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## Litmag 2007-08

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University of Missouri-St. Louis, "Litmag 2007-08" (2008). *Litmag*. 20.  
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# LitMag

University of Missouri — St. Louis  
Volume XXI — Spring 2008



## Interviews

Kathleen Finneran • Marjorie Stelmach

## Prize Winners

Fiction — Amy Perry  
“...And that I almost wasn’t”

Poetry — Madeleine Wurm  
“I Dreamed I was Showing You the Midwest”

Nonfiction — John Pyron  
“Growth”



**Instructor's Note**

Like finding your favorite flavor in a box of chocolates or buying the winning lottery ticket, working on a literary magazine often feels like a gamble. You never know what you're going to get. What skills will your editorial staff have? How many submissions will be really great? Will there be a photograph that fits your vision for the cover? You never know. It is this not knowing—the blind effort we give each year, unsure of what the outcome will be—that I find to be the most rewarding aspect of teaching Editing LitMag.

The eleven students who walked into the Editing LitMag class on the first day brought with them an insight, a determination, and a passion for literature that elevated even my expectations. Each week they discussed the merits of our submissions with the grace and respect of a group of writers who know how difficult it is to put thought onto paper and make it come to life. These eleven students have chosen work for the 2008 edition of LitMag that is thought-provoking, emotive, and entertaining. In short, it is alive.

And how many submissions were really great? Enough that we couldn't publish them all. This is the real tragedy of working on a literary magazine. We only have so many pages and so many dollars. We were fortunate in the number and quality of the submissions we received this year, but this meant we had to make some tough decisions and exclude work that is deserving of publication. Luckily, there are two undergraduate literary publications at University of Missouri-St. Louis—*LitMag* and *Bellerive*—so the talented writers and artists on this campus have two forums to showcase their work.

To the writers and artists who contributed to LitMag this year, we owe our greatest debt of gratitude to you. There is real risk in putting your work out in the world, and because you were willing to take the risk, the editors of the 2008 edition of LitMag were able to turn a gamble into a work of art.

Thank You.

Jaime R. Wood  
LitMag Instructor

**Editors:**

Rugeiata Bah  
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John Cunningham  
Daniel Diecker  
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Luella M. Isbell  
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Robert Meile  
Thomas Peterson  
Monique Rice  
Eric Toman

**Litmag Instructor:**

Jaime R. Wood

**English 4895, Editing *LitMag***

A course in editing and publishing a student literary magazine will be offered at UM-St. Louis in Spring. Interested students are invited to contact Mary Troy at [marytroy@umsl.edu](mailto:marytroy@umsl.edu) for more info.

**MFA in Creative Writing**

At the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
Fiction and Poetry

**Degree Program:**

39 hours selected from graduate writing, literature, editing, and comp theory classes, more than half of those hours in workshops in fiction and poetry writing, and occasionally in creative non-fiction and novel writing. Teaching/Research Assistantships and loans are available.

**Publications:**

The MFA program publishes the nationally distributed literary journal *Natural Bridge*, containing poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry in translation.

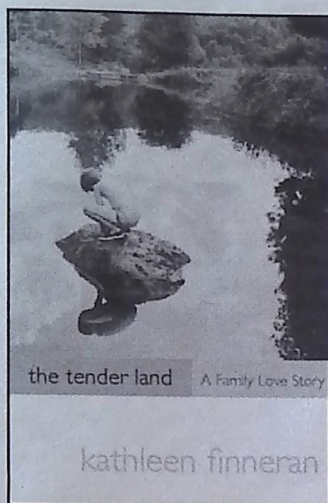
The staff of *LitMag* wish to extend our sincerest thanks to the following: University Program Board, Mary Troy, the English Department faculty and staff, Nancy Gleason and the staff of *Bellerive*, the Office of Student Life, Paul Hackbarth, Shannon McManis, and the staff of *The Current*. And a special congratulations to Amy Perry, winner of the Wednesday Club prize.

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## Author Interviews

### An Interview with Kathleen Finneran Luella M. Isbell



Kathleen Finneran is the author of the memoir *The Tender Land: A Family Love Story* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000; Mariner Paperbacks, 2003). Her essays have been published in various anthologies, including *The Place That Holds Our History* (Southwest Missouri State University Press, 1990), *Seeking St. Louis: Voices from a River City* (Missouri Historical Society Press, 2000), and *The "M" Word: Writers on Same-Sex Marriage* (Algonquin, 2004). She is the recipient of the Missouri Arts Council Writers' Biennial Prize, a Whiting Writers' Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She lives in St. Louis.

**At what point did you discover that writing was something you wanted to do?**

I remember writing a paper in response to a story we read in seventh grade English class. It was about this guy's relationship with his grandmother. I was very proud of it. I remember showing it to my own grandmother. She was clearly moved by something in my paper that had to do with the role of being a grandmother. I could sense that something reached her from that paper, and I thought, wow, that's really a cool thing to be able to do. Then, in high school, my writing took the form of journalism and being on the school paper. Because I grew up in a household without a lot of books, I really didn't have an experience of literature as writing. I had more of an experience with newspapers being where writing happened. So I started to think that was my future. I went to journalism school after high school.

**Is there a certain routine, place, or mindset that helps you be productive?**

That depends on what else I am doing in life. There have only been a few short periods of time in my life when I have ever been able to write without having another job to support myself. In those idyllic circumstances, from 2002 to 2004, my routine was to waste the morning, to unclutter my life and my head, and then write from 1:00 to 6:00 PM or so. I am usually only good for writing for four or five hours. I always need a block of time. If I only have an hour or two, I know it is not very productive for me. Ideally, I try to make sure that I have a four hour block of time five times a week.

**Do you need to have quiet?**

I have to have absolute quiet—insane quiet. I did my best stuff when I had enormous chunks of uninterrupted time. When I was living in New York and working on *The Tender Land*, I had a day job from nine to five writing grants, and I would try to go home and write in the evening. But it wasn't working out very well, so I forbid myself from writing at all during the week and would only allow myself to write on the weekend. By Friday night, I was so eager to write that it came in a rush. I would jokingly call it "going to writer's camp every weekend." I would literally start writing on Friday night and not stop until I wanted to. But, it's really hard to arrange that in the real world.

**How do you deal with revision? How do you know when your work is finished?**

The way I write is not the way that most people would recommend someone to write, but it works for me and the kind of temperament that I have. I write by hand. Each time I begin, I get myself started by rewriting the last paragraph from the time before. Then, I pretty much revise paragraph by paragraph. I don't go on to the next paragraph until the last paragraph is the way I want it. It's not a good idea to write that way because it's so slow. It doesn't bother me because I don't have any real desire to make any productivity marks in the world. I really like that process because I like to see these small moments of what I consider perfection happening over and over. When I have about fifteen pages or so written out that way, then I type that on a computer and print it out. I stop at that point and do a reading of that and revise. Obviously, what I had edited already, paragraph by paragraph, wasn't really perfect.

But there is not a lot of revision to do after that point.... I like that I can look back at the tablets of handwritten manuscript and tell when something was really happening artistically. Because if it was really going well, there will be notes and notes and notes in the margins of things I was thinking of going forward with based on what was coming out of the paragraph I was working on.

**If you were going to give advice to aspiring writers what wisdom would you pass on?**

Embrace criticism. It took me a long time to do that, and I think I probably would have progressed in my writing a lot more quickly if I had learned how to not be defensive about my work. It is hard to develop that skill. People are really wed to what they have created and it is hard to give up what you've become enchanted by yourself. I think that the more you can develop the skill of listening to what other people have to say and open your mind to what people are saying in terms of good feedback and not be resistant to it. I think that is really important.

**On a more personal level, when dealing with a memoir, how do you balance your memory of experiences with the artist's embellishing of all the little details that make the story feel so real and in the moment?**

I have a perversely good memory, and I have a very visual memory, so a lot of the details that probably don't seem as if they would be in the scope of my retention all these years later I have actually retained—things like what people were wearing. Beyond that, I work this way, and I think most memoirists that I've talked to work in a similar way: you start with a core impression of whatever experience you are writing about, one that is immutable in terms of your memory of it. Ten other people may dispute it who were experiencing the same thing, but that doesn't matter; it is not their work. So you have to first and foremost go with your own memory and impressions. If you start to filter in everybody else's take on it, then you will just go crazy and end up not writing memoir.

What happens past that, in terms of embellishing, is similar to what happens when fiction writers fill in the bare bones of a scene, except that you have sketchier material to draw on to fill the scene in. You have to have a level of integrity with what are the focal points in the story. I think, as a memoirist, you have a commitment to the reader to have the obvious symbols be something that you really remember and that aren't just fabricated. But other times, if you didn't supply details within the narrative for the reader to experience the scene, then you wouldn't be able to shape a story that had any real level of glue for the reader to stay with.

**Your memoir involves the retelling of a tragic family event. How did you balance your artistic need to tell the story while still respecting the lives of the others involved? How did you deal with that so that you didn't somehow cause more pain to the others who had lived through this with you?**

Well, it wasn't a conscious balancing on my part. I really was more consumed by the artistic endeavor, by what was needed to create the pages and tell the story. So I wasn't really overtly attendant to what their feelings were going to be. And one reason that I wasn't consciously concerned is that I never had an intention of writing anything that would hurt anyone. From my perspective, there wasn't really any material in the book that would hurt anyone. The subtitle of the book is "A Family Love Story," and that is really what I intended it to be. Another factor I had in mind was to pay tribute to my parents for creating this family, a family that in so many ways was a good family and continues to be a good family today. As a parent, losing a child is probably the biggest horror you can imagine, but losing a child to suicide, having someone that you love leave the world because they don't feel loved, is awful. I could see my parents going through this period of time where they questioned whether they should have ever become parents, and what they had done wrong. I really wanted to write a book where they could see what they did well. Maybe because of that, because I had that as a mindset, it never occurred to me that I would be hurting anyone's feelings. However, the book wasn't well received by my parents. They didn't like it when they first read it in manuscript and they hoped I wouldn't publish it.

**Because it wasn't their take on the memories?**

For my mother, it was an experience of...she has this memory problem that started when she was in her forties, so a lot of what I wrote she didn't remember, and she was sure that I was making things up. So she was very much disturbed by all of it. My brother was only alive for fifteen years, and she got sick in her mid-forties. So half of his life (his early babyhood up until the time he was seven or so) she didn't remember. Fifteen years is such a small amount of time, and then my mother could only remember half of it because of her difficulties, so a lot of this was painful for her because she had become accustomed to having what she had, instead of being given more than what she had. [Instead of the book being] sort of an enrichment, it was more kind of frightening. It challenged her reality. It made her very anxious for



whatever reason...to the point that she was going to have to be hospitalized for a mental breakdown from having read my book.

My father is very Catholic and moral and was very disapproving about the sex that gets revealed in the book. He thought that there is no reason to tell the world, and in some ways he is right. But that was a big part of the story for me that I had never told him or anyone in the family. Everybody had their version of what happened that night [the night of Sean's suicide] that was set and comfortable for x number of years, and then there's this new thing to factor in.

