

1999

UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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ZEPHYRUS

A Student Literary Publication of
Western Kentucky University



1999

Zephyrus

Spring 1999

A publication of the English Department
of Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

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Editor's note: Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

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Christa Osborne

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
James R. Fritz

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Mikki Olmsted

Zephyrus Art Award
Naotaka Minami

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

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What I've Learned

Chris Hutchins

It's been about losing and loving,
college.

About dates with Jim Beam
and regretting it in the morning.

It's been about reconciling
childhood fat jokes and mistrust,
and letting go of the molten hatred
I wore
as a caped crusader.

It's about picking the splinter
out of my eye
and seeing
resumés, awards, diplomas
don't make you a man.

They don't make you anything.
It's not where you live
it's how you live.
That whispered to me
as I smoked, shivering, on the porch.

It's been about being brave,
wearing my grandmother's charm,
and weeping
realizing the past
is
just
that.

New York White

Jason Flahardy

The voice says: "Mark your answers carefully. It is very important to get them right. Follow the instructions for each section. Color in the dots indicating your answers. Sloppiness will invalidate your tests. Any questions? Good. You may begin."

Multiple Choice (circle only one)

Question 1.

Which describes best how you are feeling all the time?

- A. A burning house.
- B. A pair of worn leather boots.
- C. Thirteen laughing monkeys.
- D. A half-remembered movie.

"Did I ever tell you about the New York White?" he asked, holding the needle up to the light and flicking it along the clear plastic barrel. I shook my head no as I watched a sperm-white pearl of insulin fly off. "Didn't I?" he asked, and frowned with the orange cap of the needle clamped down hard in his teeth. "Well, anyway," he began, while swabbing with rubbing alcohol the fish-white swipe of stomach peeking from under lifted T-shirt. I could see a leopard-skin of dime-size bruises connect-a-dotted by thick stretch-marks deep in the surface of the skin. I shuddered and looked away.

The dust I kicked up from squirming on the faded couch floated lazy in the hard shafts of light streaming through the closed blinds. I heard him grunt and I knew the needle had gone in. I looked back as he capped the needle and threw it across the room to the garbage can. He missed and it landed in a pile with the rest. Every week or so he would sweep up the needles and alcohol swabs and syringe wrappers and leave them in a discreet pile on top of the rest of the garbage for the dorms.

His room was wet and hot. He dropped the insulin bottle into a zippered sandwich bag bulging with half-melted

ice—ice that he caged off me and the semi-cute honors student across the hall while he tried to get up enough cash to pay off his electricity bill. Before he figured out the sandwich bag, he had been sinking the bottle in the tank of his toilet to keep it cool. His dorm room stank from a pound of hamburger he had forgotten about down in the crisper drawer when the power went off. He'd have it back on when his check went through. I hoped that would be soon—I was sick of listening to him bitch about the TV being off and coming over to my room to watch those damn game shows that go on forever and ever.

"So anyway, I've been reading about the New York White. Now ask yourself: What happens when the cops come a knockin' and a hollerin' and a kickin' at your door when you and your buddies got a fat bag out and y'all are just puffin' away? You set up a designated flusher—one man stuffin' and dumpin' and somebody else manning tha handle—shoosh, shoosh—over and over. All that pot goin' down the drain. Didn't ya ever wonder what happen to all that weed? I mean, it's gotta go somewhere, right? Well, I hear tell that it gets in the sewers and grows up down there in all the floating turds and rotting dogs. It grows up tall and lush into super-powered-V8-turbo-mega-pot, and dead white it is 'cause it don't get no sun. Now there's a score for a man to take—coupla pounds of that pure New York White and the likes of me and you would be set up good and tight!"

Multiple Choice

Question 16.

What best describes what happens when you lose your temper?

- A. Your emotions roll in like storm clouds.
- B. The world goes red.
- C. Your emotions sneak up behind you.
- D. The world goes black.

I just stared at him. He had rocked back in his chair—face suffused with quiet joy—thinking, I guess, of a fat

joint of dead white mutant marijuana, indianajonesed from the depths of the sewers, sweet smoke curling around his head. I asked him, disdain dripping from my voice, "How the fuck does it grow down there with no sun?"

"It don't need sun no more. Chemicals and shit fucked with it. Hell, maybe it grows in the light that comes down from sewer grates or storm drains."

"What about workers that go down there all the time when the sewers are fucked up? Why isn't the front page of every newspaper in the country screamin' about mutant pot?"

"Easy. The workers are keepin' it for themselves. They thought it was so good that they all decided to keep it one big secret. They's the ones that probably got the whole rumor going around about it in the first place."

"Don't they drug test 'em?"

"Sure they do, but the city government ain't goin' ta tell no stories of super-mutant-sewer-pot. They'd have every crazy in the city and five surroundin' states divin' the sewers day and night—like those guys that are always poisoning themselves eatin' whatever mushroom they can find growin' in a cow-pie. How many people would get down in them sewers and get eat by an alligator?"

"There ain't no alligators in the sewers—that's just a myth—an urban legend."

"That's OK. Don't believe me. One of these days the sewers are gonna back up and dump a coupla thousand alligators out on the city streets. Then you come back to me talkin' about urban legends. You gonna have 'gators biting the tires offa cabs and gobblin' down babies and shit—then you'll see."

"I suppose they'll be all twanked out on the super-pot when they come outta the sewers, right?"

"Shit no! That'd be silly!"

True/False

Question 46: The voices on the radio always belong there.

Question 47: God loves everyone equally.

Question 48: It is wrong for a starving man to steal bread.

"So, what do you want to do with all this knowledge?" I asked. I was amused and frightened and just plain tired of his great schemes and plans. I should have known what was coming, but I asked for it anyway.

He said, "Let's go find the New York White."

"Now, you've lost it. How the hell we gonna get down in the sewers? You gonna get kicked outta school if you don't start going to class and get to work. The semester's almost over and we'll be going home soon. Forget it."

"No man, we can really do it. The New York White is right under our feet, man. We just gotta have the balls to go get it."

"If havin' balls means doin' dumb shit like crawlin' around in a sewer after non-existent mutant pot, then fine—I have no balls. There, I've admitted it. I'm going back to my room. Call me when you get your power back on and stop smokin' and drinkin' up the checks your parents send you for utilities and food and for chrissakes take a shower." The door slammed itself on tight springs as I walked out. He knew I wasn't all that mad. When I got back to my dorm room the phone was ringing. It was him: "We got to go and find the New York White. Nothin' else has gone right this semester and I want to get the legend."

I said, "But that's just what it is, dammit—a legend!"

"I know, that's why we have to find it."

True/False

Question 64: The police only do what people want them to do.

Question 65: I feel that the people around me know the real me.

Question 66: Everyone gets what they deserve in the end.

There do come times in your life where causal links break down—where events cannot be traced back to their origins—where B has nothing to do with A. I sat on the sidewalk, at 3:30 in the morning, holding a rope tied around his waist as he climbed down a manhole, feet and hands slipping on the wet, fetid rungs of a metal ladder going down the shaft into

the sewer proper, and wondered how I got there.

We decided to go at night. We borrowed what we needed from the obscenely healthy and robust guy that lived down the hall in the dorm. He let us have an old rappelling rope and a safety harness that he could no longer fit around his huge, volleyball thighs. We scrounged up flashlights and galoshes out of the janitor's closet.

I remembered that the decision to go was, of course, fueled by beer and more beer—and then we steeled ourselves with more beer before going. He was drinking so much that he took a little extra insulin. When we drank this much he would be sick for days, his eyes wobbling in and out of focus as his blood sugar yo-yoed, his insatiable diabetic thirst keeping him up all night, running to the bathroom, then to the fridge. His check had come through from his mom and dad, the power was back on, the beer bought and paid for.

He had been bugging me about the New York White for a few days by then. His grin and excitement had infected me. I knew that what he really wanted was one last adventure before he went home for the summer. He might not make it back next year. His parents were running out of money to keep him in New York, and he hated the city anyway. He could never get used to sleeping through the sirens that wail banshee all night. His health was another thing. He didn't watch himself carefully enough—didn't test his blood every day—didn't eat right. When I finally told him I would do it—knowing full well we would drown or be arrested—the joy in his eyes was like that of a child. The rest was a blur.

Multiple Choice

Question 17.

Which best describes the world?

- A. A planet revolving around the sun.
- B. A home for all living things.
- C. A place where God tests mankind.
- D. A prison for the unworthy.

I felt the tug at my waist when he fell again and it nearly dragged me into the manhole. I heard his giggle bubble up. I started laughing myself. A few people walked by and no one even looked at me funny. New York is a town of infinite possibilities. Two drunk out-of-towners with hick accents crawling around in the sewers in the middle of the night doesn't even get on the radar scope of concern for a New Yorker. It's not that they're tolerant—they just don't care. We are not robbing, raping, begging for money, or puking on their shoes; they are happy that we occupy our time so well. I felt the rope tug again. He called my name and told me to come on down. I threaded the rope through the top rung of the ladder and climbed down.

The smell. Dear God, the smell. It was like a rotten egg the size of a Buick shit out of a cow's ass into a swimming pool full of rancid milk and greening beef. I started to gag—lite beer rising. I swallowed hard and tied a handkerchief around my face like I was going to rob a train and swung my flashlight around. Harold was bent over and vomiting—gouts of it firehosing a narrow walkway that ran along the wall. He had crossed the stream of steaming sewage that ran between us.

