2011

Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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Zephyrus
2011

A publication of the English Department of Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky
Elegy for Dr. Pat Taylor

Do cats sit and read from their owner teachers’ laps?

The phoenix remains ash.

She reenacted English 300 the year I majored in math but loved Greek drama…. There’s God in truth, but there’s no God in numbers unless you count Athena’s army. She rises through us, we, heavy as Odysseus’ ship, against the arrows of Troy and oceans of Poseidon.

—Ben Isaac Brooks
# Award Winners

**Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award**  
Marianne Hale  
"Because"

**Browning Literary Club Poetry Award**  
Hannah Morris  
"Orange Cat"

**Ann Travelstead Fiction Award**  
of the Ladies Literary Club  
Audrey Gearhart  
"Yellow"

**Wanda Gatlin Essay Award**  
Will Hollis  
"Inferno"

**Zephyrus Art Award**  
Katherine Mitchell  
"Inadequate"

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 clapping of hands and stomping of feet sounded across the car, past the irregular ba-bump-ba-bump of the train hitting its tracks. I reached in my pocket and fingered a few rupees searching for the lowest ones in anticipation. My three traveling companions and I met glances with the awkward countenance you make when that guy at a party won't stop telling jokes about boners and dead babies, and you try to walk away, but don't know how.

He was there. Clapping his hand in my face. Stomping his feet, yelling “DAT! DAT!” I didn't know the language, but I didn't need to.

The transvestites were the worst feature of Indian trains. We were still in India then, making the trek from Kolkata to Kathmandu. I didn't know this at the time, but transvestites have their own social class in India, though it's a low one. They're known as hijras, and they make most of their money through begging or performing at ceremonies. It's culturally acceptable, but most men still can't look a hijra in the eyes. They blindly hold out coins with calm, suppressed fear like when the doctor gives you a shot. Many hijras have been castrated, and this balance between two worlds sparks a fear of loss in a nation adorned with temples and priests and spiritual gurus who call for non-attachment.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, hoping if he didn't notice me, he would pass us. His unwashed sari was a mix of bright, dirty red and yellow wrapped tight around his body to make up for his lack of female anatomy. It was elegant and torn. I had been in the country for three months—just long enough to finish my sustainability focused study abroad program—but I still couldn't delineate between rich and poor clothing. It was all foreign and interesting. His greasy, long, dark black hair was in a tight bun, and a gentle, mild stubble adorned his cheek.
He looked at me with chiseled eyes; he'd been doing this all day. My white skin and western clothes looked like money. Everywhere we went, people stared at us, un-abashed. I'd never seen people so poor.

People who slept on concrete floors every night. Families who lived in thatch houses and ate nothing but a meal or two of rice a day. Old women with thin hands and a mane of silver, black hair slouching to the sky. I'm not rich and never have been, but eating three meals a day put me in another tax bracket. I was traveling on a shoestring, but I was made of money. Maybe it hope people saw in us—the way I would look at a celebrity. Our Indian friends told us it was curiosity. Most people couldn't travel far, so we were ambassadors of culture; I don't know exactly what we represented, most of us came to India to find something different. Something new. I hoped to find an answer to questions I didn't know. Hoped to a better side of myself. Hoped to find silence through meditation and yoga.

He reached out to feel my face, and my friend Nate said, "Don't you touch him you piece of shit." The hijra couldn't have understood, but he didn't need to. No one understands what a dog means when it growls that deep, bone growl, but everyone knows what to do next.

He didn't care. He stroked my face, and then cupped his hands into a begging bowl. Looking to another part of the train, any part of the train, I dropped a rupee in it.

"Don't give money to that piece of shit," Nate said. He clapped again. I was a young Westerner out to find the great adventure. My plane ticket to India cost more than he made in a year. My tailor-made shirt only cost me four dollars, but it could have cost him two days work. He knew I had more than that.

This was it. The travel we wanted and planned for months. While working in foreign, sticky incessant heat that gave Nate a fortnight-long rash that kept him awake all night, itching. During the monsoon when the humidity drenched everything and I woke up in the morning to find mold had taken over my mattress (I was lucky to have one)—that monsoon I got a disease known as foot rot. When we worked on an organic farm at 6 in the morning, digging holes in rubber, clay soil with crowbars and large spades while hammer hangovers pounded our heads, and I felt something rip in my back, took a break then went back to work because work was work was joy was sorrow was work and we had to work to cover our clean hands and white skin and find bliss in exhaustion.

He reached out to feel my face again, but I pulled another rupee out of my pocket. A two piece coin. He took it, though it was still lower than he wanted. Even a two piece coin is only four US cents. I met his glance this time. He wasn't afraid or ashamed, but disappointed. He didn't ask for more.

The four of us, minus Nate, sat defeated. I felt like a man who got a speeding ticket in front of his kids. Nate took in a deep breath and shook his head.

"Fucking waste of a person. You know it's all going to the local gang. Some gangster will buy a beer with those rupees tonight. You're just making it worse."

This was the biggest debate in our group. How did our white skin change the people around us? By being generous, were we the instigators or cultural change, of the death of traditional cultures? Were we the new colonizers?

No one knew. Years later, I still don't.

"I didn't want to give him money. I don't agree with it either, but it's the only way to make them leave," I said.

Nate leaned back, "I'll make them leave."

I believed it, but didn't want to see it. The train was crowed and I already felt awkward enough. Nate liked to drink and fight. When we'd go to a bar, he'd order five shots of Warehouse tequila—the worst stuff imaginable. All of the alcohol sold in India must be produced domest-
After the other, slamming his glass down on the bar and letting out a massive belch, smiling, and we'd talk till the bar kicked us out.

I could meditate longer than Nate, but I never keep up with him when we drank. He was a bit bigger than me, but we were both barely in our twenties. We shared the blood eastern hardwood forests, and we talked about maple trees in a land of bamboo and neem.

By the time the hijra had gotten to us, we must have been on the train for at least ten hours. As the crow flies, it's only 400 miles between Kolkata and Kathmandu, but the whole trip took thirty hours. Even the express trains stop every two kilometers or so, and our train didn't go straight to Kathmandu but to Raxaul, India.

Though the ride felt eternal, we had skipped most of it through poor planning. Our original intention was to take the train from Chennai, which is in Southern India, to Kolkata, which is in North Eastern India. We checked the tickets a few weeks before our study abroad program ended, and they were all gone—even the special tickets reserved for foreigners. With no other options, we booked a flight from Chennai to Kolkata. It only cost around a hundred-and-twenty dollars, but the train would have only been eight. Eight dollars to get across the country. I thought we'd miss an important cultural experience, but sitting on that train made me glad we took the flight. There is only so much cultural experience a person can take. Train travel from the South to the North would have taken a full three days.

After the hijras, the chai salesmen, the beggars with no legs, the burn victims, the nameless women holding nameless babies, the incense salesmen, the kids no older than five selling plastic junk, the egg biryani dealers, and chana malsala pushers, I was sleepy. I was worn-out.

But, sleep was never easy—we had to secure all of our baggage. I'd managed to get all of my possessions on the continent into a 55 liter bag, pudgy and overflowing. The teal vinyl seats moved from a couch into two separate beds, and the trick was to keep your stuff at your feet or at least in sight. Thieves came in the night and cut into your bags with little knives and stole anything they could grab. Ethan, the only one of us who had traveled to Nepal before, told us about a friend waking up to find his glasses stolen. He shouted, "It's my fucking glasses. I can't even see without them." He ranted for a few minutes, cursing and screaming, then calmed down and out of boredom went back to sleep. When he woke, they were hanging from the bunk bed on top of his, in front of his face.

