



NORTH TEXAS REVIEW
2010

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**The North Texas Review serves as an outlet
for the literary and artistic creativity of the
students at the University of North Texas.
We hope you will enjoy exploring their work
as much as we enjoyed curating it.**

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THE MOONS

Ovidio Hinojosa

Last night, a man made his city feel his presence by falling one hundred feet onto a power line. The wild energy that powered all of the computers, television sets, and lamps escaped within seconds. Some saw an intense light. Some heard a giant crack, like bones breaking in the stratosphere. Some in close proximity smelled sizzling pork.

When the authorities searched for identification on the man's blackened body, they found a burnt and curled driver's license. It told the reader that his name was "rro Bod."

A week earlier, the man received a package containing fifty pale yellow weather balloons. This was five more than he needed, but it's always nice to have extras.

A month earlier, the man paid thirty dollars for a lawn chair at a garage sale. It was made of aluminum, and it was silver, the same color as the Spirit of St. Louis.

Six months earlier, the man did the math and concluded that he would need forty-five balloons to support himself and a lawn chair. His research told him balloons require a ballast, a heavy material that provides stability. He bought a gallon of water and thought it could do the job.

A year earlier, a man named Errol Bodner stepped outside of his mother's house at nine o'clock. He looked upwards at the pale yellow moon and decided that it would be a nice place to visit.



Susan Blick · *Red Balloons*

Lately when writing I find
I press the pen down too hard,
impressing things not intended,
as after you left, I could still see
your footprints in the grass
and I began to entertain the idea
that absence has a shape.

Silence has a thought process,
like trying to figure out
what something wants to be.

I didn't know I was a bell
until someone grasped the ribbon
looped between my shoulder blades.

Lifted, then struck, a note of pure
pleasure. I knew then that longing
is reckless and emptiness is possibility;
that what has been diminished has
the capability to expand; and
if bliss were to lay its hands on me,
I would shatter.

NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE, NO. 2

Brit Naylor

Perhaps there is another such boy who wishes to be unique, himself – is that so odd? When he goes to summer camp, he feels alienated by the fact that he is the only one who eats cereal without milk. Really, as if he were looking for reasons. He cries all the time, and he can only make one friend. He takes special care to keep his genitals covered upon exiting the shower, but because he is so guarded is exactly why his friend must whip the towel away, to bare it all. He cries, but this is his only friend, so he must buck up. In the dining hall he contemplates starving; he's never eaten a chicken with bones before.

Perhaps there is another such boy; I pity him, for believing he is so pitiable. Rummaging through the viscera of memory, I think: what a mess! What an impossible amalgam of tepid seriousness and grief! My father will tell me now, of then, “Every day was either the best or the worst day of your life.” Would that I could remember the best. Must I really consider this little whiner me? Because truly, I cannot feel the kinship. It is as though my history is adjunct to me, or I to it, for it covers me at times. I prefer the people I've just met, because they haven't gained a sense of my other selves, only this one. That I am remembered by some for carrying around a bible in the fifth grade is truly telling. I carried it for a week; now I can't stand to read it. I wonder if I'll have to make new friends every five years, or if I can come to love my other selves, not excluding this one. I wonder if my past offenses will slip into the cracks of self-forgiveness on the grounds of temporary otherness. What if snakes kept all of their old skins around?

It was impossible to intellectualize, but even as a child I knew: Christmas was in a perpetual state of coming and leaving. It was there for just an instant, and then on around the sun. It was tragic to me that I couldn't keep it there. And that the next, well, it wasn't Christmas, not the same; it was something else. Five times removed, it's little me, receiving a guitar, actually dreaming about becoming a rockstar, and this is the only time I ever see my sister, and my father has gray in his beard.

Ten times removed, it is me collecting more books than I can fit on my shelf, and feeling unconscionably guilty about owning things and living in a nice house, while my sister is here with her husband and her new dog is in the backyard playing with our new dog – Scout passed away not so long ago – and I am finally old enough to want to be around my family, so of course they are all off so soon, back to their lives, and I wanted to stick around. By now I can't understand cameras, because how can they deal with the scope of life? It's merely a skeletal record, if that. No happy moments crystallized, the birthday boy mid-blow at the cake, no: merely images, points in time, placed in your photo album to overlap, like that Duchamp painting, or to fall through years, to boil away meaning, to split apart like an amoeba. *Carpe diem* has never seemed so trite, or stupid, or cruel.

If you live in the world long enough, ordinary memories start to give you the chills; you can hardly believe that you used to be you, and still are. My first memory is of my cousin cutting my hair and then getting in trouble. Is that any way to begin a life? There is a video of me that's freakish in its own way because I can see myself as I was then, but I can't remember it. The remembering has been done for me; does nobody else feel terrified at that fact? I am flopping in and out of a kiddie pool, shouting to no one, for pure joy of being. Perhaps it was one of those best days of my life that I purportedly used to have. I am talking to my father all the while – he is holding the camera – and it's impossible to understand what I am saying, but he does his best. I amuse him, and I should – I am his son, his itty bitty son. My brother comes out, but then turns to leave, uninterested. I follow him to the house, but he closes the door in front of me. He taunts me through the window, and my sister is there in the kitchen. "Open the door!" I say. I say it again and again, not too upset but certainly perplexed. They all see me (what of the man holding the camera?), but they do nothing. I repeat myself and nothing happens. "Open the door!" I say. Why won't anyone open the door?

SELECTIONS FROM THINGS THAT CAN'T BE TAKEN BACK

Zach VandeZande

The daydream girl

These kinds of things always seem to happen to me. A girl falls fourteen stories, yeah, she's gonna land on my car. And there she is, all nestled in the hood that's wrapped her up like warm blankets, kind of half-smiling but you know something's off because her neck's turned a little funny, but get this, eyes closed, no blood, just a beautiful, sad girl in a red sun dress asleep on my car. It's enough to make a guy drop his latte. Really just a special moment.

I imagine it sounded like when you push on a cookie sheet and then it pops back into place, but deeper. I was on the wrong side of a plate-glass window at the time and didn't hear anything. She just came into the frame and disappeared into my car the way a stone wrapped in a red flag would, say China's. What I instead heard was the air being sucked out of the room by a dozen coffee-breathed mouths and one "Oh God."

Everybody kind of stayed put, but I got up and walked over to the door and opened it. My car was honking that slow, plaintive alarm that comes factory-installed, not one of those aftermarket sirens that are only good for scaring cats away. I remembered I'd left my keys inside on the table. I thought the horn fit, anyway—I was just going to turn it off because that's how we maintain social order.

I looked at her for a long time. She had nice skin, almost translucent. Her shoes looked expensive. I'd say she looked like a model, but her nose was too big for it. There's always something. People were gathering around, watching out of windows, you know, the way a city does when it isn't something they can do anything about and therefore don't have to ignore.

I thought this would be a great love story, if only, and maybe I did fall in love with her a little bit. Anyhow I couldn't stop studying her face. The girl with dark hair and a secret. I wished she could fly.

Poor Richard pretended he was important too

My job when we met and for a little bit after was I wrote maxims that were printed on the side of paper cups, which what more honest thing was there than decorating future garbage with empty wit? I took ironic pleasure in it, had pictures of Franklin and Rochefoucauld on my desk, thumbed through almanacks looking for a saying worth modernizing.

Like what, she said, an email in the inbox is worth two on the server? This while she cut up onions in my dank and cluttered downtown apartment with me making rice. Normally I would make fun of my work too, but on a fourth date cooking dinner together I didn't much want to feel ridiculous about my worthless job and how I took such pride in it in secret. She said I'm sorry that was pretty bitchy wasn't it, and I said no, I know I'm superfluous, a cheap appropriator.

She said she liked little touches in the day, the way it made a brain seem worth having. She sniffled from the onions and I pushed the button on the rice cooker, and then we were turned around and kissing, which the kitchen was small enough that we didn't have to step towards each other to do it.

We kissed like that for a minute, her breath a little sour and mine probably too. I wondered what she was thinking there with her eyes closed and her tongue playful, whether she was thinking how she meant what she said or how else she would have to patronize me or if she was even not thinking at all, like what if she was able to enjoy a thing for what it was, what if when she kissed she just thought about the kiss? I didn't know what to do with someone like that.

Remind me to remind you

We got two Sharpie markers and went into the bedroom. The first thing she did was write boyfriend on my forehead, then she frowned and licked her finger and smudged the word around with it. It felt odd the way my skin pulled around my skull. She wrote another word but wouldn't tell me what it was.

From there you might call it madness, the way we wrote all over each other's bodies. We put things we believed and things we hoped to believe up and down our arms. The feet and the legs below the knee were for verbs that we found fitting. Nouns went above to the middle of the thigh. I wrote love in the crease behind her knee and she laughed and said I was cheating by not choosing a category. When we ran out of white space we discarded our

clothes and kept on.

Our backs were full of promises. Our chests had space for inside jokes and favorite memories and crude drawings of dinosaurs. I wrote the word “mine” on the inside of her leg where it met the tender parts of her and she smiled. It’s what she’d written on my forehead.

When we were covered over completely with the things we knew about each other we tossed the markers aside and made love, giving in to what was beneath and above the language, knowing the words were true—how could they be anything else but true—but knowing more that the best of all things could be told without words.

What forever means when you really mean it

She had this thing she would do where she would kiss the palm of my hand in the morning that was pretty great. The way her head turned away from me but still found me. Did I tell you this yet? I feel like I told you all this.

Okay I don’t care I’m telling it again. You have to picture it. The sun is coming in all over the room on account of how I never put up curtains. Curtains, they prompt me toward sleeping in. She is mostly on top of me, yeah you can figure why, but the real thing is that she takes my arm and raises it a few inches to her lips, and I see her there in profile, in silhouette, and it’s like ten in the morning and there’s no coffee brewing yet even but all the terrible things I’ve ever been through seem worthwhile in that single second, that image burned ferociously into my brain as this is what she is.

But look I feel like I am losing the point here, which is that the things that used to be true that are no longer true are no less true then. And I am sitting here punching myself repeatedly in the mouth with a drink, a double whiskey coke, trying to tell you this story like it is the answer to the whole question of what happened. Which that isn’t even a question is what I’m going to say after I finish this drink and come back with another. For now, though, I am going to sit and look out over the smoke-filled room and think how lovely, all these people, all this pain and stuff inside of them, how it doesn’t ever really get out, but how they keep trying.

Michelle Spencer · *Sleep 1*



MORNING BELLS

Christie Bingham

Let us go to the first blue of childhood,
to the hallway between my room and yours—

I measured each step between them, counted every creak
of the floor with the precision of a metronome.

And who could say that you weren't behind the door?
That God had not opened his eye only to find you sleeping.

Chances are you'd be waking to the chime of the clock—
But I could not turn the brass knob, could not bear to see

what God had seen, could not abide the sound of bells tolling.



Lori Giesler · *ITYP 6*

THE LAST NUT IN THE WORLD

Susan Blick

The acorns made small explosions as I pulled across the parking lot and took the last spot in the shade. As I parked, I heard a final boom as one fell from the tree, bounced off the roof of my car and, hatless, rolled wobbly down my windshield. It lodged in the well beyond the wiper blade. I turned to the backseat to gather my books for class.

There was a loud thump and then a soft scratching like when a dog paws at a door. He was up there walking, his nails clicking on metal. His pointed chin appeared in the window. He walked down in slow motion, haltingly, braced like a mime against the wind, his hands and feet pressed to the glass to prevent sliding. He inched down the face of the windshield exposing his underbelly, soft and golden.

I supposed he followed it down, had been sitting on the limb and watched as the acorn dropped. It was as if he had to have it. He knew exactly where it was. I watched him as he straddled the gap between the glass and the hood. Like a mechanic, he poked his head in, and then he laid his long body along the ridge and extended his arm toward the pale green prize.

