

HOMESPUN 2012

The Student Literary Journal
of Tennessee Technological University

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Glenda Pharris for her technical assistance.

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Runner-up
2011 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

Triptych

Callie Milburn



This poem is thrice
told. It exhales
a story of ghosts,
her countenance and
keys. These are framed,
threefold. As we
watch, this poem
makes us prey.
It impregnates our peripheral
sight. To see her
entirely we must
look at the picture
as one. A lady
splintered, our primary
focus. Thrice the eye,
twice removed. Thrice
her knee-jerk hair. Thrice
the concentric Underwood
circles. Each division,
a longitude rubbing her
cotton underbelly blur
on cold-rolled steel,
whiplash prances slightly
on some triptych turquoise.

The first breath
is the cat's cradle,

swathed in her
butterfly effect. The rippling
pawprint is proof
that she carries over
to the second
and third frames and
so on and
so forth. Now look.
She has moved
us into the second breath, just like that.
We crane to see her seafoam iris.
There might swim mermaids
in that jade.
We will never see
that half again.
The margin has left
us this singular
storm, this cyclopic green.
We should note
her hair is still
split-end cursive, wringing her powdered neck.
This is important.
Note the solar flare,
the fine-spun

copper coiling. These are
extensions of her
lashes. The same faerie
rings. The same
pale moons set
the frame's right hand.
She looks just
like before, except this
time, she loses
certain symmetries. And so
she moves out
of sight and mind.
This is her
final breath and frame.
We watch keys
dancing in her place.

She might be
on the other side,
behind the vertical.
She might be watching
those crescent pirouettes.
We spy her repercussion,
believing that once,
only a breath ago,
we could measure
her life in frames
and triptych echoes.

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A Frog Crossing the Interstate

Rachel Charbonet-Baker

Jumping the corner, while cars rush by, through
smoke, puddles, and leaves down to neon
yellow painted edge of steep rise,
to maze-loud Interstate with leaps and
hops, back and forth; drivers can't see
my beady eyes wide or slimy green
spots on along crossing to greenery on
the other side. And trees wait
with sky overcast, so I make my way
to return from honking horns
amidst splashing water from tires to dry tree-
roof of many beetles, slugs, and birds.
Once there, I bounce through sticky grass,
mud, and roots to where many
yellow, orange, and olive-colored frogs live.
A pond of blue-black shallowness holds
tadpoles, moths, and mosquitoes tapping
its surface between blades of grassy
shore to keep me in a rocky fortress
as night falls through branches
and earth turns colder, silent, with locusts
singing a star-song on trunks.
I peer for moonlight, nestled with other
forest creatures to sleep since zooming
across such a traffic-full highway.

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The Swan of Tuonela

Bruce Majors

*Tuonela, land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river with black waters on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing. Lemminkainen, a trickster god, is the hero of the Finnish epic **The Kalevala**. His body is hacked to pieces and thrown into the river of death. "The Swan of Tuonela" is a tone poem and the second of **The Four Legends from The Kalevala**, Op. 22, by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius.*

Melancholy music drifts in caves of air,
melodies fissuring up through
bass clarinet, oboe, bassoon, horn and harp
conjuring tales of Lemminkainen
filling my bones with reedy resonance
a chilling prelude, the dark cold waters of Tuonela.

Haunting sounds of English horn
slip over the mystic river.
Opposing strands from some antiphonal choir
move the waters, angels stirring the pool at Bethesda
and calling out the regal imperturbable
passage of the Black Swan herself.

The quiet, blue mood is excellent.

The swan drifting into a black-red glow
toward some mythic land of the dead,
riffing largo movement of waters around her,
deliberate sonorities of subdivided strings,
zithering sounds through every crawl space of quietness.

Acappella post horn, dissolved brass,
tremulous strings hovering hushed cello,
she re-enters a minor seventh tremolo,
all the loneliness of that place
where neither love nor hate exists
encrypted in sound...

Suddenly the music is dead.
Only the dirge of passing harp strings,
the ghostly quiet of the river's dark blended sound
and that lovely bird leaning toward darkness,
knowing her fate, already dark herself.

Her song now almost speechless,
motionless,
 breathless,
 dying metaphors.
Stones collide in a vast darkness somewhere
only slightly.

After the music we moved our separate ways
both toward our own darkness.

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Old Enough but Not So Old

Zach Ludwig

I am not “young.” Maybe for a successful writer I would be considered young. But that’s an image that is fleeting with every passing year. Age is a relative concept and its merit in a situation should always be somewhat subjective. If someone asked me how old I was, I would always reply “old enough.” That left everything open for possibility. Did I tell you I’m writing a novel? It will be a sweeping success and for someone as young as me to be published will be an achievement in itself. It sure will make everyone who underestimated me envious. At least that’s the plan.

I always have a plan. And if that doesn’t work, I seem to always have a back-up plan or two. Some call it OCD or over-bearing and controlling, but that’s fine with me. However, I’m discovering to my dismay that I don’t have a good back-up if my life gets fucked up. I can’t see myself happy being anything but what I always wanted to be – an acclaimed author. I am a student by occupation, in high school. I grew up in a small, southern town you’ve never heard of. And I don’t want to share its name, anyway. That covers most of what you need to know about me.

I haven’t written a lot – mainly poems, a few short stories, a beginning to my great American novel, and thousands of ideas – but some of them are repeats of what I saw on television last week or what I see at the movies. I like the movies. I wonder if writers ever see a movie, then get into trouble when all the pages they write end up with similar ideas and conversations between their characters. Back to my American novel – I think it should be written in a Kerouac or Hemingway type of way. I, too, yearn for a long road trip to discover America.

I bet that would take me west. I have always wanted to see the west. It’s a place to lose your mind, money, and time. But a territory that returns a stronger sense of personal identity when you’re through. I want to get lost in the west. That sounds kind of Jim Morrison-y or like something Charles Manson would say to his followers, but maybe they’re right. Well, at least Morrison – let’s leave the mass murderers out of the picture (for the moment, at least).

Let’s go for a trip... metaphysically, spiritually...psychedelically. The sand is hot as hell and there isn’t a tide-pool anywhere close. Alcoves hidden in the hilly terrain and undulating, grainy reality are the only things that ground you in the whole experience while your perceptions ebb into the purple shades of a desert sunset. The experience leaves you with illusions and allusions for your latest book of poems. I bet it would be a little, red leather piece with gold trimmed pages and nobody would understand the significance of the main character’s appearance on page two, but absence in the remainder of the story. I would call it a “think-piece.”

Enough tripping. After all I'm still in high school. I figure once my transformation is complete, in a few years, when I really know who I am, I will have time for all that other stuff. Lost anywhere would be an improvement from the day-to-day mandatory mediocrity of my life up to this point. I wonder if I could take a van and live in it for a year or so. Chalk it all up to crazy adolescent exploration or that adjustment period around college age.

My uncle lived in a van once in college. But he did that to save the money he would have spent on rent. I never want to have to pay rent. When I go to NYU, I hope I get a full scholarship, so that I don't have to pay anything. Katy Shoopman, a friend of my sister, who graduated two years ago, was top of her class and had a 1600 SAT – she's getting paid to attend some college somewhere. I'm not sure where because we weren't exactly close. And don't bother asking my sister. She and Katy had a bit of a "falling out" right before Katy went off to school. Something involving my sister and a lot of rumor-mongering at our high school. In such a small town, rumors don't take too awful long to get spread around, by the way.

My sister, Bethany, got pregnant in the middle of her senior year. By the time prom rolled around in May, she was already starting to show. They had to go down to Colsteen's Dress Shop at the corner of Spring and Seventh to have the dress let out as much as the material would allow, but it still looked too tight around her waist. She graduated, though. She gave birth on the 6th of July. Everyone in the family was hoping for a July 4th delivery so they could celebrate Independence Day with the newest member of the family. When I say "celebrate," that may be a bit of stretch considering no one was particularly pleased that she got knocked up by her retard boyfriend. It definitely wasn't the life she planned for herself or the one my parents wanted for her.

My parents are good people. They both work. My dad is an engineer and if you talk to him for five minutes, his nerdiness is pretty obvious. Mom is a quiet schoolteacher. She works in the Special-Ed program at the middle school. Both are fairly normal. They have high expectations, but don't mind if you fail as long as you try. As it is with parents, I am starting to understand their back-stories, and I must say they sounded like they were more interesting people before Bethany and I were born.

Jason, my sister's sperm supplier, is a small guy at about 5'5." He played football in high school, but he spent most of his time on the bench. He wasn't the most muscular guy, but he was a lean fellow with some brawn. He was definitely stronger than I was. Though I was taller, I always thought Jason would take me in a fight. Not that I was looking for a fight – I had never been in a fight in my entire life, and it wasn't something I intended to pursue in the future. But if anyone around the house deserved to get a few swings thrown their direction, it was the consensus that Jason would be the best candidate for the receiving end. The old cliché is, "I'm a lover, not a fighter." What happens if you're neither? What are you then?

So my sister had a child to support and Jason worked at the local NAPA Autoparts where he had been working since he was a sophomore. He liked his job, but he really only worked there so he could get a discount on parts to augment his customized Ford Bronco, with the roof removed to create a makeshift convertible. It was painted light blue and had a decal on the top of the windshield that read: "BABE, the Big Blue OX." It was a

real tall machine. You had to jump out of it to dismount. When he used to start it in the parking lot after school, it sounded like a dragon dueling with the passing-by marching band. When the lines of chubby nerds banged their percussion and tooted their horns louder to compensate for the roaring onslaught of the OX's dual tailpipes, Jason using only his big toe, would engage the throttle and the thunder claps of the exhaust sounded like a firing range. And the band forfeited and marched on past.

By the time that summer ended – and I was glad it did because I could flee to school to escape the incessant shrieking of my newborn niece, Kendall – I was ready to begin my junior year. Junior year was the most difficult one I had experienced to that point because I found the presence of the female students' bodies to be a realm of simultaneous delight, confusion, and utter horror. That's making it too poetic – I was horny. I didn't know why or quite what that meant yet, but there it was.

Her name was Cary Wellington and she wore...well, it's so hard to describe garb as a distinguishing feature of adolescents, because we all dressed alike: jeans, T-shirt, maybe a sweatshirt. Her smile stood out to me. It wasn't the brightest or most loving smile – the usual description when conveying a likeable smile – but it fit so well between the creases of her cheeks and under the pointed little nose, where her black-rimmed glasses perched. Cary mingled with cliques in high school. She hung out with popular kids, nerds, band geeks, outcasts, preps, and jocks. She found a niche within all the groups. But she often preferred hanging out with popular kids like the preps and jocks, groups that are sometimes interchangeable, if you weren't aware.

She caught my attention in English class. I liked English class. I aspired to excel and often did. But I had trouble grasping some of the “rules of the road,” as one of my teachers called the semantics of punctuation and other tidbits of the language. Cary and I got paired off to work on a joint assignment. After we had spent so much time together for a couple of weeks, I asked her if she would be my girlfriend. I still don't know what that meant. But for Cary and me, we forwent all of the get-to-know-you dating details and became connected at the hip.

