

Bandit

I think that my mother gave me a love for birds, that when I was in the womb she said, “God, I wish I could fly,” and her words fell to my heart like a feather. I remember looking through her many bird books when I was little; I would flip to the glossy pages that framed pictures and trace the winged animals with my finger. I wanted to learn all their names, but when I tried to remember them, they ran together. Frustrated, I would place the book back on the shelf, only to return two days later and try again. Over time, I began to consider birds as nonomniscient beings that flew in an expanse I knew nothing of--but this understanding changed last year.

My brother Daniel can be a horrible person to be around, but when he brought a fragile ball of feathers from the neighboring yard, he looked so innocent and protective. Daniel dubbed him Bandit because he had escaped from the trees, and carried him in cupped hands with a mournful look on his face. “He just fell out of the branch,” he stated. “I didn’t see him.” Daniel had been cutting tree limbs in our elderly neighbor’s yard in a rare act of kindness. My mother steered Daniel and Bandit to the porch, and set down a basket for Bandit. I’m not sure how old he was, but we could tell he was by his small size and downy feathers that he was very young. We began to nurture him, none of us becoming too attached in case of the unthinkable. Days passed, and then a week; Bandit was still with us. Soon we began to feed him wet cat food and water from a dropper. Of all of us, my mother spent the most time with him, then me, so eventually, Daniel stopped coming out to the porch to see Bandit. I think Bandit responded to my mother and me best because we weren’t as harsh.

Feeding a baby bird is not the easiest task, especially feeding Bandit. He would chirp, and chirp and chirp, until someone came out. Then he would hop over to either my mom or me and chirp some more. “We know you’re hungry,” we would coo. Next, we would take a toothpick, stick some cat food on it, and put it in Bandit’s throat for him. He would lean his little neck way back, and let this irony slide down his throat. Then, we would put the dropper in his beak again and dribble just enough, until he was satisfied. Afterward, he would sprinkle his thank you’s on the porch and occasionally on my leg. This would occur many times a day.

Soon, Bandit’s feathers became thicker and he was hopping higher, but he was still unable to fly. I would take him outside and say, “Come on, Bandit, flap those wings!” He would follow my heels around the yard, and I liked to think in his little birdbrain he was not calling me “mommy” when he chirped, but “friend.” He would flap occasionally, but never enough to catch air. One time, I told Bandit we were going to fly, and took off across the yard, flapping my arms. When I looked over my shoulder, Bandit was right on my heels, flapping his still useless wings. It was then that I knew that I could teach him to fly. We practiced this several more times, and I’m sure the neighbors enjoyed our daily ritual. I would play with Bandit, and tell him where to go, and how to watch out for cats and Blue Jays. I told him about my heart that had been ruined, and in return, Bandit would chirp to my soul and I carried his song when he wasn’t around. He sang about the trees, even though he had never flown to one yet. He sang about the night air when the stars are clouded over and only the moon is awake. He sang about God and love. He knew that God cherished his feathers and hollow bones. Bandit shared the secret of the birds with me, these songs that are burned in their hearts through mothers

that sing over unhatched eggs. Bandit knew more than I ever would. I knew that when he would have to go, it would be hard. He was getting bigger.

The greatest thing about experiencing Bandit was having him perch on my shoulder and whisper in my ear. There were many times I would come out to the porch and he would fly to my heart. He was spending the nights in trees now, and wasn't telling me as much. Though he still knew his name, I think he was in the process of creating his own. Any time now, we predicted, Bandit would leave. He could fly well, and I was jealous. I knew that anytime I saw a robin, I would think of Bandit, and he would want me to. He would want me to carry his songs. One day, I went outside and called him, but he didn't come. I whispered goodbye to the trees, and I knew he heard me.

Allison Stucker

Cloudburst

She opened the door,
and the noise of leaves rustling
tricked me into thinking there was rain.

I want rain that is cold
and leaves steam on pavement
and lets me know exactly what my faults are.

I want a downpour
that will delve into the cracks
of my personality;
I want it to freeze and split me open.
I want to be divided,
conquered and waterlogged
until I am a soggy mess.

I am tired of my throat's drought
and weary of the blisters my skin forms
when one finger causes friction
with another.

I crave viscosity,
I want it to be easy.
I want it to be clean.
I want it to be flawless.

Amanda Pruitt

Pringles

I am thinking about the Pringles can in my car, wondering if there is any inconspicuous way I can manage to rappel down from the window behind me to reach the parking lot before Mr. Lukas notices. I decide to try. I have to try. It's going to be the best way to get remembered at this school, I know. Okay, so those rock-climbing lessons at Stone Summit will be of some help, and I knew that means I'll need rope, beaners, and those neat harnesses. Well, harnesses can be overlooked, as can the beaners. I do need accomplices in order to distract him. Tomorrow is his birthday; we might do it then, somehow.

Yeah. Mr. Lukas is turning 40. That has to be a big one, the type of birthday where an adult dresses all in black and mourns the death of his childhood or something. Will Mr. Lukas buy a Porsche?

We should bring him a big, black cake, and while he's engrossed in the question of how to divide the cake equally among a number of odd students, David and Rick can suck down black "Over the Hill" helium balloons and lead the class in rounds of the birthday song. This will distract him long enough for me to tie my rope off to Berto's desk (he's the fattest guy I've ever seen, I'm serious), and rappel down two stories.

I don't know though; the cake sounds fun, and would be a substitute for chips. And building scaling is hard work. Even as I'm sitting here, the parking lot seems too far away. It's probably not worth all that work. Never mind.

Amanda Pruitt

Ambition

Her hands have been smelted.
Their cold and bruised beauty rings
like an old trumpet,
but she says that isn't enough.
She wants to replace her skin,
and fill her organs with bronze
until she at last becomes
the statue of a woman.

Andrew Chinn

Ten Slaves Struck by Lighting While Being Baptized

For the chosen souls had all been taken out of Egypt,
so they sizzled in the rain like sausages in a greased pan
while the notes to “Wade in the Water” still hung in the air
The women on shore shed fat Virgin Mary tears,
not for the bodies that floated like Moses on the Nile River,
but for the blessings their husbands and sons had been given.
The ones left behind moved on with the passing light,
and made a pact to wade with Jesus in the morning.

Andrew Chinn

What I Want From You

I want to see you still.
I want you to come to me.
I want you to open your mouth
as if you were about to say something
that would brighten the world.
I want to kiss you like somebody
who is looking for love,
but doesn't know that he is.
I want every hair follicle on your body to stand up
as if it were giving me an ovation.
I want to feel the pressure of your hips against me.
I want every one of your thoughts to melt away
into sweat that will glow on your skin.
I want my teeth to rake against your lower lip
as if it were a zen garden.
I want my kiss to end with your smile.
But most of all,
I want you to kiss me back.

Andrew Chinn

Skip

Coming Home stories have been fed to me since age five, perhaps to give me the false pretense that Greenville is a worthy point of return. There is the one that traces back to Uncle Allen walking home shoeless from Atlanta in The War Between the States, and the one about a great-something aunt leaving Savannah to return to Greenville with her freed slave and a black marble table in tow. I get personal accounts as well: “When I was your age, I wanted to leave Travelers Rest more than anything in the world,” my dad tells me. “But after traveling out to California and back with your Uncle Scott in college, I realized that Greenville is home.”

“Yeah,” my mom says during one of her Let Me Plan Your Entire Future While Driving to School escapades, “Well, you’ll probably just be living in Greenville your whole life—” (end of despicably abominable statement cut off here); it’s almost as if the boundaries of expectations are severed at the county line.

I’ve come to fantasize about skipping town. It is the last thought that my pillow hears at night, right after I glance at the empty Tahoe in the backyard and the swung-open gate and wonder what I’m doing lying down right here right now, my only excuse being that the burglar alarm is on. In the morning, I wonder why I’m packing my backpack with textbooks and not a change of clothes, some notebooks and a handful of cash, and I wonder why my mother is still driving me to school; then I remind myself that it is because I am over-committed and that is definitely a reason to skip. Ferris Bueller has altered positions, rising from previous state as high school movie hero to my idol. As I sit in history class, I wonder how far my fall would be if I jumped out the window,

whether I'd have a soft landing, how long it would take me to run to the highway from Eastside High School on Brushy Creek Road in Taylors, South Carolina, and whether the surveillance cameras would catch me. "I am faster than Mr. Brooks," I think, and imagine myself dropping my book bag and running flat-out down the busy road from the assistant principal, the same road we ran on every other day routinely in August for cross-country practice. My feet can take me for miles if I'm going somewhere I really want to be.