I said, "You OK?"

He said, "What do you think? Shit no, I ain't all right. Get that light outta my face!"

I swung the light away and into the sewage stream. Chunks of nothing I wanted to know anything about floated by. He called my name, "Bob, throw me the rope."

I jerked hard on the dangling end and the rope flipped down, landing on my face and sliding off the edge of the walkway into the water. I had heavy rubber gloves and still the ropes felt too greasy in my hands to work with as I gathered it up and threw an end to Harold. He said, "Come on across. There's a shallow part in the middle to step on." He sounded funny, like a duck, what with the handkerchief on his face.

I stepped down into the stream, felt for my footing and I was in the middle with two or three inches of sewage swirling around my galoshes. Harold held out a hand. As he pulled me up I felt something solid hit my foot. It knocked me down and I pulled Harold off his ledge and we went in, the both of us sitting

down hard, soaking in the sewer stream.

Harold screamed obscenities. I screamed obscenities. I had sat down on whatever had tripped me. It moved out from under me quick and was gone.

Multiple Choice

Question 40.

What is the meaning of "A new broom sweeps clean?"

- A. New brooms have better bristles, so they sweep better.
- B. A fresh viewpoint removes confusion.
- C. Old brooms are useless and should be discarded.
- D. Old opinions are dirty.

We got back up on that ledge and Harold was pissed and soaked and I was pissed and soaked and he was more determined to find that New York White then ever and I was more convinced than ever that all I wanted to do was go home take shower after shower after shower and never speak to Harold ever again. He said, "Come on," and jerked at the rope that we had doubled and tied to each other. We couldn't get separated and if one drowns we both drown he said. I nodded. The beer and the experience was wearing off and wearing thin. His blue eyes above the handkerchief were as bright as ever in the dim flashlight of the sewer.

"I know," he said, "that New York White can't be far from here. It'll be everything that we ever wanted." My flashlight caught a dead cat as it floated by. I tugged the rope to show it to him and therefore what I thought of his stupid obsession, but when I looked back, it was gone. A wadded handful of lottery tickets he saw instead. "Winners, I'm sure," he grunted, and moved on.

After an hour or so, I wasn't sure how long I had been in the sewers. All my life maybe. He was talking in an ever increasing clip: "We're gonna go round a corner and there it's gonna be. Nine feet tall and the stalk'll look like the trunk of an oak saplin'! I gonna light one up right here in tha sewer if my

papers are still dry. I haven't checked 'cause I don't want to be disappointed. We'll go back home and we'll have the weirdest pot in the land! We got to be real careful with the seeds. Gonna find me a big plot in one of those little caves that are all over my uncle's place and grow a helluva crop. State police never find a one of 'em with their helicopters! Pretty soon Harold and Bob's pot'll take over the land! The land, son! The land!"

There came a glow ahead after a while. He grew to a fever pitch. "There it is! That's the right kind of glow, I tell you! The right kind of glow! If it's down here, it's there! Right there!" He began moving faster through the tunnel, the beam of his flashlight bouncing around, playing on the sewer stream beside us. As I tried to keep up, I heard a splash. I stopped and put my flashlight right in the water. A large, white alligator hissed. It sat perfectly still. The flashlight beam made its large pupils—big round as a lemon—squeeze down to pin-points. I opened my mouth to scream and was thrown down as Harold took up the rest of the slack in the line. I heard him land in the water.

The last question on the test is essay. I am supposed to write it on a separate piece of paper. The question is very simple: "Write down as clearly as possible why you are here." It won't be hard for me, I have told this story a lot. Getting quite good at it by now.

The guy in front of me—who can only have one hand free to write with because he likes to take his free hand and pick holes in his skin to let the bugs out—raises his hand and asks, "How long will we have?" That is the question he always asks.

The voice says: "Take as long as you like. When you are finished, raise your hand and the orderlies will take you back to your room."

That was two hours ago and I am the last one left in the large white room. I will write my last line and go back to my room. This is always my last line:

Harold saw the New York White and so did I.

Opryland Theme Park

K. J. Martin

After closing I walk the fake cobblestones
Bluegrass, Western themes, and Marching songs
blaring from the bushes.
Roars of the Cannonball
 the Chaos
 the Delta Demon
 and the Old Mill Scream echo
 just above the plastic iron lampposts.
The mingling smell of garbage juice,
 carameled granny smith apples,
 purpled cotton candy,
 And melting ice cream Dip-n-Dots
surround the candle-makers shop
 the duck shoot
 the whack-a-mole
 the hot-dog stand
and even the over-priced novelty store selling
BANGING
flint balls on a string,
shuttered tight.
Coins plunk and rattle into blue, zippered money bags.
Cashiers count the quarters and the credit slips.
Then--
the lights go low
the speakers stop
the neon blinks out

All I hear;
the soft phud of my mandatory
white leather tennis shoes
and a mocking bird.

What the Old Man Lost

Chris Harrison

Old man Lowery sits,
naked,
on the lichen-jeweled stone
in the glass-lake's center--
elbow on knee, hand on chin--
a thinker sleeping in memory's silence.

His breath comes slow
in thin-white clouds on dew-hazed air,
while sun-heated blood warms his bones
and he dreams of times past
when their world was a child
and their life-roots tangled tight,
before she passed.

He wakes,
chest tightening
as her absence returns,
and mourns the stones
sinking in the water,
below the light.

Then he lies back
on the stone's broad top,
and dreams
of her arms
waving like wings
from the darkness below,
and waits--
the lapping tide
nibbling his toes,
eating the stone.

Squash

Amanda Gibson

without warning
my coat
wrestles me
to the bottom
of the stairs
leaves me
heaped and panting
next to the banister
a bruise throbs
purple gold
against my knee
curved and hollowed
like a November squash
in January
slowly sickening

You Shouldn't Remember

James R. Fritz

You shouldn't remember
the time I fished my number
out of that girl's purse
the morning after.
Please don't cry there
in that building with
all those people.
They weren't there
when you looked
at me
across the bus
and I gave you
the perfect look
that you needed
not to kill yourself
or do anything stupid.
Remember that,
and how I didn't hate everything,
not at all really.
If anything I believed too hard
in too many things:
books, light, food,

hard work, pouting,
laughing,
swearing,
wood chairs with no cushions.

I always said,
"I'm not that brave. You're the brave one."
You would laugh
and later we'd kiss
like in high school
when no one really
thought about
never seeing a person again.

Heartaches May Drown the Heart, Not a Woman's Soul
Mikki Olmsted

La mujer rie cuando puede y llora cuando quiere.
--A woman laughs when she can and cries when she wants to.

This old Spanish saying struck my heart the first time I read it. My stomach churned from its truth. It became my daily mantra.

There was a time when I cried a lot. Nightly for awhile, then randomly, without provocation, all of my pain and anguish erupting in acidic tears that burned my cheeks and rotted my soul. The pain held me hostage.

But, slowly, my inner strength broke the bonds.

Like most girls, I've been swept away by love. I've had several boyfriends--some good, some not. One even asked me to marry him. A few times I spent weekends with their families. We looked at baby pictures, decorated Christmas trees and talked about our futures. Mothers set aside space near the family portraits for our photographs.

Each time we seemed as happy as any couple immersed in young love.

Until the call to apologize for betraying my love. The explanations were always the same. He couldn't wait any longer. He didn't mean to have sex with the first one. Or the second. It just happened. One described it as a natural phenomenon, like summer rain. And in a whirl of absolution, they'd admit who, where, when and how many times they'd slept with the others.

I barely saw through the storm of tears to hang up the phone or drive home alone.

Usually, first came the rage that accompanies betrayal. Every relationship was different, but my rationale was not. I'd admit I loved him. I wanted him. I waited to have sex with him. I said no, not until we're married. "Let's make it special." I wanted to give each new boyfriend my gift of virginity.

Then, one by one, they left me. And I threw temper tantrums in bathroom stalls between classes and endured crying

fits at work. My entire world seemed empty and uprooted.

This last time I wanted to die. So I did.

I shut off my feelings of pain and rejection for months. Girlfriends introduced me to nice guys they knew. Nice guys who looked different, yet acted the same. We'd go out a few times to the movies. Mostly, we'd go to their apartment bedrooms. I knew where I was, but I didn't know how to stop what I was doing until I collapsed on the floor one afternoon in a surge of emotion. Again tears--this time to face what I had done.

Too often young women become victims of their emotions. They become sponges who ooze pain and soak up rejection. They let men manipulate them. They listen when men tell women they love them or that they will take care of them. The women listen because they need to believe. They feel comfortable and want to trust their boyfriends completely. Most, eventually, have sex. Others use the next man to fill the pain.

Fortunately, the tears will stop when women decide their failed relationships won't control them. It takes time to heal the heart. Comforting friends can empathize. Casual dating can re-energize self-esteem. Praying can sooth the soul.

But each woman must look inside herself to re-discover her own strength. She has to forgive herself for doubting her own tenacity. She has to pretend she's okay when she isn't. She has to laugh when she wants to cry because some days she will feel her strength and rejuvenation. She will know her boundaries to establish new rules. She will vow never to let anyone take advantage of her again. She won't allow her sense of self to be manipulated. Next time, her heartache won't steal her laughter.