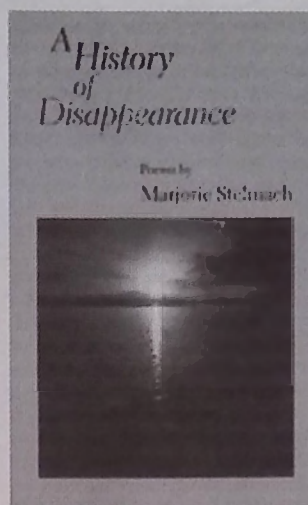
My parents' reaction to the book was really terrible, really crushing. It was the most pain I have ever felt in my life aside from losing my brother. But after the book came out and their friends started reading it and people in the community and their church had great things to say about it, then they started to ease up about their feelings for it. My mom, given the fact that she has this memory problem, fortunately forgot that there was anything in it that she should be bothered by. My dad has read it several times, and the difference between then and now is that now he has the last paragraph of the book typed out on a laminated business-size card that he carries in his wallet because he thinks it is the most beautiful thing ever written in the English language. Now, I have to qualify that by saying that he is not a big reader, so his experience of things written in the English language is limited.

About three years ago, my father had to go in for emergency heart surgery when he was vacationing in the Ozarks. My Dad and I were not on very good terms that year because of some things that had to do with my mother's care. I was not in a good place with my father, he knew it and I knew it. It was really a kind of awful year for us relationship-wise. Then, suddenly, he had to go in for a surgery that nobody thought he was going to come out of, and you are faced with how you get rid of all that gunk in a few minutes time. The chaplain of the hospital came in to do a service with my father and all the family before the surgery. It was kind of funny because the chaplain of this small town hospital happened to be a Native American faith healer. This was unusual for my father to embrace, and his name was Keith but my father has this very bad hearing problem so my father kept calling him Chief; he thought his name was Chief. So there was this sort of comedy of errors around this Native American Chief who was giving my father his last rites.

But the point that I am getting to is that we were all gathered there, and the doctor did not put good odds on my father coming through this surgery, and so, before the chaplain started his inspired flute playing, my dad pulled this little laminated card out of his wallet with the last paragraph of my book on it, and gave it to him and asked him if he would read it out loud as the prayer. It was such a stunning gift in every way, as a daughter and as a writer. As the chaplain was reading it, my dad maintained this constant eye contact with me and everything just healed in those few moments and we were okay again. Nothing you could ever achieve publication-wise could be as meaningful as having created the vehicle for your own healing with someone you love.



Bethany Webb



## An Interview with Marjorie Stelmach Troy Carron

**Marjorie Stelmach** has published two volumes of poems, *Night Drawings* (Helicon Nine Editions, 1995, awarded the Marianne Moore Prize), and *A History of Disappearance* (University of Tampa Press, 2006). A third book, *For Now, For Love*, is forthcoming from UT Press. A group of her poems received the first Missouri Biennial Award, and she has twice won the Malahat Review Long Poem Contest. After thirty years of teaching English for the Ladue School District, she currently directs the Howard Nemerov Writing Scholars Program at Washington University and, this semester, teaches the poetry workshop in the UM-St. Louis MFA program.

### When did you first start writing?

I'm not certain when I first started writing poetry. I remember when I first shared a poem. I was in fourth grade and I'd written a lot of terrible, rhymed poetry, so I guess I must have started early on. But I wrote all the way through high school. We had silent study hall back then, and if you finished your math, you had to reward yourself somehow; and for me... back then it was writing sonnets.

And then I wrote in college, but then I got married, which made me an adult. And I got a job—which made me an employed adult—and I thought it was time to put away childish things. Ha ha. I tried to stop writing... and it just killed me.

### It's kind of a drug, huh?

Yes. That's exactly right. It feels completely addictive, and when you try to give it up, some part of you dies. I hate to sound so dramatic.

### When did you first try to publish? Did it go well, your first attempt?

Ha. No. It did not go well. I remember entering a sonnet, and I thought, "Well, I'll send one in," and I won second prize for it. Which meant it was time to confess to my husband that I had written a poem. And I think it was maybe ten years before I had sent anything in again. And I was writing all that time, but I took a big risk because that first success made me feel like a total fraud, that I had them completely fooled to give me that stupid prize. And so I hid myself.

I taught at Ladue, and I was teaching Junior High at that point. And Ladue had a really distinctive program where they'd allow their teachers to take a year's sabbatical. And I really wanted to move to the high school because I love teaching literature and writing. So I thought that if I asked for sabbatical that when I came back, they would perhaps put me in the high school. And to justify the sabbatical I applied to Washington University. And the fools accepted me. I had a year off to start my MFA and then move to the high school like I wanted, and life was good; the sun was shining. But now I had to start sending poems off, which meant, of course, the rejections started coming in. And I had a lot of rejections. Some of them very entertaining, some of them very heartbreaking. And I still get rejections pretty frequently. I get accepted often enough to make them more bearable.

### But now you have your own books, too.

Right. I have two books and a third in the works.

### So when you made the first book, was it compiled of all new material or did you pull from your older stuff?

I remember thinking that I ought to use several of my published poems in the book. I had maybe seventy publications at that point, and I looked at them and wondered how they all tied together, and I began constructing the book from that plus some new poems I had been working on. The long, centerpiece poem from the first book was written while I was putting the book together.

And then I went to an artists' colony, I guess it was the year after my sabbatical, and someone there suggested that I enter this contest and then the book was selected.

By the time it came to my second book I had a ton of poems written. And it took my second book forever to find a publisher.



**I haven't had the privilege of reading your first book, *Night Drawings*, but I've read your second book, *A History of Disappearance*. Oh you did!**

**It was really good. I noticed you had it separated into different sections with certain themes running through it.**

It was a very designed book; you're right about that. It may sound crass, but I thought it would have a better chance in a contest if it had an acknowledgements page that was substantial. So I did select the poems based on things that had been published, and I looked at them and said, "All these poems have to do with childhood and all these poems have to do with whatever they had to do with."

**Your mother is in there a lot.**

Yes. I'm still writing about my mother's death, and my sister's. My new book will have a substantial section on my brother's recent death. So I tend to be a grief poet. I guess you write with what you have to write. My dad says, "Please write some poems about joy this time." Ha. So I'm trying, dad; I'm trying.

**So why can't you write anything happy?**

You know, [writing about happy things] it's as if you decided to look on a bright side and now you're going to put the conclusion down. And poetry has to follow its own course and you have to discover it as you go. And that means that whatever you have at the core, which for many, many poets I think includes sorrows and losses; it comes out.

**Sure. And you can tell when you read those poems. Like when I read "Radium" from *A History of Disappearance*, that's a very powerful poem. You can feel truth and power in it.**

Well, thank you. That's a good example of a poem that just really needed to be written. I didn't write at all about my mother's death for...twenty years. And until I'd written those poems, I couldn't write other things that needed to be written. I don't subscribe to the poetry as therapy thing. I hope that the technique, the skill we bring to writing about those things bring it above the merely personal. If they don't, then that makes your reader a voyeur, and I don't want my readers to feel that way. I also do a lot of borrowing from other people's lives, which is dangerous because most people assume—if they're reading with that sort of voyeuristic tendency—they assume that your poems are (quote) "true." And art is always true, but it isn't always factual.

**What do you feel is the purpose of writing poetry if you don't just write it to be published, yet you don't want to write crap that nobody wants to read?**

It's just so much fun. It is just the most fun on earth to work with a poem. I have poems that have taken me two or three years of concentrated work to bring to a point where I'll put them in the mail. Those are my favorite poems, the long intricate ones. It's like getting your hands into clay. Poetry is the most difficult work I've ever done; it's the most difficult reading I do, and the most rewarding. I think the purpose of poetry in the world depends on the purpose of the readers picking up the poems. If that reader is looking for comfort, I hope she finds it, even though I don't write to comfort people. There's as much purpose to writing poems as there is purpose in readers responding.

My own purpose, I'm afraid, is quite selfish. It's just so much fun. Writing poetry is just such a trip; and sometimes it's a trip straight to the trashcan. And not writing poetry is just hell. And I love to edit!

**That brings me to my next question. When do you decide a poem is finished?**

Somebody said—I forget who—"we never finish poems, we simply abandon them." I guess when I read it aloud and it sounds right. I think it's really important that the music is there—and, at the same time, I'm not exhausted with it. That's a really vague answer. You just know, don't you?

**Which of your poems is your favorite?**

That's interesting. When you have to do readings you have two things that are uppermost in your mind: you want to read poems that you really like and you also want to read poems that will be received only with one reading. I tend to like my more complex poems, and that causes some difficulties. I really like writing long poems. I really love working the ones that are really intellectually challenging.

But to answer your question, I have some really recent poems that I like,

ones about six lines long, and I don't know what it is, but I can read one of these to a group three or four times in a year and it doesn't feel stale to me. I think it's some sort of combination of the music that somehow found its way into there and the fact that it's brief.

I don't like reading my grief poems. People come up to me afterwards and say, "I'm so sorry about your mother." And, you know, that's not what I'm after. So I don't like reading those, though I do appreciate that those are poems that people can personally feel. In each of my books there's a centerpiece, long poem—I really am drawn to writing long poems, so I guess those are my favorites.

**How do you feel about teaching writing? Is writing something you can teach?**

No it isn't. I've taught writing at every level from twelve-year-olds to graduate school, and I always go in there with that trepidation. First of all, who am I to teach them how to write? They love poetry as much as I do. And then, how do you go about it? But somehow it happens. It may happen because you get people who are in love with the language and the art form in a room together, in an environment where that love is nurtured. I really think that programs or classes that teach writing tell a person, "you're safe; try to write something; use the language; try something new; we really do want you to succeed at what you are chosen for." It certainly doesn't happen for the person who wrote alone, hidden, in secret, in denial, addicted.... You don't get that kind of nurturing from editors and you don't get it from literary criticism. That just tells you, "They're a whole lot better than I'll ever be," and "Why am I trying this?" Whereas, you get people in the classes like I'm teaching here...they're wonderful! They are so supportive of each other; they give such careful attention to each other's work. I think those people will leave this class and move into the black hole of the world ready.

**Do you believe that, as a teacher of writing, every student learns how to write the same way? Essentially, how do you avoid teaching every student to write as the same writer? The real goal is to have each writer write in his or her own style, isn't it?**

I think you have to try really hard to sift through the voices that you're getting response from. In my current class [that I am teaching] there are fourteen of us poets, and I think we are each trying to read the work we are given and say, "How is the poet working? What territory is this person trying to mine?" And we assist. But in the end we say, "Ya know, this is a bad line break...because we wouldn't do it that way." And you have to understand, make it very clear, that this is what I would do if this were my poem; but I know it's not my poem.

We must build up both the ability to see our own poetry in a lot of different ways and keep it as our own. It's really hard. But it's also essential. If you go into the world and put your poems out, and you get a certain kind of poem rejected and certain kind accepted, it's the same mentality, "Ok, I'd better write in this style." What I see a good teacher as doing is both honoring the work that's getting done in the class and showing some ways that it might be more powerfully said. Now, more powerfully said is, of course, in the mind of the beholder; but if you can put it out there and the poet can get back fourteen voices saying, "this section of the poem could be said better," even in fourteen different ways, at least the poet knows that section of the poem isn't working. So you are learning some techniques, you're watching very closely other people's work and you're required to attend to it.

In the end, you just hope that your students are adult enough to say, "My voice is my voice," but perhaps you can help them to be a little bit more precise about what qualities in their voice are most effective and what qualities need to be continually rethought. That would be the best of all possible things.

