2007

Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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Zephyrus
2007

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Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award
Kimberly J. Reynolds
“Birthing Pains”

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
John Stanford Owen
“Sleep Journals”

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Jessica M. Williams
“Gano Street”

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Felicia Stinson
“Surgeon General”

Zephyrus Art Award
Adrienne Ledbetter
“Living History”

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by Zephyrus staff.
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Matria Luna
Lydia Nelson

How I have taken you for granted.

I.
And Don McLean sang *Starry, starry night*
To the throngs of sweat drenched patriots
Huddled on the Esplanade.
The red white and blue people
Swayed and hummed, mouths open
Releasing unashamed off-key music,
*Clutching at one another as though*
When the swells stopped and this moment abated,
Their present cheer and love also would begin a dénouement
As the first violinist stepped off the stage,
As Keith Lockhart's baton played dead.

Those patriotic masses, some audiences
Cabled in through satellite CBS 4 News,
Stared forward at the Hatch Shell.
Their eyes locked on the bright blue lights.
The stage.

The folk singer warbled:
*They would not listen they did not know how*
*Perhaps they'll listen now*

We needed a reason to look up:
Fireworks scarred the indigo sky
All bug-eyed *ooohs and aaahs*
Every person child-like--
Tonight we could remove our heads from
The clouds.
Tomorrow we would point our eyes to
The ground.
All in another day's work.
So we needed a reason to look up
Behind sulphuric residued clouds,
The moon sat silent where she always shines--
Lit the patriot's paths to their cars
As she once lit the way for much-Reverend Paul.
Perhaps this night one set of eyes strayed from the show
And gave the oft-forgotten glowing orb a glance,
Her eyes tranquilizing, her mouth agape agape

II.
Last night, a nonsequitur, unparticular night
While walking close to my friend-turned-friendlier
(ever since we stood in the square cloaked by dark rain under
the black umbrella like Jo March and
Professor Bhaer my secret favorite all time fantasy the moon
shined then too behind the clouds)
I looked up for no particular reason.

Full moon.

Dozens of stars twinkled, not so bright,
As if the moon brought her smaller,
Uglier friends along to attract the most attention.
The moon's full shining face--bleached-flour white.
My nose bridge tingled and saline slithered up.
How rare it is to enjoy the celestial.
And the moon, whose face never once has
Turned away from her Earth,
Never once in these millions of years,
Never once needed an excuse to look down,
Seemed to shine so sadly.
She is alone out there and we--
I have largely left her.

Fake night lights pollute the darkness.
I faded away from the conversation,
Hoping not to trip as my gaze, averted,
Was lost in that magnetic blackness.
Caressing her craters with a stare
I hoped she'd notice.
My Father
Lesley Doyle

I could see my father leaning on the fence,
Cupping his chin in one calloused hand,
A smoldering cigarette in the other,
Tracing, retracing, its path to his lips.
Though his back was to me,
I could picture the flare of the cigarette
Reflected in his heavy lidded eyes,
Shadowing the deep creases around his mouth.

My breath rose in feathery plumes,
Vanished, and rose again, undaunted,
Like the trail of my father's smoke,
A haze of silver against the black sky.

I watched it mingle,
My breath,
His smoke,
And pretended it was a conversation,
Filled with words we would never say.
Motherhood means ruin. Our cat ate her kittens, afterbirth and all, then slowly swallowed herself, starting with the striped tail, from guilt or grief of what she had done. We looked for her in the makeshift birth bed, a cardboard box and blankets, but found only particles of placenta blooming like wet, red Poppies.

My mother told me that giving birth was the closest she had ever been to death. Strange that my safe haven womb could be compared to a liquid grave by my own mother. After the doctors pulled me from her, she noticed how the umbilical cord dangled as uselessly as a plug without an outlet. She said she felt as hollow as an empty tomb. Even now, her kisses bloom black and blue.

My grandmother called the hospital I was born in Murdernount, instead of Marymount, on account of a nurse killing spree that occurred in the late 70s. My best friend is a nurse, but she never works the maternity ward. She knows what motherhood means. Some of the patients call her the Angel of Death because she pulls the plug on the life support so the sick can die. She calls them mercy killings.

Snakes lined the way when my mother brought me home from the hospital, unfurling like Morning Glories with tongues that flicked out like wet stamens in spring. "I gave you life and I can take it away," I remember her saying with a cat-like smile. I packed provisions that same day and planned my escape.

When I am with child, I will choose a makeshift birth bed instead of a hospital to spare my child the slow death. I will swallow her bulbous head and then myself slowly, out of guilt or grief. The Angel of Death will meet us at the golden gates. The particles of placenta and the humidifier will be the only reminders, crying like babies or kittens from unopened cardboard boxes, leftover gifts from the baby shower.
Happy Ending
Glenda L. Shank

That night, you wanted to stay inside and pop popcorn and watch old Doris Day movies that always had a happy ending.
Even while you wanted this one thing to end happily, all the while knowing that it wouldn't because it had been coming for a week.

Days spent at the bedside watching her sleep the deathly quiet slumber of one medicated to ease their suffering. Struggling yourself when forced to leave her bedside and tend to children too young to recognize the impact of their grandmother's death on them or you.

Wondering what to do with the two children left with babysitters, deemed too young to have at the hospital or even at the funeral. Sad that their memories of her would really be repeated stories, like reruns of TV Land where everything ends happily for everyone. Your face frozen in some clown-like smile of familiarity and civility as you make small-talk; amazed at so much sobriety in one spot, you ask, "Was there a required AA meeting before entry to the hospital?" "Or can grief sober someone?"

Sobering, too, is your own strength. That you held your dying mother's hand
while making chitchat with your molester. You use that evening news name for him when, like today, memories are too strong to be entertained.

This secret that remains a secret between you and him, angry that now is not the time to tell and knowing now there never will be time.

Angry at death itself for taking away time and for being so damn inconvenient to come while you and your children live in a battered women's shelter, and must come to the hospital with the man you were fleeing there.

He will stay through the funeral and Thanksgiving with an awkward silence as you keep that secret too,

making excuses for why you leave the hospital each night before curfew at the shelter.

Watching It's a Wonderful Life as the world prepares for Christmas knowing it's not wonderful and life doesn't end happily.

Angry at being the only one not there when she passes, after you are the one who whispered to her that it was all right.

You just get a cell phone call at the shelter, some distant cousin reporting the latest news of death.

Making you weep for the emptiness of her, of you, and of secrets and for nothing ever ending happily.
After eating olives on the corner of a car-spotted street, Sophie tells me when we die we all count to seven, and from thereon heaven is all in black-and-white—or maybe she’d said that a life-span was set out in seven chapters, and every one has a different narrator. Either way, I was sure seven swayed everything: dwarves, sins, wonders, sages, wars, thieves, and sleepers. And my poor mother, who was born color blind anyway, must have already come to five, her present narrator my father, who reads so boldly, but is probably dawdling through six himself—his narrator: Jim Beam. In that chapter, Jim has an oddly solid voice, rumbling with the ice cubes in his throat.

He says my father has always known the number well because he owns seven rifles with seven bayonets he’s only shot seven times, and I must have been about seven years old in my first chapter, when my father told me that for the man who was tortured in a concentration camp with three fingers removed by rusty gardening shears, the number is all that remains. Heaven must be one long epilogue, or the happily ever after in children’s books that we’d like to think exceeds all trials of time even when Princess Swan Lake has counted all the way to six and a half, and her prince, having already passed away from drowning in the castle moat, still has a handsome face. Either way, I’m sure the number tags everything: star clusters, seas, samurai, the day of rest. In the Bible, seven angels play seven trumpets to open the door to the seventh seal, and thus, the world ends and we all die.

Thank God, this happens in the eighth and ninth chapters of Revelations. And Sophie, she won't sleep more than six hours a night because she's afraid on the seventh, she won't wake up. And my poor color blind mother gets a preview of heaven every time she opens her eyes, while the rest of us are left with only black-and-white movies. I must be somewhere in my third chapter, and were my life a play, it would almost be over. In a novel, I am just beginning. The narrator must be Sophie who’s afraid of sevens; in this chapter, she tells me to close my life book, to stop counting the pages.
Gano Street
Jessica M. Williams

The concrete was just beginning to sizzle. Our home base manhole lay eight feet out from the edge of my driveway, where three of my tired thirsty teammates sat waiting for me to kick. My brother, the “automatic roller,” stood ten feet ahead, adjacent to Ms. Bertha, who sat catatonic on her shady front porch swing. As I brushed one of my stray braids behind my ear and hiked up the hot pink sock that had slid down on my left ankle I thought long and hard about my current situation. We were down two points; the garbage truck was up the street, it was all on me, and I was only six years old.

My brother Jay squinted, lining up his famous roll as my teammate Emily, who was standing beside Ms. Ernestine’s honeysuckle bushes, yelled for me to get her home. The Ninja Turtle bouncy ball tumbled from his dirty little hands towards me like a pint size boulder down a steep hill. As Rafael, Michelangelo, Leonardo and Donatelio’s faces grew clearer, I took my two-step leap and heaved my size one foot at the orb with all of my might. As the ball took to vigorously bouncing up the street, I took off running up the inclined path towards the tree on the hill in my front yard that we deemed first base.

“Come on. Go, go!” My teammates cheered in unison as Emily’s bare feet pounded the manhole and I rounded second base. “Get it. Get it.” Jay ordered Mark, his fastest fielder who bent down in mid stride and palmed the ball. “Throw it. She’s going to make it home.” So he threw it. The earth-toned globe flew through the air, hovering for a clock tick as my foot thumped third base.


