw him, he hopped behind the avocados with a little bit of a limp and I saw him and he is waiting. He’s waiting for me to drop dead.

I was driving once in New Mexico and among the yellow dust spitting weeds I saw a dead jackrabbit. He was large, a large dead jackrabbit and they were circling. Every once in awhile one would swoop down and land, then limp-hop limp-hop to the little dead jackrabbit. Poor little dead jackrabbit. When they tore through his flesh, when they tore through his flesh the rest of his body lifted off the dust and the buzzard? limp-hop dragged the little, little, poor little jackrabbit’s body along. Dropping him, the dust sighed. The dust spit weeds.

And now I am at the market, and I’m just trying to get an apple and I know he is there, I can sense him. He is there and he is behind the avocados and I can sense him.

The apples no longer interest me. I’ll go out into the sun.

The doors parted for me and I walked for a moment among jungle. Basketed flowers hang. I make it to the car.

I’m going to look behind me now. I’m not afraid I’m not I just want to make sure he’s not there. I want to make sure he’s not there. I don’t see him.

After the click I opened the door, I am opening the door. I set myself down on the seat and closed the door shut. I adjusted the rearview mirror. I sensed something hobbling behind the car.

Sometimes when I do things, normal things I do every day, like walking up stairs, I picture myself falling mouth-first into the edge of the oncoming stair. I taste pennies and can feel the crackles of dirt stuck by blood to my mouth. I’m still moving forward though, unscathed, stair-climbing. There’s one that especially strange though, I’m driving and the windows are all open. I’m driving and I have this vision of a mad bird flying right into the open window. It realizes it is in the car and it forgets how it came in and flaps frantically all about. I don’t ever picture the end result, like crashing into a lamppost or some horrible injury to the eyes. I just picture myself driving through an intersection with a mad, mad flapping bird in the car. I drive on, though. There is not a flapping bird and I am just going forward.

I still sense the hobbling beast behind me and I treat it as no thing and I go forward. I look in the rearview mirror the whole ride home. At home I search in shadows for him and occasionally get a glimpse, realizing as my heart begins to pound that it’s just light playing with objects. It’s just light playing with objects and the beast is not here, he’s not. Even if I want him to be.
A Rough Childhood
Abby Brown

It was June 199_ and Heather and I were swimming in my grandma’s above-ground pool. It felt awkward revealing her—my best friend—to a kind yet criticizing woman who saw me with Bible eyes and rarely beyond a bowl of macaroni and cheese. Over-chlorinated water stung our eyes and dribbled down our blonde legs as Heather and I descended the wooden steps from the pool. Our lips bumbled as we cocooned ourselves in faded bath towels and meager Pittsburgh sun. Grandma asked if we wanted any popsicles. I asked for banana, but Heather’s answer came hesitant and garbled—she was fumbling with something in her mouth.

Heather was a thief—not a burglar in a black-and-white striped jumpsuit but a bleach-blonde, blue-eyed thief. Stealing gave her the impression that she possessed a unique skill and that she defined “rebel”; she prayed it would make others find her alluringly rebellious. She didn’t just do it to be that kid; she did it to defy and irritate her father.

Wes Kolan, Heather’s father, worked long days in tar-caked work boots and blue jeans that had a wallet imprint on the back left pocket. He wore tissue-thin undershirts tucked into his jeans. He never wore a shirt over top, and I wonder if he ever had another outfit hidden in his bedroom drawers. His clothes didn’t match his temperament, however. He was unpredictable and explosive. His eyes, like glaciers, froze over and prevented anyone, even Heather, from seeing what was shifting and cracking underneath. His wavy wheat-colored hair softened those eyes and that square face, which gave the impression that something fertile and warm took root inside of him. Maybe that’s why Heather always seemed to hold out hope that he would react with a grin that melted the iciness. At times, he boiled, and at others he simmered, and less often he cooled. But, it was this shifting of forms that solidified in Heather an endless search that fluctuated somewhere between approval and disobedience.

She wanted to like him. She’d even puff up and tell of his being a soldier in the Vietnam war. She was proud of him. He teased her like a father normally does to his children. He’d pull her pant leg and not let go or he’d pinch her in the tender piece of flesh under her arm. She’d squirm and writhe in discomfort and panic which she tried to cover with nervous laughter interjected by, “Dad, stop!” She always drug out those Os. She wanted that natural and loving father-daughter bond, but he didn’t know how—or want—to love her. Despite their attempts at father-daughter affection, stranded, Heather tossed on the ebbing tide of her father’s temperament.