**Any advice for the poets out there?**

Here's my final advice: you need two kinds of readers. You need a reader who is absolutely going to love everything you write, which is my husband—but you can't have him; he's taken—and you need somebody who is really wary of praise, and is going to say, "Ya know, it's probably not ready to publish yet, but it's pretty good now. Look at stanza two." And you need them both so when this one is just tearing your heart out you can go to the other.

**So which of these readers are you as a teacher? The Hug Giver or the Look at Stanza Two?**  
Depends on the student.



## Contest Winners

### Fiction Winner

#### ...And that I almost wasn't

Amy Perry

I was born May 3rd, 1947. Japan's back had been freshly broken by nuclear bombs and allied occupation, the spine contorted by innumerable knots and welts that still have yet to fully heal, and may not ever. On that day the emperor was dethroned and castrated to a figurehead. My birth was the bridge over the chasm of two worlds of Japan, one imperialist, the other "democratic." The simple townspeople—and there actually were simple townspeople back then—milled around in a fugue. Gaijin moved in with a glint to their eyes and an unspoken understanding that the country was ripe. Italians. Americans. I was born a maybe-bastard to a Japan that was being raped and raped and raped. I knew no other Japan.

I wasn't alive to see the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I came after the fact, but I still had nightmares. Maybe it was because I had to bike around the burned up wreckage of a destroyed weapons shop every day on my way to school. And every day my friend Ichiro would say the same thing, "My dad told me that during the air raid when that shop got bombed, the owner came running out with his hair on fire. He was running around and flailing his arms, couldn't see for the smoke and then wham! The shop exploded and everything went flying. It wasn't until the dust settled that they found the shopkeeper pinned to a wooden post. He was impaled by his own sword, how funny is that?"

"How like a samurai."

I wondered later why they didn't clear away the rubble on that plot of land. Why they never rebuilt it. They said there was some issue with next of kin, but more I think it was meant to serve as a grim reminder. Yokohama stood as the eternal phoenix, forever being reborn and destroyed. First by the 1923 earthquake, then the anti-Korean riots, later the WWII bombing campaign. Every time it started to gather itself up it was again knocked down. But the rubble of that weapons shop remained, the city's rebirth evidenced in its ashes.

Some nights for the majority of my childhood, and every night when I was seven years old, I would wake up screaming. My parents would stumble in, their eyes caked in sleep, to see who or what was murdering their son. My mother would ask, "Do you need me to see you to sleep?" And I'd wave my hands in front of my face. No. It was their continued existence that brought me comfort; their actual presence did little to dispel my fears. And I never, unlike some kids, instilled within my parents godlike affinities that would encapsulate me whenever one of them put their arms around my shoulders. I was well acquainted with the frailty of human life. We were living in fragile times.

I had many different dreams, but they all seemed to focus on the same themes. In one dream I was lying on my back. Two foreigners hovered over me, one black, one white, one male, one female. The first kept unrolling gauze and shoving it back into my throat. She stuffed it down and down until I could feel it in my stomach, in my intestines. The other stood by in surgical gloves, holding a needle and a spool of thread which he was constantly unwinding.

"Bombs are exploding everywhere, skin is melting off the bone and we don't have enough gauze." He was staring down at me, but speaking to the nurse. Outside and overhead I heard the whoosh of jets and the whistle of bombs falling toward the earth.

"He's right, you're lucky young man." The woman bent forward so that only her large face filled my vision. Her mouth was set wide but her lips were thin and cracked. "Don't you realize how lucky you are? How lucky to have this much gauze?"

But I couldn't speak.

In another dream I was riding my bike to school. Ichiro was beside me, his face pointed up to meet the wind. We came to the site of the old weapons shop, only instead of being an abandoned heap of ash and wood, it stood tall as if it had never been touched by war. A group of men, women and children clustered so thick that there was no break for me to tell what they were all gawking at.

Ichiro was saying, "my dad told me that during the air raid when the shop got

### Poetry Winner

#### I Dreamed I Was Showing You The Midwest

Madeleine Wurm

stacking flat plates of land upon the table, saying this  
is iowa and this square one is kansas, pouring parking  
lot grit into your cup. this is an ear  
of corn, you peel it like this, it's called husking.  
we sit on a yellow brown sofa. you'd forgotten  
such plaid and paisley fabrics.  
later on i'll tell you of tornadoes.  
our great plain meal: grasses and buckeyes,  
dairy queen, more corn. a catholic grace, or  
i say, we could pray to judy garland. or let's  
listen to the husk and husk and husk reverberate  
throughout the night.  
this is missouri, this is where i live.  
and watched with not dismay as you  
pressed your thumbprints in the dishware.

bombed, the owner came running out with his hair on fire..." but his voice was oddly detached, like a voiceover.

I dismounted, dropping my bike to the side and pushing through the group of onlookers. In my dreams I was a bit more brazen than I was in real life at that age. I would never have been so bold as to push an adult, but a sense of urgency compelled me forward. I pushed, shoved and shouldered my way to the front of the group.

"He was running around and flailing his arms, couldn't see for the smoke and then wham! The shop exploded and everything went flying."

It was the shopkeeper. His hair was in a top knot, but he wore the army fatigues of a Japanese soldier. His cheeks, nose, and the crown of his hair were dusted white with ash. Up close, I realized that he looked not unlike my father.

"It wasn't until the dust settled that they found the shop keeper pinned to a wooden post."

His hands were clutched around the handle of a sword while the blade kept him pinned to a wooden beam that helped form the wall of his shop. It was an ornate piece of trash, not a real sword, but a shoddy, showy hunk of steel meant for oblivious Americans to buy as souvenirs.

"He was impaled by his own sword, how funny is that?"

The kind of sword that couldn't cut bread, and yet somehow it succeeded in skewering a man. He continued to clutch at the handle, moving his hands down to feel along the three inches of metal that protruded from the lips of flesh that consumed the rest of the blade. His lips moved, silently, but not at me. And the crowd just stood and stared, captivated by the macabre beauty of it all.

"How like a samurai."

How close I came to not being. My father was a fisherman, and he kept mistresses in two ports across Honshu, one in Osaka and another in Hiroshima. Marriage hopeful, my father once confided in me, though I failed to see what made my father such a lady's man as looks wise he was only average, and in personality, he was about as satisfactory as a lukewarm bath—passable, but not preferable. He told me that the only reason he married my mother is because she was pregnant, and he didn't see why he should punish Michiko and Yoko just because he was so unfailingly fertile.

He was set to visit Michiko late in the summer of 1945 when his wife, later my mother, spontaneously aborted her seven-month-old fetus. It was the first of three miscarriages she'd have over the years. My mother was distraught; she wouldn't stop screaming and she would inexplicably start throwing herself against the walls, falling over her own feet and breaking through the delicate construct of their house. They talked of institutionalizing her, but my father wouldn't let them. He consigned himself



to staying with her night and day, doting on her and encouraging her moments of sanity.

He said my mother would stay up into the early hours of the morning, holding her stomach and moaning under her breath, "my boy, my little boy..."

Two weeks later, Hiroshima got a Little Boy of its own.

My father spoke of these events so impassively that it disturbed me. He never told me if he ever found out whether Michiko had lived or died, nor did he give any indication that he cared. He recounted his near-death experience with a grin, remarking that it was odd to think that if his son-to-be hadn't died, he wouldn't have lived. To him it was amusing, but to me, it was horrifying. I realized the first time he told me the story that I had twice escaped the danger of nearly not-being. If my father had died in Hiroshima, I never would have come along two years later. But the unborn son in my mother's womb could have quite possibly been me. A me that was not-me. And learning, and trying to comprehend, that in order for me to live my not-me had to die, was not an easy task for a child.

Growing up, I would have done just about anything to know my father had been at Chiran, even if it meant I would never have been born. I might very well have been born if the not-me had lived to term, if my mom's uterus wasn't so knotted and scarred that only two out of five pregnancies would succeed in creating a child that could breathe air. My father was the right age, after all, but he was too thin. He had asthma and a collapsible lung which he claimed kept him from engaging in strenuous exercise.

The officials that bought this excuse must never have seen my father aboard a fishing boat, hauling up nets of quivering, pulsing, squirming fish. They never saw every vein in his arm bulge when he brought in a catch, and they certainly never saw him do it all with a grin plastered on his face. Collapsed lung indeed. My father was a lover of the sea, and this love ranked above all else, so that up until his death, nothing could compromise it. Not the country, the emperor, my mother, or me. Perhaps if the sea had been at war, rather than the stage of war, he would have felt differently.

My father, with his rolled up sleeves and rubber galoshes, a rag tied around his head to block the sweat or keep the sun from rotting through his balding scalp, was a perpetual embarrassment to me. He always smelled like fish, which he said was the price to pay for wooing any female, and the sea was not exclusive in that department. And he always made us eat fish, which I thought was weird given the metaphorical context *within which he framed the smell, and consequently the taste.* After the Occupation, my peers were growing fat on red meat and butter, but it was just fish and rice in our house. I didn't taste beef until I was almost thirty, and spent the entire night with my head in the toilet as a consequence.

I should have been more grateful to him when he was alive, but we had no real relationship where I could show my gratitude. He was gone for days, weeks at a time, and when he was home he was always tired and irritable. He rarely spoke but to tell me stories about himself, and he never told me that he loved me. Families just weren't like that back then. For fear of devaluing the term by saying it flippantly, it was never said at all. It feels like now people say it on a whim. "I love this handbag," or "I love this bar." "I love this sushi." But there's still hesitancy among couples that keeps them from admitting to each other, "I love you." And I think that is because for all our fear that we would deface and degrade the idea of Love, we never truly learned what it meant to love. We knew only reservation.

To my father, there was never any question as to the life I'd grow into. He knew I would be a fisherman, like him. But my mother took one look at her average offspring and assigned to me all the failed expectations from her own wasted life. She was really no different from any other Japanese mother. Overbearing demons, we whispered amongst ourselves in the schoolyard, exchanging woeful tales of how our mothers actually thought we could venture beyond our mediocrity. Imagine! I'm pretty sure the folktales of the mountain demoness, the man-eating woman, was originally dreamed by a son whose mother actually had the nerve to think her son special at an age where all children just want to be average.

Throughout the school year she was possessed by delusions of grandeur—not of self, but of son. My ordinarily well-mannered, soft-spoken mother would berate my teacher whenever I came home with a substandard, or perhaps just standard, score. How could her little genius be doing so poorly in formal academia; it simply didn't make any sense. Before long she was banned from the school grounds. Poor thing, it wasn't as though she had anything else to occupy her time. But without her helicopter approach to my schoolwork, I was able to slip into that so-desired normality, until I dropped out altogether.

Neither one of them in all their expectations and assumptions entertained the notion that I was destined to become a criminal. Not a common vagrant or thug off

the street, but a Yakuza. The Criminal of criminals. That the underworld was the only viable destination for bastards of society such as myself did little to appease them. My father disowned me outright, but my mother didn't have the heart to release her hold on that which she had worked so hard to maintain.

She cried every time I saw her; my visits became less and less frequent until there were none at all. On my last trip up to Yokohama, she spent the entire time wedged into the corner, rocking back and forth as she chapped her skin and eyes with constant rubbing and wiping. After that, I vowed that the next time I would see her, the tears would be dried. True to form, the next time I made the trip she was on her deathbed and everything had dried.

