

Advice to an Insomniac

Let the stars remove your will,
bending it into a velvet cover
where your body may rest its feet;
in the meantime,
stagger helplessly, seeking
a good place to fall.

Geoffrey Billetter

Liftoff

I close my eyes
as the pulse in my forehead quickens,
and I inhale my worries,
exhale my hopes.
The world is shaking.
I am shaking.
My grip on nothing constricts.
My nerves take off without me.
I must hold on tightly
to the feathers
of this bird.

Geoffrey Billetter

Breathe

Lungs expand in anticipation
as my amethyst heart flutters its wings--
maybe a twitch,
maybe a stutter.
From here, I can almost
glimpse a future,
but my daydream affair collapses
as her feet guide her past
the moment of meeting.

Geoffrey Billetter

Damn Family

Of your brother the nail,
Who does your job better:
When you see him,
I bet you'd turn red if you could.

Of your cousin the screw,
Who has ridges and is round:
He rotates and turns,
But you know his spinning is a waste.

Of your nieces the staples,
So useful yet common:
You could do their job,
If you cared to.

Of your aunt the brad,
So flashy and gold:
Her legs spread easily,
But you know no one enjoys her company.

Yet why do you think so highly of yourself?
Your niche is crowded.
So someone must leave,
And I think you know
Who it must be.

Geoffrey Billetter

Skin

I

We rub cheek to cheek, measuring the sensitivity
of the hairs on our skin.
We're young adults alone,
but together, two ten-year-old girls playing in the sand,
our hard play molding little castles
as we watch and wait for something,
wind, ocean, or rain, to take back
our masterpieces.

II

I offer to help the woman struggling under her own weight
and that of her grocery bags.
While we walk, she tells me that skin is nothing really
it's only there to hold the bones and organs together
even though they never agree
on what television show to watch.

III

Months ago, sleeping over at a friend's house,
and waking long before I should have,
I patiently examined the sun for hours as it traveled
from her forehead to her collarbone.
I told her once she'd woken, that I wished that I could paint,
to show her how the night surrendered to the day
on her skin.

IV

I've known that the moon
is my direct connection to God,
and that God must be female,
because the moon isn't handsome,
it's beautiful.
Messages sent through stellar night reveal to me
that body language is the only real speech,
and skin the only written word.

Sarah Carnick

Pinnacle of Dreams: A Rearrangeable Poem

You never notice where the knowledge clicks in your mind.
You never notice at which point you understand the situation.
Endings always have curtains.
Typos are never the only flaws in a beautiful story.
There's really no difference between an accident and a surprise.
There's really no difference between the son and the daughter.
The hardest lesson to learn is that some things are exactly as they seem.
The end stands strong and powerful, yet never justifies the means.
With eyes closed, you straddle the line between night and day.

Sarah Carnick

Allyson Field

Mute

The shame of classic rock
as it listens to the pop
that has replaced it on the charts.

The resentment of bottled water
as it sits in the fridge,
replaced by a Red Bull.

The isolation of a lone chair
at the top of a stadium,
cut off from the herd.

The suffocation of a wound
beneath adhesive gauze,
longing to savor oxygen.

Least-Extolled Features of the Human Anatomy

1. The Mole

A speck of contrast
on delicate epidermis,
it is at times a symbol of beauty,
but may also carry a malignant woe
that must be shaved
into submission.

2. The Eyebrow

Overcrowded hairs remaining
after a ruthless attack by metallic tweezers
frown together and raise with grace
to create an expression that perplexes
in quizzical astonishment.

3. The Gums

Trapped in a moist encasement,
they are the keepers of carefully carved lily stones.
These rosy pillows are never given the chance
to caress each other, and are jealous
of their oxygen-exposed neighbors, the lips,
who get to experience
contact.

4. The Big Toe

A stubby digit
that lacks appeal of any sort,
it is sometimes branded with mocking names
as it reaches for its partners,
but if its unpleasant self
were to disappear,
the simplest gait would suddenly become
disabled.

5. The Back of the Hand

Known well from constant viewings,
but not as beloved
as its opposing side
(which is often associated
with tenderness and compassion),

the harsher back
takes pride in its reputation
for releasing a strong impact
upon its victim.

Allyson Field

Billionaire's Dream

Sitting on a wet park bench
on a cold day,
tossing crusts to the pigeons.

Jeremiah Jones

Laboratory: The Butler's Night Prowl

Gazing into the microscope,
he watches spots appear
like foam in a distant sea.

Jeremiah Jones

Breaking Points

I

It began as a subtle tremor,
a minor annoyance.
Then came the crashing sound,
the monster awakening in the rock.
We stood paralyzed
as the ground began to split.

II

I looked upon the stained glass.
I had never seen anything so beautiful
I wept as my hands worked the controls.
The metal ball smashed into the azure windows.
The shards were all that remained
of their glorious shine.

III

We pulled with all our might,
but the other team would not budge.
We lost our balance
with the pit not far ahead.
We pulled the rope back,
abrasions forming on our hands.
Neither team could win, neither could lose,
as our instrument of war snapped in half.

Jeremiah Jones

Vacation

Travelling to nowhere,
we glimpse the open sea,
and take a deep breath,
only to turn,
and forget we ever were there.

Jeremiah Jones

Apprentice

I sat there quietly in my corner. The heat wafted over to me, the sounds of hammering and sizzling following closely. I just could not get it right, this trade of my ancestors. My father said that I do not pay close enough attention. "You shan't learn the trade unless you concentrate." I was twelve years old, not ready for this station that makes one a slave to warriors and kings.

I stood up from my stool and walked out the back of the shop, stopping by my room to grab a piece of parchment, a quill and some ink. My father always hated the written word. I never understood that disgust. Education is the only thing my mother left me. When other boys were running in the fields, I was left learning lettering.

"Come on just move the quill."

"Mother, I can't."

"Yes, you can!" I sensed the frustration in her voice. "This is all I have to give," she whispered. "You have a talent, it needs to be let out."

Slowly Father walked up. "Let him play today," he said. "I spoke with the stableman. He said that we can borrow a horse for a while."

I jumped straight up. "May I, Mother?"

"Of course," she whispered. "We will start again tomorrow."

My father gently grabbed my hand. "Come on!" Father cried. We walked over to the stable. A man was waiting outside.

"Well met, William!"

"Well met, Harold."

Harold looked at the sack in my father's hand. "They in there?"

"Yes," my father replied. Then he reached his hand into the bag pulling forth eight horseshoes and two pieces of silver. "Now, where is that steed?"

Riding was harder than it looked. I had trouble getting the horse into anything but a trot. Father though, always had a smile on his face. As we were walking home, I turned to my father. "Thank you father. I think I will write about this tomorrow with mother."

"All right, son, for now."

I trod out into the night. Two knights in-training were sparring on a field below. I sat down on the grass, soaking it all into my mind. The first one moved his sparring sword from right to left; the second parried the blow and slid to the left. Then, he came back with a feint going after the neck first, quickly changing grip on the sword he brought the blade down right into his opponent's stomach. It was spectacular. I wrote all down. This is how I remembered my mother; I used the gifts she gave me.

Suddenly I felt a tugging on my shirt. I flipped over to see my father's glare upon me.

"I told you not to leave. Why...." Then he saw the parchment and the quill. "Get up, now." As I was moving he grabbed me by the arm dragging me toward home.

That morning, I had been at mass with my father, listening as the priest droned on. No one around me, including my father, actually knew what he talking about. Latin was another gift from my mother. It was about Lot's wife and according to the priest and about defying the will of God. It always amazed me how the service went. Only the priests, the scholars and I knew a single word of what was said. Yet, they all sat there as if a word in Latin would change their lives.

As the priest spoke of Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt, one of the old scholars turned in my direction. Cassius was his name. He always did watch me, whether at mass or if I passed him on the road. I saw him a lot when was younger. I only have flashes of that time, but from what I could recall it a happy time. He used read to me, dark tales of ancient times, folklore long forgotten. Then, he and my father had an argument; I never knew what it was about, then he left. He did not come around again till round a year ago, when mother was withering away. Father hated his presence, but kept that to himself for mother's sake.

As my mother lay dying, she only said two words. "Trust Cassius."

After service, Cassius tried to greet me as he always tried, but father whisked me away as he always did. We walked back to the shop where father began hammering his worries away for hours.

As father pulled me away from the spot on the hill I saw Cassius again, but this time I saw only determination in his face.

"Let him go, William."

"Cassius, how many times do I have to tell you to leave us in peace."

"The boy will never have peace with you."

Father scoffed at the notion. "You never once thought I good enough for her, not one day."

“Was I wrong?”

“He is not going with you.”

“It is for the best.” He turned to me suddenly. “Desmond, do you know who I am, who I really am?” I was twelve, but from everything that was said I could figure things out.

Cassius’s words rumbled articulately and quietly. I was wrapped tightly in my blankets on this snowy day, my feet only stretching down half the bed.

He put the book down softly, “Now, I shall see you tomorrow, Desmond?”

“Yes, sir.” He rubbed his fingers through my hair and walked to the door. I got up and walked to the window of my room, my legs barely long enough to give me the sight before me. My mother was standing there, a great smile on her face.

“Thank you for coming.”

“No thanks are required.” Then he kissed mother on her forehead.

“You are my grandfather?” I asked.

“Out of my house,” my father barked. I gazed at them from the window; my legs gave my eyes, blinking back tears a full view of this incident in the swell of a summer storm.

“William, there is no need to shout.”

“I don’t want him learning from you anymore.”

“Is he not my blood?”

“Out!” Father howled.

“Yes, I am.” Then he turned to father, “It is what she would want, William. You know this.” My father, for the first time I had ever seen him, stayed quiet. “Desmond, do you want to be a blacksmith, or do you want more? You have a gift, come with me and you record about anything and everything.” He began to walk away, “Are you coming?”

“Yes,” I answered. I followed quickly and quietly, not even looking back at my father for fear I would turn to salt.

Jeremiah Jones

Psalm # 555-3247

Let all who are overcharged for ring tones
rejoice in an eternal harmony
of unlimited long distance
for a dollar a month.

Let those who sing static-obscured
praises to the Lord
blossom in a field of free internet access
and be lulled to sleep
by a whir gentle as a the sound
of a soft fan through a carpet of foliage.
Let all of them dream of electronic bliss
and never again toss or turn
under the somber cloud of overages.

O Lord high and above,
enthroned on the Cingular Satellite,
Who justly designates
those who get the nice Customer Service Angel
and those who don't,
hear the cry of this congregation
and punish those heathens and technological barbarians
who deftly sneak cell phones from gym bags to jackets,
who borrow our phones and never return them,
who rack up needless and excessive minutes.

Lord, reserve for them
the hottest area code in hell.

Max Lasser

Gallery

I have searched
far and wide—

I have traced
the circumference—

but I have yet to find
another place

with windows
on the inside.

