


Winter 2001

Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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ZEPHYRUS

2001

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Zephyrus

Spring 2001



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of Western Kentucky University
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Danielle Mitchell

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award

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Zephyrus Art Award

Clay Smith

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

Table of Contents

Missy Polly	"John Lennon Head"	7
Danielle Mitchell	"Morning Glory"	8
	"Refrigerator"	16
	"Graduation"	18
	"Visions Under the Table"	27
Trish Lindsey Jagers	"Past Sleep"	28
	"Neighbors"	29
	"The Game"	30
Clay Smith	"Power of Touch"	31
Suzanne Abbot	"The End of Summer"	32
Antonia Oakes	"A Storm"	33
Alex Taylor	"Coyote December"	34
David S. Crain	"The Head of Laocoon"	46
Brian Brooks	"Arrival in the town of Duress"	47
Margaret S. Morris	"Quiet Fulcrum"	48
Jeff Crady	"Again, and Again"	49
Catron Peterson	Untitled	50
Pog	"I couldn't play music, so I got married"	51
Lisa Bricker	"Exorcism"	52
Joyce Britton	"The Burning of Washington"	61
Lisa Bricker	"Birds"	62
Laura Collins	"Secrets"	64
Cindy Childress	"After Reading Hamlet Through Act 3"	65
Brian Grady	"Nana"	66
L. Christian Parrish	"Hello Almighty, the truth is this..." .67	
Nicholas Johnson	"Getting Saved"	68
Sam Stinson	"Seige of the Holy City"	72



Missy Polly

John Lennon Head

Morning Glory
Danielle Mitchell

I walk up the four steps of my porch and curse at my morning glories. Both Aprils that I've been on my own, I've planted them where the wooden corners of my little porch meet the ground, the same place my grammy had chosen year after year. The first time I planted them, I watered and checked them every day to see if the seeds had sprouted. After a month or so, shy little newcomers were shuddering in the breeze as if they were unsure of such a vast, new place.

The sprouts shot up out of the ground as many as six inches a day. They channeled everything the red Kentucky clay had to offer them. Sometimes the neighbor lady, Mrs. Holmes, would catch me in the yard, and she'd comment on my green thumb with her brows furrowed together—amazed that a single, flaky, twenty-something could accomplish such a gardening feat. I would shrug off her suspicious compliments by telling her that's what's expected of Southern women, no matter how flaky. At this, the lines in her brow would always deepen.

Soon, periwinkle blossoms began to appear in the mornings. I had never seen a flower of such a color; in fact, I'm not sure I'd ever seen anything that color—very deep, with a fragile beauty like that of a peacock feather. The blooms would stay open until around noon, when the heat of the sun was enough to shrivel them up and drop them to the dull wood of the porch floor. On overcast days, the flowers would remain open, unshriveled, until three or four o'clock, unchecked by the sun.

The vines branched out and intertwined. Soon my porch was covered; the railing, the banister, all was a tangled mass of heart-shaped green. The vines had run out of things to wrap around, so they just reached out into the air, in a constant search for connection. Two feet above the mass on the railing, fuzzy, young tendrils groped towards the sun with their curling ends suspended in midair. The mail carrier had to wade through the unruly vines just to get to the door. Blushing, I would make jokes about my own private Amazon. After he left, I would always tuck in all of the wayward vines that made me think of

Medusa's writhing head. But the sun's draw would always have charmed them back out by the end of the day. The appendages would be swirling hypnotically in the breeze like slender fingers daring me to tuck them in again.

The plants had gotten so large that they completely overtook my porch, and I considered tearing them down; it was beginning to look ridiculous. The gas man who had come to read my meter had asked me, "What are you feeding them things?" I swore I would never plant them again.

The next April—this last one—I found myself planting a mixture of purple and pink, instead of the periwinkle. I had felt compelled to replant them, even though something about them and their prolific growth had unnerved me the summer before. I had decided that it was the rare color that unsettled me, and thus, I went with the more common ones. Again, I awaited the first signs of growth, watering faithfully, and again, I was awed by the first delicate sprouts. I passed my finger over the veins in the leaves and watched them grow thicker and stronger under the bright sun that had already browned Mr. Holmes' corn crop.

Tonight is no different than any other night; I curse the thin and curling appendages as they frisk me on my way up the steps. I feel a vine tickle at my waist, sliding, like a sneaky jade pickpocket. It is August now, and the vines have, once again, overtaken the entire front porch of the small, aging farmhouse my Grammy left me. I push myself into the front door as familiar as an old friend, looking over my shoulder at the sound of Mrs. Holmes' wind chimes. I can see them stirring, the silver cylinders glinting in the moonlight. My head is groggy, and I'm tired.

If I didn't expect Ursula to wrap herself around my ankles, I would trip over her. Her low meow and the pressure of her weight sliding against my legs soothe me as I turn to shut, lock, and deadbolt the door. "Two gals living alone can never be too careful, huh, Urs?" I pull her to my chest from the darkness around my shoes. She buries her face hard in my neck as I feel for the light switch on the wall. My hand well knows the way from years of running itself against that wall. I find the switch, flick it. Nothing. "Great." Not wanting the aggravation of

changing the bulb, I find my way to the overstuffed couch with memory as my guide in the darkness. My breathing eases, and finally deepens, as it falls in tune with Ursula's rhythmic purrs.

I awaken with a stitch in my back and the VCR announcing "4:23" from the entertainment center in the corner. The rest of the room is as black as Ursula's coat. I push myself to a sitting position, sliding my arm from beneath her, only to find that the cotton of my long-sleeved pullover is sweat-soaked where she had been against me. I stand and lean far to the left—reaching—to pull out the muscles in my back. I flick the light switch, but again, the only result is a hollow "click," resounding in the silence. I grunt, remembering I've already tried that, and make my way over to the lamp on the other side of the room.

I touch the round switch, feel the tiny ridges of it pressing into my fingers. The softer light of the lamp is easier on my still-sleepy eyes anyway. Ursula glares at me through serpentine eyes barely open, annoyed by the yellow intrusion. She stands in protest, circles around till her back is facing me, and curls herself up in the warm spot my body has left for her.

Grammy's antique wing chair envelops my body as I curl into a fetal position. It has always taken me a while to wake up, so I sit comatose, waiting for alertness. My wandering eyes find my purse on the floor. The crumpled flyer peeks out of the top. "Ms. Emma," it announces in ornate burgundy script. Just beside the text, there's a picture of a hand, soft and feminine, reaching out, welcoming. "Palms read in private sessions, first reading is FREE!"

I stare at the hand until my eyes change its shape with the effort. I'm reminded of something. *A dream. I had a dream.* My eyes focus, and the picture becomes a hand again. My mind grasps at images, sounds, but grasping at dreams is like chasing fireflies. A bright light calls you to reach out, but just as your hand draws close, only darkness. Dreams are elusive, tricky. Now you see them, now you don't.

I think of hands, lots of them in different shapes and sizes, and all of them are mine. In semi-darkness, they stretch out, push, pull, grab, clinch. All of them search for something to

latch onto; they probe and feel and touch, running over each other and colliding. All of this, to the tune of Grammy's voice singing an old hymn. . .

*Jesus is tenderly
calling you home.
Calling too-day,
Calling too-day.*

I can see her washing dishes, hear the glasses clinking in the sink as she reaches in. I smell something nice and soothing that I can't put my finger on. Then, the hands again, and by this time, she is to the chorus.

*Call-ling today,
Call-ling today,
Jee-sus is call-ling
is tenderly calling too-day!*

I close the window against a draft that wasn't there before, thinking of what the psychic had told me. "Don't reach out," she had said, "for things that aren't there." A little girl with long black hair had handed me the flyer in the grocery store, and not even meaning to, I had turned into the driveway of Miss Emma's rundown farmhouse on my way back home. I told myself as my car rattled through the gravel that this would be fun.

I had tapped on the screen door mechanically, not hesitating. It was only when Miss Emma answered the door that I began to feel foolish. She was an aging woman with the same long, dark hair as the little girl's, and she must have weighed two hundred pounds underneath her loud, floral housedress. Holding up the flyer, I stammered that a little girl had approached me in a store, that I didn't usually do things like this, that if this wasn't a good time. . .

Miss Emma had only looked up at me with knowing, almost maternal, eyes. "Come in. I know that Auroona would not have come to you unless you needed me." For some reason, I felt relief that Miss Emma was convinced I belonged there.

I could smell the age of the house itself as I shuffled into the kitchen and sat down in a worn ladder-back chair. My eyes roved every corner of the cluttered room, over pots and pans and houseplants and books. They finally rested on a sun-catcher

hanging in the window—a dawning sun over verdant flowers. It read, “Every day is a new one” in purple watercolor.

Miss Emma bustled about the stove; she had been preparing some herbal tea, she explained. “Would you like some?” she asked.

“No, no. No thanks,” I faltered, a little too quickly. I was certainly not comfortable ingesting anything this strange woman had to offer.

She seemed to understand that I wanted nothing more than to hear what she had to say and leave, so she quickly seated herself opposite me and asked for my hand. Running her deft fingers over mine, she told me who I am, using words like “confused” and “restless.” She asked about “a loss” having to do with “the number 2.”

“My grandmother died two years ago.” I realized that I had pulled my hand away. She reached for it again, and I thrust it forward, embarrassed by my impulse. I had to swallow so badly that my throat ached for it, like it had been cut from the inside out.

“Two losses,” she said. “This one and another. The other, involving two people—”

“My parents.”

“Gone, but not to the other side. To the ocean. Where the salt dries up their memories. A lot of years have passed.”

“Twenty,” I said, studying the markings of the linoleum. I watched them blur and become splotches until my lashes yielded their weight onto my coat sleeve. I wondered if the salt would dry up *my* memories, but all it seemed to do was darken the red of my jacket.

“You have set root in infertile soil. It is important for you to know that sometimes there is nothing to connect with outside yourself.”

My face asked her a question that my mouth didn’t know how to phrase.

“Don’t reach out for things that aren’t there.” With that, she lifted her pewter mug and watched me over a sip. In the silence, I sensed that we were finished, so I stood and walked awkwardly towards the door. My foot caught the chair leg, and I blushed at

the scraping noise it made on the floor. Miss Emma didn’t seem to notice. In spite of that, I pushed out the door and threw a hurried “Thanks” over my shoulder. In the car, I felt her gaze for miles, and the dark spots on my jacket were growing. I decided to make a pit stop. I tossed the jacket into the passenger seat, and I walked into the bar.

Maybe the drinks are messing with my head, I think now. After all, I can’t even remember the last time I had a drink. I had gone back to the wing chair after shutting the window, and now my legs ached from being hugged so long and so hard. The VCR had progressed to 6:12 a. m. Wow, I’ve got to open the bookstore at 9:00. I need some tea.

I watch my distorted face in the shiny silver teakettle as I run water from the sink my grandmother used in my dream. The cabinet is a myriad of mugs, but I paw until I find my favorite—the one with the cat like Ursula on it. I smell Grammy’s hand cream as I rinse it out. The bottle of hand cream had always been a fixture by the sink; she would dry her hands on a dishtowel and massage the cream all over them after every sink of dishes.

