

Alchemist Review

2013 Edition



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The Alchemist Review is a 30-year literary tradition at the University of Illinois Springfield and is an online and print-based journal of literary fiction, poetry, and visual arts dedicated to publishing dynamic works by emerging writers and artists in the University of Illinois Springfield community. With an appreciation for print culture, as well as digital technologies and mixed media, the Alchemist Review provides a forum for collaboration and exploration within the ever-evolving world of literary publishing. The journal is edited by undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Illinois Springfield. All UIS students are invited to share their creative writing projects.

Alchemist Review Online: <http://thealchemistreview.com/>

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TO THE READER:

Writers are strange people. We tend to walk around like a bunch of bubbles, sometimes just bumping into each other but not much else. Even on a smaller campus like the University of Illinois at Springfield, we might never interact outside of the classroom. But how lucky am I, as well as the rest of the staff of *The Alchemist Review*, to have the chance to gather up all these unattached bubbles and put them together in this issue? We've done our best to seek out writers, poets, at artists around campus and it was great seeing the submissions roll in. We had many great pieces submitted and it was a challenge to narrow them down to what we have here.

This year, we've also tried to make use of our website - thealchemistreview.com - as well as publishing this print edition. It's nice using both mediums, and I hope publishing work online continues to be part of future incarnations of *The Alchemist Review*. Check out the site for other works we've published this year, as well as online versions of works that are published in the print edition.

I'd like to thank the Student Organization Funding Association (SOFA) for providing the funding for this issue, as well as for other activities and events during the 2012-2013 academic year. I'd also like to thank Dr. Meagan Cass for her guidance and always-useful suggestions; we're lucky to have her at UIS. I'd also like to thank the staff for their efforts in putting this issue together, as well as the reading event last semester and their work with the website. And special thanks to our Production Manager Kristen Chenoweth, not only for the hard work she put into this issue, but for taking care of all the stray pieces that otherwise would have fallen to the wayside.

And thanks to all the creative folks around the UIS campus who helped make this edition possible, either as an artist, writer, poet, or just a reader with a continued interest in the community around them.

Donald Squires
Managing Editor



The Scent of an Apple on a Cold Day

ROBERTO SABAS

Richard's in snow,
his bus late.
He shelters behind
a corporate sign,
fearing rebuff from a
wearied guard,
caught by the onslaught
of hard ice.

Into the wind,
he enters in, as finally,
the warm tendrils grab him,
enfold him, and wrap him
in a luscious dream
about his girlfriend,
and of his visit to Vermont
when he smelled crisp apples

The fragrance she gave off
was enlivening.
She kept the Mackinaw honey crisps
in a bowl, not so much to eat,
but to recall her home.

He was the only one to eat
from them, the juice coursing
happily down one side of his chin.
This was before they got
weary of each other.

And now, disoriented by
the blanketing whiteness,
he wiped his slate clean
and went on with the business
of finding his way home.

How easily lost one can get

without benefit of landmarks
in the cold, cold snow.

Recollections of a Predatory Species

ROBERTO SABAS

In 1975, I ate a poet, brains and all. His name was Jack and he *wrote* - sonnets, I think. We met in the Acey Deucey, an officer's club at the Naval Air Station on Orote field. There were others present, brimming with their overlarge confidence, unwarranted by their lackluster vision. Jack was not among these; he was broken.

I was a seabird wheeling in the sky, my eye trained for vulnerable, discarded flesh. His table was a small island in the center of the room. Writing in a leather-bound journal, amid raucous, bawdy laughter, he made me wonder what thought engrossed him so. As I encircled him, I glanced down and thought I saw the word, *faithless*. I sat opposite him and began my cannibal song.

"Should I leave or should I stay?"

"Please stay," he said. He ordered me a gin and Collins, adding, "I thought you were with someone else." He had been looking at me too.

I learned he was a literary major who had impregnated a dean's daughter and had lost a scholarship. His parents intervened and through connections, he landed at Annapolis and thrived. Later, he met another woman. They married then divorced.

"What about you?" he asked.

I said my name was Sara: I was a single biologist. I told him about my monograph on the bio-invasion of Guam. It dated back to the 1600s at least, when conquering Spaniards brought with them chickens, pigs, dogs, the Philippine deer, the black partridge, and the Malaysian water buffalo. No one knows how many indigenous animals disappeared as a result. In World War II, occupying Japanese soldiers introduced their own unique livestock, the African snail, a destroyer of plants. All these animals were brought on purpose.

Thanks to nature, our coral reefs were nearly eradicated by *Acanthaster planci*—the Crown-of-thorns starfish—whose larvae were drawn by spiking populations of phytoplankton. In 1937, freighters coming from South America had cane toads as stowaways, as did ships that let loose the brown tree snake in 1952. By the mid 1970s, the toads had killed off unique insects and the snakes were everywhere, having nearly devastated native bird species like the Guam rail. Invasions are permanently linked to consumption of the island's best resources.

He showed me his poems and I was amazed by their succinct beauty, yet jealous of them.

That night, I entwined him as if searching for the orifice to his soul. Later, our love became peaked and frenzied. After a month, we married.

He wanted to know more about me. Each day, I gave him what I wanted and he lapped it up. He worshipped at my altar for four years. I began hating him for needing me so - I left him for a ranking officer, one of those clones of virility. I knew that wouldn't last either, but I needed a clean break from Jack.

Before he shot himself in 1980, we spoke briefly by phone.

"God, Sara. I need you."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.



Hank
by Nicholas Teeter

House of Cards

KATHLEEN BRINKMANN

While the turkey roasted, we played a round of Pinochle at the dining room table. Dad sat in his undershirt with a glass of bourbon. Teetering on the edge of the velveteen cushion, I tried to keep my right knee from bouncing. It gave away too much. Dad offered me the deck to cut but I just knocked my knuckles on the top of it. Mom hung the phone back in its cradle and took her seat. She was drawn into the game as the fourth player now that Grandma was gone.

"That was Uncle Heinz. Mitzi and her new husband will be coming too. Now you'll see what I mean about her big belly." Mom said over the soft sound of faded Aviator cards sliding across the polished table.

Dad exhaled smoke and looked at me. "So why don't you get married and then we don't have to pay for no college. Women just have babies anyway." He swigged his drink then trumped Mom's trick.

I shoved a pretzel in my mouth and crunched hard, spreading my cards in front of my face. I forced myself to breathe. Greta, my younger sister, looked at me from the corner of her eyes but remained as stiff as the Queen of Spades.

Mom said, "Joe, tell that new joke you heard from Frankie."

"Huh," Dad shook his head, "Ah, I don't remember it."

After the hand played out, Mom excused herself to check on dinner and I followed. She looked surprised when I started to peel the potatoes. Mom stroked my curly hair and I quickly looked down at the raw skinned potato, my lower lip trembling.

I came home for Thanksgiving break from my first semester at Southern Illinois University looking forward to the holiday ritual of card games. Grandma had been a serious card player and usually won. One time she smacked me on the side of my eight-year-old head.

"Dummknopf, don't show your cards! Want everyone to see?"

My father was a savvy player like his mother, who counted cards and had an uncanny knack for knowing what cards others held. When I was in second grade learning to play Pinochle, he would sit me on his lap and whisper when a player rearranged their cards; it meant they were probably out of the last suit played. He would cue me to watch people's faces because it was a clue to their cards. As a Real Estate Agent in Peoria he knew how to read people. I wanted to be a master card player just like him.

While shuffling cards, Dad liked to tell jokes that usually started off with some character walking into a bar. Uncle Heinz would chime in with a few tall tales about how they had to eat worms in the old country and then nod at us kids like the stories were true. Sometimes after a few beers, Dad would give Greta and me a dollar each. Mom wasn't near as much fun as Dad. Her approach was more like 'play the cards you were dealt.' Watching us play cards, she would mend our socks or knit mittens while laughing at Dad's antics. Mom didn't mind wearing things from the second hand shop.

My dorm room hosted many a card game from Pinochle, Spades, and Hearts to penny-ante poker. After the weekends, I would dig through Pizza Hut boxes and Budweiser beer cans to find my books. My midterm grades were mostly hooks, not even a "C" average but my poker playing was becoming legend and people would bet on me to win. I stuffed my backpack with toiletries and clothes, excited to be going home for the first time this semester and couldn't wait to show Dad how to play Hearts.

When I got home, everything seemed different. Dad barely greeted me as he passed by the hallway, unshaven and distracted. Mom was in the kitchen getting a small bird ready for the oven. When I reached for the milk I noticed the promised new refrigerator had never come.

"Is that turkey going to be big enough to feed all of us?" I asked.

Mom blushed, "Oh, Uncle Heinz and his family will be over for dessert later."

In our bedroom, I dumped my backpack on the carpet and turned off the record player that was blaring Blonde's "Call Me." Greta was working a Rubric's cube. Gradually the story came out. With the bum economy, Dad's real estate sales were down. His boss cut him back to part time so he took to gambling for some extra cash except his poker bluff wasn't working. Mom found a part time job working lunch at the high school cafeteria but Dad didn't know. Greta sat twisting her long, black hair. I stared at the floor.

After the relatives left, I curled up on my twin bed in the dark hugging my knees and rocking to clear my head. I replayed Mom's words in the kitchen while I peeled potatoes. "Back in Ireland there was a saying: 'They can take away your land and your language but they cannot take away your education.' My only regret in life is that I didn't finish my schooling."

I aced my finals then moved into a cheap dump where I shared a bedroom and had kitchen privileges. With a part time receptionist job, I told Mom to keep the allowance money and send me some of her cheap crockpot recipes like "Tuna Casserole" instead. Occasionally I would chat with my Dad but he didn't have much to say. Eventually he landed a job with Allstate selling insurance. At forty-two, he was the oldest in his training class.

It took me six years to earn my bachelor's degree. In the fall, I started at John Marshall Law School while working as a paralegal. At Thanksgiving, I came home and sat at the dining room table with a dream hand of three Aces and a run in Diamonds. I trumped Dad's trick and my partner Uncle Heinz schmeered with a Queen. Dad complained.

"Now that you got a degree, you're such a smarty." He smiled.

I made a face at him. Dad went to the kitchen to get a round of beers for the men. Uncle Heinz turned to me.

