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# The Manuscript

**Fall**

**MMIX**

# The Manuscript Society—

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The Manuscript Society meets every Tuesday and Thursday at 11 am in the basement of the Stark Learning Center, room 7. The Manuscript Society invites submissions from all Wilkes students, alumni, faculty, or staff. Our annual submission deadlines are in October and February. Please send any visual or written submissions to [magazine@wilkes.edu](mailto:magazine@wilkes.edu).

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## **This is Not a Titled Poem**

This is not your confusing fortune — but listen anyway.

This is not an orchestra  
This is the screech and squawk  
of an untuned oboe.

This is not quite like an expensive dinner  
This is  
More like a grease-dripping  
Mouth-watering  
Shirt-staining  
Artery-clogging  
Cheeseburger.

this is NOT a jungle gym.

This is a colorful, twirling skirt —  
this is not  
an occasion for  
shoes.

this is a stadium full of noisy listeners  
their silence has reached  
a deafening level

This is not as relaxing as a warm mug of tea  
This is the smooth  
Suffocating shot  
of blackberry brandy

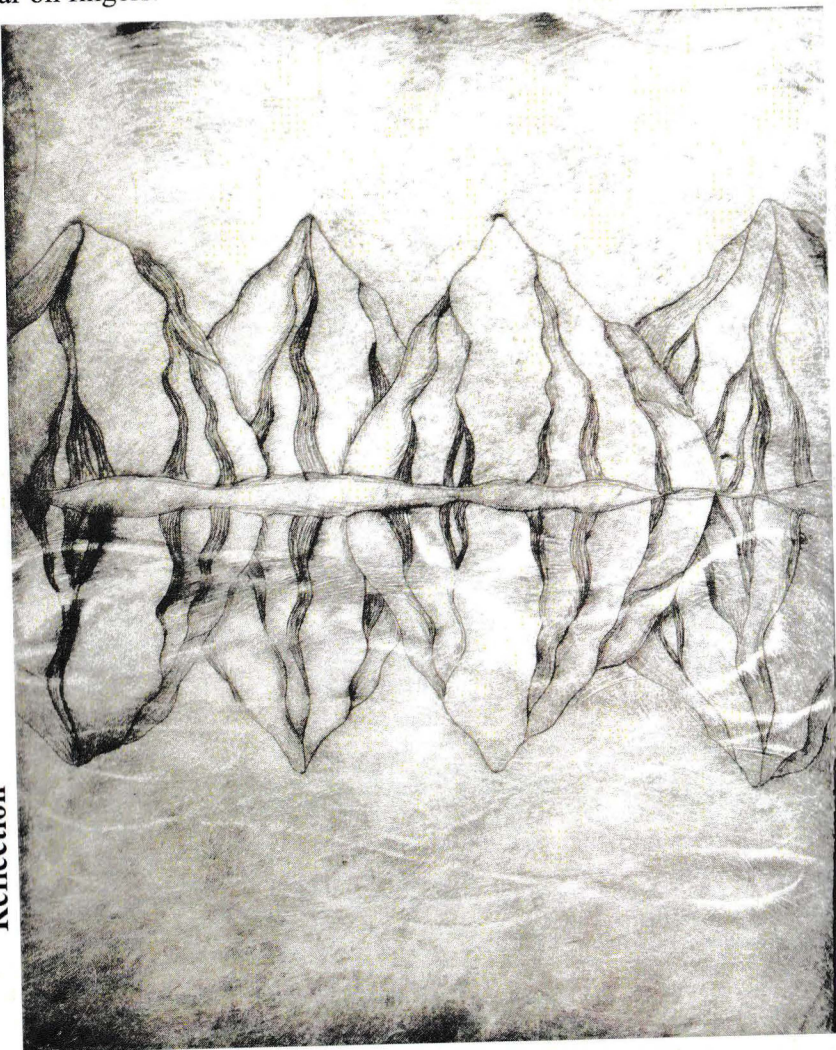
This is not cause for a headache — so calm down

*by carli heston*

## Know Thyself

A name on the board—  
Chalk dust lingers in the air like  
Sugar on fingers.

*by lauren mannon*



*by erin gallagher*

## To Achieve

Pressures falling on us still  
Eyes glairing, it's a test  
Repressing our faults until  
Failures hid in our chest  
Everything we work to fill  
Cannot achieve the best  
Try keep trying, as you will  
It fails like all the rest  
Open up your blinded eyes  
None, despite how hard one tries

*by bethany yamrick*

## Sight Reading

I was a field.  
A flat, dry expanse  
reaching toward a blue, blank sky  
Row upon row  
of fertile soil  
Organized valleys raked  
for your seeds.

I dreamt of mountains  
Peaks spiked with snow.  
Trickling streams and  
smooth, shiny stone.

I was a statue.  
Steely stone  
Your shape chiseled, piece by piece  
Artwork?  
perhaps a mold.  
So much strength required  
to produce a crack.

I'd rather finger paint.  
Goopy globs slide from my hands  
Sloppy splotches and  
spattered, sprinkled color.  
Changeable by a swipe.

I was music.  
Tight, staccato notes  
Barely audible.

I am a city.  
Rushing, bustling people  
Nearly blind.  
I am traffic jams  
and air pollution.

I long for emptiness.  
A silent space where  
I can *see*.

I am a piece of green thread  
Woven in  
Pulled out  
Shoved back in and  
Tied in a knot.

I need some scissors.  
Or a knife.  
Give me something sharp.

I am music.  
A whirl of sound  
Frantic scales,  
from growling tones to  
high pitched trills.

I try to be a canal.  
Quiet and calm,  
a rippling wake  
Traveled by many,  
appreciated by few.

I resemble rapids.  
A crashing, bubbling, foaming  
dance of fluidity.

I've become art.  
A collection to be seen.  
clay, canvas, crayons  
Colors bright and boisterous  
A brush dipped,  
Waiting to paint.

Your page is blank.  
Inspiration gone,  
I found it crumpled  
on the floor.

I ache to be a symphony.  
Bold, warm waves of sound  
A building crescendo.

*by carli heston*

## Confessions of a Hamster Killer

I stared at the back of Celeste Martin's head. My feet were still and obedient from years of institutional training. The soles of my knock-off sneakers were planted on the classroom's carpet. The carpet was just the right shade of ugliness, making the puke stains from Brandon Mason's Lunchables overdose impossible to distinguish from the chartreuse nightmare below our feet. I tapped an eraser against the desk. The engraving below my fingers was the type of profound graffiti only available to a fourth grade audience. Even then, I was doubtful that my mother would find as much amusement in Clint Ingle's "SEX"-scratched artistry as I did.

I was only 10, but already the world had unveiled several realities before my pre-pubescent eyes. For example, I knew that Hanson was the best band ever to grace the airwaves. "MMMBop" explained so much more than what Beethoven or the Beatles had to offer. I also knew that a well-balanced breakfast included orange juice, milk, a bowl of cereal, two pieces of toast, home fries, and an egg—not *just* strawberry Pop-Tarts. Balanced breakfasts and bop-pop masterpieces were observations I gleaned from the sidelines of cereal boxes and CD cases, but there was one thing about which I was absolutely certain: Celeste Martin was out to ruin my life.

My misery began when Celeste moved to Mayfield in the fall of fourth grade. I did not immediately resent the fact that she was a much faster writer than anyone else in our class, even though I prided myself on being the most accurate scribe. I had not yet mastered the art of cursive writing, try as I might. I decided to perfect my print skills. Before Celeste arrived, I was complacent with my writing. The words were clear and large enough to read. A little boring, perhaps, but average and dependable—my writing style was, in retrospect, the legible manifestation of my clumsy, socially awkward self. Regardless, a satisfied smile would spread across my face whenever I turned in an assignment, each letter of the alphabet just kissing the fading lines of my Lisa Frank notebook papers.

My compositional glory was short-lived. Two weeks after Celeste arrived, Mr. Sanders (our teacher who bore an eerie resemblance to Mr. Potato Head) called me to his desk. His glasses slid down the greasy bridge



of his nose while he thumbed through my work. He gave me a low glance and said, "You'll make me go blind." I saw what he meant—my writing had devolved from average to microscopic. Still, I could not admit with any scrap of dignity that my progressively tinier writing was inspired from competitive rage. Celeste, curly-haired and dimpled, was hardly the type of kid that Mr. Potato Head would pin as my adversary; and yet, there was something nauseatingly perfect about the way she wrote tiny words to the edge of each margin, or the way she tucked her Shirley Temples locks behind her pierced ears (my ears were, according to my mother, "too sensitive" to sport anything but my grandmother's rusting clip-ons). I hated Celeste Martin.

I hated the fact that Celeste was better at writing, Red Rover, and schmoozing at large. I hated the fact that Celeste had stolen my best friend, Angela, and that *Celeste's* mom allowed school-night sleepovers while *my* mother was trapped in the conventionality of a *Leave it to Beaver* rerun. But the real reason I hated Celeste Martin was because I was not immune to her dimpled charm. As I sat behind Celeste, staring blankly at the back of her head, I mused about how much force need be exerted upon my eraser to make its launch at her head seem but a spontaneous accident spawning from over-zealous graffiti removal. My contemplation was cut short as she swiveled in her chair, her wide brown eyes sparkling with aspartame sweetness.

