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“Blue Smoke”

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Brittany Szabo
“This is not an apology.”

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Chad Emerson
“My Doppelganger”

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Kimberly Reynolds
“Medical Record”

Zephyrus Art Award
Shelley Bender
“Dandelions”

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

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.

Faculty advisor: David LeNoir

Printing: Print Media

<http://www.wku.edu/zephyrus>
### Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lacey R. Blankenship</td>
<td>“Civil”</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Buckberry</td>
<td>“Delphi”</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Burchett</td>
<td>“My Lib”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon Hagan</td>
<td>“Big City Bear”</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley Hope Doyle</td>
<td>“When I was a tree”</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Poetry:”</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan Eklund</td>
<td>“Her father”</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad Emerson</td>
<td>“My Doppelganger”</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent Fisk</td>
<td>“Blue Smoke”</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Funk</td>
<td>“Daydream”</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Summer’s End”</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Vignettes of Zelda Fitzgerald”</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie Brinton</td>
<td>“Ciao Bella”</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobbie Hayse</td>
<td>“Birchwood Park”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie Magee</td>
<td>“La Derrota de La Niña”</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Pantoum for Your Garage”</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly Reynolds</td>
<td>“The Whippoorwill”</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Medical Record”</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan Speer</td>
<td>“Tim Geithner”</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie Rogers</td>
<td>“God in The Bomb”</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Bige Burnett</td>
<td>“You Owe Me an Apology”</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie Rogers</td>
<td>“Ode to Silence”</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy Simpson</td>
<td>“Thoughts About Hard News on the First Day of Creative Non-Fiction”</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Spinks</td>
<td>“Bones”</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany Szabo</td>
<td>“Swimming Pools”</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Yiannakos</td>
<td>“When I Boarded the F Train”</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany Szabo</td>
<td>“This is not an apology.”</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Civil
Lacey R. Blankenship

Woman, pull your tongue
tight like a girdle
to the ribs
of your mouth
and breathe silent for awhile
Delphi
Tom Buckberry

Along the footpaths to edification, I came across an overly gregarious man who violated the unwritten laws that govern human space. He extended his hand to me. So I put him in a box.

On the box I fashioned a plaque upon which I inscribed HERE RESIDES AN OVERLY GREGARIOUS MAN, FETTERED FOR UNSOLICITED DISPENSATION OF CONGENIALITY!! So I set about schooling him in the facile nature of his affability.

I spoke to him of atrocities incalculable. Of benevolent civilizations driven into dust by the wicked, Of infants ripped from their mother’s bosom; the prey of blind ataxia, Of boundless love mutated to obtuse repugnance.

I told him all this, opened the box, and sent him down the footpath, contented with the progress of my pedagogies. My gaze followed him long enough to see him embrace the first outlander he encountered without hesitation, and I shook my head.

I turned away and strode the footpath so purblind with knowledge that I paid no heed to the ravine.

My overly gregarious pupil and his new comrade found me, put me in a box, and on my cenotaph inscribed HERE RESIDES AN OVERLY PEDANTIC SOPHIST WHO KNEW TOO MUCH TO KNOW HE KNEW TOO LITTLE.
Once I got to where I was developing my own tastes, I spent less time on Mad Libs and more time on Piers Anthony in <honor/spite> of my father, who enjoyed Anthony’s work, but not as much as Heinlein’s. Ultimately, no matter how many birthdays for which I got ____, and no matter how much ________ there may be in the family, I’ll still owe my dad some amount of gratitude, just as the Mad Lib’s protagonist’s ________ girlfriend will always be <adjective> in the story as his girlfriend.

When I come to look at Mad Libs as actual lives I have to wonder if, by filling in all of these blanks, we aren’t basically playing the role of overbearing parents, ourselves. Who are we to decide what the protagonist’s girlfriend is like? For all that, maybe some of these blanks are blanks for a reason: maybe the protagonist hasn’t decided what he thinks of his girlfriend yet, maybe somewhere there’s a slot that says ________ because he can’t seem to remember the name of that shih-tzu he had when he was a kid. On the other hand, if life is a Mad Lib, aren’t we privileged to be able to read the story before filling our blanks? If my distant aunt decided to buy me a ________ she’d be doing so without the context. So, excepting bad memory like mine and assuming they aren’t blank for good reason, I’m happy to fill them.

The problem is: so are many others. Who’s to say that, one way or another, my friend Emily won’t find some way or another to fill in the blanks of my past, present, and future alike with that which fits her picture of me best? For all that, who’s to say the name “Emily” showing up there isn’t just my father filling yet another slot with what he’d prefer to have there? Call me suspicious, but I find it interesting that my brother ended up majoring in Computer Science, just like my father in his college <major> days and I ended up in Writing, a favorite hobby of my father’s. All of this <major> despite the hours upon hours I spent convincing my brother that our father wasn’t, after all, the source of all the wisdom in the world: he just made a point of carrying a pen with him.

These days, not only am I separated from my father by miles of country roads, but I’m busy with classes and work, so I’m safe from that pen, and on the occasions when it does meet its mark, it writes in illegible chicken scratch. These days, when I flip forward a few pages, I see myself moving to <Japan> after I graduate and making a living <teaching/writing> maybe someday I’ll even marry ________. However, no matter what direction my life takes, there’s one thing my father has ensured: whenever I write, I’ll write in pencil.
When I was a tree

*After Joanie Mackowski*

Lesley Hope Doyle

I was a sycamore,

a "Plantanus occidentalis,"

with thick veined leaves

as wide as dinner plates

whose shadows flirted across my body, making it seem as if I were twisting in the sunshine, serpent-like, out of my skin.

I was clothed in thick grey scrolls of bark that spiraled in upon themselves, scored with the thin signatures of squirrel claws.

Birds would cry out the songs of God from my bleached branches in voices I still hear, in languages I no longer remember.
Poetry:
Lesley Hope Doyle

(art) The delicate quill of night
dips into the inky corners
of me, traces his face
onto the canvas of my eyelids.

(astro.) A fractured half-moon of red lipstick
is tattooed onto the edge
of my mother’s coffee cup.

(botany) “If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves
to a tree, it had better not come at all.” —Keats

(hortic.) The words, “icicle pansies”
on a roadside nursery ad—
Ginsbergs’ “hydrogen jukebox.”

(judic.) “Poetic justice.”

(med.) William Carlos Williams

(meteor.) Pale flecks of snow
dart past my windshield
like bleached fireflies.

(neg.) “When people say to me, ‘I don’t like poetry,’
I tell them that, to me, poetry is like weather—
and you wouldn’t say ‘I don’t like weather,’
would you?” —David Kirby

(occu.) “There’s no money in poetry, but then
there’s no poetry in money, either.” —Robert Graves

(transp.) At the bus stop, sun bleached fliers
are plastered to a telephone pole,
ragged edges fluttering futilely,
like the waving hands
of too-late pedestrians.

See also: gravity (n.): the force of attraction between all
masses in the universe.
**Her father**
Morgan Eklund

Her father was buried in a yellow flannel shirt, a working man’s mosaic.
But first he laid out in a room of floral paper.
A hefty barren mound in a pencil box with a belly spilling over the rim.

If I hadn’t seen him with life
I wouldn’t think twice of him without.
Nor would I want to wipe the soiled glares if I hadn’t scripted the gentle rhythm witnessed.

He slumped dead on a Thursday
So she could not call her father on Friday
So I called mine.
but estrange remains a pitiless sea

We are not ink or pencil curls
We are not mended to understand.

---

**My Doppelganger**
Chad Emerson

Emily wake up. Emily. Shh. It’s midnight. Come on, careful. I heard the monster again. He woke up. We have to hide. Easy. Here I got you some socks. Hurry. The floor is cold. Come on. Under the bed. Under - oh quickly I hear him coming, I think he’s coming Emily.

They crawled under the daybed, knees and shins to the icy hardwood, hair in tangles, hand in hand. Emily cowered against her sister here in the darkness where dust makes you sneeze.
Close your eyes and imagine pretty colors. If you can’t see the monster the monster disappears. Eva told her that. But if you hear it coming you have to open them again. Peer out there into the moonlight where the furniture looks like chipped marble and cement. Where Emily’s doll lies like a dead person, red yarn hair frayed out over a ponytail. Where they once saw a mouse scurry about in search of its family. Where the door rattles and the light comes on and the monster shambles in to take Eva away.
If he gets me, Eva said. Emily listen, okay? If he gets me what do you do?
Put on my ear muffs and use telepathy.
Telepathy. Think about the monster bringing me back. You have to think really hard so you can control his brain. Okay?
Okay. And then you’ll come back.
Then I’ll come back.
And the monster won’t hurt you.
Eva nodded and her grip tightened on Emily’s hand. That’s right.

They waited for sounds of the monster. The big lurching ogre. Mean eyes and dirty claws and sour breath. When they heard it slamming things in the kitchen Eva said, The closet, the closet.
Out from under the bed and tiptoeing across the floor. Wincing when a board creaked. Emily tugged on Eva’s hand to stop her and stretched out and grabbed her doll by the leg. Crying hinges. A pause in the downstairs hubbub. Who or what did the monster despoil?
Inside, Eva said.
You first.
Together.
Okay.
At once they entered the blackness and Eva closed the door. She led Emily to the back corner where they sat on their pillows and
cuddled under the blanket. Eva felt around under the hanging clothes and scooted something close to her. A spark in the nothingness like an exploding star, a flash of white and shadows. Then Eva’s face lit up behind a spastic yellow flame. The smell of purple grapes crept into the air like the faraway jollity of others, as if some invisible thing emerged from the wall to bequeath a whisper of promise and then retreated to its antediluvian quarters.

The candle flame floated to the floor, dimming the orange glow on Eva’s cheeks, and somewhere below them the monster growled.

Eva I’m scared.
Don’t be. Tonight’s the night.
Will it work?
Of course it will, as long as you believe.
Promise me.
Emily I promise.
It’s far away isn’t it.
What’s far away?
Where you’re going.
Yes.
Is momma there?
Eva looked down to the floor, blonde strands of hair spilling over her face. She scratched her long white legs and nodded. One more magic capsule, she said.

They had eleven already, stowed away in the shoebox. Eva stole one from the monster every time it took her. And when we get enough, I’ll take them, she had explained to Emily. And I’ll turn into the knights of the round table and come rescue you.

For all the times I rescued you, Emily had said.
Mmm-hmm. Only when they come, you have to give them what?

Your diary.
And you’ll know it’s me when I do what?
When you say the magic words.
Which are?
My doppelganger.
Good job.
Cause that’s what we are.
We look just alike.
And we have the same heart.
The exact same and how do we know that?
Cause we love all the same stuff. Like kittens and . . .
And tuna sandwiches.
blotting out the world and hoot owls like soothsayers whistle their spooky tunes to signal the night creatures, Come forth and thy blood-lust be satisfied.

