



Homespun  
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2013

Tennessee Technological University



# Homespun 2013

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*Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize 2013, First Place*

## **Rowan Lumb**

### **a scarecrow's deck of cards**

I hate confiding with the  
moon she smiles so  
expectantly

*Time is a cheap high, a stale  
bride...she speaks from  
inside her palm but I still  
see yesterday lining her  
lips...*

*Paradise will steal your  
soul...*

*greedy dolls of porcelain dance about  
my feet pleading, urging  
me to betide to such a cadence*

Should I...

### **I talk to myself as a child:**

*watch how the chalk walks across the wood....*

a slender hand pulls a piece of chalk  
along the line of my vision

*he loses himself the further  
he goes, what he leaves behind  
becomes.....*

I call to mind my mother:  
her face is bright and broken,  
lost in a mosaic of neurotic  
connections She asks what I  
can't know  
I hesitate to respond

**the other room:**

try to pick it up  
but I fall further

I confide my time  
to idle, alone in a red  
desert, naked, with the  
sun,  
a magnifying glass  
and a mirror

I am told explicitly that  
I do not own this body, although abiding,  
I drag behind to notice the  
leg leads to an elliptical pit  
of bones

lending to a house of dry sickness

I ask for help but  
I can't be sure I even make a  
sound, there is no one around  
they left me behind  
when I was trying to  
find myself

**I don't want this**

this is a dream.

this is clockwork

hysteria I don't want

*this*

-- this unbalanced dance  
leaves me listless and diluted  
while  
the performance remains imitation  
at best, never divorcing  
convenience from truth  
I lie down to rest; here I meet

sweaty men wrought in towels  
shaken awake by swollen  
pragmatics drooling through  
pools of steam  
*leaning in* on listen, these soft-shell  
fiends fumble over sighs while  
ecclesiastically  
attaching mercury, *as to break the air softly*,  
weights to match my state

As though appropriating my

place! As though suspended in

air!

my skin tears from these invisible  
hooks, I want to be weightless  
again.

Let me be weightless again.

*Clara Cox Epperson Contest 2013, First Place*

## Justin Carnes

### The Pusher's Code

Bones sat beneath the poplar tree and watched a boy climb the hill. Bones had watched the kid, a redhead dressed in a school uniform, walk directly across the practice field from the school. Bones checked his watch; there were ten minutes left in the lunch period. Swallowing the last of his sandwich, Bones stood and brushed himself off. The teenager hurried up the hill and called out to him. Up close, Bones could tell he was wide-eyed and jumpy, most likely a sophomore.

“Lunch is almost up, fish. Make it quick.”

The kid worked his lips back and forth, “Are you Bones?”

“Who’s asking?”

“My name’s Davey. I need help.”

“Ask away.”

David lowered his voice, “They say you’re the best pusher in Motor City.”

“They say a lot of things. If you’re gonna gawk, I’m walking,” Bones looked past him and started to leave, but David plaintively put up his hands.

“One of the jackets hurt my girlfriend real bad. Her name is Sophie.”

Bones stopped, “She a squid?”

“You mean first year? Yeah.”

“You want me to push the guy who did it?”

David scuffed his shoes against each other. Bones saw a worn track in the leather along the inside, product of the nervous habit.

“I want to hear you say it,” Bones pushed. David looked up from his shoes.

“Push him. Push him hard.”

Bones checked his watch, “Take me to her.”

Sophie, a small, dark-haired freshman, was sitting behind the old wooden band tower. A blonde girl, wearing a blue varsity jacket that she had borrowed from her boyfriend, sat with her. David ignored her.

“Sophie, this is Bones. He wants to see you.”

“The pusher? Why would you bring him here?” The blonde was clearly older, probably a junior. She stood in front of Sophie defensively.

“I have a contract with the fish, Elizabeth,” Bones made a move to get around her, but the girl stubbornly barred his way.

“Fuck your contract.”

A small voice interjected, “It’s okay, Lizzie.”

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment before stepping out of Bones’ way, and

Sophie stood. She was particularly small and frail-looking. Her head barely came up to Bones' chest, and her eyes were red.

"Where were you hurt?"

She untied the scarf around her neck and pushed her left sleeve up. There were purple bruises around her forearm and the back of her neck. Bones nodded, and she hastily covered them up.

"What was the point of that?" Elizabeth put herself between Sophie and Bones again

"Second rule."

Elizabeth scoffed, "Not your stupid rules."

"What rules?" Sophie sat down on the concrete, hugging her knees to her chest.

"He's got this dumb code. Thinks it makes him better than bullies like Desmond Wells," Elizabeth sat down and put her arm around Sophie.

Bones recognized the name, "Is that who hurt you?"

Elizabeth made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. The bell rang.

He pushed his hands deep into his pockets, "I'll push him after school."

Bones waited in the parking lot. The red brick snagged his school uniform as he leaned his back against the wall. The other boys in the parking lot sat in their sports cars, blue varsity jackets worn over their school uniforms, their arms around trendy-looking girls with expensive purses. He picked out Desmond Wells among them, who was talking louder than the others and making grandiose gestures. Bones took his hands out of his pockets and crossed the parking lot. The laughter died down as he approached; he stopped three yards from the circle of cars.

"Message for Desmond Wells."

One of the jackets, a baseball player with an under-bite, stood up in his car and looked down at Bones, "What do you want, trash?"

"A few words."

"Then spill 'em."

"Heard you were squeezing on a squid, red fish for a boyfriend. Leave her alone."

Desmond laughed; the others laughed when he laughed, stopped when he stopped.

"And what if I don't?"

Bones took a step closer, "You know what."

The girls "ooh"-ed and looked at Desmond expectantly. His eyes were cold and angry.

"Guess I better squeeze her harder next time."

"Better not."

Desmond stepped off of his car onto the pavement, still standing a head taller than Bones.

“What are you gonna do about it, huh? You gonna push me?”

Bones flexed his fingers, “Too late.”

Desmond shrugged off his jacket, and Bones stepped into the ring of cars. Desmond cracked his knuckles. He showboated to the other jackets before throwing a surprise roundhouse. Bones ducked and used the force in his bent legs to drive an uppercut into Desmond’s jaw. It wasn’t enough to stagger him. He recovered quickly and punched Bones in the gut. Stars burst in front of his eyes, and he almost didn’t see the next punch. He threw himself out of the way and struck Desmond in the temple. Desmond responded with a backhand to the jaw that sent Bones reeling. They circled, poking and testing each other’s defense. Impatient, Desmond wound up to finish Bones off with one big haymaker. Bones kicked him in the shin, knocking Desmond off balance. He stumbled sideways into a car door and fell to his knees. Bones closed on him swiftly and grabbed a headful of hair, bringing Desmond’s head up and back. The side mirror flashed in Desmond’s field of vision just before Bones slammed his head into it with a crunch, breaking it free from the door. It skipped across the pavement as Desmond hit the ground. Breathing hard, Bones staggered away, his hands still bunched into fists. A groan came from the prone figure on the ground, and Bones looked up. The sophomore who had contracted him was watching, his mouth agape. The jackets watched wordlessly as Bones left the circle of cars.

“What did you do?” David was still gawking, wide-eyed, like a fish out of water.

“I pushed him. Who put you in touch with me?”

David blinked, tearing his eyes away from the scene. Bones stepped closer and the boy flinched.

“Speak up, fish.”

“Just some chick...”

Bones grabbed his shirt, “What chick?” He emphasized each syllable.

“Tall chick with a leather jacket and long hair,” David stammered. “That’s all I know, I swear!”

Bones indicated the lower lip on the left side of his face, “She have a piercing right here?”

“Yeah, man. I mean, yeah.”

Bones released him and stormed off.

“What does it matter, anyway?” David called after him. Bones hunched his shoulders

“She and I need to have a chat.”

The rats met behind the school to smoke marijuana. When they caught the janitor smoking there and promised not to rat on him if they could use his spot, he caved. They were on Bones as soon as he stepped out the door to their territory. Taunting him from a distance, they danced away if he tried to grab them. He scanned their faces, picked one out, and lunged. He caught her leather sleeve and pulled her

close. The other rats scattered. Bones looked down at the girl he had a hold of. She had dyed-black hair that fell in her eyes, and the dull metal gleam of the stud protruding from her lower lip gave her a permanent pout.

“Hey there, Mandie.”

“Hey yourself, pusher. What the fuck do you want?”

“We need to talk.”

“Didn’t get enough ‘talking’ with Desmond Wells?” Her lips curled up in a sneer. Bones hauled her up by the lapels of her jacket and shoved her against a dumpster.

“Why’d you send that fish my way?”

She shrugged, pointedly avoiding his gaze, “He needed help.”

“And you helped him out of the goodness of your heart? Unlikely.”

Mandie kicked at his shins. Bones responded by kneeing her in the stomach.

“Don’t try me, rat. I’ve got fire in my blood without the smoke in my lungs.”

She coughed, struggling to catch her breath. “Fancy words,” She wheezed.

“I’ve got words for days, but I’m losing use for them. Desmond knew I was coming, and I think you called it in. You want to see me scrubbed? Is that it?”

“Everybody’s scared of you, Bones; your whole vigilante pusher thing. They don’t know your game.”

Bones shook her, “I’m not playing.”

“Sebastian doesn’t believe you.”

He arched an eyebrow, “Sebastian Mercer? What’s his fit?”

“You’ve been under your tree too long, pusher. He’s got the boys in blue in his pocket, trying to bring down the dogs. He wants the big chair. You’re a threat.”

“And you’re his plus one?”

When she didn’t answer, Bones shook her again.

“Stop! The dogs keep sniffing us out on drugs. Sebastian says he’ll leave us alone, even hook us up. Happy?”

Bones pushed Mandie away and she slumped against the garbage can. She groaned, clutching her stomach. The other rats covered a safe distance away.

“You’re pathetic. It would be adorable if it weren’t so disgusting,” Bones spat on the pavement. It was red with blood.

“Bones,” The speaker was a monitor, accompanied by three more.

“What do you want, dog?”

The name provoked a collective scowl from the monitors, “Counsel wants you.”

Bones settled into a ready stance, “Counsel’s only recognized during school hours. I won’t budge.”

The monitors looked at one another. The leader spoke again.

“Tomorrow, then. We’ll send your first bell a notice. Don’t forget.”

When Bones walked in the opened the screen door to his house that night, his

dad was sitting at the kitchen table reading a newspaper. He wore his police uniform; his shift started after school let out. Bones tried to walk innocuously through the kitchen, but his father stopped him.

“How was school?” He didn’t look up from his paper.

“Same old story.”

“Heard you got in a fight.”

Casually, Bones opened the refrigerator. The cool air kissed his face as he scanned the contents. He shut it again.

“You know how it is. Some clown rolls you for lunch money and they call it a fight.”

“That’s all?”

“Not exactly.”

His dad put down the paper, “Want to talk about it?”

Bones sat down. He didn’t speak right away. The ceiling fan overhead squeaked in protest of motion.

“The guy was a classic abuser. The squid... freshman he hurt had bruises. Big ones.”

“Why would he do that?”

“A lot of jackets... sorry, jocks I guess... they pick up freshmen for fun. Hump and dump, that kind of thing. The guy makes a play, but she shuts him down; he’s got a temper, so he squeezes.”

“She could report it to someone.”