I knew what I had to do. I was going home.

I rounded third as the ball met with Chad’s hands. In full gait I glanced over for a brief moment, eyes meeting my opponent’s as he reared his arm back to heave. I bore down, biting my lip, anticipating the cheers from teammates I was sure to hear in just a few seconds, but then I felt it, the sting. And I heard it; the loud smack of the ball against my sticky bare skin, the cheers from the other team. I saw it; the disappointed faces of my teammates, and there, just two steps ahead was home base. I was out, and the first game of the day was over.

All of our games revolved around that manhole and since games were our lives, our lives revolved around it too. That manhole was responsible for my first concussion. Well, that and hitting my head on it after flipping out of the back of a wagon that just flew down our driveway. Michael was standing on that manhole when his aunt brought him in to tell him that his mother was dead. My brother choked on a peppermint there, and Candy gave him the Heimlich. Corbin got stung by a bee there, Chad lost his two front teeth there, Emily left her childhood there.

“You neva woulda made it.” Ms. Bertha, our only spectator sitting out in her usual attire, a bra and Petticoat, laughed mockingly through her Virginia Slim. “You can’t dodge it. It’s too fast. Way too fast.”

We ignored Ms. Bertha, making no direct eye contact just as our mothers instructed. Apparently something was loose in her head, because my mother always told her friends that Ms. Bertha’s mind wasn’t wrapped too tight.

“Come ‘ere.” Ms. Bertha whispered as she scratched under her left breast, which sat heavily within her sheer bra atop her bony knee.

“Mom’s got purple Kool-Aid.” Jay announced as he took off running towards our back porch. He always knew how to break away from Ms. Bertha’s invitations, so the rest of us followed suit.

Two cups were waiting for us on the back porch. After giving scattered “thanks a bunches” to my mom, who was smiling at us through the screen door, looking over to make sure we were all still in working order, before she continued her telephone conversation.

“Momma.” I yelled. “Ms. Bertha…”

Mom shuffled me with her finger and gave me the “I’m on the phone, this is adult business” glare. I never knew who was so important that Mom spent so much time talking to on the phone. I never knew why Mom wasn’t at work, or why any of the other moms on the street weren’t for that matter. But I was curious to know what the terms welfare and child support meant. I heard those terms a lot.

The rank odor of the garbage truck drew nearer; we could hear Teddy, the coolest garbage man in town, barking at the stray dogs to clear the street. We huddled at the top of the driveway, watching the parade of perishables creep by, and Teddy stood proudly in the rear waving to us as if he were the mayor of dump site C. Corbin was sure that he wanted to be just like Teddy when he grew up, and he was waving back to him harder than any of us. I’ll admit, there was something strangely captivating to my young eyes about dangling off the back of such a huge stinky machine, but I found myself growing more and more jealous each time I saw Teddy ride by acting as if he
owned the street. Who did he think he was bringing down all the west side’s garbage to the end of our block?

Ours was not the neatest of neighborhoods. The yards were not always cut, the trees and bushes were over grown, and the sidewalks crumbled under foot. Many of the houses were rundown and in desperate need of paint. Porch rails dangled like iron sculptures and the air conditioning units hung out of everyone’s front window like snagged teeth. If a household was lucky enough to have a phone, the wires laid along the sides of the house coiled up just like the snakes all the boys chased us with. We caught whisper of the adult’s complaints; the eyesores, and the potential dangers but what did we know? As far as we were concerned our jungle was perfect.

We took African safaris and traveled through rain forests running from lions and crocodiles. The treacherous sidewalks became our own mock Galapagos Island chain. We submerged ourselves in the overgrown bushes, and our underwater caverns were perfect places to keep cool when we were no longer interested in the lions or the islands. The porch rails transformed into prisons that were easy to break out of, and once we escaped, naturally unperturbed, we could run to the air unit’s waterfall where the constant condensation drip cooled our brows before we were forced to cross the Indiana Jones inspired dreaded snake pits. Nothing was new on Gano Street, yet nothing got old.

Once the garbage parade was over we all stole away to our sacred hide out in the bushes that separated old man Lynn’s property from ours. Jay and I spent a whole day at the beginning of the summer hollowing it out and lining the ground with bricks from Mr. R.T’s shambled back wall. Sitting there scratching our legs, we passed around our cups and spoke of highly sensitive subjects troubling our lives at the time. There were heated debates over whether the Power Rangers or the Ninja Turtles would be best suited to man our neighborhood watch. My bike had been stolen two weeks ago and we were certain that if the Ninja Turtles had been around, it would have never happened. After all, they work best in the cover of the night. An occasional argument arose about whose dad was getting out of jail next. I never joined that argument; everyone knew my father was in for the long hall. But John’s dad only got caught with drugs, so we were sure he was getting out soon. And like usual, we lied to one another. Our lies were about our recent game related achievements; no one ever really made it to level six in “Sonic: The Hedgehog”, but everyone raved about how easy it was to do so.

People lied a lot on Gano Street. “I’ll get the rent to you at the beginning of the month”, “We’ll get a squad car over there as soon as we can”, “If you run this package across the street to that man in the car, I’ll give you some candy”, “Zowie’s not dead, he’s sleeping”. Yeah. Lies were a way life, a big game of pretend so to speak, so it was OK. It was OK, to play hide and seek when the bill collector knocked at the door. It was OK to go on special missions for your older cousin who was always in trouble with the police that never showed up when you really needed them—not even when I saw Emily’s dad dragging her mom across our back yard by her hair just outside my window. But that was OK, right?

“This is fun.” Emily said taking a quick sip of Kool-Aid and passing it on.

“Yeah, it is.” We all agreed.

Emily liked the bushes. She felt safe in the bushes. There were many nights, after Emily would wake me up by knocking on my bedroom window, that I would slip outside to hide with her in the bushes when her dad was drunk. She almost never cried anymore. When her family first moved into the house across the street from old man Lynn everyone was a little skeptical about her. Emily’s family was the first white family to ever live on this block, and the only household with a dad around, so this was new territory for us all. But I, being the leader of the bunch, taking my cue from early episodes of Barney--truly believing that everyone was special in his or her own way, asked Emily if she wanted to join our games. After that, no questions asked, she was one of us.

After the last of the Kool-Aid was sucked down, and the cups were taken back to the house, with the ball tucked under my arm we all made our way back to home base to begin the next chapter of our day, and I chose team captains. Emily had never been a captain before, and Chad had only been captain once this summer, so they would do.

“I’m thinkin’ of a number between one and twenty,” I said right before whispering it to Jasmine.

“Fifteen?” Emily yelled.

“Right!” I said. “Your team kicks first.”

“I was gonna say that.” Chad whined. “We gotta pick again.”

“No.” I told him. “Emily picked it.”

“But we didn’t even pick who was picking first.”

I knew Chad was a bad choice. He was always whining and his nose was always running. I could never understand how a nose could run so much. I was sure he was loosing vital nutrients, which must have been the reason for his whining, but I couldn’t prove it.

“Let’s just play something else.” Emily suggested.

That was unheard of. A good summer day went as follows on
Gano St.: morning kickball, garbage truck drink break, game two of kickball, lunch, afternoon tag, Mr. Jackson’s sprinklers, relay races, gate and tree climbing, snack, honeysuckle and dandelion picking, baseball or football, dinner, fireflies, ghost stories at Ms. Candy’s, bath and bed. Every mom on the street was your mom, except Michael’s, who died in a car crash. All of our houses were safe havens, except for Emily’s, whose father loved booze and beat his wife. Drink breaks were spent at my house where we drank from the same two cups; one cup for us girls to use and one for the boys to use because we were more than aware of the 1990’s Cooties epidemic.

Every morning started out the same. After breakfast my brother and I separated to round up our friends. He would go right, east toward the stop sign, and I would veer left, heading for the junkyard. With the lusterless ball tucked safely under my arm I would jog all the way to the end of the street towards the red steel gate that kept everybody out of the compost, except for those of us who were small enough to fit in between the bars. It was there that my morning fun began.

I crept up the left side of Kacey’s house right to his bedroom window, knocked and ran to the back door to meet him. We would scale his rusty chain linked fence; pretending, just for a moment, to be fearless ninjas on a mission to rescue some hostages: the Brown’s. The three of them, two girls and a boy, were inevitably watching cartoons and Chad, the youngest, would always open the screen door to let us in. We usually caught a minute or two of whatever cartoon they were watching before we ran out the front door, leaping off their nearly three foot high red washed porch, diving into the stormy sea, adults would call a front yard.

The five of us swam through Mr. R.T’s vegetable garden to Tyson’s house, where we waited patiently on the front porch for him. His mom wouldn’t let him come out until he finished every last bit of his cereal, but once all the milk was sucked from his bowl he was freed. And after Emily, who was sitting on her front porch barefoot, joined the mob, we could finally run to the safety of home base.

“What else can we play?” Jolie, one of the friends my brother rounded up, asked crossing her arms and rolling her eyes, as she was so accustomed to doing.

Mom always told me that she would smack me into the middle of next week if I even looked like I was going to roll my eyes at her, so hanging out with Jolie meant trouble, because I was a very impressionable young girl at times, especially when it came down to expressing my emotions. I never learned how do that properly, express emotions. Growing up with a strong single mother doesn’t allot much time for pointless tears and animated expressions.

Emily shrugged her thin shoulders and stared down at her dirty little feet. “I don’t know.” She whispered as she picked a rock up with her toes. She moved the rock around slowly onto the manhole. Everyone watched as Emily’s big toes steadily scooted the rock towards the thumb latch.