Many of my friends toss around the idea as well, but none as seriously and with as much detail as I do; the majority of them want to attend Furman and Clemson and visit home every weekend. But occasionally, when the workload is especially heavy and the stress level especially high, they join in my scheming, and the schemes vary from person to person.

I've tried convincing my friend Emily to leave with me when we sit in English she wrings her hands over her notebook and tugs at her hair and wails, "I JUST WANT TO QUIT!"

"Let's go," I whisper, and explain, with flourished, romanticized language to convey the sheer beauty and brilliance of it all, how we could fit a couple of drawer's worth of clothes, a phone, a video camera and a gun in the trunk of her silver Volkswagen Bug and run away to the beach; we always say we'll go to Hilton Head, because that's where we vacationed last summer. But she refuses to receive the horrid and much-feared designation of "Volleyball Team Deserter."

When driving to movies every weekend, my friend Carrie and I decide that we will hop a plane that very day and move to Barcelona. We reason with our parents,

telling them that it will be an educational opportunity; we can utilize our acquired knowledge of the Spanish language, experience another culture, and become tour guides by obtaining jobs from Antonio, our Italian tour guide who took our class on a trip across Italy and Spain two years ago, and who more than likely has no memory of us now and probably wouldn't want to bother with handing out jobs to two 17-year-old American girls, tourists themselves. Then the money issue rears its hideous head. And Carrie is never serious about leaving anyway; she belongs in her room with her books and notes and studies, because it is where she wants to be and where she is comfortable. My issue is that I can't get comfortable; therefore, my solution is to dream about shoving myself into extremely uncomfortable situations, as long as they occur outside a four-hour radius of Greenville, South Carolina.

Ryan talks about us running away to live on Kiawah Island, where he can pursue his dream of becoming the next Armani and I can become the next Emily Dickinson. For the last two years, my cousin Will and I have planned to pack up his Buick LeSabre with our guitars, amps, every Guns n' Roses, Velvet Revolver and Metallica CD ever released in the history of mankind, and a stash of Reese's Fast Breaks, and drive out west to play on street corners for money; our plan was the only one that had been remotely serious, until he wrecked the Buick.

And even though I love them all, I think it's something I would have to do alone.

During chemistry, I wonder where I could go and who would take me in. In Charleston, I could camp out with my cousin Weeza in her dorm at the College for a couple of nights. In the morning I could go to port, find a lovely ship and set sail on her, bound for remote islands and a pirate clan to join; I do believe a pirate's life best suits

me. However, when I seriously plot it out, I realize that the largest ship in Charleston is the Yorktown, and my pirate heroine Mary Read would disapprove of such modernization.

My Aunt Marcia in Mount Pleasant is good at keeping secrets; whenever she caught my cousins and me doing something we shouldn't, she never told. Perhaps she could stow me in my cousin Rhett's old room, the one with the Robert E. Lee wallpaper border and the Confederate flag light switch plate, for a few days before my Uncle Scott or cousin (full name) Jeb Stuart Cleveland found me. But what would I do then, or in the meantime, for that matter?

No, Mount Pleasant would not satisfy a wandering bard such as myself. I think I am much better suited for a larger town, sprawling and progressive, like Boston. So far, this is my best plan: how I will get there is still a mystery, but when I do, I will move in with my aunt and uncle (my youngest uncle, who always tells me to come and visit) and get some form of job in the downtown Boston area, then submit my work to literary magazines, all while living right in town, snowboarding every day and seeing celebrities in my uncle's shop.

Every time I drive downtown, my eyes linger on the bus station. About once a month, I have a dream about packing a rolling suitcase, sneaking out and arriving at the station as the dawn peeks through its barred windows. Whenever I arrive though, someone—always a close friend—runs in as I am climbing on the Greyhound and offers me a decent (usually cliché, movie script type of) reason to stay, and I step off and into their car, waking up as the Greyhound leaves without me. When I'm supposedly doing homework, I'm looking up bus ticket and train prices; I don't spend my money anymore

but save it, stacks of accumulated one dollar bills folded every which way in my wallet. I make packing lists, price lists, grocery lists, checking the labels on foods to see what is cheapest and what would nutritionally sustain me for a good two-and-a-half weeks and not take up too much room in a carryon backpack.

Earlier this year I came home from school, and a fleeting second before my key hit the lock, I dropped my backpack and ran, my legs moving before my mind registered what was going on. I sprinted around the side of the house, ripped back the dying wisteria vines binding the wooden gate, and tore it open, dashing out through the backyard and up the alley, down Mowhawk Drive, until I found myself at Palmetto Music, a two and a half-minute car ride up the road, hand pushing open the familiar glass door.

“Hey there, missy!” the familiar stubbled face behind the counter grinned at me. “What’che needin’ today? New strings? Effects? I saw you checkin’ out them basses last time, you gone an’ switched instruments on us?”

I smiled and walked over to the wall; the number of basses was diminishing. I picked up a Dillon Paul McCartney violin bass copy and plunked out the “Day Tripper” riff halfway, then stopped. Only two minutes down the road in a guitar shop where every worker knows my name-- this was as far as I could run.

This is when I realized that it is through art that I escape. On many a gallery pamphlet and over countless doors in museums, I have always seen the words “Art is the window to the world.” And in the past two years, I couldn’t agree more. During guitar jams in which I am instructed to “go up a step,” I see my calloused fingertips on the fret board taking the place of my feet on the pavement and walking out. They’ve developed

into sorts of healers, my guitars; after a long day in which I pine for escape, I position my stool in front of the window with my acoustic guitar and my fingers travel north and south, jumping a string to the east, and falling back into the west, retracing their steps to the point of origin.

Anna Chandler

Beast

“You know, whenever I drink tomato juice, I take a big mouthful and chew it like it’s a solid. Have you ever done that?”

I stared at my wife in bewilderment as she continued by asking whether a tomato was a fruit or a vegetable.

“It’s debatable,” I said. “Some people think it’s a vegetable because it grows on a vine, and some people think that it’s a fruit because it’s juicy and has seeds. Personally, I think it’s neither because...”

“Well, why would they argue about that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t think they should,” she concluded, picking at the nail polish that was stuck to the sides of its glass bottle. I turned on the television. She pushed the mute button and looked up at me.

“So do they, like, put all the seeds in tomato juice or is it just the juicy part?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not? You seem to know everything else about them.”

“I’m not a farmer, so I have no idea.”

After changing the channel to an enlightening nature program with some wild lions taking down a buffalo, I lost interest and went to the kitchen to rummage. I could hear as she organized her little plastic tray of manicure supplies. I knew that first, the cotton balls were placed in the left corner, Q-Tips in the right, and remover in a little bowl. Then the colors of nail polish were proudly displayed in a cheap rainbow. I could still smell the acetone when my hands reached into the refrigerator, and it mingled with

the faint scents of plastic, foil, and the cheese that looked like some demented child's science fair project.

"Can you get me something?" she yelled from the other room.

"What?"

"Some tomato juice."

I stared into the open bottle, into a pool of color that was one inch deep. I stood in silence, then asked, "You sure you want juice? I thought you liked soy milk, we have soy milk you know, it's your favorite."

"No. Juice is fine, thank you, sweetie," she called back as she spilled nail polish on the rug and proceeded to rub remover over it, pretending that I wasn't looking.

"Okay," I said. I poured the remainder of the drink into a glass for her, rested the cap on the mouth of the jug, and set it on the counter.

"Hey sweetie? Make sure you rinse the container and put it in the recycling," she called.

"Yes, dear," I said. I ran the water for a few moments, then tossed the dirty bottle into the trash. Then I picked up a hunting catalog from the kitchen table and dragged myself back into the living room, where she still sat on the couch.

"Did you forget my drink?"

I turned around as I threw my magazine to the couch and brought the glass to her.

"Thank you, baby," she kissed my cheek and blushed like a little cherub as she picked up her glass. "Aww, you're not planning on hunting again are you?"

Truthfully I had thought about it a lot, and two guns were on their way in, as well as a couple grand's worth of knives from the Cold Steel company. In addition, my deer

heads that I had “gotten rid of” were in my taxidermist and friend’s basement, in their boxes labeled with my alias, Trigger Fingers III.

“No, baby,” I didn’t look up. “I’m just checking on how their technology has advanced and what they’ve done with everything. You know, hunting isn’t always what you think it is, sometimes...”

“You shouldn’t kill all those little innocent animals for fun.”

“I agree, sweetie, I agree now.”

“It’s just not right. They’re entitled to a life of peace and happiness in the woods, or savannah, or desert, or whatever. They don’t need to be shot and put through all that pain...”

My mind and my eyes drifted back to the television set, where the pack of lionesses were ripping the buffalo a new one, in their peace and happiness.

“...and don’t you think that being a vegetarian has helped you with your health issues?”