Her skin was thin and translucent, the same texture and consistency of a paper lantern, only more brittle. What she had been afflicted with, I didn't care to ask. It had taken its toll regardless, and having a name to praise or damn for her condition would have just cheapened the effect. Because for the first time since I had been sixteen or seventeen, the eyes with which she gazed on me were not marked with dark disappointment.

"Haru," her lips worked her voice out in a whisper, "you look well."

"I'm feeling it. I'm feeling well," I told her.

"And your father?"

It had taken my father several years longer, but he had eventually dropped out of my mother's life as he had with mine. Neither of us had seen him for the greater part of a decade, and I was still of the mind that I was better off for it. But I assured her nonetheless that he was doing well, because little white lies become blessings under the imposing stare of death.

She didn't register pleasure or disappointment. Her responses were empty, open, meaningless, like she was parroting them out of some sense of obligation. And her next words were so seemingly random that my brain had to actively work to catch up.

"You remember when you used to have such nightmares, Haru. You'd wake up screaming and the whole house would shake. Your father would get so angry, but I understood. I understood because I grew up with nightmares, too. I was scared of the dark, sometimes my mind would work up into these horrible stories, and I couldn't even get them out until my mother came in and started telling me new stories, so I could push the old ones out."

"Haru..." She lifted her eyes to stare into mine. The doctor had warned me about the possibility that my mother was going a bit senile, but there was a clarity in those eyes untouched by the muddled expression on her face. "Haru, when you woke up those nights screaming, what was it about?"

"It was," my words snagged in my throat on their way out, "it was just the fear of nonexistence."

"Nonexistence?"

"...And that I almost wasn't. That I almost wasn't born."

"Ah..." Her gaze left mine. There was nothing about her that betrayed whether or not she understood what I meant by that. "I always regretted not staying with you on those nights. You pushed me away, but I should've stayed. Stayed and told you stories to push the old ones out. I'm sorry for that."

"I think I survived well enough on my own."

She had no response for that. Her fingers curled into her bed sheets; it was impossible to tell where the white of one ended and the white of the next began. Every few breaths her chest would heave as if her heart and lungs were rioting against their own winding down.

"Haru..." she whispered finally, her tone confessional, conspiratorial, "I'm still afraid of the dark."

I thought idly of telling her a story, chasing away her bad dreams with images of my own. My brain kept circling back to images of an air raid, of explosions, and the shopkeeper running out screaming as his hair smoldered. Everyone watched. And the man somehow morphed into my father, but not, impaled by his own sword. The him that was not him to match the me that wasn't me. I thought about telling her the one about the gauze and the doctors, how I was so lucky but couldn't speak to say it.

But I didn't. The only words I could work out were a meek "Me, too," which was probably the most she deserved anyway. I held her hand, watched the violence in her chest, until the paper skin turned to ash. She sagged into the bed, then snapped back, and with a resigned sigh she was gone.

I wanted to cry, but she had used up all my tears, and so instead I just knelt there stroking her knuckles. Thinking about nothing, thinking about business, and feeling no real loss.

How like a samurai.



## Nonfiction Winner

## Growth

John Pyron

*Disease is somatic; the suffering from it, psychic. — Martin H. Fischer*

"There's gonna be a pinch," the antiseptic angel in white says as she ties me off in preparation for the needle and the radioactive cocktail that will become my savior.

Needle slips in, arm goes cold, face goes white, veins burn like a flame slowly creeping up a small fuse toward the big bang... followed by a pat on the arm and a warm grin.

"Let me know if it starts to burn really badly or if there is any pain. I'll be right around the corner," she says as I look across the room at the television set, hoping desperately for some sort of escape, some chance to transport myself into an alternate reality with palm trees, sunshine, and small waves gently lapping at the sandy shoreline as the perpetual ebb and flow brings me that much needed sense of peace.

Alas, I am disappointed in that all I find are horrific images of United birds colliding with colossal centers of trade, volatile fuselages smashing into broken-paned, serrated windows, dust and debris choking the sun, the small fuse creeping slowly toward the big bang. And all I can do is watch as the images are slowly burned, painfully etched into my memory, my mind spinning, seeking to grasp the details, the rawness, the realness, the tragedy...

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"FUCK CANCER," the black t-shirt silently screams at me. At first I am taken aback at the bold and, in the world of the politically correct, unthinkable word that currently bombards my senses and floods my mind with memories. Cancer. Go ahead, say it out loud.

"CANCER!"

"Cancer is a word, not a sentence," John Diamond says. True, the six letters c-a-n-c-e-r do spell a word, but they also encompass sentences, paragraphs, pages, books, volumes, and entire sets of thoughts and feelings that freely flow forth from one's so-called "chemo brain" when in the midst of being irradiated in order to eradicate the word from one's body.

I've heard all the quotes, all the uplifting thoughts, all the sentimental musings, all the blind hope from those who are at a loss for what else to offer. All the niceties, the gifts, the pitying looks, the helpless eyes that wonder what must be going through the mind of one who has been forced to be patient... not only to be patient but to be a patient. 'Tis an interesting experience for one's last name to be changed, inadvertently, to Patient. Cancer Patient.

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I am not one to paint the nice, bright, sunny picture that most want to hear when they casually ask, "How are you doing?" But I know that most people are not ready to hear the truth; most people can't handle it, and most people are afraid. If they are afraid, think how we all feel.

"I'm makin' it," I reply, knowing that answering that question truthfully would leave me minus one friend, but still I wish that I could explicitly dictate my feelings to this unknowing friend of mine. These are the feelings of the bottom of the barrel, of one who is struggling with the most basic existential dilemma: life vs. death. I recently heard a young man in a stylized documentary called "Bang, Bang You're Dead" say, "Sometimes I hate being alive, but I'm too afraid to be dead" and it took me back, immediately transported me to that cold, white, antiseptic tile on the bathroom floor that caught so many of the salty tears that slipped through my finger tips as I lay curled tightly wondering, "Why is it so hard to just be happy?" All the while I was forgetting the battle that raged on in my insides as my savior tore my body apart, piece by piece, destroying small pieces of vital organs and essential tissues along with the abnormal cell growth that became my first name, Cancer, and I was blaming the inability to live a "normal" college-student life on my own inability to "just be happy" instead of considering the correlation of my new moniker, Cancer Patient, to the interruption of my "normal" college-student life.

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And now I sit, seven years after the fact, still pondering, still piecing together, still facing the stages of survivorship, and still wondering what made me special and how I ended up in that chair, attached to a saline bag on that eleventh day of September watching two worlds explode as the flame slowly traveled up the long fuse that would lead to the big bang.

University of Missouri — St. Louis

## Poetry

## Reflections of Spring in December

John Cunningham

The fountains have all been turned off  
for the season; the amateur fishermen  
have gone home to trim the tree,  
but someone forgot to pass on the memo.  
Ducks float noisily in placid waters,  
and a warm sun sparkles gently within  
the liquid mirror.  
At the park crossing,  
the geese have the right-of-way.  
Someone has dyed the earth green this winter.

Children frolic through  
piles of autumn leaves,  
their shorts and short sleeves  
offering little protection against  
scratchy stems. All snowmen  
built this year are made from  
snows of the imagination.  
Foam cups at Christmas-tree lots are filled  
with chocolate milk instead of hot cocoa,  
and gloves are worn for protection  
from pine needles  
rather than the cold.  
The Yule log has no fear of the flame.

At sunset,  
the sky is lit up with the most magnificent  
purples, oranges, reds, and yellows  
as the sun's rays reflect off the clouds  
of smog and carbon dioxide.



Dzenita Horic

## L'autre Art Des Imagistes

Elizabeth Staudt

consider a photograph—  
the ultimate imagist poem—  
ironically a thousand words long



## Circus Moon

Jamee Palmer

*after John Rogers Cox's painting "Cloud Trails," 1944*

Behind you the late afternoon sun  
casts peculiar shadows  
on rows of cornstalks by  
scattered haystacks.  
The expanse of land spreads  
towards a vast, dusty sky.  
You hear nothing  
except perhaps a few sparrows behind you  
and the faint, imagined tune  
of a reluctant piano.  
The barn, covered in circus posters,  
signals that there must have been life here  
not long ago.  
Hands hammered  
large, rusty nails into the wood  
put up the bright posters  
plowed the field.  
As you watch the full moon rise slowly  
Half hidden beneath slight lavender clouds  
low in the murky, blue sky,  
you have a hard time believing  
someone breathed here.

## A Picture Hanging on a Refrigerator

Tom Peterson

I stand out front  
On wax green grass,  
The sky waxed perfect blue.

My hands and arms are thin black sticks,  
Below an empty circle.  
My shoes and tie, waxed fine and shiny blue and brown.

My house a simple square  
With a triangle top.  
My chimney a rectangle, grayish smoke waxing up.

Is this what children think of me? A statesman!  
And the world is paper thin.  
What will they become looking up  
To wax and stickly men?

## Remembering those days

Ellen Herget

is like smelling cat piss  
on an oft-washed carpet  
in the intervening years:  
so musky, still sharp.

And she'll never quite  
wash out, either:  
the junior woman  
who took the shrapnel  
of your words as Gospel.



Lindsay Kemper

## Agnosticism

Troy Carron

I'd been seeking Aphelion half my life  
(waxing the supposed wiser half)  
having noticed the warmest months are farthest from  
the Light  
on the  
northwestern hemisphere  
(where I dwell and where I  
intend to stay for the Warmth  
should come to me and not  
vice versa).

but i'll bear the Lightest winters contently  
for  
without the northwestern  
Perihelion  
i should very much miss my Blanket.

## Wordsworthless

Troy Carron

Fragments of light,  
tiny water droplets  
in the sky, bowing to the laws of physics,  
yet outsmarting the human eye.  
And my heart stays down here in my chest  
—steady beats unsworned by truth,  
unexcited.

Only what there is and what is known,  
no longer a wonder since I've grown  
and knowledge has forsaken me.  
And I could wish my days to be  
bound each to each by natural piety;  
my heart could soar delighted!

But I sought truth.  
And so rainbows, flowers, and the rest  
of nature are wonderments but in our youth,  
and dismaying verities when we die  
unbloomed.

## Oh, the Humidity!

Bobby Meile

You are my summer rain:  
Your appearances are sporadic and short,  
You get me wet,  
You water my plants.

## [though you speak in cryptic symphonies]

Lindsay Perkins

though you speak in cryptic symphonies  
your fingernails mounting you firmly into the wall  
like a print of some obscure artwork

i know that we will touch fingertips  
and feel for that brief second like battery acid

i will drink you up and cause me no harm  
for i am bleach and unless our molarities clash  
we'll flow like water

down the wall in a flood of song  
in your hieroglyphic embrace

and i will never need to touch you again  
because we will fall like a ceiling leak  
onto the floor,

one drop now, and into the clouds someday  
but not this humid summer



## Elegy for You in the Woods

Jamee Palmer

This song, with its tender mandolin and turning, melting harmonies makes me think of you.

I awake at four the morning after  
they told me you were gone.  
I haven't cried until now,  
as your death wakes me up hard  
like rain on my stomach.

Floating to the bathroom  
in twitchy shadows, I push  
tears out of my eyes so that they drip faster  
onto the tops of my feet.

There is no going back  
to sleep this morning.  
For hours in the stale twilight I listen  
to this song over and again, not believing  
myself when I decide you are sleeping  
right now, head buried in an old quilt,  
feet sweating in wool socks;  
beating, moving, glowing.