Memories of Grammy always send me walking down a tightrope of ambivalence. On one side, I love remembering her; on the other, doing so reminds me of the void she has left behind. I plunge my hand into a ceramic canister in search of a tea bag. There’s nothing there. My trip to the grocery store had long been forgotten when I pulled into my driveway last night. “Oh, man. I left the tea in the car.”

Thankful that I’m still fully dressed, I grab my keys from the floor beside my purse and jam my feet into tennis shoes by the door. The morning outside surprises me; I am instantly awakened. The hazy gray of the air around me is only possible with the first hint of daylight, and the early morning chill prickles and empowers every inch of my body. I stop and let it soak in. The morning glories are wild with blooms—sometimes a tender pink, sometimes a velvety purple. The ends of the vines flutter in the morning breeze and beckon to me since they have

run out of banister to climb. They reach out with those long, slender fingers, and they threaten me.

Running down the steps, I drive my keys into the pocket of my jeans until I feel them in my leg. My eyes and then my outstretched hands latch onto the shovel underneath my porch. The strength and the weight of it feel solid, capable in my fists. I walk directly over to the base of one of the morning glories, and I jab at it with the shovel's blade. The thick, gnarled vine doesn't split at first, so I raise the shovel high behind me and jab at it again and again, straining and loosening the taut muscles in my back. Little cuts begin to yield free-flowing sap that runs down to the russet earth beneath. Gradually, the blade works its way through the vine. The flowers and the ends of the vine along the banister above still flutter in the morning air, unharmed by the damage.

I walk to the other corner of the porch and proceed to whack at the base of the other plant. The morning cold invigorates me, and I attack the tangled mass mercilessly with sweat beading and running down my face. Once the plants are both cut off from their roots, I begin tearing the network of vines from the banisters. I rip and pull, severing the vines in hundreds of places, and I toss them behind me in the yard. My hands feel sticky, gummy, as I banish wisps of hair that cling to my sweaty face. Some of the vines are thick and strong, and they resist my tugging, so I use the shovel. I drive the blade through the appendages and on into the banister of the porch, leaving scars up and down the wood. I pull away the tangle of leaves and flowers and vine, and finally it is finished.

I toss the shovel to the ground and survey the pile of discarded blooms that seem to resent the punishment; the blossoms that are intact are still open. The flowers look like the wide, bewildered eyes of a child after an undeserved assault. The ripped ends of the tendrils curl in the growing light of the day. The morning glories have become a pile of rubbish in my yard; twenty different shades of green are represented in the heap before me—deep-colored tops of leaves, duller undersides of leaves,

and varying shades in the older and the younger of the vines. The mixed salt of tears and perspiration tastes savage on my tongue. "Don't reach out for things that aren't there." My voice is as shaky and low as a criminal's. I turn my back on the waste and walk to the car to fetch the new box of English TeaTime, wiping back the wetness of my face with my sleeve. I stare at the piles around me as I remount the wooden steps now free from tangles, bare. As I push myself through the door, I cast one last glance over my shoulder to see Mrs. Holmes standing on her porch, her hair wild over pink flannel pajamas, her brow furrowed as usual.

Refrigerator

Danielle Mitchell

Everyone knows that tall things
go on the top shelf.
They have to.
Pitchers of iced tea,
gallons of milk.
There's no room
anywhere else.
They just
go there.

Likewise,
everyone knows
that medium-height things
go on the bottom shelf.
Giant tubs of
Land O'Lakes,
sixteen-ounce sour creams.
They're too tall for the middle shelves,
and why waste space on top?
(Tall things go there.)
They're a perfect fit
on the bottom shelf.
They just
go there.

But it never fails.

Someone will come over,
grab that Land O'Lakes,
then put it back—
not back where it goes,
on the bottom shelf.
They'll put it on top,
(because it's easier,

closer,
and requires no bending).
Then the tall things will be crowded.
The tub will have to be shifted
to get to the tea.

Nothing can be done about it.
That's what you get
for letting people
use your butter.

Graduation

Danielle Mitchell

You always were a sucker for red lipstick. Red, like your car—fire-engine red. The red in brightly colored ads of the magazines, in the enticing statement of a child's lollipop. My mother chooses her lipstick strictly for shock value. Then she applies it in public, just so people can watch the transformation—like she's raising a flag up its pole. Everyone salutes: the women, with flitting, sideways glances and suppressed half-coughs, the men, with unblinking stares and parting lips. Nothing can compare with her nerve.

I think all of this and watch you lean farther and farther to the right during our conversation—by slow, careful degrees, of course. Your body gradually inches its way across the red vinyl seat of the booth as if you were unconsciously being drawn by a sideways gravitational pull. Mother's power is overwhelming. I wonder what you will do when you run out of red vinyl and hit the window. Will you press against it, slow and steady, until it finally gives way?

Your left hand idly pushes up your shirtsleeve and runs over the "Browder Bulldogs" tattoo on your bicep. Mother twists the tube of lipstick, caps it, and tosses it onto her car seat. She takes her time bending over the gas pump, and I am thankful. I see no way out of this situation. I try to think of a way to excuse myself, but I am mesmerized by Mother, and I stare at her, as stupidly as you do. She's kept the weight off, I see. *But then, I think, men won't pay to see a fat woman dance.* When her tank is full, she pulls out the nozzle and holds it between long, manicured, and yes, red, fingernails—like it's a loaded gun that she's a bit afraid to tamper with. When she gets it safely inserted into the pump without any accidental fire, she peeks over Jackie O sunglasses to make sure her performance is appreciated. With over twenty feet between the two of you, I watch your eyes meet, and in that glance, in that instant, I know it. Complete understanding comes to me like a slap on the face. Her eyes, fringed with dark lashes, disappear again behind the Jackie O's, and a grin widens across her face, accentuating the contrast between those red lips and her

porcelain skin. That face, at thirty-eight, looks almost as young as mine. But I suppose that is to be expected; there are only fifteen years between us.

When I had tried to phone Mother to tell her I was coming home for a visit, I'd been away at school for five years. Truthfully, the University of Kentucky was only two and a half hours away from my hometown of Browder, but I say that I was "away" because I never came home. I had worked and put myself through school in bookstores, coffeehouses, and restaurants, and jobs don't have Christmas breaks. That's what I told Mother anyway. I would call her once at the end of every semester to say—with forced regret in my voice—that my work schedule would not allow me to come home. In truth, I could have come home. Sometimes my bosses had even offered to let me off. I would just shrug and say that it was no use, that my parents were going to be in Athens for the holidays, or that they were going to summer in Venice again. Sometimes it was Barcelona, sometimes Paris—it depended on my mood, or sometimes on which restaurant I had eaten lunch in. Occasionally, I would get looks from my bosses, looks that said that parents who did that kind of jet-setting did not add up with a kid who drove a beat up Honda Civic to work forty hour weeks serving lattes or selling books, in addition to attending college full time. Those suspicious looks were quickly replaced with ones of admiration when I explained that my father was an upstanding self-made man who believed in a strong work ethic and didn't give handouts.

Between the demands of school and those of work, I had taken five years to complete the requirements for my philosophy/English double major. However, this morning, I had walked across stage with all the pomp and circumstance due a recipient of a Bachelor of Arts degree. I had been nervous about the whole day, but once there, I found myself comfortably swallowed into the anonymity of thousands of shiny black caps and gowns.

As soon as the ceremony ended, the other graduates began talking and laughing excitedly with their friends and families

who had rushed up to speak to them. The noise was deafening. I plastered an expectant smile on my face and pushed through the crowd, turning my head this way and that, as if I were hurrying to find my party. Not one person noticed that no one was hurrying to find *me*. The graduates were chattering away, hugging Moms with cameras slung around their necks, showing diplomas to Dads who turned away to wipe back tears, and calling out to friends that they would keep in touch.

All of the families were so absorbed in their own private moments that I literally had to shove some of them out of the way. I had inadvertently placed myself in about four pictures, and I had grabbed at the pain in my side when an especially exuberant mother had accidentally driven the corner of her daughter's leather diploma case into my ribcage. In the meantime, my cap had been knocked off my head three times, and I had finally just given up and carried it.

Suddenly, I found myself outside of the throng, and I turned to look back on it since I was safely out of the line of fire. I watched as a few graduates emerged from the mass to wander off towards the parking lot, arm-in-arm with Moms and Dads—handsome, graying couples in well-cut suits and conservative dresses. Inwardly, I wished that I knew who my father was.

The families were all going out to celebrate. I heard them calling to each other, "Olive Garden?" or "Stephanie wants to go to Red Lobster, and after all, it is *her* big day!" I shuffled along in their wake, realizing that I was hungry, too.

"Hey, Sylvie! Congratulations!"

I looked up to see Dr. Pickerling, and I was surprised he remembered my name. I had had his English literature class two semesters ago. "Oh, hi. And, uh, thank you." *Always the articulate one*. "My parents couldn't come. Their flight—from Italy—it was delayed. They're really disappointed though." The words tumbled out of my mouth too quickly and uncalled for. I realized too late.

Dr. Pickerling looked puzzled for a moment, but then came back with, "Oh, that's too bad, but I'm sure they're just as proud in Italy as they would be here." At that, he walked briskly away.

Opening the door of my Honda, I felt alone. In a childish way, I wanted my mommy. I wanted to go home.

The more I thought of it, the more pleasant the idea became. Time and distance had romanticized memories, smoothed out the ugliness of the past by muddling the details in a nostalgic haze. I called my mother as soon as I got home. *We're sorry. The number you have reached has been temporarily disconnected. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please hang up and try your call again.*

"Well, well, well. Nothing ever changes." A bit of the nostalgia had been lost. Nonplussed, I stood for a moment, thinking. Then, I picked up the phone again.

"Books and More."

"Mr. Pax, please. This is Sylvie."

"Oh, hi, Sylvie. I'll get him, but it may be a minute." I started taking out T-shirts and jeans and throwing them into a gray duffel bag. My watch said 12:11. I could be in Browder by 3, before it was even dark. My mind flicked over the faces that I'd see in my hometown, faces I hadn't seen in five years. First, I thought of Patsy and wished that I'd gone ahead and invited her to my graduation; I hadn't because I'd felt bad about not keeping in very good touch with her over the years, and I'd been a little bit scared she wouldn't come. Next, I thought of you. Where would life have taken *you* in these five years? Had you changed your mind and gone to school somewhere? I imagined you playing football for the University of Louisville. *Come oon*, I said to the phone.

"Pax here." Mr. Pax was huffing and puffing like he'd just run a marathon. He was immensely overweight, and the slightest movement shortened his breath. I wondered how far he had walked to get to the phone.

"Mr. Pax, this is Sylvie. Listen, my mom is really sick, and I was calling to see if you'd clear this week for me. It's been a while since I've seen her. . . ." My voice trailed off in expectation.

"Sure, Sylvie." *Breathe*. "Is she—*breathe*—all right?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine. I just wanted to go see her."

"Yeah. Did they have to come back early?" *Breathe.* "You know, I've heard about people drinking bad water—*breathe*—down there in Mexico."

"That may be what it is. She's got a doctor's appointment in the morning."

"All righty. I'll see you Saturday."

"Bye-bye."

Within ten minutes, I was on the Interstate and wondering what kind of shape I would find my mother in.