"Lauren," her voice chimed, "my hamster just had babies. I'm giving them away. Do you want one? They do tricks and they're real fun." Her dimples, as infectious and ubiquitous as Pear Glaze body spray, eviscerated my nerve to hate her.

I was also struck stupid by the opportunity to own a pet. Of course I wanted a hamster. In my 10-year-old mind, a pet was not my own unless I could name it. Thus, my family's 8-year-old Maltese that left real urine on the kitchen floor was little more than a figment of my imagination.

I smiled weakly and nodded. Celeste, looking content, turned around to face the front of the classroom while I gritted my teeth. Mr. Sanders looked at me, annoyed, and I returned to my work.

Two days later, I owned one of Celeste's hamsters. I named him

Nibbles—not because he nibbled, but rather because I would have named him Kibbles if my mother had not pointed out that the hamster would be named after dog food. I went to the pet store with my father and eagerly chose a cage, toys, and food. I knew that Nibbles would love his new home, albeit no greater than the width of a Trapper binder.

Admittedly, I was disappointed to discover that my hamster was not as exciting as the *Zoobooks* magazines in the elementary school library would have had me believe. Nibbles did not run; he waddled. Nibbles did not cuddle; he squirmed. Nibbles did not eat when I fed him, and he certainly did not jump through a gel bracelet doubling as a circus hoop. No, Nibbles did not want to do anything I wanted him to do; in my fury and frustration, I could see Celeste's eyelashes batting over an evil smirk. I realized I would be damned if Celeste's hamsters could do tricks while my hamster could only stare, beady-eyed and twitching, as I toiled over my overpriced hamster manual.

One day, I was determined to train Nibbles to come to me when I called him. After an hour of exhausting effort, we had achieved nothing. The lump of food lodged in his cheek for safekeeping began to get on my nerves. In my mind, it was an inflated dimple smirking at me in mockery. I could not bear to look at it any longer. I picked up Nibbles and walked toward his cage.

I have yet to discern whether Nibbles was simply agitated because of my would-be training, or if he was feeling especially territorial about his lump of food; whichever the case, Nibbles could stand me no longer. For a nanosecond, his head snapped back as I cupped him in one hand. In another moment, his teeth were bared, biting into my flesh. I did not notice the pain at first. The jolt of agony seared too much to recognize its presence; then, I looked down and I felt the tidal wave of pain. I saw Nibbles's long, sharp teeth stuck under my fingernail. Light faded from the corners of my eyes, and breath failed me. The world spun into the seismic pool of pain beneath my fingernail; I could not see or think clearly.

I threw Nibbles into his cage. From the center of the wood chip floor, he scrambled to his corner of solace behind the food bowl. Tears rolled down my face; the pain was fully realized as my shock ebbed away.

"I hate you!" I screamed, "I wish you were dead!"

Nibbles burrowed under the wood chips; silence was his only response.

The next morning, I awoke to find Nibbles dead. I can never know what killed him, but in more than one confession have I told a priest about Nibbles with the guilty sigh of a murderer.

I knew that Celeste was out to ruin my life; little did I suspect that she would turn me into a hamster murderer. Celeste giveth and Celeste taketh away. Celeste moved away in fifth grade, but the trauma from losing Nibbles, not to mention the prospect of accidentally killing him, has stuck with me all my life.

On the bright side, my font grew up and I did, too.

### Feet Can't Reach Yet



*by bethany yamrick*

### Wednesday

Nine brown steps marked the pathway to hell. I sat at the top fearing that if I walked down them, I would fall through their gaping cracks. Coats surrounded me. Here, where there were hooks, everyone hung their jackets, coats, and sweaters, whatever. Here, where there were hooks, I was sheltered. But I was stupid.

I walked down, crying as I lowered myself one step at a time, tightly gripping a shining, wooden railing. And the basement laughed at me. The once beautiful wooden walls had been painted a sickening shade of white. They had been coated in dentist-white enamel. Each of the nine steps was a cavity in the basement's sterile smile.

My uncle, a man I looked up to, promised me he would be here. He swore that on his last day home, he would be here for me. I look everywhere, but I can't find him. I warm my feet on the popcorn colored carpets. I freeze my feet on the cold tile floor. I keep my hands in my pockets, searching for scraps of paper and lint. I keep my eyes alert, searching for his blonde hair.

"Uncle Eddie?"

And I am thinking about how much I love my uncle. And I am thinking about how he is the best uncle in the world.

I loved my Uncle Eddie because he bought me soda. He would buy huge cases of soda in their original glass bottles. My cousins and I would line up waiting for that pop, fizz, sugar. I would always smash my glass.

I loved my Uncle Eddie because he would buy me bubble gum. We would sit on his bed, staring out of the window, chewing to taste the sugar.

"You chew like a cow," he would say. He bought me a kitten. I loved him anyway.

And as I am thinking, I spot my uncle hiding behind an outdated rocking chair. My eyes are still wet from the descent. My palms are soaking with sweat. But my uncle grabs my hands and pulls me close to him. He kisses the top of my head. I breathe him in.

My uncle tells me that he has a surprise for me and I follow him to the couch. I sit, feeling as if every sofa, every seat, has come to life. And they are all mocking me with their tongues poking out of the cushion cracks. "What mousy brown hair you have," they say. "What a poorly planned outfit."

But here it is. I can see the frosted glass, the shining blue and red design. The liquid sloshes against the sides of the bottle. The bottle's cap is dying to be plucked off. I can already taste it. Pepsi.

And now I am drunk off of sweets as my uncle says, "Let's play a game".

I jump up from my seat on the couch, setting my soda bottle down just hard enough to bruise the surface of the coffee table. It was smirking at me.

My Uncle Eddie grabs my hands and leads me to a door. Foreign marks drawn in Crayola crayon spell out a word I cannot read. Purple, red, black, orange, blue, my own graffiti. But today it frightens me.

The mirrors in the bathroom disfigure and contort my body to the point of impossibility. I pretend I am in a fun house. I want to smash them all. The shower curtains curl their lips into sinister grins. The toilet seat's mouth is wide open, gaping at me. A green towel has been laid out on the floor.

As I am looking around, I can feel my uncle's breath on my back. I can taste the smell of his hot breath. I hate the smell of his hot breath. I hate the sound of his hot breath. I turn around and he is smiling at me. I can only focus on his teeth, his hot breath.

This is the last thing I see before I hear the light switch.

I am pushed down to the ground, fumbling in the dark, staring at the crescent of light that the door allows to creep inside. Outside I can hear the furniture laughing with the inanimate things. Pillows spew their feathers all over the carpeting. The television set repeats THUNDERSTORM WARNING. The rocking chair sways from front to back. The fake trees dance and sing.

My uncle gropes for my clothing and there is nothing I can do but

reach up to push on his loose, sweating skin. I kick at the elastic of his briefs as he pulls at the elastic of my cotton candy-colored stretch pants, peeling them from my body. I scream, but no one hears me over THUNDERSTORM WARNING. I cry, but no one hears me over the gossiping lipsticks and eye shadows in the bathroom drawers. I shake my body violently, punching the air, kicking the breeze, but nobody sees me.

My uncle pulls my purple shirt over my head and grabs a fistful of my mousy brown hair. I can hear the couches. "What an awful shade of brown," they say. "What a terrible waste of space."

I have been stripped down to nothing but my day-of-the-week underwear. I am nearly naked. I can feel his skin against me now. I can feel his hands touching my underdeveloped body. I can feel the hair on his chest tickling my seven-year-old breasts.

But all I can think is that it is Wednesday. And that I hate the smell of his hot, drunk breath. And that there is going to be a storm soon.

## Senile is Just a Phase

You know, I was one of the lucky ones.  
Many people grow up struggling...  
Struggling to understand exactly how  
Grandpa walked to and from school  
Uphill...both ways...

Have you ever seen the faces of the unlucky ones?  
"Is that true, Papa? You musta been tired!"  
Grandpa and Grandma claiming they walked  
Uphill...both ways...

Grandma tried saying that to me once.  
I was young, but I knew better...  
"Dodo, you're only 47! The laws of physics are  
Still the same!" I said, and she never said again.  
Uphill...both ways...

Ha! What a joke.

*by justin jones*

## Dandelions

One of my earliest childhood memories is the first family trip to the local apple orchard. My dad knew the owner; the man gave him all of the rotten apples he had no use for. The blue buckets that my father brought home in the back of his pickup truck exuded warmth and a strong, sweet smell that felt like the air that blows from vents in run-down houses and trailers. When I was older, I would follow his path over leaves and under branches whenever he went out to dump small mountains of the mash in my grandfather's backyard forest. He was trying to lure bears out of their normal feeding routes. We needed the meat to get through the winter.

I didn't know then that we were poor. Before I discovered that childhood-ruining tidbit of information, everything was magical. The trip to the orchard happened well before any trips through the woods to try and appease the hunting gods with our apple sacrifices. Whether it was the glimmering veneer of innocence and wonder, the overexposure of a traumatic memory, or simply my eyes needing to adjust to the light outside the stifling trailer, everything seemed to glow.