I tried to keep my bag in sight. It was impossible; the darkness of the train obscured everything. The push and pull of the car and the chai and coffee salesmen roaming the train at all hours yelling "Chai Chai Chai, Cappi Cappi Cappi" kept sleep away, but that night was the worst. One space over, a group of seven-year-old kids told jokes and laughed this terrible, banshee scream all night. Nate would wake up and say, "Goddamnit. Shut up. Just shut the fuck up," but they never did.

They left around six, but I could only sleep until seven when the sun fell through the window. We were supposed arrive at 7:30 the next morning, and I didn't want to wake up back in Kolkata.

Night was the closest thing to sanity in India. Everything quieted down. There weren't many street lights, and though people still existed, they thinned out. If I stayed in one place, I could imagine solitude without having to block out the sound of car horns and motorcycles. I could hear the crickets without trying. The unnatural calm of night was like the moment before you jump off of a high
cliff into water.

But, night was over, and Nate sat awake, staring listlessly into the distance like someone after a one night stand. “I don't get it. In the states, someone would have made those kids stop. Neighbors wouldn't have put up with that. But here, no one cared.”

He was right. “We're not in the states anymore,” I said. We hadn't been for three and a half months, but we still thought about it. I came to India to find something different, and in temples, crowded streets, conversations with strangers, and seedy bars packed with drunk, angry fishermen, I found this difference, but it wasn't perfect. There is nothing in the states like the chaos of a temple- the sound of hundreds of people chanting, loud and eternal brass bells, the slosh of priests washing statues with milk. Incessant. It was more like a dance party than Notre Dame. I came for the noise, for the difference, but it made me miss the states.

I still craved milkshakes. A comfortable bed. A stranger who spoke good English. I loved travel but couldn't stop thinking about the states. She was a bad ex who I'd call when I was drunk or sick. Trains and meditation didn't cure my life, they just gave me new things to think about.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked.

“No idea. It's 7:10. If anything is right, we'll be there in twenty-four minutes, but there's no way we're on schedule.”

I started to pack my things. Roll my blanket, brush my teeth. I never knew what would come next and it was best to be prepared. All of us were up but Kim, the only girl of the group. Kim was always slow to get ready.

Shoes on, bag packed, I walked to the space between cars to watch the morning through the open doors. On my way, I almost stepped on a pile of brown cloth lying on the floor. I wanted to move it out of the way, but realized it was an old woman. She was smaller than two pil-

lows and was sleeping and silent.

I leaned out of the car door. There weren't any railings, no conductor to tell you no. No one cared. The country side fell past the train. A mist covered the fields. They had changed. It was colder outside- probably in the 50s. I zipped my only jacket tighter, and looked at still banana trees. I thought I saw snow but knew it couldn't be real- it couldn't be that cold. The soil looked dustier. Everything looked dustier, but in the morning there was something perfect about it. The air tasted fresh, and I wondered if all the morning mist was really just smoke from burning plastic.

We didn't have a map, but our last stop, Raxaul, was printed on the side of the train. It had to get there eventually.

The train stopped at a station. It wasn't Raxaul, but it was 7:35. “We'll be there soon,” Ethan, our unofficial navigator, said.

“What's taking so long?” I asked.

“Who knows? This is probably a big stop” I sat and appreciated our car. Shoes and socks and papers littered the floor. Kim was still asleep. While I was still in Southern India, my mom had sent me a small package of M&M's that came with one of the M&M's dressed as Santa. We'd hung it from one of the bunks. It was Christmas Eve that morning, but I couldn't imagine shoppers pushing one another out of the way and coming home to warmth and hot chocolate. We couldn't be on the same planet.

Slowly, the train shuddered into motion, but something was different.

“Are we going the other way?” I asked.

“Shit, we're going the other way.”

Our car fluttered with action. We woke Kim up and threw her bag together in the same action. Everything was indiscriminate. Put this in your bag. It doesn't matter
if you only have one sock. The train was picking up speed, but we put everything together. Right before the platform ended, we jumped off, bags and all.

“So, this is Northern India,” I said.

The air was cold and crisp, and already, people were staring.

---

**Burn Your Bridges**

David Asp

And close the backdoor from anyone poking around your past, a forgettable resolution to birddog the ineptitudes of ignorant society, never failing to see the shortcomings of those politicians and celebrities whom we all admire for prosperity, but disdain for their selfish lack of honesty and respectability.

But don’t let yourself be overcome by the same egotistical desire for self-inflation and sanctification—my deadliest sins and my greatest addictions are not physical, but intellectual—pulling away the ability to forgive without penitence and leaving me, a quiet 26 year-old man, wondering, why the youth of today can’t show each other a little respect.

Seems to be the motto of the warmonger looking for the quick victory as he strategizes unmanned aerial vehicle bombing runs on Afghanistan mountaintops and orders the destruction of factories using the same brand of explosives the terrorist has purchased from our past, or our citizens, or our forgotten soldiers, or our remembered enemies.

Too soon and you could find yourself looking for a way out of this hole you dug in the earlier years of youth; discover the trick of time isn’t found in clocks but in the moments spent lost in the company of those who helped you remember what it means to be human, and what it’s like to be in a satisfied state of *being*.

Down into the ashes after all your acquaintances have leached onto your supposed innocence, the good you’ve kept hidden inside of you—only to pulling yourself apart like communion bread for those you mistook for disciples—watch them suck the honesty from your marrow and turn your bones into piles of white dust.

Show the world how fucked over you’ve been, let the smoke swirl into the sky like burning oil rigs on the desert.
horizon—you could feel them slurping the oil from your mind and body, feeding off the puddles of love you had buried deep within, taking the best you had been saving for a future friend.

And one day you could find yourself as an island, waiting for outside visitors to maroon themselves on your shores, never willing to reach out for fear of rejection or disappointment—the worst mistake of them all is a conscious decision to allow another’s actions to skin your wonder and hope for the rest of humanity.

If you expect more than this ("Expectations are like masturbation, you’re only fucking yourself"); hold onto the hope that there are people in this universe who want more than their own profit, who look for the inconvenience of helping another, who will never stop dousing the flames.
**Hangover (2)**
Andrew Marlowe Bergman

Sometimes I lose track of myself.
Then, I find me in the morning
Passed out naked in my bed.
It’s August 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2007

And I find me in the morning
Alone in yesterday’s clothes.
It’s August 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2007
And Laura’s not here.

Alone in yesterday’s clothes
I can’t find me anywhere.
And Laura’s not here,
Where did she go?

I can’t find her anywhere
So I look under the sheets
Where did she go?
Losing her is like losing me,

So I look under the sheets
And it’s September 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2007.
Losing her is like losing me.
I’m lost in the bottom of a fifth.

It’s September 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2007
And Bethany is here. I’m
Lost in the bottom of the fifth
Woman I’ve loved this year.
Let Me Down
Andrew Marlowe Bergman

The oaken angels cherish their tridents while I
sit naked in church—clothes in the confessional. I realized
then that God saw
me for who I am and I couldn’t stand the
dishonesty of garments. Nude is my new Sunday best—
the most honest conception of me—but the minds
of the clergy and the righteous of
my congregation see nothing but my
flesh, my fat, my hair, my tattoos. They disallow the
generation
of fresh notions and naked luncheons, preferring them
destroyed
like the Library of Alexandria—purged by
righteous fire, driving lovers and poets to madness
left with the clothes we sacrificed to honesty, starving
for God, eating the bread of his body, but still going
hysterical
from the cold; alone in the world—naked.