Max Lasser



The Scent of Drowning

My mirror's nothing special.
It rests under a thin film of dust
obscuring the fragmented poetry I wrote on it
in French, with my chocolate eyeliner.
Yet on a regular basis, there I am,
bouncing back off the glass and through
the dust and mangled thoughts.
When I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear,
I swear I hear the air conditioner slur
in the voice of my dead daddy,
"Baby doll, princess, sweetie,
you know you'd be so pretty
if you'd lose some-a that fat."
Then I breathe in the nasal scent of drowning
that makes my head swim
against the current of my thoughts,
like that time I thought the mermaid
would grab my hand if I went out far enough.
The ocean agreed it wanted another princess
as it pulled me down, and the salt water
rushed into my throat,
but daddy was busy
teaching mother right and wrong,
so it was the boy with wet curls and no shirt
who stole me from my new home in the sea.
I promised Ariel I'd come back if it meant
my hair would billow in waves of glass,
and I could flaunt a tail
that reflected light
bright enough to see
through the dust
and foreign words.

Mary Murphy

Gravity

"How do you know we won't fall?" she asked, looking over the edge as the wheel began to rotate.

"I've been riding these since I was little, baby. We'll be fine," he said. His eyes closed and he leaned back into the bucket seat.

"But how do you *know*? This time could be different. I wish I could fly. If I could fly, it wouldn't matter, and when we fell, I'd swing back up and rescue you. Did you know that, Kenny? I could rescue you." Her eyes were wide and she bounced, tilting the bucket back and forth.

The ride churned to a stop.

"What's happening?" she gasped.

"Sit still, sweetie. All this rocking makes me sick."

"You know what? I bet Mommy would have liked this. I wish she had come. Why didn't she come?"

"If she gets off work in time, she's supposed to meet us here. But *you're* at the fair now, sweetie, so please, please let me rest for a minute. Just enjoy the ride."

She plopped back and smiled at the squeaks of the swaying bucket.

She began singing softly to herself. "Miss Mary Mack-Mack-Mack all dressed in black-black-bla—"

"Stacey."

"Sorry."

He closed his eyes again and sighed.

"I want cotton candy."

"Later. You'll get it all over you, and then we'll have to give you another bath."

"Mommy would get it for me," she grumbled.

"Then why don't you ask her when she gets here? Listen, you wanna ride the merry-go-round next?"

Stacey's eyes fell out of focus as she gazed over the rim again. There was a tent just about ten feet away, and the thought of flying was still in her mind. *I could fly*, she thought. *I could fly and dive and fall on the tent, then bounce up and down. Or the clouds. I could fly and dive and fall on the clouds, flying and diving and falling forever. And Daddy. He'd be there too. We would hide from Kenny and Mommy, and there'd be cotton candy everywhere. No more boyfriends. Well, maybe we could bring Mommy, too. Yeah, that's right. We could rescue her too.*

"No," she said. "Can we ride this one again?"

"Sure."

The ride slowed to a stop once more and Kenny handed six tickets to the man at the bottom before climbing back in. The bar was pushed into their laps and the Ferris wheel started rotating again.

Now, how do you fly? If I dive with my arms stretched out in front of me, my butt should hit hard enough to bounce me back up. Aladdin did it...but he bounced to the ground. That won't do.

"It's almost eight. Your mom should be here sometime soon."

"Uh-huh."

Wait! He wasn't as high as we are! And he was a grown man. Besides, if I start to fall, my guardian angel will pick me up. Oh look, we're almost to the tent again.

Kenny's knees were keeping the bar from being tight enough to hold Stacey down. She slid out from under it, and stood in the seat.

"Stacey, what're you—"

"I never liked you anyways," she said.

One... two... three!

And she was gone. Her short, blonde hair stayed almost still as she flailed downwards. Missing the tent by a good six feet, she hit the dew-crusted ground. Crowds turned to watch the screaming girl writhe. Almost back to the ground, Kenny jumped out of his seat.

"Stacey! You stupid girl! Are you okay?"

Her face was bright red as she choked on all the tears. "Ow, ow, ow," she whined. "Make it stop, make it stop!"

"Can you move your fingers?"

"No! Make it stop!"

"Her arms look broken," a woman said.

He held her up and tried to move one of her arms, but Stacey screamed and bit his shoulder.

"Don't you touch me," he snarled and slapped her across the cheek. "I told Victoria I could take care of you and by God, you'll pretend like you're fine when she gets here if it's the last thing you do."

But he didn't see the frantic mother, running—no, almost flying—toward her broken-winged baby.

Mary Murphy

Falling Up

I've always wanted to experience the uninhibited feeling of a freefall. The idea of letting go of all control, succumbing to gravity, is beyond my comprehension, which is probably what gives it such appeal. It's not that I'm a stranger to the forces of chaos--like most teenage girls, I am sometimes disorganized, and of course I get too lazy to clean my room. But on a day to day basis, I need to have control over what I am going to do and how I am going to do it, and I need to know that I will succeed. For all its attractions, freefall just isn't something that comes easily to me.

At the Carowinds theme park, there's a ride called The Drop Zone designed to provide the experience of a freefall. It goes straight up and then jets back down, faster than the acceleration of gravity could take you. Briefly put, I didn't like it. I was confined by a safety bar and a person on either side of me. There was neither freedom nor independence. And I knew that my "fall" would gradually slow until my feet lightly brushed the ground.

When I was younger, my brothers would move the trampoline to the side of the house and we would jump from the roof. One time, I jumped down near the edge, and then I bounced off and hit the ground. I cried for fifteen minutes and then got back on top of the roof and jumped again. I hadn't broken a bone, and thank God, too. If I had, I might not have gotten back up to do it again. This experience was closer to what it is I'm seeking, despite my ignorant assumption that no matter what, it was just a game; I would always be okay.

Technically, an astronaut is always falling. That's what makes them float inside the space shuttle. Imagine falling forever. Imagine falling where there is no direction, where you're falling up and down at the same time.

I'm looking to grow up, or is it "fall"up? I'm looking to let go of my safety rails (my mother, those hot pink sheets on my bed, my oversized hoodie) and let outside forces dictate where I'm going and at what speed. And when I fall, I'd like to have my back to the world and try to pick out the constellations before impact.

Mary Murphy

Sand Dollar

My thumb strokes its underbelly
covered in green hairs that sway with the tide
like a little girl's algae-locks
discovered in the maniacal depths.
Then I drop it into my bucket of seashells,
just one more souvenir.

But my hand likes to pull it to the top
and rub the drying shell
so it won't have to die alone.

Mary Murphy

Refuge

The tower's root-web spreads
far above the flowing clouds,
the axis itself growing as far up as down,
a vertical island for a boy
who catches dreams with poles
as long, thin boats float
through sliding river of froth.

Jonathan Thompson

Extensions

I've measured people,
but prefer their shadows,
elongated and improved by dusk.
Only the most observant
can glimpse their subtle motions.
Maybe they dwell where the years go;
as age tears at our features,
our shadows remain smooth,
timeless to the day we die.
Meanwhile, how does the world appear
to our shadows,
gazing up from underneath
at colored forms and seeing
only details?

Jonathan Thompson

Delicate Work

We strung the pulley
that would spelunk
the piano bobbing down the wall
the way a glacier floats
in a frothy sea.

We ourselves,
however,
must use
the
staircase.

Jonathan Thompson

Moose

A group of men sat around a long table, its top so shiny that their faces winked back at them. Frank, a portly man with a stiff gray suit and droopy red bow tie and a bald spot right on the top of his head, cleared his throat. “All right man,” he said, “now that we’ve had our nice long break to memorize the language, we need to start thinking about plural.” There was a general murmur of agreement. Frank cleared his throat again. “Any suggestion?”

Steve, a young, skinny man with thick black glasses and thick waves of blonde hair that Frank envied, spoke. “Why don’t we just add an ‘s’ to the end? It sounds nice. You know, egg, eggs, chocolate, chocolates, domino, dominos!”

Teddy, an extremely tall man with a distinctive grumble of a voice and of whom everyone was a little bit afraid, sat up straighter in his seat. “Why an ‘s’? Why not an ‘a’ or a ‘b’ or any of the other fine letter?”

“‘S’ sounds the best, and works with the most letter, and is the easiest to say. I mean, egga? Eggb? Eggc? It doesn’t flow,” Steve said. Teddy just nodded his head slowly.

Carl, who had a high, nasal voice that didn’t at all match his rugged good looks, piped up. “But everything else in the language is so complicated! There has to be another layer to plural word! Or, I guess, words,” he said crossly.

Frank cleared his throat. “True, true, quite true my good man. What do you propose?”

“We could choose random words to not add an ‘s’ to, and do something else instead!”

Jonah, an eager young man who always overdressed just in case someone important happened to drop by, said, “We could change word with double letter to ‘e’! But only vowel, so not leeer, that would still be letters, but goose would be geese instead of gooses! And just to make it really confusing, let’s have men and women instead of mans and womans!” He grinned, pleased with himself. Everyone blinked.

Teddy recovered first. “Excellent idea, excellent idea. Of course, there are some kink-I mean kinks- to work out.”

Steve sighed. “Let’s start a list.” The men proceeded to list all of the singular words that they could think of, and then their plural forms. They kept some the same as the singular version to mess people up, and added an ‘e’ before the ‘s’ on some to mess people up even more. Finally, they were down to moose.

“It’ll have to be meese then, since goose is geese,” Frank said. Carl started writing it down.

Jonah exclaimed, “Wait! That is not complicated enough. Instead of saying meese, let’s just make it mooses. Or moose.” He gasped. “Why don’t we make it both!” There were exclamations around the table.

Teddy banged on Jonah’s back. “Excellent idea, excellent idea!” And so, they wrote down both, and doomed people to forever be confused about the plural of moose.

Stacey Schutzman

Flow

Before

A man stands, mute.
There are no words, only hands
that flutter in the air like birds,
saying so much more
than words ever could.

After

People talk,
sing,
joke.
But the beautiful art of the talking hand
is gone.
It reappears sometimes
to punctuate our thoughts,
like shadow pains in shadow limbs,
feeling, wanting something
that is no longer there.

Stacey Schutzman

Ode to My Mind

You fell through a hole in my pocket
as I was walking down the street
of identical houses and identical lawns
and identically cheerful people.
Slipped from my hand
while I was distracted by something shiny.
Just plain faded away
as I spaced out in boredom
between the flash and the imprint of my face
at the licensing booth at the DMV.
Were stolen from me as I slept,
dreaming of red water balloons.
Snuck out the kitchen door
as I ground my molars over quadratic equations.

I buckled a collar on you; you wriggled out.
I stuck a tracker on you; you flung it off.
Now, gazing around
at the overflowing boxes of my thoughts
that clutter up my home,
I sigh, waiting for you
to sheepishly return again.

Stacy Shutzman

Theatrics

I picked a song
to make me cry about you
every time I heard it,
something about waiting,
waiting with no hope.
Oh, how desolate!
You could bound away...
now!
But that song doesn't make me cry.
It ain't gonna rain
no more no more, any more.
It's cool and bluesy now,
like you,
sauntering around,
sassy and so novel.
If this life were a play,
you'd be a shining star,
dazzling the masses,
smearing your lipstick and shaking your tush,
just to get a rise
out of old people with too much money.
All those old old people,
and their way-too-much money.