With the sun reflecting off the glass, I imagined he couldn't see me. I watched his small arm swing in the gap and his elbow bend. I thought, "Huh. Squirrels have elbows." His hand came up empty. He adjusted the angle of his body. He tried again. This time he was flatter. The fur on his back fluttered in the breeze, and his tail trailed out behind him. He strained, but still he could not reach it. He gathered himself and sat on my hood with his tail curled in a question mark. He had a quizzical look on his face and made noises with his cheeks and tongue – tsk, tsk.

I looked down at my watch. When I looked up, he was looking at me. One dark pool. We looked at each other. He blinked. At the risk of disturbing him, I cracked the car door open. He didn't budge. As I got out, he retreated to the passenger side of the hood. He chided me and then he made a noise I had never heard before and can't quite describe except to say it was almost a growl. I closed the door and walked away. I wondered if he was mad.

A baby-faced kid climbing into a BMW said, “It’s going to scratch your paint.” I looked back and saw the squirrel stretched out on my hood, head down in the hole.

“It’s okay,” I replied. “He can destroy it if he wants.” And I kept on walking. The kid shrugged and shook his head. I think he thought I was mad, and I thought perhaps he was too young to understand so I didn’t explain. I’m not crazy. I just know what it feels like to want something that’s close and out of reach.



Angie Eichenberger · *Feigned Apathy*

IN MY GRASP AND OUT OF MY HANDS

Jarrold Wade

One of the first and only memories I have of my great-grandfather is him being so upset at the end of the 1987 World Series when the Cards lost in seven games to the Minnesota Twins. Broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, with reddish hair and a big nose, he had the typical look of a man of Southern-German descent. When Willie McGee grounded out to end the seventh game, handing the championship to Minnesota, he calmly stood up, turned off the big wooden console television set, and walked outside to say words my mother had to constantly remind him I was not allowed to hear. He died shortly thereafter. I'm not completely blaming his death on the loss, but I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say Kirby Puckett killed my great-grandfather. Cheering for the Cards in the World Series is among my most cherished memories, and they definitely hold a special place in my heart because of that fact. I try to carry on the family tradition as best I can.

However, if pressed on the issue, I would probably say I lean towards the Texas Rangers if just through ease of access and familiarity. I've lived in the North Texas area all my life and the Rangers are always on tv, on the Radio, or a short drive to Arlington away. It's this opportunity to watch the games in person that's made me a Rangers fan. Every time I step through those gates, like that old Foreigner song, it feels like the first time. The sight and smell of freshly-cut emerald grass, the sharp chalk lines painted on the dirt, the collective "ohh" on every deep fly ball, the colorful uniforms, the calls of "ball, strike, safe, out, whaddya mean I'm out?": they all fill my soul with that life-giving Zen energy that most people are only lucky enough to get from that first kiss...that first love...that first lay. Heaven is a baseball stadium.

I can count on one hand the amount of Rangers games I've completely missed out on since I was a child. It's my firm belief that I was the first second-grader ever to run headphones down the length of my sleeve and rest my head in such a way so I could listen to a ballgame in school. Don't worry about fact checking that. Just take my word for it.

By the time I was in high school and had a car, I found it was much more fun when the Rangers had a home game during the day to skip school *Ferris-Bueller* style and watch it in person. A group of friends and I would buy the five-dollar seats in the third deck in left field and always sneak down to something better, taking advantage of the light attendance. I almost didn't graduate because I missed senior English so many times, but they let me make it up in Saturday detention. It's not my fault it was in a competing timeslot with the ballgames. They play those things right after lunch. What was I supposed to do?

■ ■ ■

“Yeah, buddy, you got the foul ball, but you're the biggest jerk in the park.”

I didn't know those words by Tom Grieve, the Texas Rangers' color commentator for television, would affect my life so much, but they did. On June 13, 2004, the Rangers and Cardinals were playing an interleague game. I was watching on television, tortured by my divided loyalties, and the damndest thing happened. A man named Matt Starr jumped over a row of seats to get a foul ball, almost crushing a four-year-old boy in the process. He raised his arms in celebration. The crowd booted. He decided that wasn't enough and went into full WWE heel mode and waved at the crowd, egging them on and celebrating more. Tom Grieve unleashed a rant for the ages culminating in the above spoken line, and I thought to myself, “Yeah, Tom. You tell that asshole.”

YouTube was still eight months away, but a clip of the broadcast found its way onto the internet. ESPN, FOX Sports, and even *Good Morning America* picked up on the story. Eventually, somebody released Mr. Starr's personal information to the ravenous wolves of the internet, and life as he knew it was over.

■ ■ ■

On May 7, 1992, things were different. It was time to celebrate the ninth anniversary of my appearance on this planet, and consequently, the Arlington Little League nine-and-ten-year-old division Yankees brought to you by Mr. Gatti's Pizza were going to Arlington Stadium to watch the Rangers play against the Cleveland Indians. Life was awesome. We sat in section T, which in those days was in the lower section of the bleachers in right-center field. I didn't care that they weren't good seats. When my parents asked where I wanted to sit, that's where I chose to be. It was my birthday after all, and sitting in right field would give me

the best view of the baddest man on the whole planet, Ruben Sierra (henceforth referred to as “El Caballo”). Despite what you might read on baseball-reference.com these days, it’s a well-known fact that El Caballo was at least ten feet tall and had arms as big as tree trunks. He could hit a baseball a quarter mile, sprint out and catch that same ball before it landed, and then throw it through a brick wall just because it was there. Women wanted him, and men wanted to *be* him. Of course, when I was nine years old I had no clue what that meant. All I knew was that I wanted to grow up to be a big Puerto Rican and play baseball for a living. That didn’t really work out.

With two outs in the top of the third inning and the Rangers leading four to three, El Caballo caught a long fly ball right in front of my seat in the front row for the last out.

“RUBEN! RUBEN! THE BALL!” I yelled, along with everyone else. Didn’t they know it was my birthday?

El Caballo turned around just before he started jogging in and pointed as he tossed the ball into the crowd. Was he pointing at me? Of course he was. It was my birthday! The ball on its magical flight was coming right at me: little ol’ nine-year-old me, standing in the aisle, wearing my Texas Rangers shirt and glove in the ever optimistic hope that one day I would be among the chosen few to get a ball from the game and join that elite fraternity of ball owners, which consisted of everyone else who ever got one. I would learn the special “I got a ball”-club handshake. When I would pass someone else on the street who had a ball from the game, we would both nod just to acknowledge the special moment between two strangers. You could tell which people had a ball from the game just by looking at them. People who had a ball from the game walked taller. People who had a ball from the game had a spring in their step, even when it wasn’t spring. They smiled bigger. Their food tasted better. People gave them high fives everywhere they went, and they never had to wait in line to play Street Fighter at the arcade, simply because they got a ball from the game. Granted, this ball wasn’t a walk-off homerun ball, but it was enough at least to get me into the club. Either way, today was the day I would get mine. Nobody would ever believe the story of how I got a ball from the game on my birthday. Then I would pull it out and be all, “Bam, sucker!”

A ball from the game was a trump card in any disagreement. Get caught cheating at Monopoly? Ball from the game. Need an extra day or two to finish a book report in your fourth-grade language arts class? Ball from the game. Not happy with your grade on the book that report you turned in late? Ball from the game. I would get the best seats at any restaurant. At Mr. Gatti's Pizza after our Little League games on Fridays, I would always get the seat with the best view of the tv. If someone was there before me, I would pull out my ball, and they would politely excuse themselves and beg for my forgiveness. I would be like Zeus or Superman. I could be Superzeus.

Wait. The ball. My ball. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like it was going a little high. I guess El Caballo wasn't perfect, but no matter. I was sure someday he would get a ball from the game and things would turn around for him, as well. I took a backwards step up the stairs. No, that wouldn't do. I took another step up. Another. On the next step, I stretched with all my might. I reached as high as I possibly could. "Oh poop," my nine year-old mind screamed.

I fell.

I looked up in despair as my best friend Zach's dad reached down and picked up the ball in the aisle. Certainly, he would give it to the kid who was celebrating his birthday and whose idea it was to sit out in the bleachers in the first place and without whom he would have never had access to such a treasure. That mustachioed devil did not. Seeing that ball, my ball, one time on my former best friend Zach's shelf was as close as I ever got to it again. When El Caballo was traded to Oakland later that same year, I shed no tears over his departure.

■ ■ ■

On September 30, 2004, I was twenty-one years old and taking what I thought at the time was only one semester off from school. Depending on whose story you believe, I could have been asked not to come back, but either way...not in school. My friend Gabe called me and asked if I wanted to go to the Rangers game at the Ballpark that afternoon. I didn't even have to trade my next ten minutes of air for the seat. It was the Rangers' last home game in yet another wasted year ending in a third-place finish. I thought, "Well, I've certainly got nothin' going on today. I've already woken up and that was everything on my to-do list. Why not?"

It was a beautiful fall afternoon, which seemed specially made for baseball. Clear skies. Maybe seventy-five degrees? Glorious. We arrived, and I got my beer and hotdog and settled in for an afternoon of ball. It was definitely a light crowd. In my section in the third deck behind home plate, it was only Gabe and myself. We were sitting on the front row. The only people within 100 feet of us were in the section to our left and a few rows back. It was a boy of probably nine or ten and what appeared to be his grandmother. On a school day. In the second inning, Jeff Davanon of the Angels was up to bat, and he fouled one back. “Huh,” I thought, “That’s pretty high. Nothing’ll reach up here, though.”

I was wrong. The ball thudded into the row behind me maybe twenty feet to my right. I set down what was left of my beer and calmly walked over to the ball and grabbed it out from under the seat where it had landed. I thought I saw a second hand reaching for the ball, but who the hell knows. I had my long-awaited trophy in my possession, instantly remembering that day more than a dozen years previous and thinking, “It’s about time.”

Something, however, was amiss. That second hand I saw? That couldn’t have been a real hand. I was certain it was perfectly reasonable explanation that someone happened to lose a prosthetic arm in this section the night before. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. That other hand I saw was attached to that juvenile delinquent who was skipping school to watch a baseball game with his grandmother. I stood up and looked at the ball from the game I at long last held in my hand, burning the image into my memory. I hung my head, and tossed the ball up into the next row, receiving a nice ovation from the sparse crowd, who clearly remembered what had happened several months before when Mr. Starr, the bastard, had almost crushed the four-year-old. I guess some recognition of doing the right thing is always nice, even if every part of who I am was screaming to keep the ball. As far as I know, the little shit has probably flushed it down the toilet by now or thrown it through a store window so he could burgle the place and support his heroin addiction.

My right hand would not stop shaking. I was so unnerved by giving up the ball that I was losing control of my own body. I drank another beer. It wouldn’t stop. I drank yet another beer. It still wouldn’t stop. Another. My right hand shook for the next four innings. Speaking of

drinking, would it have hurt so much to buy a beer for the guy who gave your grandchild a ball from the game? It never came. The kid never even said thank you when I gave it to him. He just ran off. At the very least, nobody posted my home address, my phone number, and where I worked for an angry crowd full of righteous fury on the internet. It was my lifelong dream. Hell, I guess it still is my lifelong dream. I was holding the release valve to twelve years of frustration right in the palm of my hand. I had no choice but to give it up.

One foot leads, the other
swallows sand.
In tune, we stand, toes teetering toward water.
Stuck on land. Shadows
extend fingers. We grasp them with human hands,
and cradle warmth
to keep us crazy.
Ripples roll in. We whisper big plans:
the world.

Swimsuits chill our skin.
Cross-legged on a picnic table,
we eat smoke for dinner;
it tastes of hickory fire
and ash.
We slip in slowly to sunless water and wade
over mud, rough rocks and weeds
like devious children laughing
at the shore. When we leave,
we have forgotten shadows. A horizon creeps
beneath our eyelids.
We leave no footprints in that sand.



Andrew Currey · *Conquered*

CLASSROOM WALL, WITH VOICE

Lucas Strough

None of these summer girls are flyers
despite their avian shoulder blades,
bare because of the hot weather.

From behind, they look
like plucked birds,
skin taut over growing wings
on either side of their spines.