Thanks for playing
Adam Bowman

The gifts given during a relationship
turn into consolation prizes
when you break up

It’s as if some slick-haired,
white-toothed TV host
comes around the corner saying

“We’re sorry you didn’t find true love,
eternal happiness,
or someone to go home to

But as a token of our appreciation
for all you’ve done
over the past three years:

For all the time,
money, emotion.
Heartache, worry,
love, and affection.

For all those sweet things said,
warm embraces given,
and tears kissed away:

Here’s a GPS.
A poster of Audrey Hepburn
And an iPod connector for your truck.

Thanks for playing,
better luck next time.”
Rocket
Luiggi Carlin

Today we never finished another movie and you spent hours admiring the explosions on the ceilings.

I started a shrine in the back of my closet to the 16 bit generation of video games, beginning with a cartridge labeled “Your Turn.” It smelled like licorice. You smelled like orange Tic-Tacs.

I could dissect the color from the brushstrokes that compose your hair on the soft of your back.

In Ecuador the police are apologizing for the kidnapping. In Chile the miners are anxious to see the sun again.

In a yard sale down the street three legs from a table are sinking into the mud and intruding on the grub beneath the surface.

Those families couldn’t afford garages, or the Christmas decorations to fill them with.

We’re opening the presents early with a box of caution labeled insurance fraud.

My friend nearly got arrested for trafficking over an ounce of marijuana in the back of his car. Another friend discovered the ocean is filled with whale semen.

I admired the closed feeling of your room, like dusting off a canister of vintage records.

Maybe next time they’ll put emergency brakes on Segways. Maybe I should be so lucky to have you close at hand, like tissue paper laced with aloe vera, or like the streaks of jet fuel lining the crooked sky.
The Nature of You
Haley Edwards

Nature finds me in the elevator.

Your hair shines with the sleekness of fish,
long and glistening.
Your gait possesses the confidence of cats:
you stalk, with neither hesitation
nor concern for wary glances.
My eyes dart over your mane,
your sharp angles and lean
beauty.

You are a threat,
A predator that encroaches shamelessly
and demands satisfaction.

I ache to tame you,
To curl my finders around the
vines that twist under the thin skin
of your wrists
and watch your palms open
like blooming flowers.
My gaze would sweep across
The plains of your back,
your mountainous shoulder blades,
uninterrupted by the ding of the
elevator doors.

You Think?
Haley Edwards

The man on the side of the road has a cardboard sign that says
“Please help. I have a family.”
The summer heat has reddened the tips of his ears,
and sweat rolls across his pulsing temples,
down into the collar of his faded blue polo.
The cars in front of me are stopped,
their drivers air conditioned and
bobbing their heads gently
to downloaded techno beats
sold for a dollar ninety-nine each.
I pray silently for a green light
and stare at the back windshield of the
minivan ahead,
my fingers moist against the leather
of my steering wheel.
The broken man begins to cry,
gripping tighter to the sides of his
black marker plea
and squinting into the sun.
I groan softly, and my discomfort settles into the silence of
my car.
My boyfriend’s warm hand is suddenly heavy on my knee,
and my back curves toward him instinctively.
“Relax, he’s faking.
He probably doesn’t even have a family.
He’s just out of alcohol or heroin or whatever.”
I glance at him.
He is all angles and icy eyes.
“But what if you’re wrong?”
Before he can answer, the light turns green,
my question no longer relevant.
In my rear-view the shrinking man sinks to his knees,
and my stomach burns with guilt.
Syllabus:
Fundamentals of Composition
Pinnacles of Creative Production
Kristin Eller

COURSE TITLE: see above
COURSE NUMBER: ENG100
CLASS MEETING DAY & TIME: Thursday 6:00 PM

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Fundamentals of Composition encompasses expository writing of essays and opinion papers. Critical thinking skills will be utilized as students explore their values, attitudes, ideas, and experiences, and enhance their research skills.

Raise your hand if you know what “expository” means.

I thought so.

My job is to teach you how to write and sound like you know (and hopefully care) what you're talking about. Get ready.

COURSE PREREQUISITES: None

LAB REQUIREMENTS: None  Okay, so that's sort of a lie. I might not schedule a class field trip to the computer lab during the course, but I expect you to know where it is, and I might even quiz you on it. Google is your friend, as is the library link on the school web page. Use them, if only so I don’t have to schedule a field trip to the computer lab.

INSTRUCTOR: is currently standing up front reading this very syllabus to you. If you haven’t been already, please
start paying attention now. Thanks.

INSTRUCTOR CONTACT INFORMATION:
Work Phone: is currently being used as a paper weight.
Cell Phone: is the enemy.
Email: is the best way to get in touch with most people these days, as we’re so busy (at least I am or must pretend to be) in our academic pursuits that we cannot guarantee any other mode of communication. Plus, the goal here is to learn to write, so why exclude basic daily communication skills?

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES/ COURSE OBJECTIVES: This is the point where most instructors, professors, and other academic authoritative title-holders will talk about things like knowledge of various and sundry something-or-others, with a particular emphasis on something else in addition to... You’re supposed to develop “the capacity for critical thinking” outside the realm of under-your-breath personal critical attacks of the students in your class who really annoy you. There’s also something about structure, language, and more development. Basically, you’re supposed to exponentially develop your cerebral capabilities. Good luck and God-speed.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS, REFERENCES, AND TEXT: I’ll give you fair warning: from now on, no matter what class you take or what the required texts are, the authoritative figure given responsibility for your education for that hour or two of your life will want you to respond to it in some way. They may use words like “essay” or “research paper” or even “reader responses,” but they will expect you to actually think about what you’re supposed to be thinking about, and then they will assign you the impossibly daunting task of communicating those thoughts on paper.

METHOD OF INSTRUCTION AND TEACHING STRATEGIES: Lecture, class discussion, collaboration, thinking/writing activities, current affairs research project.

REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION & EVALUATION: Just do the work, okay?

GRADING CRITERIA: Each student essay essay essay college-level essay critical analysis essay content in standard MLA format research paper essay, etc.

I know, I know. This is almost always where we lose you. Many of you don’t know what any of this means, and most of you don’t really care. Some of you had high school teachers who did their damnedest to make my job easier and at least impart to you some modicum of understanding about the definition of “research” and “essay” and I get it. I do. So please, please forgive me for saying this--because I don’t want you to feel as though your time was wasted or you’ve been bamboozled--but forget most of everything they told you, because if you hand in a half-assed assignment in the form of a five paragraph essay that talks about nothing but trivialities--look it up--it will make me want to poke my eyes out. Which can’t possibly be good for your grade. Screw the five paragraphs. Tell me something you think about your text that you find interesting. Then tell me why. Paint me a picture. A photo collage. A word montage. I’m your audience, and I’ll tell you a secret: I get bored easy. Don’t bore me. Impossible? Not at all. Live by this motto: if you find it boring and you’re writing about it, chances are, your writing about it will also be boring. As Wayne Booth apparently said, your paper will be “boring from within.”
Every writing assignment will be turned in first as a rough draft, then will be handed back to you with comments and suggestions from me. You will then have one week in which to edit and revise and turn in your final draft with the corrections made. Ah, the gift of mercy. You get a second chance on every paper. Don’t waste it. First shot: Write about what you find interesting, then go back and check it for grammar and readability. Then turn it in. Some of you will ask, “Why should we do all that work first if you’re going to tell us how to do it on our final draft anyway?” Those people will struggle, hopefully not for the rest of their lives, but...well...