My sister and I stood in a field of dandelions surrounded by apple trees. Our preemie bodies were like white sandcastles on the shore of a green and yellow sea. My weak, young heart beat with excitement. "Let's mee!" I squeaked to my sister over the bluster of sun-warmed wind.

We set off running as fast as our little legs could carry us. I crossed the imaginary finish line first and turned to sing a spritely victory song to my second-place sister.

The field held its Elysium glow. The sky still sparkled cerulean. But the dandelions bent and broke under Amber's body. She fell in the first stretch, wriggling like a hooked trout, the sun shining off her rainbow skin. For once in my miserable childhood I didn't think "attention-stealer" or "crayon-taker," I thought "sister—my sister."

My sneakered feet demolished the distance between us. My giggling had become sobbing. I didn't know what, but there was something wrong with my only friend in the whole world.

"MOM! DAD! HELP! AMBER!"

I like to imagine that right then my parents looked at each other uneasily like people do in the movies when they're offering or seeking reassurance. Thankfully, instinct commanded them to run to us.

Amber's ocean eyes had rolled back and waves of vomit crashed against her tiny teeth. Her body convulsed, and my dad gathered her to his chest.

I wouldn't appreciate until later the oneness of mind between my mother and my father that day. I suppose fear pushed them together again, leaving them unable to tear into each other in the moment of crisis.

I held Amber's trembling hand in the back seat on the way to Wilkes-Barre General, crying over her as her tongue curled into the back of her throat. "Is she gonna die mommy?!" I cried frantically. I wasn't much help to them.

When we got out of the truck, she stopped shaking, as if the evil spirit that tormented her let go, pushing her to the ground. At her request, my father bought my sister a bag of m&m's from the vending machine in the waiting room.

Hours passed. Amber was cleared. She was the first person I ever saw in a hospital gown, pale blue and stained brown from the m&m's she puked up during a second seizure. They said she'd be learning-disabled and prone to fits.

I can't forget the eerie other-worldly luster of that meadow. Amber's face still wears the innocence of those days— her capacity for corruption shaken off amongst the dandelions.

*by kenneth stucker*



## Dumpster Diving

It was far too far  
after midnight  
for me to care about time.  
My empty pit grumbled in agony,  
pain behind my bellybutton  
so fucking intense it stabbed my spine  
Whether it was hunger or  
Internal bleeding from that fist fight –  
I'm not sure.

Stale cigarettes clogged my nostrils  
as I swung into the glamorous buffet  
The leftover world – an atheist's sanctuary  
cast aside, collected in a box, waiting to rot  
Here, I find comfort.

I picked at hard strings of ham,  
nails scraping flakes of bone,  
And swallowed without tasting

My skin thin shoes felt  
grimy grain grind  
on the metal bottom  
Red-Orange rust dust  
stung my eyes

My watery pupils floated  
over what could have been  
a scrap of Nietzsche's yellowed wallpaper  
Crumpled advertising:  
learn to waltz  
take a physics class  
buy our latest contraption – a  
dogmatic somethingorother

Just a junkie – my fix unfound  
a starved squirrel scurried by  
a crow coughed out his call  
My clothes flavored with city stench  
It must be morning.

*by carli heston*

## Drowning

Arrowhead Lake is at least as deep as one small child perched on his mother's shoulders is tall. Maybe the lake had grown self-conscious of its receding shoreline and longed for the dangerous days when it swallowed up men who tried to trap the then much younger body of water in dikes and damns. Maybe the lake, in its old age, learned to hate small children and the mothers who don't stop them from creating warm spots in its shallows. Whatever the reason, the lake tried to kill me.

Having only ever experienced the questionable colors and metallic bouquets of trailer tap, water was not something I enjoyed. "Twins' First Trip to Beach", a grainy video from the golden era of the Stucker family, shows my aunt plopping my sister and I down on the soggy shore of Arrowhead. Amber capers. I cry.

There would be no crying the day that my long-held hostility towards 71 % of the earth's surface and 60% of its inhabitants caught up with me. I did not know how to swim. After slathering my alabaster body with some no-name variety of SPF 80 that reeked like talc sprinkled on moldy bread, my mother carried me piggyback into the shallows. The water was weak and tepid tea; the bits of algae floating unstrained tea leaves that gave the water its muddy taste.

My mother said something. Probably a joke or one of those cutesy-isms parents speak to their young (and too often, older) children in. I don't remember what she was saying (or if she even had a chance to say it) because as she looked back at me, my bleached bones sitting atop her shoulders shaking in the wind, she stumbled upon one of the more interesting topographical features of the lake. We vanished.

I had drunk from garden hoses at sprinkler parties in the trailer park. The feeling was roughly the same. Gigantic gulps of earthy Adam's Ale pounded my throat. Fluid fingers bored through my nostrils and burned my sinuses. The cool water scalded my lungs as I failed to breathe. I bobbed on the surface, gasping for air whenever I felt it on my lips. The water in my lungs was weighing me down. My mother, completely immersed beneath me, was stumbling deeper. Each time I broke the

surface I sucked in less air.

Death is simple. My thoughts proceeded something like this:

"I wonder why I'm underwater. I did not want to be underwater. I will get water in my ears."

"I am getting water in my nose. This is the only thing worse than getting water in my ears."

"I think I'm going to die. I wonder if I'll see Fluffy."

(Fluffy was a pet guinea pig who was squashed to death because two unsupervised children thought he made funny noises when squeezed. Fluffy was put in a box and "returned to the store for shots." Despite the shots, he died of a cold that Christmas.)

I realized my mother was going to die, too. This was unacceptable. I shot-putted my lead fingers out of the water. I saw my dad on the beach, standing. Then grey. I saw my dad on the beach, leaping. Then grey. I did not see my dad. He disappeared as we had disappeared. In the last second of the few seconds the entire episode lasted, I remember beginning to despair, thinking he had begun to do what we would soon finish. Before the thought could fully form and anchor me to the bottom of the lake, my killer whale father blasted my baby seal body out of the water, tendons tensing his hand into a vice-grip on my waistband. In his other arm he held my mother. Her adult body was mostly unaffected by the brief dip, her air supply being a good deal larger than mine. He dragged us to the lake's edge, where my mother coughed some and my father pounded the water out of me like he would on occasion pound the sense into me. When he was satisfied that I would not suffocate on shore, he proceeded to scream at the life guard, who said in her defense that it looked as if my father had the situation under control.

I stared at the lake, eyes wide, head and heart pounding. I thought about the smoothness of the lake that I had just seconds ago so fiercely clawed at for my life. I thought about how my screams were literally drowned out. It struck me how large the lake was and I how small I was, shivering before it.

*by kenneth stucker*

## Scam on a Robber

my hands grip these

B M P  
L E O  
A T L  
C A E  
K L S

waiting for a piece of bread and a

C W G  
L A L  
E T A  
A E S  
N R S

here I'm accommodated with a

G B S  
R R H  
I O E  
M W E  
Y N T

while the culprit sleeps under a

W D Q  
H O U  
I W I  
T N L  
E Y T

even though his bullet killed the

N S C  
I H L  
G I E  
H F R  
T T K

the blood stains my hands and i

S S Y  
E E E  
R V A  
V E R  
E N S

rotting in prison.

*by lauren salem*

## Digging a hole

His fingers are like wrenches  
he can twist apart anything with his hands  
my fingers are fine-bristled brushes  
I gloss over problems

His gut, heavy with experience  
hangs over a pair of jeans  
that didn't have those holes when he got them.

My Levis persistently slide off  
my 15 minute abs.  
I need a belt and a haircut.

We stand on the red-planet patio  
he a constructive cosmonaut  
and I an inexpert extra-terrestrial

He hands me a shovel  
I pick at the dirt like the robins,  
eager for worms  
that were once safe beneath the stone.