Out of the tears will spring resolution. Resolution will bring responsibility and the determination to make your own destiny. Go ahead and cry today. Tomorrow, you won't.

Salesgirl's Chronicle Leah Treesh

Slow moving bones
almost cold
amble aimlessly
looking for a bargain
on a tractor, treadmill,
or, perhaps, just something to do
Little hands tug on Mommy's
little mouths say "look!"
and "what's dat?"
Some moms kneel down
look, smile, and answer
while others yank at the little arm
and yell at the lip-biting child
for being too small
Teenage girls with too much lipstick
glide around in too-tall shoes
trying to walk with a straight-backed
head-cocked air of sophistication
as they wiggle, giggle, and blink
eyelashes
at the Jinko clad boys strutting by
An attractive blond woman
glances furtively from side to side
walks slowly
as she slips a hundred dollar tool set
into her oversized purse
"May I return this please?"
A tired salesman fingers his watch,
checking the time
again
as he imagines a large pizza,

six-pack of Bud,
and a wild night of Wrestlemania
The was-perky-yesterday
saleswoman runs like a train
on a well-worn track
back and forth from the stockroom
to tell another bitchy customer
that her have-to-have-today item
is out of stock

To Thighs
Angela Meyer

Maybe it began the day I saw my
grandmother's own set, tucked beneath
her like pale queens in silken robes
and realized that your kind could be beautiful.

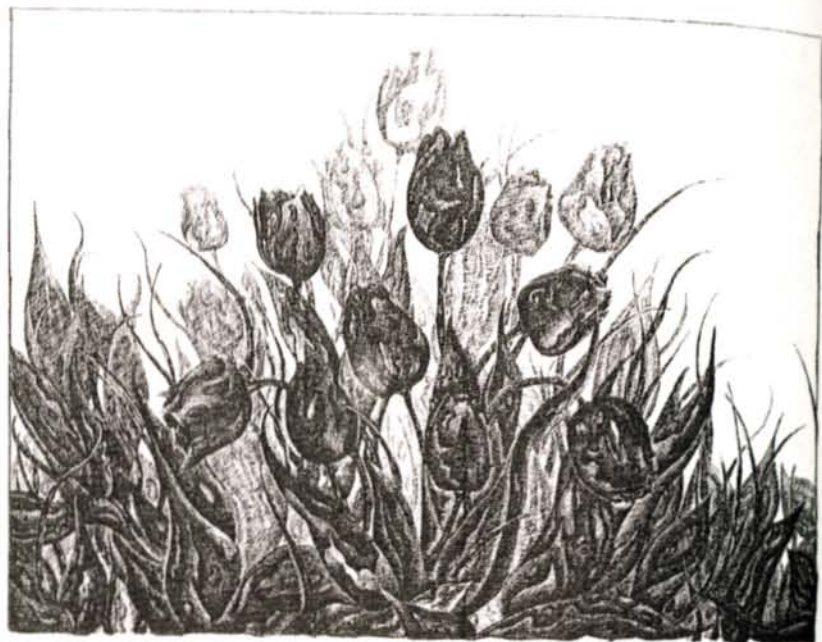
Or perhaps it was during my first sweaty
aerobics class when I held you in
unnatural positions and felt you cry out to me
in tune with the pulsing music,
"We are strong, dammit, and we will not be ignored!"

Later I looked at you in a full-length mirror and,
like noticing a shiny penny on a path I have traveled many
times,
I discovered you there. And did not grimace.

I study the tiny silver lines
that wind under your flesh like rivers to the source.
A geologist would name them "Growth spurt at Age Nine"
and "Weight Loss at Eighteen" and "Freshman Ten."

Now I see the dimples on your backs and accept them
as parts of the landscape rather than
try to remember how Cosmopolitan and Glamour
suggest I remove them.

I apologize
for hiding you under control tops and long shorts
like family secrets
and for pretending that my knees and pelvis were
connected by something other than you.
Today, I wrap you in a silken robe
and give you your due.



Jenifer White

Tulips No.5

26



Pride

Melodie Baggaly

Pride

27



Jasmine Schiedler

Untitled

Residents
James Fritz

Mary's in some intern study thing at the local hospital. "I kissed a dying man today," she says and she puts up the milk and lets her work shirt slip to the floor. "His last request," she says. She tells me how she went out on a call with the emergency unit, what she really wants to be doing, and this guy had been shot. He was still alive, breathing like a dog does when it has to vomit. "His breath kind of tasted like vomit," she says.

The walls of our apartment are crumbling. The posters never stay hanging. They seem to slide down while we're out of the house. Everything seems to be melting even though the temperature's normal in here.

We've come to hate the people across the hall. They come by at the worst times. They knock now. Right when she's crying about her day and I'm knowing we won't make love tonight.

"The landlord posted this about having guests over. There's been complaints." Mr. Thompson holds the small purple paper to my face. "It wasn't us, though we've had the urge a couple times concerning you two." He fake laughs.

"Mary's crying," I say and snatch the paper away. I slam the door and hope it comes close to hitting his face.

Back in the apartment, back on the couch, we're making bloody mary's and Mary's making them too spicy for me. "I thought 'he doesn't deserve this,' you know, 'he doesn't deserve to die like this,'" she goes on about how young his face was even though he was forty or fifty. She sat up with him while everyone else was yelling and knocking stuff in the house over. All she heard was beeping and screaming and him breathing. He pushed out the words "will . . . you . . . kiss . . . me?" and she bent over him and pressed against his lips. The air smelled like metal she says.

"There was something in his eyes like yours," she says. I understand, and think of the poor guy in the morgue on a plate right now, and wonder if Mary can still taste him.

We hold each other and after enough of that she takes her cup and drinks the whole thing. Her breath stinks when she

talks now and I decide to make it fair and down mine, even though it's way too spicy. She's shaking like a drop of mercury, staring out past me at the wall, and I know that this dying man is going to mess her up for a while. "You weren't there. You can't understand." She's right; I wasn't.

It turns out, the paper tells me, that the dying guy was shot by his father, just like Marvin Gaye. He wasn't a criminal, just a drug addict probably, and he and his father had been fighting. He is survived by a wife and a father, the paper says. I guess they don't mind printing that, but it's pretty rude if you ask me. I think about the time I wanted to shoot my father. He'd been telling me I needed a haircut, and that I looked like a loser. He just kept saying "loser."

Mary comes home the same as yesterday, all sloped and her hair down and sticking to her face. "Another day," she says. She opens her uniform, doing the buttons from the bottom up, and sits there in her bra and pants. "The people at work think I'm crazy," and she stretches her arms up over her head. "One of them even said, 'You don't know what you could've gotten from doing that, no telling what he had.'"

Today she's trying to forget about the dying guy, and I'm trying to forget that suit's look on his face when I told him about my previous employment. I told him how I was "searching for a job with more of a future in it." I should have said "looking," no one wants a guy that's searching.

"Lift me up," she says.

The bed is still on the floor because I've never built the base of it. The pillows smell clean from the laundry, and I lay her on her back and say "smell the pillows" and "kiss me." Mary's fingertips trace my spine through my shirt while I'm over her. We stay like this, kissing, for a while and I don't think I should, but I say, "This would be my dying wish, too." I kind of half giggle at the words.

"How can you say that?" She's giggling too, in-between the words, then she gets serious and says, "That's terrible." She yanks me closer, hard, into her body. Neither of us wants to think about her lips on some guy that's in a morgue right now. He's probably blue or purple by now; I've seen so many cop

shows and I still don't know which color comes first.

"I don't want dinner tonight," Mary whispers to me. "I just want to lay here with you."

"I think it's 'lie here with you.'" I'm always correcting her like that.

* * * * *

"Say three, say four, just don't say a few!"

"Okay, give me five then," I say.

Mary hands me five cigarettes and kisses my cheek to leave. She reaches into her purse again: "Okay, here's six, but go out and get your own today, and good luck with a job, okay?"

"Okay honey." And that's that. She's out of the house working again. Saving lives, or at least practicing to save lives.

After two beers and three talks shows and the television clock saying 12:00 am, I get so upset about a woman supporting me that I have to do a guy thing. I put on an old pair of blue jeans and skip shaving, and I go look at the car engine. I don't know what I'm looking for, but the smells try to lead me. I think I smell oil, then I think I smell antifreeze. I look under the car and wonder if the stains are old oil stains, new oil stains, or just the shadows of the car itself. I start the car and drive to get cigarettes. Like with most automotive problems, you have to heat up the engine a bit to really see if anything is wrong.

I point to the Marlboro Filters behind the clerk, and he's busy on the phone so I get Marlboro Lights. I figure this is less cancer for me anyway, so I don't correct him. Him, Samuel, the nametag says. I think about Mary's uniform, and wish I had one. I wish I could come home tired from work and bitching, and I even wish I could get a chance to kiss dying people, if just for the story of it.

I get back in the apartment lot, see the sign saying ST. JOSEPH'S APARTMENT RESIDENTS ONLY: ALL OTHERS WILL BE TOWED AT THE OWNER'S EXPENSE. I think how negative that sign must be to visitors, like no one here wants to be bothered with. I end a cigarette on the outside brick wall, and light another outside the apartment door. I blow the smoke in the neighbor's direction.