“Where are your shoes?” Jolie said mockingly. She asked the same questions every day, but in a more sarcastic tone each time, and she would always add a snickering, “You’re dirty.”

Emily’s eyes welled up, those big cold blue stones that I was once afraid of. I never saw that color blue in eyes before. Blue, like somebody took a piece of the summer sky and jammed it into the colored parts. Emily introduced me to a lot of things and I tried to protect her to show my appreciation, but it was no secret that Emily needed a bath. The filth covered her feet almost as if forming natural shoes. She told me that she had a pair of sandals, but that she lost them. She also told me that she had more than just that one green tank top she was always wearing, but people lied on Gano Street.

Her toes were scratched up, and so were her hands. She had so many mosquito bites it looked like tiny anthill colonies were forming on her legs. I thought she got bit a lot because she smelled, to me at least, like bologna. I remember thinking that all white people smelled like bologna up until I missed my school bus one day and had to ride home with Jay’s white teacher, who smelled like lavender and peanut butter.

My mom would get mad at me when I brought Emily into the house. Some times it was just to clean off her face. I was used to being clean, so the idea of playing with someone with three-day-old smudges on their face was a bit much, even for a kid, to tolerate. I wanted her to fit in as much as she wanted to fit in, maybe more. One day, after sneaking her into the bathroom I found out that the black smudges weren’t coming off, and even more, that they weren’t so much black as they were blue. Dirt wasn’t supposed to hurt when you tried to wipe it off, and no one knew about Emily’s painful blue dirt but me.

“I know!” I smiled, proud of myself for coming up with anything to squash this shoeless dirty talk, “Monsters” I screamed. And with that said, everyone took their cue, running about picking up whatever rocks they could find.

“I like that game.” Emily smiled up at me as she wiped the solitary tear she’d allowed to fall down her cheek.

“She too.” I nodded back to her and pointed to the rock under her foot, “Go on and stick that one in there. Quick. We got a lot of
work to do.”

Our occupation: Monster Wranglers. By throwing rocks down the thumb latch of the manhole we fed all the monsters so they would remain submerged in darkness instead of coming out to devour everyone in the neighborhood. Thus, our only drama arose when worrying about whether our best kicker Eddie really had to go to his dad’s house for the weekend. Our only stress was when our kickball rolled into Miss Bertha’s grimy dark garage where her million year old miniature primitordial mutt, Gibby, sat waiting to snap at our heels, and our only sadness took place when afternoon tag got rained out. Things were perfect then, when we were as innocent as everyone thought we were and when all we ever really wanted out of life was just a little more daylight.

Lying on our bellies, shoving rocks into that tiny hole like our lives depended on it was interrupted when the glass in Emily’s front screen door shattered. We all jumped up to see Emily’s dad standing there in the rubble with his sweaty bare chest glistening in the sun and a beer in his left hand.

“Em-ly, gitcher ass in this house.” He screamed, scratching his crotch with his free hand. His jeans were stained and he only had one work boot on. His eyes were slanted, which was weird because he didn’t have an ounce of Chinese in him, at least that’s what I heard my mom say when she was telling her best friend about our new neighbors. He had the same cold blue eyes that Emily had, but hers were softer than his. I always felt that his would burn a hole right through me.

“Em-ly!” He yelled again. This time in a harsher tone.

“Stop dat yellin’” Ms. Bertha screamed to him.

“Shut the hell up old lady.”

She held the telephone receiver up to her ear, “Well, I can’t hear.”

She always had the phone up to her ear, an olive green one with the cord stretching from inside the house right out her front door, but I never remember seeing her mouth moving while she was holding it. She talked to her dog. She talked to herself, but whenever she held that phone, she never said a word. Maybe the person on the other end did all the talking, but I can’t imagine anyone having that much to say to her.

I sat up around the manhole just like the others, eyes wide and silent. I felt Emily scoot closer to me. The skin on her arm when it was pressed up against mine was cold and clammy. I glanced over at her just for a moment, her knees were shaking, and my heart was pounding. Part of me wanted her to get up and go to the house just so he would stop looking our way and part of me wanted to grab Emily’s hand and run to the bushes like we always did, but all I could do was sit there and watch.

“Em-ly.” He said wiping his nose with his arm and throwing the beer into the yard into a pile of more cans. There was a man, a skinny old white man with a blue baseball cap that rode a bike around collecting cans. He’d stop on Gano Street, once or twice a week and spend over twenty minutes picking up the cans out of Emily’s front yard.

“You in trouble?” Kacey asked.

Emily shrugged her shoulders.

Now when we got in trouble, we knew it. This was another one of those white things I never understood. The amount of trouble we were in depended on how much of our names our mother’s would use, and the speed at which it came out of their mouths. If Mom came out on the porch and yelled my whole first name real quick, I knew I was just going to get yelled at. Adding the middle name, and holding onto the last syllable meant that a brisk spanking was soon to come, but if my full name fell from her lips and was stretched out for a few extra syllables—let’s just say, I started crying on the spot. One time, during a kickball game, we heard Antoine’s mom yelling from all the way down the street. His full name rang out and echoed even, he was half Dominican and she used all five, so he started to cry before the echo finished. Emily’s dad didn’t even use her full name. He dropped the “i” even, so I didn’t know what that meant, but he said it with such anger that I didn’t need to know.

Her dad began to loosen his belt buckle, “If I gotta tell you one more time…”

“Emily,” her mom cried, as she came running up behind him out the door with a broom and a dustpan. Her eyes were red and puffy, kind of like Mom’s eyes when she came back from my uncle’s funeral, so I knew what adult tears looked like.

Emily jumped up and took off running towards her house. We all watched as she sped through her front gate. That was the only house on the street with a front gate. She almost ran right through the glass, but her dad reached out with one hand and grabbed her by the arm jerking her through the air into the house before slamming the door.

We all sat there in silence and watched as Emily’s mom knelt down and began sweeping up the broken glass.

“Y’all havin’ fun?” She smiled as she lifted the dustpan and walked up to her recently emptied trash receptacle. “Whatcha playin’?”
None of us were quite sure whether or not we needed to ignore her question. We knew about the whole, don’t speak unless you’re spoken to, and don’t talk to strangers, but no one ever gave us any instructions on how to handle the crying white neighbor lady’s questions. We looked around at each other. I looked at my brother and he looked at me, then he looked up at Emily’s mom, who was actually sitting there waiting for us to answer.

“Nothing.” Jay shrugged and went back to sticking rocks down the thumb latch.

That must have been a good enough answer because she smiled, a short grunt of a smile, and turned around to go back into the house. She had a gap in her teeth, or she was missing teeth, I couldn’t get close enough to take a good look. The gap was bigger than Chad’s, but he still had all of his baby teeth, so I don’t believe that’s a logical comparison.

Everyone else was helping my brother shove the last of the rocks down into the sewer, but I kept watching Emily’s mom. She stopped next to the screen door and grabbed the big slices of glass that were still sitting up in the frame. I watched as she walked them over to the trashcan and as she walked back to do the same thing over again. I watched her grab her doorknob. I watched her wipe her face as she twisted the knob and pushed the door open. When she opened that door Emily’s cries were released, and they sent chills down my spine.

A man only ever spanked me once in my life; that was my great-grandfather, because I was jumping on my mother’s bed. And I only cried then to make him feel bad because it didn’t even hurt. My cousin hit me once too for telling my mom that he made me take some baby powder to his friend in a paper bag, but my mom always called him ‘boy’ so that didn’t count.

“Oh God!” Emily’s mom screamed as she took off running into the house, leaving the door wide open, allowing Emily’s cries to resonate. “Stop.”

All of us kids jumped to our feet as we watched Emily’s mom fighting to not get shoved out the door. She was screaming now too, but not loud enough to mask Emily’s cries. I knew Emily’s cries all too well. Jay took off running towards our house and I watched as everyone else around me scattered towards their own homes, but I stood there on that manhole, paralyzed.


I looked over at Ms. Bertha dialing madly, but she was pushing way too many numbers, even I knew how to dial 911. The sound of my mom pulling open our front door turned my head, I saw that she was still on the phone, but she lowered the receiver from her ear to focus in on what I turned back around to watch myself. Emily’s mom was on the ground outside the door now with her arms wrapped around her husband’s leg. He was kicking at her, and she was crying, and Emily was still screaming, and I was still standing there. Doing nothing.

“Moe!” My mom yelled for me, “Moe, get over here. Come on baby, hurry up.”

But I couldn’t move. “Emily.” I screamed.

Jay came running up behind me and grabbed my hand. He pulled me off home base, past first, up my front porch steps, into our living room, but I ran to the window. I had to see. My cousin came running around the corner with just pajama shorts and sneakers on. He had still been asleep up until Mom yelled for him to go do something until the cops got there. He flew out our front door and across the street. He was fast. We would have won that game earlier if I were as fast as him. Mom threw the phone onto the sofa and told Jay and me not to leave home for any reason right before she took off to follow my cousin.

It never failed, on Gano Street. When one person knew about a situation, everybody on the street knew, and it wasn’t long before all of the mothers came running down the street. Chad’s mom was carrying his t-ball bat in one hand and her cordless phone receiver in the other. In the midst of all the excitement I didn’t realize Emily’s dad had fought her mom off and locked himself in the house alone with Emily. My cousin picked up the old purple tricycle that I gave Emily when I got my new bike, and began to slam it up against the door. After a few seconds, he threw it through the window instead and the glass rained down on the porch in a million sparkling shards. Had I not been so frightened, I might have thought that shower to be beautiful.

