2010

Zephyrus

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Award Winners

Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award
Heather Funk
“Congratulations”

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Mason Broadwell
“Flying To Los Alamos”

Ann Travelstead Fiction Award
of the Ladies Literary Club
Brent Fisk
“Park Avenue”

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Andrew Hays
“A Journey in Five Parts”

Zephyrus Art Award
Katie Brinton
“Escape”

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing staff of WKU; the art award is chosen by Zephyrus staff.
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The Cold, Revisited
Meredith Wadlington

For Wendell Berry, champion of my Kentucke

The front porch of Charlie's Beardy Poe
(often populated with poetry, close-knit strangers,
travelers, coal, Jacob's old recliner and
the flag of our uncommon wealth)
now rests in the darkness of white and Christmas lights,
staring at a wintery night in which
burned out collegiates breathe new life
and cars suffocate under blankets of snow and uselessness.

Across the street, a handful of international students
(and the beast who occupies Helm 101 wearing headphones,
his eyes fixed on a screen of blue words and
moving images) exit the building I have learned to call home.
Transfixed, we know the magic of weather.

He prances through the empty lot
where Davy Crockett lies 6 feet under,
leaving snow and memories
(just as I did on this night 15 years prior,
haunting the streets of memphis with Erin and Tyler in our quest
to obtain the unreachable).
For a moment, he, a bearded ogre of a man, is weightless.

I flick my cigarette into whiteness,
it's lit end dying quickly in the unforgiving blanket,
and breathe Wendell's words of The Cold:
"How exactly good it is
to know myself in the solitude of winter."
The Parabola to the Asymptote
Cody Tucker

I arch toward you, Love,
my body a graceful curve.
I long to touch you.
I stretch to graze against you.

I know you want it, too,
for though you do not bend likewise to meet me
(your body itself a straight line)
you do not pull away
(or else point yourself elsewhere).

Almost there now,
nearer and nearer I claw
I draw beside you
(as I myself am drawn).

I'm deluded; I could never touch you.
Still I try,
my arms spreading open
to embrace our X-axis horizon.

They say we're destined
to do this forever
into infinity
(that figure eight knocked on its side).
Always nearer, never touching.

If that is true,
at least we do so,
stretching to the ends of the page
and the earth,

Together.
Malfunction
Cody Tucker

One time
my dad
told me a story
of a co-worker
on the assembly line
who specialized
in putting tires
on semi-trucks.
Twenty sandpaper years had
scratched and scarred
his hands.

On this day
as his finger-instruments
placed
Another bolt
on
Another tire
on
Another truck,
he collapsed.

The Line
ground to a reluctant halt
as paramedics
tried to revive him,
tried to re-hire a heart
that had reached the fifteenth day
of its two-week notice.

When his limp body
was carried off,
his co-workers stared
for a moment.
Then
the Line lurched,
impatient.
There were trucks to be made.
They filled his spot,
replaced him
like a loose screw.
And together,
the workers turned back
to their trucks,
their reflections
imprisoned
in the bright paint
of their creations.
Abortion
Cody Tucker

No one ever thinks about the upside of it.
About the fact that these fledgling little creatures
Will never experience the joys
Of cuts and bruises and bleeding.

They'll be robbed of the wonders
Of vomiting
And kidney stones.

They'll never shed a tear
Though many others will shed enough for them,
Those that walked out of the womb
Into some blissful happily ever after,
Those that weep for these tiny losses of life
While they swat flies and crush beetles
Beneath their boots.
That crowd.

Those poor unborn people
Will never enjoy sorrow,
Or embarrassment,
Or acne.

They'll never have the privilege
Of having their heart stomped on
By adulterous husbands,
Voluptuous wives,
Or confused teenagers.

But worst of all,
These fledgling little creatures
Might know death
Before they can come to fear it.
Poor things.
Young Mother
Brittany Szabo

The cardinals outside seem to paint themselves with the same rose color as babies' cheeks, or their young mother's lips while she stares in the mirror until confidence buckles her waist thin again—head high,

she struts around baby's high chair while baby uses applesauce to paint his arms and head until mother unbucks and picks him up like a rose from a garden. Mother stares at son and wonders how they got there in that tiny apartment with their clothes drying out the window, flying high like dull flags from the stairs covered in rusty nails and chipped paint. The neighbors upstairs look like they just rose from the dead, with bodies that could buckle under the weight of a single belt buckle at any second, and the cat in their window hasn't moved for days, and their rose bush has started to grow as high as the building's roof covered in spray paint graffiti from kids used to wrinkled stares from other kids on back-alley stairs where solutions come from belt buckle fights ending with blood spilled like paint on the ground and the walls of their buildings that seem to reach as high as heaven. That night, mother arose to find white petals from a rose floating like snow by the rusty stairs, and for a second, she felt that same high she felt in love—the knee-buckle kind of love that follows people into their graves and lives on after the paint has chipped and the high beams buckle and the stairs rust away and their roses have all wilted into pieces of dry paint.
Cadaver
Ruth Sudbeck

Cadaver,

You say that if I watch your chest for long enough, your stiff lungs will stretch like pink balloons to the twitch-shudder, twitch-shudder of your heart.

Let us test your hypothesis.

If I peel back the skin over your collarbone, ripping the collagen that stretches like thick cobwebs from flesh to flesh, I will find your muscles, asleep, wrapped in slick, gray cocoons; but, if I slit the membrane (gently, gently), and slide it back, I will be able to push my finger into the grooves between them, to trace the sternocleidomastoid up your neck and behind your jaw, or follow the pectoralis major into your shoulder.

If I'm lucky, I may spy a thin, white nerve, flattened by the cobwebs, and I will stroke its side with my sharp probe to coax it away, then tug at it until I find where it branches, and where it threads its white net into your muscles, like fungal hyphae (which are something like roots, except that, of course, only plants have roots).