Upon entering the small town of Browder, I found that I wanted to put off seeing Mother as long as I could. My mind was chaotic with memories, and that old tense pull that went with home was back in my stomach. I didn't like who I was here. I decided to drive around town a little while, to relax and see how things had changed. The high school had a new wing built on to the eastern side, and the parking lot had been expanded. The marching band was in the field practicing, and the repeats of the snare drums reverberated menacingly. Thinking of Patsy, I made my way downtown to my old hangout—The Diner. That's when I saw your car.

The red Camaro still looked as good as it must have in 1967 when it rolled off the line. It had been recently washed and waxed, and the chrome detail gleamed in the sun. I thought of how much you'd loved the All-American timelessness of that car, and I knew there was no way you would have sold it. *He must be in there*, I thought to myself, and I was surprised at how my pulse quickened. I turned into the parking lot before I even had time to give a signal.

I pulled around to the side of The Diner so I could get myself together in an inconspicuous place. In the rearview mirror, I thankfully saw that some of the makeup I had worn for the special occasion of the commencement was still intact. I pulled my fingers through my hair, wishing I had done something with it after wearing that cap all morning. I looked down at my clothes and grimaced. A ragged Metallica concert T-shirt is the last thing I wanted to be wearing when I saw you after five years. I debated about putting on a jacket, but it was eighty degrees

outside, and that would look even more stupid than what I had on. Besides, my jeans weren't even clean, and there was no way I could cover that up. I decided I would just make up an excuse, say I had been helping a friend move into a new apartment . . . Or something.

Stepping out of the car, I felt the heat of it as my face blushed redly. A thousand questions ran through my head. Did you still drag race on Bancroft Road? Would you recognize me? Did you ever know what I would've given to go out with you? Did you still work at that factory outside of town? Would you be impressed by my going off to school, making my own way? What would you say to me?

I walked around to the front, weaving through the gas pumps and the cars driving up to them wondering if you were watching me through the storefront windows of The Diner. I strode in as nonchalantly as I could, and I was thankful for my uncanny ability to blend into a crowd. I approached the counter and saw Patsy at once. "Patsy!"

Patsy, looking older now with more gray beneath the hairnet, spun around to face me. After a split-second of uncertainty, "Sylvie?"

When I nodded, she smiled just as I remembered. Her eyes squinched up until they almost disappeared in her plump face. She wiped her hands on her white apron already soiled with what appeared to be mustard, grease, and ketchup; then, she held out her arms to me over the counter. I leaned over and hugged her. "When'd you get into town, Miss College Girl?"

"Oh, I actually just pulled in about ten minutes ago. I graduated this morning, so I thought I would come home for a visit before I start trying to find a job."

"Well, isn't that something! I always knew you'd get outta here." Patsy had served me a thousand hamburgers on nights when I'd walked to The Diner because my absentee mother's refrigerator held only Coors Lite and an ancient jar of grape jelly. In those days, I had a running tab here, but Patsy would always sneak me milkshakes without writing them down. I would eat and would usually end up staying and helping Patsy clean up when The Diner closed. I had nothing else to do. It

was either that or wait at home for my mother to stumble in and collapse in the hallway, if she came home at all. Over the years, Patsy and I had built up a real affection for one another.

I had been so hungry for it then that I made myself forget that the friendship had its origin in pity. After my second semester of college, I began to feel pathetic calling Patsy, telling her about my classes and my grades. My communication with her had just sort of tapered off.

"Patsy, you haven't seen my mom lately, have you?" Patsy's lips straightened into a thin line. The smile in her eyes faded some, but didn't quite disappear.

"No, hon. You been by her house? She works awful late hours, and it's usually about now that you see her around town. You hungry? How about a Graduation Cheeseburger on me?" Patsy asked with a flourish of her hands.

"That would be wonderful," I said and smiled, truly amazed at how quickly we had slipped back into our easy familiarity. I turned to scan the room while she shuffled behind the counter.

At first, I hadn't seen you. Always the loner, you had taken a booth in the far corner. I could have jumped up and down when I saw you were alone. You'd kept your dark hair in that short, scraggly, gelled look—the look you'd inspired all the underclassmen to adopt after your amazing touchdown won the district championship. From the counter, I could see the blue of your eyes, and I imagined the green flecks in them that I knew to be there. You flashed your crooked grin of perfect teeth when a pimply young waitress refilled the glass in front of you. I swallowed a mouthful of Coke with a gulp.

Sitting here with you now, I don't know how to make my escape. When I had initially walked up, I had just slid into the seat across from you, trying awkwardly to surprise you. When you saw my face, you looked like you were about to vomit; my attempt at surprise had certainly been successful. Immediately regretting being so forward, I stammered something about just coming into town and seeing you from the counter. You rudely spat out that you were meeting a "friend," and I wondered if you were really trying to dismiss me so promptly after not having

seen me for five years. Your "friend" was nowhere in sight, so I simply stayed where I was, waiting for some sort of insight into your behavior.

I told you I'd graduated and complained about the prospect of getting a job. You just tapped your fingers on the table, and stuffed french fries into your already full mouth; you nervously coaxed a Marlboro from the red-and-white package beside your plate. You lit it, even while you were still eating. I felt uncomfortable, unwanted, and worst of all, confused.

However, as soon as I saw her pull her black convertible up to the pump, I noted the change in you. I had understood completely. First, you looked embarrassed, trying to keep your eyes on mine. But when she had gotten out of the car, you had watched the part of her lips, the redness of them daring you; you had given up trying to conceal your desire. I wondered how long it had been going on as I watched her saunter across the littered pavement and around to the gas tank of her car. I knew I had to get out, but I found myself watching her walk, watching her hips sway to some raunchy music in her head. I realized that she hadn't seen me. A sign in front of the window allowed me to see her, but obstructed her view of me.

She is on her way to the door now, and my head is too busy for the silence between us to even get noticed. When I was in high school, I had actually thought that you were interested in me. Now I know why you had kept coming by my house. It hadn't been for me at all. What a fool I had been! What a stupid, dreamy child! All of the guys went out to the city limits to the bar where Mother worked. All of them, including you.

Mother's long blonde hair billows out as she turns to look towards the road, a maneuver obviously contrived for this effect. Your hand can hardly hold the cigarette as you pull on it, hard. The voices in The Diner are very loud; the noise jolts me to reality and to the fact that you and I have said nothing for the five minutes that have passed since Mother pulled up to the gas pump.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom. I think my mom's outside, and I want to surprise her." I tip over the salt shaker as I

reach for my Coke. My mouth works, but only a few unintelligible syllables come out.

"Patsy'll get it," you say, eager for me to go as my shaking hands do a miserable job of sweeping up the scattered grains.

"Y-yeah." I smear my hands back and forth on my jeans and back away from you. Then, at once, I wheel around and head not towards the bathroom, but towards the red "EXIT" sign at the side of the room. I hear the cook call, "Patsy, order up!" as I step out into the muggy afternoon; I watch through the windshield of my car as Mother slides gracefully—easily—into my seat at your booth.

Visions Under the Table

Danielle Mitchell

Mom always told me,
"I can't picture you with kids."
I'd close my eyes,
try to conjure an image
of a little boy half me,
half someone else.
Instead I'd see myself
with a rich leather briefcase,
some smart little wire-frames,
an even smarter suit.

But today you and I ate oranges
on the kitchen floor,
tearing off sections
that sprayed us—
and we laughed
with juice running down
our chins.
We rolled and rolled
on the carpet,
ricocheting off the recliner,
backtracking when we came to a wall,
until we stopped under the coffee table—
to watch each other make faces
in the glass above us.

All those years searching
the backs of my eyelids
and then
there he was.
I could almost see him—
on the bottom of my table
like he had always been there.

Past Sleep

Trish Lindsey Jagers

This night, I choose to stay
in the curls of grass,
fingering dew,
not caring
whether I sleep
late—or not at all—just hold
my eyes open.
This night, I wanted to *be* you, Moon,
lay out all night
with the stars—
like heathens—
kiss their jagged crystal edges,
come home with blood
on my lips, glass in my eyes.
I own
this night, the disappearance
of everything familiar.
Words stay cornered.
Not one dares
sneak through
these reasons I've given
for staying.

Neighbors

Trish Lindsey Jagers

He asked me to come over,
swept a small place on the table,
moved matches and cigarette
packs; a squeezed
beer can
rocks on a stack
of unopened mail.
Bill collectors wonder
where he is;
I know.
He folds his hands
like a prayer book,
reads line after line
of hope through his fingers,
hangs on,
lets go,
wipes his hands
on his pants,
offers me a beer.
I say, "It's too close
to supper, you know,
beer and empty stomachs."
He says, "Yeah,
I know,"
touches the velvet rose
of lipstick smiling
from the edge
of her old cup,
pulls a beer
from the box on the floor.
The tab, when he lifts it,
sounds like ribs splitting
from the inside.

The Game

Trish Lindsey Jagers

Beneath silk shoulders
the bra stretches to thread-
bare tapestry, taking on
a new verse, repeating rhyme after
rhyme over stanza of ribs.
Under the dockers, strings tease legs
from underpants past pulling up
or staying put.
Redwing leather shoes mark the floor,
hide feet scarred
from the soles up; where a sock
once covered a hammer toe,
the nail now pulls at the bed.

I imagine these
while trying to see this woman
and man
in their underwear—
this game of putting everyone
into a category that I can relate to.
As they slice through
my side of the breeze,
the restless ghost of their perfume
makes me aware of a mist
on my face,
the absence of their eyes.



The End of Summer

Suzanne Abbot

It left on Sunday.

It kind of felt like
my mother-in-law left town.
The heavy, stagnant air
that coated me sticky
became arid and light
and teased the lace curtains in my room.

The wind turned frisky
and nudged me with the faded scent
of burnt wood and crispy leaves,
while the hairs on my arms,
which the day before were curled and matted,
grew glossy and straight.

The sky looked bluer and the grass greener,
and the sun,
tired and aged to a pumpkin orange,
lounged comfortably on the treetops
and welcomed the respite.

A Storm

Antonia Oakes

The Moon is full
and her water has broken.
The windows boil with rain.
I think I've made a mistake, I told you.
The road home was black and slick.
There's mud on the floor,
where I pulled a muscle coming out of my boot.
Earthen bowls and copper pans
hold their mouths wide to the ceiling
like hungry birds.
They chirp when fed, sharp bells,
hollow chords wake the room.
Candle flames dance to the off-rhythm.
I couldn't be more still.
My knuckle is crowned with tarnished silver—
a bent circle once perfect and white,
my swollen finger won't let go.

Coyote December

Alex Taylor

I come up behind the house, through the forsythia bushes that have grown limp with snow, pause where the clothesline hangs, a long, pale rope above the gray, December ground. The house is big, bigger than ever before as if its windows are shuttered eyes and its door nothing but a great mouth waiting to swallow me. A long time ago, my great-grandfather built this house. Back then, it had green-painted oak siding and beds of tulips that grew under the eaves come spring. My great-grandfather was a Deacon and so am I. Now the house stands with broken shingles and snow thickening around the chimney floe. Black smoke rises there from Grandma's coal stove. The smoke is big and dark like the house.

I walk quickly up the porch steps, my boots caterwauling on the dry permafrost beneath, open the screen door, take the tarnished knob between my fingers. When I was little, a starling flew into this screen and broke its neck during the night. I got up early the next morning and found the bird before anyone else did. I saw its blood pooling out like strong tea against the porch boards. Grandma called it good-riddance. Earl called it "a goddamn shame."