In high school, you had someone to spend weekends with, see a movie, hold hands, and things of that nature. Looking back, I wish I had played the field a bit. But that's something I still have difficulty with, even now. Within a few months, the chance for sex peaked my interest. Sex in high school was difficult because I was in school all day and home in the evenings with my parents a couple of doorways down the hall. Weekends didn't lend themselves to many reckless lapses in parental supervision either. We took to gallivanting around in the 1993 Honda Accord I borrowed from my sister.

Cary would steal a pack of smokes from her mother; we would head out to a nearby state park next to a lake, and spend Saturday night just listening to the radio. We were holding hands and making out, then taking sporadic breaks to sip some Cokes and light a cigarette that we passed between us. We were making out and I decided to cop a feel, so I did. I touched her breast through her Clemons High School sweatshirt. She let out a slight groan of satisfaction. I took that as a go-ahead signal from the third-base coach.

She was wearing blue jeans, but they were quickly stripped from her smooth legs and my hands continued to work. She was less of a novice with her hand motions than I

was, which showed that she had done this before. This was my first real experience with a girl, but it was obvious she had had some kind of formal training – it seems like that’s a course offered in high schools across the nation these days.

We stopped taking breaks to sip from our Cokes and there was still the lingering acrid smoke from our latest discarded cigarette that was burning itself out in the Accord’s slide-out ashtray. She lost her gray hooded sweatshirt and pink T-shirt and then she popped off her bra. It was like her perky, bold nipples were released from confinement, as her chest took on a new presence. Or, perhaps, I was just enthralled by the new toys that were revealed to me in the flesh. In the meantime, I discarded my blue jeans onto the floor of the car and ripped off my sweater and T-shirt simultaneously, like they were connected. I didn’t want my view of this recently-revealed Lolita in the passenger seat to be interrupted by mere, mortal fabric. This went beyond the confines of the physical world – this was sex!

We rummaged into the backseat, scrambling over the center console in only our underpants. She climbed over first, gracefully like she’d done it before. I followed and fell into her spread legs and waiting, outreached arms. She never looked more beautiful than she did right then, but at the same time there was something I didn’t like about what was happening. You would think that having a teenage sister who just became a mother would be the most potent form of birth control there is, but teenage hormones can’t be easily stifled.

I didn’t have a condom and all I kept thinking about were the scores of baby clothes that filled my sister’s dresser drawer where she once kept her high school track-and-field outfits. So I was already swimming in my own worries, as well as the semen that was backing up into my brain as it overflowed from other parts of my body. I told her I didn’t want to have sex that night. At least, not until I had a condom.

She reassured me, “I’m on birth control, plus you can pull out.” Those did sound like damn good counter-arguments. But I just couldn’t. My parents were already dealing with one bastard child in the house; they didn’t need another.

“No, not tonight.” Even I couldn’t believe I said it. “How about oral instead?”

Cary looked pretty pissed. The night was starting to get chilly and I began to realize that I was naked and had a big damp spot on the front of my boxers.

“No, I want you to take me home,” she said. And her body closed up. Her legs were no longer open and receptive to me. She retracted her arms until they were tucked in, covering her breasts.

“Are you sure?” I asked. She turned to look out the window. Although it was dark, I knew that she was beginning to cry. She didn’t make any sound; she just nodded her head and continued to look out the window at the nothingness on the shore of the lake.

I scrambled back over the center console, nearly falling forward and whacking my face on the steering wheel. I thought it would have been ironic to have a big “H” imprinted on my forehead – try to explain that one to my folks. But I adjusted myself in the seat and, as I turned around to see if she was following me between the seats, I found that she was opening the rear door, stepping out, and transferring herself to the front passenger seat.

She was still only in her underwear and began fumbling around the dark cranberry-colored interior for her lost clothing. I turned the ignition key the remainder of the way to engage the engine and not just the battery. The sound was soft, but still penetrating the silence of the increasingly cold October evening. As she put her clothes back on, I noticed she was shaking. It could have been from the cold or because she was holding back an even-greater torrent of tears.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath as I put the car into drive.

My relationship with Cary Wellington was destined to be repeats of that evening. We would see each other and we would neck, but we never had sex. I don’t know whether saying no to sex once is like telling the girl it’s off forever and you have to give a presidential address to retract the statement, but I do know that nothing really happened with Cary to make me think any differently. Within days, I had purchased a whole box of condoms and was raring to go, but my fantasies never materialized. She seemed more disconnected after that night, like I had done something to personally offend her, though I felt like I hadn’t done anything.

I had the strange feeling that everyone she knew was told about our night by the lake. I don’t know if this was all real or if my own sexual frustration and postponed, pent-up ejaculation were causing any head trauma, but it definitely felt stranger to sit in school after that. I know she told all of her girlfriends and, of course, they told their boyfriends. The problem was that a lot of those guys were preps or jocks, or a combination of both. And those types of people always have someone they can tell about another person’s embarrassment.

One day I was in the restroom during class, it must have been second period, when William Davis came in. He never tolerated it if you called him Will or Bill. It was always William, and he was very adamant about that point. I always had to challenge that because I found it funny.

“Hey, Will, how you doin’?” We had been through this little dance before and he was not amused this time, nor was he ever amused by my wit. He just gave me a kind of a look because he knew that I knew what he preferred to be called. I was heading to wash my hands and he was unzipping his pants to take a leak at the urinal to my right side.

I turned on the faucet, lathered my hands, and began to rinse. In mid-urination, Will began speaking to me, which I found to be a rather profane exercise in bathroom etiquette. Nevertheless, I wasn’t the one peeing so I felt less uncomfortable than I would have if our places were swapped. He asked me how Cary was. It was well known that were an “item,” in whatever the high school standards of that were at the time. She was fine, despite our falling out, I supposed.

And I told him so.

He got right to the point. “So I heard you didn’t fuck her.” My insides jumped and my penis shriveled a bit. Not only did it scare the hell out of me that this was fodder for the public forum, but it involved my reputation and that of my genitalia. And he does not appreciate slander.

“Not exactly,” I said.

He zipped up his jeans and started walking towards the bank of sinks without flushing the urinal, though it looked like he had no intention of washing his hands. “What does ‘not exactly’ mean? You either do it or you don’t.”

I flicked my hands into the sink to avoid dripping them all over the floor and I reached for the paper towel dispenser so I could dry my hands and get out of there. As I cranked the metal lever to get the brown paper towel, I said, “It’s complicated.”

“What’s complicated? A girl opens her legs for you – and believe me, it’s not gonna happen too much for a guy like you – and you don’t fuck her. Are you a fag, or somethin’?”

I wasn’t really sure about the word fag. I didn’t hear it much – they didn’t say it on TV or around my house – but I did hear it around school a bit. But it’s one of those words that took on a new meaning when it entered adolescent slang. Just as “gay” doesn’t mean homosexual. It means stupid to the typical high schooler. Definitions get flipped around and new ones are made. So I didn’t know if he meant fag, like lame, or some other synonym for gay.

“I don’t know,” was my only answer. He seemed to light up at that, as if by not answering the question correctly, it opened the gate for future insult and torment.

“Not sure,” he said. “Do you exclusively fuck guys? Because that’s what a fag is. Are you a fag?” Upon having the term appropriately defined in context, it became clear what my answer should have been.

“No, I’m not a fag,” I told him. “No.”

“You sure?” he quickly responded. “Ever tried?”

“No. Why? Have you?” I think that question was meant to come out of my mouth more matter-of-factly than it did, rather than the challenge or insult he perceived.

“What are you sayin’? You think I’m a fag?”

I could see this wasn’t going to end well. I tossed the brown, saturated cloth I had been rolling around in my hands toward the trash can and began to make my move around him toward the exit. But, for him, the conversation was not over. He side-stepped to his left and blocked my exit.

He questioned, “You sayin’ I suck dicks?”

Fearing that this was quickly going in the wrong direction, I said, “No, I don’t think you...no. Listen, I have to go.” Sometimes you just can’t reason with people like Will – I mean William. He knocked me one good time across the jaw and I lost my legs.

I always worried about the sanitation of our bathrooms. But at that moment, I was more concerned about being able to stand again. It felt like I had gotten a bazooka to the gut. I couldn’t breathe. But my face didn’t hurt. I think it was the shock more than the bunt of his fist that laid me out. Luckily for me, William wasn’t keen on beating the shit out of someone who was already down for the count. And I was definitely not going to retaliate.

He got agitated because I wouldn’t and couldn’t put up a fight. “Yeah, you are a fag,” he said. As he realized an amicable fight was not a possibility, he withdrew his anticipatory stance and started to leave. He flushed his urinal before exiting. I always thought that was odd.

I regained the ability to stand a few minutes later. I was really no worse for wear, except that I couldn't figure out what the fuck had just happened. The rest of the school body responded about the same as Will had – sorry, William. But William was the only one to express his emotion physically. From everyone else in school, I received the cold shoulder, strange looks, or just that odd, out-of-body experience you have when you walk into a room and realize that everyone was just talking about you. And you are not sure why – well, you know why – but you don't know what they said exactly and that's what drives you crazy.

So by the end of junior year I was, if you asked any of my classmates, a closet fag who wouldn't have sex with a good-looking girl, even if she was laid out for the taking. I was still no lover, I had missed that opportunity. I was now a fighter, even though I possessed the dreaded glass jaw. I wish the former had been the case, so I could have avoided my face-plant into ceramic tile. But that's what really happened. Great way to start out senior year!

He hit her. Fucking sonofabitch. He hit her. And hit is a colloquialism. We use that word in any case of domestic abuse – he almost killed her. My sister, with a child at home and baby powder smell on her hands. She had just folded tiny, freshly-cleaned pajamas and placed them on the end of the bed. He beat the mother of his child and she never saw it coming. I didn't visit her when she was in the hospital, but I hear she didn't look good. When she came home, it was no longer a home.

Her bedroom, for her, took on a sanctuary feel – a place of solitude and meditation to escape, if only for a short time, the hell that had become what was outside: real life. The dining room and kitchen became a forum where we all tried to sift through and sort out pseudo-reality and whatever was on our minds – usually having to do with Bethany or the baby. But usually, the family just ate in silence or avoided each other and ate at separate times. The bathroom was the backstage of a Broadway production where we all put on our makeup to cover up the scars of our recent rumbles, to seem more normal. But most were internal sores – except Bethany's – so there wasn't a lot of difference to see. And the garage was the way out. You start the car and remain in place until the air seems so thick it's like you're swimming through the air, just like in Peter Pan. "Second star to the right and straight on 'til morning," they said. I wonder if Bethany remembered that story.

I didn't talk to her enough that last year – my senior year. But I feel that if I had, I might have been able to stop all of this. I know why she did it. Others from the outside couldn't believe it and didn't understand why she would, but I knew why. She had entered a reality that she would never have accepted as her fate. For each one of us, that will be an unfortunate sign of aging – when you look up and realize that life is not what you planned. For most of us, however, it will be "I hadn't planned on three kids instead of two", "I hadn't planned on that second mortgage", "I hadn't planned on the career I'm stuck in now." For her, it was that she hadn't planned on fucking up her life. She had plans. But you know what they say about the "best laid plans of mice and men." – I actually forgot, but I think it's apt.