If I dig a little more, I will find your sternum. Even the heavy shears cannot break that, so I will strip each of your sides in turn, and schick—schick—schick—schick,
Awkward Teeth
Felicia Stinson

Crack
the juice drips from under my nails
and we both throw the ripped husks
past the barbs of the fence, where
others are tangled and trapped.
dead corn skin for the calves

my mother's hands, empty of rings,
tug and pluck, digging out silks,
worthless silks from each crevice
leaving gold, worthless gold
to store through winter dinners

Crack
my mother's hands, just like her
mother's hands before, like mine
these women's hands that stick
from cracked kernels and silks
every summer, husking hands

a plump white worm crawls
through the thread thin silks
his trail dug through golden teeth.
without flinch, I dig him back out
always these bare women hands

Crack
the juice drips down my palms,
exposing the shriveled top of
what could have been corn teeth
the sweetly sour smell in my throat
but never on my tongue

during the denting metal pan with
dozens of fresher-than-the-store cobs
hours with my mother's hands,
the only sounds made beyond silence
by cracked stems and crinkled husks.

Crack
I don't eat corn.
Always do your homework...

Or monsters will know.
What I Tell Myself About My Father
Eddie Rogers

my dad and i are wrapped in down cocoons as clouds putter from our lungs in opposite directions.
warm gray blurs the canopy, pushing coiling mist away from he and i, awake and silent in the morning dew.
we watch thoughts float by as if they were such clouds, shape shift meditations in stillness and subtle bullshitting.

my dad, i don't know him the way he knew his dad, so he takes me to nature, where we practice patience with one another, where he slurps coffee, freshly boiled from propane, black, like he taught me to drink it. my father spoke in advice, but my words come out with breath, white and spontaneous.
i ask about my grandfather selling blow in his pharmacy.
time between my father's words simulate the anticipation of a solar eclipse, until he remembers how he flushed handfuls of cocaine down the commode, and i wonder if he tried it once or twice, such secrets hold their breath, sealed in empty beer cans and campfire coal, forever petrified in this southern kentucky wood.
my dad, he writes in his journal by the glow of dying embers.

he writes in latitudes and longitudes, time and fahrenheit. he pretends to be lewis or clark, i don't bother to recall which. i prefer him to be a wizard as he leads me through fresh mud, as he scribbles scattered scriptures in his spell book, as he tells me when he's dead, all his exploration records will belong to me, as he tells me, with time i'll be a wizard too.

i pretend he has been reading my mind all along, building empathy with my secrets, fears, and curiosities, watching every thought expand like ripples in rivers.
i pretend i say everything i've ever wanted to say to him, but never will, and this moment, i pretend he knows everything, because i see him smiling with lips which have spoken little.
Body Language of Christ
Jamie Ogles

A boy in church found Jesus
at the altar a couple of years
after pulling a Trojan
out of his wallet in the wooden pew.

He found Jesus and cried
and stomped around the small church,
hugging everyone
as they cried and sang and shouted Amen!

I cringed with every sloppy tear
and every drop of spit that
flew like a gnat out of the preacher's mouth,
and I cringed with every hug from condom boy;

he smelled like decades,
like green shag carpet
and musty, shit-brown recliners
with specks of orange

and green; he smelled like a yellow and white
crochet blanket with a big
brown cross knitted in the middle.
The kind of blanket you want
to hug for warmth, but then the smell
of decades envelopes your entire body
as the smelly crochet folds
between your legs.

At this point, in this smell of
smelly decades, condom boy begins to rock
back and forth, crying,
I love you, he says, I want you to be saved.

He squeezes so that my chest
sinks inward, my ribs enclosed,
And he rocks—
hump, rock, hump, rock.

I focus on my fingers against his back,
they flitter with pat-pats
of acknowledgement. Okay, pat-pat, I understand, flitter flitter.
He leaves, I breathe
until he comes back minutes later
for round two—

Hump, rock,
Hump, rock,
A crochet blanket
Sneaking between my legs.
Thoreau and a Cup of Tea
Hannah Morris

As my rolling hills slowly seep with copper in the early evening light, I shuffle home beneath the discarded clothing of trees. Her leaves lay about like paper-thin nightgowns, lazily tossed. My thoughts are only interrupted by the clod of a swollen chestnut or the bickering of a crow. I contemplate the desperation of fall; how the few brave vines hurriedly climb up cold stone walls, throw themselves on to dead branches, and splay like blood on to the grey sidewalk. Everyone has long since slithered home and I can see, in the wildness of what is left, that they feel the cold creeping.

Summer may be for sticky hands tugging down on white cotton dresses. It may be for running, downhill, in a whir of chartreuse to wiggle one's toes in the cool of the garden's mud. Summer is for moment dwelling, non-thinking, heads full of hydrangea fireworks and songs about sex not even disguised as love, heard in line for a milk shake.

But Autumn! Oh my melancholy Autumn! Autumn is the grating scent of decay, buzzing just beneath your feet. It is for visiting a dead squirrel on a morning walk, watching his jarred face return to earth with the little workers that scatter him. It is for nodding at the shy, white mushrooms, peering from neglected shrubbery. I delight in the tearing down of summer's frippery, the preparation for rest. Autumn, is for regeneration, I think, sitting under a tired oak, with Thoreau and a cup of tea.
On a dare, two boys slip into a changing room at the Salvation army and proceed to try on several pairs of pants, pissing in all of them—until the floor of the changing room has been effectively transformed into a swamp of warm urine.

A young hooker goes down on her landlord humming Ella Fitzgerald's rendition of "Blue Skies." She imagines she is singing to a packed auditorium, glittering in her blue sequin gown. Her eyes open to see a satisfied audience passing an eviction notice through the shredder.

A middle-aged man lathers his clammy stomach with peanut butter and looks away as his cocker spaniel proceeds to lick it off him. His wife of twenty years wouldn't do it—now safely in her grave for five, she'll never have to.

