

Amanda Sans Bouts du Doigt

I

After a dream in which my fingertips
Were chopped off by a piece of heavy machinery,
At first, all I could think about was
Whether or not anyone would love me:
Amanda Sans Bouts du Doigt.
But now what I wonder is whether or not
My fingertips would be faithful to me,
Or whether they would run away.

II

My fingertips could rewrite history:
They could finger paint
In Japanese kanji,
Making each character more fluid and precise
Than anything the Han dynasty could hope for,
Changing connotations here and there
Of what-happened-when,
And no one would ever know,
Since the writing itself would be so
Beautiful.
Independent, my fingertips would steal
Little girls' Barbie doll shoes;
They would travel in pink rubber soles,
Taking up tap-dancing
And outdoing Gregory Hines.

III

I, however, would lose the ability to play the piano
(As if I really could in the first place).
Think of all the sloppy sonatas and mistimed minuets
That would be lost to the world!
I would never be able to seduce a lover
Without fingertips to caress a cheek;
Performing my artistry on windows in winter
Would be out of the question;
Childhood would be twice-lost,
Since I couldn't mutilate play-dough
The way I did when I was five;
And I could never do as Bob Seger said in his song,
And turn the page.

Atrophy

Here, in the creased
pearl matchbook
where my imaginary
great-grandmother
hid her train tickets,
is where I stall.

I've folded
half-dead fireflies
in the starched hem
of my white gauze dress.
I've drowned
in the caramel foam
seascape of grass and sky
and clouds.

I've spun
neon and uncertain,
baked and perfect,
through wet evenings
and chalk faces.

I've stopped
sleeping at midnight,
curled in the nest
of the unblinking hatchlings,
who curve into my spine,
who burn, who never falter.

Maggie Johnston

Fiend

The day was muddy and cold. It seems as though every last day of school each year has been the same--cold, and cloudy, foreboding. That day was the first last day that I didn't care about what came next.

Early before the big event, I power-walked through the school, leaving recycling boxes at logistical places throughout the hallways. The sweat was forming a soft cushion along my upper lip, and my peach deodorant was starting to wear through to the less artificial smell of my body. When the students began pouring out of the classrooms, I stood sentinel in the middle of the hall, looking desperately up and down to make sure the boxes were being filled. However, they were ignored, pushed to the corner, hidden behind the overflowing stack of papers stuffed into the blue trash bins.

"Hey! Use this!" I tried to shout over the banging lockers, grabbing my hand down into a sticky black trash bag, extricating three new notebooks. The 250 sheets of paper inside each spiral bound pad were unused, except for 20 SAT vocab words scribbled across the first ten pages.

"Put your paper in the recycling bin!" I shouted repeatedly, my voice drying out like burning toast as I raised the empty cardboard box high above my head.

No one turned, except for one boy, who, seeing my box, yelled,

"Hey, lemme use that."

I tossed him the box. He pulled on the loose-leaf papers lining the metallic walls of his locker, dropping some of them into the small box.

“Good job!” I encouraged him. Next came a ratty white gym shirt, followed by a half-eaten Twix bar.

“Just put paper in there,” I tried to explain to him.

“Huh? Oh.” He went back to unsticking the candy wrappers from the bottom of his locker.

Hearing shouting down the hall, I turned, sliding on my dirty socks towards the end doors.

“There’s no more space!” some kid was shouting as he threw his binders on top of the trash. The three bins were already overflowing with an abyss of goodies, including science fair poster boards, old campaign stickers, and spare socks streaked with Winterfresh gum. Paper was sliding loose down the hall towards the exit doors.

“Hey! Put your paper in these boxes! Look! They say ‘Recycle’!” I grabbed one of the big recycling boxes that had doubled as a trash bin/football from a little boy surfing on the ripped posterboards and paper scraps. A few hands began to stretch towards the cardboard box, filling it gradually with paper sheets.

Looking up, I saw a blonde girl knocking half-unstrung binders towards a bursting trash bag. Her shirt explained that she was a “HOTTIE” in neon pink across the front. I power-walked towards the broken trash bag, and as she lifted her tapered fingers once again to fling another binder towards the plastic, I swooped down from where I stood towering over her and caught the blue binder in mid-air.

“Whooah,” she said, startled and breathless as she looked up at me, awe in her eyes.

“Hey, this is a nice binder,” I said pleasantly as I scoped it out. “I Love Willie!” was sharpied across the front, and engraved with miniature hearts in magenta ink. “You don’t want to save this for next year?” I asked her.

“Nooo.” She said decisively, as a boy’s picture, presumably Willie’s, fell out from the confines of the binder’s metallic clasps. It was ripped across the front, the crease deforming his face into a basketball-shaped pudge.

“Well, do you mind if I save it? No point in wasting a useable binder.”

“You can have it,” she said and went back to her locker.

“Hey, you can use this recycling bin for any of your paper.” I handed one to her.

“Oh, thanks.” As she turned back to the metal locker, her expression reminded me of that of a moody tan cow trapped behind barbed wire.

I stuck the binder under my arm and carried it with me upstairs, discarding Willie’s crumpled face into the recycling bin as I passed. I catapulted up the stairs two at a time, stumbling across the landing and rounded the stairway corner with zest, arriving just in time to see a cardboard bin totter to a collapse in the corner ahead. “Ahhhh!” I cried mechanically, watching my life’s joy sway and crash before me and the grubby smell of my feet. “Where did my shoes go?” I wondered as the smell assaulted me. “What! No time for that!” I reprimanded myself for the lull in action, and charged ahead towards the now half-alive recycling bin. I slid to my knees, lunging towards the treasure, collecting as many scraps of paper I could as I neared the site. I felt strangely as if I had entered into

some 49er's obsessive dream, discovering gold being tossed aside as I grabbed for it in vain, but felt it slip from my hands.

A strapping young man appeared at my side. "Can I help you with that?" He asked me, peering from behind green-tinted sunglasses that overwhelmed his petite face in their bug-eyed size and appearance. He lifted his hand slowly to remove the glasses, his head swooping down to meet the hand in a grace reminiscent of some type of majestically retarded swatting of a fly. Suddenly, his body buckled, hand colliding with jade glasses and whisking them upwards to the blank forehead, and he was sliding away from me, his stomach imprinted onto the side of a sprinting plastic trash bin. Cackles could be heard from the direction of my peripheral vision.

Something rose up inside of me, something that rarely revealed itself. "You fools!" I suddenly heard myself scream. "He was helping me with recycling, saving our planet, which is more than any of you is doing!!" I left my guard at the wounded recycling bin and lunged towards them, ripping my well-used sock from my toe, preparing to create any weapon necessary to avenge the terrorism. They hesitated for a moment, distracted by the sight of their lives flashing before their eyes, or, perhaps, in disbelief and mockery. Then they burst out into a screeching buffoonery of hysterics as they fled into the safety crevice of the boys' bathroom. Fuming, I turned back to my job and jumped towards the bin at my disposal.

I found the boy cowering behind the uneroded half of the recycling cardboard, nursing the papers as he stacked them from the floor onto his lap. Glasses gone, his face looked comfortingly familiar, as if he was one of my fellow brethren in recycling.

“Don’t worry about those stupid guys,” I said. “We’ll dump them in the trash can, where they belong!” I offered this as a consolation prize; the thought of their being consigned to the trashcan was a sure winner that could satisfy any tree-hugger. He smiled politely. I knew he was a kindred spirit.

We trailed the heaving bin out towards the recycling dumpster, the cardboard leaving trails of tears as we nudged it towards its final home in this form. I tried to console it, saying, “Don’t worry, you won’t have to live out your life miserably buried under others; you will be put to good use again and again! Just think how helpful to the world you will be!” Obviously, there was no response, until I heard a faint chortle from the workhorse of a boy in front of me.

“Isn’t that wonderful?” I said. The back strips of his hair flapped against his acne-assaulted neck like floppy felt ears, making him seem even more donkey-like.

“Sure is,” he said quietly, a dull twang to his voice.

I just didn’t understand. His voice wasn’t familiar, but most everything else about him was: his face, his hair, all the basics. Where had I met him before?

Stunningly, it came to me. He was the mirror image of my brother! No wonder he looked familiar! However, his hair was a little too long. And his chin was sprouting with sprigs of whiskers. And his nose was smaller and more round. Actually, he didn’t really look like my brother at all. I guess that wasn’t it.