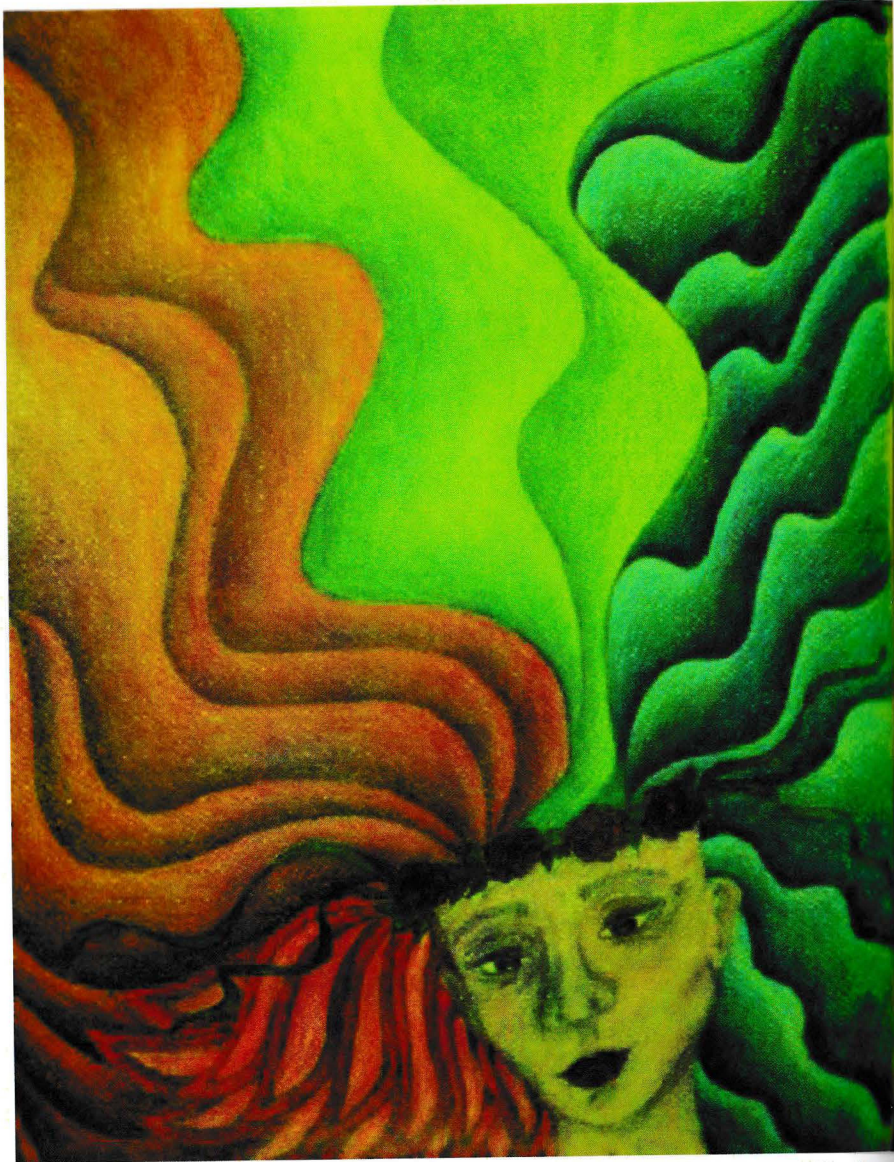
"Like this" he says  
He sinks the shovel like a fang  
into soft flesh  
and rips a bite out of the earth.

I chomp down  
leaving a trail of tiny teethmarks  
where my shovel barely breaks the surface.

*by kenneth stucker*



## Mother Earth



30

*by erin gallagher*

## A Firm Handshake Says Nothing

These hands are good hands  
with long, sturdy fingers  
not painted but the nails were clipped  
a few weeks back.

These are really good hands  
and they shouldn't be abused  
or forced to do things  
like put on plastics gloves  
and cut bread  
while quickly transitioning over to the scale  
with ham in grip  
weighing out to the proper portion  
before inserting hard salami  
and/or capicola  
and/or american, swiss, or provolone  
and whatever else the customer is right about.

These hands are too good  
to get burnt on the fryers  
or hot plates  
too good to sift through containers of chicken blood  
counting out 30 flats and 20 drums  
for that bucket of wings that was called in  
for 6:35.

These idealist hands that remind me so much  
of the man from la mancha  
telling stories of lovers and lunatics—  
hands that make grandmothers exclaim  
that they've never heard such profanity  
coming from their granddaughter.

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These hands are too good  
and shouldn't be mixing dressings  
Stocking beer  
Taking orders  
Slicing meat  
Deep-frying pierogies  
Bagging hoagies.

These hands are too special  
to waste time making it easier for you  
to support your lazy habit of eating and drinking  
excessive amounts of toxic delicacies.

They're way too tired to hold the tongue  
that wants to tell you to fuck off  
because it's easy to put tomatoes on your sub  
even if you requested that they be left off  
especially when you have to make tons of these things  
per shift.

These hands are too good to press buttons  
and total your order  
but if they didn't—  
What would they have to complain about?

*by jami kali butczynski*

## It's a Hard Life



## Clean Kill

I sat in the spot my dad had selected, swathed in velvet-soft camouflage. Every skipping bird shook the wilderness. Every squirrel carpet-bombed the forest floor as it scampered over the November leaves. Each time I turned to face a noise I was leveled with relief and frustration—frustration because my prey had not come into sight, relief because I was terrified at the thought of sitting on the ground anywhere near a bear.

Around four p.m., when the temptation to go for a bike ride like a normal kid my age was the greatest, I saw it. My insides shook. There were no bars between us, no fences. The bear had gotten close without me even hearing it. It was walking towards us.

I raised the two-forty-three bolt-action rifle my grandfather had given to my dad and popped the red safety button off.

“Take your time,” my father whispered.

With each shallow breath the muzzle must have jumped three feet. I held my chest tight, but my war-drum heart threatened to shake the rifle out of my hands with its bass. I shoved the butt hard into my shoulder and rested my cheek on the polished wood.

A bear’s heart and lungs are just behind its front shoulder blades. I lined up the x with the scapula sloop. The centimeters my aching index finger traveled to pull the trigger felt like miles. At last, the forrest trembled.

“You missed” my dad said quietly.

“No.”

Through the scope I saw a red mist spray from the bear’s far side, bathing the tree behind it in blood. The bear turned as if to run, but simply rolled over dead.

My dad looked at me, amazed. A grin spread across his face. Then he began to laugh the same high-pitched hyena laugh his father laughed, the same laugh I laugh. We laughed together, like schoolboys. We all but ran to the dead bear.

My dad had drawn his hunting knife and kneeled over the harvest,

examining the hole in its body. “Couldn’t have asked for a cleaner kill,” he beamed. He was more proud of the shot than he had been of years of good grades or near-perfect attendance.

“Hold this,” dad said, handing me one of the bear’s paws. The dead weight was covered with shiny, coarse hair, like the black wire that was starting to grow under my arms and between my legs.

We buried the knife in the animal and unzipped its belly. The gash was flanked by leathery brown teats.

“Pretty big for a she-bear,” my dad grunted. He was pulling at the intestines, it sounded like he was dumping condensed soup from a can into a pot.

I looked away, uninterestedly running my fingers over the bear’s knuckles, feeling its claws. Off in the distance, two little black lumps stumbled over logs, whimpering. My exhilaration curled up and died somewhere in the bear’s hot sticky, body cavity.

I had murdered their mother. And for what? So that my dad would flash that three second thumbs-up? So that I could show my friends pictures of me, biceps cocked with one foot on the poor animals head? So that we could have a new rug when we can just buy a goddamn mat from the dollar store? I looked at the paw I held in my blood-soaked hand and thought about the price this bear paid so that my father would be proud of me for just a few minutes.

I stood in silence. My dad couldn’t hear the cubs crying, trying to find their mother. He was too busy pulling at the strings that held her heart in her chest.

*by kenneth stucker*



Recollection

by jami kali butczynski

## Krypton

Move over, SuperHero,  
There's a new kid in town.  
Your days as a Wonder  
Are numbered

tick  
tick tock  
tock

It's true,  
I'm your threat.  
I'll slip you 'til you trip on your cloak of—  
And people will  
Whisper,  
"SuperWho?"  
SuperThem? SuperYou?  
I lack the  
Luster  
Of your

Downtown Hero (in)

Truth  
Justice  
The American Way

I'm not a bird, nor plain,  
But I don't need a cloak  
To be

Invisible

by lauren mannion

No Catch Today



by bethany yamrick

38

### Escaping Addiction

He drank his way to AA  
fumbled his fingers over  
SERENITY COURAGE WISDOM  
emblazoned on complementary keychain.

Her steam-engine screams  
pushed him past the pub.  
He parked someplace quiet

“I’ll never touch alcohol again”  
sleepy smile asserted  
he saw light  
at tunnel’s end  
growing larger  
devouring dreamy night  
his car  
on train tracks.

by kenneth stucker

39

## Everything in Focus



40

*by adam burke*

## Cool

You are our savior  
In the flames of hell

A fine mixture of plastic  
And wire.

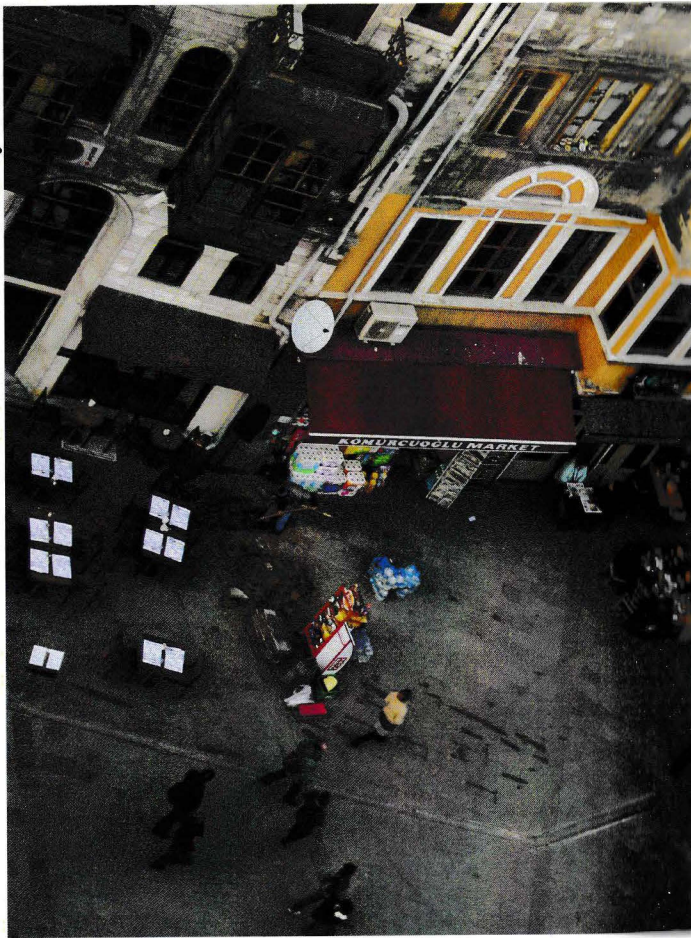
Motivated by electricity  
You swoop and spin to the rescue.