"Your Dad, all he does is brag on you. He is so proud of you. We're all proud of you."

I blinked then nodded 'thanks.'

Dad returned and plunked down two beers and said, "Okay kid, let's see how good you are."

He rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt and started dealing the cards.

"Bring it on!" I grinned.

Mom and everyone else laughed, but Greta pulled up a chair to watch.

Diet

CHRISTINE THOMPSON

Today: I'll dine
far from home on Twinkies, ding dongs, and pickled pig's feet.
I wonder what my 20-year-old figure will do
given my diet and how I'll explain to my husband
why my waist
has increased from a size seven to a ten.

Confession: my diet severely altered at age ten.
My mother died
such a young age – such a waste
both our lives... (I'll reflect later her terrible fate)
But first, I call my husband,
report my indulgence, receive my proper dues.

Reflection: every time I see dew
on lilies, I fade back - age ten
(pause - my cell phone rings) - my husband
text me: "Wer hell mi diner?"
Damn! Carried away. I go home and make him a fete
something low cal, something help trim my bulging waist.

Digression:
my mother's situation defines why I hate lilies sparkly dew.
her aggressive but tragic feat -
she ran away from home when I turned ten.
Later, I casually learned how she died -
police report : accidental head blunt blow from husband.

Recommendation: you'll marry someone like your mother's husband,
But my man is different; he's not a total scum bag, a total waste.
Sure he has his bad points, but not like he hurt me so bad I die
like mother's white lilies all covered in dew
next to her grave site near marker ten.
No, I'll pretend I didn't eat, go home, make him roast beast.

Petition: he'll cherish pickled pig's feet,
Twinkies, Ding Dongs, and love me like a husband

should, not like the thing mother married ten
years ago. Sorry, I must go... God!? I think my waist
carries more than fat. I'm doomed...
Tomorrow, I'll die

if my husband finds out my diet when I get home around ten o'clock,
it won't matter: he's wasted:
his pickled pig's feet propped up on his chair, squealing obscenities, demanding his feast.

Fish Night

ROBERTO SABAS

Wait until 6:55 before you turn on the tube to watch *Survivor*. Give your mother enough time to get everything off her chest so that she won't talk to you while you're watching TV. Otherwise, you'll miss important dialogue like, who's forming a new alliance with whom, and, which tribe is blind-siding what obnoxious, clueless, dead-weight on their team. Last week during tribal council, your old lady wouldn't stop yapping about her hangnail or the black girl at Pathmark who gives her shit about paying by check. Stop yourself from saying, nobody writes checks anymore, Mom.

Also, don't finish this thought: God! Sometimes you make me want to...

Since tonight is fish night, steel yourself for the side dishes. Okra, her favorite vegetable, fried up in Crisco and butter and mayonnaise and onions, is especially noxious to you. She never seems to think about what vegetables you like (none) but just keeps serving you that same mound of snot with seeds, expecting that you will lick your plate clean like you were still eight. But that's okay, you'll get through this night; you can zap a hot dog after she's gone to bed. Don't question her quirk about fasting on Wednesdays. If she wants to get a leg up on all Christendom in observing Lent, let her. Pause, reflect, on how things could be so much worse. So, she's just this side of dingbat sometimes — what's the bother?

Recall that this is what you signed up for. Seven years ago, your five married siblings fell off the face of the earth and you, having come back from a war, were the only one she had. If you hadn't checked in on her that one summer, she might have died from heat stroke. It wasn't her fault she didn't know who to call when the a/c was out, even though you taped an index card, with all the numbers, to the thermostat panel. Being widowed does this to a person, causes their grip to loosen a little, their focus to blur. But Mom knew who you were.

Remember then: the life she gave you; the years' worth of messes — yours — she picked up; her making sure you were fed; her cleaning you of your shit; the regular visits to the doctor, unlike the neighbor kids three doors down to whom medical attention was given only after someone called Family Services anonymously.

Realize that your mom can see through all of the shenanigans your five brothers pull. Since they found out she still keeps up payments on the policy Dad bought her years ago, they curry her favor like dogs fawning at the holder of the kibble bag. Now that they're off the hook for her, they enshrine her. So, even though it got decided that from this year on, Thanksgiving will be at this house, understand that you won't actually get to run the show, but don't be surprised if everyone blames you for the turkey being dry. Your mom knows who you are.

Halloween

LORI BECKHAM

My little cousin Geoffrey and my aunt Malva are coming over for Halloween. Mom informs me that I will be taking Geoffrey trick or treating this year. "But he'll slow me down," I counter.

"Are you kidding?" Mom says. "When it comes to candy, kids move fast. If anything you'll be trying to catch up with him, unless you'd take the car. Of course you don't have your license yet."

"I'm getting to it," I tell her.

"You haven't asked to go for a drive in weeks. You've been sixteen for three months now. How long are you going to put it off?"

"I'll get to it!"

"Anyway," she says, "it would help me out if you took him with you this year. Malva and I want to stay home and talk."

I agree to do it, but I know the real reason she wants Geoffrey to come along with me. It looks less weird if I am with a little kid. That's what she said last year when I put on my witch outfit, that I'm too old.

Every Halloween we get into this fight over my age and this ritual of collecting candy from strangers. Because I should want liquor instead, right? If I should wear a costume, it should show off my cleavage and thighs. I should spend the night hanging out in someone's basement with people I don't even know and talk about who is sleeping with whom at school. I'm sorry, but that's just not for me. I like trick or treating, but Mom's not proud of that.

"It's weird," she says to my face; "I stopped trick or treating when I was twelve."

And I want to shout, "Then you got knocked up when you were seventeen and look at your life now." But I don't. I bite my lower lip instead, allowing my lower teeth to make dents into the wet flesh, creating a taste of copper in my mouth. She shakes her head at me and walks away. I am left standing there, thinking of what I should wear.

Geoffrey comes as a pirate this year. He's got a bandanna, an eye-patch, and a plastic sword at his waist. It's cute I guess. Aunt Malva comes as a pessimist. I can be pessimistic too, but at least I have enough sense to keep my mouth closed; she doesn't know how to keep it inside.

She works at the State and complains about her co-workers ganging up on her. She spends hours telling my mom about how she'll never get a promotion and she's stuck there with people she has made enemies of, because she likes to talk shit about everyone. She also complains about potential boyfriends that she always scares away with her nagging. She even complains about Geoffrey's teachers; his grades have been slipping since the divorce and she wants to blame the school for failing her boy. I hope she doesn't complain to her six-year-old son. Then again, who else does she have to rant at, besides my Mother of course. What pisses me off is that she and her sister are in the same predicament. Both have one child, a dead-beat

ex-husband, and a crappy government job.

Their conversation will start with her and the people she hates at work. Somehow this talk will turn to Malva's lack of a love life, and then it will lead to other people's relationships in our family. I remember three years ago on Halloween, I heard her telling my mother that she saw Dad with a redheaded woman with some little kids at Walmart. Mom said good for him. I didn't say anything.

Dad used to come over maybe once a year near my birthday with a card with fifty dollars in it. The last card given to me was sent through the mail with a twenty, and the letters didn't loop right like they used to; the writing was so clean and sharp, slanted in such a way that I knew it was not by his hand. I remember I went to the backyard, fired the grill, and burned the card, the money, and the few remaining cards that had lingered in my room all this time. Then I took a weenie and used that fire to cook myself a hotdog.

This year I am going as the grim reaper. I love costumes that hide your face. I found a plastic scythe at Hop Shop a few weeks ago. There's not much more to complete the outfit than a black robe, which I already have from my witch costume from last year. A few days ago - before she informed me that she will not be trick or treating with me - my friend Rebecca suggested I go as the Scream Guy. You know; the stretched out ghost face. I told her I don't do horror movie characters. I prefer those that have been around for centuries or thousands of years; witches, vampires, ghosts, and mummies - all the classics. I can't stand those who dress up as whomever is popular that year. I hate temporary characters that no one will remember twenty years from now.

I walk downstairs decked out in black cloth, holding up my scythe to avoid hitting it against the steps. Geoffrey looks at me wide-eyed, so I unveil the hood and show him it's just me. Then he smiles. Mom doesn't smile. "Why are you always covering your body up like you're ashamed of it?"

"I have no shame; I have dignity," I say.

"And you have such a pretty face too," Mom adds, as if to show Malva that she was trying to give me a compliment rather than an insult. "Why not leave the hood down?"

"Because I am death, not Ally in a black robe," I scoff, putting the hood back up.

"Your mom's right, though," Malva says; "You are pretty. Why wouldn't you want to go as Cleopatra?"

"The real Cleopatra wasn't all that pretty, at least not by today's standards. She had a really big nose, but you are suggesting I go as the fictionalized version of Cleopatra, aren't you? With straight black hair and wearing a bikini?"

"Well, maybe not a bikini," Malva chuckles, then she turns away from me and takes a sip of wine Mom had put out.

Mom glares at me, folding her arms tight against her chest.

"Can we go now?" Geoffrey whines.

"Sure, I'm ready," I say to Mom behind the black cloth.

My Mother's expression softens as her eyebrows push together. "Be back in an hour," she says, and Malva looks back, nodding in agreement.

Geoffrey swings his orange plastic pumpkin bucket and I carry a wooden basket from Easter. I had a green witch bucket that McDonald's sold at one time; I loved that bucket, but a man who was moving Dad's desk from the property accidentally crushed it with his boot. I wanted it replaced, but I have never found the same green jack-o-lantern smiling witch again, or her cute pointed cap. Couldn't bring myself to get a boring orange replica like everyone else so I've used the wooden basket since. The handle is wearing off and giving my palm splinters.

The air is much cooler tonight than it has been. By now most of the trees have been stripped bare, pointing up at the sky with a million extended finger tips. The moon is peeking out from the clouds, creating a lining of light that makes the sky part eerie, part beautiful. We walk down the cracked uneven sidewalk of Main Street. People are always complaining about the sidewalks, but I think it gives the neighborhood character, a glimpse into the past when these sidewalks were made as the town of Dalhart formed. I tell Geoffrey to watch his step since he is not used to their unpredictable slants. Geoffrey wants to hold my hand, but I can't hold his hand, the scythe, and my basket of candy at the same time, so I keep my distance.