A forgotten elderly couple dance quietly in an already evacuated nursing home that is slowly filling with flames. Judy Garland's "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" is playing on a nearby record player that gradually begins to drown out the sound of the room collapsing around them.

A college student sits in the back of class quietly imagining the film he will never make. He allows the disconnected scenes to play out in his mind, over and over again, as they try to find their way out.
Burn
Carrie Law

Inspired by: The Crucible, by: Arthur Miller

leaves fall—
Death surrounds us—
Souls burn—
all for—justice
for those who feed your paranoia—
Lies—deceit welcomes
those who walk free.

He has turned from this place.
though in His name—
You damn us all—
innocent of our crimes.
defiled our names—
orphaned our children—
laid waste our crop—

all for Envy.
all for Greed.
all for—Justice.

He has turned from this place,

and so we burn
for our sins in your blind eyes—
hungry for Blood.
My blood—
My life.

like the leaves, we fall—
Death—enabled by forked tongues.
all for Truth—
Honesty—
all for Him—
But He has turned from this place

—and so we burn.
The Shoulder Poetry of Eva Braun
Will Hollis

A refined boy will find a poem
in the shoulder of his lover,
hidden there within the wrinkles
of the passionate skin.

Do you think Hitler ever looked for poetry on Eva?
Or did she carry it
upon her freckles
for her always man,
the weight stooping her back.

Did he look for the poetry
in any woman,
as any man is want to do?
Unless, of course, he held favor
for the verse of boys and men
with granite and lime
beneath their words.

Did he hide his poetry,
as he was taught to do,
knowing the poetry of men's shoulders
must lie and hide from the sun,
yet burn with the yearn for the lips of a poet man?

Hey Neighbor
Will Hollis

Hey Neighbor—
Since I live in the neighborhood, I decided to feed your dog. The poor thing was barking on the balcony for 3 hours, all alone, cold, and tired of asking for you to let him in. I never checked, though I'm sure it's a boy, even though he may be clipped down there. Only a male would yap so much over being left out for hours on end. If your dog were a girl, she would realize you weren't denying her the warmth of your apartment, but merely conditioning her to the cold of the world. So it stands to reason the dog still has his balls. Of course, a eunuch would be the best adapted to being left outside in early February, what with manhood not mattering at all.

I fed your dog some of the leftover Chik-fil-a I had in my car. I wondered a bit why you didn't come out ever, but I'm guessing you're another absentee parent. You seem like someone who just wanted warmth for the foot of your bed at night, so you bought a dog. Of course, Wal-Mart sells heat pads, but those don't come with the option of giving you a warm fuzzy feeling whenever you want one. Heat pads don't dispel loneliness. Heat pads don't give you a reason to brush your teeth. Heat pads don't make an indent on the mattress to make you feel a little less vacant. Whatever happens to the dog during the day obviously isn't a concern of yours.

Your dog should be fine digesting the sandwich. Of course, if he pukes all over your apartment, you might want to consider the possibility that he evolved emotions while I was sitting with him. We had a good talk, the furry heat pad and I. I took the time to analyze him, and he did the same for me; a head in the lap is as therapeutic as an hour with Dr. Phil. He listed to my woes; since dogs don't judge, he was wonderful. He made my space a little warmer, and I became a little less tense; jealous of you, in fact. I taught the emotions of people like me, the ones with ninety-eight crayons in their emotional boxes. I told him about puce and teal and hyacinth and ecru, and he told me how he liked the subtleness of grays.

Spending time with a liberal arts major can't be good for anyone, especially those who are impressionable. If your dog decides to become more than a heat pad and vomit up the food I gave him, look at it as...
his way of showing some color.

So next time it's 40 degrees out and you think it's OK to leave out a terrier, you may want to think twice. I'll steal him next time, and since he knows me, he probably won't miss your sorry ass.

A Concerned Neighbor

A Journey in Five Parts
Andrew Hays

Part One
She used to laugh, but now she's quiet. Immensely quiet, eternally quiet. I remember the drive down to Dallas, to see her in the hospital, and I remember how small and foreign she looked in the hospital bed, silent, swollen, bruised, and unconscious. I remember carrying her coffin across a plush, green field.

They say you should search for truth. For a while, the best I did was to switch from Baptist to Catholic, from juice to wine. My real search began the moment I came to the wake and saw her coffin, closed because her body was too unrecognizable for display. I wasn't "mad at God"; in fact, I happily dealt with it for the first few weeks. My uncertainties crept up on me slowly, and the more I saw her in my dreams, the harder it became to deal with the fact that she was buried underground right now.

That wasn't right for her. She was sixteen years old. No teenage girl should be planted in the dirt. But, this time, God didn't give me a single satisfactory answer, because this time, I was finally looking for one.

Part Two
She was in that particular car, on that particular day, during a storm that had developed and traveled along the perfect path to reach her at that moment. Decades before, a guardrail was placed at just the right spot, and before that, a road was built exactly where that storm would be. Her parents' choices put her near that road, and someone built a house that they would buy that would require she take that road every day from a school that was placed in the perfect spot. Destiny must be chaos, and every moment from the start of it all was working towards her death. Every moment from the start of it all is working towards everyone's death, for that matter.

What kind of God can be found in any of that? How can any of us be foolish enough to think that a serendipitous moment is really from above? Miracles only happen because before them, something else happened, and before that, something else happened, and while we're enjoying our good fortune, someone else is getting fucked over. But we can rationalize that with karma, or destiny, or God's blessings and punishments.

She died because she hit a guardrail during a storm, not because God called his daughter home.
Part Three

We're on our own then, it would seem. Then why can't I shake that feeling whenever I see an image of a cross, or a crescent, or an aum? The thought of going to church sickens me, but the idea of something sacred, of something meaningful, can never fully be purged from my mind.