Eva.

Footsteps making a crescent shape in volume and the door screamed closed. Emily tossed away her blankets and scurrying back to the closet felt blindly about the floor and found her item of search and hurried back to bed as though ghouls were at her heels. She covered herself again and stretched the ear muffs over her head and closed her eyes and thought with all her might, Bring my sister back.

Wake up Emily. Em. Shh. It’s okay. I’m back. Did you think - you can take them off now. Did you think real hard?

Yuh-huh.
Good job. You can go back to sleep.

Emily looked up to those restless glittery eyes.

Eva?

Yeah.

Will you sleep with me?

For reasons Emily couldn’t comprehend Eva began to cry. She climbed into the bed and over Emily and scooted herself under the covers. Resting her head on the pillow she wrapped her arm around Emily and curled her fingers around Emily’s fingers and hugged those interlocked hands to Emily’s chest.

Don’t cry Eva.

Okay. But she didn’t stop. Emily tried to think hard about Eva not crying.

Did you get another magic castle?

Cap - capsule. Yeah I got it.

Are you gonna take them?

After you fall asleep.

Can I take them too?

No, the oldest has to take them.

Emily hugged her doll in the same fashion that Eva hugged her. She studied the gray-black of the moonlit floor for mice. Cute little animals. Always running darting skittering as if chased by unseen entities. She had once taken a mouse to show-and-tell and the other children poking the glass and screaming had scared it to death. All by itself the little mouse. Emily blamed herself. Every creature is afraid to be alone, and when something big comes along it thinks it will get hurt. Bad thoughts and bad things come from being lonely. She thought about the poor baby mouse often, how she should never have taken it from its family.

Tonight she saw no mice. They were hiding away, shaking in their nests of newspaper and insulation. And if they got hungry enough maybe one brave little mouse would dare nibble the mouse-trap and give himself to the big squish so his brothers and sisters could eat.

Emily closed her eyes and thought hard about the mice finding the leftovers on the kitchen table, so long as the monster slumbered.

Eva I’m scared.

Don’t be. Tonight’s the night.

Knights of the round table.

Exactly.

And I’ll know it’s you cause you’ll say the magic words.

Yep.

Eva?

Yeah.

Did the monster hurt you?

No no, your telepathy worked good.

Eva?

Yeah Emily.

But Emily said no more.

White sunshine and the chimes of birds chirping. Emily awoke sore under her arms and crusty about the nostrils. Eva’s arm lay heavy across her side like a root on a creek bank. She turned over and buried herself into Eva’s chest, hand hooked around the back of the shoulder.

Eva wake up, she said, shaking Eva so slightly. Eva.

The frosty morning air. Emily shivered and shook harder.

Eva you wanna eat some cereal?

Not a stir or the slightest breath.

Eva. Eva you wanna watch Charlotte’s Web?

Emily pushed Eva’s arm away and sat up. The arm fell stone-heavy and the hand bent under it at the wrist. Stringy blonde hair moved down Eva’s cheek.

Eva.

Somewhere below her it stirred.

I don’t wanna play anymore. I’m scared.

She picked it up. Wrapped it over her head. Lay against the pillow and closed her eyes and thought hard, Please please no please Eva.

Eva was still next to her when she awoke, her arms cold, her mouth open.

Don't sleep with your mouth open, Eva had once told her, or spiders will crawl in there.

Eww Eva!

I'm serious.

Nuh-uh.

Eva had then shown her proof in one of her science books. It's okay though, she'd told Emily. They won't bite you.

Still the thought had kept her up nights, and though she yearned for truth as all children do this was something she regretted knowing.

---

Emily if I've taken the magic capsules and you're now reading this please stop or else it won't work. I love you and I'll be back soon.

Emily sneezed and held her doll and kept reading the inscription inside the cover of the diary, the thing above her no longer her sister, the words in the diary all that remained of her in this room. Eva had schooled her in her letters.

To the recipient of this diary: you'll see why this has happened in what follows. You'll see the reasons for what I will now ask of you. Please make Emily believe you're me. Please. I told her I'd turn into knights who would come rescue her. I want her to believe she's not alone. I told her she's my doppelganger. Tell her she's yours too.

---

That morning the monster called to her and with no hand to guide her she went to it, socks loose and pantless down the stairwell, hand to the wall. It asked of Eva and when she gasped and fell to sobbing it stormed up to the bedroom tearing down everything it touched and stomped about and cursed its pitless god. Guttural pleas and raspy condemnation. All by herself Emily sat on the couch and watched out the window as the knights of the round table came in carriages flashing blue and invaded the house and fought the monster to the ground. The monster begging for redemption, the knights offering sympathies.

---

She held the diary to her stomach, and when the knights unshackled the monster she cried out to them and thrust the diary into the hands of the blue-eyed knight.

What's this?

What the hell is that?

Is this yours?

That's hers!

It's Eva's. It's yours.

Give me that! the monster bawled.

Eva wanted to tell you.

The knights shackled the monster again and took him to their carriage. The blue-eyed knight went to the kitchen to sit and study. He held assembly with his army. They whispered to each other and glanced at Emily with sorrow and shame and out of the discussion arose great dispute and the flaring of tempers and Emily sat alone and closed her eyes and tried to ignore the thundering voices like murmurs of curious giants looking down upon her.

---

Battle horns blared and red lights led the convoy. Emily sat bundled in a blanket clutching her doll and crying.

Don't cry hon.

She cried.

You know what? The man turned down his radio. You know what Emily?

Emily looked up at him, lips quivering, throat burning.

You have blue eyes just like me. You notice that hon?

Emily said nothing. She had nothing to say.

I think we look a lot alike. Well you're a pretty little girl, but . . .

The blue-eyed man coughed and looked out the window.

Drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

They got a word for that, he said. Lookin' like somebody?

Doppel- Doppelganger! You're my doppelganger. Yeah that's it.

Right?

Do - do you like Charlotte's Web?

Who?

Emily clutched her doll and stared at its red yarn hair and thought hard about just having cotton.
Blue Smoke

Brent Fisk

At dusk two men drive by,
tan arms dangling from the windows,
lawn mowers jutting from the trunk.
The roof's tattered fabric hangs in the dim interior.
Whole summers consumed with edging sidewalks,
sweeping grass from concrete stoops.

There's a freedom in the scent of mown lawns,
a beater wallet fat with fives,
a car that knocks to a stop all summer.
The sky is touched just yellow
like iced tea too long in a glass.

Blue spruce needle my arm,
and rose thorns scratch the window screens.
Late afternoon and I'm kicking up gravel,
watching boys jump ditches on bikes.

The moon so pale I hardly know it's there,
like the old me in this dream
watching the younger me fritter away a July.
Day lilies close at dusk
as two birds creep toward each other
along a thin wire.

There's my father dead on his feet,
a cigarette behind his ear.
He knuckle-busts an old battery free,
looks at my mother through the window
as she forks ears of Silver Queen
from a steaming pot. My brother is still in her belly,
and for once in my life I'd come at my father's first whistle,
if he'd only cup his hands and fiercely call me home.

Daydream

Heather Funk

Sipping on a yerba mate—kombucha tea? No, blueberry soda,
in her favorite café, I am struck by the ease
with which she speaks. She is, after all, only twenty-
two—make it twenty-one. She is, after all, only twenty-
one. Also striking is her resemblance to certain silent
film stars, a quality that resonates not only from her young
small-lipped face, but also from the self-aware
grace which flows from her animated hands, stirring the
straw in her violet drink, playing with the silver locket
that grazes the neck of her—of her—of her blue vintage
blouse. But the physical descriptions are certainly more her forte,
as is conveyed beautifully in her latest—her first book,
entitled Nowhere Bound, a collection of essays from the time
she quit school and hopped in her car with her
adorable, well-behaved, short-haired dachshund Eliot,
as in T.S., and traversed—is that the right word? the country
washing dishes, selling antiques she found in lovely little shops
from coast to coast, the radio on loud and the windows
all rolled down, sleeping on floors or in parks. She chronicled
her exploits the entire way, really, she says,
just to let her mom know she was still alive; on a blog—
that's such an ugly word—a site which quickly gained
a cult following. In a twist of fate straight out of
some fairy tale—no, out of a postmillennial indie Cinderella film—
Doubleday picked up her story, and her ride to success was as
easy as—as easy as—as sweet as this blueberry soda she has urged me
to try. "Come on, you've flown all the way out to Louisville, and
blueberry soda means spring is here," she says. I obey: I have, after all, come
all the way from New York—San Francisco?—definitely New York
to speak with this young literary star because she is certainly
a busy woman these days. Everybody who was ever
mean to her must surely be so jealous.
The hat of the man sitting next to me at the bus stop is soft and dry and dirty like the skin of the elephants we used to ride (fifteen of us, corralled on top of a swaying dusty beast for two dollars a turn) at the zoo in high July.

Today I knew summer was over—on my way here I saw the withered husk of a banana peel that must once have been the same bright yellow as the sari of the woman standing on the balcony above me. The season went the same way, borne on a Sunday wind that rushed roughly against the side of the house, sounding enough like a July train to lull me back to sleep. It's clove cigarette and dead leaf time now, time for air that nips sweet and cold against the backs of my arms like this fan waiting out its last days in the hallway. And I want so badly to touch that elephant-skin hat, climb on it and let the sun bake my skin again as we swayed back and forth in silky worn windblown dust.

The pear tree was the only cool thing in the hot summer nights of her youth. It grew pale green like a moon goddess outside her bedroom window. In May, white flowers sprang from it like lace. By August, the newly-formed golden fruit perfumed her room heavily and lushly.

Her earliest memories were of color and summer. In the day, everything was hot and golden, lazily baking in the Alabama sun. The gold would fade as the hours passed, into lavender twilight when lightning bugs would set the trees a-glittering. When she was very young she would catch them in her hand, feeling them crawl ever-so-slowly, tickle her palms and glow from between her fingers.

They lived at 6 Pleasant Avenue, she, her mother, her brother, and her father the Judge. When she was older, she detested the street's name for its blandness, but the sound of it would always sting pleasingly and poignantly. Born the same year as a new century, she felt like she had always known that a bigger life was calling her.

But the pear tree on Pleasant Avenue was a good start, a comfortable place despite its oppressive mugginess. Summer days were the only ones she could remember of Alabama, and they wove together to form the tapestry at the background of her life, all gold and violet and clear blue and green and white, which would color even the most dismal blanknesses later on.

The pear tree itself was a beacon and a mother in its way. When she was young she felt she could climb it as high as forever, rest in its arms when she got there. That it would never let her fall.

She maintained very publicly that she detested school, and declared her preference for boys and swimming in the yearbook. These were rightfully things she loved, and both together were best—and lucky was she that her father was the Judge, because when she would swing from the rope at the swimming hole in her pink bathing suit, well, it could set people to talking, as it seemed that she swam wearing nothing at all.