MEDIA/LEARNING RESOURCE CENTER ASSIGNMENT: Students are encouraged to use the campus LRC to obtain support material for their persuasive writing.

Remember: Google is your friend.

INTERNET PROJECT: Students will be using Internet sources to support positions for their argumentative essay. They will also be taught to correctly document these sources.

COURSE OUTLINE: will change so much (due to weather and my personal idiosyncrasies and fancies) within the span of each week that it’s better for all of us if I pretend I didn’t see this section when I filled out the standardized syllabus. Trust me.

ATTENDANCE: This is where the attendance policy goes. You know the one...the same one you have in pretty much every class. I’ll sum it up for you: Come to class.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS: I am expected to write syllabi every three months, always adhering to standard format. I am expected to outline my expectations as dictated to me by the higher-ups in five pages polka-dotted and parcelled out by sections of grading scales and attendance policies. And I always feel disappointed in my work, feeling as if I could’ve made a better syllabus, thus creating a better class with better texts and a better, clearer explanation of what’s really going to happen when you (the students) walk through my door to lend me your minds for a minute or two. A syllabus where I can write a three-word attendance policy rather than a half-page paragraph created by a corporate curricula specialist who read the studies about learning and retention and then regurgitated the statistics back out at me without offering so much as a greasy, used napkin to clean up the mess.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU NEED TO KNOW: Apart from my three-word attendance policy, this syllabus has truly nothing to do with what I want you to learn. You should now, or at some point in the near future, weep for the trees who gave their lives so that my boss’s boss’s boss (and the rest of corporate education) might marginally be satisfied with their personal contribution to your education.

My biggest fear is that this class will be too easy once you know the secret: I want you to think things, and sometimes I want it to hurt. When you write, I want you to learn to just say what you want to say and not worry about wrapping it up in the wordy verbosity so typical of traditional academia. You got something worth saying? Then say it. Just remember, I’m your audience. My brain synapses fire faster than the average bear. But I am also one of those endangered beings who wants reading to be pleasurable and not just functional. So if you must aspire to be anything, aspire to be interesting. Otherwise, you will be nothing.

Failure to adhere to any and all of these expectations will result in failure in this class.
The insurance said 24 hours. I sat in that same bed for 24 hours. Where he was. I refused the wheelchair. I said I wouldn’t ride in that contraption; John rolled his eyes. My mother held my pocketbook and diaper bag, her eyes pleading. I flat refused, but they made me. John didn’t push me. The nurse did. She ushered me out of the hospital, careening around corners. Rushing me out of that place. She forced me to hold the discharge papers. Preachy: do this, do that. She crumpled them into my hand. “You and Your Baby” glared at me. She said she had highlighted the information I needed. She said don’t even look at the other pages right now.

I saw a pink bundle, swaddled and lumpy across the lobby. A little, pink football. A little stab of happiness came over me. How beautiful.

“Just get in the car,” said John.

I looked at him. Tall, dark, handsome. The same way I met him. His button-up was wrinkled and had stains on the sleeve where the hospital gown rode up. He had two days’ worth of stubble, which would be gone in the morning. Maybe even when we got home.

The valet pulled the car under the NICU canopy. I didn’t even realize it was mine. I traded in my Avalon for a sport crossover. The second row of seats had the brown carseat strapped in. John had the sheriff check the fastenings for safety. Now there are three empty seats.

I waved the nurse’s hand away. “I can stand by myself, thank you.” She grabbed my elbow and pulled me out of the chair. I reverted to the walking-on-the-balls-of-my-feet sway, the center-of-gravity-in-my-stomach walk. A wave of nausea swept over me.

The car ride was silent. I looked out of the window while John drove home. It was plowing season. The green
combine made dust dervishes from the yellow, dried corn, and the brown soybeans. Washed out, barely blue sky faded to white on the horizon. The straight, black road was framed with IU mailboxes and cheap, plastic garbage cans. I pretended I saw Moses driving the paving machine through the fields, leaving asphalt behind him. His beard and bushy hair streaming. The soybeans parting in waves. Wooden staff outstretched. A giggle came to my throat. John glared at me. His knuckles tightened around the wheel, white peaks with angry, red mountains beneath.

He pulled into the gravel driveway. An old four-room house with two windows sat by itself on an otherwise empty lot. The white paint was peeling, showing the gray wood underneath. The sagging porch and windows drooped. The lace curtains blew in the wind. The third step wobbled. The ancient oak tree shaded the haphazardly hung tire swing. Blue streamers hung from the awning. A sign saying, “It’s a Boy!” lay bent and broken in the front lawn. John sprung from the car, leaped up the steps into the foyer. The creaking screen door slammed shut behind him.

I watched him go. I heaved my swollen body from the car. I held my too-small shoes and the aftercare instructions in one hand. The gravel road and the broken acorns pierced my feet. I hobbled to the sign. Janice meant well. I smiled. I picked up the sign. I ran my fingers over the torn corner. My baby boy.

I could hear the sink sputtering from the sidewalk. The septic tank must be backed up again.

The tiredness sank into me. I sat on the stooped step. The pain shot through my abdomen. The ache pulsed, moved like a stalking lion, pouncing on my emptiness. I put my hand on my middle. Remembering.

The sheer terror. The panic. The pain. The final relief. My perfect boy screams. I watch the doctor run his finger through his mouth, clearing the uterine fluid from his purple gums. One last push, the placenta out and done. The nurse said, “You did it, sugar.” She smears red lip stain over her teeth. John hovers over the little boy. He smiles. His hands flutter like the birds in the oak tree. His weight shifts from left to right. The wailing boy and his tiny feet leave little toe tracks across the birth records. The nurse clamps his umbilical cord. The baby screams from the sharp pain. Poor baby! My boy.

“Let me hold him.”

The nurses clean the yellow paste from his blotchy skin and the bloody liquid from his blond hair. It looks like my hair. It frizzles on the ends. A little blue cap is placed over his head.

“Here, now. Here’s your little boy. Clean for his momma.”

She placed him in my arms. The radiance of the moment, the perfection of it spread through me like a shot of pure sunshine. He cried softly, hiccupping. I traced his eyebrows with my pinky finger.

“There is a whole world for you. It is made of shining stars and the sun. The corn around our house and the golden retriever across the street are all here for you.”

The crying calms, his eyes close slowly. “Sleepy boy.” The nurse peers over my shoulder and calls to the doctor. His small purple mouth hangs open. “He sleeps like his daddy.”

The doctor says, “Lillie, give him to me now!”

I watch the doctor hold him, bring the small baby to his ear and to his table. He pushes on the little boy’s chest, and the nurses pass a small tube to the doctor. Five minutes. Curious.

Ten minutes.

Heart pounding

Twelve minutes.

Hands shaking. Gasps.

“Ms. Jameson, your son is dead. He died from... we don’t know why. He didn’t suffer.”
"What?"
"His heart just gave up. His little lungs just didn’t want to work. He was only four and a half pounds. There was nothing the good doctor could do, sweet pea. You hold tight, now. It’s time to let him go."
"Let me hold him."