I thought that when the glass was broken, I’d hear Emily’s screams again, but I didn’t. I thought once my cousin climbed through that window and drug Emily’s dad outside through the door it’d all be over, but it wasn’t. I thought that the police should have been there by now, but they weren’t. Emily’s mom followed my cousin through the window, and she followed him back out the front door a few seconds later with Emily in her arms.

Red was a color I had never seen on Emily before that day, but her once blond hair was drenched in red. Her mom was crying for real tears now, I could see them, even from across the street through the window, I could see them falling onto Emily’s face. Emily’s eyes
were closed. As they laid her down on the sidewalk my mom huddled
around her and began shaking Emily violently, telling her to breathe.
Kind of like Candy did the day my brother got choked right before he
spit the peppermint out. It landed on my shoe, and I stuck it down the
manhole, I think the monsters enjoyed it. Emily’s mom began to kiss
her face. That’s how my mom would wake me up sometimes when I
wasn’t feeling good but still had to take my medicine. She would kiss
me all over my forehead until my eyes fluttered open, but Emily’s
weren’t opening.

Chad’s mom had run over to Ms. Bertha’s house and started
fighting to use her phone. Gibby was barking furiously, but adults
don’t get scared, so she kept reaching for the phone until Ms. Bertha
gave it up. I watched as my mom lifted Emily into her arms and ran
with her over to Michael’s aunt’s car. Four of the moms, including
Emily’s and mine, climbed in and drove off. My attention was shted
quickly to my cousin who was taking free blows on Emily’s dad. I
never saw him hit any other grown up before unless they were wear­
ing blue or yelling curse words while flashing strange motions with
their hands. Jay told me that it was sign language, just like on the Ele­
phant Show, but that we’d better not do it anywhere but on Gano.

“Emily’s asleep now.” I whispered to Jay.
“T saw.” He answered.
“Was that blood?”
“Naw.” He sighed as he made his way towards the kitchen.

“Want some Kool-Aid?”
I followed him to the kitchen. “Are the p’lice com’in’?”
“Yeah. Momma called ‘em.” He smiled opening up the re­
frigerator. “You want some cookies?”
“Ms. Bertha called ‘em. I think. And Chad’s mom called
‘em, right?”
“They’re comin’.
My brother and I finished five cookies each before we heard
the sirens outside. I dropped my cup of Kool-Aid in the sink, took off
running towards the living room and straight out the door.”
“Momma said not to leave home.” Jay yelled.
I ran straight to the manhole and stood. I stood at home and
watched as one of the chubbier officers shoved Emily’s dad into one
of the cop cars. I watched as one of the skinniest moms yelled at the
police officers for not coming sooner. I listened to Ms. Bertha yell for
everyone to be quiet, with the phone up to her ear. I watched the cops
drive away, and I felt my cousin’s hand on the top of my head.

“Moe, cum ‘ere.” He whispered, “Come on, let’s go home.”
I didn’t move.
Pencil in an Army
"War"
Dave Shackelford

Nine soldiers,
reel in the mint pages
of a story book alone in the dark,
dropping lines to rivers
and falls.
Armies stroke their arms with saws
like stone tablets fighting
chiseled battles that flower stars on crutches.

Nine blooming men
are standing in tomorrow's door
smoking a pipe together,
eyes water, and sting
like bacon grease.
These men are held up like candles
and unfold in the wind like paper airplanes
flying against the warring wind.

Just another horse in the stable
waiting for a ride.

Ben Davis
My Favorite Place
Poem I Planned My Escape To
Kimberly J. Reynolds

Ramona talks back to "Poem to Line My Casket with, Ramona" by Josh Bell

Go perfect your boyish charms in the cemetery.
Go burrow a shallow grave, and tuck yourself in beside the dead.
When vultures are training their hatchlings to scavenge, the living are learning how to die.
When you hear the corpses yawning, remembering now why they died in the first place,
then you must scrape out your dirges on the tombstones,
and my legs will be moving in time atop tables.
Your funeral songs will not go unnoticed.
These are not celebratory dervishes, but funeral processions.
You must mind your words, the verse,
because this will only incite the dead to riot.
I used to love your every pale pen stroke
when you lamented the day and loved the night.
I used to be your muse. It turned into obsession.
I used to dress in a burial gown for you.
And you've been digging a double grave ever since.
And they've been concerned, the people that love me.
And I couldn't remember myself. You were my mirror, as such.
The radiator gasps from the wall in the hall.
I hear it, or is it your breath muffled from underground?
Yes, I used to play your wheelbarrow
until you changed my legs into a divining rod.
Outwardly, you used them to seek water, meaning, manna.
Inwardly, you are already wrapped in the grave clothes.
Inwardly, your poems are all epitaphs.
There's a difference between needing and kneading someone.
You used to peel the onion of me without crying.
You used to promise a nursery. You used to go to parties.
You used to take me dancing. Now you've been seen consorting with the dead. They are laid to rest for a reason. The rest is being disturbed. The rest are tunneling escape routes.
The rest are planning new plots. More than the dead are suffering.
But oh, how their families wonder where they went.

You with your muttering and scraping out passages on the gravestones.
When I first escaped, a Lazarus of sorts, I kept a few poems for memory's sake.
Now I use them to warn the dead of an infiltrator, and the times you come slinking around the mounds above them,
that's not dancing you hear. It's running.
Sleepless Nights
Brooke Shafar

Dear Joan
I've almost forgotten
The pane in the window
Blue dress in the doorway

I was listening to “Dear Joan” by a band composed of half the members of Matchbox Twenty before they became Matchbox Twenty – from an album of handwritten songs free of post-stardom, mass-marketed, artificially happy lyrics that send middle school girls into excited frenzies. Night had consumed the particular chunk of world upon which I existed several hours earlier. By most standards, I was up late; it was one AM and I was experiencing another bout of all three clinical variations of insomnia.

Dear Joan
Help me remember
The face I forget
And the traps that I've sprung

My room was too dark for my taste; bits of my childhood paranoia about darkness still lingered occasionally. Between the black blinds that matched the Star Wars posters decorating the walls and the small forest outside my window, my corner of the house never reflected much light – not even during the day. I was unable to move; nights like this had a way of rendering me immobile, as some instinct from within told me shutting my eyes and not moving was the best option I had. My mother had long since succumbed to drowsiness and, well, a tornado couldn’t wake this woman when she sleeps.

But I was not the only one awake. My stepfather was in the spare bedroom down the hall magnetically attached to the computer; I could hear the frantic mouse clicking from my bed, doors to both rooms closed. I had pulled my CD player and headphones out from under my bed, hoping a familiar tune would induce in me that warmth and strange tingling feeling that demands one’s eyes to close and one’s body to relax.

I guess I grow tired
It’s just what’s expected of me
To tear your heart from the inside
To the outside

You know I was wired
I just couldn’t help it
The hundred thousand times
I hurt you

The undulations of acoustic guitar notes and Rob Thomas’ haunting younger voice weren’t enough to drown out the sounds invading my ears from the other room. He would lie in bed with Mom until she went to sleep (which, admittedly, never took that long) – only to get up again and carry out his own agenda. I was trapped under the covers by my self-induced paralysis, sweating and shivering and clinging to the side of my mattress like some incoherent infidel.

Dear Joan
I wanted to say
That I’m sorry for the screaming last night
And the nights before
Well I’ve wanted more from this
Than anything I’ve ever known

I thought about screaming, blowing his cover of night time darkness and revealing to the world what he truly was. But he would’ve been the only one to hear me. Mom once slept through a natural disaster; she would not stir at the sound of her daughter’s voice. Still the rampant clicking ensued, as if he was possessed with some madness. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. It seemed to grow in volume, echo piercingly down the hallway in a rhythm that was the antithesis to my music.

I wondered if he had found one that looked like me yet – they were always my age or younger. But, I suppose, I had been younger once too. I shook my head fiercely and pushed my thoughts back to an unseasoned Rob Thomas, poor Joan, and away from him in the other room clickclickecklicking at the computer.

Dear Joan
Your face has a brightness
That I’ve never seen
In the years that I’ve known you

I imagined him greedily viewing the photographs of those extorted to suit his whims and the whims of every other man like-minded to him, the computer screen illuminating whatever expression
of pleasure had formed on his face. I shuddered as I imagined his facial features grotesquely distorted by the darkness of the room and the competing glow emanating from the computer monitor. I wondered who the subjects of those pictures were, if they were victims or volunteers - not that it mattered to him. He had never cared about the plot of things, just the shock appeal of the final product.

This was far easier for him than attempting to 'accidentally' brush his hands against me, or 'accidentally' slip a finger beneath the waistline of my blue jeans during some permutation of a pat on the back or hug he'd give while sitting next to me. I suppose the computer screen was a much less threatening and risky victim. For him, there was no danger clickclickclicking on the computer. Pictures can't speak. Those girls couldn't feel the burning eyes of cyberspace upon them every minute of every day, could they?

**Dear Joan**

*I pick up the pieces*

*But some scatter too far*

*You see they flew when I kicked them*

Perhaps I had over reacted. Perhaps he had never meant to touch me in places to set my entire body ablaze with a knowing-and-not-acting fire. Flames sounded cool then, would've broken the fever that had me soaked and trembling. I continued to prevent my brain from firing off any signals of movement. He thought the rest of the house asleep - best to keep it that way.