I rub my face red and wish  
you out of the woods.  
In fat whispers,  
I ask Him to put you  
there under that quilt.  
I plead with Him, delirious  
at the thought because I am sure He must  
comply  
if I cry hard enough, hold my breath  
long enough.

The sun, blurred behind the vapory  
veil of morning,  
rises above swarming oak trees across the road.  
I hold my toes tight,  
pull out a few eyelashes, taste  
the tears gathered at the corners of my mouth.  
The song swells behind me, pushing my teeth  
into my knee  
until the tight skin breaks  
and dots of blood rise and pool  
at the surface.

## Reflections on my Antebellum Southern Heritage

Luella M. Isbell

The heirloom silver spoon  
of my birth  
has long since been removed  
and sold  
at auction  
on eBay.

Why then  
can I still taste  
the guilty tang  
of tarnish  
on my tongue?



Abby Gillardi

## Dear Mr. Whitman, John Cunningham

I have contemplated a leaf of grass, blade less than a millimeter thick,  
And I am no closer to understanding the cosmos than I was before.

I pulled it up by its root, found its little green heart and its green skin,  
And I know God no better.

I have gone into the forest and heard the wind sigh through the trees,  
I have listened to the echoes of the birds and the crickets chirping.  
I have seen the December snows cover the prairies,  
And I have looked up at the mountain,  
But the only thing I know for certain  
Is that I am small, and I am alive.

The tree, mighty, majestic, and old, wooden and emotionless,  
Is no kindred of mine.  
I do not see myself in the electricity of your atoms,  
And men that have died and returned to nature,  
To flutter with the breeze or ebb and flow with the ocean,  
Will be vaporized when the sun swallows the earth.  
Eternity is a very long time to be a desolate rock.

So I sit, on this unkempt hair of the dead, and pray.  
I pray for rain,  
I pray for salvation,  
I pray for prayer's sake.  
I pour out all my desires, wants, yearnings, with the carefree ravings of vanity.

And in short, I die alone.

I have contemplated a leaf of grass, sitting on the bones of untold generations,  
And I understand only that I cannot understand.



## Iambic Postcards

Madeleine Wurm

A strongman in the circus propping up  
three suited men upon his stomach's bridge.

A hillside and a girl playing the flute,  
her wind-flung hair held back by a black band.

A levitating baby, empty crib.  
His parents seem to take it all in stride.

The lurid purple color of a book  
from '65, called Satan Was My Pimp.

The skyline of a town in lilac light.  
A giant party—everything is free.

A thick-veined, disembodied Spanish heart  
pierced by a bloodied arrow. Corazon.

Two snapshots of a redhead boy's repose—  
his empty child's stare and checked green shirt.

A wizened, grizzle-bearded Indian  
who's leaning to the side to light a smoke.

A dreamy mod-type girl with ironed bangs  
who loves mascara, libraries and sweaters.

Block letters telling me I'm but a blip.

## In Nara

Ellen Herget

In Nara I bought my parents a bell  
made of real cast iron  
with a long, blue paper charm  
covered in white kanzi and deer.

You watched from the door,  
two ice creams drenching your fingers  
under a sticky sun, dripping a stream  
that nearly stained your favorite sneakers.

I felt your eyes on my back  
while the old man prepared my gift.  
I knew your sigh when he  
dropped the deer-patterned wrapping

and bowed for it with sluggish, creaking joints.  
As he rose I looked back at you  
and shrugged; when he was righted  
I thanked him profusely.

## [so really, everything is because]

Lindsay Perkins

so really, everything is because  
we awaken early, foreheads dripping,  
dust clinging to fallow ground  
and shake, eyes tight with seasons,  
forgotten cliché, a frost that overtakes  
suede coat upon broken ears.  
I am a flower box waving in the still air;  
you are my roots,  
spiraling around the fence posts,  
falling short of the ground;  
an inch of difference is a mile of lost moisture  
and a mile of difference is really  
really no separate day or morning  
where I awaken is no concern of mine,  
everything is because  
because we are

everything is because it drips, slowly, feeding, infusing with grace,  
the harsh word and shallow sound, a timbre of separatism,  
a misplaced pitch and underfed pose, limbs stretching lithely,  
with carefully-placed I  
scattered We, trees without trunks and their leaves

## Recycling Center Haiku

Devry Becker

Oh what joy! The sound  
of green glass breaking at the  
recycling center.

## When Windows Are Frozen Shut

Jon Lampe

coming down like dandruff,  
down like the whiskey and lime pulp.  
so often I say,

"don't drink" and still I hold  
hands and hair and  
friends with porcelain teeth  
that sleep with a crust  
at the corners of their mouths.

I turn and look up the slope  
to the graves of nuns  
and a sign which denotes  
"dead end"

but don't laugh.

climbing the path,  
I think to quit but  
constrict my nostrils  
clench my fingers  
double-thump sick timing of my heart  
like a Vicodin downshift,

jumping gears as it goes—  
snow shin high, I plow on to  
the bench beside the mausoleum,  
I doze and wake  
like shapes in a fog  
and think to the greater permanence  
of granite slabs and  
life's debt repaid  
with interest.

the hushed snore of snow  
stirs me under  
the gaze of mother mary and joseph—  
damn, it's an awful time to  
find your way through fresh snow.



Abby Gillardi



## Nonfiction

### The Year I Lost the Stone Wall: A Memoir

Luella M. Isbell

My thirteenth year was my year for losing things. The first thing I lost was my best friend Nycci. Her parents were in the middle of a brutal divorce, and she was uprooted at the end of the school year to move to Iowa. Her new home, in Des Moines, seemed so far away to me, so removed from my everyday life, that I knew that I would never see her again. While I was saddened for Nycci, her mom and siblings, my personal scope of experiences hadn't provided me with any reference point from which to relate to the pain and turmoil in her life. Her abusive father had long made their lives chaotic, and her house had always held a palpable atmosphere of tension for me. While she had enjoyed coming to my home where the surroundings were stable, loving and laid back, I had been able to provide little else than girlish talk amidst giggling sleepovers. I am afraid I wasn't a very good friend. I was unprepared to cope with her painful life. Instead of sharing her grief, I just felt sorry for myself that my best friend was moving away and leaving me. Then she was gone, just like that. I shed more tears for my own loneliness than I ever did for her pain and affliction. With the loss of my only close friend, I began to feel an unraveling as the first tiny hole was torn in the warm cocooning fabric of my tightly knit life.

The next thing I lost, misplaced entirely, was an enormous stone wall. It was the wall that my father and my older brother had spent most of that same summer building. They must have carefully arranged it, stone upon stone, laboring side by side. They probably laughed and swore and made a ruddy picture of a close-knit team of two, streaked with dirt and sweat, as they labored outdoors in the cool North Carolina mountain air. I should never have been able to lose such a mammoth structure; the finished product being long, heavy, and built to last, designed to shore up the foundation of our summer home and keep the dirt from falling down the mountainside. However, I did lose it; somehow, I lost the whole wall. It just disappeared from my memory along with most of what happened during that dreadful summer. The whole thing just ceased to exist in my mind. I didn't find it again until several years later when I was thumbing through some photos and came upon one faded color photo, stamped with the date, portraying my father and my brother, smiling through grime and concrete dust as they stood together. I had to stare at it for a long time; I just couldn't place it. And then the memory of a memory came back to me. The photo brought back the summer and the wall and my mother's tearful announcement that had begun a cataclysmic rupturing that grew to shake the very foundation of my tenuous adolescent existence. My perfect family, my parents' happy marriage, my little world of comfortable stability was ending.

Up until that moment, my summer had been humming along in slow, luxurious mountain time. I loved the mountains. My parents had built our mountain home not only to vacation in but with the idea that they would retire there together. They had carefully designed every element of the house, and it was splendid. With four fireplaces, vaulted ceilings and peg and plank flooring, it was as beautiful as it was peaceful. Every summer we would spend at least a month enjoying the calm, the beauty and the togetherness that permeated our home in Montreat. Here was a slower pace of life and a family unity that we didn't have anywhere else. We had come to this place every summer since before I was born. There was no television or radio reception and so we were forced to relax into a comfortable natural laziness. We read, hiked, played board games and assembled jigsaw puzzles, things we would have spurned as boring at home.

In the mountains, it rained pretty much every day, but only for a short time. Reading was my favorite activity during the mountain rain. The rain was good and fresh and I liked it. It smelled like growing things. That morning, the morning my mother told me the news, I had the windows open so that the moist, sweet air could fill the room, and though I was absorbed in my book, stretched out lazily upside down on the bed, I was still aware of the rhythmic sound of the rain gently hitting the trees with a soft plip, plip, plip.

It was into this tranquil scene that my mother came. She had been crying, and I was alarmed at her red eyes and swollen face. Without preamble, my mother told me that my father wanted a divorce. I was dumbfounded. I remember thinking later that, had my mother told me that little green men had landed on the front porch, I could not have been more surprised. Strange that I should remember the details of that day so clearly and yet have lost the entire rock wall. Memory is a strange vehicle; sometimes it refuses to take you somewhere, because deep down you know it would be dangerous to travel there. Up until this time, we had been an all-American kind of family. My parents were both from good southern aristocratic families whose hardworking Protestant ancestors included doctors, legislators and ministers. They were well educated; my father held a Doctorate of Theology; my mother, a Masters of Education. My father was the pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church, the largest congregation in our small city. My mother divided her time between raising the three of us and her successful career selling Real Estate. We children lived a charmed and pleasant life filled with freedom and unconditional love. Though our parents were seldom home, we knew a caring and peaceful existence. The household was run according to rules of fairness and respect, and seldom was there any indication of discord. So little discord, that I sometimes think our house was like an area deep beneath the earth where the geological tension builds and builds as the tectonic

plates press and groan, struggling to get by one another, without ever causing the least seismic rumble on the surface. In the natural world, as in relationships, it is only a matter of time before the pressure mounts to a breaking point that must find release. The earthquakes of the highest magnitude often come with the least warning tremors.

But meanwhile, even as the pressure built and built toward inevitable disaster, year after year, it was too far below the surface to alarm us and so our sunny smiles shone out messages of health and prosperity on the yearly Christmas cards, which were always accompanied by a charming letter detailing our many blessings and accomplishments. Thus, my simple childish life had proceeded along these lines for thirteen happy, self-indulgent years. The fact that my mother had Multiple Sclerosis hadn't really scared me much. I had often heard that long multi-syllabic medical term in our home, and the disease became as closely aligned with my overall perception of my mother, as her beautiful hands or her sparkling blue eyes. She was a strong woman of admirable character and tenacious will and had raised us to function independently from an early age, in case of her succumbing to an "attack" of the disease. She had formed an MS chapter in each of the cities where we had lived and was very successful in her Real Estate business, to the point of being gone from the house for much of the day and night.

My preacher daddy was a gentle, quiet man who read me the funnies and of whom I stood in loving awe. Standing high in the pulpit every Sunday, in his long black robe with the velvet panels, he read us the word of God. He was magnificent. Though he grew up in the South, he fought all his life for racial equality and even marched on Washington D.C. with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Justice was as important to him as holiness. He was a humble man with a keen sense of humor who would often catch my eye in the middle of the service and wink at me from the pulpit. He often had us laughing so hard at the dinner table that my mother's sense of propriety was offended. For all of his good qualities, he too was gone a great deal and spent much of his time at home in his study preparing sermons, or just escaping from the hubbub of family life. While they were absent a great deal and neglectful in a harmless kind of way, my parents were loving, warm and gentle. They taught us the love of God and our fellow man, and they modeled it daily. The revelation, in the summer of my thirteenth birthday, that my parents' marriage was ending, caused an almost palpable sway and heave of the ground upon which I stood.