Inside I write a letter to Mary. I sign it: Love, your

cigarette thief, David. I fold the letter and put it on the middle of our bed. I don't want to be here when she gets home all tired again, so I go back to the car.

I check the oil, and since the engine's still hot I jerk back my hand and get oil all on my shirt. It has the color of blood, it's a weird kind of oil, and suddenly I feel like a complete idiot for even looking at a car engine. I put the cap on, twist everything tight, and get behind the wheel.

I start talking. The motion of the car seems to make it come faster, and stranger. I try to think of Mary and how she's so quiet lately.

I say, "You never know." You put a stick in the dirt and twist until you're good and drunk and it stands up. You open your car door and focus on the top of the wheel. You sit there and breathe and notice the smell of a lot of cigarettes. You put an unlit one to your nose. You're wishing you had the money to drive to Philadelphia. It takes money to drive. No matter how open you think the road is. You can get Mary drunk until she'll come back to the couch and stop crying, and just come sit down and hold you while you fool around with a lighter or something. "I have to try Philadelphia," I say and look out at the road. "My name is David," I say, "like the guy that killed the giant."

* * * * *

"Come back here," Mary grabs my hand and pulls me to bed. "Stop pouting, you big baby," she says. I let her pull me and I let her put her head in my lap. She was smiling a bit, but now she's just looking at the walls. We don't say anything. I think we're trying to keep the new picture frame up just by looking at it. I think we're trying to figure out how we breathe together.

The bed makes us feel bad. If I had one wish it would be to have the bed off the floor. No matter what, people feel scummy if they're just lying there on nothing but a mattress.

Mary starts to fall asleep and I say, "Will you kiss me? I'm a dying man." I can't stop thinking about that. I keep bringing it up.

"There was blood on his lips, David. Is that funny?"

I think of the oil on my shirt today, and if I had put it to my lips. I bet it would have tasted like Mary's breath. I imagine

that all reddish things taste the same. I say, "I was just making a joke."

She doesn't forgive me. She just gives me a look like I'll never understand because I wasn't there. We both look at the walls again, because there's nothing else to look at really. I notice where somebody's smashed an insect and left his guts all stuck on the wall. I wonder how the bugs keep getting in.

I start to say that we're not going to be able to sleep anytime soon, and suggest a pot of coffee and a talk in the living room, but Mary's eyes are shut. She's got early shift tomorrow.

The doorknob won't let me turn it and I remember that Mary always locks it before bed. I peek in at her and see her digital clock and think how those two belong together. I'm starting to be too big for the room, like my father used to say when he had to leave for no reason. I want out before she hears me. I have trouble with my eyes when I open the door. I put on my sock cap, the one Mary says "makes me look like a mugger" and I get light-headed by the hallway light. I'm tempted to knock on the neighbor's door and run away. I remember I'm in a hurry, so I only lock one lock and my coat wrestles me to the bottom of the stairs. I hop to the car. I look up at our bedroom window and feel sad at the thought that maybe Mary still thinks I'm beside her.

I go to the Waffle House and play an Elvis song on the jukebox. A really greasy guy is talking to the waitress in a double booth. He has his arm around a blonde girl with a very high-class shirt on. I wonder how he can get a girl like that, and then remember that I have a girl like that, better than that, sleeping on a mattress at home. I think of Mary's lips, and the shape they make when we're making love, right at the end of it.

My eggs are cold, and I just play with them. I keep time with the song, and move my mouth to the words. I think about that job in Jonesboro, and how I guess I could drive that far every day if I really had to. Elvis sings, "It's now or never."

The waitress tells me, "You gonna finish those eggs?"

I say, "I guess my eyes were bigger than my stomach." I swallow one more bite like it's killing me to force any more food in and think how much I hate saying clichés like that. I hit the

door after paying and get something sticky, probably syrup, on my hands. I think how gross some people are and how they just don't consider anyone else. Elton John is banging on a piano and I think about jerking the plug out of the jukebox, standing on a table, and yelling at everyone in the place. I should just leave, and let the greaser get the girl, and let the waitress continue to serve cold eggs.

I don't. I go up to the greaser and say, "How'd you get her? Really, how?"

He wants to beat me up, but realizes that cops are always in Waffle Houses and whispers, "Do you want to take this outside?"

I light a cigarette and say I'd prefer not to and he lets me go. The thing is, I wasn't just being a smartass. I really wanted to know how he got that girl. I decide that you can't think about that or you'll go crazy. Couples never really make sense. I pay my bill and leave, letting it all drop away behind me like pages in a book. I just want back in the car and I just want to sleep beside Mary and not have to say anything in the morning.

Mary's father used to own this Baldwin piano store, and other pianos, but Baldwins were all he really pushed. He had that bad comb-over hair, and he called Mary his "little angel of the ivory" because she could play that old beautiful stuff so well.

She grabbed my hands once and tried to teach me what she said was the easiest Beethoven piece there is. No matter how easy, I couldn't get it.

I think of this on the way home, rubbing the sticky off on the steering wheel. I remember how my fingers used to hurt. I remember her fingers pushing the nails of mine down on the keys. I first felt that whole romantic thing when that happened. I thought she was going to be a professional artist of some kind. She'd say that no real artist could ever be a professional anything. I would tell her she could do whatever she put her mind to. I know this was a mistake. That's what parents tell children that haven't really accomplished anything yet.

* * * * *

A week from all this, all the stuff with the dead guy and

me driving around for no reason, Mary sits up in bed. I'm awake, but quiet, so she pokes me a couple times to be sure. It reminds me of how my father used to kiss my forehead in the mornings while he thought I was still asleep. Mary says, "Wake up, David. We need to talk."

"David, I'm thinking of, I mean, really, do you ever think of moving? I really want out of this place right now." She does this motion to her lips that means she wants a cigarette, so I stretch over the ashtray on the floor and get one for each of us. The room feels like a box, like some experiment with two people. I feel like we're being monitored by scientists.

"Yeah, I hate it here too. Not here, but in this town. Honestly, if it weren't for you, I'd be completely messed up. I know that sounds cheesy." I light my cigarette off the end of hers.

"Can't we just--"

"We can do whatever we want, we're--"

"Free, I know." She says. "But I'm not talking theoretically; I just can't feel safe here now."

"Now?" I say. I make a point of it to look in her eyes. "Since the guy?"

"Since before. Since a while. Sometimes I think he just brought it all out." She rubs her belly like she's letting her words settle there, or like she's waiting to swallow mine.

I don't say anything until she takes that hand away. I want her to hear me for real this time. I just think "Mary," over and over, and that's all I want to say is her name. I want me saying her name to make the walls stronger, so they'll keep us inside with each other. I want me saying "Mary" to keep her from turning over and going to sleep with her back to me.

I say, "Mary." I sigh and touch my nose to her collarbone. I can smell her work on her skin. The work is taking her over, and I'm still jealous. I want her to have my smell on her, not that sterile smell of her hospital clothes. Over in the corner my poster of Tom Waits lies folded over itself, but somehow I catch Tom's eyes in the light. They look dead, like they're even dead in the picture. I go under the sheets, up to my nose, and feel something move over the room. I smell our bodies together, the compacted smell building up like smoke in a bottle.

What Nourishes

Sylvia Ahrens

*For Maria Elena Cruz Varela
Cuban Writer/Activist
Imprisoned in 1991
Now Released*

All I knew of you is your picture,
a few paragraphs in a magazine,
an address to plead for release,
ten lines of your poetry:
such simple truths written
in such a dangerous country.

You look like a friend I had
many miles and long summers ago.
Younger and shorter, on bikes or
with boys, she went unchallenged.
One year she broke her leg and reigned
the neighborhood from her porch swing.

But you are not that girl.
You are a woman who was hounded,
dragged down stairs by her hair;
you and your daughter beaten;
your beautiful words crammed
into your mouth to silence you.

I once had a taste of revolution,
the tear gas and the clubbing,
nothing as concrete as jail.
Worn into retreat, I have
long since traded my defiance
for noisy barnyard politics.

I know little of your land; Havana
something my grandfather smoked.
Your message arrived in a glass
bottle that sailed the seas, a voice
uncorked that awakens my own,
cries from a starving land:
lacking bread, I feast on words;
silence, a worse form of hunger.

Bruise, Horse, Milk, Reason, & Bride
Chris Harrison

There is a yellow photo
on my Aunt's cedar dresser
of a new-made bride
wearing a milk-cream dress,
riding a colorless horse.
She is smiling at me,
though I do not know why,
for there--with no reason
or excuse--on her soft, faded cheek
is a four-fingered bruise.

Enjoyment
Amanda Gibson

it's all about me
in my soft soled moccasins
walking down 5th street
not thinking of you
not in my morning
of red sweater and loose jeans
soft shoeing against concrete
my pleasure in a day
without you

Arbor Day

Andy Washburn

I watched my grandfather tree
Yanked until his roots showed,
Placed in a cold, antiseptic nursery
Where gardeners feed and water him daily.
"He was getting to be too big a responsibility,"
So I hear.
He wakes up on Arbor Day
Every morning,
Looking forward to intimate soil.
Somebody, please
Yell, "Timber"
Before you tell him
He has outgrown dirt.