*I know you believed when I said it was over*

*You stood by me*

*Patiently waiting and brooding*

*So deeply in love*

*With every face that I've shown*

If one is going to commit a moral (this had to be at least a moral) crime, one should be intelligent enough to hide it, as one of the main objectives of criminals is generally not to get caught. But he always left remnants of his late-night antics within the memory of the computer’s web search. I could type 'www.' and a letter of the alphabet, and at least one page would appear in the auto-fill that didn't sound familiar. I discovered this one day while home alone, stumbling upon the incriminating evidence while trying to check my email. Did he think I would not notice, that there was no chance I might accidentally click on something listed next to hotmail?

Once I forget

Twice I'm a fool

Three times I wrap my hands around your neck

While you're sleeping

You're quietly sleeping

Sleeping and dreaming

I clung to the music as much as I clung to the bed. My pillowcase was soaked in patches. If he wasn't literally twice my size and could throw me over his shoulder as if I were a toddler, I might’ve contemplated wrapping hands around his neck and squeezing. But what then? No physical evidence of his provocations. No one would recognize his wrongdoings then if they didn’t now.

I succumbed to my anxiousness and rolled over in bed, remembering the dream I’d had the night before. I was trapped on my bed, screaming for help because, for some reason, I couldn’t move on my own. The light was on in the bedroom (unusually bright with a reddish tinge), and I thought Mom might hear me and come. But he entered instead, dark, dead eyes staring down at me. He forced me into embraced, and even in the dreaming world I suffocated beneath the grip that threatened to crush me. The world grew fuzzy when he wrapped vice-like hands around my neck, and my consciousness was lost even in dreams.

**Dear Joan**

*Don't walk out that doorway*

*Because if you did, I believe*

*I could honestly kill you*

The clicking stopped. I pulled one side of my headphones off. I listened. The keyboard shelf thundered back into its slot. A cabinet door clacked. The door creaked. Mom heard not a bit of his activity. He was done for the night. I had sat up and coiled around myself. I waited to see if there would be another nighttime visit to my room.

Footsteps meandered close to my room. But they took the appropriate turn, and his strides barked into their bedroom, popping over the loose floorboards beneath the carpet. Nothing more tonight. I laid back against my damp pillow, refocused on the music, let my eyes fall closed.

**Dear Joan**

*I wanted to say*
That I’m sorry for the screaming last night
And the nights before
Well I’ve wanted more from this
Than anything I’ve ever known

Dear Joan

In the Vineyard, as a Child, I was Frightened
John Stanford Owen

Consider the days of a vineyard under the whirling
winter’s silver breath: the wind coils
around the grapevine’s throat, seeps
into the flora’s mouth, sleeps,
and leaves naked stalks to be scythed
from the posts. I was ten when I watched
a weathered man cutting, with a sickle,
away lifeless grapes and leaves, dried up
like his tumored skin. I was frightened
of him wiping winter sweat, with a glove-husked
hand, from his brow, but so young,
I was frightened of everything.

Now consider that vineyard in spring:
winter brown birthing green with milkweed,
goldenrod, clove crawling under the wooden foot
of the trellis. Notice the would-be-captive
fragrance matching the musk
of burial clothes; how like us to turn all things
to death. Even the grapes know it: all things alive
will die, especially in spring when grapes grow
plump with nectar and get plucked
for wine. Consider the procedure, the vinification:
for white, the grapes are pruned by the bunch,
the membrane peeled from the head;
red is made from the must, the pulp,
with the skin left to stay in the mush bucket,
aging, turning sugar to spirits.

It was on my eleventh birthday when my mother
walked the aisles so slowly, and ran her fingers
across the fruit-rows, cupping the bottom
of the pinot-cluster most filled with juice.
From the stalk she pulled them from the garland,
laid them in a wicker basket,
and I was frightened of her gentility when she
washed away the earth from the fruit,
but so young, I was frightened of everything,
even a vineyard, even my first glass of wine.
Bitter Insomniac
Jay Sizemore

The night's clammy hands
are pulling me apart
at the cellular level,
leaving me a bone sculpture,
devoid of blood and sensation.

Fuck dreaming.
I want to curl up and sleep
in the crusty corners of your eyes.

The days are too long; they wear thin
until I can almost see through the fabric stretched
between the sun and the sky.

Sleep will come like a dirty thief, and steal the marrow from my bones.

I won't notice.

Surgeon General
Felicia Stinson

"You're doing it wrong," she chastises grabbing the pen from my mouth.

"Okay, pucker your lips," she directs, handing me the ball-point pen once I do it properly.

"Hold it between your fingers like this." She holds up her own hand as example, where the cigarette is held lightly between two fingers suspended, defying gravity by my sister's magic.

"Now inhale and hold it for a few seconds," she orders. I take the deepest breath I can, tightening my chapped lips against the smooth white end of the pen. I wait for her to tell me to breathe again. She just watches me, twirling a strand of her wavy blonde hair around her finger until the tip of it turns red from a lack of circulation.

"Exhale," she murmurs starting to get bored, taking a drag of her real cigarette. "Okay now go play," she shoves me away and lounges back in the dining room her feet propped on the table.

Surgeon General's Warning—this may be hazardous to your health

She never did warn me.

There are some siblings who confide everything in each other, who are inseparable. There are Leave It To Beaver families out there, or there are the ones who cover-up their dirty secrets in order to look like that type of family. Mine never bothered with those types of pretensions until we weren't a family anymore.

My sister and I already had eleven years of distance working against us. In the distance was so much more than age. She was old enough to know what was going on with our family just as I was learning there was something wrong.

"I told you not to come in my room!" was a sort of mantra she always repeated. She was more than three times my age, and her orders were often veils to her subtle threats. But I wanted into her room so badly, how I wished her rebellious attitude and independence would rub off on me. It was worth the risk of getting yelled at or being reduced to tears. It was time for an offensive move.

Her long, pale, lanky body would be lying across the water-bed, partially hidden beneath the black waves of her comforter. Her nose would either be buried near the spine of a book or pointed towards the ceiling as she whispered on the phone to her friends, the other delinquents in my parents' eyes. Yet, no matter how distracted
she seemed, Sissy was always poised for attack.

Turning the knob slowly, the lock no longer allowed on her door by our parents. I would creep in taking cover behind a metal Joe Camel sign. Like entering a battle zone, I had to be strategic in my approach, and like war, the spoils are worth the fight. I’d murmur her name “Sissy,” slowly increasing volume until she noticed me. Meanwhile, my gaze would drift over the clutter of the room. I would look at the prisoners of war strewn across the room—my stuffed rabbit with the prettier ears, the girl teddy bear that matched the boy, the larger kit-n’-caboodle, and anything else I had that she thought was better. In some ways it felt like a competition, the rift that was the start of the crack. In my sister’s eyes I had the better deal as the planned, pampered child. She had been the catalyst to a shotgun wedding and grew up in a shared home with an outhouse. But she had the one thing I wanted most—knowledge. She knew the fragile balance our family was suspended on was falling apart. I was always left in the dark, not worth consideration.

But none of that mattered as her blue eyes would finally settle on my 5-year-old body and narrow with my presence.

“Get out!” she’d bark.

Surgeon General’s Warning—war may cause conflict.

So I lied, a useful diversionary tactic. I’d tell her I just want to play with my toys, or I want to pet the cat. Sissy would sneer and turn away, back to her book or her druggie friends on the phone. She ignored me while I was there.

Victory! The battle is won... and I’m gaining ground.

“Leave my Atari alone,” she cautioned starting to watch me closely. I didn’t reply. I just moved hesitantly towards the game system and the black and white TV propped up on a wicker footstool. Her gaze followed me. I turned the knob to the TV adjusting the channel and the antenna. “That’s mine. Now Leave. It. Alone!”

“So can I play Space Invaders?”

“No,” she said bluntly.

When she finally turned away again because her friend on the phone has said something amusing, I switched on the Atari and died twice before she cared enough to get off the bed and grab the controller from my weak grip.

“You’re doing it wrong,” a phrase I’ve heard many times before. She stared at the screen and maneuvered the joystick around effortlessly. Her spaceship moved around the black abyss of the TV, shooting the aliens more by the whim of her mind than her skill with the controller. Out of the corner of her mouth, she explained what she was doing, why, how.

It’s important to know how to stop the aliens from taking over. It’s important to learn how to protect your world. When something foreign creeps in, trying to destroy everything you know, it’s human to want to know how to protect yourself.

She plopped the joystick back into my lap as it moved to the next harder level. Sissy showed me how to play the game just in time for it to be so difficult I’d have to start all over again. Maybe I didn’t get through unscathed, but Sissy always at least taught me enough to... make it through the next level. It was all about survival, in the most sane way possible.

I still played the Atari, not dying as quickly now. I was more surprised, however, that as Sissy paced around the room on the phone she didn’t throw me out of her room for repeatedly ignoring her orders. She just completely ignored me until I left on my own. She would teach me the bare necessities of how to survive, but never bothered with the why... are we even fighting? Some questions just aren’t ready for answers. Sissy just assumed I’d be safer not knowing. Yet look what happened to Pandora. If Zeus had just explained what was in the box it never would have been opened, a world without turmoil. But then, my sister was more into skipping school back then, she probably missed the lesson on Greek mythology.

Even at the darkest point of the night, the round golden door-knob of my sister’s door was still visible enough for my hands to find it though my feet stumbled. I hesitated for a moment, looking behind me at my parent’s bedroom door. I didn’t go to them though; they would just carry me back to my own bed, telling me everything would be okay, that nothing could come in and get me in the middle of the night. I knew better, and it didn’t help that their agitated voices during the night were part of the “boogie man.”

Making a decision, I quietly turned the knob of Sissy’s door and crept in on my tiptoes clutching my blanket and dragging my Sebastian the Crab pillow. Silently I lay down at the end of her bed, my back pressed against the wood boards holding the water-filled mattress. I was safe there.