From the time she was very small, she loved her ballet classes. It was all about lovely long stretches to her: of her body, as she reached her arms far enough to embrace the world within her lithe crescent-moon frame; of her mouth, around the French words—plié and jeté, un,
deux, trois all the way up to six, counting out the positions that felt so completely natural to her.

She continued the ballet lessons even into the summer after she left high school. It was the summer the soldiers came to Alabama, scores of young, tidy men, some with comical Northern accents or mustaches which tickled when she kissed them, all willing to share a sip of gin in the moonlight outside of the grand Old Exchange Hotel’s Friday night dances, the contents of their flasks—which glinted in the night—stinging, but warm from resting so close to their skin.

Days before her eighteenth birthday, she performed before the crowd at the Old Exchange, dressed as Folly in flowing green chiffon. She and her mother had labored over the dress for days in their parlor on Pleasant Avenue, and that evening she had posed for photographs among the tiger lilies in the yard, tilting her bare shoulders and holding her mouth just like Ruth Roland, the film star.

She knew the steps to the dance well; she kept her eyes closed the whole time. When she opened them at the end, though, was when she saw the soldier. The soldier with the deep-set eyes under neatly parted blonde hair, combed to either side like most of the others. This one was staring right at her, though, his eyes penetrating and curious. She bit her lip and left the stage, almost uncomfortably aware of the naked, sun-baked gold skin of her shoulders and the un-self-conscious spectacle of her dance. It was as if, to this staring man, she had accidentally given something tender and private, heart or soul or mind.

He was waiting for her when she returned to the dance floor, ready this time to participate in the festivities.

“May I have this dance, m’lady?” he asked her. His voice ran like cool water over rocky creek-beds. “My name’s Scott.”

“Maybe,” she replied, and smiled, close-mouthed. “I’m Zelda.”

**Fruit and Ice; Diamonds, Letters**

He was from Milwaukee, a name which tasted candy-coated, like Jordan almonds in her mouth. He would stand neat and slender with his shirt tucked in just so, leaning against the columns on her front porch, with a pocket knife and a pear in his hand, lazily cutting off slivers of fruit while the juice flowed haphazardly down his hands.

He said that, according to Keats and Browning, she should marry him. She would giggle, only vaguely knowing who Keats and Browning actually were, and coax him to join her on the porch swing, to take a sip of the iced lemonade her mother had made for them which glittered in the pink-orange evening light like liquid sun. He was, she said, an educational feature, his words an overture to romance. He didn’t know that she had almost decided that perhaps she might marry him after all. He was a writer, and he told her exciting stories of cities where no one went to sleep in buildings of glittering stone that stood taller than lobolly pines, places she longed to make her own. There was, too, something about him that was unlike any of the Alabama boys she’d known since she was small, or the soldiers which all proved to be too young and timid, all the men who blended together despite their tickling mustaches, desire whether they were from Montgomery or Montana.

By the time it became too cool to spend his free evenings on the porch with her, he was sent North and probably to France. She promised to write to him.

Soon enough, the war ended, and he’d never even gone. Bright flowers and confetti, thrown from windows along Main Street and Pleasant Avenue, floated slowly to the street as if in sighing relief. Similarly in relief, a diamond ring arrived in the mail, as if to seal her fate.

**With All the Iridescence of the Beginning of the World**

The Cathedral of Notre Dame could not have been as splendid as St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Easter Eve, 1920. The Biltmore Hotel, grander than Versailles; where she and Scott set their Tiffany silverware next to wilting lilies and she learned how to be a writer’s wife.

They returned to New York, to a whirl of marble and silver and electric lights glowing peach, silk to replace her organdy, hotel parties to replace dances at the Old Exchange Hotel. There were, strangely enough, newspapers and magazines, and gin gin gin champagne gin, jazz, dark wood restaurants, and Scott on a typewriter writing stories about her. And here she was in the bathtub with her expensive salts, with the door open and the flat full of people, riding atop a taxi, diving into the fountain at Union Square. Here was broken glass and laughter and dizziness and all the glitter that he promised her, all she wanted, and she took it like someone starved confronted with a feast, took her fill and more.

It is all anyone remembered of her later. But it was gone so quickly, and then they were in Europe.

**Rubber Checks**

Nothing was simple. Obviously, it couldn’t be any more: they had a baby, now, a girl they named after her father. There was
money, too: they spent what they had, he wrote another story or so to make more, which was also quickly spent. Then there was infatuation: he had Ernest and she had Jozan.

Ernest was a great swaggering brute of a man who Scott mother-\-henned in coffee shops all over Paris. Ernest called her crazy. She called him phony as a rubber check.

He was nothing like Jozan, the pilot, of the tan and smile that glinted like a row of piano keys. She was exhausted, and he was more than a cool gravelly voice, he was salt-water on her hot and tired skin, bracingly cold, awakening. It was wonderful to have someone new to tell her she was beautiful, someone who she knew would not turn stolen embraces into fodder for Harper’s.

When Scott found out he locked her in the house, and sometimes she would curse herself as everything she held dear broke into little pieces.

Sometimes, though rarely, life seemed all right after all, when they pretended that the not-so-serious was serious, and their smart and glamorous friends, who called home “the States” and couldn’t imagine life as a Judge’s daughter in Alabama, would smile reassuringly and discuss what mattered to them, which was a million years away from the world that got smaller as she began to see how big it really was.

**And the Earth was Made of Eggshells**

It seemed that all he did in Paris was drink, and all she did was slowly go crazy. So they went to Genoa instead.

She wanted to dance again. She was tired of being a writer’s wife, and longed to dazzle within her own right again, to be Folly or the barbarian princess who had mesmerized the pale blonde writer from the candy city. Her legs had become soft over the years from walking on the bottoms of her feet like everyone else.

A wealthy friend introduced her to Madame. Madame was sternly, severely beautiful, like a waiting hawk. Zelda spent her days at the studio, treated the exercises like a life and death matter—as if pausing to breathe would bring the ceiling crashing down around her.

She was very afraid most of the time, of something she couldn’t name. It was as if nothing would ever be new again. The people they met were the same people they’d always known with different faces, the loose laughing man who she’d married for his glittery promises was silent, sullen, or gone, his face hard, the deepness of his eyes turned simply to shadows. Her daughter was beautiful, but fragile, and Zelda was very afraid she would break her.

Fear begat superstition. Missteps, wearing the wrong color leotard, could unleash a fiery bath of flaming, vengeful fury upon everything she held dear. Concrete objects held prophetic significance, as if carrying a clean handkerchief on a particular day meant her legs would fall off, Madame would vaporize, that her porcelain doll of a daughter would shatter.

In early spring, they were having a luncheon in their flat—whose walls were cream-colored and whose roof was red, the whole thing not-quite-happily bright—during her ballet lesson.

That knowledge—she was missing the most important thing, the thing that gave her purpose, meaning, autonomy—made her heart beat sideways, turned her blood to soda-water.

She put her napkin down on the table and rushed outside, caught a taxi, barely breathing, nervous sweat turning her hair to tendrils, causing her clothes to stick to the small of her back. When she finally got to the studio—a journey that seemed to last eons—she threw herself at Madame’s feet, weeping.

“Something is quite wrong with you,” is all Madame said.
The fish kept dying.
The water was fresh, the bowl was clean, the motive was good, and yet the fish kept dying.

Some days he’d come home to find her shiny and wet-faced staring woefully at that fish tank—the floating gold body unmoving in the pristine water.

At first, he’d blamed schematics. He took her to a pet shop and bought the best tank he could afford—the SeaClear Bowfront 30 gallon corner tank, complete with light and heater. And still, the fish died. Then their deaths became the fault of poor nutrition, so he brought home Aqueon Goldfish Granules with natural ingredients and enhanced vitamins. And still, the fish died. So he suggested different fish. Perhaps a beta, which seemed able to withstand even the strictest of environments. But she was determined to have a goldfish, and insisted terribly on their survival. And still, the fish died.

So they became gifts of tiny goldfish swimming around a bag of water instead of flowers he brought home most evenings. He would arrive to find her smiling and optimistic, placing the fish delicately into the prepared water.

The tiny park across the street called Birchwood Park became their burial ground. It was a small park—with only a few benches, three dogwoods, and an old magnolia—but she considered it a better fate than a toilet bowl. So he agreed, and would take the dead fish there wrapped up neatly in paper napkins.

Most nights when he would sneak to the park to bury them, she would stay in their sixth-floor apartment, and he could see her sorrowful silhouette in the window. But sometimes, if the day had been particularly difficult, or her paints hadn’t been mixing properly, she would come along to bury the fish. She would slowly sink to her knees beside the tiny grave as he slowly covered its tiny gold body.

It was late tonight, and as Wilmington tried desperately to break his spade through the icy grip winter had on the ground, he looked upward. There he saw her dark figure, and while he could not see her face, he knew the shape of her body as she cried. He knew that she again would not sleep, and that in the morning he would wake to an empty bed and a 36X24, oil-filled canvas in the living room.

He sighed his fish-burying sigh and continued stabbing the dirt. The ground gave only slightly, and he continued the process again and again, all the while aware of the motionless figure in the window that was his wife.
The sirens were going off. Instantly, Wilmington jarred awake. Annette bugged him about buying an alarm, but he argued that one needn’t have one when every morning, like clockwork, the fire tower two blocks away sounded its alarm at precisely 9 a.m. Annette eventually began sleeping through it, but Wilmington’s body adapted and every morning he awoke with its shrill sound.

He grazed his hand over her side. Cold and empty. He breathed in deeply, and sure enough, smelled the sour smell of turpentine and oil paint. This was “her” smell, and he had learned to love it.

On mornings like this she usually walked down to the bakery on the corner to buy a fresh loaf of bread. And as he predicted he heard the sound of her keys in the door, and the banging of kitchenware as she prepared French toast and coffee.

He entered the kitchen and she looked up, her tired eyes smiling. Behind her he saw the painting, sitting dimly in the living room of their small apartment. He walked toward it, and as he passed Annette, she reached out and touched his bare chest. This was her “good morning” and he quickly grabbed her hand and kissed her fingers softly before continuing to the dark strokes of burnt umber, sapphire, and sangria. He picked up the canvas gingerly, by the edges as Annie taught him long ago, and scooted the easel so that he could survey it through the window’s morning light.

The painting screamed darkness. In the middle a large, heavily painted oak tree stood. In the tree a single bird’s nest rested. A fat robin sat on a branch of the tree near the nest, and below another robin sat, staring up at the sky, mercifully. As always, in the bottom right corner was her familiar signature—etched solidly: Bailey-Myers.

“Walden,” her tiny voice said from behind him.

Wilmington nodded to himself because he already knew the name of this painting. And her last, and the one before that, and the hundreds of others that had graced this very same spot in exactly the same fashion.