“It probably has.”

I’d adhered to the diet as soon as she came up with the idea of it. I’d decided to give up my life of filet mignon, tuna steaks, pinwheels with ham and spinach, and chicken sandwiches. I now shared with my wife the love of all food that was eaten by rabbits.

“I’m going to bed,” I stood and groaned. The lack of energy was making me sleep more than usual, or that’s what my guess was. I started up the stairs and into our bedroom. She had designed it herself, and painted it green, and said that it was organized for Fing Shweng or something Chinese like that. I removed my clothes and threw them

into a pile. I threw myself into the feather bed and felt the tiny points painfully connect with my back, like I was a duck wrapped inside of my inside-out skin. I dozed as the digital clock read eleven.

After drifting in and out of my mind, I was thirsty again. I put on my robe, then put the pile of clothing in the basket, as not to offend the room's oriental aura. As I trudged downstairs, I tripped, and regained my balance by slamming my shoulder into the wall. I heard a slam from the kitchen, and my head turned automatically, as if I was a deer, staring at my own gun.

When I reached the kitchen, my wife was standing with her back to me, hunched over something. I gently touched her shoulder, and she spun around with wide eyes and a small cry of surprise. The plate that had been one of our wedding presents fell and shattered, and the half-eaten steak landed with a sickening thud.

Karin Ahlgren

Polyphonia

I. The Untouchable's Universe

This is a universe of simple role reversal. All of the higher classes wash the Untouchables' feet, mop the ground where they walk. With a touch of a pinky, the slightest nod in their direction, the nobles crumble into dust. It's always been this way, the history books say. Since the beginning of man, the history books say, Brahmin means Untouchable, and you can't. Except the Brahmin never feels lonely, after causing so much death. His wife is Vishnu herself.

II. The Ugly Girl's Universe

In this universe, the ugly girl is still ugly. But she can do whatever she wants. And she does, for a while. She stabs and shoots and burns, until all that's left is the ugly girl and the pretty boys, the sex slaves. She gets lonely after a while.

III. Stephen Hawking's Universe

In this universe, he can walk, and Newton was right all along.

IV. The Beaten Dog's Universe

In this universe, he can read and write and chew whatever he wants. He can bite his owners, and he's rewarded for it. He doesn't leave, or have the chain cut off. It's dug into his neck meat. He doesn't know how to leave.

V. The Conspiracy Theorist's Universe

In this universe, he's right. The government has a barcode over the cyst in his neck, on each toenail, ad infinitum. Aliens land regularly. Most people don't know this, but he does. He's right about the Mayan calendar. The Rapture. The black helicopters. The Freemasons. The Mark of the Beast appearing in governmental buildings. Roswell. The fakeness of the Sun. He's right about all of this, and he lets people know. The world's ended 700 times before, and he's reborn every time. He's their Savior, and he knows it. Until the government finds him and kills him, though he could've fought them off.

VI. The Porn Star's Universe

In this universe, sex doesn't exist.

See also: The Ugly Girl's Universe.

VII. Galileo's Universe

In this universe, the Church rules the people even more tightly, and Galileo never invented the telescope. He makes wild claims about how the Sun is Hell, and medicine shouldn't be invented, because the Sun won't exist if people stop dying. He commits suicide by burning down his house.

VIII. The Cement Mixer's Universe

In this universe, everything is held together by natural forces. Wood on wood, rock on rock. This eliminates the idea of making sidewalks and walls and buildings. The world is natural and everything, even love, is simple.

IX. The Movie Star's Universe

In this universe, everything is the same.

X. Custer's Universe

In this universe, Custer is a banker who reads of the Indian attacks with relative disinterest.

XI. The Divorced Electrician's Universe

In this universe, the world is run by love. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, & Martin Luther King, Jr. power the world. Blackouts are caused by arguments. Hitler and the electrician's dad are executed, of course, by the Love Chair, the love that stops his heart, provided courtesy of Princess Diana.

XII. The Lockpicker's Universe

In this universe, the world is full of locks. There are locks on everything. It requires a Phillips head screwdriver to open the medicine cabinet. Everything is concrete. The love of the lockpicker's wife is attained through a series of military style Krypton bike locks. He opens her love up every night with a ballpoint pen, and closes it again.

XIII. The Sewage Worker's Universe

In this universe, there are no cycles. The water cycle doesn't exist. Water, pure water, springs from wounds. Most of the world's fresh water comes from AP Chemistry experiments. Schools rule this world, and so do wars.

IX. The Miner's Universe

In this universe, there are no noble gases. There are no gases. In this universe, people survive by breathing dust. Lung cancer is seen as a sign of good luck. Smokers are viewed as debonair, and survive the longest. All those antismoking ads, they're all wrong, the miner says. Except the miner doesn't breathe in the tar and the nicotine and the carcinogens. He breathes the gold dust. His moustache is flecked with tiny bits of it as he licks his lips, the anticipation killing him as he gets his jackhammer ready.

Ben Wright

Habitat

David sits in the middle of the playground, bawling his eyes out. His peers have little insight as to how they can console him. Each in turn assures him that things will be okay, that he will see his grandmother in heaven. He brushes them off with flailing arms and legs.

From a distance, Carol observes him for a time, then calmly walks to him. She sits down beside him.

“Your grandma is dead?” she pronounces, a question to which she already knows the answer.

His sobs and pitiful nod confirm the fact.

“My grandma is dead too.”

He continues to sob, but with less intensity and force, then finally quiets himself to a few whimpers and sniffles. “She’s gone,” he says.

“Yes, I was very sad too.” She pauses to look into his red-tinged eyes, quietly she asks, “How did she die?”

“She got sick. She had to have surgery.”

He stops to reflect on what the surgery had caused. “Grandma couldn’t talk to me anymore. She just lay in bed with machines that beeped all the time. Grandma would never let me sleep as long as she did. We always got up early to play or she would tell me stories.” He finishes wistfully, “I was her favorite.”

Carol nods sympathetically and watches as in the lull, tears well up ready to surge at any moment. She says, “My sadness lives in a fishbowl. Not the kind that are in aquariums but ones that fish like Goldie live in. It’s small enough that I can carry it all by myself. When I’m sad, I pretend that my tears are the water that Goldie swims in. If I cry too much, I will wash out Goldie, but if I cry too little Goldie won’t have enough to swim in.” She pauses to let him imagine her fishbowl, and then asks, “Would you pretend with me that you have a fishbowl for sadness?”

He nods slowly catching on to the idea.

She asks, “What does your fishbowl look like? What is in it?”

Distracted from his grief, he says, “My fishbowl has a shark in it! My fishbowl is HUGE!”

Carol sighs and says, “Your fishbowl is too big. You need something you can carry.” Motioning with her hands, she creates a portable fishbowl. Continuing on, she says, “Sharks are too scary. How about a zebra fish?”

He looks pacified at the thought of such an exotic sounding fish. “I’ll call him Zane.”

Carol looks at David and asks, “Is the fishbowl full?”

David thinks for a moment, and then nods.

The bell rings, signaling the end of recess. They both stand up, fishbowls in hand, and carry them into the classroom without spilling a drop.

Beth Bennett

Catalog of All Things Natural

When I am with my grandmother,
I tend to affect an English or French accent.
English by day, French by night--
My mother hates it.
Especially the French.
I suspect she would adore Italian or Greek,
But I can't seem to muster that,
She used to make me wear big floppy polka-dotted bows,
But I found my anti-ribbon therapy in sandboxes
and small animals dismembered slowly,
For a better look at Why.
When I was in Girl Scouts,
We set up a lemonade stand.
My father bought at least 10 cups.
Since then I have only consumed Crystal Light.
The fact that it's low calorie,
Doesn't mean they should compare it to a rock.
My father writes.
I only wish that he could put on a poem everyday,
Instead of that plastic business suit.
The blue pinstripes make me dizzy.

Jenna Lyles

Define Sanctuary

The interval between peace and silence while talking to a stranger about the weather.

Where do you come across such a place?

I've been there twice with Emily Dickinson. And once, I danced with the frost-kissed fountain in the eye of Central Park with my lids closed and tongue stretched out to steal misplaced snowflakes.

Do you seek religion in churches?

I seek the colored tableau of a history book with walking dead men and prophets.

What are your feelings on alchemy?

I once saw the lights of heaven reflected in the polish of a violin, though I cannot recall the music that was played.

Allison Combs

Distillation

As the worm spirals in me,
I dream of razor wire
twining circularly with its thick body.

Africa--the birthplace of life,
a cradle for a generation that was lost
before we began.
I remember the taste of boiled water
and cake that was dough inside.