I knew that Sissy would be angry in the morning. She had warned me repeatedly before we had rented Halloween: Revenge of Michael Myers that I was not under any circumstances to sleep in her room. I had nodded my head profusely, just thankful that she was indulging my passion for cliché horror films. I had meant to keep my promise and stay in my own bedroom, but sometimes bad dreams are the stronger fear.
"I told you that you couldn't sleep with me tonight," she commented groggily. Darn, I thought I'd been quiet. "Here," she said dropping a blanket off the end of the bed, so it dropped on top of me. "It's cold."

There were no “everything is going to be all right” or “Michael Myers is not out to get you” speeches. I didn't need to hear that. She could have told me that she didn't throw me out into the hall because she understood that I felt safer with her—the angry rebel—than with my own parents. Around them everything was tense, uncomfortable. I sat in wait of the breakdown. Sissy admitted in every breath she took that our home was hell and she dealt with it. She was cold to the tension, however, that made her cold to me as well. No one was perfect, but Sissy kept me out of the crossfire the best she could. She at least offered me a place on the floor.

It was finally a night I was not plagued by nightmares and had managed to stay contently in bed. I couldn't have run to Sissy's room anyway since she had gone out with friends. Yet, around two in the morning, my dad dragged her home and the nightmares came with her.

Disappointed. Unacceptable. How could you? Look at me! I hate you...

Late again. Drunk again. Angry still. Sissy wasn't holding back. Even Mom yelled, forgetting she was supposed to be the good "Christian mother." The subtlety and subdued anger melted away. In one night, the doors flew open and chaos reigned. My door stayed closed, muffling the heated shouts.

I tucked my knees up to my chin in fetal position and wrapped my arms around my shins. My tempers started to ache because my eyes were so tightly shut. At least I didn't cry. Instead, I remained frozen in my bed, hoping it would stop.

As I listened to the argument, which had developed into pointless, hateful, screams, I was torn between the safety of my bed and a desire to open my door and join the fight. I had something to say as well. I was young, but I wasn't stupid. I was angry that my family couldn't control themselves and even more so that they had forgotten I was around while they sparred verbal blows. Yet mostly, I wanted to run out and protect my sister, maybe even hide her in my room.

I never left my room and after what felt like years of yelling, I heard the couch scratch against the floor and a loud thud that jarred the house. My sister's door slammed shut behind her moments later. It was a few days later when I followed my mother to the high school principal's office. My sister had a suspicious bruise—

Surgeon General’s Warning—anger is the leading cause of injury

That night was far from the last fight, though the others lacked quite the intensity. The arguments accumulated at faster rates and grew more destructive in their paths. It was a cool, collected sense of hate with stony, unreadable glares and biting remarks accompanied every other word. Even Orwell would have had trouble keeping up with the ambiguous statements, much less a confused child. Yet for the next few years I may not have understood things, but I felt the tension when anyone entered a room, I noticed the scathing looks, and, impossible to miss, were the shout.

They would argue about everything, anything, whatever was available. My sister's behavior was the easiest outlet, but their other fights were to blame for that. So much hate streamed between them that even the other's voice stirred the rage boiling under the surface, regardless of what or who was around them.

I was seven and my parents couldn't even wait until I was asleep. By the middle of the afternoon they had retreated to the back room to yell and scream in peace. It sounded like they were killing each other. During this, I had been left alone, forgotten like usual, trying to stay calm, left to fend for myself.

I pulled my pajama shirt, a previously over-sized tee that had belonged to my sister, over my knees and tried to watch the movie as Chucky the doll terrorized the little kid. But the murderous doll didn't stop me from flinching each time there was a thud or a slap, and he couldn't distract me from grimacing when my mom or dad's voice became so loud it echoed in my ears. All I could focus on was the noise from the back room, so I searched for an exit.

I looked out at the carport from the curled up ball I had become on the couch. Sensing the growing tension between our parents, my sister and her boyfriend had escaped earlier to Sissy's wrecked Beretta, currently waiting repairs. She had told me to stay put as our parent's voices escalated in volume; I wasn't to go out to the car.

The gravel on the carport dug in the tender soles of my feet, so I just ran faster. Sobbing, I disregarded my sister's order again and hoped this wouldn't be the one time she decided to throw me out—to keep the doors closed. No, not today. This time I didn't have to sneak in with some made up excuse or even touch the handle of the car door. Before I was even close to the car, Sissy had opened her door for me.
Her hand slid under my arms once I was near enough, and she pulled me into her lap, embracing me. I cried into her chest, and she petted my hair, asking if I was going to be okay. I had never been that close to my sister before. My sobbing slowed since I was no longer bombarded by the constant shrieks of my parents, and I pulled away from my sister, sitting with my back against the consol of the passenger seat. My sister rubbed her hand up and down my arm as I played with the strands hanging off the holes of her jeans.

“You can stay in here,” she told me. I watched her hesitantly. She had never willingly offered me a chance to stay with her. I looked over at her boyfriend in the driver’s seat smoking a cigarette. He just shrugged and nodded. With that, I crawled over the shifter to the backseat. I didn’t want to press my luck by staying in the front.

Things stayed quiet. I didn’t trust myself to say anything and the pair in the front seat were too busy smoking to really talk. Finally, Sissy’s boyfriend turned in his seat and handed me his cigarette.

“You wanna try it?” I pulled back unsure.

“Don’t give her that,” Sissy chastised.

“It okay,” I mumbled and took the cigarette. “I know how.”

Pucker your lips; hold the cigarette between two fingers, inhale and… that was as far as I managed. I swallowed as I inhaled unprepared for the smoke. It felt as though my throat and lungs had been completely charred. I began coughing uncontrollably and handed the cigarette back to the boyfriend. Sissy asked if I was okay, and I nodded. I could feel my insides turning black. Her boyfriend started to chuckle and mentioned that I shouldn’t have really inhaled.

Surgeon General’s Warning—smoking may cause lung cancer

The burning hurt more than anything I had ever felt before, yet somehow through the pain, I still felt better inside; safe on the other side of the car door, than I had before, completely open and alone in the living room.

The three of us sat in the car until her boyfriend went home that night. There were only a few monosyllables spoken intermittently as they chained smoked through two packs. While I stayed in the backseat, biting my nails watching the smoke billow like thunder clouds from her nose and mouth.

The drinking, the drugs, late nights, and promiscuity; It was self-destructive rebellion to dull the pain inflicted by our parents. Mistakes, which hurt like a cigarette burn, that fade into a scar. Then, she just did it over and over again. Because once you feel so much pain it eventually becomes a numbing tingle.

Surgeon General’s Warning—forget it...you keep smoking anyway
Sleep Journals
John Stanford Owen

Yes, sleep. It's a tiny prayer, Lord,
for when my body lulls and anchors

the frailty of sleep speaks in a language
I do not understand. My mother,

I slept inside of her. On the sixth
month, she was forced to lie in bed,

began to keep a journal. If Johnny lives
through this, she wrote, I will teach him

how to admire his laughing, his reflection
in river water. My father understood

sleeping more than anyone, but he never
prayed that way. He hid his ghost-ships

in desk drawers, in bottles of gin.
Drunk, he wish-boned my mother's legs

by her ankles, put me inside of her,
his breath still on her neck.

When I came out, curious faces
gathered round and lined up to touch

my slippery, cone-shaped head.
Could I think, I must have

thought "If this is living, I want
to go back to sleep where I admire

my hands, where the water is warm."
My mother wrote, Johnny lives. Now.

I will teach him to praise life. but I
only wanted to praise these strange
words I keep hearing in my sleep.
Thinking of Ways to Forget  
Brooke Shafar

I wonder what would happen if I cut a part synapses in my brain, let gray matter writhe in death throes, shut my eyes and memories ooze from temples to cheeks to chin,

free fall
to a puddle of
still images between my feet so I shiver when they gush crimson 'round wriggling toes I dance and kick and smudge and smear them—'til I can't decipher them as frames of past presents belonging to my mind; broken connections can't remember.

God Will Not Let Us Be Champions  
Kimberly J. Reynolds

I am a young girl primped, pinched, and perfumed for Sunday service. I'm in for a grim ride. Church scares me, especially since it's the Southern Baptist kind. Maybe I'm scared to disappoint my Grandpa again from not getting the Holy Ghost, or maybe it's the way the steeple rises severely, like an axe mid death stroke, casting a rug of graying shadow before me. I take that shadow as a bad sign, but I march those patent leathers up the arching entry and slip in anyway. There's the faint but distinct odor of mothballs and Old Spice lingering like something dead on the breeze. The preacher mops his sweat-laden brow with a dingy handkerchief that has been embroidered by his doting wife, it has hand-stitched initials and is edged with tiny, yellow flowers. Rows of oak pews with blue felt backing float around me like lifeboats, but I keep walking toward my Grandpa, wearing his old browning skin like a bronze medal, and the modest wooden altar. My feet are heavy. Cement shoes, my Momma calls them.

Now I'm drifting, shuffling one foot in front of the other, and thinking about the gangsters in New York that whack stoolies in those kinds of shoes. What a way to go. Flailing and flapping all the way down past the fish until you are settled there at the ocean floor looking out amid that expanse of waterscape and seeing what the fish see: sunken ships, seaweed reaching upwards like so many octopus legs, and maybe other poor souls who faced the same fate; their blue bloated bodies, arms and hair stretching up towards light breaking across the steeple of water, and in their snug little cement shoes just like you. I read about those kinds of things in detective novels. I read all kinds of books. I read the Bible for Grandpa so he can preach his sermons. He's been preaching for years, but he never learned to read. My favorite lesson from the Bible is whatever God speaks becomes real. All the power to create is locked in those secret words.