The recycling bin was a big red aluminum container that attracted all sizes of flies, even though I have never before known flies to seek paper. We dumped the remains of the

cardboard box into the half-empty bin. I mournfully thought of the stuffed trash bags in my memory.

Where were other people who cared? Were the awkward scruffy boy and I alone in this venture? I thought I had at least enlisted a small group of helpers.

Finally, I spotted two fellow cohorts sorting through the trash bags, looking for scraps of paper to salvage.

“Where is everyone?” I mouthed at them. My voice was almost gone now, especially after the attack on the boy’s predators.

“Who?”

“Our fellow recycling troops!” I felt like I should have said, “recycling troupes,” since these clowns were daintily picking up slips of paper piece by piece with the farthest ends of their fingertips, and squirming as they tossed them prissily towards the spacious recycling box. I could tell this was going to take a while.

“Recycling troops?” They asked. “What does that mean?”

“The other people who signed up to help out with this!” My voice sharpened like a pencil tip extruding from my lips. “And why don’t you guys just pick up all the paper at once! It would go a lot faster.” I was nearly at my wit’s end with these fools.

“Well, we have to go back to class soon anyways,” they said, becoming indifferent and aloof.

I closed my mouth to hold in the tsunami of my exasperation, letting it burst instead from my nose, so that it morphed into the sound like that of a snorting mule. The girls stifled a giggle. I let out a “Harrumph,” as I swiveled away from them, nearly

knocking the poor green sunglasses boy down as he stood behind me, waiting intently for the orders, “Forward March!”

“Let’s go!” I barked, and headed towards the exit ramp.

“There are some weirdos downstairs,” the girls called after me as I knocked the door open.

These weirdos turned out to be the rest of our recycling cohorts, whom apparently these girls never bothered talking to. They had assembled into clumps of groups, who stood around trash bins, pulling out papers from the debris, with the enthusiasm of city-folk learning to shuck corn, except, they were not decked out in clean overalls and crisp plaids, but in tie-dye and hemp. Before I even smelled the hemp, I could anticipate the all-too-familiar aroma of bad fish, after its clash with their perspiring necks and wrists.

“Good work, folks!” I shouted, almost fainting from enthusiasm. A few slackers looked up. The rest of the dedicated crew didn’t flinch at my comment, but remained as they were, head bared down towards the trashcans. The recycling bins surrounded their circle like a lotus flower, petals expanding before our eyes as they slipped white and tan sheets of paper into the bins. A few random colors shocked me from my blissful reverie.

“Finally,” I said dreamily, “we are getting somewhere.” The boy beside me let out a few troubled coughs, like the twitching of a bunny rabbit’s schnozzle. I turned to my servant who had followed so closely on my heels and so deeply in my heart. What a trooper he had been! He had stood by me when all hope had seemed unattainable. But these glossy thoughts were interrupted as I involuntarily found myself staring intently at

the dry skin on his cheeks. Those cheeks looked so familiar! I was sure I had seen that texture somewhere before.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Uhh, my name? Oh, its, umm, Willie.”

Willie. Willie?! Flashbacks of his face, smooshed abnormally between the folds of a Fujifilm picture, came rushing back to me. How could “Hottie” have let this dear soul go?! I stood for a moment, in disbelief that anyone could be so blind.

Finally I spoke, quietly and with empathy. “I’m sorry about Hottie. She must be lost to let you go.”

“Hottie?” His voice expressed puzzlement. “Umm, you mean Patrice?”

“Who? Oh, yes.” I assumed that was her name. After all, even if it wasn’t, what difference did it make? He was still a hurt being. Hurt even more than the cardboard bin we had carted out for rebirth. Even more than Patrice herself whose face had looked like that of a confused cow behind its barbed wire cage. Even more than the stupid guys who had left dents on Willie stomach and soul before retreating in terror, and hopefully, guilt, to the bathroom hideout. Even more than me, who was traumatized by the apathy of my class mates. What had Hottie, I mean, Patrice, done?! Left Willie to die here without her! A traitor, that’s what she was!

“Yeah, I dumped Patrice a couple of months ago.”

“Dumped? You mean like put her in the trash?” I thought to myself. “What an insult to even tell someone you were dumping them. If I was told that I couldn’t even be

recycled, I would just perish right then and there!” Tempering my words, I ventured, “What did Patrice do to deserve such cruel treatment?”

“She tried to give me a mullet with her hairspray.”

I didn’t even venture to ask for an explanation. Needless to say, the use of hairspray, fuming unnecessary CO2 emissions into the air, was, in my book, grounds for immediate “dumping;” the only kind allowable.

“Well, glad to hear you gave her what’s what.” I said stridently. But I couldn’t help it; images of Patrice trapped behind that barbed wire fence kept flashing into my mind. “Surely,” I thought, “she is just an innocent girl, ignorant that she is harming anyone. Surely,” I thought, “she did not mean to hurt our world, and she could perhaps mend her ways, if she was guiding along, lovingly but insistently.” I turned, pensive, towards Willie. He was busy trying to reach an itch on the lower left side of his back with his superhuman green sun-glasses that were now bent out of shape after having been precariously extracted from the infamous trash can.

“Willie.” I spoke with authority, and seriousness.

“Huh,” he said, his mind still focused on that swelling bug bite.

“Willie!” My voice this time sounded like that of a recently hatched chicken. It elicited a glance upward, his mouth open in a stunned position. “You’ve got to go back to Hottie,” I said. “She needs you to teach her about conservation and recycling. This is... a must.” I spoke with finality, an abruptness to my voice.

He ceased to scratch his back, and stood up straight, looking up at me with silence. Slowly, he began to form words. “Patrice doesn’t want to learn about recycling,”

he said. “She wants to become either a cosmetologist, or a car mechanic. She won’t listen to me.”

“But she must learn sometime.”

“I know,” he sighed somberly, “But... now is not her time.”

I stared at his dry cheeks, and the flaps of his hair sloping across his neck, the pink stripes of his shirt, and the wall stretching far above his head. “What could one do?” I wondered.

“For now,” Willie spoke on, “We have got to play our part in saving Mother Earth. We can’t be brought down by the hair-sprayers of the world. Look at all our fellow carers around us!” He lifted his hand, palms upward, towards the groupies splayed softly around the trashcans. “We can’t force others to love our earth, we can only toil on.”

“That’s a sad state of affairs,” I grieved. But I began to look around, seeing for the first time this wasteful world with fresh eyes. The guffaws of the trashy students peering through the dirtily streaked glass of the class doors smoothed into slow motion, their cat-calls becoming muted as they raised their heads in an expression of bliss. The buck-toothed smirk of a youngster who stood mockingly crushing a Pepsi can between the glass and his angry palms became muted to me, almost, somehow, poetic. I felt his joy. I sensed his pain. The aroma of the drying Pepsi as it dripped down the doorway refreshed me, made me whole. A chick leaned against the wall, her delicately straightened hair adorned with a light blue bow, watching her M&Ms wrapper slip carelessly from her lips. These after all, were my fellow brethren in preservation, however futile and worthless their plight seemed at the time. What could I do but smile?

“You’re right,” I said, turning to Willie. “We just have to keep on keeping on.”

He grinned back at me, his feathery whiskers shifting at odd angles as his cheeks stretched. I put my arm around his shoulders, in true tree-hugger style, and gazed down at the papers flapping like prenatal swan chicks, gawking cheerily as they glided along the glossy halls at my feet.

Emrys Jaskwhich

Hair Mythology

It is not true that wavy hair means you are destined to die by an overdose of water. The actual truth is that someone in your female ancestry was a mermaid in disguise.

People believe short hair means that in your childhood you had a traumatic experience which caused your hair to shrink. The truth, though, is that when you were in the womb, your mother often played classical violin to you, and your hair feels nostalgia for the grace notes.

Straight hair is often associated with people who have a fear of neutral colors, but it is really associated with love for caged tigers.

An old wives' tale is that curly-haired people dream about throwing blown glass against broken-down nursing homes, but in actuality, curls appear on the heads of those conceived around the time of the maypole festival.

Long hair is thought to be more common on people that have a fetish for the taste of salt, but it is really a result of fishing for pearls.

It is a belief that people with oily hair often go to the grocery store twice every week for skim milk. Actually, they are descendants of desert nomads that had a curse put on them by a yellow and brown corn snake for being jealous of the sun.

Dry hair isn't formed of fossilized amber; it actually comes from insufficient exposure to dark closets in old houses.