Am I just afraid of dying, now that it's come so close? Am I afraid of being put deep in the ground? Is it really that simple? Is it a part of my makeup, or my upbringing?

I'm not angry at a deity for killing her, because I can't believe that a deity could control that chaos any more than we can.

Part Four

She probably never knew what happened. I suppose that should be comforting, but is it really? Her last memory was whatever over-played piece of shit song was on the radio? Or maybe it was the brief moment of fear as she felt the car slip out from under her. Her heart must have nearly stopped when the car rocketed off the road, and the breath was probably jolted from her lungs when her head smashed into the side window. Or maybe, just maybe, she hung on for the next 36 hours, in some sort of murky confusion, trembling and scared, unable to speak, unable to move. And then nothing. Gone. Her entire memory of herself, her life, her friends, gone.

Part Five

Any search for truth is ultimately fruitless, at least for me, because I've started to define truth as something that can't be known. I'm always going to fail, if I look for it. It's behind my unarticulated reverence for a symbol or a figure, it's behind her last thoughts, it's behind the chaos, and it's behind wherever she is now. I'm content, though, to leave the chaos alone, because regardless of the mechanism, it's something I'll never understand. Rather than belief in truth, I'm content to believe in "is."
Failed priest, perpetual disappointment, he went to Lapland in the fall of seventeen-something. Carl, son of Nils, the pastor, he ventured forth, even though he had no money, to collect. Specimens, he called them, after he pressed them neatly between clean pages, and tucked them to bed in his apothecary's cabinet.

The Earth's creation is the glory of God, he said, as seen from the works of Nature by Man alone. Carl saw himself as Adam, great namer, Lapland's flora his Eve. The briar rose, that lush and lively thing lay in a bed of green for him, the bridegroom, and she was soft and perfumed and eagerly waiting, her stems sweet fleshy thighs, her petals—Well.

***

A couple came from Malmo to stay with us in Buffalo, on their way to Mississippi. They wanted to see Niagara Falls. The man, Peter, was over six feet tall, filling the tiny one-bedroom apartment—where sometimes gunshots rang out in the night, followed by ambulances—like a blossom ready to burst, with his case of Old Milwaukee in one hand and Miller High Life in the other. I've brought some of your shit American beer, he said, and hospitably, we crowded with it around the clean plastic kitchen table and everyone else talked of politics while I thought of poems about the time a couple came from Malmo to stay with us in Buffalo on their way to Mississippi.
Long after I was drunk, to demonstrate his country's superiority, Peter brought out his leather wallet and sorted through the currency he'd gathered from across the world—having stuffed his pocket full of now-useless cash as souvenirs, specimens. But also, he had from his homeland Swedish money—a tiny gold kroner, and a bill with a shining purple etching of a bearded man, a leaf, and a cabinet.

***

This journey changed Carl—afterward he tried his hand at medicine, became Doktor von Linné. Sage of syphilis, curer of the royal family, laboring at night over his blossoms and his cabinet, bestowing upon the peacock flower, the lady's slipper, wild hemlock, algae, ferns, names in the language of men of letters: monoecia, the hermaphrodites. Monadelphia of the twining phallic stamens. Cryptogamia, the "plants of a hidden marriage." Changing his own name to the language of letters—Carolus Linnaeus, namer of all.

Young men, like Adam's children, ventured into the land of Nod or to realms at least as tropical, for Carl, Carolus, stuffing their pockets full of leaves and branches and buds, starving, sometimes to death, facing condemnation for the spread of this loathsome harlotry, this beautiful fertile flora.
**Quercus robur**  
(Oak Tree)  
Heather Funk

This moment, in a warm house, glowing—
Although truly, I am not alone in any sense but for
The winter dreariness, the new-chill
   nipping at my hear-strings—this moment, I am waxing
Pensive, penning thoughts not of the past-day splendor
Because it isn’t knowledge alone that will sustain me—
Not knowledge, not week-old blackberries, growing silvery mold
   like first frost.

It’s a big country now, this place
Long dreamed of, a place of poets lacking meter-making minds,
Singing songs of themselves, I’d think,
Though truly I speak for no one but myself,

   here in this warm house, glowing—
I speak for no one but myself though I’ve longed to know
The inner workings of my fellow-creatures, but their sorrows
   turn my arms to lead, a new-chill

Nipping at my heart-strings, till I thought my
   own longings might break free and drift away.
Who is capable of greatness? Quiet book-worms
   Weighed down with sorrows coast-to-coast?

Orators, whose voices never tremble
   like the poets, who strip their models naked,
Who throw away their soul-clothes bit by bit with every word?
This moment, in a warm house glowing, I think myself

incapable of splendor,
Uninterested in heroism, I chose survival,
Uninterested in splendor, I chose silver week-old blackberries.
In New York State, I saw a live-oak growing.

In Kentucky I lay beneath an apple-tree and dreamed.
North of Nashville, I sat in a warm house, glowing—
   in this big country, I will find something,
A thought to call my home—in this big country,

I will find something, and I will sell it
   for a song.
Congratulations
Heather Funk

Maybe the doctor said, Congratulations, it's a girl—another girl, because the first was lying, squalling, finally turning pink over on the other side of the room—maybe he said, Happy birthday, baby, or, She's got your hazel eyes and Roman nose, oh, this one is cut out to be awkward, cut out to be a bookworm, she's even got your dark arm hair and tendency toward martyrdom, your generosity as big as this hospital. Maybe he said, How are you feeling, Mama?

I don't know, being the baby, and neither did the twenty-three-year-old lying in the bloody blue sheet bed with her insides out of place, because Mama's heart rate was already racing toward the heaven I'd apparently just come from, fading out, preparing for days of critical condition, all my fault for having wedged myself so tightly right under her right rib—so she couldn't tell me either.