Jenna Lyles

Surface Tension

What if I sent you out?
Out rowing down a river.
Not rowing, actually—
see, I'd send you without a paddle
so you would have to become
resourceful.
I'd send you out in a little boat—
a coconut shell.
a banana boat,
a paper boat,
You'd shake your fist,
and if you had a paddle,
you'd shake that too.
But nope, *I'd* have the paddle,
right here safe and sound on the shore,
waving as if you were going away
to stay.
But I know
you'd just row row row right back,
somehow,
to me, me, to me.
You'd shake your fist,
and I'd just laugh,
having learned to row without you
in the meantime.

Jenna Lyles

The Boutique in the Dying Downtown

supplied endless fantasies
of dates culminating in marriage proposals.

One dress in particular, stitched
of golden sunsets' cornhusk silk,
would land me in ballrooms,
elicit engraved invitations to the White House.

But today, standing quite still
amidst a towering, blooming wedding dress,
I realize that I've never dreamed myself
any farther than this point.

Beth Bennett

Conviction

I wanted to run as he did,
blind to destinations, directions,
and the shock of curbs
his not-so-trusty guide had missed.
I wanted to believe in my own velocity
as inexplicably as he did
in me, the guide without whom
he could not run.

Beth Bennett

Teller

Mary's got an earring that she says once
belonged to her great-aunt Greta, the one
who could just look into your eyes
and see the map of your past unfurling,
and trace lines into your palm, creasing
your future into the folds of skin.
The earring's partner is long lost
in the fog of the Metro seven years back,
so what's left is just a single pearly patch of sky,
the shape of a blind man's eye. Who knows but that
the shadow of that steely bank, the one soon to be robbed,
didn't gleam within the earring's pale face
that day Greta walked right past the best mistake of her life?
Mary loves to tell it, how Greta forgot to make a withdrawal,
how the robbery and shootings were just spilling out of the papers later
and Greta knelt down, her earrings eating light,
unsure of whom to thank.
According to Mary, Greta felt from that day
that something within her had broken off
and left her unbalanced, like the earring.
But looking more closely, it's as if
the single earring is more whole by itself,
fuller without its facsimile. So perhaps
Greta mistook her luck for something emptier, something
she could not face. Or as Mary puts it,
when she dangles the earring into the shaft of sunlight
that a lone cloud is starting to break like a puzzle—
It's a lot like the truth, in this light, she says (of the earring I suppose),
and she turns it again, the opal flashing dully
like the map in Greta's eyes,
she adds, almost to herself,
Beautiful, beautiful.

Tina Bu

Please Check Your Context at the Door

Closed Space Gets to Dad's Head

Bright flashes of blue interrupted by solid concrete: that's the sky, there's the road, here's me and Dad in a green car that doesn't seem to belong. I drive. Time hesitates across the road. Dad's yelling.

“Jesus, son, a C in _____ (*subject*)? A C? Do you want, to go, to *college*? What the hell?”

“What the hell” is right. I'm not stupid. I took those little “Challenge” classes in elementary school, back when being smart was okay. The thing is, I just don't *care*.

“John, this isn't even one of those fancy Honors classes, and it sure as hell isn't AP. A regular _____ (*subject*) class, and you're doing less than average.”

Dad doesn't even mean half of what he says. I mean, sure, he means it, but we both know that I've gotten plenty of C's before. He just feels that need to yell once in a while, to establish his parental authority and express his “disappointment”.

“I'm disappointed in you—”

Right on time.

I pass a white truck. I get this urge to wave to it. It speeds up, faster than us, faster than Dad and I will ever go. *Wait*, I want to say. *Tell me what you know*, because the truck is like a story I'll never get to hear.

“John. Are you even listening, son?”

I think of piano keys.

My Stepmom, Janet:

“How was your day, Johnny?”

Janet thinks we’re best friends. She’s 5’6, an inch shorter than Dad, and is perpetually golden from the tanning bed. Really, she’s too old for the tanning bed.

Janet always asks me about my day. My day’s always fine. That’s what she thinks, because even when _____ (*noun for the way I feel just after Alderman yanks me outside to the halls at school and give me another “serious warning” about acting up in class*) happens, even when I _____ (*verb for that minute when I’m looking at the clock and hear dad’s laugh*) again: it’s fine.

I don’t have a best friend. Janet doesn’t count, though sometimes I’m tempted to tell her everything she’s so eager to know:

The _____ (*ordinal*) time I tried pot, I started choking, and as that happened I felt the world zooming sixty miles away and then back, the distance a yo-yo, and for some reason I knew that _____ (*noun for the gap between thoughts and the walls of the words that hold them*) was only so real.

Sometimes, sitting there in Spanish, throwing _____ (*small objects*) across the room, listening to Zach’s account of the latest time he _____ (*verb describing immoral conduct*), I have to fight the urge to _____ (*verb that explains why Dad never cries.*).

It hurts to look at Dad when he’s laughing.

I like this girl. Her name is _____ (*her*).

Lost Stories Will Always Find themselves

_____ (*class*). Not paying attention. Story of my life.

I watch _____ (*her*). With my pencil, I trace an outline around her, cutting her out of _____ (*class*). I sew her into the crooked corners of my voice.

Stories are drawn up from the mouth of my memory: _____ (*some other word for mother*) leading me toward stick-like buildings, _____ (*fairy tales*) being strewn haphazardly into my eight-year-old heart. *Are* they stories? Their edges meld together. They cast vague shadows in my _____ (*a harder word for heart*).

Alderman, the Bitch Who Hates Me

is yelling again. Scissor-edged words.

“Johnny if I hear another peep out of you I’m going to call the principal and you can see how you’ll do trying to disturb. . .”

But guess what. I can’t even hear her. The same way I don’t hear Janet when she says “son.” Or Zach’s incessant flirtations with _____ (*her*).

Things I can never avoid hearing, though:

The void that fills in right after Dad coughs.

_____ (*the silence hovering between two empty chairs*).

_____ (*a softer word for mother*), weaving into the veins of dark, just before I fall asleep.

The click of Alderman’s minute-stained fingers. Her resignation—you can see it on her doughy face, hear it in her sighs.

Johnny Parker, the Greatest Writer in the World

So I write her a poem in detention.

_____ (*her*), I write:

Your words grow trees;

the leaves fill my throat.

You're choking me,

and every question bears a new seed.

I scribble this into a corner of my _____ (*subject*) notebook. I write more. Her name is a knifed-out jag in my hand. Time, bored, sits down to a spaghetti dinner and then waits patiently for my return to earth.

Detention goes by so fast.

The Best Conversation I've Never Had

" _____ (*her words are broken keys; her eyes the color of knife meeting paper*)."

" _____ (*these are the perfect spaces I cannot fill*)."

" _____ (*we seek our names in the Bible of gravity*)."

" _____ (*why does my voice carry the mirrored scars of Dad's laugh?*)"

The D in Death Reminds Me of a D-minor Scale

Dad plays the piano for Janet sometimes, but the notes sound out of place, forgettable, too heavy. They turn into metal rings when they reach my ears.

After the funeral, I tried to think of bigger words for “mother.” I tested my _____ (*a faraway noun for sadness*) on that same piano, pushing scales beneath my fingers. B major. D minor. High octave, then I’d tunnel lower until the deepest chords resembled the bowels of some distorted riddle. It was like limbo: how low can you go?

_____ (*Dad whispering to me: “I laugh whenever I feel like crying.”*)

I had a dream afterwards that Dad was carrying the piano on his back. *Give it to me*, I said, and just as quickly wished I hadn’t.

The piano weighs on my tongue. I imagine what I could say without it: “_____ _____ (*no words. Just music.*)”

Zach Attack

Zach is sitting right next to _____ (*her*). Like he can't see me watching him. The sun chooses this day to soften and cast buttery haloes around Zach's hands. Just the way I'd imagined it would be, if Zach were me—her boughswept laugh. Her fingers that could inspire a philosopher's love. _____ (*words too big for her pinprick whispers.*)

Their shadows loom behind them, larger, darker. Their edges overlap. _____ (*the stark imbrication of shadows*): disgustingly beautiful. The sheer idea of amalgamation. _____ (*word for how close the distance can seem*).

_____ (*Profuse Profanity*)

I'm carving ZACH MUST DIE unto the cover of my _____ (*subject*) notebook, when Alderman confiscates it. I mutter “ _____ (*obscenity*)” at her back. But Alderman has razor-tuned hearing. And this time I've really crossed the line.

Mr. Principal's office. Things zoom around the room, ricochet off the corners of walls, and clunk into my head:

_____ (*the wrong word for mother*).

Dad at the supermarket: "No, thank you, my son can carry the bags."

_____ (*silence, folding into itself*).

_____ (*Janet's voice, rising an octave when she asks me if I'm sad*).

I stumble down the corridors of thought. Mr. Principal dials Dad's phone.

I Reinvent Dad's Words

“ _____ (*nothing is ever small enough to only be said*).”

The Worst Thing Alderman Can Do, She Does

Alderman visits my house. “Mr. Parker,” she says. She smiles. Malicious teeth. Cartoon wolf molars.

She's got my _____ (*subject*) notebook. She raises it high. “Johnny is quite the tortured poet,” she announces triumphantly. “Listen to this,” she says, flipping pages.

“This is lovely. 'To _____ (*her*): Your words. . .’”

Time unwraps itself the way Janet peels the tinfoil off her ham sandwich. My footsteps drown out Alderman's words.

I Attempt to Fill in the Holes in My Life

"Look," I say to the toaster. In the safety of the kitchen, I grapple for the right cookiecutter words. I'm talking to an appliance, I think. I don't even know what I'm thinking. There is no longer a need for specifics. I close my eyes. I open my throat.

_____ (*Zach beating up that guy who made fun of me when I cried before Mom's funeral*).

_____ (*Dad's gruff fingers enclosing the gaps of my own small hand.*)

_____ (*that crooked feeling of being eight, when nothing's in its place yet, when a coffin is a decisive period at the end of a scrawling sentence. Of not yet needing the right words for the _____ reasons. Of pushing a rock into my palm to remind myself what pain couldn't do.*)

_____ (*light plunging the way _____ darkens, _____ reaching for my breath. Her hands were the color of _____*).

_____ (*noun*) _____ (*verb*) the way I never will.

_____ (*Dad saying, "What the _____? What _____ you _____ _____?"*)

_____ (*Why does it hurt to _____?*)

_____ (*a quieter word for pain*). _____ (*a misplaced word for weight*).

In the living room, Alderman finishes reading. She murmurs something, and then it's Dad's turn to speak. Chords tumble out of his mouth. D minor.

"Are you kidding me? John? Why would he write that?"

In the kitchen, I suddenly feel bigger than Dad's piano will ever be.

In the living room, Dad's just laughing. He won't stop laughing.

Tina Bu

Fell

for Zach

You thought you could have everything
the day you pedaled your love down the hill,
leaning into hour and air and light,
only to wrap your heart around a tree.
The bike never recovered;
bent in its fetal position,
it waited patiently for your rebirth while,
splayed across the numb grass,
you watched the sky close in on the ground.
Everything seemed to be dislocated:
your heartbeats moved into your fingers,
your words into the back of your neck.
From the corner of your eye
you wanted an ant thread incessant trials
into the dirt, its path folding, unfolding,
and then too distant for words,
and then too close.