Multiple Aeoluses in every home.  
Fans keep us cool.

*by justin jones*

41

**Bird's Eye View**



*by bethany yamrick*

**A Lesson in Crossing the Street**

On a windshield, you have died.  
This was your fate, Splatter Fly.  
A panicking scream and lonesome cry,  
No one heard before you died.  
You'd be on the other side,  
Had you looked both ways before you fled.

## Read About Murder

Pleasing doesn't even exist  
In my vocabulary anymore.

I take a bath and wait  
For it to be over.

I dial numbers and wait  
For voices to tell me things  
That are more than meaningless.

I sit in chairs for you.

I read about war  
For a reason.

I read about murder  
For fun.

I imagine the skin,  
The light,  
The petty things.

Those things are running  
Out on us.

We're running out of  
Supplies and oatmeal.

We're running out of numbers,  
And letters,  
And delicious oatmeal.

I spot you but I don't stop you.

*by mariah welch*

*by adam burke*



**Catacombs**



## A Ghoulish Laugh

Tanya flicked the lid open; the fire burned for a few short seconds. Then she shut it abruptly. Darkness filtered through the air. She flicked it opened again, stared into the tiny flame, and remembered the frightful day.

Dr. Erickson had laughed when Tanya pulled so hard on the ropes from her chair, it fell over – and her with it. He didn't laugh simply either – indeed he never did that – but with a sinister glare. By his grin, he could have been the devil himself.

Tanya flipped the lid again. He had played with his lighter constantly. Opened it, shut it, opened it, shut it – he spent hours with the thing. Tanya couldn't help herself now.

"What's your name?" she remembered his fluttering voice, completely carefree.

She had stared at him blankly.

In response, he laughed for a moment. Was this a game to him?

"What's. your. NAME?" He kicked her so hard in the gut she had to swallow whatever it was that had come up. He leaned close to her face now and smiled playfully.

"Hmm?"

She shivered.

"T – tan – Tanya."

"Much better. Thanks pumpkin." He scruffed her hair. She watched his face float above her, his sharp teeth giggling like a tickled schoolgirl.

"Don't think about it," Tanya thought and forced her eyes shut. When she opened them, she concentrated on her breath spreading out against the concrete floor; the condensation wet it. That's when she remembered the cold. The coming night could literally freeze her to death. She didn't realize where it came from, but the whimpering was getting too loud.

"Quiet" Dr. Erickson reproached her as one would a dog. His clear eyes that had so recently attracted her appeared red beside the flame. He now crouched down beside her.

"How are you supposed to listen to the story I have for you if you

keep making noises like that? Hmm?"

He gently caressed her face as she gritted her teeth. His fingers barely moved the invisible hairs of her cheeks; he lingered on her lips. She quivered beneath him, unable to remove her eyes from him.

"Such beautiful skin." He pronounced the "s"'s clearly in his whisper. After a quick glance down her tied body, he moved his fingers down the side of her neck to the lining of her shirt. Dr. Erickson shook his head in a fake sadness.

"This won't do... This won't do *at all*."

Then, with a fluttering jolt, he pulled out his scissor. Tanya closed her eyes.

"My story," he began with his first snip, "involves someone just like you – only, I actually cared about her. Heck, I even loved her! I suppose," he leaned two inches from Tanya's face now; his warm breath tickled her ear lobe, "you can really blame her for this."

Snip. Snip. Snip. No matter what Tanya did, she couldn't escape the nightmare. She opened her eyes again, but in the darkness she could only see his outline and his shining eyes.

"You see," Dr. Erickson pulled the cloth away and stood up again, grinning down at her, "*she* was a monster."

He fiddled with the lighter once more. Flame, darkness, flame.

"You know, they say the Ebola virus tries to create itself in another being, and that's why we die. I wonder..." He laughed that awful, overjoyed laugh, and the worst part was it could have been innocent.

"Sure," he addressed Tanya again, "you don't believe me now, but you will. Trust me."

Now he lit a cigar, inhaled, and blew the smoke all over her. She shivered as the heat escaped her body. Goosebumps hopelessly covered her. Even his speech sounded like laughter.

"Are you cold? Oh, Darling; you don't have to worry about that."

Dr. Erickson inhaled once more, tapped his cigar, and approached her.

"Such beautiful skin..." he shook his head, "such a shame."

Then he giggled.

Tanya flicked her lighter now with a somber expression on her face. She quietly rubbed one of the scars that had long since healed.

"Funny" she thought, "how incredibly slowly emotions heal. Would they ever?"

Then she composed herself and let out a sudden, brilliant cackle. She glanced up at the man tied to his chair.

"Let me tell you a story..."

*by jessica price*

stared  
conc. "at."  
cold. T. "at."  
realize who approached  
"Quiet" L.  
eyes that had no shame."  
now crouched down  
"How are you sup,

## For

This poem is dedicated  
first born  
lifted up  
to the spirit of poetry  
the spirit of prophecy  
This poem is dedicated  
fish-stick fingers  
frozen to frosty rock face  
gonna plant that flag  
gonna do it first

This poem is dedicated  
olive branch  
passed on for peace  
or pushed into an eye,  
bridge  
in memory of  
built  
or burnt

*by kenneth stucker*



## Tracy Writes to Become Loved By All

Tracy always wanted to become the greatest poet of her generation after she read Plath and said to herself, "I can do better." She read Dickinson aloud mockingly like a bully on a playground. "This is shit," she would say to her imaginary audience.

She sits at her computer and tells herself to write sonnets about boyfriends she kissed in junior high.

And villanelles about her devotion to Christ.

She mass-produces her poems. Her mind becomes the sweatshop spitting out cheap imitations of Elliot and Bukowski. She does it just to say, "I did it."

Tracy erects an elitist barrier of recycled opinions on art and what a poem is.

The creativity gets blocked out by this firewall.

She pounds the keys of her computer to push out another AABBCA poem but it comes out like a crack baby screaming for what it lacks and desires.

Fingers bleed Petrarchian and her bones burst through flesh as she slams out another poem for the sake of the poem.

Tracy tells me that I should sit down and write with structures in mind I really cannot do that the words become small cinderblocks and I have a foreman leaning over my shoulder smelling of hotdog grease and cheap whiskey sour telling me that this fucker goes on the left and that fucker goes on the right and I get fired and replaced with a guy who will work for less and not bitch about healthcare getting cut.

I can't do that and let everything I feel become stifled.

Only life can heal her. Experience can be the electricity to zap her heart.

Forcing poems to live will only hurt her soul.

You cannot give life to something that cannot feel and become part of the human song.

You can still change Tracy.

We're easily moldable.

*by anthony thomas*

# Taboo

Poets aren't supposed to write about love  
like diners aren't to talk religion or politics  
or children aren't to touch themselves  
(even in private)  
Exploration frustrated

*by kenneth stucker*

Mrs. Beasley



*by mariah welch*

## Language is my Bitch

I don't care  
if she has a problem  
with being used  
and manipulated  
and slapped around  
then laughed at (in front of my friends)  
only to be apologized to—  
when I need something out of her.

I don't care  
if she notices  
that I come around more often  
when I'm desperate  
or in need of a fix  
because

she likes it when I'm rough.

*by jami kali butczynski*

## Parrish Confessionals

I  
Those lips on my face kiss the cold toilet. This is my own  
Funeral. Alyssa *i fucking hate your*— left me for dead;  
I choke on Absolut shit  
And watch my life flush down the toilet.  
Am I really listening to Sarah *in the arms of the*— McLachlan?  
Jesus, no wonder I have no friends.

This tongue glosses over cracked teeth and tastes  
Sanguine, sagacious irony.

My face is ruined: my wisdom teeth remain but the  
Subdermal hematoma  
*sawney parrish, this is the harvard admissions office, we regret*—  
Has shanghai'd my skin into secondhand artistry.  
I am all swirls;  
I am nothing but failing shades of purple, yellow, and mocking green.  
It is neither halogen illusion nor the carbonic oxygen pulsing in my blood  
As two eyes drip down a mirrored face, and all that's left of one nose  
Melts into a Picasso dream.

II

“Mr. Parrish? Mr. Parrish...”

“What in the hell—”

“The boy's fine, but get an oxygen tank running—he may get a little post-traumatic.”

“No pulse: she's gone...”

“Sam, this is Winchester, do you copy? Forget the ambulance. We need the ladder rig.”

“Ma'am, were you present at the scene of this...”