My mom found her. After she brought in the groceries through the front door, she had began packing away baby formula and jumbo packs of diapers in the kitchen

cabinets and hallway closet. Kendall was crying in her crib in Bethany's room. My mom ignored her for a moment while she went to put the extra sodas and beers in the auxiliary refrigerator in the garage where her baby had dozed off for the final time while her grandchild's discomfort was vocalized in the backdrop.

Everything after that was a bit blurry. Bethany killed herself in March, so there weren't many months of school left at that point. For any senior, those final months are a formality, anyway. For me, they were especially hazy. The next step seemed less important in the greater scheme. I tried imagining what Bethany would have said if she had been in my shoes in her senior year. She was already very pregnant by then. Her athletic outfits and blue jeans didn't fit anymore and she was already adjusting to her new life.

Senior year for most people is a time of joy. A bittersweet time. Your last homecoming, the real prom – not that junior prom bullshit they seem to be implementing nowadays – when partying is the prerogative and curfews are a suggestion, and it's the last time you will see many of those people. So many things are coming to an end. Never again will school be so forgiving – they supposedly don't hold your hand in college. Relationships are ending for many couples and some are just being realized but sadly, time is cut short for those would-be Romeos and Juliets. Never again will so many novices at love be stuck in a room together – unless you are one of those church camp people. For many, it's a time of completion because they know where they're going and they think they know who they are.

My final semester in school was a troubling time because too much was happening. So much was crammed in for it to really only be a few months. Kendall was becoming more of a nuisance. Tensions mounted between my parents as they mourned, yet tried to move on. I was encouraged to move on by so many. Leaving home is harder for the people who actually have to leave. Those who get to stay behind have the easy part. I'm not saying I didn't want to go – I did. I was ready to go. I knew a piece of me would always stay behind in the small town where I was born. I applied to a few schools – NYU included, of course.

I felt sorry for my fellow classmates. Many of them were so focused. The smart, driven students knew where the next destination would be and the stupid kids knew that high school would be over and that seemed to be something of an accomplishment to them. And then there was Bethany. She had had the drive and the potential, but was limited by her circumstances. What would she have done if Kendall hadn't been born? What kind of person would she have become? Where would she be now? All of these questions could be turned around and asked about me. I didn't have the answers and perhaps Bethany never had any idea either.

My mom focused more on Kendall than ever before. That was how she coped, I guess. The two-year-old was my mom's newly-adopted daughter and the toddling kid was never out of her sight. I wonder if Kendall knew her mom was gone. Surely she recognized that a familiar face was missing, but she couldn't grasp the gravity of Bethany's actions. My dad lost something. He was not the weirdly funny guy he had been before Bethany died. None of this surprised me, but you can't imagine the toll that things like this take on people, until you see first-hand how they react.

I was adjusting to my new life, too. But mine came with less baggage. Knowing I had very little to carry with me – realistically or philosophically – made everything easier, I think. I didn't own anything, I hadn't worked for anything, there was very little that I had taken part in so there was not much to carry with me. Mentally, I was a blank slate. I didn't have any real ideals, I wasn't religious, and I didn't have a destiny – at least, not one that I could foresee. I had less to stabilize myself and therefore, I could be a bit more accepting of the fluid feeling that life was taking on.

I knew I couldn't follow the regular patterns. I couldn't follow the rituals others were going through. So I didn't. I became even more consumed in my own fantasies. The only thing I could consider was a next step that wouldn't end with me back at home again. So it was that I discovered the flatlands west of Memphis.

A great writer, that is to say, a great story always delivers what the audience wants at the end, in some way or another. It may not be exactly what people thought they wanted but it just seems to fit, if you think about it. Rhett Butler has to walk out that door, E.T. can't stay with Elliot, and Darth Vader has to die. Sure, we all fantasize about the way things could have gone, but it just wouldn't be what was supposed to happen.

I guess that's where I was. Struggling because I knew I had to deliver what others expected from me. My difficulty was I didn't know what I wanted yet. I didn't know what was supposed to happen for me, but I felt I would take a cue from some of the movies I liked. I decided to take a leave of absence.

I didn't know what the west would hold – or if it held anything for me at all. I took my sister's Honda. It hadn't been driven since she used it to kill herself. The coroner did a good job removing all traces of her. Someone even cleaned out the cigarette butts from the ashtray – the car was cleaner than it had been since we had bought it. It still kind of smelled like burnt-out cigarettes though, and that will always remind me of Cary. My dad had moved it out onto the driveway and put a blue plastic tarp over it.

So I heard that roads on I-40 beyond Memphis become desolate, leaving behind the mountainous terrain of Appalachia and the greenery of the plateau. Beyond Memphis lies a flat wasteland of dry cotton fields, and that feel pervades into the plains. It isn't until you get beyond that and the desert, when you get to the Rockies, that your perspective changes – your attitude changes.

It took a change of attitude for me to see once and for all. Nothing like a trip (in whatever way you like to take it) to make you reminisce and fully experience your own regrets. Luckily, the young have time for regrets. It isn't until you get past the cotton fields of Memphis that you are able to see what went wrong before. So many things, I feel bad about. And I have had a short life, comparatively. What will I feel regret about ten or twenty years from now? Probably most of the same stuff. But hopefully, I'll be more adjusted to it all by then.

I thought a lot about Cary right before I left home. I was still confused about our falling out. After considering her behavior on our one infamous night, I realized that Cary was one of those people who always gets what she wants. She wanted sex – it might not have even mattered with whom – and she was side-struck when I denied her. Sex, in high school, is a tradable commodity in war-time: you stock up when you can, because

you know there will inevitably be a shortage any day. Cary was just trying to stock up with me, but it's still strange that was the nail in the coffin of that relationship. Of all the stupid things I did and said in my inept, inexperienced relationships, it was a very adult, responsible consideration of accountability that caused the greatest pitfall with Cary Wellington. That was just who she was.

I thought about the other students, too, but in a more fleeting way. They were all kind of lumped together. Some stood out. But in the end, my graduating class was just a group of people who happened to be stuck together for twelve years of school. If real bonds were there, it was too easy for all of us to move on after graduation day. I wish I had made more friends. But, I guess that would just lead to more heartache when everyone scattered. The popular kids must have had more heartache than the losers, by that logic.

I thought about my parents and Kendall a lot. My folks were middle-aged. As I prepared to go off to college, before Bethany had Kendall and killed herself, they were looking forward to having an empty house. Now they were stuck with another child for sixteen years. I hope they didn't think of me as inconsiderate or ungrateful because of the way I left them to pick up the pieces. I really do care about them, but I couldn't stay there anymore.

I imagine Bethany would have taken another exit if she had had the chance. There was no money to scrounge so she couldn't just buy a ticket to some other place. I guess she thought her options were limited. My big sister occupied most of my thoughts, as I plodded into the dusty air beyond the Mississippi. I tried to imagine her the way she had been. She used to smile more, before the baby came. She looked older after Kendall was born, more run-down and sad. I didn't like her looking old. I mean, she was older than me, but not by much. But if she started looking older, did that mean that I looked older, too?

I checked the reflection of my eyes in the rearview mirror of the old Honda. I don't think I'm looking too old. I'm old enough. I am old enough to see what this new world has to offer and old enough to give myself a break from what that old world offered me – nothing, really.

But all of the afterthoughts, cogitations, and regrets are in the miles left behind. They're in the pages I have already written. I am trying not to look back too much. Back there where I was dead. No better off than Bethany. We all settle into our lives in some way or another. Sometimes these are lives we never thought would become our identities. This is my way of moving past it.

Ahead is only opportunity and people who don't only live in small towns. Ahead is NYU – figuratively. Technically, it's back the other way. But I'm sure I'll make it there someday. Ahead is only new love and new life and new fights to be won. I hope to get a chance at the love part again before I get into another brawl. But that is yet to be known. And that is the spirit that made the west, after all. And I intend to chip off a piece for myself. I better do it now while I'm old enough, but not so old that I lose my spirit of adventure and my intentions to find and expose my real self.

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Easter

Anna Gilbert

It was the Easter before the storm. The eggs, found.
The ham, eaten. The dinner, done. The 6 a.m. joy
of the bunny, the grass, the treasures buried, the
budding yard of connected trees, the glorious
giddy of the laughing kids, the raucousness of
teenaged tournaments and searching races,
the flinging “hi” of sneaky sons and Boggle
played beneath the sun. The sister with
roses at her belly and the mom with afternoon
already upon her brow. The candy of youth,
the weather of warm looking.

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Joel 2:12

Katie Reasonover

There in the moonlight
looking down at a bridge
I saw there below it
my heart,
who had been lying on the ground,
gently rose,
left my body, turned to the world,
and there they made conversation.

“Were there rings on your fingers?”
“No, only under my eyes,” my heart’s reply.

“Did you love this religion?”
“Sure. Look what it has caused me.”

“But the sun has always risen, has it not?”
“You of all should know, it is the world that turns.”

The two continued
and as I rose higher,
to the left I saw
the angels, the devils,
shooting dice for my soul.

To the right
there were onlookers
softly rocking my body.
With this movement
my heart felt compelled
to return to its cage.

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The Guardian and the Shade

Steven Stratz

Through the rain I saw you
Gently kneeling in the mud.
In your eyes flashed the wicked grin
Of a demon lathed in blood.

In its fist was an ashen blade
Of lucrid hammered lead,
A weapon of great deadly force
was crashing toward your stead.

Through the rain I saw it,
Bound to strike the fatal blow.
You seemed so beaten, terrified,
Yet hatred did not show.

But as the blade was tearing down,
A glorious light appeared,
A figure bathed in shining love
Emerged in high revere.

Through the rain I saw him
Softly walking to your side;
An armored chain-mail suit of gold
Surrounded swords of pride.

The demon shrieked a deadly hiss
As the angel drew his blade.
What ensued was the perilous fight
Of the Guardian and the Shade.

The clash of good and evil
Could be heard in all the land;
The angel shone with mercy,
While the demon took command.

The monster swiftly threw a blow
to the angel's armored chest.
Sparks of mercy, love, and sin
Blew toward the settling west.

But the angel, filled with guardian love,

Cast forth a ray of might,
So powerful, so paramount,
The demon died that night.

Through the rain I saw you.
Bathed, Gloried, Hailed.
Shining in salvation,
You, mankind, prevailed.

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Faith Is

Richard Cooper

Faith is more than a building of stones and the veneration of old dead bones.
Faith is beyond the human even with the utmost acumen.
Faith is the words that GOD spoke to impart what to hold in the depths of the heart.
Faith is the knowledge of what is right, more than knowing, a second sight.
Faith is the faith of a child, knowing GOD'S love and being beguiled.

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Ends of the Earth

Alyx Wright

I've been to heaven and hell and everywhere in between
I follow the footprints of the saints
The ends of the earth are a rather dull place to be
No life, no love, no joy. No animals or people. Just wind
But in the wind are the sounds seldom heard.
The lovers whisper into the night
The words that would have made everything better, had they been said
The screams of the many silenced by the few.
The sermons untold that never changed a life
The words and rhymes and thoughts that go unheard.
The actions of those that died before their time...
And the consequences that would have gone with.