Bones absently picked at the edge of the worn card table and rocked back in the chair, “The hall monitors, we call them dogs because they’re too busy chasing their own tails to do be useful. Anyway, the system counts your bruises as your faults. It’s a crime to be a victim.”

“So you went after him,” His dad eyed the blood on his sweater. “He hit you?”

“Couple of times.”

“You hit him?”

Bones smiled, a brief flicker on his face, “I broke a car mirror with his face.”

His father nodded thoughtfully. “For a smart kid, you’re pretty thick,” He concluded.

“You’d do otherwise?”

“Oh, I’d probably have punched his lights out, but your mother used to say I could be thick sometimes, too.”

A palpable silence settled between them. Bones looked down at nothing in particular. His dad checked his watch and stood.

“I gotta go,” He was half out the when he stopped. “I know you’re a good kid. Your mom knew that too. That can get you in trouble sometimes. Just be careful.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

The next morning Bones went to the counselor's office instead of his first class. The door was open and Ms. Lavender, dressed in one of her many purple sweaters, sat at her immaculate desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Edwards."

"You can call me Bones."

She gave him a curious look, "And why is that?"

"It's what the other kids call me."

"Why do they call you that?"

"Because I'm big-boned."

Ms. Lavender laughed, a shrill, high-pitched giggle, "Honey, you're a seventeen year old boy who weighs one-hundred and fifteen pounds soaking wet. You are not big-boned."

Bones shrugged, "Guess I don't know then."

"Please sit down," She indicated an open chair, and he obliged. "I would like to talk about your family situation."

Bones stood quietly and turned to leave. His hand was on the knob when Ms. Lavender stopped him.

"Okay, we don't have to talk about that. Please sit back down."

Bones held onto the knob for a moment longer before letting go. He sat down again. Ms. Lavender straightened a picture frame on her desk that didn't need straightening.

"The other kids call you a 'pusher'. What does that mean?"

Bones slumped down in his chair, "Kids get pushed around, can't always push back. They need someone to push for them. That's a pusher."

"So you hurt people professionally? Is that why you fought with Mr. Wells?"

"Pushing's not about fighting. It's about equilibrium, keeping the status quo. What it takes depends on who you're pushing, and why," Bones leaned his chair back on its hind legs. He waited while Ms. Lavender took notes. The furious scratching of her pencil filled the room.

"Have you ever wondered how it makes them feel?" She kept her eyes on her notepad, still writing. "The people you push, I mean."

"Nobody wonders why I'm pushing them. They know."

"What makes you say that?"

"Second rule."

"So this is a system with rules?"

"Yeah."

Ms. Lavender sighed and put her pencil down, "Mr. Edwards –"

"It's Bones."

"This is a serious issue. Insisting on that name –"

"It's what the other kids call me."

Her shoulders drooped in defeat, "Fine. I'm worried about you, Bones. I think

high school is a microcosm for the rest of society. You're a bright young man with a lot of potential, but you've constructed this systematic philosophy that glorifies violence as some sort of justice, and I can't understand why."

Bones shrugged, "Too many violent video games and war movies."

Ms. Lavender gave him an irritated look, "That sounds like a dodge."

"It's what you want to hear."

"Then tell me something I don't want to hear!" She threw up her hands.

Bones stared out the window, aware of Ms. Lavender watching him intently. He spoke without meeting her gaze.

"I hate them."

Ms. Lavender blinked, "Who?"

"There are so many out there: jackets, rats, dogs, clowns, fish, even some of the squids. They all play games that don't matter. They're trying to get someone or something or somewhere, and they bounce off of one another like a pinball machine. They use the other kids like pawns, peddled and brokered and extorted and squeezed, all so they can play their meaningless games. They hurt people for fun, and I hate them for it."

"Why do you think they do that?"

Bones looked her in the eye, "You said high school is a microcosm for the rest of society. You tell me."

Ms. Lavender shook her head, "So what does that make you? You're not a pawn; doesn't that make you a player?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Third rule."

"Why don't you explain these rules to me so I can try to understand?"

Bones shook his head, "You'd never understand."

"And why is that?" Her exasperation was apparent.

"You're colorblind. You think it's black and white, good and bad, pawns and players. It's not," Bones stood again. "Are we done?" He didn't wait for an answer and reached for the door.

"How many rules are there?" Her voice was subdued. He stopped in the doorway.

"Just three."

Quietly, the door shut Ms. Lavender out.

Elizabeth sat waiting in the hall. She stood when Bones came out.

"How was therapy?"

He flipped her off.

"Not great, then. I just want to ask some questions about the fight," She pulled a tape recorder out of her purse. "For the newsletter."

Bones shoved his hands in his pockets and walked away. Elizabeth followed.

“Why did you push Desmond Wells?”

“Fuck off.”

She stopped and put a hand on her hip, “You’re pissed. She ask about your mother?” She laughed at her own joke. Bones stopped in his tracks. He whirled around and snatched the tape recorder from her hand, turning it off.

“Hey! That’s —”

“I’ll tell you why I pushed him,” His face was close with hers, his voice low and dangerous. “I pushed Desmond Wells because he’s a blue jacket scumbag who squeezed that poor squid until she was purple because, just like all those kids who dance around in store-bought skins, he thought the world belonged to him and nobody bothered to tell him any different,” He thrust the tape recorder back into her hands. “So I did.”

After school he lay in the shade beneath the poplar tree with his hands behind his head. The grass prickled his forearms as he watched the shifting green patterns. The patchwork trunk of the tree rose in his field of vision, disappearing into the leaves. The events of the last few days played over and over in his head, blurring into one continuous stream, lulling him to sleep. He slept, and he dreamed.

In his dream he climbed the poplar tree. The bark chafed his hands, leaving bloody prints, but he kept climbing. As he got higher, he saw things among the branches. On one he saw his dad next to a squad car with the back door open. Sophie sat inside crying, with black, ugly bruises on her arms. The bruises began to expand like a virus, covering her skin, her clothes, and her face. The darkness devoured everything, consuming the car and his dad with it. He kept climbing. He saw dogs chasing rats on fire, a fish with arms and legs, and a party of blue ghosts that danced jerkily. Elizabeth sat on another branch. She was smiling at him.

“I have something to show you,” She unbuttoned her shirt, but when she opened it, there was nothing but bones, yellow and cracked. Through her ribcage he could see her heart; with every beat it pumped out a black, bilious liquid. He realized her smile was forced and, every time her heart pumped, she winced. He kept climbing until he reached the top. The sun set in the distance, turning the sky a bronze hue. His mother was standing on a white cloud, golden light illuminating her from above. She waved to him. He tried to reach for her, but a black cloud, Desmond Wells hanging from it, moved between them and blocked his path. Desmond laughed and let go of the cloud. As he fell, he became a lightning bolt that struck the tree and knocked Bones off. The poplar tree burned, pouring all of his memories into the sky like smoke, and the orange sky went black. He was falling.

“Bones? You okay?”

His eyes fluttered open. Sophie was peering down at him. She wasn’t wearing a scarf, and her sleeves were pushed up. Bones sat up.

“Your bruises...”

She absently inspected her arm, “They’re not that bad. Everyone knows about

them anyway.”

“Because of Elizabeth?”

“Because of you, really. People keep asking why you pushed Desmond, so I show them.”

“Sorry.”

She shrugged, “It’s no big deal. So what happens now?”

“Status quo, more or less. Sebastian’s pulling for the big chair. He wants to be student government president, and he’s got all the jackets in the fold. Meanwhile the dogs are crooked, the rats are in the information business, Elizabeth manufactures news, and whatever else goes on.”

“You say that like it’s the same old song and dance.”

“It is. Tale as old as time,” Bones lay back down, feeling the crush of grass beneath him.

Sophie sat down next to him, “I never thanked you. For the thing with Desmond, I mean.”

“Don’t. It was a thick thing to do.”

She laughed, “Thick isn’t all bad. Sometimes it’s good to be thick.”

Bones looked up at her. She was playing idly with her hair and noticed he was staring at her. She met his gaze.

“Hey, Bones?”

“Yeah?”

“You look like shit.”

He laughed, and Sophie smiled.

“Were you dreaming just then?”

“Yeah.”

“It sounded pretty bad. Want to talk about it?”

Bones stared up into the tree and cleared his throat, “You were in it. Desmond and Elizabeth, too. I think your boyfriend was a fish.”

Sophie giggled, “Which boyfriend?”

“The sophomore, David. Said you were his girl.”

“He did not! What an asshole,” She huffed. Bones raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’m not dating him,” She fixed him with a serious look. “We’re not dating.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Sophie crossed her arms.

Bones suppressed a smile, “Fine.”

Sophie lay on her back next to him, “Why do kids call you Bones?”

“It’s a nickname I got from my old gym teacher. First day of school she looks at me and says I’m the skinniest bag of bones she’s ever seen. She called me Bones all year. It made me somebody, you know? I wasn’t just some squid; I was Bones.”

“She sounds like a cool lady.”

Bones picked a blade of grass and inspected it closely, “She was my mom.”

Sophie looked incredulous. Bones ignored her.

“She had these rules in her class, stuff she would say all the time. There were three of them.”

“These are the rules Elizabeth was talking about, right? Your pusher code or whatever?”

“Yeah,” He looked over at Sophie. “You want to hear them?”

“Sure.”

“So these were rules for the gym, but they had a lot of meanings. You could apply them to your entire life if you tried,” Bones sat up, and Sophie joined him. He held out three fingers and pointed to the third one.

“You do them in reverse order, like this, so the third rule comes first. Each is more important than the last. Rule three is, ‘Pushing is not a game.’ She’d say that to all the big kids who’d pick on the smaller ones. She’d call them out and they’d say they were just having fun. So she had that rule,” He moved to the second finger.

“She had to cover her bases when we were playing games like football or tag, something with a lot of contact. So that’s rule two: ‘Only push what needs pushing.’ It was okay to be pushy in games that required contact. The whole point was to think before you act, that sort of thing,” He put his fingers down.

“So what’s the first rule?” Sophie edged closer to Bones, looking up at him.

“She always had three rules, but would never say what the first one was. She only told me once, right before she left us. I asked her why she was leaving and she just held out her finger like this,” He held his index finger in front of Sophie’s face, watching her closely.

“What did she say?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Rule one: Rules are like bones. Sometimes, they just break.”

*Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize 2012, Runner Up*

## **Katie Reasonover**

### **For Henry**

He says the stars  
are the freckles of God.  
And when the moon is a crescent,  
well that's just the Lord's way of winking at us.  
I asked him what he wants to be  
when he grows up,  
He asked me,  
"Who said anything about growing up?"  
I look at him as if  
it's the first time  
I've seen the sea.  
The waves crash on me,  
the water fills my ears,  
and I'm scared.  
I don't know what to expect  
but there's nothing that  
can keep me on the sand.  
There's no way  
I'm not jumping in.

He doesn't like  
to be looked up to.  
But I can't help that  
he is taller than me.  
So he asks,  
"What will you do with your life?"  
I tell him I will speak Spanish  
y tener amor para todas las personas  
en el mundo.

My chest,  
falls like raindrops  
fat, splashing on the ground,  
covering the earth,

saturating the grass.  
When he looks at me  
he can see the passion  
that I thought I hid  
deep into my eyes.  
So I blink  
and I look away.

He asks if dreaming costs  
too much...  
can he really afford to?  
I told him, "Why not?  
You've got good credit.  
Charge them."