The closer I get to the altar the heavier my feet get. Momma says my cement shoes are really the Devil. When I asked her why the Devil makes my feet heavy she said, "He's trying to talk you out of it."

I don't say anything back to Momma about it, but I secretly believe the Devil has better things to do than talk me out of being saved. He's probably talking the president's ear off right now. Power. He's probably convincing the terrorists to kill Americans. Martyr. He's probably telling the rich to get richer. Dollar signs.
But I know he isn’t talking to me. It’s my own fear of failure that’s making the floor under my feet feel like quicksand. Momma desperately wants me to get saved on account of what happened to Elizabeth Sparrows, one of my classmates at school. Seems she went and shot herself after Jeff Mackey dumped her for Rachel Rue. The doctor called it depression, but I know it was the Devil and her Daddy’s pistol. Momma didn’t want to dwell on it too much, but I know all about it. In small towns, you hear people talk.

Sometimes, when my Grandpa’s out, I look at the guns in his cabinet out in the barn, even though I am not supposed to. He hides the bullets to his gun collection out in the shed. Holding a gun makes me feel closer to Elizabeth, like I can understand what she was thinking when she did it. I hold one to my right temple and look sidelong at its barrel. Its sight emerges like a gray shark fin circling fresh blood in the ocean, the gunmetal gray stalking its fresh prey, the rows of razor teeth rising like pale gravestones jutting from cemetery ground. I always get scared and pull it away. I can’t see how she could do it unless the Devil was pulling at her strings like a marionette.

When I finally reach the altar, I kneel down to pray. It’s my thirteenth try, and I’m starting to give up hope of ever being saved. Grandpa’s eyes are dim but hopeful, and when I look up at him his lips stretch smoothly across a mouthful of enameled headstones. At the altar, I pray for Elizabeth to somehow be safe in Heaven and for all the stoolies that are in the ocean right now. I pray for Jesus to save me and impart the Holy Spirit, but he never comes. Not like Momma said he would. Not like the picture books, I read as a kid with Jesus gathering around the little children and lambs. No flocks of angels or weight being lifted from my shoulders. I imagine he has better things to do. I hear the congregation coming around from the safety of the lifeboats to kneel and pray with me after a few minutes. They know the drill. They’re crying and praying. They’re wanting a reborn Christian today. They’re wanting me to be bonafide by the blood. They’re wasting their breath.

II

I tried for one whole year before I realized I wasn’t meant to be saved. I think Grandpa and the whole church kind of gave up on me. I am going bad and Momma just can’t accept that. But if Heaven won’t have me, then Hell will. If the church taught me anything though, it’s the power of words. When God created the world, he simply uttered words. 

“Let there be light,” he said and there was.

If Grandpa could’ve read he would’ve been the best preacher around—Hell, maybe I’d be saved by now. I figure all the writers must be just about as close to God as you can get. They, like God, create worlds with words.

Not all writers are going to Heaven though. I like to think about who’s in Hell when I sneak out to smoke with my boyfriend, Jimmy, out in the barn; it helps me get a sense of who’ll be there. I know Sylvia Plath’s there for sticking her head in an oven. Reminds me of Hansel and Gretel when they pulled the reversal and pushed the old gingerbread witch into the oven. Charles Bukowski’s there for being a pervert. God put warts and boils all over him to keep the ladies from looking but that didn’t stop him. Edgar Allan Poe’s there for drinking until his liver gave out. I can’t say that I blame him for wanting to escape those nightmares judging by the stuff he wrote. Jimmy breaks my concentration as he fumbles for the lighter in the front pocket of his dirty blue jeans. Taking it, I put flame to the jay again and exhale a spindly of smoke that curls like a lazy, gray cat to the ceiling. The overhead light swings like an eager guillotine.

“Pass that shit,” Jimmy says with hungry baby bird fingers.

Jimmy’s a softhearted stoner with a bit of a hair-lip. Momma says that little indentation above the top lip is where angels touch you before you’re born to make you forget Heaven. Well in Jimmy’s case that must of been one Hell of an angel.

I never had boyfriends when I was in church, but then again, I never smoked grass when I was in church either. I figure if I’m going bad why not go all the way. After smoking cigarettes and pot, sex seems to be the obvious next step toward going bad. Ever since I promised Jimmy my virginity, he’s been sniffing around me like a starved dog. I can tell by the savage look in his eyes that tonight’s the night.

Jimmy’s coming at me like a punch-drunk octopus. His tentacles are fumbling for glory.

I am a young girl stretched naked and numb across a bed of hay. I’m in for a grim ride. This boy’s name is Jimmy, he’s horny, and he won’t stop pounding my hymen until I’m hollering in pain. I’m a stone’s throw away. Buttons fall from my shirt like little, white stars. With my eyes clenched shut and my hands clutching handfuls of his shirt, I listen to the grunting passion. He’s a werewolf mounting me and howling at the full moon. Sweat runs smooth down the pale flanks of my legs. He’s panting so loud I’m afraid the barn will fall down. I listen to Momma’s voice inside my head instead.

“It’s the Devil trying to talk you into it.”

Her voice is as useless now as a wet towel. Momma wouldn’t be proud of her little grasshopper girl wriggling in the hay like an earth-
worn in dirt. Dust to dust and ashes, ashes we all fall down. After a few minutes, he’s looking like a Duchamp and I’m reeling with the blur. Steady boy, don’t spend it just yet. My eyes snap open and shut like a Venus flytrap swallowing a fruit fly. He is a horror film. Red and several shades of gray. I look away. The moon hangs heavy in a battered sky. I spy with my little eye: a pitchfork. A serpent’s forked tongue. A fork in the road: Heaven or Hell and I’ll never tell. My secret.

III

I am a young girl strapped, saddled, and stirrupped to the hospital bed. I’m in for a grim ride. This horsey’s name is Hell’s Stallion and he won’t stop galloping until I’m hollering in Hades. I’m a stones throw away. With my eyes I follow a long, skinny crack in the wall looking like God’s shoeshine smile slipping at me because Momma’s nowhere around. She wouldn’t be proud of her little grasshopper girl jumping on the table like a wily squirrel so I lay like snow in a Robert Frost poem. The doctors teeter in like wobbly bowling pins and put the thorn in my arm. After a few minutes, they’re looking like a Picasso and I’m ready with my lasso. Steady boy, don’t spend it just yet.

They wheel me past all the girls in white socks and curls to the octopus machine. Lucky for me its still hide-and-sleeping. One doctor inspects a tentacle that coils uselessly about his hand.

“Will it hurt?”

He is a silent film. Black and white. The other comes at me with the anesthesia veil, and I remember Papaw telling me about the tearing of the veil at the exact moment of Christ’s death, and covers my nose and mouth.

“Count back from one hundred,” he monotones.

“100, 99, 98, 97.”

They are gonna feed me to the beast. I see its tentacles stir for only a second before the pillow top and lemon drop backgrounds morph into dreamscape.

I’m still a coltish thing, running with Papaw through Indian trees. They are wiser than both of us are, but they don’t have the lips to tell us what we’re running from. The sky hangs three moons in different phases. I ask Papaw what it means.

“It’s the end of the world,” all hellfire and brimstone style. We are running to the safety of my little white house. But when we finally reach the front porch, the glass wall keeps us from getting in.

Upon waking, my eyes are dying moths just flapping and flailing to open and flutter away. The octopus’s tentacles are alive and wriggling to getta hold uh me. The suction-cupped mouth of one tentacle is slurping the life outta me. My legs are all jabber jabber in the stirrups. Back in the saddle again. My heart is all pitter-patter in the drum line. It is all lightning percussion in my mind. The blood flows up and down teeter-totter style through the tubes. I’m bacon in God’s frying pan.

After the sacrifice, I am wheeled away to the recovery room and the girls in white socks and curls. Their eyes are fallen soldiers. Their beaks whittle at cookies. I am in the saddest music box. I am the tiny dancer twirling toward the floor. This room has too much gravity and it bows my legs when I try to stand. I feel nothing like Neil Armstrong ready to plant the flag. I remember the three moons from my dream and laugh because I know Neil has only been to one of them.

“God will not let us be champions,” I say, and it becomes real.
I'll Dress My Girl
Jessica M. Williams

I'll dress my girl in stripes
So that she won't be a spot on the wall.
So that her lines will flow forever on
Like mine couldn't.

I'll dress my girl in red
So that she'll be seen for miles around.
So that she'll swim freely in a sea of gray
That I drowned in.

I'll dress my girl myself
So that she won't make mistakes in the process
So that she won't end up naked
Like me.
Directions to a Minton Hollow Bat Cave
Brett Gray

left on Old U.S. 27 (loop 3)
right on Minton Hollow Road
drive by old blue peeled snake skin house
see the billy goats
penned in Mother Mary bathtub shrine backyard
wave at
squinting locals
stop.
bathe in gravel dust
pick up shattered Coke bottles
waterlogged cigarette butts
and bullet-ridden beer cans
follow the spray-painted trees
and tick-laden paths made
by ATV's
go down
and down
and down . . .
to hidden black thickets
and spider's fingers
briars
crags
trudge half an hour or more
see all signs of desecration
swallowed
slowly
beneath the cathedral canopy

rest.
upon these jutting rocks
damp
and creeping with moss
God made monoliths here . . .
test flashlight.
tread now into the lost and found
dripping green ground
beside tight walls squirming
translucent-winged angels
--sleeping--do not disturb
five-finger fluttering
webbed
silent vespers
they awaken in darkness
and speak in tongues
you and I can't decipher
Explain to me the origin of water, how hydrogen and oxygen can bond in volcanic steam on the icy heads of comets can change the face of a world, exploding... or erupting into the foundations of mortality, the soupy mixture of salt and protein that *breathes*, in the misty sighs of waves, and gestates parameciums and amoebas that eventually become fish, develop lungs and walk on land, evolve into German shepherds, iguanas, or people.