He went into the kitchen to help set the table for their breakfast.

“You need to sleep, honey,” he said. She nodded her little girl nod and they continued eating in silence. He poured her coffee and watched her still lips, hoping this day would be better.

An hour later, Wilmington kissed his wife goodbye and began the 10-block bike ride to the airpark where he worked as a pilot. Final Flights began in the early ’90s as an ash scattering company for those who wished to return their loved ones to earth or sea. Wilmington had been working for Final Flights for a year and a half, and found it to be a peaceful job that fit the pace of his life well.

He arrived around 11 a.m. every weekday morning to a list and a box of ashes waiting to be hoisted into his plane. His only flight crew member consisted of a 19-year-old boy named Maxwell, who sat in the back of the Cessna 340 prepared to open urns and scatter ashes at Wilmington’s command. Maxwell talked a lot about girls and atrocious plans for the future—like buying a Yamaha YZF R6, and asking some girl named Ganelle Kazinsky for a dance eventually. Wilmington considered the boy’s eccentric yammering to be useless, but he enjoyed Maxwell’s company and thought of him as a friend most days.

“This one’s from Charlotte, North Carolina. ‘Enclosed are what’s left of our beloved Sophie, who loved the sea and sleeping on the back porch summer nights,’” Maxwell read from a card placed inside the dull-colored bronze urn. “Hey, look, and there’s a picture.”

Wilmington was checking gears and knobs, testing his signals and communications, and buckling his seatbelt. He looked up to see a photo of a dog—most likely husky with the clearest eyes he’d ever seen. Eyes that reminded him of Annette’s.

It wasn’t all that uncommon for families to send the remains of their much-loved pet to be scattered. Final Flights began with serious conventions about finality, and Wilmington never questioned or argued the sanctity of providing this closure. After all, he was an idealist and had much experience in the death of pets—however small and scaly his might be.

“Oh, dearest Sophie,” Maxwell began to croon, and so on and so forth until he was eventually rambling about lost causes and the state of pitiful human beings.

Wilmington said nothing to Maxwell’s banter as always, and began talking with air traffic control, who granted him permission to take off. Once in the air, Maxwell began again berating those who were silly enough to pay money to cremate and then scatter their pet’s ashes, and those who named their pets such silly names like Butch or Sophie. Wilmington rarely listened to these relentless long-winded rants, so he tuned Maxwell out. And he liked the name Sophie.

The comedy of a job such as the one Wilmington and Maxwell worked was never voiced by Wilmington. He was happy to do the honors that many could not, and took much pride to be the one to deliver solemn justice. The job was easy and fun and allowed him to do two of his most sought after passions every single day: fly and think of Annette. While flying, Wilmington measured his wife’s pain and mulled over many a solution to its inevitability.

She needed something to love, this he knew, and he wanted to be the one to give this to her. Only, they had been trying for nearly
a year, and even he was beginning to give up hope. After countless trips to doctors and specialists he learned that nothing was wrong medically. Innumerable changes were made in both he and his wife's life in order to accommodate a healthy baby-making atmosphere, yet still they were unsuccessful.

While they were in college, Wilmington brought up the idea of the cheap gold fish because Annette missed her cat from home. As a joke he brought two of the little things to her one evening, and instantly they became recourse for her loneliness. Ingrid and Humphrey she had named them, and for three weeks she could do nothing but boast of their playfulness as they swarmed the circumference of their tiny little bowl. Then he came home to find an empty bowl, a devastated woman, and the beginnings of a painting.

No, Wilmington never joked about the tenderness these people held for pets because he could share their sadness; he knew their grief. And besides, Maxwell joked enough for the both of them.

"Muriel Sanders," Maxwell said after he'd opened the hatch and tipped the rest of Sophie's life out the window. Wilmington tuned the rest of this conversation out as he maneuvered the tiny plane in circles, all the while his thoughts circling the certain altitude of death.

When he returned home that night the first thing Wilmington noticed was their clean apartment. As he was accustomed after a night such as the one Annette had the night before, he usually spent the day after cleaning up her miserable adventures: her curled and empty aluminum tubes of paint, shavings from her graphite pencils, her smudged fingerprints on the corners and furniture.

But as he stepped through the door, his bike hanging from his shoulder, his first instinct was to worry. All around him he saw clean, swept, and wiped-down surfaces. No piles of stained and yellowed rags, no dirty smock hanging haphazardly over the easy chair, and most importantly—no painting in the middle of the floor. He was the one who usually took it upon himself to remove the paintings the morning after—feeling it his duty to clean up the mess the night had made for her. But somehow the floor was void of the painting and the easel he'd built for her their first Christmas together. He put his bike away and went to their office: the second bedroom in their apartment that served as a storage room for her paintings and his stacks of books.

The door creaked open familiarly and the bright, thick smells of paint filled his nostrils. He noticed it immediately leaning against the far wall—the two robins hiding, still gleaming wetly. He walked toward them, wiping his sweaty hands along the way. He tilted her painting called "Walden" forward so he could see her previous pieces of despair.

Sigourney. Yes, he remembered Sigourney. He'd bought this one for her birthday last year. It had survived three weeks—a record—before gracing a small and shallow grave in Birchwood Park. Next came the painting of the most hideous looking dead sun flowers he'd ever seen. This painting was nearly void of all color—stark gray with several streaks of black and white hanging ominously in the sky above the unfortunate garden. Miller is what she'd named this fish, and he remembered finding him floating belly-up before her. He had come home from work early and tried his hardest to remove all evidence of Miller’s life before she came home...failing miserably.

As Wilmington flipped through the stacks of paintings he remembered each fish clearly.

Betsy, the white one with the splash of gold near her tail; Jane and Exodus, the tiny pair he'd won at the fair. He remembered watching her paint this one—her tear-filled eyes unstoppering as the violent swing of her arms swept across the canvas to form the rugged train tracks that lead to nothing. And as Wilmington ran his fingers over the rough strokes of the tracks he remembered the painful screams as she sank into him later that night—signaling her surrender.

Patrick and Henry—the painting of the child praying before a gravestone that read Nowhere, And Fast. Parsley, his personal favorite fish that followed his fingers as they circumvented its tank. Spektor—memorialized as a Buick 8 that was smashed into obliteration against a concrete barrier.

He could go on and on. He walked toward the large window and saw her then—her back facing him as she kneeled, concentrated on a spot in the grass below. He took the stairs four at a time in impulse, threw open the door with a thrash, and bolted across the street without bothering to check to see if cars were coming.

The honk and screech of tires as they tried to suddenly stop started Annette. She turned around—alarmed—and when her eyes met Wilmington's, he could see her whole body relax. This, in turn, relaxed Wilmington, and he left the street to meet her as she walked toward the bench. Before she opened her mouth to speak Wilmington knew she was okay, because she smiled and reached for him as she sat down.

"You scared me, Will! I completely lost track of time. How are you? How was work, honey?" she said all at once, and before he could even begin to answer she began to explain how she'd fallen
asleep after Wilmington had left for work.

“And I had this dream, baby, and I was lying down in this canoe and the water was rough. The boat was rocking and shaking and I was screaming and crying for help, but it was as if I was all alone in the world.”

Out of habit, Wilmington reached out to touch her cheek, but she smiled and continued.

“And then all at once the movement stopped. I took my hands from the front of my eyes and sat up and all around me I saw the clearest, calmest water.” She stopped then to look Wilmington in the eyes—stopping his breath immediately.

“Like Lake Tahoe when you flew me there last spring,” she added calmly.

Wilmington remembered the trip vividly. The clear water, the reflection of his plane as they flew above, and best of all Annette’s amber-colored hair that reflected the sunlight perfectly.

“Anyway, after that I woke up and felt much better. I needed air so I came down to read, only when I got here...” her voice drifted off as she looked over Wilmington’s shoulder to the back of the lot that was littered with the tiny graves.

“Do you remember Sophie?” she asked her eyes still on the patch of earth under the magnolia.

Wilmington did remember Sophie. She was the fish with the “ich,” some type of fish pneumonia. On this particular night, Wilmington had brought Annette to pick out the fish, and sure enough she fell in love with the fish that was dying. But with a week’s worth of consistent antibiotics, Annette had nursed the thing back to health again, only to come home to find her dead after a play one night.

Annette smiled then, and though Wilmington could see the studded glitter of tears in the corner of her eyes, he knew she was glad. He put his arm around her and led her back across the street where they both gingerly walked up the stairs to their apartment and silently went inside.

That night they made the kind of love that was slow and delicate. Wilmington learned the geography of Annette’s body long ago and knew to expect the tangled mess of limbs that clung ruthlessly together. He knew nothing but her pleasures, and it seemed the more hope she lost the more hope he tried desperately to give. She would sink against him gratefully and he would try his best to extinguish every inch of sorrow her tender cries would surrender.

Weeks passed as Wilmington and Annette continued their cycles of life: Wilmington in his plane with Maxwell at his side, and Annette in her studio pausing every so often to watch the tumultuous pattern of the gold fish swimming in their tank. After days of solitude, she had convinced Wilmington to bring home several of them, and they became Harry, Baldwin, The Cushion, and Soviet. The Quads is what Annette called them, and after they survived the first week and then the second, Wilmington began feeling the flurry of apprehension in his stomach he usually did when waiting for the fish to die.

This particular day began usually enough with Wilmington waking and instinctively patting Annette’s empty side of bed. He lay in the near-darkness of their room until he heard her come home and begin breakfast. She hummed from the kitchen and he knew that for now the fish still lived, and his wife was at least happy. After their usual morning conversation, Wilmington kissed his wife and gathered his things for the bike ride to work.

“I have a doctor’s appointment today, and afterward I plan to go to the gallery to check on a few things,” Annette said. “So you’ll have to come straight home to check on them, okay?”

She looked toward the tank where The Quads swam peacefully. She didn’t have to tell him he was checking to see if they were still alive, but she meant it. Wilmington assured her that he would and continued down the stairs to the road where he hopped on his bike and traveled on to work where he knew Maxwell was already waiting.

After their usual start up, Wilmington and Maxwell were in the air with Maxwell reciting the various degrees of eulogies the box of urns had to offer. There was the gentleman who seemingly died alone in his apartment in upstate New York. He had been sent across the country by his neighbor who knew nothing personal about the guy, other than the fact that he liked to collect things. There were also the assortment of pets as usual: Polly the Siamese cat that lived to be 20 years old; Marisol the Labrador mix that liked to go swimming in the Straits of Florida; and Sylvia the parakeet that was nothing more than a pity-scatter, according to the letter from the boyfriend who had accidentally left her cage open.

Wilmington piloted his plane all morning and eventually the box was empty and Maxwell sat up front, leaning back in his chair and talking relentlessly through his headset about his typical meanderings.