The neighbors’ kids across the street are jumping on the junky trampoline in the backyard. They bought it at a yard sale in Tennyson a couple years ago. The rusty springs creak. Squeals break the autumn afternoon. Snot is usually rubbed across their faces and their unbrushed, sandy hair is tangled in knots. The jeans from last year’s “winter pants” make rattly cutoffs for the summer. The youngest ones go without shirts half the year. Small pink nipples are exposed to the yellow heat. The older ones work the fields with their Pop. The dry earth is caked in between their toes and patted onto their heels.

They are always tormenting that old dog on the chain. Tossing Bradford Pear cherry bombs at him and connecting water bucket pulleys to his collar. They hide under the crawl space and twist the wind-up toys I got them for Christmas. That dog falls for it every time. He runs, and he gets splashed. He’s a good sport.

John says they are brats. “Brats. And those goddamn worthless parents let them run around like them wild injuns out west.”

They live in a house like ours. It isn’t painted, but Jimmy carved designs into the roof’s dormers. The brown siding is warped with age. It shudders with the weight of the bodies inside. They don’t have carpet on the floors. I helped Janice make gingham curtains for the kitchen from her worn Sunday dress. Farm equipment peers around the corner. Beer cans litter the front porch.

I can feel the sticky blood seeping through my panties onto my dress, but I don’t want to move. I can feel the heaviness in my breasts. The doctor said that will go away soon.

I remember my water breaking in the vegetable garden in the backyard. It was two months too early. I finished pulling up the carrot, placed it in my wicker basket, and walked inside.

I said, “John, I think the baby is coming.”
“Not now, Lillie. The game is on. The Buckeyes got the ball.”

“John, I’m being serious. My water just broke.”
“That baby ain’t due for another two months.”
“He’s coming.”

I look to my left and see the mailman coming along the road. His cigarette dangles precariously from his mouth. It bounces up and down to the words of the country tune on the radio. I know he’s got four kids and another one due in five months. She had the nausea like hell. He waves.

“Hey, Lillie-belle. I not seen your John throwing that football in months, darlin’. He got himself a damn good arm. I remember that game three years ago when he threw a touchdown from the fifty. Good times. Good man.”

“He gave that up.”
“And I not even seen a football thrown like that since his days. He should teach my boy. Lennie likes a good man to teach him some football. Good man that John is. Now, in the mail you got yourself some bills, honey. That’s all. Except this one letter from your momma. I think it got money in it or something because it’s thicker than a usual letter. Well, I be going now. Tell John hallo for me. I’ll just stick it in your mailbox.”

“Lillie, get yourself some supper.” hollers Janice from her front porch. “I got hotcakes on the griddle. I made fresh your favorite coleslaw, too. Tell John he can mosey over, too.”

“I’m not hungry.”
“Sure you are. Supper in fifteen minutes.”

I see the youngest child come around the corner. She’s got her saggy diaper on and nothing else. She has her thumb in her mouth and her raggedy bunny in her right hand. Its legs dangle in the dust. She looks at me with her wide, blue eyes. Her head cocked to the left.

“I have a piece of taffy in my pocketbook. Do you want it?”

She nods her head, but she stays rooted in place. The oldest one calls her inside to wash for supper.

I look at the corn stalks across the road and remember the nights John and I used to sneak off together in high school. My daddy knew, but he let us go.

I remember running through the maze my cross country coach measured out. It was almost one mile around the Freiderikson’s field. Nanny F called out times from Coach’s stopwatch as she shelled peas for supper. Coach drove his blue pickup in front of us, yelling from his megaphone. “You lazy dogs, get your asses in gear. Them Northern teams think they are hot shit, and we gonna prove them wrong. Pump them arms! Move it!”

I was the best runner he had ever had. I won every meet in Southern Indiana. I was breaking records, too. I could run faster than half the boys. I loved the way my hair flew out behind me when I ran. I liked to feel the whip of it on my back. It timed my steps on the hills and made me go faster on the straights. I imagined I looked like a yellow comet, fuzzy and bright.

I loved the way my muscles moved me. I always felt so free. I didn’t even have to do times tables in my head like the other girls. I could keep my mind on running and not on the pain.

I made it to sectionals, and I won it. I went to regionals, and I got third place. It was my first white ribbon that year. It looked funny to me on my wall, but I kept it. I was practicing every day and every weekend with Coach, getting ready for state. No white ribbon for me there.

At my physical, my doctor said I was too little to be running more. I hadn’t even had a period by the time I was in high school. He said my running was “suppressing my body.” I wouldn’t become a woman if I didn’t stop. I knew John was fixing to propose soon. I wanted to be a woman for him. So I quit running. I missed state and the college running scouts.

I got married in the chapel to football captain, John, two weeks before graduation. John said, “I do,” and we did.

I got a job at Bi-Lo at the register while John went to college on his scholarship. He came home after football season sometimes, when he didn’t have weekend practice. He laughed at the lace curtains I bought at the Goodwill.

“We ain’t people like that, Lillie. I am a college man. A football man. We don’t have no lacy window shades in a football house. What would Leroy or Stocks say about this? God, they would call me a faggot.”

But I left them up. I also started decorating the back room slowly. The mortgage was paid by John’s parents. Even though it took thirty minutes and a lot of gas money to get to town, the paid-for house was worth it on a clerk’s salary. I put aside five dollars each month from my food money to go to the thrift shops and yard sales.

I found the crib first. It was old and the front of it slid down. I saved my money and bought paint. I bought yellow, blue, and green and painted the outside world on the wooden slats. A yellow sunshine crib. I found a changing table with three legs next. Jimmy fixed it for me. He made it look nice. For Christmas, Janice and Jimmy made me a rocking chair to put in the last corner. I knew they didn’t have the money, but they saw me lonely in my house. I made it up to them and babysat on the weekends, so they could have sex without the kids hearing it.

I hung the tire swing in the grandfather oak, and we swung the little ones. I taught the older ones how to play gin
rummy and how to cheat at it.

Then, John came home. "Don't look at me like that. Can't a man come home to house and have a 'Welcome home, baby?' Football... I gave that up. I don't need that crap. That city will be begging me to come back. They need John Jameson. They need me."

I found the letter in the trash that said he had lost his scholarship from failing grades. I didn't ask him about it.

That first week I spent all my food money. I bought short ribs, cabbage and vinegar for canning chow chow, fresh vanilla beans and cream for homemade ice cream, collards, and corn. We were going to eat like kings. He turned his head from the Michigan game. The backup quarterback threw a long pass for a tie-breaking touchdown. He said, "You don't even know what food is like in the city. They got Chinese, Japanese, Indian, cheeseburgers... gourmet stuff. You don't even know what classy food is. You don't know nothing. I can get any girl in the world up there to spread her legs for me and all you do is cook. I can't even believe you." He turned around and continued watching the football game.

So I served myself supper and gave out the vanilla bean ice cream to the kids. And I saw Lillie, the comet, fall from the sky.

A year of overtime shifts, passionless sex, cleaning, and watching the neighbor kids from the porch slips away.

It was a Thursday morning, early enough to be before I left for my twelve hour shift. I opened up the fridge and smelled the lima beans from the night before. I threw up. I went to Bi-Lo, smelled the samples of Tyson chicken baking, and threw up. My coworker bought me a pee-stick. I was pregnant.

I called my mother from work. She flew straight from Georgia and left her new husband to help me. She paid for my doctor's visit, and my blood said I was pregnant, too.