Swishing her tongue, she tossed something from cheek to cheek. Grandma went through the screen door and into the kitchen to fetch our popsicles. I begged Heather to show me what she had in mouth—gum, candy, or a mint? Did she have the thing the whole time we were swimming—diving in, doing underwater flips, and walking on our hands? Heather revealed a small glimmering object clenched between her front teeth. She puckered her lips, sucked in, and it was gone again.
Cordially, Wes stammered his greetings. He’d pick on me with a harmless jab about my being short, skinny, or that I chose to be friends with Heather. His greetings lacked substance, but his mannerisms expressed much. If he kidded with a tinge of sarcasm, Heather would be okay. If he pressed hard to be friendly, she’d be quiet and cowering. But it was all a matter of external influences.

Wes had been a troubled kid, she said. Forced to live with his grandparents then shipped off to a boys’ home, Wes had had a “rough childhood.” Even a ten-year-old knew that meant something horrible. He enlisted in the army and soon after prepared to fight. In Vietnam, he earned a Purple Heart, Heather said. I think she tried to show it to me once but couldn’t find it. Heather was a liar, too.

“What do you have in your mouth?”

“Nothing.”

“Show me!”

“No, I don’t have anything. Look!”

Shoving whatever treasure she held between her teeth and cheek, she lifted, dropped, and flopped her tongue as if she were proving to her father that she did eat all her green beans. Proving her innocence was a daily toil for Heather, she had to prove that it was not her who ran too hard and fast down the steps, prove that it wasn’t her who left the chips opened, and prove that when she rode her bike she didn’t get too close to the car.

Her dad’s car did have a Vietnam Vet license plate with the little purple heart in the center. She told the truth on that instance, but not always. Often, when I went to see her, Wes would open the fading, sixties-style door with the three slanted windows only to blurt out that Heather had been bad—she had lied or talked back. Had she seen me from her bedroom window those days? His anger got the best of him, and I thought that there must be a best of him. He’s been to war, he’s seen dead people, and he’s just a little different because of that, right? But it was the pride I sensed in his voice, like he had been sitting by the door waiting for me to arrive to tell me the news, which told me whether in war or at home, control and triumph determined his actions.

In a moment that felt nothing like what triumph feels like to Wes or to anyone else, I succeeded in recovering the coveted object from Heather’s mouth. She sucked off the gathered saliva and spit it in the palm of my pruney hand. The tarnished band glistened and the crimson hues of the gem warmed me—my favorite diamond-encrusted ring! She must’ve slipped it out of my jewelry box earlier that day. With trembling hands, I pulled at the malleable metal and stretched the ring over the knuckle of my middle finger.

She smiled, though embarrassed, and anticipated a reluctance to forgive. Confusion, resentment, and anger coursed through my tiny body, but revelation came quick. Rug burns covered her elbows and knees and the bare skin in between. Purply-blue puddles surfaced on her shins and the tops of her thighs where her shorts usually covered. Other days, there were none at all—the best of him, I suppose.

Gramma brought us the banana popsicles, and we lapped the juices and chewed on the splintered sticks in deserved, necessary silence.
I Am...

Allen Berry

at least a thousand miles away from where you are.
the sun has slipped prying fingers under my eyelids,
hours too soon, stealing my respite.

I wonder what you’re doing at this moment, 
What it’s the weather where you are? 
Do the bridges smell like chocolate 
as they once did in Chicago?

Do your fingers still cradle a Red Bull 
As they did on the street, 
in front of the bar, 
that night the lens caught you 
in a moment I did not share?

I was miles away then, 
as you are now. 
Perhaps I was even someone else 
As you may be now... 
sitting in Paris at a café with a journal, 
or wandering down a rainy streets of some 
nameless city.

Maybe we’re never anywhere 
at any time in the world until 
the camera’s eye captures us 
proof that we were, that we existed 
for a moment and a place in time.

Caught, in essence recorded forever 
by the eye that freezes our moment 
in a family album, or scrapbook, 
history in LIFE Magazine.

Never mind all that. 
You are not here, and I’m unable to 
hide your absence in sleep. 
You, frozen in time across the room 
thousands of miles away, 
and no outbound flight to where you are.
Naked Honesty
Christian Bonnell

What is 'naked' but hiding nothing?
And what is 'hiding nothing' but complete honesty?
So why not go honestly naked all the time?