And so, that is how I came to know about would be my greatest loss that year. Back home in Missouri, the following months were strained, and by the end of December I had become an orphan of sorts. I had lost both my father and my mother. My father, who had always been a kind and generous man, had become unrecognizably transformed as he battled a deep and desperate depression. It seems he had been unhappy for years. He was a man with a strong sense of duty who had tried and tried to stand up under the weight of it all, but now was finally crumbling. Ultimately, the overwhelming sense of impending middle age, combined with the felt responsibility for the lives and souls of so many others, would drive him to leave the Church and move away, deserting wife, family and vocation in a last ditch desolate attempt at self preservation.

My mother—proud, stubborn and despondent over his rejection of her and abandonment of us—traveled inward and inward until she was as far removed from the three of us children in her physical presence, as our father was in his physical absence. My two brothers and I, with nowhere to go, stayed right where we were, trying the best we could to conduct the painful business of growing up.

My father left us the day after Christmas. He didn't even stay to take down the tree and clean up the mess. Those of us who remained, stood in the driveway, like half a person, waving goodbye to the other half, as he drove away in the family station wagon, pulling the little U-haul trailer that held everything he thought he would need for his new life.

My mother sank deeper and deeper into her own depression. At 52, she was still a strong, beautiful, aristocratic woman. Her marriage to my father had survived 27 years. I am sure she had considered the Silver Wedding Anniversary two years before as a talisman against marital discord. She had thought they were happy. She had been content. She had never for a moment considered that my father might be suffering a misery of depression and slow emotional strangulation. She was too busy living her life to think much about his at all. Now, she was livid. She was a formidable woman who was willing to fight for what she wanted. She had never let anything thwart her before: not Multiple Sclerosis, not three late-life kids, not even balancing her role of the pastor's wife with her career as the town's top Realtor. Now her fury grew and grew, and we watched in silent wonder as the calm mother we had once known became a tall, thin vessel of vehement rage.

She had always been a woman who liked to realize her objectives. Having grown up in the South, she valued being a "lady" above all. The loss of my father to another woman was a blow, but nothing like the pain of losing her respectability and her status in the community. The roles of "southern lady" and "divorcee" were significantly incompatible. Back in the summer, when my father had first told her he was unhappy and wanted to leave it all, she had begged him to stay; she had wheedled and threatened and lambasted him. He had tried to explain his desolation to her. He had tried to describe his desperate need for change; that he was suffocating; that he was too weary to continue; that he needed "space" to "find himself."

It turned out that she was the one who found him in the arms of another woman, a bar-maid with piled-high fake red hair that gave him oral sex and didn't expect too much from him because she had little to give in return. My mother was not to be rejected that easily. Instead of turning him away, she pulled him in tighter and closer. Weaving a web of suspicion around his every move, she demanded more and more of his



time and attention in a desperate move to regain him. He, who felt spent and in need of respite, recoiled with further withdrawal. It was a cycle of misery without an answer.

By November, my father had informed the Session that he was leaving the pulpit. He was ready to leave town. My mother used guilt and manipulation to talk him into staying in town through Christmas "for the children." She wanted him to leave Mary and come back to her. He wouldn't come back. It was never about Mary; she was a simply a foil for my mother, as opposite a female form as he could find to rebel with. (She would later fall away like chaff and my father would marry a fine aristocratic, southern lady too like my mother for the resemblance to be ignored.) No, this was about his survival. He was burned out, used up, and tired. A life of serving God, trying to please a congregation and giving, ever giving, had left him bereft of "self." And so, he drove away. My mother lost her battle: she lost her husband. We, kids, lost them both.

So, on that cold December day, my father left us and drove away to freedom from everything... except an all-consuming guilt. We didn't hear much from him for years. He would send us little notes on our birthdays, or a check, or age-inappropriate gifts on Christmas. I think he tried to forget about us, so he could stand to live. But there was always the guilt. He began drinking to forget what he had left behind. I think he had begun to figure out that not everything of value fits in a U-haul trailer. He had never been a drinker and once he started he couldn't stop. With every can of beer he drank, he tried to wash away his sin, a sudsy baptism of hops without hope. I know about the guilt. I sadly watched his self hatred over the long years. Long after the rest of us had forgiven him, he still could not forgive himself. Here was a man of the cloth—for he returned to the Presbyterian Church, in a different Presbytery, in the role of interim minister, the only capacity for which they would employ him—who preached on the forgiveness of a merciful God, but who could not accept in his own heart that he deserved or had received that forgiveness. He was ever after a broken man. He died surrounded by all three of his loving children, his second wife of almost twenty years and her children. All loved the man for who he was. None blamed him for who he couldn't be.

My older brother was fifteen when my dad left. He became the man of the house. He had lost his faith in God when his pastor drove away and left him with a sick mother who took little blue pills and said, "You children are the only reason I don't kill myself." My brother tended to find reasons to leave the house. Who could blame him? He stayed with us until the day he turned 18, and then he left for good. He is now a successful CEO, but even after all these years, he is still angry with God. He reconciled with his earthly father early on, but never forgave his mother for her emotional desertion and self-absorption. When Mom finally died after so many years of emotional and physical suffering, I had to convince him to come to her funeral.

My younger brother was only eight when our family collapsed. He lost the most. He lost his father and his mother only one day after Santa brought him everything he thought he wanted. He didn't see his Daddy again for a long, long time. His Mommy, as he knew her, never came back. I became my brother's Mommy as best I could during those long growing-up years. Recently, he told me that he had gone without a warm coat during the entire winter of his sixth-grade year. When I asked him why he hadn't just asked Mom for one, he just shrugged, "It didn't occur to me that she would have cared." Perhaps she wouldn't have. I still feel bad that I didn't notice and figure out how to get him one, but I was not a mom, only a teenager doing the best that I could.

I was thirteen and a half when my father left us. In the six short months since my mother had entered my mountain bedroom, I had aged a lifetime. For all that I lost; I had gained a world-weary knowledge of adult life. My mother, desperately alone and lacking friends of her own, had confided in me when she caught my dad at Mary's house in the early fall. She made a habit of coming into my room every night and unburdening the trials of her heart and life, while I hugged my knees to my chin. She returned often and told me things that I didn't want to know because it made her feel better. I was the priest for her confessions. She told me too much. She told me how she had never denied my father sex, except for oral sex, which she was sure was a sin. She told me that I couldn't ever tell anyone any of this because Daddy was an important minister and it was not yet publicly known. She also told me I was her best friend. Even then, I knew enough about life to understand the true meaning of best friend.

## Fiction

### The Woman Who Rode Horses

John Cunningham

I cried when I heard she was dead. They had come into my house, too old for the bustle of youthful excitement, and, with those same whispering voices we always used when talking about her, told me that she was gone. The impact of the news must have struck them the moment they gave it, because they sat on the wicker furniture of my back porch and stared dumbly out at the ocean below us. They seemed to realize, as did I, that this was the last worthwhile thing that any of us had to say to each other.

Tomás had been the first to spy her, those ten years ago, when we used to wait by the tide line for the ocean to wash away our footprints. The two girls were screaming in delight as each wave washed up at their ankles, and I was off amongst the rocks, digging through the wet sand for buried seashells and pirate's treasure. Skinny little Tomás had been skipping stones before he saw her, but he was quick to

abandon the game in favor of excited exclamations and fevered finger pointing.

"¡Oye! ¡Oye, Juanito, mira!" he cried, jumping up and down with excitement. I looked up to see what the fuss was about, the girls quickly following suit. All four of us stared in awe at the most beautiful woman any of us had ever seen, as she rode a magnificent white horse bigger than any in our town above.

She was riding at full gallop, not much farther than a couple dozen feet up the beach from where we stood, her dark hair and red dress flaring behind her in a whirlwind of color. She never looked behind her, despite all our shouting and waving, and after stopping briefly along the shoreline to gaze out at the ocean, rode on over the horizon. The surf washed in and erased all traces of her passing. No words passed between any of us that had witnessed such a strange and wondrous woman, but we all knew that we had encountered something special.

For the rest of the summer, every day that the sea was calm enough, we four hurried down to the beach and waited patiently for the woman to pass by. None of us tried to chase her; that would come later. For that timeless, perfectly innocent summer, we simply stood in sparsely stifled glee and waited for her to come. And she always did. Whether below leaden clouds or sun-kissed skies, she was always there, riding a variety of horses, no one ever the same. Some days her mounts would be the wildest of colors, blue or orange or purple, and others they would be the dull browns of the townsfolk above. She always wore that red dress, though, and stopped to glance out at the ocean. No matter what the weather, and, later, how hard we chased her, she would always stop for a brief glance out to sea before galloping over the horizon and disappearing from view.

When fall, and, eventually, winter, settled in, the restrictions of indoor life forced us to only imagine the woman as she galloped along the beach. What precious free time we did have was always spent guessing the color of the woman's horse. Tomás liked the blue the best, while the girls favored the purple, and I was partial to the red. When the storms were particularly fierce, we wondered if she still made her ride, even though the thunder was close enough to shake our houses when it rumbled. Secretly, I knew she did. I always saw her riding that red horse across the wet sand, so fast that I could never tell where her dress ended and the horse began.

After a lifetime of guessing games and indoor chores, summer finally came back around, and the very first day, we raced down to the beach in hopes of seeing her. Almost immediately, she came. Sitting atop a horse of the brightest green, she came hurtling out from behind a cliff wall and shot across the golden sand. We were all so excited to see her after long months of seclusion that we hurried after her without thinking. We shouted for her, urging her to wait, that we wanted to see her, to meet her. When she stopped to gaze out at the ocean, we thought that we would actually catch her, that we would finally meet her and see her face, but after that moment, she urged her horse on and galloped over the horizon. The sea erased all presence of her passing.

A new game was born, though. Every day we saw her, we quickly gave chase. Some days, we even went as far as to wait for her further down the beach, anticipating just where she would emerge from behind the rocks. Every time we tried, though, she escaped us. No matter what strategy we used, or how early we went down, the woman was always a step ahead of us. It never got old, though. Most days, we were sure that we were gaining an edge on her; that, if we kept at it, we would eventually catch her.

As the summers went on, though, the woman began to miss some of her appearances. There were times that our quartet sat down on the beach and waited for her long past the sun setting into the dark water and the third call from our parents. No longer did she come every day, or even every other day. Sometimes, we would go a whole week without seeing her. And with the irregular visits we made to the beach, it began to grow harder and harder just to glimpse the woman who rode horses.

And my last day, the day I left the town behind me, Tomás and the girls came to tell me that she was dead. I left my house, the only one I'd ever known, but I couldn't go without a look back. Despite swearing not to, I couldn't keep from glancing over my shoulder, back down at the beach, and the memory of four skinny little children, giggling excitedly at the prospect of a woman riding a horse along the sand. Just beyond the choppy surf, I swore I could see a red dress.

## Asper The Unlucky

Jeff Sjerven

Asper pissed, watching the golden stream splash against the urinal's ceramic back. It was amazing how much liquid a boy's bladder could hold. Rupert stood to his left, gazing in the mirror, combing the fibers of his beard with his fingernails.