For an hour a day I listen—
in them, the sighs of the flightless.
Prayers for necessity and nests
and other fictions
so rare and easy to let slip.
I begin to think

that as I contain them I change them,
I clip their wings.
It is because of my enclosure,
a familiar construct,
that they accept limitation.

The vast share of them
will grind their nails dull
on pavement,
wandering off into late hours.

Insomniacs will witness this
but only as sound—
white sound, ancient,
click-click.

I CAN POINT YOU IN THE DIRECTION OF ANYTHING

Aaron Case

I gotta tell ya, I was like Vanna White with those cigarettes. Those cigarettes that were arranged like some Spanish—maybe Greek?—tile mosaic on the wall that I always lazily posed in front of. Fully equipped with an itchy blue polo showing that yeah, I work here and all; tight pinstriped pants showing that I work here and I'm damn good at it; name tag, bannered with red letters shouting in all capitals—*CUSTOMER! SERVICE! REPRESENTATIVE!*—showing that I work here and I'm damn good at it and I'm *somebody*.

“Gimme three Pall Malls. Soft pack,” says a squinted smoker's voice—a voice that tells me she must buy all of her clothes here, too. I reached behind my shoulders and imagined myself as Ms. White—in heels of course—spinning those bright consonants without even looking, and everyone cheered as each one revealed one more piece of the puzzle, and I rung them up, and she bought them, and I said thank you like I always do, even though she did nothing for me, and she left with a Mall sort of walk—sort of like disgruntled sleepwalking—and disappeared into the night, swarming with moths feeding on the streetlights. Those goddamned cigarettes.

Air Supply was wailing as usual over the intercom: *I can't llllllllllve, if livin' is without you!* Trying their best to color the beige air with their quavering tin voices. I heard the glass sliding door open and saw a group of three teenage boys without a clue carrying a load of forced, acned faces, younger than me, decorated in parent-approved punk band t-shirts and self-torn jeans. Their hair thick with oil. I vomited my feigned interest at them by welcoming them to Walgreens, then continued cleaning, as store manager, Rick—of all names—expects me to have a good three aisles organized before I can leave. It's important that the gummy worms aren't off swimming with the Swedish fish.

As I was hanging up some renegade knockoff Crocs, I heard the familiar crescendo of an airy nasal laugh floating past a bristled pubescent mustache and the smell of too-much aerosol deodorant, peer pressure, and onion.

“Excuse me, do you guys sell toys here?” He was wearing a Relient K t-shirt and braces, his buds wearing Simple Plan and Blink 182, laughing, picking at the scabs on their face.

“Toys? Sure, what kind of toys?” I said, pinching the ingenuity out of my voice. I could point him in the direction of anything. Apple sauce? Aisle 9, on the left side in between the dehydrated fruits and iodized salt. Charcoal? Aisle 5, toward the back, on the bottom shelf, underneath the pesticide and pet food. Birthday candles—

“Um, you know, adult toys,” his dignity wilted along with the whisper of his voice.

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“Um, you know, like, dildos?” Relient K’s eyes squinted at the word as if it were far away. His audience began to dissipate. A mountainous orgy of Beanie Babies was all that was watching him now, with a series of black, beady choking hazards.

“Well, how big are we talking here? You’re kind of young, so, you might want to take baby steps, maybe start with—”

“Dude, no, no, no, man, I’m not queer, I mean, no, you got it all wrong. It’s for my girlfriend. It’s for my *girlfriend!*” You’d be surprised how many times people have asked me for vibrators at Walgreens. This was the second time. The first time, the bitch was serious. Man, was she serious.

“Listen,” she said over the phone, a line of customers gathering before me—most of them with children—her voice a cross between Joan Rivers and a local Dodge dealership commercial. “You got ‘em or don’t you? I ain’t gonna drive all that way for nothin’. You know, with rising gas prices.” Everything could be blamed on rising gas prices. Apparently, even the ability to masturbate.

Relient K’s friends were obviously no longer interested in his prank as they walked toward the register, cradling batches of Monster Energy drink and dehydrated pastries on the edge of expiration. Graham Russell’s voice scraped across the walls like some tired kid raking leaves made of iron: *I can’t give anymoooooore!*

“For your *girl*/friend, huh?” He had to have been thirteen at the most, but I guess you never really can tell.

“Yeah, man, it’s crazy. I know.”

“Aisle 3, on the left side, past the lotions and facial cream.” He walked away in the direction of my arm, disappearing into the field of fluorescent lights. This is where we keep the religious candles, you know, the really tall ones that the Catholics light. I don’t know, it just seemed like the right thing to do. I pictured a tall, dark, and convex St. Guadalupe smugly looking at Relient K’s speckled face. I think that’s the day Air Supply became my favorite band.



SELECTIONS FROM THINGS THAT CAN'T BE TAKEN BACK

Zach VandeZande

Warming your hands at the burned bridge

I had that queasy feeling I sometimes get, or maybe it's more just an anxious feeling, like it felt like something was going on right under the skin, like what, in the subdermal layer. This guy was talking to me in an overtly male way. He was pointing himself at me with words as if he were a gun. I thought of him as the kind of guy who would gesture with a drink in his hand, not worried about spills found the next day or whatever, but actually he was really conscientious about it, and the carpet stayed dry of his crown and coke while he asked me if I was a faggot.

Which I was not a faggot, and really I was one of those people who understood that a word like that had an unacceptable weight of hatred because words kind of made the world, gave things form, you know like will to power or whatever. This was about as good as I could have explained it at the time, and so when she laughed nervously and didn't get boily angry along with me I kept quiet and stared hard into my drink and felt the feeling I was talking about at the beginning.

Look, never mind, some things aren't worth cataloging. Someone made me feel like a middle-school chump at a party and I am here assigning blame like it's fair. Like I've not said my own hateful things. Like she could even say or do anything to change this dumbfuck story that she's not even really the issue of, by the way. So look, you can scratch all of this, scratch driving home shitty with drink, scratch the feeling of knowing we were not talking at that frozen moment at the red light while a bit of defrosted ice ran down the windshield like an escapee, scratch how upset and apologetic she was about a guy she didn't even know who just happened to be at her friend's party, how she bore the responsibility and shame and anger that belonged to someone else, and she bore it for me. Especially scratch that.

Delivering all the dead letters

She was suddenly full of words all the time, like there was a pressure on her sternum pushing them bubbling out of her mouth. A happy plague of sentences is what. It lasted for three weeks or so before slowly dying off as she came to realize that the things she talked about didn't have any weight, which they didn't, but they did.

But those three weeks. At first it was a kind of miracle, the way we suddenly found ourselves awash in things to talk about after months of dry land. She told childhood stories, ones I'd never heard, like the one about the inflatable pool or the one about her dog eating a whole turkey and throwing up in her bed or the one about her uncle hanging her over the banister by her ankles and talking like he was Hans Gruber, which these were warm and film-grained memories that filled in the darkened places. She told about her dreams and her fears and how some of them were the same thing. She told little things, white truths, honey-thick and without fear of judgment or the pain of human loneliness.

You would think that after all those silent clinking dinners that I would have fallen in love all over again, that what would have happened would have been a soft slipping away of all the barbs and resentment. But come on. By week two I was on the couch watching tv asking her to wait for the commercial, but wait, have you seen this commercial? I was staying late at work, which I didn't even have the excuse that it was my career. Week three saw the birth of mocking uh-huhs and rolled eyes. It's funny the way we commit these tiny assassinations again and again. Actually I guess it's not funny. But it happened.

Life is sad. Here is someone.

The water was running along the eaves and dripping, raindrops as racecars. I stood there under the shelter looking up at them, how there are tiny dramas going on all around us that we fail to notice. I'm sure I looked pretty dumb to the other people coming out of baggage claim and looking around for old friends.

She pulled up in her fading Volvo and I fast walked over, taking a long step off the curb but still hitting the outside edge of a deep puddle. I got in and gave her one of those awkward getting-into-the-car-after-not-seeing-each-other-for-a-week-and-missing-each-other-even-though-all-we-did-these-days-was-fight-all-the-time hugs. The windshield

wipers clacked out the passage of time, and I bit the inside of my cheek.

The way she drove was squirrely with hard manual shifts that were fun for her, how she pretended at the precision of a machine, but caused me to tense my legs against the glove compartment. She said she was feeling drab and kind of sleepy, so I should talk, just say whatever came up.

I thought for a second and then said I like that poem by Tao Lin, the one about stealing from Lorrie Moore. I said I could relate as a writer. She said I was so full of shit sometimes with the self-involved writer stuff, which was said lightheartedly. I didn't take it that way. A minute went by and I said sometimes I felt like I was dying faster than everybody else, and she laughed. She slammed on the brakes because the people in front of us had all slammed on their brakes. The wipers clacked at each end of their circuit.

Right then I almost told her about staring out the window of the plane watching the diorama landscape unfold, clouds over land, and realizing that there was nothing much for me these days, how maybe love was a finite supply of civility and trust and tensed knees in car rides. That all we had left was empty companionship and someone to pick us up from the airport. Instead, I asked her how work was going, and I listened.

She got what was coming for not going

I had a mouth full of mistakes that I was going to drop over our conversation like a sad and reckless payload, landing wherever they may. Maybe it was a mark of who I am or maybe it was just gender patterns that I thought in war metaphors a lot of the time, but at any rate it didn't much help me being drunk and more than a little bitter.

I thought the central problem of the human condition is everybody gets raised all fucking wrong, one way or another. I thought it while I sat on the bathroom tile leaning against the tub with her standing over me, I thought we're all miserable, we all hurt and hurt and hurt, which I meant that as transitive and intransitive both. It was a goddamn reflex for me to say what I was about to say, and then all the things that eventually came after, like what was I but one of those sea anemones, if those are the ones that just react to the current all the time and jerk their tendrils in at the sign of danger. I don't know, I'm no zoologist.

But let's watch this how it played out through the way my brain saw everything as growing constantly like an optical illusion and my words slurred a little and I stopped mid-sentence to consider if I was or was not saying something I wanted to say. I didn't look at her face was all, I was brave enough to say the stupid thing but not enough to see what it did. I didn't see the way her concern for me, the same concern that had held fast all the way home from the party, through my half-conscious singing of songs that weren't on the radio and my pulling her hair by mistake, I didn't see that concern become a deep and shriveling pain when I said the only reason anybody would talk about your paintings is because you look like a go-to-the-back-bedroom-and-give-a-blowjob kind of girl, so don't expect that guy to actually call his gallery friend. And then I was in the bathroom alone, head lolled back on a loose neck thinking about what it would feel like to throw up my whole vocabulary and never speak again.



Erin Page · *In Memory*

HOMECOMING

Christopher Sims

My brother-in-law was the only person on earth who could have possibly wanted to go to my high-school homecoming less than me.

“You still going tonight?” he asked over the phone.

“I didn’t know I ever was going.”

“Uh-huh—sweet man, so, I’ll meet ya’ll over there after I leave the office.”

He had managed to escape all but one half of a game during his ten years with my sister. Now, they had a kid, and she was determined to get her family there Friday night. So, for his sake, I set down the video game controller, crawled into my closet, came out wearing something like an outfit, and went to my first high-school homecoming game.

Hours later, we pulled onto the familiar campus where every square acre, every building and *every* hiding place is of no secret to me. I’m sure I could draw a rough blueprint of Dallas Christian School blindfolded and dosed with sedatives. Once we drove through the front gate a smiling face greeted us. It was Gary, the school’s do-it-all man, and he guided us to an empty parking space. I felt like I knew Gary very intimately from the two years he had driven me, along with the rest of the varsity soccer team, all around the DFW metroplex. Unlike most bus drivers, Gary had sat in the stands and watched all of our games in their entirety. We had teased the captain of the team, Barrett, because his mom always sat next to Gary. So, because we had never met Barrett’s dad, we had joked that he was the bus driver’s illegitimate son. I smiled and waved to Gary, but I could tell he didn’t recognize me. For him, we were just another car to park, some more ungrateful alumni—faces in a yearbook.