So many lazy people just have porch lights on, with maybe one jack-o-lantern near the door. A few have dangling fake cobwebs on small trees. It's a bland Halloween, unlike when I was a kid; everything was colorful and enchanting like the smell of pumpkin guts and Dad scooping orange globs and flinging them into the kitchen sink, hallowing the pumpkins for me to carve. That's what he did in my earliest memories; he gutted pumpkins. Mom gave out candy. Houses then had flashing lights--greens and purples--and ghosts dangling from the trees and black ugly spiders on the cobwebs. "I feel sorry for you, Geoffrey," I say after the tenth house; "Back in my day, Dalhart treated Halloween like a celebration, not a routine."

"I'm having fun," he says.

"I am too; it just will never be the same. You weren't born then, so I guess you wouldn't know the differ--" I stop talking.

I see colors down the road. Purples and greens. I hear a witch's cackle and a ghost moan. A house up ahead has costumed people walking in and out of it. It has to be a haunted house; I want to be there more than anything. Geoffrey whines though when I head toward the flashing house with engineered fog seeping out from the lawn. "But I don't want to go in there; it's scary," he says clasping onto my black robe.

"It'll be fun," I say, but he nestles his nose farther into the black cloth with his eyes closed. He's terrified. I shake my head at him. "I really shouldn't leave you alone out here, but I got to check this out. Will you wait for me right at this spot?" I hand him my basket of sweets.

"Don't go in there," he pleads, and now I'm rolling my eyes. Of course he's not used to going into a house of real trick-or-treaters. So much color and detail is scrambling his mind. He's used to porch lights and a middle-aged woman complaining about work. He's used to potential fathers coming and going from his house. He never had a father who hallowed his pumpkin for him. Malva probably doesn't give out candy because everyone's rotten enough. Poor Geoffrey never had a real Halloween, so I urge him to come but he refuses.

I'm not letting this opportunity go. "I'll be back in a minute, just one minute; will you do that for me? What do you do if a stranger comes up to you and wants you to go with him?"

"I yell?"

"Yes you yell, but that's not going to happen because I'll only be gone for a minute."

I walk up the steps and ring the doorbell. I look back and Geoffrey lifts his eye patch to see me better, I guess. A bright green light fills a corner of my vision and I turn toward the open door. A wolf man jumps out at me and I scream. I jump back a good five feet. I hear the guy laughing behind the hairy, rubber mask and I laugh too, looking back at Geoffrey. He had screamed and now he looks confused, worried. "It's just a mask," I laugh and tell him, but Geoffrey remains frowning, like he doesn't understand what is happening. It's sad.

"Want to come in and see the terrors of my house?" the wolf man asks.

Just then a goblin and a ghost came between us, exiting the house. I can see other creatures moving around in there, laughing and screaming. I look once more back at Geoffrey. "Just for a minute," I tell him and the wolf man. The man's big rubber teeth clasp and unclasp to mimic a laughing mouth.

"Excellent," he says, leaning back and allowing me to pass.

I step in and I'm exposed to a black light. I'm wearing all black so it has no effect on me, but the end of my scythe glows green. I see a mummy and a witch holding hands, leaving a white-flashing room. I hear "eww" sounds, screams, but overall laughter throughout the house. There is no particular trail to follow; every zombie, vampire - what have you - leaves and enters a room at random. The room with the flashing light draws me in first. It's a room with a blinking light and a plastic skeleton shaking in the air; it reminds me of a skeleton we used to have at the house that also thrashed when people got close to it. Another room has boxes with big holes on the top of them; I'm guessing that each box harbors a bowl of peeled grapes and spaghetti.

At one corner of the house, there is a room full of pitch black with a red fake flame glowing at one corner, not providing enough light to show anything else in the room. I step in and remove my hood with anticipation, waiting for whatever is going to jump out and scare the crap out of me. Adrenaline rushing and my heart pounding, my eyes search in the darkness.

Nothing happens. I wait and wait, but the darkness remains still. Maybe this was the wolf man's room and he hasn't returned to his lair yet. I want another scare from him or from anybody. I want excitement, and I am left with a dark empty room. Disappointing, I turn and leave.

The flashing light I should see in the hallway is gone. There is only darkness now, even the green lights down the hall have gone out, creating a new dark atmosphere. There is no laughter anymore; the house has become dark and quiet. "Uh oh, did the power go out?" I call out for anyone to answer.

No one responds to me, not even a shuffle or creak to let me know others are around. Is it possible everyone left? How long had I been in that dark room waiting for the wolf man? Surely it hadn't been more than a minute. Now I think of Geoffrey.

I know my sense of direction and I walk feeling with my fingers down the hall. The moonlight provides a few slits of clarity and I know the door is between the windows. I hope Geoffrey is right out there where he should be. As I take a step, I see the faint lining of the man

in the wolf mask, standing in my way of the door. He is so still in his erected stance, I wouldn't have known he was there if it weren't for the lights catching the hairs of his mask. I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. So I talk. "Hey, don't scare me now. I need to check on my cousin." But the man makes no effort to put aside my fears. He stays still and I know something is wrong. There is mildew in the air, and dust. My heart is pounding.

Just as I wonder if there is another exit, perhaps in the back, he takes a step closer to me and I lift my plastic weapon in defense as if it could protect me. He removes his mask and I swear the man resembles my father. He's not though; there are small differences in the nose and eyes, but there is a resemblance. He looks a little younger too, maybe by a decade. I smell something, a rotting odor like old fruit or vegetables, maybe spoiled guts of pumpkins. The man stands tall and I don't think I can go around him.

"What's going on?" I ask him, seeing his fingers curl and uncurl by his sides. I curl my fingers around my scythe.

He steps closer and clasps my shoulders; his breath reeks. This can't be real. "What did your mother say about strangers?" he asks. He leans close and the odor is prominent. I try to answer his question.

"She said--"

I ram my elbow up into his big nose, then I spring for the door and grab the knob, turning and pulling the door toward me. The door, with force, slams shut in front of me as the bastard grabs me from behind and struggles to pull me away from the door. I squirm, kick, and grab the knob again, refusing to let go. He could throw a punch at me or throw me on the floor, but instead he hugs and kisses the side of my face. "Ally, this is what you want," he says. "This is what you always wanted."

I turn around and use all my strength to push his face away from mine. He's too strong. I slap him and he continues to hang on to me. "Ally," he coos, rubbing my back. "Don't go. Stay with me. Stay with--"

I slam my forehead into his nose and his grip loosens. I get to the door, open it and the moon floods me. Jumping to the ground off the porch, I want to run and scream and cry, but I stop and look back at the house.

I stare into the open darkness, waiting for the wolf man or just the man to appear, just as I had waited for him in that room. As I wait, prepared to see him again, I see the place has changed. The windows of the dark house have cracks, the wooden stairs and columns have white chipped paint, and the floor has a few broken boards. Near the doorway there are pieces of a rotting jack-o-lantern with half a grin curled inward and brown.

Yes, I see it now. How did I not recognize this was the abandoned house a few blocks down? I used to trick or treat here when I was little. An old couple used to live here, but not since those days.

I realize the place was never inhabited. The man: a ghost. I have been waiting half my life for another scare, another Halloween, another gutted pumpkin. But it is just an abandoned house with a rotten jack-o-lantern. Those days with Dad are gone.

I turn my back to the hallow house and see Geoffrey standing farther away than I

remember, holding onto my basket and his bucket with a wide, quaking eye. I hurry to him and ask him if he's okay. He nods with a frown. "I want to go home now," he says. "I want my Mom." Me too, I think.

He lifts my basket but I shake my head; I tell him to keep the candy. As we walk fast down the neighborhood, I hold his hand and he asks me where my scythe went. I tell him I left it back at that place.



Tower
by Lori Beckham

Index of Joplin, MO

ALLISON DUNCAN

The wind tore through churches, streets, St. John's hospital.
Cunningham Park, a wound.
A lit corn field,
Black as the alley between Seven Eleven and Papa John's pizza.

Bodies cling to bodies,
Temporary tent hospitals for the hit and dying.
Cars wrapped around tree trunks,
Homes left exposed like the side of a doll house.
Baby swings hanging loose from frayed yarns.

Echoes of the boarded up high school,
Kids attending class in the shopping mall.
The neon green froyo shop on the corner sticks out amongst a block of broken buildings.
Always packed with families, volunteers, tweens.
Giving money to turn back to normal.

Stripped trees grow leaves in obscure patches on their clean shaven surfaces.
Burger wrappers from the newly built McDonalds lay on the unused train tracks.
Heat index reaches 114,
People rake their front yards of forks, books, excess debris,
The wind hasn't shown up since.

On a flat house foundation,
A pool table standing amid high water, slowly decaying
A yearbook floats by, giving no one the chance to pick it up
While closets go abandoned, dress clothes, pajamas, left in their drawers,

Someone has painted a mural on a leafless Oak.

Old Ones

ROBERT VON NORDHEIM

My name is Marcus Younger, and I am evil. I spread agony and discomfort to those who are unfortunate enough to meet me. I wither handshakes, stifle conversations, and rub every tender moment raw. I haunt the corners of rooms as a subtle, disturbing presence. Perhaps it's in my eyes. Those who do speak to me - who dare to enter my mind - let their eyes wander off into the distance, where they can surely find something more pleasant. To look me in the eyes would require courage that few mortals can muster, and a certain amount of divine protection. Some claim the problem lies in my brain - a social defect or chemical imbalance, which could've been treated if Mom had only known better. An insanity plea, if you will. But I won't accept such an easy answer.

I was born to bring misery into this world. My mother, poor, put-upon creature, can attest to this. Eighteen years ago, she and the unassuming staff of the Ellsworth Municipal Hospital witnessed my catastrophic birth, forever blackening those bleached-white hallways. It was fitting, I suppose, that they opted for a cesarean section. It was like a satanic ritual: torn flesh, bloody knives, and desperate cries, with a ragged scar to mark Mom's sinful crime of fornication. Grandma and Grandpa had disowned her for this, and swore to have no part in the upkeep of her bouncing baby bastard. And where was the father during all this? Mom would rather not divulge. He looks human enough in the few pictures she's kept, with the tangled black hair and short, thin, sickly physique I later inherited. But he was undoubtedly of otherworldly origins; an incubus, perhaps, cackling fiendishly from Hell at the mischief he wrought.