“I wanted to get a job at that copy place where she worked. Four times I tried, man. Four times I sent in my application and four times I was denied. It’s a bunch of bullshit is what it is.”

Wilmington stared ahead without commenting back. Max-
well continued.

“So I ended up just spending, like, over a hundred bucks there by the end of the semester, just so I could see her and talk to her!” He continued to complain on and on about his own stupidity and willingness to make a complete idiot of himself in front of his future wives and Wilmington stayed quiet all the while. He wondered how someone could have such a heavy and continuous conversation with themselves, and didn’t blame Ganelle at all for never giving Maxwell the time of day.

When they finished for the day, Wilmington packed up his gear and rode his bike home, remembering that before he went to the bar around the corner, he’d have to check on Annette’s fish. He stepped through their apartment and gave a sigh of relief to see two gold and two white bodies swimming around their tank fervently.

“Thanks, guys,” he said as he tapped their glass as he passed. He put his bike away, grabbed a copy of the Merton book he was reading and headed out the door. He knew that if Annette was spending time at the gallery she wouldn’t be home for awhile. When she did go there, she tended to stay a long time or until she got her art fix, she used to say.

Marcus Antonius was the first bar Wilmington found when he moved to the city. While he waited to hear from prospective jobs and while Annette painted he had stolen away one afternoon to the nearest place he found. He was in dire need of conversation and a cold beer, and found both of those things in Marcus Antonius. Since then, he stopped there a few times a week to read, or to watch the older gentlemen that sat lonely on their barstools. Annette came with him when he could coax her to, and she seemed to enjoy it as well. It was here he told her about his job with Final Flights, and here where Annette had cried over many a lost fish, nursing her SoCo and lime.

Hence the paradox of unselfish love cannot rest perfectly except in a love that is perfectly reciprocated: because it knows that the only true peace is found in selfless love, Wilmington read as he sipped his drink. He saw her enter before she saw him. Her face was flushed from her bike ride, and she pushed her hair from her eyes and squinted around the room. Wilmington smiled and put a hand in the air. Annette returned the smile and after stopping by the bar to order her drink she continued toward him.

He could tell she had something to say before she reached the table, and he pulled a chair out for her and waited. She bent forward to kiss his cheek as she sat down.

She began talking about the gallery then and Wilmington listened fully, asking the appropriate questions when they arose. She spoke of complications, planned exhibits, and artistic drama. When he was sure she was finished, her drink arrived and he asked what she failed to mention.

“How was your appointment?”

She sipped her drink slowly before looking him in the eyes.

“Dr. Hatcher said nothing’s changed. Nothing is worse, but that certainly means nothing is better, either. He suggested several other alternatives, and he’s still really pressing the Nashua medicine, but I don’t know...” Her voice drifted off then and she stared at her class as she slid it back and forth on the table.

Wilmington did know. He knew three times before, three different doctors suggested surefire alternatives proven to work. He shuddered remembered the nights Annette spent trying to recover from three failed attempts.

He put his hand out to comfort her, but she jerked hers away before he could do so, and instead grabbed his wrist firmly. Her eyes met his and before he could respond they filled with tears and she let out a quick laugh.

“I want it, though,” she said suddenly.

Wilmington began explaining the hope they spent, and wasted, on desperately trying exactly this. But Annette shook her head, took another sip of her drink, and looked at the stained table top. “I just have a feeling. This just can’t be it,” she paused briefly and looked up. “I refuse to give up.”

Wilmington could not argue this, and knew no matter how much he resisted he would eventually give in because it’s what she wanted. He would support her and understand her decisions, regardless of how reluctant he was. And he would reach deep within himself to clench a fist around another batch of hope for her.

They sat together in the bar for a long time, holding hands and not talking. After awhile, Annette picked up Wilmington’s book and flipped through its pages. She put her face close to the fluttering book, and closed her eyes, smelling it.

“Let’s go home, Will,” she said afterward, and stood.

Wilmington followed, placing his hand gingerly on the small of her back as he led her toward the door.

Ten weeks later they sat together, quietly eating over their breakfast on a Saturday morning after they’d both slept in. Autumn had finally come along, and they both stared out the open blinds at the city as it said goodbye to summer. After breakfast they planned to take a walk, and stop by the art shop. Since the addition of the four scarecrows that hung bleakly over the dry riverbed painting Annette
hadn’t picked up a brush. The fish tank hummed empty in the corner. She had been talking of getting another fish, and thus decided to replenish her supply of oils.

“It’s been ten weeks,” she said quietly, not taking her eyes from the window. Her coffee cup was in her hands, and she leaned with her elbows on the table with the cup lifted to her face, inhaling its fumes.

“Yes, dear,” Wilmington said, remembering their trip to the clinic, and how they did everything they could not to wait in anxious anticipation.

“I’m going Monday, and I want you to be there,” she said and he agreed. He preferred to be there.

They finished their breakfast and walked the five blocks to her favorite shop, and on the way home they stopped to sit on a bench at Birchwood Park. They sat facing the roadway and watched midday travelers pass slowly.

“Now, me, I like names that begin with ‘s.’ There’s Susan and of course, my favorite, Savannah. Sarah. Sabrina. Sandy, and even Selma. ‘S’ is sexy, man, real cute. Especially the name Sophie.” Maxwell was sitting with his feet on the back of the seat in front of him, his arms folded behind his head.

They were preparing to land and Wilmington had said nothing the whole day, except to announce his change of luck. Maxwell had immediately asked the name Annette liked most and had spent the duration of their flight commending her on such supreme baby-naming skills.

Wilmington didn’t complain, as usual, and actually enjoyed the sound of it coming from someone else’s lips.

The suffocating excitement that followed them home from the clinic that morning two weeks ago had finally left the air that surrounding him and Annette. Now an excitement lingered that hinted at a bit of fear and unpreparedness.

He landed the plane, went to a short briefing, and gathered his things to head home. It had begun to rain, but Wilmington wasn’t upset because he enjoyed the rain and began to walk home. As he walked he tried desperately to slow down the thoughts that sped quickly into the future. Their apartment had instantly become a hotbed of exhalation as they innocently quibbled over the four names they eventually picked out: Wilmington brought Theodore and Emma to the table and Annette decided on Jack and Sophie.

The rain soaked his hair to his scalp, and Wilmington knew the decision wasn’t up to him, and he smiled. Annette favored Sophie and so they would have a Sophie. As he neared their apartment he cut across Birchwood Park and looked up. A single light was on in their living room, but Wilmington couldn’t see Annette. He quickened his pace and took the stairs two at a time.

The solid smell of oils hit his nose as he neared the top of the stairs. Without a pause he slid a key in the door, opened it, and swung it open. Annette was standing behind the easel as he’d hoped and imagined she would be. After a quick scan he noticed nothing out of the ordinary and saw the bulkiness of the back of the canvas surrounded by the piles of discarded paint rags and tubes of paint on the floor. He saw her bare feet sticking standing unmoving in front of the easel, but could not see her face.

“Honey?” he said as he slid his wet jacket from his shoulders and slid off his shoes. There was no response and he began to walk toward the easel. The silence in the apartment unnerved him, and he called for Annette again. There was still no response as he passed the empty fish tank and ran quick fingers through his dripping hair.

He reached the easel and stared at the painting intently. There was a mountain thick with trees with heavy clouds above. At the base stood three tiny figures silhouetted and wading in what appeared to be a thick and black, oily substance. It was obviously and unfinished painting as only part of the details were in place.

“Looks good, babe,” he said, kissing her cheek. It was wet, and finally then he noticed her red eyes and rigid, tired stare.

Wilmington leaned in close to smell the oils. He noticed the crude words written along the bottom of the canvas. They were nearly indiscernible, rough, and lightly painted.

But he could make out at least of the words. He read it over and over again, his heart beginning to beat nervously.

“Annette?” He called as he gripped the sides of the painting tightly.

And he read the word over and over again, standing alone their apartment, trying to fight the tears as they forced themselves from his tired eyes. He called for Annette once last time and turned away from the easel. He sank to the couch slowly and stared at the half-finished painting, and even from his distance he could make out the name painted rudimentarily on the roughly woven fabric.

“It’s called “Sophie,”” Annette said softly without turning away from the painting. Her hand was still poised in the air with a paintbrush, but she did not move.

And as she began to cry, Wilmington said nothing. He only watched the rain spatter violently against the limbs of the trees nestled in the park the tiny park across the street.
La Derrota de La Niña
(The Defeat of La Niña)
Jessie Magee

"Man, why does Spanish group masculine and feminine nouns together? The articles change to masculine every time. The feminine gets swallowed by the masculine with groups of anything."

He moves nothing but his mouse finger as if I didn’t speak. I’m on the bed in his dorm trying one last time to get him to talk to me. He hasn’t moved from his computer across the room since I came in and seemingly hasn’t noticed a woman is in his bed. He didn’t look up when I came in.

His constant video gaming uses the energy I get so upset about wasting, but he doesn’t make the connection, as usual. It’s possible I’m wrong and computers have nothing to do with rising temperatures. Maybe El Niño will really save the day instead of ruin it.

Maybe he didn’t understand what I said.

"Like ‘el niño’ and ‘la niña’ change to ‘los niños instead of ‘las niñas.’” The back of his head stares me down. He took French; maybe it’s different in French.

"People don’t know nearly as much about La Niña either,” I say, and begin reading what I’m studying. "Often, one doesn’t know La Niña exists and is sometimes called anti-El Niño (which means ‘anti-Christ child). It’s the same basic phenomenon as El Niño and causes similar destruction. The frequency of both is increasing as carbon emissions and temperatures go up.” I peer around the side of his ear. His eyebrows are raised like he could respond but knows better. As hard as I’m trying, you’d think he’d say something. He doesn’t get it and I don’t do well with silences.

"Maybe you could reduce your own carbon emissions by turning off your damn computer once in awhile. Pretend you aren’t just doing it for me or that you have a relationship based on something that isn’t digital. Maybe talk to me?”

The first thing he’s heard since I walked in the room is the attack on his pathetic passion for online poker, his manhood. His freshly chopped hair doesn’t move when he turns his head toward me. "Whatever,” he says, typically.

I remember what he looked like before all his shoulder-length hair disappeared. He used to talk to me and hold my hand. I didn’t love him because of his long hair, but if this decreased interest in everything is the progress he makes from long hair to short hair, I have no desire to know him when he’s bald. “Los Niños don’t ever come near each other.” I read aloud, now to myself more than to him.

“They occur somewhat on other sides of the planet. They don’t ever touch.”

His lips twitch, but he doesn’t smile. He’d lose every time if he played real-life poker with a tell like that.

"Every so often, it is ambiguous if the weather changes are from El Niño or La Niña. In this case, the effects are always attributed to El Niño. That’s why so few know about La! El gets all the credit!"