*"Yessir, I seen it with my own two eyes. She leapt offa that  
acknee like a lemon offa cliff. No sir,  
that Missus Parrish never was right, even before  
her husband left. An' I'll tell ya 'nother thing;  
that there boy's been – ever since, and—"*

*"That'll be all, Mrs. McKarm. You can head down to County for questions  
tomorrow. Now, Mr. Parrish—"*

*"Officer. S' name's Willow-bee."*

*"Uh, Willoughby, I... Know this must be tough..."*

"Sir. Please.

You have no idea."

*"No, I... I'm sure I don't. But she's in a better place, son."*

"I'm glad she's gone.

And don't call me son."

### III

Dear Mr. President,

You don't think you know me, but you do. My name is  
Mikael Xavier Parrish,

mostly my friends call me mike and the other privates  
called me mikey no-show but my brothers called me kael  
because that is what Our Father called me

And I serve as a private under the command of your  
Most respected and coordinated  
Fighting First Infantry Division.

You don't recall our names, but I swear,  
You know us.  
but i never really knew my brothers  
until it was too late

too late

We gave your son that job at Morgan Stanley  
And sold him the pipe at the hardware store  
No he could purify the streets with the  
Iron force of freedom.

We told your daughter where to hide  
No the headmaster wouldn't find her  
Slumped on the floor with her hands  
Between her legs, crying over spilt blood.

my mom said i couldnt have helped it  
not with a father like ours

who aint in heaven

she cried when she met willoughby

because he looks most like dad

but his mom is dead suicide

i never knew her

but i imagine they were a lot alike

hes a writer he helped

write this

I cant write too much

I never learned except

the battle of gettysburg

but i still confused

booker and george

i would be jealous but

hes not like a kid anymore

i never wanna grow up

he says he doesnt care and that

dying is what were born to do

but once in mayfield

i swore i saw him blink back a tear

as he stood under the sky with us

and he whispered

its our curse that we cant tell a nuke from a shooting star

We married and marred your enemies.  
We forged the filthy foundations of foreign factories.  
We paved your streets with amber oil,  
And we put rubber chickens in every (dimebag of) pot.  
So you see, Mr. Precedent,  
You know us because we are what you sold,  
And you are what we bought.  
We're everything we had to be to keep you what you are.  
And now a request for just one thing in return:  
Absolut Freedom

his vodka smile faded when the  
fire grazed the sky  
and physics disintegrated  
over us all  
out sawney fell into  
charged at  
became  
that metal that was  
made in japan  
or was it america  
well you never really can tell  
melted into his head like a picasso dream  
unhappy bastard our little matisse  
and then his face was an explosion of color  
platter  
couldnt no i wouldnt  
ow could i understand  
ny baby brother was worms meat and you are  
Ve are all the worms.

*by lauren mannion*

## Atomium



*by adam burke*

### **Thoughts on What?:**

**A short story of conflict, crisis, and resolution.**

*Why does he keep avoiding eye contact?* shrieked the sharp voice inside his head. Marty's eyes rose and he forced himself to stare directly into the shimmering brown puddles surrounding Jessica's pupils. Brown was his favorite color.

*Pumpkin kibbi*, a softer voice echoed inside his skull. *Wait, no. A falafel wrap sounds good.* This voice was too kind to belong to Jessica and his eyes scanned the restaurant, surveying the faces of his fellow eaters and orderers. He wondered who it was that shared his interest in falafel wraps.

*He's too quiet*, said the sharp voice, which he recognized again as his companion's, and he remembered where his eyes were supposed to be. Splinters of wood grain penetrating the brown sea. Jesus Christ did she have gorgeous eyes! But eyes meant nothing. *What's his problem? Why don't he talk?* whined the voice inside.

"How's your food?" Marty asked as Jessica twisted her fork around and sifted through the remaining mush on her plate.

"Fine," she smiled.

*I can't believe he brought me here. I hate Indian food*, the voice formed him.

Marty forced a smile. He remembered life before his accident, but it was getting harder. Sometimes the thoughts blended together into an electric hum that prevented the concentration that was required for remembering. He would drive, sometimes, deep into the country, far into the middle of the woods, where he'd finally meet with a mind as clear as Jessica's skin. The silence came on strong, like a high he wasn't expecting, but the remembering was bliss.

Before they brought him back to life, thinking was normal.

Before his heart stopped beating.

Before the blood paused on its journey to his brain.

Before all brain activity came to a halt.

Before they charged his heart full of life-giving electricity.

Before they brought him back.

But his mind was busy and it had been a while. Fifteen years and forty-seven days, to be exact—so he tried to look at the bright side. At least he didn't pick up the thoughts of anyone outside of the forty-foot cage. *And he's ugly, too*, the sharp voice in his head observed.

"Fuck!" Marty yelled as he slammed his book onto the floor. *No help with all of these bags?* his head demanded and he knew that his neighbor, Laci Phelps, was home from the store.

*I have to call Diane when I get inside. Need Xanax. Did she hear about Grace?* And he had heard about Grace many times but he didn't care to hear about Grace. He was too tired to drive his car to the mountain and pull over to the side of the road to read. He didn't want to go out tonight. Gas was getting expensive.

*Oh, I forgot the toilet paper*, Laci's thoughts reverberated off of the walls of Marty's skull. *Bill's gonna kill me!* Sometimes he thought about moving out of his apartment, though there were days when he didn't mind the voices. Hell, they were good company sometimes! Really, there were days when he didn't mind it.

But tonight he did. He lifted himself from the couch and stepped into his closet-sized bathroom. He glanced once in the mirror before his eyes were drawn to a new pack of straight razors. He hated shaving and he hated having to scratch his face when the hair started to grow in. Jessica liked when he shaved, so he tried to do it often. Ever since she stopped answering her phone, however, he had let it grow in. He didn't mind at first. He figured she'd probably make it a point to call him back soon. He had to give her space when she needed it. And it felt good to have his own time, even if it wasn't always as quiet as he wished.

It was after the fourth day when he bought the razors. He called her during his drive home. She didn't answer.

He called her again the following day. And the day after that. Maybe she needed a short break, he thought. Maybe she'd call back soon.

He had tossed the razors near the sink. After the shave, maybe he could knock on her door and ask her about what's going on. But he decided against it. Nineteen days had passed since she answered the phone. He looked up at his reflection in the mirror.

He tore open the package and cracked one of the razors to remove the blade. He was almost blinded by the paleness of his arms.

~



*When is this guy gonna shut the hell up?* asked a single voice.

"Amen!" shouted Marty.

"Is there something you'd like to share, Marty?" Margaret reprimanded. Margaret was the session leader. "Or can Timothy continue?" Marty hated going to group therapy.

"I'm sorry. It can wait." Marty held his hands over his face as he felt the color spreading throughout his cheeks. He slipped, sometimes, but he knew he wasn't depressed. He also knew that he didn't belong at a group session for natural downers, but his unsuccessful attempt at jumping to the next life landed his ass there. The scars on his wrist made Kate, the fourteen year old group member, wonder if Marty had even gone deep at all. He didn't belong. His ears shrilled as an orchestral uproar of voices sang out all at once:

*What a fucking nut...*

*Pick up Lucy at four-thirty. Dinner at six.*

*Three more till my turn. Three more till my turn. Three more...*

*Sex. Sex. Sex. Sex.*

*I forgot to mention the man at the bank. Dammit! I always forget.*

*Cigarette. I need a cigarette.*

*A room full of people as pathetic as myself—and I'm alone. No more thoughts. No more thoughts on suicide.*

"Thoughts on what?" Marty yelled out, this time lifting his head to meet eyes with Dale. Dale was the retired ACME trucker. He recognized the tone of the thought, as Dale's was distinctly rigid and low and slightly red in color.

"This is the last time I'll ask you, Marty. You don't need another bad report," Margaret scolded.

*Tonight is it. Tonight's the night. Finally ending it,* Dale's thoughts echoed through Marty's head. Marty had promised the same on many occasions, but he never followed through after the first time. Dale probably wouldn't either.

*No one will notice till my bills aren't paid. Tonight's the night.* Dale had to be bluffing. So when it was his turn to speak, Marty paid close attention to any inconsistencies in thought and speech. This was a pastime

he had developed through toying with his curse. It was something to do.

Dale said that nothing too bad was going on. His wife was mad at him again because she'd found out that he'd gone to his ex-wife's funeral. "I left the mass card in my coat pocket," he said.

She found it like the women on TV find lipstick on collars. She wasn't happy though she was pleased, for a moment, to hear of the death and, according to Dale, he could tell this by the smirk that flashed across her face. "I wish that I'd gotten rid of the card before coming home," Dale chuckled.

His social life had crumbled. He was sixty-five now and retired. He thought it would feel good to retire young. He didn't have buddies anymore. He looked up a high school friend named Chris and gave him a call because he knew Chris would still be living in the area.

"Things are fine, Dale," Chris had said, but he couldn't talk. He had a meeting at three o'clock. He'd call Dale back for sure.

"How does all of this make you feel, Dale?" Margaret asked.

"I feel stale," Dale said. "Stagnant."

Group ended ten minutes early and Marty watched everyone race for the door. He tapped Dale on the shoulder and waited for the hefty man to turn around.

"Yeah?" Dale responded.

"You're a good man, Dale. Keep holdin' on," and Marty patted him on the back.