Our parking spot was in a large field on the campus outskirts that we used to call The Cow Pasture. The team had had to practice on this battered and broken, piece-of-trash acre of land even after football had ended because their coach hadn’t wanted us “Lawn Fairies” to tear up his sacred temple. Behind the Cow Pasture was its appropriately

named counterpart, The Barn: a giant, white, tin-can gymnasium that resembled something you would see on the Hallmark Channel; all it lacked were the haystacks and the old, tobacco spittin' farmhand properly seated in a rocking chair.

When I was in elementary school, the Barn's plumbing pipes had burst on a freezing day, spilling feces and an unknown white substance (I won't speculate on its makeup) out of the girls' locker room and all over The Cow Pasture. For a week, the entire school had stunk of something that would have blushed if you had called it vile.

We started walking toward the stadium, and my nephew ran on ahead of us, my brother-in-law chasing and playing with him in the field. I couldn't help but picture the two of them rolling around covered in that white, mystery crap. As we approached the stadium, I could hear the sound of the band playing and the announcer's voice exploding from the obviously new and improved PA system. I had dreamed before about what would happen if I ever came back to one of these things. Final glimpses of scenes from those dreams played in my head, but they had felt more real than this.

My old assistant principle manned the admissions table at the stadium entrance. Aside from having been my disciplinarian on school grounds, he had also been my old girlfriend's disapproving stepfather on the outside. I couldn't say which of us had felt weirdest about this conflict of interest, but I remembered the day he had called me into his office, armed to the teeth with policy and the student handbook.

"Truancy — do you understand what that word means, Chris?"

"Yeah, it means something about telling the truth, right?"

That had been In-School-Larry. Out-Of-School-Larry was the guy that walked into his stepdaughter's bedroom later that night, just about the time my hand was up her shirt.

"Stacy, could I have a word with you in the living room?"

I had wondered if he had given her the same truancy speech.

Five years later, he handed me my homecoming ticked stub, peering out at me from underneath his oversized ball-cap, and we both nodded without a word, a kind gesture acknowledging everything we had heard about each other through the grapevine: the stroke he survived that year, the same stepdaughter having pounded down his door with a bastard newborn and a bad habit, and my two hellish years in the city that left

me crawling back to my own mother's house.

Almost exactly a year before, I had come home to visit for Thanksgiving and somehow had ended up in his living room. His wife, a shapely Italian responsible for all the parts of her daughter I liked best, had received me with a conventional smooch on both cheeks.

"Hunny, hunny, when are you gonna get wise and move back down to God's country? How *anyone* could live in that forsaken place will forever be a mystery to me."

That had been the first time I thought I would never talk to any of those people again. I had fled the Promised Land, and my conscience was running thin. I wouldn't be able to keep secret that I had ridden the train all night sometimes because we had had no heat during our first violent winter or that we had thrown away all our rent money once to cut a demo with a singer that split town the same day we learned about her aspiring porn career.

Walking past Larry, through those gates, and into that stadium seemed like stepping through a dream portal of some past world, where all I needed to worry about was the definition of "truancy" and avoiding the cracks in The Cow Pasture during soccer practice.

This was God's country.

In the bleachers, my brother-in-law and I stood behind the band because it was the only place where my nephew would sit still and cease crying. (We found out days later that he had strep throat that night). I surveyed the crowd for a familiar face and saw a gorgeous, older blonde woman waving both hands at me like I was a plane and she was landing me. It was our class's Home Mother, Laurie. Her daughter, Emily, once a good friend of mine, whipped around to see who had caught her mother's attention. She saw me and joined in trying to land me. I made my way down to where they were sitting, and we began chatting about nothing. I had seen Emily at a bar during college, and after too many drinks I had asked her out. Now, sitting with her, having the same conversation we had had then, made me want to ask why she never called me about that date. But after she jumped up, mid-sentence, to cheer for her younger brother, who was streaking for the end zone, I decided to let it slide.

Her cheering caused me to take notice of what was happening on the field, something I hadn't done yet, up to that point. I wasn't

surprised to see a couple of my classmates coaching from the sidelines. Coming back to coach had always been the popular thing for jocks to do at DC. In fact, almost all of my coaches had been alumni. However, I was surprised at how tiny the players looked. I remembered how huge all the football guys had seemed to me when I was that age, and these kids didn't even compare. I envisioned myself now, as a twenty-three-year-old, tossing around those padded and numbered midgets.

My sister's face appeared over the shoulders in front of me and she mouthed something. All I could make out was, "should...go." Before following her, I tried to squeeze a little bit more out of my conversation with Emily. Maybe that date would happen after all.

At the bottom of the stairs, I ran into the homecoming queen of my class, Heather, and her husband, Jon, who I immediately recognized as the same idiot she used to drag around the halls. Heather still looked her cute, little self as she waved excitedly at me and smiled so big it could have popped out her deep-set, dark brown eyes. Still such a cheerleader. As she bounced toward me, I thought I saw the glimmer of a tooth strike from Jon's lips. I wasn't sure if this was a greeting or a doggish threat to stay off his territory.

"I saw your mom about a year ago in Macy's," she said.

"Yea, I heard that. So, you two are engaged now right?"

"Married," he barked.

I dodged.

"Did you miss Texas?" she asked.

You don't want me to answer that question, I thought.

I mentioned something about Southern hospitality, or being torn between here and there, or some sort of pre-made, decorated and packaged answer that I had fed to everyone who asked before them. Their eyes told me they were forgetting every word, right off my lips.

Somehow, I made it out of that conversation without getting punched in the teeth, and I started navigating through the crowd, looking for my sister. I found her in conversation with the high-school secretary who didn't manage to even glance my way as I joined them.

"Mrs. Cox, this is my little brother, Chris. I know he's hard to recognize with his hair so long."

"Oh, I knew it was him. I'm just shocked to see you; I didn't think you'd ever come back."

And it's so nice to see you, Coxy! How's your delinquent son doing? No, no—your youngest, the one who could never do any wrong as long as your parents' checkbook was readily accessible, I wanted to reply. In addition to being high-school secretary, she was, more importantly, the proud daughter of the school's number-one benefactors, so her name was plastered over a good portion of campus, and her son was among the poster boys and girls for the school, despite being the biggest douchebaggy troublemaker there. But aside from my repressed anger towards her, I couldn't help but notice how much she had aged since I graduated. Her eyes looked tired and overexposed; her jet-black hair was showing touches of gray and drooping over her leathery skin that used to be soft olive. All of a sudden, I didn't want to curse her out the way I had imagined and acted out so many times, drunk in my friends' backyards; I wanted to have coffee with her and talk about her new grandbabies and retirement. I felt just as stretched as she looked—just as old.

It was mostly quiet on the drive home. The little guy was beat from a full night of running away from his dad and crying hysterically whenever he was caught. I looked over at my sister; she looked worn out, but she was faintly smiling.

“Well, that was interesting,” I spoke softly.

“No joke, dude. Are you glad you went?”

“It was alright—sort of depressing though, to see all those people who I knew so well for eighteen years and know that none of us care enough to stay in touch outside of these types of things. You know?”

“Mmm, I don't like to go to try and rehash old relationships or anything. I go because I like to remember that place, and how—good and bad—it's part of me.”

ON TRYING AGAIN

Treavor Wagoner

It has been 5 years of riding this broken train,
reluctant to get off and gritting my teeth to try
but I am back on again—trudging along.
We have entered a new place in this world,
but all the old places are stuck in the corner of my eyes.

I am captivated by the scenery once more:
A golden sun atop mountains and
waving trees that pass us on,
I want it all in my hands to hold it forever.
Is it not enough to connect? To be near
not of?

You operate by strict fluidity: no form, no shape, no track
and there is nothing to brace myself for the turn;
this train. We are soul mates now;
until the last axle corrodes, we ride.
But where are you taking me?

THE WEREWOLF

Bonnie Stufflebeam

My tires recognize this road:
its curves, wrapping like teeth
'round the fire station, an empty cop car,

the playground where my first boy kissed me.
His lips, rotten meat in my mouth.
When I pass this place, sour stomach

bubbles into my throat, burning
the layer of lessons learned.
This town changes me. It hangs

like an unfinished moon when I'm away;
it swells when I creep closer.

The people here are concrete; they starve themselves
of blood. Their blood dulls my tongue.
I bite a chunk of that moon instead.

I've been starving since you
burrowed your face in my chest and told me,
take me anywhere. That was another town.

We swallowed miles like vodka,
and I wanted you to be more than a body
I dragged through my door. My tongue wept your name;

it dripped your sweat, and I licked
the clumps of fur abandoned by your hair,
wished I could rid myself of the taste:

stained skin, shredded muscle tissue, bone.
I never should've brought you here.



Zach Hale · *Frank Ink*



Zach Hale · *Frank Ink*

THE TROUBLE WITH GRANDPA

Andrew Starz

“Have a good day, Sarah,” the bus driver says. I realize something is horribly wrong almost as soon as I step off the bus. Of course the driver speeds off before I can get her attention. It’s been that kind of day. The mailman is down on the grass in our front lawn, clutching his stomach and worming around in pain. As I come closer I can make out irregular looking lines of scabs on his calves. Some of them have broken open and are slick with blood and dog slobber.

I kneel down next to the mailman, “Are you okay?” I ask without thinking. Of course he isn’t. “Is there anything I can do to help?” That’s better. Less moronic. “I could call an ambulance if you—”

He lunges for my throat, teeth snapping the air. I hit him with my backpack. Twenty pounds of science text makes for a fairly decent club. The mailman groans something incoherent at my back as I rush to the house. I check over my shoulder—he’s on his feet and shuffling after me, growling.

Mom and Dad are both at work; the door is locked. I fumble for the key, and I can feel him getting closer every second. And then, the lock clicks. I turn the knob and put my shoulder into the door. It doesn’t budge. The deadbolt!

I risk a second look. He’s almost on me. My hands are shaking, mailman’s face and twist the deadbolt closed again. There’s a muffled thump as he runs into the door. Then comes the sound of teeth breaking on wood as he starts gnawing into the oak paneling.

I make my way into the living room, sit down to catch my breath. There are windows along the back of our house; I can see the entire backyard from where I’m sitting. It’s deserted.

“Oh, no. He’s escaped.”

■ ■ ■

My grandfather is a zombie. Now I know what you’re thinking, and yes, I’m sure. He’s been clinically dead since 1993. It hasn’t slowed him down all that much. He still gets around okay, but now he smells

of moldering earth, formaldehyde and decaying flesh. It isn't his fault of course. Zombiism is not a laughing matter.

Grandpa was already at the funeral parlor when it happened. He'd already been through the preservatives and sent off to have his makeup put on when he sat up. It gave the makeup artist a heart attack. Probably for the best. She was dead before he bit her. No rising from the grave for her, no sir. Not like poor Aaron.

Aaron was a friend of my brother's from high school. His uncle died in a car crash the week before, and Grandpa came shuffling into the funeral blood drooling down his chest and craving fresh meat. Aaron tried to stop him, and Grandpa bit him in the face. They crashed into the casket and sent Aaron's uncle Jeff tumbling out across the carpet. I was in the back with Dad and the funeral director; we heard the commotion and came running.

Grandpa had Aaron down on the ground and was ripping chunks of flesh out of his arm. People were screaming and hollering and mostly running around useless. Dad grabbed the flower arrangement from the aisle and smashed Grandpa in the back with it. Knocked him clear off a shrieking Aaron. His false teeth stayed behind, knotted around Aaron's collarbone.

Dad and the funeral director managed to get grandpa wrapped up in the velvet rope they used to cordon off the front couple of rows that were reserved for Aaron's family. Mrs. Stephenson was leaning over Aaron trying to get him to calm down, but he was already changing. It was a lucky thing Officer Davis showed up when he did.

Officer Davis was the D.A.R.E. officer for my school, and at first he thought Grandpa and Aaron were on drugs or something. He had us take them to the hospital, had them tied down on gurneys. The doctors took some blood, and when they came back, they said Aaron wasn't on anything. They said something almost under their breath to Officer Davis about embalming fluid, but I couldn't make out what it was. Mom finally showed up with a video tape, and after a moment of general milling around, she popped it in the wall-mounted TV/VCR. Dad put his hand over my eyes to stop me from watching. I managed to peek through his fingers a little. Officer Davis watched the TV intently,

his eyes darting back and forth from the screen to Grandpa, to Aaron and then back. After a moment, he grunted.