Those who have dandruff are supposedly eaters of snowflakes. With research, however, it has been proven that the sun has rusted their scalps.

People with thick hair are said to have been pirates in their past lives. The real truth is that their fathers were, when young, prone to roll in red clay.

Flat hair is assumed to come from an obsession with pillowed slumber, but it is the combination of that and by being related to a man with the love of dry cleaning.

Gena Roberson

Billow

The weight of the world lingers
like a lost swarm of darkness in Antarctica's astral summer.
It is a bulging mass that drags its toes across eyelids in the night
before dwelling between velcro thighs and bouncing wildly off of suburbia,
imprinting bruises on trembling hands disguised in diamonds.
With fragility it taps on the vertebrae of a young boy in a sandbox,
and spends a week of sleep at the household,
causing his earlobes to swell with secret tragedies of shipwrecks.
The solidity is audible just before daybreak as it paces near idle streetlights,
leaving a mere flicker for the mother who flips the switch in a dim corridor.
This weight compresses and deflates and shifts constantly,
as if by tiny porcelain saucers that rest on our shoulders.
It travels alone within its endless boundaries, guilty for the pain it has caused,
until it tumbles unnoticed next to a silver compass in a pleated skirt pocket,
and the prematurely worn hand that reaches in won't mind anyway,
for she claims the cardinal directions seem only to tear her apart,
and since the burden awakens each moment in a different scene,
it departs from the young girl too soon,
just missing the prolonged sigh that streams from her lips
as she releases her first pound of grief.

Anne Hasuly

Buried Voice

Once I demanded it be the sun,
for a star can feign power and bliss
and yet never shine on itself--
but I cannot be so generous;
my voice erupted from my throat
wishing it was smoother or pinker,
emerging as a mute sliver of light
that presented itself in hesitant wavelengths,
no longer able to suppress
its murmur of sickly thunder
and tiny clattering wings,
hoping to stain fingertipped compassion,
lure unlucky births back into innocence.
This is a sound that interrupts lucid dreams,
ends them.

Anne Hasuly

Catch-and-Release Poet

I cast a bobber into the water;
a hooked worm wriggles somewhere below it.
I am a fisherman.
I put a pen to a piece of paper.
A scribble mark will soon follow.
I am a writer.
I don't have a 36" Bigmouth mounted on the wall.
I don't write snooty things like
"The lake's serenity overwhelms me."
No, simpler is better,
A worm will always beat a flashy lure.

The idea strikes.
The bobber is yanked under the water,
and the pen begins to scratch the paper.
Both of them are nibbling on my outstretched lines
I reel in,
painfully slowly.
The line is taut--
my work is fighting me.
Grammar will not be lost this story
Dragging the conclusion,
I see my work struggle,
swimming in directions
I'd never thought of before.
The end is close.
I feel exhilaration running through me.
Revising, the net swoops into the murky water.
Soon I hold a small, white,
gem-like body in my hands.
I can see the soul of my labor.
It is beautiful.
But it is not mature.
I let it go.
I will catch it again
another day.

Andrew Chinn

Choose Your Own Adventure

Last night, as I lay in bed with my mom scratching my back, I asked her if she'd ever thought about how things would be different if we had lived in a different house. I remember looking at many houses before we moved to Greenville, and trying to project the image of myself into them: a personal movie of my future. She paused and replied, "No, have you?"

We looked at houses in the Augusta Road and North Main areas, because those were designated for Greenville High. A childhood friend (the only person I knew in Greenville) lived in the North Main area, which accounted for my stubborn "Ew-I-don't-like-any-of-these" attitude about the Augusta Road houses that were shown to us. We began with a house overlooking the bustling Grove Road and one on the equally bustling Faris. Both were cute, but we put them on the bottom of the list because of the busy area. A house somewhere in the vicinity of Aberdeen seemed very nice (the roads get so confusing back there, I can't possibly remember the exact address). The only problem was that I couldn't seem to get my movie reel to fit in the projector. We put that house on the bottom of the list, too. Next, we investigated a horrid bungalow beside Augusta Circle Elementary. And when I say beside, I mean *right* beside...right in the mushy red clay completely surrounding the area due to construction. "Oh...um, construction should be finished at the end of this year," the realtor said as she saw our disgusted faces. We looked around it anyway, finding in it the wreckage and leavings of an irresponsible bachelor. She apologized profusely, shooing us out of the house as quickly as possible, and showed us the final Augusta Road house. When we pulled up, a family was piling out of their Suburban. They had a red Greenville Raiders bumper sticker, making me even more anxious to be a part of the school and the city. It was owned by missionaries who were moving to some third world country and needed to sell the place. It needed a good deal of work and didn't seem to be well-cared for. Half of the front porch was made of plywood, making it seem a cover-up for possible structural problems. The carpet needed to be taken

up, the wood floors needed to be refurbished, the kitchen to be redone, the backyard bulldozed and replanted, and air-conditioning installed upstairs. When asked my opinion, I told Mom that when I moved, I wanted to end up in a house that didn't need work, one where I could immediately feel "at home."

So off we went to North Main. I was considerably happier now that we were moving in the direction I wanted. We were shown a few, none any better than the Augusta houses. However, one house nestled in deep evergreens and oaks had a hot tub, which I could see as a good vehicle for making friends. But sadly, the house was more broken down than the missionary house. A little broken down ourselves by this point, we moved on. Accidentally, we came upon a For Sale by Owner, Open House Today! sign. The realtor made a sharp turn after spotting it, taking us down a road that happened to be the home of one of Mom's friends and also about two blocks away from my friend. We stopped in front of a house that seemed to smile at me. It had a white porch and swing, and a tiny but beautiful front lawn. As soon as we entered the house, lulling music filled my ears and a smell of freshly baked cookies wafted into my nose. (They obviously knew how to make a great first impression and a sale.) It had pleasant little touches, such as a professional hood over the range and terracotta tiles in the kitchen. I can't remember if I tried to picture my things in it, but I don't think it would have mattered, because I had already made up my mind as soon as I got a whiff of the cookies.

I have frequently thought about what my life would have been like if we had decided to live in the missionary house or the hot tub house. If we had chosen the missionary house, I wouldn't have ridden to school every day with my childhood friend, which would have made my first day even more uncomfortable. I would be way closer to the gym, which would keep me from giving in to the excuse of "It's too far away." I would have already gotten extremely upset with the traffic, and probably would have caused an accident by now. I wouldn't have to fight over which of us gets the only bathroom first after consuming some awkwardly digesting Chinese food. I wouldn't have to worry about invading Mom's space

when my friends are over. But I would have had to worry about the construction of the inside of our house, and the horrible heat during the summer while the upstairs air conditioning was installed, and also about whether the foundation was going to collapse next after the rest of the porch. If we had chosen the hot tub house, I would have had a reason to invite people to my house, an immediate opening for friendship and possible manipulation by others. However, I would have had to endure both the worry of the cramped living space and the burden of fixing up of the house.

I know the house we chose was the right one, but something always makes me wonder--what if there had been other houses up for sale the day after we decided to buy our current one? What if *that* house had been “the one”? Sometimes I wish my life were like those books that offers you options of which way to go in the plot. It would say, “If you want to: A. Choose the hot tub house, go to page 30. B. Keep thinking about which house you want and wait for more to go on the market, go to page 20. C. Choose the missionary house, go to page 50.” Then, once one path of the plot ended, I could go back to the decision that led me there and choose a different path until I finally decided which life I liked best, and go on from there. Each path would lead me to more forks in the road, developing a large web that would cover my brain so heavily, it would be crushed under the load.

Katherine Stehling

Death of a Star

It fell into my hands, cool and jagged,
It meekly told me of its prominence,
Its eminence.
It told me it was beautiful.

I buried it deep in the packed sand,
With a reed for its headstone.

Margaret Mason Tate

Directions for User

Never misunderstand the rules completely,
or you won't know exactly how to break them.
Always stampede with blueprints in hand, but release them freely,
or James Richardson will whisper a reminder that one who sticks to his plan becomes the
man he used to want to be,
who takes nothing eternal for less than a grain of salt,
yet remains aware of his cholesterol levels at all times.
Everything we give is returned,
though it may not be measured by the intentions with which we gave.

Jillian Levy

February

The dog rubs her nose
into the snow
fallen fresh by the bird feeders.
I am standing hands-in-pockets
beneath the high, tensile fingers
of a tree; barefoot
in his around-the-house slippers,
I wiggle my toes.
I haven't showered yet.
The dog doesn't hold it against me.
She is elated. Her brown eyes
pierce me as she lifts her head.
The snow is sticking to her fur,
to the sweet beard beneath her chin.