Idea

Christa Osborne

It breezes in on borrowed wings
And soon enough has brothers.
Before long I'm twirling in a field of them
So thick I can hardly see.
I spy the biggest of the group
Floating my way.
It lightly lands,
Lingers long enough to tickle,
Then leaves a soapy residue.

Darrell

Terri Whitehouse

Wearing stiff navy
blue Dickies
workpants,
the high school
janitor
picks up the
change that
the wall of
rowdy kids
hurl at him.
Into his pocket--
He is saving up for a
new truck.

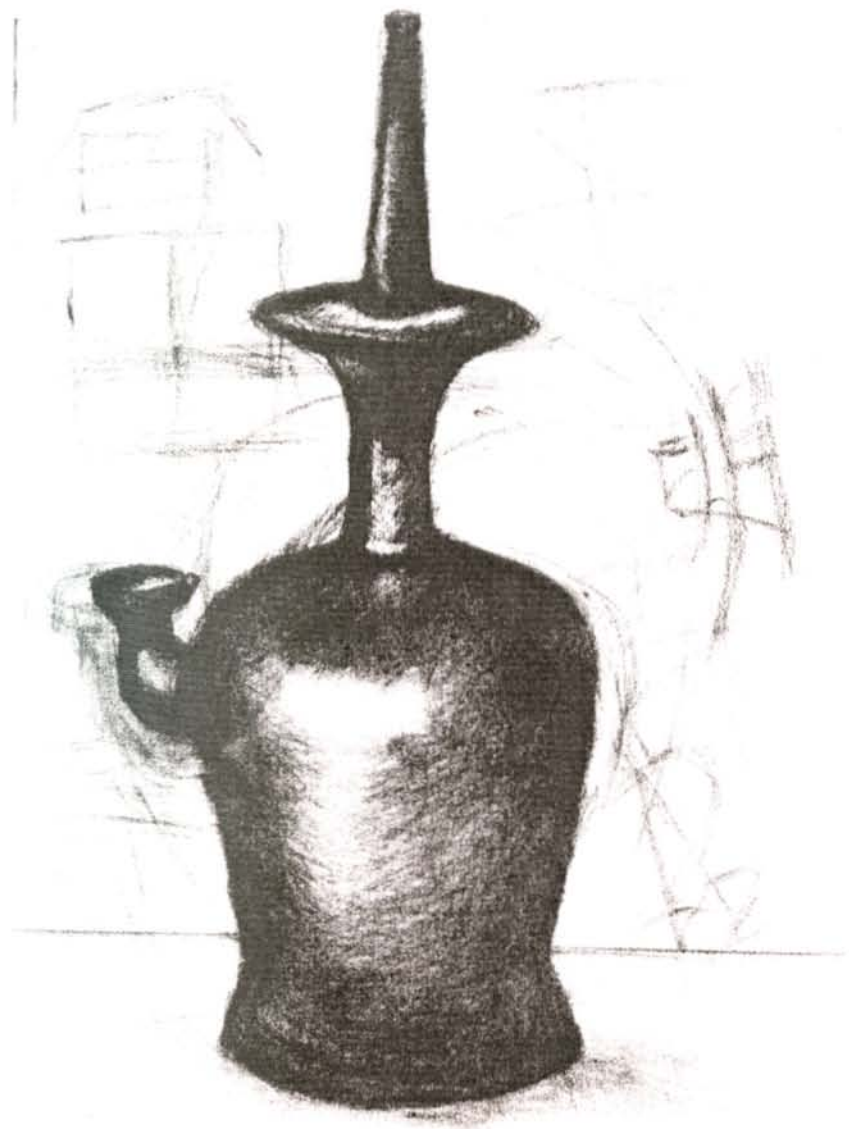
Untitled
Henry Pile

I like the way I think
at the bottom of a beer.
My frosted mug eyes
drip
like beads of water
until I remember
what it was
I meant
to say.

McGee's Farm

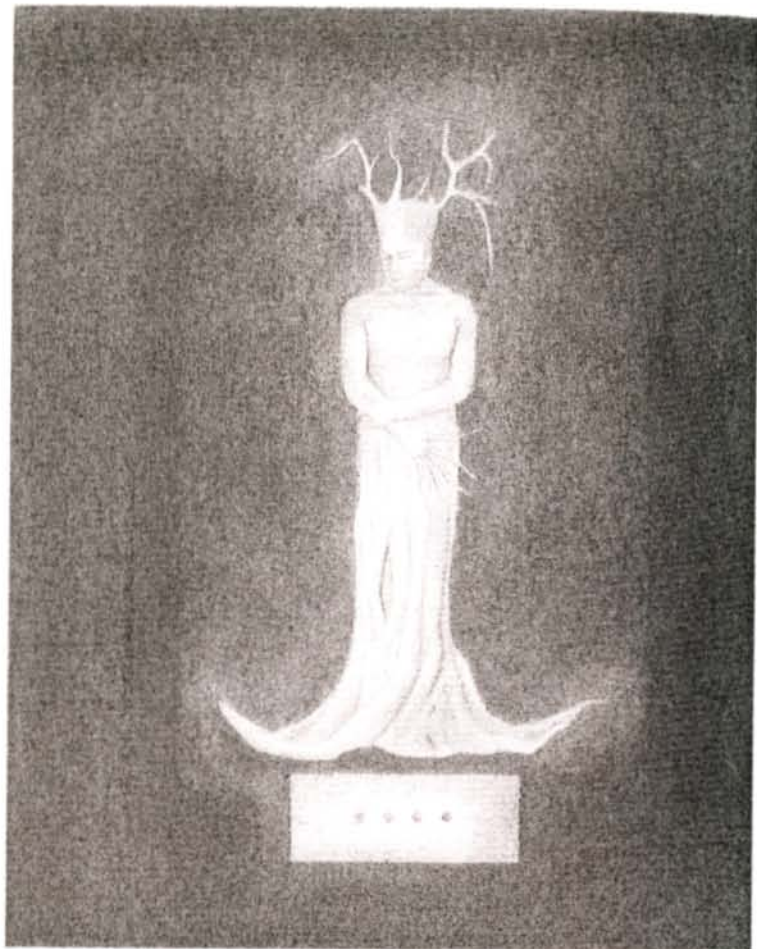
Jack Kindlesparker

At the muddy pond
Surrounded by cedars and
Cow paddies--I smoked cigarettes
Stolen--one at a time
And filled a stringer with fish
Some bright and others not.
By God I was King,
King of all I saw--
That old farmer chased me off
Waving a shotgun,
I was his King too and laughed
Dragging fishtails across the field.
My mother pointed me away from the house,
Disgusted by my catch.
I looked at a catfish--
Its mouth opening and closing slowly
Saying he was King once too.

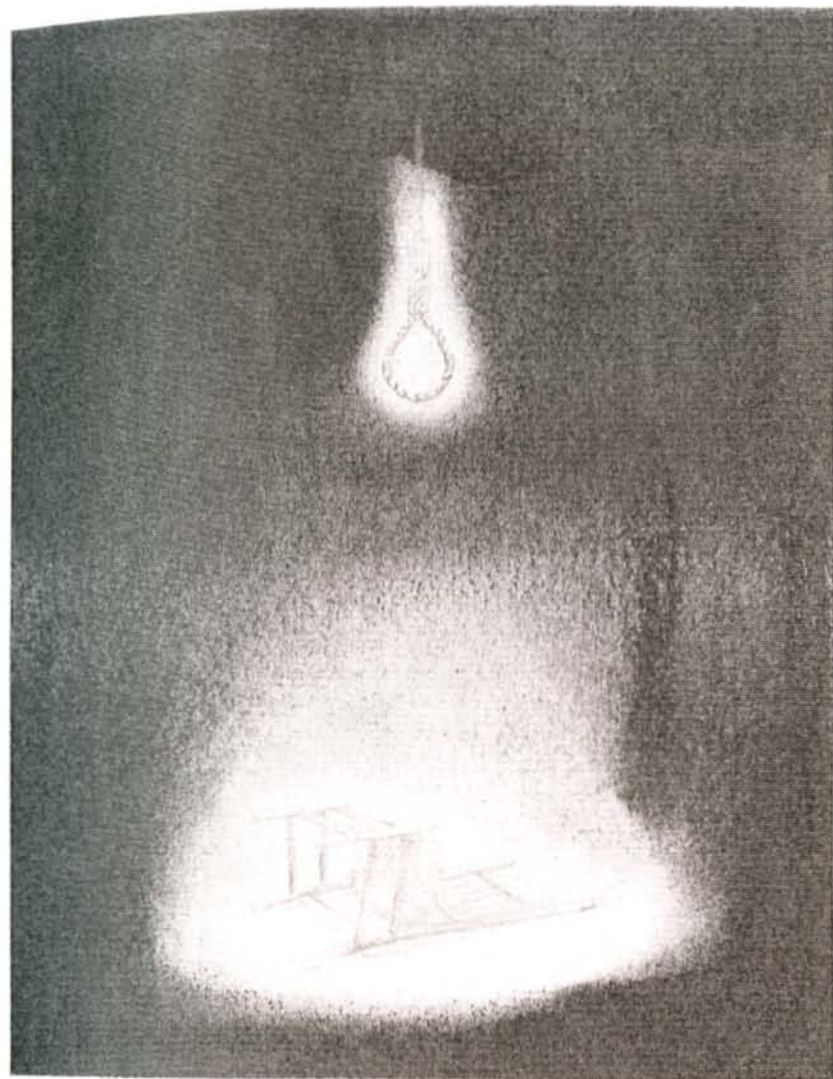


Jenifer Knapp-Bell

Ewer



Naotaka Minami **Untitled**



Naotaka Minami **Untitled**

The Laundromat

Anna Allen

I woke up sweating, my hair plastered to the back of my neck in damp tangled strands. Throwing back the sheets, I sat up, my nightgown clinging to my back like wet tissue paper. Frank's mom had discovered this little basement apartment in the fall, saying what a great find it was. We moved in, and then winter set in early, as it usually does up here, I guess. Frank and I soon discovered that the heating unit for the whole building sat just beyond our bedroom wall. Our great little find was also a great little oven. Frank still insisted that he liked the place, but then again, he could be in hell and not break a sweat. I, on the other hand, woke up miserable almost every night. And the lousy windows wouldn't even open.