John said he knew it was a boy. He put his hand on my belly. I saw a lightness in his step and a glow in his eyes. He started opening the doors and making me salt baths at night. My mom stayed in the baby's room. She traded my trusty car in for a new Mazda. She bought me an embroidered diaper bag with LJE monogrammed on the front. She got the car seat. Janice even held a baby shower for me on my front lawn with lemonade and fancy cucumber sandwiches, just like my mom's shower was in Atlanta.

I felt the glow around me. The yellow was back in my hair. I felt the baby grow and kick me with his little feet. John said that only real men kick so young. He was going to play football like his daddy someday.

The dew came stealing across the ground in the mornings, twinkling like the faint stars that refuse to go to bed in those early hours. I talked about the crunchy leaves underneath my feet. I told my baby about the world and about the beautiful things inside it. He just decided to come out then and see it early.

I can hear the cicadas chirruping in the trees. Jimmy's Ford rattled up road, startling me from my reverie. His boys yelling at me, "Miss Lillie, Miss Lillie, we caught us some catfish in the creek!"

I smile at them. So young and so beautiful.

The sun is setting, and an orange fire sneaks across the sky. Yellow hazes and heat waves rise from the cornfields. I can hear the birds squawking at squirrels who are picking at the dropped cobs. The sky above me is fading to deep blue. A comet streaks across the sky. A little hand pulls my sweater sleeve. It's the little one. She holds her hand out for the taffy. I dig for it and put it in her hand. I look to show her the comet, but it's gone.
Because
Marianne Hale

"Give me the strongest cheese, the one that stinks best..."--Kim Addonizio

Give me morning’s first kiss, the one that stinks of sleep; and I want your first words, too, when your mouth just remembers sounds after a night of sleepy sighs. Give me your hang-ups and I’ll hang them next to mine or throw them on the floor in the melted piles of clothes we lost to find ourselves in someone else, each other, smothered madly in lust, the love. Forget flowers and sweet nothings. Show me your somethings. You, hopeful in childhood and awkward in yearbooks and depressed the year your ex cheated you. Show me moles and scars and birthmarks and all the other parts you don’t like. Then I’ll show you mine, and we can bring all our beautiful baggage to bed with sighs and thighs in knotted sheets and love each other not despite but because.

Inferno
Will Hollis

I went to a small Catholic elementary school right behind the railroad tracks that raced up the Ohio River to my grandfather’s steel mill. I would sit and look out the windows of my fourth and fifth grade classrooms whenever a screaming engine would rush through, eager to get by without being judged. Our school was a yellow brick refuge, the parochial education better than what was available at the city schools. Dad wanted my brother and me to go to his public school, have some of his teachers. Mom never even thought of it. We were going to get out that town someday, permanently, and a good Catholic education was our ticket.

When a teacher was out sick, Sister Mary Anne, supposedly present at the Crucifixion, would walk across her garden grotto to our squat block of a building, starched collar and sleeves smelling of menthol. As soon as she walked through the doors in the morning we could hear the rasp in her throat and would wonder who would have to survive her for the day.

Sister Mary Anne hated the trains, intrusions into her lessons, which always circled around to a new definition of hell. He voice would catch in her thick throat, the waddle still swaying and her flushed face becoming pale again. She would breath, the air in our rooms settling in an apology for the interruption, and go back to the chalkboard for the lessons of the hour. She would check her watch and change the subject every fifty minutes, staring through each of us that didn’t catch the signal to switch books. Already in the beginning stages of Catholic Alzheimer’s, her curriculum usually strayed to math and Satan.

When the train was signaling its entrance to the town one day, I focused on it rather than our impromptu multiplication table focusing on the deaths of the Roman martyrs. Fifteen Christians can be eaten by five lions, each getting six
arms and legs to gnaw on. I listened to the wailing horn of the diesel engine, locking my eyes on the overpass, seeing the logo of the Ford dealership logo behind it. The oval looked like a stadium to me, Saints Felix, Oliver and Dirk laying down their lives, and I struggled to remember a saint that would finish the sign when the train sped past, blocking my view.

As the blackened metal went by, my eyes followed it across the windows and the room, landing on the boy in a blue shirt that had let me win at dodge ball last week in our parking lot playground. Charlie was dosing, resting his small lips and freckled cheeks on his fist, young strength there that made him the most sought after player in our highly political little league baseball organization. Twice he had played for the team my father sponsored, the navy and white cap with “Doctor Bob’s” looking better suited for his head than my own.

The boys in my class were more athletic than I, all doing more on the blacktop and baseball field. I was habitually assigned to be an outfielder, giving me the time to pick blades of grass and make kazooos, not interfering with the games. Boys were meant to pay attention to balls, follow statistics, but I wanted the pizza that came after the game. My father sponsored a team in the name of his medical practice, buying hats and uniforms for about twenty kids. Charlie was on my team that year and had made a home run the previous weekend.

As I rested my eyes on him, my hand was snatched by Sister Mary Anne and the yardstick she held clapped down on my desk. Her small silver watch still shook from the speed of her action, my palm getting chilled and clammy as she stared at me with no sign of a convent in her anywhere. The other children froze, brought to attention by the stopped lesson, and she asked me if I knew what she was just saying. My weak, shaking head was all she got as a reply, then she dropped the yardstick to the ground.

I was explaining what hell is, but since that is too subtle for you I believe I shall demonstrate.” She reached into her black pocket and pulled out a Bic lighter, the same type my grandfather used, the silver wheel sparkling. I flushed, my ears filling with blood. She moved her clenched claw around my hand, exposing my palm. She held the lighter under it for just a moment, long enough for our eyes to meet and two tears to run down my cheek. “Hell is that all over, forever, with Satan staring at you.”

The lighter was extinguished and back in her pocket before I realized it was gone, my hand still held out as she made her way to the blackboard. My classmates’ mouths were all open, Charlie’s missing tooth showing. I looked away from him, focusing on the workbook in front of me demonstrating how to find the least common multiple. I locked myself in that page, my ears still out in the room, not hearing the other children breathing yet.
Cancer
Will Hollis

Wells up from the mud
caked earth wetted by oil
sin slipping between the cracks
loosening the dust and making paste
that will be liberally applied to skin
as a salve for sun burnt brows.

My father killed a man today.
His third for the week,
and it is only Tuesday.
He walks into his office
and puts on his white jacket
with the knotted rope buttons
and the rod of Asclepius on his chest,
both showing his oath to Hippocrates.

My father vowed to combat disease
the bacteria, viruses, particles, sins
that take root in the chests of men
after working the mills for some money,
vowed to keep their health and comfort
above his own pride. He vowed to keep them
from illness, for prevention is preferable to cure,
but the bits of earth that sicken and kill
are all around
and he is breathing them too.

Tuesdays are normal days
but for some they are last days
ending days, when my father
reads a graph to them,
and gives them options for death.
The art of the science is knowing

how to deliver finality,
to be the one imposing the big question,
What happens after this?