He has a soul that begs,  
that tries,  
that desires.  
He wants to swim in the heavens  
he wants to see the invisible.  
He holds his breath,  
dives into caution,  
whispers, "Fuck you."  
Then prays that  
God doesn't require a censor.

It scares him how young I am.  
But I've knelt in more churches  
and I've laid in more beds  
and I've spoken more words  
than he has  
and that's what really scares him.  
He can't handle knowing  
that he doesn't know.

Because when he dreams...  
he dreams of Jupiter  
of lying on his back  
on the frozen ground  
and peering through the smog  
hoping to catch a glimpse

of the Kuiper Belt.  
He knows the moons  
are out there  
and that the gods are winking at him  
even when he can't see them.  
But it's not the sunlight  
that blocks his view  
and it's not the clouds  
but it's that he closes his eyes.  
Because sometimes dreaming  
costs too much  
and he doesn't have  
the money to spare.

I tell him,  
"I want to teach you  
the things I will learn.  
I want to show you  
the places I will see.  
I want you to  
read to me  
your favorite quotes.  
I want you to  
see me when you  
look at the moon.  
I want you."

But he can't answer me.  
Not when he's distracted  
by the twigs,  
and the rocks,  
and the bird's feathers  
he found in his pockets.  
All clues to his childhood-  
the one he left on Jupiter.

*Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize 2013, Runner Up*

## **Alex Swartz**

### **Work**

Work is effort.  
Now, effort is a complicated issue.  
It takes effort to gnaw through a frozen glob of chocolate.  
And it takes effort to draw one's next breath.  
It takes effort to make love.  
And it takes effort to flick the switch.  
to forget the past—forgive,  
to retain or mend it.  
Somebody must put forth effort for lunch to appear.  
Somebody must skin and butcher the cow.  
The books will need binding if we wish to read them.  
The threads will need spinning if they are to carry.  
the colors will need mixing if we wish to enjoy them.  
And somebody must fix my dragged teeth.  
The worm pursues the sun (to keep the cycle).  
The leaf pursues the sun (for the same).  
The stars follow and chase each other for reasons unknown.  
I do not know if there is effort in the chase—there is certainly energy and motion.  
But work is more than motion.  
Perhaps work is the pursuit of love,  
at the very least work may entangle desire.  
Work then comes from within.  
Work is need.

*Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize 2013, Runner Up*

## Robert Novick

### How I Learned

The ruckus from which I emerged was like  
 Education where everyone succeeded at their  
     Own pace and there was no race  
         To the future. They made it sound so easy:  
             How forms could be calculated and built  
     As strong as wasps' nests how crisply words  
     Could fit into neat satchels, how the conveyed forms  
         From the mind of god sprawl upon pallets,  
 And sing praises, "Oh this love! So grand so vast! Paint  
 Me upon your pillow, calm me in your embrace."

First I heard from the Zen monks who tempted  
 Me into a silence I could not understand, all this talk  
     Of sticks and satori baffled my eager mind, koans that  
         led to tangled threads, unformed clouds that might exist  
 tomorrow, rain that plays in puddles, all the questions  
     Of subject/object, seeing in the distance that refracted  
         formulation of written language, never translated, perfect  
             Form understood only by the crawling of a salamander  
             On a sunny deck, summertime, high sun, white in the  
         Atmosphere, beyond everything imagined, right out of reach.  
 Then came Rumi and Shams, the inseparable heart  
     Of the Beloved  
     Culminating and pulsating through time, every reminder  
         of small hands, large desert, ocean, time, parables  
         and who is this object I love? isn't love all around?  
             whose hand is this outstretched, ripping my heart?  
 whose is this song this story this venerable shadow from  
                             my past that outlasts my desires?  
     Whirlwind dervishes  
     Like sand cyclones through the mirage, oasis that stretches  
 Further than perception takes me into the heart  
     Of perfect form, of conjecture, of subjective analysis,  
     Of personal perception, of hindering the truth,

Of stretching the variables  
Until what I have learned  
Is a fragment of gravel embedded in a highway  
That stretches out and out to a destination  
Where definition is  
a continuum of endless  
travelling.

## Katie Reasonover

### Denouement

When he spoke,  
It was like listening to God.  
There was no beginning,  
no end,  
just the middle of all his stories,  
and they begged me to give them some  
sense of time.

So I came,  
with my watch  
and with my calendar  
and I gave his stories a setting.  
I detailed their plots  
and together  
we developed our characters.  
We searched for the symbols,  
together  
and we worked our way  
through the structure.  
Ignoring the dim lighting  
and forgetting about the locks,  
we searched blindly,  
beating down the doors.

We wrote poems on the walls,  
carved initials in the floor,  
and we made it our own.  
We timed the punctuation  
perfectly,  
keeping in time with every period  
never ignoring  
the breaths of a comma.

We wrote our story  
on loose leaf paper,  
thankful for each stain

of his calligraphy pen.  
We smeared the ink  
over the words we didn't like  
and we read over and again  
the sentences that sounded  
like poetry among prose.

With his pen he traced  
the curves of the letters,  
the form of the words,  
the body of the text...  
and I read each line of his story  
in the reflection of his eyes.  
The words became wet  
and blurry  
and his eyes rained on them  
in the falling action.  
The final pages of the story  
begged my tears to accompany his,  
and we watched as the words broke  
and bled all over the sheets.

We did our best  
to clean up the papers,  
to contain the disaster  
the syllables found themselves in.  
But we were running  
out of paper,  
and his pen was writing dry,  
and I awaited the resolution.  
We ran the spell check  
and no more  
did he sound like the Lord.  
He was suddenly human-  
imperfect  
and broken,  
holding our finite story.

That night  
I put my knees on the floor  
and listened

for the voice I once heard,  
but upon closing the book,  
it all became fiction.  
And my dreams,  
they begged for a sequel.

## Cindy Schueman

### Ugliness

Inept ogres  
Ignorant trolls  
Witches and bitches  
From their bowels extol  
Causing such stress  
To pull things apart  
Having no love  
Having no heart  
No depth of character  
So full of hate  
They stumble and mumble  
And spew their dictate  
With warped reality  
And incoherent haze  
Delusions and lunacy  
Ranting and craze  
Having no grasp  
Or real plan of attack  
Striking at loved ones  
A knife in the back

Forked tongues slither  
With flames in their eyes  
Loathsome, deceitful  
Hell improvised  
Disguised in the flesh  
The demons run  
Focused with intent  
To have their fun  
Destroy, steal and ruin  
They strike with malice  
Having no foundation  
Just hatred and callous  
Glee at their victory  
Laughing with joy  
Alienating a soul  
A loving heart destroyed  
An indelible mark  
Insufferable stain  
There is nothing in life  
That can remove their pain

## Amanda Brown

### Head Games

I imagine that day  
 your wilted, pale frame  
     (crump)led under the screech of tire and tread  
 rubber rubbing delicate flesh (etched)  
 your blue bicycle in pieces  
     metal fragments poking through  
Translu-cent-skin

I imagine your frosty brown eyelashes  
     flickering weakly over your  
 wet and blue (and white and red) eyes  
     Broken eyes.

I imagine that night  
     my drunken, sputtering-ing-ing                      lips  
     Stumbling over your re-quests(ions)  
 and a broken booksh elf  
     party clothes flung              off              hastily into the floorsea of half-read books  
 and  
 crumpled napkin scribbles, lost coins, borrowed paint brushes I forgot to rinse, and  
 misplaced affection...  
     mine. Not mine. Never mine. naked chest                      you looked away  
 from  
     Earlobes, you compared them to... You said—  
 it wasn't sexual. They were just like  
 Earlobes...  
 As I sank into a pil(e)-lows and fell thud into visionless paralysis

I imagine how flushed my face would have been  
 Should have been              —except I was not there—

water spilled on exposed bitsbitsbitesbites I bite I bit you because I like you.  
 I bite people I like, isn't that why, people bite, right? Right.

The taste in my mouth:  
 nothing  
 left of my bed (barely) any water left (of my bed?) and you left

eye(s)/I  
closed in subconscious embarrassment  
I wouldn't remember (or dare ever forget)

cold and sleeping and broken like your body could have been  
might have been  
but I wasn't there.

## Sarah Naomi Townsend

### Orange and Blue

The moon is different  
 Since we parted  
 It is a silver sliver thinner and higher in the sky than I  
 Remember—  
 When we met?  
 I don't know what the moon looked like on that evening  
 But the stars were real to me  
 There was no plastic or cord or stage or hiding place  
 Only the blue and orange  
 and the stillness of your whispering gaze  
 Encircling me as if we were not strangers  
 As if we never were—  
 Arms snugly folded over what were before my arms that I gave to you  
 Before you knew you had them.

I said, half-aware:  
 "We must be best friends"  
 and you replied, without a blink, without a breath:  
 "Oh, we will be."  
 as if you knew  
 as if we already were.  
 Two children who realized they had to share the same box of Crayolas  
 Yours, orange  
 Mine, blue.  
 we were done being one another from that moment to be each other's  
 but you don't feel like an other anymore  
 just a piece of me and I of you  
 it doesn't feel too soon.

the moon is different  
 since we let go of each other's hands this afternoon  
 tonight, it is a slick and un-scribbled-on white, a paper crescent  
 curving, smoothly down in the center floating over the halcyon everything  
 a secret smile peeking from a great, laughing spirit  
 sitting calmly, far above the pink line against the clustered-trees divide  
 this body is sore, this body is finite, this body is dying but it craves yours

it craves the sweat we wipe away with the same shades

The moon is different tonight

She spoke to me silently through my window

In a rare dialect with no words she whispered, like you do when you let your lips  
curl over the way she bends tonight:

we touch despite the space between

us, like the clear, unclouded, boundless blue fades into the orange

where the sun slips down to rest

and so do I

because we will be.

*Clara Cox Epperson Contest 2013, Second Place*

## **Kim Hinkson**

### **Motel 100**

For a moment I sit in the stillness. The godless brown walls, the fossilized carpet. No windows. An end table with no lamp, and one drawer. An air conditioner that looks like a spray painted birdcage is hooked onto the wall, neighboring a doorway that, I assume, leads to a bathroom.

When I sit up the bed doesn't creak. It makes a sound like a hospice patient—a sad moan of recognition. I take my boots off one at a time and let them fall to their sides like sleeves. I push my jeans down my legs and shed my jacket. Standing in my shirt and panties, I feel more naked than necessary.

Defenseless.

I felt hopeless this morning. And now, by the end of the day, I'm this. How far have I come?

I crane my neck and look at myself. My thighs are cold. I feel the coarseness of nearly a day's worth of growth across my skin. When I have my clothes on I like to pretend I have perfectly pale flesh that flows like cream. But when I'm bare I have to cope with the fact it's more like old gray dishwater. Streaked with insipid colors, the tissue on my feet is so thin with cold it reveals the ribbons of my circulatory system.

I touch my thigh softly, trying to dissolve the disbelief.

I laugh feebly to myself. I've never been good at accepting reality.

My eyes lift from my body and walk to the bathroom, my sore soles slapping the carpet. I lean myself against the doorframe. It's dark inside. I reach my hand into the contour of the blackness and flip the clammy switch on the wall.

Two out of the three bulbs come to light over the mirror. The glass watches me once-over the bathroom. I try not to look at it. The base of the sink, the tub, and the commode all shine like pearl between the stained and yellow tile. For a second I believe they might be the cleanest things in this entire place.