Dale hesitated, then took a breath. "Thanks, Marty." He turned back toward the door and began to walk out.

"Don't give up yet, brother," Marty advised. "You've got alotta livin' to do."

Confused, Dale looked back again. "Thanks," his lips slowly let out. Marty was shocked to hear the news about Dale when he returned to group the following week. They said he'd been dead at his house for a few days before his wife came home from her sister's and found him. The smell was horrendous, she reported.

*by jami kali butczynski*

## Perspective



64

by erin gallagher

## Forbidden Knowledge

Sweat bends your brow,  
Bearing the bough of thought.

Your sharp tongue lashes at Earth,  
Inhaling her soil and spitting wet mud in my eyes.

The hair above your brow won't  
Dare betray the boundary,  
So I shall break it for you.

You think aloud;  
The quill rustles, the leaf shakes,  
And I am an echo in your sonic swirl of ink.

Jeans ride low enough to  
Play hide and seek  
With shades of indecent gold as it pales against  
A peach that's almost ivory.

*Boom boom boom*  
Your voice shakes the room  
And everyone  
Listens.

65

But I watch from outside  
Your glass cage  
As the wall crackles  
From the shackles  
Ripped from your own ribs.

I taste myself in your reflection and  
Drink deep draughts of  
Self-desire, self-delusion, and self-damnation.

I kiss the soles of your feet  
And pray you'll walk over me on your way out,  
Heels sinking into my chest  
Like some half-hissed apology  
Brewed to poison apples.

*by lauren mannion*

## **I Can't Even Function**

There are two of us on the rock.  
Blowing smoke into each others faces  
To check on the other.

The only problem is  
Neither of us know  
How to get off.

We are surrounded by water on every side.

We have traveled only to find

The sun has been burning our eyes.

But we push on  
Torturing each other with  
Knives, and bugs, and lies.

The truth is  
We don't know  
How to survive.

*by mariah welch*

## Christian Death Metal: The Perfect Soundtrack to an Awkward Evening

I never liked the name John. I always knew this was absurd, but I could never overcome my prejudice. Maybe I had such a tough time liking Johns because of my acquaintances. In third grade, I was forced to sit behind John Skavich, the nine-year-old Oppenheimer of flatulence. John Skavich made me fear the backside of every John in the world. But in my world, good people read the Bible. John was in the Bible. Hell, John *wrote* some of the Bible. If I did not like John, I could not have liked God. Great, I thought, after only nine years in this world I score a first-class ticket to Hell in a half-desk just because John Skavich can't cop some of his gram's beano. That's justice for you.

I cannot say that my initial fears were not quantified. In tenth grade I met John Willis. John Willis was the dreamy stereotype—you know, blonde hair, blue eyes. John never made weird noises or laughed like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*. He never talked during a lesson and he never mouthed off to the teacher. Actually, John never did much of anything, including his homework. One thing that John was passionate about, though, was church.

I had shied away from the Catholic Church after putting in my dues for Confirmation. In my mind, having to sit there for the two hour ceremony in assumed innocence while Theresa Banning, to my left, hiccupped the aftermath of a ninth-grade keg party seemed unjust. Regardless, when John Willis asked me to attend a prayer group with him, I was too fixated on the blue of his eyes to notice the religious mania behind them.

John picked me up at my house around seven. I took a seat in the reddest car I had ever seen, and John turned up his idea of good music, also known as Christian death metal—a paradox I have yet to understand. Already regretting my decision to join him, I looked to the rearview mirror. An air freshener dangled beside a crucifix. I could not help but wonder if Jesus preferred “vanilla” or “pine.”

“So,” John said, turning down the music as we reached the cathedral. By that time, I was wishing I had sonar instead of hearing.

“Yeah,” I said, unbuckling my belt.

“You’ll like these guys,” he smiled, his crooked teeth catching the sun’s last rays reflecting from the dashboard. “They’re great people.”

I nodded and got out of the car. We walked into the rectory and were greeted by a small group of cardigan-sporting, rosary-jingling, frankincense-scented men and women. Father Simms welcomed me to the group, and, while he was kind, I felt my feet turning in an instinct to run right out of the room. I looked toward the door but John stepped before me, taking me by the arm and guiding, or dragging, me to the atrium of the church.

We stepped onto the altar from the side entrance. I looked around in uncertainty as we crowded the tabernacle. I knew this was wrong. I was a woman, and I had no right to sit so close to our Lord and Savior. I looked at John.

“Maybe I shouldn’t be—”

“It’s fine,” he said with an easy smile and kneeled as Father Simms led us in an evening of prayer.

I tried to pay attention to Father Simms’s reading from some part of the gospel according to what’s-his-face. I caught something about a flower dying, its seed falling to the earth, and regenerating the next time around. I was too busy thinking about and staring at John, who could only seem to stare at Father Simms in apt wonder, the votives on the altar flickering in his eyes. A sudden fear grew inside me that God could hear every thought in my mind—God would know that I only agreed to attend the prayer meeting because I wanted to spend time with John, that I wanted to rip the crucifix off the rearview mirror so I could kiss John without the cast of sin upon me, and that I had no desire to embrace in the Lord because I was fantasizing about embracing John on that very altar.

“Hey,” John tapped my arm as I lifted my face from my knuckles. “It’s over, but Shirley invited us to her house for pizza. Wanna go?”

I grimaced as I rose.

“Cramped leg or something?” He tilted his head.

“No,” I wanted to say, “I just don’t want to spend anymore time with Shirley and the rest of Camp Crucifix.”

Instead, I smiled and shrugged. “Yeah, let’s go.”

We arrived at Shirley's house after everyone else. I felt the scrutiny of Shirley's and others' looks and could only assume that they figured we took longer because we were fooling around. In truth, John got lost on the wrong street and took us on a ten-minute detour.

"Have some pizza and sit down, dear," Father Simms smiled, patting the couch seat beside himself. To be honest, Father Simms could not have been more than thirty years old, not to mention he was rather attractive. Two moral strikes for the evening: fantasizing about John *and* a priest in the context of a prayer group.

I sat with the group and did my best to enjoy the pizza. When Shirley and company started to discuss a passage from the Corinthians, I scanned the room and realized that John had disappeared. I excused myself and went to the kitchen. I saw John with his arms folded over his chest and head slumped forward.

"Are you okay?" I neared him, putting my hand on his elbow.

"No," he shrugged, pulling away from me. His face and eyes were red; I could feel the heat radiating from his skin.

"Oh," I pulled back, not sure what to do.

"Let's just go," he muttered, leaning over the sink and splashing water on his face before we strolled through the parlor and made a hasty goodbye.

"Come back soon!" Father Simms called as John led me out the door.

I smiled at Father Simms and nodded, then turned to John, who was ready at the car. I followed him and got in.

"What is going *on*? Why are you acting like this? I thought you liked these people," I said, staring at him.

"They're all fake, fake, fake," John hissed. "They'll never accept me into their group. They're hypocrites. Hypocrites!" He slammed his palm against the steering wheel and I continued to stare. I felt for the comfort of my cell phone in my pocket, assuring myself that my father was just a phone call away.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and turned the key in the ignition. "I just feel like I'll never be good enough for them. You know? I feel like I'm not pure enough. Did you ever feel like that?"

He turned to me, an almost desperate look in his eyes, and I nodded.

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

I watched the houses blur past us as John took me home, knowing that I would never be the nun he expected me, and himself, to be. John dropped me off and hugged me goodbye, apologizing for his behavior. I shrugged it off and said it was no big deal. I walked up to my room and closed the door, preparing for bed. I laid in bed that night, looking up at the ceiling, asking God if we could just cut a deal about this whole John problem.

*by lauren mannion*



**Leslie Howard**

*by sarah hartman*

## Walk Away

Hysteria at midnight over:

“Am I average?

Tell me

tell me something

something I haven't heard.”

And when all is said and done

your answer finds me

laughing out loud

because your name gives me a reason

why.

A reason for

leaving before

we begin.

*by jami kali butczynski*

## Life or Death, Whichever

I want to die first

by your side

in bed

our bodies clinging tightly to every hours last tick

and I'll whisper to you my final thoughts on life

(the ones that will sum up everything

into a neat package labeled: FRAGILE)

I'll explain that it's all been worth it

that our portrait's only a portrait

of a euphoric dystopia

and I'll defend, “Hey, love's supposed to hurt!”

and you'll smile

and agree

Or I can die outside

near dancing streams

bubbling birth each moment

and we can ask each other for our thoughts on simple issues

like life from the wind's perspective

life or death

whichever

because we can't explain

either

because we can't explain

anything

Or we can drive

and drive

until my very last gasp

and we'll mutually decide which song I should go out to

the one that says the most

or least  
about everything (or nothing)  
since it all depends on our mood

And I'll die first  
by your side and through your eyes and in your skin and on your mind—  
I'll die.

*by jami kali butczynski*

### Untouchable Face



### Pretty Words

pretty words do oft take flight  
from lovers lips in dark of night  
but when the sun resumes the sky  
all syruped tongues are parched and dry.

*by sarah hartman*

## We made love again last night

We made love again last night, despite what I said I was going to do. It was lonely and hot in my room and I had already gotten a good start on the bottle of Blush resting on the floor near my bed. The more I drank, the hotter it became. This being the case, I had been gradually peeling clothes from my body all night. I was down to my pink lace underwear that he wasn't going to see again.