"Frank." For some reason, I wanted him to know how miserable I was. He already knew, of course. I complained about it all the time. "Hey, Frank." No response came out of the dark, save Frank's usual wheezing snore. Although the room was mostly dark, I could make out the lumpy bulge of Frank under the covers. If I stared hard enough, I could see the basic outline of his face, his mouth gaping open like a cave. I reached out and touched the top of his head. His hair was dry, and that annoyed me. I ripped my gown off and flung it to the floor.

Swinging my legs around the side of the bed, I stood up and glanced up above the dresser at the small window there. It came to Frank's eye level, so it was way over my head. That was another thing I hated about this place. I walked over to the window, and reaching up, touched the rough hem of the curtain. Frank's mom had made the curtains herself, and like everything else she gave us, asked about them often. They were a hideous pea green, but Frank wouldn't let me take them down. It'd be rude, he'd said. I let the hem slip out of my fingers. Carefully, I pulled myself up onto the dresser and drew back the coarse folds of fabric. The snow was still there, reflecting the yellowish light of the security lamp that hung nearby. I was sick of the snow.

I was starting to climb down when my eye caught

movement against the white. The neighbor's fat tabby was tiptoeing across the icy yard, lifting her legs in high jerky motions. I watched, pressing my forehead against the window. The coolness of the glass felt wonderful. I brought my hands against it, and wished we had a bigger window. My sigh fogged the glass.

"Lucy, what are you doing up there?" Frank's sudden voice startled me, and my forehead knocked against the cool glass. Frank's cologne bottle clinked and rattled against his cans of mousse and hair spray.

"Huh?" I turned to see him sitting up in bed, running a hand through his hair. "That fat tabby is out there prowling around tonight." I turned back to the window, scanning the snow for the cat.

"What? Jesus, Luce, are you naked?" I heard the sheets rustling. Frank coughed and cleared his throat.

"I wonder if the Parkers know she's out." The cat was gone. The yard was empty and yellow. My palms rested against the windowpane.

"Lucy?" The bed groaned as Frank changed position. I heard him slapping at the wall, probably hunting for the light switch.

"I bet they forgot to let her back in." The snow sparkled. I traced a rough spot in the glass with my fingertip. Suddenly, the light came on, turning the glass black.

"Damn it, Luce. Get back in bed before somebody sees you up there." Frank yawned. "And don't knock my things off when you get down." Without turning, I climbed back down to the floor. The bottles rattled a little, but didn't fall. The light clicked off as my feet touched the carpet. "Now, get on back into bed." I turned to find him still sitting up, waiting for me. I dropped on to the bed, stretching out on top of the sheets. The bed groaned as Frank sank back down into the covers.

"What time do you get out of class tomorrow?" I knew, but I felt like talking. I was too hot to sleep.

"What?" Frank sighed and turned his head toward me. "Not till eight. You know that." We lay in silence for a few minutes. I stared back up at the window. I had forgotten to

close the curtain. Frank shifted his weight and the bed cried out. I felt his big hand slide over my body, coming to rest light and flat against my stomach. He leaned over and rested his head on my pillow, next to my own. His breath was hot in my ear. "Mr. Thatcher already has the hots for you. He doesn't need to see you naked in the window." Mr. Thatcher was the 90-year-old man that lived above us. Frank kissed my cheek, then rolled over onto his favorite side. His hand slid away, leaving a damp place on my stomach. I was left again with the heat and silence.

"Frank?" I kicked the sheets away from my feet. "Let's go out tomorrow night." I started thinking of what I could wear.

"I can't, hon. I've got. . . ." Frank interrupted himself with a yawn. "I've got to help Mom move that furniture out, remember?" He yawned again. "But we'll do it soon, all right? Now, go to sleep. I've got to get up early." I listened as Frank's breathing changed to snoring and watched as the light outside turned from yellow to rose. My period was now over a week late.

It was around noon when I awoke, although I couldn't tell. The room was dark; Frank had pulled the curtain closed again. I turned to see the red smear of numbers on his alarm clock. It was 12:07. I sat up and noticed that my nightgown had been folded and placed on the edge of the bed. Frank was forever straightening. I threw the gown into a drawer and snuck a quick glance at the sheets. They were stretched out white and spotless like the side yard. Grabbing my robe, I headed for the shower. It's probably nothing, I thought to myself.

I don't know why I even bothered showering. I had no plans. I hadn't been working much during the week, especially now with all the snow. I had been working at the museum downtown, guarding the exhibits and running the reception desk. It was the most boring job I ever had, but the old lady that ran the place was nice. She kept me on weekends, even though she didn't really need me there. Some days, no visitors would come at all. She always said it was because of the snow.

I dreaded finding a new job. Frank and his mother had been pestering me to get a job at his cousin's flower shop. This

cousin was as pushy as Frank's mother. Every time I saw her, she asked me when the wedding would be. That really drove me crazy. And the thought of delivering flowers all day didn't exactly appeal to me either. Despite what Frank thought, it wasn't that I was afraid to drive in the snow. I just didn't like to be out in it. I missed the grayness of Kentucky winter, all of the colors blending together at the edges. Maybe the white was more contrast than I could take. I sighed as I thought about another day spent in front of the television. My plans were about to change, however.

Frank had taped a note onto the shower curtain reminding me to go to the laundromat. Wednesday is laundry day. That's all it said. I tore it off, wadding it into a ball. Would it kill him to wash clothes on Thursday? As I lathered my hair I remembered that my mom had called me and left a message on the machine last week. I watched the suds swirl around my toes and tried to think up a good excuse for not calling her back sooner.

I heard the phone ring as I stepped out of the shower. Thinking it might be my mom, I hesitated. I hadn't thought up a good excuse yet. My hair dripped onto the receiver as I leaned over the phone. I stared at it as it continued to ring. Finally, the machine picked up. I listened to Frank's recording and jumped when his mother's loud squawk followed. "Frankie, this is your mother. I was just making sure that you didn't forget about helping me with that furniture. Your dad is too old to be doing that kind of moving, even though he thinks he isn't. It's really just a coffee table and some chairs. I would have given them to you, but Lucy didn't seem to want them. They really would've looked nice in your living room. I guess your sister would probably appreciate them. . . ." And that's when the machine cut her off. I was already on my way to the bedroom.

The laundromat was unusually crowded for a Wednesday. By the time I came back from my second trip to the car, some old man had stolen my washers. He glared at me as I stacked my baskets in a pile by the table, almost daring me to challenge him. I picked up a magazine, took my seat in an

uncomfortable plastic chair, and resigned to wait. After all, I had all day. The snow melted off my boots, forming murky puddles on the green linoleum. I shook out my coat and received another eyeballing from the old man. I opened the magazine.

I skipped all of the articles about pregnancy and childbirth and focused on the sexy articles instead. Turning the page when someone passed by, I smiled at the thought of being caught in the act.

A blast of frigid air caused me to look up from my article. A small figure stood holding the door open, its face and body almost completely concealed by folds of a big red scarf. Soon, two more little bundles waddled in, dragging a bag of laundry behind them. I watched as a tall slender woman entered next, carrying a child in one arm and balancing a heaping basket of clothes in the other. The little ones began unwrapping almost immediately, fighting against difficult buttons and zippers. Soon, all three were engaged in the task of unwrapping the baby, who squawked and sputtered under the attention of the rest. I noticed that the mother was underdressed, wearing only a thin spring jacket over her shirt. She left it on as she sorted out the laundry.

"Miss, are you waiting for a washer?" I looked up to see a short round woman standing before me. Her gray hair was set in pink rollers. I think she was the attendant.

"Yes." I looked up at her, folding the magazine slowly in half.

"Well, there's two open down there." She pointed down the aisle with a pink stubby finger at a couple of machines. She stared at me.

"Okay, thanks." I tucked the magazine under my arm, grabbed the corners of my bottom basket, and started to drag the heap down toward the little family. The children stood in chairs, sorting clothes. They looked up at me as I approached. Their eyes sparkled as they whispered softly to one another.