I use the toilet, flush, and go to the sink. The cold faucet is as tight as a bolt and doesn't crank no matter how hard I try. I turn the other and water runs from the nozzle, as warm and thick as blood. I clean my hands with a green, sudsy bar on a porcelain ledge by the glass and rinse my face, stripping the chap of my tears and the residual grime of my make-up.

I open my eyes. Beads fall from my lashes. My profile radiates. It registers to me that I have brought no cosmetics with me on this hideous odyssey. I shake my head at myself.

I breathe in the steam before turning the facet off. I stand there. I feel clean. I

feel better, but how actual is this?

My head hurts. I've never felt a memory so heavy. I know it's a memory. That has weight and being. That hurts to remember. That kicks the cables of your brain. A regular cognitive phenomenon.

I keep the bathroom light on and turn the others off. My heavy steps trek once again across the stony carpet and all the way to the bed. I fall on the sheets and curl into the pillows. A little ball--a dying beetle, a deathly worm. The shadows play on my habitat. On an object I didn't notice before. A TV? Well wow, it's so old I actually mistake it at first for a microwave.

It's right across from me on this long, old stand. It reflects me as I lay, reflects me as I watch me. I blink gently in the dark. Everything settles like debris. Except my mind. I have to settle that myself.

I went to the zoo a lot. A whole lot. Saw everything every time. The same way. Same exhibits in the same order. Reptiles to cats. Wicked anacondas sitting methodical behind their case, to panthers pacing nervously on their half-plastic, half-concrete supplement rocks.

In retrospect, I see every zoo trip I ever had as single event, a single memory hardened into singularity.

Except one.

I didn't know it would be an exception until the end, when we ambled into the exotic cat country and came to the final stop, which, incidentally, is a crossroad. One path you can take to see the ocelots. Which always have freaked me out. They looked like spotted leopards if you shrunk them to one-fourth their original size and gave them an enflamed nose and the mentality of a domestic house cat.

The other road led to the lions. Fat and tarnished gold, majestic and ugly, seventeenth century British kings reincarnate.

When met with this fork, my tired, sweaty family headed for the ocelots. (The same way every time. See ocelots, come back up, see lions, exit.) I knew the pattern like a blueprint. But some innocent impulse came over me.

Can I meet y'all at the lions?

I don't wanna see the ocelots.

And I didn't. I still don't. All four of them, equally emaciated, always looked at me like they were inches from croaking.

I've never forgotten that reply: Why not?

So, predictability conquers, I wander in my youthful lonesome to the lions. The den was devoid of all other human beings. Outside, tourists in candy-colored shorts with overpriced souvenirs stalked towards the exit, and behind me my family was trudging towards their typical, semi-final stop. No one else followed me nor preceded me. I was alone in both directions, boxed in by a high rail.

I took the cold bar in my hands and levered myself, peering over the wall to, sure enough, witness them all basking in the sunlight. The two lionesses and their

hulking male. One female was far away, melting into the shade of a gum tree. The other lioness was *lying* against the cage, ripples of her elastic skin protruding through the bars. If it weren't for reinforced, childproof barriers, I could have reached and brushed her brassy fur with my fingers.

I felt the thrill of her closeness in my young, fragile bones; I was about to savor this. (Oh, was I.) Yet at that moment, I saw the male, pacing beside her.

He wasn't pacing like the panthers or the jaguars--bored and desperate. His steps were labored, his body awkwardly tense. From my distance I could hear his breath--deep and hot--sounding too demonic, too *evil*, to be regular. My smile fell slowly. I watched the scene, becoming transfixed almost. These waves of worry swelled in me, rushing over my chest like an anticipatory tide before nature turns for the worse... It's like I felt it happen before it actually did.

And *it did*.

It was only a minute, but when it passed, I watched him stop moving. I watched him stare into the grey slab of his prison. He stilled; he stood transfixed, utterly absorbed. My little mouth leaked open and the lion turned to his lioness. The one that seconds ago I dreamed of petting, dreamed of hearing her purr at my palm strokes, and he leapt at her and wrapped his maw around her snout.

I was struck. The whole scene was brutally blunt, abominable, *graceful* (I can't look away, Jesus H.) He pushed all of his immense weight into the air and on top of her, in this kinetic, wicked movement. She growled, she clawed him, put all of her heft into the thrusts of her limbs, but he crushed her, forced his mouth further around hers, locking the placement by burying his teeth in her face, making her breathe his carbon dioxide, his in-breathable fumes, raping her of oxygen. My hands felt slick on the rail. My femurs vibrated in my thighs. My voice hung, unspoken, in my chest... Not even sure what I could earthily say as the giant hooks of the lion's claws sank into the lioness's body. I watched her grapple for her life, fighting and struggling as her blood slung everywhere. But he got above her and dug his face into her neck, and weak from drowning in his breath, he killed her.

She went slowly still. My eyes couldn't blink. My legs couldn't move. I was mortified. I thought I was horrified. But I didn't know what being horrified was... Then he started to *eat* her.

My lips fell apart. I didn't know what I was seeing. But there was no mistaking. He ripped his face from beneath her hairy chin and there hung a filet of flesh in his mouth. And before my eyes the lion lifted his head back and wolfed it down, staining his long blonde sideburns red.

The other lioness stood, as shocked as I. She stood up and looked back and forth at the scene, as if in utter disbelief. Her giant square jaws hung open; she took a step toward them, but immediately the idea of intervening reduced to panic and she turned abruptly, running full throttle to her brown wading pool--as if the desire to wash the image away had seized her very soul. The splash echoed around the exhibit,

and I watched him pay no mind. He put his paws on his lioness's breastplate and cleaved slimy cords of muscle from her throat and down his own... he was focused on nothing else.

I didn't hear it at the time. And I didn't remember hearing it the days that followed. But over time the sound of her voice crystallized from a mnemonic spec to a gemstone, and I can hear it--loud and clear and naïve.

The zoo will be closing in ten minutes. Wrap it up.

Hey.

Little girl. You listening?!

I didn't feel like a little girl right then. I felt too old. I felt like this sequence was maturing me beyond my will.

Right then I felt her hand on my shoulder. Right then her hand retreated. She gasped. She cursed. She clutched her walkie-talkie and gasped and cursed into it--in a panicked language of numbers and names.

Then she tried to talk me off the rail, her eyes ever drifting to the events unfolding in front of her. The lion was tearing open the lioness's chest cavity, snagging her tight flesh and ripping smoothly. Like the peeling of a canvas off a drum.

Then she tried a different tone, one that was actually borderline parental. Let go. She said. You shouldn't be seeing this.

Her hand clasped my shoulder. Her walkie-talkie made distorted screams like a Furby underwater. She pulled me. The lion snarled, yanking at his lover's insides, the static coiling in my ear. I was in the middle of a voluptuous chaos, and I just wanted to see how it would end.

Kid you can't do this to me.

The woman yanked me. I clutched fast to the rail. My magnetism to what was occurring tuned my grip, kept my eyes unblinking as the lion cannibalistically feasted. He raised his head, blood in his mane, the steak of his own kind between his drenched jaws. The daylight gleamed off his body like a golden, holy cloud. Then he roared, then there were people. Special shields and special guns, shooting special capsules. When he fainted I thought he had died. He tumbled back, was stationary, then retched forward and collapsed on his lioness's corpse, his eyes and lips leaked open.

So many people behind me. I didn't even realize it then. I was utterly consumed and so sure *he was dead*. I shrieked. The wail of a widow. Pregnant with despair. I released my grip and fell from the rail. For so many urgent vices I was in the clutch of, no one caught me. I landed smack on the pathway and cried until I threw up, chunks of corndog and milky ice cream coating my puppy dog tank and Salvation Army cutoffs.

The local news, ever frantic for a story, clung to the incident like wet wallpaper. Every day I religiously waited for 5 o'clock. When the tale made the headlines (and it *always* did) it was always under a catchy, utterly injudicious title: Rare Lion's Behavior

Unbelievable!, Cannibalistic Cat Acts Out!. They angered me to no end. They made out what happened to be so much more businesslike than how it really was.

Despite this, I watched every interview, I heard and reheard the experience over and over through under and over exaggerated perspectives. I followed the story like it was my life's purpose.

I watched as the zoo manager spoke into the reporter's cuffed microphone of their hope to salvage the lion due to its rarity. They told the reporters they plan to have the lion undergo "psychological analysis," "mental treatment." They threw words and phrases out there that applied more to failing marriages: "de-strenuous exercises," "trial separation," *therapy*.

They showed screenshots of the lion in its isolated den. All bar and metal. The more conventional variation of a penitentiary. He sat with his golden head high. Proud that he killed her. Proud that he slurped up his own species like it was nothing. I shivered. I thought about him stretched out on a cot, a dumpy shrink trying to apply the Freudian method on his subconscious. I imagined the lion roaring, laughing, at these humans' stupidity. Trying to personify him. Telling them all, "*You're all so brainless! Isn't it clear: You can't humane what is beyond humanity!*"

I saw this message when he turned at the end of the clip and stared into the black lens of the camera. Matching the single eye of moronic naivety with two blazing ones of endless hate, perpetual contempt, eternal disdain, for the entire world.

The news proceeded to lick the essence of the story. They tackled its every groove and cranny until I had been force-fed every detail they had exploited. I watched as the conclusion was made and therapeutic action was taken. And it was taken for months. The news tried to discourage and separate me from it with its repetitive tirades and its dumb, incessant declares of "improvement." But I refused to be ward off. Like all religions, mine was giving me doubt and frustration, but I had to see it through till the revelations.

Finally the news announced that the lion was to be allowed back into its social environment, and the story was left on a note of finality. The preemptive, plastic smile of the anchorwomen recited the expectations of the entire newscast: that other than the generic, mild update, they were done with this story; they were done conferencing the empty-headed, optimistic zookeepers and showing that same chilling clip of that murderous star of a lion. I wanted so badly to return to his public confines and see him again. This was all I could think about the moment I heard this announcement.

I can't even begin to stress how powerful this desire was; the need plagued my every waking thought, but by the time our weekly zoo date rolled around, the rain came. And it came and came.

I looked outside as the thunder and its endless legion of black clouds sullied my opportunity. Every unchanging hour contributed a layer to a becomingly dense apathy. My devastation was supreme. I was so young and yet, since then, I never felt a sadness so focused. I had to have felt something in advance because I ended up

missing my chance to see him entirely. For a day short of two weeks later, *it happened again*.

He took the life of another lioness and, upon tranquilization, took a lunge at a zoo practitioner. The decision to euthanize him was practically unanimous. When I saw this my body went cold. I turned off the TV and screamed in my bedroom. I convinced myself I would never watch TV or go to the zoo ever again. I kept myself from the news for two days, but I simply couldn't make it over the third hump. My mind craved for a resolve, *even if it was on such a tragic note as that...*

At five o'clock I pressed the power on the television set. I was prepared for it. With tears skirting my eyes, I hugged an old black blanket over my head just for the occasion, but when I pressed power, and flicked through the channels, and saw the distressed pair of anchors below the choppy, animated headline, I learned, with utter shock, that there was no occasion. The lion had escaped.

He fled the zoo on the day of his execution. In the end the only thing anyone could lean on was that the jailbreak was founded on the lion's own supply of "adrenaline and chance." When the amazement faded and the incredulity subsided, I realized the whole thing left me absent of a reaction.