Those words you never told him
Those thoughts you never shared with her
Those feelings you never let see the light of day
That life you always wished for and dreamed of
They reside at the ends of the earth.

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At a Halfway House

Bruce Majors

Sign says *Salvation Army*
could be alley of the lost
smoke-gray faces stare from every darkness

Homeless sit ragged possessions
in every doorway or alcove
suspicious eyes watch
 for signs of weakness

I get tough yelling out questions
Is this the place? Who do we see to get in?
I got family here!

Lock the car
bravado impresses no one
they've seen this more than once

Make my way through a crowd
gathered around the door
to a wire cage with a desk
ask if I might see my son
tough guy façade completely gone
nothing more than a gentle dog
 tangled up in wolves

Inside the iron door
hard faces with hard eyes
a dark hallway
I could be stabbed
no one smiles

A thin shadow emerges from gray walls
...cries...embraces –
eager wet eyes not hardened
 not yet

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To Be or Not To Be

Dave Phifer

They say the grass is greener
On the other side
So we, like cattle,
Live with our heads jammed

Through a fence
Only one foot in reality
All the while calculating

Existence and reason
One massive line
Stolen from the ghost
Of Shakespeare's tongue

To be or not to be
With something to look forward to
After we expire

To be with
Is to simplify
To be without
Is to exacerbate

Call it pragmatism, atheism,
Or even bruxism
But I see this greener grass

As an anachronism
Like Samson I'll bite my thumb
Grind my teeth
Until there is nothing left

But gums to clap together
The consonants of
Clever cash cow

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Crimson Mask

Mark Conner

It felt like I had a runny nose, except an intense burning sensation came with it. As I looked down, I noticed a drop of blood dribble onto the floor in a perfect circular pattern. One drip led to a few more, and before I knew it, the dripping became a steady stream, making the floor so slick that footing was difficult to maintain. Shocked at the sight of my own blood, I blurted to Cody, “Ah, fuck. You busted me open.” Cody continued clubbing me over the back with heavy forearm shots, never responding. The show had to go on. To begin our match that night, in somewhat of an unorthodox fashion, we started brawling outside of the ring, pretending to thrash one another just feet away from the fans in attendance. Cody had slammed my head into the unforgiving steel ringpost, too careless or forgetful to hold back a bit and let me get my hands up at the last second to protect myself. I paid for his mistake in blood. This wasn’t supposed to be part of the show.

Cody and I go way back – friends since kindergarten, actually. Shortly after I began wrestling around areas of Tennessee and Kentucky in independent promotions (the minor leagues of professional wrestling, I suppose), I felt it was only natural to get him involved as well, seeing how, as kids, we both shared a love for the sport that most people wouldn’t even consider a bona fide sport – the “fake” stuff on television. I’m not quite sure that I’ve regarded it as a genuine sport at any point in my life, either. As evidenced by my bloodshed, though, professional wrestling is, at times, far from fake. Predetermined would be a much better word to use.

The blood on my face didn’t worry me. My nose wasn’t broken; it was only a nosebleed, although a severe one. What weighed on my mind for the next minute or two while the match continued out on the floor was how the fans would react to the sight of my blood. Our scuffle was taking place, along with my profuse bleeding, directly in front of our announcer’s table and the camera recording the action, so with my back turned to most of the fans, not many of them had even detected my nosebleed yet. My concern was that some of the paying spectators, consisting mostly of parents who brought their children along to watch the matches, would be appalled after they finally noticed. Another thought then circulated through my brain, as Cody and I took turns hammering away on each other’s left temples with right fists, opening them up slightly just before making contact so as not to hurt each other; it troubled me to think about what stance the people in charge of the small community center in Byrdstown, Tennessee (the building the show was being held in that night) would take once they heard about the bloody incident. If they were to become offended and feel that the building had been abused, they, in all probability, would never permit another wrestling event to be held there again and the promotion would have been dealt a crushing blow.

Once Cody and I were back in the ring, all the fans began to notice what they felt

were the gory effects my opponent's onslaught had on me, but they were none the wiser as to the blunder that had actually caused it. I did my best to stop the bleeding by wiping my nose defiantly on my forearms and the back of my hands, which were heavily wrapped with tape that many athletes apply to their wrists and ankles to prevent sprains or breaks. My nose still bled like a geyser, and the more I wiped, the messier I became. To my surprise, their reaction indicated that they weren't bothered at all by my bleeding all over the place; it only added to their excitement. That's when I allowed myself to soak it all in; it dawned on me just how exhilarating it was to have my own hot, pasty blood flowing down my face.

The blood, I realized, was a service to the match itself. It allowed Cody and me to have one of the easiest contests I had ever participated in, because all the fans just wanted to see the two of us duke it out, no longer caring about high-flying maneuvers or scientific mat wrestling with complicated holds being applied and countered. In my opinion, the match was a moment for the wrestling fans or reluctant spectators (whatever the case may be) to question their disbelief about what was taking place before them, a rarity in this age, considering the stigma and overall perception of professional wrestling. I could tell by the expression on their faces, as I walked back to the dressing room after the match had come to a close, stained with blood and a swagger in my step, that the people watching weren't so sure anymore if what they had witnessed was all just an illusion to take in on a Saturday night. I took this as one of the greatest compliments a wrestler, or *worker*, as wrestlers often call themselves, could receive.

Behind the curtain, I rejoined my brotherhood who pretended to beat one another up in front of crowds on weekends, and I was greeted with countless questions in regard to my well-being. It occurred to me what a paradox this thoughtfulness was, considering the nature of what professional wrestling portrays. I downplayed the mishap to everyone and went directly to the restroom to wash the blood from my face. Two blows of my right nostril left the sink in scarlet disarray, which I purposefully neglected to clean up in hopes that the next wrestler in line to relieve themselves would make a grisly discovery. Meanwhile, before the next match was underway, a member of the ring crew used a pushbroom to wipe up the floor around the outside of the ring, where, due to the blood spatter, a gruesome stabbing appeared to have taken place. With a little use of the imagination, it would've been easy to picture the area outside the ring as a darkened alleyway. All that was missing was yellow caution tape and a chalk outline of a body.

The referee for the night rejoined our huddle of pretend-to-be tough guys in the locker room, in order to be instructed of his duties for the next match, and he commented to me that I'd done a fantastic job making the fake blood look realistic.

"That *was* real," I replied, a confused, somewhat agitated expression on my face. The referee just stared blankly at me for a second, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and turned to walk back out to the ring, not sure of what to make of my revelation.

As Cody approached me upon his return to the dressing room, visibly embarrassed by the accident during the match, we bumped fists and I promised him I was fine. "Let up a little bit on those pole shots from now on," I leaned in and whispered to him, laughter in my voice. Thrilled at the crowd's reaction to our match, the two of us then reminisced about the first time when, during a training session, Cody had inadvertently

caused my bloodshed. It had been Cody's initial experience inside a wrestling ring and I was teaching him how to fall (also known as *bump* in wrestling patois) for a maneuver in which I stood behind him, clutching both his wrists, and simply pulled him backward, appearing as though the back of his head was being driven into the mat. As I fell to a sitting position and Cody crashed downward in unison, his wrist broke free of my grip and, because of his wedding band, his flailing hand glanced across my face, slicing open my right eyelid. Stitches probably wouldn't have been a bad idea. But I never got them.

Most people are under the impression that anytime they spot blood on a wrestler's face, it's "gimmick" blood, created by blood capsules or some red gunk in a squeezable container. It's not. Nearly all the blood one can see while watching any given wrestling program is authentic. The only rare exceptions created with blood capsules occur when wrestlers begin spitting up blood, which announcers will then certainly exclaim is a direct result of some "internal injury."

Blood has been a servant of professional wrestling for as long as it has existed, although it's utilized much less than it used to be, due in large part to the outspread of HIV. Typically, a wrestler bleeding, also referred to as *getting color* or *juicing*, is done as a way to elevate the intensity and realism of a match so as to maximize the excitement of the crowd. Before the modern method of bloodletting in the squared circle came about, wrestlers of yesteryear would simply strike one another in the face, usually the nose or the fleshy area along the eyebrow, hard enough until the red stuff gushed out for the audience's amazement. The blood resulting from this intentionally harsh method is often referred to as *hard way juice*, hence the recipient bleeding from being punched, elbowed, or, in my case, rammed into a ringpost – hard.

Nowadays, heads of wrestlers are normally split open by way of self-mutilation. The performers make themselves bleed with the use of, in most cases, a razorblade. Such an act is known in the wrestling business as *blading* or executing a *blade job*. An up close example can be found in one of the opening scenes from the critically acclaimed film *The Wrestler*. The camera pans in on Mickey Rourke – who depicts a broken down, washed up casualty of the wrestling business leftover from the 1980s, yet still performing on a much smaller scale in the independent circuit – as he deliberately creates a gash across his forehead during a match without the use of special effects.

Ahead of time, wrestlers intent on bleeding will cut a razorblade in half, tape up all but one corner, and conceal it on their person somehow, normally by taping it to their wrist with the rest of the athletic tape they have applied to themselves. When the time is right, wrestlers, commonly lying face down, peel away the tape to retrieve the razor, also called a *gig*, and then cut themselves, usually across the forehead. Another area of the body where some wrestlers hide a blade is unthinkable; it is either taped to the tongue or to the roof of the mouth and then coughed up when it's time to be used. Personally, I can never fathom attempting this under any circumstances, because the risks of swallowing the razor or having it lacerate the inside of the mouth are too great.

Regardless of where the razor is hidden, the most challenging part of the entire blading process is pulling it off without the crowd, particularly in seats closest to ringside, becoming aware of what's happening, which is why wrestlers with longer hair

have an advantage; they can cover their hands and face with their hair so that the viewers are unable to see them swiping at their forehead with the blade. Then, ever so subtly, the referee will move in and collect it from either the wrestler's hand or off the mat and stow it away inside his pocket. Professional wrestling is just an elaborate magic trick, hiding illusive methods with simple gestures.

The next time I bled during a wrestling match, it was months later in December of 2008, and this time intentionally. I was set to defend the promotion's championship belt in the final match (*blowoff match* in wrestling jargon) with my arch nemesis in what was basic good versus evil storytelling, with me playing the fan favorite and my opponent playing the *heel*, wrestling lingo for bad guy. For this match, I wanted to do something extra special. I needed some way to illustrate to the people in attendance that the savagery in my match was taken to an extreme. Weeks before the event took place, I decided that there should definitely be blood for this grudge match, to leave a lasting impression on the fans. My hope was that my sacrifice would spike the interest of the fans and keep the promotion running as strong as possible.

Film study of my matches filled my days before the event. I mapped out in my mind supposed punishment that my opponent and I could inflict upon each other to please the crowd. Bleeding wasn't bothersome to me; what I was nervous about was cutting myself without the crowd noticing what I was doing. If I got caught, it would surely destroy the credibility of the contest, as well as the entire show, so I devised a plan to execute the blade job outside of the ring, far away from watchful eyes, and instead of having the burden of fumbling for a razorblade taped to my wrist, I decided I'd be more comfortable letting the referee hang on to it for me until I intended to use it.