The milky flesh of the parasite
has distorted the underlying tissue of my thigh,
creating bands the hue of a fever.

I crave the vermilion that leaks from the abscess
as if it were grease from a take-out bag
that fell open in the seat of my car.

The worm birthed a circle that grew up itself,
tail appearing, thin like a tip of a bulb,
devouring the last ring it made.

A medicine man with hands black and wrinkled
as if he had been drained by the sun
places on my thigh the point of a stick
broken from a Silver Terminalia tree,

pressing into me the ancient wood
like a medieval syringe that is to draw out the maggot,
twining the creature as if it is a spool of thread.

I grip the post before me
as if it is a lover into whose back
I dig my fingers.

Tiffany Leonard

And We Gave “Fly” a New Meaning

We went down to the ocean of clouds
and dipped our faces
into the rhythmic softness of sky.
We sheared the wings off our backs,
then floated in the endless meadows of earth.
No longer weighted down to the solid sky,
we felt as free as stallions
galloping shamelessly in the dew-sodden grass.
As shadows of exhaustion paled our faces
we returned to the ocean to retrieve our wings.
But when we attempted to reattach them to our bodies,
we didn't understand why they were no longer
tailored to the shape of our shoulders.

Emily Horowitz

Hunger

The pages devour the words
as if they had never eaten before.
Philosophers, historians, and the like
place their pen tips down
on the malnourished paper
in an attempt to soothe their cravings.
Once trees, the pages long for something more;
their tendrils reach farther
than the crusted ink dried upon the surface.
As rain starts to fall,
the educated men cry out
and watch helplessly as their intellect
runs in black drips down the pages,
and the paper swells with satisfaction,
the knowledge of rain
seeping into its roots.

Emily Horowitz

Puncture

The sun is a door with no knob;
longing for a glimpse inside,
I chisel a crooked key hole,
then peer in,
shielding my eyes
from the glaring darkness.

Emily Horowitz

For William

So many things are broken and covered
by the way a field stretching green along a bump in the earth
and a sky rinsing blue into its seams
touch each other with more love
than the kisses of fingers.
This is what fills my body and makes my heart hurt
with a happiness that could never be broken or forgotten
because green and blue will never make gray.

I am in love with the way that I love;
it's as warm as this sun that drowns me,
even through the submergence of water
where I might sink if feeling were made
of something other than nothing,
just as the sky would collapse
if it were anything more than what rests in a soul,
because like me, it cries when happiness
folds into something that's sad as leaving
the one thing you love the most.

I want to stay here until all of God's sorrow
evaporates with the weight of the world,
and disappears into the crippled cracks we have made here
where our hearts are connected
by the boy who makes miracles inside his leg;
where brokenness itself descends
to the bottom of a lake
I myself am too afraid to swim to the bottom of
through a surface as thick as an oil-based canvas
where ripples and whirlpools create the illusion
that a person's two legs could dance among its edge.
I look to the crevice where heaven greets earth,
and I tunnel it through all I am made of.

Callie Plaxco

Interlude

Dogwoods speak a poetry of their own
this season when they've bloomed too early.
I can feel them cry as I drive past,
and I mourn the loss of a thousand white flowers.
If trees have souls, then they must be greater than ours,
withstanding winter only to be a new kind of beautiful.
I have been waiting for the sun
like I have been hoping for love to cover my windows.
But bare feet in early spring
are replaced by rain too stubborn to be snow.
I am wondering if people on the moon
are looking down or up in order to see us in their sky.
It's not fair that the moon doesn't have a moon;
perhaps they wish on stars made from another light.
So many songs have turned into the poetry of my breath,
so many words into prayers that I keep praying.
It is difficult to write about happiness.
I now pay my debt to all those moments
never translated from my heart, but fallen out of my soul.
To you I write that the dogwood will bloom again.

Callie Plaxco

Folds

One hundred paper cranes
with sharply creased feathers
perch in a huddle on the shelf,
stare blankly out the window
as a blue jay flies past.

Jenna Wood

Gravity

If rain is a river from the sky,
What does that tell us of the land above?

Can it explain the emptiness,
The blue sea overhead
With its white islands drifting?

I love to run in heaven's cascades
How it shapes the plains, the hills, and rocks--

Think how dark the earth would be
Without the sea in the sky,
Its snowy mountains.

Yet only children are fearless of the foamy spears of rain.
They dance and sing through showers of joy
While the grown-ups cover their heads,
Dodging the rain as it descends from the uppermost ocean.

Jenna Wood

Transport

In summer, the lawn
is a shark with red eyes
calling to you
to roll in its wet fur.

In winter, the grass turns gray
and won't let you cross.

For the lawn is brittle and contagious,
like a disease that longs to absorb you--
and beware the sidewalk,
with its many cracks.

Jenna Wood

Atmosphere

Why do we surround ourselves with candles
in order to create romance?

What if the flames we crave
were made of ice?
Would we still find them
to be aphrodisiac?
Would we respond the same way
to an elemental reversal?

And if the heat of the ice couldn't ease
the nipping of the flames,
to what would we turn?

Jill Levy

My Dream of Shadows

Completely surrounded,
I tried to feel comforted,
but though each of the shadows
fit in its designated place,
the objects that birthed them,
were nowhere to be seen.

Jill Levy

Ode to Icarus

It's true, you didn't listen,
but they've got the ending all wrong.
You didn't plummet to your death;
you learned how to fly on your own.

Your dad was a wonderful parent—
always there to talk to,
never missed a triathlon—
but what people don't seem to understand
is that once you reach a certain age,
you have to become your own
support system.

Your dad built you wings
of feathers, wax, and love,
but you grew up and out of them
and into your own skin.

Jill Levy

Wonder Boys

Mackie and I sit side by side on the damp cement steps of the closed-down bakery. His shoes are grimy, worn through the soles where the rubber flaps loosely and a brown shoelace dangles down. It's dark and rainy, and the only people to pass us are businessmen hurrying to their taxis from their late hours and affairs. Mackie drums his fingers on the steps, dum-dum-dum, counting out the beats of the men's fine Italian leather shoes. Our t-shirts are soaked. We stoop, chins cupped in hands, a pair of runaways that no one has missed.

Between the two of us, there is fifty-two dollars left, fifty-two dollars in wrinkled ones and tens and a dog-eared twenty. I'm the only one with a knapsack: Mackie's got stolen on the subway, though whoever stole it probably wouldn't want it anyhow, probably would've been disgusted to find only underwear and a plastic kiddie flashlight with cartoon characters on it and a tuna sandwich that's gonna go rotten in a day or two. We're both scared to death of pickpockets, now. Mackie's got *his* money taped to his thighs under his pants. Mine, well, I can't tell you where mine is.

Neither of us has said anything about wanting to go back; we'd agreed to that before we stole the bus tickets out of his grandma's purse. (That old lady wouldn't miss them; she'd just think she never bought them and get some new ones.) Mackie's grandma is rich, and she hoards boxes of saltines, too.

So here are me and Mackie together, the two of us, the Famous Pair, Wonder Boys of the Twenty-First Century, and we're so great, every teacher at school prays not to have us. Here we are, lost, wet, cold, annoyed, and neither of us complaining because

we knew we can't. We really have nothing to do; we're not professional thieves living off what we could get like we thought we were gonna. Well, Mackie did succeed in swiping one lady's purse, this big lady in a ballooning yellow blouse--a patchworked leather purse with a fake mother-of-pearl clasp that broke when we tried to pry it open. In it there was a horrendous shade of crème lipstick, and coupons, carefully clipped out, some yellowing, and an eyeglass case covered with a bumpy kind of material. Nothing of use, until we finally unearthed her wallet amidst the junk, and it was a nice wallet, fine tanned leather (Mackie has an expert eye on these things), and there was about nineteen dollars in there, but Mackie was careless, folding the bills into his back pocket smugly, and what do you know? Stolen.

And now it's almost dinnertime and our stomachs are growling and I have some crackers in my knapsack which I take out and we share. I've never noticed how much I hate the sound of cellophane around a pack of crackers ripping apart but I do, it sounds like skin tearing, not human skin but some precious skin of someone far more delicate and beautiful than us. Me and Mackie, we're rough. We sit on that step like tough guys, scowling, but the darker it gets the more our scowls fade and we start worrying about gangs and alligators that live in the sewer. And we're all alone, too, never felt more alone in our lives and we start panicking and both of us start thinking about using that fifty-two dollars to get a bus back home, we don't say it but it's in both our brains, we can see it in each other's eyes. And we're just about to split when Kelly finds us.