Not numb, but wholly and absolutely blank.

I watched as people on the TV strained the importance of finding him. They had zookeepers beg into the cameras, grating their dignity raw. They showed the infamous clip in inappropriate abundance, and even described the beast orally, as if the blind could aid in the mission of seek-and-destroy.

They never found him.

Months later, numerous people proposed theories to calm the public, assuring viewers that he was probably dead somewhere. A normal victim of a foreign habitat (just like you would be), his body readily dissolved by wildlife and bacteria (just like yours would be, too). It was then that I stopped watching. The news had provided me all it could; it stopped being my oracle and was once again just absurd and silly.

After I went to bed those nights, two opposing frames of mind vied in my head.

Part of me turned under the covers. It made me afraid for my life that the lion was coming for me. He was waiting under furniture, patient until my most least-expecting moment, where he could bite into my meaty calf and drag me to a place where he could swallow me in pieces. That innate part of me listened for growls at night, wetting herself when she heard the fridge burp or the air filter hiccup.

But then there was this other part. And the other part was much different.

It was a fantasy.

Once the fear was finished subduing my childish self, a fermented dream entered my subliminal self. And it's like I relived it every night, and when I didn't, I'd recant it as if I had.

I would encounter the lion somewhere in public, and everyone would run away

screaming and shouting. And through the mesh of these screaming, shouting people would emerge me, a lanky child. I would approach him as the people sprinted around me, stumbling all over themselves, skinning on the pavement, and I would take his giant golden head in my hands and pet him, looking into his eyes, two globes of forbidden gold. I'd mount his giant back and we'd run circles around all the screaming people. He'd roar and I'd yell. In sync and in victory. There would be blood all around us and we'd run off. Run away into the dark, a swift smoke of blonde and red, my hands in his mane, his thunderous pitch echoing around the bodies of the people.

When I would sit at my kitchen table, I would be asked if I had any dreams the night before. I'd look into my cereal, the crispy grains floating around in the milk, turning slowly to mush, slowly turning the white—the pure, dense white—into a polluted assortment of greyish slush. Yes. I had a dream about fishing with Dad. I had a dream about going to the barber shop. I had a dream about our dog. Me riding a colossal grasshopper. Me meeting Dora the Explorer at Kroger. Me at the dentist, getting popcorn unstuck from my twenty-two little teeth. Roseanne was on the TV. Jesus Christ was there.

I had dreams about that. I didn't have a dream where everyone was dying. I didn't have a dream where that lion ate you. I didn't have a great and marvelous dream where everything was strewn with open cadavers and strips of bloody clothing waving around the road like flags and cars were tipped over and steaming and flaming with more dead people inside and it was all my fault.

(All my fault mom.) (All my fault and I liked it.)

I spooned breakfast gunk into my mouth and everything about it sucked. The taste. Texture. Everything. It was like trying to swallow grit that was soaking in equal parts of water and B12. Rice half-cooked in a melted snow cone. Still. Bite after bite. After bite. The waxy milk pouring into my stomach like sugar into a gas tank.

Do we have to go to church today?

Of course we do.

Can I stay home?

Of course not.

But I don't feel good.

That's why we go to church.

*That's why we go to church.*

I went to the bathroom and threw up. And when I was done, my eyes would leak open and I'd see the rotary, gross rainbow in the bleached basin. Happy colors my body rejected. And when I pulled the lever, and all of them got sucked away, into the gaping sewage hole of our platinum Ikea commode, the sound was always that lion and nothing else.

I sigh. No one knows I'm here. Or why I'm here. But I'm here again. I'm here enough to do one last thing.

My legs swing over the side. The bed whimpers.

My fractured ankle hums in hesitance but I progress anyway.

I'm riding a dying prophecy that must be fulfilled before the means vanish forever.

I collapse to my knees before the silvery TV set and drag my clean finger over the screen. Dust clings to the pad like cake icing.

I scrape a second finger. A third. A fourth.

Until my whole palm is rubbing and scrubbing--pushing the powdery filth in all directions--separating it from the glassy surface.

When the canvas is clean I take the Sharpie into my dirty hand, between my black fingers, and put it to the screen. I'm not thinking. I'm asleep already, but that doesn't matter. in the dirty light of the motel bathroom I draw the curvy silhouette of an apple. its bulbous form and its little stem and leaf all in a permanent mark

Then I push the obsidian head into its cap and hook its body onto my shirt

I crawl back to the bed.

Sleep enters me like a lover.

## Nathan Strickland

### [Pin]

Pin  
 Lady sees what what  
 that jack billie and cindy finger  
 through inbookatschool

while that what that  
 balloons inside  
 jack allen and anne  
 pinches that what  
 against what that that  
 haroldhomerandgertrude  
 sleep through long-eyed  
 theroughthedrudgeofdays

And butter-colored balloon  
 boys and girls  
 swift-silver-sink or  
 murky-brown-sink highinthesky  
 orontheground un-  
 til

POP

Pin Lady stops  
*That* What when  
 jack  
 allen  
 and anne  
 first frown at grey  
 haroldhomerandedith

*Lora Printz Memorial Poetry Prize 2012, First Place*

## **Robert Novick**

### **It Is What It Is**

Marmalade mansions and hoochie koochie catamarans,  
 Purple fog over red rocks, and floating leprechauns  
 Who drive Grateful blimps into pristine tire factories.  
 Long lacquered nails set against shiny placards,  
 Lovely moist bright lippy smiles,  
 Shapely tennis shoes that increase the curves of buttocks.  
 Meals fit for kings who seek to sit on ergonomic thrones,  
 And always the adorable children, day trading on their tablets.  
 This is how we sell ourselves to each other.

This, our nation of grace, our shining example  
 Of man's grand culmination of himself, standing,  
 One foot on the rock,  
     The other foot on the roll.

It is what it is.

Douglas had sworn off television,  
 And drove five hundred miles to see  
 His favorite bands gathered into one concert.  
 He ran away from what fate had lain before him:

Molly was having sex with his best friend,  
 Dave took 60 bucks from his wallet,  
 The mechanic sold him a drain plug for his alternator,  
 Earlier in the week, he noticed dandruff on his shoulder,  
 His teeth didn't look quite right.  
 His whole life, falling apart and yet he had  
 This one moment, this gathering of bands, and  
 Liberation from his continual mind trap.

The marijuana smoke floated thickly over the meadow  
 As each band took stage.  
 Glassy eyed graduates strained their necks

To stare at the exalted performers.  
They swayed and surrendered to the scene  
As their collective perceptions were  
Transported to that other place  
Where gelatinous hexagons graced the sky  
And bonfire embers penetrated the humid air.

It is what It is.

As much as Douglas sought to escape  
The barrage of information that inundated his  
Life, his dreams were still infiltrated by sneaky symbols.  
The futile gesture of shaking his fist at the sky  
Only spawned a storm in his head.

Blurry cars reassembled into insects,  
And pulsated like yesterday's nightmare  
Through the head of a recovering addict.  
Sped up lines of slow motion mannequins  
Confused the senses until nothing happened.  
The tribulations raced in front of his face,  
The subtle smiles of sneaky scheisters  
Took the money he thought he had earned.  
All the consumption and mass production  
And there was no sign of anything ever  
Slowing down.

And though perplexed, Douglas  
Arrived into a trite state of serenity.  
He quit his bitching, and set forth to stitching  
His life back together again.

Even when soda had run out of fizz,  
Even when bang no longer had whiz,  
Even when jazz no longer had jizz,

He reminded himself  
It is What it Is

## Amanda Miller

### Alone

I walk through the empty streets, slate grey  
sky overhead an ominous background  
like a tombstone waiting  
to be engraved. The leaves  
crunch beneath my feet like tiny bones shattering.  
Piles putrefying in discarded heaps  
at the end of driveways. The stacks,  
soft and wet underneath, smell of dank decay and  
sweet death. They have fallen from  
their lingering tree hung torture,  
giraffe mottled colors slowly bleeding out. The green  
life giving way to watercolor  
finger painted fantasy dripping  
down the veins. Becoming  
brown hollow husks soaring  
through the sky. Wraiths  
on howling breezes that seethe  
between shedding skeleton fingers, forever  
reaching wretch-like toward salvation.

## Josh Rankin

### Deep Breath

The process of the living  
Adored by those who aren't  
Just keep on breathing  
Even when you can't see the road ahead of you  
Even when this world seems to get a little smaller  
Breathe  
Open your mouth like a meth head locomotive  
Let me know you're still on this planet  
And I know it's not been easy  
When I can see years of tire tread face lifts, broken down tears, and sparks that dig  
down  
deep  
Just remember this one thing  
Keep breathing  
You want it, take it, take my air if you must  
Release my lungs of life  
I give them to you freely in handfuls and happy meals  
But I know you don't want to feel my chest expand or to even hear me speak  
I may not mean anything to you, but I love being your shadow  
In the rising and setting suns, I'm by your side  
A sinner gripping to the ends of his home made home depot noose  
Arms flailing and falling only to find out that the bottom is not what you thought it  
was or what you had heard  
Never listen to the ones who chose to stop  
So if you are willing  
Let me return to the time when smiles were right side up  
To when I could watch the classis of Hannah Barbera before school, mom, just five  
more minutes of innocence before I trade it for crosses made of gold jewels  
Displayed in lower east side art galleries  
I'm left hanging there for people to watch; to stare with their hearts of melted morals  
Some pieces of art, you weren't meant to figure out so keep on walking  
This is meant for somebody  
And when you return to the people you used to be, to when times were red with  
anger  
Don't fall from your knees  
It's hard to breathe without grace

## Amanda Brown

### Laundry (for Cummings)

When the sheets

are  
 within twothree days of  
 (needing)washing

I haven't got-  
 ten  
 time. For laundry.

The dirt-ysheet smell is all most badlike  
 body

Odor; and love-made sweat. But all most good  
 like  
 lotion and cologne, like us a-  
 wakeandoutofbed

Busy. I am bizz  
 zzy with boredness of everydaylife  
 Lessness

“come here” he says. Stre tch ing outon dirt—y  
 licious

sheets. L o o k i n g. (at)me  
 in the eyes.

“no,” I say: “I haven't got-  
 ten  
 time. For-“ (that)

No: he says “You haven't got  
 ten  
 time. For laundry”

## Nathan Strickland

### Plato Sits on a Stool in My Space

where gray matters cast long, cave-creeping shadows  
and similes of lines form a realm of misunderstanding:  
he sits and wags his middle finger  
in disappointment at me.  
for he is my personal pocket philosopher.

But instead of fitting snugly in denim gloves.  
he snuggles with stalagmites  
and crawls out to the frigid surface outside the wintery dome  
in fruitless search  
of the sun, of its rays, of its warmth.

The pointless quest rings with the flat tone of the *ideal* exercise in deep longing.  
achievement left untended  
conversation left unsaid  
hunger left insatiate  
life left unlived.

But the hermit sun peaks its head through the inkwell sky,  
tosses a sideways beam for a glance,  
and says,  
“Fuck you.”