A few days before the match, I remembered a wrestler I had met in Somerset, Kentucky a year prior. Standing about 6'4" and weighing probably every bit of three hundred and fifty pounds, he was a mountain of a man, covered with prison yard tattoos and known as The Regulator. Although I didn't know him very well, he was always an agreeable guy, routinely extending his hand for me to shake after watching my matches through the curtain. One night, he lumbered over to where I sat in the dressing room and leaned down to inspect my forehead, gliding his fingers slowly across my skin close to the hairline. I wasn't sure what to do or say, so I just held still until he stood upright again. As he walked away, he said, "Okay. Just wanted to check."

Perplexed, I laughed and asked him what he had been doing. His face twisted into a not so toothy grin (four or five at the most, from what I could tell) and he told me he was looking for scars on my forehead. At the time, I had never bladed before and he seemed pleased to hear this confession. "That's good," he told me. "You're too pretty to do that shit. Don't waste your looks by giggin' yourself. It's not worth it, brother. You're too talented for that."

"Uh, thanks," I managed to choke out, wondering for the first time since I'd started wrestling just what the hell I was doing surrounded by unfamiliar people in a town I'd never been in to wrestle in front of a dismal crowd. I was so taken aback by what he had said that I grabbed my bottle of water, unscrewed the lid, and guzzled every drop of it, attempting to overcome the awkward situation by putting it out of my mind.

“If you ever do it,” The Regulator added, turning his attention back toward me, “take the gig and cut close to the hairline, so if it scars, it’ll be less noticeable. And don’t cut too deep. But I don’t think you should ever do it.”

I was relieved. I had obviously misinterpreted his intentions. This was merely friendly and professional counsel from someone who had been wrestling almost longer than I had been alive, not an unwanted flirtation. It was a sign of respect and an act of kindness toward me for this veteran to go out of his way to pass along his knowledge, no matter how bizarre that knowledge was. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I assured him.

Perhaps when I got the idea to willingly bleed for my match in December of 2008 I wasn’t listening to The Regulator’s discouragement of blade jobs, but I was definitely going to heed his advice about how and where to cut. Scars weren’t appealing to me, and I intended to make only a small incision to preserve my appearance. In order to get blood flow, a gash from coast to coast across the forehead isn’t necessary, since the mixture of blood and sweat makes it appear as though there is much more coming from the slit than there truly is. I didn’t (and still don’t) want to end up looking like some of the most notable bleeders in wrestling history, with hideous slash marks across their foreheads to show for a life of sacrifice within the business. One wrestler in particular who comes to mind is Abdullah the Butcher. It’s said that the scars on his forehead are so deep that he’s able to place gambling coins in them.

When I arrived at the venue a few hours before bell time, I immediately sought out John, my opponent who would be wrestling under the disguise of a mask that night, to go over the specifics of our match. John and I were the same height, but he had a fifty pound advantage. Despite this, John and I always put on spectacular matches, and he was one of my favorites to lock up with. As usual, I found him sitting with an assortment of bottles around his chair where he sat; several with water in them, one with Gatorade, and another he spat chunks of tobacco into. When I mentioned that I’d be bleeding for the match, he looked at me hesitantly. “I don’t think you should,” he said.

“I won’t cut too deep – just enough to get some color and that’ll be it. It’ll be fine,” I told him.

John let out a long sigh. “Ah, I don’t think you ought to,” he responded. John’s main concern was upsetting the people in charge of the building, which I sympathized with, seeing as though I’d once felt the same reluctance toward bleeding. It took a few minutes before he ever came around.

I’m usually quite talkative in the dressing room before matches, but I was totally focused that night, multitasking by lacing up my boots and explaining to John in detail what we’d be doing at the same time. I delicately handled the razorblade I’d brought along as I wrapped it in tape, lightly pressing down on its tip to feel its sharpness. When a few other wrestlers saw what I was doing, they were all surprised, asking for me to spoil what would take place in the main event. “You’ll just have to watch and find out,” I told them. “Just know this – I’ll be wearing the crimson mask.”

After I finished preparing the blade, I pulled the referee aside and explained what was going to happen and what role he’d play to ensure everything went according to plan. I produced the blade and watched him blink nervously. For an act that would subject no one but myself to physical pain, everyone was sure uptight about it, I thought.

“Just put it in your back pocket. When John tosses me into the wall near the exit sign, run over and act like you’re checking on me. But have it ready,” I stressed to him. “When we go outside the ring past all the fans, you need to have it ready to slip to me when I’m down. Don’t let anyone see you, though. And when I’m done with it, I’ll leave it on the floor. Pick it up and put it back in your pocket. Don’t worry – it’ll be simple.” With that, the referee nodded and stuck the object in his back pocket. “And don’t lose it,” I joked as he walked away.

Just before I made my entrance to the ring, I did my routine stretches and thought I was too much at ease with the notion of harming myself than I should have been. My only butterflies were due to the actual work John and I would have to do inside the ring, because, despite all the attention toward readying the blade, this was still supposed to be a wrestling match. Knowing full well what direction this contest was headed in, over the loudspeakers I heard the promotion’s ring announcer state before the bell sounded: “Folks, this thing could get ugly quick.”

Three minutes into the match, John had a reverse chinlock on me. Apparently, John overheard a fan heckling him and he panted in my ear, “You hear that son of a bitch? I’ll kill ‘im.”

“Ignore it. Just ignore it. Let’s keep going,” I whispered. I fought my way to a standing position and warned John of the next maneuver I was going to pull off. “Jawbreaker,” I said in a low voice, using his arm to shield the fans from seeing me speak. With John standing behind me, gripping me around the neck, I reached up with both hands and pulled John’s chin to the back of my skull, abruptly falling down to the seat of my pants to simulate his jaw crashing into my head.

We kept working hard, even though the temperature was stifling by that point. I mentally prepared myself to have all the air escape my lungs as John hoisted me above his head for a gorilla press slam. After a pin attempt by John and my subsequent kick-out, I gasped, “It’s time. Throw me outside.” My body thumped the concrete floor before I even had a chance to catch my breath. John slowly made his way out to the floor, as if he were stalking his prey. I felt his hand tighten on the back of my neck as he directed me past the fans and toward the brick wall. Just as he launched me toward it, I leapt slightly, for added effect. I heard the people’s disapproval for the beating I was taking as my body again made a sickening thud upon impact, and I slid down the wall to the floor, where I lay in a maimed heap. When I opened my eyes, the referee was crouching over me, handing off the blade. Quickly, I raked it across my forehead, the referee groaning as he looked on. I knew he didn’t want to watch, but somehow he couldn’t bring himself to look away, either.

Blood spurted from my forehead as John and I made our way back to the ring. I winced and kept wiping the blood away, a trick I hoped would escalate the blood loss. For good measure, John pretended to gouge the wound on my head, his skill as a great worker apparent at that moment in particular, because I never felt a thing, though I grimaced and writhed in agony as if he had nearly killed me. As John and I fought back and forth, the crowd seemed stunned and fairly surprised at what they were witnessing; they didn’t want to believe evil was prevailing over good. The loudest reaction of the night from the fans came when I fought back just enough after taking an immense

amount of abuse to dive off the top turnbuckle and crash into John with a perfectly placed clothesline, but the air was sucked out of the building when he kicked out of the pin attempt after only a two count.

John took back over from there and blasted me with all of his most powerful maneuvers, which I sold the believability of very well. By this time, my entire face was a blood-soaked mess. After each slam, the crowd was more and more on my side, hoping I'd make a comeback and somehow pull out a victory. When I bounced off the ropes and was guided downward by a modified slam that John dubbed the Death Rattle, a maneuver, by the way, that had such force behind it that it had legitimately given me a concussion the month prior, I paid extra attention to tucking my chin on the way down, so as not to have the back of my head bounce off the mat again.

When I kicked out after another near fall, I began slapping the mat rhythmically to get the crowd on my side. They joined in, clapping their hands and stomping the floor as John brought me back up to a vertical base. In an act of desperation or a clever possum-playing enactment – no one will ever know for sure – I caught him off guard, giving with a quick boot to his abdomen and following up with a maneuver I use to finish off my opponents, the DDT, which is performed by tucking an opponent's head under the arm and kicking one's feet out from under oneself to fall backward in a sudden, vicious motion that drives the victim's cranium straight down to the canvas, a dangerous move if done improperly. The crowd erupted as the referee counted to three and I was declared the victor. John rolled out of the ring, retreating to the dressing room, and I was presented with the championship belt, having successfully defended it. I was saturated in blood and sweat, and it was one of the most rewarding moments I've ever experienced.

Back in the dressing room, I found John sprawled out on the floor, wheezing heavily. Had I not witnessed this dozens of times before, I might have been alarmed. We caught our breath and thanked one another for what had been a spellbinding, suspenseful contest. Only in professional wrestling would two individuals express gratitude for pummeling one another. I had bumped all over the ring, and even outside of it on the concrete floor, to make the match look as realistic as possible; my entire body, it seemed, was already airing its grievance about all I had just put it through. Applying pressure with the towel in order to stop the bleeding from my head, I looked at myself in the mirror. All this for people's entertainment, I thought to myself, realizing at that moment I'd willingly slash my forehead again, if the match and promotion could benefit from it. A morbid sense of accomplishment washed over me with every scoop of cold water I shoveled on my face, leaving yet another sink in bloody disarray.

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Runner-Up
2011 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

When in Rome...

Caroline Sapp

do as the
Romans do? do
indeed, invest the time in
debauchery! decadence shall
reign with overflowing
excess, indeed –

incoherence? Yes! Yes
please! indeed! with
glittergold nipples on
top spraying seeds of
grape through the
gold god stuck in –

limbo. between good and
better! eat the
meat! tear into
the hare! suck
the duck down to
its last –

fuck the
girl, the
boy! Or both! Or
twice! Or the
man with the slithering
tongue with scratches down –

the slender curve, sliding into
the worship room, worship the
party thrower, gayest gal, the
beatific bombshell, the
frisky frolicsome Ram of
Rome –

Surely, this makes one

happy? Yes! Yes! Yes?
indeed! razor-sliced
emotions, forgotten eves, plump with
pestilence, rotten to the
inner core with bubbling blisters –

but do, do as the
Romans do. Enjoy! Enjoy
the vibrancy, the views, the
harpy happy melodies! the
harmonies, the arts, the
affluence, the architecture –

pose! model-like for
Michelangelo – be a
Pope popper! slip
swan-like in the
Sistine! feast with the
fatties –

race with the robust
Stallions! be
intrigued! relish the
atmosphere! passion in
the air! party play with the
thespian, the musician, the persona –

of the Roman. So do, do
as the Romans do!
who cares if
coherency never
knocks – open the
gate – jump into –

the Tiber! squirting, sporting, and
sprouting Roman
horns! splash in the
sea! the sea swarming with
silly sinners who
gobble the guts! prance –
periodically past
the Coliseum, the
Vatican! guzzle each
gulp of the goblet's

last drop until
you – yes you – do as the Romans do!