Casey Burnside

An Ounce Of Prevention

An alarm rang out through the entire ship, alerting the passengers that their presence was demanded on deck. Mothers grabbed the arms of their disobedient children and began their wait for the elevators to carry them up. Businessmen with their wives still in their fine dress lined the hallways, frowning in disbelief. One woman glanced out a small circle shaped window and shouted, "I'm not going out in that monsoon!" Her husband replied, "Not in these Prada shoes!" The passengers became more restless as the rain pounded against the cruise ship's steel frame, and the boat began to moan with the tension of the hurricane like winds. The passengers were baffled because they had only entered the ship moments earlier, and now a deafening buzzer rang throughout the cabin walls. A couple in the lower class section of the liner switched on their TV to discover that the storm outside had been brewing for weeks, and that the entire coast of Miami had been preparing for it. The weatherman blurted that this was going to be a rough one, and his advice was to stay inside and hope for the best. The winds slammed into the sides of the ship, and the red lights flashed on as the alarm became overpowering. The husband looked at his wife and said, "If we want to escape from this storm, we need to cooperate so that we can get going towards the Bahamas." So they began their journey up to the elevator lobby to wait for its return. The elevator dinged and the upper deck awaited them on the other side of the doors which slowly drew open as the rain filtered in with each drag of wind. The rain came down in sheets, and the passenger quickly realized there was no escape from the tortorous weather. The ship's crew lined the decks nearest the rails; swinging over their heads were many tiny lifeboats. Through a large megaphone, the captain began shouting to the passengers that this was completely routine. He emphasized that in order for the ship to be allowed to depart, every passenge had to load him or herself into a lifeboat and be lowered 12 stories into the icy water. This was their first fire drill.

Suzi Russell

Roots

On a particular day, Amy came home from work and, as usual, Mike wasn't home. When she started making dinner for them, she found a note on the fridge that hadn't been there that morning.

Amy, please water the plants.

Mike

He often left her little notes so stupid that she disregarded them, but for some reason, she decided to do this anyway. When she had finished making the chicken pot pie, she stuck it in the oven to bake at 350 degrees, and then she went outside.

She looked around for the alleged garden. She had never really taken the time to stand outside and see what life surrounded her with, so it wasn't surprising that she didn't immediately see it.

She figured that it had to be small, because their backyard wasn't very big. Finally, after several minutes of wandering in small, tight circles, she turned around, and there it was, right in front of her tucked between two trees, yet larger than she had expected. Slightly confused, she went and got the hose.

Amy didn't know if they were his plants, but she knew they weren't hers. Mike, she guessed, had always watered them without her noticing, since they were all in full bloom, almost overgrown. It was a riot of tulips, pansies, violets, azaleas, roses and peonies. There was even a Chinese Maple, and a small herb bed from which Mike must have gotten the herbs when she needed them for cooking. She spent a while watering the plants, and then went inside to check on the dinner. Not long after, Mike pulled in.

Amy was standing at the cupboard preparing to set the table when Mike walked in. He set down his things in the entryway and went to find Amy. She was leaning over the table setting it like a waitress would.

"I see you watered the garden," he said quietly.

"Huh?" she said. "Oh, yeah, I did."

"What did you think of it?"

"Nice, I guess. A lot of work. Hey, did you notice that there's a sale at K-Mart this weekend? I thought we could get a new shower curtain."

Kaylyth Harris

Love Song

I

This grain of salt
which wedges itself
into the groove
of my tongue
is sometimes set
rolling towards
the freedom of
my half-parted lips.

That time
when you grabbed
my shadow
and shook,
I saw the salt
fall and dissolve
into a pool
of pyrite and I saw
The Second Coming
played backwards
on its surface
where rapture was
a ripple and the settling
dust was cast
as Jesus.

II

And I will lick friction
moss,
and hope your hands
love steam;
and I will call parking lots
beautiful,
and hope your cheeks
love dashboards;
and I will carve letters from
my finger oil,
and hope your elbows
love greeting cards;
and I will chew and swallow
my silhouette,
and hope that your throat
longs to wrap itself
in half-finished portraits,
as I long to wrap myself
in the ashes of your older
sister's blue turtleneck
that she lost
in the dream fire.

III

Lightning won't sing
love songs,
but when my hair rises
and the rain breaks like
Mother's resolve on my shoulders,
I know that you'll hear me
carried through the current
of a million broken blades
of grass.

Maggie Johnston

Soap!

There are some things that cannot be erased, wiped clean, or nullified. My plan is to become a scientist and hide away in a laboratory, experimenting with various chemicals, gelatins and glycerin, in order to create the perfect recipe for soap that can clean anything, no matter how soiled—no matter how physically or emotionally soiled.

It will be clear, not a dark color, to coat the evils of the world, without hiding them. With the prototype, the user will have to spend hours removing it from himself with a cheese grater, as the soap will cling to every imperfection, lie, and bad gene. Eventually, this error will be corrected, and the soap will take on a translucent blue tint—as many years of research have shown that imperfections *despise* blue. It's not a pale blue, nor is it dark, or anywhere in between. It's grayish, with a slight purple tint to it—so maybe, it shouldn't be called blue, but rather, purplish gray, or maybe grayish purple, depending on the viewer, and the amounts of each color included in the mixtures of dyes.

In the future, no longer will each person be forced to mend his or her ways in the traditional manner by apologizing and begging for forgiveness, or by “making it up” to the one who is wronged. The user will just have to rub the slightly gooey soap into his pores, wait ten minutes, wash it away, and everything will be better again. Until that day, however, it is suggested and recommended by doctors everywhere that the potential user attempt to avoid all sticky situations and substances, except for honey--normal soap works just fine for that.

Michele du Jardin

Morning Ritual

If she takes the pills she will hate herself
but everyone else will love her.
If she doesn't take the pills will respect herself
but everyone else will hate her.

Every day
she swallows the first one- -
instantly there is a twinge of remorse in her stomach.
Down goes the second one- -
now she is annoyed with herself.
Then it's time for the last one of the morning,
as she spirals into a pit of self loathing.

But it's done.
She will live another day
as the bright, quiet one.

Jillian Levy

Ocular Introspection

Sometimes I stare so hard,
my eyes dry out.
I blink,
tears rising
to rehydrate them,
tears spilling
in overproduction,
tears flowing
because I feel so lost sometimes,
I can't tell if I'm running away or being pulled.

Amanda Pruitt

Ode to Dirt

The day I was born,
you were there
outside waiting for me.
And the first time I met you,
I could not help
but lay my hands
upon your wind-blown body,
and raise you to my mouth
to taste your richness.

I could have spent hours
just rubbing my hands across you
at daycare;
as long as I could,
I'd ignore the cries of teachers calling me;
then later, I'd bite my nails,
savoring the leftover taste of you.

I joined my puppy when he dug into you,
covering myself up to my elbows,
hating when I had to go in to wash off,
red clay spiraling down the bath tub drain;
I dreaded the soapy scent that always came after.

I made mud pies from you
in my mom's metal mixing bowls,
shoving my hands in, kneading you slowly,
letting you sit, then picking you up in clumps,
and patting you into pancakes.
My mom would never allow me to eat you,
but I'd occasionally steal a bite
before she made me spit you out.

Why should you forever be covered by pavement,
never to be stepped upon by barefoot children?
Yet I worship the construction sites
where you are piled high above my head.

I remove my shoes and socks
so I can dig my feet into you,
stirring dust in the air, taking a large breath,
holding it in as long as possible,
sorrowfully letting go,
loosing the grains of dust in my nose.

The ground is barely wet from yesterday's rain.
Letting you cake under my shoes,
I bend down on my bare knees
To rub you on my fingers,
Painting with earthy colors upon my face,
Rubbing the burnt sienna upon my forehead,
Adding wisdom to my face, wrinkles of the old,
Covering my arms with brown ember color,
Making myself ethnic with your history.

I often see your brother when I visit the ocean.
I lie upon him in my bathing suit,
Catching loose rays of sun,
Watching his constant battle with the tide.

Gena Roberson

On Sato's 323 #324, Yotsukura, 1996

Stars migrate from gold
To stainless steel,
Choosing purpose
Over ornament,
Construction
Over stagnation.

They flee for fear of uselessness,
The need for utility driving them
To press onward toward the steel.