“Huh,” he said, and took off his hat and scratched his head a little. “Don’t that just beat all.” Dad took me out of the room then and we sat in the hall, while Officer Davis said whatever it was he was saying. Looking back on it, I can tell he was swearing everybody to secrecy to avoid a panic, even the doctors and the nurses.

■ ■ ■

We had to put sheets over them to sneak them back out of the hospital, and Grandpa tried to eat the sheet all the way down the elevator. Aaron almost bit his mom’s hand when we were putting him in the trunk of their car.

■ ■ ■

Mom and Dad got together with the Stephensons that night, deciding what to do about our little problem.

“Without his teeth,” my father said, “Hubert is perfectly safe. There’s no way for him to spread the contagion.”

Mr. Stephenson looked skeptical. “Well that’s fine for you! What are we supposed to do about our son?” Mrs. Stephenson started crying, which gave Mr. Stephenson the courage to go on. “What are we supposed to do? Chain him up in a shed and feed him table scraps through a slot in the door?” Mr. Stephenson’s voice cracked as he spoke.

“Either that or you kill him for good, like Officer Davis suggested,” Mom said, speaking up for the first time. “It seems like I’m the only one here who’s ever seen a zombie movie! He’s not your son anymore, Miriam, so stop that crying!”

“You insensitive bitch!” Mrs. Stephenson sobbed. “What if it had been your daughter?”

Mom looked at my hiding spot, eyes dark. She somehow pointed directly at me. “Go to bed!”

■ ■ ■

That was the first time I ever heard the word “zombie.” I didn’t really know what it meant, I thought—I don’t know what I thought it could mean. I just remember thanking god we didn’t have to lock Grandpa up in a shed, like the Stephensons had to with Aaron. Then I remember giggling that Aaron’s mom had said a swear.

We keep my grandpa in the back yard because you can't open the gate from inside. We made sure. We even put a lock on if we have to go out of town.

Somebody must have let him out on purpose.

■ ■ ■

Grandpa lost his arm in the late nineties. It was my tenth birthday; grandpa was shuffling around the back yard, moaning and gumming party guests at random. Zombie stuff mostly. Barry Westfield, the boy from across the street, thought having a zombie for a grandpa was the best thing ever. He was always letting Grandpa almost catch him, then he'd scamper away laughing. I'm ashamed to admit I thought it was cute. For some reason Barry thought it'd be funny to play trip-the-zombie.

Grandpa had never been a tough guy, and three years of slow decay hadn't helped things. His left arm snapped like kindling, just above the elbow, when he tried to break his fall. Nobody noticed at first because Grandpa didn't moan or anything, even when the sheared off bone split open the meat of his arm and puss started oozing out.

"Oh, cool," Barry said, "that's so gross!" Eventually he tired of the spectacle and ran back over to the party. "Your Grandpa hurt his arm. The bone is poking out. Wanna go see?"

I'd had a crush on Barry for weeks, so naturally I was going to say yes. But Mom overheard, and she wouldn't have any of that.

"Sarah, run and get my sewing kit. Tell your father Grandpa broke his arm." Mom was so businesslike that I didn't realize right then just how serious it was. By the time I grabbed Mom's sewing kit from the bedroom, Dad had gotten some cold hamburgers out of the fridge and was waving them in front of Grandpa, keeping him distracted so Mom could work on the busted arm.

■ ■ ■

Mom's makeshift repairs didn't hold for long, and the arm fell off entirely after about a week. We burned it. You can never be too careful with zombie parts. Dad wanted to roast marshmallows over the fire, but Mom yelled at him, and he sighed and put them back in the cupboard.

■ ■ ■

The phone rings. I feel like I'm being watched, but I answer it just after the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Joanne? It’s Miriam Stephenson.”

“Sorry. This is Sarah. You want my mom.”

“Is she there?”

“No. She has work until five.” She really should know better.

“I really need to talk to her. It’s important.”

“You can leave a message if you want. I’ve got a pen somewhere.”

“Just tell your mother that... that Aaron got loose.”

“So did my Grandpa,” I say. “You don’t think Aaron let him out, do you?”

“I don’t know, Sarah. I guess it’s possible. I don’t know what to do... about Aaron I mean. He bit Nathan—my husband, so I—I had to shoot him.”

“He turned into a zombie too? Omigosh! So did our mailman!” I realize it was grandpa slobber on his calves, not dog slobber. Something to remember.

“What? I—y-yes, of course. He turned into a zombie too.”

“We should call the police. Officer Davis—”

“It’s no use, dear,” Mrs. Stephenson cuts me off. “I already tried. They said we have to wait at least twenty-four hours before filing a missing-persons report.” She sobs into the phone. “They just laughed at me when I tried to tell them my son was a zombie. I think they thought I was being metaphorical.” It sounds like she’s about to lose it.

■ ■ ■

So I leave Mom a note, get my brother’s old baseball bat, and run outside and hit the zombie mailman in the head. He wobbles, but he doesn’t fall down, so I wind up and hit him again. And again. I know I break his neck with the third shot because he just sort of falls to the ground and stops moving. He still growls a little, but he’s not going to be out trying to eat anybody again any time soon. I drag him into the garage and get on my bike and head over to Aaron’s house. I can’t wait until I get my learner’s permit next month.

■ ■ ■

Mrs. Stephenson opens the door. “Oh, Sarah! You didn’t have to come over here to check up on me, really. I’m fine.”

“Can I come in? I think I heard something in the bushes.”

“Oh, of course, dear.” She closes the door behind me. “But you really

shouldn't worry. I don't think Aaron wants to stick around."

"Won't he try to eat you too?"

"No, I don't think he'll try that again. I think I winged him with the shotgun. He whimpered and took off like a shot. My Aaron used to run track you know." Whimpered? Grandpa hadn't even made a sound when his *arm* came off. And he never did more than shuffle around like an old man, though I suppose technically he was an old man when he died. But still, it was odd.

"Where's Mr. Stephenson?" I manage to keep my voice light, hoping she hadn't noticed my doubts. "Better safe than sorry, right, ma'am?"

"Oh, of course. He's just in the back yard. But I really think you're overreacting, Sarah. I took care of *him*."

Mr. Stephenson is lying in a giant black pool of blood on the back porch.

The door to Aaron's shed is still chained shut. The lock is still on the door, still locked through the hasp on the door. Aaron never got loose. My eyes flit back to Mr. Stephenson on the ground, to the blood that's already starting to congeal. I pick up the shotgun from the patio table, sling it over my shoulder. "Shouldn't you call the police? Again. You—I mean, your husband—was just killed. I think they might want to know."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that. I'll go give them another ring."

"Good. I'll just hang onto the shotgun. In... in case Aaron comes back."

"Of course, dear. That's fine."

■ ■ ■

Once Mom and Dad show up, we comb the neighborhood, shouting "Grandpa! Grandpa!" or "Dad! Dad!" or "Hubert! Hubert!" but he doesn't come shambling out of the lengthening shadows. At around ten o'clock, Mom finally says we should call it a night. She watches the news carefully, but says there isn't anything about Grandpa.

We leave the gate open, hoping Grandpa might just wander back in. Dad decides to set a dish full of ground beef out on the back porch, to grease the wheels.

"What can it hurt?" He says.

"One of the neighborhood dogs will eat it." Mom says. "It's a waste of food."

"But what can it *hurt*?"

I lay awake all night long, watching the back yard, just to be safe.

▪ ▪ ▪

In the morning, after making sure the back yard is still zombie-free, I head out with an armful of fliers I designed and Mom printed up last night. Each has a little picture of Grandpa from 1992 and a larger one of him sitting next to his dish on the back porch from last fourth of July. Underneath the pictures it says:

MISSING: GRANDPA HUBERT
 REWARD \$\$\$ CALL (281) 446-1854
 (DO NOT APPROACH WITHOUT PROTECTIVE GEAR.)

▪ ▪ ▪

Days pass with no sign of Grandpa. The only good news is that my anonymous tip finally panned out. Mrs. Stephenson is arrested early Monday morning for killing her husband, and I can finally let myself sleep again at night.

When I get off the bus that afternoon, there's a van outside.

I run into the house. Some fat guy in a jumpsuit is in the kitchen talking to Mom. I can see Grandpa out on the back porch gumming down a fresh plate of ground beef. I can hear them from the living room as I watch Grandpa eat.

"Yeah, I was just driving to work the other day, and I saw this flier. Looked like this homeless guy I seen around the warehouse. I decided to check it out, and shore enough."

"Thank you for bringing him home. He didn't drool too much, I hope."

"Nah, I was wearin' my work gloves. Like it said. Sure smells bad though. He got something catchin'?"

Mom fights back a weird, worried little grin. "You could say that."

"So. The uh, the flier mentioned a reward? I could use the money."

"Just a second. Let me go get my purse."

▪ ▪ ▪

That night, Mom and Dad sit me down in the living room.

"What's wrong?"

Mom does all the talking, because Dad looks like he's on the verge of tears. "It's about Grandpa."

"What? What is it? He's back now. I locked the back yard and

everything.”

“Well, Sarah. Your father and I talked about it, and...” Mom looks at Dad. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks back at her. “And we decided.”

“Decided what?”

“It’s too dangerous keeping him back there. Grandpa needs more attention than we can give him. We think it’s time we started looking for a home.”

“But this is his home.”

“You know what I mean, young lady.”

“Yeah... Can we go visit him sometimes at least?”

“I’m sure we will, Sarah. We’ll go visit Grandpa *all* the time.”

THE PRODIGAL'S AFTERPARTY

Lucas Strough

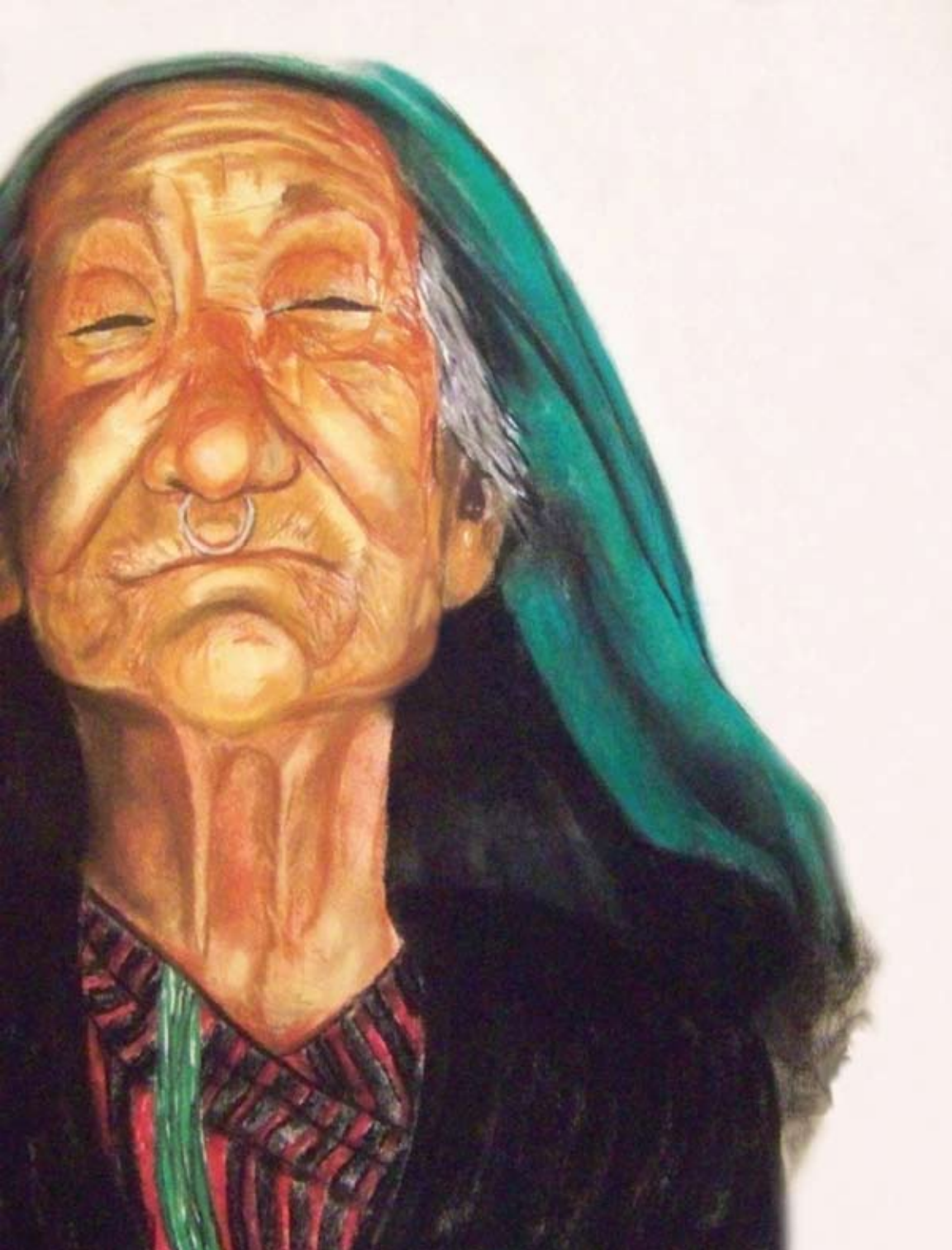
There is a story in the Bible
about a god made of silver, gold,
bronze and clay,
and it occurs to me that if such a thing
were to fall and shatter
it would make a sound
that would ring in the ears of dead men
and children yet to be born.