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*Department of English and Communications
TTU*

Light

Jerrel Sanders

Laughter is the dawn
That dries the floods of yesterday's sorrows
And beckons the seed of spirit.

Inspiration is not what the water is,
But how it flows eternally from earth's springs and
Supports life's fleeting breath.

Growth from the inside out
Bears fruits of our existence
That becomes tomorrow's beginning.

Healing the shattered fragments
Of what mirrored our past can piece together
A mosaic for the future.

Transform our thoughts
Into a liberated symphony that conducts
A fantasia of light.

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First Place
2011 Lora A Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

Wrathful and Wrinkled

Dave Phifer

I can't conceive
Quarreling with my –
Self. Excluding
When we dance
Dazed, drunk.

I'll slip up
And slide
Through the kitchen
Crashing crudely.

Hands on the counter.
Hands on your mouth.
Hands deconstructing

Your entire frame
Curve wildly,
Speak quietly.
Distaste for
One moment.

Again I stagger,
Stupor, Baby
Giraffe's Gait
Overtaken by gravity.

Then we'll wonder,
When did we
Wallow into this

Reality: It's real,
But we hide
From ourselves.
Out in the yard
We make out

The figures of
Our perception of old trees.
Our need for recitation
Recycling words.

Then we'll sober
And wallow
Back into the house

And we'll wake
With only ourselves to blame.
Pretend we're fine
Promises in lines
Practically consoling

Each other for
Nothing. Is this reality
What we want?
Wishing and wasting

Everything for
The sake of comfort.
Nothing

For neither of us
To be had,
Until we wake,
Wrathful and wrinkled,
For our own procession.

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First Place

2010 Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

Ash

Callie Milburn

Quicksand remedies suffocate twist-tie solutions
that dissolve resolve and build you up to compost shred
Taste the perspiration of debris aspirations
that clutter to-do lists you always manage to leave undone
Gulp the sweat of your brow that feeds your fragile ego
until you crashandburn and choke on ash
that composes your decomposed pisspoor excuse for composure
Postulate miniscule steps to nowhere that pave
the gutters of your unbeautiful mind
And don't mind the obvious obscenities that you fail
to observe because those babyblues are sewed shut
with concrete thread that knots the know-it-all
you have become And still you know nothing
nothing and no one exists to convince you otherwise
And wisdom itself underestimates you because sagacity
alludes you and subdues your overdue rerun of wakesleepwalk
And you walk under magnified shadows while
pools of turpentine thin the rush of thriving to
dripdrop pitiful while all vitality and thirst trickle away
Dehydrated you cannot whistle for parched the blank pages
of your song won't hold a candle to the books you've burned,
the ash you are

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This Road Not Yellow

Joshua D. Martin

I blame Judy Garland for the first cliché that I ever learned. In the film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, the character Dorothy wants nothing more than a prompt return to Kansas. “There’s no place like home; there’s no place like home,” she recites, hoping that repeating a universal truth could magic her out of Oz and into the colorless reality of her simple Kansas farm. Dorothy is an object of much contrast, establishing a pretty skewed relationship toward both her family and her native state. Her attitude toward home changes eventually, with Oz as the catalyst for her about-face. The film ends happily, and Dorothy wraps herself in the comfort of her family. The tornado that opened the film had long vanished into the sky, the Wicked Witch of Oz was really just a fictitious evil, and the Kansas cows moo themselves back into normalcy. Dorothy resumes the life she had momentarily left through a dream. There’s no place like home.

But Judy Garland died of a drug overdose, and Dorothy never needed a heart transplant.

When I was six, I decided that Dorothy was probably too optimistic in the end to know what she was talking about and that the sudden upheaval into a fictional fantasy land would make anyone want to return to a life devoid of green Wicked Witches and flying monkeys. I decided that “There’s no place like home” was a simple line and nothing more. Its factuality was irrelevant to the overall hunky-dory effect of the film. I think I grew way too pessimistic because my own concept of home became blurred and confused. Because when I think of home, I think of a person.

My grandfather has lived in the same small town his entire life. It is a community populated by more cows, I think, than people. Tractors outnumber cars. Churches line the sides of the road. Old barns act as sacred, untouched monuments to people from years past – daunting and disfigured ghosts – and the people who currently live here know each other like they know the land out of which they raise their food. But the town’s possibilities are as minimal as its beauty and simplicity are abundant.

The only way to enter is by following a curvy, snake-like road. If you survive its seemingly unending twists and turns and its rollercoaster-like ups and downs, your reward is entrance into the community. My grandfather grew up here. Besides various jobs, and occasional travel demanded by those jobs, he hardly ever left the area. This is what he knew. This is where he stayed.

Abraham Carter grew up living and loving a life that I only came to know through fading photographs. The setting looks strange and primal. Gardens explode with vegetation and slanted, unstable barns tower above the people who rely on them as much as do the animals which occasionally lie and rest and sleep inside. The people imprinted on the plastic live without smiles, or at least hide their happiness well. The pathetic road

twisting its way in the background is small and beaten and unpaved. The house is equally grim – small and ill-built, both beautiful and terrible. Wild and savage trees linger and litter the photographs, enshrouding the living within an ambience dictated by green and unbothered things. Everything is frozen; the few colored pictures are fading, becoming as brittle and as stale as the hard reality of change, which creeps into the community now obsolete like a foreign drug injected by a cold and impersonal physician, so detached from his patient lying there upon his table. Those living now contrast with the tight and impersonal faces and bodies of their youth. They dilute what was and smile and think that hardships since endured have made them stronger and smarter, wise and great. They live quietly and remember the past with a fondness and frightfulness unshakeable because that's what makes sense, and that's what erases what was. They treat time as if it were an omnipotent intruder who doesn't leave and doesn't give and can't be stopped with their stories and pleas. They sit on their porches and laugh. Because that's what makes sense. And that at least, the laughter anyway, is an idea made concrete, while the twisted dirt road has since been tamed with a paved aggregation of different concretes.

I look at them now, these photographs turned brittle, and see a generation gap hidden somewhere in the background, in the lines of faces and in the woods expansive. Maybe that's why I listened to my grandpa's stories hungrily, finding it difficult to picture what he was telling, thinking *that's what it was like then . . . so different. So strange.*

He wore Western shirts and discolored blue jeans, faded by heavy use, and for many years he could usually be found with a cigarette in hand, smoke gently rising out of its red, burning tip. And he also loved to laugh; in fact it may have been his favorite thing to do. Visiting my grandfather was like entering an amusement park save the roller-coasters and cheap thrills. That's the best simile I could make as a kid. It's the best I can make as an adult. My cousins and I would usually play on the school buses he owned, one of us acting as the callused driver while the rest of us screamed stupidly and ran up and down the aisles. We rode his horses rarely, though the times we did were always pretty memorable, especially the time one of them kicked me. It has been, so much as I can remember, the only animal on which I have wished a slow and painful death, hoping all the while that karma circulated in the animal world.

One of my favorite stories about my grandfather is the one in which he tried to shoot a dog.

"I'll show him," he said, laughing while loading his rifle. He pressed his weathered face close to the trigger, aiming meticulously for a clean kill, a successful shot. His eyelids closed closer together, preparing for the bullet's loud exit. And then nothing. *Damn safety switch*, he thought. Fully pissed off, he fumbled the gun in his disgust, dislodged the safety lock, and then, quite suddenly, shot off his index finger. Successful shot. Completely gone.

I'm not really sure if the dog left after that. Knowing my grandfather, he probably kicked the animal before running into his house to phone for help. He always called his finger "the stub." And when I was younger, I wasn't exactly sure how to approach that

idea, so I was more than reluctant to let “the stub” get near me – the midget digit of the scary grandpa. When my mom and dad married, right before the family group picture was taken, my grandfather raised his hand and waved his miniature finger, smiling and creating a laughter that filled the simple country church hidden in the enclaves of that all-too untamed nature. It’s one of my favorite pictures that I have of my family – my grandpa, dressed in an uncomfortable, decorous tuxedo, and his decapitated digit, held high like an Olympic torch. Yes, he was godlike. Zeus.

My own family started its story in the same community, but when I was one, we moved away. Not far – just enough to ensure that neither of us fell into the trap of the community’s simplicity and comfort. For my mom, I think, it was a way to branch out. For my dad, it was simply the next step. I was one, so I neither understood nor cared.

My mom and I kept driving back through the road to visit my grandparents, both of whom were divorced and consequently single. My grandmother, who at having become a grandmother only increased in her altruism, was always an easy person to approach. She was rarely strict, and like most grandmothers I know, she let optimism rule her judgment. Without my grandfather, her house lacked a brisk, harsh, authoritative voice. So when we visited my grandfather, I did my best to be as stiff and as mute as possible. He was the first person, I think, of whom I was genuinely afraid. He was strict, unwavering in his judgment, and loud. Maybe that’s why I also liked him as much as I feared him. So when I was on his good side, and I usually was because I tried my hardest to not screw up, we were often inseparable.

So home, the idea, remained just as divided between my own community and that of my grandfather. I liked it, though I didn’t understand why my grandparents were divorced and living in separate houses. It was just an accepted, unquestioned truth – something undisguised and ignored, pushed behind the white picket fences of the family we had created, staring blankly back, mute.

And then the trips through Seven Knobs stopped. Suddenly, like a heart attack.

My mother’s family has always suffered from a genetic line of heart trouble – irregular heart beats, clogged arteries, heart disease, heart attacks. Medical terminology bred itself into our vocabulary much like old recipes handed down from one generation to another. My grandfather and his brothers have had at least one heart attack, some have had more than one; last year, my great-uncle died, unexpectedly, of a massive heart attack. My mother suffers from an irregular heart beat, as do I – kind of like an internal reminder that I have genetic bad luck, that things are never definite.

When I was six, shortly after I cast Dorothy off as a delusional fool, my grandfather moved out of his house and into St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. Only temporarily, I was told, would he stay there. I don’t really remember a lot of specific scenes, just a collage of images and brief memories blurred within a murky fragment of time. I remember IV’s jutting from his arms, and I remember waiting for hours in a big maroon waiting room with my cousins. We played with dinosaur toys and colored entire coloring books, filling the pages with a vibrancy the hospital seemed to lack. I remember my family going into a Catholic church at the hospital to pray, even

though none of us were Catholic. And I also remember riding with my mother on the interstate, the van noisy with a heavy silence, her being brief with answers to my questions.

“What’s wrong with Pa?”

“He needs a new heart.”

“Why? What’s wrong with the one he has now?”

“He just does.”

When many who are in need of a new organ are met with the reality of a waiting list, they grow grim with the possibility of not receiving needed organ in time. Where in one mental image I can see my grandfather in a hospital bed, bitter and restless, in another I can see him in a wheelchair, regaining a sense of balance post-surgery. But the surgery itself is a gray area I can’t define. It’s almost like a myth, simply because I neither understood the concept of surgery (“They *really* took out his *heart*? And gave him a *new one*?”), nor did I want to admit a flaw in my grandfather – the hardcore, godlike figure who wasn’t allowed by mere nature to get sick.