Those who doubt my supernatural pedigree should note that I was born with a caul, that ancient, prenatal crown of destiny; I imagine that I wore mine like a Prince of Darkness. Not all cultures consider the caul a good omen. According to a Croatian legend, we caul-bearers can either become kresniks or kudlaks. A kresnik's soul escapes its body every night to fight the forces of evil and bring health and happiness to his community. Kudlaks, meanwhile, terrorize their communities, spreading fear, famine, and disease. A cursory glance at Cedar Falls should suggest which category I fall into. My hand can surely be found in its cracked, weed-choked pavement and its rows of stilled, rusted factories.

My latent evil manifested itself early through a number of dark pursuits. Even as a child, I would obsessively read and write on the paranormal; no doubt I was looking for conversation topics, in the event that Dad ever visited. Cedar Falls Elementary proved to be no match for my demonic brain; addition, subtraction, and the ABC's were all mastered too easily. Early on, teachers praised me for my intelligence and creativity and wondered why the other children couldn't be more like me. But their admiration cooled as my morbid obsessions grew, and soon the faculty began to avoid the little boy who spoke of blood, fire, and death. My behavior proved just as disturbing to my classmates, though I was never bullied; I earned fear and infamy effortlessly, keeping my enemies at a comfortable distance. Was it my pale, skeleton-

thin face? These hypnotically sinister eyes? Perhaps there is something abnormal about my voice – an alien pitch created by inhuman organs. Whatever the reason, I was grateful. My spare time had been dedicated to the research of demons, spirits, and deities of all natures, and my peers were a poor source of information. In 6th grade, I wrote a book report on *At the Mountains of Madness*; by junior high, I was quoting the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

I was equally disposed to spending my free hours locked in my room, rendering unknown horrors in ballpoint ink and notebook paper. Despite my crude materials and lack of formal training, I quickly developed into a master surrealist. I favorably compared my creations, with their winged heads and mucus-coated appendages, to H.P. Lovecraft's Outer Gods, who subjugated their human victims with paralyzing dread and insanity. With practice, I knew, my art would inflict similar psychological damage on its viewers. I gradually invented a mythology, rivaling Lovecraft's in scope and complexity, which placed me firmly at the center of the universe. I reigned supreme as a preteen Old One, while the fanged, tentacled, paper population of my realm bowed in fearful submission.

By all accounts, my schooling in the black arts was sudden and quick. None of my relations shared these fixations and I had no peers to influence me, badly or otherwise. Mom, meanwhile, did little to suppress these tendencies. In my early years she even encouraged me, displaying my abominations on the refrigerator and driving me to the public library for research materials. Cedar Falls doesn't have a single decent occult bookstore, but at least I could get the *Zohar*, the *Rigveda*, and the *Ars Goetia* on loan. If Mom wasn't exactly enthusiastic about my chosen field, she was not offended by it, either. She made no effort to maintain a religious household – rebelling, I assumed, against the same values which led her parents to abandon a teenage mother. For years, she and I lived happily in sin in our two-bedroom apartment. At night, she shared her frustrations with work, rent, grocery bills, and auto repairs with me, the closest thing to a man in her life; afterward, I told horror stories of a more supernatural bent. We made quite the pair – like Rosemary and baby. How could I not be grateful to the woman who sacrificed herself to bring me into this world?

Then along came Mr. Right.

Mr. Steven Wright, that is – though he's never tired of that joke. The man very nearly exorcised me from Cedar Falls. It could all have been prevented if, for one evening, I had abused my powers: I could have stolen Mom's mind; destroyed it with secret truths too horrific to comprehend. I would still be comfortable in our little abode of the damned, free to pursue my important work. But I suppose that, like Sodom and Gomorrah, all good things must come to an end.

I'm told that they first met at the library, where widowers must hunt for single prey. He effortlessly dazzled Mom, still used to the magic gloom of our reprobate lifestyle. In hindsight, it's almost comical; how could I have expected an electrician who rented his DVDs from the local library would bring Mom salvation? Steve didn't resemble any of the angels I'd seen; he was hairy, greasy, and hardened with muscle, though his abdomen was cushioned by a sizable beer gut. He came garbed not in silken gowns, but a tight-fitting striped polo tee. He bled, sweated, stank, and swore like any other man, but somewhere inside that bloated stomach was

the fire of God. And while the two made idle chitchat, I danced with Shiva in the darkest reaches of the reference section, unaware of the chaos I had invited.

If any proof of Steve's divinity is needed, just look at his son, Robin. Six years younger than I, he still stood at the same height of 5 feet and 7 inches; his pale face was topped with platinum-blond hair, shimmering even in the library's dim fluorescent lighting. Though his athletic slenderness contrasted with Steve's burly physique, he was no less intimidating. His penetrating stare and permanent scowl suggested that he'd seen and judged all manner of sin by pre-adolescence. While his father delivered the good word to Mom through blue-collar innuendo, Robin descended upon the reference section, no doubt drawn to my malignant aura. I should've anticipated trouble; the moment he spied me behind the stacks, Robin approached and asked,

"What is that weird book you're reading?"

Returning my feet from the Tandava pose, I stared blankly at the burning-white boy. I had never been asked about my research, so I never thought to prepare an answer. Besides, this wasn't a human concern. Annoyed by the interruption, I outstretched my right hand, silencing him, and cradled the flames of destruction in the other. I then thrust my left leg into the air, trying my hardest to imitate the illustration on the Shiva Purana - a difficult task for someone with only two arms. But when his unearthly gaze met mine, I was stunned. Stumbling back into my chair, I watched, confused and helpless, as Robin snatched the ancient text from the table before me. He scrutinized its offensive cover and, with a single verdict, sentenced four millennia of cultural heritage to death:

"You shouldn't read this- you'll get in trouble. 'Shiva' is another name for The Devil."

The encounter shook me to the very depths of my shriveled soul. I understood that my existence on Earth constantly at risk. Who knows what might have happened if a more enlightened mind pondered my odd habits, recognized the long, ancient names I spoke aloud? It took careful study and assimilation, but I was confident that I had created a passably normal disguise: Marcus Younger, high school student. No sports or academic honors. Hobbies include reading and drawing. But on that evening, Robin pulled me out from the shadows and stared right into these beastly eyes; he toppled my 18-year reign as Prince of Darkness in fewer than ten seconds. The library was no longer safe. I needed to recover; I needed to draw sigils, burn effigies, build idols. But to my absolute horror, I learned that Steve was visiting our apartment for something Mom called "movie night" - and he was bringing Robin with.

The film was *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a perfectly appalling fable of right-hand-path morality. The book was beneath me ten years ago, when I didn't even recognize its grotesque abuse of the classical Pan archetype. I couldn't bear to see witchcraft so trivialized; I excused myself before those puritanical children spoke a single word and returned to my drawing. As I dreaded and expected, Robin stalked after me, eager to inspect my room. Cursing myself for choosing red-and-black curtains over a locking door, I stuffed my bestiary beneath the mattress and braced myself. Walking into a fog of incense, past candles and pentacles, Robin remarked, "The Devil loves it when people believe in dumb things like this."

He proceeded to tell me much of this Devil - a creature quite unlike the one I knew. This

Devil “is jealous of us, so he tricks people into thinking and doing evil things. He wants us to forget that God loves us so we’ll follow him instead.” Robin even blamed him for the absence of his mother, who died during childbirth - funny that he attended both of our birthdays.

On their next visit, Steve brought steaks, while Robin came armed with a pinewood crucifix. “Lots of weird moons and stars in your room,” he said, “but I didn’t see any crosses.” Robin then trailed behind his father, periodically staring at me from over his shoulder. He could see past my disguise, so I made no effort to conceal my confusion and annoyance, soon amplified by rising heat and the stench of charred carcass. Curling my lips and biting my tongue, I stood and handled his miniature godhead. I was genuinely disturbed by its grisly detail: an oozing wound, bloody, bolted hands, and a spiky head. To Robin, it was the most valuable thing in existence. It allowed him to entertain any fantasy, deny any fact. I wondered if any of my creations could inspire such madness.

Steve roasted the steaks until they were well-done, slopped them onto our plates, and called Mom to his side. He dropped to one knee and brought his hands together. But this was no prayer. Mom bent over, kissed Steve’s hairy lips, and I neatly snapped our deadwood guest in two.

It all happened in a matter of weeks, but to me, time froze like the ninth circle of Hell. Steve performed feats of superhuman suburban strength, tightening screws and trimming wires to improve our resale value while Robin packed, again passing judgment on my materials. Mom and Steve were wed in municipal court, unwilling to wait for friends and well-wishers to RSVP. By the end of the month, our apartment was sold at an impressive mark-up, boosted by Steve’s improvements. The profits, combined with the sale of the Wright’s single-bedroom loft, allowed the newlyweds to purchase a mild little ranch-style home in Cedar Falls’ Feather Ridge development. Unfortunately, Mom didn’t care for the lackluster test scores of the local high school, so I was enrolled instead at Valley Lutheran High. My books and drawings were lost in storage.

In the past, my heathen ways were tolerated, but I was now subject to Steve’s code. My research was cut short in the interest of “family time,” which was mostly expended on TV. Drawing was also forbidden, as the only medium available was Robin’s Crayola 64-pack - nothing a boy my age should be playing with. Saturdays were spent recuperating from my dismal Bible Studies grades; Sundays, meanwhile, belonged to the mystical torture victim named Jesus. My room was kept clean and free of contraband; I finished my homework on time and often tried to find correct answers; why, I’ve even began to attend church on a regular basis. By all outward appearances, I had become a normal, nice boy, one who could be a source of pride, or at least of no particular shame, for his parents and community.

I did make some token efforts at rebellion against Steve. After our housewarming party, I drank my first beer from a crushed, rusted can, half-filled with rainwater, which I found in our backyard. One week later, I took my first drags of tobacco and marijuana from butts I was lucky enough to find in the school bathroom. But Steve anticipated this and was unfazed; it was another part of the suburban ritual. He monitored my reading and writing, claiming that he was “keeping my mind on schoolwork”; this neutralized any real threat I might pose. The great,

faceless, tentacled gods in my mind collapsed under Bible verses and Christian cartoons.