I put the magazine down and spent the rest of the time thinking. The little troupe marched around the laundromat, sticking close to their mother. I had hoped they'd come over to

me, but they never did. One of the smaller ones did smile a lot, though. His hair was reddish and stuck up all over the place. He reminded me of a commercial I'd seen on television for shampoo. I wanted to hold him in my lap and touch his wispy hair. Frank's hair was coarse and curly. Suddenly, I just had to find out. I had to know. I pulled the still damp clothes from the washer and threw them into the baskets, not bothering to fold anything. I smiled when I thought of how pissed Frank would be.

I had trouble deciding on which pregnancy test to buy, so I bought three different brands. I think I saw the clerk make a face, but I didn't look up to see. I sped home like a maniac, dodging the giant mounds of dirty snow that seemed to be piled up everywhere. I didn't even wave back at old Mr. Thatcher when he waved at me through his window.

All three said the same thing. I gathered them into a bag and drove a few miles down the street to throw them all away. I rolled down the windows and felt the cold air burn into my face. I didn't want Frank to see them. I didn't want Frank to know. It was around four when I got back to the apartment. I got into bed, piling the blankets high and heavy. I left my coat on.

"Lucy, get up." My head wobbled against the pillow as Frank shook the mattress. "What are you doing in bed?" I felt his large hand rest against my forehead.

"I was tired." I sat up, rubbing my eyes. Frank sat staring at me. He noticed my coat.

"Sure you're all right?" He pulled at the collar of my coat. "Did you go out today?"

"Mm-Hmm." I threw the covers back, revealing my snow boots. There were brownish gray smudges on the sheets where the dirty snow had melted and dried. I had forgotten about my boots being on.

"Geez, Lucy!" Frank leaned in for a closer look at the dirt. "That'll probably never come out." He rubbed at the stain with his finger, giving me a scolding look with his eyes. I stared back at him. "Go get a towel, will you?"

"You get a towel." I stretched, then stood up beside the bed. Frank growled and stormed off to the bathroom. "What about the laundry?" His voice echoed in the bathroom, seeming even deeper.

"It's in my car." I walked over to the dresser, putting my wallet in my coat pocket, and picked my gloves up off the floor. I heard Frank's heavy footsteps in the hall.

"Will you get it, please?" He didn't even look at me when he came in the room, but went straight to the stain. He began to spray it with one of his cleaning solutions.

"Sure." I stepped out of the house into the white yard. It had begun to snow again, and I watched the feather-like flakes land upon the dark sleeves of my coat. I opened the car door and got in. Inside the car, it was cold and quiet. I put the key in and turned. A billow of smoke rose up from behind the car and disappeared. I watched it in the rear view mirror. I put the car into drive and drove. I drove down the street, past chalky yards. I drove down the highway, through frosted fields, past slouching trees. I drove until the white gave way to brown.

My Scared Mouth Bryan Hulse

. . . And then I remembered so many dark nights
Pressed flat against my bed by the weight of the ceiling,
Or lying in the cool of evening grass staring at the thickness of the sky;
Tasting the warmth of my breath and the smell of my skin.
Thinking how nothing could command more of a respectful silence,
Not a church, or a library, or my dad's boss' home.
And believing that the only sounds suitable to disturb such a quietness
Were those of my tumbling heart,
My scared mouth babbling,
"My, God . . . my, God,"
And the invisible air answering,
"Just love me."

Cinderbox

Chris Harrison

There, in the cinderbox,
behind Ol' Lopeman's brown, broken barn,
the copper-dun serpent coils
and the world sits up
as the rattler shakes like a baby's toy,
ebony eyes glint crimson-orange
from under the diamond coat
and my chin trembles--open--at the hissing maw.
I retreat.

I Did Not Wake Up This Morning

Matt Britt

I did not wake up this morning
because my feet were stiff cold.
My legs were swollen with a chill.
The coarse hair on my head stood straight
and out; I could not smell the air.
My cheeks were white as paper,
and felt like smooth, chilled slate.
And the air was calm; it barely
touched my dry, blue lips.
My stomach did not churn with morning hunger,
nor did my back ache from the reckless night's
sleep.
My spine was heavy,
motionless
I could not breathe.
And so I did not wake up.

The Afghan

Amanda Gibson

yellow green
like grass
wizened by the cold
the kind
that always leaves smears
on the knees
and butt of my jeans
when I roll against the lawn
thinking only of pleasure
and earth
the blades tickling my
arms with the soft itchiness
of yarn blankets
tucked around me

Dejection

Christa Osborne

A pine cone, alone
Curled up on a table
With faded brown bristles that droop from the stem
Like brittle flower petals that crack when touched
Or a hundred sagging sandpaper tongues
That breath out a musty smell
Like the bottom of an empty cocoon.

Period Prayer

Terri Whitehouse

In our navy blue
pleated skirts--
we rolled them
up to make them
shorter.

We knelt
down (*earn your
place on your
knees*)
folded our hands,
right thumb over left thumb,
and rolled our eyes.

We said our prayers--
our father, who art
in heaven, the lord be
with you and also with you,
go in peace to love and
serve the lord.

God, I am not worthy
to receive you,
but only say the word
and I shall be healed.

In confession,
we left out our
real bad sins and
instead said--
I was mean to my sister.
I used God's name in vain.

We have lied to God,
We have all said this prayer,
We have all made this bargain:
God, I promise, I'll never do it again.

Mark looked up and smiled . . .

Kelly Towe

Mark looked up and smiled at me
And I, not understanding, asked why?
To which he replied,
"I didn't know I was."
Which was the best answer, really
Because maybe it meant just that
He loved me
And nothing more

Callus

Henry Pile

Line your pockets with dirt
and sweaty palms,
full fisted clods.
Tilt your head back and upward.
Open eyes wide and sucking
Leave the moon in your mouth
like gum wrapped around your tongue.
Spit,
and shut the darkness in tight.
This year's gotten colder.

Birth Stone

(Patricia) "Trish" Lindsey Jagers

Buy me an opal--
Not a milk-white one,
 No--
One with the fire
Arcing inside the dome
Straining to break
 Aching to breathe--
Not a milk-white one,
 No--
One whose soul beats
wrinkles in the heat
and blisters
the skin of one who touches it--
Not a milk-white one,
 No--
One whose trapped passion
excites those who see
it and burn to be with it
inside the clear bubble--
Not a milk-white one,
 No--
One that in my closed hand
at night, locked in
my closet,
the slivers of fire
light my eyes to a squint
and color my fingers red,
 Blood red--

Not a milk-white one,
 No--
Legend having
 Misfortune
follow those who buy
themselves an opal,
Leaves me standing,
blinking at sparks
beneath the jeweler's
 glass case.
Buy me an opal--
Not a milk-white one,
 No--

Superhero Zero
John Aaron Powers

The alarm blared, sending me jumping out of bed. I crossed the room and unplugged it. Why did I set it anyway? As I snuggled back into my warm covers, I remembered my appointment at the Hall of Justice. Shoot. I kept asking myself why I was going for A superhero's license. I mean, you get hit by a meteor and everyone jumps to conclusions. "You ought to become a superhero. It isn't everyday someone survives that sort of thing," everyone keeps telling me. So I got tested.

I went down to the Hall of Justice and they asked me to do stuff like try to shoot lasers from my eyes and fly. Well, I couldn't. I could however, take anything they threw at me. "Congratulations, you have a 'special' gift, thanks to that meteor that hit you," one of the examiners told me. "Judging from our tests, you are totally invulnerable. In other words, you can't be harmed in any way."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I don't want to think I'm invincible and then get my butt handed to me by some punk with a chunk of kryptonite or something."

"Trust us. You can't be harmed at all. We've never seen anything like it."

"Cool!"

I'm still nervous as hell. I mean I don't even have a cool costume or a snazzy name. I don't even have a cool weapon or a cape. I never heard of superheroes having butterflies. You don't read that sort of stuff in comic books.

I took a shower and threw on some clothes. Realizing I'm running behind once again, I grabbed a cold slice of pizza on my way out the door. Mmm, the breakfast of champions.

"Ah, there you are! We've been expecting you. Running a little late, I see," said the short troll-looking thing that greeted me at the door. He looked like a compacted Irishman in a business suit.

"Yeah, traffic," I said nervously.

"Never cared for it myself. By the way, name's Bjorn."

"Er, hi, Bjorn. I'm Lucas."

"Yes, I know. I read your profile."

Bjorn led me to his office down one of the massive corridors with huge columns shaped like massive marble titans. Superheroes and superhero-wannabe's in all shapes and sizes milled about the vast open area of a lobby. Most of them had costumes, but some were dressed in plain clothes. Must be their day off.

Bjorn's office was rather small but comfortable. It only had one chair, and he motioned for me to sit in it. Bjorn hovered behind the desk crosslegged. He must be a retired superhero. "I just have some paperwork for you to go over here and put yer signature on, and then we'll go over the Superhero Code." That was all fun, mostly signing a lot of stuff and being told I have to play by the rules, so to speak.

"What's your alias going to be, you know, your superhero name?" The lady issuing the licenses asked.

"Hell, I don't know." I thought for a while. "Mmm... How about Superman?"

"Sorry, that name's already copyrighted."

"Well... How about... Punisher? That sounds kind of threatening."

"It's been taken, too."