The philosopher relishes in the brief moment of cold, perhaps disheartening  
enlightenment  
and tries to trace  
the almost forgotten form  
of warm beams on the soul, but  
cave walls fall short when it comes to tracking  
or drawing  
or so the philosopher says to himself, at least until he  
finds fault with the full-bodied shadows  
that swallow  
the sun

as a picture of the fragmented ray forms, reforms, and destroys  
itself as the bats that escape the cave, winged black rats blurring

remains of the ray.

with flight what

What winds up on the wall seems a botched job;

“This line is hardly like the ray; I have failed myself and my form.”

The true sun stays in hiding until it simply can't take the solitude

when it faces the white dwarf, an inward-burning firing squad,

thinking back on the time it showed little Plato just a little light.

The sun never shines again,

BUT

the little line wracking Plato's mind

survives.

## Amanda Miller

### Frozen

Red poppies bloom on snow covered mounds, frozen  
flakes melt as warm petals spread, thirsty  
petals greedily tainting purity.  
Blue fingers grasping at barren branches cracking  
under desperate pressure.  
Hopefully, hopeless pressure.  
Poppies turn to streaks and streaks  
to puddles at prone feet becoming a river.  
A river flowing from a warm gaping mouth. Slick  
life covered fingers holding jagged edges, pressing over  
spurting death.  
Fading steam puffs, shallow  
from blue, finger matching lips, lips that form soundless  
words, silent prayers to the unhearing trees, telling,  
praying. Lips that hold no hope, frozen  
lips cold enough to hold the snowflakes  
like jewels on blue velvet.  
Unblinking eyes roll in frozen sockets,  
salty icicles form on spiked lashes lengthening  
down Carrera cheeks already sealed in death.  
A flow cut down in a forest  
of snow and ice and silence.  
Silent screams,  
silent life spurting and flowing into silent earth  
telling its silent story.

**Alex Swarz**

**Darwin on the Cheep**

The analog of a feather

    Takes all forms of whether

    Lays them down together

        Folds            unfolds

                    its measure

*Clara Cox Epperson Contest 2012, First Place*

**Robert Novick**

### **Birdman Conjures American Zen**

Birdman sat on the bench out back and slurped soup from a spoon. I was on break and it was customary to share with Birdman whenever you went out. Some folks gave him cigarettes. Usually I gave him a pint of our nightly soup. His favorite was the curried pumpkin with pistachios and spiked cream. He wasn't fond of the cold, fruity soups, but he ate them. I never expected to learn so much while taking a break from work, but during that stretch of time Birdman had laid the foundation of American Zen for me.

"The trick is to pay close attention. Otherwise, you'll slip up and miss it. Starting over all the time." He slurped a moment and added, "Hand me that piece over there."

I crushed the cigarette butt into the sand bin and retrieved the plastic. He was working on a model airplane and collected random plastic pieces from all over the city to compose the various parts. I never saw him add a piece to the plane, but while we talked, he would view it from different angles and when satisfied, he put the piece into his leather bag. At that point, the plane had barely taken shape. He hauled it everywhere and I heard someone say jokingly he carried an albatross.

I had moved to Asheville, North Carolina during the spring of 2001. Lured by dreams of fancy kitchens and eclectic restaurants, I thought I would propel my cooking career into the next level of expertise. It took a month before I landed a job at a tapas and wine bar called Zambra and began my fascination with urban chic fusion. We created the illusion of Spanish and North African style tapas by using ingredients like rose water and pomegranate juice reductions. I finally found a place where the dishes popped like those from the pictures of cookbooks. We had specialty artichoke hearts and marinated olives like Arbequinas, Empeltres, and Hondroelias. The Arbequinas marinated in citrus infused brine for a month before we sold them, and the Empeltres soaked in a jar full of Sherry. I learned to distinguish the specific textures of the olives in order to maintain consistency, especially the Hondroelias, the largest of the three. The trick was to take care of the olives at the right moment, before their integrity broke down into mushy fruit.

I was in charge of the cold tapas station. I prepared and plated salads adorned with artichokes and pecorino. I slabbed layers of goat cheese atop a pile of roasted red peppers, drizzled it all with reductions of port and herb infused oils. I added zest to the bland white plates as I made them pop into life for all the senses. Some plates I garnished with sautéed spring mix, tossed with toasted garlic and rosewater. The hiss

of fresh product hitting hot oil slithered through the night. By the time I sprinkled fleur de sel on the mound of wilted greens and placed upon them a hunk of stilton bleu cheese, another few orders zipped through the ticket machine. I completed the dish with a tightly crafted quenelle of quince paste before I slung it into the window and pulled the next ream of tickets. The business continued to bombard us and every night I could see through the flurry of the future--my colleagues and I perched on the stoop in front, sipping from longneck bottles. We would discuss the storm and how it raged through our kitchen. We looked forward to the end of tourist season.

During slow nights we detailed the kitchen. I took down the hood filters and soaked them in degreaser. By the time I needed to spray them, Birdman would arrive. While I worked we talked.

“Not too many folks out tonight. Wonder what’s going on. Wonder what the rich folk are doing. Wonder what the poor folk are doing.” Birdman was fascinated by small crowds.

“I hear there’s a concert down the street. I think Laurie Anderson is playing.” I swished the pressured stream of water across the grimy grates. “I noticed you started on the fuselage. It’s looking good.” The white plastic tube set across his lap was taking shape.

“Yeah, it’s coming along. Another week or so and I’ll start on the wings. You do remember when I told you I worked for years in Oak Ridge.” His eyes drifted off vacantly while he searched the sky for his next thought.

Birdman had told me many times about working in Oak Ridge. Because of it, he suffered from early onset dementia. He always described his job with ambiguity and all I could ascertain was that he had been a scientist who worked on top-secret projects and one of those projects poisoned him somehow. Due to the large number of homeless people who wandered the streets of Asheville, many people assumed Birdman was one of them. Actually he lived in a moderately sized loft above a bakery and preferred to roam the streets during the day. He always wore the same clothes, a crumpled baby blue cardigan, baggy blue corduroy pants, and weathered suede clogs. He appeared to seem homeless and his thought patterns embellished the façade, but he had been smart in his life and lived comfortably.

“There was a composite we had formulated. So durable and light we just knew the future. Now, not many people know about this so it’s just between you and me. I worked at that place for 25 years and had to sign waivers. Who was that project director?” He scratched the bald patch between strands of thinned grey hair. “I forget his name but he was always so severe. Lines on his face so thick like dried mud. One day he calls me into his office and says I’m granted an early retirement package. Says I’ll be taken care of. I don’t think I ever noticed his eyes much but it seemed like something flickered in them then.” Birdman peered into the sky, deep in thought. “We were involved in all sorts of stuff. We developed adhesives, molded plastics into parts. So this guy tells me I’m laid off and of course I’m furious.”

Birdman retired to Asheville in 1988, the year I dropped out of college. While I was beginning an illustrious career as a dishwasher in a high volume chain, he was involved in reconstructing the chemical universe. The tube he carried around lacked any noticeable seams and to the touch, it was smooth like baby powder. When I asked how he attached the plastic pieces, he would shrug and change the subject. He explained in detail complicated processes and random information. I learned that the density of water decreased as it froze and as a result, ice floated. He explained that such a simple phenomenon was crucial to life. He explained how polymers constructed everything from plastic to paper. Rubber and wood contained them. I was surprised when he rambled about science, and yet forgot names, places, and time. The most fascinating topic he addressed was Zen Buddhism. He introduced the mountain concept to me. He told me about the concept of Mu. When I returned home I scrawled as much as I could remember into a funky colored journal:

Regardless of which side of the debate I prefer to straddle, there is one constant among all belief systems. Faith is required in order to pursue any relationship with elements that are beyond comprehension. We strive to understand the nature of this phenomenon and in the end, the only proof for any of it is what is told to us by that part of our brain we call our heart. The concept of flux is ever apparent. Even as I write, everything around me changes in subtle yet persistent ways. Though I cannot see it directly, I am aware of the process. The idea of having an inherent understanding of things as they are is most apparent before we utilize symbols to express those things. So we arrive at Zen again. Mu is a term in Zen that is used to describe "emptiness" or "nothingness." This is what a Zen practitioner hopes to attain and realize. The universe is in constant flux. Nothing remains unchanged. As long as we continue to desire we will always be suffering. If one wishes not to suffer, desire must be cut-off from one's life. Physically, all sentient beings suffer with birth, illness, old age, and death. The whole body-mind complex is in a state of suffering, and through Zen there is liberation from the cycle.

Though desire lies at the root, and disappointment is the byproduct of expectation, there is professed a systematic movement towards something more. Alleviation from suffering is the goal of enlightenment. All sentient beings suffer and as a result, the cycle must be transmuted into something else in order for the chain to be broken. Through realization it is as such:

Before one studies Zen, a mountain is a mountain.

Once one attains insights, a mountain is not a mountain.

When one really understands, a mountain is a mountain.

He told me the story of the three brother monks who walked through town after a storm. One of them had picked her up and carried her across the street so her dress wouldn't be soiled. He put her down and continued walking. The other two brothers were perplexed as it was their custom to never touch a woman. Finally one of them approached and asked, "Brother, why did you carry her?" To which the

monk replied, “I left her on the other side of the street. Who is still carrying her?”

Birdman told each story with such enthusiasm. His gesticulation amplified the stories as his hands waved in flourish when he reached his point. He managed to remember so many important things, but always insisted he was losing his mind. Each week his airplane took shape. By summer, both wings were finished and he mentioned that he started designing the engine. I was promoted to the sauté station and my time spent cleaning equipment was delegated to Sarah, a recent graduate from the culinary school. Through Sarah, I picked up tidbits about Birdman’s progress while we sat around the bar after our shift and sipped on Tempranillo from Rioja.

The sauté area was cramped and hot. Though I learned how to sizzle scallops to that perfect caramelized color and douse them with mandarine-coconut curry, I longed for the coolness of the pantry, and the colors of the mise en place in the top-reach cooler. I missed the dazzle of the bright pink of raspberry vinaigrette swirling in the food processor. The only bright item on sauté was a pomegranate sauce. We served it with skewers of chicken that had been dredged through harissa and roasted, but even that dish lacked the grace of focaccia with four cheeses, three infused oils, and two reductions. The cold tapas plates popped like firecrackers, the sauté plates popped like worn out tires. Mainly I missed conversations with Birdman. I only saw him during smoke breaks, five minutes at a time. The sauté station kept me busy and could run out of hand if I stepped away too long.

Sarah kept up with his progress and by the end of the summer he said, the plane would be ready for flight. She also passed on two books lent to her by Birdman. The first was called *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* by Chogyam Trungpa. I learned about the inflated sense of ego that registered when understanding occurred. I faced it many times, from perfecting a technique in the kitchen to realizing the profundity of spirit. Trungpa, and Birdman, warned against demise through pride and I paid attention. Chogyam Trungpa led me to investigate Tibetan Buddhism and opened up the vein of poetry of the Beat Generation. Trungpa was a mentor for Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, two poets I had met during my college days.

The second book was *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard. For a time, I perceived things in the sense of being hyperreal. The mountain had become something far more abstract than not being a mountain. I struggled to understand Baudrillard. His concepts evaded me. I had no clue how Disneyland could represent what reality had truly become. I wrote a small portion into my journal to remind me:

*“There is no real, there is no imaginary except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, including that between the real and the imaginary, tends to abolish itself, to be reabsorbed on behalf of the model? Well, from one order of simulacra to another, the tendency is certainly toward the reabsorption of this distance, of this gap that leaves room for an ideal or critical projection.”*

I followed up with an idea inspired by Birdman's paradox of science and Zen. American Zen is a reconciliation. The debate over what delineates substance from artifice continues to rage as people strive to define our common era. American Zen is a practice where vast consumerism merges into a process of spiritual integrity. Through the intentional expansion of consciousness, we are able to achieve a heightened state of awareness and overcome the disdain that erupts from our interpretation of environment. Birdman's guidance led me into a new way of perceiving the world. He called it the synthesis of phenomena.