"Rupert" said Asper, shaking off and zipping up. "Do you believe in luck?"

"We make our own luck by capitalizing on the few opportunities we're given. Luck—the idea of luck—is cockamamie bullshit."

"How can you be sure?" asked the boy. "I'm so terribly unlucky. Don't you think so?"

"No," said Rupert, picking something small from his teeth. "There's no luck. You live each day like your last and then you die. Carpe diem and what have you."

"Where will I go when I die, Rupe?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. Are you listening?"

Asper's mentor, Rupert, was his best friend. They were as inseparable as a woman's legs. Their age difference—a spectacle to others—never bothered them. They were bothered by very little, such was their companionship.

Rupert wore a tangled gray beard and a weathered trench coat draped over his



drab, thread-bare clothing. He offered words of wisdom to the young pupil who, at twelve, was nearly four decades his junior. Asper's mother was very wealthy, and so able to afford a general life instructor of Rupert's caliber.

The most recent educational outing had brought the pair to the local library. Rupert intended to show his friend a unique spectacle, something beautiful and exotic: Alice Locusta, the newest librarian. They had stopped in the bathroom to freshen up.

Asper washed his hands with three squirts from the liquid soap dispenser above the sink, taking extra care to rinse between the bends of his narrow fingers. You can't be too clean these days.

"I like to know things," he said.

"You foolish, foolish boy. What is it you want to know?"

"I want to know everything, but I know hardly nothing, I'm so unlucky."

Rupert raised his leg and booted Asper in the rear. The boy, caught off guard, collapsed onto his hands and knees on the yellow-speckled tile. He spotted a dead cockroach in the corner, its legs turned up to the heavens, and mused on the brevity of human existence as his teacher glowered above.

"What now, Mr. Knowledge-Of-All-Things? How's your luck now?"

Spittle formed at the edges of Asper's lips. He stood slowly and dusted himself off. Cleanliness is next to godliness; Rupert had said that once.

"Stand up," said Rupert. "Ready to meet your goddess? You'd better be ready."

Asper stood, shaking the dizziness from his head, and held the restroom door open for his teacher, who he followed into the library.

Behind the counter, Alice sorted a pile of returned books. Her physical beauty caught Asper's attention immediately. Her short brown hair fell about her shoulders, soft eyes, tiny lips pursed in meditation. Her only flaw was the squirrel tooth that jutted out slightly, separating itself from the surrounding teeth.

She continued sorting, unaware of the watchers positioned by the restroom door, and picked up a children's book with wild animals on the cover. She squinted at a large yellow giraffe looming above the other beasts.

Rupert elbowed his pupil. "Look at that," he grinned. "I'd get in there if I were you. And I mean in there."

"She's pretty."

"Now, Asper, I wanted to give you my Love Magnet, but I left it in Vermillander. Without it, you'll certainly fail. Be ready for that, I'm telling you it isn't going to work, but you need to try. That's what's important. And learn some lessons for next time. You can't win them all; there are lots of fish in the ocean."

"I understand."

"Now get in there."

"Rupe?"

"Get in there."

Asper plucked up his courage and approached, straightening his short black hair; it always flipped out at the front, just above his eyebrows. He smiled then stopped, pulling his lips into a narrow ball. Then he smiled again, working the muscles in his lips back and forth.

Alice placed a book titled *Senex Iratus* on one stack and picked up *The History of Serial Murder*. She paged through the latter with some interest.

"Hi," he said. "How are you? My name's Asper. What's your name?"

"Alice," she said.

"I already knew that, I shouldn't have asked."

"What?"

"My friend, the old guy over there—no, the one with the beard, he's waving his arms now. That's him. His name's Rupert and he's the kindest man you could ever know."

Alice put the book in its proper stack. She blushed.

"So how do you like library work? You get to read a lot of books, I suppose. How's that?"

"It's all right," she said, smiling nervously with her lips together. "I like it all right."

"I would like it too. Books are fun."

He shoved his hands in his pockets, glancing back at Rupert, who had ducked behind a shelf of used books for sale, mostly old issues of *National Geographic*.

"Do you like me?" he asked. "You don't know me, I know that, but do you like me so far? I mean, do you like me enough to want to talk to me anymore or should I go away? I'll go away if you say so, I just wanted to make—"

"You don't have to go," she interrupted. "But I can't talk much 'cause I'm working. You can talk 'cause you're a customer, but if I talk too much Ms. Nancy will see me and I'll get in trouble."

She brushed imaginary dust particles from the cover of a romance novel.

"I would have waited and talked to you later, somewhere else, but I don't know where you'll be. I only know that you work here." He scratched his neck. "Do you live nearby?"

"At the end of Hickory Woods. I ride my bike here."

"I live nearby too. You're more than welcome to stop by sometime, if you'd like. I'm sure we'd have fun."

"I'd like that," she said.

"So will you? Will you stop by when you get off work, maybe, and see us?"

"Us?"

"Me and Rupert. He spends most of his time at my house. My mom doesn't mind. She says it's extra tutoring."

"The old guy? He'll be there?"

"Yeah, probably. He's always there. Is that okay?"

"He's old and weird. He frightens me."

Rupert popped up from behind the stacks and winked at his pupil.

"Get her," he shouted. "Get her!"

Asper fidgeted with his hands. "When do you get off work?"

"Seven."

"You can stop by at seven then?"

"I think so, yeah, as long as the old guy isn't there."

She had run out of things to sort, so she picked up the children's book again.

"No, he won't be there," said Asper. "I'll make sure of it. You need directions though. Can I write on this?"

He grabbed a flier for a weekly creative writing group and jotted directions on the back.

"It's simple," he said. "We only live about a mile from here, all right?"

"Okay. I have to work now."

Asper felt a twinge of victory in the hair on the back of his neck as he offered her his hand. She shook it gently enough.

"It was very nice to meet you," he said. "I'll see you soon."

"Okay, goodbye."

He found Rupert kneeling in a nearby aisle, perusing a book by Francois Rabelais.

"How did it go?" asked Rupert.

"She's coming over tonight after work. Is that all right?"

"What are your intentions?"

"I don't know. Talk to her? Get to know her, I guess."

"I sometimes forget how young you are. How inexperienced you are."

Asper nodded ignorantly. Rupert was so wise it made his stomach turn. He remembered the time they made philosophy shakes, jamming torn-out pages from textbooks into a blender with expired milk and cranberry-flavored ice cream. It hadn't tasted very good, but it had been enlightening.

"Well then," said Rupert, "shall we be off?"

"Did you want to get that book?"

"No. I don't read French writers. They're cowardly bastards. Mustache men, all of them."

"Mustache men?"

"A mustache is a sign of weakness. Write that down."

Rupert dug a black pen from one of the pockets of his trench coat, which he handed to Asper. Asper jotted the note on his left forearm, under his reading assignment, and they left.

Once home Rupert continued his teaching, asking Asper to paint a mural on the wall of his bedroom. They cleared the wall of posters—man enlarged photograph of Silent Cal and a rust-colored portrait of Guillaume Postel—and pushed his bed alongside the dresser.

He gathered his paints in a small pile in the center of the room. He had only three small tubes of acrylic—the primary colors—but never complained.

"All the arts," said Rupert, "are equally important. Now paint.... Paint!"

Asper began. He first painted Rupert's head, his gray beard drooping from his face. Below Rupert, he painted a lion, flanked by the profiles of two bears. The mural was done entirely in blue and yellow, and he made a very poor job of it.

"Do you like it?" asked Asper, sitting in his pile of paints. "Have I done well?"

"No, I'd say not." Rupert squinted at the mural as if he hadn't watched the boy paint the entire thing. "Your craftsmanship is sloppy, you have no real technique. You just don't have what it takes. We'll continue to work, of course, because that's no real excuse."

"I'm not good?"

"Of course not. Few are, Asper." He smiled proudly.

"I'll never be good?"

"I can't say for certain, but the gut instinct says no. You'll never amount to anything."

"Are you any good, Rupe? At paints I mean."

"Ho," chuckled the teacher. "Yes, damnit, I'd say I am. I'm grand, excellent, indescribable! But enough about me. We're concerned about you."

"Can I see you paint something?" Asper's eyes glowed with adoration.

"No, it's time to read. I'll find something for you to read."

"Will you paint me something first? Something small?"

"You need to read now."

Rupert exited quickly, heading down the hall to the mother's office. He hurried through the doorway, stopping in front of a wall-sized bookshelf. He scanned the titles for an appropriate subject of study. Asper's eyes shivered in his memory. The boy was wise beyond his years, that much was obvious.

He dragged his wrinkled fingers from spine to spine as he decided. Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, Mythology. So many titles, he wasn't sure which to choose. He moved his lips without speaking. He doubted himself.

In his room, Asper crossed his legs and began to think of Alice. She was such a cute little darling, except for that snaggletooth. He could look past it, look into the warmth of her soul. Also the warmth of the pussy, for Rupert had informed him of its undying warmth and he was ready to experience it himself, if possible, when she arrived.



If she arrived.

He grew suddenly anxious. Terrible thoughts invaded his mind. What if she lost the directions and forgot the way to his house? What if she was attacked by wild animals? What if she was raped?

Rupert reentered holding a thin volume titled *Leda and the Salacious Swan*. The painting on the cover showed the white head of a swan snaking between a woman's breasts.

"Rupert," said Asper, "It's getting late. Do you want to leave?"

"Leave? I thought you wanted to learn, to know everything. I cannot leave if you are to become wise."

"Just for tonight though," said Asper, standing up. "I'm tired. Maybe I'll just go to bed." He yawned slowly, like a lion roaring in reverse.

"Isn't that girl coming over? Alice the Tooth?"

"Oh, right, I forgot about her. Right."

"I'll wait around, make sure everything works out between the two of you."

Rupert smiled weakly. "I won't interfere, of course."

"It's not necessary. I think I can handle it."

"You think so. Of course you think so, but do you really know? Have you actually had the experience before? I know women, Asper. I've known hundreds of them, intimately."

"Rupe."

Rupert stopped. He opened the book as if maybe he would read it himself. Maybe he didn't care what Asper did. His cheeks burned.

"Do I look all right?" asked Asper.

"You look better than a squirrel, if that's what you mean."

"Okay. Okay. I'm going now."

Rupert nodded, his eyes still in the book, as he listened to his pupil's footsteps retreating down the hall.

His excitement built during his walk to the local library. He hurried, imagining the joy of a friend his age, especially a girl, and arrived fifteen minutes early. He decided to wait outside, so he could surprise her. He watched people going in and out, guessing what each person would read. Fat people, he assumed, read suicide prevention books. The elderly listened to books on tape. Women read romance novels. Men with mustaches read French authors. Some people didn't read at all. But then they didn't come to libraries.

When Alice came outside she smiled cheerfully, only partially surprised to see him with a fleck of yellow acrylic on his cheek.

"Hello," said Asper. "I came to make sure you made it safely."

"Thanks. You're like a knight, kinda. You're going to protect me?"

He wasn't sure if he was supposed to answer that. "Oh," he said.

Alice's bike was locked in the bike rack. She unlocked it and strapped on her helmet. The thick red plastic hung over her forehead and both sides of her face, emphasizing her tooth. She grinned.

"How do you like my helmet?" she asked.

"I don't. Not really, anyway. Rupert says helmets are for cowards. Why bike at all if you're a coward?"

"I'm not a coward." She mounted her bike. "I'd say your friend Rupert talks too much and has no sense in his head."