Dad comes home late on Tuesdays,
every other day too,
and smog wrinkles
his forehead, showing how many
men he’s killed, men
he has sentenced.
He smells of clove cigarettes
sticks that make him human
and I see him and smell him
and count the wrinkles
to see if it will be a quiet night,
everyone going to bed
without a television vibrating the floor,
or if he needs to watch a war movie,
something with john Wayne
where the bullets pelt the planks of oak,
the speakers thumping my bed
as Dad closes his eyes to listen.
Bullets and war are a fast death,
and these men will never know
cellular rebellion.
Desert Skull Fiddle Song
Tracy Jo Ingram

I hold freedom like water
in an ancient vessel.
Siphon body bone dry, hurl
the clay to the ground, finger
shattered remnants. Gather
now what you please, reassemble
the image. Take a photo, shove
it in your pocket, fish it out
when you need a good fuck. Rough
up vignette edges, fondle
defiled corners, unfasten
the button that reveals
you're a member of the steadfast sex.
Fumble here with your intentions, rip
the snapshot to shreds, shame
your train of thought. Grab
the next boxcar. Jerk yourself
on towards the bed of the American West.
Snatch your bow, hum a line. Play
the tune that feels right
in your hands. Eyes flicker,
see how long I can hold
the key. I am the sweet string
song cradled in your neck. Sunset
rubs elbows with cacti, with dirty
boots and knees. Corral
the notes that fall out of your mouth,
s shove them back in. Lick what sticks
to my fingers, collect the rest
for my ancient vessel. Where freedom
is pooling like water
at my feet.

Jazz in the driveway
Morgan Ison

Traffic floods the street
where droplets fall
to humming hoods
and plangent tires
throw their brothers
back in rhythm,
and then
amidst the city noise:
late night hustle bustle,
there drums a funky beat
of a truck filled bass.

Wails and whines
of goodtimes,
and the scatting
chatter of just
the booze talking.

a train howls
an epic ballad
of coming.

Then centered, staged—
twinkling in lights—
a vocalist, smooth, liquid
ripples in time
swings a rhyme:

an impromptu
||: Drip—
dripendrip—
Drop :||
drip.
Angled Self-Portraits of Locked-Up Daughters
Joshua Johnston

Of course, it is always the mothers who grow greatly despondent when the Marquis de Sade parks his black corvette across the street. They imagine that, behind those tinted windows, he’s probably drumming along to some Poison with his index fingers on the steering wheel, or something else that says, “Indeed, my father did take the greatest of pains to preserve his honor, but the summer is eternal and my father was a fool,” just as effectively. He’s been in the Bastille, pumping iron and devouring Reader’s Digest, and he attests that this is proof that he is not the source of the recent syphilis epidemic. He’ll piss in a cup, let you prick his fingers, or whatever it is you must do in order to take his picture off of the bulletin board. He’ll be the first to admit that you don’t see him in the front row of the Baptist church each Sunday, but, then again, you don’t see him ankle-deep in the blood of some Spanish prostitute with his hand down the front of his pants, either.

“If someone who enjoys the crack of a whip on their bare flesh and someone who enjoys the rush of wielding said whip decide to take things further than a chat room and arrange to enjoy each other’s company in the privacy of an actual room, that’s no one else’s damn business!” he says aloud, responding to a hypothetical mental argument with a woman who appears to be a nun in pedestrian threads. With that, he pounds the skip button, searching for a riff aggressive enough to mirror his current state of mind.
The town-freezing bum
Jamie Lopez

Winter is stalling.
He’s grown accustomed to our brown brick town. Once respected for his affiliation with the season of giving, he’s turned to shamelessly exploiting our Salvation Army by freezing the nose of ancient bell ringing lady he’d asked some spare change from and stood begging next to.

Winter is a vagabond stopping in our town to entertain the children with foolish shows of pretty, casting snow on our rolling hills in receding white islands that turn to sludge. He drinks like the wind howls into night and drunkenly drifts across our roads causing noisy car accidents.

Winter’s a smiling hobo that looks like grandfather. He asks for a cigarette. I spit in his face. My knuckles are all bleeding and cracked from Winter hanging around.
We don’t see Winter much here. We cancel school so our children can go play with him, surprised when they come home with red cheeks, frozen fingers and broken arms sobbing that Winter played too rough and threw their sled into a tree.
Sterile Winter wanders childless and never acquires parenting skills from Spring.

I used to live in a town up North where Winter would rest his cold bones for months and his wind whistle and crunch sounds of tromping around would keep me up at night.
I still have nightmares of the first time I met Winter. There was this tree outside my window Mother and I would climb. We’d look out over dark green forests and she’d whisper me stories about the mountains beyond. I cried and slept in that tree when she left. I scratched the bark searching for long strands of brown hair or her faded scent or some motherdust still lingering. Winter came one year and froze all of her branches: the whole tree was a brittle icicle that snapped apart.
Elegy to Fallen Grapes
Michael Miller

I imagine the grapes speaking to one another under the sound of the refrigerator hum as their sticky sweet brains plump with elaborate plans of escaping death.

They would pray within their Tyrian skins that my hand pulling them from their stem would place them on the small green plate I can never seem to grip.

Their seeds would do a kind of wiggle in their heads as they bounced on the teetering saucer causing one of them to fall onto the floor and roll to freedom. Never mind where freedom might be; a nice spot under the radiator might do until they could pick the place—Rome, the sphinx, even the coffee shop down the street—anywhere impossible for me to reach with a coat hanger or a broom.

I pull back the fridge to look for lost coupon clippings and there they are—a moot of raisins covered in a thin snow of dust and cat hair. I suspect they spent their first few night in anticipation, telling stories of where they would be going—but quickly the sentiment shifted to where they would have gone had their corpses not sloughed and their sweet matter not dried out to a soft mumble. The hopeful new arrivals continued to come, but the elder grapes remained, wrinkling, whispering their regrets but still counting on the force of the hand, the plate, or even the dreaded teeth to rip their place from their ring, their minds from their skins, and make their old juices run wild to a warm place not far below my chin.
Space
Michael Miller

When my grandfather lost his legs
to the shakes in his and the fluid in his brain,
he called us in to remove the space
he could no longer reach.

Mom lifted her old room with a crane
but accidentally dropped it through the ceiling
of our attic, now littered with Christmas tensile,
hair curlers, and the scent of forget-me-nots.

My Aunt drove a bulldozer from Tennessee
to haul her room back in broken chunks,
her high school portrait and oyster comb falling
onto the roadside as she ploughed down the interstate.

My grandfather’s woodshop, frosted over
with sawdust, was blasted out with dynamite
and rebuilt at my Uncle’s cabin from scratch
but without the sawdust, and with the renewed smell of fresh
paint.

I was never asked to take a room,
but I was given his Canon AE-1 from under the stairs
along with Kodak slides of their trip to Cumberland
and an ivory elephant from his mother pierced with a rusty
nail.

I carried my pieces out the front door
as he watched TV in his navy blue recliner
and insisted we weren’t looting the place
or what was left of it—
just the brick block of their living room
wrapped up in blue tarps
that parted and rose with the wind.

These days, he rolls over to doorway of the block
to let the quiet dead weight of his legs dangle over the side.
He holds out yellow plastic pansies drizzled in sugar water
to entice the hummingbirds as he imagines
all the empty space around them
slowly filling up with green.
Orange Cat
Hannah Morris

I contemplate a dead orange cat.
And he contemplates me.
I am standing in the gutter in the street,
he is laying just inside the road.

I want to move him from danger,
this dead cat, for my own sake,
but all I can do is stand over him,
sobbing incoherently into the telephone.

I remember hearing once,
in catholic school,
something about a little bird dying
every time a boy wanks off.

And I would just picture my classmates
their braces shining holy
in the shaking computer light,
mouths turned upwards toward the heavens.
And then, just beyond the swing-set,
a tiny sparrow, knowingly,
careens toward the manicured lawn.

I wanted to think of the cat’s parents
leaving niblets on the porch,
worried hands on hips, patting little heads.
I tried.