"Hell, I don't know. How about Grendel?"

"I don't think you want that one. It's not copyrighted, but it's used by what we call a 'supervillain'."

"Damn it." I looked down at my sweater. It had my old high school football number on it. "Zero. Has that been taken, too?"

"Zero, huh?" she said unenthusiastically. "Zero it is. Smile for the camera."

My superhero license picture made me look like a doe in headlights. Real threatening. Bambi the Avenger. Great.

I was now an official superhero. Me, a scrawny twenty-one year old with a history of puking when I get too scared. And I didn't know whether to trust those guys who said I was totally invulnerable to injury. What if some big-assed alien came down to take over the planet and whooped me like a schoolgirl? Ah, well. A job's a job.

.....
"Hi, guys. Mind if I sit here?"

"No."

"Go right ahead."

Smoky Ben's Restaurant was the local hangout for the superhero crowd. I only knew these people I was sitting with because of seeing them on the news. I felt like this was my chance to get on my soapbox. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't take such a ballsy move, but I was mostly certain that if I criticized too much, I wouldn't get injured in a fistfight. Hopefully.

"You're that new guy. I heard about you. You, like can't be injured," Tiger-Man said.

"Yeah, that's me," I said.

Everybody introduced themselves, and I told them my name.

"So, Zero, you got a sidekick yet?" Captain Kentucky asked me.

"No, I really haven't thought about it," I said. Having a young boy in tights as a sidekick didn't settle well with me. I didn't tell Captain Kentucky this, though. He had a fourteen-year-old sidekick named Skippy.

"So, Zero, how'd you get you powers?" Tiger-Man asked me.

"I got hit by a meteor. How 'bout you?"

"I got bit by a radioactive tiger," Tiger-Man said.

"A radioactive tiger? How in the world did that happen?"

"Long story."

"I like pudding," the Incredible Behemoth chimed in. He looked like a gray brick house with arms, and he's just about as smart as one. I heard he used to be a physicist before he was on the wrong end of a nuclear accident.

"Lame-ass," Atlantic Lad mumbled at the Behemoth.

"Er, what are your powers, anyway?" I asked Atlantic Lad.

"I can communicate telepathically with aquatic life. Why do you ask?"

"What good is that? 'Look out! He's summoned a mackerel!'"

"Shut up, man!"

"Atlantic Lad's saved my butt a few times," the Red Ranger said.

"Ranger stupid! Shine red light on bad guys! Oooo...Behemoth scared," the Incredible Behemoth said. Maybe he's pretty smart after all.

"Up yours! It's a raybeam, anyway."

"Oh, that's real threatening," one of the Wonder Twins said sarcastically.

"Like you guys have room to talk. You can shapeshift, and you change into stuff like an eagle and a bucket of water! What's up with that?" I asked.

"We have limitations to our powers. I can only turn into simple inanimate objects, and Jan can only turn into animals," Jayce said. I think he's the male twin; I'm not sure.

"Well, why don't you do something like turn into a kangaroo and a pair of cleats? Or at least a baboon with a machete."

"God, I'm glad I got cool powers," Tiger-Man said.

"Amen, brother," I said.

At that moment, Megaton Girl burst through the door. She was beat up and bleeding quite a bit. "You guys!" she panted. Everyone stopped and looked at her.

"Good Lord, what happened?" Captain Kentucky asked.

"Something landed just outside of town! We all tried to stop it. A lot of us are badly injured, maybe dead. I know the Fantastic Five are dead."

"So?" Captain Kentucky said under his breath. "Who cares? They're assholes, any way."

"What is it?" someone asked.

"Dunno. It's bigger than the Behemoth. Wearin' some kind of armor, too. It just plowed us over."

"Take it easy," Tiger-Man told Megaton Girl.

"Someone call an ambulance." We were all out of there.

.....

I remember watching Aliens in junior high. The Alien Queen gave me nightmares for three nights straight. The movie The Fly gave me nightmares for a week. This thing made them look like Care Bears in comparison. It was at least fifteen feet tall and looked like some kind of space ship walking upright.

I've seen army tanks less impenetrable than that gargantuan monstrosity. It definitely wasn't anything from this planet.

It had ripped through the countryside and mowed a path of death and destruction through four city blocks before the other superheroes and I made it there. I froze when I saw it. Dead and injured people lay in its wake, most of which were superheroes. It was holding half of Mr. Elasto, who had been snapped in half like a rubber band. It dropped the dead superhero like a discarded toy.

"Dear Lord," Tiger-Man muttered in astonishment.

"What do we do? How do we stop it?" Captain Kentucky asked, still in shock.

The giant turned its massive head, or what looked like its head, toward us. It eyed us for a couple of seconds and charged like a frenzied bull. The Incredible Behemoth sprinted at it at a speed unimaginable for someone that big. Unfortunately, this titan made him look like a midget.

The Incredible Behemoth rammed him and bounced off. The thing picked up the 600-pound humanoid, punched him in the head, and punted him football-style. The Behemoth landed on a taxi, visibly injured. He didn't move.

"Any ideas now?" Tiger-Man asked.

"Yeah," Captain Kentucky said. He threw his circular shield emblazoned with the emblem of the Kentucky State flag. The razor-sharp edge could cut through anything. Well, almost. It bounced off the beast and bent up like a cheap hubcap.

"Uh, oh," Captain Kentucky said. Skippy looked scared to death. Captain Kentucky's shield should have cut the thing to ribbons.

The alien berserker picked up the broken shield in one massive hand and examined it. "Ptah," it said in a slightly annoyed tone. It then reached down and backhanded both Captain Kentucky and Skippy in one stroke. They both went sailing into a deli window.

"Maybe it can be reasoned with," Tiger-Man said. He then addressed the thing, "Hey, what's going on? Can't we work something out here?"

"Ha, ha, ha," the thing bellowed. "Spiznlgnikt!" it thundered.

"So much for that idea," I said. "The thing doesn't even know English." It heard me say this.

"Yes I do," it said. "I'll suck this planet dry."

"Of course! He's heading straight for the power plant on the other side of the city," Tiger-Man said.

"Thank you, Sherlock," the Red Ranger said. "Any clue how to stop it?"

"No."

Tiger-Man ran swiftly around the gargantuan, looking for a weak spot in its armor. It had difficulty catching him, but then it learned his technique and grabbed him with lightning speed. The alien piledrived Tiger-Man into the roadway. Tiger-Man lay in the depression he made in the asphalt and twitched.

The Wonder Twins took my advice to heart. Unfortunately, it was at the wrong time. They turned into a gorilla with a sledgehammer and ran at the abomination swinging wildly. The alien giant kicked them aside like someone kicks a stray mongrel dog.

Red Ranger shot a laser from his ring at the alien. His aim was off, and he hit the monstrosity in the groin. This pissed it off severely. It charged us and grabbed both Red Ranger and Atlantic Lad and banged them together. The thing then threw the two unlucky heroes like ragdolls into a nearby alley. I was now the only superhero left.

"You only one left," the extraterrestrial titan chuckled in broken English. I was scared to death, but I tried not to show it.

"Bring it on, bitch," I taunted.

"Rrraaagh! Tsplitchth!"

"Same to ya'!"

It charged me and kicked me with full force. I didn't move. It stopped and stared at me. It then hit me on top of the head. Nothing. "What?" the alien asked.

I was feeling cocky now. "Come get some!"

I jumped on it and started flailing my arms like a madman. I just couldn't stop it. I punched, elbowed, kicked, and even bit, but to no avail. I jumped off of it and looked at the ugly creature as I contemplated what to do next.

"His balls!" a voice yelled.

"What? Who said that?" I asked.

"Punch him in the balls!" the Incredible Behemoth exclaimed. He was nursing a broken arm and was bleeding severely, but he was barely conscious enough to yell. I looked up at the alien. Of course! Red Ranger had hit it in the groin earlier with his ray. The thing's codpiece was barely hanging on. Some kind of material was visible underneath. I actually believed that the Incredible Behemoth was still at least part scientist after all.

I planted my feet between the alien's legs and uppercutted at its noogies with every fabric of my being. The big metal monstrosity fell over, sending seismic waves over the surrounding city blocks. It didn't move. I approached with caution, but as far as I could tell, the thing was dead. "I don't even want to know what I just punched," I said, looking at right hand in disgust.

The Incredible Behemoth hobbled over to it and spit blood on it. "Take dat. Punk."

.....

I still don't know how most of the superheroes survived. Sure, some were severely beaten, but the only real deaths were the Fantastic Five and Skippy. Captain Kentucky took it hard, but he had a new Skippy by the end of the week. Someone told me he's lost four Skippies previous to Skippy number five.

"I'd like to congratulate you, rookie," Tiger-Man told me, his arm still bandaged. If it wasn't for you, we'd all be six feet under."

"Thanks," I said, "but I was only doin' my job. By the way, did you find out anything about that alien?"

"Yeah, I went and saw the autopsy. It turns out that you hit it in its brain. The crotchpiece on its armor was to serve as its skull."

"That's ironic," I said.

I felt in my niche now. I wasn't so out of place as a superhero. I actually think I can get the hang of this superhero thing after all. Now I just have to decide whether or not to join the Revengers or take the Wonder Twins on as side kicks. Such difficult job decisions.