I’m suddenly very aware of his eyes on me. He blows me a kiss, and I wish I had been able to convince him silently to stand up and kiss me properly. He shouldn’t need convincing that being close to me won’t cause catastrophic climate changes like being close to his electronic friends will, that the convergence of our lips won’t cause an uproar at sea. He’s happy as long as they aren’t catastrophic effects to the electronic hand he’s been dealt.

"La Niña is cold. El Niño hot. Their existence is natural, but some research shows rising temperatures are making it more unlikely for them to occur at the same time.” La has to do something drastic to reach El or he’ll get the credit next time she strikes.

I stand, go towards him, and kiss him like I wanted. He moves so little his kiss comes from the corner of his mouth. He doesn’t even bother to close his eyes so he can see his next hand.

For a split second, his eyes connect with mine instead of his King’s and I think we’ve won.

He blinks, and when his heavy, sleep-deprived eyelids lift up again, his pupils are staring—blankly—at the computer screen, unable to resist the shiny, bright lights.

I’ve gone all in for the last time.

His royal flush trumps the hands of the others. He smiles and turns his head towards me for a kiss.

I fold.
Pantoum for Your Garage
Jessie Magee

My fingers didn't reach your skin.
I sat behind you, examining your hands,
baby in a struggle with a carburetor,
your muscles teasing the wrench in half-circles.

I sat behind you, examining your occupied hands.
I wished to be a carburetor to feel your muscles work me like
your muscles teased the wrench, in half-circles, if only so you could find my love, the love

I wished was a carburetor. To feel your muscles work me like
I needed fixing, needed my oil changed, if only so you could find my love, the love you lost in your garage that day you kissed me like

I needed fixing, needed my oil changed, not like I was a woman
lost in your garage. That day you kissed me like you knew how to repair my damage,

not like I was a woman:
trailing your greasy fingers down my arm, thinking you knew how to repair my damage like you could stop the leaks in the carburetor.

You trailed your greasy fingers down my arm and I dropped my hand from your back, hoped for leaks like the carburetor had—when the motor crushed metal to a halt.

I dropped my hand from your back;
I saw my love drop from your fingers when the motor crushed metal to a halt.
Your hands started turning half-circles before

I saw my love drop from your fingers: busy in a struggle with a carburetor, hands turning half-circles before my fingers could reach your skin.
The Whippoorwill
Kimberly Reynolds

From inarticulate darkness
the Whippoorwill’s refrain
drips from tree fingers,
tiptoes the strand,
branches the waterscape
between the black bramble
and the belly of my boat,
forming ligaments, muscles, bones,
the skeleton given shape to stand
in the air made electric
by its song.

Medical Record
Kimberly Reynolds

NAME: Kimberly J. Reynolds
DATE: 3 / 05 / 2009
AGE / DOB: 31 / Aug 17 1977 1:18AM
ACCOUNT #: 70000001
PHYSICIAN: Quinn Quackery M.D., FACS
General Surgery

KIMBERLY J. REYNOLDS
70000001
3 / 05 / 2009

CHIEF COMPLAINT(S):
1. Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis (an autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks the thyroid gland; named after and discovered in 1912 by Dr. Hakaru Hashimoto, who was inspired to study medicine because of the legacy of his great grandfather, a physician who, trusted by the feudal lord, was permitted to carry a sword while he practiced) with the presence of goiter.

2. She reports sometimes forgetting where she’s going, being preoccupied by the prattle of birds at the window, which, she says, remind her of death and her grandmother, alligator lady skin, waking from dreams of red, slithering things slinking beneath her flesh, feeling like a marionette on her last string being directed by a clumsy hand in the sky, checking the alarm clock, the stove, the lock too many times, believing that god’s voice is the slender stream of light that slips through cloud clusters, thinking that everyone’s distracted by the bulge that bobbles in her neck when she talks, realizing that, though unspoken, everyone feels the same, lonely and afraid of dying.

HISTORY OF PRESENT ILLNESS: The patient believes the mass in her throat may have developed from “keeping quiet” for most of her childhood, as that’s what “good little girls do” or after too many home haircuts, in which she could never hold her head still or crane her neck high enough for the sheer of her mother’s silver scissors.
PAST MEDICAL HISTORY: Patient appears untrusting of doctors, claiming they judge her when she’s honest about past recreational drug use and are always taking things out of her: teeth, tonsils, and now, thyroid.

SOCIAL HISTORY: In seventh grade, she reports being fearful that peers will discover that her white “Highlights” shoes are generic, not the actual Sam and Libby’s everyone else is wearing. At puberty, she was ashamed of her breasts or, as her mother calls them, her “shame,” and is embarrassed because she just doesn’t need to shave as early as the other girls and gets her period long after all of her friends have gotten theirs.

ALLERGIES: SULFA.

MEDICATIONS: Synthroid 75 mcg and Ortho Cyclen.

FAMILY HISTORY: The patient reports leaving home first at five years old, packing her makeshift “Raggedy Ann” suitcase, which had been a child’s record player, but, after it stopped spinning, the internal contents were gutted and the outer part kept as a suitcase, with pencil, paper, crayons, coloring book, and her favorite doll. Just before making it all the way to her babysitter’s trailer, she is found out by her father. Because of her poor decision to run away in too-big-for-her house shoes, she must stop every few moments to slip her feet back into the slippers and every pause invites a wiry switch across the backs of her legs. And “switches,” she says, “hurt worse than belts.”

DISCUSSION: In further questioning about her goiter, she appears anxious, asking why her bolded account number takes preeminence over her condition. This, she says, proves doctors care more about making money than curing patients. In addition, she wonders why she has to wait so long when she “clearly” had an appointment and complains that the staff will not listen to her ("she knows her own body") and addresses her with questions, commands, and jargon she cannot understand. She is anxious about missing school and work for “this litany of” medical procedures. She is tired of undressing in front of strangers, wearing an ill-fitting paper gown, the chill of the stethoscope, breathing in, then out, being asked questions with a thermometer in her mouth, making a fist, then releasing it, thumbing through outdated magazines and looking at a painting of a surgeon’s hand being guided by Jesus while waiting another hour for the doctor, being told to lie back on the table, relax, and look up at the loveable puppy poster on the ceiling while needles are poking and prodding her neck. She wonders why the nurse had to restrain her during the fine needle aspiration when she clearly was not struggling. SHE IS ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS. Surgery recommended.

PLAN: Invasive surgery to remove mass and thyroid. I have discussed the treatment, risks, and side effects with the patient: thyroidectomy; potential voice loss and permanent hoarseness (NO MORE BOTHERSOME QUESTIONS FROM THIS PATIENT); lifelong medication; conditions systematic of hypothyroidism.

POST-OP FOLLOW UP: Patient reports short-term voice loss and depression. She is comforted that many noteworthies like Faulkner, Hemingway, Dickens, Woolf, Blake, Dickinson, Eliot, Keats, Poe, Plath, and Sexton shared similar mood disorders. She also reports sleep disturbances characterized by nightmares of “axes at the root of my throat where the taut red-blue cords pulse and sing; the scooping and hollowing out of the place where the lump had grown ripe and round, larger each year with the words that would not come out.” In addition, she exhibits some marked paranoia, wondering if we kept the “lump” for biopsy; she is fearful that if dissected, “her secrets will tumble out.”
Tick-tack- a second of time floats off the clock- towards heaven, except it's floating toward the sun, and in this world there is no heaven. I'm sitting at the dinner table thinking, "How the hell did I get here?" And I don't know. All I know is that I've been here before. The Atomic Bomb has invited my cousins over for dinner. The Atomic Bomb will drop - his pants, humiliate me, and force me to come to the ultimate conclusion that this life is meaningless, and I am nothing but a meaningless fragment of dust blowing in the wind. The Atomic Bomb, he will be laughing his ass off the whole time.

My eyes trace the perimeter of my kitchen, like they've done a countless number of times. They scan three gray barren walls, with a fourth one behind me in my peripheral. There's some sunlight shining through the window to my left. I can see it reflecting off the sink in the corner. A grandfather clock sits against the wall straight in front of me. It's a colossal eyesore. It does nothing to the room except aggravate its aura. It's like a big fat beached whale, all rotten. If it were literally a beached whale, I would try to tear it apart with a stick or something. I would destroy it. I'm here, thinking this thought, motionless, staring straight, waiting. I'm waiting for my cousins like I've done many times before. I'm waiting for the end of the world - all over again.

Tick-tack- a second of time floats off the clock - and instead of floating toward the sun, it buzzes across my round wooden table and up onto my forehead, only it has six legs and little wings, and I slap its frail little body against my skull. Still staring forward, I can feel its guts sliding down my face. I just wish they were the guts of something real.

I've been here at this table so many times, it feels as though time has given up on me. To be honest, I can't even remember my name. I don't think it matters though. I'm not telling you all this so you know my name, or my story, or to tell you about true love, or the meaning of life, or any of that bullshit. I'm telling you this because I just gotta believe that someone is listening. I gotta believe my existence is not just a reoccurring practical joke, but I know it is. I know it is, because The Atomic Bomb is laughing his ass off. I know it is,
because in an hour from now, I'll realize my mind has been plugged into some crazy ass computer simulation program- all over again.

Let me tell you about The Atomic Bomb. He's the guy who controls my life in this place, wherever the hell this is. The Atomic Bomb is a no good filthy bastard, but he's one drop dead gorgeous son of a bitch. His smile would drive the most earnest and pious of nuns straight to hell, screaming halle-fuckin-lujah all the way down. His smile is like a big fat line of pure cocaine. I know it is. I've seen the end of the world over and over, and I swear to you, right before the world ends, The Atomic Bomb smiles a big pearly Christmas morning at this one grizzly bear looking dude, and that dude, he smashes a mason jar full of coins right against his face. He bleeds to death right in the middle of the sidewalk before anyone calls an ambulance or anything. And I watch him. I watch him die every single time.

Sec, in this computer simulation program, I keep living the same fourteen hours over and over, and I've seen this grizzly bear looking dude bleed to death over and over and again. And I've never seen his funeral, but I can imagine everyone would be telling real nice stories about the grizzly bear looking dude, and making him sound all profound and everything. I'm sure they'd have the dude draped up in all sorts of war garments and medals of all kinds, and have his body sent on a flaming raft over the ole Niagara, and everyone would remember how much of a great ole bastard he was.

But, I've never seen his funeral. He'll be dead again here in a bit, and in a sense, maybe he's already dead. Maybe he's dead forever. In a sense, maybe I'm dead forever too. I guess I have to be, because I've seen my own funeral. I'm not kidding. The Atomic Bomb video taped my funeral in the real world and plugged it into my mind in this computer simulated purgatory. I guess he still has my brain in a jar or something. That's really the only explanation I can come up with. I'm forced to watch it every time it's played. I have to. I mean, I can't close my eyes or anything. Closing my eyes isn't gonna do shit if the thing is plugged into my fucking mind, so I watch.