Out on the River Road
Heather Funk

When it was sunny enough outside I'd go with Daddy and we'd borrow things. He was always a borrower, in his rented friends' rooms downtown, but these men were loyal enough to give freely, or at least they seemed to me to be that way. We'd take the convertible from Mike and Gareth, who were his British father-and-son friends, with Gareth calling his dad Mike and not Dad, and they were both so old and foreign to me when I was so young; afterward, we'd go to Randy's house which was behind the cast-iron statue of a man on a horse, Randy's house with the fox door-knocker because the man who built it was a cartoonist and the fox was his most famous character. We'd go to Randy's house and get Lucy, the white-blond Labrador who was so old and sweet, and with Randy's dog in the backseat and the top down on Mike and Gareth's convertible we would bask in the sunshine and then the twilight.

We'd fly down the road that hugs the river where everything was lush and green like a jungle and find the secret hollow where the bikers went for fish and chips, and we'd eat them at picnic tables while the dirty dirty water slowly lapped at the docks where boats swayed gently with the current. Or we'd take the highway out into the country and look at all the fine houses and the not-so-fine houses, where we weren't going fast, because going fast was in our blood, it was what his mother, my grandmother, did on weekend nights when she was young in the real country, not the suburb-country, she told us so, once, and smiled.

There was one ride when I had just turned nine and he'd forgotten about it, forgotten that I'd suddenly become nine years old, because he was worried my mother was taking all his money, and because of that worry he'd sent me to swim two doors down at my friend Amber's, who was nice to his friend Jimmy, who was son of my grandmother's friend Margaret. He'd forgotten too that night that he shouldn't drink a summer night's worth of beer and drive me home down the curvy roads just as fast as we drove every summer night, and he was pretending to be a lion, but his lion's roar was YOUR-MOTHERSTOLEALLYOURMONEY and since we must have been playing circus I drowned him out with the Dumbo song about the drunken elephants and then.

After he was reassured that I wasn't as fragile as he had feared that night where the smells of burned rubber and clayey summer soil twined together acridly in the evening mugginess, he was
ready for us to go driving again, and we stayed driving, all the summers of our younger selves, both of us getting old—him getting middle-age old, the beginnings of wrinkles blending the scar on his forehead from where his head hit the rearview mirror into near-nothingness, and me getting almost woman-old, the kind of old which his friends would comment on when we went to borrow the car, and when they said those things my face would grow hot like the sun was already shining on it out on the river road.

We drove all through those summers until I had to really grow up and get a job and he had to too and we didn't see each other so much anymore, and then I had my own car so I had to cruise by myself with the windows down which was nothing like the top down on a borrowed convertible, and Lucy was too old to ride with anyone anymore anyway, and we'd already found all the secret river hollows, and I'd learned better manners than to borrow all the time, I'd learned not to overstay my welcome, I'd learned that when I kissed him on the cheek all those summer nights and walked into my bright house while he turned around and went to drive more, and for all I know, that is what he is doing still.
The windows of Devona White’s house were black as old nail heads in a fence. I wobbled in unsteady circles on the rickety merry-go-round, one foot dragging in the dust, and waited for her bedroom light to come on. Acorns peppered the ground. It was autumn, I was in the fifth grade, and nothing I owned seemed to fit me anymore.

I lived in a working class neighborhood where our small town petered out and gave way to open fields broken by thin bands of woods and trickling creeks. Our fathers, when they wanted their kids to come home, would whistle to get our attention, each man with his own distinctive sound. My father put his pinkie fingers in the corners of his mouth and whistled two notes, high and shrill. My mother called it a wolf whistle, and it was much like the ones sailors in those old black and white war movies used whenever a girl walked by. At the moment I was well out of earshot of my father’s whistle. The sun was sinking behind a distant stand of trees, and though I was hungry, I was not thinking of food at all, but those first few days of school back in August when our forearms stuck to biology books and the large fans roared in the tiled halls. I’d first noticed Devona at recess when she wore white cutoffs too short for our school, and she’d been sent home with her mother, blushing. Her skin was olive and warm. A sixth grader said he heard she was Italian.

Devona lived opposite City Park with her mom and dad and six sisters. The kitchen stoop was littered with the butts of cigarettes and there were cans of old cat food in the window wells. One of the older sisters slept in a popup camper in the driveway when it was warm enough. I spent much of September bouncing a tennis ball against the brick wall of a local bank hoping for a glimpse of Devona. Some days I’d see her pushing her younger twin sisters in the swings. The girls had unruly manes of dark brown hair and grey mustaches of mucus and dirt. She’d push the girls with her palms in the small of their backs, each sister crying “Higher! Higher!” but they’d eventually sling out of control and knock together only to spill from their swings and run to the relative safety of the slide where they could play without her guidance.

Devona first spoke to me on a Tuesday after school. In Earth Sciences that day, we’d watched a film strip on the reproductive system of a frog. I was slogging away at a tennis ball with an old beat up racket and a lady in a beehive hairdo peered through the drive-thru window and she fluttered one hand to get my attention. The micro-
phone hissed to life and she said, “I think it’s time you moved along.” When I turned around, Devona skidded to a stop on her bicycle. The purple and white tassels on her handle bars stirred in the breeze and the vinegary scent of rotting apples wafted from Mrs. Goertel’s side yard.

“I wondered why they took so long to run you off,” Devona said. Her shadow stretched across the asphalt. A tingle shivered between my shoulder blades when I looked at her and I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. In Mrs. Goertel’s windows the blackness was cut by long lace curtains. Across the street Mr. Daywalt chopped at golf balls in his unkempt lawn. Every once in a while he’d make decent contact and clunk one against the downspout or off into the remains of a dead forsythia. The sun slid out of place like a sack of stacked cement.