Kelly pulls up in a little red Mercedes, only we don't know her name yet, and she gets out wearing a tank top and jeans. She inspects us as if to say, *bandits*, but struts

toward us in high high heels and asks if we need a place to stay for a while, just like that. No *Why are you running away*, no *I'll need to call the police*. We've been told not to get into strangers' cars, but Kelly doesn't look like a child molester, though you never know, but we're willing to take that risk, we're so tired and miserable.

Kelly is a supermodel, she says, and she looks like one too. Golden-brown skin everywhere, not one tan line or pale patch from a swimsuit strap or something, and sun-streaked hair. Kelly says she loves the beach. She looks at us with brown-green eyes in the rearview mirror, and we see ourselves in it too, we're thugs. We feel large and awkward even though we're not really big or anything, around Kelly who is small and sweet-looking but still sophisticated. Mackie wants to rub his finger, it's a grimy finger, along the edge of the suede seats in her car but I make him wipe his hands on his jeans first, not that it helps. We look at each other as if to say, *This is a nice car*, and wonder why Kelly even cares about us. She's driving, God knows where, but it's not in the direction of home, that's good. She finally stops at a fancy loft, and opens the door with a slender key. And once we're inside feeling the thick plush carpet under our feet (she makes us take our shoes off) she points out the bathroom and says, Go take a shower, and *scrub* yourself, and leave your dirty clothes by the door. Then she heads off and she says she's going to Marshall Field's and she's gonna buy us some new clothes and she trusts that we will not run off somewhere. When it's my turn to get in the shower it feels good, ah-hhh the water hits my skin like hot hot teardrops but not sad. And while I'm drying myself with a big soft white towel I hear Kelly come back (wow, I must've taken a long

shower, how time passes by) and she leaves our clothes in their shopping bags by the door. I can see that she has disposed of our old ones.

The price tags are still on the clothes and we can see that they're expensive. They're preppy, too: the kind of sweaters and button-downs and cords that Mackie's grandma would make him wear on his Bat Mitzvah or some such occasion. Mackie grumbles a bit but I don't mind, I like this stuff, it makes me feel like a different person. She's even gotten us new shoes, Mackie runs an expert finger along them and they're suede, very nice. We come out fresh and clean and handsome, and Kelly smiles and I can see that she's already changed her outfit to something a little less formal but still elegant. You guys look so much better, she says and we're not sure what to say back. She motions for us to sit on the couch and then takes a seat herself and says, So, what's a pair of tough guys like you doing here anyway?

We're on an adventure, Mackie says lamely, because his tongue is quick but not always his brain. Kelly sighs and says, You two wouldn't've made it here without me, you know that, the least I could do is get you into some decent clothes, but tomorrow morning you are going on the first bus back. And no buts. Meanwhile---she gestures toward the hall---you can stay in the guest room, okay?

Yes ma'am, we say like obedient schoolchildren but Kelly doesn't want us to go yet, she wants to talk. She gets up to pour herself a glass of wine into a crystal goblet and sips it languidly. She wants to hear about middle school and birthday parties that she says she misses because she's kept so busy as a supermodel that she's forgotten about such things. She finishes her wine and pours some more and starts talking more about modeling, the long hours, the ridiculous photographers, the pressure to do nude shoots for

those haute couture designers who want bizarre poses. Then she says, Wait, and she walks into the kitchen slightly wobbly and returns with two more goblets and pours us some wine too. Of course Mackie drinks it up and by his second glass he's asleep on the couch, zonked out, but not me because I haven't drunken that much. Kelly keeps talking and she gets to saying how lonely she is, so busy, no boyfriend to keep her company. Next thing I know she's beside me, I can feel her breath on my ear, and she says How old are you, James? and I say Almost thirteen, and she says *That's so young* and she's leaning toward me and I close my eyes and suddenly she's crying, sobbing her heart out on the white leather couch, the wine glass forgotten, a lone red drop of wine at the very rim just itching to get out and stain the carpet. I don't know what to do, Kelly is sobbing *Why am I like this why why why* and I sneak off silently to the guest room and get under the warm covers and the wine lulls me to sleep.

What happened here, what *happened---*? Is the first thing I hear and I rub my eyes and wonder where I am. Then I remember and remember that I've left Mackie on the couch, poor Mackie, because the voice I hear is a man's voice and he sounds rough. I run out of the room and see Kelly on the floor looking numb, her mascara smeared from crying and dried now into interesting patterns on her cheeks. The man looks angry. He's got on this fancy suit and a silk tie and he's saying, Jesus Kelly I can't leave you to look after the house for one day but you pick up some hitchhikers and wear my wife's clothes and drink all my imported wine, no less! And Kelly stares at the carpet like it's the first time she's seen it and I think of cellophane tearing and the man sees Mackie and me and

says, Okay, kids, playtime's over, we're going to get you home. I look down and see that I am still wearing my shoes. And to Kelly again he says, God, I can't wait for you to go back living with your *mother* again (and he spits out this word like a seed), and he gives Mackie and me the once-over, sighs, and motions us toward the door.

So Mackie and I are on a torn vinyl bus seat headed back home to where no one wants us, and we're planning on what we're gonna say to impress the kids at school and make the teachers go *tsk-tsk-tsk*. Mackie can't remember much since he blacked out, and I lie and say I passed out not too soon after him because I don't want him to know I got that close to a girl, I'll never hear the end of it. Pretty soon I tune Mackie out and I see Kelly again, sitting on the steps of the loft, waiting for something to come, staring out into the buildings beyond, and there's rows and rows of them, rows and rows.

Tina Bu

Eucharist

*I hurt myself today
to see if I still feel.
I focused on the pain,
the only thing that's real.*

-"Hurt," performed by Johnny Cash

The song faded from the room, and I brought my hand down on the radio. I heard the click as the power shut off. I was lying face-up on my bed, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling and fan. I felt the wet spot on the pillow where the cottony material had absorbed my tears. I smiled in the darkness, almost laughing at how silly I had been.

Turning over on my side, I stared out my window, watching the stars flip in the frame. The waning crescent moon sunk past the pane, and as it did I fell asleep.

*

I had been sitting in the cafeteria when it happened.

"Yeah, look at these scars!"

I winced when he spoke. I always did; his boyish voice was painful, and he tended to punctuate what he thought as witty comments with a high-pitched, squealing laugh. I turned to look at him, even as I took a bite out of my chicken sandwich. The

parallel slashes on his arms looked like someone had skied over his skin wearing razor blades.

"How'd that happen?" The question was obligatory; I already knew the answer.

"I got in a knife fight the other day."

I nodded and stood up, tossing the rest of my lunch in the trashcan. "I've got to make up a test. I'll catch you later."

I exited the lunchroom quickly, shouldering my book bag like it was a shield.

*

As I finished the test, I thought back to what he had shown me. He hadn't ever done that before. I didn't know him well, but I did know he was a devout Catholic. What was there about him, where was his hidden sin, that drove him to make slashes on his arms? I saw through his knife-fight story quickly. Knives are thrust in a fight. They make holes that pass through skin and bone, slashes that randomly decorate the surface. They do not produce geometric patterns, parallel lines split by a transversal.

I was still thinking about this when I got home. I started to do my homework, but I couldn't concentrate. I'd known cutters before, but they were proud, arrogant; they wore depression like a badge. If it were possible, they would have carried licenses around to prove their membership in the Club.

It struck me as funny. Every single one of the cutters had told me they did it because they were alone. It gave them reality, it gave them knowledge of what was real. They cut themselves because they were lonely, but this idea was ridiculous to me. I think they slice their bodies, not out of loneliness, but out of a sense of community. In their

solitude, they found they were holding communion with something greater than themselves.

I shrugged away these thoughts, knowing that I had to finish my homework. I finished reading the chapter in the Latin American studies book, about the ritualistic practices of a Mayan king. Once a year, he would open his veins and let his blood flow into ceremonial bowls. Then he would take an obsidian spike and drive it through his tongue and sexual organ, letting his fluids flow for the benefit of the gods. Mayan gods had no blood; they had to receive it from their people.

*

That night I stood in the bathroom naked, staring at myself in the mirror. I had used my mother's eyeglass screwdriver to pry open a disposable razor, and the blade now lay on the countertop in front of me. I wanted to know this community, this reality. I could feel that hole inside me, where my spiritual inadequacy resided. People took this form of holy communion every day, crucifying their own bodies with a cold length of steel. I wanted to share in that deep passion. I desired to see my own blood, to recognize every drop of humanity pouring from open veins. I wanted to feel the pain, to let it flow up my sensory pathways into my brain, where it would travel along the fibers of the soul, lurking in the depths of my body. I wanted to be religious.