Tina Bu

Pigeon Hole

I love to click open the tiny brass door at the post office,
peer down its rectangular shaft,
and watch the postmen behind the grid of boxes
carrying bulging canvas bags and packages,
wearing rolls of Scotch tape on their arms
like thick, clear bangles up to their elbows.

They never look back at me.

I want to reach my whole arm through the chute,
thrash it around in attempt to wave,
or send them a note
without a postmark.

I want to observe them during winter hunting season
pushing their bubble-wrap longboats
down ink rivers dripped from stamping pads
as they spear letters to Santa Claus with Stay-Put Pens,
then haul their bounty back to shore in thick canvas bags
to be weighed on the Great Scale.

I want to watch a hunter return to his home
of corrugated cardboard walls and cellophane windows,
kiss his wife as she peels the stamps from the envelopes,
scrubbing off the postmarks
and the kids' greasy fingerprints and crayoned return addresses,
then steaming and positioning them like numbers on a clock,
to be opened, contents scooped out, oyster-style.

I want to see her pull children's story manuscripts and European postcards
up under their chins to tuck in the kids in at night,
wrap the baby in stamp rolls
and lay him in his cradle.

Anna Chandler

Donations

Bending over in the dim light of her secret closet, preparing a gown for her unborn daughter's Pageant Day approximately eighteen years away, the mechanic's wife twisted copper wires into chokers, working them into spirals to fall down across the chest, along the shoulders and down the back. In cashew tins, she set aside silver screws to wind in her daughter's sure-to-be rich dark hair, and nails bent into loops to spin into her curls. The textured interiors of pliers were turned into bangles. The dress was the turquoise hood of a 1954 Mustang, pounded from the inside until the chrome was thin and malleable enough to be bent into flowing folds from her waist, which would be circled with a glimmering steering wheel. The father would carve curving diamond shapes down the train to give it an authentically classic feel.

The chicken farmer's wife, also the daughter of a chicken farmer, had, as a girl, been mocked for her simplicity by the women in the town. Determined to prevent her daughter's exposure to similar experiences, she crafted an exquisite gown of buttercup chick feathers that fell off the shoulders to trail behind.

Traditionally, daughters of spies coated their bodies with black paint. Cigarette manufacturers made their girls layer two dresses, one on top of the other, for past experience revealed that the end of the day saw girls naked after walking through the town; former smokers couldn't resist on such festive occasions. The writer's daughter merely spoke. The daughter of the dressmaker was inevitably disappointed.

The key maker's daughter would clink as she walked. Rusting lockbox keys started at the neckline, falling into overlapping skeleton keys to circle her ribcage and then transitioning to complex medieval keys and trailing newer house and car keys. Every few moments, someone from the street would run up to lift a key, examine its teeth, and inquire whether it could possibly be one of his or her lost ones.

Women unsure of their child's father were required by law to do extensive research. Once, nobody's wife investigated for two months and recovered nothing but the name and birth date of the father from miles away. From the sole memory she held, she sewed a gown with a top piece made of slick Jack Daniels labels stitched together with gold thread and a skirt of amber glass, beer bottles melted down to be so thin that the glass would form itself to the wearer's shape yet still shine. It buttoned top to bottom with eighty-five bottle caps down her daughter's spine. On the day of the pageant it rained, and when the hem of the gown grazed a puddle it sang like a licked finger on the rim of a wine glass.

On October 19th the astrologer's wife finished stitching stars to the map of her daughter's gown, with the faces of tarot cards as a wide train border, slid the finished dress on the mannequin, bolted the windows, nailed down the shades, turned off the lights and locked the door. Two days later, the chicken farmer's wife swept up any down mixed with dust and hair in the corners near the room. On November 29th, the tombstone maker's wife pushed a bookshelf in front of the closet door and shut the key in a book on the top shelf, too high for anyone to reach on their tiptoes. Within three months they were all mothers. Their girls, along with the dozen or so other girls in their birth year, grew up whispering about their pageant, wondering what their gown looked like, though none dared peek throughout grammar school. The watchmaker's daughter sketched a hemline of little black and gold hands and a gown of a million faces. During high school the mechanic's daughter slid lipstick on her mirror over her reflection – Corvette-red spaghetti straps and flirty skirt.

The anticipation grew to an uncomfortable intensity throughout their seventeenth year. Bets were placed on gown length and material. The mirror maker's daughter knew she would be only as beautiful as what surrounded her. The florist's daughter and the daughter of the university's artist-in-residence were the most envied, particularly by the seventeen-year-old daughters of pest controllers, neurosurgeons and butchers.

But in the landscaper's daughter's house, the pageant was never spoken of. While other mothers giggled mysteriously with their girls about "what" their dress could look like, the daughter of the landscaper never heard directly from her mother that she even had a gown or a place in her pageant, and thus became doubtful.

Two nights before the ceremonies would begin, while all the parents were draping lavender and rose-colored crepe down the streets, twisting bouquets around lampposts and opening their ovens so that the smell of baking sweets would permeate the air, the landscaper's daughter was tapping the walls in her house with her fingertips and then her knuckles, listening for an echo she hadn't previously detected. After an hour of searching, she found it beneath her feet, a thin rectangle marked on the floor, and by running her finger over it, she discovered an edge and pried open the trapdoor, stepping onto a stairway. The sound of running water below her was audible. After lighting a candle, she followed the steps down into a part of the house's basement that had been built up on the sides. Some of the bricks in the wall connecting the basement, which had several windows, were loose; she pulled them out so rectangles of light fell across a mannequin covered with sheets of sod.

Hands by her side, she stood there for some times, examining the gown. Flattened spades were draped around the neckline. Water streamed from miniature sprinklers through the air to sink into the surface, trickling out down a path leading to a spout and into the ground. Billions of minute fertilizer spheres dotted the gown from shoulder to hem, spattering the floor in little pools.

But in patches across the torso, grass was turning brown; dehydrated blades littered the ground, dry soil piling up around the base. In the center of the larger patches, peach-toned mannequin skin showed through.

Cautiously, the landscaper's daughter placed the candlestick in its holder on the wall, approached the mannequin, slipped off her own clothes and zipped the sod dress. She pulled it on delicately, fingers sinking through the grass and dirt, creating more holes like inverted brass knuckles or stocks for the fingers. Her reflection in the mirror showed three-quarters of a remaining gown, with her dirty hands holding the back in place where the zipper had pulled out. Weeping, she ran upstairs and out into her closed backyard, ripping the leaves of elephant ear plants and pressing them over the exposed skin, their shade and soft texture clashing with the gown's remaining soft green. Seasonal plants, Astroturf, nothing could be done. She would be nothing but a ruined landscape. So she returned it to the basement and replaced the dress on the mannequin, blew out the candles and ascended the stairs.

At this very moment, several houses down, the carpet weaver's daughter, who was punching out a knot in her wooden wall, glimpsed an Arabic pattern with gold tassels touching the toes, bright needles as filigree.

Several houses up, the landscaper's daughter knew, as did the daughter of the carpet weaver, though neither understood why. And that night, the carpet weaver's daughter pulled a green thread from the underside of the gown, unraveling lines through the entire dress, and as they passed each other on their evening walks, the carpet weaver's daughter pressed the wound length of yarn into the landscaper's daughter's open palm and closed it and continued walking up the street. It was the perfect shade, adapting to the tones around it when the landscaper's daughter quickly stitched it in the empty patches.

The next morning at dawn, girls awoke to find their rooms filled with flowers on the walls and in vases on any available space and petals sprinkling the floor. The curtains were pulled back and light flooded through, bright, splendid light that revealed the city streets decorated by the townspeople the night before. After waking, the mothers would lead their daughters to the Sewing Rooms, unlock the doors, and reveal their gowns, after which the town hall would hold a breakfast for all the girls and their families, a sprawling buffet with fresh fruits from the farmers, hand-poured pancakes and imported fresh-ground coffee with pure vanilla extract stirred in.

The landscaper's daughter awoke as her mother sprinkled rose petals on the end of her bed. Her mother dropped the basket she was holding, told her daughter to turn back around into her pillow and close her eyes, hurriedly dumped the rest of the petals on the bed and pulled back the curtains. Her daughter didn't seem shocked or enchanted as she opened the trap door ("Would you have guessed? Your father hid it well!") or as she lit the candles, turned off the sprinklers and showed her the gown. She practically had to coax her into trying it on, turning around in the light to see how it shone – or how it wasn't shining in areas. The mother leaned over and ran her hand over the skirt ("Maybe it's dried out somehow...") as her daughter seemed to shrink back, then noticed the coarse looped strands tied in with the grass and looked at the girl, knowing.

The carpet weaver's wife gasped as straight lines of her daughter's skin showed through the carefully hand-wound fabric. It couldn't have happened, locked in its room with sealed doors, protected from rodents, pests or moths. Threads dangled in a row like a torn hemline.

Across town, the florist's daughter was pressing flowers into the asphalt back of the road worker's daughter's gown. The watchmaker's daughter and the alphabet soup maker's daughter were trading numbers for letters. The bookbinder's daughter was sewing a crinoline underskirt of novel pages to peek out from the flashing Technicolor dress of the news anchorman's daughter –

pastoral poetry to balance out poverty and scandals. The OB/GYN's daughter was sliding one light pink and one baby blue beaded bracelet on the mortician's daughter's wrist. And no one knew.

At two o'clock, the mechanic's daughter brushed melted chrome slid crushed asphalt over her eyelids and kissed the gasoline stains on the floor of her father's shop to gloss her lips. Fifty-two zippers zipped, rows of buttons closed, clasps fastened, simultaneously. Fifty-two doors swung outward and fifty-two gowns spun down the roads to the town square, where fifty-two times fifty-two gasps and sighs of awe were met and fifty-two times two hands clutched in anticipation and delight. The town gathered with bottles and bottles of chilled wine, flags, banners, and confetti. They tipped their glasses to the town marching band as it warmed up and to the line of girls led by the mayor's daughter wearing a flag adorned with gold city seals and the flag stitched, perfectly form-fitting. Closing up the end of the procession were the road worker's daughter and the chicken farmer's daughter. People made up excuses to go talk to her just to brush against the soft chick underbellies. The ladies in their townhouses who spoke so badly of the daughter's family hurried to her to ask her how she was doing. Each rested a smooth white hand with filed nails and a thin gold ring on her strong shoulder just enough for their fingers to feel the down's breath, like an infant's first warm exhalation.

About a quarter into the procession, a reporter's camera lens zoomed in on the string of letters around the watchmaker's daughter's shoulders. The looped fine Arabic threads peering from between blades of grass. The grey blossoms pressed into the thin cement train. The camera's flash reflected in the glass eye of Saint Michael and shining edge of an angel wing dangling from the ears of the window maker's agnostic daughter who had procured it from verger's daughter in exchange for long, clear gloves made of glass. The zoologist's daughter had pinned a shiny badge to her waistband, while the sheriff's daughter sported a peacock feather shooting from the band of her cap. The reporter dropped his camera in mid-click, realizing what

he was capturing. People began to whisper, until the gasps and murmurs evolved into exclamations and pointing fingers.