The house is cold and dark mostly, save for a few corners where Grandma has set a kerosene lamp. After seventy-five years of living she still doesn't trust electricity. The house smells of mothballs and vinegar, cold cuts and old clothes. I walk quickly through the rooms, tracking snow as I go, knowing it will melt to water before long. There are yellowed photographs hanging on the wall, most of them pictures of old people before they got that way. Old, I mean. One of them shows a man in a white T-shirt leaning against a Buick on a dusty, gravel road. His baseball cap is pushed far back onto his head and the sun shines down into his dark face. There's a briar pipe clinging between his lips. Earl, I think. The picture has no color.

I find Grandma in the basement in her rosewood rocker. There is a crocheted shawl drawn across her legs and the smell of burning coal rises to scorch my nostrils. The basement is dark and all I see of her is the amber flame from the stove reflecting off her bifocals.

"You come to see the old man I reckon?" she asks me. I nod, dig at the quick under my fingernails. She looks at me, her hair fallow and curly, her lips drawn inward against toothless, tobacco-browned gums. Her face is like an old, beaten patch of road, thick with dust and potholes.

"He ain't no good anymore. Allus knows it but you, Jimmy. Allus knows it but you," she says, her tiny head shaking back and forth between her shoulders. I shuffle round the basement which smells of old magazines and newspaper. I can hear her breathing, a sickly, sawdust-filled sound that reminds me of water flowing into a paper cup. She has pneumonia this winter and it's slowly eating a bright, red hold in the center of her chest. I think of this, watching the October-colored shadows crawl through the cobwebs on the basement walls.

"You come here like a tomcat without a home. Ev'ry morning you're on the back porch looking for that old man. I swear, Jimmy, iffen you don't watch it, you'll be just like him." Grandma's words are full of spittle and blood. I can see the blood darkening the white collar of her gown and don't say anything about it.

"That wouldn't be so bad would it, Grandma?" I ask instead. Grandma shuffles breath through her nostrils and coughs steadily.

"You poor child. You can't even see the harm it'd do to end up a man that don't care for his wife or his God no more. That's gonna be the death of you boy. Your blindness," she says, wiping the red, raw flesh under her nose. I don't say anything, wait for her to tell me where I can find the old man.

"Out back I reckon. Out by the barn." I nod in the darkness, trudge back up the basement steps, and out into the cold, December world. For awhile, I do not move from the back porch. I'm thinking of the starling again, its wings broken like toothpicks, its feathers crumpled against the screen, its blood pooling below. Then I think of Grandma down there in the basement, winter circling round her aged body like a buzzard on the wing.

"A goddamn shame," I say and walk off into the cold to find the old man.

He is standing under the eaves of the barn, snow flakes dribbling down the brim of his baseball cap. His head is thrust upward, the whiskers on his chin thick with moisture. There is a briar pipe thrust between the paleness of his lips and smoke wreaths round the wrinkles of his face. In front of him, he is warming his bare hands, blunt, red things that hang like ragged brick at the end of his arms. Striding up the snowy path which has been blackened by that morning's cow manure, I see these hands and this man hidden, here, among all the coldness of the earth.

"Grandma said you'd be out here. Guess she knows you better than most folks sometimes," I say, coming close and drawing my shoulders about my neck to keep out the cold. I shiver, hear my teeth chatter, and watch my breath float away from me like liquid smoke. If there's one

thing I hate, its being cold. Being cold gets inside a man, makes his bone marrow thin out and his blood thicken up. It bites you right in the balls with teeth like burnt Velcro. Sometimes, I get nose bleeds from the cold. In the dead of winter I'll look down and see my knuckles dotted with blood from my nostrils which was probably, at one time or the other, blood from my heart. Earl ain't like that. He's been cold for so long now that winter ain't no different to him than Sunday evening.

"Sometimes she does I reckon," he says. His eyes are narrow, blue canals of light and they watch the horizon, fold over the line of cedar trees at the end of the pasture like parachute canvas. His hands don't stop moving. They collapse, finger o'er finger, bright crimson flesh stapled to dark sinew and bone. Smoke rises after his words and it smells of ripe burley, reminds me of how old he really is. Eighty five this winter I think. He's wondering more than anybody now how much time he's got.

"There's a blizzard coming. I can smell it running down from the north. Liable to blow us all to hell," I say, scratching my boot toes at the muddy earth under the barn eaves. This is earth the snow hasn't touched, orange, limestone tread the color of pumpkin pie. Earl doesn't say anything. The pipe smoke curls around his ears like pale corn-shucks. I force a smile out between the porcelain shards of my teeth. I've had a sore throat for the past month now and sometimes I smile when the pain gets really bad. It's like my throat is rusting out and every time I swallow I get these jagged barbs of pain running through my skull. Sometimes I feel like my throat is full of nothing but molten shrapnel. That's when I smile.

Earl pulls a sassafras root from his pocket and hands it to me. I take it silently without thanks, begin chewing on the bittersweet pulp. The taste is like antique earth under my tongue and I feel a little better. The old man has been doing this for a long time, giving me teas and roots and the like. I trust him because he's eighty five and has never been to the doctor.

"Fix you up good, boy. Here directly, it will," he says, taking the briar pipe from his mouth. He taps the bowl against the red dryness of his palm and lights the tobacco again with a kitchen match. His face is the color of shale rock and I watch him close, the sassafras root wagging out between my lips like a licorice stick.

Earl nods once and we walk around the barn, hear the dripping freeze fall on the aluminum roof. Our boots make dark patches in the snow and our breath flows backwards against our cheeks as we move. Like water, I think, and suckle the sassafras.

We walk down the rocky hill past the iced-over cow pond, rise again as we enter the pine groves. There is snow on the ground, wet and thin here. It clings to our boots like the salty ways of an ocean. Above me, I can feel the pines swaying in the breeze, letting snow drift down off their needles. There isn't a sound. In the summer, I hear chain-saws and traffic on the wet highways, song birds and the lowing of cattle. Yet, the snow has deadened my world, made a moat between me and all other things. The cold, nuclear winter has killed everything, left only Earl and me to wander these hills.

Above me, the pines are like dew-covered cob webs against the bright, colorless sky. I know where we're going. We clamber over a bent and rusty fence, tuck our coat collars in against the numb flesh of our necks. We walk down through crags of earth, kicking up dead leaves as we go, making a dark trail in the snow. We pull maple limbs away from our eyes, see jagged stones outlined with new frost. We taste the dry, December air on our tongues and it's like a fine, mountain-aged bourbon. Earl is still smoking his pipe and the smell wafts back to me. I know where we're going. I've been there already. A thousand times or more.

We fall about the forest, trudging o'er logs and strangled bits of frostbitten vine. We are trying to make noise without speaking, breathing hard and taking rough steps in the snow. Even then we are only passing shadows against the crusts of snow, things that can not disturb a world so deep in slumber. There are a few snow flurries in the air and they float against the grueling sky like oleander blossoms. Some of them get caught in the creases of my jacket and I breathe on them, turning them to water. We walk on, the pines creating soft alcoves above our heads, the earth rising and falling like a cold, gray lung.

The old man walks in front of me, his granite hair streaming out below the back of his cap. His shoulders are thin as wasp wings and lurch forward like dumbwaiters every time he takes a step. From where I am, I can count every liver-spot on the back of his neck, trace every ounce of time that has been laid upon his shoulders. His legs move with great strain through the snow and I can hear him grimacing, his face spilling out below his jowls like porridge.

He was in the war, the big one that came a thousand years before my birth. He fought slanty-eyed, yellow men in a far off land, learned how to eat cold beans from a can, taste another man's blood and ask for seconds. I think of him sometimes, as a man about my age, his hands thick with black spines, his teeth made pink by the guts he's been eating that day. I think of him in a uniform, a rifle hoisted over his shoulder. There's never much talk from him about anything and I wonder what he

saw all those years ago that made him lose his tongue. I know he killed folks, know he burned babies and raped yellow-skinned virgins. And sometimes, when the snow is one the ground and the earth smells like cracked leather, I can see right through him as if he was never even there.

We walk onward, though cold-strangled briars and brown thickets where thistles and cog spines grow in April. Our chests are heaving in and out like billows and we clutch our ribs with the pain. Drool runs from my mouth corners. I feel it freezing on my chin and wipe it away quick as I can. Bending down, I scoop up a handful of snow and eat it. I'm thirsty and the snow is bitter like grapefruit rind. Yet, it is good. As all things should be.

Again, I see Earl's hands flash out before me, amber red and crooked at the fingertips. He is scratching at the stubble under his chin, his jaw punched out in front like a slack piece of rope. They are good hands, hands that have worked factories and plowed fields, busted lips and took a few lumps of their own. They are made red by the cold because he refuses to wear gloves, says he can't stand to feel his palms sweat. We've stopped walking now and Earl is bending his hands, twisting them at his wrists like locked door knobs.

"Cold?" I ask him. He waves the hands at me through the frosted air and shakes his head. The knuckles are like custard, soft and milky, broken by years of overwork. In the quiet, darkened ways of morning, he pulls his hands forward, as if trying to shake away some great, unseen weight. His blue-jeans are damp around the ankles and there are a few flakes of snow caught in the wiry stubble of his chin. Sometimes I catch him washing his hands in the snow, scrubbing them until the flesh is rubbed raw. I don't know the kind of dirt he gets them into, but I know it sticks.

"Woods are deep this morning. Ain't a thing around. We can turn back if you want," I say, licking the frost off my lips. Earl shakes his head, the wrinkles of his face stirring about like coffee grounds.

"There might be more in these woods this morning than you think. Just o'er that ridge yonder, might be more 'an ever a man did see," he says, starts walking again. He doesn't wait for me to follow. He knows I will. For all the days my life is worth.

We reach the top of the rise and look down into a lonesome, snow-drowned valley. Down there we see straggling cedars and clumps of old blackberry bramble. We trudge down the hill at a slow pace, straddling the slippery earth with the sides of our feet. Halfway down, Earl falls to one knee. He grunts and gets up quickly, pretending I

wasn't there to see. I can hear his bones screaming like rusty nails being pulled through hickory.

We come to the bottom of the hill, look back over our shoulders at the swaying web of pines above. Rabbit and fox tracks litter the pale ground and we can smell the cedars. I can see snow falling on the red flesh of Earl's hands and they do not melt. I know he's cold.

Earl taps the bowl of his pipe again, strikes another match. The flame burns an inky blue out here in the cold. He lights the pipe again, takes deep gulps of the smoke, and runs a hand over the thin, wicker bones of his face.

"Whiskey's over 'ere ain't it?" He's wagging a blunt, red finger at an old maple log as he speaks, breath and smoke following his words. I nod, walk with my head bent down against the snow, feeling like I'm twelve years old all over again for some reason. I get down on my knees, reach inside the log, and feel nothing but dead leaves and squirrel bedding. Then my fingers touch the cold glass of the whiskey pint and I pull it out, let the gray sun caress it before drinking. I unscrew the cap and press the cold, glass bottle to my lips. The whiskey burns the rust away from my throat and makes a little fire deep inside my gut. I walk over to Earl and hand him the liquor. He takes three, big swallows, the pipe still cupped between his gray lips. He keeps the bottle between his hands, the only warmth he'll know today. I can see a single drop of whiskey hanging, amber and warm, on the tip of one of his fingers. I watch the drop fall. It makes a dark, melted hole in the snow. I think of Earl.