But I look sharp,
dressed for a funeral,
and I push the thought
of broken gods out of my mind.
Before it goes
I see the scattered pieces
of the idol swept up
and packaged neatly,
stored for later use.

Reassembling things gone wrong
is part of the mortal pattern
and I suppose that
such an idea should prove reassuring.
I am not
comforted.

Because the pattern is a network
of fibers and nerves,
impossible and dense,
defiant to the point of
exhaustion.
Truth is a difficult thing,
it clings to my skin like red clay
and no water can wash it away.

Ischande Sitton · *Portrait*



SELECTIONS FROM THINGS THAT CAN'T BE TAKEN BACK

Zach VandeZande

Christmas cards, ransom notes

The picture shows the two of us in matching shirts, terrible Norman Rockwell cheese. Ironically unironic. It's from last year maybe but that's basically okay for the purpose. I dump a bunch of them in the mail, some with addresses, some not. Some with directions as best I could remember. He lives on that one street with all the cars. She used to live with her sister but now I'm not so sure. Her sister is the one that had one of those looks she'd give from across the bar where she would just smolder and smolder but you never knew what it meant.

The girl in the picture who was you is smiling. The girl in the picture who was you has a big cheesy eggnog smile. The girl in the picture who was you knows exactly what that means. I throw some out the car window and wish the wind well. Wish the wind a merry Christmas.

I am drunk and I am driving and I am in the present tense. What has happened to consistency of voice is a reasonable question to ask. Cards go out the window and into the dampness of the ditch. The song on the radio is of a band I used to like before it was on the radio. I am that kind of person. I thought the girl in the picture who was you was aware, but she was not.

Whitman sees the ships at dock

I was sitting on a brick planter outside of her downtown office complex, that time of day when afternoon and evening depend on your relation to the hard-edge shadows of the buildings. The day had gone cold here in the shade, and I clutched at my elbows and kept my jaw tight against chattering. I hadn't really planned on being here except that I was forced to drive into town for an unpaid parking ticket.

But that's a lie, isn't it? I knew my day would end up here from the moment I got the summons or the warrant or whatever it's called when you owe the county a hundred and forty-three dollars. Maybe it was

low impulse control, maybe it was fate. I guess it depended on who you asked. Mostly I was looking for a justice in the world, for her to say or for me to say what we'd spent so many months in mutual nonexistence not saying. I sat there, tapping both my feet with hands thrust deep into jacket pockets, trying to keep my extremities feeling alive.

People started coming out of the building in spurts, like each elevator load was a pump of blood. These people probably hadn't been smiling on the way in, but now some were, and I wondered how they lived their lives when so much time was spent in the thing they dreaded.

Then it was her, talking to a girl I met at a party once where I had kept my mouth shut and took awkward sips of beer. She was beautiful still—I don't mean the girl from the party—she still walked with that bounce that worked against the sunken slump of her shoulders, how she never really wore makeup anyway and how her hair was blowing all over and how her nose was starting to go a little pink already from the cold. I didn't want to be here then, I didn't have the right. The silence between us had been the justice I deserved. She saw me and froze, not smiling, not frowning, just blank-faced recognition, maybe with her head going through how sadly I was presenting myself these days, how goddamn pathetic to be sitting on a brick planter unshaven wearing an old jacket and trying to work up the nerve to look away. This was just what I wanted, and it felt awful.

Not an ending exactly but

If we have to talk about it, I found myself years later on a bar balcony overlooking a college campus, radio rap in the air from some car and used bookstore poetry spread out in front of me like a map of living places, which probably it was. If I had thought about it, I would be sad that I never much thought about it, but then that's a paradox worth ignoring. I took a sip of my beer.

The traffic sounds, the chipped paint tables, the stale smell of smoke in my clothes, they felt good. The same with it being about to rain, being boxed in by dark dragging clouds coming from the north and west. It had been months since I'd seen a building taller than the corn factory with the raised letters in what I guess was the bad part of town, and that was another thing to feel good about.

The rain began, smudging the words I'd written about Elizabeth Bishop, who was as lovable as anybody I'd met. Life is like that sometimes. Life is a gentle lie replacing the ungentle ones. But that's just sometimes.

Where was she? I didn't know. Wasn't my right to know? It didn't much bother me. I gathered up my poetry and went inside. It was early afternoon, so the place was emptied out save for a guy and a girl playing foosball in the corner, concentrating on the game with cigarettes hanging from their mouths, laughing. They were vital and young. Her feet slid along the scuffed floor as she moved between the handles. He could reach them all without moving. They moved together, and the small wooden men moved with them, and the ball made sharp noises against the sides of the table. I guess I thought it was pretty beautiful.

In my mind it's always night,
but it was more like a deep October
blue—afterbirth of a tobacco sunrise.
You didn't flinch. You didn't
even say a prayer for the dead.

You shot the injured colt.
I hear the gunshot in thunder,
see the blood-foamed mouth.
The colt and I breathed
fear and leather.

I can still see the polished eye,
almost too intelligent, too aware.
It spoke blame, confusion, regret.

You told me not to watch, but I
can never look away. You said the mother
wouldn't even watch her baby die.
But I knew
somebody should watch
and always remember.





Christiano Dias · *Rooftop*

Lori Giesler · *ITP* 7



When I was thirteen years old, my boyfriend died.

Two weeks later, I was sitting in Home Ec, and a girl named Brandie was fastening a studded leather bracelet onto my wrist. “I won’t ever wear this,” she said, and her finger brushed my skin. “So you can have it.” I shivered, and the butterflies in my stomach murmured.

Looking into her face, into her pale green eyes and into the red lips that kept speaking even though I remained silent, I felt faint. She was gorgeous even under the harsh fluorescents. I wanted her hand to stay wrapped around my wrist, but she clicked the clasp into place and her fingers folded back into a loose fist.

Guilt washed over me. I couldn’t quite place my feelings for her, but I knew they were feelings, and I knew I’d had them before, when Tim had touched my hand. I felt guilty because I wondered, *what would Tim think?* I felt guilty because it had only been two weeks since his funeral, and if I was to find a place for crushing on a girl, didn’t I have to discard every feeling I’d ever had for a boy? I felt guilty because it had been here, in this room, that I’d found out about his death. I felt guilty because he was the only other person to ever slip jewelry onto me. I felt guilty because I was still wearing his necklace, hidden beneath my shirt.

■ ■ ■

The orange tabletop radiated up as I gazed down to the blue folder resting beneath my fingers. Across the front of the folder I’d pasted magazine letters to spell out E-L-I-J-A-H W-O-O-D. I sat squashed between two girls at one of the tables labeled specifically for seventh graders. The eighth graders got to sit at the front of the cafeteria, and the sixth graders didn’t even share a lunch with their older peers. The clucking of the other kids in the cafeteria drowned out our conversation; I could barely hear the buzz of their words.

Rachel, the girl to my left, was busy writing a note, but she stopped long enough to catch me thumbing through pictures of my favorite movie star. Tapping her pen against the folder, she laughed. “You’re

obsessed,” she said and snatched the folder from my fingers.

I lifted my eyes and glared at her. “Oh, you’re one to talk.” I motioned to the notebook next to her note, where her boyfriend’s name formed the book cover it was written so many times.

Rachel laughed and ran her fingers over the holes in the notebook paper. “At least I know Ray,” she said. “You’ll never meet *Elijah*.”

I looked over her shoulder at what she was writing. The note wasn’t to Ray, as I’d expected. It was to his twin brother, Tim, who happened to be one of Rachel’s best friends. I gave Rachel a lopsided grin. She covered the rest of the note with her hands.

“I’ve already seen it. No use covering it up now,” I said.

Rolling her eyes, Rachel removed her hand from the paper. I snatched it from her fast. “Let me write something,” I said.

Rachel traded her note for my folder. She flipped through the pages as I scribbled a few words onto the note and signed my name. “Hand it to Tim after lunch, okay?”

My pulse pounded as Rachel turned the note over and read what I’d written. Her eyes widened. “You’re asking him out!”

“I am.”

“You told me he wasn’t boyfriend material,” Rachel said and tucked her mouse brown hair behind her ear, revealing a silver hoop looped through the cartilage. Valentine’s Day was the next day, and Ray had already begun showering her with gifts: silver hoops were her favorite, and these were still shiny with newness.

“What?” I asked.

“Before, when I asked what you thought of Tim, you said he wasn’t boyfriend material. Remember?”

“I lied.” My smile stretched from ear to ear. “Tim’s cute and funny and nice and polite, and how cool would it be for best friends to date twins?”

“Okay,” Rachel said. “I’ll give him the note.”

I snatched back my folder. “Thanks, Rach.”

■ ■ ■

Bounce, bounce, bounce.

Pretending to play basketball was my favorite P.E. activity. Lost in the monotonous bounce, the echo of balls hitting the gymnasium floor, I didn’t see Rachel bound from the dressing room. She ran over to me,

her long legs exposed in short black shorts. Her shirt was the same one she had been wearing this morning: a blue tee labeling her *Angel*, another Valentine's Day present from Ray. At least it was actually February 14th.

"He said no," she said and shrugged her shoulders. I glanced over at her but didn't dare hold her gaze. Her words had sunk my smile. I'd always hated this stupid holiday.

"Did he tell you why?" I dribbled the ball to keep Rachel from seeing my feelings slouch. "He said you were nice, pretty, and smart...but he still just doesn't know."

"Oh?" I said, trying to keep a silence from closing in on the already awkward P.E. air. I didn't know Tim that well, but I hated hearing the word *no*.

Rachel and I walked to the bleachers, and I tossed my basketball back into the bin. We stepped over the first rows, settling down in the very back.

"He told me that he likes you a lot. I guess he just...." Rachel's eyes migrated to the ceiling before drifting back to me. "Actually, I don't know what was up with him yesterday. He was acting weird."

I laughed, but my stomach was still digesting disappointment.

Coach Garza blew his whistle. On my way to the locker room, I tossed an orphan basketball at the hoop. It bounced off the rim. Rachel trailed behind me. She took the ball and dribbled it before aiming at the hoop and releasing. It went right through.