“I’m going to be an aunt,” Devona said as she tipped her bike in the grass. She’d lost her kickstand. She stepped gingerly among the apples which were full of bees and yellow jackets and picked up the stray tennis balls that had rolled away. Two of Devona’s older sisters were pregnant, and while the kids at school talked about this often, they didn’t put the stink on it the way some parents did after PTA meetings or the way the teachers did on the playground. Even some high schoolers who still rode the bus would cat call as they rumbled past the White’s plain house.

“I’m going to be a Webelo,” I said, as if her impending auntshood and my nerdiness dovetailed together. For years I’d fudged the scout motto until my pack leader had given me a small laminated card to keep in my wallet. He didn’t know I had no wallet, but I carried the card in my back pocket at all times and so took it out and looked at it again. It said in neat black letters:

I, (say your name), promise
   to DO MY BEST
   To do my DUTY to GOD
   And my Country
   To HELP other people, and
   To OBEY the LAW of the Pack

Devona gathered the tennis balls into a loose pile in the grass. Silence agitated like a swarm of gnats over a baseball field. She toed a bit of crumbled rock at the edge of the parking lot and said finally, “My mom says we can’t get any more kittens now because money’s tight.” The streetlamps along the road buzzed to life all at once and a light came on in a rear room of Mrs. Goertel’s house. Mr. Daywalt’s young daughters banged through the storm door into the backyard. They overthrew the empty kiddie pool, put it over their heads like a hat that was much too large and began dragging it around the yard. Mr. Daywalt rifled home his sand wedge and lugged his golf bag into the garage.

“Would you like to go steady?” I asked and then shriveled. It was if someone else had said it aloud. Devona looked up at the nearest streetlamp, and when she said nothing, I knocked a tennis ball against the building and watched it dribble off among the apples in the shaggy grass. I heard a shrill whistle in the distance, more urgent than my father’s. Devona brushed the dust from her jeans and pulled her bike up from the lawn. “That’s my Dad,” she said, and with three graceful pumps of the pedals she disappeared around the corner of the bank. I felt the yellow fuzz of tennis ball deep in my belly. She kept her head down the whole way up the hill and never looked back. Mrs. Goertel’s side yard descended in gloom.

The next morning I feigned a stomach ache, picked at my eggs and bacon, fed my toast to the dog. My mother moved my stack of books to the chair by the door and caught sight of what I’d written in large block letters, I LOVE DEVONA WHITE. My mother cleared away the plates, and asked, “Devona White? Isn’t that the girl with the two pregnant sisters?” I turned a steady shade of red. A new symptom of my serious illness, something like a fever, consumed me. She tossed a wet rag into the sink and said, “You know, you have to be careful who you fall in love with.” She lit a cigarette and wagged the match until the flame went out.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said, “especially if I can’t stay home from school.”

Stuffed in the vent of my locker, a thickly folded sheet of notebook paper. Written in lavender ink, the simple word yes. But I did not see Devona at lunch or recess. We were served prunes and pizza while a heavy rain roared on the metal roof of the gym. I killed the last fifteen minutes of indoor recess staring through the eyepiece of a microscope and dismantling a plastic model of the brain.

After school I waited until all the last bus had pulled away, but when there was no sign of Devona, I picked my slow way along the damp streets, a different route than usual. One that took me past City Park and the small, cramped houses that crowded near it. I hunkered beneath the oak and watched large black ants run up the crazed bark of the tree, little bits of katydid suspended above their heads. As it grew dark, Devona’s house did not fill with light. The front door
remained tightly closed. The next day passed like this as well and Annette Smith poked her freckled face into homeroom and asked for Devona’s assignments.

That afternoon I straddled the hard rubber swing as a haphazard pack of stray dogs meandered trash can to trash can. Annette Smith trudged along the sidewalk with her heavy backpack slung over one shoulder, and seeing me, made a beeline for the swing beside me. “Did you know Devona’s sister lost her baby?”

“No,” I said, “I thought Devona was sick.”

“It was Naomi, her oldest sister,” Annette said. She twisted the swing to her left and right, lifted her feet, and straddled the muddy puddle beneath it. “I’ve got the homework she missed, but I don’t want to go over there.”

“Why not?” I asked. I shadowed her movements in my own swing winding the chains tight and letting go.

“Her father scares me a little,” she said.

“We’re going steady,” I said, and pretended to study the upper canopy of the oak that towered over us.

“Then will you give this to her,” Annette asked as she pulled a folded slip of paper from her jacket pocket. Her hair had fallen from one barrette and her fingers trembled.

I waited until dark to knock. When the porch light snapped on it was almost violent. The interior door scraped open and a large man with greasy hair and glassy eyes stood behind the storm door. I could only see him from the waist up. He was shirtless and his stomach jutted tightly out as if he were pregnant too. A thick spray of silvery hair ran across his chest. He held onto the latch of the door as if he thought I might try to force my way in. “Yes?” he said in a low, sleepy voice.

“Is Devona home?” I asked, holding out the slip of paper. The man leaned nearer the screen and cleared his throat. “I could smell bacon, cabbage and the sourness of a house too full of cats. “Devona’s not allowed to see no more boys,” he said. I wanted to tell him I’d soon be a Webelo. That I practiced tennis every afternoon and had brought Devona her schoolwork. That I loved his daughter. But he’d closed the door already and left me in the harsh light of a naked yellow bulb. The stoop was rough and bare and the top step wobbled as I planted my foot to fly away. Far off I heard the sound of my father’s insistent whistle, and without looking back I ran full throttle until all thoughts of love burned away and left me breathless and raw.
Oranges
Jordan Embry

-Jessica: second grade. On the playground she gives me a kiss on the cheek for letting her borrow my blue crayon. I am shunned by my classmates for contracting cooties.

-Amber: fifth grade. Under the bleachers she places my hand between her legs. We kiss, hard and without passion, something that just has to be done. The next year she changes schools, and I never see her again.