I picked up the smooth blade, setting it perpendicular to my forearm. I tilted it slowly so that the corner rested against my skin. I took a deep breath. Suddenly, my newfound faith was obscured; the Lord's Supper of my own flesh and blood was interrupted by doubt. Would partaking of the food and wine of my body propitiate my sins? I gulped, drawing the blade across my arm before I could talk myself out of it. I

yelped, but I hadn't put enough pressure into the movement. I was blocked by fear: fear of pain, of reality.

I went to bed that night with a red welt on my arm, but no blood had left my veins. My gods would have to starve.

Madison McClendon

Mare Undarum: Sea of Waves

We dressed the moon in evening gowns
stitched together with beads and confetti
like a dreaming girl's birthday party
bloated with what's left of a candle.
We gave it chocolate syrup from a spoon,
fed it sugar canaries and candy trees
and spilled an ocean into its mouth
so that taste would not last until forever.
We followed the moon to sleep,
watched its dreams rolling around in its head,
sang silently a tune as old as falling
until the moon could not wake up anymore.
We found the moon a heart
because it was sad without one,
and we hung guitar strings around its neck,
listened to the melody it played as it loved.
We showed the moon how to dance,
how to make poetry with its feet,
and read aloud so that grass roots could hear
as they pushed green closer to the sky.
We taught the moon where the world was;
it learned beginnings and ends without middles;
it learned that ice is neither,
but instead contains the fidelity of it all.
We wrapped the moon in ground,
colored it in with a sky as open as our eyes,
drew it a map of the subway systems
in cities where nobody sleeps anymore.
We rolled the moon through the streets,
a parade as empty as a church tower with no bells.
It laughed as hills whistled past,
cried when there was nothing left to move around.
We gave the moon a smile
and a tear for times when the smile is not enough.
We broke it into pieces as small as our teeth,
stippled our souls with it;
planted holes with it; washed our hands with it.
We watched it die without mourning its death.
We forgot the moon and where it had come from.
It remembered itself for the sake of life.

It reminded us of loving too much
and never letting go of another body's heart.
We lost the moon before it was alive;
it catches its own waves now.

Callie Plaxco

Nameless

My husband gave me a monkey for my thirty-sixth birthday. Not a real one, but a furry stuffed animal he'd thought amusing enough to buy at the Air and Space Museum while in D.C. on a business trip.

"Here's an adorable gift for my adorable wife," he said as he handed the brown-and-gray spider monkey to me.

I don't know which upset me more, the fact my husband had found the toy with the glass eyes adorable, or the fact that he was comparing it to me. But at the time, I loved my husband, and because his eyes, dark like the monkey's, seemed so earnest, I accepted the gift, cooing over it like it was our first child, which, in a way, it was, since I had what my mother liked to call "scrambled eggs."

So, for the remainder of our marriage, the primate perched royally atop the mountain of pillows on our bed on days I decided to pull up the bedspread. Otherwise, it stayed lost under the bed, or sat crookedly on a pile of unmade comforters and sheets, its long spider monkey legs dangling around its neck in a position only the best of yoga instructors could ever achieve.

I left my husband a little over a year later, my rolling suitcase packed with the few clothes left in my closet from my "I'm-single-this-sucks" period of my life, a time long before what my friends would describe as my failed marriage.

But I don't think of it as a failed marriage because the word "failed" implies that we divorced because we were incapable of staying together. In reality, I think the fact that we had such a successful marriage was the reason we wanted out of it.

Besides, isn't the fad nowadays a good old-fashioned dee-voice?

Days after I announced my separation from John, my friend Mary Clinton admonished me.

"Oh, Sarah," she said, placing her hand on my shoulder and uncrossing her white Capri-clad legs so she could scoot closer to the edge of her patio chair and to me. "Couldn't you try marriage counseling?"

At the time, she and her husband Henry were seeing a Dr. Johnstone whom she claimed came highly recommended. What she meant, however, was that he was highly recommended by her.

John and I agreed to attend an hour of Dr. Johnstone's counseling, but even before the first half hour of our session was up, we both decided the Good Doctor needed to seek some professional help of his own.

Besides, I already knew what was wrong with our marriage—it was that we were just too perfect for each other. The first time we'd slept together, we discovered that we each preferred a different side of the bed, him the right, me the left. When I'd told him that I could not have any children, he'd bashfully confessed to having already had a vasectomy.

The honeymoon just never seemed to end for us. I longed to complain about things like slaving over a hot stove, but John and I both seemed to prefer Big Macs to home-cooked lasagna. And I experienced make-up sex only in romance novels, since we never fought. That is, not until our divorce, when he decided he wanted the monkey back.

I, of course, would not let him have it, and so we took the matter to court. The local papers joked about it in the metro section: WOMAN SEEKS CUSTODY OF MONKEY and IS THE COURTHOUSE GOING TO THE MONKEYS?

Random people I met on the street would yell things at me like: “Who’s your monkey’s daddy?” Even Mary, who filed for her own divorce three months after mine, asked me, “Was there specific kind of *primating* ritual that you and your husband had to perform?” before she busted out in giggles muffled by her French-manicured hands.

I even saw Dr. Johnstone in the grocery store not long after the articles appeared, and he told me that he’d quit marriage counseling since he hadn’t been any good at it, and was currently writing a book on parenting. Then he asked if I’d ever spanked my monkey. Needless to say, I grabbed the bag of Cheetos and walked away, my middle finger nonchalantly standing at attention. *Yeah*, I thought pushing my buggy up the aisle, *I’m slim and trim, and I gave birth to a monkey.*

The custody proceedings, while completely outrageous, were conducted as if the stuffed toy was a human child. John’s lawyer argued that since John had paid for the animal, it should be his. My attorney, however, smart woman that she was, took the position that since it was a gift, it should remain mine. “After all,” she reasoned, “it is implicit that my client is allowed to keep both her wedding and engagement rings—which I might remind you were also gifts from Mr. Richmond—and therefore, we can only assume it is her right to keep the stuffed animal in question.”

The judge saw things my way, as I knew he would, and awarded me custody of the monkey.

It perches on my bed right now, its long legs and arms flung about, and the WWJD bracelet—its homemade collar—tied around its neck to make it appear dressed up for its upcoming weekend at my ex-husband’s house, where it will be spoiled and then returned to me.

Markie Gaddis

Namesake

My mother gave me a name.
When the moon was as ripe as her body,
she would knead her skin like warm dough,
whispering a lullaby.
The swell would dance under her tracing fingers
as I reached to touch her
through bloodwall and flesh.
Now her touch is the air
all the way at the bottom of my lungs,
never exhaled.

My name means silk, flaxen gauze,
like the dress my mother would wear in Charleston,
her shoulders red and peeling
under the slight touch of the fabric.
The constant wind stirred her hair
as we walked in the open markets,
sand still clinging to our feet.

My name in Latin is Theophania.
It means “the appearance of a god to a human.”
Epiphany.

Tiffany Leonard

Piano

Some of the cracked black keys
from her old piano
stop dead,
as if an invisible old man
has laid his finger
on the coiled brass strings,
muffling the vibrations,
chuckling to himself
at the frustration
of the frozen fingers
pounding harder and harder,
causing nearby relatives
to contort their faces
and plug their ears.
After The Fire,
she painted it black
to cover the charred mahogany.
As a child,
I played it on Easter and Christmas,
my small fingers dancing clumsily
across those splintered keys.

Jenna Lyles

Mosaic on Swing Sets

I've never really wanted to fly; I only desire the safe restraints of aerial motion found in airplanes, roller coasters, and swing sets. My freedom is not contingent on having my own pair of wings. Instead, I curl my fingers around the sun-scorched metal links and pump my legs, knowing the chain will let me go as high as I want, within reason.



Like most children, “swinging” began for me as sitting on the plastic seat and keeping my legs straight as my parents or some other adult pushed me. I did not learn to operate on a swing by myself until I was five. My aunt, uncle, and cousins had come down from North Carolina to visit, and we’d all gone to Cleveland Park. While my sister pursued the jungle gym and my cousins dominated the slide, I refused to leave the swings. I made my Uncle Barry push me, keep me in the air at all times, until his arms grew tired. Then he explained to me the mechanics of using my legs and weight to propel myself forward. I struggled at first, inhibited by my lack of experience. But by the end of the afternoon, I was swinging proudly on my own.



We used to have a swing set in our back yard, the kind that came with a teeter-totter and a slide attached. In the first few years we lived in that house, the grass was always long. I had to wade out to my swing, but it was always worth it to feel my bare feet graze the tips of the blades as I went back and forth, back and forth.



Supposedly, some people find it easy to interact with others. As a six-year-old, I never did, and with each passing year “fitting in” never got any easier. I have always felt awkwardness in asking someone to spend time with me. The line between friend and acquaintance is sometimes hard to define, especially through the childhood and preteen years when emotional attachments are arbitrary. Finding and maintaining friendships can feel like swinging sometimes, thrilling on the way up, but scary on the way down. If you don’t keep pumping, then eventually you come to a stop. You aren’t swinging anymore.