The day I quit working at Zambra I returned home. The owner explained how I needed to spread my wings. There were too many fine restaurants where I could learn much more. I knew it was all a front and the betrayal stung me until I had finished my second whisky. By the time Sarah had come to check up on me I was halfway through the bottle and rambling. I explained all the concepts as if they hit me at once and swore it to be a satori moment where all thought vanishes and phenomena is experienced directly. I practiced spiritual materialism until I made a sanctimonious claim against my boss—that never had I experienced another cook who could take a burner and a pan and throw something into it that billowed out the scent of decay through the kitchen. How could he consider himself a cook? He had no clue the level of attention I had achieved through that kitchen and I doubted he ever would attain any higher state than a coke laced fat-cat who was drenched in expensive scotch. Sarah calmed me down and I poured more bourbon.

I was hired at a restaurant called Rezaz a few weeks later. I was excited because the chef-owner had a solid reputation and knowledge of Persian food. I called Sarah so we could celebrate. She told me about changes in the menu and how the place was going to be sold anyway. She still saw Birdman and updated me on the progress of his plane. He had finished the shell and engine, but during the test flight, something happened to the remote and the plane crashed into a tree. One of the wings was badly damaged. Two weeks later he showed up and it had been repaired. She said you couldn't see a seam anywhere on it, that when she ran her hand down the newly built wing it was soft like baby powder. When she asked him how he constructed it, he just gazed up at the sky and counted clouds.

After working for three weeks I finally received my first paycheck and met Sarah at the French Broad River Parkway. We hiked towards the park. As we approached, I saw Birdman across the way. He held a remote controller in his hands. I followed the line of his gaze and saw something flying towards the setting sun, splashing through the blazing mauve. I had expected to hear the whine of an engine but the plane flew quietly as it shot upward. A liberated albatross had taken flight.

## Amanda Brown

### Coffee Beans

Dumbfounded lips make senseless plural mouths arranging singular disjointed  
Sentences into words of worthwhile paragraphs.

Open eyes of the blind see nothing.

Blind eyes open see everything.

In This everything a light beams of a Godforsaken seraph's perfect distorted face.

Imprecise and brilliant there is nothing hidden in the face. Imprecise and brilliant

there is a face hidden in nothing. Nothing there is imprecise and brilliant in a hidden  
face.

From God. From Me.

Who covets.

Liquid marble skin and frozen life does not pulse. Does not bleed and drip and  
splatter. Still and cold the seraphs' mouths do not stir but pour liquid thoughts  
onto the floor that spreads like Crucified blood and smells like sweet rotten  
pomegranates.

Tasteless tastes like metallic and everything has no meaning of love.

Besides the seraph.

Cold flavored marble skin flows through veins and mouths and an unfocused eye to  
deliver

nothing.

But perfect splitting clarity of nothing and light beams; hard thighs and breasts

conjugate, coagulate, and combine into meat on an inconsistent symmetrical face. A

face that bleeds. A face that bleeds pure. A face that bleeds pure light of God. From

its mouth for sentences. come eyes and words and flesh and love and.

Everything that comes from it means

nothing.

Like coffee beans.

*Clara Cox Epperson Contest 2013, Honorable Mention*

**Jennifer N. Kelley**

## Choices

I walk off of the cleared path and into the woods. The wet earth squishes beneath my feet. The shrill birdsong of a Brown Headed Cowbird flows through the trees and the chirp of a Northern Cardinal responds. The sound is so right, comforting. It belongs here, right along with the fiery orange leaves clinging to the trees. I belong here, more so than the noise and chaos I came from. Shaking my head; not now I tell myself. I don't want to think about my past or Uncle. Let the funeral director keep calling. That is part of the outside world. Be here, like Uncle told me. Be here among the birdsong; be here enveloped in the cool air.

I take a deep breath and run my hand over the smooth handle of my bow. Stopping, I close my eyes.

Breathe in; note the rustle of the leaves.

Breathe out, let everything else go. My hand grips the bow; it is solid in my hands.

Breathe in, take in the crisp air. Am I falling? It feels like it.

Breathe out, have to let go. Warm tears run down my face. I run my hand down the bow. It is solid like Uncle, an anchor from the turmoil inside and out.

Breathe in; suppress the shudder that takes over. Listen to the cardinals. I have to focus. I taste salty tears.

Swallowing, I breathe out. Drowning; I felt wretched when mother died but this is infinitely worse. Uncle is gone. He can't be and somehow is.

Breathe in, Uncle is dead and I can't change it.

Breathe out, I have to stop this. Wiping my face with the back of my hand I continue further into the woods. I'll do what I've done before when I left like I was drowning. What Uncle taught me to do. I'll hunt like I was shown. Find a nice deer, and then the world will right itself. I'll be able to think straight.

The weathered tree stand comes into view. Tempered by years of wind and rain, the wood is dark and smooth. Wooden boards nailed to it serve as steps. I put my boot on the bottom board and climb up. I set down the bow and take the arrows out of my pack. Getting ready I feel myself relaxing. This place is as comforting as birdsong. I belong here. More so than from where I came from. I remember the last apartment me and Mom shared.

It was the third one that year; a dim cave, with years of cheap, dirty living engrained in every wall and floorboard. It was a place where no amount of scrubbing eliminated the smell of grease and grime. And the only permanent residents were the

roads. Who by day lived within the walls and at night scurried out in droves. Really they owned this place, not the human tenants.

Evictions plagued us like an ill wind. The only thing we went through faster was Mom's men. And like the apartments, each one seemed a little worse than the last. Which is where Mom was now, down at The Stroll, finding a new...um, benefactor. I imagine the scene; a thick cloud of cigarette smoke hangs in the air and some wannabe sings up on the state. This wannabe has not gotten the memo that this was New York City and not Nashville. A fool belting out some shrill, crude cover of Conway Twitty with no clue why they were still singing in dive bars. It is pathetic, just like everyone else in that place.

And leaning over the fingerprint smudged bar is Mom with her makeup caked on. The only thing worse than all that red lipstick and green eye shadow, is the cleavage on display. She says I'm adverse to her skimpy outfits and boobs practically falling out because I am her son. But I can't understand how anyone finds that attractive.

The wannabe belts out another line, "A forgotten soul is waitin' by the phone."

And Mom turns to the scum next to her. He smiles, revealing crooked teeth, "That's a pretty thing like you doing out here?" There is a look in his eyes that is anything but gentle.

Bile rises in my throat. I roll over on the thin mattress. The rest of the conversation doesn't matter. Pulling the sheet around my shoulders I let myself drift off; it always ends the same way. Mom will come home eventually, but with luck not tonight.

*Thwack!* I startle. Shit, that was the door being thrown open. I put my glasses on and squint at the clock; Four, fucking, in the morning. Unfortunately, that is Mom's intent if she is home before daybreak. I have no intention of staying around for this.

"Come on, the bedroom is this way." Mom's voice is rough from smoke. I pull on pants and a t-shirt.

"That's just the boy. He won't bother us." No I won't. I learned that lesson early.

Next I tie my sneakers and wait to hear the click of Mom's bedroom door closing. Then I grab my backpack and head out the door. The hallway smells like stale piss. I head down the stairs. The elevator's broke, has been, I think, for as long as the roaches have occupied the building.

I'll ride the subway till it's time to go to school. It's too early for the park or the library. Finish that assignment my English teacher was nagging me about. She swears I have potential. She really has no clue. This is my life and always will be. Potential doesn't mean food on the table or an end to the succession of Mom's men. I'm a kid from the Upper East Side and always will be.

It is a few weeks later. Nothing has changed, I'm preparing for another of life's blows. I'm in the apartment's kitchen eyeing Crooked Teeth warily. He meets my face, a ghost of a smile on his lips and Budweiser in hand. We are two opponents squaring off in a stuffy arena. Mom, the spectator, is at the table holding the letter from school. Her eyes are a bit glassy and her stare has come a distant. Crying didn't do that to her, I wonder what the drug of the day is.

Crooked Teeth stands up, "Suspended for fighting?"

He is much taller and thicker than me. My slight frame and slender girly hands dwarf in comparison. This was going to be a knock out.

I shrug my shoulders and glare, preparing myself for the inevitable. He is a bully, same as Russ whose nose I busted.

"Eleanor wants me to do something about your attitude." He is almost smiling. "Are ya running with the East Side Bloods?"

I repress the urge to laugh, me affiliated with a gang. Crooked Teeth or my Mom would never believe how I spend my time. They don't have the capacity.

"Is that ah smirk?"

Maybe it is. Sure I have taken clothes from the laundry mat and stolen peaches from the market. It's called survival. But I prefer books from the library and bird watching in the park.

"Anything to say for yourself?"

I don't respond. He is standing between me and the door. Was saving the new kid worth this? That bully, Russ, had him pinned against a locker. The teachers had turned a blind eye. That kid, I don't even know his name. He looked so scared. I didn't think about it; stupid. I pushed the new kid out of the way and blasted Russ, terror of McKinley High, in the face. All I got in return was a black eye and suspension. And soon to come, Crooked Teeth's lesson.

I don't think I'm going to avoid getting hurt this time. I duck out of the way as Crooked Teeth goes to grab my shirt collar and I trip over a chair. He takes the opportunity and slams into my face with a meaty fist. Pain registers in my brain; quick and sudden, like lightning across the sky. Distantly I register my body crumbling onto the yellowed linoleum. Shaking my head, to clear my thoughts, my stomach rolls threateningly. I push the nausea down along with the pain. Survival is what matters. I roll unto my side, pulling my legs towards my head. His boot presses into my shoulder. Is he talking again? I wish he'd shut up and get this over with.

*Snap*, the sound of branches breaking, reaches my ears, bringing me back to the present. I breathe deep and will my hands to stop shaking. I am in the woods, waiting for a deer to come along. That nightmare in the kitchen was years ago. I'm not there anymore.

Shifting, I look into the woods looking for the source of the noise. October frost has killed off much of the vegetation, enabling me to see farther. Far out, almost

too far for my short sighted peer, I spot orange. A hunter then, not what I was expecting. This is private land.

What is this man doing on Uncle's land? Trespassing? Although I expect that the land is mine now. He never made it home from his job at the plant. There was a storm, a bad one. All that rain wiped out the road at the intersection. One minute he was pattering along in a battered Ford that was more rust than blue paint and the next breath he was slammed into an oak. While I was warm and secure in our little house, having gotten home long before the torrential rain came in. Six thirty came and I set the table. By seven thirty I was calling the plant manager. At eight I was staring out the window watching the torrential water come down in sheets. I worried all night, called all over town looking for him. Sometime around three I fell into a fitful sleep on a couch warped in drab green afghan. It would be morning before a somber police deputy rapping at the door would wake me. The clearing of dark clouds and morning's searing light had allowed for a grisly discovery by one of the locals.