-Seth: eighth grade. As soon as he kisses me, I know it is dangerous. It's the first time I feel real passion. He tastes like oranges, sweet and tangy. He is my first. Two months later a boy named Ike Winters is beat up for "acting gay." We decide it is best to pretend like nothing happened.

-Courtney: tenth grade. She understands me. Our first date is at a drive-in. We kiss and have sex in the back of my car. It is over quick. We both cry. Two months later I tell her about Seth, "it's gross," she says . . .

-Me: eleventh grade. I have contracted "cooties" again. People think the threats and beatings will "cure" me. Shortly after a few broken fingers I change schools.

-Seth: Just out of high school. I find out he was murdered. He didn't get away fast enough. His coffin is closed. The scent of oranges floats through the air . . . or perhaps I just imagine it.

Waiting on the Scientist
Morgan Eklund

A woman in the news had eight babies
Not to forget the six before that,
How is that she can let a man put eight babies inside her
And six before that
And I can only let you touch me in small doses,
When my head is behaving and eating its vegetables
Like a clean child
And when I am as close to the rational as I can be to a thorn plant.

Despite the urgency
You told me I was fine
And my skin was not showing my insides
Where I was certain there were lumps and clots.
Though you told me
My thoughts that I was dying
Were under my hat
And I was fine
And if I just have patience—

Patience like a waiting room
Where one dirty eyed man
Said to a man on a cliff
"You'd think I'd be used to waiting by now."
A room of waiters and readers
Waiting on men in coats
Men who are scientists
Waiting on mountains to make chatter
And beds to let in the dogs and the good
And reading an old friend across the room
Reading the twitches and tapping of the foot
Reading each other like a month old Newsweek on the table.
Vostok 7
Luiggi Carlin

Yuri Gagarin never saw God when he finally made it into space.

Perhaps, instead of looking up, he was searching down for the eyes of his daughter twinkling like a tiny light blinking on the side of a satellite, fooling us into thinking shooting stars exist on cold nights, chasing shots of barber shop vodka with foreign tasting beer.

Somewhere on the streets of space town, where cosmonauts and heroes are born lies a park bench, alone and envious of the attention garnered by statues and busts of everyone who died propelling humanity into space.

The Associated Press announced today that scientists have found more habitable planets amongst the stars we'll never have the tenacity to reach.

I wonder if I can catch a flight with Vostok 7 to a planet where the support of a park bench is valued over the idols of dead heroes, if only to get away from you and the gravity that keeps me grounded to the floor, like the barrel of a gun constantly cocked in my direction.
When was it no longer fashionable
to admit how uncomfortable you are
breathing on the back of her neck?

We grew too old for archetypes
and decided it was better to wish
for rain, just for the chance to stay inside
and see how long you could hold your breath
before goodbye meant more than the
words stumbling across the screen.

I want to resist the bandages that hold me together
like the uneven screws in a Swedish drawer.
I stopped believing in the magic of
Disney movies and Christmas reruns.
Steel helmets and mustaches were disintegrated
by flushed lips that can only say I hate you.

I can't find comfort in the solitary confinement
of a straightjacket composed of everyone's
locked doors and open windows.

I remember nose-diving off a cliff in an
effort to get your attention away from the lives
we convinced ourselves everyone should afford.

I've forgotten how to pay my dues for letting
three syllables tarnish the sanctity of your eardrums.

And there are others just like me, stapling
their feet to the ground in an effort to
keep their hearts away from the clouds.

And I'll maim and disembowel them all for the
chance to leave this solitude behind, but every chance
to be forgiven etches another ballistic trauma into my skull.
Off they go,
My brother and father,
Off to have fun,
Washing the old VW Van.

Here on brown shag carpet,
With koopas and goombas,
With Yoshi and Luigi.
I'm already having fun.

Why should I go?
I have King Koopa to face.
I have mushrooms to chase.
In this, my extra life.
Horses
Benjamin Brooks

They aren't pretty
when they chew the fence
like a piece of fried chicken.
They gnaw the grain

And leave splintered posts
saying, "We're Monsters
we eat our own cages,"
like broken toothpicks.

They charge the field
surging uneven like a flood.
Each mechanical snort gathers
speed, sweat, and drips foam

Like they pull Neptune's chariot.
And Megan wants to ribbon
braid their course manes
like her delicate glass dolls.
Watching Batman
Mason Broadwell

Man shall not live by riddles alone: sometimes I need a hunk of bread. My communion is worshiping the costumed underworld, because

only the costumed underworld is worth conflating with religion. I've floated in the fog of self-righteousness and tried to ignore the B-movie veteran jiggling a seascape and blowing a conch shell just outside my porthole, but holiness is a cliff-hanger of deception, and watching Batman (I hope) makes the plot start making sense.

Hungry nights like this, I wish I could fend off the flamboyant Pharisaism I've been closeting for twenty years, but there is no Shark-Repellent

Bat-Spray for reality, and Jesus doesn't wear a cape and dash to the rescue. So if my new prophet wears purple pinstripes and paints over his moustache, or if she has to be sewn into her leather bodysuit, at least we admit we're wearing masks. At least nobody ever tried to blow up a building for Catwoman—except in that one scene.
Flying to Los Alamos
Mason Broadwell