The old man is not a drunk, though I'm sure he's been that way a few times. His face doesn't have enough color to be a drunk. Grandma won't let him have any kind of liquor in the house, not even beer, so he buys a pint once a month during the winter. We come out here, have a little nip when the notion takes us. There ain't no shame in it and I don't reckon there should be. Earl knows I won't come out here drinking by myself. I'm no drunk either.

"Your grandma thinks I'm no good. She says I ain't Christian enough and a strain on the family. I tell her its a goddamn shame," he says, tossing back another swig of whiskey. I stomp my feet in the snow, shifting my weight from one toe to the other, think of the sixty years that has separated my birth from his.

"She says I don't take care of her no more and that I've neglected my faith. Says I've turned you into a drunkard at an early age. Like it'd be any better if you were older or with someone else. I can't say a word when she goes into that," he says. His narrow, blue eyes are on the horizon again, looking up the long rise. He sees his dark foot prints in

the snow, no doubt. Right behind them he sees mine and can't tell the difference, knows only that he came before.

"How that be boy, me going mute with an old woman?" he asks.

I don't say anything and I know that I should. I'm thinking of Grandma, sitting down in the dark basement of winter, her clothes stinking of coal smoke, her lungs turned to cream of wheat in her chest. I think of the starling on the porch when I was little, its blood pooling out below it. The blood was the color of Earl's hands.

"You ain't none too popular with my folks neither," I say, finally. Earl sighs, hands the whiskey back to me. I take small, bird-sized drinks, feel my throat begin to sizzle like grease in an iron skillet.

"I aim to please," Earl says, licks the stem of his pipe. I only nod, waft the smell of whiskey into my senses. Above us, along the rise, I can see the pines swaying like a clutch of angry hens. I can taste the cedars and feel the memory of Grandma dangling at the end of my fingers like marionette strings.

My folks are worthless, cardboard shapes I think, things that grow damp in the rain and smother under July heat. My pa logs for a living and I think about how it doesn't even irk him to do that kind of work. He pulls the seams out of the earth, digs up oak trees that have seen eight generations of the Deacon clan come and go. He's afraid of time more than any man I know, used to read medical journals thinking it'd help him live longer. That's why he cuts the trees. Something that hangs around for that long and just keeps getting stronger reminds a man how little time he's got. He ain't a bad one, my pa. But, he comes home with a smile everyday and I don't trust no man who does that, no matter what his work is.

"They tell me I need to stay away from you. I tell them to go to hell. You're my blood as much as they are," I say, pulling my earlobes to keep them warm. Earl grins a bit, takes another pull from the whiskey. In the distance, wind whips down the rise, makes snow shuffle from the cedars, and goes hollering like a blue tick hound down by a mess of dried up honeysuckle.

"Shouldn't talk to your folks like that. Even if you are a grown man. Don't do a man any good when he talks to his folks like that, even if they oughtta hear it," he says. We're just cane-stakes shoved into the ground, standing in the snow, our coats and blue jeans serving no purpose other than to give us form and shape. Earl is bent and his shoulders lean south with the wind. His face is pale straw, burned by ruin, washed by the sun. I'm younger, but just as pale, grown old and angry at an early age. Our tracks smear the cold away below our feet, but it comes back and kicks us square in the balls. I spit into the wind.

"They said they was gonna put Grandma in a home if you didn't start taking care of her," I say, pulling my cap down tight against my skull. I can feel my hair bunching up under there, filling with sweat and turning gray. Earl chews on the stem of his pipe for a bit, knocks the bowl against his hand when he feels the urge. The burley falls out black and smoldering. He scoops it round with his boot, making a dark slush in the snow. I watch him close, trying to picture him in some Asian city, burying the nameless dead as if he were planting row upon row of endless corn he knew would never sprout. I see him coming over a sharp, grassy rise and looking down onto the gray streaks of land where buildings lay leveled after Anola Gay has passed by. I see him grown ugly and wrinkled, letting his children taking his wife away from him.

"I been to one of them homes once. My Uncle Virgil got put in one after a stoke turned him into a vegetable," Earl says. He's starring down at the dark snow, his chin laid like a fiddle against his chest.

"Was it of God?" I ask, knowing he reads his Bible more than most. I cup a gloved hand to my ear and listen. All I hear is the roar of December, wind cutting like saw teeth through the treetops. Then Earl starts to speak and I'm a cane-stake again.

"No. God forgot all about those places a long time ago. It was just like this. Cold and shameless. It was a man-made December," he says. His hands are still pinched round the whiskey bottle, bright things full of purpose. His head is raised towards the north, his eyes the color of arsenic. He can hear the blizzard coming. There ain't no fooling a man like Earl.

Earl tosses me the whiskey and it's cold even through my gloves. I can see the dirty, copper-colored liquor sloshing around inside and I hear the old man's footsteps walking away from me. I look up and he shakes his head at me to follow.

"C'mon. Better bring the whiskey. Might get colder than you care to know about," he says, walks off into the pale ash of winter.

So we're walking again, round the edge of the rise. I don't know where we're headed. We part the gripping, naked claws of dogwood saplings and brush old, dried cockleburrs from our sleeves. We walk along the cattle paths, stick our feet into the hoof-beaten earth. There is a sort of weird, paltry light coming through the December clouds. It's the color of old urine and makes the snow slither across the pasture. Nuclear winter has set in again, turning trees into dark, hollow skeletons, burning shadows into the ground. I think of eyes folding back into wrinkled sockets from the cold, tongues turned blue in the frosted ways of morning. Man-made December, I think. And it never ends. Not for a thousand years.

I follow the old man to the edge of the pasture. He crosses over a bent piece of fencing and lays his feet on land that isn't his. The snow is softer in the forest, not packed by sunlight. It slides in under my boot laces and soaks through the wool of my socks. There are pines here too and we walk beneath them like insects unaware. I smell rusted barb wire and damp earth, a river flowing under the unbroken expanse of snow.

We come round the hillside, walking parallel to the earth because Earl's too tired to face the rise head on. I'm tired too. We lift legs over a ditch where there's a stream of frozen creek water. There are dead leaves encased in the ice and the snow is dirty with the muddy tracks of coon and possum. I can see stones and kindling buried under there and think about them not moving for a thousand years, not changing or moving or even wanting to. All things constant for a thousand years, I think. And that's how Earl is.

Then I see the coyote.

He's a big fella, standing a good thirty yards off. His coat is dirty and matted with blood and he pulls his teeth back in an angry smile when he sees us. Thick manes of foam drip from his jowls like soda fizz. The froth falls to the snow below and melts a dark patch between his front paws. His fur is bristled back like quills against his spine and his eyes ain't got no color to them anymore. His right front paw is tangled with barb wire and I can see he's gnawed it down to the bone, staining the snow a sickening, copper red.

Earl takes a few steps forward, slowly, his dark, red hands thrust in front of him. The coyote sees him moving and snaps into the frosty air, its breath clouding thick as troll beard in the cold. I can see his paw dangling at a bad, broken angle, the bone protruding out of the bloody mass of hide and fur like an ivory statue. Another hour and he would've had that paw chewed completely off, I think, watching streams of blood ooze from between the coyote's clinched fangs. His tongue has been torn to ribbons by the barb wire and turned to the color of coal soot.

He has the biggest jaws of any coyote I've ever seen and I can tell Earl is thinking the same. He's moving slow through the snow, his hands a tangled mass of wire at the end of his wrists. In the air, I can smell dog urine and old blood, frostbitten wounds and stagnant foam. I can hear hydrophobia boiling deep inside the coyote, turning over like a hot, dull knife in the center of its soul. On my tongue, I can taste the coyote's breath, warm and spoiled like old whiskey broth. On the pale sheet of snow, I can count every single drop of blood he's shed. They stretch out, a red fabric of disease, making his fur a thick and bunched roll of hide and fur. There's so much blood, on the snow and on the

coyote, dripping from the gnarled strands of barb wire. I can taste that too and again, I think of the starling...on the back porch...when I was young...broken wings and all.

"He's got the rabies, Earl," I say, my lips quivering, filling my mouth with the briny taste of my own sweat. The old man nods, switches the pipe stem from one side of his face to the other. From his jacket, he pulls a finely-oiled twenty-two pistol. It's the color of coal dust against the snow, its barrel polished and gleaming in the season of anguish and cold. He has carried the gun as long as I've known him, I think. He's never been without it, bought it in a pawn shop long before I ever came into this world.

"So I can make the earth clean," he told me when I asked him why he had it. And me a ten year old kid. And him an aged and angry man. And the coyote and the blood and the rampage of time and the bitter rind of winter that we were swallowing...all of it was there. All of it came converging down into the marrow of bones like steel jaws in the December of my twenty-fifth year.

I blink hard when I hear the pistol report. When my eyes are open again, the coyote is lying dead against the snow, its blue, shriveled tongue laid in a pool of its own blood. Its eyes are the size of half-dollars, bulging out of the sockets, trying to see some hidden beauty in the finality of death. Between those humid, smoke-colored eyes is a small, red hole where the bullet went. I'd like to disappear in there, I think, and swallow hard. My throat burns.

"A got-damn shame," Earl says, his eyes looking out past the broken, body of the coyote. He's watching the pines swaying over the snow, wanting to get up and walk away from it all. The pines know a blizzard's coming same as the rest of us. There's no fooling a tree like a pine. They got soft wood but soul's hard as polished steel, won't sweep the shadows from their branches unless it suits them. I look at them, tall, bedraggled things of green standing like lonesome widows above the snow. I see Earl and he is no different than the pines, looks upon them as though they were his brothers and he their keeper.

He moves forward, crosses the smooth, snowy terrain with ease, ignoring his arthritis. He gets real close to the coyote, takes a look around. Steam rises from the wound and I see Earl kneel beside the carcass. He puts the pipe in his pocket, places a red hand against the dead animal's flank. He's not feeling for life; he knows there is no such thing to be found anywhere anymore. He's feeling for soul.

And there are no colors anymore, only the white awning of blizzard that rises in the north above the knobby pine trees. Everything is blank and pale, graveyard shades floating through the milky texture

of the forest. I see Earl's eyes darkened by shadows, his red hands laid like blood stains against the hide of the coyote. I see the dark blue of the animal's tongue laid against the stoney ground, taste whisky and the inner pulp of oak trees. I can feel my sore throat burning deep inside my neck like heated Styrofoam. I can smell the coyote's blood. Earl rises quickly, looks down at the mangled corpse, sees the blood and teeth-gnawed paw, scratches the underside of his chin with fingers the color of Alabama clay. He nudges the animal in the gut with the toe of his boot and his breath comes in tiny, hurried clouds.

"Musta been possum-bit or something. Got that poison all in him," I say, gnawing at the cold flesh of my bottom lip. Earl reaches out, grabs two fistfuls of December air, and opens his red fingers to let the frost out.

"I don't know. Sometimes Jimmy, there's a sickness in the air and all you have to do is be born to catch it. I'll say that afore I go blaming ol' man possum," he says. I hear his words and think of him fifty years younger and twenty thousand miles away. I think of him in his Marine fatigues, wearing a gas mask, and carrying the bodies of yellow children unto a great bonfire in the center of Hiroshima. He has a tiny, sallow arm in one hand a small, wax-colored leg in the other. He kicks away broken shingles and doorways, will piece together a body out of the shattered detritus of busted lives. He isn't old but he's getting there. By God, he's on his way.