I called him but there was no answer. "I miss you," I whispered into my phone and in response to the voicemail lady who presented me with few options and little time to make up my mind. I reached for my lighter, the one he had actually borrowed but returned last week. As my fingers felt around on the shelf next to my bed, my phone began to ring and his picture, the one where he's making that face, lit up the front of my phone.

"I'm outside of your house," he said. "But my phone's about to run out of minutes..."

"Okay, I'll be right out!" I jumped up and scanned my floor for the articles that had previously clothed my body. I tugged on my shorts and pulled my head through the neck hole of a shirt, but I left off the bra.

I scurried downstairs, through the loud living room din of televisioned voices and opened the front door. He was waiting on the sidewalk and I could barely see anything but the blurry outline of his body. My limbs quivered and I could feel the butterflies fluttering not in my stomach but throughout the tissues and muscle in my arms and legs. Somehow, that was *still* happening.

"What's up?" he asked with a hint of pity.

"I'm drunk," I said. "And I'm having such a bad day." I sat down and rested my head against the black iron railing that followed alongside the concrete steps leading to my house.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I'm feeling depressed."

He put his arms around me and I did the same to him.

~ ~ ~

His living room was moved around and it was a change that I didn't feel comfortable with.

"Someone's gonna get hurt on this if I don't move it," he said and pushed the broken television away from the steps that led to the upper floor. He positioned it to a spot directly across from me and took a seat atop the backside slope of it, where inside rested all of the television's guts, growing older, weaker, and more obsolete with each seconds passing.

"Wanna go lay down?" he asked.

~ ~ ~

We made love again last night, and, "I love you," he said.

"I love you too," I said. And although I really *really* felt it, I'm not feeling it now.

It'll be another three days until I hear from him. Another six until I see him. The feeling comes and goes, like everything else.

by jami kali butczynski

## Reunion From Afar



by bethany yamrick



## Everything We Talk About

We live in the small bit of forest that the rest of the world has been slowly forgetting about.

We sleep so far away from one another anymore. I can feel the invisibility between us.

We live so far away from the rest of the world that we can scream as loud as we want when we make love.

But...

We don't make love. We just fuck.

We just fuck and then we take a ride to the nearest McDonald's to get some cheeseburgers and cram them down our throats.

We don't even look at each other anymore. We know about souls and windows to the soul so well that we haven't made eye contact in years.

We have two babies that we don't know how to hold because we haven't held each other in a while. We keep forgetting everything.

Our babies already have psychological problems. Alyssa has taken habit to lying on the floor when her babysitter is over. She pulls at the hem of her skirt and cries, "Save me! I'm dying."

Can you believe how much more she knows than we do? At one point, maybe I knew too.

But...

We keep forgetting everything.

*by mariah welch*

## Immaculate

She stood silent at the sight; shock penetrated every individual pore of her painted cheeks. Tension crushed her teeth together like a coffee grinder. She couldn't cry, not today, not. Today. Though apparently only she held standards to accompany the stained lips, elongated lashes, the fluttering dress that glistened in the light – a symbol of innocence befitting the religious steeple in which they stood. Not him – No! Not one day could he withstand temptation of the chinkling ice cubes calling from the odious glass! All her life she only ever heard the clink-clack that reminder her another one gone, like the days of her childhood wasted to the swooping tune of an endless and purposeless rhythm. She should not have been surprised – she had known somewhere within, hadn't she?

*by jessica price*

## She is a wedding

She is a wedding,  
chiffon masked truth,  
feral tugging beneath white cake.  
She is stained gossamer,  
a blushing bridal chamber slick with sweat,  
a harlot's divan stretched with virgin sheets.  
She is rice, and doves, and flutes of chilled champagne,  
moaning stifled under singing bells.  
She is a wedding,  
sex concealed in swaths of lace,  
the lie the congregation smiles upon,  
legitimate sin.

*by sarah hartman*

## Labyrinth



*by sarah hartman*

## What the Living Look Like

She held the corpse to her,  
pretending he was hers a second more,  
but a second or a lifetime wouldn't change that he was gone.

I'll hold you in my arms,  
and pretend that you can't see,  
the deadness in my eyes,  
when your dead eyes look at me.

She forced his neck back,  
it was stiff,  
placing another kiss on frozen lips.  
They didn't respond, but they didn't resist.

I'll watch us mimic lovers,  
and pretend there's undertow,  
imagine friction is devotion,  
and ignore the numb we know.

They didn't know how long she'd been there,  
or how long she would have stayed.  
Prying her from his body had taken little force,  
she'd seen the blood in their cheeks and realized her mistake.

I'll let you clasp me tightly,  
holding onto you the same,  
with epiphany unsighted  
and denial in your name.

If she'd have remembered what the living looked like,  
she'd have cast him away long ago.

*by sarah hartman*

## There Is Still an Awakening

Iraq  
Busy market place around noon  
Car bomb explodes  
Killing hundreds  
Men, women, and children  
The young and the old

Thousands of miles away  
At the base of snowy Oriental mountains  
On the surface of a crystal lake  
A lotus flower blossoms in the sun

*by anthony thomas*

## A Masterpiece

The thick colors painted on  
The three primaries all mixed in  
The dark shades and light hues throughout

The inspiration layered on  
The drive to put emotion in  
The messages hidden throughout

The many masks it puts on  
The view from different eyes within  
The varied messages come out

*by bethany yamrick*

## Abstract



## Fall

Summer  
slit from solstice to equinox  
stumbles away from our sunlit Saturdays,  
dumps its blood on sycamore stretches  
slumps into storm gutter swamps  
and bonfire pyres

Sunset's golden shower soaks  
world in sepia  
mind in nostalgia

September oh-seven  
maple tree scorches sky  
synopses snap, crackle and—  
past  
I can't get around, can't get past  
the pass-the-blame game  
passed sentence un-named  
passing time  
till we pass for  
passed-over

You under that damn tree  
Bright leaves in brown hair  
seventeen or something like it  
Ask me what's wrong  
Tell me it's okay to  
tell you anything  
telltale signs of telling blow  
stretch across ceramic face  
and at once I know  
I told too much  
to tell you anything  
ever again

The world falls from summer to autumn  
freezes from fall to winter  
But season cycle doesn't take you back where you start  
gravity pulls red hands from arboreal wrists  
silences the applause of wind through trees  
leaves freezing breezes howling 'neath your coat  
Once terrestrial, the only return  
is burning  
skyward cinders spell out the story:  
fiery warmth  
supplanted by smokey blues and grays

*by kenneth stucker*

## Biographies—

**Jami Kali Butczynski** isn't quite sure how she ended up where she is. Oh well, though. She's content for now. Who needs memories, anyway?

**Narah Hartman** is a graduating senior English major. Please send money.

**Carli Heston** is a senior at Wilkes University. She intends to graduate in the spring with a degree in English. After graduation, Carli hopes to explore the world, accompanied by her writing to document her travels.

**Justin Jones** is a Junior English Major. He prides himself on his ability to write as well as understand literature in all shapes and sizes. If you ask him what he wants to do with his life, he'll tell you he wants to write a book. In all honesty, you might see him working at a shoe store in ten years, but you can bet anything at all that he will still be reading and writing.

The film about **Lauren Mannion's** life will feature a Cat Stevens song (preferably "Trouble"), a Kandinsky painting (most likely *Composition VII*), a *Goodfellas* reference ("No, you said, 'Spider, Spider'"), and a panning shot of Dean Winchester's 1967 Chevy Impala speeding down a desert road. Tim Burton and Chuck Palahniuk are set to make frequent cameos, but Edward Cullen was requested to sparkle somewhere else. Meanwhile, Lauren spends her free time reading, her work time reading, and her weekends at Bernie's.

Contrary to what you may believe based on her story, **Jessica Price** is not psychotic (maybe crazy, but not psychotic). Like her varied culture, she enjoys pulling many different people and aspects of humanity into her writing.

**Kenneth Stucker** loves writing.

**Mariah Welch** has broken into more abandoned houses than one can count on her fingers. She enjoys falling through rickety floors, walking up and down sloping steps, and getting covered in filth. Mariah once played a piano.

The piano was so old that the keys stuck. Sadly, those were the very last notes the piano ever played. In the summer, Mariah sat underneath a cherry blossom tree and looked at pictures of a Mandelbrot Set. In the winter, Mariah found a notebook in an abandoned house. She took the notebook, sat in front of a waterfall, and read it with a friend. The notebook was filled with love letters. Mariah wrote her friend a love letter. Mariah enjoyed the sound of babies being pushed on a swing-set while walking home one night.

**Bethany Yamrick** is a sophomore at Wilkes, studying communications. She is a happy, bubbly individual. She enjoys photography, spending time with her sisters, and watching cartoons. Her favorite is "The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack" and she encourages anyone who is having a gloomy day to watch an episode and they will realize life is all joy, smiles and happiness and they will instantly cheer up.

**Ryan Bracey, Erin Gallagher, Whitney Patrusevich, Lauren Salem, Adam Burke, and Anthony Thomas** refuse to feed your curiosity.