Explain the origin of every grain of sand that might find its way into an oyster's mouth ground out of the rocks of cliffs by the incessant tongue of the sea, the human equivalent of a canker sore or a prostate tumor that rich women collect to wear on strings around their necks with black dresses: the prostrate tumors of mollusks.

Explain to me the way time moves always forward, like the hands on my clock unless it's time to "fall backward" and I have to run around the house at two a.m. or midnight and wind cogs or set the digital numbers on my VCR in accordance with the national standard for daylight savings. For a moment, when I am setting the clocks, time stands still and then without even moving much more than a finger, I have added an extra hour to the day.

What if I perpetually wound my clock? Could I live forever? Would the sun never set again outside the windows of my house and turn my kitchen into the red furnace of hell? Could I forget that it has been nearly a year since she has touched me or wanted to be touched that no candles have burned inside lamps or inside ourselves for so long that I have lost the scent of smoke and the pain of searing desire to empty space and rust.

Explain to me far off looks and the dirty black stains of soot on the pads of her thumb and forefinger that must have been licked carefully to dampen the skin and avoid the sensation of heat by a tongue that would rather lubricate sounds of breaking bones than lick my wounds, a tongue that used to enjoy turning me into sand.
Other
Jessica M. Williams

While filling out the cover page of tests, such as the ACT, I look around the room to see everyone speeding through this effortless preliminary questionnaire and I am taken back. Name, birth date, age? I have those down pat. I know them like the palms of my hands. But race, like the color on the backs of my hands, is a secluded, recurring theme for me.

There is something extraordinarily gratifying yet astonishingly discomforting about checking OTHER when race reveals itself as one of the determining questions in an analysis. I have had to respond to that particular question that way for some years now. It always made my schools angry, being that they sought clear-cut, distinct state testing score results, and apparently “other” just did not fit into their profile. “Just mark African American Jessie.” That is what they would tell me. And when I was younger, I did. Without question, they told me exactly what to put and I would put it thinking they knew all the answers. But who is “They,” and why do “They” think they can tell me who I am?

I am, OTHER: a combination of everything, but none of the above; too light to be black, too dark to be white, too American to be foreign, but too foreign to be Native.

Other: being the one left; being the one distinct from those first mentioned; distinct, different, extra, further, new, additional, supplementary.

That is what Webster says, and for the most part, he is correct, but Webster did not sit in a classroom, looking around and seeing no one the same color as you. Webster did not sense the cold stares of strangers while out with your family. He did not feel the knot in your throat when you father’s relatives came around and you were unable to fit in with them. He definitely never got nicknames like Casper, and Old Yellow at which everyone would laugh but you. On the other hand, Webster did not have a great great grandmother who would hold you in her arms, hum her native spirituals and name you Goldie, because “you shine like nothing anyone has ever seen, and everyone knows it but you”. Other was not something I gradually slipped into; it was who I was born to be.

My mother shares the story of my birth like a massive supply of stolen cupcakes. The tale of a young single woman in the hospital giving birth to her second child goes something like this; there were doctors all over the hospital room, but she was alone. She was spread out on the table like a Thanksgiving feast; lights were blinding her already obscured view because she was rushed from her room into surgery without her glasses. Medical jargon filled the air; confusion hovered over the head of the twenty year old. Six minutes in, they pull out a soundless infant, who was once just a figment of her imagination; exposing her to this world she was to call home. The baby was paler than the sheets they placed her upon and the doctors were flabbergasted. She asked to see her baby, but they would not let her, like it was some big secret that her baby was not breathing. She was stitched up and taken back to her room before she even heard her daughter cry. Two hours later, a doctor and a nurse come to her room. The nurse was holding a bundle with a pink hat on.

The doctor smiled, “We know you are a young, and struggling single mother. So we, my wife and I, want to adopt her. Your other baby.” After my family generously donated mouthfuls of words that proved their country ghetto upbringing, the doctor backed off, and she held her other baby for the first time.

“The other baby was special from the beginning. Even the doctors saw that.” Mom always tried to explain my guise as if it were some miracle. But what was the miracle in being unidentifiable? The answers to that question, unlike the title, came with time, and were developed by those around me.

A person is unfortunately more or less what their environment portrays them to be. My environment, excluding my mother and siblings, always treated me differently. My instructors in school always compared me to my African American peers, but grouped me with my Caucasian peers, therefore leading the African American students, that I felt most comfortable around, to shun me and consider me a tanned Caucasian. I went to a predominantly black church, but spent Saturdays at the lake with white friends and family. My cousins and I liked to get our hair done the same way, but I could not wear every style they wore because my hair was too “fine” thanks to my Native American roots. Born a blond, raised a red head, now my hair doesn’t even know who it is. It has turned into this brownish blond corkscrewed contraption that changes just about as much a traffic light. It is a miracle I have made it this far in life.

The miracle lies in the fact that I am hard to remember, and impossible to forget. Not many people forget about a high yellow red head three year old that hangs out with a group of black people.

“Who’s that other kid with them?” That is probably what they said.

Other: Only The Heart Emphasizes Reality. The heart bares all, sees all and knows all. The color of your skin, the texture of your hair, or the width of your nose and lips, does not determine who, or
what you are. Only the heart can articulate those issues. To me, other is exactly that; heart. In marking other, I am exposing the fact that I am more than an image perplexingly pinned on me by society. I, of indiscriminant race, am just like everyone else, but so unique. No one can say that they have experienced life exactly as another person. So in a sense, we are all Others. I lived the other life; the life that makes or breaks you, the life that no one can change, but that everyone has altered. what you are. Only the heart can articulate those issues. To me, other is exactly that; heart. In marking other, I am exposing the fact that I am more than an image perplexingly pinned on me by society. I, of indiscriminant race, am just like everyone else, but so unique. No one can say that they have experienced life exactly as another person. So in a sense, we are all Others. I lived the other life; the life that makes or breaks you, the life that no one can change, but that everyone has altered.

red sprites
Brett Gray

a child
gridlocked and cradled
in Midwestern summer suburbia
we walked home
from an evening with neighbors
I ran ahead to explore the steam bath Eden
of concrete paths and freshly cut grass
leading home.
I saw quiet red lightning
just beneath the black oil
blood and tissue
writhing sinew
come to a boil
behind the murky membrane
my world was soaked in its red spectral haze
with filmy fish eyes
I was hooked
blinded Paleolithic man
I cowered before
such strange, vengeful gods
transfixed by the light show
of alien skies
I ran to the mother ship and waiting arms
Remember, Sophie
John Stanford Owen

"And all men kill the thing they love."
--Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"

I want you to remember me, Sophie, as an eager mouth opening over the arm of Gertrude Stein's statue in Bryant Park. Remember, Sophie, the pedestal was bigger than the woman sitting on it, and I crawled up to kiss the crook of her elbow before the guards noticed.

I want you to remember Three Lives. I want you to remember Anna, Lena, and Melanchta, and how their names got caught up with the words that lived in the nooks of our tongues.

Remember David in Florence? You liked his hipbones, I recall.

Remember the Fellini film in Rome? It was the one with all the clowns and all the crying, and you scooted far away when I laughed at the circus Strong Man who inflated his lungs and broke the chain around his chest. Sophie, you loved the Vatican, and the peacock plume of eyes gawking at the Pope's lotus-white robes. You thought he'd give you a flower name--Lily, Heather, Rose, Violet, Dog-Wort--but he just blew kisses, and threw down prayers as big as Goliath's casket. Now I see you, Sophie, peering around the stairwell in the afternoons, and I remember the band-aids you wore on your ankles to keep your shoes from cutting you.

At night, I dream of you walking on window-sills.

At night, I dream you're teaching me Spanish again.

Love is Amor, you said. Testicle, Testicu. And Death was a word you'd forgotten how to say. I remember, Sophie, the way you hated the hair I left on the soap, and how I refused to write about the sun. You used to love poems beginning with "I," I recall.

You used to wish my hipbones looked like David's.

And, Sophie, I know you've been called to raze something you once loved--the pen-knifed stars on your bedposts, the picture of your sister riding elephants in the sun, and the poem you wrote about it. You've set light to these and watched them turn to a snow of black ash. And, Sophie, I too, have loved the things I've put to sleep--journals, pocket watches, the mole beneath your lips. I kissed their foreheads in the firelight, Sophie,
Contemplating Jazz
Ryan William Hunton

The dim of foggy speakeasy
reeks of old tradition
in a fresh light.
Voices are quiet,
the mood is mellow
as it should be.

At the bar I
hear a woman talk
about phenomenology
and how she thinks
this is exactly how
she's imagined heaven.

The man in brown takes
the stage with a golden trumpet
and the melody begins.
Puffing my cigarette,
I see him lean back
and close his eyes.

He wanders the depths
of smooth definition
with genuine style,
that 21st century savior.
He'd laugh if someone
mentioned the death of jazz.

I see the drummer's eyes
meet the guitarist's.
They don't miss a beat.
And when they close their first number,
al six eyes turn to the crowd
who are, likewise, contemplating.