I hated my elementary school playground because it didn’t have swings. Because I was tall, I had access to the top of the monkey bars in first grade. Along with the other vertically gifted kids, I would climb up and slide along the thick metal end bar until I was in the middle, and then I’d jump. This activity was supposed to be thrilling. The others would shriek gleefully when they jumped, while I could never enjoy the drop. My stomach felt like it had broken loose from all of its interior restraints, a rock banging into my ribcage. It was nothing like the feel of descent on a roller coaster when your insides come apart and leap helter-skelter into your chest in their excitement. Rather than laughing and throwing my arms into the air, I would close my eyes and take a deep breath before I slipped from the bar. In the half-second it took to fall, I geared myself for the inevitable pain of my heels crunching into the ground.



My Sunday school teachers would have had much more success in keeping my attention on the words of Jesus had not He seen it fit to bless our church with a first-rate playground, complete with a glorious swing set. As a child, my mind often wandered from our lesson as my whole body itched to settle into a swing. What could be closer to

heaven than the stretchy black seat of a swing molding to your butt? Often, if we had been good, we were released for a few precious minutes before church to play. I was always the first one to the swings, ready to climb higher, higher, closer to God, but always linked to earth.



One of the many wonderful things about swings is that they can bring people together, not just elementary school children looking for a playmate, but also parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, children and mentors, and of course, young lovers who haven't quite reached the end of puberty yet. My first serious relationship was in my freshman year of high school, and having never been in love before, I was convinced that Matthew and I would be together always. He seemed perfect, allowing me to indulge in my odd obsessions, including my love of swinging. On more than one occasion, we went together to Cleveland Park, the same park where I'd learned to swing. Sitting on the exact same swing set where I was the afternoon Uncle Barry gave me my first taste of independence, I allowed myself to become dependent again as Matthew pushed me. I felt myself on the brink of something, swinging between childhood and adulthood.

It ended, of course, as most high school relationships do. There were a few fights, unkind words, and soon I began to doubt our "perfect" love. However, redeeming moments, three-hour phone conversations about the future and afternoons in the park, mixed with my doubts to create extreme confusion. I wavered in my decision to end things, wavered in my assurance of forever. *Infinite. Finite. Infinite. Finite.*



I still feel a rush of excitement whenever I come across a swing set, and I have to stop for several minutes at least to let the seat of a swing cradle my hips and to caress the chain in my palms. The metal links feel like a timeline. It doesn't have to be the same swing; they all remember. I can close my eyes and launch myself into the air and feel limitless.

Rachel Huskey

Recycled

During the 2004 presidential election between Bush and Kerry, though there was much contention as to which candidate would take the country as a whole, in my home state of South Carolina the outcome was decided long before the contest even began. South Carolina as a state had not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since the '70s, when Jimmy Carter won both the election and the electors of South Carolina.

For those of us who tended to disagree with the Republicans who dominated the state, the idea of Kerry actually winning in South Carolina was laughable and thus only discussed in the half-hearted speeches of candidates trying to hand out hope when there was obviously no chance. It was a generous formality, but ultimately an empty one.

In compliance with my rebellious teenage ways, and in the spirit of the idea that all great political thinkers are wont to reject the manner in which they were raised—after all, Ayn Rand, noted for desire for free people and free trade, was a product of an authoritarian communist Russia—I felt that those on the left side of things were more justified in using less savory means of campaigning than our conservative adversaries.

I offered a minimal participation in a local county council race, mainly because other people dragged me into it, in order to appease my own sense of needing to practice what I preach. (I also did this for the privilege of being able to tell off those on the other side for not assisting in *their* campaigns, as if they had any reason to, knowing the ease with which they would win.)

This was always something that bothered me on a local, personal level during the election—the ease with which the Republicans knew they were going to carry South Carolina. The Bush-Cheney 2004 bumper stickers that were plastered over what seemed

to be half the SUVs in the state, the widely prevalent yard signs announcing a host of conservative candidates who were all more than likely to win, these things in and of themselves were uncalled for and simply dirty.

These signs and bumper stickers were the equivalent of state employees in a one-party nation driving around in an ice cream truck that blared the national anthem. They were obviously an affront to those of us who disagreed, who sadly had no hope of ever winning. It was the height of discourtesy and self-adoration. Republican political yard signs were the epitome of dictatorial propaganda.

All of this and more factored into my decision to steal one. My political attitude had long been something I'd borrowed from Noam Chomsky—the idea that people should seek out institutions of authority and question their validity, breaking them down and reinventing them if they cannot be justified. As Republican yard signs in the heavily conservative South Carolina were obviously unjustified, they were something that deserved to be “broken down and reinvented.”

Perhaps it is misleading for me to say that it was *my* decision to steal one, because it was something that my meek and servile nature would have never allowed on its own. Yet it is my meek and servile nature that allowed me to steal a sign once I was convinced to by my friend Madison. Perhaps in this case, my submissiveness in general was an asset rather than a fault, something that allowed me to strike a blow deep within enemy territory. After all, soldiers that won medals were ordered to commit their acts of bravery by superior officers, were they not? The correlation was painfully obvious.

It was around one in the morning and Madison and I were driving home from a friend's house, discussing a subject that had been on our mind since the onset of the 2004

campaigns: how valiant it would be of us to steal someone's Bush sign. It was one of those late night conversations where big ideas are exchanged at small intervals, where the gaps between things that are possible and impossible shrink considerably. We decided that it was finally time to stand up for what we believed in, to at least complete *one* of the wacky schemes that we always dreamed about, to do something that mattered.

So at the first house with a Bush-Cheney 2004 sign out front—well, the first house that had most all of its lights off, at least—Madison pulled the car over to the opposite side of the road. Up until this point, it had not been in my head that I would be the one to do the actual sign stealing. After all, I was the nice guy here. *I* was the quiet one. Why should I be the one to do all of the dirty work?

But Madison's persistent insistence and the fact that I was worried someone in another house may notice us sitting in the car in the early hours of the morning provoked me to act and act quickly. As a last minute snide remark, I verbally likened our situation to Madison waiting outside in the getaway car while I dashed inside with a vast array of firearms to hold up the bank. With that, I opened the car door and got out.

I ran across the street, glancing around in the darkness for signs of approaching cars or lights coming on inside any nearby houses, to the place on the lawn where my objective was standing. Nervous but mostly exhilarated, I jerked hard on the sign once but it did not come out of the ground. My second attempt proved more successful and I was able to tear the thing from the earth, to purge the neighborhood of propaganda.

Holding my prize in my hands, I ran back across the street to the car. I knew that some of my friends had left a few minutes ago to walk their dog and I thought it might be fun to wave the sign in their faces from a distance, to show them the thing we had

accomplished, but I didn't see them anywhere on the road. Madison popped the trunk and I tossed the sign into the back of his car, then jogged to the passenger seat and got in.

Upon sitting down and buckling my seat belt—something I doubted real criminals would do—Madison informed me that it would be a good idea to close the trunk. After a few seconds of nervous debate, I ran outside and closed the trunk, and then I got back in the car. We drove off and we laughed and laughed and laughed. We were victorious. We were Hawkeye Pierce and Trapper John, joking around after having thwarted some misguided plan of our supposed higher-ups.

Before Madison dropped me off at my house, we created elaborate schemes on how we would steal scores of Republican yard signs—Bush, DeMint, Inglis, we were not going to discriminate. We would steal a whole row of signs from several houses that all sat next to each other, setting up complicated check-points with the assistance of our like-minded comrades, using such-and-such's house as a base-of-operations. This sign would be the glorious beginning to an endless guerilla war.

We never did any of these things, obviously. In our hearts, and in our defense, I think that we really intended to, that we really wanted to. We just never did. The one Bush-Cheney sign would be the sole spoil from our short-lived insurgency.

The next day, I asked Madison what he had done with the sign. He said that he'd put it in the recycling bin. A Bush sign in a recycling bin. I found the irony of this delightful.

Politics are a minefield of trickery and lies, deceits and acts of treachery, with some golden state of being always looming in the horizon. The dirtiness of politics is

something that overrides partisan lines. I felt justified in what I did. We were an oppressed people and I was a freedom fighter—or well, *something* along those lines.

What really mattered to me throughout the shady ordeal of The Great Sign Robbery was that I had held true to the ideals that I so valued, the words of Noam Chomsky. I had seen something in a position of power that was unjustified, and knew that it would be reinvented as something better—in this case I was hoping the recycling people would turn the Bush sign into a Kerry one.