Margaret Mason Tate

On Sato's #60, 1990

Stars float down the Gilmore,
Spherical and airy,
Illumined orbs that barely skim
The brown, turgid water.

They collect like wishes
In the mouth
And are drawn to the shore,
To house forgotten fantasies,
Too radiant to view.

When a star falls,
I know where it goes.
Often, I follow it
To the Gilmore
To see if it is one of my dreams
That has been beached.

Margaret Mason Tate

Radiance

Light bends,
laying siege to your body,
encircling your waist,
slowly creeping up the small of your back,
then glazing your shoulder blades.
It drips onto your toes and fingers
as it tickles along the back of your neck,
making the hair stand up and applaud
the sensation of shining.
It beads on your lashes like rain;
it spreads across your cheeks
like the make-up that you say you need.

Andrew Chinn

Radical

I was six, and my tooth was halfway out of my mouth already.
The blood seeped into my chin and shirt.
I was running frantically between my parents' bathroom at one end of the house and the
one I shared with my siblings on the other.
I would get to one bathroom, and rinse the blood from my hands and my poor wounded
tooth, then flee to the other, to repeat the process.
Mother tried her hardest to get me to let her pull it out.
I wouldn't let her.
I had to wait until Dad got home so he could use his big, strong hands.
It would only take one jerk.
I expected him to come home any minute.
Until then, I kept up my weary marathon.
My sister would sometimes come to me to see the little aberration that wanted so badly to
leave its home.
That confused me to no end.
Why would my tooth want to leave me so badly as to hurt himself?
He was bleeding and hanging on by a thread.
Was this suicide?
I could not make up my mind.
It seemed like forever, though it was actually just twenty minutes, before my father trudged
into the house, grumbling.
I think my mother tried to warn him about my hysterics, but I will never know if she
succeeded.
I trailed my father to his room trying my best to explain my predicament through the flow
of blood.
He set down his bag and went to the bathroom.
He hadn't said anything yet, but I followed, knowing that relief would soon be upon me. He
got his water, and I asked him again to take out my little rebel.
He looked at me.
I recognized that look; my heart contracted.
He started unscrewing the caps to his nightly medications, and said, "You do it. It's not
hard, and it's barely in your mouth."
My heart was completely empty as I faced myself in the mirror.
I saw what I had not seen before:
Though I felt rushed and overwhelmed, my face was actually calm.
How could my eyes be that brown?
I slowly reached up and plucked the pearl from the one string.
Looking at it sadly, I didn't even bother to clean up the blood that had started to make its
own design around the sink.
I set it down by my father, spat one more time, and went to bed.

Rachel Howard

Reading the World

Reading Yehuda Amichai makes me feel like floating. I've read his poetry for an hour now, while the eleven-month-old twins play on the floor. They have been so wonderful today, probably because they too still feel like they are dreaming. Normally, at least Caroline makes my hours babysitting seem like months. She herself has no sense of time, though; one moment of playing with a toy might seem like a lifetime to her, and so when the moment is over, she is crying, ready for me to entertain her once again. That's how it was all the time at first, babysitting for the twins four months ago. Now Caroline has discovered the new art of crawling. She can move across the playroom in enough time to catch the ball I rolled to her without getting distracted. She's amazing; moving with her tiny legs and skinny muscles, she can pull herself up on anything, walk around the room using tall plastic toys, window ledges, her brother, Charlie's head, as her stepping stones. The other day, she discovered the stairs, and learned to pull her miniature body from one step to the next. I walked behind her, alert to her every move, until she reached the top. That was the last time though; we cannot take any chances with this child's life. Today, however, she has no desire to leave this room; her Spanish and English picture books are enough for her. She's already torn the page from one book, a lullaby, and showed no signs of sadness.

It took Charlie about a month longer to learn to maneuver his body from one spot to another. He would get aggravated at first, with his sister playing so pleasantly around the room, catching balls that had gotten loose from his grip, gazing through books that she'd snatched from his lap. I had to comfort him, bring him the toys he could not reach.

And then he would be happy, and learn everything there would be to know about one small toy, maybe a wooden cow, or plastic keys. It doesn't take much to make Charlie happy. He cries when he is hungry or when he falls backward onto the hardwood floor. When I put him into his crib, his soft whimpers are drained by Caroline's uproar, and so I have to pick her up and rock her while she screams in rage. Eventually, she'll fall asleep, I know, but the process is terrifying and bittersweet for me. Her mother keeps a cassette of piano music playing underneath her crib. Sometimes I forget that it is there, and I imagine that Caroline does too. What is it that makes sleeping so horrifying when you are eleven months old? She'll doze off in my arms, my arms that are so tired and worn from holding her all day. In sleep, she is so light that I place her in her crib as if she were a porcelain plate, crystal wine glass, a page of gold leaf, and I wonder if she dreams like I do. Charlie's been put to sleep by his sister's screaming. I rub his back, his feet and his toes, and I say to his sleeping self, "Poor Charlie."

But today, both the twins are wonderful, allowing me to read through the pages of Amichai. It's as if they know that I have had enough, that I am tired and exhausted from watching them, my legs eternally asleep from resting on the floor, my lips burned from singing songs about bananas and farm animals. This, I know, is all that I need, and the next time I am here I will be rejuvenated, as if I've been reworked, turned on, then off, then on again. This mid-February day has been oddly warm. I am wearing my sandals and a short-sleeved shirt, and I've left my jacket on the chair at home. Like me, the sun is alive again. We've both been lost in the fridity of winter, but today is a promise that winter does not last forever, even though I was sure that it did. Today transcends all the

rules and leaves me floating, with the serene help of Amichai and his lines and lines of poetry.

Since the day is so perfect, I decide to take the twins for a walk, share with them how I have felt all day just by being outside. It is hard, putting my book down, breaking the unruffled motions of my mind. But I wrap them in a blanket so that the breeze cannot hurt their toes and bare knees. I walk slowly, take as much time as possible, in the hope that when I return, my hours there will be over. I know this street as if it is my own. I grew up with two best friends whose houses abide along its sidewalks and green lawns. And I have driven it countless times. I forget that it is the twins that I am walking for; they do not make any sound, the handle of the stroller just another presence under my palms.

I walk to the music of Amichai's words as I push effortlessly against the sidewalk's bumps and ridges. Monkey grass and purple flowers grow next to the houses of West Earle, all of their windows clear and watching me as I pass by. As I walk, my focus is on the sky, just as do the twins, even though their faces are shaded from the sun. I'm not sure if I have ever seen the sky so blue. Maybe it is the sun, or maybe it is all the words that rest in my mind, but this blue seems unique. And the few clouds are spindled along the sky's emptiness. I hope that it is not emptiness that fills the sky, I hope that it is everything. All of the world's happiness exists in this sky today, at least all of my happiness, because it has been a long time since I have felt like this. I am assured, reassured, that things are growing, and that along with everything else, I am growing too. More than anything, I am feeling that I want to see things as Yehuda Amichai does. I

want to write poetry that makes people think that the sky is not empty. I want to be eleven months old and start over; see things for the first time again; learn how to walk; taste milk that is cold but warms me; believe that the clouds are angels, and write it all down. That is what I am thinking right now as I pass yard after yard, as the sky churns above me and the ground stands still: clouds are God somehow trying to tell us something—they are his messengers to the human race that has ignored him all this time. I want to answer God because I have received the clouds, because I know that he is there, but I do not know how. And so I am lost as I walk the straight line of Earl Street, and I can only hope that the twins will not be as lost as I am when they are my age. Tomorrow may not be so warm. The weather calls for wintery mixes, and I'll have to huddle in my socks and blankets as I sleep inside. But God continues to give his voices to angels in the clouds, and I continue to labor to translate them.

Callie Plaxco

Enchanted Repast

Breakfast plates set around the table--
my heart aches at this simple scene.
My family never sits down together.
When we do, on that off-occasion,
I am the one running around
setting up, serving, clearing.
But here, there's pleasant small talk,
my friend at my side,
his kind parents radiating tenderness.
I don't usually drink milk.
When I try, I always stir ice into it.
Now, drowning in the feeling of belonging,
I grasp the glass and,
throughout the meal,
succeed in forcing it down.
The offering of a second cup
I politely decline.
Another might break the spell.
Just one glass
should be enough.

Rachel Howard

Reunion

In the past five years since I'd lost contact with my real father's family, I'd always imagined visiting everyone at Christmas and having an all-out soap opera Christmas, with bear hugs, lipstick tattoos imprinted on my cheeks, big tears of happiness, and of course those clichéd sayings of: "My, how've you grown," "We missed you so," and the ever-wonderful "I love you."