I see him vomit from the smell of burning children, feel his stomach turn to guacamole inside him. He has eyes of amber nectar and they fill with tears that are wiped away by the stench of stagnant blood. His hands can not do something so human as wipe away tears anymore. They are occupied elsewhere. Hands...hands smeared with grease and waste, hands with knuckles white and broken, fingers like cured strips of bacon. Hands that rise above the leveled city at his feet. Hands that are the color of blood and nothing else in the ripe, clear, coyote December.

"It was like this sometimes, but there was never any snow," Earl says, his voice rushing me forward through the first twenty five years of my life. I see him and know that he is looking at me, though his pale, blue eyes are fixed on some greater point that lies beyond my shoulders. He's in Asia, cleaning up the garbage, making America beautiful. He's old and he can do things like that so I forgive him.

"Was is cold or was it Christian?" I ask, kicking up a fog of snow with my boot heels. Earl puts his hands in his pockets and moves past the broken body of the coyote. He leans like a cigar-store Indian against

a sycamore, his face knotted without emotions. He's thinking about God and so am I.

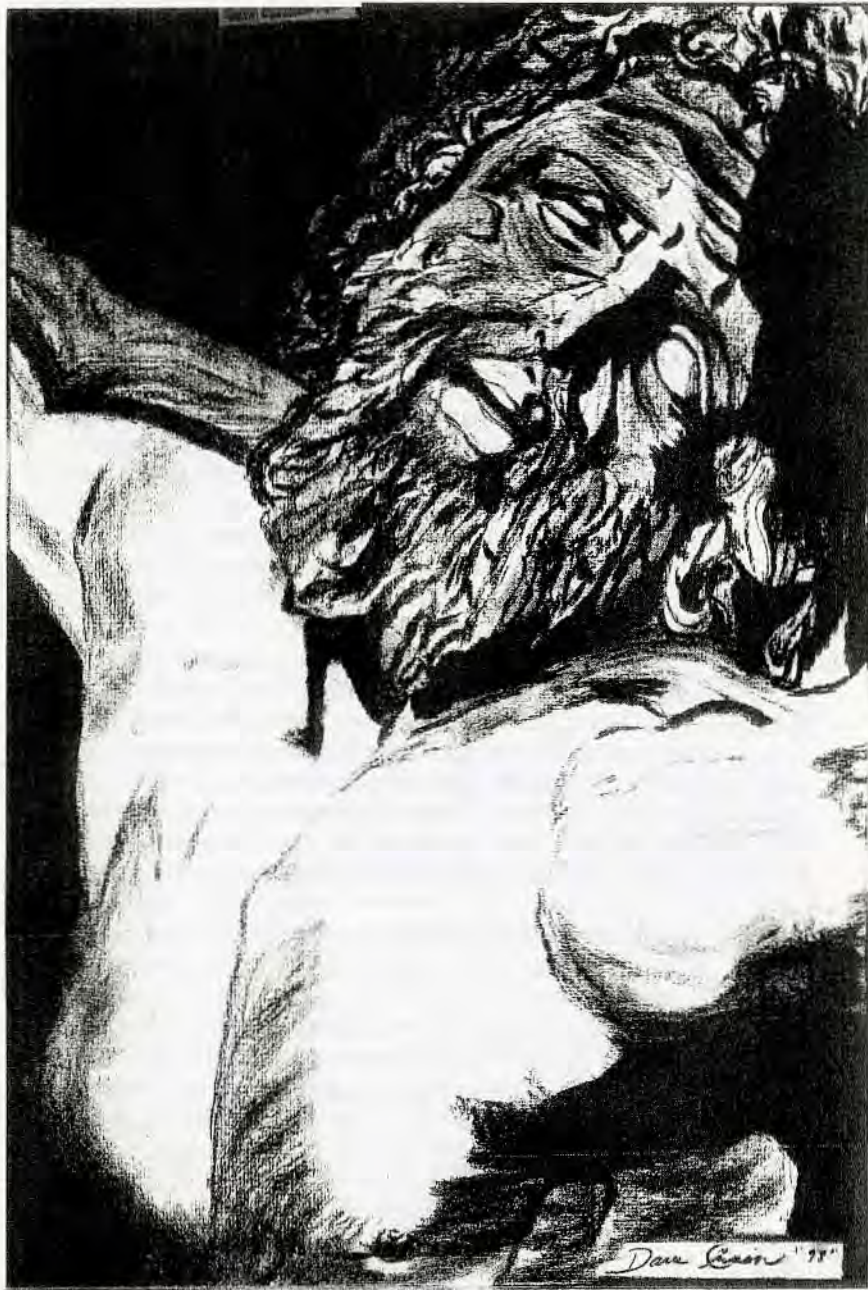
"It wasn't good, but it was always cold. That wasn't what made it bad though. It was all that emptiness where you knew something wonderful had once been. That's what I hated about it," he says. I see the whiskey bottle come out of his jacket and touch his lips, the rusted liquor sluicing of his tongue and into the cold. I can feel the bottle pulling at him, taking him directions he was never meant to go. I can hear the flesh on the back of his hands growing hair and full of leathery wrinkles. Above us, the pines are tiny, egg-colored lamp shades and God is an atom bomb in the sky. I see the mushroom cloud and taste the bitter almonds on my tongue right before the blast wave hits. Then everything is white and returned to its abnormal realm.

"You remember that starling you found in the backdoor screen?" I hear Earl's voice and suddenly its me whose in Hiroshima, picking up yellow children killed by the bomb. I hold a broken bird-wing in one hand and nothing but empty space in the other.

"You cried like nothing else over that bird. But you weren't crying 'cause it died. You were crying 'cause there was nothing you could do to help it. That's what it makes you feel like, this being old. You ain't cold and you ain't Christian, you're just helpless."

I rise over the snow, my thoughts constricting the gnarled words of Earl into tight, fist-clinched wads of paper. I think of the starling, its blood pooling below it and congealing on the oak porch. And Grandma is there, under the house in her coal-stove basement, her eyes two, blunt wads of amber fallout. And my folks and Earl are there, spread over the snow like broken glass. There is cold and danger on the edge of my face, my tears ripening at the very verge of my eyelids. There's a pain in my throat and in the hollow, wooden space where my soul used to be.

Now I can only follow my shadow across the snow, a feathered darkness that does not die. Earl is walking in front of me, is halfway home before I even see. His ways are a form of anguish that I can not know and he's a blurred vision of sky and earth molded together as one. There's snow at my feet and I think about winter. It goes on for a thousand years, you know, flows back against me like a tide without an end.



David S. Crain

The Head of Laocoon

Arrival in the town of Duress

Brian Brooks

When the ferry slips the inner breakers, and drifts like flotsam toward the jagged rocks of the Albanian shoreline, the gray assaults the eyes: water mirrors sky mirrors water slamming the coastline without ever revealing a whitecap or a color of any kind other than the gray.

The sound of flat metal over sandstone grates against eardrums when the ferry pushes ashore; the old man in the captain's seat moves like a raft in calm waters, forward and back, and forward over so slowly until his eyesight clears the forward rails. *Andiamo*, and again he shouts, *andiamo*.

Moving at the measured pace of a breadline, the passengers ease off the ferry: booted feet sliding along below the cracked faces of Albanian fathers and Albanian mothers, slumping like battered veterans of a battle lost in the winter of another war. Easing from gray into gray, past the docks, away from the west.

Quiet Fulcrum

Margaret S. Morris

The Joe is hot.
Southern Pecan in magnolia-white ceramic.
Joe's more sophisticated these days.
Storm abates, sensibilities list to ". . . *these are a few of
my favorite things*"
in syncoption. "*Raindrops on . . . roses.*"
Roses limp above near-bottomless summer moats—
overdosed by intravenous mulch—
blooms bogged in soggy stupor.
April showers. May flowers.
June glowers.
The jazz blues; piano mellows and fades.

Interlude.
Saxophone strides into psyche jamming signals horn
blaring whining touch and go
big-city traffic pattern lurches then spurts.
Rifts of metal brush on rim.
Chords rise leveling dropoff.
Talk-muted-like-trombone turns a corner eluding
meaning.
Isolate in art-walled anteroom.
Nut spent in lukewarm latte bath.
Voices doppler by.
Springed screen in weathered woodframe clack-k-ks.
Joe's cool.

Again, and Again

Jeff Crady

You were "sick of me"
"tired of how I was,"
your hands flung papers,
my red Oxford dictionary
off my desk,
as I simply sat, in
my favorite vinyl chair.
Its olive skinned seat,
my fingers rolled over
the slick metal studs,
its watered stained back
from some typical 60's diner,
where husbands and wives would
sit, over coffee and eggs.
Talk, yell, break a dish
against empty wood booth.
While truck drivers, factory men
simply ignored them, concentrated on
the soap spots of their crooked, pronged
fork—cool, violent
between their ashen fingers.



Catron Peterson

untitled

50

I couldn't play music, so I got married
Pog

It didn't hurt
when you pulled out
my earring.

You say you were asleep,
dancing in a dream.

The stitches don't
bother me;
they just itch.
The scab will go away
and insurance
will cover
the doctor's bill.

But why
did you let the
blood dry
on my favorite pillow?

51

Exorcism
Lisa Bricker

Liz was home for Christmas. The ugly gray/brown cornfields, freezing winds, and snow drew her as surely as the compass needle swings north. She had arrived a couple of days ago, but only earlier this morning had she finally given in. Actually, she'd first thought of the search while she was at school, but she'd never really believed she'd have the guts for it. Yet she couldn't ignore the tiny girl tugging at her mind's elbow, so she decided to make her excuses that evening and go. Since her family lived in the country, it only required a little white lie. She told them she was going to Otter Creek, to Wal-Mart for some things she'd forgotten. She was actually going to the house near Otter Lake. That is, she was going if she could remember the way there and if, once she got there, she didn't lose her nerve. She borrowed her dad's car, the green Camry, because it had a CD-player and because a feeling of security automatically settled on anything belonging to her father. Luckily, there were no questions as to what exactly she'd forgotten or a list of requests for anything else.

It was so cold that the snow didn't stick or melt to refreeze as ice; it just swirled in little devils across the interstate she used to save time. Reaching Otter Creek, she drove more slowly; trying to remember, trying to decide. She could bail now, her ever-tightening shoulders suggested. She thought about the quaint little coffee shop in the mall. And there was the library; she could pick out some CD's and relax in a beanbag with a book. She could actually go to Wal-Mart. Anywhere warm and filled with Christmas-cheery people had to be better than this cold, dark search for an unnamed gift she wasn't sure existed. The blinking multi-colored lights everywhere made this pilgrimage seem very out of place. Liz drove past the town on her route to the highway she hoped was the one her dad had pointed out that past summer, saying they'd lived out further on that road. He hadn't noticed her reaction. She had marked it on her mental map, not sure she'd ever want to use it; but she

needed the option, the choice she might make. She signaled and turned unhesitatingly, if a little slowly.