At my funeral, no one cried. Everyone was kind of pissed off actually. It was plain bad and everyone thought so. All the guests had all been waiting around for about an hour and a half because my body arrived late to the funeral. By the time it got there, only five people were still there, waiting for the damn thing to be over with. There was The Atomic Bomb, 2 strippers that he was bringing to a bachelor party later that evening named Shy-Shy and T-Bone, my uncle Mark who is the leader of some bizarre alien-god cult somewhere out in Kansas, and my mother.

They held the funeral on one of the basketball courts at First Baptist Church, and they had to cut the funeral short due to a youth group basketball tourney going on that day. Not much was said; however The Atomic Bomb told this one story about how I once drank two whole bottles of cough syrup during my first day of high school, climbed out the window, got onto the roof, then started pissing and throwing my own shit all over the dean of student's white mustang in the parking lot below. The truth is, I never did that, but The Atomic Bomb thought it would be good to tell. He said it was an example of how little I cared about the troubles of the world.

Since there weren't enough arms to carry my casket to my grave, and the whole thing became a big hassle, everyone agreed that uncle Mark could take my body back to Kansas with him and use it as a vessel to try to summon one of his crazy ass alien gods with. The Atomic Bomb eventually decided to sell the casket to some dude from this nihilistic Swedish drone metal band for real cheap on eBay. The band wanted to use it for the purpose of burying their lead singer alive in it with a microphone, then record his last struggling moments of life. Apparently it was going to be the most darkest, most metal shit ever. "He would have wanted that," everyone said when they found out about me and my coffin, "He would have wanted nothing more."

The troubling thing about having my mind plugged into a computer simulation program is that I'm not able to tell the difference between the real world and the simulated one. It's an exact copy, almost. At least, I think it is. Once the script of the program ends, it resets, and I go right back to the beginning of it all. I'm living the same shit over and over, but I never realize the reality of the end until my cousins arrive. Right now, sitting here, I know it's going to happen, but I don't actually "realize" the reality of it until I see them arrive. It's like a bad dream you keep waking up from and going back into as soon as you're done telling yourself it was just a dream. When you're awake, it's easy to tell yourself it's not real.

In just 45 minutes I'll reach the end of the script. It's as if God, in all his omniscient and omnipotent glory, just throws in the towel 5 minutes after starting the creation of the universe and says, "Eh, what the hell! Just put what I got so far on repeat. Forever."

And here I am, sitting at my round dinner table with 5 empty seats around me, waiting for my cousins, waiting, being forced to feel this experience is unique. Trust me, in this state, you can feel the warmth of spring and all it's merry-go-rounds and tulips dancing around all day long and not believe it one bit. Eventually you stop seeing reality as "real" because you realize that your reality is just a copy of a copy of a copy of a, well you get the picture.

My ass starts to feel all damp so I stand up and stretch. I feel
my spine bend. My arms reach towards the ceiling. Moving my body is difficult. It feels as though all the fluid in my body has been replaced with glue. It feels slow and sticky, like mucus draining down your throat. I begin to cough. I feel sick, so I decide to stumble over to the kitchen sink and splash some water against my face. The water is thick with grime and rust. It feels disgusting, and I don't feel any better. I knew it wouldn't help, but I pretended it would anyway. Feeling indifferent, I make my way back to the chair. I stare at the grandfather clock.

I must have gone through the routine of these fourteen hours at least eight million times by now. Who keeps track after that long? Have you ever had that movie you've seen so many times, that you don't have to pay attention to it anymore to experience it? Do you know what I mean? You watch it and you're saying all the dialogue in your head two seconds before it's even delivered out of your television set. You watch the ending, thinking it's just as great as the very last second. Sometimes you wish the cowboy would just leave that bitch tied up on the train track and let her sorry ass be transformed into a blood cloud.

Eventually, you just want change, no matter how terrible it may seem. I know this. I know this, because it's all I think about. I'll think about all sorts of shit like that, like how bad I'd like to be bobbing for the apples of Eden, then say fuck it, and grip the serpent with my teeth and rip his fucking head off. Then, I'd take all those apples and shoot them into space towards heaven with a note that says, "How's this for free will, ass hole!" But, there's no heaven to send my note to here, no afterlife. There's no rejoice hallelujah, no thy kingdom come thy will be done. There's only these fourteen hours. There's only the tick-tock of The Atomic Bomb.

Almost thirteen hours ago, and almost forty minutes from now, my world ends right before it begins. It ends with the death of a grizzly bear looking dude. It begins with me peeling my sticky face off the surface of my round dinner table, and seeing The Atomic Bomb with a shovel outside my window. He's in my backyard, standing in a pit, waist deep. He's smiling a set of ivory piano keys at a white wedding.

"Rise and shine, Gary," he calls to me through the window, sticking his shovel deep into the ground, "Wake up and smell the fucking morning, Gary!" His voice is muffled.

My eyes are glazed over so bad, they might have both just popped out of a womb. "Gary?" I say under my breath, "Who the fuck is Gary? My names not--"

"You're name's fuckin Gary, Gary," he says as he shovels a large scoop of dirt over his shoulder. His smile is gorgeous. It's like a dove breaking the bonds of chains and liberating itself up into the clouds, "You don't have a choice."

"What the hell are you doing?" I yell at him through the pane of glass.

"I'm digging up dead bodies, Gary!"

"What? Why the hell are you - I mean what the -"

"Because I've gotta! Because you don't amount to shit, Gary. I'm the one who has to make changes in the world. Change is desired, you bitch ass! That's why I'm switching all these dead bodies around, mixing em up. I dig up this bastard and bury em where that bastard was supposed to be."

"But why?"

"Because God damn you, you BITCH ass! That's why I'm switching all these dead bodies around," he says to me through the window. "Gary? My names not-"

"No!" I yell at him through the pane of glass, "I'm God now. I control things now. Deal with it!"

Dragging the corpse from underneath its arms, he brings it to the pit and drops it down.

"Whatever..." I hear a muffled thud.

He laughs, wiping his hands on his khaki pants. "Oh, and by the way, I invited your cousins into town. They'll be here tonight. I invited them over for dinner. Tonight's the night, Gary."

I want to say, "fuck you," but I don't. Instead, I stay seated and stare at the grandfather clock, thinking about my cousins' arrival. I obsess over their visit. From the moment The Atomic Bomb tells me about my cousins' invitation, to the time they arrive, I dwell on the subject. Most of my existence is spent doing this, dwelling on how embarrassed I'm going to be. The Atomic Bomb will drop - his pants right in front of my cousins, and humiliate me to no end. This is the worst thing that ever happens to me, and that's why it's so horrible to experience. The Atomic Bomb is right. I don't have a choice, because if I did I would do something about it all. I swear I would.

In thirty minutes the world ends and I'm damn fine with it. There's no sunlight shining through the kitchen window anymore. A
hand is resting on my shoulder. My staring contest with the grandfather clock is brought to a halt. I look over my right shoulder. The Atomic Bomb is peering down at me. His smile is a white picket fence that borders the foundation of the American dream, all wrapped up in white powdery one hundred dollar bills and baby diapers clean enough to scrub the oil off your face with.

Behind him are my cousins. There are millions of them. They are black silhouettes, tall enough to be skyscrapers. They are lined in rows long enough to go on for miles. They are strangers. They all look the same. They all look like me. They begin crawling into my kitchen on their hands and knees and start tearing down the walls. Dust and residue crawl into my eye lids. The Atomic Bomb's hand still rests on my shoulder. He is laughing his ass off. His laughter is rattling the inside of my skull. The silhouettes are whispering.

Suddenly, there is silence. The dust clears. I sit at my round dinner table in a graveyard that stretches on beyond sight. The silhouettes are standing, surrounding me, staring at me from hundreds of feet up in the air with blank black faces. The Atomic Bomb crawls onto the dinner table, laughing, then slowly stands, slouches over, and drops—his pants. His khaki pants fall down to the surface of the dinner table and pile up next to his ankles. I'm blinded from a light projecting from his groin. He is laughing. There is a television displaying a screen of gray static in the place of where his genitals should be. His laughter transcends into the ringing of static. It emits an overwhelming crackling hiss, which creates a dizziness throughout my body.

One of the silhouettes kneels down and extends an ethereal finger. Slowly uncoiling, the finger slides into the The Atomic Bomb's back, and pulls out a bronze crank, which looks as though it would be appropriate on a children's wind-up toy, then begins winding the crank in slow precise 180 degree turns. The sound of static is deafening. The winding persists. The Atomic Bomb is smiling, like genocide. The winding stops. The black shadowy faces of the silhouettes are focused on the television screen. They glow in a sea of static. They watch the screen. I watch the screen. The static begins to clear. A television broadcast is revealed.

I watch as I see headlines scroll over a variety of news broadcasts. The headlines read all sorts of crazy ass things like: "Worst Genocide Since Hitler," "Computer Hacker Kills Half The Human Race," and "Nuclear Holocaust Begins." A female reporter on the verge of breaking into tears begins explaining how a mastermind computer hacker found a way to break the U.S. government's security system and fired armed nuclear warheads all over the world.

There are images of vast deserts of ash. One shows Berlin. Another shows Paris. I see London, Beijing, Ghana, Moscow and Los Angeles. They're all deserts. They're all graveyards.

This is when I realize everything. This is when I realize there is a point when humility turns into guilt, and there's a point when guilt gets so overwhelming it baptizes you in nihilism. There's a point when everything rational slips into the absolute absurd. And that's what happened to me. I'm feeling the weight of half the deaths of the human race, and now I'm hidden here with the Atomic Bomb and my secret for eternity. The Atomic Bomb is right. I don't have a choice, because if I did I would do something about it all.

The television is back to static. The silhouettes are still.

They're breathing. They're glowing the same gray fuzzy distortion as the television screen. There is white noise fluttering down on me like snow flakes. The world looks different. For the first time in the last fourteen hours I hear my heart beat. I feel my eyes blink rapidly. I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand stiff. Everything appears to be bleeding static. Is this real? I stand up for the first time in hours. My legs are shaking. They're brittle. They're vibrating. They're moving. They're running. I'm running as fast as I can. I'm running as fast as I can. I'm running as fast as I can.

"Excuse me sir, do you have any change? I'll be honest, I just need some money to drink away this terrible world. Can you do that for a poor washed up veteran?" The grizzly bear looking dude is standing straight in front of me, gently shaking his mason jar with a small assortment of change in it. The coins clink against the glass.

I pause for a moment. I'm just as shocked as I've been a countless number of times before. Looking around, I find myself surrounded by skyscrapers in the streets of a city I can't recognize. Attempting to gather myself, all out of breath, I barely manage to mutter, "Uh uh I can't. I, I'm trapped inside a computer simulation program. I think, I mean I think I'm here because I killed half the human race. I uh, I think someone is playing a joke on me. Someone put me in here!"