The lacquered nail of the potluck club president from the second row of the crowd on Third Avenue made an invisible line to the angel wing coupled with, “Sacrilege! A messenger of God touching her bare neck!”

Her fellow club members bobbed their heads in agreement. “Barbaric.”

“Hedonistic.”

“The closest the family comes to prayer and confession is her father dusting the kneelers each Sunday.”

“Can’t be allowed, this blasphemy.”

“And the officer’s daughter, like a showgirl! Complete disrespect for the representation of the law.”

“Can’t be tolerated. Not our town, not like this.”

No one knows who reached first, the edge of the angel wings splaying out like a polished cream-colored fan unfolding through the air, unraveling as it hit the ground. Saint Michael watched and was projected forward, tumbling and seeing sky, ground, sky, ground in his two-dimensional state, finally smashing into the road beneath him. The peacock feather was jerked from the hat, the end taken between thumb and forefinger and pulled, feathers spilling off like a thousand green and purple eyelashes falling at the feet of the sheriff’s daughter. The threads of the grass dress were plucked, the dress unraveled; the chicken farmer’s daughter struggled to gather handfuls of the down, now greedily being torn away, clawed at, and hand it to the landscaper’s daughter to patch her slowly deteriorating gown. Someone hurled the badge like a throwing star at the flashing screens of the news anchor’s daughter, so that all that was visible were the lines of poems running down her legs. The surgeon’s daughter ran to the cemetery out of fear of the blind wanting new eyes, the alcoholics coveting a new liver—on her way crying to the

landscaper's daughter for one of her spades with which to bury each organ in front of the church. She was closely followed, with just enough time to complete the task and climb up a tree, to watch as the area around which the eye and wing had carefully been punched out, like paper doll dresses in a book, was smashed with the spades ripped from the landscaper's daughter's throat. Her dress was now rotted away and her body concealed solely by the rug maker's daughter, who began unraveling the bottom of her dress and handing the bottom pieces to the daughter of the landscaper.

The next morning was quiet. The townspeople stumbled out of their doors, bare feet pressing into chips of broken glass, wood and rubble into the deserted square. They halted, still, at the sound of the breeze flowing through something seemingly ethereal. One threw out his arm in the direction of the town gate – from behind its wrought iron bars, fifty-two gowns were swinging in the wind. Townspeople turned as morning light shone through the negatives from their own family vacations woven into the photo developer's daughter's dress. The thatcher couldn't find his daughter – he tore through the town, screaming for her until he was pointed in the direction of the remnants of scorched straw and reed down the dirt road, traces of it twisted around the bars of the gate. Mothers and fathers searched corners, alleyways and basements for their girls, their belongings perfectly in place in their rooms, their gowns swaying down the road. These gowns were left in their places, the town deserted over time by families leaving to find their daughters and young girls leaving to see where the elder ones had gone. Travelers going by the town on their way between large cities would stop at the gates, rusted shut, and reach out to touch the soft down, smooth chrome and stiff, browning grass, locked to the gate with thick vines. No one knew the story; no one entered the town. It became a roadside attraction, someone claiming own to the property, charging a few pennies for passersby to see The Fifty-Two Frozen Dresses, Eighth Wonder of the World, postcard snapshots available at the gate. They never fell.

Anna Chandler

Meeting the Monster

God had never properly explained to us about the grey-green expanse that rolled lazily over and over on its side like a cat in the harsh midday sun. I suppose He'd forgotten to tell us before our banishment, or maybe He omitted the explanation to spite us, smirking behind our fig-leaved backs as we walked through the doorway and the angel with the fiery sword swinging at his rope belt closed it behind us. We asked the guardian for directions, but he didn't speak to us, leaving us no choice but to walk straight ahead through the thick grass. By the time we could no longer see our guarded oasis behind us, we were significantly weary. Adam grabbed my arm and swore he could hear a lion's roar in the distance. I told him he was imagining it, was yearning too much for home, and that we must keep traveling until we could find a decent place to rest, yet as we walked, I, too, heard it—the sound of a gentle purr mingled with the first stirrings of a thunderstorm.

The grassy stretch in front of us seemed to be fading into soil, so we followed it tentatively until our steps began to give way on seemingly unstable ground, sinking each time we planted our bare feet. I kneeled and ran a finger along the top of the surface; it was like earthen sugar. When I rose, bits of it clung to my knees and palms like pinpricks.

We stepped gently through it, slipping, falling in it, laughing at ourselves, until we reached the pinnacle of the hill and looked over it. I could suppose only that it was a type of creature with a million lips opening and closing over invisible prey, surging forward at a slow, slow rate toward us, closing in on us. Adam immediately ran back to the grass plain and hid himself in its thick blades, crying, "Woman! What do you think you're doing? It will consume you whole! It hasn't just one mouth, but one for each of your limbs and organs, and more besides; do you hear me? Get back!"

But still, I approached it. It was several components of Eden fused into one—the color like that of a peacock's feather resting on the back of an elephant, its consistency the same as that in which I'd bathed, its movement like that of Lucifer, slithering across the barren plain and retracting, and also like those of the birds, dipping gracefully, swelling and rising. I neared it—Adam screaming at me (man is so stubborn!)—until its shapeless paws could brush my toes. I stood motionless. It reached out and tickled them, it gushed between them then devoured them in a numbing wash. The crumbly earth beneath my feet abandoned me, sucked away by that creature which was not arriving to take me, but rather, the very ground upon which I stood! It dragged it out, then cast it back in a perpetual cycle, and even as it surrounded more of me—my ankles, my calves, my knees—all was craving was that which supported me.

Anna Chandler

Andrew Chinn

Wrestlers

The shooters,
boldly sweeping
others off their feet
with audacity.

The sprawlers,
determined to take advantage
and let opponents
carry the burden.

The fishes,
flopping around the mat,
eyes bulging
from asphyxiation.

The old,
who never die--
they just can't
make weight
anymore

Tides

To a blind man
there is no horizon
or north star.
There is only the rocking of the boat.

To a blind man
there are no dark, menacing breakers
foaming at the water's mouth.
There is only the electricity of a storm cloud kissing his forehead.

To a blind man
there is no lighthouse beacon
or ship passing in the night.
There is only the guiding hand of the current.

To a blind man
there is no confusion.
He rides the waves with faith
in the diligence of a god and his imperfect creations.

To a blind man
there is a sense of home on the water,
for he is not wound to the ship like a rope around a mast,
but floats in a sea of vibrant darkness and rising tides.

Andrew Chinn

Local Flavor

It's a faux cabin
fabricated from life-size Lincoln Logs,
with rockers on the porch,
a green shingle roof,
and a drive-thru
window.

Cathy greets the customers:
"Y'all take a seat and don't go nowhere"—
you'd never know
she's a Yankee.

Todd receives the order,
staring at it with a dull gaze
until it hooks him
and drags through the depths of the kitchen,
where he flops in and out of coherency
as he scrapes the pans for morsels
that were devoured yesterday.

I eat here because it's free.
I ignore the faint taste of metal
in the sweet potato soufflé
that will varnish my throat
but never fill my gut.

The order is ready to serve.
It's my job now.

I find the customers
"We didn't go nowhere," they say.
Their smiles are genuine,
while mine is the same
as everything else in this restaurant,
and my brass-coated voice rings out,
"Well, that's great,
'cause I didn't want to eat all this
by myself."

I linger just a moment,
watching how the customers
smile at each other,
the kids enamored by the toy train,
the parents happy
because the kids are.

The metal is searing my throat;
I want to tell them that I'm real,

but when they look up
and their gaze meets mine,
all I can ask is,
“Would you like that drink refilled?...No?
Well, then, y’all
enjoy your food.”
At least the wood of the walls is real—
it’s pine
the same as any cheap coffin.
Every day I come to work,
the sign still reads:
“Now Hiring.”
I know it will be
my epitaph.

Andrew Chinn

Ezra

It seemed like a good idea at the time to become Ezra. The soul shift was an easy process, the holiest of evils; I simply closed my own eyes, and when I opened them again, I was. I wasn't *him* exactly; I just *was*. It was a lesson on how to be--to be the eyes behind his eyes and see things from a few inches higher. To sing in the shower as Ezra, and watch the steam rise slowly upward. To smell Sharpies in the back of Algebra class as Ezra. To think bad thoughts as Ezra.

I loved being him, especially the way his fine black hair unfurled, forming shallow waves across his forehead, flattening easily under the red-knit cap I wore as him. I found the task of Ezra darkly inviting. I saw his personality as a black fluidity that could be easily imitated, but never explained. It was almost like taking a test, except for the thinking part. We never had to think.

"You look like my ex-boyfriend," a girl said to me (as Ezra) in the grocery store. And, as if my own mind was overridden by his, my lips automatically formed the words, "I'll take that as a compliment." Such an Ezra thing to say. After that, every time I was spoken to, it was as if a phrase bank appeared in my mind. Certain phrases suggested themselves louder than others; I could only guess that these were the standard responses of his intellect, quietly whispering their ghost sayings out of habit.

If I had wanted to, I could have outsmarted Ezra's imprint and said exactly what I wanted to say. I could have told everyone that I, Ezra, was a homosexual (a complete lie). I could have shaved my head. I could have wrung a rope around my neck and asked his mother to see a therapist. But that's a bit like cheating, isn't it? After all, if you're going to become someone, shouldn't you play fair? Infiltrating a soul isn't a very fair move, I know, but I had wanted to know him more than ever. Not that what's-your-favorite-animal or how-old-were-you-when-your-dad-left kind of knowing. I wanted the *everything* of Ezra without the *thing* part—just the essence of his being.

I lost seven months of myself to him.

It was all lucidly perfect until the *I* and the *he* began to mesh. It was neither messy nor smooth. Questioning. It was a question.

Before I had encountered my own body, which I had set on automatic pilot, I'd wondered if I would eventually become unable to recognize whom I was—an entity of myself trapped inside another's silhouette. I then began to wonder how it would be to see me as he did, my eyes behind his eyes. I would think, outside myself (inside him):

Maybe those gray-blue eyes (or should I say these?) would see me (or maybe it's more like her?) and stop. and stop. so careful not to let her see.

My recognition was deteriorating.

It became unhealthy to be him. I had neither the past nor the future Ezra. Just the *I* pretending to be *him*.

On the first of December, I decided it was time to diverge. I sat on the bed and closed my eyes, leaving Ezra's body, returning to my original. I knew everything about him. I knew *every* him. I wondered how I would use that knowledge now, and whether or not it really mattered.

The next night, I trudged through the snow to 462 Easterly Street. Ezra's house. I only wanted to see if he was the same as he was before I became him. His window was on the side of the house where the chimney was, tall and dark and ivy-covered. He was looking out of the frosty glass toward the sky. I walked closer and touched my nose to the windowpane.

Ezra, Ezra. It's me. I was you.

His face was blank. It was as if he didn't see me. His features reflected everything. And when I looked into his eyes, I saw a cold, cold moon that swallowed back the light.

Alexandra Elledge

Opalescence

A visible spine is always a good thing.
It's an anti-religion of sorts—
a gluttony of starvation.
A naked back is Braille for the blind,
an under-the-skin chain-link fence
rooting into a membrane of flesh.
The s-curve of a vertebrae hints at
skeletal seduction,
arced like a Texas Rainbow Roll
devoid of color.