Adam Barrett

Seasons

Black is very bright,
sending out lemon-rays of music,
to the wailing ears
of Sandra the postal worker
who drives her truck up a small tree,
and over the other side,
daintily smudging
the paint job from Ontario.

The storm tomorrow morning
will be crucial
to the rise of the sunset tonight,
which will start
at precisely the time
when taste becomes stinking
and molten like cartilage.

Where is your boy tonight?
There is the echo of a small parade,
when he lifts the receiver
to call you.
That is why your coffee
went so icy under pressure,
on the way to Sans Souci--
and you thought it was the headlines.

I am going into town tomorrow
to look at the tall buildings,
the ones like bamboo
that grow even while girls
in tight black skirts
pump up the elevators
for another day
of ducking under people's
lines of view.

Jenna Lyles

Equilibrium

Did you know
that when I am confronted
with a tile floor,
I am possessed by the desire
to stand
occupying three analogous tiles,
one foot on each of the ends,
leaving one tile to reside
in between?
This is my miniscule attempt
at balancing my world.

Allison Combs

Fourteen Western Moments

1.

The airport in Billings is like a ghost town: transparent, dark, and sort of hokey. There is a huge moose in the lobby that overlooks a parking lot full of cars so bright they resemble carp in a backyard pond. I can imagine myself tossing them breadcrumbs from the top of the airport building, watching them wriggle in hysterics over who gets to eat first. But I am more interested in the moose, although the ghost people in the airport seem to find him rather blasé. His fur is a little bit faded, and his antlers are bleached and dead-looking, but to me, he seems like a gatekeeper to another world, the watchman between the west and me.

2.

There are four people in the rental car: Kate, Brit, Robby, and me. Coming out of the airport, we are all really hungry. Brit makes jokes on the road like “Keep your eyes peeled for meals” and calls Burger King, “Burglar King.” No one laughs except me, because they are used to him. Robby holds my hand occasionally; we are sitting in the back seat together, and he looks at me as if checking to make sure I’m okay, that I’m coping with the transition. We stop at a Pizza Hut and eat outside. We see three bunnies: tan, black, white. Pet store bunnies. I am sort of confused about them; they seem out of place, but then, everything in this city feels out of place. There is an old Indian man sitting on a bridge over a little stream, and underneath him are a group of hippies who ask us for money. Everyone is pretty sarcastic about the Pizza Hut except Robby. It’s okay.

3.

The ride to Cody, Wyoming is full of green leaves so shiny that they look like lakes in the middle of boiling rocks and dust. In a land with so little water, I am amazed at how much wetness I see: the shining green lakes, the shimmering black river that the tar road makes. I think the leaves are some sort of crop, because I see hoses that snake their way through, watering them constantly. The lakes look odd against the mountains, huge mountains, with flat clouds clustered around the top. The land here is hard and real, land that you can fall in love with because you know it will never love you back. There isn't any land like this in Greenville. Greenville is so blurry—I can only recall colors and trees and cement. I can see lines in the west.

4.

We're leaving for Yellowstone, and the car ride gives me a moment to reflect on our night in Cody. The shootout was mediocre, but dinner was above average. I had gator for the first time, which is kind of strange considering I'm in Wyoming. The sunset at dinner cast the light in such a way that the dining room lit up with startlingly white light, and I felt like it was noon again. I think this is because the sky here is bigger, and generally more serious. It is amazing how different the western sky is. When I look at it, I think of my friend Sarah back home. She would be so jealous of me. The sky is her second mother, and nothing grounds her more than its vastness. I feel that if she saw this sky she would leave and never come back home. I've considered it myself, a couple of times.

5.

Initially, Yellowstone is a disappointment, but once we hit Yellowstone Lake, the disappointment is replaced by a nervous awe. The water is unending and interchangeable with the fog surrounding it, and it reminds me of blue desert. I love deserts and water similarly, and not only does the west supply both, but it supplies each mimicking the other. After the lake we see the forests that were once consumed by fire. Their logs, chalky and stunning against the forest floor, are like giant feather spines, rotted away after the great bird took flight.

6.

The ranch is astonishing. After the giddiness of arrival wears off, I am overtaken by the howling western loneliness and the certainty that I will never be a part of this place. My solitude is impacted by those around me. I like to be alone in crowds, in the car, in my house knowing that outside, hundreds of people are busy with each other and I am lucky and alone. Here, however, the loneliness scares me and threatens to swallow me up. I think that I'm starting to get used to it, though. I'm going to take a nap and Robby is leaving to go fishing with Brit. So far, this is a good thing.

7.

The ranch is more authentic than I thought it would be. I meet my horse, who is named Hank, and we go on a trail-ride where I quickly become bored and sore. But the

view is so wonderful that it's mostly worth it. Afterward, Robby and I find a little island in the creek, and we set up lawn chairs on it and read, and it's probably my favorite thing to do here. Last night, the stars were so cluttered in the sky that they made me laugh, and I think it's the first time I've been able to laugh at this sky. I'll be sure to tell it to not take itself so seriously all the time.

8.

It is mildly chilly today. I've found two wonderful spots here: the little creek island and a weirdly tropical bit of the Ford, although the Ford is kind of a hike. The feeling I get when I dip my feet into the freezing river is actually nice once the pain subsides—kind of warm and soft. Robby and I decide to go into town, and we see a moose, a big male moose, and I get out of the car to watch him. He has huge antlers, and a surprisingly graceful lope. He passes us, and Robby is very anxious, trying to get me into the car. I almost wish the moose would stop, and look at me. He reminds me of my airport moose. But he keeps running, over the road, into the forest.

9.

Today is packing day, and tonight is my last night at the ranch. I'm sort of sad to be leaving. It seems that despite my reluctance, I've actually assimilated here, and there is a part of me that is very intensely against leaving. Sometimes, I think to myself "This is where I want to stay, surrounded by mountains and tiny mountain flowers, where I can stick my feet into the freezing river, so much harsher than my southern ocean, and so much more lonely, caught between the burnt grass and the ever-extending sky." Maybe

something out here does appeal to my secret self; maybe I'm not just imposing myself on this reality, and maybe I do belong in this heartbreakingly open space. But I think I miss my home more than I'll miss my horse, so I'm not too crushed about leaving tomorrow.

10.

I realize that I am afraid of dying. I am so scared. I realize that someday, inevitably, I'm going to die. I was lying in my bed, when suddenly I opened my eyes and all I saw was darkness. It is so black here at night. And now I am so full of horror and fear that I feel nauseous. I start to plead with God, and I ask him to let people stay like they are forever. I am aware of how impossible and childish I'm being, but I don't really care. I get out of bed, and walk through the dark to where I think Robby's cabin is but I can't find it. I am sobbing so hard now that it's even harder to see where I'm trying to go, so I give up and stumble back to the lodge, where the light is on, and sit on the back porch crying and afraid. When I am finally able to pull myself together, I run back to my cabin, crawl into my bed, and turn on the light. With the light, I'm suddenly able to regain the "intellectual" part of myself that I had lost in the fear. I am able to analyze myself, and create the distance that I need to survive day to day. Most of my time, existing, I am able to distance myself from this sort of reality. I think I need to. I don't think I could survive in the fear. Right now, I can look back on what just happened, call it an episode, and forget about it. What's so terrible about not being after all? But now, I am filled with a tender painful love for everyone. I love people so much right now, and this beautiful spiraling web of people that will keep me close, keep me safe, keep me here.

11.

We're leaving the ranch. The trash burning outside reminds of how the kilns at my school smell, which is pretty appropriate: while I'm here I'll miss home and when I'm home I'll miss here. We leave the ranch with little drama, quietly, and are on the way to Yellowstone again.

12.

This place is so dry—maybe that's why I always feel like crying.

13.

Watching Old Faithful erupt is understated and depressing. Actually, the large groups of people—especially people so out of place—is depressing. The actual eruption is understated and wistful, and I'm not at all disappointed. It reminds me of a girl wrapping a white sari slowly around her body, a beautiful silent routine that is filled with hidden implications, and air full of dust caught in sunlight. The Indian Paint Pots remind me of fat, laughing, drowned men. They seem to speak in voluptuous gurgles, shaking their heads against the flow of dead branches and the snake-like rivers that dart in out of their pores. There is so much death in Yellowstone, everything, even the water and sky, seems a bit more crowded.

14.

Billings is more depressing than I remember. It's probably because, as my first association of the west, its glamour has faded considerably in comparison to the ranch and the wild land out here. At the airport, I see the moose again and wave hello, and I hope that he will always stay at the airport, and that maybe I will see him again. In the plane, I press my forehead against the window and breathe in. I think I smell fire.

Maggie Johnston