The grizzly bear looking dude's eyes widen and he scratches his chin through a thick jungle of beard. "Really? That's real damn strange. I think the same thing has happened to me. Is this program written in binary or decimal coding?"

"I uhh, I mean, I have no fucking clue."

"Ah, I see, I guess you're not a computer guy are you?"

In twenty five minutes the world will end. The Atomic Bomb is approaching me. He's smiling a smile that is meaningless. He gazes at me for a moment with his big meaningless smile, then
says, “Hey Gary, do you have any spare change on you? I'm just looking to get fucked up.” Then, he sees the grizzly bear looking dude standing behind me and peeks around my shoulder. The Atomic Bomb and the grizzly bear looking dude make eye contact. The Atomic Bomb is smiling an abyss of absolute absurdity. I hear a mason jar shatter against flesh and bone. Coins dance across the sidewalk. I turn around. He's unconscious. He's bleeding.

“Why did you do that!” I say, almost choking on my own words.

“Jokes on you, Gary,” The Atomic Bomb says, as he lights up a cigarette. Its ember is burning like the sun. Smoke floats towards the cold, dead emptiness of space.

“No, I mean, why are you doing this to me? Why am I here? What's the meaning of all-”

“Shut the fuck up Gary, and watch him! Watch what happens to him.”

The man lies bleeding in the street corner. I watch him. He's dying. He's bleeding. He's dead. Tick-tock- a second of time floats off the clock- all over again.
Ode to Silence
Eddie Rogers

“There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.” — John Cage

brothers and sisters point up to heaven, where they think God should breathe matter, pulling vices from all us sinners, while the lips of slouched over veterans pull smoke from narcotics and push them out like the big bang, or the boom boom of gangsta rap from the shivering subwoofer in the car outside my rattling window. fingers and compass needles point in various directions that feet walk in. footsteps push grass beneath trails where earth’s detectives find hardened soil. people point down where grass is missing. they say nothing. nothing, like the sound of mathematics. pencils scratch the surface of paper, as prayers strap saddles to faith, and ride up-up-up with helium towards heaven, towards Chicago, where I heard the subtle hum of the stage before the lights dimmed, before the saxophone pretended to be an elephant, somewhere between the darkness of my bedroom and my first dream of Cthulhu’s silhouette out at sea. my thoughts slurried like a drunken trombone. silence was nowhere, even the roaches scraped against the cherry surface of my desk drawer as they scattered after light crept in, over the cracks like a morning horizon. silence was nowhere. even if i had a remote control for my brain, the mute button would cause my last thought to ring out to infinity, beyond the reach of fingers, beyond the direction of heaven, beyond everything, everywhere, except nowhere, where God’s thoughts are still, as he holds his breath, and listens to silence.
Thoughts About Hard News on the First Day of Creative Non-Fiction
Mandy Simpson

Lead: Short. Make them salivate. Tell them the only way to satisfy the suddenly heavy moisture wetting their tongue is to fill their mouths with the words left untouched on the page below. If you have style, if you can actually transform heavy-handed information into something elegant that sweetly slips down the reader’s throat—thrill them with it here. From this point on, facts and formula run the game, so say it here. Prove to them you can write now, right now.

Example lead: If you want to know the purpose of this essay, I haven’t gotten to it yet. Keep reading. (The pressure of a lead gets to me. Keep reading. I want to show you I can write. Keep reading.)

Nutgraph: One sentence. Sum it all up here. Feed them like you promised. If they only read this sentence, they should understand the entire purpose of the article. Craft it carefully, though. Take the edge off, but leave them hungry for the swell of explanations that follow.

Example nutgraph: This piece isn’t really about how to write hard news.

Quote: Let someone credible say it, or react to it. You have no voice. You have cold facts, and hot opinions from “credible” sources. Throughout the rest of the story, mix them perfectly to concoct something lukewarm—easy to swallow courses for readers with slowly filling bellies. But for now, give them something burning, something biting.

Example quote: “For all you journalists, pretend you’re writing for an audience whose reading level is above fourth grade,” the professor said. [Heat]. “Write a real sentence for once,” he said. [Fire]

Explain the facts in descending order of importance: Self explanatory. (Journalists explain the self-explanatory.) Use the classic inverted pyramid model. At the top, place essential information: long strips of tough, rubbery, protein readers must gnaw until subjective truth seeps out of objective information—a perfect main course. Don’t forget to leave all the small details, all the spice, all the unique particulars that make a story worth consumption, at the bottom. Those ingredients are unimportant.

Example:
1. Journalism has little in common with creative writing, he said. She did too; actually, most people do. I am painstakingly aware of this fact.
2. I write like a journalist, listing facts, telling other people’s stories. [I have no idea how to tell my own story.]
3. I starve for news, breaking news, because I can’t write like Hemmingway, but he can’t rise from the grave to tell you the director of Hobson House has been embezzling for three years.

Unimportant information: If any readers make it this far, give them something sweet, succulent. Wet their mouths again. Reward yourself as well; write what’s important to you. Your story is about what the reader needs to know, not what you want to tell them. Tell them now; no one will make it this far anyway.

Example: Sometimes, I think I pursue journalism because I don’t have the skill to write creatively. I’d rather pretend I nobly sacrifice the beauty of what I want to say, for the urgency of what people need to know.
Bones
Sarah Spinks

It is late afternoon
when we find the bones.
Pale reminders of life
lost
transformed
pushing through moist dark earth.

No joint no flesh no
connection
transfixed and
scattered

lost

a jaw,
a femur,
a hoof,
a forgotten pelvis
    like a roman mask
peering through the dirt
of memory.

I do not touch,
    I do not draw near
but move up the steep hillside
to the wind and the sun

while he takes up the mask,
props it on a dead branch
and through its empty eye
fixes my image with a clear glass gaze.

I stand,
    trapped between earth and sky and
disjointed wind,
    unsure, caged by bones.

Don’t move, he says.

Don’t move.
Swimming Pools
Brittany Szabo

The only way to survive summers growing up in Florida was in your swimming pool. At eight years old, the water was my holy ground on the days when everything looked yellow and blurred, like the whole world was melting into a hazy pool for me to swim in.

Some people ease into the water toes first, then knees, belly button, nipples, neck, like it’s their baptism. But I had to dive head-first every time: tip-toe to the tile, arms raised to the sun, eyes closed, a leap of faith and... SPLASH, I enter a new world as a new being.

Underwater, everything sounds far away. Words are lost in a rush of tiny bubbles; you can hear their sounds but not their meaning. Everything looks fully and dull: the bright flowers in your bathing suit turn a wilting pale-blue. Underwater, everything loses its weight, even the organs in your body and the thoughts in your brain. This feeling of weightlessness is something rare, something people forget until they see a single leaf making its slow, dancing descent to the ground.

I used to take a blue plastic diving ring and squeeze it around my ankles so I could only swim like a mermaid. My mother told me I was only going to drown myself that way, but I liked being something other than human. I liked floating just under the surface with my mermaid tail, watching the clouds ripple into new shapes in the sky and the tree branches bend and bulge in the waves.

Graceful I was not, and I wore the ring around my ankles every time I swam, hoping to evolve into a beautiful half-fish right there in the chlorinated water. I spent as much time as I could underwater. Even in the bathtub, I would stick my head under the mountain of soap bubbles and hold my breath until I almost passed out. I brought down little cups and had tea parties at the bottom of the pool, where sometimes a huge Great White shark would crash the party and I’d use my trusty trident to stab the shark after a fierce chase through the drain-cave in the deep end. After emerging from the abysmal depths, my fishy friends all cheered for me in a growing cloud of bubbles and out of these bubbles swam the cutest merboy in my whole pool to kiss my puckered mermaid lips.

Underwater, I created my own world, my own rules, a power lost along with childhood laughter. Something has to happen in every kids’ life that makes them grow up.

That same summer, my mother took us to the creek she lived in as a little girl in Beaver Creek, Pennsylvania. Every day after school, she’d go there to catch fish, pick flowers, swim, sun bathe on the rocks, anything. It was her escape, one she’d lost long ago. “The water is much lower than it used to be,” she said to me as I slipped across the rocks covered in some slimy plant. It was the first time I saw inside my mom, and I saw a little bit of myself in her.

The summer I gave up on my mermaid ideas and my water sanctuary was a few years later, the same summer my mom started sleeping on the couch. I guess you could say it was the summer I had to grow up. I slipped the blue ring around my ankles and floated out to the middle of the pool in the rain, the colors blurred into chaos, and my hair floated around my head like a halo, glowing around it all.

I knelt there at the bottom of the pool and cried my first real cry, the kind that comes from deep inside and pours out like a fountain, threatening to drown us all. The kind that comes when the world you think you understand turns on you and leaves you stranded, lost, confused, sinking.
When I Boarded the F Train
Christina Yiannakos

Brooklyn has not changed much since my father’s day—
new graffiti on old buildings,
Russians now inhabit where Puerto Ricans once lived,
and before them Italians
and before them Irish—
all the trains still end on the same track,
slithering slowly out of their tunnels
like a bride out of her white slip,
all fire and sparks and indifference
for the satin and lace falling to the floor.
The sparkles at a distance look like magic,
wizards fighting by the sea,
hidden amongst dull apartment buildings,
and laundry, flapping on balconies.
The children on the train are fidgeting already,
dressed in bathing suits and slathered pale with sunscreen,
as the catch a glimpse of the Wonder Wheel over a gravel roof.
The train station is full of bodies, moving together,
crying, laughing, cursing, living together.
Coming together from the corners of the sweating city
to feel a bit of ocean air.

My father’s past and present can walk together here
past the Cuban woman selling tacky tourist chintz
and Nathan’s Famous Hot Dogs.
The hecklers have learned to yell over the sounds
(hey asshole! Bet you couldn’t hit the barn side of a broad!)
of the crowd rushing around them.
Ahead rattles the Cyclone, its screeching a siren call
that only a child’s ears can hear.

From the top of the Wonder Wheel, we can see the shore
stretched out, fading into the haze of summer,
and although we are both scared of heights
we take the risk and ride again.
Here is my father’s childhood, his young years.
Here he learned where the subway ends.
Years later, when I follow his path
and make my home in a quiet Brooklyn neighborhood
I look out across the beach
and still see him walking.
you can have your skyscrapers, your Times Square
and I will have Astroland.
This is not an apology.
Brittany Szabo

Lord, forgive me for growing weeds
from the souls of my feet.

Break my knees and use them to house
little birds. Peel the rind

of my skin and stretch it across the earth.
Lord, forgive me for keeping

the most dangerous criminals in my brain
cells. Pluck my eyes and fill

the holes with grains of sand that slide down
past my throat. Lord, forgive me

for loving the rot in the roots of trees. Chain
my arms to the thorns around

the princess’s tower. Let my palms touch
nothing but the air around them.