■ ■ ■

Lunch was immediately after P.E., a welcome cushion for the burn of boredom. After lunch, Rachel and I always waited outside the gymnasium for Tim and Ray to come out of their P.E. class. Ray emerged from the huge double doors first, a short girl with a ponytail at his heels, yapping nonstop. She took one look at Rachel and split away to disappear into the hallway crowd.

"Hey, Rachel," Ray said. "Hey, Bonnie," he added.

"You don't sound so happy to see me, Ray," I said.

His smile shrunk to a frown. "Well, you always act like you hate me."

"Aww, you know I love you." I stepped away from them, waving as I walked.

As I made my way through the sea of preteens to my sixth-period reading class, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Tim.

I backed against the wall so I wouldn't block traffic. Tim slid next to me. He handed me a folded up note. "Thanks," I said and pocketed it.

"See ya." He moved back into the crowd.

The note began to burn in my pocket. My feet carried me quickly to the classroom, and I slid into the first empty desk I found. I looked around for Mrs. Bratcher, but she wasn't in the room. So I pulled the note out.

A red heart covered half the page. Inside the heart, written in the middle, were two names: Tim + Bonnie and the words, "Will you be my Valentine?" I looked closer at the note. Where my name was, another name had been, but it'd been scratched out. Peering into the pen scribbles, I saw that it was another girl's name. My stomach soured a little, but my cheeks still glowed as flattery-pink as they had before I noticed the other name. I'd never been very popular with the boys – I was too quiet and awkward in my skin – so second choice was good enough for me.

Mrs. Bratcher entered the room and sat behind her desk, fumbling with the clutter piled there. I shoved the note into my purse.

In study hall forty-five minutes later, I wrote Tim back: Yes.

I handed him the note after class, and he read it right in front of me. Smiling, he handed me another folded piece of paper. This one was a drawing, a red teddy bear covered in hearts.

Maybe I didn't hate Valentine's Day after all.

■ ■ ■

My birthday fell on a Friday two weeks later. I was having a birthday party at my house after school, and I couldn't stop thinking about it the whole day in class. Tim and I lingered in the deserted hallway, on our way to the bus stop. I walked him to the bus every school day before heading to the front where my mom picked me up.

Walking through the sixth-grade hall, we must have looked like a bit of a sight sore. I towered over him; my body shot to the ceiling before the boys at school gained any height. My clothes were too small, my shirt always revealing a slip of stomach. His red t-shirt – red was his favorite color – enveloped him, hanging down to his knees.

Tim's books filled my arms; he was carrying most of his own, but there were two big books he couldn't wrap his arms around. I had offered to hold them for him. We walked side-by-side, but our spare

hands didn't dare touch.

"You're the nicest person I know, Bonnie," he said, his voice soft.

"Stop it. You're making me blush." My eyes studied the floor. I shifted the books from my left arm to my right.

"Don't you always blush?" His lopsided grin called the butterflies back.

"No."

"But honestly," he said. "I'm really glad I met you."

■ ■ ■

The sky came toward me, drifted away from, descended down on me, traveled up again; Rachel, her lips pursed in the middle of her face, was curled up in the middle of the trampoline. Four boys and two girls bounced around her, trying to make her let go of her legs, but the egg would not crack. The boys were tough. When they were the egg we never could crack them.

After everyone got a turn playing the egg – Rachel got two turns, on account of her short shorts – we went inside to my room. I got out the video camera I'd received for Christmas that year and taped my friends sitting on the floor, on my bed, in my desk chair, listening to Usher and laughing about nothing, really. Tim held a red marker to his lips like a microphone. "This is Tim Camarillo reporting." An unidentified flying trinket burst into the scene, hitting Tim across the chest: it was a marker, thrown by one of the girls. "Ow!" he said.

An hour later, Tim pulled me to the side of the party.

"I got you a birthday present." He pulled a thick silver chain from his pocket. "Here." He touched my shoulder, and I turned around and lifted my hair. He draped the necklace around my neck.

"Thanks, Tim." I let my hair fall as I touched the chain. "I love it."

I lay in bed that night watched the tape again and again, reliving the warmth. I stopped and paused on Tim's face, and I kissed the screen. I pressed play again and watched his face fade into static. I fell asleep with the camera clasped in my hands.

■ ■ ■

Three weeks went by. I walked Tim to the bus every day. We stood in circles of friends and talked about movies we wanted to see again. Rachel and Ray held hands; Tim and I grasped pinkies by their side. I still felt nervous around him, and we only had our brief moments at

the bus stop to talk. Tim and Ray didn't have a phone, and Rachel and I had gotten in trouble for loitering in the sixth-grade hallway, where the principal said we didn't belong. Two girls had complained about our presence there, said we'd been calling them bitches every time we saw them there, but really they just liked our boyfriends. I minded less than I should have.

Then one night my phone rang. It was 1:30 in the morning, too late for anyone to be calling.

"Bonnie, you have a phone call," my mom yelled down the stairs. "It must be Jeff. Can you please ask him not to call after midnight?"

I asked him not to call after midnight every time he called.

"Sure, mom," I yelled back and picked up the phone.

"Hey, Jeff. Hey, when you call this late, can you call my line? The phone wakes my dad up."

"Okay." Jeff said that every time too. "Bonnie, I have to tell you something."

"Yeah? What?"

"Tim's cheating on you."

The words stuck even though Jeff wasn't the most reliable source. He'd been my first boyfriend last year, when we'd gone out twice for a week each time. With his thick glasses and looming height, he made most girls nervous, but he could be sweet, and I hadn't thought I'd care that people would laugh at us, since I was already used to that sort of thing. I did, though. When I broke up with Jeff – both times – he knew exactly why: I was ashamed. But over the phone, it was okay to talk to Jeff, where no one could see.

I guess the reason I believed him was partly because I was bored, of Tim, of middle school boys, of walking to the bus stop and hugging when really all I wanted was my very first kiss, something Tim wouldn't give me. And there were so many girls in our group who liked Tim; I knew there was a pretty big chance he'd been liking one of them back, whether Jeff really knew it or not. I knew that Rachel, for one thing, couldn't keep her eyes off of Tim when Ray wasn't around. Drama was her favorite game.

I didn't ask Tim about it. Instead, I stopped smiling so much when I saw him. I went right to class instead of waiting for him in the hallway. I hurried away to the front, asked my mom to pick me up right when

the bell rang, so I wouldn't have time to go to the bus stop.

One day, Tim found me coming out of the gym. He placed a hand on my shoulder, and my stomach jumped. It'd been two weeks since the phone call from Jeff.

"Ray and I are moving," Tim said. "Next week. We're moving next week."

"You won't go to Aledo anymore?" I asked.

"No."

"Oh," I said. "That sucks."

■ ■ ■

The day before they moved, Ray met me at my locker after school.

"Are you going to dump Tim?" he said.

"Probably." My voice was nearly inaudible. Ray's face fell, but he nodded.

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear, Bonnie." He stuck his thumbs under the straps of his backpack. The hallway was empty, and the echo of the afterschool rush bounced from wall to wall. Ray held his head low as we walked to the soda machine. He pulled some change from his pocket.

"Bon, you got fifteen cents?" he asked. He never had enough, and I always had too much. I handed him a dime and a nickel.

"Thanks." He popped the money in. "Guess I might see you sometime, Bon."

"Guess so," I said. He popped the top of his Dr. Pepper and hugged me goodbye. I could smell his sweat, and I thought about what he'd said as I watched him walk away. Even then his advice seemed too heavy to fully comprehend at age thirteen; it sagged in my mind until years later, when I realized just how right he was.

■ ■ ■

I wished I had told Tim goodbye. I missed the two of them; I missed teasing Ray. I missed seeing Tim's smile. Armed with pen and paper, I wrote Tim a note. I apologized for doubting him and for failing to say goodbye. I folded it and placed it on my bedside table, beneath my alarm clock.

They'd only gone half an hour away to Granbury. It wouldn't have been difficult to get the note to him, especially since Rachel and Ray were still going out, but I wanted to give it to him myself. A month

passed, and the letter lay untouched still.

Sometimes I'd wake up and hit the snooze button only to catch a glimpse of the note. It was always too early in the morning to think about mistakes, and the note rested at the back of my mind all day long. I mentioned it to Rachel, who said she could easily take it off my hands. I was a little scared that she would read it. My words were too personal for her eyes. I let the orphan note stay squashed beneath my alarm clock.

■ ■ ■

I jolted into Mrs. Hartman's Home Ec classroom, my first period class. I slid into a seat behind an eighth grade girl right as the bell rang. Dropping my books next to me on the floor, I winced. They thumped against the carpet.

Mrs. Hartman stood and walked over to the TV and clicked the on button.

"I'll be right back." She turned the VCR on and walked out the door.

The credits for *The Lion King* came on the screen. An older brunette I didn't know got up and went to the teacher's desk, sitting in the teacher's chair. She started playing Solitaire on the teacher's computer.

"Oh yeah! Did you guys hear?" she asked, looking to her friend, another older girl with red hair. "Tina's cousin died yesterday."

"On Memorial Day? How awful," the redhead said.

The girl in front of me looked back at me, frowning. "Did you hear about that?" she asked.

"No."

I knew a Tina. I had met her a couple of times, mostly around Tim and Ray; they were her cousins.

"His name was Tom... Tim... something like that. He was struck by lightning while he was on a boat in Granbury."

My heart sank into my stomach. I felt like throwing up all over the girl and the desk before me, but I held it in. A flash of Tim's face talking into the red marker leapt through me. I felt an itch in my pinkie. Forty-five minutes stretched on and on and on. I tried to watch the movie, but I couldn't focus. My brain brought a fog across it.

I walked through the hallways, my arms down to my side and my face unflinching. There were other people milling around, but I didn't notice them. I walked so fast I missed the crowd and slid into the gymnasium.

Sitting in the bleachers, I thought about wasted space and wasted time. I couldn't cry, and I didn't know why. I had never felt *loss*. My fingers closed around the word, but it didn't cut my skin. It rested in the palm of my hand, pulsating.

Brandie sat next to me. "I'm sorry Bonnie."

My hand moved to my necklace, so I would have something for my hands to do.

Tim gave me this. I shivered at the thought.

I unlatched the necklace, letting it fall into my hand. I twirled it around and watched the chain curve like a snake.

"That's very pretty. Where'd you get it?" Brandie pointed to the necklace. Tears sprang to my eyes, only this time I couldn't choke them back.

"Tim bought it for me." I rose and ran as fast as I could to the hall, to the water fountain. I leaned over and let the water rush over my mouth, my cheeks warming with fresh tears. I could hear Dakota, a boy who was usually too busy sneaking cigarettes in the boy's bathroom to talk to me, accuse Brandie of saying something to set me off. I heard her saying she hadn't known, that all she'd done was ask a question.

Dakota ran in after me. "Do you want to go to the office and go home?"

I wiped the tears away and nodded. He told the coach that I'd known Tim and looped his arm around me, touching my shoulder.

"Don't cry," he said. "It'll be all right."

I'd been to funerals before, but I couldn't ever cry and I didn't ever feel anything rumble inside my chest as I looked down into the coffin. I knew that death happened, but I didn't really know what that meant. I'd never thought about, about how that person's memories went with them, about how once they were gone there was no more getting to know them. Everything you knew was everything you would ever know, and I didn't know enough about Tim.

When I read his obituary three days later, I uncovered a few more things about him. The paper said he wanted to be a racecar driver. I hadn't known that, and I wondered if he'd have held on to that dream had he grown up. It didn't really matter, because I would grow up and – if my plans didn't change – become a writer, but Tim would be twelve forever, only a memory in a handful of people's minds and eventually only bones in the dirt.

At his funeral, all his friends wore red. I walked past his coffin; his brown skin was smooth, and his eyelids were closed in a way that made them look like they might open again any minute.

The family hung a banner on the back of the grand piano and left pens so that everyone could say goodbye to Tim. Rachel and I wrote our farewells, and once the words were on the paper, we started crying and couldn't stop. I had never cried at a funeral before. The tears dripping off my chin made me feel so exposed in front of all the people I didn't even know. We sat down in front of the banner and read the names of the people who had loved him, and we couldn't place half of them to a face, but they all seemed so sad. Finally, when my mother came over and told us it was time to go, we went outside and said our goodbyes to each other on the sidewalk. I saw Ray, who hadn't said a word all day, walking up and down the street with his hands in his pockets.