The months went by in a grey, inscrutable blur; then came the holidays. Aside from its pagan roots, the celebration of Christmas was entirely foreign to me. The almighty cross was accompanied by a host of new symbols: prancing elves with mocking smiles; unnatural trees as sharp as spearheads; and fat, diaper-clad angel babies, no less frightening than Steve and Robin. On Christmas Day, our ranch-style living room was a papered wasteland, littered with the tokens of Robin's conquest: a junior bible, WWJD bracelets, and blood-red candy canes. I asked Mom for a tarot deck; Steve did the shopping, and bought me Bicycle playing cards instead. Later, Mom and Steve busily assembled our first family photo album over eggnog. Their chance meeting was exalted as love at first sight; my sibling rivalry with Robin was made into the stuff of legends. "Like Cain and Abel," Mom suggested, prompting a deep scowl from Steve. Things didn't end well for the favorite son in that story.

In Robin's first baby photo, its subject fresh from the womb, I noticed a stunning peculiarity: atop that pale head, already laced with spun-gold, was a caul. It was bunched above his forehead, shaped into a neat, amniotic halo. I asked Steve if he knew the legend of the kresnik, and received a typically flat, irritated "no." After I related the tale, Steve blithely replied: "Don't compare my boy to some Pollock monster."

The following Friday, Mom and Steve went to an event at Valley Lutheran. Maybe it was a bake sale, a fish fry, or a bake sale to raise money for a fish fry – it was no concern of mine. The church's daycare service charges \$10 an hour, a rate which a new family simply can't afford, so Steve reluctantly agreed to leave Robin at home, with me. Before he left, Steve gave his son a massive hug, three meaty pats on the back, and the grimly suggestive order: "be good to Marcus." Robin then backed away from us, his eyes always on level with mine. I was no more pleased to be left alone with him, my nemesis by divine right. But without my books and my drawings, I was dangerously exposed. It would be best, I thought, to reason with this kresnik.

I entered the dining room and found Robin distracted. His eyes were now focused on a badly torn sheet of notebook paper, and his elbows rested on stubbed, smeared crayons. On the paper, an outline had been traced and retraced into a brownish-black smear. Inside it, something resembling a face had been fiercely gouged with red and yellow, and was now a festering sore. Beneath moldy clumps of badly mixed colors laid a familiar image: wood, nails, a headful of spikes. I tapped Robin lightly on the shoulder, his brilliant angel-hair glimmering as he turned to face me. When I asked what he was doing, he slipped a few words out of his tight seal:

"My teacher told us to draw what we think Jesus looks like. I know what he looks like, because I love Jesus more than anything else in the world. But my picture's going to be the worst because I can't draw. I love Jesus. I don't love art."

Heresy! Didn't he know of the power that was held in that box, shaped into 64 pointed wands of pigment, paper, and paraffin wax? It is immortality, I said. He could create the world over again, fix everything that's wrong with it- destroy, manipulate, create, kill. Of course, kill. What do you, the Creator, owe them? How could you ever understand their lowly, earthbound

concerns? Why show mercy to the ones who blame you for every misfortune, criticize and spite you for your well-intentioned mistakes?

Robin arched one blonde eyebrow. "What are you talking about?" I suppose that was a bit heady for a 3rd grader. I was clearly losing him, and I had more than just a generation gap working against me. But despite Steve's best efforts, Robin hadn't learned to stop listening to me - it was not too late to reason with my foe.

Coloring was simple, I said - you just need to start with a recipe. To make my point, I pulled a few of the most appetizing colors out from the box, hoping to sweeten Robin's sour face: Granny Smith Apple, Wild Strawberry, and Pink Sherbert. Today's children are so spoiled - my old 16-pack didn't have anything more appealing than Burnt Sienna. I read each of their labels aloud as I piled them on the table, gasping and cooing with exaggerated delight at my tantalizing little menagerie. When I reached Cotton Candy, Robin was struggling to force down his curled lips. I decided then that it was time for the coup de grâce. Holding that pastel-pink crayon under the fake chandelier, I studied it, sniffed it, and gave it a long, hungry lick, darkening its paper label with spit. I fully anticipated the repulsive flavor which filled my mouth, having learned this lesson many years ago, but still played my part to perfection. Coughing and sputtering, I assumed a ludicrous frown which outmatched his; at last, Robin's crumbling scowl caved in under fits of laughter.

I rinsed the taste of paraffin wax out of my mouth, checking for Cotton Candy-colored patches, while Robin tried to commemorate the episode with a stickman - Marcus choking on crayons, bringing my mortal quest back to mind. I looked to the left, at the paper which Robin had beaten to a pulpy mess. Somehow, he would need to mold this monstrosity into something divine. But without an artist's vision, Robin despaired at the impossibility of this task.

I offered to give him lessons. After all, I'm experienced at drawing gods.

Even Cedar Falls is governed by symbols and names; vague glimpses of ancient powers, unfathomable to the human mind. Younger. Wright. Kresnik. Kudlak. Jesus. The Devil. Pseudonyms of the ultimate archetype, which Robin and I will someday reveal. I tremble in ecstasy as a shapeless mass is mounted to a cross, nails driven into its tentacles, a crown of thorns upon its winged head.



Mother T
by Nicholas Teeter

Sonnet #18

DUSHAN YOVOVICH

Fuck the seasons and their torturous ways
I'm sick of fluctuation and change
There's no place one gets comfy and stays
One's inevitably foreign and strange
Joints ache, allergic nose gets congested
Wardrobe divested, needs to be replaced
Spring parks are suddenly cheer infested
Summer beach fees begrudgingly raised
Fall victim to poor weather death of leaves
Winter's choke-hold demands a scarf for breath
To hell with weather unto us God heaves
Dreams of harmony and rest met with wrath.
At best, take comfort this has never changed
Forever, misery's cycle's arranged.



Pastoral Eclipse
by Sarah Collins

Other Peoples' Houses

KELSEY LAY

Today I fall asleep on the pink satin pillow my mother bought me when I was twelve. It's always been there, sitting in the bed I never slept in, in the house that was not my own. Samantha's home was my home. She was my best friend since our bicycles collided in the middle of Third Street. Samantha's arm was skinned just above the elbow, but she didn't cry. Instead she pushed me down and told me to watch where I was going. I told her the scar on her face looked like a starfish. She said, "Oh."

Samantha's father was an overnight janitor and she didn't have a mom, so I slept over at her house. At first it was on the weekends, and then I started staying during the week. My mom said she missed me at home. I laughed. The time my mother spent with me was merely time she spent talking about herself. She didn't need me for that.

Tonight was Saturday. We were cruising down Main Street on our way to Josh's house in my Camry. Josh was five years older than us, which by default made him cooler than most of our other friends. He had his own place and could grow an actual beard. His house was on the corner of Oak and Tenth Street. The paint was peeling so the "1423" stencil read as an exotic language. The overlapping willow trees and long, green grass made Josh's home a hideaway in the jungle. We pulled up to the front of his house, crushing Old Milwaukee cans as the car climbed over the curb. The drink of an unemployed God.

Samantha and I went inside and were poured blue liquid in plastic martini glasses. We danced with Josh's friends, people we had probably met before, but didn't remember. The room filled with people, emptied and refilled every hour. We danced with more people we didn't know, and drank more colorful drinks out of more plastic cups.

I couldn't taste anything anymore but sipped what I was given anyway. Parties are parties; you drink, you dance, then drink some more. The pink shot in my cup looked like cotton candy, rosy clouds roaming free inside the plastic – almost too pretty to drink, but I wanted more. Sip after sip of the pink clouds. I floated to the bottom of my cup, falling gently through its rainbow. I slept in a haze of soft, orange sunrise.

When I awoke, I was alone. The sun wasn't up; the clouds were gone. My pillow was a piece of cardboard, my bed a basement floor. I had on only a white t-shirt, one that wasn't mine. I found stairs, ran up them. I went outside to the Camry, Samantha asleep in the front seat.

"What a night!" She started the car and drove me to my mother's. I walked upstairs, rested my head on the shiny, pink pillow I had never slept on before. This was my home. I would sleep here – I wouldn't, I *couldn't*, sleep in other peoples' houses anymore.

Deda's Living Room

DUSHAN YOVOVICH

Wrinkled, firm hands with freckles scattered across
rippled pond reflecting stars; they tell astronomical tales
Lives as a farmer,
guerilla warfare fighter, gymnast, military lieutenant, Serbian secret-service officer,
Chicago Police Department detective, machinist,
son father husband widow
man.
Deda sits in my grandmother's chair - now his throne
In his kingdom of solitude
Sovereign over framed family photos, newspaper chess puzzles, raucous television, stale
cookies.

Right elbow firmly planted in left palm, right hand extended above, fingers verdant
In broken, but beautifully effective and eloquent English
You chopping trunk with edge left hand.
He draws my eyes between tiny rings, ages past, and the bark - rough frontier
Here You planting young
Sprigs. His acutely dissecting fingers
cut and wedge twigs in the trunk's thin, soft, valent crevice.



Stairway to Somewhere
by Sarah Collins

Medusa's Children

SARAH COLLINS

I stepped out of Floyd's and looked around. *Where had I left the goddam car?* I blinked stupidly and realized that the hazy neon across the street wasn't due to bad electricity; I was drunk. Yep.

Well, Mandy always said I was a lightweight. Whatever. She doesn't control me anymore... lightweight or not I can still have a goddamn drink or two.

I turned right, walking toward the square dividing Adams Street between 5th and 6th... I wondered if my trusty baby was waiting for me over there. *Probably...* I remembered thinking about how I'd never been to Andiamo's, and I'd been in this town for almost two years. That café was over on 6th, and I was meandering in that direction from 5th street. At least I hoped so. Blurry street signs didn't make it easy.

I staggered past the Korean War museum – haggard looking thing. It was deteriorated and sad. No wonder no one visited... everyone prefers the shiny monument in D.C.

Those pesky Lookin' for Lincoln signs were everywhere. I knew he'd spent a lot of time in this area, but does the fuckin' Historical Society need to remind me of it every two feet?!

Thoughts.

"Oh, fuck!" I felt my knee connect with something unyielding and fell straight overtop something. I didn't faceplant – whatever I was on top of caught me by the waist and I draped over it like a sad excuse for planking. As I tried to pull myself up, my numb limbs almost useless from the Jack pouring through my veins, I realized I must have blacked out a little. I didn't remember passing the Feed Store or Robbie's. I blinked, trying to clear the haze, and saw words underneath my chest. I must have fallen over the sign commemorating Medusa's Children.