I remember how she'd looked
in her too-small cotton t-shirt,
her face lumped into her palms,
eyes closed like those of a dead muse.
She'd leaned forward with each shudder,
and I'd noticed every porcelain rib,
willing myself to see her beauty.

Today she was a mermaid,
figure translating from urchin to sea cloud.
her upper body was a skinny mass
of thin opalescent skin, soft as weathered suede.
A filmy white sheet clung to her legs
like salt-water skin,
fanning out at her feet,
a cotton sunrise.

Her backbone was straight
as a trident,
her face cold as the sea.

Alexandra Elledge

Five Seasons of Autumn

I.

I am alone in my zip-up
where I can feel the world.
My God, what a waste.

Fall is near.

II.

Autumn,
Autumn,
Autumn
is
my
very being.

III.

Si tu m'adore,
I might rise up
out of these dead sticks.

IV.

October has eaten at me,
leaving me hollow
as the inside of a pumpkin—
soft orange flesh
illuminated by the night.

V.

The moon will not let me sleep.
O winds of cold December,
come home.

Alexandra Elledge

Remedy

The year I was fifteen, the sky was on fire. It happened frequently back then; the first time was a shock and everybody cried about something so beautiful being destroyed by something so beautiful, but after the seventh blaze, we didn't even bother looking up anymore. The sky became a dull blue, with scattered patches of sandy gray and black--the earth's ashtray.

My friend Brandon had an ugly hole over his house, but couldn't sympathize with the sky; he took too many painkillers. He was only a freshman, but a massive football player at that, already on first-string defense. He was an avid weightlifter, and naturally needed them—or at least, in my naiveté, I believed he needed them. Brandon's desperate consumption of the drugs became an obvious problem when an ulcer developed in his gastric lining.

"I can't *just stop*," he told me. My response was that soon his stomach would become a hole, and then his kidneys, his lungs, and his heart in a progression that would last until his body disappeared. I told him that everyone had said they couldn't *just stop* driving cars, close all the factories and industrial plants, people wouldn't *just stop* steering oil barges, and that is why the sky was deteriorating. "You're way too melodramatic," he told me.

Brandon's family had a hot-air balloon landing site in the backyard. When we were younger, we used to climb in the empty baskets and pretend we were going somewhere.

As we got older, we grew out of them, or at least I did. The balloons didn't seem so mystical to me once I found out about the process of their flight in eighth grade science—simply air rising into air.

When Brandon was old enough, he started taking real rides in the balloons by himself after school every day, but never for too long, because they were impossible to steer. He said that being in the air cleared his mind. Though Brandon invited me to come a couple times, his invitation didn't interest me; I was busy. I regretted having been busy, however, the night his mother called my mother. When she hung up the phone, I was standing a few feet to her right. I asked her what was wrong; I could tell by her contorted face that she was having trouble processing something.

“That was Mrs. Davidson... she said Brandon is...” she swallowed and tried to look at me; her eyes weren't quite sure where to rest.

“What?...Brandon is *what?*” I felt my eyes widen and I let my mouth hang open; I was afraid the sentence would be finished upon the closure of my jaws.

“He's not here anymore,” she finished. I felt a blockage in my brain, similar to the sensation of encountering a complex algebra equation that you *should* know how to complete, but realizing you have no idea how to even start.

“Well, where did he go?” I said irritably after a brief silence. A coldness grabbed my lungs. “I mean, he didn't just pack up and leave—I saw him at school today, he would have told me.” I asked her again where he went, my voice louder, as if she hadn't heard me the first time.

“No, he went up in a balloon, but this time he didn't come down,” she said to my left shoulder. “He just went up through the sky; couldn't stop.” She shrugged. I walked

out of the kitchen and through the side door. I continued walking about two miles until I reached sight of Brandon's house. The gray, ashy gouged-out spot that had hovered about Brandon's house was restored to a full, deep blue. The hole was gone.

Emily Horowitz

Winged

I. A man threw me from a cliff
one time,
the day that the birds
did a double-take,
pecking at their wings,
making sure they were real.

II. *Why*,
the word thudding against
the inside of my barred cage
of teeth.

III. I wondered what would happen
if I were to land alive--
how would I land,
on my arms, on my head,
on my feet;
how would I have fallen?

IV. He didn't throw me,
exactly;
it was a slow, hesitant shove,
a mother guiding her young
out of a nest.

V. Just as I was becoming lonely,
I passed through
a flock of birds,
floated in the middle of them.
I could not tell
if they were surrounding
my descent out of sympathy,
as if they knew I didn't belong,
or if the wind from their wings
was holding me up.

Emily Horowitz

Exposure

Only half of her is present.
I can see her open brain,
like an apple sliced through the core.
The seeds, inverted holes, reveal
everything, like an eye opening
for the first time. I want to hold her
and tell her it will be all right,
but I'm afraid to upset the balance,
causing one kidney, one lung, one hipbone,
one-half of a life to spill out.
Her mouth looks like a split parabola,
the origin resting below the tip of the nose,
protruding up until reaching
the vertical asymptote that runs through her eye.
I stand in front of her gaping body,
cradling the image in my eyes,
shielding her from the light.

Emily Horowitz

Dust

I cannot envy old cathedrals;
always blooming with incense,
they will never recognize
the scent of dust,
never know that they swallow endlessly
the lost skin cells
of pilgrims.

Rachel Huskey

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 possessing 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 an awkwardness in asking someone to play with me or go to the movies 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 could 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 broke loose from all of its interior restraints, a rock banging into my ribcage. It was nothing like the feel infof 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 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 took place 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 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 in 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

How to Address a Wizard

In Ursula K. Le Guin's books about the land of Earthsea, knowing a wizard's name means you can take away their power. That's why wizards tell their true names only to people they really trust. They give everyone else an alias, some false name that has no ability to control when spoken. Being told a wizard's true name is one of the greatest gifts of friendship you can receive; it means you are highly trusted and esteemed and worth taking risks for. Because that's what opening up is- a big, big risk.

I want Max to say my name. It occurred to me yesterday that I don't think I've ever heard him say it. I know his voice well, and can *imagine* the name sliding off his tongue and easily passing out of his mouth, but I can't recall a single memory of actually hearing it spoken.

I have no idea how to get him to say it. He always has my attention when I know he's nearby; I've never overheard any of his private conversations to hear him mention me. For all I know, he doesn't talk about me to other people at all. This could be either because he does not find me important enough to talk about me with other people, that other people don't find me important enough to talk about me with him, or—hope beyond all hopes—I am too close to his heart for him to speak of me to others. My name, sacred above all names, should not be blasphemed by the mouths of lesser beings whose love for me is not nearly as great as his own. I am a topic to be discussed only secretly within him. Then again, I imagine that if he does talk about me, it's probably because the

other person brought me up, and after they spoke my name, he could use the generic subject “she.”

But I digress.

It isn't that he doesn't know my name. We've been friends for a few years now. Together we've climbed trees, been places we shouldn't have gone during school lunch hour, acted side-by-side on stage, and goodness knows we've had no shortage of arguments. We play in a band together, we talk on line for hours. How could he *not* know my name?

He has to say it because he wants to. I can't just go up to him and say, “What are you waiting for? Say my name already!” No one can prompt him. Maybe when he passes me in the hall and I don't see him, instead of waving, he'll call out to me. It has to be a deliberate effort to get my attention. Maybe he'll drop it in a seemingly casual manner during a conversation with me, while actually, his heart is beating with the anticipation of all that it means. I don't have a name to hide from him; everyone calls me by the same one. Instead, his power comes from the fact that it would mean something to me to hear him say it. It would be the ultimate confirmation that, to him, I do exist.

For some reason, Donald B. Carson IV does not want anyone to know what the B in his name stands for. Before I knew what his middle initial was, I always imagined that his middle name must be Maximilian, because where else would he get the name Max from? (The answer is that it was his mother's maiden name; he and his father both go by different names so that there isn't a lot of confusion whenever the family talks about one of the three living Donalds.) I don't remember how I was first introduced to the

enigmatic B, but I found out quickly that he doesn't want anyone to know his middle name.

At first, the only two friends in our mutual group who knew were the two who had known Max since he was little, almost in diapers. I realized he was serious about keeping the name a secret when the two aforementioned friends couldn't be persuaded to reveal it to me, or anyone else for that matter, not even when offered chocolate, cookies, five dollars, or a willing slave who would do their chemistry homework for a week. Apparently, they were sworn not to tell under pains of death.

I don't know why were all so anxious to know what it was. For some of us, it may have been that he knew *our* middle names, and we felt naked when the willingness to reveal the stupid, embarrassing names our parents had given us was not reciprocated. For others, it may have been the lure of power. Clearly, the name has some sort of effect on him if he tries so hard to keep the knowledge to himself.

I would have imagined I had built up more trust by our sophomore year than he could ever place in any of the newly arrived freshmen, but then he met Julie. He fell in love with her and told her everything: all about his family, his childhood, his private thoughts, *everything*—including the middle name.

I didn't actually find out from Julie, though she's told me everything else about him that she could remember, trusting me to keep all private information to myself. She told another friend, who in turn told me. I haven't told anyone, though. To me, this secret is something to be cherished, to relish when I'm alone.

For my wizard, it is not a question of the alias (Max) versus the Christian name his parents gave him (Donald). It is knowledge of the middle name that gives power to

whoever knows it. Don't get me wrong; power is great—but it's knowing the name and yet keeping it to myself that pleases me the most.

By the way, I'm not going to tell you what it is.

Rachel Huskey

Just Before Sneezing

It makes me think of a brushfire;
I see the trees burning
behind my eyes as they water,
and I think of smoke and ash
and sawdust and pollen and skin flakes,
all dust.

Ordinary words from a moment before
seem suddenly harsh
in the light of the fire.
It's a feeling that makes me want
to tear my skin off
and rid myself of the sensation,
at the same time wanting everyone around me
to shut up
so I can fall into it.

.
Rachel Huskey

Kisses

In the same way that Wendy
bestowed her thimble on Peter,
so I want to shower you with kisses:
a button secreted from my mother's sewing basket,
a snippet of lace used for my grandmother's wedding gown.
In the same way that Peter
planted an acorn cap in Wendy's palm,
so I want to hold my hand out for
a face-wrinkled leaf made by Father Time

Rachel Huskey

Subcutaneous

I have invented the world
between the yawning flatness
of blue rooms
where nothing is beautiful
until dissected.

In the small wilderness
of our kindred hands,
my scalpel undescribes
the missing space:
I cannot help but weave myself
into the knotted trees
that are your muscles,
as the threadings of your abdomen
shift secrets.

Rachael Gallman

To a Leaf

Because you brought me the sunset in a cup,
because everything is tinted like windows,

because the world is wrapped
around the sky and we are all deserted streets:

You, an old star,
me, a damp head among
waning spaces.

Because at night your words feel smaller,
and because, in the quiet, where all loves grow,

we are only lost faces between deep trees,
gold stinging silver like laughter in a mirror.

Because with time we will both be old,
empty of summer and full of sleep,

and because,
smeared below the moon,
there is only the faint glamour
of snow.