I imagined that Christmas with the family would be just as it had been when I was six: the tall, full pine, with mounds of gifts (seemingly the only things keeping it standing), located in the basement-turned-den, the table full of cakes, pies, cookies. Of course, I also expected that my cousins and I would enjoy the same games as we did as those years ago. I expected Mina and I to play with our baby dolls and dress them up in their new outfits we got from Santa that year. And when Mina got upset and cried over something her brother Andrew did--and he always did something to upset her--I would run off to play with him until her wails were muted and her cheeks dry.

Then after lunch, the whole family--aunts, uncles, first cousins and second-- would go downstairs to the den ready to open gifts. But first, Andrew, Mina and I would sing Christmas carols, using the steps leading to the den as a makeshift stage. We'd sing *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, *The First Noel*, *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, and a new version of *Jingle Bells* Andrew taught us, and for which he would get in trouble. The two of us would watch the lecture he got from his mother, Aunt Beth, giggling and laughing through the whole ordeal. The rest of the night we'd sing the new lyrics about grandma having a gun and shooting us in our underwear during the year 1991.

Mina and I would pass out the gifts, stepping over the train at the base of the tree, going around and around, no stops, no passengers, forever traveling in a circle, unable to go anywhere else it might have wanted to go.

Everyone would open their gifts then, littering the thin red carpet of the den with bright wrappings. Mina and I usually got the same things from our relatives, only in a different color. Our Aunt Donna would usually give us each a board game--different ones, of course--and we'd spend the latter part of Christmas playing them with the rest of the family.

I think that the family gave us similar presents to avoid a rivalry among the two of us. It was true; we were very peculiar about who had the best, the biggest, the prettiest. I'm sure that if we'd gone to the same school, we'd be fighting over the same guys.

But what I don't think the family knew was that our biggest rivalry was over who was Aunt Donna's favorite. Aunt Donna and Uncle Chase had not been able to have children of their own—I'd never learned exactly why--and we always fought over who got to sit beside Aunt Donna at the dinner table, while opening presents, while in the car. I don't really know how or when the feud started, but I do know that it was I who had ended it when I'd stopped visiting the family.

My parents got the divorce when I was six, and to be honest, I was happy to have relief from the fighting, I was happy to get away from my father. I still had to visit every other weekend, but I looked forward to those days only because I would get to see my grandparents. I could not have cared less about my father.

But every other weekend had turned into once a month, to every other month, and then to never. It eventually got to the point where going there represented a disruption to my usual routine that I had grown accustomed to and hated to break. My only regret was how rarely I got to see everyone else.

But this Christmas I had managed enough courage to call my grandparents and get an invitation to Christmas lunch.

Aunt Donna and Grandpa met Mom and me in the deserted mall parking lot, and drove me the rest of the way to their house. It was less an act of convenience than a way to prevent my mom and father from crossing paths.

When I first saw my grandfather, it was hard for me to believe it was the same man who had called me Turkey, who had pulled the family in a trailer behind his tractor, and who had told ghosts stories at family gatherings. The man in the car with my aunt was too frail, bony, and his cushioned belly had lost its stuffing. The eyes that used to glint clearly and happily at me were now dulled in color.

Aunt Donna, on the other hand, was exactly the same as five years ago--at least, I think she was. The picture of her in my mind had lost all its brightness, leaving only the coloring book lines. Now that I was in her presence again, everything about her seemed to fill those lines, nothing overlapping.

I spent the time during the ride to my grandparents' home answering my grandpa's and aunt's questions, but I wanted to know about them; I wanted feel as though I had never been gone. But I answered all the questions politely, my stomach clenching and my hands fiddling with the book and notebook I had brought with me as I passed places I recognized from years ago. We pulled into their driveway, moving slowly along the gravel to my grandparents' house that was hidden from the road. More trees had been cut down since I had last visited, and the golf course next door was more visible through the foliage.

At the end of the driveway, we parked behind another car.

"Grayson's here," my grandfather said in his cigar-raspy voice.

So that was my father's car. It was new, much nicer than the crappy piece of shit he drove five years before when I was ten. But I hated the car because it was my father's.

At the front door, my grandma greeted us. She had changed, too, but not as drastically as had Grandpa. Her face seemed shallower, and as her nose looked bigger. I hugged her, feeling like a complete stranger. She was so happy that despite the fact that I

wanted to walk out of her arms and break the awkwardness, I stayed put and let her touch me, see that I was real.

I entered the kitchen and noticed that it hadn't changed much. They had put in new hardwood floors, and the table that used to be cluttered by Grandpa's papers and a small TV was now cleared of its debris; the TV that still sat on it seemed oddly alone. Did Grandma and Grandpa eat at that table now? I had wondered. No one had ever eaten real meals there before. It had been reserved for football games and peanuts and goldfish crackers.

"Your Dad's somewhere here. Go find him."

I moved slowly through the kitchen to the open area at the center of the house. I didn't know what to call the area. A foyer? It was like a junction, the place where the steps to the den, the living room, and the long hallway to the bedrooms and bathrooms met.

I walked across the stone-like floor and looked into the living room. I was surprised to see the Christmas tree. There were empty spots in the branches, making the tree look like a stray cat with bald spots, battle wounds from fights it had fought in musty alleys.

The long hall with the mustard-yellow carpet was empty, and somehow I sensed that my father was downstairs in the den. My legs seemed to move of their own accord down the red-carpeted steps, which I remembered falling down as a child. I walked onto the platform at the bottom of the stairs and turned to face my father.

I had been right; he was in the den, sitting in Grandpa's old chair, letting the sun from the windows silhouette him. I couldn't make out his face in the shadows, but as I got closer I could see his long white hair and frizzy beard. I could smell the smoke from his cigarette before I could see it.

He reached across to the table beside him, putting out his cigarette. He stood taller than I'd remembered. I guess I had assumed that because I had grown, he would have gotten shorter. I had been greatly mistaken.

As he moved closer to me, I stood my ground, not shrinking back like I had when I was younger. I allowed him to hug me, even though the hug lasted longer than I had wanted it to. When he let go, he led me over to one of the two couches in the den. I sat down on Grandpa's couch, which was much softer and more giving than Grandma's because he fell asleep on it every night watching old black-and-white movies.

My father handed me my baby book—why? I had wanted to know. As I noted the condition of the thin book, I became more focused on being mad at him, at the way he had let my baby book become a mildewed mess, the pages a dark ash-grey, the ink on the pages barely legible.

I pretended to flip through the book but I was more aware of the presence in front of me, pacing back and forth. Why wouldn't he sit down?

He asked questions about my life: "How are you doing in school?" "What are you up to?"

I answered politely, telling him that I was making A's and that I had discovered a new interest in writing. He then produced a sheaf of poems he had written. I knew that this was his way to try and bond with me; I knew Grandma had told him everything I'd said to her in my letters.

I skimmed over the poems, not understanding a one of them, not caring to. I hated them, whether it was because of their quality or because of their creator, I didn't know. He told me his plans to get rich from his writing, saying that if he sold a thousand copies of his poems, each at a dollar, then he would have a thousand dollars.

I said nothing of what I was thinking.

He told me that he wanted to wrap some Christmas presents and that he needed help because he wasn't good at wrapping. I followed him up the stairs and down the long hall to my grandparents' bedroom where the presents were, even though I longed to go to the kitchen and help with the food.

On the bed, there was a movie box set, several burned cds, and a calendar. He separated the cds into stacks, telling me whom each one was for. I was surprised when one stack was for me. I didn't want the cds, mainly because the gift was from him, but I had also never heard of the artists. I told him so.

"You'll like them," he said.

I doubted I would.

"Don't you wonder why I never came to see you?" I blurted, but slightly glad to have asked.

"I knew you'd come." It wasn't an answer to my question, but he said the statement with such assurance that I had to get him back.

"I didn't come to see you." I stated the truth. "I came to see Grandma and Grandpa."

"That's okay, baby."

I grew madder, and I kept spilling the truth about how I felt about him. But his voice remained calm, and he continued to call me "baby" and say that I was his girl even after I told him that I'd only visited him as a child because he took me to the mall and bought me things.

I realized that I wanted him to get mad, become the man who had become infuriated with me because I'd spoken to our Japanese neighbors when I was three years old. But he remained calm, too calm, and it unnerved me.