I tried to brush myself off as I stood, but stopped as I realized I must have looked like some prick who walked into a goddam spider web – crazy and pathetic. My eyes connected with Honest Abe's, and I swept my eyes over the rest of the motley crew slowly. I felt dizzy, so I decided it was wise to plant my ass on top of the sign which just moments ago had supported my top half. Symmetry... or something.

I slid the back of my hand over my mouth, and then realized a firmer rub was needed to coax myself into sobriety, so I brought both hands up and commenced chafing my face with my palms – the day old facial hair on my chin chafed my hands right back.

Feeling clearer, I looked up at the statues. Frozen in time... running joke was that Medusa'd bagged and tagged them. I wondered if the long road to the Oval Office – *did they have that back then?* Hmm – had hardened their hearts, freezing them from the inside out instead. Either way, they were cold. They were stiff. They were numb. Kinda like me... they're also steadfast. They aren't *moving*. They won't be *changing*. Not like the rest of the world. Movers. Shakers. Changing everything in a heartbeat. Heartbeat... more like beating hearts into pulps for the sake of that American Dream. Pursuit of happiness. Never the achievement of

happiness... always the pursuit. And always selfish... personal. No one gives a fuck about anyone's happiness but their own, anymore. Pursuit of happiness.

Maybe I'll get there one day. First I gotta find that car. Gotta move my ass before I can do that though.

One step at a time.

The Inapplicable Appliance

WILL D. PATTON

I wish I had been in use during the heyday, back when credit was first established and people were buying dishwashers for the very first time. Back when the repair man would have to come by if you were broken. He would give you extra special care and have you up and running again, and the entire family would celebrate. They would make you feel important, useful.

Folks nowadays, they have no appreciation for a household appliance such as myself. They have had dishwashers their whole lives. Taking all of your dirty dishes and preparing them to be used once again was once a respectable job! Thanks to me, you no longer have to spend countless hours making sure that everything is perfectly sanitized and spotless and sparkling! But that means nothing to my folks. They take me for granted.

How nice it would have been to be a family's first dishwasher. To have the whole bunch crowded around you watching in amazement as you made one of the most difficult household tasks trivial. I heard of these stories from the fridge next to me while I was still at the appliance store only four years ago. It was like that for fridges too back then. You get credit for the first time and you get yourself a nice fridge and voila, no more salty meat and no more dumb milk man knocking at your door every day.

I was ready to make a statement. I wanted them to know just how much they needed me to work. I stopped cleaning well, to show them just how difficult my job really was. How would you like dried, crusted cereal molded to your bowl when you pull it out Mr. Wilkins? Having fun cleaning the rice off the plate by yourself, jerk?

But that didn't do anything at all. They just started talking about how I was getting old and worthless. You'd think that they would call the repair man to come fix me up if I were really that worthless, but no such love here! It is not the 1950s anymore, and people have no compassion for a machine which has been nothing but a loyal servant to the family.

I kicked things up a notch. Hey Mrs. Wilkins, do you like that all of your plastics are melted apart? Doesn't even look like a cup anymore, does it? C'mon here folks, I'm dropping very obvious hints. Start appreciating me. But no, they just thought I was broken. Okay, so when is the repair guy coming? I wouldn't mind a few new parts you know, it's the least you could do for me after all of my years of faithful service.

All of that acting up, it only landed me here at the dump. Don't bite the hand that feeds you I suppose. As I found myself on this conveyor belt with this large compactor above me, all I could think was that my only regret was not being built half a century sooner. That, and having ever served those ingrates in the first place.

Then I heard a massive, booming voice above me.

"Being a garbage compactor was once a pretty respectable job, you know. Nowadays, they take my work for granted."

He spared me in an attempt to make some sort of statement. They're disassembling him

right now.

This Is Work Week Poetry, Therefore, It Is Uninspired.

ZAK KRUG

I. Just Waiting For Someone to Find Me Not Doing What I Am Supposed To Be Doing

Most days I
just lean back
in my chair
hoping,
that my back will crack.
Staring at the
dull, white ceiling.
I wonder what happens
when you work here
full time?
Do you drink more coffee?
I can hear coffee pots
brewing.
Pick your poison.
Somewhere off
I can hear
someone clipping their fingernails.

If I lean too far back
I'm afraid
That me and my filing cabinet
will become close.
Listening to the copier
spit out
hot off the press copies.
Waiting for someone to knock
on my cubicle door.
Drifting into nostalgia...
Or is it
nausea?
I can never remember.
They both sound about right.
Watching the clock,
It's only half way
and I'm

all out of ways to procrastinate.
This is about
the time I go
for my walk.

II. Quiet Mediations In A Government Bathroom After Lunch

Kicking the door open
disregarding the "Open slowly" sign,
I scan to see that
the bathroom is empty.
I hate having to share,
especially after lunch.
Lucky for me, this one is empty.
I pick my stall and push it
open with my elbow.
You know how many germs are on these things?
Do they even clean in here?
Maybe, that why everyone is
always complaining.
This is the best place to hear
second rate gossip.
The best place is the parking lot.
Whispering.
Always hoping the stories main character
doesn't happen upon them.
Staring at blue-green, dull, ugly tiles.
They rise to the top.
I'm fighting back sleep.
This is why I should have gone to bed earlier.
I remember once
when I was an undergraduate,
this kid fell asleep
while on the john.
I think he is a doctor now.
Wait,
until everyone has left.
When you're done you use cheap soap.
Looking at a figure in the mirror that is
barely recognizable.

It sure is funny how things change,
then again,
no one is laughing at this punchline.
Always use paper towels to open the doors.
You know how many germs are on these things?
They're filthy.
I'll have to remember to get more hand sanitizer.

III. Watching The Office Sky

Back to where I belong...
Pock-marked particle board
and AC vents
criss-crossing or crossing-criss
my vision.
Either way.
These clouds are ugly.
I cant make them into any other shapes.
My creativity turns
the particle boards
into swiss cheese.
My God...
Maybe I am going insane.
Wouldn't that be something?
It might be better.
I try to
count the holes
but,
I'm lost at one.
That just wont do.

I ascend the power pole on my right.
Shooting into a government controlled sky,
making one of the boards
imperfect.
It's different
and it's friends make fun of it.
Rough life.

Listening to the
vents make their
best outdoor impersonation.

I rise.

Just trying to catch a glimpse of
the outside
without letting others see me.

I don't want to talk to anyone.

My self-imposed cubicle isolation.

IV. Leaving

The day has ended.
I'm leaving.
Time to crack knuckles,
fly down the street
blurring business and pleasure.
Break the barrier
through the liquor store door.
Crack a
"tomorrow is going to be a better day" pint.
Knowing that it
wont...
Just imagine the rest of this poem.

I punched my clock.

I've checked out.



Study in Sepia
by Sarah Collins

Today I Am Turtling...

CHRISTINE THOMPSON

I will not freak out for any good reason.

I will not freak out...

I will not....

My counselor says when I feel “the urge” to follow my active intellect, as she kindly labels my anxiety disorder, I should mimic a turtle.

Like a turtle:

I will retreat inside myself

then re-emerge when I feel safe.

*But how do I accomplish this when the inside of my shell smells like fish guts,
rotting in the sun on the shore?*

-Breathe in and out....

Like a turtle:

I will go slow and methodical

being thoughtful about how to invest my time.

*But how is this possible when my heart races like the fins on a bass,
chasing a minnow in the creek?*

-Count to one hundred backwards by tens....

Like a turtle:

I will protect myself

through snapping and biting, though, not in an aggressive way.

*But how can I wash out the foul taste of algae,
gagging me from the silt and sand?*

-Imagine dancing turtles....

Like a turtle:

I will use my hard shell

to let judgments roll off my back.

*But how can I achieve this when words javelin at me like a jagged piece of concrete,
cutting my feet in the murky waters of my psyche?*

-Recite Sticks and Stones nursery rhyme....

Like a turtle:

I will adapt

by living both, in water and on land.

But how can my lungs acclimatize to this duality with pain like a fishing hook,

yanking my innards out with a fisherman's rusty pliers?

-Utilize guided imagery....

Like a turtle:

I will be persistent and self-righting

and take my time to roll over when flipped upside down.

*But how can my meds change my irrational fear of dying when the side-effects are,
wrenching my bowels, cutting like a gutting knife.*

-Build self-esteem through group therapy....

Today I am turtling.

My counselor says, no matter how hard the creek's currents slap me around I should ride the emotional waves and overcome my irrational feelings.

I will ride the emotional waves.

I will ride...

I will....

-Unless, of course, I drown first.

Phantom Hand

DUSHAN YOVOVICH

I.

I had my mother's hands. She is an artist, but she doesn't have soft, graceful hands – students' hands. Her hands are more like her favorite tools – pliers, c-clamps, rolling presses, metal snips, tiny spinning metal burrs. Her fingernails are stained and roughened, her skin callused and cut. Our hands' biggest similarity is the overdevelopment of adductor pollicis and hypothenar muscles, at the base of the thumb, and on the opposite side, below the pinky, respectively. These two spots, on each of us, bulge and flex with nearly monstrous definition and bulk.

II.

It was a tree like any other, perhaps a bit older and bigger. We chose a spot to saw through, just a few steps off the trail, downhill, so that the upheaved trunk, once cut, would naturally fall down the hillside, and not take us with it. My brother cleared the brush and bark from his side of the cut. I tended to not bother, preferring to straddle or kick aside whatever small foliage was in my way. I rubbed dandruff from between my crowns and tried to guess the tree's age while I waited to see its cross-section.

The crosscut sawing process is long and tiring on a hillside, and with a tree still wet with former life, like this one. Opposite one another, my brother and I would take turns pulling the full length of the saw through the tree, back and forth for what felt like a lifetime. Once the width of the blade was completely sunk into the tree, we drove wedges into the cut to reduce friction, which was increased by the tree's moisture. Liquid would squeeze out of the wood with each powerful strike from the butt of an axe to the wedge, and our overalls were splattered with a viscous mixture of wood shavings and the tree's clear watery blood, which sprayed violently out from the cut with each pass of the saw.