"That's a terrible thing to say. If you were half the Rupert he is—"

"Listen, I like you. I don't wanna argue. I just wanna be friends. Can we go to your house now?"

He nodded and they started down the roadside. She rode along slowly, wobbling from side to side. He kept pace with a quick walk, using different muscles than he usually did and his legs ached a little.

"Do you have a boyfriend? I should have asked that earlier. I hope you don't have a boyfriend."

"I don't." She seemed to take pleasure in his question. "I'm single."

"Good. I'm single too. Rupert says the single life is all there is. Everything else is an illusion."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not really sure. It sounds true though, doesn't it? Astute?"

"I don't know. Not to me."

"It is, don't worry. Everything Rupert says is deep and philosophical."

He's very wise, even though he's old. I can't wait till you meet him. You're gonna love him. He already loves you, he told me."

Alice looked confused. "I thought you said he wasn't going to be there."

"Oh yeah, I know. He won't be there for long. He's about to leave. He just wants to meet you is all."

The sun was setting, spreading its golden rays across the scenery. Trees glowed. A fox appeared from behind a bush and waved hello. Asper was touched with poetic sentiment. He picked up a pebble from the roadside and hurled it. The pebble thumped the grass near the fox's tail. The animal groaned and scampered away.

"Isn't it beautiful out here?" he asked. "I love it."

"I love nature. It's a beautiful day for a walk, but I'm biking."

She smiled, thinking she had told a joke.

"Have you ever had sex?" he asked.

"What?" Her bike stopped, she dropped a foot to the side to steady herself.

"Why would you ask me something like that? That's a personal question."

"I know, but I wanted to know. I'm curious. Have you ever had sex? I haven't, but Rupert tells me I will soon. He says it makes you wise."

"I've never heard that. I just know it makes you pregnant."

"It makes women pregnant. It makes men wise. I thought everyone knew that. So you don't want to have sex? We don't have to if you don't want."

"I don't. Can't we just talk and be friends? You seem nice, I want to know you. I thought you wanted to be my friend."

"I do, but friends have sex too. Rupert says so."

"Well we can be the kind that don't. We can play marbles and dollsies."

She began biking again. Their talk turned to more conventional matters. He told her how life with Rupert was great, how he didn't need to go to school because Rupert knew everything and was his mentor. Alice said she went to school, and it was no fun because homework left a bad taste in her mouth, and what was worse, some of her classmates teased her about her tooth.

"They call me Squirrel Tooth Alice," she said wincing.

"Well that's not so bad. Squirrels are great, they climb all over the place with their little feet, they've got the tails. They can jump."

"But they're ugly," she said. "They're ugly little rodents."

"No they're not. I don't think they're ugly. I like your tooth."

"You do?"

"Of course. It makes your smile nicer. I like when you smile. Like that, that's nice."

She blushed, of course, and the tooth protruded between her lips.

In Asper's room she admired his mural, saying lions and bears were quite nice. Almost as nice as the other animals. He agreed and they began to talk about things.

"I like books and paintings and things," said Asper. "What do you like?"

"You're so smart. I love how smart you are, like you read and do paints and stuff. I wish I could do that."

"You could if you tried. Don't you read a lot? You work at the library..."

"I just volunteer there because I want to look smart and it's easy. Really I don't know much of anything."

"That's not true, I don't think."

"It is. The girls in my class always tease me. They say, 'Squirrel Tooth Alice can smile, but she cannot understand the human condition.' It's very mean the way they say it too, putting their fingers in front of their mouths like squirrel teeth."

"Rupert tells me the human condition is trying to get laid. Do you believe that?"

"I don't think so, no. I think the human condition is too many people in one area. A city, maybe. Too crowded, too polluted. Global warming."

Alice picked up a paintbrush, turning it over in her fingers. Asper worried maybe she was getting bored. He needed to entertain her somehow.

"Have I told you how very unlucky I am?" he asked. "I have the worst luck ever. Seriously."

"What makes you say that?"

"Everything. I know nothing, I can never learn enough, I have no talent, I love life but sometimes I hate life and want to die. I can't stop thinking about how if I ever do truly love myself I'll get old anyway and die."

"Isn't that true for everyone? Can't everyone say just that same thing?"

"That's a very pessimistic thing. Do you want to paint?"

Asper handed her the tube of blue acrylic. She handled the brush, making long strokes over a piece of green construction paper. She painted and painted, the acrylic thickened on the paper in globs.

"Do you know what I'm painting?" she asked.

"It looks like.... Is it a giraffe?"

"No, I mean, maybe. I don't know what it is. That's why I asked you."

This adorable response filled Asper with an intense emotion he couldn't describe. His toes became cold, his arms shivered. He leaned forward and kissed her delicately on the lips.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Should I not have?"

"No, I just wanted to know why you did."

"I wanted to."

She kissed him. Their fingers intertwined. His knuckles were large and strange-looking.

"Your hands are so pale," she said. "Paler than anything I've ever seen."

In the next room, Rupert watched, with his face pressed against the wall, staring through the tiny peep hole he had created. He watched as the girl kissed Asper.

The youths giggled and tickled one another. Asper kissed her on her nose. They looked very happy together.

Rupert opened his book and stared at the pages. His youthfulness had disappeared, but he always had literature. A good piece of literature is the best companion, he had told Asper that once.

Perhaps he was the unlucky one.



## Featured in this Issue of *LitMag*

Devry Becker ("Recycling Center Blues" p. 40) is a senior majoring in Philosophy.

Troy Cullum ("Amusement" p. 20) will graduate in May with a Bachelor's in English and a Writing Certificate. His stress in life oughtn't be comparable to his rollercoasters.

John Cunningham ("Dear Mr. Cleman" p. 10, "Reflections of Spring in December" p. 8, "The Woman Who Rode Horses" p. 12) is a senior in the English program with aspirations of writing fiction shortly after graduation. His biggest hope is that someday the "golden" idea will strike him like a peach in the face. In the meantime, he reads and writes constantly and is also passionate about his other two loves: music and beer.

Abigail Gillard ("Recycling Center Blues" p. 40) is a sophomore majoring in Accounting. She would like to earn a Photography Certificate. She lives in Florissant with her family and used to attend Hazelwood Central High School. She works at the St. Charles Humane Society and is a big animal lover. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, scrapbooking, photography, and spending time outdoors. Her favorite subjects to photograph are animals and nature.

Ellen Herget ("In Sand" p. 11, "Remembering Those Days" p. 9) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis and graduates in May. She is finishing her thesis in *Midwestern Zen Buddhism*, an incomplete dissertation on Zen. She lives in St. Louis with a fitness instructor and two fending cats.

Dzenita Horic ("Over Photo" photograph p. 9) was born in Berlin, Germany, on April 9th, 1986. In 1992, she moved with her parents and her older brother to Florissant, Missouri, where they lived for eight years. In 2000, she and her parents moved to St. Louis, MO, where her brother remained in Germany. Dzenita is an English major with a minor in Business Management. She enjoys traveling to Europe and taking photos very much. Her biggest goals are to one day become a professional photographer as well as teach English as a second language to foreign students.

Luella Millsell ("The Year I Lost the Stone Wall" p. 12, "Reflections on my Amish/Southern Heritage" p. 11) will graduate in December with a BA in English, along with a minor in German and a Writing Certificate. She would like to thank her four kids (Katie, Emily, and especially, Hannah), Ricky, who see her more as they still love to (tear) and her dog, something named Ricki, who miss her, for their support as she pursues her dream.

Brackley Kemper ("Over Photo" photograph p. 9) is a senior in the undergraduate program at UMSL St. Louis, majoring in Psychology. Her photographs in *LitMag* were taken during her stay in January to Cocoa Beach, Florida.

Jon Lampe ("When Windows Are Frozen Shut" p. 1) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1987. He has seen the winter of 2007 frozen, tucked together on a median that separates the highway into lanes. He has seen it in a sign-garage basement, haven through five states in one state, and in a car that got on at random orange light by accident. He has seen it inside from the bus, the car, the broken books, and the guitar. He is currently pursuing a master's degree. He expects to be nestled on a median in Hawaii.

Bobby Meils ("On the Hummingbird" p. 9) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis. He is working towards a Math major, a Biology minor, and Honors and Writing Certificates. His hobbies include reading, writing, and gardening. Bobby's poetry is often inspired by the tiny greenflies living in his head.

Jamie Palmer ("Circles Moving" p. 8, "Soliloquy for You in the Woods" p. 10) is a junior at UMSL St. Louis, working on English degrees. Her greatest desire for the future is to become a writer. After graduating, she plans to be a freelance writer and editor. She has been a personal assistant to one St. Louis family and works with children at Jubilee Church in St. Louis. Besides school, she enjoys reading for fun, singing backup vocals for local musicians, bike riding, and spending time with her church family. In writing poetry, Jamie's primary goal is to create a certain feeling, using imagery and the musical quality of words.

Lindsay Perkins ("So really everything is because" p. 14, "Though you speak" p. 10, "Symphonies" p. 9) has been writing since before she can remember—it is her greatest passion, and she hopes to one day make a career as a poet. She considers her biggest influence to be the Beat poets, and she is also inspired by many free-form poets such as E.E. Cummings and Walt Whitman. She is currently in her second year at UMSL St. Louis.

Amy Perry ("And then I found a secret" p. 10) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis who plans to graduate this May with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology. In addition to psychology, her interests include singing and photography. She also teaches Japanese culture and history in her free time, the two being the closest point of much of her education. She is inspired by the work of writers like Murakami, Haruki, and Chuck Palahniuk. She has been previously published in *UMSL's Bulletin* and *LitMag*.

Tom Peterson ("A Poem in the Heart of a Refrigerator" p. 9) is an English major and hopes to graduate with a Writing Certificate and a Bachelor's degree from Lehigh University.

John Pylon ("Crowd" p. 8) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis, majoring in English with a minor in Chemistry. He earned a Bachelor's in English with a minor in Chemistry from Eastern Kentucky University in 2004. Enrolled in the Graduate School of Education at UMSL St. Louis, John is the vice-president of the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society and an eighteen-time All-State basketball player. He is also a member of the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society and an aspiring musician. He is currently playing in both professional and amateur bands and is also a member of the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society.

Jeff Siervens ("Aspen the Chucky" p. 10) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis, majoring in English with a minor in Chemistry, and the St. Louis Cardinals.

Elizabeth Staudt ("Winter Art Desires" p. 10) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis, majoring in English with a minor in Chemistry, and the St. Louis Cardinals. She wholeheartedly believes that "the purpose of writing anything is to make someone, somewhere, for something," as phrased by Professor Charles Smith. All her best poems begin on paper because words on a computer screen are too easy to change. Such deliberate changes make it too easy to forget where a poem began. Elizabeth would like to thank her mother for encouraging an early love of reading and for not putting it on her to write anything.

Bethany Webb ("Photograph" p. 9) is a junior at UMSL St. Louis. She plans to graduate in spring 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Writing Certificate. In the future, she plans to work in editing or publishing.

Madeleine Whinn ("I Dreamed I Was Showing You The Midwest" p. 10) is a senior at UMSL St. Louis, majoring in English with a minor in Chemistry. She wrote "I Dreamed I Was Showing You The Midwest" in 2007. She currently resides in Kirkwood, Missouri, also known as the birthplace of Modernist poet Marianne Moore. She enjoys reading, traveling, and watching movies.