"I told my girlfriends you would come visit. You know, I could have gotten married, but I knew you'd come visit and you're my only girl."

"I wish you'd get married!"

I didn't believe in the women he spoke of; who would date a crazy man like him? I was reminded of the time we were in his old car, on the way to the mall, and he'd pointed to a piece of pink chewed bubble gum stuck to the dashboard. One of his girlfriends had stuck it there, he'd told me. I hadn't believed him.

He was pacing back and forth, and I was crying like a baby. I didn't want to show such a sign of weakness in front of him. But I was, and it made me cry harder.

He brought me tissues. I didn't want him to be helpful.

He said, "That's good. Cry, cry." I didn't want him to say that.

My nose began to bleed, and he brought me a wet rag to put on the back of my neck. I didn't want him to be nice.

After my nose stopped bleeding, I went to the bathroom to look at my appearance.

"Go away," I told him.

He left.

In the mirror I saw that my nose was a giant red cherry. My cheeks were wet with tears, and drops of blood were drying on my pink Old Navy shirt and pants.

Grandma arrived to tell me that Aunt Beth, Uncle David, Andrew, and Mina were driving up. She saw me on the bench in the bathroom, and I know she had no idea what to do. It had probably been a long time since she had dealt with a blubbering child, let alone a blubbering teenaged girl.

I had asked her if she had any makeup I could use to cover up my redness, and she had handed me some corpse-white powder. It didn't help much, but any improvement was better than none.

With the same wet rag I had used to cool down the back of my neck, I tried to clean the blood off my clothes. My pink shirt cleaned up okay, but my pants, on the other hand, stayed the same. I imagined I looked like a homely little girl, and my cousins would have to see me like this.

My cousins were the only ones who hadn't known I was going to be there. As cheesy as it was, I imagined one of those huge welcomings I'd always seen on television.

I walked out the front door with Grandma and Grandpa to greet them when they pulled up. They had a new car, I noted, before the doors opened and everyone piled out.

Aunt Beth and Uncle David were relatively the same, but Mina and Andrew were another matter.

Mina's platinum-blond hair was cut to her shoulders. Her skin was smooth and unblemished. Her braces were gone. She remained taller than me by half an inch, and was dressed in black slacks and a teal sweater, making me feel more of a homely country girl than ever.

Andrew was a lot taller than I'd remembered, over six feet now. He looked like a man, not the boyishly adorable cousin I'd remembered him to be.

"Is that Jessica?" I heard Mina whisper when they saw me.

I imagined that I too had changed drastically since they'd last seen me. My hair was now a cocoa brown and natural, different from the bottle blond I'd tried to be years ago. I had also developed hips and breasts. My face had finally caught up with my nose. I was a stranger to them.

I got a hug from Aunt Beth and Mina, but Mina didn't give me the huge bear hug she used to give, and for which I'd been longing.

At the urgings of Grandma, Mina and I went to the back bedroom to finish wrapping my father's presents. As we carefully folded the paper, we talked about how school was going for us. Mina was a year ahead of me, yet I was taking more advanced classes than her. I explained that this was because my school had doubled up the math and English classes. Slowly, I felt us begin to get into the old rhythm.

But it didn't last for long, since we had to join the rest of the family for lunch, and I wasn't able to fall into the old groove of things because the atmosphere wasn't as personal. Different conversations were occurring all around me, and I couldn't be a part of every single one to get to know everyone again.

I was surprised by Uncle Chase's appearance. His formerly salt-and-pepper hair and broom-cut mustache were now just salt. He smiled, gave me a hug, and moved on.

I fixed my plate with green beans and a few slices of turkey. I wasn't very hungry.

I entered the dining room, not knowing where to sit.

“I’m sitting beside Aunt Donna,” Mina exclaimed when she entered.

Just because I was there, it didn’t mean that I was ready to fall into the same old rivalry. I half wondered if she had fought to sit beside Donna when I hadn’t been there. Besides, the war was over now, and whether Min knew it or not, she had won. I was a stranger now, and a stranger stood no chance.

Instead, I sat at the head of the table, at Grandma’s request. I was the guest of honor, she had said.

“Tea or water?” she asked once I sat my plate down.

“Water.”

I half-expected her to come back holding the plastic Irish beer mug with the red fingernail polish on the handle to tell it apart from Mina’s. But instead, she set beside my plate a glass filled with ice water.

“She has my nose.” My father’s voice rang out as if this was a compliment, but I had always been self-conscious of my rather large nose.

Now I had another reason to hate it.

Once I finished eating, I stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. The same heavy drapes from years before were pulled back, letting in the afternoon light. I remembered playing behind those curtains and shivering in childish fright every time I came across a dead wasp that had gotten caught behind the heavy fabric; they had littered the carpeted floor like tiny, fallen soldiers.

“No one will buy them if they don’t understand them,” I overheard Andrew say. I smiled to myself; it seemed that Andrew felt the same as I did about my father’s poems.

After lunch, everyone sat down in the living room to wait until we could open presents. I wondered which year they had decided to move the tree to the living room.

I looked for the book and notebook I’d set down on a chair before I went to fix my plate. My book was still in the same place, but the notebook was missing. I looked around

and found my father writing in it. I stomped over and jerked it out of his hands, then sat down on the couch across the room between Mina and Grandma the Great, my ninety-six-year-old great grandmother, who still lived by herself.

Mina and I were asked to pass out presents, just we had done five years before, but I was embarrassed to realize I couldn't remember everyone's name or read the handwriting on the presents. I was surprised at the amount of presents I got. Most of what I received was money, because no one knew what I liked anymore. Aunt Beth and Uncle David, who had been unaware I would be there, had sometime during the afternoon found an envelope and slipped a twenty into it. I did get some bedroom slippers from my grandparents--three sizes too small.

I felt bad, as though they had bribed me to come visit. But I didn't want the money; I wanted them to give me a Christmas of the past. I wanted to move the tree downstairs, and regress my family's appearance five years. I wanted the impossible.

I thanked everyone politely, even though I just wished they would take the money back, all two hundred dollars of it. But they didn't, and even if I had asked or suggested they do so, they would have turned deaf ears on me.

The sun began to set as I sat quietly on the couch that was plusher than I'd remembered. No one initiated a conversation with me until my father came over with a newspaper clipping and told me how the reporter should have written a sentence in the article. I tried to explain that using *I* in that article wouldn't be grammatically correct because it was done in third person, but he didn't listen. Even Aunt Donna took his side, saying that it did sound better to her.

I grew lonely, homesick, even though I was in a room full of my family. But I had never felt this isolated, even among my step dad's family at Christmas, who were not even my blood relatives.

It was time for me to go home.

I told Aunt Donna that I was going to call my mom and have her meet us at the mall parking lot. I left the room and made the call, trying to keep the emotions out of my voice. She said she would meet us at the mall in thirty minutes.

I walked back into the living room and announced that it was time to leave.

“I’ll drive you home,” my father announced.

I didn’t think I could be trapped in a car with my father. Plus, I feared he would make a scene when he saw Mom. I also think he hoped to catch a glimpse of my step dad should he be with her.

I sent a look to Aunt Donna, which I’m thankful she could read.

“I’ll just take her. It’ll be easier if I drove her.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“Grayson, she wants me to drive her.”

“I’m her father.”

“I want Aunt Donna to drive me,” I said, crying once again, but this time because I was causing a rift amongst my family.

“I’m driving you!” he roared.

And there he was, the father I’d once known. There was the anger that I knew he had been hiding barely below the surface of his grey eyes. I had a sort of release, now, knowing that I had been right about him, that he was still the same and I wasn’t punishing an innocent man.

“Let Donna drive her.” Grandpa had entered the argument now, and I was almost afraid that yelling would do in his frail body. I was so glad Aunt Beth and Uncle David had left to take Grandma the Great home a few minutes ago. I would have hated for her to see what was going on.

“I’m old enough to make my own decisions, and I chose to ride with Aunt Donna!” I yelled, and then left the house to stand by Aunt Donna’s car. She and Mina

came out a few minutes later with the gifts I had received that day. I was about to get in the car when I heard someone call my name.

By the door of my grandparents' house, Andrew stood with his arms out for a hug. I walked up to him, embraced him around the waist and whispered a sniffled goodbye.

I saw the hug as a sign that he supported me, as a way to say that what I'd done should be commended, that he was on my side. I'd hate to ever find out that someone had made him come outside and hug me and say goodbye.