"Hold," one of us would say to signal that a pause was required in the sawing rhythm to re-establish a firm grip or good footing. We would each rustle through our lunging stance and tug softly at the wrist of our leather gloves, worn through at the fingertips and between the thumb and pointer.

We slowly brought that crosscut rhythm back up to speed and a nettle, dislodged from under my boot when I adjusted my stance, swung across my hands and managed a thorn in through a hole in my glove, slicing the taut skin over my hypothenar muscle.

"Hold," I calmly cut the nettle with a pocket knife from my side pocket, placed the knife back in its pocket, and tossed the nettle aside, tipped lightly with a bright red fleck of blood. The saw sloshed back and forth through the tree for hours more. Each inch deeper drew more of that pulpy fluid from dense core, until we were soaked through from knee to heel.

An inch of the diameter of the tree left uncut, we removed the wedges, saw and ourselves from the cut. I admired the tree's tenacity - the ability for a tiny fraction of its girth to

hold the trunk's weight without breaking, but with a job to do, I grabbed hold of the tree's unearthed root system. Bouncing my body weight on it, the familiar cracking noises began. I hopped back beside the axe, wedges, and crosscut and watched the tendril wooden boulder sink slowly, fibers snapping and tumbling down the hillside with phlotic cracks and thuds.

When we made it back to camp, I cleaned the cut on my hand in the stream, and wrapped it carefully in a clean bandana, reminding myself that blood is the greatest antiseptic. It wasn't until well after we restored that patch to a straight and flat tread, a week or two later, that I began to notice a throbbing pain emanating from my left hand.

III.

It's been half a year in the dusty basement and storage spaces since Umatilla, and still the pain hasn't subsided. In hindsight, I wish I hadn't allowed the doctors to amputate without a better understanding of what was happening, but it's hard to be patient and deliberate when your veins are filled with fiery hot sauce, day after debilitating day, interminably. I told myself I'd at least, with most of a left arm, still be able to sort through my remaining family's boxes, books, furniture, and everything else I ran into the forest to hide from. It's not so bad - I still have my writing hand. Just the same, it's no small thing to remove a piece of the body.

They never mentioned the possibility of a phantom limb - that my hand would be gone and its pain would persist. Its occurrence isn't common, but it is tenacious. They kept telling me "it should subside over the next few months", "it rarely extends six months beyond amputation", "just keep taking your medications." My own research revealed testimonials that if the pain hasn't subsided by the six month mark, it's not hopeful. Reading case studies between motionless hours spent in bed, breathing through phlegmy pain, it became clear that the only significant change after six months of enduring phantom limb pain was in amputee suicide rates.

I buried myself in childhood artifacts. With their passing, my parents' belongings and home were abandoned. In the basement, I waded clumsily through bookshelves overflowing with art, literature, commerce and craft books. I occupied myself with shuffling objects into tessellations. Some mornings, before I wiped the rheum from my eyes, I would see my left hand, purple and swollen, veins protruding from the skin like poles in a slack, stretched out tent. Then the tarpaulin skin balloons with pressurized sludge, abrasive and caustic, hemorrhaging from my elbow to lifeless fingertips, rattling cracked bones. I kneel against a dilapidated air conditioner. Squeeze my eyes shut. I try to focus on flecks of rheum riding tears down the bridge of my nose while I groan and reach with my other hand, to massage it - to attempt to stimulate an even flow of curative blood, but I grasp at nothing. There's only the forearm to grip, squeezed so tight that cold filled the nub of scar tissue.

Slumped onto my mom's dusty workbench, I heard myself muttering something about water, and gripped the reassuring firmness of a pick mattock's wooden handle. Fractals reflected in my eyes off of the scattered tools beside which I heaved my headlamp - mallets and hammers, pliers, barber's shears, parts of an acetylene torch, a mirror, scattered paperclips and a scalpel.

I woke up there, staring into the cracked grain of an uncarved wooden block. I made a small “p’u” noise to clear away some dust, and the familiar basement smell flooded my nose. I sat quietly, breathing deeply for the first time in memory. I adjusted the mirror on my left to inspect a small splinter that had wedged its way into my damp cheekbone. Wiping my face, my hand smelled like linseed oil from the sanded and cured pick mattock and McLeod handles. I nudged the mirror away and began to stand, tossing my arms in frustration. The reflection of my right hand flashed in the mirror. When I held my hand back out, I could clearly see its reflection to my left. I held out both arms, my left forearm now behind the mirror, and I saw two hands.

My right hand’s reflection aligns with where my left hand would be, and the nerves in my left arm seem to settle. Dumbfounded, and afraid to find out that the pain will simply resurge if I pull my arm away, I sit at the bench for the entire day, arms out, unclenching my left hand. I want to touch it, to hold my hands together and rub the last ounces of pain away, but I know better.



Swept Away
by Sarah Collins

The Rockfalls River

CASEY TESTER

After giving us the upcoming highs and lows for the week, the weekend weatherman, who sounds like a cross between a robot and Alex Trebec, warns the viewers of our town that the water levels of the Rockfalls River are rising. Though I hear the warning through the static of the speakers of my old thirty-five inch box of a television, I continue to focus on grading the literary analysis papers on *Macbeth* from my first and third period classes, painting them with the blue blood of my ink pen, my feet stuck in Dan's grasp on his lap, while he naps on the other side of the couch, his head tilted up. I consider shooting a piece of my kettle corn for three into his mouth.

My house phone interrupts fragments and run-ons and the snoring. Knocking the pile of essays onto the floor, I hurry to the kitchen to hear if the caller will leave a message - if they do, it is likely my mother. A pile of speech rubrics that need scored peek out from my schoolbag as I pass it. *Shit. Forgot about those.* I am constantly chasing yesterday.

It is my mother. I contemplate whether or not to pick up the phone. I do. We have the same conversation every week. She asks if I can swing by their house sometime to have dinner (Dan can come, too). I hate to say no, but there is almost always something going on. This week it is a soccer game the next afternoon and Dan's not around anyway. I tell her I'll let her know if that's okay and that if I can't, I will surely see them sometime soon. We exchange goodbyes and I tell her to give my dad a hug for me. I'm their only child, but sometimes it's just easier to grab something from a drive-thru.

I walk back into the living room and seize the renegade papers from their attempts to avoid the slaughter of the pen. Dan has changed the channel to ESPN. He asks what my mom wanted and I tell him. He hmphs and tells me it's a good thing he'll be at work. I throw my pen at him. He won't give it back to me until I give him a kiss. I lean over and he pulls me on top of him. My lips and breasts press against his lips and chest. I feel his pants swell against my thigh and remember the essays. I swipe my pen and move back to the other side of the couch. Dan doesn't say anything to me the rest of the night, not even when he heads to bed.

At two something in the morning, I wake up lying on sheets of papers and still in my t-shirt and sweatpants to my cat coughing up a hairball. My contacts stick to the top of my eyeballs, my left hand is numb, and I can feel a pear shaped indentation throbbing on my cheek. I step right into a slimy wad of cat vomit on my carpet. "Dammit Puck," I wheeze. When I actually reach the kitchen, I notice two empty bowls side by side on the floor. I fill both bowls, grab the spray bottle and paper towel, clean up the mess, wash my hands, stuff my papers in my bag, make sure my alarm is set (it wasn't), peel out my contacts, brush my teeth, and slip into bed next to Dan and his nasal night music. I pull the pillow up over my ears, feel the warmth of Puck at my feet, and crash - again.

I sleep too lightly or deeply to dream and wake to a combination of beeps and water streaming against the shower walls, floor, and human skin. Dan smacks my ass as we pass

through the bedroom doorway and calls me Boo Bear. My nose twists. I'm surprised he's not pissed about last night, but I'm too tired to care. I put on a half pot of coffee and jump in the shower myself. Before he leaves, he peeks in, blows me a kiss, and tells me he's closing at The Corner tonight, and not to forget to check out the venues he e-mailed me last week. I tell him we have a year at least. When I leave, there's less than a cup of coffee left.

On my way to work, my ring stares up at me. I look away and see the river. The water has risen halfway up the trees. It's a good thing this town is on a hill. When I get to school, I am greeted by a handful of students outside my classroom questioning what their reading assignment for last night was, what the speech test will be over, and did I know what today's lunch would be. I hustle by them, throw my bags onto the ground, turn on my computer, grab the speech test from the edge of my desk, and tell them, "Check your syllabus. I gave you a review sheet. I don't know - am I a lunch lady?" as I tear through my door into the library toward the copy room. The warning bell rings. Five minutes until class begins and fifty-three, five-page copies. I snag my sweater on the diamond. The weight of this Wednesday feels like a Monday and I'm having trouble lifting it.

After a morning full of discussion on the symbolism in *Paradise Lost*, a test on nonverbal communication, and day one of punctuation instruction for my freshmen composition class, I welcome my preparation period with a bear hug. I fall into my desk chair, take a good long swig of my mocha latte—extra shot of espresso, no whipped cream, room temperature - and close my eyes. I'm interrupted by the secretary who sounds like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (looks a little like her, too, only she wears thick red frames) paging me down to the principal's office. The speech rubrics cheer silently, another escape from the pen. I grab the inky weapon and a legal pad—just in case - and head down toward the front of the building, click click clicking as I walk.

I pass by Mr. Sye's classroom and he's saying something about the rising river waters. I stop for a minute to listen. "It's really quite amazing," he says, "since we've been without rain for weeks now." He looks kind of hot in a sweater vest. "We should see the levels of the river fall. Any hypotheses as to how the opposite is taking effect?" I smile. He's a good teacher. Probably ditched his lesson on cell division to discuss current scientific phenomena. I could have had my students write about it. Instead I trapped them in Milton's hell. I smile again and continue to Jockman's office.

"Ms. Noland, have a seat." Principal Jockman shows all of his teeth when he's baiting a hook. I sit.

"Ms. Noland. I have a proposition for you." I raise my eyebrows as unsarcastically as possible. "As you know, the JV girls basketball coaching position just recently became available."

"Oh?" I hear my voice. I sound surprised? Excited? Secretly hopeful of a question of recommendation and not an offer of the job itself? I can't tell. It doesn't seem like he can either.

"Well, I was talking to the Athletic Director, and we agree you would be the perfect woman for the job." His voice is smooth and manipulative, like a car salesman's.