Rachael Gallman

Y

You are a place
where molecules
meet skin cells
meet slinky coiling DNA.
X chromosome
Y chromosome
(because we're all at least one part woman).

You are a place
where some wild night in 1987
meets your childhood
meets a few awkward years
and facial hair

In between, there was
rebirth, then
rebirth,
rebirth,
for despite your relentless efforts,
you could never be
unborn.

Rachael Gallman

Finer Spaces: A Prose Poem

I used to eat dinner at other people's houses so that I could study their fine china. It was mostly the detail I noticed, the craftsmanship, but I always experienced the same feeling precisely at the center of every plate—a feeling I can't name because it is a word too human and too deeply implanted in the living spaces that are not filled. It is the word for nonfeeling—a sensation acknowledged only in its own absence, shaped like an empty sphere, rolling around in negative space trying to make up for what isn't there. The sphere carried a lot of weight, as if there was a load of invisible bricks inside.

I once ate supper with Picasso in his half-lit dining room. That night, I was particularly eager to uncover the design beneath the heap of fried fish on my plate. I was like an archaeologist digging for bones, inhaling every crumb until I stopped because I finally saw it--Picasso's plates were entirely white. In my years of studying fine china, this was the first time I hadn't encountered the usual feeling in the middle of the plate. The whiteness of it made me wonder if this was the same white Picasso saw when he fixed his eyes on a blank canvas.

The center of the Picasso plate held a different kind of sphere: still hollow, but heavier. The sphere didn't roll around, didn't move at all. I wanted to check its pulse with the tips of my fingers so that I could prove to myself it was still living. The sphere began to swell like a womb full of creatures that had already existed and were ready to be unborn. The sphere was dead and alive at the same time, for the same reason.

Nonfeeling.

After my dinner with Picasso, I quit studying fine china. Details became only blurred edges, like the outer rims of plates. I decided to study whiteness instead, even writing a book called *Picasso's Plate* which no one but me has ever read. It hasn't been published, mainly due to the nature of whiteness and its tendency to be found in negative space, where things aren't. In my research for *Picasso's Plate*, I also discovered the shape of whiteness, vast and spherical and unending, filled with the weight of all the other colors it reflects.

Rachael Gallman

Decomposition

I set out to write a poem
merely a millisecond before I realized
that in my current mood,
the value of the paper on my desk
would be more nutritional
than literary.

The paper dissolved in my mouth,
its edges softening
as my saliva packed them against each other,
shrinking it into a bland wet ball

which I spit out,
and then I sat down
to write a poem.

Caroline Roper

Swingset

The rhythmic creaking of its rusty joints
implores me to become
like the long, lone weed
boldly piercing the sky.

Swooping upwards
my dusty, bare toes
engrave my name deep in the blue.

Caroline Roper

To My Swing Set

Cradle my body,
the worthless weight
my mind loathes to carry.

Ask nothing of me:
neither to travel
nor to stand still.

My pieces scatter
and drift.

Caroline Roper

Listening In

There are three varieties of eavesdroppers. The first, and the most prominent in society, is the journalist--any eavesdropper who shares what he or she hears. The most obnoxious form is the Entertainment Tonight junkie, hovering around the "important" people, waiting for an opportune moment to assault them in order to divulge their friends' secrets. In some cases, the journalist's thirst for drama may be mixed with genuine concern for those involved, but despite the presence of good intentions, even this type of journalist is motivated primarily by social gain.

The second type of eavesdropper is a less offensive and more common variety: the socialite, usually an outgoing but cautious character, the sort of individual who fits every meaning of the word "average." The socialite is interested in eavesdropping only on those they find attractive or interesting. For them, eavesdropping is merely a way of getting a foothold in order to begin a relationship; he or she usually stops eavesdropping as soon as a friendship has been established.

Then there is the inner ring of true eavesdroppers, who possess no external motives; their behavior is merely an accidental and inevitable side effect of their quest for personal enlightenment. In my life, I have met only a handful of them. I share a bus ride to the Fine Arts Center with one. She brings a Walkman with her, and occasionally shoots wary glances at the journalist sitting beside her. It is important to note that the Walkman is the indispensable tool of the eavesdropper. Of course, there are many non-eavesdroppers who listen to a Walkman because of an interest in music or the desire for background noise, but for an eavesdropper, the Walkman can serve as either a strategic article (by putting on the headphones on and leaving the CD player off), or as a

distraction from the voices in the room (when the eavesdropper becomes weary of the constant garble to which she cannot resist paying intense attention). In my co-rider's case, it's to drown out the journalist. A classmate of mine is a prolific eavesdropper, but not one of the most discreet; he often chuckles under his breath at jokes not directed toward him, and demonstrates a great deal of curiosity and social awareness, two traits commonly found in eavesdroppers. My own little brother Eric is an eavesdropping protégée. I suspect he developed the habit by sleeping in the room adjacent to that of my sister and me, lying awake at night with his ear six inches from the wall.

There are disadvantages to even this third type of eavesdropping. For instance, an eavesdropper learns to imitate different patterns of thought in order to sympathize with the subject. After a while, the eavesdropper's own mental voice becomes so flexible that from a mere analysis of his or her thoughts, it would be impossible to determine the eavesdropper's true age, gender, religious beliefs or personality.

Eavesdropping can also be detrimental to relationships. It's common knowledge that even sincere people emphasize different parts of their personality before different audiences, and it's easy for a non-eavesdropper to accept this. But an eavesdropper becomes familiar with his or her friends from all angles. As a rookie eavesdropper, I often took offense at the flippant remarks my friends made when they didn't suspect I was listening. (Over time, however, I have learned to disregard statements made in haste or merely for the sake of agreeing with another. Even negative comments dropped in earnest must be considered in the larger context of the overall relationship.)

Eric's gift for eavesdropping is so strong that he has already become a solemn, small adult among hundreds of guffawing, lanky seventh grade boys. A young

eavesdropper such as Eric may choose many ways to cope with his gift. Some once-true eavesdroppers become journalists in an attempt to ease their sense of isolation. Others live in hatred of their gift, constantly moving away from places where they may overhear conversations, or trying desperately to drown out the voices of others with their own thoughts. But the elite eavesdroppers know when to indulge themselves in time alone, while not disowning their life's mission. Eric, showing the first signs of a discerning eavesdropper, recently purchased a Walkman.

Caroline Roper

Elemental

If fire were water,
we would be seventy percent flame:
our orifices would cough ashes
into the atmosphere around our heads,
clouding our vision,
polluting the clear blue of newborn eyes
burning with the fresh taste of smoke.

The sky would mirror
burning oceans' ebb and flow,
turning the sandy beaches into glass,
fragile beneath the weight of bare feet
and sharp against tender fingers
working to build a brittle castle.

A morning shower of fire would clean
away your skin,
leaving your flesh new, pink.

In winter, faceted blue flames
would crystallize into rays,
turning silhouetted landscapes into ash
when the fire melted.

Markie Gaddis

Digression

“You sound like the rain,” he said.

“The rain? Are you saying I snore, because if you could hear yourself at night—”

“No,” he interrupted, “that’s not what I mean.”

On the defensive, I told him to continue.

“I, erm, your voice.” He ran a hand through what was left of his hair. “Gosh, Judy, now I don’t what I was trying to say.”

I waited, my arms crossed, for what was bound to be a waste of my time. The dishes were waiting in the sink for me, the towels in the dryer needed folding, and the dust was collecting in the corner above the entertainment center that I had been avoiding for the past month.

“You know how when it rains we like to take naps because of the rain? Well, your voice is like the rain.”

“My voice puts you to sleep? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No! No, I’m trying to say your voice is soothing.”

I wondered if Tony was deaf. My voice may have once been soothing and youthful, but that was before I picked up my smoking habit. I know some men find the low, rough quality of my voice sexy. “Sultry” is a word I’ve heard it called before, but never soothing. My voice is more like the sound of Tony’s old diesel engine warming up in the morning before he goes to work. Then again, I’ve heard Tony groan at the sound of a powerful engine.

“How do you feel about the sound of your engine?” I asked.

“Huh?”

I could tell he was confused. Perhaps he was expecting me to tear up at his compliment or reward him with kisses for his romanticism.

“How do you feel about the sound of your engine?” I asked again, cocking my head in the same direction of the leg my body was leaning on.

“I like it, I guess. Why?”

“No reason, really,” I answered. “I just always thought my voice sounded more like your truck. What would you like for dinner tonight?”

M a r k i e

G a d d i s

Diminutive

I'm too small for my body.
My wrists are the only part
I can claim as my own.
Able to fit in the oval
of my thumb and forefinger,
they reside too far away
from my shoulder,
the distance of my forearm
equal to the length
of my feet.

Markie Gaddis

Awkward Girl Gets a Crush

She thinks the best way to confess
she likes him more than just friends
is to bruise his skin repeatedly
with playfully intended
pool-noodle abuse.

Markie Gaddis

Awkward Girl Wears a Prom Dress

The dress, a towering twelve layers
of foaming pink tulle, chafes her thighs,
weaves through her ankles
like an attention-hungry cat,
and forms a circle
with a three-foot radius at its base.
Her frequent bathroom visits
have become Olympic events,
the judging of which is based
on the amount of fabric noise
coming from the handicapped stall,
and the poise and grace she can master
as she exits the restroom.

Markie Gaddis

Awkward Girl in Gym Class

She imagines that if she were a corpse—
a zombie from cartoons with pale green skin
and popping glazed eyeballs—
her torso would detach itself from her arms
and leave them dangling
(like loose celery strings caught in braces)
from the slick metal bar
over which she is expected to pull her head
while watching herself in the mirror.

Markie Gaddis

Awkward Girl Speaks in Public

The art of knuckle popping
she has perfected all on her own
by hiding one hand behind her back
and using her thumb
to push each finger towards her palm.
Nervous energy has spawned
a nervous habit
that resounds as interference
when she speaks into the microphone.

Markie Gaddis

Awkward Girl Roller Skates

She thinks she can remember
how to skate properly, since
all she needs to remember
is how to balance on wheels.
However, her center of gravity has moved
without leaving her a forwarding address,
and she is becoming very intimate
with all the objects that she can use
to stop her trajectory, including
the wall and the floor.

Markie Gaddis

Awkward Girl Gets Sunburned

In the summer she creates ovals
across the lawn of her front yard
at the helm of her John Deer.
As she orbits, her Scottish skin
blushes under the sun's stare,
turning the color of an apple
resting in the jowls of a pig
slowly roasting over an open spit.

Markie Gaddis

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Awkward Girl in Gym Class

She imagines that if she were a corpse—
a zombie from cartoons with pale green skin
and popping glazed eyeballs—
her torso would detach itself from her arms
and leave them dangling
(like loose celery strings caught in braces)
from the slick metal bar
over which she is expected to pull her head
while watching herself in the mirror.

Markie Gaddis

Speeding

So the second hand
has been on the hour
for an hour.

The only things that speed now
are thoughts.

I think that I think.

If only I could begin to feel,
I would stop the spinning world,
and just as in the movies,
the people would continue on,
while I remained
perfectly slow,
with an hour to pass each year.
Time wouldn't be so precious
if it didn't last
so long.