The hunter has stopped and sat down. It's not a deer. I need a deer. It was Uncle who tried to give me something to do, to focus my anger and hurt. It started after the kitchen incident. There was a new guy in town. Crooked Teeth was out and the lard ass, Crater Face was here to stay and apparently he wanted to be my friend.

I'd had a long day. Mrs. Lark gave me in school suspension. She wanted me to enter some writing contest. I lost my cool and stormed out of the class room. She's lucky I didn't throw the textbook at her head, it crossed my mind. Anyhow I trudge up the stairs and into 5B. Crater Face is sprawled on the couch.

He stands up, with a grunt. "Hi, Alex. How was school?"

"Fine." I mutter and start to head to my room.

Crater Face gets in the way, "I thought we'd go get dinner."

Not a chance. Mom's friends are not my friends. Another lessons I learned young. He is not the first to try to befriend me.

I shrug my shoulders, "Can't I'm going bird watching."

He snorts with laughter. "Good one. Bird watching."

That confirmed it; he is like the others.

Five weeks passed. Little had changed. My grades were still dismal and Crater Face was lingering like a foul odor. I'd been spending less and less time at the apartment. Even the streets were better than that claustrophobic hole with too thin walls. And with the coming of May it was much warmer. But school letting out in a few weeks meant I would have even more time to fill. I'd need a plan. When I returned to the apartment after three days I realized Mom had also been hatching a plan. When I came in she was on the phone.

"I don't know what to do with the boy. We tried taking him to the zoo. He flat out refused." Mom whined, taking a long drag on her Kool. "Give him something to do."

I doubt that she is all that worried about my. And no one has offered to take me to the zoo since I was seven.

“Well, he has um been avoiding me lately.” A pause while Mom lights up another cigarette.

“Don’t make this about me Howard. I’m calling because of the boy.”

I fight back a smirk; after all it can be dangerous to smirk. I’ve only met my Uncle Howard once, when I was little. Mom got out of Wappingers Falls by the time she was seventeen and pregnant. But Howard still lives out there.

“He has a temper and roams the street like some wild animal.”

Mom sounds flustered.

“Expect him on Thursday at six. I’m sending him by bus.” The phone is put down with authoritative *click*.

I went from Upper East Side to rustic, quaint Wappingers Falls with less than a week’s notice. Talk about change. Fallen leaves crinkle and crack. The amateur hunter sits on a fallen log eating lunch. There will be no deer as long as he is scaring them off. Putting down the box, I stretch. This is problematic.

I could shoot an arrow next to him. Spook the hell out of him and scare him off. I run my hand through short, spiky black hair. I need to shoot something, preferably a deer. What I have is an oblivious hunter and killing him was not an option.

And yet I wonder would killing him be like that first deer? Maybe the hunter is what I need, not a deer. Uncle is gone and all I have is this stupid hunter. I pick up my bow again and settle into a comfortable position. The hunter munches away on his chips unaware of my presence.

I’d come to live with Uncle four years ago. He met me at the Greyhound station twenty minutes from his house. Unlike the station in the city it was not congested with people running to and fro like frantic ants. It was calmer here. Standing on the platform Uncle loomed over me, a bit lumberjackish in his appearance. I stood there, shoulders slumped, bag slung over my shoulder waiting for him to make a move. When he approached me I wanted to retreat back to the bus to avoid the lumberjack. Uncle was bigger than I remembered. What he did next was unexpected and resulted in stopping my cowardly retreat. The man stuck out his hand. Never had one of Mom’s men done that.

“You can call me Howard.” And he stood there holding out his hand.

I was surprised enough to reach out and shake it.

He stood there, studying me.

Releasing my hand Howard started talking, “It’s what a good four hour trip from the city? You must be hungry and tired. I saved you some dinner and have a room ready.”

He turns around and heads for his Ford. With that I followed Uncle Howard into a different life.

The first few months Uncle was on the receiving end of yelling and broken dishes. I scowled and pushed every limit and chore given to me. The frown lines on his face deepened while trying to rein me in with groundings and rewards, like a book on birds common to New York. In late July, after walking out on a grounding for refusing to do the dishes or anything else around the house, Uncle had had enough. Two days later I slipped back into the house hoping that I'd return to my room unnoticed. Yet as I tiptoed into the kitchen Uncle was standing in the corner with his arms folded against his chest.

"Sit down." With that Uncle left the room.

Slumping into a chair I consider leaving again. But I remain seated and Uncle returns with a belt. Eyeing the belt I almost bolt. I'm in a kitchen again with someone bigger than me. My sweaty palms grip the edge of the table and I try to slow my breathing.

Uncle stops in the middle of the room. "My dad used to punish me this way. I wanted to avoid this but you just won't learn. Take off your jeans and put your hands on the wall."

Uncle is going to beat me and I'll have no choice but to take it. Uncle towers over me and running almost never works. After pushing my jeans off I stand against the wall in my boxers and T-shirt. I brace for the pain and it comes; three sharp stings on my backside. I'm still waiting for more when Uncle tells me to go to my room. I do so without a word. I'm not lying on the floor too afraid to move. Uncle administered the punishment and then stopped, unlike Crooked Teeth and the parade of ogres before him.

By the time I go to my first day of school in August I've only received one more belting. Howard has laid out clear rules and I know there will be pain for breaking them. But strangely I don't mind. He never yells or uses his hands. No dishes have been broken for almost a month and strangely I don't want to break anymore.

At school I meet an overambitious English teacher; this woman could be Mrs. Lark's cousin. When I fail to do a reading or an assignment she tells me what great accomplishments I could achieve. I shrug my shoulders and tune her out. Then she calls my Uncle one Friday to talk about my attitude problem and apparent lack of progress.

I expect to be punished. So when Uncle woke me up early Saturday morning I was nervous. Had I pushed him into really hurting me? Will he turn out to be like all the others? I'm confused when he hands me an orange vest and tells me to get dressed. It turns out we're going hunting. This is his solution to my indifference to school work? We trek across the field and into the woods. Neither of us speaks. The only noise comes from the wildlife.

We go into the woods and Uncle sits down and motions for me to do the same. He unpacks the bow and arrows and begins explaining the parts and how to go about hunting. At long last he stops and takes a deep breath.

When he begins to speak his eyes meet mine. "It all about choice."

I don't understand Uncle's point.

"I saw your grade transcript."

Abysmal, I'm sure.

"You have a choice to make. You can continue to be that kid from the wrong side of New York City and never have anything better. As a matter of fact if that is what you want I can put you on a bus back to the city, tonight. Or you can apply yourself, make better grades, and do something with your life. You weren't given much of a chance from your mother but now you have a choice. And if you don't take it there will be no one to blame but yourself." With that he went back to talking about how to hunt with a bow. It turned out that hunting gave me something I needed. It required that I learn to be still and focus. As I gradually began to bring home better grades Uncle took me out more often.

Then in the following spring I killed my first deer. There was a phone call and Uncle looked solemn when he got done. Mom had been found dead, details were murky. I had only spoken to her a handful of times since I'd been sent away. And now she was dead, probably murdered. I know she wasn't much of a mother but I still didn't want it to end this way. Did my leaving cause her to further slink into the grime?

Uncle's strong arm wrapped around my shoulder, "Get your coat and vest."

Amidst a wave of grief Uncle took me into the woods. Perched in the tree I had to calm myself; the weight of the bow and Uncle's instruction anchoring me. Then the doe stepped into the clearing. All emotion focused in that one arrow, flying across space, then the deer falls, and the world stands still. The experience was beyond words. I didn't know I could feel like that. It was like...like finding God in the dirtiest drug den in Harlem; unexpected salvation. Amidst all the muck I was lifted up out of myself.

Now I find myself sitting in the same tree. Finishing his sandwich the hunter stands. I want to shoot him, to chase that feeling of my first kill. Uncle's death weighs upon me like a boulder. Focusing I put the hunter into my crosshair. I want to feel better. I pause; Uncle told me I had a choice to be better. If I don't act soon the hunter will be gone. Mom whispers from beyond the pale that I'm nothing more than a street kid. And yet...yet the guidance counselor told me about a great college. I take aim and release the bow. Everything stops as the arrow takes flight and strikes its target.

Startled, the hunter looks at the arrow buried into the tree. He yells something as I climb down and make for the house. I don't pay attention. I made my choice. And as part of that choice I leave the woods to face the world. Although dead, Uncle

remains with me; lending me strength. With his help, I am more than a poor kid from the Upper East Side. And that means I need to finish filling out college applications.

## Ross Drummond

### Shore of Emotion

Today I stopped and wondered, my eyes aren't as dry any more,  
Nowhere near the barren desert they used to be before,  
Now the slightest moisture can instigate a drop to fall,  
And into an ocean of emotion cause me to cast my soul.

And as I'm thrashing in the undertow I start to sink,  
and think, "It used to be my greatest wish to have a drink,"  
I'd give the world to satiate this human thirst,  
But I'd have to give up my inhumanity to quench it first.

Gorging myself on far away dreams and pointless hopes,  
my bloated body steadily climbs the exalted, slightly foamy slopes,  
and with my last breath I beg the tide to reel me in,  
and spit me out on the shore of my arid dust land again.

## McCarran Hazlett

### Assurance of Faith

You stand out brilliantly in my mind,  
fogged though it may be by pipe ash  
gamboling like snow toward powdered mirrors,  
my mind still easily descries your flawlessly faded pinks  
and scalded-sienna tresses.  
Auburn ringlets rippling like Saginaw Bay waves  
with more shine or mystery than those Great Puddles could ever muster.

Your laughter is still hidden  
in the creases of genuine smiles, my muse.  
I can hear its echo spurring me,  
wheedling me.  
The dregs of your dulcet tones whisper still  
of hibernating white pines,  
of proximity to the Yukon,  
of truly natural elegance stripped of  
finger, hand, foot  
printing. Press onward, love.

Such magnificence as yours  
will rarely taste consistency,  
but know, that on certain encounters with the Sun,  
the comeliness of your simple shadow  
gave me cause for song.

## Kelly Hanwright

### America Screaming

O city,  
Night after night you have heard screams  
echoing through your dark alleys as well as your Germantowns.  
Day after day you have seen bruises and cuts that reach beyond the epidermal level.

When the pregnant teen mom was raped,  
you heard her cries of anguish.  
What was the reason you did nothing –  
because you feel her child is not real until he breathes *your* air?

Another girl was sodomized in a cardboard cut-out apartment at the same time  
as a boy was being mugged on the way home through the dark streets  
where his parents sent him to buy their food  
while they sat at home wasted,  
playing video games.

O town,  
perhaps the screams which you have heard have been quieter.  
Still, you have heard them  
in the rising undertones of the woman on the phone  
with the boyfriend who calls too frequently.

You have seen them in the eyes of the dirty  
neighbor children as they try to act like “normal” kids which  
Everyone knows is all show.  
Even those they rely on to protect them cannot be trusted.

Social worker,  
you come to the house across the street from this and remove a boy from loving  
parents  
with a broken nose he got from a stray baseball during a game with friends.  
The dirty neighbor children watch  
Enviously.

A child goes to school with matted hair, cuts on his arms and a vacant look in his eye.  
Teacher, you see the desperation on his face,

yet day after day choose not to report this ugly secret  
which you and his father are keeping together.

I sit in my living room watching I Love Lucy when I start to hear a strange noise.  
I mute the TV and listen harder as it grows, becoming a cacophony of sound.  
Every moment, decibels rising, I can hear. America.  
Screaming.