The heart transplant, more so than anything, made me rethink a lot of things. My grandfather changed a lot, and I think I did too to be so young. I came to view home as a gray something-or-other. Hospitals or houses, I wondered? Interstates or inclined country roads? Where did my grandpa fit in, or belong? The whole thing was just as confusing as the bright, nonsensical monitors that kept him company during his hospitalizations.

We gave my grandfather’s house a make-over before he ever returned to it, adding on to the existing foundation. The hospital bills grew into a massive, neatly-sealed stack of envelopes lying on my grandfather’s dining room table. And we ignored them, or at least I did. Papers and papers and pills and papers. What was important was not in black or white or enumerated in extensive bank statements and medical bills. The man – the god – would be here, in his chair. And there I would be too, sitting on the floor. Looking up at God.

When he did come home, he came with a new scar, a new heart, and a personal pharmacy of medication. Some pills fought infection, others were necessary for the health of his new organ.

When I was older, I remember his appearing suddenly at our house, with another person. They drove into the driveway, and I stood, hid, behind a curtain. My mother walked outside placidly, head parallel to a lawn well-kept, eyes fixed on the man once half insane with loneliness and with emptiness. The encounter was short; his white hair stood disheveled and unkempt, and the stranger beside sat comfortable and unbothered by the news of something whose weight made the small, little insignificant created world or sub-universe of a family shake and stumble and reek with acidity of an unwanted addition.

“I’m tired of being alone,” he said.

My mother walked back into the house.

Sitting idiot-like behind a curtain which didn’t shade my confusion, didn’t veil the tension, I asked if I should call her grandma. Looking spent and tired, sick and accusatory, my mother didn’t respond. I figured out the answer on my own.

Such was the first encounter with his second wife.

The marriage didn't last long, so I don't remember much. I do remember that she smoked, and that even though my family and I had hung small signs outside my grandpa's home reading, "NO SMOKING ALLOWED; TRANSPLANT RECIPIENT," she continued smoking anyway, creating a hazy, chaotic environment whenever my family and I visited. They eventually divorced. I'm not sure why.

Maybe it was the effects of her smoking or maybe even the lonely, blunt reality of another failed marriage that made my grandpa worse, but it's common for transplant recipients to be sensitive to anything – the sun, the wind, maybe even their emotions. Transplant recipients rely on numerous drugs; their immune systems have an increased risk of deteriorating, thereby creating more possibilities for other sicknesses to exacerbate an already extensive list of existing complications. Pneumonia, a silent enemy of my claustrophobic grandfather, came and left his house often. But there were other things that took his breath away, too.

When I was a teenager, another woman started visiting my grandfather; her name was Dorothy. And I felt as if I were drowning in a pool of irony.

Dorothy wore no sparkling red slippers. She had her boots. She didn't bring a Toto. She had children who came and went as they pleased, borrowing my grandfather's vehicles and his money without asking and eyeing his medication with suppressed envy. Her yellow brick road wasn't yellow, just curvy and shaded by overlapping trees. And she wanted a marriage license, because that's what people do when they're half sick with possibility and drunk on emotion. That's what makes sense when you're older and wiser and sure that *this* time it will work out, that everything that occurred has merely made you stronger. And when logic is too stale and outside opinion too harsh, that piece of paper looks so delicious in a frame offset by gold, in a house that won't be so lonely, owned by a man who won't be so lonely. And even though both halves of the formula are flawed, and even though one hasn't spent his life savings while the other has no monetary hoard, reality doesn't really matter anymore. Because misery is never so lonely as misery, or singularity.

Dorothy and my grandfather eventually married, in a private ceremony. I like to think that behind her façade of fake selflessness, was a layer of green skin. It just doesn't show up in pictures.

My family and I don't speak about the years that followed what became of my grandfather's third and final failed marriage. But I was old enough to remember everything this time. I see it vividly, with a mixture of betrayal and confusion.

Our attempts to expose Dorothy's subtle abuse of my grandfather's life savings failed. So did our attempts in telling him that her children were using his vehicles, possibly stealing his medication as well. The years of their marriage became a novella of twisted realities. My grandfather sided with his wife, casting off our pleas as empty and vain – the attempts of a family unwilling to embrace this new idea of home.

The whole thing was sort of a like a coarse and gradual goodbye. My grandfather had always appeared stern, callused by a thankless childhood of farm work and unrelenting labor in adulthood. But this? It was probably the most difficult job he ever had – vindicating the ungreen witch.

Despite my attempts to sound level-headed, I couldn't say anything because my word bank tends to run dry when conflict wraps itself up in my family. I guess I just wanted the ideal. My mom never answered my pleas for reconciliation. She stared out the window with an adult logic that couldn't mend, a mentality I didn't possess.

Months later, while camping with Dorothy, my grandfather mysteriously fell down a cliff, breaking his arm and his collar bone. The fall affected him worse than it would have a normal person. His immune system had grown weak over the years – heart attack after heart attack, marriage after marriage. We abandoned our ill feelings and drove to the hospital, breaking speed limits and accepting Dorothy for what she was. Nothing more.

We asked the typical question. "Did you slip?"

"I don't know."

And in private: "Were you pushed?"

"I . . . don't know."

Eventually, my grandfather's kidneys failed completely, the fall acting as a brutal catalyst for his slow descent into deeper fragility. He was put on dialysis, and the cleansing valve needed for his procedures was installed in his arm, the one that had not been broken. It left a cruel, vertical scar, much like the one on his chest. He went three times every week to have waste removed from the installed valve, despite the fact that he became increasingly weak, losing weight as well as confidence. One of the things I remember most, which was oddly one of the last memories I have of her, was Dorothy's insistence that my grandfather sign a "do-not-resuscitate" form. He was lying half-conscious in a bed when she first made her suggestion known. I guess she couldn't keep up with a man becoming increasingly brittle and frail. We never told him of her request.

They got divorced pretty quickly. We try to keep her absent in our memories, and so far that's been surprisingly easy. We have what appear to be hundreds of family photographs, some recent, others old and broken. She's in very few, since we stopped taking pictures at about the time of their marriage. But even with the ones where she's in the background, smoking, and my grandfather is positioned more favorably for the camera's shot, I now look at her only as a blur, an unfortunate human watermark, neither good nor evil. Just grudgingly smeared into our own family story.

The summer my grandfather became dependent on others was also the summer I got my first job. I stayed with him almost every day and night, becoming a fake doctor or a would-be nurse. Since he had trouble breathing, he kept the temperature of his house bearable so that his visitors and I wouldn't be uncomfortable. He kept his house at a stifling sixty degrees Fahrenheit.

I started college wanting to get away, to shut out the simplicity of a winding road and embrace whatever a university could offer. I could exhaust my experience so far with

a lot of memories, most of which are probably irrelevant to you, the reader. What matters is that I have them and that I made them. But of equal importance is the fact that I have memories that stretch through a curvy road to a community and to a people who still accept me despite my long absences – something I didn't expect. I've answered a lot of questions which needed answers. But not why I keep going back to my grandfather's town. There's really not a lot there, except old people and older houses. Fields, now empty. Gardens, now dead.

My grandfather is one of those people. The last time I visited him was brief. I was thankful that I didn't have to stay as long as I did because I wanted to run away from the weak, nearly bed-ridden man who had taken the place of my loud and dogmatic grandfather. But I stayed, setting the plate of food I had brought him down on his dinner table and engaging in conversations about college, the future, and family – big ideas dissected by small people. I saw the list of his medication hanging on his refrigerator door, the names of all twenty pills written neatly in the sweeping cursive of my mother and her sisters. Under the morning section were fifteen names, none of which I could pronounce. Some had what I'm guessing were nine, ten syllables. Others were short, with few vowels. The remaining few were to be taken at night, their names equally confusing and just as unpronounceable. The breaks in our conversations were heavy. We didn't talk about the extreme unlikelihood that he would ever leave his house anytime other than an assisted drive to the hospital, where he would have pints of waste drained from his withered, robotic arm. He already knew.

So I turned our attention, instead, to the gold colored dog outside who jumped on me as soon as I had shut the door of my car, causing me to nearly spill my grandfather's food on the ground.

"I dunno where he came from," he said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "I got up the other day and told him to get. That didn't work, so I got my gun and shot at him four, five times. And that didn't work either."

I laughed, picturing my grandfather on his porch with his crinkled, agitated face held close to the barrel of a gun long unused. He laughed, too.

"I guess I'll just let him stay. Damn, stupid dog. What kind is he?"

"Looks like a lab, I think."

I left shortly thereafter. On a good note, while he focused on the dog's vitality.

"What's his name?" I asked, shortly before closing the door.

"Duke."

"Do you still have your fingers?"

He laughed and said yes.

At 3:27 A.M. on June 15, 2009, I woke up to the beeping and whining of my alarm clock. My family and I were going to Florida – only the second planned vacation we have ever taken together. I packed everything and anything I thought I would need, from dental floss to three or four bottles of allergy medication. And even though I would be wearing sandals the entire time, I threw in three pairs of socks. Just in case. But I also wanted to deeply ignore the fact that my grandfather had been admitted to Vanderbilt Hospital, a week before the thirteen year anniversary of his heart transplant.

So 3:27 A.M. came, loudly, and 3:35 A.M. came too – the time at which point our phone rang, louder than usual if that’s even possible. I looked at the caller ID and read its unforgiving digital truth. My mother and I picked up the phone at the same time. I didn’t say anything.

The doctor was calm, well-rehearsed. “Mrs. Martin?” he asked. My mom affirmed that it was she. “We just wanted to inform you about the developments regarding your father. He had an *episode* earlier this morning, and CPR had to be administered. He wouldn’t respond to any of our staff, but he’s conscious now and his heart rate is normal.”

He continued to explain what he could, but even he wasn’t so confident as to why exactly my grandfather’s heart seemed to suddenly stop, like a scratched c.d. ending mid-song.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. That’s really all I know.”

He was lying alone in the intensive care unit, so when we arrived at the hospital, only two people were allowed to go see him. I waited my turn, thinking I would be welcomed by the man who adamantly hated hospital imprisonments as much as he did the stray animals that encircled his house. But I didn’t see my grandfather. I saw a ghost.

He had been replaced by a seemingly weightless, skeletal personification of death. He looked like a life-sized, ethereal figment, too morbid to be real, too real to be so morbid. He was bone, held together by sagging, blindingly white skin. And it was too much for me to take. The breathing tube jutted out of his mouth like a plastic sword, his eyes were coated by an armor of dried tears. Strange, alien machines kept him company with their beeping and occasional buzzing, and the tubes that jutted in and out of his skin seemed more like plastic, medical chains, entombing him within a gray, impersonal hospital room and to a bed that was not his own. He wouldn’t acknowledge my words; I don’t think he even knew I was there. And then the weight of my intentional absences dropped to my stomach and lay there, sloshing in a created misery. *Oh my God*, I thought. I repeated it over in my head until I forced myself to turn away. And then I repeated it again and again. I said it loudly in my mind, as if I were waiting for a deep, celestial voice to answer in a comforting baritone. My grandmother soon joined me. Weathered and beaten by time, she looked at her unresponsive past as it lay wrapped in thin, white blankets.