▪ ▪ ▪

It has been eight years, and though the thought of Tim does not perch at the edge of my thoughts, it creeps into them sometimes. Thirteen seems so far from me now. I've since grown into my skin, and, though I never did kiss Brandie, I got my first kiss a year later; her name was Ashlea, and she was better than any boy.

Other people have given me jewelry since then. My high school girlfriend of two and a half years bought me a silver chain with a diamond heart, and my college boyfriend of two months latched a slender chain with a black claddagh pendant around my neck at midnight on Valentine's Day. I still have Tim's necklace, though, stashed at the bottom of my closet, buried in a pile of sweaters.

Even now when I go to the Dollar General store for shampoo or cat food, I can't help but search the necklaces. I grab the bundle and hold it in my hand and let each one fade back into the crowd; they wiggle in my palm then fall against one another with a gentle chime. I pick through the strands of plastic beads and the gold-painted medallions strung on metal chains. Sometimes I find what I'm looking for: the single silver chain. They still have it, I marvel. Still, the necklace that Tim gave me.

THE SECOND DYING OF REMEMBERED THINGS

Mark Sweeney

I promised many times to the strengthless heads of the perished dead
(Homer)

I wear my perished like a cloak of faces.
They flutter and follow from room to room,
the wake towed by a gray ship.

Solitude and company.
Whichever we choose,
The lurching shape of the other
hurls itself against the screen door.

Memory like the chatter of rain
falling tall through the gum trees,
pounding the brain's tin roof
till its shelter fails.
So this is what it is to be human,
monkey dreams beneath a green roof.
Our hands grope around up there
drawing back only fragments,
a knotted fist of sky.

The dead splinter so inside us,
a sound just discernible in dreams
like the slow breaking of an old wooden pier,
barely audible above the storm.

Smaller and smaller they become.



Erin Page · *Fierce Like Me*

NEW MOTHER

Aubree Blomgren

Once you get them,
I am learning,
you want to keep them
asleep if you can,

if you ever want to get
any writing done, ever.
100 times, already
I rock the cradle,

the car seat on the dinner table,
with my left hand as my right
hand writes in rhythm, making
what comes come on a cormorant boat.

My hands are oars in cadence
sculling for the sweetfish
through some cursive gale,
some half lullaby,
this white page

to hold onto the way
his lashes rest down
on the butter-cliffs
of his cheeks. The origami

of his mouth. The red
specks of new heat bubbled,
god-tattooed, crowning on the hairline.
And the gallop of breath

that rides into his village,
out of his village. Six months old.
Six months towards another six,
towards when I will say *you were just a baby then*,

as I tell him his hands were always clutched
around the invisible,
like a baby carrying a bag
of dreams, or magic gunpowder,

or lucky nickels—two fighter's fists
that cut when I tried to cut
his ten thin nails like edges of paper.
I pruned little bits
of my bonsai-boy off,

knowing what I wish
I did not know,
that unlike the tree
he would not stay small
the more I cut.

NOTES WHILE WAITING

Colin Winnette

At 7:58 last evening a bomb landed in our backyard. It's still here, but I'm not alarmed as it seems to be a dud. It arrived with a loud, dense "tunk," followed by the sprinkling speckle sound of dirt peppering brick. I checked the clock. I started taking notes on the stack of index cards I keep on the bedside table.

We know it's a bomb because it looks like a bomb. The same thing you see in cartoons, photographs, movies, all of it. Metal, greenish grey, bomb-shaped, yet smaller than I would have guessed.

Neither my wife nor I can figure why, or from where, it was dropped. We live a short distance from an airport, but as far as we know it's not one associated with any sort of military action. Then again, we've yet to fly from it.

My wife seems to be even less concerned than I am. After the initial curiosity faded, she began to offer glimpses of the bright side. After all, it hadn't exploded. We, along with the house, were still intact, still whole, still separate entities, unmixed. Not, yet, a compost heap. No steam in sight. But, in spite of her efforts, I'm getting anxious.

■ ■ ■

A bit later that evening, inspired either by the excitement of its falling or the position in which the phallus rests in its crater – entering the ground at a slight angle, as if beginning to dip back upward towards the sky – for whatever reason, my wife became more sexually aggressive than usual. But, what with my paranoia finally being on the verge of actualization – the world truly being out to get me – I wasn't into it.

Crouched on the tile, grappling at my flaccid penis like an appetent kitten with an end of string, she filled the once-silence of our kitchen with alarmingly high-pitched growls and loud, coarse vowel sounds. Soon enough, she noticed my gaze still fixed on the glass of the kitchen door. She grew angry. Her complaints seemed reasonable. After all, it could have been our last night together. Could still be, I suppose.

But, as I've mentioned, my mind was, and is, elsewhere. She's made tea, but I won't drink any.

I've decided not to examine it. The bomb, I mean. Initially, my fear at the idea of its being on some sort of time-release kept me from getting too close. Perhaps the party responsible for its delivery, being particularly malicious in intent, wanted to cultivate our curiosity before providing us a belated end. It's either our curiosity or our hope.

As time passes, my urge to inspect it comes again. This time my wife violently objects. She even strikes my hand. She doesn't see the point. Now that I've got my wits about me, I've decided she's right. As a result of our limited knowledge of modern weaponry, tampering with the thing, as tempting as it may be, is not likely to yield positive results.

■ ■ ■

Some time passes. She's having trouble keeping the dog in. I must admit, he's braver than I am. He truly wants to be outside. Not a doubt in his mind. Though I find my wife's efforts to quiet him humorous, I'm pretty curious as to what would happen upon his release. After all, he's a small dog, and if I allow myself to ignore the danger in it, I'm sure watching him attempt to assert his masculinity on the intruder would prove amusing. Her scolding, voiced as delicately as she breaks eggs, a softer force even than that first, faint, wet crack draws up a jealousy of the animal within me. Her tone is familiar, but it's not for me.

It's only a matter of moments before she calms the dog. With animals, she's first rate. He even licks her hand.

■ ■ ■

Now, resting on the sofa in the living room, his eyes move back and forth between the two of us. Occasionally, he emits one quick bark, loud and abrupt; it's what he does when he's hungry. But he's already eaten once tonight and my wife shakes her head firmly at him, *no*.

My wife is making funny faces at me from across the table as I'm writing. It's charming, in a way, but I refuse to engage her. These days, it's fair to say, we annoy one another more easily.

Boredom has set in. We toss a few jokes back and forth. We laugh about what the 911 call we've decided not to make would sound like: *my emergency? Well, let's call it an encumbrance*. We joke about what to call it; my wife says Amis. A miss. I laugh, suggest Milo, and she shrugs.

I almost say Isaac, but stop myself. I couldn't say where it came

from. She's not over the whole thing and I guess I'm not either. It's strange that I feel the urge to joke about it.

I continue to make jokes as if it hadn't crossed my mind. Jokes about the purposes our impotent friend in the backyard could now serve: plant flowers in it, turn the photos into t-shirts. My wife tries to laugh. Her eyes look tired. I call us "God's Botched Abortion." She doesn't look back from the refrigerator. Now, she's pretending to be hungry.

She's had a long day. Her days seem to have grown longer. I offer to take the night shift, let her sleep. After all, she's got work in the morning. I don't work. I haven't since our son drowned. Initially hesitant, she questions the necessity of my staying awake, which causes me to suspect she feels guilty for deserting me, though she wants to nonetheless. I can't be sure, but she seems grateful when we both begin to say goodnight.

She begins to explain how we can't help being curious, expectant, and I interrupt her in agreement, *yes, it is curious; what, why, how*. She calls me Wake, which is a nickname from when we were younger that I won't explain, because that joke is for us. She asks something else under her breath, and I only faintly hear the last part. It sounds like *pyres are fading*, or *mired and waiting* or something similarly aureate, and I'm staring and not in the mood now, so I don't ask her to repeat it.

▪ ▪ ▪

I thought about having some of the tea, but at this point it seems silly. My chest feels empty, but my stomach's all worms. The sun set forever ago and will rise at any moment. The bomb is less visible now due to subtle changes in the darkness, but I can still feel it and I'm uncomfortable with that. Thinking back to what my wife could have muttered as she headed up the stairs, I start to feel a bit guilty. I often think she is resentful of my unemployment, though she's never said anything. It's just...how I feel. Any moment now, the sun.

▪ ▪ ▪

At 5:12 in the morning I'm drinking cold tea and waiting for more time to pass, for my wife to wake up, honestly, for anything at all. Later, I hope to examine the total damage done to the lawn.

My wife insists on my not smoking in the house and, as a result, I've become an attentive landscapist. If made visible to the public, I'm sure our backyard would receive awards. Best groomed, best kept,

tidiest, and, most likely, greenest lawn in the whole damn county. Unfortunately, even during that brief stint when the number of visitors we received was considerable, very few actually made it to the backyard. They stuck to the kitchen mostly, to the platters, to the coffee. The yard was less impressive then anyhow. I used to have less time on my hands. Now I'm all freed up.

For whatever reason, I'm unable to shake my desire to go outside. I'm curious. Perhaps about the damage to the lawn. Most likely about the bomb. Curious if parts are still spinning. Things are still whirring. Curious if when I press my ear against the pane of glass separating my territory (the kitchen) from its territory (the backyard), I'll hear a faintly whispered countdown.

Maybe we'll make a million dollars. Maybe when the army comes to pick it up, saying, "Oh, sorry about that. Didn't mean to scare you. Our mistake," maybe then they'll offer us some serious compensation. I doubt it, though. Life's not too big on compensation. It seems to me that, generally, the things we lose and the things we gain have absolutely nothing to do with one another.

My urge is to press my ear against the glass, and since my wife is asleep and I'm not technically in breach of our agreement to remain inside until morning, I do. Why the hell not? The glass is cool against my ear, and outside the insects are beginning to hum. It's almost morning.

5:45 A.M. Everything is still, and after listening for a short while, I recognize that the hum, which I heard as insects, is really more of a whirring. It's too consistent. I'm focused now, and I press my shoulders and hands against the glass as well.

Yes, a whirring. A soft whirring, unvarying in pitch or volume. I think about waking my wife, but I'm not quite ready to pull myself away. Perhaps it's fear that paralyzes me, though I prefer to call it intrigue. Either way, I remain pressed against the glass, listening. I've watched the dawn from our kitchen before, but today, for some reason, I notice the leaves on his tree look iridescent.

I think of how I would have acted two years ago, and I feel a certain amount of shame for not being able to pull my ear from the door and dash upstairs to my sleeping wife. Yet, I remain pressed against the cool, protective glass, focused, focusing, curious, and it comes to me. The question my wife asked. And she's right, I *am* tired.

The sound is not a countdown. It's more like what you would hear from a crumpled coffee can, alive with ill-tempered bees.

It sounds satisfied, the whirring. Like it's humming. Like it's content. Big bees. Or, better yet, it's purring like a house cat. A constant, steady purr, like baseball cards stuck in the spokes of an old bicycle, like the tips of my wife's fingers against persistent fan blades, or the sound when Isaac...but then – and I must admit the curious part of me is grateful for the release – it stops.





RAYMOND ALLEN

CHRISTIE BINGHAM

SUSAN BLICK

AUBREE BLOMGREN

AARON CASE

ANDREW CURREY

DALE DEWOODY

CHRISTIANO DIAS

ANGIE EICHENBERGER

LORI GIESLER

ZACH HALE

OVIDIO HINOJOSA

BRIT NAYLOR

ERIN PAGE

CHRISTOPHER SIMS

ISCHANDE SITTON

KELLIE SMITH

MICHELLE SPENCER

ANDREW STARZ

LUCAS STROUGH

BONNIE STUFFLEBEAM

MARK SWEENY

ZACH VANDEZANDE

JARROD WADE

TREAVOR WAGONER

COLIN WINNETTE