Ann Kennedy

Poetry Reading

I love when the author presents the poem,
so the sound I'd held in my mind
is slaughtered by the alien, raw reality
of the poet's voice,
and the emphasis I'd imagined
is unexpectedly rearranged.
I love how a simple poem
is made complex by the reader,
how each line
is interpreted and misunderstood,
dying to be reborn
every time.

Ann Kennedy

Staring Contest

I used to be able to stare at the sun;
it was my magic.
I saw every feature on her face,
and she was beauty.
Scientists said I had achieved the unattainable.
They studied me closely
with microscopes and test tubes.
They jabbed at my eyes
with dowels and rods,
and blinded me
with beams of artificial light.
They served me colored libations
with bubbles and steam
as a side dish.

Day after day, I struggled
to keep my gaze
on the sun,
but my scientifically afflicted eyes
began to see
that there was no depth—
not with all of the 63,000,000 miles
of breadth and diameter.
And so I stared,
and she stared back,
and I watched as she blinked
and sank into the atmosphere,
to smolder on the other end
of the earth.

Ann Kennedy

Romantic

My friend Jen has a Lois and Clark complex: she wants to be Lois Lane, and she's willing to have any man pose as her personal Superman. No one would ever mistake her for a feminist once they found out her least favorite Disney movie was *Pocahontas*, not because of its inaccurate portrayal of historical events (John Smith was really a idiot who never should have been deemed worthy to have Richard Geere play his voice actor), but because it was ultimately Pocahontas who saved John Smith's ass, and not the other way around.

Jen has this big theory that it should always be the guy who saves the girl, the strong protecting the weak, which is why she enjoyed *The Little Mermaid* so much, because at the end Prince Eric saves Ariel.

I was always a little dissatisfied with the ending of *The Little Mermaid* even as I got older and watched it with my little cousins, who do not know what good animation is having grown up in the age of *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.* To me, Ariel had always seemed a little too weak, too desperate, flopping around the bottom of the whirlpool like a, well, like a fish, and the prince had seemed a bit too corny and foolish for wanting to save her. If you ask me, it was Ariel's own damn fault for wanting to give up the sea.

The last time I babysat, Jen was over, and we watched *The Little Mermaid*. When I began to laugh hysterically near the end of the movie, she gave me this huge lecture

about how deeply in love the two characters were, and how being of a different race doesn't matter when it comes to love.

“This is about a prince ending up with a fish, not a black slave falling in love with a plantation owner's daughter.”

“It's symbolic, don't you get that? Look,” Jen paused the tape, and my cousins, who had been straining to hear the movie over our arguing, groaned as the picture stopped on a frame of Ariel, huddled at the bottom of the whirlpool, her eyes huge. “See that terror on her face. That's not just for her own safety, but Prince Eric's as well. That's love.”

“Face it, Jen,” I told her, “Ariel would have fallen for anything walking on two legs.” I laughed at my joke, and then grabbed the remote from Jen and un-paused the movie, thus ending the argument.

I couldn't believe I had been arguing about a Disney movie.

The scene in which the front end of the ship stabs the giant Ursula in her swollen, blubbery belly and she screams in her new masculine voice followed our argument. I had never liked that part in the movie. I'd always expected Ursula to pop like a whoopee cushion, but instead her stomach swallows the ship, caves around it, her giant tentacles breaking the surface of the turbulent sea like the long, fat leaves of an aloe vera plant. Her death scream, in her smoker's voice, does not seem fake enough to me.

Jen, however, seemed fully satisfied that good had triumphed over evil, and that it was safe for the couple to move on with their lives.

Jen is also a serial romance novel reader, but she won't purchase a book unless she has taken a peek at the ending. Her favorites are the ones in which the male detective/ FBI agent/ fireman/ defense attorney comes to the rescue of the woman he has just realized he is *in* love with as soon as she becomes the next victim of a serial killer/ is kidnapped by her mafia connected ex-husband/ becomes trapped in a burning building/ is attacked *finally* by her stalker after she forgets her toothbrush and goes home to get it in preparation for her planned night at her lover's apartment.

She confessed to me as she re-read the ending of a novel for a third time, "You can read the fear he has. He's so worried. Imagine how he would feel if Danielle died!"

But Danielle doesn't die. They never do. Tragic romances expired with Romeo and Juliet.

This same fear that all the heroes have in romance books is the same fear that makes her love the movie *Speed* so much. I like the movie because I think Keanu Reeves looks hot in his SWAT gear; Jen likes the movie because he looks so afraid when Sandra Bullock has the bomb strapped to her chest.

I worry about Jen because I think she believes that the real world is like her books and movies. Sometimes, just to assure myself that she's not going to go purposefully looking for trouble just so she can be rescued, I ask her, "You know that's never gonna happen in real life, right?"

"Yeah, I know," she says, putting me at ease before she adds, "but wouldn't it be great?" making me nervous all over again.

So I use the line from *Speed*, "Remember what Sandra Bullock said? 'Relationships formed under intense situations never work out.' Remember that, Jen?"

She always answers, “Yeah, yeah, I remember,” and I’m assured for a few weeks until I catch her sighing over another book.

Back in high school, Jen and I had this friend named Avery. He was smart, really tall, but a bit too klutzy to be first string on the school’s basket ball team, and he had the biggest crush on Jen, who was, of course, oblivious.

Avery always paid Jen special attention and always asked her what she was reading when he caught her holding a book, and Jen, polite as ever would give him a synopsis of the plot thus far, as well as a line of understated praise, such as, “It’s pretty good,” or “I’m enjoying it.”

I always found it oddly interesting that she shied away from going into detail about the fact that her books were romances. Usually, she’d say something like, “This guy is friends with an older man whose five-year-old daughter went missing, like, twenty years ago, and the guy is trying to help find the daughter.” She mentioned nothing about the guy falling in love with the man’s daughter when he finds her, and how someone is trying to kill her because her new-found father is an influential man. She never told Avery about the fear the man feels when the daughter is shot in the leg by a hired killer.

Jen, I realized, was embarrassed by her secret addiction, and even purchased a book cover from a new and used bookstore to kept the books in mint condition and to hide the covers of her paperback novels, which often had titles containing the words *deadly*, *secret*, *hidden*, and *lost*. To me, it seemed pointless, like a man trying to hide a vodka bottle in a paper bag, since the method used to hide the sin has become a cliché. She could never get away with saying she was reading poetry or Faulkner. Books like

that are printed in hardcover or quality paperback, which are too large to pass for the mass market paperbacks she purchases from the grocery store.

Avery, however, being a guy and probably not much of a reader, like me (I prefer video games and the sound of Donkey Kong bouncing on purple crocodiles) had no clue, and continued to ask Jen about her books, hoping that she would notice him.

Finally, I decided to step in and help Avery out. I told him, confidentially, about Jen's Lois and Clark complex. So we devised a plan. I figured if Jen wanted to be rescued, then she was going to be rescued. We didn't do anything as drastic as hiring someone to try to run her over in the school parking lot, but I figured that a small rescue would be enough to jerk her away from her book men.

So we staged it so that Jen and I would be talking and walking down the stairs near the cafeteria, where Avery would just so happen to be. Then someone (me) would accidentally bump into Jen, causing her to stumble on the stairs. But lo and behold! Avery, the really tall second-string basket ball player, would be there to catch Jen, saving her from the peril and embarrassment that was sure to befall her should she fall down all four steps to the bottom.

Finally, I'd given Jen the chance to utter the phrase, "My hero," and Avery the chance to bashfully say, "Awe shucks, it was nothing." Then, they would get all gooey looking into each other's eyes, which would prompt Avery to ask Jen out.

They would go on two dates—the first to the movies, and the second to the park—before they would officially call themselves a couple. After graduation, the two of them would go to the same college, and then, two years after they both get their degrees, his a business degree, and hers as an elementary school teacher, Avery would buy Jen a

copy of the newest novel by her favorite author and tie a engagement ring to a tassel attached to a bookmark inserted in the pages of the book.

Jen would then say, “Yes, of course,” and they would get married the following June on the beach, because that is maximally romantic. The waves would be lapping, the sun would be setting, and the sand would be sandy. They would kiss when instructed, but it would last longer than appropriate, and Avery would dip Jen over his arm as the gathered family and friends hoop and holler. I would catch the bouquet of red roses at the reception, right before the couple leave for their honeymoon in Hawaii. They would then wait two-and-a-half years to have their first child of three (two boys and one girl), and of course, I would be the godmother.

At their fifth anniversary, when everyone would bring them silverware as tradition dictates, Avery and Jen would compile all the spoons, forks, and knives into a mismatched collection to hand out to all the guest at the dinner party they’d throw for all their friends, instead of the plastic disposable ones that they would have originally intended to use.

For their twentieth anniversary, their children would get together to buy their mom a platinum tennis bracelet and their father a watch.

At their fiftieth anniversary, friends and family would gather in the reception hall of their church for a dinner, and then in the middle of Avery’s toast, he would surprise Jen by telling her, and everyone else in the room, that he had planned for them to renew their vows. Their preacher would have then stand up, indicating that he was in on the plan, and Jen, embarrassed and moved, would raise a wrinkled hand to her face. They would exchange their vows and gold wedding bands again.

Insert happily-ever-after followed by ending credits.

However, that is not what happened. Avery did catch her, but Jen didn't do anything dramatic. Instead, she smiled and said, "Thanks, Avery," as though it were nothing. She didn't faint or anything.

Baffled because I had told him just how big of a romantic Jen was, Avery had stuttered, "Oh, um, you're welcome." Apparently, he too, was expecting her to throw her arms around his neck and exclaim, "You saved me!"

So for the next week, Avery and I were both clueless on how to proceed, until one day Jen asked me while I hung out after school at her house, "Promise you won't tell?" I replied accordingly, and she looked down and blushed at her lap, "I think I like Avery."

I had to refrain from singing the Hallelujah Chorus. "Really? That's cool," I said instead.

"You're cool with that? Really?" I nodded. "I was worried. I mean, you seemed to be talking to him a lot lately, so I thought maybe the two of you had a thing going on."

I tried hard not to laugh. I couldn't tell her that Avery liked her, because I would then be breaking his confidence. I had to play stupid. "So do you think he likes you?"

"Well, he does ask me what I'm reading a lot, and the other day, when that asshole pushed me down the steps, he was so nice, keeping me from falling and all."

"So if he asked you out, would you say yes?"

"Maybe." She blushed.

So a week passed, and I tried to get Avery to ask her out but he wouldn't, not without a sign that she liked him. I could not tell him that Jen liked him for the same

reason that I couldn't tell her that he liked her. I was beginning to go crazy, especially when Jen grew more despondent everyday.

"He doesn't like me," she'd mumble and then say, "Oh well," trying to make me think that it didn't matter.

I tried to get her to ask him out, but she wouldn't. She claimed she was old-fashioned, which was just her way of saying that men should do the asking, just as men should do the rescuing.

Eventually, I realized that Avery was never going to ask Jen out, and when I realized that, I realized that it was just as well. He wasn't Jen's Superman, not if he wasn't brave enough to rescue Jen from her own shyness.

Rachel Huskey