Perhaps it is because we are ashamed
Of some deep part of ourselves
That is not quite perfect, and so we hide
Behind our little white Fig-leaf lies

Perhaps it is because those around us
Do not want to know the truth;
And so out of consideration we construct
Our multi colored personas

Or perhaps it is not nakedness we fear at all,
But vulnerability... And so we cover our weakness
Behind an impenetrable wall of cloth
That serves more as armor than as adornment
Shiloh

Joseph T. Richardson

Last Saturday I took a trip to the Shiloh National Military Park in Hardin County, Tennessee, site of the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862. It was the bloodiest two days in American history up until that time, and among the bloodiest of the Civil War. As the Confederate army retreated, over 3,000 Americans lay dead between the two sides, and over 16,000 wounded.

As a passionate Southerner, I have been steeped, for better or worse, in the romance of the Civil War and the Lost Cause, the glorification of its battles and heroes and dead. No matter now much I learn and understand of the horrors of the war, the wrongness of its causes—Lee, Jackson, Stuart, Johnston, all have seemed such larger-than-life figures, such Southern gods;
their moments seem so epic, so romantic. Even on the verge of becoming a historian, I still have struggled with this enchantment.

I am taking a course this semester in the Civil War and Reconstruction. It is the first time, other than watching Ken Burns or reading The Killer Angels, that I have truly focused my mind on the historical Civil War (as opposed to the mythical one). And both of those works, while bringing home the war in an emotional way, tended to bolster my romantic perceptions. In studying Shiloh this term, I caught a distant sense of its senselessness, its brutality, its tragedy. My interest was piqued. It being so close to Huntsville (a mere three-hour drive), I decided I needed to go, to experience that for myself.

I am a person who gains a lot from physical connection. As a historian and a genealogist, it has always been very important to me to visit the graves of those whom I am studying. To be in the place where these people laid down their dust takes me beyond the page, makes them real and physical, brings them alive for me, in the same way that visiting a new place brings alive its dot on a map. Experiencing an abstract concept in a physical way brings to me a transcendent, almost spiritual connection. Oftentimes in the midst of writing papers I have visited the graves of my subjects and prayed for inspiration.

And in visiting Shiloh, I had hoped for the same kind of connection. Something to transcend both fact and romance, to make it real to me, to bring home the reality and the horror of the event. I wanted to feel it, to at last lay to rest this romantic infatuation. I got more than I could possibly have hoped.

From the very moment I drove onto the park, I felt an overwhelming sense of heaviness. Something grave and terrible had happened here, and I could feel it hanging over the battlefield like a black pall. I nearly shuddered as I felt it, and it did not go away. Throughout the park there are scattered monuments to various leaders, units, and turning points. And it gave the whole place the feeling of a vast cemetery. But it felt so much rawer, so much more immediate, so much more funereal, than any cemetery I had ever been to; it felt like being present for the funeral of 3,000. Driving slowly through the tour route felt so much like a funeral procession. A great well of sadness sprang up inside me. I encountered something deep and spiritual; I grasped it physically; I felt it. I felt what I came for. I felt the horror. And I’ll never forget this feeling. It will affect me as a historian, as a Southerner, as a person, from now on.
Pour Some Sugar on Me: The Au Naturel Girl in an Artificial Age
Kate Blake

So this morning I poured myself a heaping bowl of Ultimate Organic Crunchy Soy cereal, and to liven all that conscientiousness up I threw a handful of dried blueberries into the mix. When I plunged in, expecting natural berry goodness, I realized something was amiss—the blueberries were unnaturally cloying. When I checked the bag—we’ll say it was a bag of Brockley’s Best Berries, just to keep the lawsuits at a minimum—I discovered that natural berry goodness isn’t the only ingredient in the bag: Brockley’s Best Berries adds sugar to the mix.

Why do they do that? I can only assume that modern American taste buds are so accustomed to an overload of artificial sweetness that Brockley’s Best figures no one would think the berries tasted good if they sold them as they actually come. They might, like, taste less like candy and more like fruit.

It’s not really as perplexing a phenomenon as it seems on first glance, though. Most of the food we eat is presented to us with additives to “improve” its color, texture, and taste. For example, the natural flavor of vegetables won’t cut it, either: sugar is used in sautés and glazes, lest we catch on to the cabbage and carrots hitching a ride. Warm crusty bread needs sugar to get its brown on, and, well, who wants black coffee when you could have a triple mocha latte?

Nope, all of the variety and taste and color Mother Nature delivers has to be gussied up for food to become cuisine. And, in fact, when it comes to our looks as young women, we operate on the very same principle.