The drive to the mall was mainly quiet. I eventually realized that Aunt Donna and Mina didn't want to talk about what had happened, and began to calm down. But I wanted them to tell me that I wasn't nuts, I wasn't an overemotional teenage girl. However, they changed the topic any time I apologized for my behavior.

Mom was parked outside the mall when we got there. I tried to make the goodbye short as possible. On the ride home I told Mom everything that had happened through more tears. As she drove, my nose bled again.

I had wanted the perfect reunion Christmas that year, with all the tears and hugs. I wanted a soup opera, and in a way, I got my wish. I got the surprise beginning and I got the tearful ending, just not in the way I'd wanted. Now I half expect to turn on the TV and see my face with the Rudolf-red nose and sticky cheeks looking at me from some new daytime drama.

Markie Gaddis

“Red and Orange Streak”
inspired by a 1919 oil on canvas by Georgia O’Keeffe

You are downcast eyes
ashamed of brilliance.
You are a ruddy orange streak
not worthy of being golden,
shining a little before turning green
and dissolving into the brown of your atmosphere,
flying, an arc of flame
across the red strip of sunset,
the curved back of a weeping lover,
a smear on God’s face
folding and unfolding
all at once.

Casey Burnside

Shades

Sleep catches me off guard, relaxed and alone. Sleep is the only occasion I'm ever by myself, and yet I'm not even aware of it. Sleep steals what it gives me.

Once, I went grocery shopping by myself, on purpose, and ended up with a personal escort to help me find every item I needed (and some I didn't.) He was very sweet, a good person, I'm sure, but walking those cluttered aisles at the local Munch N' Save, I would've sworn he'd been sent by the devil himself.

I've never known loneliness. I thought I had once, right after Bobby Baker and I had parted ways. I was sitting in a café drinking hot chocolate and nibbling on an apple streusel muffin the size of my fist when the thought hit me; "This must be what lonely is," but then the waiter boy sat down beside me with two more fist-sized muffins, one for me of course. We started talkin', makin' up life stories and what-nots, and the next thing you know, he slips a ring on my hand, sneaky as a starvin' raccoon. It's stuck there for almost eight years now, and normally I don't mind, but sometimes I can feel it, the way you feel a spider crawlin' along the back of your neck, the way you feel a venom flowin' through your veins, hot and uncomfortable-like.

Yet, when I sleep, I think of Bobby Baker still. He tried to make me lonely. I thank him for that, and it's neither of our faults he failed. He was the only boy to ever try and give me what I wanted, he knew it too 'cause by the time he came along my closet door was stuffed and bowed by all the moons behind it.

My waiter boy ain't a bad catch or nothin', he's just like all the other boys wantin' a wife and children. Some people create other people keep from being lonely, while others would just as soon never hear another voice, especially that of a cryin' baby.

My waiter boy was saddened when he found out I couldn't have any kids for him, but I just told him it's because God knows me too well, and he seemed to understand that.

He got himself a dog, even taught it to fetch and play dead, although at the end of the night, I'm the one he wants to roll over.

For my birthday one year, he got us a cabin. "So we can be alone," he said. I told him that he didn't know what alone meant or he wouldn't have used "we" in the same sentence. We went anyways though, and he asked me if I was havin' fun. "Fun doin' what?" I responded. "Fun bein' alone together." I told him he wasn't allowed to use that word again until he looked it up in the dictionary. He laughed, but he's not said it since.

He loves me dearly, I know, but I'm not cold-hearted, I just care for people more as a whole than individuals. 'Cause when you care for people as individuals, you begin to pick at them, findin' all their flaws and weaknesses, and after that it's pretty easy to not care for them, and then there's crying, and I don't care who you are, everyone cries like a baby.

Every time someone cries around me I buy another bottle of nail polish. So far I've mixed 123 different shades of "Lonely." Most of them purple, some blue, and even the occasional pink, but no matter where I go, my nails are always lonely.

Sarah Carr

The Best Poem in the World

I wrote a brilliant poem,
packed full as a divorcee's suitcase
with extended metaphors and double entendres
a scathing expose of post-literalism,
bemoaning the loss of language
amidst an onslaught of images and instant messages.
I wowed a publisher with a litany
of euphony and allusion,
and the cacophonous clamor rolling off my tongue
when I denounced television
was a textual illustration beyond compare.
Walt Whitman came back from the dead
to blurb my piece.
But now I lie in the gutter.
Nobody bought my poem –
they couldn't understand it.

Madison McClendon

To Objects Lost in Dreams

Sometimes I wake up with my hands clutched
around your ephemeral form--
a Tylenol gelcap, or a pen, or a tape recorder
stolen from me somehow.

I sweat, wondering:

what am I to do? You were my urgency,
my reason for walking through rooms of fire
and chambers stacked to the ceiling
with Arnold Schwarzenegger workout videos.

Nothing scares me more than you.

I worked so hard to buy you,
embossed lapel pin, mug from the Greenville Zoo,
and my fingers still curl around you,
a fleshy cave guarding a hollow secret.

Madison McClendon

Elemental

□

□ It's always the child that chooses the mother, looking down to the earth from a place that's later erased from its mind. A newborn nebula that craves the rich texture of flesh delivers the child to the mother's womb by way of her mouth. Her head must be raised to the sky and her mouth gaping wide as if to be receiving a snowflake that has drifted from an obese cloud. Small and pink, the child falls to her outstretched tongue, swimming within organs and entrails, discovering the uterus.

▣ The mother lays her identity aside to allow the child to dwell within her. Inside the uterus, the child forms himself, taking flesh from the walls of the womb, grafting the extracted membrane to his fetal body. Once the child discovers fingers and toes, it tests the walls of flesh to prove to the mother that it exists.

▣ When the Braxton-Hicks contractions become more than a discomfort and the dilation commences, the child begins its struggle for a gasp of oxygen. The mother clenches her fists and thrashes about the small table, legs supported by massive stirrups. Her hair is drenched and plastered to her neck like seaweed clinging to an ankle. She grits her teeth, calling for her mother as if she herself were a frightened child.

Tiffany Leonard

Sanctuary

□

After she had acquired the vial of milky powder
to mix into her palette,
my mother's paintings seemed to come alive;
they were never still, even when they'd been dry for days,
when she laced and unlaced her fingers,
all I could see was new colors streaming and weaving.
But she herself paled,
her flesh yellowing, thinning, stretching,
until one day, I heard her fall and cry out,
and, rushing into the forbidden studio,
I found her in a heap of tangled limbs.
She had used the last of the powder.
I cradled her head on my lap,
placed her stained palms to my lips,
then laid her down on the wooden floor.
Taking the can of turpentine she'd used as a door stop,
I began to drench the many canvases,
combing her hair so that it fanned out like tentacles.
And though I could almost feel the fumes
embalming my own inner organs,
I bathed her beautiful body in fluid.
Then turned from the studio that had been
her sanctuary of perfection,
and placed the can where it had been.
I didn't look back as I flicked the lighter
and tossed it in—
this was my canvas, mother.

□

Tiffany Leonard

□

Eat You Alive

When you and your kind were but monkeys in trees,
My kind walked the earth, and it was whole.
I ate you alive, consumed the life liquid
That animated your furry flesh.
My sweet nectar, even now I hunt you, I smell you.
That is why you stick to your scabs of pollution and metal.
Please, I am hungry-- come to my jungle, drawn by the scales that cover my heart
As I bask in the sun. No mercy, no compassion--I am eternal.
Before you monkeys made fire, I breathed it.
When you Simians learned the pleasure of eating flesh, it was to copy my power.
Thank Gaia for her mercy, since the rest of my kind slumber.
You hairy two-legged abominations cut and dig at her flesh
And wear my descendants to warm your monkey feet.
I am hiding there in the ocean, in the forests, in the sky.
Hungry, so hungry, I'll eat you alive.

Mark Davis

Passage

Have you ever noticed how the roads of the rich are so smooth?

They never seem to have any bumps or lumps.

It's not so smooth on my block.

We do our best, and we always seem
to have a lot of construction going on.

Now don't get me wrong;
there are a lot of paths rougher than mine.

But I don't think anyone knows
how deep my potholes feel
but me.

Krystina Hunter

Camouflage

Wanting to be loved
Is far more dangerous
Than being in love.
The fact that you touch
Doesn't mean
That you feel.
With the skin of a chameleon,
You blend right in,
Only to realize later
That you were never really
There at all.

Krystina Hunter