The whole thing seemed overwritten, like a forced novel played out in real life. After he became house-ridden, he refused to go to a nursing home. The idea itself was simply absurd in and of itself – a precursor to inevitable decease, the ultimate waiting room for the half-dead. My grandfather wasn’t stupid; he was sick. His brothers encouraged nursing homes and assisted living intensively. My mother and my aunts disagreed, knowing that if there were any place he would ever want to leave the world that had for so long been harsh and unkind, it was home. We gave in to his experimental request, letting him stay there, at least until the inevitable time for change came. It came heavy and loud at 3:35 A.M.

He relies on IV liquid for food, and an ugly tube performs his breathing. His kidneys don’t work, and he floats in and out of consciousness, unable to speak. To make ourselves feel better, we speak for him, and when we leave his room, we walk away on

empty optimism. When people hear his name, they assume either that he is dying or is already dead. My family and I wait in a Nashville hospital, thirteen years after that lackadaisical, maroon introduction. We sit locked away from a city bursting with life and rapidity. I notice how different people look when I'm walking on the streets: the businessmen and the urban hippies, the doctors and the college students. And then everything, everyone, blurs together when the elevator doors open to the waiting room layered in cheap, floral wallpaper. We read the same magazines, watch the same television, walk up and down the aisles, wring our hands, fall asleep, fall awake. Fall apart. It's really just the same story. He said he wanted to go home, before slipping soundlessly out of coherency, large, grey buildings blocking out the sky barely visible from his small and mundane window. We wait.

Initially, I grew to believe that my grandfather would cheat death again, like the other fifty or so times which now exist only as noble attempts of a man too in love with life. I grew to think that the essay you now hold would exclude what you expected from page one – his death. Walt Whitman once called it a “sweet, delicious” word. But I think he forgot to mention that it also has a bitter foretaste. The sweet part, I think, lies at the center, like a strange candy, layered away until a person cracks open the hard outer shell and swallows the rigid, soured reality. It's never easy to swallow.

My grandfather passed away on the thirteen year anniversary of his heart transplant. We opened the curtains and welcomed a sun which bathed his body and ours in a warmth that both the cheap coffee and the stale, grey room had failed to offer. His monitor displayed its flat line, as if it were some sort of ostentatious cyber-badge. A digital question mark neighbored his linear, lifeless lifeline. I guess the digital world doesn't accept death sweetly and deliciously, as we do. The computers and the monitors, faithful neighbors for many nights during many years, stopped their beeping and whining. They left death alone, ascribing to its abstractness an innocent and confused symbol. Later, we walked out of the room, and I left the curtains open. I give you the sugar-coated description. I've already swallowed the sour part.

I stayed with my grandmother that night, and I drove through Seven Knobs Road with the windows up, music blaring. *She looks so much older now*, I thought as she welcomed me into her house. *When did this happen?* Everything seemed too shaped and bent for his passing. I stopped reading the book I brought with me and turned over on the couch, trying my best to sleep. I got up for a glass of water and noticed the frail flowers sitting fragily and lifelessly in a glass vase.

So when I think about my grandfather's fall and his house, his marriages and his transplant, of horses and Western shirts and of June 24, I think of it all as a real myth, or something like it – too complex and unbelievable to be anything else.

For a long time he sat in his weathered and withering blue chair, watching Western reruns and deliberately avoiding the outside world, whose possibilities had long left him only when his body had betrayed him. There were few years when a woman sat beside him, filling the uneventful void of commercials with a talk and maybe half-interest that was not and could not be entirely reciprocated. There, in his house, in a created

edifice of loneliness and anecdotal refuse, my grandfather withdrew into himself, like a forgotten hermit, becoming ghost-like in a grave and indeterminable silence. His left arm acted as if it were a bastardized limb of symbolic betrayal; a long, vertical scar hid the imbedded machinery that made big and swollen the hard and darkened skin made brittle by the accumulation of years, the sad and unfortunate creation which is time. His chest shrank, making the scar of his surgery bright and big and unnatural. And the silent decay of his own life fed upon his mind like a parasite savoring its own created infection.

Had he the energy to do so, I imagine he would have raised his hands in a feeble plea to his newly discovered God, asking for a magical pill to diminish the loneliness of a foreign heart. Instead, he was left with the low, humming rhythm of an oxygen machine and a dinner table littered with bottles of prescription pills. And so, when I think of home, I think of many things – interstates and IV's, hospitals and houses. I keep my memories of my childhood, and of my grandfather, stashed away in crinkled, fading photographs, or locked away in my feeble prose. My grandfather kept his hidden and tucked away, or perhaps twisted underneath the caps of prescription bottles. He took his twenty daily pills, some the size of small erasers and others resembling large rocks, simply out of regularity. And much like my grandfather's relationship to his pills, I cling to my memories, to the idea that is home, because they keep me going, giving continuity to a life which offers few promises. And as much and as hard as I try to fight that savage cliché, I feel as if I'm drawn to it, not because it's true or because it holds any value, but because I wrestle, or did struggle, within myself to find clarity with the concept of home. There's no place like home. I try to fill the hole it leaves with specificity, and with meaning.

So I think that's why I keep driving through Seven Knobs Road. Few trees have fallen, few houses been built, and the community still echoes the simplicity that I have come to know and crave and love. My grandfather's house remains as beautiful and as well-kept as the day we finished building it – a gross contrast to the feeble occupant who was once inside. He often talked about the past as if it were a treasured heirloom – a touchable, tangible abstract. And I listened, too, knowing I could never rewind into that strange and otherworldly past, no matter how much I wanted. We were bound by stories. That's really the whole of Seven Knobs: stories and people. And when I think of both, I keep my grandfather and his story as my own little cliché – a response of which only I am fully conscious. I hold it, strongly, and I keep struggling with images and the past and my words. My grandfather struggled, too; he worked the past like a puzzle, picking up his memories and fitting them into a bigger picture, hidden away and cloaked in secret, beautiful anecdotes. And, whether my optimism be a product of my naiveté or of a strong intuition, I like to think, that he smiled as well, when nobody was looking, so as to avoid unnecessary explanations of a hidden joy. I like to think that he finished the puzzle.

Time is still a little too cruel to the community. Self-built houses betray their owners and rust and grow weak with old age and exposure as rapidly as do their owners. Animals are bought, raised, and sometimes wander into the recesses of the nature which stands like a silent and half-defeated embodiment of what used to be, way back before people created the road that twists and turns and doesn't make travel any easier than the family histories which complicate. And even when some die, the community adopts

that sorrow as its own and very quickly tucks it away because convenience and reality wrestle together in constant and infinite conflict. That's the way of things. The people pick up the pieces, and then they make something with what they have left. They, like my grandfather, my grandmother, whoever is even left, walk with feet caked with a gilded and tainted web of beauty and misfortunes. That's what's left: stories. Everything else is dying, slowly, and in the process, other people, if they're lucky, get glimpses and rare views of something – a town, a story, a person – which is iridescent only there. Because the outside world forgets to slow down, to uncomplicated, to remember. And even if the community does die, only after its human constituents acquiesce to the meticulous ticking of time's clock, the fight was good. I remember it.

I keep driving through the road so that I won't forget.

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Curiosity Killed the Cat

Callie Milburn

Was it playing when
curiosity killed the cat?
I must know. How
and why? Was it,
 perhaps, the cat was
 black, bad luck? Licking
 old age? Was it
 preying? Dying to know
where cat ghosts go
once they die life
number nine? Ate seven
mice and paid? Dearly
 beloved we are gathered
 here today to remember
 the cat. Was it
 crossing the road to
get to the other
side? Did it cross
a chicken on its
way out? Inside? Down
 under? Where was it
 when curiosity killed it?
 I wonder sometimes. And
 I get caught up
in the wrapping and
forget about the present.
I wonder. Was it
out of its mind?
 In good company? Maybe
 over the hill? Beyond
 the mountain seeing what
 it could see? But
all that it could
see was the other
side of the... what?
What did it see?
 A seashell? A
 sea shore? Did it
 drown at sea? Swallow
 its pride? For whom?

Did it give a
damn? Did it give
two? Have a heart
attack when curiosity struck?
 Did it finish its
 supper, the last meal?
 Was it dead meat?
 Did it regret being
at the wrong place
at the wrong time?
Or was it right?
Was time like it
 is now? Was it
 alone? Starving for attention?
 Or did it love
 the spotlight? Was it
ruthless, maybe a glutton
for punishment? Was it
a pet? With a name?
Like mine? Was it
 already one foot in
 the grave? Was it
 arching its back? Breaking
 dawn with yellow eyes?
I wonder, was it
the cat who wondered,
in so much wondering,
was it worth it?

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Helpless

Jerry Nash

You tried to explain the silence
During my darkest days
No calls, no letters
You said you felt helpless
Didn't know what to say
I understand helpless
We are well acquainted

Helpless is...
Watching your wife sleep, unable to get up
Missing the best years of the children
Watching her
 Struggle to move
 Struggle to think
 Struggle to remember
Watching her year after year after year
Until you can't even remember when

Helpless is...
Sitting alone at the hospital
While they run useless tests
Brain scans and spinal taps
Tests you can't afford
Using a credit card for the first time to buy groceries
Eating Lipton soup alone in the room
As she lies flat on her back
Not realizing that this is only the beginning

Helpless is...
Staring into the face of your child
Nine years old and screaming in pain and fear
Screaming in spite of the morphine
Screaming through doctors' worried whispers
Pain the legacy of a botched surgery
Gripping her hands as she screams:
"Make them stop, Daddy!"
Staring in her eyes
Searching for words to calm the fear
Ease our pain

Helpless is...

Sitting in rehab while she learns to walk again
While she learns to use a foot she'll never feel
Watching a wound heal day by day
Knowing that wounds leave scars

Helpless is...
Listening to her stories
Of teachers fussing
As she falls asleep in her wheelchair
As she fights the drugs that keep the pain manageable
As she struggles to be the best in her class
Of classmates taunting
It can't be that bad
Stop faking to get attention
Of friends who soon quit calling
Uncomfortable with real pain

Helpless is...
Holding your seven year old
Hand on her chest
Feeling her heart racing, throbbing
Rubbing her back to ease the pain
Watching her wake exhausted day after day
Strapping on the heart monitors
More hospitals, more tests, no more answers
Hearing "Rub my back, Daddy" night after night

Helpless is...
Each night room to room
Holding a wife, daughters, one by one
As they cry themselves to sleep
Rubbing a back, a foot, a neck
Pain that won't ease
Tears that won't cease
Night after night
Days, weeks, months, surgeries, viruses, years

Helpless as they cry
Helpless as they hurt
Helpless as she loses her job
Helpless as you're told to find a cure
Helpless as you lose your house
Helpless as you lose everything but each other
Helpless to stop the voices

That rage, accuse, condemn
God have mercy, Lord have mercy...
Helpless in the silence
Helpless in the silence

Yes, I understand helpless
We are well acquainted

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anatomy
Callie Milburn

if rain had bones
i'd imagine them
pretty pearl splinters

burrowing into slick
membranal nooks,
baby fences in sog.

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