After all, how many of us would willingly go on a first date unless we’ve plucked our eyebrows clean, curled our straight hair, stuck a faux French manicure on our woefully short nails, and made up our face with Estee Lauder’s finest? Sure, you may have a pretty face. Big green eyes. Cute little nose. But compare your au naturel looks to those of the sultry-eyed blonde pouting at you from the cover of Cosmo, and you quickly realize that that’s not going to cut it. The lashes aren’t voluminous enough, the cheeks don’t have that peachy glow, and would any man really pucker up for lips not prepped in Siren RedTM? Nope, just like Brockley’s Best Blueberries, Shanghai Veggie Surprise, and Starbucks, we have to sweeten the deal. The upshot of it is, by today’s standards, what we actually look like isn’t considered pretty enough to pass.

“The era of simulation,” writes French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard, “is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real. . . Simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’” (Simulacra and Simulation 2-3). For young women, what this means is that the face we present to the world is the “imaginary” face, the face that only exists through L’Oréal. Worse, the “imaginary” face is the standard face, so that the very representation of a woman becomes a creation of the cosmetics industry, and her femininity is judged according to her approximation of a false image. Thus, a young woman looks at her bare face in the
mirror and considers that face unacceptable to present to the world—because it doesn’t resemble the simulation presented to her by pop culture as the face a woman should have.

What we’ve done, really, is to accept an overload of Revlon’s purest refined sugar. The standard by which a woman is judged attractive no longer has much to do with her big green eyes, but with whether they’re batting at a man through Super Triple Extended Lash. It has, in short, become a completely artificial standard. If a girl presents herself as she actually is—yes, fresh from a hot shower, combed, and not reeking of b.o., but sans war paint—she’s dismissed as plain and even unfeminine, in favor of the girl who spent thirty-seven minutes with the curling iron alone.

In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, French feminist Simone de Beauvoir describes the typical man’s concept of a woman, writing, “The more the features and proportions of a woman seem contrived, the more she rejoices the heart of man because she seems to escape the vicissitudes of natural things. We come, then, to this strange paradox: man, wishing to find nature in woman, but nature transfigured, dooms woman to artifice.” And thus, the last thing a girl is expected to do to be considered sexy and turn on a man is to look like herself.

De Beauvoir, bless her heart, might disagree with me, but it’s not that there’s actually anything wrong with being pretty, or with presenting oneself as attractive. Most of us want to be sexy—but sexy on more equivocal terms. Guys, after all, don’t have to do much more than roll out of bed to be hot. (Well, sometimes not even that.) Generally speaking, as young women we don’t expect the average guy to have to go to any lengths beyond basic grooming to achieve sexiness. Yet when it comes to our own feminine appearance, we demand artifice to meet expectations.

The vast majority of men aren’t really to blame for this—yeah, they may overlook the “plain” girl when the Barbie doll walks in, but really, guys with heart just like women—curvy, skinny, red-haired, blonde, short, tall. It’s easy for them to see us as sexy without a face full of goop, because the good ones know that you can’t paint sexy on. Is it really too much to believe that we too can be not just “accepting” of our real, natural good looks—but that we could make them the standard of sexy? A fruit like blueberries doesn’t need sugar to taste good. And girls like us don’t need lipstick to be a bombshell.

Diffidence
Justin Roller

To devise and comprise
A comment, a group of words,
A sound bite of affection
To describe, and to portray you,
That would be a crime against poetry.
A painter’s impression would show
My befuddled expression,
And one could watch the words
Glibly gliding from my gums,
The air gently pressing on their bellies.
And they’d be scripted on a
Whim; carelessly comic sans,
A subtle ten point font blanketing
The verdant surrounding,
Calling for you with idiosyncratic rhythm.
But they’d be insufficient, they wouldn’t
Do justice to my feelings,
And I’d be like a child in a playroom
Shifting and turning his learning blocks,
Searching for the right combination.
And in the end I’d be frustrated
To the point of watery eyes and saline,
Dripping down my rosy cheeks
And framing my quivering lips,
Quivering at their inability to say the right thing.
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Submission Guidelines

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All entries must be delivered in person or via mail or e-mail. Please be aware that the submission we receive will not be returned. All submissions must be your original creation and must have been created within the last five years.

To be considered, you must agree to the following terms:

You grant The Project one-time publication and anthology rights, which means we may publish your work in any/all of the following ways: in one (1) biyearly print issue of The Project magazine; in any future "Best of" anthology edition (s) of The Project, either in print or online. You also grant The Project the right to promote the work in advertisements, announcements, and promotional materials.

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By signing our submission form, it will function as a legal document.