But all I could think,
standing there in the street,
is that every time you break an eager heart,
in a hurry,
on the internet,
On the Fingers
Josh Robinson

The Index Finger—Digitus secundus

The Grim Reaper, the index finger decides who lives and who does; it pulls the trigger. When held straight up in the air, the index finger represents the number one. It's made into giant foam hands to cheer for a sports team. It can stare at a person and convey a sense of guilt, shame, and ownership. A dog owner may point at their dog to the item they were supposed to fetch, or point at their face to say, "Bad dog!" A teacher may point at his student to call on them for an answer. In Japan, pointing with the index finger is considered to be rude. They point with the palm on their hand facing upwards and all of the fingers together. In Michelangelo's famous painting, Adam and God touch each other's index fingers together.

The Middle Finger—Digitus medius

The most beloved finger in the world is the middle finger. It's a renegade. The bird, the salute, or flipping someone off all involves the middle finger. With one swift motion, a sense of pure hatred or disgust can be displayed by raising the middle finger. Some people use the middle finger instead of their index finger because it is the longer. To use the middle finger properly, "Extend either arm at an approximately 90° angle perpendicular to the body. Bend arm at the elbow. Position it parallel to the body, forming three sides of a perfect square. Close palm tightly. Fiercely upturn digit between pointer and ring finger. Hold approximately 10 seconds to a minute for emphasis."

The Ring Finger—Digitus medicinalis

*Only the Ring Finger Knows* is the name of a famous light novel series in Japan. In the video game series Assassin's Creed, the ring finger is severed as a sign of loyalty. The ring finger binds together two lovers in marriage. Cambridge University researchers found that the most successful had a relatively long ring finger. Some researchers believe that the length of the ring finger directly correlates to aggression levels. Though it represents all of these things, it is the weakest of all the fingers. It cannot be extended all the way by most people. Most people wear rings paying homage to their alma mater or fraternity on their left fingers. Championship rings are all worn on the left also.
Coal
Krystol Stinson

The mountain bleeds black blood.
Carrion crows,
with rows of silent teeth,
swoop into their bowels,
to rip, rend and feast,
until all that is left
are black blood stains,
between the legs of the virgin.

Making a Mountain Out of a Molehill
Ruth Sudbeck

isn't hard, when half your lawn is nearly as sheer as a
cliff-face and the other half is pitted with dimples and ridges
that sink in under your feet when you bring them down in the
soft clods of freshly turned earth; which is how my siblings
and I amused ourselves all that summer, my sisters jumping
up and bringing their heels down and grinding them in the
dirt and screaming with laughter; my brother tromping
through the domes pathways like Godzilla, roaring as he
brought his foot down, saying tough or clever lines like his
heroes, Bionicles and Transformers; and me probably prac-
ticing marching with a roll-step—I might not have been in
marching band, yet, but it was the same principle, nonethe-
less, of bringing my foot down heel-first and rolling my
weight slowly forward onto my toes, even if I kept me eyes
trained on the ground, watching the dark, damp earth sink in
around my purple-and-white sneakers instead of focusing on
some figure on a raised platform against the sky.

Meanwhile, my mother would bend over the hills in
another part of the yard, sweating with her long, brown hair
tied back and her sharp face set in a grimace, at first trying to
be humane, planting traps overnight and then carting the ani-
imals off a few at a time to a field about a mile from our
home; and then, as she battled on in desperation and frustra-
tion, feeling "soil erosion" and "declining property values"
and all her other worries trampling on her heart like so much
loosened soil, a vengeful cruelty settled in her, and she
turned to chemical deterrents, plugging their holes with
smoke bombs and poisons, her fury making her Kentuckian
jaw twang like a new-strung bow as she dared those damn
vermin to show one glimpse of their squint-eyed little faces,
one rumble of wide, flat claws scuffling forward in the blind
darkness of the underground, and then we'd see who'd make
a freakin' mountain out of whose lawn.
In the end, though, neither smoke bombs nor cement nor poison could drive the moles to greener pastures, and my mother was beginning to think she might have to resort to chasing them down with an axe, one by one; but one day, a friend was standing with her, surveying the damage, and said, Well, have you tried Juicyfruit? and my mother wiped her face with the back of her hand and flung the sweat away and looked up and said, What? and her friend said, I know, it's weird, but it really works, because you see moles love the sweet smell and will eat the stuff whole, but they can't digest it and so it kills them.

And so my mother went out the next day, armed with Juicyfruit and rubber gloves, because hell, she'd tried everything else; and she put on the gloves and rolled up some sticks of the gum and pushed them through the mounds where the tunnels met up and branched off; and within a week, after a few had did of painful intestinal blockage, the moles left, and went looking for another field to burrow in that had no such sweet-smelling dangers, and our yard became smooth and firm again.
With All Due Respect, in Response to Dr. Tom C. Hunley's Comment That What I Read Is Crap
Kasey Vaught

Vampires, though? Voldemort? I am concerned that you're reading crap. There are just too many good books out there.
—Tom Hunley

I beg your pardon?

Who's to say the books I reference in my poem don't have value?
Is a book crap because it involves vampires or Voldemort? I suppose you think good books come only from the canon.
If that's true, then weren't my nods to Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Faulkner enough to satisfy your critical ear?

I'd argue, moreover, that my allusions fit well within the parameters of the canon.
Vampires, for instance, have proven resilient figures in literature.
Lord Byron, Bram Stoker, Richard Matheson, Anne Rice—do these names mean nothing?
You may not put much stock in creatures of the night, but I certainly do.
They are, after all, far more influential than either of us, literally speaking that is.

And I resent your suggestion that Lord Voldemort is a product of poor books.
He-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named has done more for literacy than any of the aforementioned writers, and he is a fictional wizard who probably doesn't appreciate being referred to as "crap."
I worry for you, Dr. Hunley; you just successfully insulted the most dangerous character in children's literature, not to mention the countless pissed off vampires that are likely on their way from coffins as we speak.

So in conclusion and in defense of supernatural works, I appreciate the concern, but rest assured that if I were limited to one story for the rest of my life, rather than picking another one of the "many good books out there," I'd choose Harry Potter to read over and over again.

Expelliarmus!
Desire
Seanna Lyn Wilhelm

Desire is walking purposefully
without an umbrella in the hopes
of feeling rain
and experiencing nothing
but amusement at the vibrant
protective circles held above
faces unaware
of the mere misting
they would have otherwise received.

It's licking your lips to taste
the water that's kissed you
there and smiling
despite its briny
taste because the rain that dripped
off the building is still rain.

It's holding
your breath as you hope
that he will deepen the kiss
because you're too much
of a coward to do so yourself.

It's beathing his scent in
as deeply
as you can
in the hopes that it will
forever linger in you.

It's forbidden thoughts . . .

It's wishing
that the rain you're blithely
allowing to smack you in the face
will turn into the engulfing
press of snow.

It's living your life
boldly and doing everything
in your power to never rein
in your beliefs.

It's never saying "no" when
your heart says "yes," or
"yes" when you truly
feel "no" leaping
frantically beneath your ribs.

It is the willingness to wait
for the right moment,
the right timing,
right thing,
word, phrase, sentence,
thought, face . . .
the right man.

It's digging your nails
as a refusal to let go.
A Black Day
Ryan Wright

Ashen clouds cover the sun
Black shadows crawl across the surface of the Earth
Water drops from the sky and I lie beneath catching each droplet in my gaping mouth
Today, I will drown myself with the rain.