She turned off the CD-player now, wanting to concentrate. She had to be able to recognize things she hadn't seen in years. Some things about that house and its surroundings were so clear she'd been able to describe them to the counselor effortlessly. Others she couldn't dredge up to save her life. A road sign appeared amid the spitting flakes and Liz stomped the brakes, forgetting the snow. She drove much slower now. Yes, there was the babysitter's house where she and her sister had ridden the ancient gray horse, Pepper. She turned left, past the house where their mom's friend and her bratty boy had lived. Maybe a mile down the road, she saw the large, two-story white house she'd been watching for. One more turn to Breezy Point Road. Such an innocuous, whimsical name.

It sat on a slight hill, the long, yellow-sided, homely house. There were lights on. Liz felt her face pull tight against her skull. Why did they have to be home, whoever they were? Why couldn't she just drive by and know her errand was in vain and let it go? But then she'd have to drive out again later; the little girl would never let it go so easy. Liz thought she should be relieved. But she drove past the house, unable to turn in. She drove on down the road to the 90-degree turn, remembering how she had seen a van racing around it long ago, trying to beat the rain following it in sheets. She went all the way to the tavern at the edge of the now-frozen lake. She pulled into its parking lot and turned around, headed back. As if a magnet had flipped, she drove slower and slower the closer she came to the house. Liz expected her heart to burst, crashing and quivering, out from between her ribs. But the urge to see, to remember, pulled her car into the driveway.

There were two cars parked in front of the garage. Liz remembered Bluebird, the big boat of a car that had sat in front of the basketball hoop until it wore dents in the asphalt. They had made great puddles for stomping when it rained. Liz saw a line of boys, like stairsteps, next to the old car, smiling for the camera; her jaw clenched with years'-old anger. But she couldn't hesitate now; they would have seen her headlights

through the bay window. She walked up to the front door, suddenly realizing she had no explanation to offer whoever these people turned out to be. Hell, she thought, I can at least tell them part of the truth. So she rang the doorbell and stuffed her gloves into her coat pocket. A man answered the door; a harmless, middle-aged, average man who looked a little puzzled when he saw her. It was, after all, late evening on a weeknight and far from town.

"Hi," Liz offered. "Um, I know you don't know me or anything, but my family used to live here when I was a little kid. My name is Liz Thomas."

"Thomas!" the man exclaimed, looking relieved and more willing to welcome her. "Oh yes, I bought this house from Dr. Thomas. A nice man."

Liz smiled as her eyebrows rose, startled the original buyers were still there. "Anyway, I just wanted to see the old place, if you don't mind; if it's no bother. I hate to disturb you. Sorry to just show up like this." She heard herself running on so she stopped abruptly.

"Oh no, no problem at all. Come on in!" he swung the door wider. She stepped in, ducking her head automatically in the shy guest's fashion, trying to appear as harmless as her welcomer. His wife appeared in the entryway to the kitchen. "This is Liz Thomas, Dear. You remember Dr. Thomas, we bought this house from him . . ."

"Oh yes. Nice to meet you." She smiled and turned back to the kitchen before Liz could really respond beyond her own smile and a nod.

"You remember the living room, of course, even though you must have been pretty small then." He gestured for her to enter the large room. But she remained on the wood entrance and gazed in. She'd been about four when they had moved out of the house. The last time she'd seen this living room was after the thieves had been through. It was the most ridiculous robbery, evidently to furnish a fishing cabin further north. They had stolen the carpet, the counters, and the kitchen sink. She remembered her parents telling them to walk carefully on the padding; there might be tacks. Now it was nicely furnished. Not

fancy-nice, but rather comfortable, family-nice. She fought the urge to see what the TV was saying. Liz turned to smile at the man.

"Oh yes, I remember. We had a sofa under that window."

He nodded and led her towards the hallway. "The bedrooms."

"Oh, that's ok! I don't mean to intrude." She hadn't come to see the bedrooms. She'd come for the basement. The rooms really didn't interest her at all and she felt a little awkward seeing a stranger's bedroom.

"Oh that's all right; I think they're clean!" He winked and waved her to follow him. So she did. The bedroom that had been her parents was now furnished for another couple not unlike them. She did the cursory, expected look around. He showed her the bedroom where she and her older sister had slept as children. They had had Holly Hobby sheets and bedspreads, maybe even curtains. Little matching twin beds on either side of the narrow room with a lamp on a stand in between. Now the room belonged to a teenage boy and Holly Hobby was long-gone. Somebody wearing red-hot shoes began a war-dance in her gut.

"We redid the kitchen," he said, leading back down the hallway. "I don't know if you remember the colors . . ."

"Oh yes, they were atrocious! Brown, orange, and yellow." She grinned. The kitchen had been the warm, homey center of the house. She could remember sitting at the counter, choking on a grape she'd thought she was big enough to swallow. The little birthday parties for her two younger sisters when they came home from the hospital had taken place there as well. The war-dancer had paused and Liz's smile this time was neither cursory nor nervous. The deck was still connected to the dining area with a sliding door; its stairs down to the backyard had been the subject of many warnings when she was small. Her eyes focused, in spite of herself, on the doorway to the stairs down to the basement. Now she could almost hear the heightened beat of the dance.

"Well, come on down and see the basement. We haven't changed much down there." He had noticed her gaze. She

pulled her eyes back to him and smiled obligingly. He walked in front of her and she focused on the back of his head. The doorway to the stairs seemed narrower, smaller, than she'd remembered. These were the stairs they had slid down in cardboard boxes, Liz thought, like someone kicking heels into dirt to keep from slipping. But entering the basement, she couldn't stop the slide. Turning the right angle down the last three stairs, she saw the wood stove her dad had had installed shortly after they'd moved in. Her eyes flicked all around now and her hands were in her pockets. An adolescent boy was sprawled across the sofa facing the bigscreen. She tried to appear unperturbed, cool even, hoping her agitation didn't show. Liz was seeing another teenage boy altogether. She couldn't avoid the memory of the two armchairs in front of the woodstove. He was sitting in one of them, Andy was. A three-and-a-half year-old Liz was standing beside him. There hadn't been anyone else around then. He was saying words that she still heard sometimes, "If you squeeze it, stuff will come out the end." She was giving him a hand job.

"And this next room we just kind of use for storage space," he was saying. Shaking her head slightly, she turned back to her kind host.

"Oh?" she said, surprised. She didn't remember that room at all. She remembered the door as leading to the guest room. But now there was a small, nondescript room in between. She wondered why she couldn't remember it when she thought she could have laid out the plans for this floor in her sleep. A curtain dropped in the back of her mind and she didn't have the composure to look for the join that might let her through. Yet she looked around the little room anyway, hoping little Liz might remind her.

"My daughter lives in this room," he said, stepping on into the guest room. "Sorry for the mess!" She looked around the room. Despite the typical teenage mess of fantastically-colored clothes and the years between her and the memory, she could easily see the obscene poster that had hung on the wall when Sherry, Andy's mother, had lived with them for a while. Her seven sons had been constant visitors. The two small windows

catty-corner to each other across from the door were just as she remembered. Liz saw her little self lying on the bed, pants down. For little Liz, Andy looked much larger than the twelve or thirteen year-old he was, standing backlit by the sun in the windows. Little Liz had asked him what sex was; her mother was pregnant with her next sister. Big Liz still could not forgive the innocent question; still hated herself. Perhaps knowing this, little Liz would not let her see anything after Andy unzipped and crawled on top of her. Someone behind the curtain, not little Liz, told her that he smiled when he did. Liz swallowed to clear the sour taste in the back of her throat, hoping little Liz would say something, explain anything. That day, that afternoon, that hour was the biggest pull little Liz had used to get her here. She swallowed again, hoping the effort didn't show, angry. Come on, dammit; I deserve to know at least as much as you do, she hissed at little Liz.

"Hi. Dad, who is this?" A teenage girl, older than the boy out on the couch, walked in.

"Dr. Thomas's daughter. The one we bought the house from. Liz, this is my daughter Cindy."

Liz held out her hand, hoping the effort she could feel in her face came from a smile.

"Hi, Cindy. Nice to meet you."

"Hi, Liz. Sorry my room's a wreck. At least I have most of it shoved in the closet. Wanna see?"

She nodded. The huge walk-in closet, almost a small room itself, was full of darkness, whispers, and "bad touch" to the little Liz. Big Liz wanted to see it; wanted to see if she could remember anything specific. All little Liz had told her about the closet was that "things happened here. Bad things. They happened a lot." Cindy had taken the door off the closet and made it an extension of the room. She flicked the switch and motioned Liz over beside her. Liz focused on her shoes for a second, then forced her eyes up. Looking into the bright, pastel-filled closet, she couldn't remember anything. It was filled with typical teenage stuff; clothes of all sorts, piles of shoes, and teen magazines with Leonardo DiCaprio on practically every cover. Cindy was laughing apologetically.

"Oh, it's all right," Liz said automatically, politely. "You should see my room!" She grinned like a co-conspirator. The truth was that Liz's room was nearly always spotless. Everything had a place and everything was in its place. She vacuumed once a week and always hung her clothes up. The fact that she was still a teenager herself didn't stop her from being her father's daughter. She took one last look around, ending at the bed. Nothing. Little Liz wasn't telling. Even the voice behind the curtain was silent.

They walked back through the basement, past the little utility closet where Liz's mom had banished the cat while she was in heat because they couldn't stand the yowling. Back past the teenage boy, whose couch was almost exactly where the Ping-Pong table had been. They had played Round-Robin with her dad's partners and their kids so many times. Liz walked up the stairs behind Cindy and her dad without a backwards glance, tense with resentment against little Liz, who had dragged her here to remember nothing she hadn't already known.

At the top of the stairs she hesitated, then reached one last time for the memories and clarity she had driven to find. "I know it's silly and I know it's cold out, but would you mind terribly if I just ran to the pole barn out back? We used to play there . . ." She felt stupid even as she said it.

"Oh, sure, that's fine. Cindy, would you take her out? You've still got your shoes on."

"Sure, Dad. I'm going to switch into boots, ok Liz?"

"Sure."

"Look, thanks a lot," Liz turned again to her tour guide. "I appreciate it. Just a look in the barn and I'll be out of your way."

"You're welcome. Come visit us again some time." He certainly was gracious about this nosy stranger, she thought.

Cindy crammed her boots on and headed out the door into the garage. Liz, looking around, could find nothing familiar about the drafty, cluttered place. But then, she hadn't expected to. Out into the wind and snow they trudged; heads lowering instinctively to prevent the flakes from creeping down their collars. Cindy turned to Liz. "It's so odd; you being here. I

mean, we moved here when I was four; I just can't imagine anyone else living here."

Liz nodded. "Yeah, I was about four when we moved out. I just wanted to see it because I haven't been back since." Only the one visit after the burglary, actually, and that didn't really count. They tramped on out to the pole barn. Cindy yanked the door open and flipped the light switch beside it. Liz looked around. That corner was where the old dresser had been. If she pulled the drawer out quickly enough, she could see the baby mice before they scattered for cover. She and her sister had come out at least once a day all summer for that purpose alone. Now an old beat-up car sat clumsily in the middle of the small barn. Old stalls she didn't recall being there surrounded it. Nothing was familiar once she was inside.

She turned back to Cindy. "Thanks. I just wanted to see it because we used to play out here. There was a dresser with a family of little mice . . . well, there was a lot of stuff here."