When you look out of your window and notice both left engines are on fire at 30,000 feet on the red-eye to Los Alamos, you have to decide: should you unlock the seat-cushion-cum-flotation device on the off-chance you land in the Abiquiu Reservoir, or should you just eat your Red Hots and pretend you didn't notice? And what do you think about to distract yourself? It's like when you board the campus bus and see an old lover, and you both desperately refuse to open your eyes. It's like watching Top Hat but humming How Could You Believe Me When I Said I Love You When You Know I've Been a Liar All My Life. It's like the sleepover where Ashley forgot her underwear and all you could talk about that night was alligators. It's like Sunday afternoons eating Red Hots in your granddad's 1975 Mercedes on the way to Piccadilly. It's like the relationship that ended when she said "I always knew you'd be the one to break up with me"—by which she meant "Nobody else would have the balls to treat me like that"—by which she meant you found it endlessly fascinating that her breasts were different sizes—by which she meant "What happens next?"—by which she meant "I don't have a car"—by which she meant "You'll have to give me a ride home"—by which she meant "I never want to see you again"—by which she meant "We'll probably transfer to the same school next year anyway, won't we?"—by which she meant "In the event we run into each other on campus, let's pretend we're blind to the curves of our bodies"—by which she meant pin-up girls will always remind you of her. And you're pretty sure that's why it's like the day the vending machine broke during lunch in 11th grade and the only thing you could grab in the furious silent scrum that followed was a roll of breath mints that tasted like dollar-store shampoo. And it's like the ice on the sharpest edge of winter. It's like sludge tankers silently crushing fishing boats in the night. It's like the magic trick involving a nun, a salt-cellar, and a nipple ring. It's like the ski trip when you hit a tree, and while your family laughed and shivered unknowingly at the bottom of the slope, you slipped away in the blue blackness of tomorrow. In that sense, it's like the summer you did all the hardest things you could think of, and the resulting glories of the autumn. And ultimately it's like those placards on airline tray-tables that read In the event of an emergency, your seat cushion may be used as a flotation device. In the event of spiritual emptiness, gamble, eat Swiss Cake rolls, read Descartes, sing a song of sex pants, learn to die, and bury yourself for 100 years or more. In the event you get 2nd-degree burns on most of your forearm from the cappuccino machine, it's okay to cry—but it wasn't okay after she got off the bus and your eyesight returned. In the event you rise from the flaming dead, as you will do, substitute a plane trip to a city you've never visited. And in the event you glance out the window at 30,000 feet and the engines are on fire, eat a Red Hot or two and close your eyes.
Warning Label
Andrew Marlowe Bergman

Andrew Marlowe Bergman
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The Honorable Congressman Brett Guthrie
510 Cannon H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515
Phone: (202) 225-3501

Dear Congressman Guthrie,

From The Los Angeles Times: Dated 11/11/2005
"FDA Suggests Warnings for Condoms"
Johanna Neuman and Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Times Staff Writers
WASHINGTON --- Against a background of pressure from social conservatives, the Food and Drug Administration is recommending a new series of labels for condoms, warning that they "greatly reduce, but do not eliminate" the risk of some sexually transmitted diseases. Though little noticed by the general public, the issue of condom labeling has become another battleground in the nation's culture wars.

In accordance with the desires of the Food and Drug Administration, this citizen wishes the following warning label be printed on all condom boxes sold in the United States.

1. Condoms greatly reduce, but do not eliminate the risk of some sexually transmitted diseases, those with no allergy to penicillin are advised to pray to their higher power, or silently reflect upon their fortune.

2. Condoms using nonoxynol-9, a common spermicide, have been known irritate the vagina when used multiple times a day over an extended period of time.

3. Latex Condoms have been known to irritate the genitals of persons with a latex allergy.

4. The use of Sheep Skin Condoms greatly increases the likelihood that you will have to drop $53 the morning following coitus in order to acquire the morning after pill.
   a. Regarding the acquisition of the drug levonorgestrel,
otherwise known as the 72-hour Plan-B pill.

i. After being turned away at every locally-owned pharmacy in town, women must present photo ID upon arriving at one of the many chain pharmacies that actually stock Plan-B.

ii. Until arrival at said chain pharmacy, women must endure the cold, judgmental scowls given them by the staffs of the local pharmacies that refuse to distribute based upon the religiosity of the pharmacists despite the religiosity of the potential customers.

iii. Upon arriving at the proper pharmacy and showing her photo ID the woman must still endure the cold, judgmental scowls given her by the pharmacy’s staff, and refrain from lashing out at them out for failing to turn their eyes in the same manner towards her boyfriend or male escort.

iv. Women, please do not help your male friends unnecessarily stockpile Plan-B, as it may lead them to increased unprotected and anonymous coitus.

5. Autoerotic stimulation on a day in which one engages in coitus is not recommended. Side effects may include prolonged coitus. Also, a lower discharge in semen may cause the female to become paranoid after the male member is withdrawn. Women have been known to remove the condom from their partner’s member, sprint into the bathroom and fill the condom with tap water to check for possible leaks in the condom despite the man’s insistence that "his boys take a few days to fully regroup."

a. Note: The sight of the size of a condom filled with water can cause depression in men whose members cannot fill said condom as adequately as the tap water.

6. Condoms have been known to mask symptoms of chronic premature ejaculation syndrome in men. A note on CPES, hereafter called PE.

a. Serotonergic medication has been shown to decrease the risk of PE.

b. Examples of such medications include (alphabetically) Celexa, Lexapro, Prozac, and Zoloft.

c. If treatment with serotonergic is not maintained throughout the patient’s life the chance of PE will increase. Men already using these drugs for reasons other than PE are advised to stay on them indefinitely, as these drugs may cause PE in patients with no prior history of the disorder.

d. PE is currently said to be evidenced by climax within the first ninety seconds of penetration. It is believed that unprotected coitus, especially for those not accustomed to it also increases the chances of PE.

e. Other factors related to PE include:

   i. Sexual repression by current girlfriend or wife.
   ii. Sobriety.
   iii. Desire to watch SportsCenter.
   iv. Novelty of the coital positions employed by partners.
   v. Novelty of the cavity in which coitus occurs.
   vi. Subconscious desire to escape the Lionel Richie CD she turned on before she led you into the room.

7. As always, the United States Government insists that abstinence until marriage and monogamy within marriage is the best option to combat the spread of STD’s including unwanted pregnancy.

I await your reply.

Sincerely,

Andrew Marlowe Bergman