"Oh?" I echo.

"We understand if you've got too much going on." Oh, here it comes. "But I know the girls were really excited to hear that you might be interested." Just outside the office, the radio program one of the secretaries has on says something about the mystery of the river.

"Ms. Noland?" I'm back in his office.

"When does the season start?" My fake smile doesn't involve any teeth.

"Next month, but Coach Butler has them coming in for open gyms already. I'm sure he'd love the help." And I'd like a JV English teacher to help me grade papers, too. "I know you're busy, so I'll let them know you're in." He waves me out and I go.

"Oh, Noland." I spin on my heels to face the open door. "Thanks."

Another toothless smile. I consider pairing it with a thumbs up or another more prominent finger. I turn, exhale, exit. Now two radio voices argue about why the river is rising. Just like my blood pressure.

As I enter grades that afternoon, I hear my cell phone vibrate in my desk drawer. I wheel over just in time to miss my mother's call and eight texts from Dan. I punch the missed call list. "Hi, mom." Pause. "Yes, I was going to call you." Pause. "Yes, there is a soccer game, but it will likely get over around 6ish if you want me to - " I'm full of fake smiles today. "Okay, see you then."

I wheel back over to the computer, enter the remaining grades, and pull up a window to check the afternoon's weather. A red strip flashes at the top of the page. Flood warnings. People in houses located near the river should evacuate and seek higher ground immediately. I scroll down to today's forecast. Sunny and 67, perfect weather for a snagged sweater. I check the text messages: 1) hey BB, just got to class, wish me luck on my test!; 2) nothing?! 3) don't you want to know how it went?; 4) well it went well. hope YOUR day is good; 5) and that you checked on those venues; 6) no lunch break today I guess. did you hear about the river?; 7) love you; 8) why the hell aren't you responding?

I can hear his voice seeping through the words on the screen. I thumb a novel of an explanation, making sure I finish with his three favorite words, pack up my stuff, and head out and to the soccer field. I watch the boys kick and run, flailing their arms against the wind and the shoulders of the other players. They put up a fight, but the other team is bigger stronger, smarter, faster. I sit away from most everyone, taking advantage of half-time to grade a couple more *Macbeth* essays. They lose three to one, but all of my students got in the game. They wave at me, little boy grins pasted across their sweaty, grass-stained faces. "Hey Ms. Noland, you finally came!" I wave back, my left hand reflecting the sun, hurting my eyes.

At dinner, I watch the clock and listen to my dad talk about the two candidates running for the presidency and how he's really waiting for the debates to decide which one to vote for. My mom chimes in, saying she probably won't vote at all. I can't even remember their names. I nod, inhaling spoonfuls of mashed potatoes and roast beef, washing them down with iced sweet tea. They look at me like they don't know me. Usually, my food is cold by the time I actually get to eating it. I try to make a little small talk, complain a little about the school day and avoid wedding planning. And when Dad brings up the river, I bring up baseball. It's about 8:30 when I leave. Dad hugs me before turning back to whatever game he's watching. Mom

walks me to the door. “Don’t work too hard, sweetheart!” I smile, teeth showing this time.

As I drive on the bridge over Rockfalls River, I can hear it rushing louder and faster than I have ever heard it before. It sounds so close, like it’s running wildly just below the wheels of my car. Like it’s chasing me. I decide to stop at Sutton’s Grocery to pick up some staples—bread, milk, eggs, yogurt, coffee, 5-hour energies, and a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. I put the bags in the trunk. Water drips from the wheels of my car. I look up at the sky: a dark sea of stars.

During the rest of my drive home, Dan calls. He’s on his break and suggests we stay at his apartment tonight. I tell him I’m already in my pajamas but he can come over when he gets off. I’ve got a date with some speech tests, but I might be able to make up for last night when I’m done. He doesn’t bite, just snaps back, questioning what I was doing earlier that kept me from doing those. I remind him of the game and my parents and his being gone and now working. His seven-year-old voice tells me he will just go home after work and maybe he will see me tomorrow. My seven-year-old heart does cartwheels.

I carry everything in, put the cold stuff in the fridge and leave the rest on the counter next to the pile of dishes I keep putting off until tomorrow, double check that Puck’s bowls are full, wash my face and brush my teeth, and bring my schoolbag to bed with me. Puck jumps up and nuzzles my elbow and curls up in Dan’s spot. He purrs while I stroke the stripes on his head

Suddenly, he is up on all fours, the fur on his back and his tail standing straight up. I hear a whooshing like a thunderstorm’s wind, but stronger. I rush to the window and look out. I see it coming. A strong and black current, eating whatever is in its path and ready to swallow more. With no time to run and no time to think, I scoop up Puck, phone, purse, school bag, and bottle of wine. Up on the roof of the house, I watch as the river breaks open around my walls, crashing through the windows and doors until it swirls just below the surface where Puck and I safely sit, a shadowy mirror of the sky. It’s hard to see with all the blackness, but I don’t use my cell phone as a flashlight. Instead, I soak my feet and calves and bask in the silence, drink the wine straight from the bottle, and pet Puck, who has made a bed out of my lap.

I wake on my back in a haze of Cabernet and sunlight, my left hand stirring the water below. I lift it up and see my ring finger, naked and free. I roll to the very edge and see nothing but deep water and my neighbors camped out atop their roofs. I hear Dan’s ringtone muffled under Puck’s belly fur. I press my cheek against sandpapery shingles, warmed from the sun. I don’t answer.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS & ARTISTS

LORI BECKHAM grew up in Rochester, IL, graduated in December with a B.A. in English, and was the Assistant Editor for Features for our campus newspaper, The Journal. Lori's passion is creative writing, digital art, drawing, photography, and reading other people's stories.

KATHLEEN BRINKMANN is finishing her master's degree in the Liberal and Integrative Studies program at UIS where she is focusing on folktales and storytelling. She is a professional storyteller and has performed at regional Midwest storytelling festivals. She hopes to publish a book of short stories in the future.

SARAH COLLINS is an alum of UIS for both her undergraduate and graduate studies in English, and is now a faculty member at the University of Illinois Springfield, teaching in the English department and serving as the Writing Specialist at the Center for Teaching and Learning. Her thesis, entitled "The Face of Disability: Humanizing Effects of Autographics on the Physically and Mentally Impaired" won the university's Outstanding Master's Thesis Award for the 2011-2012 academic year, and she has had a screenplay ("Tragic Affair") and short story ("His 'n Hers") previously published in the *Alchemist Review*.

ALLISON DUNCAN is a junior at UIS. She is majoring in English, with a minor in Elementary Education. She is originally from Elgin, IL, and hopes to teach and write when he graduates.

ZAK KRUG writes most of his poetry in the car or within the confine of his cubicle. He is pursuing an MA in Environmental Studies. Sure, he should of graduated last year, but why not take a victory lap. His influences include Yusef Komunyakaa, Adrian Matejka, Buzz Borders, and Brian Turner.

KELSEY LAY is a senior English major at the University of Illinois Springfield. She is from Hamilton, Illinois and will be graduating this spring. In her free time she likes to eat, cry, and laugh.

WILL D. PATTON is a Central Illinois native who prefers to spend much of his time enjoying classic horror flicks which inspire most of his work. He is an English major and a Women and Gender Studies minor at the University of Illinois Springfield, and he also works in the University's IT Department. He is still in the early stages of his writing career, but would love to eventually have an established audience.

ROBERTO SABAS and his five siblings—two boys and three girls—revered their parents Frank and Cecilia with affection, as they grew up in the Philippines and on Guam. Frank's muse called to Roberto when he wrote his fifth grade opus, "The White Plague," a short story based loosely on the 1958 horror film, "The Blob." But, Roberto's art muse had a head start: at the age of four, his Aunt Flora marveled at his scratchy scrawling of a tricycle. Years of art work later, Roberto rediscovered a love of literature that germinated in 1997 and began putting out serious shoots in 2012, while taking creative writing under Dr. Meagan Cass. His real-life muse, Cheryl, and their children, Victoria, Arwen, and Richard, live in Champaign, Illinois.

NICHOLAS TEETER

CASEY TESTER is a product of both of her parents, an older and younger sister, a sister-in-law, and an aunt. She teaches high school English, choreographs musicals, and takes classes. She makes frequent trips to Chicago, and loves red wine and dark chocolate, and she does not sleep enough. When Casey has time, she reads; when she gets frustrated, she cries; when she is emotionally heavy, she writes. She keeps all of her greeting cards and listens to music all the time. Her eyes have always been bigger than her stomach, her heart more open than her schedule.

CHRISTINE THOMPSON is a 2010 graduate of UIS with a BA in English and minor in philosophy. Thompson is also a 2013 graduate of National University with a MFA in Creative Writing (emphasis in fiction). When Thompson is not writing or reading, she enjoys spending

time with her elderly friends at her current day job as an activity director

ROBERT VON NORDHEIM is many things, but certainly not lost for words. He first discovered his love of language during his freshman year at the University of Illinois, when his chemistry teacher gushed about his beautifully-written lab reports (which were sadly short on science). Since then he's tried his hand at essaying, creative writing, and student journalism. His *Journal* column is his first big step on a long & winding career path; with any luck, he'll either become an American lit professor at UC Berkeley, or *Rolling Stone Magazine's* Chief Interviewer of Uncool Aging Rock Stars. When he's not studying the works of Ginsberg and Bowie, he likes to indulge in more nerdish pursuits, like *Sandman* comics and the *Persona* franchise. On weekends he can usually be found at one of St. Louis's many karaoke bars, offering up his distinctive versions of 80's metal hits. And yes, ladies... he's single.

DUSHAN YOVOVICH is a UIS Capitol Scholar Honors student of English whose focuses are rhetoric, writing, language, and new media. Dushan's father is a mathematician turned writer, and his mother an engineer-minded artist and metal smith. Stemming from the responsibility of passing on the Yovovich heritage comes a student of interdisciplinarity, holistic perspective, and the pursuit of sustainable healthfulness. Dushan has spent his efforts toward said goals by environmental restoration of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) in the Mojave desert, working as an organic farmer in Vermont, urban landscaping in Chicago and most recently as a student of the University of Illinois at Springfield. He is a fan of self-propagating electromagnetic waves and SET the card game.

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