Cindy nodded, "Yeah, I know what you mean", and was off and running with some story of her own that Liz didn't hear at all. When they reached the back door again, Liz paused long enough to thank Cindy again and ask that she pass her gratitude on to her father. Cindy went through the motions of "nice to meet you, come back sometime" or whatever it was and hurried back into the light and warmth. Liz walked around the garage to her car.

She was sitting at the steering wheel before she remembered to dig her gloves back out of her pocket. She pulled them on to distract herself from the darkness flowing forward from the curtain, like fog from a machine backstage. Liz glanced at the passenger's seat, half-expecting little Liz to be there. Little Liz was gone. Somehow, Liz didn't think she was in the basement any more, at least not that basement. She had lost little Liz.

She started the car and pulled out of the driveway before turning the headlights on; that nice family deserved her courtesy. She drove back past the row of trees where they'd played with countless puppies. Past the little shed and frozen swamp that the garden used to be next to. Past their property. At the corner, she stopped at the sign. Sluggish and unwilling to fight her own

inertia, she sat staring at the tunnel of light her headlights made in the woods across the road she was about to turn onto. For a second, just a second because she was tough stuff, her head touched the steering wheel. The simple and blatantly plain truth was that it could have been anyone's house. She could have saved herself the trip except that it had been the only route she knew to whatever lay behind the curtain. Now little Liz was gone and the curtain had become a wall.

Liz flipped her blinker on reflexively, although no other cars were out. Such a responsible citizen, she mocked herself, living life by the book. Then she pulled onto the other road; the one leading away from Breezy Point. The snow still swirled in paperweight perfection.



Joyce Britton

The Burning of Washington

Birds

Lisa Bricker

My friend and I walked down the street. In the casual manner of a "by the way," she said, "Around here," waving a vague, freckled hand at the cookie-cutter townhouses I lived in, "there were too many birds. Since it's within city limits, they couldn't shoot them."

"Too many birds? Too many for what? What harm can birds do?"

"I don't know; there just were too many of them. So they sprayed them with this stuff," her shrug suggesting that it could have been anything from kerosene to apple cider, "some stuff, I guess, that ate the oil off their feathers. They didn't die then, but when winter came, they had no protection against the cold and they froze."

"So these stiff birds fall out of trees like snow. What did they do with them?"

"City workers swept and shoveled them up and threw them away." She didn't have any real reason for the story; it was just something to fill the silence, to move mouths in time with feet.

We had lived together before, she and I, in a house that held several others as well. Like any group of women forced to cohabit, we fought and cried, stole cigarettes and changed each other's TV channels, ate barbecue on the back porch while teasing two Jehovah's Witnesses, and called the cops on the neighbors so we could sit on the porch and watch the entertainment. The two of us considered ourselves the only ones likely to make it out of that mess and actually *do* something. We spent our coinciding house arrests watching cable and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream.

She taught me how to smoke at the Waffle House, offering me her half-smoked cigarette. When I held it carefully (never play with fire), she grinned. When I strangled a cough (always play it cool), she snickered. On our spur-of-the-moment trip to Nashville, she introduced me to clove cigarettes. We went down into a seedy little place with pale fluorescent lighting and tobacco everywhere. She was as competent there as I was in the

dimly-lit coffee shop near our house. Sitting by the river, half-sprawled on the giant steps that made a kind of amphitheatre, she lit our cigarettes. When I realized I couldn't walk a straight line, I grinned at her, "Good stuff." She laughed.

We spent weekends in the park, at the orchard, in the mall, watching movies. One Saturday or Sunday she asked me to take her to the flea market. "I need a pregnancy test." We wandered up and down the aisles since it couldn't really be real, since it wasn't that important if it was. When we reached the tests, she grabbed one casually as if any would do. She hesitated, so I offered to take it up and buy it for her. Back at my apartment, I sat at the table with my clove cigarettes and her lighter in front of me, her cigarettes sitting beside her empty chair. She came out and I didn't turn to look. "Want to see what a positive result looks like?" she asked as she headed straight out the back door. We sat, laughing uncontrollably, on the back step, watching the sunlight retreat before the shadow of the building, smoking my cloves like cigars in celebration.

The things I said, the things she said. Her shocked, hurt silence after my unthinking comment, her voice telling me things I didn't care to hear. The distance of my new one-room apartment and her move to another house. My envy of her extra life, her dissatisfaction with the house.

Three months after she had the baby, I saw her again. We agreed to meet for coffee in a week, to talk, to laugh, to "catch up." I think she sensed my unconscious hesitation because the phone never rang.

I stopped and stared at her. "They killed them all?"

"Well, not all of them of course. Some survived. Why?"

"And they swept them up and threw them away?"

"Yes. So? They weren't anything special, just ordinary birds."

"Can you fly?"

I laughed before she had a chance to answer, to understand, in case she didn't; turning it into a joke. And I wonder who was the oil on my feathers and was I that for her?

Secrets

Laura Collins

She tried to make me
touch her
crouched and hidden
like a broken toy
between the bed and wall
Each time I would
be startled
and back away
to tiptoe into the kitchen
where her father
took up space
He knew what six-year-old
lips could not say
and as his footsteps threatened
to puncture the floor
I would run back next door
to escape the staccato snap
of a thick black belt
against the exposed flesh
of a little girl
who let his secret slip

After Reading Hamlet Through Act 3

Cindy Childress

A small moth's clawfingers
struggle to grasp
the windshield wiper blade.
The car speeds
down a busy freeway.
The moth's wings
blow in the air
and bend backward
pulling him like the sail
of a tiny boat
Anchored in an indifferent sea.



Brian Grady

Nana

Hello Almighty, the truth is this . . .

L. Christian Parrish

I caused no one to lie.
I always rotated my tires.
I never fished without a license.
I paid my taxes.
I've returned all my library books.
I did not urinate in public.
I never slept past noon.
I loved my mother.
I never drank more than one glass of wine.
I supported the Armed Forces.
I washed all "whites" separately.
My jokes were never tasteless.
I never sneezed without blessing you.

Getting Saved

Nicholas Johnson

Well I went to church last Sunday, heck I even got saved. It's the first time I'd ever been. But to be honest it was the weirdest happening I've ever been to in my life.

Mom and Daddy didn't want to take me to church let alone go themselves, so they called the church van to come get me. It was a big, beige van that was driven by an old man with no hair, thick glasses, and a brown suit. I don't think I've ever been on a longer ride in my life, and we only picked up four people. During the ride I kept falling asleep and being jarred awake long enough to see two high school kids firing paper wads onto the old driver's shiny head. Sometimes they would stick, and he would swat at them like it was a fly. He was whispering something under his breath, I think he was praying.

When we got there I found out we wouldn't be having church right away, but we were going to school. It was the worse news I have ever heard, I can't imagine going to school six days a week. The church had two, huge white doors. The one that I tried to open wouldn't budge, but the old driver pointed out that they used the other door. I think that if they only use one door then they shouldn't have made two. Inside was the most old people I had ever seen in one place. It even smelled like old people; you know, kind of like chicken noodle soup and peppermints.

In Sunday school, an old lady talked about the wisest man ever in the bible named Salmon. He was wise because he told two ladies that he was going to cut their baby in half. I asked the old lady what was so wise about that. She just shot me a mean glance and told me that God didn't like smart alecks. Boy I'm glad ole' Salmon ain't around no more. Wise or not, he sounds pretty mean to me.

After Sunday school we went upstairs for the church service. To start the service, the song leader, who was a gray-headed man with a thick, gray mustache and a pea-green coat on said, "Turn your hymn books to page 319: Heavenly Love."

So that's what I did, I turned to the page and started mumbling, because I didn't know the song well enough to keep up. But when I looked around, I was the only one holding my hymnbook, all except for the two high school kids who were holding theirs upside-down and giggling.

Then after the singing was done, four fellows came to the front of the church. There was three old men and one man that was fixing to be old, I think they called them hushers. The preacher finally stood up and told everybody to pray. He prayed that people would give these hushers money. I guess the hushers were awful poor, because then they passed two plates, and I'll be dogged if people didn't put all their money in there. When they got through passing the plates around the hushers went off to a little room to the side. They probably went in there so they could split the money evenly, because God wouldn't like it for one husher to get more than the other hushers. I wished I could be a husher and get to pass the plates. I could save enough for a new bike before school was out.

Then the preacher asked all of the Dickens to come have prayer before the message. All six of these men were old. They had all set in the seats together, so I guess they were brothers. But lord have mercy, when they got to praying they were moaning and groaning something terrible. I felt bad for them Dickens brothers, I bet they really got it rough. When the Dickens brothers got up, their faces were red and wet with tears, then they all shook hands.

Finally the preacher stood to preach. He was a tall man with thin, gold-rimmed glasses. He wasn't as old as the rest of the people, but let me tell you, he got mad. His face got as red as a turnip and he slapped the bible just as hard as he could. Now that I think about it, he preaches about like Daddy does. They both get to raring and cussing and even spitting too. I thought I was wrong to cuss until I went to church, why that preacher screamed words such as "hell" and "damn." But something *is* wrong about it because as soon as I said those words at home, Daddy jumped up and whooped my ass.

Towards the end of his preaching, when all the wind was knocked out of him and he had to gasp for breath at the end of

his sentences, he wanted everybody who was lost to come up to the altar and Jesus would take them home in Eternity. I had never heard of eternity before, I guess it must be on the other side of the county. All of a sudden the old van driver asked me a strange question, "Are you lost?" he asked.

This was a silly question coming from the man who picked me up at my home, bless his heart he must be so old he forgot.

So I said, "No. Remember, I live about a mile and a half down the road."

Then he asked me an even stranger question, "Son, are you saved?" Well this didn't make any sense to me at all.

"Saved from what?" I asked.

He looked at me kind of funny, then he stooped down to my eye level and asked, "Do you know Jesus?"

I knew that this was the man taking those lost people over to Eternity, but I didn't know him personally so I said no.

Then he said, "Come with me." He grabbed my hand and we went down to the altar.

I thought he was going to introduce me to Jesus and then we could go home. But he kneeled down and told me to also. He started crying and telling Jesus to take me into Eternity. Well this made me cry, because I wanted to go home. And I told him too, "I want to go home."

"Oh, do you hear him, Jesus? Take him home." The old van driver cried. This carried on for awhile until he stopped all of a sudden and asked me, "Do you feel any different?"

"Yes," I said, because I didn't want to come to church any more.

"Amen, son, you're saved." He told me, wiping his eyes. Everybody was looking at me and smiling and some even shook my hand.

I was glad to be saved, because I didn't want to go to Eternity. All my stuff was at home and I was getting hungry, and I bet no one there would feed me. As we left the church the preacher said, "God bless you." I guess he wasn't mad anymore.

When the church van arrived at my house and I was fixing to get off, I turned around and thanked the old van driver for saving

me, because I didn't want to be a smart aleck. He looked at me funny again and told me, "You're welcome."

I told Mom and Daddy I was never going to church again, because the old van driver saved me once, it might be asking a lot of him to do it twice.

Siege of the Holy City

Sam Stinson

Sitting inside a wooden tower,
like a box, palisades of pine planks

Wheeled up to the Holy impregnable wall,
like a cart, but no longer dung

Men cramped together in compartments,
like a militant Trojan horse, but
we are not knights

God has shut us in, gave the Infidel the key
as He often allows

God promised eternity through Christ, Urban,
clouds, fields, steel, marble, billowed smoke

We sit, become lime, never knowing our
true Trojan heritage